

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nurturing Futures: Foster Carer Perspectives on Looking After Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children With Histories of Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a small-scale qualitative study exploring the experiences of Foster Carers looking after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) who are identified or suspected victims of child trafficking ('UASTC'—unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children). Through in-depth interviews with six fostering families and one specialist Social Worker, key themes include a lack of specialist training and support from skilled Social Work professionals, the significance of the role of the Foster Carer in the identification and management of risk, the challenges of supporting children through the asylum process, and the resulting emotional toll on Foster Carers. Notwithstanding the challenges encountered, Foster Carers derived a sense of fulfilment from the role. The study's findings should be read cautiously due to the small sample size and regional focus. Despite this, resulting considerations for fostering agencies could include exploring specialised care pathways for UASTC that integrate trauma-informed support, offering reflective supervision and bespoke training for carers and professionals, and providing access to peer support networks. Recommendations for future research include explorations of the first-hand experiences of UASTC and the variety of placements they inhabit.

1 | Introduction

In the United Kingdom, an 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking child' (UASC) is a person who is under 18 years of age when their asylum application is submitted, is applying for asylum in their own right, and is separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, has responsibility to do so (Home Office 2025). As of 31 March 2024, UASC represented around 8.5% of children in care and accounted for 17% of all children taken into care in the year 2023–2024 (Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) 2025).

The United Nations Palermo Protocol (2000) defines child trafficking as the 'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt' (Article 3) of a child under the age of 18 for the purpose of exploitation. According to National Referral Mechanism (NRM) data, in 2023, 7432 children were identified as potential victims of trafficking in the United Kingdom, accounting for 44% of all referrals to the NRM (ECPAT UK and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner 2024). Most of these children were British (78%), with the remaining originating from Albania, Sudan, and Eritrea (ECPAT UK and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner 2024).

Rosie is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Leeds Trinity University. This research was conducted when Rosie was a student undertaking the MRes in Social Work, University of York. This paper is the result of the research project element of the course.

Within this study, the term unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children (UASTC) is used to describe children who have been trafficked into the United Kingdom for the purpose of exploitation and who, by nature of being unaccompanied, most likely will claim asylum upon discovery by the authorities in order to obtain a legal right to reside in the United Kingdom. The term trafficked children is used when referring to *all* trafficked children, including those trafficked *within* United Kingdom borders. It is recognised, however, that referring to people by their legal status and acronyms can have a homogenising and dehumanising effect, and so while it is necessary to clarify who is and is not being referred to in this study, an ideal solution has not been found as to how to distinguish between children when writing about them in this context. Indeed, many individuals may not see themselves as children, especially given the context of their experiences which have required a great deal of resilience to survive.

2 | Background

UASTC represent a vulnerable group of children in care who have migrated to the United Kingdom as a result of exploitation. The unique circumstances surrounding these children, including separation from family, exposure to trauma, and poor asylum outcomes (ECPAT UK 2022; ECPAT UK and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner 2024), pose significant challenges not only for the children but also for those supporting them. UASTC are often exploited in various forms of criminal, sexual and labour exploitation, with domestic servitude and organ harvesting also featuring within the official statistics (ECPAT UK and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner 2024). Many UASTC have also experienced serious abuse, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Department for Education (DfE) 2011).

In terms of migration routes, UASTC are often smuggled clandestinely through dangerous means such as channel crossings or openly by traffickers using false documentation to bypass authorities (Department for Education (DfE) 2011; ECPAT UK 2019). Some UASTC enter the care system upon arrival in the United Kingdom, only to later be collected by traffickers and forced into exploitation, with one in three trafficked children going missing from local authority care in 2020 (ECPAT UK and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner 2024).

It is difficult to know exactly what type of accommodation UASTC are placed in; however, the most recent survey data on placements for UASC in local authorities in 2021 provides some indication, suggesting 49% are in foster care, 29% are in residential care, and 21% are in independent living (Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) 2021). Government guidance states UASTC should be placed in risk assessed and safe accommodation (Department for Education 2017; Department for Education (DfE) 2011), however, there is no data to outline whether this happens or what this looks like. Research, however, suggests family settings promote safety, mental health, educational attainment, and integration (Van Holen et al. 2020; O'Higgins 2019; Wade 2019; Hardy 2018; Sirriyeh 2013).

While there is a growing body of research into the care of UASC (Van Holen et al. 2020; O'Higgins 2019; Čelebičić 2019; Sidery 2019;

Wade 2019; Hardy 2018; Ni Raghallaigh 2013; Sirriyeh 2013), there is little research which explores the nuanced experience of those who have experienced trafficking and their carers.

When exploring research into family-based care for UASC, findings highlight several indicators of a positive placement. Firstly, the initial welcome provided to young people can have a positive impact on long-term outcomes (Wade 2019; Ni Raghallaigh 2013), in addition to the establishment of positive relationships with caregivers (Čelebičić 2019; Wade 2019; Sirriyeh 2013; Chase et al. 2008). Furthermore, the provision of culturally appropriate food and the involvement of children in decisions around food is found to be crucial (Ni Raghallaigh 2013; Sirriyeh 2013; Kohli et al. 2010), as is a broader respect for and understanding of their culture and religion (Ni Raghallaigh 2013; Sirriyeh 2013). Additionally, the negotiation of boundaries between carer and child is thought to be a vital element of relationship building (Van Holen et al. 2020; Sirriyeh 2013), as is respect for the child's agency and autonomy (Devenney 2020; O'Higgins 2019; Chase et al. 2008). Research also suggests that to facilitate the above, Foster Carers should be provided with adequate training and support (Sidery 2019; Wade 2019; Ni Raghallaigh 2013).

Research in relation to trafficked children also provides insight into their needs, including access to mental health services in addition to support navigating the asylum and trafficking systems (Hynes et al. 2022; ECPAT UK 2011). Common risk factors associated with trafficked children going missing include unsafe accommodation, children not recognising themselves as victims of trafficking, fear of immigration and social care processes, fear of traffickers, and poor relationships with caregivers (Ayeb-Karlsson et al. 2024; Simon et al. 2016; DfE 2017). Despite this knowledge, research suggests UASTC are often living in placements which do not meet their safety needs (Ayeb-Karlsson et al. 2024; ECPAT UK 2011).

In response to concerns around placements for children experiencing trafficking and exploitation, the children's charity Barnardo's set up the 'Safe Accommodation' project, aiming to recruit and train specialist Foster Carers to look after children who had experienced trafficking and/or child sexual exploitation (Shuker 2014). The project's evaluation found that the specialist role enabled Foster Carers to better understand and meet the needs of children in their care, thus increasing the safety of children (Shuker 2014). Though this project is no longer running, it highlights the positive impact that specialist foster care placements may have on the safety of children facing specific risks. Despite this, there continues to be a lack of evidence of the experience of placements for UASTC and their carers. This research aimed to explore this gap, seeking to understand the realities of providing care under complex circumstances and contributing to the knowledge base required to influence practice in this area.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design

The study employed a qualitative design due to its strength in providing insights into the personal experiences and conventions of participants (Čelebičić 2019). While it is recognised

there are limits to this approach in terms of generalisability, the aim of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Foster Carers carrying out this role, thus highlighting a voice missing from the literature. To do this within the remit of a master's degree research project, the chosen method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, analysed using a thematic approach.

3.2 | Sampling

A purposive approach to sampling was adopted to select participants with the shared experience of caring for UASTC. The target population was Foster Carers within one region of England, with the inclusion criteria being Foster Carers who currently look after UASTC and have over one year of experience in the role, though this was later adapted as one family who participated had many years of experience in caring for UASTC but under one year of experience of caring for UASTC. Their inclusion in the study was due to a feeling that their cumulative experience of caring for UASTC will have informed their care for UASTC. For the purpose of this study, 'Foster Carer' is defined as an individual approved and registered as a foster carer with a registered fostering agency in England. Attempts were made at a 'stratified' (Patton 2015, 272) purposive approach to sampling with hope the sample would comprise both Foster Carers who fostered for local authority and independent fostering agencies; however, independent fostering agencies were not responsive to calls for participation and so the sample comprised local authority Foster Carers only.

Local authorities in the sample included large urban local authorities with high numbers of UASC and rural authorities with either high or low numbers of UASC. Gatekeepers (managers within local authorities) were used to recruit participants, though this approach has limitations due to the potential for only those with a positive experience being selected for participation.

The findings suggest this risk did not materialise, as foster carers shared a variety of experiences, both positive and negative. The study aimed to interview eight to 10 fostering families; however, recruitment using gatekeepers proved challenging, possibly due to demand on the services of those being contacted. For further details of participants, see Table 1.

3.3 | Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. While it is recognised that such interviews may only capture subjective experience at a particular moment in time (Walford 2007), it was felt this approach would prioritise the experience of the Foster Carer, something which may not be possible with other methods, such as structured interviews or quantitative data collection. The interview guide included open-ended questions to gather responses about the Foster Carers' experiences, challenges, and support mechanisms. Questions covered areas such as initial motivation to foster UASTC, daily caregiving practices, interactions with support services, and personal reflections on their experience.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in a setting of the participant's choice; either in-person, over video interview, or over the phone. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.4 | Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the interview data, following the systematic, phased approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This process involved identifying, coding, and analysing themes within the data. The researcher then familiarised themselves with the data through transcribing it

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of participants involved in the study.

Category	Details
Fostering families interviewed	Six families (comprising of five couples, one single carer)
Local authorities included	Four local authorities within the same region: Two large cities with high numbers of UASC One relatively small rural area with low numbers of UASC One large rural area with moderate numbers of UASC
Range of years of experience of fostering UASC of all families involved in the study	6 months to 8 years
Total UASTC Cared For by all families	12
Nationalities of UASTC cared for by all families	Vietnamese, Albanian, Eritrean, and Guinean
Trafficking experience	All but three children trafficked directly to the United Kingdom: Two experienced significant trafficking on their journey. One discovered to be an adult <i>trafficker</i> after arrival in placement. Children had been trafficked for labour exploitation, criminal exploitation, and domestic servitude.
Social worker interviewed	One specialist Social Worker experienced in working with UASC, UASTC, and their carers

and then reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting down initial thoughts during the process. The second phase involved the generation of initial codes based on these initial thoughts, which were then input into a spreadsheet. These codes were informed by both the transcripts and previous literature to aid the process of categorising data into broader themes. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data collected. This involved checking the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts.

4 | Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained in January 2022. Informed consent was secured from all participants through the provision of comprehensive information contained within information sheets and through verbal follow-up discussions. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data; for example, pseudonyms were used in transcripts to protect participants' identities. Foster Carers were interviewed away from the children they care for and were asked not to share any confidential information about children. Foster Carers were also advised of the process for dealing with any information reported that could be deemed a safeguarding risk. The use of gatekeepers meant there were clear lines of reporting any safeguarding concerns should they arise.

The risk of pressure to participate was mitigated through discussions post-referral for participation. These discussions detailed the right of the Foster Carers to refuse to participate and that this refusal would have no impact on the services provided to them. In opposition to feeling obliged to participate, some Foster Carers may have experienced barriers to participating in the study due to the use of gatekeepers; this risk was not mitigated in this study.

5 | Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study fall under five broad themes: training and preparation, support, safety and risk, navigating asylum and trafficking processes, and the positives of the role. All five themes lead to an overall picture of a rewarding yet challenging role which risks negatively impacting the well-being of Foster Carers.

5.1 | Training and Preparation

Some participants reported feeling unprepared for caring for UASTC, attributing this to a lack of specialist training on the care needs of and risks facing UASTC or receiving limited information regarding the trafficking status of children prior to their arrival.

5.1.1 | Limited Availability of Specialised Training

One of the key requirements of being a Foster Carer is attending regular training courses (DfE 2012). Despite this, many Foster Carers reported they received little or no training to

educate them on the care needs of and risks facing UASTC. Those who held specialist knowledge had gained this through other means such as self-directed research, online training, learning through experience, or through their professional life. A common feeling was that any training which was accessed did not fully prepare Foster Carers for the reality of the role:

I don't think that the course that I went on would have given me enough of the absolute daily impact of a young person walking out of that door and you knowing there could be somebody at the end of the street in a vehicle. They know your address, they know where the young person is, they can be taken, and they can very willingly work with them.

(Foster Carer 1).

It is better training, but still not enough. I mean, how do you deal with what we did with our first [UASTC]? How does a normal family deal with that?

(Foster Carer 2).

These comments suggest no amount of training can fully prepare someone for the nuanced experience of looking after UASTC, but that some knowledge of the challenges prior to placement would assist Foster Carers to prepare.

It may be that for some of the Foster Carers, any self-directed study undertaken is influenced by their passion and interest in the role. It may therefore be beneficial to build on this interest through providing routes to specialising in fostering UASTC, including the provision of training and support that would allow them to become experts. However, given the rising numbers of UASTC arriving in local authorities through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) (ADCS, 2025), a scheme set up to distribute the responsibility for caring for unaccompanied children across local authorities more evenly, it may be necessary to ensure all Foster Carers receive at least some preparatory training to ensure they are prepared.

5.1.2 | Limited or Incorrect Information Prior to Arrival in Placement

Due to the nature of trafficking being a hidden issue in society, it is likely Foster Carers may be asked to look after UASTC with little information about the child's history and that this may be a challenge. Despite this, Foster Carers involved in this study expressed a concern that often they were not informed prior to placement that a child was a victim of trafficking, or that there were signs that could indicate this. This is in contrast with government guidance which states Foster Carers should be provided information on the risks faced by UASTC placed with them (DfE 2017). In some cases, there was also a concern that despite Foster Carers being knowledgeable and alert to the signs, their concerns regarding trafficking risks were not reciprocated by supporting Social Workers. One Foster Carer, discussing their experience of reporting trafficking concerns, shared the following:

I don't think my concerns were matched. I think that the Social Worker thought I was being a bit over the top, but because of my training, I saw the red flags, in lots of different forms. To me, it was totally obvious what was going on, but it wasn't seen as that.

Where children had been identified as a potential victim of trafficking prior to placement, some Foster Carers felt key information about this had been withheld from them, making it more difficult to understand how to protect them in the home.

Overall, a lack of specialised training for Foster Carers and inadequate information upon placement regarding trafficking risks suggests some may not be adequately prepared for the role.

5.2 | Support

Underpinning concerns regarding preparation and training for Foster Carers was an overall feeling that the Social Workers supporting Foster Carers were lacking the experience, knowledge and skills to support them. While feelings around support varied according to who was providing it, for example Foster Carers spoke positively about the support received from the 'Independent Child Trafficking Guardians' (ICTG's), a service provided by the children's charity Barnardo's (Home Office 2024), the overriding feeling was that supporting Social Workers were often not able to offer support in managing trafficking risks. Furthermore, Foster Carers reported mixed access to localised peer support networks, suggesting access could be improved in some areas.

5.2.1 | Support From Professionals

In relation to supporting Social Workers, despite reports of them as kind and well-meaning, many participants felt they were lacking the specific knowledge regarding the care needs and risks facing UASTC, and thus were not able to provide adequate guidance to Foster Carers. Some Foster Carers reported feeling as though they were the experts in the situation as opposed to the Social Workers, leading to a role reversal in terms of who was guiding the supervisory relationship and safety planning. Some Foster Carers, however, were unable to take this lead due to their own lack of knowledge and expertise in the area, leading to risks going unidentified. This lack of understanding may be down to a low number of UASTC being placed in certain areas, leading to a lack of expertise and resource development.

Foster Carers also reported varying experiences of support from other professionals. For example, some Foster Carers felt the support they received from first response police officers was poor, perhaps due to a lack of specialist knowledge:

The Police said when we spoke to them, we might come, and when we rang 999, they did come to be fair, they came straight away, but they couldn't do anything in terms of trafficking because they didn't understand that.

This lack of understanding sometimes meant Foster Carer concerns regarding risks were not always met by the police. However, when discussing interactions with specialist trafficking police officers, the experience was more positive, with Foster Carers reporting them to be responsive to concerns raised. These findings suggest first response police officers may need more training in understanding child trafficking.

Despite reporting frustrations with Social Workers and the Police, more positive views were shared regarding the ICTG service. Not all children had access to the service as it is not available in all the local authorities involved in this study; however, Foster Carers who reported involvement from the ICTG service found support to be very good. This was mostly based upon their experience of guardians as knowledgeable and having the time to build positive working relationships with children that helped them understand their experiences of exploitation. One Foster Carer reported the support they received from the ICTG service helped to maintain the placement:

They saw him every single week. They were amazing with them. From what they have told me they went out and did some fun things [...]. They were obviously doing very in-depth work with them. [...] They became very close and very trusting of the workers. But I have to bring a reservation, that the young person believed that the Barnardo's worker was their Social Worker because she was the only person who ever did anything for them, and I totally agree. That relationship went on and was fantastic [...]. I feel like me and the Barnardo's worker are the only people who are protecting this young person who is very vulnerable [...]. If it hadn't been for the [ICTG] from Barnardo's, I really do not know how we would have carried on.

This finding was also reflected in conversations with the Social Worker who participated in the study, who explained that the ICTG service acted as a vital form of support to children and their Foster Carers, thus reducing risk and enhancing the stability of foster placements.

5.2.2 | Support From Peers

The availability of peer support varied amongst Foster Carers involved in the study. Peer support may be beneficial to Foster Carers as it allows them to learn from other people in a similar position and seek support outside of their supervisory relationships (Sebba and Luke 2013). For one of the fostering families involved in the study, a local support group for UASC Foster Carers was available, something which they found useful. Additionally, some Foster Carers had accessed and spoke positively about a region-wide support group for UASC carers, run online by a regional body; however, some of those who accessed this group felt it would also be good to meet in person with other UASTC Foster Carers living locally to them. This may be challenging for those who are more isolated in their role due to where they live. This finding was supported

by the Social Worker who participated in the study, who advised being involved in a Foster Carer peer-support network, whether in the form of a group or on a one-to-one basis, helps Foster Carers keep up to date with best practice and current issues, helping them to better manage risks posed to the children they cared for.

Overall, the findings regarding support suggest that professionals whose role it is to safeguard UASTC, such as Social Workers and first response police officers, may lack the specialist knowledge and expertise required to effectively carry out this role. This may negatively impact the safety of children in foster placements. These findings also suggest the ICGT service is a vital protective layer for foster placements. Consequently, it may be beneficial to upskill supporting Social Workers and to expand availability of the ICTG service and peer support across the country. This latter suggestion regarding the ICTG service has recently been recommended by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2025), who notes the crucial role the service provides in terms of advocacy and support for child victims of trafficking and the positive effect they have on outcomes for children and young people.

5.3 | Safety and Risk

As a result of a lack of support from knowledgeable social work professionals and/or their own research into the needs of UASTC, many Foster Carers who participated in this study found themselves playing a key role in the identification and management of risk facing the children they cared for. The experience of risk management sometimes led to increased levels of hypervigilance and 'detective work', thereby increasing the risk of emotional toll. Despite these challenges, Foster Carers cited the importance of strong relationships as key to enhancing the safety of children in their care.

5.3.1 | Foster Carer's Role in Safety Planning

Research into the needs and experiences of UASTC has found that safety measures are not always implemented in relation to their care, despite a need for them, due to a lack of knowledge and experience amongst supporting professionals (ECPAT UK 2011). This study reflected this but with some variation in the findings. For example, it was found that some Foster Carers reported their supporting Social Workers to be lacking the knowledge required to formulate safety plans, leaving some Foster Carers to fill this knowledge gap while others did not have the ability to do so. On the other hand, some Foster Carers felt safety planning was not always necessary due to children wanting to keep themselves safe and could even be unhelpful in some circumstances, perhaps emulating a child's experience with traffickers. Other Foster Carers reported being provided with a safety plan but finding it difficult to implement as the child they were caring for did not recognise themselves as a victim, suggesting a significant part of the role of Foster Carers is being able to help children to recognise themselves as victims, something which may be difficult when implementing safety measures. These findings suggest that safety planning for UASTC is a complex issue for which Foster Carers would benefit from increased support.

5.3.2 | Creating Safety and Understanding Through Relationships and Environment

When discussing relationship building with UASTC, Foster Carers reported trust was key to reducing the pull of children to traffickers:

We were trying to slow everything down so that they couldn't contact these people [...]. At the same time, we were talking, whenever we could, in the gentlest way we could, to them in order to build up as much trust in the relationship so that the relationship they had with us was stronger than the pull that was given by the trafficking people [...] and we spent a lot of time saying 'you're safe here' [...]. So, we were constantly reinforcing this relationship we had with them so that that was the key relationship, because they need a relationship. So as soon as we could, we're trying to establish ourselves as that secure base for them [...]. What we're trying to do is build robust people, so that not only have they come out of trafficking, but they're not likely to go back into it.

Such trusting relationships may assist children in developing an understanding of their experiences as exploitative. This can, however, be challenging, when children do not understand that their Foster Carers are not there to exploit them:

Well, they were such a lovely, sweet young person. But they had no confidence in anybody. They obviously didn't know that we were good people. They didn't know that they were here to be looked after. I mean, for all intents and purposes, we could just have been more traffickers, and they were here to be our slave. They wanted to clean all the time because they'd been a house person, you know. They wanted to take care of us. They asked if they could massage us and our feet. And did we need our nails doing, they were just trying to please all the time.

These reflections highlight that creating a safe environment requires Foster Carers to build relationships with children to enable a sense of belonging and safety. This may go some way to countering the negative impact that safety measures may have on the emotional well-being of children and help them recover from traumatic experiences. To create safe environments and build positive relationships with children, it is important that Foster Carers receive support to develop relationship-based practice, such as in the form of training and adequate support from trained professionals.

5.3.3 | Hypervigilance and 'Detective Work'

As a result of the challenges associated with keeping UASTC safe at home, some Foster Carers reported being in a state of high alert, particularly when UASTC first arrive in a placement.

Subsequently, some Foster Carers engaged in ‘detective work’ in order to find evidence of risk. Some particularly challenging incidents that led to a state of hypervigilance for Foster Carers were shared during the interviews, including a child trying to hide in a supermarket so that they could return to their traffickers, traffickers being spotted outside the home of Foster Carers, and in one case a trafficker posing as a child in foster care to gain access to other children. As a result of such incidents, Foster Carers were acutely aware of the risks posed to themselves and their families, leading them to sometimes adopt the role of ‘detective’, observing children’s behaviour, monitoring their movements, and passing on any concerns to social care and the police. Foster carers also reported hypervigilant behaviour, such as sleeping downstairs so children at risk of going missing would not leave in the night, and counting shoes in the morning to check everyone was still in the home:

■ You’ve got to be in a state of high alert.
(Foster Carer 1).

Wherever they go, you’re making a risk assessment. We took them to a Vietnamese supermarket because we needed to be able to tie in the culture, you know, for the food and everything [...] and while we were there, we were always assessing, okay, who is here? We were walking around and looking at buns and we’re looking at the various bits. But you’re also looking at all the people, seeing what people are taking in, what people are taking interest, is anybody talking to them?

(Foster Carer 2).

That was the biggest fear, getting up every morning. I’d count their pairs of shoes to see if they’d gone. And that went on for a few months, worrying, and every time they went out independently, I was like, oh God, will they come back? And then they started going to visit their friend in [nearby city] for the weekend and every time I’m like, will they come back?

(Foster Carer 3).

I sometimes feel like I’m a detective and maybe I’m overcautious, but my belief is that I need to be over cautious because I’ve got more than one young person, [...] and so sometimes I may be more cautious than most carers.

(Foster Carer 4).

This hypervigilance had a negative impact on the well-being of some Foster Carers, for example, affecting their sleep:

When we first got them, I wasn’t sleeping very well because, you know, it’s quite easy for them to just leave the house when you’re asleep, isn’t it?? [...] I was really concerned, and I kept saying to [Foster Carers partner], what if they take them?

Overall, these findings allude to the potential negative impact of the role of ‘detective’ on Foster Carers and the children they look after. The subsequent state of hypervigilance may have a negative impact on the well-being of Foster Carers. Consequently, it could be argued that greater support is needed both to manage risk but also respond to the impact of this risk on Foster Carers, ideally through the provision of trauma-informed mental health support where appropriate.

5.4 | Navigating Asylum and Trafficking Processes

Foster Carers’ involvement in and understanding of immigration and trafficking processes varied amongst those who participated in this study. In relation to NRM, the system by which the Home Office decides whether or not someone may be, or is, a victim of trafficking, most Foster Carers felt their knowledge of this system was lacking, although some did take an active role in advocating for referrals to be made when they had identified potential indicators of trafficking.

In relation to immigration processes, some Foster Carers demonstrated a good understanding of the asylum process, often providing emotional support to children while they were experiencing the asylum system. Some Foster Carers saw it as their role to be involved in meetings such as asylum interviews to ensure children’s well-being was prioritised:

It’s just retraumatising the children. So, we’ve got smarter. [...] I’m always there with our young people and I’ll say to them can we just have a break?

(Foster Carer 1).

And it just seems, I think the system, I’m sure it’s designed to be as cruel as possible. And that was hard, and so in the interview I had to ask for it to stop and take them out again to try and reassure them.

(Foster Carer 2).

So, it really does help to sit and listen to their story. I’ve always taken my young people to the solicitor because I wanted to know the story so that I can help them in specific ways if need be. Lots of carers don’t do that. So how do they know the person? How do they get to know that young person and their needs?

(Foster Carer 3).

Due to the potential of the asylum process to negatively impact the emotional well-being of children, some Foster Carers reported this to pose additional challenges to the caring role:

You have the interview, and then you could be on hold for another couple of years while they make their decision. It is, to my mind, just cruel. All our unaccompanied asylum seekers have been seriously affected by that. And that is one of the biggest problems of looking after them, is that they just don’t know whether they’re coming or going for years.

Supporting children through the system can also pose a challenge for carers themselves as a result of listening to the stories of the children they support:

Some of the hardest hours of my life [...]. Harrowing. Absolutely harrowing, and the only way I got through it without adverse effect on me or my husband, we're a good team together, and I would come home and obviously I would talk to him about it and I would get it all off my chest. But I know myself, I am a strong person, but I know myself that it's all in there. It's all in a compartment in the back of the brain. [...] No preparation at all to deal with that. I'm not a psychologist, I'm a person really. I'm just a mum trying to be a good person and help somebody who has been treated so badly by many other people.

These findings suggest helping children to navigate the asylum process carries a risk of secondary traumatic stress (Baird and Kracen 2006) for Foster Carers, further enhancing the argument for access to trauma-informed mental health support for Foster Carers in this position.

5.5 | The Positives of the Role

Despite the numerous challenges of the Foster Carer role, all participants of the study were keen to highlight the positives, describing it to be a fulfilling experience that had enriched their lives. Additionally, foster carers reported how the care they provide can enable children to thrive:

We just put an environment there that allows them to do it, you know, you put this environment around them and then all of a sudden, this magic happens. It is a bit like planting something, you plant something and when you get a plant, you don't see farmers pinning leaves on plants, they just grow and develop. All the farmer does is just put this environment around it that allows it to do its stuff. And that's what we do. We just put this environment around and this magic happens [...] it's been a real joy, to be honest.

Helping a young person to thrive can also bring rewards for the Foster Carers:

[They are] just a lovely, lovely person. And it was wonderful to watch them blossom and grow. [...] Totally fascinating and amazing, and we've learnt so much. People say to us, oh, you're amazing at what you do. But we get back tenfold of what we gave, the joy that we get from them. They're just so lovely. It's enriched our life.

These insights highlight the benefits of the role, despite some of the shared challenges Foster Carers face. These enriching elements of the role may go some way to supporting Foster Carers

to weather the difficulties and support children to grow and develop. Such insight may be useful to highlight when considering how to recruit people into this role.

6 | Conclusion

The findings of this small-scale study reveal several themes which suggest while caring for UASTC brings a sense of fulfilment, Foster Carers may face challenges beyond those associated with fostering children who have not experienced trafficking. These additional challenges are related both to helping children navigate complex systems such as the asylum process and managing risk within the home. With these challenges come additional responsibilities, for which Foster Carers do not always receive appropriate training or support from trained professionals.

These additional challenges, coupled with a lack of specialised training and support, may heighten the emotional strain experienced by Foster Carers. Consequently, there is a risk of Foster Carers experiencing secondary traumatic distress, defined as 'a set of psychological symptoms that mimic post-traumatic stress disorder, but is acquired through exposure to persons suffering the effects of trauma' (Baird and Kracen 2006, 181). The potential psychological cost of managing the risks associated with trafficking highlights a need for trauma-informed mental health support. This could include access to trauma-informed counselling and reflective supervision for Foster Carers.

Similarly, several themes within this study touch on the lack of specialist knowledge and skills amongst Social Work professionals and other agencies such as the Police. Knowledge gaps include the ability of some professionals to recognise the indicators of trafficking, leading to missed opportunities for intervention and effective safety planning. These knowledge gaps contribute to a disjointed safeguarding framework, where Foster Carers frequently shoulder responsibilities that should be shared by trained professionals. This can lead to increased strain on carers and reduced protection for children. Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive training for supporting professionals, ideally covering areas such as understanding and identifying trafficking, risk assessment, trauma-informed practice, and training on the asylum system and NRM processes.

In contrast to the lack of specialist skills and knowledge of some supporting professionals, findings regarding the ICTG service highlight the difference that can be made when children are well-supported by knowledgeable professionals, suggesting there is a need for this service to be available to all children in the United Kingdom.

Collectively, these findings outline a need for systemic improvements to enhance the support, training, and well-being of Foster Carers looking after UASTC. Such improvements align with some of the strategic reforms recently announced by the UK government (DfE 2023). These reforms outline a need for new models of fostering that promote safety for children who are in 'the most complex' situations (DfE 2023, 46), a category under which UASTC arguably fall. Furthermore, the strategy recommends practitioners supporting vulnerable children have access to specialised training

on issues such as trauma and immigration (DfE 2023). With these strategic reforms in mind, this study makes the following recommendations for policy and practice:

6.1 | Practice Suggestions

Due to the small-scale and regional nature of this study, it is not possible to offer broad system-wide recommendations. However, there are some considerations which may be useful for fostering agencies and service providers at a local level. For example, the findings imply there may be potential value in providing opportunities for foster carers to specialise in looking after UASTC, mirroring models such as the Barnardo's 'Safe Accommodation' project (Shuker 2014). Such opportunities could incorporate access to trauma-informed mental health support for both carers and children, which may be of benefit to foster carers more generally, regardless of who they are looking after.

Consistent support from knowledgeable Social Work professionals including reflective supervision, pre-placement briefings and access to specialised training focusing on trafficking indicators and providing safe care for UASTC may also be beneficial. Furthermore, supporting Social Workers and the Police may benefit from training to improve their understanding of trafficking risks. The perceived value of ICTG service also suggests that it may be useful to explore improving access to the service if it is still operating. Access to specialised local peer support networks for shared learning and support may also enhance the experience for carers.

6.2 | Limitations of the Study

While this study provides in-depth insight into the experiences of some local authority Foster Carers within one region of England, it is small scale in terms of sample size and is regional in focus, thus the findings should be read cautiously. It is possible Foster Carers fostering for independent fostering agencies and living in other areas may have different experiences. Furthermore, there are other perspectives which should be explored, for example those of supporting Social Workers and, most crucially, the experiences of UASTC. Despite these limitations, the insights provided by participants are detailed enough to formulate some key messages for policy and practice, as discussed above.

6.3 | Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the limitations of this study, it is recommended that further research includes studies exploring the voice of UASTC in the variety of placements they inhabit including and beyond foster care. Such research may also explore the experiences of carers in these different settings. It may also be beneficial to engage in longer-term studies on outcomes for UASTC in different placements to understand the appropriateness of different care arrangements.

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Ethics Statement

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are not made available by the researcher.

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