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# Fostering Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People

A research project

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## Introduction

Young people arriving in the UK unaccompanied by a responsible adult and seeking asylum from political, religious or other forms of persecution form a small but significant part of the looked after children population. The needs and circumstances of these young people are complex. They have often been chosen by their family as the child who most needed to be rescued or who was most likely to establish themselves in a new safe country for the opportunity and rewards that might create. For many families, the investment of large sums of money to traffickers to secure the young person's journey and overcome the numerous hurdles to arrival in the UK is itself a major barrier to be overcome. The characteristics of young people seeking asylum today suggests that they are mostly teenage males from countries embroiled in war or significant political, ethnic or religious conflict.

The journey itself is often extremely arduous and traumatic, full of risk and uncertainty, and usually ends in an ambivalent welcome into the UK. It is not known how many young people fail during that journey or the detail of the experiences they suffer. But to survive indicates a determination, resilience and sense of hope that is almost unimaginable. These characteristics signify for the young person and for the UK a source of enormous potential. But the dominant issue at arrival and onwards is their asylum claim, the evidence that supports that claim and the repeated questioning of the basis of that claim. The claim for asylum is in itself a most difficult journey, also full of doubt, risk and suspicion but with a more certain outcome – most claims for asylum are refused.

Welcoming an unaccompanied asylum-seeking young person into a foster family is complex – full of hope but with many sources of misunderstanding and tension. Most of these young people are unlikely to have a concept of fostering, of the nature and meaning of family life in the UK or of the routines, opportunities, expectations and rules of family and community life. For the foster family, they are likely to be welcoming a young person whom they do not know and to have little sense of their background, their origins or recent experiences. As well as having to negotiate the bureaucracy of foster care, the young person and foster carer both have to negotiate the reality of difference – of ethnicity, culture, religion, and language. These are translated into negotiations about every aspect of daily living – food, dress, hygiene, music, time, authority and boundaries. Similar negotiations occur around school, health and leisure. And these negotiations are two-way: young person–foster carer and foster carer–young person. The challenge for both is to adapt, to learn and enjoy. But there is a real risk that the opposite could happen.

## The research objectives

The project was designed to explore, explain and understand the responses of local authorities in planning for and placing unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in foster care. The research aimed to evaluate the evidence gathered from foster carers and young people about their perspectives on the placement, and its meaning, significance and outcomes. It explored the integration or otherwise of the young people into the wider community, through education and the development of meaningful social networks. It also sought to place these experiences in the context of the preparation, training and support provided to the foster carers and their families.

## The research design

- We undertook a census survey in four local authorities to provide information on all 2,113 unaccompanied young people identified as being supported by these local authorities on 31 March 2009.
- We undertook a postal survey of 133 foster carers who were providing a placement to an unaccompanied child on 31 December 2009.
- We conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 foster carers and 21 young people.
- We undertook a policy and practice study, including focus groups with social workers and young people, and gathered the views of various key stakeholders.

## Changing care and placement pathways

The vast majority of young people in the census survey were being formally “looked after” by their local authorities. This represents a significant change from that which was common a few years ago, where most unaccompanied young people were supported in the community as children “in need”. This new status is important, guaranteeing young people access to allocated social work, care planning and review procedures and to pathway planning and aftercare support. For most unaccompanied young people in the past, all social work support had stopped on reaching 18.

However, the census study indicates that only a minority of young people (those aged below 16 at arrival) are afforded access to foster care and that amongst those aged 16 plus, the vast majority are placed in private sector shared housing with (or without) support. The availability of and reduction in central government grants (which are age-related) to local authorities plays a major part in determining these pathways. Given the circumstances of these young people, this situation is of concern.

## Assessment and preparation for foster care

Age is an important marker of eligibility for asylum claims and for receipt of social work services. Age determination is therefore an important feature of assessment, one that can overshadow an assessment of young people as children “in need”, a process that in itself is challenging and complex. Many social workers and foster carers were able to maintain a consistent focus on the needs of young people as individuals, with an appropriate perspective on the authenticity of young people’s stories. Time is almost always pressing. Age assessment decisions are required quickly, when practitioners know that time is needed to produce good, well rounded assessments. Many young people require placement on the day of referral. Initial assessments therefore focused on immediate practical needs, leaving exploration of deeper issues for a time when young people were more settled. Good assessments involve relationship building, and the development of trust when there is a profound and understandable unease with the objectives of officialdom. There was strong evidence that many foster carers and social workers negotiated this task extremely well over time.

The young people had little, if any, understanding of foster care or of what to expect from foster carers. Careful explanations of what a particular family would be like were both needed and welcomed. Preparation time was also constrained for foster carers, often amounting to little more than a couple of hours notice. Many placements were made with independent fostering providers and the relationship with the local authority may not have been well developed. Only one-third of foster carers felt well prepared for their first placement of this kind, usually in circumstances where they had personal experience of migration, where they shared the young person’s religious or ethnic background, where they had had previous contact with refugees (through fostering or employment), or where they had received formal training from the local authority.

## Settling into foster care

The demands placed on foster care families to understand and meet the needs of young people whose life experiences were constructed in a “different world” were extensive. In foster placements that worked well, an initial offer of “hospitality” to a stranger paved the way for the development of more intimate family-like relationships over time. The way hospitality was initially constructed and experienced had a profound impact on the placement, especially where there was no prior link by language, religion or custom – from initial signifiers of welcome (in the young person’s language), through use of sign language or shared pursuits, including use of the internet to explore familiar points of reference for young people, or through enquiries into the dietary customs, likes or dislikes of young people. These were some of the foundations

of relationship building that were remembered as points of change in the depth and meaning of these relationships.

Familiar foods, with their scents and reminders of home, could act as a marker of inclusion and belonging. It provided a simple psychological fix that helped young people to find their bearings. Sourcing, preparing and eating homeland meals was a challenge for many foster carers, but those who were able to do this were rewarded by the sense of closeness it could bring and by the strengthening of emotional bonds. In contrast, food could also act as a marker of difference and exclusion within the household (meals cooked entirely separately, locked kitchen cupboards to regulate access to food and so on). These examples were fortunately relatively few in number but do indicate the importance of the foster carers being properly trained, supervised and supported.

Trust and responsibility were other markers, with keys to the house being made available, being left alone in the house or taking responsibility for family business, such as caring for valuables or the family pet. The vexed issue of “matching” seemed to have little obvious part to play in how these issues worked out. Difference was the norm and more general factors such as sensitivity, the capacity to adjust and adapt and be positively curious played a more significant part in how well the placement was working out. While “matched” placements could bring ease of communication, familiarity and more shared points of reference, these qualities in foster carers helped foster placements to work well more generally.

## Developing family relationships

The development of meaningful relationships extended into the foster family with the carer’s own child or other family members playing an important role. Introducing the young person into education and health services was an important part of this provision of hospitality, demanding major adjustments on the part of the young person. Similar issues were identified with participation in sport and leisure. The regulation and bureaucracy of foster care often has difficulty in lending itself to a language that acknowledges the essence of “ordinary” family life in foster care households, adjusting and re-adjusting to the rhythms and practices of daily experience. In the best of the families that we studied, family structure, relationships, routines and practice were adjusted to incorporate the young person as an active participant, enabling them to help shape family practices in ways that were meaningful for all concerned.

Three-quarters of foster carers reported that the placements were working “very well” for both them and the young people. The majority of young people were seen to have become integrated into the structure of family life. However, there were a sizeable minority who had not. Here, differences remained a source of tension: young people tended to be placed at the margins of family life, with any growing sense of “becoming settled” seemingly absent. One-third of the young people expressed a desire to leave, perhaps reflecting that absence of settlement in the foster family, with tensions around money, age disputes and existing family rules and practices being relatively common. But these tensions may also reflect other pressing agendas – the fear of a decision about the asylum claim, the need to earn money, or the need to find friends or make contact with family members.

In reviewing the evidence as a whole, therefore, three broad categorisations of placement could be identified:

- **family-like relationships**, where the adaptation and adjustment of structure, relationships and practices had resulted in a sense of settlement that was expected to provide a source of enduring, meaningful support after the placement had ended;
- **temporary home bases**, where the foster carer and young person had made adjustments that enabled the placement to work well, but where a sense of emotional distance was present that resulted in there being a limited form of family life that would be unlikely to continue after the young person left;
- **lodgings**, where the basics of daily living were usually available but where boundaries were firmly drawn in ways that indicated this was a functional arrangement with no real prospect of settlement.

## Bridging the placement: education and social networks

Schools and colleges are places where the lives of unaccompanied young people can regain an ordinary rhythm. Education and language acquisition are essential for young people to realise their ambitions. Schools and community settings (religious, youth and leisure activities) are important social sites for making friends and broadening the scope of young people’s relationships. Foster carers (alongside social workers) often acted as advocates (to access education and resolve educational problems); as facilitators of additional language support, where this was needed; and provided ongoing support and encouragement (as good parents would). Young people were often described as being

highly motivated. Over two-thirds were making reasonably good progress in their studies, especially where support was good; where the courses they attended were thought to be appropriate to their skills and abilities; where their placement had remained stable; and where they exhibited few signs of emotional or behavioural difficulties.

Many foster carers were active in helping young people to make social connections outside of the placement. Ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural links with members of young people's own countries of origin helped to create initial feelings of comfort, security and companionship and to reduce the feelings of isolation associated with migration. However, not all young people wanted these links to the same degree. Some chose not to make these cultural and religious connections, preferring to make a heavier commitment to cross-cultural relationships, or their involvement in such connections ebbed and flowed over time. It is important to remember that young people's concepts of religion, culture and identity are fluid and may change over time, and that over-generalising assumptions about cultural and religious needs are not helpful.

Access to wider social networks commonly occurred through schools, colleges or through youth, leisure and sporting activities. Most young people had a wide range of hobbies and interests that were a source of pride to them and they valued the interest and involvement of foster carers and their families in supporting these interests. However, experiences of bullying and racism were not uncommon and acted as a brake on participation. Most took measures to avoid these threats; some attempted to conceal their identities, at least initially, although others spoke about their position as community outsiders, which could sometimes be overcome with time as they gained local acceptance.

## Preparing for transition

The approach of adulthood brings the likely consequences of the asylum process to the fore. It is a stressful time. Alongside the complex transitions made by other care leavers (from school to work, from care to independence), there is also the constant threat of forced removal. Local authorities have clear duties to help young people prepare and plan for adult life and to provide ongoing aftercare support while young people are in the UK. Foster carers (and social workers) had key roles to play in providing practical help, emotional support and companionship to young people preparing for transition (most had not yet left care). Most foster carers expected to continue to have a place in young people's lives once they had left. Consistent with wider leaving care research, this was more likely where young people were strongly integrated into the structure of the family, where things were going well and where they exhibited few behavioural challenges.

Facing up to the prospect of enforced return was difficult for all concerned. Very few young people wanted to return. Most, having spent their formative years in the UK, wanted to settle. Questions of identity and belonging were clouded by their emotional distance from “home”. Yet, in a climate where immigration policies have been tightened and the likelihood of return has grown, there was a sense that social work practice was having to change in response and that the question of return was earning a more central place in pathway planning than had been the case in the past, when return was less common. Planning drift should be avoided and it is important that pathway planning (or “triple planning” as it is often called) takes account of all likely outcomes of the asylum process. It is important for planning to be realistic, to weigh all the options and pathways open to young people so that they can make informed choices about their future, even where this is unlikely to be in the UK.

## Conclusions

The overall findings from this study are positive. Our foster carers were broadly satisfied with their experience of fostering and felt it had enriched their lives. Most were satisfied with the support and training they had received to help them with their role. This was more likely where they had personal experience of migration or of contact and involvement with refugee communities. Other foster carers had felt less well prepared, frequently lacked confidence in their ability to meet young people’s cultural and immigration needs and these areas of training and support need to be strengthened. There is a risk that the needs of experienced foster carers coming new to fostering unaccompanied young people may be overlooked and their skill set too often taken for granted. Social work support was valued when everyone worked together, where it was responsive and reliable and where foster carers felt involved in decision-making.

Most foster carers had shown great commitment to the young people in their care. They had not only opened their homes but, in many cases, had allowed young people to make an imprint on the cultural life and practices of their families. By being adaptive, flexible and willing to share, many foster carers and young people had managed to create a network of family-like relationships that helped young people to settle, thrive and explore life within and beyond the placement. Not all young people were this fortunate, however, and where young people only lodged or found a temporary home, these relationships were inevitably much more constrained.

Foster carers were presented with many challenges. Young people’s stories were frequently painful to witness, although some foster carers were able to help young people organise their immigration statements. Not infrequently, young people presented behavioural challenges, resisted the rules and rhythms of the placement or pressed



for extra material resources in ways that created tension. There were also tensions at cultural borders that emerged in relation to gender roles, norms and customs. However, where these were overcome, young people tended to settle and develop new feelings of belonging. Foster carers were then frequently viewed as parent figures, confidantes and companions.

It is important to be mindful that only a minority of unaccompanied young people get to experience foster care or only do so for a very short period of time. Most move to private shared housing which we know is variable in quality. The range of supported accommodation that currently exists for this group is too restricted and requires expansion. Local authorities are also under increasing pressure. While the number of foster placements is relatively static, the demands placed upon them are growing as more children enter the care system. Loss of resources will add to these pressures and there is concern that the situation for unaccompanied young people will worsen. These are the realities of recessionary Britain. There is no doubt that good foster care can make a positive difference to the lives of many unaccompanied young people. At its best, it provides for warm family-like relationships that can be transformative for young people and foster families alike. But the extent to which unaccompanied young people will continue to be afforded this opportunity, only time will tell.

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