

Supporting vulnerable migrant children to integrate and thrive in their new UK communities

An examination of the Settlement Workers in Schools programme in Canada and the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor programme in the United States.

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Executive summary

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children making dangerous small boat crossings to the UK seeking asylum.

With the increase in arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in recent years, there has also been an increasing challenge of how to appropriately receive these children and provide the right level of care and support to ensure they are kept safe, are supported and integrate into their new communities across the UK.

There are three main challenges with the current system that this project examines.

1. The lack of safe and legal routes that enable children to apply for asylum from their home country and travel to the UK legally.
2. There is no specialist approach to the care of these children.
3. Too often UASC don't get the support they need to effectively integrate into schools – with a lack of a uniform country-wide approach to supporting children to access high quality English language tuition to help them engage in school.

This report

Two nationally delivered government programmes abroad (the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) in Canada and the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) programme in the United States) were studied (through visits and observation of provider practice), each demonstrating a coordinated, specialist response to the care and integration of migrant children. Both models involve resettlement agencies working in partnership with schools, local government and care providers to offer a holistic framework tailored to the unique needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children. These international models highlight the value of proactive engagement, early intervention, and culturally responsive support.

Recommendations for reform

These recommendations draw on principles that underpin both the SWIS and URM programmes to highlight actions that would improve the system for UASC fleeing war and persecution and seeking protection in the UK.

Learning from the SWIS programme:

- Develop comprehensive language support programmes for refugee and asylum-seeking children.
- Provide dedicated coordination roles in schools for refugee and asylum-seeking children.
- Schools should establish welcoming environments.
- Promote peer support and social inclusion.

Learning from the URM programme:

- Establish a comprehensive resettlement programme with guaranteed safe and legal routes for children seeking asylum.
- Ensure strategic involvement of resettlement expertise in the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Expand and strengthen foster care and family-based placement options for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Introduction

This Fellowship project was born out of my experience of working on policy around how to better respond to the arrival of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in the UK. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of children making dangerous small boat crossings to the UK seeking asylum. When these children arrive, unaccompanied by their parents or guardians, they are entitled to be taken into the care system across the UK. However, with the increase in arrivals of UASC in recent years, there has also been an increasing challenge of how to appropriately receive these children and provide the right level of care and support to ensure these children are kept safe, are supported and integrate into their new communities across the UK.

My Fellowship was therefore motivated by three key challenges that sit at the heart of the UK Government's response to these children.

There are three main challenges with the current system that this project examines. Firstly, there is a lack of safe and legal routes that enable children to apply for asylum from their home country and travel to the UK legally. Secondly, there is no specialist approach to the care of these children – in the vast majority of cases children are placed in supported accommodation, often alongside other children their own age and often with no regular onsite adult support. Thirdly, research has shown that too often UASC don't get the support they need to effectively integrate into schools – with a lack of a uniform country-wide approach to supporting children to access high quality English language tuition to help them engage in school.

The UK context – motivation for learning

Overall numbers

Over the past decade, the number of UASC arriving in the UK has increased. In 2015, there were 3,043 applications from UASC, representing a 56% increase on the previous year¹. As of 31 March 2024, there were 7,380 UASC being looked after (children in care) by local authorities in England, a slight decrease on the previous year². The majority of these children are male (96%) and over the age of 16, with only 11% under 16. Last year the 7,380 UASC made up 9% of all children in care in England³.

Between July 2021 and early 2023, the Home Office accommodated over 5,000 UASC in hotels across the UK due to insufficient capacity within local authority care. Although intended as a short-term emergency measure, some children remained in hotels for several weeks or even months. In July 2023, the High Court ruled the practice unlawful, citing breaches of the Children Act 1989⁴.

In a 2023 report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, it was reported that the Home Office was unable to provide the office with information about the education provision children received while accommodated in these settings⁵.

Children most often being placed in supported accommodation rather than family-based care

As of 31 March 2024, UASC made up 9% of the total children in care in England, with 37% of UASC placed in foster care, compared to 68% of the wider children in care population⁶. UASC are more likely to be placed in supported accommodation (44%) or other types of care, such as children's homes (1%), with a smaller proportion (17%) in alternative placements. In contrast, the broader CLA population is more likely to be placed in children's homes (10%) or supported accommodation (7%), with only 2% being adopted⁷.

Lack of language and integration support

UASC in the UK face significant challenges in accessing and integrating into the education system, particularly upon arrival. Many UASC, especially those aged 15 to 17, experience delays in school enrolment if they arrive after the academic year has commenced. As of March 2022, 21% of UASC were missing from education, compared to just 2% of other looked-after children in England⁸. Additionally, older UASC may find their educational options limited to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or vocational courses, which may not align with their aspirations or prior educational experiences. These challenges highlight the need for targeted support and policies to facilitate the timely and effective integration of UASC into the UK education system.

This project

The UK typically operates a more centralised and government-led model of resettlement for unaccompanied children, while the United States and Canadian immigration and child protection systems have a greater emphasis on the delivery of nationally funded

programmes through partnerships with NGOs and faith-based organisations, particularly in the delivery of specialised foster care and integration services.

For this project, two nationally delivered government programmes abroad were studied, each demonstrating a coordinated, specialist response to the care and integration of migrant children. Both models involve resettlement agencies working in partnership with schools, local authorities, and care providers to offer a holistic framework tailored to the unique needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children. These international models highlight the value of proactive engagement, early intervention, and culturally responsive support.

It is important to note that the two programmes differ in scope. The Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) Programme operates across Canada serving a broad range of refugee children, whereas the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) programme in the United States is relatively small in scope; however, there are valuable lessons to be drawn from its history, structure, and approach to supporting vulnerable young people in achieving stability and self-sufficiency.

Findings

The selected countries and programmes chosen exemplify innovative practices in the reception and integration of UASC, particularly through collaborative delivery of care and education. Site visits and stakeholder engagement allowed for in-depth understanding of these models, including the opportunity to observe service delivery in action. This immersive research method enabled both contextual insight and the development of strong professional networks to inform future practice in the UK.

By learning from international examples, the project aims to propose evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the UK's approach to reception, care, and educational inclusion of UASC. Specifically, it explores how structured collaboration between care systems and education providers can improve outcomes and promote long-term integration.

International engagement has been central to this process, allowing for the exploration of promising practice and how those lessons might be adapted to the UK context. Through this, the project hopes to contribute to policy and practice that truly safeguards and supports young people seeking safety on our shores.

1. Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS): Canada

1.1 Background

The SWIS programme was first introduced in 1999 as a pilot initiative in Toronto through a partnership between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), local school boards, and community-based organisations⁹. Since then, it has expanded across most of Canada¹⁰. Over the past 25 years, SWIS has become a foundational component of Canada's school-based settlement services, offering targeted support to newcomer children, young people, and their families as they navigate the education system and broader community life¹¹.

The SWIS programme is aimed at newly arrived immigrant and refugee families as they adjust to life in Canada, with particular emphasis on helping children integrate into the education system. Delivered through a school-based outreach model, SWIS places trained settlement workers in both primary and secondary schools across the country¹².

These workers provide direct, individualised assistance to pupils and their families, offering guidance on school registration, orientation, and broader integration. Their support also includes delivering information sessions on key topics such as education, health, and legal rights; facilitating parental engagement with school communities; and linking families with services including English language classes, housing support, employment resources, and healthcare.

The programme is primarily designed to assist refugees, permanent residents, protected persons, and government-assisted immigrants. Services are generally offered free of charge, with interpretation support available where necessary¹³.

Within schools, settlement workers serve as crucial intermediaries between educational staff and newcomer communities, helping to foster mutual trust and understanding. A notable feature of the initiative is Newcomer Orientation Week (NOW), which provides targeted support to help pupils begin school with confidence and cultural awareness.

1.2 Funding

The SWIS programme is funded by IRCC, which provides financial support through contribution agreements with school boards and community-based organisations¹⁴. These agreements define service expectations and funding conditions, allowing for a tailored approach that reflects the needs of each community and the number of newcomer pupils served¹⁵.

1.3 Programmes visited

I visited four organisations that deliver the SWIS programme, three of which are based in Toronto, and one based in Windsor, Ontario.

1.3.1 *North York Community House*

North York Community House (NYCH) is a longstanding community organisation serving the Northwest of Toronto. Their SWIS programme offers newcomer children and their families tailored support to ease their transition into the Canadian school system. This includes assistance with school registration, orientation, and ongoing help navigating cultural and academic expectations. NYCH also provides broader settlement services to families, focusing on integration within the community and access to necessary resources¹⁶.

I had the privilege of visiting their centre in Toronto. They operate within a “don’t ask, don’t tell” culture when it comes to immigration status, which exemplifies their non-judgemental, inclusive approach. Schools are viewed as the primary point of contact for families, making them a natural hub for settlement support. SWIS workers are embedded in schools physically, often visiting multiple times a week, where they offer drop-in sessions, run youth groups, and liaise with school staff. They are usually assigned based on their language skills or specialisms, with many workers fluent in the first languages of the families they support.

The SWIS service begins with an initial needs assessment, including with unaccompanied youth and families living in shelters. Some clients are reluctant to use mobile phones, so outreach often requires creativity and persistence. Workers collaborate directly with headteachers, administrative staff, and school social workers to bridge the gap between communities and institutions. They also act as a vital link to legal and social supports, including referrals to legal aid and advocacy for families facing deportation.

Programmes such as NOW provide peer-led support to help children manage the anxiety of starting school in a new country. These are often complemented by initiatives like newcomer clubs and parent-led sessions that build community knowledge and confidence. The mentorship model ensures continued peer support through the pupils’ early integration. For younger children, similar peer-led models involve parental participation, facilitating connections to local resources.

SWIS workers also offer financial literacy and employment readiness training for both young people and parents. CV writing, job search strategies, and basic budgeting form part of these workshops, helping families prepare for economic integration. The service has expanded significantly from its original scope due to increased funding and the growing complexity of needs in local communities. Notably, NYCH has adapted their programming to respond to contemporary challenges, including the rise in unaccompanied minors and the impact of inflation and pandemic-era migration.

NYCH plays a critical advocacy role within schools, filling service gaps that schools themselves cannot. Teachers, they stress, are not settlement experts, and the existence of SWIS fills an essential need. While most school principals are supportive, levels of engagement and effective use of SWIS funding vary widely depending on leadership.

NYCH highlights the ongoing and growing value of SWIS funding, which has evolved over 25 years to accommodate local needs. Funding allows for additional services, including translation, mental health referrals, and targeted support for vulnerable children such as trafficking survivors. However, they note that sustainability often depends on federal support, community advocacy, and school leadership. They stress the importance of cultural competency and the necessity of services that operate with a “serve first, ask questions later” philosophy.

Practice highlight – Digital Storytelling Model

A notable innovation by NYCH is the adaptation of the Digital Storytelling Model from Berkeley, California. Pupils are guided through a process where they narrate personal migration stories, create scripts, and transform them into short videos. This not only aids healing but also fosters community understanding. These stories are then shared at school events or parent nights, contributing to a deeper cultural competence among educators and peers.

1.3.2 The Neighbourhood Organization

The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO) is one of the largest SWIS providers in Toronto, uniquely positioned in an area of high newcomer settlement. Their catchment includes approximately 165 schools, supported by around 37 SWIS workers who collectively speak over 45 languages¹⁷. This linguistic and cultural diversity enables them to serve a wide range of families, many of whom arrive in the city with complex needs and limited English.

TNO views schools as foundational spaces for newcomer integration. Many of the area’s largest elementary and secondary schools are in neighbourhoods with high newcomer density, and TNO has developed close relationships with school staff, administrators, and families. These relationships are key to building trust and facilitating effective referrals. SWIS workers are embedded within schools, providing ongoing support through one-to-one

casework, workshops, and group programmes. Their work is particularly notable for its whole-family approach, where services are extended to parents and siblings, not just children.

The service extends beyond schools, including collaborations with public libraries, where TNO runs SWIS programming over the summer¹⁸. TNO also offers curriculum-based initiatives such as the Newcomer Orientation Week (NOW) for high school students and Welcome and Information for Newcomers (WIN) for middle schoolers. These peer-led, culturally responsive programmes are described as transformative, often helping students with little to no English find friendship and belonging within days.

TNO's SWIS team is highly trained, often comprising former social workers and graduates from Ontario colleges with specialist qualifications in settlement work and counselling. The workers bring personal migration experiences, multiple language proficiencies, and deep knowledge of the cultural context of the communities they serve. Some speak up to four or five languages and are trained in trauma-informed care.

TNO has also played a leadership role in sector advocacy. They work closely with Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, the umbrella organisation for Ontario's resettlement sector, particularly around funding, wages, and professionalisation of the workforce¹⁹.

Innovative elements of TNO's work include the use of itinerant settlement workers, mentorship initiatives linked to post-secondary institutions and employers, and specialised mental health and system navigator roles. Their settlement workers often handle legal referrals, help families complete intake forms for IRCC, and address issues like housing insecurity, employment readiness, and youth vulnerability.

Despite challenges, particularly around housing, pandemic-related service gaps, and fluctuating migration patterns, TNO remains a model of community-led, culturally competent settlement service delivery. Their continued integration of schools, libraries, and community hubs into a cohesive network emphasises their belief that successful settlement is local, relational, and rooted in trust.

Practice highlight – colocation of integration services

I had the opportunity to visit a secondary school near TNO's community hub, where I was able to observe the SWIS programme in action. I visited the settlement workers' office, where students were already waiting to speak with staff – some seeking help with school forms, others simply looking for a safe, welcoming space. The atmosphere was calm but purposeful, a reflection of how embedded and trusted these workers have become within the school environment.

1.3.3 CultureLink Settlement and Community Services

CultureLink Settlement and Community Services is a key provider of settlement supports in Toronto, including a robust SWIS programme designed to meet the needs of newcomer children and families. It provides regular settlement support to 50 schools across Toronto, with a distinction between regular and itinerant schools depending on assessed need. Services begin with a detailed intake and needs assessment, which includes general and settlement-specific questions, language assessments, and identification of personal needs such as childcare, transportation, or counselling. These assessments are continually updated as family circumstances change. Many families require assistance with housing, legal issues, or food security, and referrals are made accordingly.

A major component of their offering is orientation programming. The Newcomer Orientation Week (NOW), often lasting three to four days, provides peer-led cultural orientation in middle and high schools. Students learn how to navigate basics like school routines, while peer leaders themselves develop leadership skills. These programmes are developed in collaboration with the public and Catholic school boards²⁰, which also oversee centralised student intake. In addition to school-year support, CultureLink offers a Summer Settlement Programme that runs in community centres, helping children maintain educational engagement and social connection during the holidays.

CultureLink currently employs 16 SWIS workers and is one of five agencies delivering the programme in Toronto. Their team also includes youth mentors and specialists in refugee support, legal navigation, and community referrals. A guiding principle of the SWIS model is to promote culturally sensitive communication between schools and newcomer families. This often includes navigating gender norms, facilitating introductions through cultural clubs, and ensuring new arrivals feel safe and supported.

For unaccompanied minors or vulnerable youth, there is a clear child protection protocol in place. Settlement workers have a duty to report concerns to Children's Aid and are trained to handle disclosures appropriately. Their work is supported by broader mental health and employment services, many funded by IRCC²¹. These include short-term counselling for youth and adults, arts-based group therapy, job fairs, and volunteer placements. Notably, the mental health supports initially targeted at parents have also expanded to support children, especially during surges in migration, such as the recent arrival of Ukrainian families.

A notable strength of the CultureLink approach is the deep reliance on, and involvement of, newcomer communities themselves. I heard that some SWIS workers are former clients who now support others navigating the same systems. Their in-person interpretation services and grassroots outreach reflect this community-centred ethos.

1.3.4 New Canadians' Centre of Excellence

The New Canadians' Centre of Excellence (NCCE) is a community-based, direct-service agency dedicated to assisting, supporting, and promoting the full and equitable participation of immigrants and refugees in all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life in the Windsor-Essex region of Ontario. Their SWIS programme provides settlement services

in over 100 schools within the Greater Essex County District School Board and the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board. Settlement workers assist newcomer pupils and their families in settling into their schools and community environments by providing information and referrals to other agencies, schools, and community programmes. Additionally, NCCE offers programmes such as Welcome and Information for Newcomers (WIN) and Newcomer Orientation Week (NOW), which provide orientation and peer support to help students integrate into the school system²².

I had the honour of visiting the New Canadians' Centre of Excellence in Windsor, a true community hub that supports not only newcomer children but adults and families across the Windsor-Essex region. NCCE is a community-based, direct-service agency dedicated to promoting the full and equitable participation of immigrants and refugees in all areas of social, cultural and economic life. The organisation offers a wide range of settlement and integration services, including employment readiness programmes, language instruction, community connections, and support for housing, healthcare and legal needs. Their work is guided by the belief that inclusive communities are built through collaboration, empowerment and equity²³.

A central component of their work is the SWIS programme, delivered in partnership with over 100 schools across both the Greater Essex County District School Board and the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board²⁴. Through SWIS, settlement workers provide newcomer pupils and their families with information, guidance and referrals to other agencies and services. During my visit, I accompanied a SWIS worker to a local secondary school, where I observed a group information session being delivered to recently arrived students. The session helped young people understand the structure of the school system, attendance expectations, and where to seek help if needed.

The organisation also offers programmes such as WIN and NOW, which provide peer-led orientation to help young people integrate into Canadian school and community life. These initiatives not only inform but empower newcomer students, while also fostering leadership skills among peer mentors. I had the privilege of participating in an afterschool club during my visit, where students creatively acted out a podcast project, an imaginative and inclusive activity that encouraged collaboration and confidence-building.

Beyond youth services, NCCE supports adults and families through employment assistance, mentorship, and comprehensive settlement support. Services include job search workshops, workplace language training, bridging programmes for internationally educated professionals, and community mental health supports. Importantly, NCCE is committed to inclusive access, and some of its programmes are open to clients regardless of immigration status. Throughout its services, NCCE promotes client-centred, culturally responsive support, and continues to adapt its offerings to meet the diverse and evolving needs of the community it serves.

1.4 Impact of SWIS programme

The SWIS programme has been recognised as a highly effective model for supporting the integration of newcomer students and their families into Canadian society. An evaluation conducted by IRCC in 2022 highlighted the programme's significant role in providing

essential school-based settlement services. These services have been instrumental in helping newcomer youth, children, and their parents or guardians navigate the Canadian education system and broader community²⁵.

The evaluation noted that SWIS services are perceived by children and young people as useful and responsive to their needs, contributing to increased knowledge, involvement, and performance in the education system. Additionally, SWIS has been effective in referring families to other necessary settlement services and enhancing cultural understanding among school staff²⁶.

The United Nations Network on Migration also recognises SWIS as a best practice in integrated service delivery. SWIS workers act as cultural liaisons and system navigators between schools and newcomer families, facilitating school orientation and settlement experiences. The programme's adaptability to local and regional realities, while maintaining core services, has been key to its success²⁷.

Despite its successes, the IRCC evaluation identified areas for improvement, such as the need for a common definition of SWIS with core services and activities, and enhanced data collection procedures to better monitor and report on outcomes. Addressing these areas would further strengthen the programme's effectiveness and consistency across Canada²⁸.

In summary, the SWIS programme has proven to be a vital component of Canada's settlement services, effectively supporting the integration of newcomer students and their families through school-based initiatives.

2. The Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) programme: United States

The URM programme, administered by the US Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), provides care and support to children who arrive in the United States without a parent or legal guardian. Established under the Refugee Act of 1980, the programme aims to protect and assist particularly vulnerable young people, many of whom have fled conflict, persecution, or trafficking. It offers a stable environment where these minors can rebuild their lives and work towards self-sufficiency in a new country²⁹.

I spoke to a director of the URM programme at the ORR who provided an in-depth overview of the system's structure, historical evolution, and current challenges. The URM programme, which originated during the Vietnam War and formalised in 1980, was designed to offer child protection and resettlement to unaccompanied minors facing trauma distinct from domestic cases. Care is primarily delivered through foster homes, although some providers offer group homes for youth requiring greater supervision, with placement decisions shaped by both assessments and the child's own preferences. Youth typically remain in foster care until age 21, with transitional support extending to age 26.

The URM programme ensures access to a wide range of services, comparable to those offered within the broader US child welfare system. These include safe housing, food, healthcare, and education, alongside language support, mental health counselling, and legal assistance for immigration proceedings. The programme also helps minors acquire life skills

and offers cultural and recreational activities that encourage community integration while honouring their heritage and beliefs³⁰.

2.1 Who it serves

It is important to note that there are two major resettlement programmes in operation in the United States for unaccompanied minors: the URM and the Unaccompanied Children (UC) programme. However, they differ markedly in their legal frameworks, purpose, and administration.

The URM programme, as outlined, provides long-term foster care and integration support to children with specific legal statuses, including refugees, asylees, Special Immigrant Juveniles (SIJs), victims of human trafficking, and certain parolees. These children are typically placed in licensed foster homes or supervised group settings, with access to education, healthcare, and legal services.

In contrast, the UC programme, also overseen by ORR, serves children who have recently crossed the US border unaccompanied and are placed into temporary, federally funded shelters or foster care while awaiting immigration proceedings. These children are held in custody only until a suitable sponsor, usually a family member residing in the United States, can be located and vetted. Once released, ORR may provide post-release services, but the children are not placed under the formal child welfare or long-term resettlement model that characterises the URM programme³¹. Importantly, children in the UC programme do not receive legal immigration status unless they qualify and apply separately.

The URM programme was initially created to support unaccompanied minors identified from abroad with refugee status. Over time, its scope has expanded to include a wider range of eligible children. There has also been a growing trend in children entering the URM system via the UC programme route, especially following past restrictions on refugee admissions.

While specific national data on the average length of time a child remains in the UC programme before transitioning to the URM programme is not publicly available, anecdotal evidence suggests that this varies significantly based on immigration processing, sponsorship attempts, and placement availability. These shifts reflect the changing demographic of unaccompanied minors in the United States and the expanding role of the URM programme in supporting vulnerable children from diverse migration pathways.

URM providers support young people transitioning from the UC programme, although such transitions may involve moving across states due to differing programme structures and provider availability.

2.2 Custody arrangements

In the United States the URM programme operates under two main custody models, public and private. In public custody states, legal responsibility for the child rests with the state or county child welfare agency, allowing URM youth to access services through the broader child welfare system, including education, healthcare, and legal protections. In private custody states, licensed agencies, often community or faith based organisations, assume

legal custody and provide care under federal guidelines. Public models benefit from established infrastructure but may be constrained by state policies and funding, while private models offer tailored support but must manage federal oversight and often lack the integration seen in public systems³².

2.3 Programmes visited

URM services are delivered through partnerships with local providers under the coordination of two national agencies, Global Refugee (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops³³. Below is an overview of findings from two of my visits, one in Massachusetts (Ascentria Care Alliance) and the other in Washington DC, Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA).

2.3.1 *Ascentria Care Alliance – Worcester and Waltham, MA*

The visit to Ascentria highlighted an organised and multi-layered system of care for unaccompanied minors. The structure is shaped by several levels of oversight, starting with the Department for Children and Families and area officers, with Ascentria operating as a subcontracted area office. The organisation has its own legal and casework team, and regular planning meetings help forecast placements based on incoming referrals and young people leaving the programme. There is a clear emphasis on ensuring children are placed into care before the age of 18, as after that point participation becomes voluntary, although services can extend to age 21.

Placement types vary depending on the needs of each young person. While foster homes are used where appropriate, the majority are in group homes. These homes range in size and support levels, with staff to resident ratios adapted to meet individual needs. Some homes offer one-to-one support, after-school help, and workshops focused on life skills such as budgeting. A number have in-house clinicians and permanent staff presence. Most are boys, and many girls who enter the system are teen parents placed in specialist provision or tailored foster placements.

Support goes beyond immediate care. There is strong emphasis on developing independent living skills, especially in group settings where routines include regular group meetings and structured learning activities. Support for education is built into the structure of care with children being supported to engage in school.

For younger children, particularly those under 16, permanency planning includes the option of adoption. Others are supported through asylum processes or Special Immigrant Juvenile status, although immigration pathways have become slower and more uncertain. In some cases, if a parent arrives while the child is still under 18, there is a state policy which triggers a 90-day reunification process. This can be initiated by the child or flagged during case review.

Referrals and placements are managed through close working relationships with other providers. Homes are well known to Ascentria staff, and matching is done with care, particularly in cases involving self-harm or high vulnerability. Intensive foster care is available and subcontracted through agencies with trusted foster homes. Group homes tend

to be for young people who are more independent. These homes often refer directly and maintain regular communication with Ascentria. In Massachusetts there are many providers, but the organisation works closely with a small number where relationships are well established.

Foster carers come from a wide range of backgrounds, reflecting a diverse set of languages, cultures and social experiences. Part of the placement process includes listening practices to understand carers' motivations, including the role that financial incentives might play. Young people are matched based on both need and suitability of environment. In some cases, they may petition to return to care after leaving, though an open criminal case prevents re-entry.

2.3.2 *Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA)*

Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA) uniquely delivers both the UC and URM programmes, accommodating approximately 150 URM placements. The agency operates under both public and private custody arrangements. In Washington, DC, children are committed to the district's child welfare services, facilitating access to specialised support such as therapeutic placements and educational oversight. Conversely, in Virginia, the programme functions under a private custody model, requiring LSSNCA to independently source and monitor all necessary services, as state refugee coordinators are not child protection agencies. During the visit I heard from staff that there was a preference for the public system as it was noted that it offers more robust support for young people's needs.

Placement decisions focus exclusively on foster care, with group settings being phased out in jurisdictions like Washington, DC. Recruitment of foster carers presents challenges, particularly in licensing multiple beds within a single household. Foster carers often come from diverse backgrounds, including federal employees and military personnel, and are motivated by altruism rather than financial incentives, as stipends are typically lower than those in domestic foster care. Specialised placements are available for specific populations, such as LGBTQ+ youth and teen mothers.

Children in the programme are generally between 14 and 17 years old, with a significant proportion transitioning from the UC programme after exhausting reunification options. Education is a priority, with children enrolled in local schools and supported by educational attorneys and school liaison officers. Foster parents are engaged as co-parents, participating in onboarding processes and ongoing support.

Support workers in DC are required to hold graduate-level social work qualifications, while those in Virginia may hold bachelor's degrees. Bilingual staff with migration backgrounds are preferred, though high turnover remains a challenge. Monthly in-person visits are conducted to monitor the well-being of both the children and foster families.

LSSNCA collaborates with Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service), which provides training, technical assistance, and platform-based learning for programme delivery. This partnership is particularly significant as the agency also runs UC placements directly in Fairfax, enabling a more seamless continuum of care.

2.4 Evaluation of the URM

The Descriptive Study of the URM Programme, published in May 2021 by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), was commissioned to document how the URM programme operates, assess the services provided, and explore how effectively it supports unaccompanied children who enter the United States without a parent or legal guardian. The study aimed to fill a knowledge gap by systematically describing the implementation of the programme across multiple sites and by identifying both promising practices and ongoing challenges.³⁴

The report highlights the distinctiveness of the URM programme within the broader US child welfare and refugee resettlement systems. It is the only federal programme that combines child welfare expertise with refugee resettlement, offering a tailored response to the unique needs of unaccompanied children who are eligible through refugee, asylee, or other humanitarian pathways³⁵. Unlike standard domestic foster care, the URM model incorporates culturally responsive services, legal assistance specific to immigration status, and dedicated case management from providers trained in both child protection and resettlement³⁶.

The study highlights the programme's emphasis on holistic, long-term support. Youth receive care not only through foster homes but also, where appropriate, through group homes and independent living settings. Importantly, the programme promotes stability and integration by prioritising educational attainment, mental health support, and cultural identity, helping youth to become self-sufficient while maintaining a connection to their heritage³⁷.

Recommendations

The below recommendations aim to draw on principles that underpin both the SWIS and URM programmes to highlight actions that would improve the system for UASC fleeing war and persecution and seeking protection in the UK.

(1) Improve the support for refugee and asylum-seeking children in schools

- **Develop comprehensive language support programmes for refugee and asylum seeking children:** the UK Government should support schools to expand English Language support for refugee and asylum seeking children. This should include intensive language support on arrival, ongoing integration into mainstream lessons, use of technology and culturally relevant resources, and peer-assisted learning schemes. The Government should provide clear guidelines and adequate funding to schools to develop and sustain these programmes.
- **Dedicated coordination roles in schools for refugee and asylum-seeking children:** the UK Government should fund roles akin to SWIS workers in all schools with refugee pupils, who can advocate for children and liaise between families, schools, and external agencies such as health and social services. This coordination is vital for overcoming barriers to attendance and learning.
- **Schools should establish welcoming environments:** schools should create “welcoming hubs” where refugee children and families receive dedicated support on arrival. These hubs should offer orientation, emotional support, and practical help such as school registration and understanding school policies. This support should be delivered by a dedicated school-based settlement support worker, modelled from the SWIS programme.
- **Promote peer support and social inclusion:** schools should be encouraged and funded to develop buddy systems, inclusive extracurricular activities, and social clubs that actively integrate refugee children with their peers.
- **After-school and supplementary learning programmes:** schools should be supported to offer after-school clubs and tutoring that combine language learning with academic catch-up for refugee children. These programmes should be tailored to address disrupted schooling and help refugees overcome educational gaps.

Together, these actions would support the development of inclusive, welcoming educational environments where refugee and asylum-seeking children can thrive.

- ### (2) Ensure there are safe and legal routes for children fleeing war and persecution, and access to family-based care once they have arrived
- ### (3) Establish a comprehensive resettlement programme with guaranteed safe and legal routes for children seeking asylum

- The UK Government must develop a dedicated flagship resettlement programme designed specifically for children seeking asylum.
- This programme should guarantee safe, legal, and accessible routes for children fleeing conflict, persecution, and extreme hardship, so they are not forced to resort to perilous journeys across the English Channel or through unsafe migration networks.
- Such a resettlement programme should include simplified visa processes, clear eligibility criteria prioritising the most vulnerable, and a commitment to reunite children with extended family members where possible. It must also be well-funded and coordinated with local authorities, charities, and community organisations to ensure smooth integration and ongoing support. Establishing this flagship scheme will signal the UK's commitment to responsible asylum policy and act as a blueprint for child refugee protection.

(4) Ensure strategic involvement of resettlement expertise in the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

- The UK's child protection system has significant experience in safeguarding vulnerable children, including UASC. However, to deliver the best outcomes for refugee children, this expertise should be complemented by the specialist knowledge of resettlement and refugee support organisations.
- Organisations with experience in delivering resettlement programmes should be supported to bring their expertise in supporting the psychological and practical needs of displaced children. Their involvement can strengthen planning and delivery across care, education, mental health, and integration pathways.

(5) Expand and strengthen foster care and family-based placement options for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

- The UK Government must urgently increase the availability and quality of foster care and family-based accommodation for UASC.
- To achieve this, the Government should fund targeted recruitment, training, and ongoing support for foster carers specialising in caring for refugee children.

Further reading

This section is intended to provide the reader with additional information to explore this topic, examining practices around the care and integration of asylum seeking children across the world.

- **United Nations Network on Migration:** Promising practices in the provision of essential services to migrants: [provision of essential services - good practices.pdf](#)
- **UNICEF:** Best Practices for Working with Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Humanitarian Contexts: [Best-practices-working-with-unaccompanied-migrant-children.pdf](#)
- **UNICEF:** Building Bridges for Every Child Reception, Care and Services to Support Unaccompanied Children in the United State: [Building Bridges for Every Child | UNICEF](#)
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):** Child Protection Practices in UNHCR 2014–2022: [Child Protection Practices in UNHCR 2014-2022](#)

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