

**Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)
Scrutiny Paper.**



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Introduction

In late January 2023, the three statutory leads for the Brighton and Hove Children Safeguarding Partnership (BHSCP) commissioned the Independent Scrutineer to complete a fast-time piece of work to examine the Partnership response to 'missing migrant children'. This followed significant local and national media coverage and questions from other partners on the subject. The term 'missing migrant children' appears to have originated in media coverage and this report will describe the children involved as Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).

Terms of Reference (ToR) were set¹ and I, in my role as Scrutineer, was provided with a brief that sought an independent view on the following:

Thematic Review - Areas of inquiry/themes to be explored by Independent Scrutineer:

1. What is the scale of the problem, specifically how many children have been reported missing?
2. Are the concerns raised accurate, is there an evidential basis for the concerns?
3. What was the status of the missing children?
4. What steps are being taken locally and nationally to find missing children and resolve the issue?
5. What steps are being taken to prevent further children going missing?
6. Is there evidence of criminal coercion or exploitation? If so, how is this being addressed?
7. Is the Partnership doing all it can to respond to the safety of these children?
8. UASC are placed in hotels under the care of the Home Office. What part do they play in preventing children going missing?
9. Does the Home Office support Brighton & Hove agencies to prevent children going missing, investigate episodes of missing children, and develop best practice in this key area?
10. Is there any learning or recommendations that could improve practice and reduce risk to these and other UASC?

These 10 areas will form the basis for this report.

Methodology

I have examined documents that set out the concerns raised by national and local politicians, social commentators, national and local media and safeguarding partners. A summary of these concerns was created so each could be examined to see if there was evidential support for the issues set out.

Having established a summary of concerns raised I was provided with statistical data to check the accuracy of reporting.

Agencies involved directly in the care of UASC were spoken to. They were asked a series of questions to establish what actions their own agency was taking to safeguard these children. Additional questions were asked to establish if there was effective multi-agency

¹ ToR attached at appendix1

safeguarding measures being taken to protect children. Views on how agencies could improve practice, reduce episodes of missing and return missing children at the earliest opportunity, both in a single agency and multi-agency environment were sought. Agencies spoken to included Children's Social Care, Sussex Police, Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the Home Office.

Media Coverage / Political Comment

There has been extensive media reporting about UASC for some time. The subject has been raised at Brighton and Hove Safeguarding Children Partnership (BHSCP) affording the wider Partnership with an opportunity to scrutinise those involved.

It is not possible to outline all media coverage regarding UASC in this report, however some headlines and comment that have resulted in the raised profile of the issue will be summarised for the reader. It should be noted that, at the time of writing this report, media outlets continued to report on the issue.

In January 2023 there was a significant rise in coverage of what were perceived to be safeguarding concerns regarding UASC who were being housed in a hotel in the Brighton and Hove area. These concerns were raised in the national political arena with local politicians asking questions in the House of Commons. This, coupled with investigative journalist pieces, resulted in headlines which included:

'Revealed: scores of child asylum seekers kidnapped from Home Office hotel' – The Guardian 21/01/2023

'Dozens of asylum-seeking children have been kidnapped by gangs from a Brighton hotel run by the Home Office in a pattern apparently being repeated across the south coast, an Observer investigation can reveal.'

'Dozens of child asylum seekers kidnapped from Brighton and Hove hotel' – The Argus 23/01/2023

The Argus claim dozens of UASC have been kidnapped from a Home Office run hotel in Brighton. The Argus states 600 children have passed through the hotel in the past 18 months with 136 reported missing.

'Brighton council slammed as 'ineffective' over missing children' – The Argus 25/01/2023

The Council has been branded as 'complacent and ineffective' over a scandal in which 'dozens' of UASC have been 'abducted' from a hotel in the city.

The following comments were attributed to political representatives:

Caroline Lucas MP, op-ed, Metro 25/01/2023 *'In Hove, next to my Brighton Pavilion constituency, the Home Office has put vulnerable, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children at risk by placing them in hotels.'*

Peter Kyle, MP for Hove has worked to highlight the issue of children being *'snatched, abducted and coerced by criminals.'* – **Metro 25/01/2023**

Local MP - Labour's Peter Kyle - said the missing children were being "*coerced into crime*", adding: "*Just last year Sussex Police pursued a car that had collected two children from outside this hotel*". – **BBC 25/01/2023**

It is clear the reports raise a very genuine concern that is clearly in the public interest to report on. This report in no way seeks to minimise the issue of UASC who go missing from placements that should offer them a safe environment, it is an issue that all agencies and individuals who have contributed to the report recognise as significant. However, comment will be made on the language used in media reports. This language needs to be carefully considered, its impact on public confidence and on children specifically can result in unnecessary distress and anxiety.

1. What is the scale of the problem, specifically how many children have been reported missing?

The data provided for this scrutiny report show no significant difference between the information held by agencies.

Since August 2021, 137 UASC have been reported missing from the hotel used to accommodate them.

- 60 have been located
- 1 has been transferred to another police area for enquiries to be made.
- 76 of those reported missing are still outstanding having not been located.
- The majority of those reported missing were of Albanian origin, all were aged 16 or 17.
- Of those who have not been located, 37 are now adults and 39 are now 16/17.

It is of note that the episodes of children being reported missing was considerably higher in the summer months, peaking in August 2022 when 41 missing reports were made. This rise in numbers is linked to the increased numbers of UASC making the crossing to the UK in better weather conditions. Since November 2022 there have been 7 children reported missing, this is a significant reduction.

Comment - It is apparent that there is a significant change in the profile of missing children dependent upon time of year. The majority of missing episodes, particularly during the 'peak' are of children who are Albanian origin. Whilst this may be uncomfortable it is a fact that must be considered. Albanian children are disproportionately likely to go missing from the hotel. This means that, through making themselves missing, they are more vulnerable to exploitation. This has to be a factor in risk assessing these children on their arrival. There is a clear link between nationality and likelihood of them going missing, therefore is a hotel the best environment to ensure their needs and safety are met?

Data quoted in several media pieces on this issue rely on both national and local figures. This is a national problem with significant localised impact for Kent and Sussex. This report, and the conclusions drawn, will rely on data that refers specifically to Brighton and Hove, but

it is important that the reader considers the impact of the larger national picture and commentary on it.

From the data provided, it is clear there is an ongoing issue with the number of UASC children who are going missing from a hotel in Brighton and Hove which is used to temporarily house them prior to transfer to local authorities for longer term care and provision. The numbers of children who are reported missing increases significantly in the summer months; it is therefore imperative that action is taken to ensure the problem is resolved and to avoid a repetition of 2022.

2. Are the concerns raised accurate, is there an evidential basis for the concerns?

The scale of the issue, as stated above, does give rise to significant concern. Other concerns reported include the following:

'... children being snatched, abducted and coerced by criminals.' - Sussex police are clear that they do have concerns regarding the small boat entry method which is associated with organised crime. However, of the children who have gone missing, only a small number have been found to have been exploited. Three have been arrested for drug related offences in other areas. Many are located with relatives and/or friends whilst others self-present to police after a period of time. There remains no definitive answer to where the outstanding missing children currently are, therefore, to rule out exploitation would be bad practice. I am re-assured by conversations I have had with all agencies that there is considerable work being completed to maximise all opportunities to prevent these children becoming the victims of exploitation.

I have been provided with no evidence that children are being *'snatched, abducted and coerced by criminals'*. The use of such highly provocative language should be carefully considered and limited to instances where there is clear evidence that such offending is taking place and it is in the public interest to raise the issue. The impact of such statements can undermine public confidence and lead to children being fearful of a threat that does not exist. If there is evidence that children are in danger best practice would be to raise this with the police and other partners so a co-ordinated approach could be taken to minimise or eradicate the risk. This would also afford an opportunity to deliver appropriate messages to local communities and raise awareness.

The Guardian reported on 21/01/2023 *'Dozens of asylum-seeking children have been kidnapped by gangs from a Brighton hotel run by the Home Office in a pattern apparently being repeated across the south coast, an Observer investigation can reveal.'* I have been provided with no evidence of any children being kidnapped, the police have investigated one incident (also referred to in the press) where two 17 year old boys were seen by staff at the hotel to get into a car. The vehicle was stopped by police and the boys, along with another child from Kent were found to be in the vehicle with two adult males. The adults were arrested for offences of Human Trafficking and remain under investigation. This incident is not being dealt with as a kidnap.

Further media reports have alleged that racial abuse, violence and verbal abuse are being used against children in the hotel. I have been informed by police that all reported incidents at the hotel since 2021 have been reviewed. There are no recorded assaults or hate incidents

by staff on UASC at the location. The only incidents or calls to police in relation to violence are from persons outside the hotel trying to force entry when it re-opened, a fight between two boys, and one resident offering violence as he did not want to be there. Police are clear there is rarely any reported disorder at the hotel. The police have also searched their records for incidents relating to abuse and racist behaviour, no incidents are recorded. The Local Authority confirmed that they had received no concerns of this nature. Partners responded by completing an immediate visit to the hotel (conducted jointly by the Head of Safeguarding, Local Authority colleagues and ICB) which did not find any areas of concern. This response was good practice and shows appropriate initial response to safeguarding concerns raised.

Whilst there is a clear evidential basis for legitimate concerns regarding the number of children who have gone missing from the hotel, I have found no evidence to support claims of kidnapping or coercion by criminal gangs. Reporting of unsubstantiated allegations such as these must be balanced against public confidence and a wider safeguarding agenda.

Comment – Safeguarding is everybody’s responsibility; this extends to political leaders and media outlets. It is important that we hold each other to account and press, local government and political leaders play a pivotal part in this. However, we also need to consider the impact of language on our communities and children. It is important that we think about how we deliver this challenge and the audience it may well reach. All of us have an ongoing responsibility to be mindful of the impact our language can have on children and families who hear or read it.

3. What is the status of the missing children?

I have been informed that both the Local Authority and the Home Office are currently seeking legal advice on this incredibly important issue. At the time of writing this report the status of UASC children remains ‘in limbo’. They do not have looked after children or child in need status with the Local Authority and the Home Office has no statutory responsibility for their care. This creates a significant statutory gap in provision and leaves the child with no corporate parent. Statutory agencies have no specific guidance and the longer a child waits to be placed in the care of a Local Authority via the National Transfer Scheme the greater the risk to them.

The system that has been introduced has been led by the Home Office who maintain they have no direct statutory provision to deal with children in these circumstances, but that they have the power to put arrangements in place which are borne out of necessity in the absence of appropriate facilities to house children at the point of entry. Local safeguarding agencies have responded to the situation with advice, training, consultation and full engagement in safeguarding referrals made on a case-by-case basis. The Local Authority have maintained that the primary responsibility for the welfare of the children in the hotel remains that of the Home Office. They are clear that the Local Authority in whose area the Home Office places UASC before they are transferred to care cannot be expected to treat them as looked after children for that period. In the case of Brighton & Hove City Council, at the time of writing this report, were the authority to have triggered duties to accommodate the children under section 20 of the Children Act it would have meant providing accommodation for in the region of 1700 children since July 2021.

The Local Authority recognises UASC are likely to be children in need but maintain that the Home Office are primarily responsibility for meeting these needs until such time as the child is placed in the care of a Local Authority under the National Transfer Scheme.

Local safeguarding agencies have responded to the situation, but the Local Authority remain clear that the children do not have 'looked after' or 'child in need' status. They are clear that they will respond to specific safeguarding issues / concerns when they are raised regarding children placed in the hotel.

The Home Office have helpfully explained the process in place when a child reaches the UK, specifically Kent. To help the reader I will outline the stages involved:

- The child lands or is rescued whilst in the process of crossing the channel (98% of children arriving in Kent come via small boat crossing).
- They are brought to Dover where they are triaged.
- They are age assessed by a social worker and immigration officer. Only those definitely over 18 are placed with other adults in the Kent intake area.
- Children are processed, offered a welfare interview, and have various biometrics, fingerprints and photograph taken.
- Each child is registered as seeking asylum.
- They are then referred to Kent County Council. It is accepted that Kent cannot provide care for all the young people.
- They are then referred into the National Transfer Team who in turn allocate them to a Local Authority who will have responsibility for their care. This is done within 48 hours.
- They are then transferred to the hotel where they are 'temporarily' housed until the host Local Authority makes provisions for their care.
- The average length of stay is 18.5 days.
- There are some cases where this stay exceeds that average due to several factors.

This system is preferred to the alternative of children being housed with adults in the intake area.

Once the child arrives with the host area allocated under the National Transfer Scheme statutory provisions and responsibilities are transferred to that Local Authority. This is a mandatory responsibility for the Local Authority.

The area of concern is the period between the child landing and being placed with a Local Authority. This has been described as a 'grey area'. The Home Office are clear that they have no statutory responsibility for this provision, whilst the Local Authority state that these are transient children in the care of the Home Office for whom they do not have statutory responsibility. The real danger comes when children are either housed in the hotel for an extended period or when they go missing for a protracted period.

For the National Transfer Scheme to work efficiently there must be accountability across all Local Authorities. The scheme depends upon all Local Authorities taking children and having processes in place to do so at the earliest opportunity. When this does not happen, children are kept in the hotel for extended periods. It is clearly best practice to transfer these children to a Local Authority who can provide the best possible care and support for their needs at the earliest opportunity.

Comment – A clear legal position should be clarified regarding the status of UASC placed in hotels in these circumstances. Once obtained the legal position should be considered against the demand statutory responsibility would place on LAs or central government. It has to be acknowledged that approximately 1700 children have been placed in the Brighton and Hove hotel, the demand associated with giving the LA responsibility for all of these children would result in unmanageable risk. Without a clear legal position there is a risk that the systemic issues will remain because of lack of accountability.

4. What steps are being taken locally and nationally to find missing children and resolve the issue?

Sussex Police have increased capacity in their Missing Persons Team, adding a supervisor and other staff to form a dedicated team under Operation Watchful. This is good practice given the increased demand and shows a recognition of the risks involved. I am reassured having spoken to Police, Local Authority and the Home Office that children who go missing from the hotel are dealt with in the same way all children would be. A multi-agency strategy meeting takes place affording good opportunity for information exchange. There then follows a police investigation that uses all available avenues of enquiry to locate the missing child.

The task of investigating these missing episodes does become more challenging because of the nature of the children involved. All are extremely vulnerable and may have been provided with advice prior to arrival that encourages them to go missing to avoid the 'immigration system'. In addition, they do not have the community footprint other children who have been resident in an area would have. This reduces lines of enquiry for investigating teams.

Additional measures are in place that recognise the unique situation the current provision creates. Local police are linked into other national law enforcement who deal with tackling organised exploitation, a national task and a task force has been established to provide assurance regarding the response to missing episodes and there is good cross border communication to consider best practice. Local police have links with Home Office staff in Albania who can also offer assistance.

5. What Steps are being taken to prevent further children going missing?

There is evidence of good practice by agencies through the implementation of the Missing After Reasonable Steps (MARS) Protocol. This provides an opportunity to gather as much information as possible before any missing episodes, ensuring the best opportunity of locating children. In addition, the biometrics and photograph taken on arrival will assist in any such enquiries.

Children are interviewed as part of the arrival process. They are offered support and given asylum seeker status.

Comment – Whilst the details above show good practice the fact that so many children choose to remove themselves from the hotel clearly illustrates that the system in place

does not adequately address this risk. This risk needs to be assessed and alternatives considered prior to transfer to accommodation that increases the opportunity for children to remove themselves from a system that they believe will end in their deportation when they reach adulthood or to allow themselves to be in a better situation by joining friends, family or other associates elsewhere in the country. Both of these alternatives clearly increase the risk of exploitation and other safeguarding issues becoming a factor in a child's life.

6. *Is there evidence of criminal coercion or exploitation, if so. how is this being addressed?*

I am assured the issue of exploitation is clearly recognised by all agencies involved in the care of UASC. There is some evidence of children who have gone missing being criminally exploited, this is evidenced by those children who have been arrested for criminal offences. Whilst these numbers are small it must be acknowledged that there are a number of children who remain missing and therefore the possibility of them being exploited or coerced cannot be ruled out. I have been provided with no evidence that indicates knowledge of a specific threat or known organised network that could be involved in such exploitation.

Where allegations of criminal exploitation are made, I have been assured that they are investigated rigorously, local and national resources are used, and appropriate statutory functions are completed.

Any allegations of exploitation or coercion that are made from any source must be investigated thoroughly. When whistle-blowers, children, professionals, or members of the public make such allegations they must be considered as a priority. It is vital that any information, no matter how it is considered by the recipient, is passed to police so intelligence can be developed to assist ongoing and future investigations.

Media articles quote whistle blowers as the source of some of the allegations made. I am aware that the Home Office has a whistle blowing policy for staff within the hotels, but I have seen no evidence that any whistle blower has raised issues with any statutory agency. It is imperative that when information relating to safeguarding concerns is raised it should be shared with agencies so it can be thoroughly investigated, and steps taken to safeguard children.

7. *Is the Partnership doing all it can to respond to the safety of these children?*

There is clear evidence of a genuine will to work in partnership to ensure that the UASC placed in the hotel are afforded every opportunity to be safe and cared for. I have been provided with details of the partnership approach to safeguarding generally and specifically around missing episodes. Whilst the issue of children going missing is persistent (to varying degrees depending on time of year) and needs further consideration, the response is thorough, appropriate and multi-agency. The three main agencies charged with safeguarding children in the city all play an active role and work together well. The recent response to allegations of assault and racist behaviour were responded to immediately by the Local Authority and Health. Checks were made by Sussex Police to ensure crimes of this nature had not been reported and an immediate visit was made to the hotel. This illustrates

the way in which agencies work together to respond to safeguarding concerns, deploying appropriate resources to deal with issues raised.

8. UASC are placed in hotels under the care of the Home Office. What part do they play in preventing children going missing?

The housing of UASC in hotels whilst they await transfer to Local Authorities was implemented by the Home Office in the summer of 2021 in response to increased numbers of migrants entering the UK.

The Home Office have contributed to this report and have responded to questions I have raised with them. They have assured me of the following:

- The welfare and safety of children arriving in the UK is an absolute priority for them.
- Social workers and nurses are available at each hotel during office hours, 5 days a week.
- These professionals are trained to identify any signs of concern in their interactions with young people.
- Team leaders and care workers are on site 24 hours a day.
- There is liaison with local agencies if safeguarding issues are raised.

In addition, they have provided reassurance regarding their response to the issue of children going missing from the hotel:

- Once in UASC hotel accommodation there are measures in place to ensure that the risk of a child going missing is minimised.
- Records are kept of children leaving and returning to the hotel. These are managed by security and overseen by team leaders and care worker support in the hotels to ensure that the young people have returned to the hotel.
- Incidents of children who go missing are taken extremely seriously. When a young person goes missing from a hotel, the 'missing persons protocol' is followed and led by our directly engaged social workers.
- MARS protocol is followed and the Home Office staff from the hotel are fully involved in this.
- A Multi-Agency Task and Finish Group was established by the Home Office in Sept 22 in response to the significant number of arrivals over the summer and the corresponding missing children numbers. This group includes police, National Crime Agency, DFE and Home Office colleagues. This group is considering process changes to mitigate the risk of young people going missing and to locate them if they do.
- They state that police have confirmed that all cases for the young people still missing are still live and active, but the level of enquiry they are able to undertake will vary depending on the information held about the young person.

Comment – Whilst it is absolutely clear that the Home Office take the issue of safety and wellbeing seriously, investing in staff and partnership engagement, I am unable to offer appropriate reassurance regarding many aspects of safeguarding within the hotel. Whilst an inspection has been carried out by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, I am concerned that a more thorough inspection process should take place if the use of this and other hotels continue. I understand that this

accommodation would fall out of the regulated inspection frameworks which currently exist; but it is clear they are housing extremely vulnerable children and as such should be the subject of scrutiny. An OFSTED led inspection process would provide reassurance and support improvements that would benefit children and professionals involved.

9. Does the Home Office support Brighton & Hove agencies to prevent children going missing, investigate episodes of missing children and develop best practice in this key area?

This question is dealt with in my response above. I am confident that there is local information exchange and that the Home Office are clear regarding expectations of partnership working. Some financial assistance has been offered to local agencies. They remain fully immersed and committed to the MARS process.

Comment – It is worthy of note that the MARS process was developed to deal with children who were residents of children’s homes. The implementation of this system is good practice and supports my earlier comment regarding the need to implement an OFSTED led inspection framework.

10. Is there any learning or recommendations that could improve practice and reduce risk to these and other UASC?

This Independent Scrutiny Report has been completed in a relatively short period of time. Whilst I am confident in the conclusions I draw and recommendations I make there is no doubt that each will require careful consideration and development.

I have been left in no doubt that there is a genuine will across all agencies to protect and safeguard these children. The use of hotels as temporary placements was born out of a need to reduce the risk of harm associated with holding them in a place designed for adult migrant arrivals. This process has been managed by the Home Office who have no statutory responsibility for this provision. I would also question their expertise in what an extremely complex safeguarding situation is. The alternative of passing this responsibility to the Local Authority is not achievable. The numbers of children involved, and complexity of the situation, would involve the deployment of resources which are beyond the capacity of the Local Authority.

From the data provided there is a clear picture that, without significant intervention, this issue is likely to recur in spring and summer this year. Planning to deal with this is essential.

Recommendation 1 – The Home Office make an immediate decision on the continued use of the hotel to accommodate UASC. If the decision is to continue to use the hotel, then the next recommendations made should be considered.

Recommendation 2 – A definitive legal view should be arrived at regarding the status of the UASC. This is essential going forward and will provide a legal context to decisions made and accountability.

Recommendation 3 – A multi-agency planning meeting should be called to establish a joint strategic response to anticipated seasonal UASC arrivals (those expected to arrive in spring / summer 2023). This meeting should consider accountability, resources, all safeguarding issues including missing episodes and communication strategies. The meeting should also examine any views on possible alternatives to the current provision. The specific issue of overrepresentation of Albanian children in missing episodes should be addressed. Planning needs to occur for this group who are at greater risk of exploitation through their missing episodes.

Recommendation 4 – If the hotel remains open then an independent inspection system must be put in place to reassure all agencies and central government of the hotel's suitability to house these children. This should be an OFSTED inspection that would look at systems and practice. This is essential to the continued safeguarding of UASC placed in these circumstances.

Recommendation 5 – The National Transfer Scheme should include greater accountability for all Las and ensure that its mandatory status is enforced. Those who do not take UASC should be held to account and penalised for non-participation. This must be viewed as a national issue with the responsibility for ongoing care being shared equitably.

Recommendation 6 – Plans must be put in place to fund the extra resource required to adequately safeguard these children. This reaches beyond their initial care needs and should extend to increased resource requirements across all agencies involved in every aspect of their care, including missing person investigations and exploitation initiatives.

Recommendation 7 – The Home Office and local political leaders should engage with media outlets to encourage a more balanced approach to the coverage of the issue. The impact of the headlines and articles produced should be considered in a wider safeguarding context. Editors and those responsible for these articles should be asked to consider the language used and provided with pathways to report concerns to agencies who can act on them.

Additional Information Provided

The ICB have helpfully written to me detailing their health offer for UASC in the hotel. They are clearly committed to the Partnership response and have provided health care for the children, including GP registration. They are part of the multi-agency response to missing children, their response evidences both commitment and good practice.

My conversations with the voluntary sector have been limited because of time constraints. I did discuss the issues with a representative of an organisation that is an active participant in the multi-agency system in place to assist with UASC. It was clear that this agency provided essential challenge and support to the statutory partners. It is important that the city's excellent voluntary organisations are considered when devising any multi-agency strategic plan.

Conclusion

This report has been completed as a 'fast time' piece of scrutiny at the request of the statutory partners of the Brighton and Hove Safeguarding Children Partnership. The conclusions reached, comments and recommendations made rely on information provided by several local agencies and the Home Office.

I am reassured that there is a genuine wish to protect and safeguard UASC in the city. I have found that concerns raised regarding missing episodes of UASC children housed in the hotel are absolutely justified, there is a significant problem. However, I have also found that there is little evidence to support claims made of kidnap and criminal coercion, matters on which I have commented on in this report.

This is an issue which is unlikely to be reduced without significant change. It is extremely likely, in my opinion, that numbers of UASC will increase as the weather changes and small boat crossings become more attractive. The current system is not fit for purpose. Unless there is systemic change in the way UASC children are initially assessed, housed and transferred into the care of Local Authorities then there is nothing to indicate a reduction in missing episodes will occur. I have been provided with evidence of good practice and investigation by local agencies when children do go missing, I can see little more that could be done. Therefore, the issue must be addressed before missing episodes occur, with alternative provision of immediate care being offered.



Chris Robson

Independent Chair and Scrutineer B&HSCP

Appendix 1

Independent Scrutiny

Start date of CSPR	27 January 2023
Reviewer/Author name & contact	Chris Robson c.w.robson@outlook.com 07928 644092
Case I.D / initials	Independent Scrutiny - Missing UASC in Brighton & Hove
Date of ToR	27 January 2023

Independent Scrutiny

<p>Rationale for commissioning</p>	<p>A number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) housed by the Home Office in Brighton and Hove are considered missing, possibly trafficked from a Home Office run hotel in the Hove area. It was agreed that the Independent Scrutineer would complete a review of the safeguarding arrangements of the UASC hotel in the city. This review would be undertaken under Working Together 2018 and would consider what this case reveals about the wider systems including joint working between the local authority, the Home Office, and local Police.</p> <p>This piece of scrutiny is not an investigation but a learning and improvement opportunity. This can be undertaken with minimal specific case details included in the final report. It should include a focus on the systems that are in place and what is working well in a strengths-based approach, alongside an exploration of where systems are not working well and where there might be gaps in multi-agency working and learning has been identified.</p> <p>The commissioning of this thematic review was requested as a fast time piece of work on 27 January 2023. In light of this, the review will be completed by BHSCP Independent Scrutineer.</p>
<p>Key Lines of Enquiry</p>	<p>Thematic Review - Areas of inquiry/themes to be explored by Independent Scrutineer:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. What is the scale of the problem, specifically how many children are missing. 12. Are the concerns raised accurate, is there an evidential basis for the concerns. 13. What is the status of the missing children.

	<p>14. What steps are being taken locally and nationally to find missing children and resolve the issue.</p> <p>15. What steps are being taken to prevent further children going missing.</p> <p>16. Is there evidence of criminal coercion or exploitation, if so. how is this being addressed.</p> <p>17. Is the safeguarding partnership doing all it can to respond to the safety of these children.</p> <p>18. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are placed in hotels under the care of the Home Office. What part do they play in preventing children going missing.</p> <p>19. Does the Home Office support B&H agencies to prevent children going missing, investigate episodes of missing children and develop best practice in this key area.</p> <p>20. Are there any other safeguarding concerns identified as part of this thematic review, given media reports that children are subject to verbal abuse; racial abuse and threatened with violence.</p> <p>21. Is there any learning or recommendations that could improve practice and reduce risk to these and other UASC.</p>
<p>Context of the case</p> <p>Any known conflict between agencies/staff related to this case?</p> <p>Any vulnerabilities or concerns?</p>	<p>In response to the numbers of unaccompanied children in small boat crossings and Kent County Council not being able to take them into their care, the Home Office had to temporarily use hotels to give some unaccompanied children a roof over their heads whilst local authority accommodation is found through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) and ensure that arriving UASC were not left at the Kent Intake Unit without adequate care or provisions. The children are in the Home Office hotels for a short period of time whilst this happens.</p> <p>The Home Office Hotel in Hove was opened at the end of July 2021. Whilst Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) were informed when the hotel was opened this was not done in consultation. The hotel accommodates 16/17 year old males, however this is not always the case. Safeguarding partners in Brighton and Hove have become aware of 15 and 18 year old males being placed there by the Home Office.</p> <p>Over 1400 children have moved through the hotel since July 2021 and allocated to Local Authorities across the country through the NTS to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) teams. Agencies have worked closely together to support the welfare and care of the children.</p>

	<p>The Home Office employs their own Social Work team in the Hotel alongside Nurses and Support Workers. All children have an initial Welfare Assessment and are registered with a local GP for the duration of their stay. Any safeguarding concerns are raised with FDF, and Strategy Meetings take place if appropriate. For every child that goes missing a Strategy Meeting takes place and BHCC have a dedicated Practice Manager at the FDF who oversees this.</p> <p>Missing Children Data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Missing children were initially quite rare with only 7 children going missing from the hotel up to April 2022. All children were located following Strategy Meetings and work with the Home Office and Police. ○ From April 2022 – there was an increase in missing episodes that peaked in August 2022. BHCC CSC noted a distinct pattern of this being Albanian children who were going missing. All cases had Strategy Meetings taking place. ○ In June 2022 the Head of Safeguarding in BHCC Children Social Care raised the issue with the Home Office, Kent CC, Sussex Police, Kent Police, and the Police Serious Organised Crime Agency. ○ Many children are located safely with family or friends although a number have not yet been located. ○ According to the Home Office of those not located over 90% are Albanian children. There are complex reasons for this, risks of trafficking but also some evidence of disenfranchisement from the Asylum Process as some believe they will not be given Asylum. ○ The number of children going missing has dropped quickly since August with less than 10 in the last 3 months. This has coincided with a significant drop in the number of Albanian young people on crossings.
<p>Clarifying scope (time span, focus)</p> <p>What period of time will be reviewed?</p> <p>Any particular focus within that period?</p> <p>What agencies will be involved?</p>	<p>Time period: From July 2021</p> <p>Agencies: BHCC, Sussex Police, Home Office, NHS Sussex, Primary Care (GPs), relevant Health providers, education as required.</p>
<p>Clarifying who should be involved</p>	<p>Independent Scrutineer</p> <p>BHSCP Partnership Manager/BHSCP Coordinator</p> <p>Statutory agency input via Home Office Rep, B&H Children’s Social Care Rep, NHS Sussex Rep, Sussex Police Rep, and any other relevant Partner agencies.</p>

Consideration for accessing confidential documentation	All confidential documentation will be sent securely via egress. When egress cannot be used, the documentation will be password protected.
Governance How to keep BHSCP sufficiently informed?	BHSCP Partnership Manager to be main point of contact for all parties – Independent Scrutineer to meet with Lead Partners and Agency Reps as needed.
What budget is available for the process?	TBC
Who will be the main contact? Who will be admin support?	Sarah Smart – Partnership Manager 07716 702257 Sarah.Smart@brighton-hove.gov.uk Daisy Piatt – Co-ordinator 07818 453285 Daisy.Piatt@brighton-hove.gov.uk
Key Contacts	Sussex Police contact: Kris.Ottery@sussex.police.uk Home office contact: Hannah.Honeyman2@homeoffice.gov.uk Gemma.Barlow@homeoffice.gov.uk Local Authority Contact: Justin.Grantham@brighton-hove.gov.uk NHS Sussex ICB Contact: michael.brown23@nhs.net

Fast Time Review Timetable

Activity	Date
Commissioning Date	27/01/2023
Findings shared with Agencies	20/02/2023
Publication	TBC

Costing

Activity	Time spent (days)
Report writing	TBC
Presentation of Report to Lead Partners/Case Review Group/BHSCP	TBC