

Maximising opportunities for unaccompanied asylum seeking children: Warwickshire County Council

Area: Warwickshire

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Brief description

This example describes how a strongly child-centred service has been developed in response to the high levels of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in Warwickshire. Excellent management and a strong corporate parenting ethos have enabled the provision of high-quality accommodation placements with experienced and well-informed foster carers and in closely supported semi-independent accommodation. A strong emphasis on supported learning ensures good educational outcomes. Comprehensive practical and emotional support includes when young people's appeal rights are exhausted.

Overview – the provider's message

'We have developed over a number of years a team of highly effective specialist social workers and support workers to work with unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in Warwickshire. The Children's Asylum team provide a full range of services, from needs assessments and age assessments through to practical and emotional support. As a stable staff group, we are able to give young people consistent working relationships with social care staff throughout their time in care. We work with some resilient and motivated young people who make good use of the opportunities available to them. We provide accommodation and all of our young people have personalised weekly support and are assisted in accessing culturally appropriate services within the community. The team has well-established links with the virtual school and education providers which result in good educational outcomes.'

Martin Cliff, Service Manager

The good practice in detail

Background

The project was established in 1998 following the first group of asylum seekers arriving from Kosovo and Albania, and subsequently developed into a county wide service. In 2006 the team included two social workers and one support worker, but increased in size to meet the needs of a growing number of young people arriving in Warwickshire. Over the past five years, the numbers of young people being supported by the team at any one time has varied between 90 and 135. Now known as the Children's Asylum team, the current establishment includes an operations manager, two team leaders, four social workers, four social care workers, an accommodation officer and administrative staff. Workers have developed a range of assessment and specialist skills, including expertise in age assessments. An out-of-



hours service is provided to young people being supported by the project, including those living in semi-independent accommodation. The team has developed a strong supportive culture to cope with the stress of working with young people who may have witnessed or experienced significant violence, abuse and loss of friends and family members and who are likely to have to return to high risk and uncertain futures. As one team member said: 'We are always looking out for each other - the team has developed a culture of openness, honesty and listening'.

The recent Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services found that, 'The work of the unaccompanied asylum seekers' team enables vulnerable young people to develop skills well matched to their needs within a safe and well supported environment. Outcomes from the service are excellent, and the service is highly regarded by partner agencies and by the young people themselves'.

Corporate parenting ethos

Corporate parenting principles are fully embedded throughout the work of the project, based on the belief that all unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people should be treated the same as other Warwickshire children. The council recognised in 2009, that all unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people under 18 should be accommodated under section 20 of the 1989 Children Act. Young people are therefore given the same quality of care and access to resources as any other looked after young person or care leaver in Warwickshire. Referrals are usually made by the police after young people are found at one of the local motorway service stations. Young people, who come from a range of countries including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Eritrea, usually arrive disorientated and traumatised by their journey which may have taken months or sometimes years.

The work of the project has benefited from consistent all party support in the Council, and elected members ensure that corporate parenting principles are applied by in-house and partner agencies to ensure the best possible outcomes for young people. Efficient financial management has helped to ensure that the project has operated consistently within the Home Office grant and has not had significant overspends. One social worker said: 'Team

management is flexible and adaptable to the constantly changing environment and encourages all of us to think outside the box’.

Accommodation

Young people are matched with experienced foster carers immediately following referral or, when appropriate, placed in supported accommodation. A core assessment is initiated. A high level of ongoing support is provided, with frequent contact by project and fostering support workers. Foster carers are also provided with a comprehensive and regularly updated resource pack which provides political, religious and cultural information about the countries from which young people are likely to be arriving from, including a full range of recipes and contact details of specialist food shops and community resources. A welcome DVD has been produced in Pashtu and Dari to help young people develop a realistic understanding of what to expect from living in foster care. Young people say that they appreciate being treated like members of the foster carer’s family, with one young person commenting: ‘She’s like my mother, and I’m like her son’.



Good quality semi-independent accommodation for those older young people for whom a foster placement is not appropriate is provided by a small number of landlords with whom the project has developed close relationships over a number of years. It is locally based to enable good access to supportive cultural, community and education provision and to other young people. The team has deliberately not outsourced accommodation support, as they have found that young people’s trust is earned through frequent worker contact and by addressing needs and resolving practical difficulties efficiently and promptly.

Young people moving into semi-independent accommodation have a comprehensive assessment of their basic independent living skills over a four-week period. Extensive support packages can involve a number of team members, covering everything from basic cooking skills and household management, to personal safety. Weekly visits include a thorough accommodation check as well as an opportunity to engage with the young person about whatever their needs and priorities are at that time. Young people say that they appreciate the care taken within the team to try and understand what their concerns are, particularly in the early days, and then achieve a speedy resolution. One young person said: ‘Although many things you needed help with when you arrive were small, when you are somewhere different they are important’.

Age assessments start as soon as possible after a young person’s arrival, when required. These are [Merton compliant](#) and involve contributions from a range of people in contact with the young person. It includes foster carers, teachers, health workers and observations about the interactions by the young person with other young people. The thoroughness of the multi-faceted approach means that: it does not rely too much on a young person’s appearance or is rushed to be completed; the Home Office is normally prepared to accept their assessment without challenge; and the young people are satisfied with the outcome. The project has established

‘If there is an emergency things get sorted out very quickly.’

a clear professional framework which does not include advocacy or campaigning on behalf of young people's asylum applications. Energy is put into ensuring early and continuing access to high-quality legal support from suitably experienced lawyers with a realistic approach being taken when considering the likely outcomes of applications. As the Operations Manager said, 'The local authority is a service provider, and it is important not to give young people false hopes'.

A small number of experienced and well qualified interpreters, who are skilled at working with young people, are used for all necessary interviews, meetings and assessment visits. Where possible, the same interpreter is used throughout the young person's involvement with the team.

The virtual school

There is a strong focus on education and, where appropriate, vocational training throughout the work with young people, overseen by the virtual school. This helps develop confidence and skills and to create a more balanced perspective towards areas of their lives which remain troubling, including mental health concerns. As one social worker says, 'An early priority is learning English and achieving independence skills which then open the doors to accessing education and training opportunities'. Educational outcomes are exceptionally good, for instance out of the 15 young people taking GCSEs in 2011 who had been looked after for at least a year, 11 achieved at least five A* to G grades. Pathway plans are initiated at the right time for each young person. One young person who recently graduated as a lawyer commented: 'The project provided invaluable and much needed support throughout my academic career. Their efforts, hardwork, encouragement and investment in me will never be forgotten'.

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A six-week group work programme addressing issues of loss and bereavement which the majority of young people will have experienced has been developed jointly with 'Journeys', the organisation recently commissioned to provide CAMHS services in Warwickshire. It was initiated by the project in response to many young people experiencing nightmares, headaches and other symptoms arising from dislocation and serious trauma, but who did not meet the normal threshold for referral to CAMHS. Activity projects have been run during holiday periods, including an arts project and day trips, to strengthen the informal network of support for the young people.



An increasing number of young people are choosing to remain in touch with the project after their appeal rights are exhausted (ARE) and following the withdrawal of free education, Income Support, Housing and Council Tax benefits and the right to work. Having satisfied themselves that the young person is destitute, the project continues to provide a weekly subsistence allowance, undertake weekly

support visits and provide accommodation for those young people that would otherwise be homeless.

Provider background

Approximately 124,000 children and young people aged 0 to 19 live in [Warwickshire](#), making up a quarter of the total population of the county. In January 2011, 14% of the school population were from minority ethnic groups. The May 2011 School Census reported 6% of pupils with English as an additional language, and 10% of pupils were eligible for free school meals. Further information can be found [here](#).

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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