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and College

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# Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People in education

Guidance for schools and colleges



achieving  
for children

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# Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to support schools and colleges to provide quality education and learning experiences for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people (UASC).

For all children and young people, but of particular relevance for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people, education is a significant protective factor. Many of these young people have been separated from family, friends and their home country. Education provides a place for stability and security where a sense of belonging and community can be fostered and young people can be supported to achieve their aspirations.

However, appropriate support needs to be provided for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people when they enter education to address their particular needs. A welcoming and supportive environment is essential to promoting the wellbeing and progression of young people.

This guidance is designed to support designated teachers, school and college staff working with, or planning for the induction of, unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. It will develop their understanding of the specific factors that may affect this group of young people, to support everyone involved to effectively plan and prepare for their arrival and provide appropriate education and pastoral support throughout their education.

Signposting to relevant websites and resources for further information is provided throughout<sup>1</sup>.

Settings who wish to further develop their practice in effectively supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking young people can explore a number of awards and accreditation schemes, both locally and nationally including:

- [AfC Virtual School Attachment Aware Schools ward](#)
- [Schools of Sanctuary](#)
- [UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools](#)
- [Refugee Welcome Schools NASUWT](#)

This guidance has been developed from a range of sources by Dr Sara Freitag, Senior Educational Psychologist and Dr Kim O'Connor, Specialist Educational Psychologist in partnership with AfC Virtual School and AfC Virtual School Transition Hub.

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<sup>1</sup>AfC Virtual School is not responsible for the content of external links, videos and websites signposted in this document. All links were accurate as of February 2022.

# 1. Who are unaccompanied asylum seeking young people?

Please note, for the purpose of this document, the term 'unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people', the acronym UASC will be used, as this is commonly understood within education provisions and used by the UK government in relevant policy and guidance. However, feedback from the young people themselves highlighted a preference for being referred to as 'separated children or young people' or 'unaccompanied minors'. Therefore, within individual education settings, terminology used should be carefully considered in reference to this group of young people.

The UK home office defines unaccompanied asylum seeking children as people under 18 years old, who are applying for asylum, are separated from both parents, and not in the care of a guardian. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, who are usually between the ages of 13 and 17, have travelled independently into the UK or have been separated from their parents or carers to seek asylum from war, persecution - political or religious and situations of combat and torture. They are cared for by the local authority and therefore have 'looked after child' status.

Legislation and guidance stipulates that all children in England have the same entitlement to education from the age of 5 to 16, regardless of immigration status. Children in care, including unaccompanied asylum seeking young people, are also entitled to additional educational support through the personal education plan (PEP) and Pupil Premium Plus funding.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children face distinct challenges in the UK due to their legal status, age and experiences of trauma, separation and loss. They require dedicated support to help address these challenges, promote resilience and achieve their potential.

## National context

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) 98,400 unaccompanied minors sought asylum in 70 countries worldwide in 2015. In the UK, there were 3,043 asylum applications made by unaccompanied young people at this time. From 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, this increased to 4,070 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people being looked after in England alone. Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people currently represent around 5% of all looked after children in England (2020/21). They are generally male and generally older children. In 2021, 92% of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in England were male and only 13% were aged under 16 years.

## Local context

The number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people being supported by AfC Virtual School has increased in recent years.

In the academic year 2020/2021, AfC Virtual School supported 74 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people from Year 9 to Year 13, of which 84% were in formal education in school, college or alternative education provision, alongside 212 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people from Year 14 to age 25.

## Outcomes

A recent report by the Education Policy Institute (EPI, December 2021) suggested that unaccompanied asylum seeking young people may be experiencing an attainment gap of around three years in their educational outcomes when compared to non-refugee peers. Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people often present with multiple vulnerabilities (previous experiences of adversity or trauma, availability of a support network, and proficiency in English to name a few). Alongside this, they are often dedicated and motivated learners with wide ranging skills and talents.

The report also reveals that unaccompanied asylum seeking children experience higher rates of fixed period school exclusions (7.1%) than non-migrant children (5.2%), as well as slightly higher school absence rates of 6.8% compared to 6.6% for non-migrant children.

It is therefore crucial that their learning and wellbeing is prioritised. How this can be achieved will be explored in more detail throughout this guidance.

For more information about asylum seeking young people around the world, please see the [Refugee Council website](#).



## 2. The asylum process and the impact of legal proceedings

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people often have uncertainty about their immigration status in the UK. This can lead to high levels of anxiety about their future. Research has identified anxieties related to their immigration cases as being the most difficult aspect of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people's lives, as well as something that has a negative impact on their mental health (Chase, 2008; Hodes, 2008).

Uncertainties about immigration status impact a young person's ability to feel settled and that they belong - something that is important to us all.

It is important to note that unaccompanied asylum seeking young people may need to attend a range of legal appointments, including interviews and age assessments during the school or college day. Many report these to be distressing and anxiety provoking.

Education provisions will need to consider how to put in place support around these events. Liaison with the young person and their social worker about these events will be important so that young people are not unhelpfully questioned as to why they haven't been in school or college on a certain day or time. The promotion of an inclusive whole school or college culture will support peer and staff understanding and empathy and reduce the possibility of unhelpful questions from fellow students and adults.

Missing school or college to attend such appointments can also lead to additional worries about missed learning opportunities. Schools or colleges can support unaccompanied asylum seeking young people by responding sensitively and putting in place provision, academic and relating to emotional wellbeing, to ensure a young person is supported through these processes.

### 3. Safeguarding considerations: Trafficked children or young people

Trafficking is when a child or young person is moved within a country or into a new country for the purpose of exploiting them. They may be made to work to pay back the cost of their travel to the UK. Usually, children and young people who have been trafficked will have been identified as such before starting at their new educational setting. In these cases, detailed information on how to keep them safe whilst at school will have been given to the school or college by the young person's social worker.

Occasionally, a young person may not already have been identified as trafficked before starting their education. If any school or college has suspicions that an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person has been trafficked, they should immediately report their concerns to the young person's social worker.

[The DfE \(2017\) document](#) provides useful additional information about the safeguarding of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.

[The NSPCC website](#) identifies signs of child trafficking to watch out for.



## 4. Barriers to accessing and thriving in education

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people are not a homogeneous group and will have had different experiences before, during and since their arrival in the UK. The diagram below helps us to consider the interconnecting relationship between language, culture, social and emotional needs on learning and education providers will need to consider each of these when planning appropriate support.



In addition to the individual circumstances and experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people, [a report by UNICEF](#) (2018) identified barriers to refugee and asylum seeking young people accessing, remaining and thriving in education on three levels:

- systemic factors
- individual institution level factors
- contextual barriers

### Systemic barriers

National and local policies or systems can contribute to a delay in young people entering education. These include: school places and admissions policies (such as the management of in-year arrivals), admissions systems (for example, the need to navigate online processes or provide documentation), and the extent of specialist expertise available in local authorities. Identifying an appropriate education placement (whether school or college) was important for older UASC and a driver in their educational success. Many factors appear to influence whether a school or college is most appropriate - and these vary per individual.

AfC Virtual School works in collaboration with the young person, their social worker, local admissions teams and prospective education provisions to identify the most appropriate education provision, based on individual assessment of the young person's circumstances, strengths and needs. Our aim is to integrate UASC in mainstream inclusive education ensuring they have equal opportunities afforded to all young people residing in the UK.

## Individual institution barriers

This refers to barriers to access encountered at the individual school or college level. Three key strands identified by UNICEF as impacting the ease with which young people enter the education system were: difficulties finding places for children with special educational needs (SEN), schools delaying entry for older young people in secondary education, and difficulties accessing school places in some academies and grammar schools. Challenges to remaining and thriving in education include: lack of language support, challenges addressing SEN, bullying and other social issues, and a lack of school-based expertise in working with UASC.

## Contextual barriers

These barriers refer to broader factors that may impact the individual situation of refugee and asylum seeking young people. Contextual barriers noted in the UNICEF research include issues related to dispersal and type of accommodation, as well as mental health difficulties, poverty and challenges related to age assessments. Mental health difficulties and emotional distress were a significant barrier to remaining and thriving in education. Young people often experienced multiple and intersecting difficulties, including: witnessing violence in their country of origin and/or on their journey to the UK, the grief of being separated from family, the stress of the asylum process, and fear of the future.

Section 5 of this guidance provides an overview of how to put in place support to overcome some of these barriers.



## 5. Facilitators to educational success

AfC Virtual School has undertaken focus groups, with the support of the Institute of Education via their [‘Promoting the achievement of looked after children’ \(PALAC\)](#). They gathered the views of local unaccompanied asylum seeking young people to explore how AfC Virtual School and their partner schools or colleges can better support unaccompanied UCAS in their education (see appendix for further information). The young people in the focus groups had a range of experiences of education in the UK and had been in England for between 10 months and three years. Themes regarding facilitators and barriers to education from the young people’s perspectives have been integrated with available research and are outlined below.

### Planning and preparation for the arrival of a UASC in school or college

Starting a new educational provision in an unfamiliar environment can be a daunting prospect for anyone. Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people are a very diverse group. Their proficiency in English levels may vary from being new to English to fluent. They can arrive with widely different socio-economic and educational backgrounds ranging from having had a high standard of education to very little or interrupted schooling. Therefore understanding the young person’s previous educational experiences is essential for planning educational support. It is important that those first days and weeks provide a containing and positive experience of education. Planning and preparation is key. AfC Virtual School has produced a school or college induction checklist planning for the start of an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person in your education provision which can be found in the appendices. [A downloadable version of this checklist can be accessed here.](#)

[Further information](#) about whole school or college, classroom and individual young person considerations.

[The National Education Union](#) has produced a guide to welcoming refugee children to your school.

### English language support

The young people in AfC Virtual School’s focus groups identified that being supported to develop their English language skills was a key factor in supporting their educational and social success within educational settings as well as the wider community. They urged schools and colleges to consider the range of ways, formal (EAL and ESOL teaching) and informal (supported social opportunities with English language speakers) that English language support can be embedded in their educational curriculum and provision. Further information and signposting in relation to English language support can be found in section 7.

## Pastoral care and mental health support

Starting a new education provision can be daunting for any young person and can provoke feelings of being overwhelmed, lonely or anxious. Many unaccompanied asylum seeking young people arriving in the UK would have undertaken a difficult journey without their families and support networks and may have experienced traumatic events. Meeting their pastoral, wellbeing and mental health needs will need to be carefully considered. Further information, guidance and signposting in this area can be found in section 6, alongside the following sections on key adult and peer support systems.

## Adult support and the role of the key adult

The young people in AfC Virtual School's focus groups identified support from their teachers and key adults as a key facilitator to their success. This included the experience of being held in mind by an empathic and attuned adult, who they could go to for support when needed.

The warm welcome provided by a designated key adult makes a huge difference for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. A consistent adult to greet the young person on their first day, to undertake any initial information gathering or assessment, and to provide materials to support their orientation aligns with everything we know about the importance of positive relationships and attachment security.

Focusing on compassion and the young person's emotional safety will go some way to alleviating the stress and anxiety associated with starting at a new school or college.

For young people who have experienced trauma, a sensitive and attuned key adult is crucial. It is worth spending time identifying who is best placed to take on a key adult role - ideally a member of staff with capacity for daily contact with the young person in their initial weeks in education. The availability of a key adult to support a young person over an extended period of time is another important consideration.

## Peer support systems

Support provided by peers is a very effective way to create a welcoming climate for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in their school or college. A buddy scheme is one way to establish peer support from the outset. Research suggests that refugee and asylum seeking young people appreciate being linked with others who speak the same first language or who are from the same country of origin, particularly when first starting in a new placement.

Over time, however, young people value making connections and friendships with a range of young people, particularly those who are good language role models or immersed in the local culture (either being from the UK or having settled there for a long time, for example). Providing opportunities to mix and socialise with a broad range of peers is therefore important. Consider involving young people in sports and other activity clubs (for example, football or activities such as sewing or craft for those less interested in sport).

Creating a welcoming peer atmosphere at the classroom level might include the class learning some key phrases in the young person's first language. School and college communities benefit from learning about issues facing refugee and asylum-seeking young people, as well as the positive contributions that refugees and migrants can make to host communities.

## Flexible curriculum

A flexible and tailored curriculum is supportive of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people flourishing in education. UNICEF recommends models combining intensive English language input in a separate group, with integration with non-EAL students for other subjects such as creative arts and sports. There follows some resources that may be helpful for teachers when planning for a new arrival in their classroom.

Oxfordshire Virtual School has produced a [helpful summary document](#) outlining useful teaching and learning strategies for new arrivals. Classroom support strategies guides are also available on the Bell Foundation website.

There is no single assessment or test that schools or colleges can administer on admission to assess a newly arrived asylum seeking child or young person. The assessment process will need to be ongoing and multi-faceted, ideally initiated within the first two weeks of admission. This will enable appropriate provision to be offered and appropriate learning targets to be put in place. These targets should be reviewed termly, in line with the statutory personal education plan process.

It is important that schools or colleges are aware of adjustments that can be made to their result reporting and exam access arrangements. The [JCO](#) publishes guidance on access arrangements for EAL and newly arrived English language learners (for example, regarding rest breaks and use of bilingual dictionaries and reading pens).

## Staff training

UNICEF (2018) identified training as one of the most effective facilitators to good practice for supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in schools and colleges.

The report identified that the more school and college based staff were able to build an understanding of the issues facing asylum seeking children and young people, and increase expertise in their educational and support needs, the more likely they were to provide effective education places. Schools and colleges feeling equipped to meet the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people is key to supporting access to education.

Areas to consider for staff training include: attachment, trauma, English as an additional language, supporting social, emotional and mental health, as well as risk and resilience factors to wellbeing.

AfC Virtual School has produced a [short training video](#) that can be shared with education staff preparing to welcome an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person. This can be accessed via the AfC Virtual School website.

The following videos<sup>2</sup> may also be helpful to support education staff's understanding of the experiences, needs, and incredible resilience of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.

- [This video](#) (6 mins 12 secs, embedded in the website) provides an overview of current initiatives in Glasgow Clyde College to support UASCs. Two young people provide their perspectives about what has supported them.
- [Dear Habib: a short video](#) (3:41) shows the journey and painful losses a young person from Afghanistan experienced and how with the right support he is able to be a valuable part of his new community in the UK.
- [A range of videos](#) to give an idea of what it was like for seven young people as they each searched for safety and opportunities. They each produced their own digital story
- Schools of sanctuary have signposted [a range of videos](#) about the lived experiences of people seeking sanctuary in the UK.
- The Schools of Sanctuary website features [a resource pack](#) that develops understanding and empathy of refugee and migrant experiences.

## Partnerships between schools and voluntary organisations

Good practice for education settings supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking young people includes partnering with external refugee support charities and organisations. This can help access advice and signposting, as well as mentoring and community activities outside of school or college.

Local organisations include:

- [Refugee Action Kingston](#)
- [Multicultural Richmond](#)
- [Refugees Welcome in Richmond](#)
- [Slough Refugee Support](#)

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<sup>2</sup>AfC Virtual School is not responsible for the content of external links.  
Please note these videos were accessible at these links in February 2022



## 6. Supporting emotional wellbeing

“Reducing the experiences of children to simply a question of mental health, tends to mean more focus on vulnerability in individual psychological terms rather than social ones. Ultimately, it is the economic, educational and socio-cultural rebuilding of worlds, allied to basic questions of equity and justice, which above all will determine the long-term wellbeing of millions of child survivors of war worldwide.”

### **Derek Summerfield, ‘Childhood, War, Refugeedom and ‘Trauma’: Three Core Questions for Mental Health Professionals’**

It is important to note that most unaccompanied asylum seeking young people are extremely resilient despite having experienced a number of unsettling or traumatic events before, during and after completion of their journeys to the UK. Going to school or college, making friends and feeling a sense of belonging are key factors that further support resilience and emotional wellbeing. The structure and predictability of education provisions can provide stability and normality, which again can serve to support emotional wellbeing.

It is important to be mindful of the young persons’ previous and current experiences and to be watchful for signs of emotional difficulty or distress whilst recognising that everyone’s circumstances and responses to these are unique. It is not helpful to assume that all unaccompanied asylum seeking young people have had the same experiences, or will be affected by their experiences in the same way.

[NALDIC](#) highlights the following good practice guidelines.

### **Avoid generalisations about young people’s experiences and needs**

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people are not a homogenous group. Careful and sensitive information gathering and understanding of their individual circumstances is important. For example, NALDIC highlights that to come from the same village, city or country does not mean that people always feel that they belong to the same cultural or ethnic group or share the same beliefs or alliances.

### **Identify current factors that may be affecting wellbeing**

It should not be assumed that all unaccompanied asylum seeking young people will need specialised mental health intervention. Young people may also be affected by stressful circumstances whilst in the UK such as uncertainty around education or care placements, uncertainties about their asylum applications, adapting to a new culture, learning a new language, meeting new people and trying to make friends. Young people may also experience racial discrimination. Consider the range of support structures and systems available to address any issues encountered.

Teachers can be a significant source of support. Showing an interest in the young person’s life and their experiences can be very helpful. The availability and quality of on-site pastoral support, as well as access to specialist support where needed, is a key factor of unaccompanied young people thriving in education.

Young people interviewed by UNICEF valued the availability of an interested adult they could talk to in their education setting. It is important that non-mental health specialists (including teachers) develop an awareness of helpful approaches when working with young people who may have experienced considerable emotional distress. A kind, caring and warm approach is in itself hugely valuable.

## Focus on resilience and positive coping behaviours

Many young people are incredibly resilient and time should be prioritised to consider how to increase resilience and positive coping behaviours. AfC Virtual School focus group research identified that making friends was a key factor in supporting wellbeing. Consider how young people can be supported to develop friendships and a sense of belonging, for example, through social, community and sporting activities.

## Identifying when further support or intervention is required

Difficult experiences in their past and present can lead to emotional difficulties for some young people. Many unaccompanied young people may have witnessed terrible events in their home country and had a traumatic journey to the UK. Many will have done this without the support of family and friends and many will have concerns regarding their family's safety back at home.

The first few weeks in a new school or college can feel overwhelming, confusing and lonely. Having arrived in the UK, unaccompanied young people will be attempting to settle into a new environment, learn a new language and settle into a life with new carers who may not share the same cultural background as them.

The effects of trauma, loss and change may affect young people's behaviour in school or college. Those working with them will need to be aware of, and vigilant for, signs of distress and trauma which may include:

- mood swings and showing signs of becoming withdrawn
- reduced concentration, difficulties retaining information, showing little interest and not making progress
- becoming irritable, disengaged and disruptive
- flashbacks or nightmares, disrupted sleeping patterns
- self-harming behaviours
- isolation - not being part of a strong friendship group
- difficulty trusting others, including difficulties building relationships with adults
- difficulties with attendance or punctuality (perhaps linked to sleeping difficulties)

It is important to discuss any concerns regarding a young person's emotional wellbeing with the young person and their social worker, as well as relevant professionals in school or college (special educational needs co-ordinator or pastoral manager), to identify what further support, including referrals to outside agencies, may be appropriate.

## Racism, discrimination and bullying

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people can experience racism, bullying and discrimination within and outside their educational provision. Make sure all students and staff are clear that this is unacceptable and that robust policies are in place to manage any such incidents effectively, which include providing appropriate emotional wellbeing support for the affected young person.

## Resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of UASCs

- [Mentally Healthy Schools](#) in partnership with the Anna Freud Centre, provide a range of information for schools in relation to identifying and supporting the mental health and wellbeing needs of asylum seeking young people.
- [Young Minds](#) provide a range of resources for foster carers, social workers and school staff who are supporting asylum seeking and refugee children across England
- [Directory of organisations](#) providing mental health and psychosocial support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Greater London.
- [SecEd](#) also provides a useful source of guidance



## 7. Teaching and Learning - English as an additional language

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people may arrive in schools with varying proficiency in English. Providing high quality English as an additional language (EAL) support is key to unaccompanied asylum seeking young people thriving in education. A useful starting point is a baseline assessment of the young person's English proficiency. In general, good practice would involve carrying out an assessment in an environment that is familiar to the learner. You should also consider different contexts when assessing what a learner can or cannot do in English (for example, using language for social purposes or outside the classroom).

It is recommended to avoid using formal standardised tests (such as those that assess verbal reasoning or reading age). Such assessments are typically designed to assess the abilities of those whose first language is English and may contain vocabulary or cultural references which are unfamiliar to EAL learners. This may lead to underperformance in these assessments, and possible lower expectations for the EAL learner.

Below are a range of questions to consider when assessing pupils who use English as an additional language (taken from the Bell Foundation).

### English language background

- Has the learner had any prior English language input?
- Does the learner have any qualifications in English language from their home country?

### Previous education

- How much prior education has the EAL learner had?
- Have there been any gaps or interruptions in their education?
- What are typical teaching styles and expectations in the home country?
- What expectations were there with regard to parental involvement?
- What was the learner's attainment at their previous school?

### Language and literacy practices

- What languages are spoken at home?
- Are these languages spoken by the EAL learner?
- Who speaks which language to whom?
- Are there other families nearby that share the EAL learner's language?

### Family circumstances

- Who is the EAL learner living with?
- What is the family situation?
- Are there any circumstances the school or college should be made aware of?

## Religious and cultural considerations

- Are there any dietary needs to take into account?
- Are there any issues regarding clothing and changing for PE?

## Home language assessment

It is recommended, if possible, to arrange for a home language assessment that will give a much fuller picture of the learner, especially when used alongside other methods.

[For further information](#) on the importance of home language assessments and how to organise them.

There can be vast differences between the grammar, syntax, vocabulary and written rules of different languages, for example, word order and use of tenses. It will be important to understand these differences between the learners' home language and English to establish where additional support may be required. For example, in a lesson about the characters in a book, an Arabic speaking student might benefit from some input on the difference between who and which, since relative pronouns in Arabic do not distinguish between human and non-human forms.

The [Bell Foundation](#) provides further information in this area including links to booklets produced by the British Council about Arabic, Polish, Chinese and Urdu and typical differences between these languages and English.

## Supporting those new to English

It is useful to be aware that new learners of English may go through a 'silent' phase and appear withdrawn. In this case, monitor the young person's ongoing social, cognitive and linguistic development. Each learner's experience of the silent phase is influenced by individual factors so the length of time that the young person remains silent will vary. However, over time you should notice increased interaction with other young people and adults. Initially, this might consist of communication in the young person's first language, non-verbal communication (such as gestures) or copying of others.

Students typically develop basic 'survival' English within two years, which equips them with key interpersonal communication skills (for social environments or the playground, etc). It typically takes EAL learners about five to seven years to acquire the full range of academic language skills (grammar, syntax and so on) at the level required for the demands of a GCSE, BTEC or other key stage 4 course.

However, the length of time a young person received formal education in their first language is thought to impact how long it takes them to develop cognitive or academic language proficiency in English (it may take longer than seven years). Students should not automatically be disqualified for entry for formal examination due to EAL status. Consideration should be given to whether special considerations are required, for example, additional time, and to the range of strengths the student has in different subject areas, including in their home language.

There are freely available EAL assessment frameworks available from organisations such as the Bell Foundation. Classroom support strategies guides are also available on the [Bell Foundation website](#).

For those who are literate in their home language, [bilingual dictionaries](#) can be a useful tool. Information about bilingual dictionaries and how to use them is available here . [Bay language books](#) is an example of a company that specialises in bilingual dictionaries.

## English as an additional language and special educational needs

Distinguishing potential special educational needs (SEN) from the need for EAL support can be challenging. There is the risk of over-identification of SEN (for example, by underestimating what a young person is capable of) as well as under-identification (for example, viewing all difficulties solely through the lens of being an English language learner). If English is not a young person's mother tongue and they have had gaps in their previous education, special educational needs can be obscured and take longer to be identified.

UNICEF research (2018) suggests it is important to listen to the voice of the young person: if a young person self-identifies as struggling with learning this may indicate to key adults the need to explore further. A first language assessment may be particularly useful in highlighting whether a young person also experiences difficulties in their home language, or may reveal gaps in the degree to which it was possible to learn a first language (for example, did the young person learn to read in their first language?)

Information gathering and assessment over time and across contexts will help to develop the picture of any SEN difficulties and should consider the following.

- Continue English language acquisition support, making full use of a wide range of strategies.
- Target additional group/individual support to address SEN concerns (ideally provided by a bilingual language assistant for some of the time).
- Grouping to include good English language role models and same language speakers where possible.
- Plan for multi-lingual or multi-sensory approaches.
- Create opportunities for ongoing use of the learner's first language, to support both cognitive and language development (for first language and English)
- Work closely with carers and other first language speakers, if necessary, through translation
- Make use of local advice and support from the community
- Effective on-going liaison between support services.

(Adapted from 'Guidance on the assessment of pupils with English as an additional language who may have Special Educational Needs', Milton Keynes)

Further resources to support identification of special educational needs in EAL learners are signposted below, along with strategies to support learners with both EAL and SEN.

## EAL and SEN: identification and support strategies

- [Bell foundation](#): EAL learners with special educational needs or disabilities
- [Colorin Colorado](#): English language learners with special needs: effective instructional strategies
- [Milton Keynes Council](#): Guidance on the assessment of pupils with additional language who may have special educational needs
- [Naldic](#): Special educational needs - identification and assessment language needs or special needs: does it matter?



## 8. The role of AfC Virtual School

Virtual School headteachers are a statutory appointment for all local authorities and have a responsibility to champion the education of children looked after, previously looked after, care leavers and those with a child in need or child protection plan.

As part of this wider brief, AfC Virtual School plays a strategic role in promoting the educational achievement of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people.

Our general aim is for UASC to benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum in an inclusive mainstream secondary setting. To this end, we encourage prompt acceptance of admissions requests. We are keen to support schools in any adjustments that may be needed to meet the needs of this group.

Staff in AfC Virtual School support UASC through close multi-agency working and our offer includes the following.

- Attendance of school induction meetings to discuss assigning a 'buddy' (from the same country where possible), offering strategies to support learning, and identifying whole school activities or policies that will enable a UASC to feel welcomed, safe and feel a sense of belonging. This might include international evenings, national dishes included in school dinners provision, student body raised awareness of the issues for UASC and training for staff.
- AfC Virtual School in collaboration with partners in the Educational Psychology Service provide a comprehensive, year-long Attachment Aware Schools training programme. The focus is on understanding behaviour, raising awareness of emotion coaching techniques and moving away from a rewards and sanctions approach.
- Regular personal education plan meetings with funding available to support target completion.
- Complimentary tuition in English and maths including EAL tuition specific for UASC.
- Regular designated teacher forum.
- AfC Virtual College careers support and mentoring opportunities.
- Outreach support for time-bonded interventions.
- AfC Transition Hub intensive support for secondary new into care (Years 7 to 13).

For students who are care leavers, we continue support until age 25 and this includes the Care Leaver Recruitment Scheme championing opportunities for care leavers in AfC and our councils.

## 9. The Personal education plan (PEP): additional considerations for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people

It is a statutory requirement for all school age and post-16 young people to have a termly personal education plan. AfC Virtual School works with 'Welfare Call' which manages our electronic PEP system (ePEP). The designated teacher will need access to Welfare Call as all ePEP documents must be completed by the Welfare Call site. Further information about personal education plans in general is available on the [AfC Virtual School's website](#).

### Obtaining young person views

The young person is central to the PEP process and therefore, it is of paramount importance to consider how a young person's voice will be heard and their views known during PEP meetings.

You need to consider whether an interpreter is required to make sure the young person can comprehensively share their views and participate in their PEP meeting.

If needed, the PEP process should be explained to the young person in their home language, for example, through use of an interpreter.

### Aspirational target setting

Lack of English should never be equated to lack of knowledge or ability. Therefore, targets set should reflect high expectations and aspirations for the young person. Schools should aim to use SMART targets which focus on educational progress.

It is important to note that young people new to English will often make very rapid progress. PEP targets should reflect this.

The first PEP meeting should take place within 10 days of the young person starting at school or college.

Examples of possible target areas for the first PEP suitable for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum seeking young people with different school and English language experiences are outlined below. These broad areas will need to be made into SMART PEP targets relevant to the young person in collaboration with the wider network.

### A young person who has never experienced formal education

- Learning the route around school or college to different lessons or areas within school
- Bringing the appropriate equipment to lessons
- Punctuality to school and lessons

## A young person who is in the early stages of English language acquisition

- Being able to communicate basic needs in school or college
- Participate in lessons (could be non-verbal)
- Is able to demonstrate learning through a range of means including visually
- Focus on belonging and developing friendships - suitable for all language levels
- Participating in social or extra-curricular activities
- Developing friendships
- Interaction with peers or adults during lessons (could be non-verbal)

## Pupil premium funding

Pupil Premium Plus funding comes directly from the Government to the Virtual School headteacher and has strict conditions of use with regards to how it is spent. Please see the [AfC Virtual School's website](#) for more information about Pupil Premium funding.

AfC Virtual School delegates a portion of the Pupil Premium Plus funding to schools retrospectively at the end of each school term on a pro-rata basis depending on the amount of weeks the young person has been in care that term.

Pupil Premium Plus funding should be spent on interventions and support that are evidence based. Some ways of spending pupil premium funding for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum seeking young people may include:

- bilingual books, dictionaries and visual resources
- equipment (art materials, sports resources, musical instruments)
- IT (voice dictation software, talking pens) - ensure the young person receives appropriate support in how to use any devices provided.
- tuition (with interpreter if needed) to address specific needs
- extra-curricular activities
- wellbeing support

## 10. Transition to full time education, employment or training

- When considering how to support an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person to transition to full time education, employment or training, it is important to keep in mind and put in place all the usual support structures we would for any young person making this transition.
- Involve the young person in all decision making (make sure an interpreter is used when needed).
- Transition planning should start early.
- Use PEP meetings and looked after reviews to consider ideas for transition and opportunities for the young person to understand what different options are available to them (attending open days, taster days, etc).
- Ensure good careers advice is in place.
- Ensure developing independent skills (travel, organisation, budgeting, etc are incorporated into the young person's wider curriculum and support plans.
- Provide support to complete applications and interviews.
- Ensure effective information sharing and planning and preparation are in place during any transitions. The AfC Virtual School or College team can support this.

### Additional considerations for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people

- Keep aspirations high whilst recognising that additional support, including additional time, etc, may be needed to meet aspirations so that the young person is not overwhelmed.
- Future planning should be considerate of any anxieties a young person may experience regarding possible uncertainty about their immigration status and handled with appropriate support as to not confound anxiety in this area.
- Identify what the young person's conditions regarding education, employment or training. Some young people are able to access work whilst still waiting for full leave to remain.
- Be aware of scholarships specifically for UASC young people who are unable to access government funding. [For more information](#).
- A young person can volunteer even if they have no right to work. This is something to consider when 'building' the CV of a young person in readiness to work.



## Appendix A:

### School or college induction checklist for newly arrived or unaccompanied asylum seeking young people

Key information:	
Young person:	
Social worker or personal adviser:	
AfC Virtual School or College contact:	
Personal education plan meeting date:	

### Key messages

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people are a very diverse group. Their proficiency in English levels may vary from being new to English to fluent. They can arrive with widely different socio-economic and educational backgrounds ranging from having had a high standard of education to very little or interrupted schooling. Therefore, understanding the young person's previous educational experiences are essential for planning educational support. The below [checklist](#) is aimed to act as a guide to support thinking about planning an effective induction for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.

### Preparation and planning (prior to the young person's start in school or college)

Arrange a preparation and planning meeting. At a minimum, the following people should be invited: relevant school staff that are co-ordinating the educational and pastoral support for the young person, young person, carer, social worker, AfC Virtual School. Please note that if the young person is not proficient in English, an interpreter will be required for this meeting.

The below provides areas that are likely to be helpful to explore during the school or college preparation meeting (not all of these will be relevant to all young people).

### Young person information

- ☐ How is the young person's name pronounced and spelt? What name would they prefer to be called at school or college, if different? If needed, note it down phonetically to act as a reminder.
- ☐ When did the young person arrive in the UK? From which country?
- ☐ Has the young person had an age assessment? If yes, age agreed at assessment?
- ☐ Do they have any friends, family or community connections in the local area or wider UK?
- ☐ Young person's interests, hobbies or relevant experiences

## Educational history

- ☐ Has the young person been educated in their home country?  
If yes, to what age and level?
- ☐ In what language was their previous education?
- ☐ Description of educational experiences (formal or informal learning? Exams taken? Teaching styles and expectations in previous learning experiences?)
- ☐ Subjects studied and favourite subjects
- ☐ Experience or understanding of ICT? Accessing or using the internet?
- ☐ Any learning needs or additional support required in previous learning experiences?

## Language

### Home language skills

- ☐ What languages does the young person speak?
- ☐ Can they read and write in their first language?

### English language skills

- ☐ Have they had any exposure to English or English language teaching previously?
- ☐ If so, can they: understand any spoken English? Use any spoken English? Read in English? Write in English?
- ☐ Is an English language assessment required?

## Culture or religion

- ☐ Does the young person have any cultural or religious needs to be met in school?  
If yes, how would they like these to be met?
- ☐ Is the young person attending or likely to attend home language classes or a supplementary school or tuition?
- ☐ Does the young person attend a religious school, such as Mosque classes? Are the classes during the week or at weekends?

## To discuss with the young person

- ☐ How may school or college in the UK be similar or different to their previous experiences?
- ☐ What support needs to be put in place to support them to understand the UK education system? Who will provide this support? When?
- ☐ Do they have the necessary equipment for school or college?
- ☐ Uniform if required, bag, stationary, ICT equipment, bilingual dictionary, etc?
- ☐ Who will provide this and when?
- ☐ How will the young person travel to school? Do they need any support with this?
- ☐ Does the young person have any questions or concerns?

## Education planning

The following prompts aim to support thinking about the practical elements required for supporting the young person's induction into their new school or college.

- ☐ **Year group:** the aim should be for UASCs to be educated in their chronological age group. 'Back yearling' a young person can have a negative impact on outcomes according to Education Endowment Foundation Research
- ☐ **Timetable:** consider benefits of a full timetable vs 'doubling up' of curriculum subjects vs time for intervention or small group work.
- ☐ **Class grouping or sets:** UASCs should be placed in groupings or sets in line with their cognitive abilities (not placed in lower sets purely due to learning English). UASCs will need access to strong language and learning role models.
- ☐ **Information sharing with relevant teaching or pastoral staff:** inform all teaching staff that they will be joining their class, how to pronounce their name, first language, country of origin, English language abilities and previous educational background.
- ☐ **Key adult:** Identify a member of staff who has the time and capacity to check on the young person at least at the start and end of the school or college day, check how they are settling in and to be the young person's first point of contact if there are any difficulties. This is often their form tutor, learning mentor, EMAS co-ordinator, designated teacher, etc.
- ☐ **Peer buddies:** If the school or college has other young people who speak the same first language in the same year group, they can often be an effective peer buddy, especially in the initial days and weeks. Young people also appreciate opportunities to form relationships with those from a range of backgrounds including proficient English language speakers. Is the peer buddy clear on what to do in this role?
- ☐ **Additional support: What additional support may the young person need?**
  - ☐ Pastoral or wellbeing
  - ☐ English language skills
  - ☐ Curriculum knowledge
  - ☐ Learning or study skills (planning, organisation)
  - ☐ Independent living skills (travel, money, safety)

## Induction or first day

An induction or transition day will provide the young person with an opportunity to become familiar with the likely very different structure of their new school or college. It will help them experience the new environment and what the expectations for the future will be. Induction or transition days support confidence building with regards to the school or college experience.

- ☐ Key person to greet the young person on entry to school or college.
- ☐ Tour of school or college and facilities.
- ☐ Provide a map with key locations highlighted.
- ☐ Meet allocated student buddy.
- ☐ Meet tutor or key staff.
- ☐ Basic needs: ensure young person can find the toilet, canteen, religious or cultural facilities and knows any expectations about accessing these.
- ☐ Provide any necessary resources and show the young person how to use them: bilingual dictionary, electronic translators, talking pen, laptops, etc.
- ☐ Share school or college expectations, rules and boundaries (needing to stay on site during school day).

## First weeks and ongoing support

- ☐ Daily check in and out at start and end of the day, including focus on academic (access to teaching and learning) and wellbeing needs (monitoring inclusion and belonging).
- ☐ Targeted English language learning as needed by the young person.
- ☐ Use good practice strategies for students with English as an additional language across the curriculum.
- ☐ Signpost to social activities and clubs in school or college that the young person may enjoy.
- ☐ Consider whether the young person would benefit from attending 'taster lessons' in some subjects they are likely to be less familiar to support informed decision making regarding curriculum options.
- ☐ After a settling period of a couple of weeks, consider baseline assessment to support further identification of support, intervention or provision.

## Appendix B:

# Views of young people: A summary of AfC Virtual School focus groups with unaccompanied asylum seeking young people

AfC Virtual School has undertaken focus groups, with the support of the Institute of Education via their Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children (PALAC) to gather the views of local unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people to explore how AfC Virtual School, schools and colleges could better support them in their education.

The young people in the focus groups had a range of experiences of education in the UK and had been in England for between 10 months and three years. Themes regarding facilitators and barriers to education from the young people's perspectives are outlined below and have shaped the information contained in this guidance.

### Facilitators of education

- College resources, for example: being provided with laptops, relevant text books and equipment, access to the internet and a place to study.
- Helpful college tutors.
- Support from college.
- English mentor once a week.
- Support from social worker.
- Being able to attend a language course over the summer before joining college.

### Barriers to education

- Solely being on an ESOL course - there are no English students on ESOL courses so it is difficult to meet new English people which also slows down learning English.
- Lack of opportunities to meet other English students generally - difficulties making links when they don't share social or learning experiences.
- Often put in lower classes such as maths because of lack of English rather than ability.

## What would further support look like

- Induction: When going to school or college for the first time be shown around, be provided with a map or handed information to refer to later.
- Bi-lingual dictionary on arrival to support independence with language learning.
- Support or time to learn subject specific vocabulary such as maths.
- Organise opportunities or social events to meet new people.
- Have a mentor.
- Having a buddy who is also a UASC or speaks the same first language (when possible).
- Having an English speaking buddy, to support to navigate the social world of school or college.