MY Response – ICIBI call for evidence, an inspection into Home Office's use of age assessments

Introduction

1. Migration Yorkshire provides strategic leadership and local support across Yorkshire and Humber, carrying out the Strategic Migration Partnership (SMP) function in the region. We work with stakeholders across the statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to ensure the region can benefit from migration.

2. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. Our response is informed by the work of our UASC service which undertakes strategic coordination work supporting Local Authorities children's services teams, Home Office and the Department for Education with the National Transfer Scheme and ensuring there is high quality support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across the region.

3. The UASC service is led and managed by qualified social workers who have previously worked in voluntary and statutory

settings with UAS children, including directly undertaking age assessments and acting as an appropriate adult during age assessments.

Guidance training and development

4. Since 2018, Migration Yorkshire has commissioned expert providers to deliver free training to local authority social workers on how to undertake an age assessment. This training has reached hundreds of social workers in that period.

5. The funding for this work has been significantly reduced and we now only have a small pot which covers the cost of 4 courses per year. We have engaged with the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) to continue providing free age assessment training. There are 8 two-day, in-person training sessions booked throughout 2024 covering all sub-regional areas in Yorkshire & Humber.

6. We are confident that Migration Yorkshire’s long-term investment in training social workers means the region is able to undertake high quality, accurate age assessments.

Quality assurance, risk management, and safeguarding

7. Migration Yorkshire has been raising concerns about the quality of age determinations at the Intake Unit for several years because of the large number of referrals to children's services of young people from adult asylum hotels.

8. The referrals put pressure on social work teams and UASC placement availability, especially as arrivals cannot be planned for. When young people are wrongly deemed to be adults they miss out on their rights and entitlements as a child under UK law and could potentially be at risk of harm. In a recent case in the region, a young person had run away from an adult hotel because he was so afraid as he had been disbelieved by officials and found himself surrounded by adults. He spent several nights sleeping rough until a community member took him to a voluntary sector organisation who were able to refer him to the local authority where he was accepted as a child after only a brief enquiry based on his appearance and demeanour.

9. Children are often dependent on others to raise concerns if they are placed in adult accommodation. In hotels where there is a greater voluntary sector presence, referral numbers remain high.

10. When a young person is referred to an LA through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) with an age dispute, it can cause difficulties finding a suitable placement, particularly if the claimed age of the child is under 16 and a foster placement is needed. The age dispute can raise safeguarding concerns from foster carers about the risk of taking an adult into their home,

often forcing LAs to use expensive private foster agencies (IFAs) and placing outside of area or region.

11. When a UAS child is age disputed this causes delays in their access to education – for example, in some areas they cannot attend ESOL classes or school until they have been age assessed and the age dispute has been resolved. This can also impact their wellbeing and increase social isolation.

Record keeping and data collection

12. The official data on age disputes, provided by the Home Office, only considers young people who have been given the benefit of the doubt and accommodated as a child, it does not include those young people classed initially as an adult by immigration officers but later assessed as a child. Refugee Council recommended in this report that Home Office should '*publish full statistics on the number of people claiming to be children who the Home Office has treated as adults and put in place monitoring processes so it can track the outcomes for those who are later determined to be children*' as well as '*notify local authorities about potential children who have been determined to be adults by the Home Office*' .This would enable LAs to better plan their own resources and would help to more accurately inform government policy decisions on age assessment.

Stakeholder engagement

13. Migration Yorkshire has participated in several meetings with the Home Office, local authorities and DfE about the age dispute issue, however key concerns have remained unresolved, including on data sharing.

14. The NAAB is fully operational in Y&H and is available for all 15 local authorities to make referrals. Currently only 5 local authorities are working with the NAAB in this region. There are regular NAAB user group meetings held by Home Office facilitated by SMP's.

About this briefing

This briefing was prepared in October 2024.
For further information, contact us at admin@migrationyorkshire.org.uk

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