UASC Briefing Paper June 2026

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

They can also be referred to as ‘UASC’, ‘unaccompanied children’, or ‘separated children’.

1. An unaccompanied asylum-seeking child is defined in the Immigration Rules (2016) as one who is:

- under 18 years of age when the asylum claim is submitted
- claiming asylum in their own right
- separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who is law or by custom has responsibility to do so

2. Local authorities have a duty of care for unaccompanied children under Section 20 of the Children Act (1989). UASC aged 18+ who have been in receipt of at least 13 weeks of support under Section 20 are also entitled to support as 'care leavers' under the Children Leaving Care Act (2000).

3. National immigration statistics for the year to March 2026 showed:
There were 3,627 asylum applications from UASC in the 12 months from April 2025 to March 2026. This represents a – 13% decrease compared with the year ending March 2025, where 4,181 applications were registered as UASC.

- The top 6 nationalities for UASC applications were: Iran (21%), Sudan (17%), Somalia (12%), Eritrea (9%), Afghanistan (7%), and Vietnam (6%).

Reasons for leaving

1. Many children and young people who claim asylum have experienced significant trauma which forced them to flee from their home, including living through war, enforced conscription, imprisonment, torture, being the victims of physical or sexual violence, witnessing violence to others or traumatic bereavement. Children and young people will often be very frightened for the people they left behind.

Arrival routes into Yorkshire and Humber

Unaccompanied children may arrive in Yorkshire and Humber through one of the following routes:

1. **National Transfer Scheme – NTS:** The Immigration Act 2016 introduced the National Transfer Scheme on a voluntary basis. The scheme facilitates fair distribution of UASC looked after by each local authority across the country by transferring children and young people from areas with a high number of arrivals (e.g., Kent) to areas with fewer UASC. The scheme was mandated in November 2021, all local authorities now have an obligation to comply

by receiving into their care the unaccompanied children referred to them via their regional Strategic Migration Partnership (SMP). From August 2022, only local authorities who support a number of UASC at or above 0.1% of its general child population can request the child is referred to the NTS. The number of referrals through the scheme has increased significantly and the region continues to face significant challenges sourcing suitable placements.

2. **Spontaneous arrivals:** some young people may arrive into an area from the back of a lorry, via docks and ports, or present at other locations. These cases are known as ‘spontaneous arrivals’. These young people will usually not be known to the authorities and should be referred to the local authority Children’s Services team and supported to lodge an asylum claim with the Home Office.
3. **Adult asylum contingency hotels:** there has been an increase in referrals received by local authorities from adult asylum contingency hotels. These referrals are usually followed by an age dispute claim and in many cases, they are found to be children when their age is assessed by social workers. In this scenario, local authorities are responsible for providing care and support to these children under the Children Act 1989.
4. **Other routes:** the previous schemes that provided safe and legal routes for unaccompanied young people seeking sanctuary such as the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) and the Dublin III Regulation are no longer in place and no new schemes have been announced.

Immigration Processes and Policies

If a person has fled their country of origin due to a fear of persecution and wishes to stay in the UK as a refugee, they should apply for asylum.

1. In May 2026 the Home Office updated its guidance on the 'Streamlined Asylum Process for Children' (SAP) which was first introduced in 2023. The streamlined process now applies to all asylum claims lodged by unaccompanied children from the top grant nationalities, regardless of arrival date. The top 2 grant nationalities are currently Eritrea and Sudan. Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria have all been removed, having previously been included in the scheme, due to falling grant rates. This is a 'fast-track' process for asylum decision-making and involves a 'preliminary information meeting' (PIM) to assess whether asylum can be granted without the need for a substantive interview. If successful, the young person would receive a positive status or alternatively proceed to submit a Statement of Evidence form and attend a substantive interview.
2. Currently, UASC asylum claims may result in the following positive outcomes:
    1. **Refugee status:** 5 years
    2. **Humanitarian protection(HP):** 5 years
    3. **UASC leave:** a form of temporary leave for young people whose asylum claim is refused. UASC leave

lasts for a maximum of 30 months, or until the young person is 17.5 years old (whichever is sooner) when they can appeal, make a fresh claim, or plan to leave the UK.

3. Young people who have had their asylum claim fully refused, known as appeal rights exhausted (ARE) and do not possess any other form of leave to remain, are expected to leave the UK once they reach the age of 18. The Immigration Act 2016 introduced a provision that ARE former-UASC are not entitled to leaving care services. This provision has not yet been implemented, and the regulations have not been published. At present local authorities carry out a human rights assessment to decide whether to continue to support the young person. Home Office funding ceases 3 months after the ARE date.

Age assessment

1. Age assessment is used to assess whether a young person is a child or an adult, or to estimate their age if there is contradictory or no information available.
2. A full age assessment should be 'Merton compliant'. There are a few useful principles to guide through the process:

   - It should only be carried out if there is significant doubt about the child's claimed age.
   - The assessment should be done by two qualified social workers, and the young person should be supported by an

appropriate adult, to ensure they are treated fairly and fully understand the process.

- It should be noted that calendars vary depending on country of origin and that not all countries have their births recorded routinely, as chronological age may not be considered important.

3. It is important to note that the outcome of an age assessment has significant impact on the young person's life, as the conclusion will be used by all relevant organisations. Young people can challenge the decision through the courts and in such cases the judge's decision is final.
4. The Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) 2022 introduced significant reforms to the age assessment process for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The Act reduced the age threshold used by immigration officers to decide whether to treat someone as a potential minor from 'visibly under 25' to 'visibly under 18' years of age. The Act introduced the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB), a decision-making body within the Home Office comprising of social workers who support local authorities with age assessments and training. The NAAB became operational in March 2023. It oversees and may carry out age assessment in some situations as provided by the NABA.
5. In July 2025 the government announced its intention to pursue the use of AI driven Facial Age Estimation technology to assist with the age assessment process and to potentially replace the previous plan for 'scientific methods' of age assessment which were laid out in the

Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

Current challenges

There are some consistent challenges with regards to support available for unaccompanied children and the pressures experienced by local authorities.

1. When a local authority receives an age dispute referral, an age assessment should be carried out to determine the claimant's age if there is significant doubt. They would also have to provide placement and care if the claimant is proven to be a child. Local authority resources are currently under strain, and this is causing significant pressures on children services' teams.
2. There is a national placement shortage. Local authorities are struggling to find reasonable options within their vicinity. They are increasingly resorting to other forms of provisions, like private placement providers, which is often costly.
3. There is a national shortage of legal aid provision to support unaccompanied children. Local authorities often struggle to find available solicitors which can impact on the progress of the young person's asylum claim.
4. Challenges such as delays in moving to a placement or progress with their asylum claim can affect the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Statutory and key voluntary mental health organisations are also under pressure. Young people may have to endure long waiting lists. Migration Yorkshire provides a list of available services for young people in Yorkshire and Humber.

Sources of support and information

1. Local authorities have a responsibility to provide services and support to unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children in their area under Section 20 (Children Act 1989) both during the age assessment period (up to 28 days) and once it has been concluded they are a child, until their 18th birthday - regardless of their route of entry or immigration status. In most cases children should receive all support associated with being ‘looked after’ including a suitable accommodation placement, a care plan, a personal education plan, access to health assessment and health care, support accessing legal advice and an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who will review the child’s progress and ongoing support requirements.
2. Migration Yorkshire coordinates UASC referrals into Yorkshire and Humber through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) and supports local authorities to meet the needs of children by identifying appropriate referrals for each area, providing support and guidance on casework and procedural issues, and offering training. Through the Welcoming Young Refugees Project, Migration Yorkshire works with local authorities in the region to develop UASC provision and expertise amongst professionals working with young refugees.
3. Migration Yorkshire provides a UASC hub, where professionals can find a range of information including policy and guidance, training, and resources.

About this briefing

This briefing was prepared by Hanna Ayisi and last updated in August 2026. It is available on the Migration Yorkshire website.

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