

UKBA – invitations to local authorities to be specialist authorities for the support and care of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

Following the UKBA letter to Chief Executives and Children's Services Directors at the end of August, you will be aware that they are planning to hold a seminar in Leeds on 1 October.

Below at 2 and 3 is an extract from the information provided in the latest UKBA briefing to the National Migration Group last week. The italics are mine which I feel are parts worth drawing your particular attention to. I've added some further comment below the extract.

“2. Key Objectives

Overall

We must safeguard the asylum system from abuse and do more to identify and deter those who are not in genuine need of asylum, while at the same time ensuring the best possible responses to those with a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin.

Specifically

- **Faster Asylum Decisions.** Ensuring the immigration status of the child is decided as quickly as possible and removing the uncertainty over their longer term future.
- **Improved Pathway Planning.** Care planning must take fully into account the position of both the successful applicant and their need for effective integration, and the position of unsuccessful applicants who will be required to return to their country of origin.
- **Better Age Assessment.** We have initiated research of the various techniques available and their use elsewhere. The results of our analysis will determine whether, for example, the use of medical techniques should/can be introduced into the asylum screening process for UASC. This will help counter the abuse of the system by adults claiming to be UASC. It is essential that care services are accessed only by the appropriate age group.
- ***Specialist model of support for UASC: we are not suggesting that local authorities treat UASC any differently to other children in their care when it comes to providing the main care support services. The specialism that is needed is to ensure that the immigration issues relating to the UASC form an integral part of any care planning, especially if the ultimate result is that the child may be returned to their country of origin at 18 (if not before).***
- **Safe Case Transfer.** As local authorities have the duty of care for any child who presents in their area we need to agree a process with them where we can have UASC who present in London and the South East transferred to local authorities in the main NAM regions. There is a need to relieve the disproportionate pressure currently placed on London and the South East.

3. Why is there a need for reform?

Local Authorities

- There are over 130 local authorities who are currently supporting UASC in the UK. Not surprisingly, this has led to significant inconsistencies in the services and support that they receive.
- Under the current system the LA governing the area where a child presents as an asylum seeker is responsible for that child's support needs. This is the case regardless that the particular authority may be overstretched by the numbers it is already dealing with or lacks the necessary expertise and specialist infrastructure.

- Around 70% of UASC are currently supported by Local Authorities in London and the South East. These are the most expensive areas in which to support UASC. Any move to rebalance the numbers may have an added effect of reducing inflation in the Care Market in these areas caused by the high demand for these services.

Current Position

Establishment of Specialist Authorities

- Now that agreement has been reached with the LGA and London Councils over historical funding claims we are keen to make progress with the reforms set out in the "Better Outcomes" paper.
- A letter was sent to all Chief Executives of Local Authorities and Directors of Children's Services on 28 August notifying them of regional workshops scheduled to take place during October. *At the workshops local authorities will have the opportunity to discuss any remaining concerns they may have about engaging with the reform programme and how they should submit their bids to the Agency if they are interested in becoming a specialist authority.*
- *By the end of November 2008 local authorities interested in becoming specialist authorities will have been invited to submit an indication of how many children and young people they believe they can accommodate, and at what cost. Thereafter the Agency will hold separate discussions with the relevant authorities with a view to operating new reception and processing arrangements by the beginning of the next financial year.*
- *A dedicated joint UKBA/Local Authority Working Group is being established to resolve concerns over the funding of former UASC who have been refused asylum yet remain in the UK beyond their 18th birthday.*

Age Assessment

- Following the publication of "*Better Outcomes: The Way Forward*" a Working Group was set up to look at the evidence behind the various methods of age assessment. The group brought together colleagues from within UKBA, representatives from the main intake authorities, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and various NGOs involved in the area of children / asylum.
- A plenary meeting of the Age Assessment Working Group took place on 4 August. This brought together the various strands of discussion and evidence which had been presented to the working group over the previous six months. There was general agreement that the social worker age assessment should remain as the main form of deciding age. It was however acknowledged that there was a need to improve and standardise the process. Work is now beginning on looking at updating guidance, developing training in age assessment and providing an avenue to appeal against decisions.
- No consensus was reached on the use of medical age assessment (paediatricians' reports and x-rays) but work is ongoing on how UKBA should respond to these when they are commissioned by applicants."

My comments

- i. The UKBA is still glossing over the difficulties and economic impacts of supporting UASC after 18 and indeed do not seem to understand any other concerns LAs may have.

- ii. They have given a timescale for submitting proposals/costs. The model and experience we have through the accommodation contract could be used to assist in this.
- iii. UKBA early seemed to offering full-cost recovery and conditions set by LA business proposals. It remains to be seen whether they can deliver this.
- iv. Nevertheless, this is an opportunity to be able to plan for UASC by determining numbers and putting good support structures in place and obtaining funding for it which can be used to provide wider services as appropriate. The accommodation contracts for asylum seekers have made a substantial contribution to services across housing for asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups, for the past 8 years.
- v. UKBA will be very keen to have Leeds' involvement in this as it is the hub for the region.

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