

Covid-19 & Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children in the UK

The daily lives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are wrought with challenges and uncertainty. As they wait months, sometimes even years, for their asylum status to be determined, they are expected to adapt to a new culture, learn English, build new relationships, and overcome past experiences. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these children are now facing further obstacles. This briefing document presents the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK. It will also identify the responses to Covid-19 from the government and charity sector, as well as recommendations for the transition to the post Covid-19 phase.

1. IMPACTS

The key areas of impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of unaccompanied children are:

Asylum process

On 19 March 2020, all face to face asylum interviews were cancelled and the Home Office ceased to schedule dates for future interviews. Asylum decisions were also put on hold.

- Those affected will be feeling deeply anxious and concerned about when their interview will be rescheduled.
- Unaccompanied children on the cusp of turning 18 face greater uncertainty as this is the threshold at which they are no longer entitled to receive the safeguards that children are afforded.

Education

As with most children in the UK, unaccompanied children are unable to attend school or college.

- Many unaccompanied children who are enrolled in formal education will be expected to access their classes online. This could prove challenging if they do not own a laptop.
- Unaccompanied children are provided with a weekly allowance by social services; the amount varies depending on the local authority and the circumstances of the child. Most of them will be expected to pay for data on their phone from their allowance and some may also be paying for data for their laptop thus leaving them with less money for other essentials.
- Buying larger data packages can be prohibitively costly and some may find it complicated to set up.

- Unaccompanied children may not feel comfortable participating in online classes if they are not accustomed to using technology in this way and thus may become disengaged from education.

Accommodation

Unaccompanied children are either accommodated in a foster placement or in semi-independent accommodation. The type of housing they are provided largely depends on the age of the child, their self-care skills and other additional needs.

- The scope and responsibilities of foster carers will have increased during Covid-19 as unaccompanied children require their support to understand and adapt to life in lockdown. Unaccompanied children may enjoy spending more time with their foster carers and they may use this period as an opportunity to rest as meetings, appointments and assessments that they usually attend are put on hold. For others it could be far more challenging for many different reasons. They may be unhappy in their placement if they are not appropriately supported and have a strong desire to be moved; they may feel isolated if they live alone with their carer and thus feel disheartened from the lack of contact with other children; they may find that more time spent in a familial setting evokes painfully nostalgic memories of their own family and life back home.
- Unaccompanied children housed in semi-independent accommodation are at a greater risk of contracting Covid-19 due to shared living spaces and communal kitchens. As unaccompanied children cannot choose which young people in care they wish to be housed with, they may find that tensions between cohabitants are more likely to arise now that they are required to spend more of their time indoors. They may also feel anxious about socialising with others in their accommodation and thus may suffer from a greater sense of loneliness if they confine themselves to their rooms.

Accessing Services

Unaccompanied children are looked after under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 by the local authority in which they are first encountered. They are supported by social workers and key workers during their time in care. Many also seek (or are offered) additional support from charities providing relevant and/or specialist services.

- Unaccompanied children may not feel sufficiently supported as contact with social workers and key workers is now largely by telephone.
- There will almost certainly be significant delays in social services beginning and/or completing age assessments as these are usually conducted in person. The consequent prolonged uncertainty is very likely to cause increased anxiousness for those children affected.

Social

Many refugee charities provide unaccompanied children with a safe space in which they can form friendships, socialise and speak their own languages; they often regard these spaces as second homes.

- Unaccompanied children with low levels of English will be at a greater disadvantage during this period as understanding the severity of the virus, the need for lockdown restrictions and social distancing will be very difficult for them. If unaccompanied children are not provided with up to date, relevant information in their own languages, it is likely that they will become frustrated at the situation and may not follow national guidelines which could put themselves and others at risk.
- Most charities are now closed and are operating online or by telephone therefore unaccompanied children may be finding it difficult to cope without these places of solace.
- The support networks that unaccompanied children have created since arriving in the UK through religious communities, sports, charities etc. will now have increased barriers to access.

Disabilities

Unaccompanied children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities are supported by their social workers to access the services they need.

- Unaccompanied children with disabilities may not have the adapted technology they need to access education or social activities online.
- Social workers must ensure that unaccompanied children with disabilities are provided with information on Covid-19 in accessible formats.
- Unaccompanied children must be involved in decisions that are made about their health during the pandemic and must continue to access any support they require.

LGBT

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are LGBT have fled their home country in fear of persecution sometimes because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

- Unaccompanied children who are sharing accommodation with other young people may be subject to higher levels of harassment and discrimination whilst in quarantine and may lack access to the discreet support that they need.
- Safe spaces that are provided by LGBT groups can no longer be accessed thus unaccompanied children who are LGBT may feel an additional sense of isolation.

Physical Health

Unaccompanied children are entitled to free primary health care and are exempt from paying prescription charges. Access to free secondary care is dependent on their asylum status when they reach 17.5 years old.

- Unaccompanied children have had long arduous journeys to the UK and as a result may have underlying health conditions potentially increasing their susceptibility to Covid-19.
- Some unaccompanied children suffer from poor dental health due to malnutrition and lack of dental hygiene. This may be due to limited access to healthcare prior to migration and/or during their journeys. Dentist appointments are extremely restricted during lockdown and can only be accessed in cases of emergency.

Mental Health

Unaccompanied children suffer from various types of trauma to varying degrees, however all share the pain of separation from (and often loss of) family members.

- The lack of routine brought about by college closures and activity cancellations can add to their sense of loneliness and helplessness.
- Attempting to come to terms with their experiences takes time and often requires professional help. Many therapeutic services can now be accessed virtually however unaccompanied children may find it challenging to share their feelings over the phone or laptop. They may also worry about being overheard if they live in close proximity to others.

Discrimination

There have been various reports of increases in xenophobia and racism against migrants since the onset of Covid-19 in the UK. It is likely that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will be targets for such abuse in this hostile environment.

- Covid-19 has created a sense of fear towards others and this fear is being projected onto migrants. Migrants are being blamed for the spread of Covid-19 by far-right groups and ultra-nationalist groups which has led to an increasing number of reports of verbal abuse as well as physical attacks and beatings [i].
- Unaccompanied children, particularly those of Asian descent, are now at an increased risk of verbal and physical abuse.

2. RESPONSES

UK Government

Finding suitable responses to the issues caused by Covid-19 has been a challenge for the UK government. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are particularly at risk given their reliance on the state (i.e. social services) to protect their physical and mental wellbeing.

- Under the Coronavirus Act, the government has relaxed the legal duties of local authorities towards young people in care. These include the easing of intervals between mandatory visits by social workers as well as around independent reviews of a child's care. Amendments also allow for emergency foster placements to be made faster as well as the standards of care in residential settings to be lowered. The removal of these vital safeguards could lead to neglect and ultimately put the lives of all children in care at an increased level of risk. While these measures are said to be temporary, there is significant concern that they could be made permanent[ii].
- Unaccompanied children are now able to attend the Asylum Intake Unit (AIU) to make their claim and have their biometrics taken. The Home Office has opened five temporary AIUs to ease the number of people attending the facility in Croydon and to reduce travel time. Substantive interviews are on hold and alternative ways to conduct them i.e. by telephone or video call, are being explored. Although the Home Office has resumed making asylum decisions on cases where they have the required information, any others will continue to be on hold. Asylum appeals will be determined either as a paper or telephone hearing[iii].
- The government has recently launched a digital devices and internet access scheme to ensure children in care can access education online and stay connected to their friends[iv]. However, local authorities are only allocated a certain number of laptops and must decide which children in care have the greatest need to receive one.

Third Sector

The additional support that is provided by charitable organisations is needed more than ever.

- Many organisations and charities that support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have adapted quickly to working from home and have found it possible to deliver their services over the phone or online.
- Many are providing asylum support, Covid-19 information and therapy over the phone through interpreters.
- Some organisations are also offering digital ESOL and maths classes as well as social gatherings so that unaccompanied children can see their friends and participate in fun activities.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations will ensure unaccompanied asylum-seeking children feel supported and connected during this period of uncertainty:

- UK government to monitor the impact of the Coronavirus Act on unaccompanied children
- Provide all unaccompanied children with a smartphone and a laptop/tablet if they do not own one already
- Ensure unaccompanied children have affordable and generous data packages
- Arrange weekly phone calls to young people to check on wellbeing and to provide asylum process changes/ updates
- Raise awareness of counselling services to all unaccompanied children and signpost to mindfulness/relaxation resources online
- Check young people are connected to friends and are able to maintain regular contact. If they are new to the country, connect them with another young person their age
- Offer 1-to-1 tuition for unaccompanied children who struggle with online classes
- Refer unaccompanied children to mentoring services to mitigate sense of loneliness during lockdown and help them plan for the future
- Gather evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on the daily lives of unaccompanied children to inform government policy and practice.

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[i]
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-world-wide>

[ii]
<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/sector-leaders-hit-back-at-dangerous-relaxation-of-councils-statutory-duties>

[iii]
<https://refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/changes-to-home-office-asylum-resettlement-policy-and-practice-in-response-to-covid-19/>

[iv]

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>