



Wales Strategic
Migration Partnership
Partneriaeth Mewnfuldo
Strategol Cymru



Hyb ACE Cymru
ACE Hub Wales

**“ FALLING FROM
THE SKY ”**

A SUMMARY REPORT

**Voices of unaccompanied
asylum-seeking children in
local authority care in Wales**

Author: Eithne Nightingale

Acknowledgements

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Hub Wales, and Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP), co-commissioners of this report, would like to thank the author, Eithne Nightingale, the participating children and young people, and the people supporting them. With the support of Sabina Hussain, responsible for UASC for the WSMP, and Anne Hubbard, Head of the WSMP, the voices of many young people across Wales were able to be included. Thanks to the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Heads of Children’s Services across Wales, and all those who enabled the young people to participate through providing interpretation, trauma-informed support, time and resources.

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ACE Hub Wales was founded in 2017 and was established to support Welsh society to become trauma and ACE-aware, and make Wales a leader in tackling, preventing and mitigating ACEs. We promote the sharing of ideas and learning, and to challenge and change ways of working, so together we can break the cycle of ACEs. ACE Hub Wales is funded by Welsh Government and is led by Public Health Wales and is part of the Policy and International Health Directorate and World Health Organisation (WHO) Collaborating Centre on Investment in Health and Wellbeing.

Website: www.acehubwales.com

The WSMP, established in 2001, is funded by the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), and works with partners in the statutory, voluntary, private and community sectors to provide strategic leadership, advice and coordination on migration. The WSMP is hosted by the WLGA, to reflect the Partnership’s all-Wales role around migration, and to help foster closer working with public services and the 22 local authorities in Wales, linking in with local government’s political structures and local priorities.

Website: <https://www.wsmp.wales/home>

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THE EXPERIENCES OF UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN IN WALES

“I FEEL PEACEFUL. WE DON’T HAVE ANY CONFLICT OR WAR.”

1. Introduction

This research, commissioned by the ACE Hub Wales and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP), captures the voices of forty two Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and former UASC Care Leavers living in Wales or in out of country placements in England (supported by Welsh Local Authorities). They have arrived by various means including via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), spontaneously or routed through the adult asylum system.

The report and its findings, agreed as a deliverable in the ACE Hub Wales plan with the Welsh Government for 2024/25, will feed directly into the implementation of the Trauma-Informed Wales Practice Framework.¹ The Framework, published in 2022, sets out five underpinning principles of a trauma-informed approach in Wales, including a commitment to being inclusive of the experiences of adversity and trauma in all our communities. The report contributes to an established body of work commissioned by ACE Hub Wales to support this commitment. The collection of studies considers how adversity and trauma is experienced by children and young people on the move in their home country, during the migration journey and in Wales.

The focus is on the many positive attributes children and young people demonstrate to overcome the impact of their experiences on mental and physical wellbeing; and the identification of person-centred support needed for improved health and social outcomes. The report also speaks directly to the Wales Safeguarding Procedures requirement of being child-centred and ensuring young people’s voices are heard. The report will be shared with the Home Office and Heads of Children’s Services in Wales to consider the findings in order to review practice and support for UASC.

1 ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales. (2022). *Trauma-informed Wales: A Societal Approach to Understanding, Preventing and Supporting the Impacts of Trauma and Adversity*. Cardiff, Wales

This research has become even more important since the NTS became mandatory in November 2021 requiring all UK local authorities to place UASC referred via the NTS into their care. Since then, Heads of Children's Services in Wales have expressed concern whether the best interests of young people, as set out in the NTS Protocol, are being met. This report aims to address this, bearing in mind that UASC who arrive in the care of Welsh local authorities under the age of 18 have the same rights as all children under the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989, to which Wales is a signatory.² They are children first and foremost and, with encouragement and appropriate support, potential to become, 'active citizens of the future'.

2. Background

Wales is proud to be a Nation of Sanctuary, a commitment that reflects its dedication to welcoming and supporting people seeking safety, including children and young people. This vision ensures those fleeing conflict and persecution are met with kindness, dignity, and opportunities to thrive and reach their potential. For children and young people, this means access to social care, education and English/Welsh language acquisition, healthcare, and community support in an environment that values inclusion and respect.

While immigration policy is not devolved to Wales, the Welsh Government and local authorities are responsible for most services provided to young people, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These children are treated primarily as Children in Need and are supported under Section 76 of the [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#).

UASC are classified as 'looked after' children, entitling them to accommodation, financial support, a social worker, education, and healthcare. They are also eligible for 'leaving care' support.

Children having experienced or facing safeguarding risks are protected under the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and All Wales Practice Guides. Their best interests must be considered, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UK immigration law.

2 Children's Legal Centre, *A Best Practice Guide for Social Workers supporting children who are claiming asylum*, Swansea, Wales.

3. Key Findings

Coming to a place of safety

The young people who participated in the research met challenges that all child migrants face - learning a new language and adapting to a different culture. But those interviewed had additional challenges of having no family to support them; of experiencing abuse or discrimination; of being caught up in wars and witnessing horrific atrocities. Many spoke, therefore, of the safety they felt in the UK. *“I feel peaceful. We don’t have any conflict or war.” “We can go out without being scared that this or that will happen.”* Some valued the freedom of religion or expression. *“In my country, you can’t practice your religion without fear.” “We can express ourselves freely. In our country, it’s not like that.”* One female participant valued her new-found liberty. *“The freedom is extraordinary. In my country, society dictates what you do.”* Some were grateful at being able to reclaim a new identity they hoped would lead to a better life, *“You have an identity here, maybe a citizen in the future and you can travel. I had no identification card in Eritrea and after my family left for Ethiopia, we had no identity at all.”*

Arrival

Whilst some young people felt relief at having arrived safely and gratitude for those who had rescued them at sea or shown kindness in other ways, others felt distraught, bewildered or frightened if they felt unwelcomed by the authorities. Failure to give adequate information to young people about the temporary nature of their initial accommodation or advance notice as to when they would leave and to where, as well as being separated from friends with whom they had bonded on the journey, could cause additional stress. A child-centred, trauma-informed approach that communicates essential information, allows young people to ask questions, voice concerns or give preferences including being transferred with close friends or to live with, or near family members, could mitigate such stress.

Given the impact on mental health of young people disbelieved about their age, the associated safeguarding risks,³ and the delay in receiving age-appropriate services, where doubt exists over their age, young people should be afforded the benefit of the doubt pending an assessment by local authority social workers. The alternative is that young people, if not afforded the benefit of doubt, are placed in the adult system (hotels). Evidence from English LA’s is that a high proportion of young people are subsequently assessed as children by the LA they are residing in.

Accommodation: Foster care

Many spoke favourably of foster care in Wales; of being loved, helped with their English, studies and asylum claim; of respect for their dietary, cultural and religious needs. Placements in non-urban and rural areas sometimes created challenges around access to education and meeting people of the same background. The overall positive experiences

³ Children’s Commissioner (2023), *Unaccompanied Children in Need of Care*, London, UK.

of foster care, however, suggests it should be made available beyond the age of 16 to both new arrivals and those already in foster care. Moving further away from their school or college into shared housing at the age of 16 can disrupt young people's education. In other cases, it can open up education and other opportunities, for example when moving from a rural area to a multi-cultural city.

Accommodation: Shared housing

Living in shared housing with at least one young person of the same cultural or linguistic background, at least initially, can alleviate loneliness and help new arrivals settle - some of the most cohesive households were of residents of the same nationality, where more established or older members supported younger members. Also important is whether the location allows young people to access appropriate education, religious and cultural facilities, to make friends and feel a sense of belonging. This was particularly challenging outside cities. The isolated cases of new arrivals living with non-asylum-seeking children in care were not successful although, a mixed housing development with various units in an English city did encourage the integration of one young person after gaining leave to remain.

Accommodation: Moving On

Several young people, cared for by one local authority but living in another, faced a challenge in accessing social housing where they were settled, went to college, had friends and access to religious and cultural facilities. This was because the local authority where they lived, given they were still in the care of another authority, might consider they did not meet their social housing criteria. This barrier to having a stable home was severely affecting several young people's wellbeing and ability to progress with other areas of their lives (See 8v Move-on Accommodation p28). Given that just over 50% of the research cohort, i.e. 22 out of the 42 people at the time of the interview were placed out of county or country it is clear there is an urgent need for closer collaboration between local authorities to address this (see Appendix D to compare with *Analysis of NTS 2024, Wales*).

Social care

Young people greatly appreciated the care they received from social workers and personal advisers. They valued being listened to, having their concerns addressed or receiving an explanation where this was impossible. Ensuring UASC understand their rights and entitlements and receive the best possible, timely legal support and representation for their asylum claim, for which local authorities are legally responsible, was crucial. Social care practitioners could benefit from additional guidance in this area. Yet there were varying levels of service between children's services, sometimes highlighted by young people cared for by different local authorities living together. Interestingly those living out of county/country did not necessarily receive less support. A more standardised practice across local authorities could mitigate feelings of unfairness.

Advocacy and other support

Some young people benefitted from advocates provided by organisations such as TGP Cymru and Barnardo’s who stepped in to provide additional support or to address delays e.g. in accessing a solicitor. It was unclear how many UASC benefitted from this service to which all UASC are entitled under the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014, but one which has potential to meet the specific additional needs of UASC. The informal support received by one young person who fled an adult hotel after being age disputed, suggests there is untapped potential within migrant communities that could be drawn on, in a paid or volunteer capacity, to enhance the wellbeing of UASC.

The transition at the age of 18, when social care services and accommodation are reduced or changed, can be challenging for UASC still familiarising themselves with different support services, often with little knowledge of English. Further strategies are needed to enhance their confidence in accessing services independently.

Health

Some young people received excellent care for long-term conditions, but others felt their symptoms were not treated seriously and hospital stays were particularly difficult. Communication issues indicate that UASC would benefit from more information about how to use the various NHS services effectively particularly from the Looked After Children’s Health team who visit UASC when they first arrive. Many UASC lack the necessary confidence to access medical care independently after the age of 18. Improved access to interpreters would assist young people as well as the training of medical staff into the needs of UASC.

Mental health

Many of the young people had experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in their country of origin, on the journey, and in the UK. They missed their families and were concerned for their safety. Some close members had already been killed, and others were missing or difficult to contact. Young people were anxious about their own futures and feared to be sent back to their country of origin. This often manifested itself through sleeplessness, depression, a lack of focus or withdrawal.

Some supported their own wellbeing by talking to trusted friends or through social and other activities. It was clear their mental health improved with positive changes in their lives such as reconnecting with family, making new friends, confidence in the use of English and, crucially, when granted leave to remain. Some young people were unaware of mental health services, hesitant to use them⁴ or found them unsatisfactory. Others spoke positively about counselling delivered by third sector organisations. Collaboration between mental health practitioners in both the statutory and voluntary sectors on developing culturally appropriate services, supported by a realistic funding model, would progress this service alongside the roll out of ACEs trauma-informed training for all those working with UASC.

4 ACE Hub Wales. About ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and a trauma and ACEs informed approach, Wales.

Education

Young people, with varying levels of prior education, showed enthusiasm for, and commitment to, education. Yet there were barriers in accessing a full-time school place in a rural area, something to which every school-aged child is entitled as is support in English as an Additional (EAL) from day one. The nature of EAL was sometimes considered unsatisfactory by young people suggesting a need for more EAL provision and staff development, particularly in schools with limited experience of EAL students.⁵ and that enables access to the mainstream curriculum.⁶

Many UASC valued college courses for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) recognising this was key to living and thriving in the UK. There were delays, however, outside cities in accessing full time college courses particularly after the start of the academic year - young people may not feel at ease learning alongside older learners in community-based adult ESOL classes. Other barriers included distance and variable financial support by local authorities for post 16s in further education.

A key frustration was having to study ESOL for years before progressing to other studies.⁷ Flexible provision that offers language support alongside vocational and academic qualifications could address this. EAL and ESOL online/hybrid provision could support students unable to access, or as an addition to, face-to-face tuition.

Asylum process

Some young people spoke of their relief, even joy, on being granted leave to remain. Some who had arrived relatively recently, notably from Afghanistan or Sudan, had received the outcome of their asylum claim within months. Others voiced their frustration about delays in finding a solicitor, waiting times of years and months, not understanding the reasons for delay or outcome differentials. More clarity by the Home Office and effective communication to young people and those who work with them on procedures, timelines and decision making, could help address this.

Whilst some people felt confident about the interview others felt intimidated by Home Office staff including interpreters who spoke a different dialect or whose interpretation was inaccurate (See 13 iii Home Office Interview p45 - 46). This suggests the need to review the interpreter's role and for all involved in the asylum process to adopt a child-centred, trauma-informed approach.

Crucial to stop young people risking their lives on dangerous journeys is the need for safe routes to the UK as well as an expansion of family reunion eligibility.

5 Learning and Work Institute Wales and the University of South Wales, A review of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy for Wales.

6 Learning and Work Institute Wales and the University of South Wales, *A review of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy for Wales*.

7 Ibid.

Work

Many young people, particularly those waiting years for their asylum claim to be processed, were frustrated at being unable to work. Permission to work whilst waiting for the outcome of an asylum claim, as in Germany after 6 months, would enhance young people's well-being, financial independence and integration. Meanwhile clarification is needed about whether, after 12 months in the UK, young people can apply for permission to work despite not having leave to remain.

English language proficiency limits employment opportunities as does a lack of confidence, local networks and knowledge of the job market. Support in this area including contact with people employed in different sectors, particularly from migrant communities, could broaden their horizons and open up opportunities.

Integration

There were positive examples of UASC mixing with local people through youth and sport activities but there was also a lack of confidence and opportunities to do this. Many showed enthusiasm for meeting local people, learning about local culture even the Welsh language, although English was a priority. They wanted to make their lives here, study, work, establish their own families and contribute to society.

This underlines the need for statutory and voluntary organisations to work with UASC in creating opportunities to foster integration through sports, outdoor, creative and other activities and of safe spaces for UASC to share their culture and lived experience with others. Removing barriers to volunteering could aid integration. The needs of minorities, for example of those from less represented countries of origin, of female and LGBTQ UASC, should also be addressed.

Sharing of expertise

It is clear that the mandatory NTS scheme has achieved positive outcomes but also brought new challenges. Children may arrive in a multi-cultural city or neighbourhood with shops, restaurants and religious venues where they feel comfortable. Or they may arrive in a neighbourhood where no one looks like them or speaks the same language; where access to appropriate education, cultural or religious facilities may be problematic. It is understandable that local authority may assess that it is in the best interests of the child to be placed in urban areas where there is a clear infrastructure that meet their needs. Neither is it surprising that young people ask to move to a city or prefer to remain there, even though, if placed out of county or country, this creates problems in accessing social housing. Migrant communities, dispersed across the UK, have often moved to urban areas for study, work, culturally appropriate facilities and mutual support.

However, given the mandatory nature of the NTS, it is important to identify factors, some of which are cited in this report, in supporting UASC placed in non-urban and rural or semi-rural areas, and to discuss how placements outside cities can work for young people in the longer term. There is also a need for the WSMP to continue to facilitate training, advice

and sharing of expertise between local authorities caring for UASC in cities, who often have more experience of supporting UASC, and local authorities caring for UASC in non-urban and rural areas, for whom this is relatively new.

4. Conclusions

Wales is a Nation of Sanctuary with a commitment to welcoming migrants and policy measures to ensure this ambition is realised. It has a legislative framework that promotes the wellbeing and rights of all children. The nation is, therefore, in a strong position to draw on the good practice cited in this report but also to respond to the recommendations based on the young people's generosity, insights and lived experiences.

It is hoped that this can be the start of an ongoing dialogue with the young people who participated in the research, hoping that those responsible for their care would listen to their views and ideas, leading to the improvement of the lives of present and future unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Based on this research, a series of recommendations have been made for Welsh Government, local authorities, Home Office and other partners, who will work together in the coming months to consider how they can be taken forward.

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF RESEARCH TERMS AND ORGANISATIONS

Routes through which a UASC could arrive in Wales

National Transfer Scheme (NTS) – The NTS is intended to ensure that an individual local authority does not face a disproportionate responsibility in accommodating and looking after unaccompanied children, simply by virtue of being the point of arrival of unaccompanied children (e.g. Kent Children’s Services).

‘Spontaneous’ Arrivals – many UASC arrive in the UK by their own means and are encountered at their port of entry, at the Asylum Intake Unit in Croydon, or are otherwise encountered by police/social services. Spontaneous arrivals are usually taken into the care of the local authority they first present to.

Refugee children, (who do not have to go through the asylum process), may also arrive into the UK under the [UK Resettlement Scheme](#).

Adult Asylum route – young people ‘age disputed’ by the Home Office or other authorities may be placed in adult asylum dispersal accommodation in Wales. On arrival in Wales these young people may be referred to Children’s Services in their area and require an age assessment.

Dubs Scheme - formally known as Section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016, was introduced following an amendment proposed by Lord Alf Dubs. The scheme committed the UK government to relocate a specified number of UASC from Europe to the UK, in response to the humanitarian crisis affecting children stranded in camps like Calais and across southern Europe. The scheme closed in 2020.

Organisations

[Asylum Justice](#)

Asylum Justice is the only organisation in Wales to provide free specialist immigration advice and representation, up to and including court level, to asylum seekers, refugees, and vulnerable migrants.

[Barnardo’s](#)

Barnardo’s provides direct, specialist support to trafficked children. They run a specialist [Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship Service](#) (ICTGS) in Wales that:

- builds trusting relationships with trafficked children to help them build a positive future.
- helps children navigate the criminal justice, immigration and social care systems.
- gives practical support, such as help with housing, medical needs and education.
- gives emotional and psychological support.
- trains professionals working with children so they can spot the signs of trafficking and know how to support trafficked children.

British Red Cross

The British Red Cross is the UK's largest independent provider of services for refugees and people seeking asylum. They offer emergency help, one-to-one support and casework, and special services for children and families.

The British Red Cross operates the International Family Tracing Service, which assists those who have lost touch with family because of armed conflict, disasters, migration or other emergencies. The service is available across the UK and further information can be found on the British Red Cross website.

Dreamers Project

The Dreamers is a co-produced project that aims to improve the mental health of young (16-25-year-old) refugees and asylum seekers living in Cardiff and the Vale. The project is delivered through a partnership between [Oasis](#), [TGP Cymru](#) and [Cardiff and Vale Health Inclusion Service](#) (CAVHIS) along with the young people who are seeking sanctuary or have received refugee status in the UK.

GAP Centre (Sanctuary) – Newport

The Sanctuary is a project that provides a welcome and support for refugees and asylum seekers in Newport. In addition to befriending and emotional support, the Sanctuary offers practical support to refugees and asylum seeker communities in Newport through several advocacy initiatives. The Sanctuary also runs a range of activities throughout the week, including an after-school Youth Club, which provides a safe space for unaccompanied minors to socialise with local young people and access appropriate support.

Into Work

The Into Work Advice Service provides employment, training and digital support to individuals actively seeking work or looking to upskill. They also have a mentoring programme for young people aged 16-24.

Migrant Help

Migrant Help runs a free asylum helpline 24/7 accessible to all asylum seekers in the UK. They can assist with applications for asylum support, reporting maintenance issues with asylum accommodation, requests for assistance, and advice on any asylum-related queries. UASC Care Leavers can contact Migrant Help if their support from the local authority is being stopped.

NYAS

NYAS is a rights-based organisation that provides advocacy to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Wales. Alongside advocacy support they provide youth participation programmes for care-experienced young people which include mental health and wellbeing, a child's rights approach to policing, support for young women who are pregnant/have children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and homeless youth.

Oasis

Oasis started in 2008 and operates as an essential hub for sanctuary seekers in the heart of Cardiff. They are a buzzing community of many nationalities, cultures, experiences, skills, challenges, successes, and food. Oasis provides a wide range of holistic, free services for sanctuary seekers which operate on a drop-in basis.

TGP Cymru - Young Asylum Seekers and Refugees Programme

TGP Cymru provides advocacy, participation and consultation work with UASC across Wales and supports young asylum-seekers and refugees up to the age of 25.

Welsh Refugee Council (WRC)

The WRC are the leading organisation in Wales promoting equality for, and fostering good relations towards, asylum seekers and refugees. They provide specialist advice and support services to asylum seekers and refugees in Wales to ensure they can access the services they need.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER TO THOSE WORKING WITH UASC

Dear

I have been commissioned by ACE Hub Wales and Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) to gather the experiences of USAC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers) and former Care Leavers living in Wales or in out of country placements in England (supported by Welsh local authorities).

This research will be carried out January to March 2025 through group or individual interviews, in person or online, in English or, if required, with the support of an interpreter. The aim is to gather young people's experiences of the National Transfer Scheme and entering Welsh local authority care, on education, health including mental health, immigration issues and integration. I will encourage young people to share positive and negative experiences as well as to identify, as in my recent book [Child Migrant Voices in Modern Britain; Oral Histories 1930s - Present Day](#), their ideas on how to improve the lives of young asylum seekers. The research will be brought together in a report to inform both policy and practice.

I hope that, as someone knowledgeable in this area, you will be able to facilitate young people's involvement. I will follow all ethical principles around consent, anonymity, ability to withdraw at any time or change, or add to, their words at a later date. Drawing on my experience in this field I will aim to create a participative, trusting environment and identify opportunities, as appropriate and if desired, for young people to voice their own views within the public domain. Participants will also receive a £25 token as a thank you for their contribution.

We are keen to recruit young people from diverse backgrounds, including young women.

The time scale is short. If you know of young people who could contribute to this important research, please contact Sabina Hussain on sabina.hussain@wlgga.gov.uk

asap to coordinate details and in the first instance. I attach a flyer to distribute to young people as appropriate.

To see more of my work on research with young migrants including films and publications see childmigrantstories.com.

Yours Sincerely

Eithne Nightingale

childmigrantstories.com

eithne.nightingale@icloud.com



APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT LEAFLET TO UASC



Experiences of Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers in Wales

Have you arrived in Britain aged under 18 to seek asylum and been accepted into Welsh local authority care? Would you like to share your experiences, positive and negative, of welcome and support?

If so Dr Eithne Nightingale, a researcher, writer and filmmaker, would like to talk to you. This would be in a group or on your own, in person or online. You can speak in English or, if possible, with an interpreter. You can choose what you want to share and whether to use your own name or be anonymous. Eithne will send you a copy of your interview so you can change, or add, words at a later date.

You will receive the final research report with your suggestions on how to improve the lives of young asylum seekers. All participants will receive a £25 voucher to thank you for your contribution.

What you share will not affect your asylum claim, immigration status or the care and support you receive now or in the future.

If you are interested talk to your social, youth or community worker or contact Sabina Hussein on sabina.hussain@wlga.gov.uk.

You can see more of Eithne's research, writing and films about young people's experience of migration on childmigrantstories.com

This research is funded by the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Hub Wales and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP).

APPENDIX D: THE RESEARCH

ACE Hub Wales and Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) commissioned Dr Eithne Nightingale, author of [*Child Migrant Voices in Modern Britain; Oral Histories 1930s - Present Day*](#), published by Bloomsbury 2024, to gather the experiences of USAC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers) and former Care Leavers living in Wales or in out of country placements in England (supported by Welsh authorities).

The research was carried out between February and June 2025 through group and individual interviews, in person and online, with the support of interpreters. The aim was to gather young people’s experiences entering Welsh local authority care, in particular although not exclusively, through the National Transfer Scheme.

i) Recruitment

A letter from the researcher Dr Eithne Nightingale, written in consultation with ACE Hub Wales and Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP) was sent to Heads of Children’s Services and UASC practitioners across Wales (See Appendix B), after agreement that the voices of UASC needed to be heard. This was accompanied with a leaflet to be distributed to, and discussed with, young people (See Appendix C).

ii) Methodology

Forty-two Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and former UASC Care Leavers living in Wales or in out of country placements in England (supported by Welsh local authorities) participated in the research. This makes up 4.89% of the number of UASC (389) and UASC Care Leavers (470), total (859) in Welsh local authority care on December 31, 2024.⁸

The following data is taken from forms filled in by the young people, sometimes helped by the staff and interpreter in attendance.

Country or origin

West Africa	Vietnamese	Syria	Eritrea	South Sudan	Somalia	Afghanistan	Iran	Sudan	Total
1	2	3	3	3	3	7	10	10	42

All but West Africa are in the top 8 highest number of nationalities of young people referred to Wales through the NTS in 2024 with Sudan the highest, followed by Iran and Afghanistan.⁹

⁸ Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership (2025), *Analysis of NTS Referrals – 1st January 2024 – 31st December 2024. Wales.*

⁹ Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership (2025), *Analysis of NTS Referrals – 1st January 2024 – 31st December 2024, Wales.*

Age (at the time of interview)

13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Missing	Total
1	0	0	6	14	10	4	1	1	0	0	1	4 *	42

* Four young people did not complete the question on age.

Gender

Male	Female	Total
39	3	42

Females made up 7.12% of those interviewed. Out of the 207 young people referred to Wales through the NTS in 2024, only 5 were female (2.4%).¹⁰

Method of arrival in Wales

National Transfer Scheme	Other	Total
34	8 *	42

* 1 person came on the Dubs scheme (Section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016), 7 were spontaneous arrivals (See Appendix A).

Placements in and out of country in Wales and out of Country in England.

Of the 42 participants 14 were placed in out of county, i.e. in three cities in South- West and South-East Wales, and 8 were placed out of country in England seven in a northern English city and one in London. Of those interviewed only 5 were living outside cities, although several had moved there after living in towns and non-urban and rural villages across Wales. Analysis of UASC referrals in 2024 showed that 43% were placed in county, 25% placed out of county in Wales and 32% placed out of country in England.¹¹

iii) Group and Individual Interviews in Person

Group interviews of between 2 and 7 young people and three individual interviews were held in venues already known to the young people in cities in South-West and South-East Wales and in the north of England. They were held during the February half term and during the Easter holidays when young people were not in college. The young people were actively recruited and encouraged to attend by social workers, personal advisers, foster carers and others working closely with UASC who also organised and hosted the interviews.

The interviewer emphasised that the purpose of the research was for the young people to be as open as possible. They were assured that the report would be anonymised (they

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

were encouraged to choose their own pseudonym), that nothing they shared would affect their asylum claim, immigration status or the care and support they received then or in the future and that they would be sent the final report for comment before it was published. They signed consent forms, or this was recorded prior to the interview, confirming that they understood the research, that they had been able to ask questions, that they could refuse to answer any specific question and withdraw at any time (see Appendix C).

The young people were given the choice as to whether the professional adults including those who cared for them or staff from the Welsh Strategic Partnership who attended some group sessions in Wales, could attend. The young people mostly agreed to this, but with the adults sometimes choosing to absent themselves for all or part of the interview if they were directly responsible for their care. On occasion the social workers and personal assistants made valuable contributions to the debate, providing background to, or confirming, what the young people said. Some of this, with their agreement, has been included in the report anonymously.

Several, but not all of the interpreters were already known to the young people. Indeed, some had been present when the young person first arrived in Wales or had interpreted for their counselling sessions, for example. Some interpreters had come themselves as young people, one having entered foster care as an UASC in Birmingham decades earlier. Most group members shared the same linguistic background except for some young people with good English, who felt they did not need an interpreter.

The group interviews lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours, the longer ones with a break in the middle. The interviewees were given the option to write responses to the questions in their own language or in English on Post-it notes but preferred to discuss things orally, assisted by the interpreter. The group dynamics were helped by most of them knowing each other, sometimes as close friends, prompting memories and open discussion. Interviewees were all given the option, announced at the start of the interview, that at the end of the interview they could talk to the interviewer one-to-one and in private, anything they did not want to share in the group. This was taken up by one female interviewee.

iv) Online Interviews

Seven interviews, four individual and a group of three, were held online. All but one of the interviews online, were supported by interpreters. They lasted approximately one to two hours. With the agreement of the young people a social worker was in attendance with two young people online and a personal adviser with three young people online.

vi) Interview Content

The focus of the research was on the young person's experience in the UK and particularly in Wales. Although their experiences before coming to the UK can impact on, and be relevant to, such exploration it was not feasible to go into the life stories of all 42 young people within the time and other constraints of the research. However, elements of a person's back story were sometimes shared incidentally and in certain cases, in the individual or small group interviews, the young person spoke of the reasons they left their homes or of their journeys to the UK. Some, as was their right, preferred not to answer such questions. It was too painful.

The interviewer employed a mixture of open-ended questions, particularly at the start and end of the interview, with more specific questions on key areas. The open-ended questions at the beginning included, 'What have been the best experiences and the most challenging/difficult experiences since you came to the UK?' The open-ended questions at the end included, 'What are your fears and hopes for the future?'

The core of the interview focussed on the positive and challenging experiences of specific services such as foster care, accommodation, social care, health including mental health, education, work, and of the Home Office. We discussed what people knew of Wales before they came; of their friendships with people of the same and different backgrounds, including Welsh and English born young people; of what and who they missed; how other unaccompanied young people like themselves could be supported and how they could play a role in this.

They engaged in the process, often with enthusiasm, wanting other UASC not to experience difficulties they themselves had encountered. In response to, 'What are your hopes for the future?' two young people setting aside their own ambitions, said "We wish for this report to improve the lives of other unaccompanied young people who arrive in Wales." Another young person online, hoped, "The government and everyone responsible listen to the young peoples' wishes and feelings."

Report

The summary report has drawn on extensive quotes from interview recordings whilst also providing some analysis and drawing out key recommendations to improve services for UASC in local authority care in Wales. Sabina Hussain, responsible for UASC for the WSMP, has provided important contextual information. Both she and Anne Hubbard, Head of the WSMP, have provided support and advice throughout.

APPENDIX E: REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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