

Learning Example: Language and Communication for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People in Supported Accommodation

This learning example was developed through the National Children Bureau's Sector Awareness and Provider Preparedness programme in relation to the mandatory quality standards and inspection and regulatory regime for providers of supported accommodation.

Interviews took place before the end of the initial registration window with existing providers of supported accommodation. Every effort has been made to ensure this learning example represents excellent practice across the sector and we have developed this resource with extensive reference to the regulations and quality standards. It is highly recommended that you refer to [Department of Education](#) and [Ofsted's](#) most up-to-date guidance to support the application and registration process. Any placement of a young person in care whose needs can be met in supported accommodation should only be met with a provider who is registered with Ofsted.

With thanks to:

- 123 Supported Accommodation
- 1625 Independent People
- Avensis Support
- Places for People
- Salvation Army Housing Association (SAHA)

Introduction

The Sector Awareness and Provider Preparedness programme

This learning example is based on analysis of interviews conducted by NCB as well as sector intelligence gathered through the programme. It explores the different perspectives of what good practice looks like regarding **language and communication** when working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in supported accommodation settings.

Providers were asked a range of questions to understand their approach to effective communication with UAS young people, including how good communication can support the emotional wellbeing of young people, ensure they are aware of their rights and entitlements in the setting and positively impact their transition into supported accommodation.

The legal framework for local authorities accommodating UAS young people

Local Authorities

Local authorities have legal duties to make sure that unaccompanied 16- or 17-year-olds seeking asylum are provided with accommodation which is safe, nurturing and meets their needs. In doing so, local authorities must act in the young person's best interests, consider their feelings and views, and seek to secure the best outcomes for them.

Supported Accommodation

Supported accommodation was previously a type of accommodation outside of regulated children's homes, kinship care and foster care, providing supported, semi-independent living for 16 and 17-year-olds. From 28 October 2023, to operate legally, all providers of supported accommodation for looked after children and young people aged 16 and 17 must either be registered or have had an application accepted as 'complete' by Ofsted by this date.

Providers must also meet mandatory quality standards as part of the Ofsted-led registration and inspection regime, which apply to all types of supported accommodation, including providers supporting UAS young people.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People

In March 2023, there were 83,840 children looked after in England, with 7,290 of these being unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. Over half of these UAS children and young people (61%) were placed in supported accommodation ([Children looked after in England statistics – Gov.uk](#), 2023).

Supported accommodation is not automatically the right setting for UAS young people, especially if they are not yet ready for greater levels of independence and preparation for adult living. There are other types of accommodation, such as foster care or residential children's homes that may be more appropriate, and local authorities must always consider the individual needs of each child or young person, ensuring their varying circumstances and histories are recognised and met by their care plan.

'Language and Communication' and the relevant Quality Standards

The key principles for supported accommodation highlight the importance that the voice of young people should be "respected, heard and advocated for".

While supported accommodation providers are accountable to all the Quality Standards in the Regulations, the importance of language and communication is particularly relevant to the **Support Standard** and the **Leadership & Management Standard**.

- The **Support Standard** outlines that each young person should be provided with support to "communicate their views, wishes and feelings and participate as fully as possible in all aspects of the service and their support package".

- The **Leadership & Management Standard** outlines that staff should “clearly communicate to young people their rights and what they are entitled to from the service” as well as their rights in education and entitlements as a looked after child or care-leaver.

Approach

The providers that we interviewed shared a range of approaches to ensuring good communication with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

Communicating information about the new placement

- The **Accommodation Standard** highlights that staff should offer a welcoming and nurturing environment and ensure that they “provides appropriate boundaries in relation to the manner of conduct expected of young people”.
- When young people first arrive in their placement, they will often be asked to sign documents such as a tenancy agreement and to understand the boundaries of their new living environment, through agreeing house rules and acceptable behaviour.
- This includes information about how to use appliances in the home, such as the washing machine, how to lock doors and what to do if there is an emergency.
- It is important that this information is communicated clearly and in a language that they fully understand, particularly if asked to sign documents such as a tenancy agreement. It is crucial that an interpreter, preferably face to face, is available when a young person first arrives in a new setting to support with these practical tasks.

Supporting emotional health and wellbeing

- The **Support Standard** emphasises that “staff should work to make the setting an environment that supports young people's physical, mental and emotional health”.
- UAS young people are extremely likely to have suffered traumatic experiences, unimaginable to most people, in their country of origin or on their migration journey.
- The effects of such trauma can be exacerbated by other factors on arrival into a new unfamiliar environment, such as isolation and loss of family and community, if young people are not supported to discuss how they are feeling and to feel understood.
- Providers recommended using community interpreters from people in the local area, who can connect the young people to the wider community and support their

emotional wellbeing by providing an emotional outlet. For example, one provider worked with a local imam for support with language and interpreting.

- However, it is important to remember that some young people may be reluctant to engage with community interpreters, particularly if they have been trafficked, as they may have concerns about confidentiality and be fearful of the potential impact on family and friends. Providers need to ensure they have relevant procedures for DBS checks for anyone who is in regular, or unsupervised, contact with young people.
- There may also be differences in the way young people from other cultures express emotions and it may take some time for adults who support these young people to understand this. It is important for staff to consider the cultural norms, expectations and possible differences in communication, as this might be different from in the UK.
- Providers described that if possible, pairing young people with a shared language together can ensure they have someone to speak to in their first language so that they can support each other and reduce feelings of isolation.
- Providers also suggested offering young people time with an interpreter weekly to discuss their general wellbeing and any worries or concerns. While the accessibility of telephone interpreting can be convenient, in-person interpreters are more appropriate for these emotionally complex or sensitive topics.

Rights and entitlements

- The **Leadership and Management Standard** outlines that staff should clearly "communicate to young people their rights" and ensure that their "rights and views are at the centre of the support they receive".
- It is crucial that unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are informed of their rights and entitlements and that they are actively involved in decisions that affect them. This means that interpreters should be present for important conversations about the asylum process, education, mental health, and the support they receive.
- Most UAS young people will begin learning English once they are in the UK. As their English language skills develop, they may still need interpreters for important conversations around plans for their future and their rights and entitlements.
- Providers suggested that it is important to continue to check in with the young person about their levels of comprehension and not to assume that they always understand.

Challenges

Availability of interpreters

- Providers shared that there are challenges to the availability of interpreters, particularly if the setting is not located near a city. This means that providers are reliant on telephone interpreters, which is not always appropriate dependent on circumstances.
- Some supported accommodation providers work with a local community interpreter or have multi-lingual staff to ensure access to face-to-face interpreters at short notice.
- Providers referred to the additional costs of interpreting and translation services, which can be a barrier and vary depending on the type of services required.
- Some providers are registered with services that will include a language line with 24/7 availability. Providers highlighted that online translation services such as Google Translate are not sufficient and cannot reliably translate information.

Advocating for young people

- Providers referenced the challenges in advocating for young people by ensuring that there is an interpreter present for important conversations, especially for mental health appointments or meetings with a solicitor about their asylum claim.
- This can lead to delays or rescheduled appointments if interpreters are not available or if the necessary documents have not been translated.

Key learning for other providers and local authorities

Providers of supported accommodation and local authorities may want to consider the following points as key learning to ensure that communication and is prioritised with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people:

1. Having access to an interpreter is critical for this group of young people, particularly in **the first 24 hours** after they arrive. This ensures that young people can understand relevant documents (such as a tenancy agreement) and rules of the home.
2. UAS young people are likely to have **experienced trauma** and the effects of these traumatic experiences can be exacerbated by isolation if they are not able to communicate with others. Young people should be able to regularly discuss their emotions in their first language and using a community-based interpreter can be helpful to connect both the young person and the service with the wider community.
3. Communication is key to ensuring that young people understand their **rights and entitlements** and that their views are heard and respected.

We have additional information and resources about supported accommodation and support for UAS young people and professionals who work with them [on our website](#).

If you are a supported accommodation provider, our online Community of Practice offers an online space to share ideas and support – email ncbsocialcare@NCB.org.uk