



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Wokingham Borough Council
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking
Children Strategy
February 2023

DRAFT

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1. Purpose of this strategy

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people (UASC), also known as separated children or unaccompanied minors, are children who are outside their country of origin and are without the care and protection of their parents or legal guardian. Their status, age and circumstances may well be uncertain.

Sometimes they may have witnessed or experienced traumatic events and they may be suffering the most extreme forms of loss. There are many reasons why children and young people may leave their home country. Some of the reasons include:

- fear of persecution, due to their religion, nationality, ethnicity, political opinion or social group
- parents killed, imprisoned or missing
- in danger of being forced to fight or become a child soldier
- war, conflict
- poverty, deprivation
- sent abroad by parents/family

This strategy sets out the council's approach to supporting and caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) giving these vulnerable children the chance to rebuild their lives in safety.

It is recognised that the strategic priorities for UASC, as laid out in the Children in Care (CiC) and Care Leavers' (CL) Strategy and reproduced below, are the same as for any child in care or care leaver, however the circumstances which lead a UASC to come into our care warrant a specific and tailored approach to achieving the best possible outcomes for them.

The cohort of UASC in Wokingham has increased significantly over the last year following the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) becoming mandatory, and an increase in the % of the child population allocated. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children now represent approximately a third of our children in care population.

Children in Care and Care Leavers strategic priorities

Priority 1: To fulfil our Corporate Parenting responsibilities to Children in Care and Care Leavers.

Priority 2: Ensure that Plans for Children in Care and Care Leavers are robust, ambitious, regularly reviewed and updated, and reflect the individual views and changing needs of the child or young person.

Priority 3: Ensuring that Children in Care and Care Leavers are supported to develop strong, stable and trusted relationships with their Social Workers, Personal Advisors, Foster Carers, Advocates and others in their support network.

Priority 4:	Ensure that all Children in Care have a plan for permanence.
Priority 5:	Work with partners to ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers are supported to be both physically and emotionally healthy in a timely manner.
Priority 6:	Ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers achieve the best possible educational outcomes and have access to academic enrichment activities supported by a Virtual School which is resourced to deliver support up to the age of 25 and beyond.
Priority 7:	Ensure that children in care and care leavers have a safe place to live, in the right location, which meets their individual needs.
Priority 8:	Work with children and young people in care and care leavers to support access to leisure and cultural activities they enjoy.
Priority 9:	Support children and young people in care and care leavers to be well prepared for adulthood.
Priority 10:	Ensure Children in Care and Care Leavers have a strong voice and are supported to articulate their needs and wishes.

2. Background and Local Context

Wokingham's number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) has been historically low, as there is no port or obvious point of entry in the borough. During 2021 Wokingham Borough Council assisted, where possible, in taking on the care of UASC from other local authorities via the voluntary National Transfer Scheme (NTS). This resulted in us taking on the care of 7 additional children that year. At that time, any offer or agreement to take on the care of a child from another local authority via the NTS was based on our capacity, available resources, and the ability to meet the needs of the child/ren at the time of the request.

When the NTS became mandatory, the number of UASCs in our care increased from 14 to 37 in under 8 months. Initially our cap (0.07%) was 28 children and the new 0.1% cap increased this to 41. The NTS has increased the number of children in our care significantly, from 23 to around 36 per 10,000. We currently have 41 UASC in our care.

Nationality

The children we currently care for come from 10 different countries, with most originating from Afghanistan (37%), Sudan (21%) and Iran (16%). The remaining children come from Syria (2), Iraq (2), Eritrea (2), Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kuwait, see Fig.1 below.

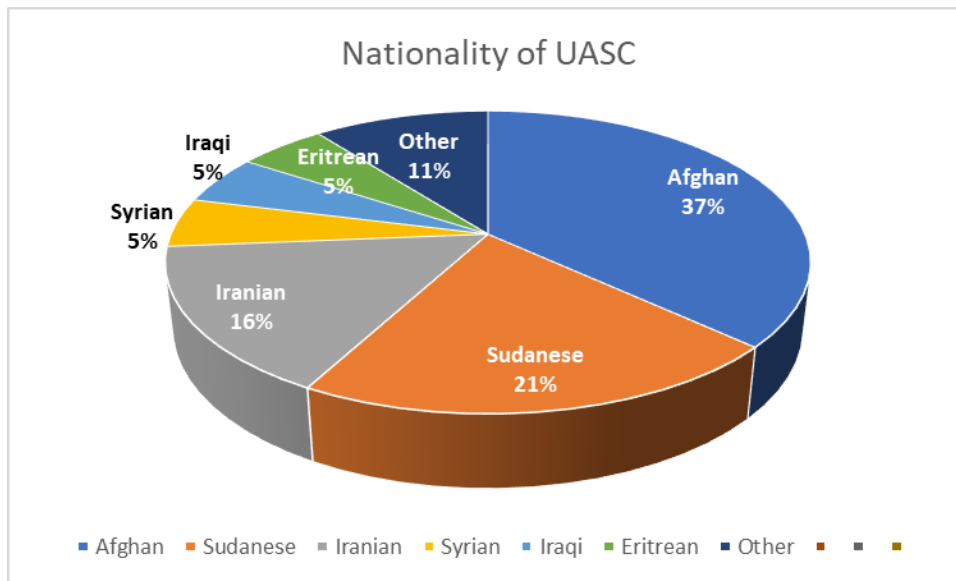


Fig.1 Nationality of Wokingham UASC

The unaccompanied children in Wokingham speak over 14 different main languages, the most common ones being Pashto (24%), Kurdish Sorani (22%) and Arabic (22%), see Fig.2 below.

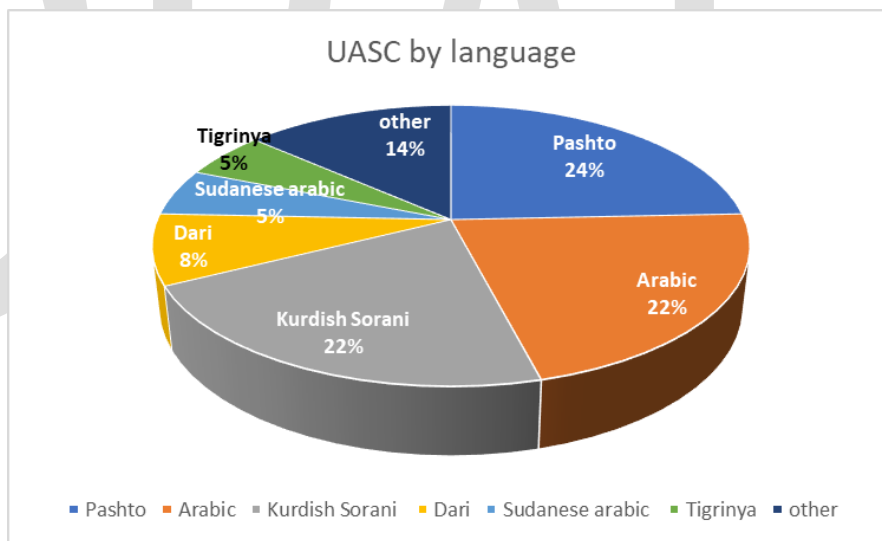


Fig.2 Main languages of Wokingham UASC

UASC ages when entering care

Of 33 UASC that came into care in 2022/23, the average age at entry into care was 16 years and 25 days. 15 (45%) were under 16 therefore required a regulated placement such as fostering. The other 18 (55%) were 16 and 17 years old so could be placed in semi-independent homes if this was appropriate to meet their needs, see Fig 3 below. However, of this 16/17 age group, 3 were placed in foster care rather than semi-independent accommodation.

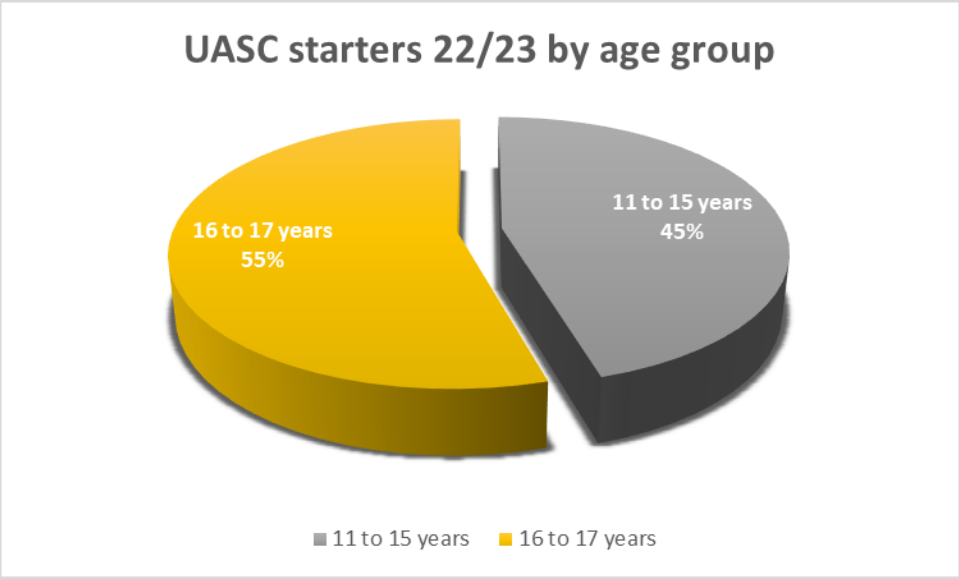


Fig.3 Wokingham UASC by age group when entering care - 2022/23

The youngest UASC was 14 years and 2 months old and the eldest was 17 years and 8 months old. There were six 14-year-olds, nine 15-year-olds, eleven 16-year-olds and seven 17-year-olds, see Fig. 4 below.

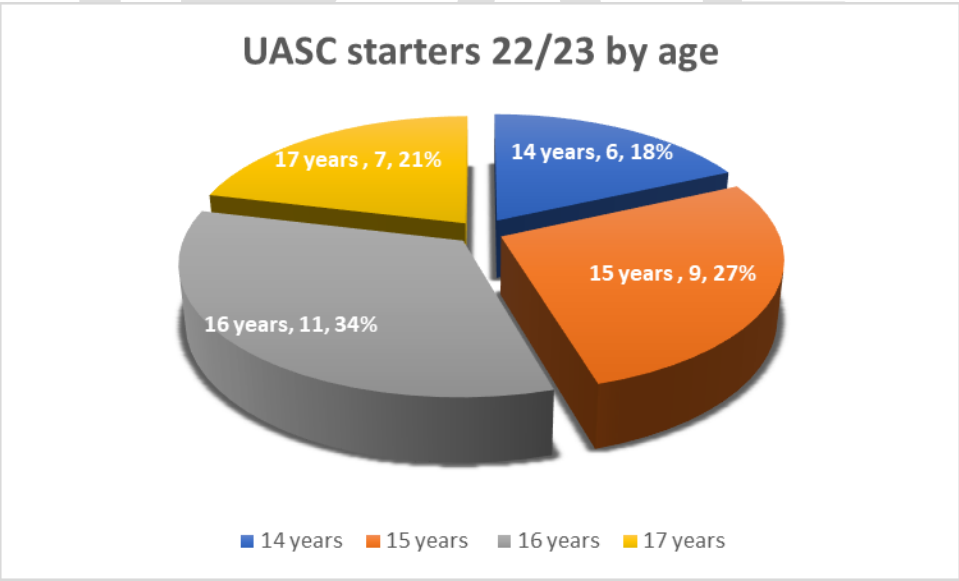


Fig.4 Wokingham UASC by ages when entering care – 2022/23

Type of placement

We currently have 41 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in our care. These children and young people are in the following placements:

Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	In-House Fostering	Children's Home	Semi-Independent (SiL)	Supported Lodgings
21	5	0	15	0

Table1. UASC by placement type

Placement locations

We have 5 UASC in Dudley (semi-independent) and 1 in Plymouth (in-house fostering), see Fig.5 below.

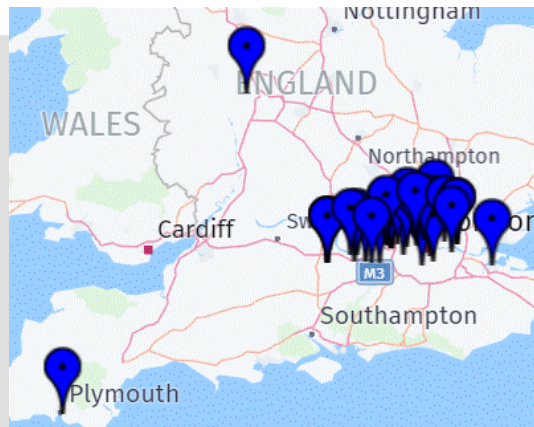


Fig.5 Location of Wokingham UASC within England

The other children or young people all live within the South East, see Fig 6. below. (Note that there is more than 1 child in some postcodes.)

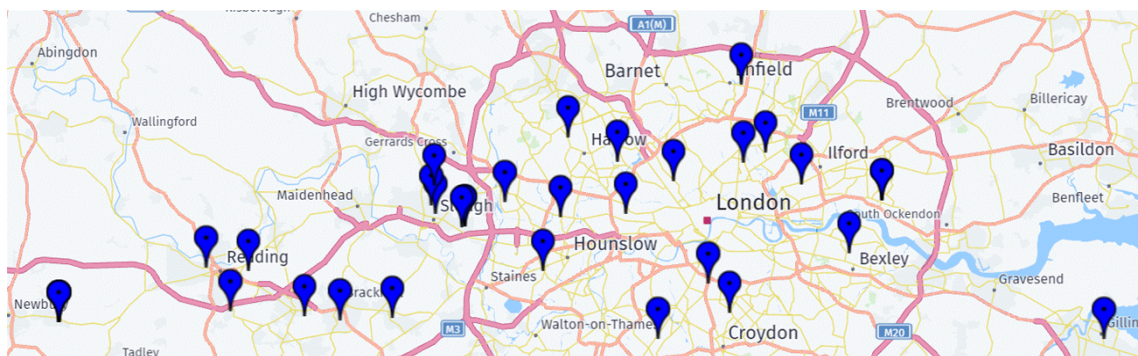


Fig.6 Location of Wokingham UASC within the South East

26 UASC are with foster carers, 21 in IFA placements and 5 in-house. The 21 UASC with IFAs are all placed outside the borough with 19 young people in 16 different London boroughs and 2 young children placed in Medway and Buckinghamshire respectively, see Fig.7 below.

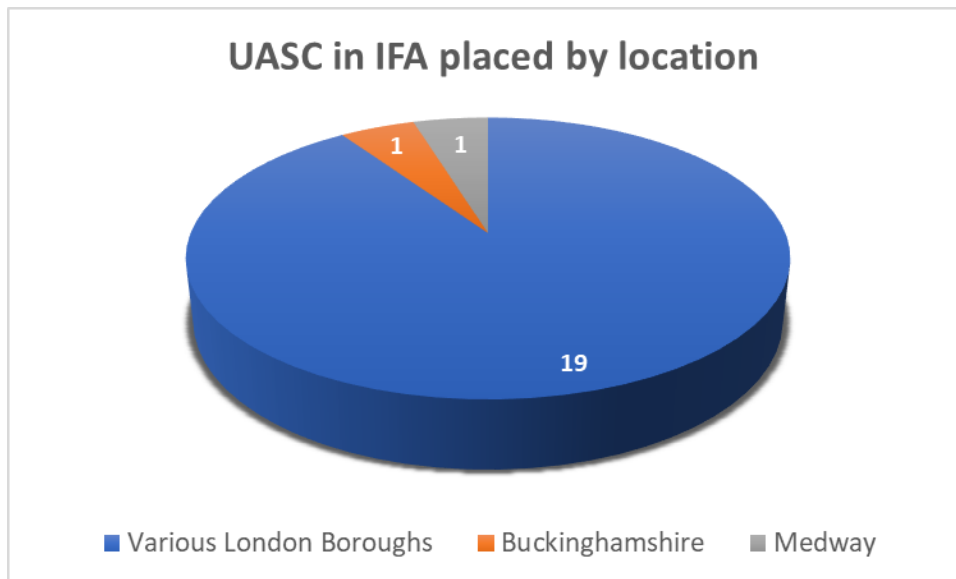


Fig.7. Location of Wokingham UASC within Independent Fostering Agencies

15 young people aged 16-17 are currently living in semi-independent accommodation. 5 of these young people are living in Dudley, West Midlands, 3 are living in Slough, 3 are living in West Berkshire, and 1 each in Wokingham, Hillingdon, Bracknell Forest and Reading.

3. Why are UASC placed predominantly away from Wokingham?

Predominantly, UASC are placed outside of Wokingham due to the shortage of a local supply of suitably matched placement options. By placing children in foster homes or semi-independent homes in London, for example, we are more likely to meet their cultural identity needs and it is more likely that they will live near people they know. London also has the greatest density of diverse placement options giving greater opportunities for appropriate matching.

Implications of Placing UASC Outside Wokingham

Assuming the 0.1% continues to be the expectation, predicted growth in UASC will lead to over 100 UASC Care Leavers by 2025/26. As these care leavers will be predominantly placed outside the area, they will be less likely to access local education, training and health support. They may also be unable to obtain 'local authority housing' provision meaning they are unable to settle in permanent and more affordable accommodation.

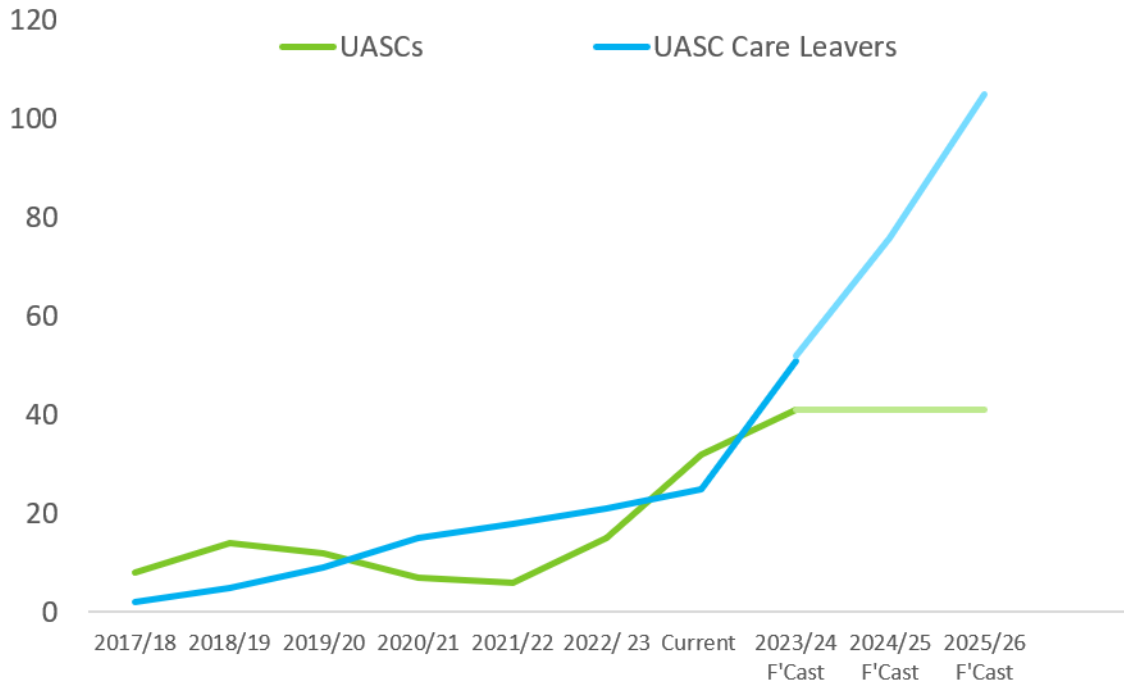


Fig. 8 Predicted growth of Wokingham UASC and UASC Care leavers.

By recruiting and training more local fostering and supported lodgings carers alongside developing community links and specialised staff and resources we will aim to provide for more UASC when they initially come into our care. These children and young people will therefore also have the opportunity of ‘Staying Put’ with many of their carers.

More younger children placed within or close to Wokingham will allow us to develop more 16 plus accommodation and support options. Ultimately, allowing more UASC children to live within or around Wokingham until they are adults will provide greater stability for them to access good education, training and employment opportunities. These young people will also have a right to local permanent housing.

4. Local provision

Strategic Priority 7: Ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers have a safe place to live, in the right location, which meets their individual needs

Family based care

- Fostering/Staying Put

Wokingham’s in-house fostering service has 3 mainstream carers who offer UASC placements and 2 Family and Friends carers who are looking after ‘Connected’

children. There are currently 2 UASC Care leavers in Staying Put arrangements with Wokingham Foster carers.

- Fostering Transformation Programme

The 'Fostering Transformation Steering Group' (FTSG) was set up to lead and provide oversight and governance to an agreed programme of work to review the Council's current fostering arrangements, and, if necessary, develop a future model of delivery which is evidence based and needs led. This work has identified a shortage of local UASC foster placements and this is one of the main foster carer recruitment priorities within the current Fostering Transformation Project. Currently our growing UASC fostering population is mainly being cared for through Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) at some considerable distance from the local authority. Engagement events have already begun with some community groups to publicise Wokingham's needs, but this will need particular focus if we are going to start to build in-house and/or local fostering resource.

- Supported Lodgings

Currently we do not have supported lodgings carers for UASC. These would be ideal for older UASC with good self-care skills. These placements have also been identified as a priority within the transformation work.

Semi-Independent

- Semi-Independent accommodation

Over the last 5 years Wokingham Borough Council has developed 2 in-borough semi-independent provisions (SILs) offering up to 16 beds which are available to care leavers.

- Action taken:
 1. Wokingham Borough Council are currently in the process of acquiring 6 x 1 bed flats in Wokingham Town Centre. These flats have recently been refurbished. These 'training flats' will provide step down accommodation for our care leavers for up to 6 months and will provide an opportunity to get 'tenancy' ready. Move on from the training flats will be via accommodation in the private rented sector or social housing/housing association accommodation via the council. The training flats are expected to come online in June/July 2023 subject to completion of the sale.
 2. Children's Services are also working closely with Housing commissioners within the council to secure an allocation of care leaver accommodation within new housing developments. Children's Services will continue to work with Housing to ensure that we continue to secure an allocation of housing from new developments specifically for care leavers.

3. We have recently secured 5 care leaver 1 bed flats as part of the Wellington Road development in Wokingham Town Centre. These are likely to become available in 2024/25.
4. Wokingham Borough Council has acquired a property in central Wokingham that will be renovated to provide additional accommodation for care leavers (approx. 8 flats, with on-site support). We have been successful in securing capital money to undertake renovations to this property, with work commencing in late 2023.
5. Wokingham Borough Council (Economic Development and Growth dept) has also recently recruited a Housing and Partnership's Officer to encourage relationships with our Registered Providers and have also created a Private Sector Landlord Forum to build relationships with the Private Rented Sector. This work will ensure that we are able to further develop opportunities to increase our housing options for Care Leavers.

Increasing housing specifically for care leavers in the borough will enable more UASC to remain close to education, training and health support, as well as have better access to a permanent housing offer.

5. Support Offer

Strategic Priority 3: Ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers are supported to develop strong, stable and trusted relationships with their Social Workers, Personal Advisors, Foster Carers, Advocates and others in their support network

Social Worker Support and Advocacy

It is our commitment that all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by registered social workers.

Our Advocacy Offer has also been adapted to reflect the growing needs of the cohort. Currently, our Advocate commits to supporting all new UASC at their age assessment and their first Children in Care review.

Enhanced Training Package

In order to ensure we can respond appropriately to the needs of our UASCs we have commissioned new training via CORAM/BAAF.

This training supports social workers to better understand the specific needs of separated young people. There are two courses within the training package:

- Immigration status of migrant children in care
- Legal rights and entitlements of young refugees

Legal Advice

Support is provided to UASC with access to a specialist immigration solicitor to ensure that there is no delay in following legal process.

Age Assessment

Our advocate for children and young people attends age assessments to support UASC, alongside provision of appropriate translation services following [guidance provided by the Association of Directors of Children's Services \(ADCS\)](#).

Translation Support

Wokingham Borough Council has engaged DA languages to provide translation services, with a choice of in-person, video or phone translation as appropriate.

Strategic Priority 5: Work with partners to ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers are supported to be both physically and emotional healthy in a timely manner

Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Children in care are a high risk of developing mental illness but they often present with challenging and high-risk behaviour, poor mental wellbeing that does not always meet diagnostic criteria for mental illness and even when it does, typical CAMH services do not easily fit their needs.

We know that children in care tend to have complex needs that are:

- Multiple
- Persistent
- Severe
- Framed by family and social contexts
- Influenced by many Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

NICE guidance now recognises that a different approach is needed: Trauma Informed thinking or the Trauma recovery model.

Following the findings of our last Focused Visit in April 2022, the specification for our new Children in Care CAMHS service has been reviewed and updated to ensure that it specifically includes and caters for our UASC population.

The CIC CAMHS service provides:

- An Initial consultation/advice as required
- Ongoing therapeutic consultation to the system around the young person/trauma recovery model
- Direct assessment
- Direct intervention
- Training for teams

The interventions are based on the:

- Trauma recovery model
- Mentalisation based approaches
- Whole system approaches

Mental Health First Aid training also been commissioned, the programme includes all the elements of the accredited Youth Mental Health First Aider (MHFAider®) course, plus bespoke content relating to the experience and mental health needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Strategic Priority 6: Ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers achieve the best possible educational outcomes and have access to academic enrichment activities supported by a Virtual School which is resourced to deliver support up to the age of 25 and beyond

The Virtual School

Significant improvement work has been undertaken in this area this year (informed by consultation with other South-East Regional Virtual Heads).

In December 2022 we were involved in a Peer Review led by the National Association of Virtual School Heads, this piece of work scrutinised our approach and aimed to provide us with information to support our continuous improvement.

This work has included a review of the Virtual School UASC offer. This resulted in significant improvements which were formalised and shared with relevant teams and partners:

- Development of a UASC Specific Personal Education Plan.
- Commitment to provide daily small group tuition for young people not yet admitted to school, or those who are on roll but need additional ESOL support. To support this commitment, we commissioned Winchmore Tutors to provide this tuition.
- Providing a flexible education offer: inc. information, advice and guidance to other professionals when placement break down results in disruption to education.
- Increased opportunities for young people for wider wellbeing: Science days, Football Holiday Camps, Music Tuition, Arts and Creative Writing

- Broader and enhanced offer for UASC:
 - Introduction of a UASC specific app with Wokingham Council Branding, inc. Our STAR mission. This app provides different packages of support, ESOL support, access to learning resources, Life in UK, Mental Health Support, Money Support.
 - Introduction of 'school- ready' bags.
 - Winchmore Tutors 'Welcome' package.
 - 1:1 ESOL tuition.
 - Introduction of the first language REMA assessments.

6. Resources and Cost Implications

The increased expectation that we take into our care UASC equivalent to 0.1% of the under 18 child population will potentially have a significant cost implication on the Children's Services budget. Early modelling and forecasting work has estimated that there could be an additional £1.09m pressure on the children's services budget by 2025/26 if we do nothing to mitigate the increases.

	Year	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26
Additional UASC		13	13	13	13
Additional UASC CL		0	7	17	25
Total additional		13	20	30	38
Total Income (Grants)		£78k	£775k	£915k	£1.03m
Total Costs (incl increased resources)		84.7k	£1.07m	£1.61m	£2.12m
Total impact of 0.1% UASC		£6.7k	£292k	£695k	£1.09m

Although currently UASC income exceeds the average UASC accommodation cost, it does not cover all the other overheads associated with a Child in Care, such as social worker pay, travel and education costs. The further children and young people are placed the greater these costs become.

On average UASC accommodation currently costs £100K over their Care Cycle (1 year CiC and 3 years CSC paid accommodation as a Care Leaver).

	Placement Costs	Grant	Difference
UASC	£900	£1,001	£101
USAC CL	£900	£270	£630

Although most of the UASC placement and support costs are met by Central Government Grants, when the young people turn 18 there is a significant shortfall due to the difficulty of finding suitably priced accommodation local to where they have been living.

7. Actions going forward

1. Establish a UASC Steering Group

We will establish a UASC Steering Group to take forward and implement the key challenges and actions identified in this strategy.

The steering group will develop a UASC strategy action plan setting out how the key challenges will be addressed. This will be monitored on a monthly basis to review and record progress.

- Reporting
 - Highlight reports on the progress made against the action plan will be provided to the Children's Transformation Programme and Corporate Parenting Board.
 - Reports will be provided to the Children's Transformation Programme monthly.
 - Reports will be provided to DLT quarterly.
 - Reports will be provided to Corporate Parenting Board on a 6 monthly basis.

2. Set up a Community Hub

We will develop a hub of support in collaboration with foster carers, trained social workers, mentors and UASC experienced people at the core. The hub will include support from CAMHS, Education, Community groups and advisors to ensure that we can welcome, support and re-settle new UASC arriving in Wokingham.

We will look to open a physical space once a month to run a Youth Programme tailored to our UASC. The Hub could provide informal education that includes mentoring around basic skills, healthy eating, asylum rights and responsibilities, social awareness, and sleep hygiene.

3. Market Development and Engagement

We will develop a market engagement plan to increase local sufficiency. This will focus our market development and engagement approach on encouraging providers of fostering, supported lodgings and semi-independent to establish new provision within and close to the borough.

We will establish Provider events to promote our needs within the locality. These events will set out our current and future requirements.

This activity will support us to increase overall placement sufficiency, as well as complement the investment in local authority provision.

4. Community engagement

We will develop a UASC fostering marketing plan to promote fostering opportunities within diverse communities. This will include an array of marketing activities including social media, press releases, advertising, editorial, staff promotion, WBC emails, stands out in the community and utilising the fostering website and Facebook pages as platforms for raising awareness of the need for more local foster carers. We will proactively engage with local and National community groups to promote fostering

5. Local Sufficiency

We have identified throughout the strategy the need to improve local sufficiency in relation to:

- Foster Carers

Actions:

- *Targeted recruitment of foster carers specifically for UASC. Local sufficiency of Foster Carers has been identified as a priority of the Fostering Transformation programme and actions related to this will be tracked via the steering group.*

- Supported Lodgings

Actions:

- *Targeted recruitment for in-house supported lodgings carers*
- *Commissioning an external provider to provide supported lodgings placements*

- Semi – independent Accommodation

Actions:

- *Market Development activity to increase local provision*
- *Review requirement to increase local authority provision*

- Housing

Actions:

- *Secure allocation of care leaver accommodation within new housing developments.*
- *Renovation of property to provide care leaver flats*
- *Continue to develop relationships with our Registered Providers and Private Landlords to provide stable housing*

Reviewing and addressing our sufficiency requirements will be a key component of the UASC Steering group.

6. Support Offer

We will continue to review and improve our support offer to ensure it is responsive to needs of UASC. This includes support around:

- Our advocacy offer
- Training Offer
- The Virtual School
- Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Support

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