

Report of an Exchange Programme
to Kent County Council
(United Kingdom)



Nuria Amores Tello
ENARO Spring Exchange 2005

Personal Details

Name and surnames: Nuria Amores Tello

Profession: Psychologist

Position: Psychologist in a Centre for refugees in Madrid

Country: Spain

General Details about the Exchange Program

The exchange program took place in England from 18th to 28th of April 2005. The organisation in charge of organising the meetings was Kent County Council, which fundamentally supports unaccompanied minors. Another participant was Magnus Jutell from Sweden and he is a reception officer in his country.

OBJECTIVES OF THE MEETING

The Enaro Program promotes two annual exchanges, one in spring and another one in autumn, among the different countries, which belong to the program.

The targets of this exchange were:

- To learn about the intake-system for unaccompanied children in the U.K., and particularly in Kent County.
- To share knowledge, different experiences and projects that are being implemented in the different countries of the program.
- To compare the differences and the similarities of work in the different countries of the Enaro program.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEETING

INTRODUCTION

Kent County Council holds the responsibility for unaccompanied minors if:

- The port of entry where they claim asylum is in Kent or if they are first presented to Kent county Council Social Services Directorate.
- They have an address in Kent or other local connection, for instance family already in the area (and the Social Services Directorate has agreed to provide support).
- They are living in another local authority but were placed there by Kent County Council Social Services Directorate (which continues to support).

Furthermore:

- All unaccompanied female asylum-seekers under 18 go immediately into foster care.
- All unaccompanied male asylum-seekers aged 12 or under go immediately into foster care.
- All unaccompanied male asylum-seekers aged 13 to 15 go to Swattenden Centre for assessment and are accommodated there until

they can be placed with a host family or in supported lodgings, as appropriate.

METHODOLOGY

The program was imminently practical and well suited for exchanging experiences.

They gave us an activity program and theoretical information as of the very first moment, and although my colleague and I had the same work program, but in different weeks, I found it positive: after we finished our work we met at the hotel and talked about the things we experienced and learnt during that day.

The organisation of the program was:

- A practical approach to the work carried out in the minor's centre in Swattenden including the work of the duty team social workers... The methodology consisted in accompanying and observing the work of several social workers and visits to the minors' centre, where we had the opportunity to talk with the different workers and also with the minors that live there.
- An approach to the different organisations involved in asylum claims/reception.

CONTENT OF THE PROGRAM

During the meeting the three systems (Spanish, Swedish and English) have been compared constantly to draw up the differences and the similarities. From the very first moment Kent County Council gave us documentation about the process, but from my point of view I have missed a theoretical explanation of the English system before putting it in practice. I think it's important to make an oral exposition about the asylum seeking process starting at the moment a person claims it and further actions carried out. To keep this order in practice makes it easier to understand.

Things are different in Spain and therefore it is a bit difficult to understand the whole process in England: the organisations involved, the different workers...

The program carried out by Kent County Council consisted of visits to the different organisations in order give us an overall impression of the reality in this country:

1- The work teams with unaccompanied children:

- ✓ The Duty team: I worked directly with three social workers watching some Initial Assessment Report-intakes to determine the age of the minors and some of their basic needs, and the monitoring of the minors through periodical revisions. I visited the minors Centre in Swattenden and also the offices where this team is located (Dover).
- ✓ The transition team: I visited the offices where this team is located and I had the opportunity to interview one of the social workers as well as an accommodation officer.

2-The Centres:

- ✓ Reception Centre for adults in Ashford: I visited the premises and I had the opportunity to talk with some asylum seekers who were waiting to be accommodated in flats in the North of England. They complained mainly about the inactivity in the centre, as they don't have access to English lessons and/or to information about jobs/courses while waiting.

- ✓ Swattenden Centre for unaccompanied minors: It was the most interesting thing for me since I could interact directly with the minors who were living there, learn about their experiences, activities, concerns, life projects. I also had the opportunity to talk with the staff, keyworkers and interpreters, about the organisation of the centre, their functions and the problems these centers face with regard to the social climate in the UK.

In the centre there are fifteen keyworkers in three shifts (mornings, afternoons and nights) and there are always two keyworkers at night. Apart from that, there are three team-coordinators and five people to substitute in summer holidays.

The main duties of the keyworkers are:

- ❖ Identify the minors bare and special needs (health, education, independence...) with the minors and other workers.
- ❖ Make a basic plan of attention for each child, with the minor and the social worker.
- ❖ Revise these plans and be able to modify when necessary.
- ❖ Help the children be independent and autonomous.
- ❖ Reinforce the children and make them live up to the rules.

When the minors enter the centre they receive a dictionary; a Koran because some children usually go to pray in a nearby village; some clothes and toiletries; 85 pounds to buy some clothes and 10 pounds for toiletries.

Regularly they receive 15 pounds a week (5 pocket money, 5 for telephone, 5 if they clean their own room); black children receive the toiletries free every month, because they are too expensive; every six months they are paid to get a hair cut and every month they are given 25 pounds for clothes and 10 more for toiletries.

Normally the time to stay in the centre is six months but it depends on the needs of each child. When they go out from the centre to a semi-independent flat they receive 44 pounds a week.

Every Wednesday a local association with the project **Around the World** goes to the centre to work with the children in environmental subjects such as gardening and conservation of nature. They usually go out to the country and they teach the children how to clean up spoiled areas... The interesting thing about this project is that there is an interaction with the reception community but the volunteers association (like in Spain) always promotes these kind of projects, eventhough it should be the local authorities or government doing the promotion.

I really like the interpreters: you are able to use their language so the children can understand everything and as an interpreter you are able to keep contact with their culture.

Every Friday there is a doctor in the centre to assist the children and monitor their health. The only problem is that the doctor comes to the centre at 8 o'clock in the morning and there isn't any interpreter at that time.

Also on Fridays a solicitor comes to the centre to talk to the children about their asylum request. The solicitor fills in a long questionnaire, from my point of view very quickly..., and asks the same questions as the immigration service and the social workers... I mean: the children have to tell their story a lot of times which can generate some stress and anxiety. This is a critical note, because in Spain I see this happening as well: before entering the centre, people were already made to tell their problems (to different authorities) more or less 4 times, and when they are in the centre, it starts all over again.

3- The Refugee Council in London: This is an independent organisation that informs, gives some advise and support to asylum seekers, both minors and adults.

In this organisation we visited The Refugee Council Children's Panel that has three teams to support the minors:

- An advise team that works on the phone. They receive phone calls and try to solve the doubts that the minors have and they give them information.
- The drop-in team: Minors can go there if they need some help or advise such as: they have arrived in the U.K. and they don't know where to go to get help; they need a legal representative; they don't know how to apply for asylum or they are having a problem dealing with immigration or the Home Office; they have nowhere to live or they are having problems with accommodation; other problems having to do with housing, health and/or education. Besides the minors can go to the drop-in team if they need a hot meal, a shower, second-hand clothes and/or contact the Red Cross if they want to find somebody who is lost.
- A team of 30 advisors that can move around the country to support the unaccompanied children. This team's main functions are:
 - Help to find a legal representative to assist with their asylum application.
 - Help them when they have to see their legal representative or the Home Office.
 - Make sure the children are protected and cared for.
 - Deal with organisations that provide services and support.
 - Make sure those organisations listen to what they want and need.
 - If they want, help them contact their family back home.
 - Make contact with people from their country that live here, if they would wish to.

All separated/unaccompanied children are referred to the panel by the Home Office.

Besides, we also visited the area for adults and families. Here asylum seekers mainly receive information, since they don't have free lawyers to advise them. However they have the right to 5 hours of legal advise in the refugee Legal Centre and then they have to look for their own lawyer. The asylum application must be submitted in English and within ten days from their arrival to the U.K., so they need a translator to do this.

There are also free English lessons taught by volunteers, a room specifically for babies to play and sleep in and a dining room where they receive free meals.

4- The Interpreting service: It was very interesting to visit this service as we could speak to the director who explained to us how this service works:

- All the interpreters receive a sixty hours course in education, health, social services, children and family, protection, confidentiality of the interpretations.
- They have interpreters for approximately 50 languages.
- There are interpreters on the phone just in case people working with immigrants and refugees need some urgent information.
- They prepare bilingual glossaries for the different professionals.
- They prepare an agenda in different languages so that the person can look for his/her language and point out the service he /she needs.

- A language card exists on which language you speak is indicated so that the person can show it at any given moment and is able to get an interpreter for him/her.

PERSONAL OPINION

From my point of view, I consider the exchange program as very positive and useful. This way you get to know the different asylum procedures, the manner of working in other countries and useful job instruments we can try to adapt to our reality.

I want to highlight the following as very positive points:

- All the unaccompanied children are considered asylum seekers in order to provide them as much protection as possible.
- Swattenden Centre is a small centre with a capacity for 30 minors, which makes it easier not only to communicate with the minors, but also for the minors to communicate with the workers. The fact that it is a small centre I think avoids problems.
- The centre has a kitchen for the boys so they are able to cook their own meals and/or learn how to cook. This helps the children to be independent and autonomous and on the other hand to keep in contact with their culture through their meals.
- Every day there are lots of interpreters in the centre to work with the children. In this way the minors can access information more easily and they can learn some words in English. Besides this is a very important way to connect the minor with his culture.
- In the centre there is a great number of workers, who can give the minors a lot of attention and who make the children feel protected.
- If the children have family in the country, the social worker helps them to get in touch. Children have the right to receive visits from their relatives in the centre and/or to visit their family outside the centre.
- The workers give the children a dictionary and a Koran if they need, at the moment the children come to live in the centre.
- The compulsory revisions of the care plan: the first is drawn up at 28 days and every three months afterwards, favour the continuation of the minors case, as they permit to check his evolution and the flexibility to change things just in case it is necessary.
- The time to stay in the centre is flexible depending on the needs of each individual child.
- When all the workers decide that a boy is sufficiently independent and responsible, to live in shared flats with other boys, they will send the boy to a semi independent flat.
- The collaboration with the Project Around the World enables the centre to create an opening for the community.

- The children's accommodation in foster families can provide a stable emotional situation and some effective bonds in the long term.

And some things that can be improved:

- English lessons aren't promoted for all the minors, in the centre and also outside the centre, this makes it difficult for them to integrate into society. Some of them have the opportunity of attending school on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays to learn English and computer-skills, but only if the minors are under 15 or 15.
- The centre is located in the outskirts of a small village and this hampers the access to the services and doesn't permit for the carrying out of programs which could make people/the wider community susceptible to the problem of the unaccompanied minors.
- The Initial Assessment Report is very subjective and there are a lot of differences between the way of working from one social worker to the other. I think it would be a positive thing to agree on their criteria.
- Lack of a social psychologist, who could develop commentary actions in the centre and in the village. The psychologist can also work individually with those minors who need psychotherapy, due to the immigration process or, to support his learning process.
- Personally I think there are a lot of keyworkers in the centre and few children. Each keyworker has two children in charge but when I visited the centre there were some keyworkers without any child in care and the impression was they didn't have anything to do. I think it would be more effective/efficient to have fewer keyworkers, and in addition an English teacher and a person that stimulates health habits, access to cultural & leisure time activities.
- Everyday there are interpreters present from 18:00 to 22:00. In a way this is a positive thing because there is always somebody to support the children and to translate everything, but on the other hand I think that this doesn't encourage their integration into society. I think interpreters should be present, but for more punctual things.
- I think it would be more effective to have one or two social workers present permanently in the centre- to make the Initial Assessment Report and to monitor all the minors in the centre, and on the other hand have some social workers available to monitor the children that are living in semi-independent flats or foster families. In Kent County Council the towns are very far apart from each other and consequently the social workers have to move constantly from one place to the other.
- Lack of activity in the centre. Minors don't have any rules to comply with. They don't have to get up at a certain hour and if they don't want to, they don't have breakfast, they can cook their own meal at any moment without a daily routine.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES AND CONCLUSIONS

The foreseen activities for the future are:

- ✓ Enaro closing conference that will take place in Solenice in November 2005.
- ✓ 7° Enaro exchange program in autumn 2005.

To conclude I consider it extremely important that the program organisers provide some information about the country we are visiting: The process of asylum, if they work with unaccompanied minors, before going to the country.

I really enjoyed my stay in Kent and I really liked the fact that we had the opportunity to indicate what we wanted to see or visit and as far as possible you tried to do the best. However, the exchange program would be more useful for everybody if we could know in advance the way of working of the reception country and investigate beforehand in our own country to make an inventory of the things that are similar or very different in Spain.