

Planning Education for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking

Children in Kent

Caring parents spend huge amounts of time and energy agonising over the best secondary education for their children. They will do almost anything in their power to access the chosen route – move house, hire private tutors, delay career moves, attend church and so on. They have a plan. But this plan is constantly modified by their knowledge of their growing and maturing children and the changing circumstances that surround them.

Now imagine being that caring parent, but knowing virtually nothing about your child. Enter the unaccompanied asylum seeking child. Where do you start?

In Kent (Kent County Council or KCC for short), we recognised some years ago that instant personal education plans (PEPs) for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) might tick boxes, but often end up in blind alleys, resulting in disengaged and disinterested young people and a huge wastage of scarce local budgets.

Young people were being offered educational provision because it existed, not because it was appropriate – and too many were voting with their feet, rather than finding their feet.

The key to a successful PEP is a full understanding of the child. You don't send someone to climb a mountain without first checking that they are well enough equipped to do so (or that they wish to climb that particular mountain).

Is this all blindingly obvious? Of course it is! But does knowing that change our practice?

In simple terms, authorities have a choice when dealing with UASC: they can either act like babysitters or like parents. Either choice is valid, but the choice has to be made.

In Kent, a special education assessment team, supported by a senior educational psychologist, developed a framework for holistic assessment based on dynamic methods. This led to a multi-agency protocol by which PEPs could be developed over a more realistic timescale, while taking account of the relatively few years of residence available to a young person with exceptional leave to remain (ELR). This timescale is shown in the table below.

Education planning for USAC

Timescale	Current situation	Actions
Week 1	Arrival and initial placement in KCC induction centre or foster care	Duty team inform education assessment team by email
Week 2	Ongoing assessment and induction	Appointment with local GP Education assessment team, liaising with key workers, undertake a full assessment using the dynamic framework developed by Lucille Galli-Phillips and produce an initial report for the PEP
Week 4	Initial review Possible education/training routes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Route A – School • Route B – College course • Route C – Employment with training 	Decision on education/training route PEP targets set for next 8 weeks Person/s to identify provision named on PEP Appointment with designated nurse if appropriate Appointment with Assessment Connexions PA
Week 5	Young person moves to foster care or community housing provision Young person considered NEET (not in education, employment or training) if 16+, or out of school if under 16 Ongoing assessment in new context	Education assessment team hand over to outreach teachers Education/employment placement identified, but considered temporary until the 2nd review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Route A – school-based programme • Routes B and C – First Base Programme Connexions PA and outreach teachers liaise with school/college
Week 13	Second review Duty team hand over to transition team Assessment Connexions PA	Long-term plan for education/employment but targets set for next 13 weeks

	hands over to, appropriate local Connexions PA	Outreach teacher files case Long-term education/employment placement identified/confirmed
Week 26	Third review Foster placement or housing reviewed Funding for extra support discussed	Long-term education/employment plan reviewed in line with Pathway Plan/Care Plan Outreach teacher intervenes only as required
6 monthly	Actions continue as with all young people supported under Section 20	

Dynamic assessment methods assume English language and cultural deficiency and so concentrate on what the child brings to the learning situation – what they can do, not what they can't do. This leads to young people for whom mainstream school is appropriate being placed in groups suitable to their potential as opposed to their perceived difficulties. The GCSE and A Level results prove the strength of this approach.

But have you ever tried to secure a school place for a 15-year-old with little or no experience of formal education? We are back to the babysitting choice again, aren't we! What has the latter stages of the standard Key Stage 4 curriculum got to offer to such a young person?

Using funding from the Vulnerable Children's Grant and our Alternative curriculum department, in 2003, we entered into a partnership with the ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and study skills departments in three further education (FE) colleges, to develop special routes to FE courses for 15-year-old UASC. These are roll-on roll-off courses, allowing for flexible entry and exit, given the random nature of arrival patterns. The courses tap into the wealth of expertise to be found in the colleges, but also offer a wider package than simple ESOL. This includes ICT, maths, citizenship, catering (really important when you're 16 and in supported lodgings!) and taster courses in the mainstream college.

The model for development on a countywide basis is to be found at Canterbury College where a strong pastoral system has given added stability. The colleges work in close cooperation with key workers and foster carers, so that personal, social and emotional needs are not left unmet. Canterbury College also offers, where appropriate, the opportunity to take home language GCSEs and have a 100 per cent A*-C pass rate to date! Also, partnerships between the colleges and local secondary schools are being developed to maximise the expertise offered by each organisation and allow for even more flexible approaches to provision. A full evaluation of this work has been undertaken and will be presented to senior management in January 2006.

Following the changes in approach required by the Hillingdon & Merton Judgements, the model of practice for under-16s is now being developed – in partnership with the Legal Services Commission (LSC) and Connexions – into

appropriate packages for 16 to 17-year-olds, who have been offered little more than entry level ESOL courses up until now. Also, given that UASC could arrive in Kent at anytime during the year and that a growing number, particularly from the Middle East, are illiterate in their own language, work has begun to develop a specialist E2E-type course as a pre-emptor to college admission. It is our aim to make sure that we have commenced an assessment of educational need within the first four weeks of a young person's arrival in the county and that no approach is made to either a school or a college without there being a PEP to evidence the decision.

Each month, between 20 and 40 UASC arrive in Kent. They all have different experiences and aspirations. The only current certainty is that they will keep coming and, if educated appropriately, will become contributing adults in a world community.

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