



Ailish King-Fisher and Joy Johnston
Deputy Director
Resettlement, Asylum Support & Integration

Home Office
2 Marsham Street
LONDON SW1P 4DF

Dear Directors of Children's Services,

I am writing to update you on our recent work in Kent on age assessment and how we hope we can continue to work together in this complex and difficult area. Many local authorities raised age assessment as a concern in the recent National Transfer Scheme (NTS) consultation and it is a key priority for our Ministerial team.

One of our responses to the significant increase in the number of small boats arriving on the south coast over the summer and autumn of last year was to set up two age assessment pilots to provide extra support in this area. Your local authority may have seen individuals dispersed to your area following age assessments conducted by Home Office funded social workers at either the Kent Intake Unit (KIU) or Kent County Council (KCC). We thought it would be helpful to provide you with some background about the pilots and the age assessment process to assist with any subsequent decisions you and your local authority may be required to make about providing support and accommodation to these young people and handling any challenges to age assessments.

Short form age assessments at Kent Intake Unit

The Home Office have contracted a small team of social workers at KIU who are professionally supervised by senior social workers in the Home Office Safeguarding Advice and Children's Champion (SACC) team.

If a newly arrived individual appears to be 25 or over, a Chief Immigration Officer will decide they can be treated as an adult, even if they claim to be a child. If the individual claims to be a child but the Chief Immigration Officer believes they are likely to be an adult and they do not appear to be 25 or over, these social workers will conduct a short form Merton compliant age assessment. As you will be aware, the case law on Merton age assessments allows for a "short form", less prolonged enquiry by a social worker where it is very clear from the physical appearance that a person is either under or over 18 years of age, in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary. The individuals are assessed within KIU shortly after arrival. Our policy is that interviews are conducted with two suitably qualified social workers. The social workers ensure in advance of any assessment that they are comfortable and have had refreshments, and that the young person has access to an interpreter and understands the process and purpose of the age assessment.

If you have doubts regarding the age of any individuals who are still claiming to be a child after having been assessed as an adult through this short form process at KIU, we recommend that you request a copy of their KIU age assessment by emailing Ageassessmentenquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk and that your social workers review this assessment. If, following this review, your social worker believes that there is doubt that the individual is over 18 then we recommend that a full Merton age assessment is conducted. If you are concerned about your capacity to complete the assessments within a reasonable timeframe,

we may be able to support your authority by providing Home Office funded social workers to conduct the age assessments.

Kent County Council (KCC) age assessment project

In addition to the pilot at KIU we embedded a team of social workers in KCC to conduct full Merton compliant age assessments. KCC have taken every precaution to ensure these assessments are fair, thorough and accurate. In line with established practice the assessments were conducted by two social workers 'in person' in the presence of appropriate adults and interpreters. The assessments were completed under the supervision of KCC Children Services leadership, with all the usual quality assurance processes. As a consequence, we are confident that the quality of these assessments is of a high standard.

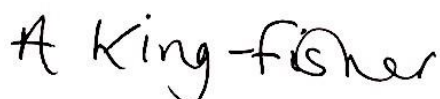
A material number of the young people identified for a full Merton-compliant age assessment in Kent were found to be over 18. They have now been placed in adult asylum accommodation. We are likely to now see some of these individuals challenging the age assessment decision either by maintaining their assertion that they are a child to the local authority where they are now living or by initiating legal proceedings. We recommend that if an individual assessed in this way seeks support as a child in your area you firstly contact Ageassessmentenquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk to request a copy of the Merton compliant assessment from KCC. I hope that by doing so you will be assured of the quality of the assessment and your local authority continues to accommodate and support the individual as an adult, whilst KCC defends their decision in any legal proceedings. If you believe that new evidence has emerged, and you consider that the individual may not be over 18 then a full Merton assessment should be conducted by your own social workers.

Wider age assessment support

We are acutely aware of the challenges in this complex and difficult area and welcome the constructive and collaborative engagement from local authority partners. We are currently developing a pilot team of social workers to support local authorities across the UK to conduct age assessments and provide guidance and support. This includes exploring bringing into that team expertise from local authorities that are highly experienced in age assessment. If you have any further questions about age assessments, suggestions about this area of work or require support, please contact Ageassessmentenquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk.

Regards,

Joy Johnson and Ailish King-Fisher
Deputy Directors



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Deputy Director



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