

PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR AGE ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKERS

Assessment of age is a complex task, which is a process and not an exact science. This is further complicated by many of the young people attempting to portray a different age from their true age.

In completing the assessment, please be mindful that clients have the right to legally challenge the conclusion.

UNICEF publishes the figure of 50 million children who are currently not registered at birth, depriving them of nationality, a legal name and proof of when they were born. Many societies calculate age in a different way from the method used in the UK; internationally millions of young people do not know their age. The Royal College of Paediatricians (1999) states that “in practice, age determination is extremely difficult to do with certainty. More over, for young people aged 15 to 18 it is even less possible to be certain about age”.

Young unaccompanied asylum seekers both at the ports of entry, and as in country applicants, sometimes give a stated age that is disputed by the immigration authorities. The Home Office will often, based purely on appearance, judge the young person to be an adult and refer directly to NASS. A proportion of young people are referred to the local social services department for an assessment of age. Additionally young asylum seekers self refer to social services and an assessment of their age becomes necessary.

A young person's age is a key part of the information needed when making an assessment of need and subsequently for the appropriate provision of service. The Local Authority has a responsibility under the Children Act 1989 to assess whether a young person is in need and to provide services to safeguard and promote welfare.

It is important to explain to the young person that an assessment must be undertaken in order to identify what services may be provided . An assessment of age concluding that the asylum seeker is a minor will become an important component of the initial assessment.

The task of the assessing worker is to assess from a holistic perspective, and in the light of the available information, to be able to make an informed judgement that the person is probably within a certain age parameter. It is a process of professional judgment.

Age assessments are sometimes undertaken at the port of entry and the asylum screening unit where a decision is required in a short period of time, or sometimes at a later stage. In circumstances of age uncertainty, the benefit of doubt should always be the standard practice. When practical, two assessing workers is beneficial. Age assessments are also undertaken following the acceptance of a referral to social services to ascertain if the person is entitled to a service as a child. However, in some Local Authorities age assessments are undertaken on presentation when the stated age is disputed. Here the assessment can sometimes be undertaken over a period of time, and involve other professionals, for example residential social work staff, foster carers, doctors, panel advisors, teachers and other young people.

It is very important to ensure that the young person understands the role of the assessing worker, and comprehends the interpreter. Attention should also be paid to the level of tiredness, trauma, bewilderment and anxiety that may be present for the young person. The ethnicity, culture, and customs of the person being assessed must be a key focus throughout the assessment.

It is also important to be mindful of the “coaching” that the asylum seeker may have had prior to arrival, in how to behave and what to say. Having clarified the role of the social services, it is important to engage with the person and establish as much rapport as the circumstances will allow. This process is sometimes known as “joining”. The assessing worker needs to acknowledge with the young person that they will have had to already answer many questions, and that it may be difficult and distressing to answer some of the questions.

In utilising the assessment framework, the practitioner should ask open-ended, non - leading questions. It is not expected that the form should be completed by systematically going through each component, but rather by formulating the interview in a semi structured discussion gathering information at different stages. The use of circular questioning is a useful method, as it is less obvious to the person being assessed that the questions relate directly to age, and hence may reveal a clear picture of age - related issues.

It is essential to feed back to the young person the conclusion of this assessment and a written form is included for this purpose. It is essential to feed back to the young person, the conclusion of this assessment, and a detachable form is included for this purpose.