

From: Peter Oakford, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services
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To: Scrutiny Committee
11 December 2015

Decision No: N/A

Subject: **UPDATE ON UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN**

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway: Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee
2 December 2015

Future Pathway: None

Electoral Division: All

Summary: Since June 2015, Kent County Council (KCC) has seen an unprecedented rise in the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) arriving in the county and subsequently entering KCC's care. UASC now make up more than a third of all children that KCC looks after.

This paper details the steps that have been taken by KCC since June 2015 and builds on verbal and written updates to:

Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee (22 July, 8 September and 2 December 2015)

KCC's Corporate Parenting Panel (3 September and 23 October 2015)

County Council meeting (22 October 2015)

Recommendation(s): Scrutiny Committee is asked to **COMMENT ON** and **NOTE** the content of the report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Prior to June 2015, there had been a relatively steady increase month on month in the numbers of UASC arriving into Kent and becoming accommodated by the Council. Recent world events though have led to a developing crisis within the county and pressure on both KCC services and the services of partner agencies (e.g. Kent Police and local NHS among others). This is well documented within both national and local news.

1.2 The table below details the numbers of referrals relating to individual unaccompanied minors received by KCC children’s services within 2015 to the end of November:

Figure 1

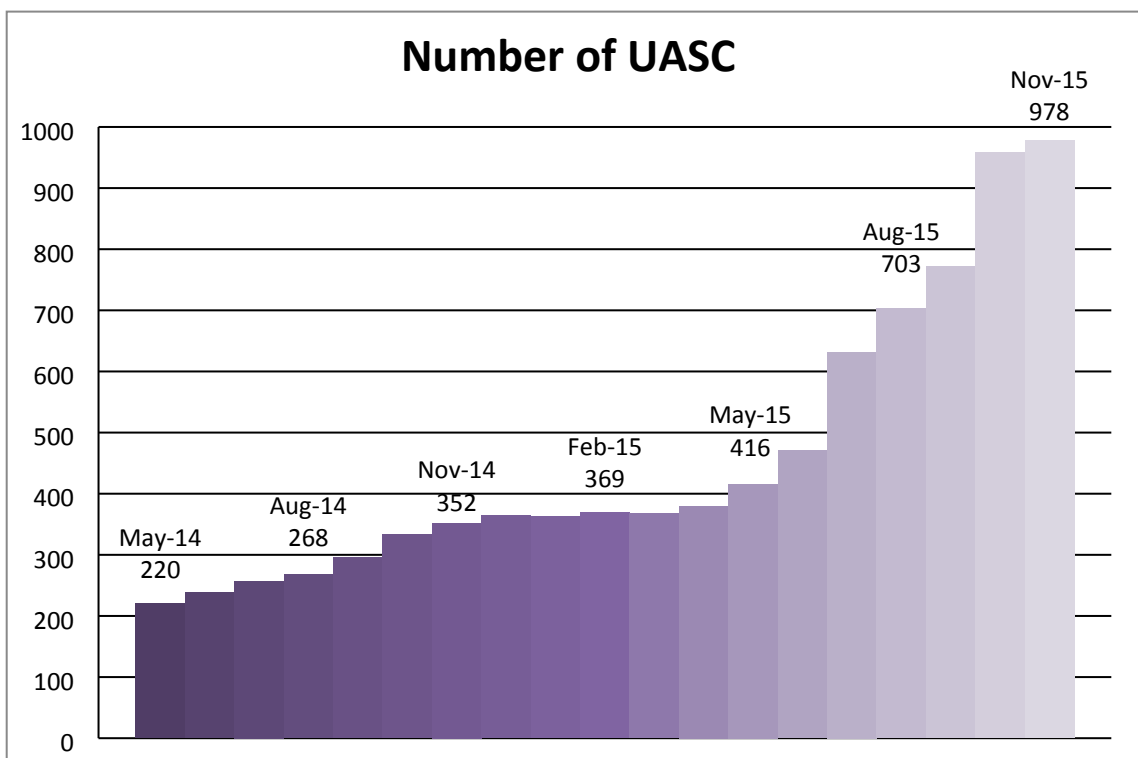
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Total
31	17	31	13	41	100	181	95	97	214	51	871

1.3 For each child or young person that presents in Dover, there is an immediate need to identify a social worker (and an interpreter if required) who can meet the child and conduct an initial safeguarding and wellbeing assessment at the port. This initial assessment includes making a considered judgement on signs which may indicate for instance that a young person is a different age to that claimed and/or signs that a child may have been trafficked, exploited or harmed. A bed must also be identified in an age-appropriate setting; however temporary, it must be available immediately.

1.4 Recognising that many of these children and young people have had long traumatic journeys, this process must be undertaken in a child-centred timescale; taking a maximum of 24 hours. This is manageable when up to 20 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children present in a month, but it becomes increasingly untenable when over 20 children *a day* are entering Kent’s care.

1.5 The heightened numbers of new UASC arriving into Kent has created mounting pressure on available placements and staff capacity to meet its statutory requirements i.e. completion of visits, Children and Families assessments, health assessments and Looked After Child reviews etc.

Figure 2
Numbers of UASC aged 17 or under in KCC’s care



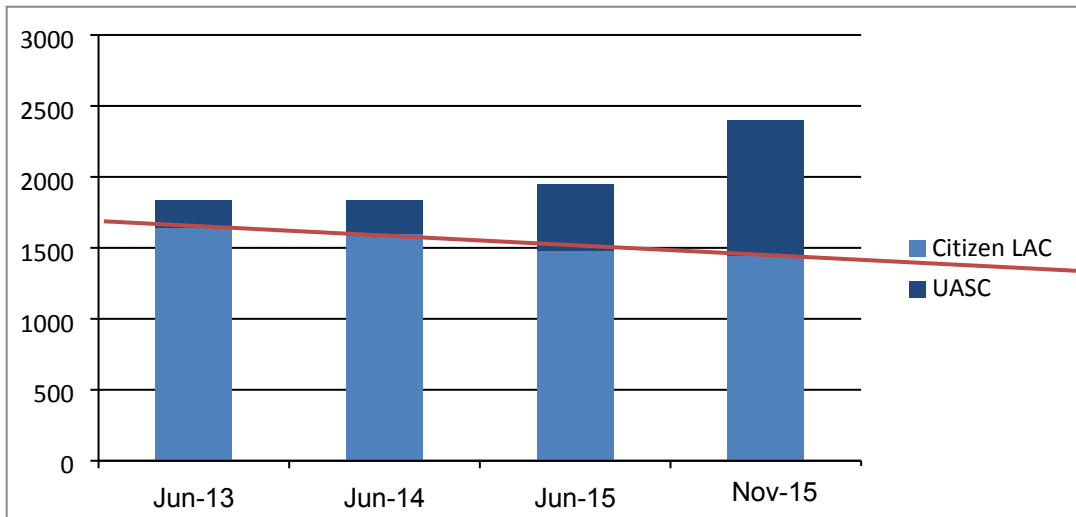


Figure 3
Total numbers of Looked After Children for whom KCC is corporate parent

2. KCC response to the increased numbers of UASC arriving in Kent

2.1 The summer and autumn peaks of new arrivals showed that the current service provision cannot keep pace with these rates of referrals, particularly in relation to:

- Sufficiency of additional accommodation and placements for children and young people;
- Increasing the numbers of front-line Children's social care staff in order to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people presenting at the port of Dover;

2.2 Whilst KCC's response to this year's UASC crisis has been a commendable effort, it is far from sustainable. There is an ever-mounting pressure on children's social care. This is increasingly having a detrimental impact on the needs of citizen children the Council is already supporting. The pressure on wider services for children and young people is particularly visible in the Access to Resources Team sourcing available placements for Children in Care, the capacity of the Out Of Hours (OOH) service and the availability of school places and medical services.

2.3 Accommodation and placements

2.3.1 The majority of new UASC entrants to Kent are 16 and 17 year old boys; and make up over 60% of UASC looked after children. The previous flow of new arrivals meant most older, adolescent boys were temporarily housed in the Millbank reception centre (Ashford) for six to eight weeks whilst their Children and Families assessments were completed. Female children and children under the age of 16 were placed directly into a foster placement. The increase in numbers over the year, however created an accommodation emergency in the county and additional housing capacity was required.

2.3.2 Following the sustained drop in arrivals through 2013 to 2014 the decision had been taken to close Millbank Reception Centre. However as 2014 progressed

the numbers started increasing again and so implementation of the closure was paused. By 2015 it was clear that there was unprecedented number of arrivals and the Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services was consulted and agreed that the closure should not be implemented. This was noted by the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee on 22 July 2015.

- 2.3.3 In collaboration with the council's Property and Infrastructure division, a full options appraisal of all buildings held within the council's portfolio was undertaken to urgently identify additional Reception Centre facilities. Ladesfield in Whitstable, a former care home, was identified and considered to be the building most suitable for temporary use, which could also be refurbished and brought into operation quickly.
- 2.3.4 Ladesfield was opened for use on 14 September 2015. It is able to accommodate a maximum of 40 young people at any given time. Although currently providing a source of temporary accommodation for UASC, it remains on course to be demolished in 2016, making way for the neighbouring school's expansion. A commitment has been given to use Ladesfield for only up to 6 months.
- 2.3.5 It was clear from the rate of arrivals and the usage of Millbank that Ladesfield alone would not provide sufficient capacity moving forwards.
- 2.3.6 Appledore (Swattenden Centre, Cranbrook) was originally part funded by the Home Office to be a Reception Centre for unaccompanied children. In partnership with staff within the Early Help and Preventative Services, the Appledore Unit was returned to its former use as a Reception Centre over the course of early September. Currently open, it is able to provide accommodation for an additional forty young people.
- 2.3.7 Despite best efforts to source accommodation locally, the council still has to place children and young people out of the county, some as far away as Hertfordshire. This goes against best practice and statutory guidance. Having to place children outside of Kent is also further complicating the timely delivery of assessments and the support these young people are offered.

2.4 Access to information

- 2.4.1 From the end of July 2015, daily update reports have been sent from the Management Information Unit to senior managers within children's services and finance, the Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services and the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children in Kent. The report details UASC team caseloads, numbers of UASC who are currently missing and an ongoing illustration of daily referrals. It ensures senior managers have a strong and current knowledge of the issues and challenges faced by front-line staff.
- 2.4.2 Status reports are also shared weekly with the Department for Education (DfE) and the Home Office, in order to inform decision making and maintain transparent communication.
- 2.4.3 The council continues to work closely with United Kingdom Visas and Immigration (UKVI) to ensure decisions are made in a child-centred timescale.

Children's Services has placed a UASC assessment specialist social worker in Dover who is accessible to UKVI within ten minutes of referral.

2.5 Section 27 responsibilities and requests for support

2.5.1 Although every effort is made by the Access to Resources Team (ART)¹ to place UASC within Kent, the surge in numbers of children entering the UK is not an issue that could be solely managed and contained locally; national engagement from Government and other local authorities is also required. From June 2015, the council has needed to place increasing numbers of UASC outside of Kent's boundaries. In mid-August, around 100 asylum-seeking children and young people were placed outside of Kent, however as the numbers of UASC have grown, by the end of November 2015 this had risen to over 312.

2.5.2 Alongside work nationally to progress a national dispersal scheme and following discussion with the Department for Education, KCC's Corporate Director for Social Care, Health and Wellbeing sent a letter to all Directors of Children's Social Services in England requesting urgent support under Section 27 of the Children Act 1989.

2.5.3 Section 27 (2) states:

"An authority whose help is so requested shall comply with the request if it is compatible with their own statutory or other duties and obligations and does not unduly prejudice the discharge of any of their functions".

2.5.4 As the council does not have the facilities or placements to meet the needs of all the UASC, help was sought in the form of:

- Offers of placements within other local authority areas;
- Offers to take on full Corporate Parenting responsibility under the Children Act for one or more UASC;
- Offers to supervise, on KCC's behalf, young people that had been placed in their local authority area;

2.5.5 Since the request was issued, 19 local authorities have agreed to take over full responsibility for 49 UASC². A further nine local authorities have made an offer and work is ongoing to ensure a young person is appropriately matched and transferred to each offer made.

2.6 Additional staff and new UASC teams

2.6.1 The Service for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (SUASC) Assessment and Intervention Team (AIT) ordinarily comprises one team manager, four social workers, two support workers and a senior administration officer. The team is part of the wider Central Referral Team and is managed alongside the other Central Duty Teams and the Out of Hours service. The team hold new UASC arrivals for six to eight weeks whilst Children and

¹ Part of Children's Strategic Commissioning

² This figure is inclusive of an ongoing arrangement with Brighton and Hove to accept one child per week for ten weeks

Families assessments were completed. The children or young people would then transfer to one of the district Children in Care teams.

- 2.6.2 With four social workers, the SUASC AIT would ideally hold no more than 60 children. Prior to bringing in significant numbers of additional staff, the SUASC AIT was responsible for between 250-300 children and young people at any one time.
- 2.6.3 Although the formerly separate UASC service was integrated into the Children in Care service and 18+ service in December 2014, recent surges in the numbers of UASC has meant additional staffing resources have been urgently required in order to ensure the needs of children and young people are met. A new, temporary UASC Service Manager joined the council on 11 August 2015, to offer support and assist in overseeing the additional UASC social workers and team management.
- 2.6.4 A decision was taken corporately in August 2015 that all UASC who have become looked after since June 2015 will become the responsibility of the new Central UASC teams, under the management of the Assistant Director for West Kent and UASC strategic lead.
- 2.6.5 This decision was taken to ensure that newly looked after unaccompanied minors are fully supported, and secondly so as not to overwhelm the existing Children in Care (CIC) teams. If the numbers of UASC becoming looked after had continued to transfer into the CIC teams, each social worker's caseload would have significantly increased which would have negatively impacted on the care and support individually given to children and young people already looked after. UASC already allocated to a CIC social worker will not transfer or face any unnecessary disruption as a result of this decision.
- 2.6.6 Since June 2015 over twenty additional social workers, three team managers and a service manager have now been recruited from agencies to specialist UASC teams. These three new teams, combined with the existing UASC AIT are working with and supporting over five hundred asylum-seeking children and young people currently. Together with the number of UASC the CIC teams are also supporting, this means the council is in total currently looking after over 960 unaccompanied minors aged 17 or under.
- 2.6.7 Urgent action was also taken in collaboration with the authority's IT department to source laptops and create additional Liberi accounts for the new members of staff starting.
- 2.6.8 As the numbers of UASC continue to grow, the council has continued to urgently seek additional social workers. There continue to be recruitment challenges in firstly sourcing qualified, suitably experienced staff and secondly in finding staff who are prepared to work primarily in either West Kent or Dover.

3. Funding for UASC

- 3.1 Historically the Home Office has paid KCC a grant towards the cost of supporting UASC who arrive in Kent and so become the responsibility of KCC. KCC and the other gateway authorities of Croydon and Hillingdon, who receive

a significant proportion of the national UASC arrivals, have consistently challenged the sufficiency of the Home Office grant.

3.2 In March 2015 the Home Office advised KCC that it intended to reduce the funding paid to Kent for UASC. The reductions in the daily per capita rates were:

- Under 16 Year Old from £155 to £114
- 16 & 17 Year Old from £112 to £91

The revised rates remained higher than the daily rates the Home Office were paying nationally of £95 (Under 16) and £71 (16&17 year old). KCC entered into discussion with the Home Office about the basis for this.

3.3 There were no proposals to alter the funding for Over 18 year old UASC Care Leavers which had been set at £21.43/day (£150/week) for a number of years.

3.4 From June 2015 onwards KCC saw a dramatic increase in arrivals resulting in significant increase in the projected financial shortfall to £7.6m. During the summer as numbers continued to increase KCC made a number of representations to the Home Office regarding both practice and financial issues.

3.5 KCC officers and Home Office officials met in October to discuss the financial implications for KCC. At this meeting the financial impact of the increased level of arrivals was discussed. KCC also raised that the current funding levels were a disincentive to other Local Authorities to participate in any voluntary dispersal scheme. This disincentive was particularly relevant when considering post-18 support. The Home Office officials agreed to give thought as to how additional funds could be made available to KCC to meet the particular additional costs it was incurring and incentivise other Local Authorities to participate in a dispersal scheme.

3.6 As a result the Home Office offered a number of measures:

- The Home Office recognised that due to exceptional pressures, KCC's cost of supporting UASC in the current year had increased and a new funding package has been agreed for this year only, with daily rates of:
 - Under 16 Year Old £150, and
 - 16 & 17 Year Old £100

Based on current estimates, this should generate an additional £4.250m to offset our current shortfall on Under18 year old UASC.

- The national rate for Over 18 year old UASC Care Leavers was increased from £21.43/day to £28.57/day (from £150/week to £200/week).

3.7 The net impact of these measures was to reduce the projected shortfall by £5.1m to £2.5m. Breakdown of current financial position is detailed below.

Revised Home Office Rates

Projected position for end of 2015/16

		Total UASC	Total Care Leavers	Total Asylum
Days Support		295,162	149,511	444,673
Average Daily Cost		£105	£36	£82
Total Cost	£(000's)	£31,101	£5,431	£36,532
Grant Income		-£30,667	-£3,349	-£34,016
Shortfall/ (Surplus)	£(000's)	£434	£2,083	£2,516

3.8 In addition, Home Office agreed that any Local Authority accepting responsibility for a UASC from KCC during 2015/16 would be entitled to receive the higher rates of £114/day for under 16s and £91/day for 16 & 17 year olds originally offered to KCC in March 2015. Additionally it was confirmed that when these young people become over 18 the accepting Local Authority would receive the higher national rate of £28.57/day.

4. Next steps and the plans for a national dispersal scheme

- 4.1 All unaccompanied children arriving in the UK become the responsibility of the local authority where they arrive. The majority arrive in the gateway councils of Kent, Croydon and Hillingdon. Under current arrangements, any unaccompanied child that arrives at the port of Dover becomes the responsibility of KCC. During times of crises, this places an unreasonable and excessive burden on the gateway authorities.
- 4.2 Staff within the council should be commended for their tireless efforts in trying to meet our statutory responsibilities in the face of the enormous challenge that the volume of new UASC arrivals has posed. However, it should be stated clearly that services are at breaking point and the current position is not sustainable. There have been significant discussions between the Home Office, Department for Education (DfE), the Local Government Association (LGA), the Association of Directors for Children's Services (ADCS) as to alternate model of national dispersal which are both financially and logistically viable and ensures children and young people face minimal disruption during the transfer process.
- 4.3 On the 24 November the Home Secretary and the Secretaries for Education and Community wrote to all 151 English local authorities setting out enhanced rates for accepting UASC from Kent and urging them to engage with the voluntary national dispersal scheme. There have subsequently been 4 enquires which are being followed up but there remains a concern that such a voluntary

scheme is not going to address pressure KCC currently faces nor will it deal with any future surge.

- 4.4 In case the voluntary national dispersal scheme is insufficient, amendments have been tabled in the Immigration Bill which would create reserve powers to establish a national dispersal scheme. KCC continues to work closely with the central government and other on this.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations: Scrutiny Committee is asked to **COMMENT ON** and **NOTE** the content of the report.

6 Background documents

None

7.

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