



Refugee Education UK

In collaboration with



University of
Nottingham

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Promoting the inclusion of refugee children in schools: recommendations for secondary education policy in England

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“Education is the key”

REUK youth advocates' statement

As refugee and asylum-seeking students in England, **we believe in the power of education** to empower people, help them discover their potential and effect change in society.

Educators are frontline responders for refugee and asylum-seeking students. We have been through a lot, and having someone to support us, provide necessary information and care for our wellbeing can have a significant impact on our futures.

We dream of a world where we are seen as more than just “refugees”, and recognised for our brilliance and what we have to offer. We have experienced hard things, but we are not broken. We want to be given a chance to have a positive impact on the societies that have welcomed us. Education will give us this chance.

Let us strive to find common ground, embrace our diversity and work together to ensure accessible and inclusive education for all refugee and asylum-seeking students. These recommendations are a reflection of **the change we want to see** that will help achieve this goal.¹

Introduction

Schools can be places of safety for refugee and asylum-seeking children, providing a place of growth, flourishing and integration. Education is a springboard to future success and improved life prospects. However, research has demonstrated that a range of tangible barriers prevent learners from a forced migration background from thriving in education, often resulting in compounded disruptions to learning and progression².

The recommendations presented in this paper are not an exhaustive list of all beneficial policy changes but rather a call to promote welcome and inclusion for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Policy decisions are often made in silos to the detriment of refugee and asylum-seeking children's education. We call on policymakers to work

¹ This statement is the product of a series of conversations with the youth advocates at Refugee Education UK, that began at a conference organised by the [Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe](#). The young people were asked to reflect on the purpose of education, the barriers they've experienced in accessing education in England, and their message to policymakers. During the course of the conversation, certain key phrases were repeated and highlighted by the participants, which have formed the basis of this statement.

² McIntyre, J., & Abrams, F. (2020). *Refugee Education: Theorising Practice in Schools*. Routledge; [McIntyre, J. & Hall, C. \(2018\). Barriers to the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking children in schools in England. Educational Review;](#) [Ashlee, A., & Gladwell, C. \(2020\). Education Transitions for Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Young People in the UK. Unicef;](#) [Chetwynd, G., & Gladwell, C. \(2018\). Education for refugee and asylum seeking children: access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales. Unicef;](#) [Hutchinson, Jo., Reader, M. \(2021\). The educational outcomes of refugee and asylum seeking children in England. Education Policy Institute.](#)

collaboratively across departments to consider policy consequences that impact their education. We recognise and celebrate positive steps already made to support the inclusion of other disadvantaged pupils including children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) and looked after children (LAC). In an era of continued global migration, we urge policymakers to extend this inclusion to refugee and asylum-seeking children and move beyond a crisis-based response towards a more sustainable and inclusive strategy.

“The UK is providing a safe haven and a lifeline. A lot of refugees want to pay back to society. Education empowers them to do that.”
- REUK Youth Advocate

Approach to developing policy recommendations

Sustainable Transformative Inclusive Refugee Education (STRIVE) is a partnership between Refugee Education UK and Professor Joanna McIntyre, at the University of Nottingham, which draws upon extensive research of educational policy and provision for refugee learners and experience of working directly with children and young people from a forced migration background. The purpose of this document is to inform policy changes at a national level that will improve outcomes for refugee and asylum-seeking children in secondary education in England. Semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with representatives from a range of stakeholder groups including: young people with lived experience of forced migration; teaching staff; representatives from teaching unions; Virtual School head teachers; CEOs of Multi Academy Trusts; staff from local authorities and third-sector organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers with education-related outcomes.

These focus group discussions enabled participants to identify structural barriers, celebrate examples of good practice and address the question: “*What policy changes are needed to enable schools and education settings to be a more inclusive and welcoming place for refugee and asylum-seeking pupils?*”.

Summary of findings and recommendations

Impact of dispersal accommodation practices on the education of refugee and asylum-seeking children

The impact of Home Office accommodation policy on education was a recurring theme emerging from the focus group discussions. Asylum seekers in initial accommodation are often required to relocate with very little notice to what is known as 'dispersal' accommodation.³ The impact of dispersal on a child's education is only considered if the child is in their final year of school or college and preparing for GCSE, AS or A-Level exams.⁴ The Home Office policy states that all other requests for a preference for location of accommodation on the basis of educational needs should normally be refused.⁵ Focus groups participants emphasised the disruption this can have on a child's education, leading to gaps in schooling and a detrimental impact on overall wellbeing and mental health.

“Every time I had to move around, it had an affect on my mental health, which made it really difficult to study.”
- REUK Youth Advocate

Recommendations:

- The Department for Education should work collaboratively with the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure consideration of educational access and outcomes at all levels is explicitly encouraged within accommodation and dispersal policy for refugee and asylum-seeking children.
- The Home Office should provide advance notice to local authorities about the dispersal of families with school-age children in order to allow the arrangement of school places before the relocation takes place

³ [McIntyre, J. & Hall, C. \(2018\). Barriers to the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking children in schools in England. Educational Review.](#)

⁴ [Allocation of asylum accommodation policy. \(2022\). Home Office \(p.9\).](#)

⁵ [Allocation of asylum accommodation policy. \(2022\). Home Office.](#)

- The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office should prioritise developing an approach to housing refugees and asylum seekers that minimises disruption to childrens' education and promotes access and inclusion

In-year admissions funding for pupils from a refugee or asylum-seeking background

Children seeking sanctuary in the UK do not have control over the timing of their arrival. This means that many of these children arrive mid-academic year. If an in-year admission takes place after a school's census date in October, the school will not receive funding for the child for the remainder of the academic year. Focus group participants described how this can significantly affect schools' willingness and ability to accept students into their classrooms, particularly if the pupil requires wrap-around support with English as an additional language, mental health and trauma, and in-class 1:1 support. Schools should not be burdened financially for accepting a newly arrived pupil past the census date.

Refugee Education UK is working with [The Bell Foundation](#) to research education access and provision for refugee and asylum-seeking adolescents who arrive in the UK mid-way through an academic year. Together, we are seeking to understand practices that promote and hinder academic and wellbeing outcomes for these adolescents, with a focus on those at the upper-secondary level. We hope to use findings from this research to strengthen evidence-based policy influencing work on this issue. Further information can be found [here](#).

“I arrived in December [...] I wanted to go to the local college or school, but they refused us.”
- REUK Youth Advocate

Recommendation:

- The Department for Education should implement an alternative approach to lagged funding to ensure schools receive appropriate funding for children who arrive after the census date.

Funding uplifts for refugee and asylum-seeker pupils

The lack of targeted funding to support the specialist and often intensive work required

to ensure successful education outcomes for newly arrived children emerged as a significant theme from the focus group discussions. While it is hard to accurately estimate the number of refugee and asylum seeking students enrolled in schools in England, there is research which gives us an indication of the scale of the need.⁶ The Department for Education administered crisis-based funding to local authorities to support the education of resettled refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine.⁷ However, participants stressed the need for a more sustainable model of funding. Appropriate funding is essential to enable schools to address attainment gaps, provide additional language support, support distinct pastoral needs and promote integration for all pupils seeking sanctuary.

“[Due to differences in funding], there is a huge disparity even within the community of refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people in terms of what we can offer.”
- Focus group participant

Recommendations:

- Building upon the positive provision of funds for schools for resettled refugee pupils from Afghanistan and Ukraine, the Department for Education should create sustainable education funding uplifts for all sanctuary seeking learners. A sustainable funding model should be informed by funding already in place for other vulnerable groups, including alternative provision funding and uplifts for care-experienced pupils.
- The Department for Education should fund the targeted deployment of teaching assistants to provide additional 1:1 support in the classroom for newly-arrived pupils

Routes to refugee practitioner professionalisation for educators

Many respondents reported examples of positive work happening within schools across

⁶ McIntyre, J., & Abrams, F. (2020). *Refugee Education: Theorising Practice in Schools*. Routledge; Hutchinson, Jo., Reader, M. (2021). *The educational outcomes of refugee and asylum seeking children in England*. Education Policy Institute.

⁷ [Afghanistan resettlement education grant](#). Department for Education; [Homes for Ukraine education and childcare grant conditions of funding](#). Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities & Education and Skills Funding Agency.

the country to meaningfully support refugee and asylum-seeking children. Participants highlighted the need to professionally recognise the work of educators in this area (and enable others to do the same) through a specialist professional accreditation, similar to that of a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinator. Young people with lived experience of forced migration echoed the value of this and emphasised the importance of having a named contact within a school with a specialism in this area.

“Having a person [in school] who knows you are from a refugee background who you can trust, talk to and believe in, that can have a big difference in your life and in your education and with your mental health.”
- REUK Youth Advocate

Recommendations:

- Department for Education should design and implement a professionally recognised status in schools for educators with a specialism in the support needs of refugees and asylum seekers
- Department for Education should review the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) core content framework to ensure that all new teachers have insight into working with refugee and asylum-seeking pupils⁸
- Continuing professional development⁹ (CPD) should include up to date information on the rights and entitlements of refugee and asylum-seeking pupils, as well as ongoing updates on best practice in the refugee education sector. Teachers should be properly resourced to complete such training within their roles.

Support for communication and collaboration at the local authority level

Focus group participants recognised that an improvement in communication at the local authority level could lead to improved outcomes for schools and learners. For example, one school reported that they were not allocated any new pupils from Afghanistan or Ukraine who had been accommodated in the local area despite being ready and willing to welcome pupils from a refugee background. Additionally, participants highlighted that sharing resources across schools within a local authority could lead to better collaboration and more cost-effective outcomes. For example, many pupils from forced-migration

⁸ Refugee Education UK along with Joanna McIntyre at the University of Nottingham are building a teacher training curriculum on supporting refugee children in school.

⁹ CPD within Early Career Framework, National Professional Qualifications and Specialist Leadership pathways currently overseen by the Department for Education

backgrounds could benefit from accessing wellbeing services and counselling in their preferred language.¹⁰ This can often be difficult to source, and costly. However, the local authority could coordinate an approach whereby different schools can access these resources according to need thereby improving cost-effectiveness and reducing duplication.

“We have been able to respond better to the Afghan Resettlement Programme because we had the information through the Home Office about which hotel the [Afghan children] were going to be at. We were able to deploy our staff to meet them at the hotel to [...] support them with school admissions.”
- Focus group participant

Recommendations:

- The Home Office should provide local authority school admissions teams with regular and accurate updates about the location of existing and new refugee and asylum seeker accommodation within their catchment area
- Where the majority of secondary schools within a local authority are academies, the Department for Education should authorise local authority school admissions teams to oversee in-year admissions for refugee and asylum-seeking pupils to avoid children falling between the gaps of the multi-faceted academy system
- Local authorities should be supported to coordinate the sharing of resources between schools where a need is identified (for example, the translation of documents and guidance into mother-tongue languages prominent in the local area; sharing of well-being resources across schools such as access to counselling in mother-tongue languages)
- Where funds are distributed at a regional level, local authorities should communicate with schools to ensure funding is targeted where it is most needed

Learning from young people with lived experience to inform further policy

The recommendations in this paper seek to amplify and learn from the experiences of the

¹⁰ [Bunn, M. Betancourt, T. \(2022\). Strengthening mental health support services for refugee children resettled in the US. *Society for Research in Child Development*.](#)

young people we work with. The value of involving individuals with lived experience in policy decision-making is well documented and evidenced.¹¹ Learning from young people with lived experience of both forced migration and the UK education system is important in ensuring that further policy decisions will be most effective in achieving educational outcomes without creating unintended negative consequences.¹² Focus group participants highlighted the importance of including current and previous learners from forced-migration backgrounds in the design and consultation of educational policy decisions whilst also recognising that refugee and asylum-seeking children are not a homogenous group.

“It’s very important to create a refugee-inclusive environment [in education]. If I was in charge, that would be my priority.”
- REUK Youth Advocate

Recommendations:

- The Department for Education should create and consult with a youth advisory committee of learners with lived experience of forced migration whilst recognising the diversity of experience within this group.¹³
- Members of Parliament and the Department for Education should support the creation of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugee Education to advocate for and inform policy changes in order to achieve successful education outcomes for pupils from a forced migration background

Accountability measures for schools

Another key theme from our focus group discussions was the impact on the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking pupils of accountability measures for schools in England (including Progress 8, Attainment 8, attendance monitoring and Ofsted inspection). Participants noted that some measures are already in place to ensure schools are not penalised through these mechanisms for welcoming pupils from a forced migration background. However, participants raised concerns that accountability measures in general do not encourage schools in this area. As an example, a school’s attendance statistics may be negatively impacted by Home Office dispersal policy. If a child is enrolled at one school and then dispersed to another part of the country, they must stay on the first school’s census until enrolled at another school. This process could take weeks or even months, during which time the child is classed as ‘absent’ from the original school. Focus group participants recognised the current Ofsted framework as making positive

¹¹ [Conte, C., Wolffhardt, A. \(2021\). Effective inclusion of refugees: participatory approaches for practitioners at the local level. UNHCR.](#)

¹² [McIntyre, J., Neuhaus, S., Blennow, K. \(2022\). The Art of Belonging: Social interaction of young migrants in urban contexts through cultural place-making.](#)

¹³ Refugee Education UK is able and willing to work with the DfE to facilitate such a group

steps towards promoting inclusion in schools. However, participants noted a disparity between how inspectors interpret and apply this framework to recognise inclusion.

Recommendations:

- Ofsted should ensure that inspectors receive appropriate training to interpret the education inspection framework to recognise positive practice taking place within schools to promote the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking pupils and other vulnerable groups
- The Department for Education should ensure that schools' attendance figures are not negatively impacted where a child is dispersed and delays occur in securing a new school place whilst the child remains on the original school's census

Conclusion

The voices of young people with lived experience of being refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are clear: education is a vital lifeline for refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK. Focus group participants recognised and celebrated pockets of good practice already happening across the country. However, there remains much to be done at a policy level to recognise and prioritise inclusive classrooms for refugee and asylum seeking students. The recommendations in this report are not an exhaustive list, but rather the beginning of an ongoing conversation to ensure positive outcomes for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Further research and policy recommendations are required across different stages of education in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We call on policymakers to move beyond a crisis-based approach to refugee education and towards a sustainable and inclusive policy landscape to ensure every child seeking sanctuary in the UK is able to access and thrive in appropriate, high quality education.

“I think that education is an everlasting gift that you can give to a refugee or asylum-seeker. They can help themselves with it. I think it’s really important.”
- REUK Youth Advocate
