OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Refugee Education UK

University of Nottingham
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Inclusive secondary education for refugees in Oxfordshire

Research report

July 2025

About the research partners

Refugee Education UK

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is a UK charity working towards a world where all young refugees can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future. Our direct programme work supports children and young people to get into school, from primary to university, and to thrive academically and in their wellbeing. Alongside our direct work, REUK provides training, resources and bespoke support to education institutions across the country and carries out research to build evidence on issues related to refugee education. Find out more about us at www.reuk.org.

Oxfordshire County Council

Oxfordshire County Council is the county council for the non-metropolitan county of Oxfordshire in the South East of England. The county was awarded the Council of Sanctuary award in 2025 in recognition of its efforts to create a culture of welcome, inclusion and empowerment for people seeking sanctuary.

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Executive Summary

All children have an equal right to education, regardless of immigration status, as enshrined in international law. This right is not limited to access alone: education must be inclusive, appropriate and suitable to each child's needs. Upholding this right is essential, not only to meet legal obligations but to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive. In England, local authorities have a legal duty to ensure appropriate education is available for all children of compulsory school age in their area.

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) has affirmed its commitment to people seeking sanctuary, and has recently been awarded Council of Sanctuary status by City of Sanctuary UK. OCC has also seen an increasing number of children and young people arriving in the county since 2021 on specific humanitarian schemes and visa pathways for individuals from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. OCC commissioned this research in order to better understand the experiences of young people arriving through these pathways in secondary schools in Oxfordshire. The research sought to inform the development of evidence-based interventions for enhancing and supporting inclusive refugee education. The report draws on insights from interviews and focus groups with 89 participants, including 58 young people from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine.

The report highlights the heterogeneity of displaced young people's experiences of education, both prior to and after arriving in the UK, underscoring the need for a tailored, individual approach to the provision of support. Participants felt that the provision of resources and training for teachers on the educational systems and cultural backgrounds of newly arrived young people would be beneficial. Young people emphasised the importance of teachers having high aspirations for newly arrived learners, and avoiding generalisations and assumptions about their abilities, past experiences and needs.

The importance of swift access to a supportive, inclusive education for young people who have been forcibly displaced is well established (e.g. Gladwell, 2021; McIntyre et al., 2020). However, the research found considerable variation in speed of access to school places between young people who had arrived in the UK through different routes. Young people from Afghanistan, and particularly girls, had often experienced significant disruption to their education, with many missed years of schooling. This disruption continued in the UK, with young people from Afghanistan who participated in this research having faced longer waits for school places than those from other cohorts. This was influenced in part by the locations in which families from Afghanistan were housed, with a lack of places in nearby local schools, as well as by the disruption posed by dispersal. Young people from Ukraine and Hong Kong had typically started school in the UK more quickly after arrival. For participants from Ukraine, sponsors in the Homes for Ukraine scheme played a significant role in facilitating rapid access to school places, with sponsors sometimes securing places for young people prior to their arrival in the UK, enabling a smoother transition.

Young people across all three cohorts emphasised the importance of support to learn English, as well as flexibility and additional support in lessons and exams while they were improving their English language skills. Support to learn English is crucial not only for academic success, but for fostering a broader sense of safety, belonging and succeeding in and beyond education. Young people across all cohorts also spoke about the importance of support networks formed of peers with whom they had a shared background and

language. These support networks were crucial in the initial weeks and months after their arrival in a new school, and had a positive impact on their sense of belonging.

The findings highlight the critical role played by English as an Additional Language (EAL) staff in providing holistic support to and advocating for newly arrived young people. EAL staff worked to build trusting relationships with young people, providing pastoral care and a consistent point of contact within the school. Recognising the pivotal role played by EAL staff, the report notes the need for additional professional development opportunities for these practitioners, while underscoring the importance of increasing training and support to *all* staff around supporting displaced learners. While some schools have been able to establish EAL departments and to strengthen their EAL provision in response to growing numbers of displaced students, this has often been initiated through short-term funding, raising questions about long-term sustainability and the consistency of support. There is currently no requirement for schools to have an EAL policy and provision, but as this research shows, there is a clear need for longer-term support to ensure consistent, high-quality EAL provision within all schools on an ongoing basis.

Trusted staff who share a linguistic and cultural background with refugee young people can play a particularly crucial role in fostering a sense of safety and belonging, particularly in the first weeks or months after a young person has arrived in the UK. They can also help facilitate effective communication and engagement between schools and parents and caregivers of displaced young people. The research underscores the importance of enabling schools to draw on teaching expertise already available in refugee communities, such as by hiring members of refugee communities as teachers or teaching assistants.

The report presents findings on the identification, assessment, and provision of support for refugee children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The considerable challenges facing many children and families in navigating the SEND system in the UK are intensified for those who have experienced forced displacement, leading to delays in identification of SEND and in access to appropriate support. Education practitioners described difficulties in identifying and assessing SEND needs in refugee learners, including in distinguishing between language barriers, trauma-related behaviours, and SEND, indicating a need for additional training, resources and support in this area.

As is the case nationally, these challenges are compounded by the difficulties practitioners face in attempting to source culturally and linguistically sensitive assessment tools and approaches. Navigating the SEND system was described as complex and challenging for parents and caregivers as well as for practitioners, with refugee children arriving with varying levels of previous support, and schools struggling to respond effectively within a context of limited resources and funding. The report also highlights learning and good practice related to the development of expertise in supporting refugee children with SEND, within schools and in local authorities.

The research underscores the need for a well-resourced, long-term approach to supporting refugee children and young people in secondary schools, in Oxfordshire and beyond. Despite the considerable efforts of practitioners, significant barriers to equitable and inclusive educational provision remain. Ensuring that every displaced child has access to a high-quality, inclusive education that recognises their strengths and meets their needs requires an intentional, holistic, system-wide response. The conclusion to the report offers recommendations for schools, local authorities and for national government.

Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations

ACRS	Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme
ARAP	Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy
ARP	Afghan Resettlement Programme
BNO	British Nationals Overseas
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EbLE	Experts by Lived Experience
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
HfU	Homes for Ukraine
OCC	Oxfordshire County Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENDCO	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UPE	Ukraine Permission Extension

1. Introduction

All children, regardless of immigration status, have the right to a quality education, as enshrined in multiple international agreements, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In the UK, the right to quality education is acknowledged in statutory policy and guidance for all refugee and asylum-seeking children. Consequently, local authorities in the UK have a legal duty to ensure that appropriate education is available for all children of compulsory school age residing in their local area, tailored to their age, ability, and any special educational needs or disabilities they may have. This legal duty applies regardless of a child's immigration status or right of residence. This equal entitlement extends to all types of schools, including those run by local authorities, academies, and free schools.

This research was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), with the aim of deepening their understanding of refugee children and young people's experiences of inclusive education in the county and providing evidence to inform local interventions. It focuses on the experiences of young people arriving in the UK from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine on bespoke humanitarian pathways, and on refugee children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are refugee young people's experiences of safety, belonging and succeeding in secondary schools across Oxfordshire?
    a. Do these experiences vary across cohorts of refugee students? If so, how?
    b. Do these experiences vary according to other factors (including SEND and gender)? If so, how?
2. What factors do refugee young people perceive as important for supporting their experiences of safety, belonging and success in secondary schools?
3. What strategies can secondary schools and local authorities in Oxfordshire put in place in order to promote inclusive education for all refugee students?
4. What good practices can be identified, and what recommendations can be made, for Oxfordshire County Council and secondary schools in terms of assessing SEND, making appropriate education placements, and supporting refugee children with SEND in schools?

1.1. Research context and background

1.1.1. Inclusive education for refugee and asylum-seeking children

The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide has grown each year for the last 12 years, reaching 122.6 million in 2024, and is predicted to continue to rise (UNHCR, 2024a). Between 2010 and 2023, the number of children displaced by conflict and violence more than doubled, from 18.8 million to 47.2 million (UNICEF, 2024). This includes children who have been internally displaced, as well as those who have crossed international borders. Children are disproportionately represented in the global refugee population, accounting for 30% of the global population but 40% of all forcibly displaced people (UNHCR, 2024b). Of approximately 14.8 million school-aged refugee children worldwide, an estimated 49% are out of school (UNHCR, 2024c).

In the UK, in 2022, approximately 0.6% of the population consisted of people who came to the country seeking asylum (Walsh and Jorgensen, 2024). Many newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are of school age (Prentice, 2022). However, there is no accurate data on the number of refugee and asylum-seeking children in England, nor of newly arrived refugee and asylum-seeking pupils in English schools (McIntyre et al., 2020).

The importance of access to high-quality, inclusive education for displaced young people is well established. Schools are often the first systems that refugee and asylum-seeking children engage with in the UK, and are the places in which they are likely to spend most of their time outside of their home. The act of going to school can help newly arrived young people to resume an everyday existence after periods of trauma and upheaval (McIntyre et al., 2020). Positive experiences of education can play a crucial role in facilitating inclusion and integration into a new environment (Peterson et al., 2017), in bolstering wellbeing and resilience (Kelley et al., 2025) and in enhancing socioeconomic outcomes for young refugees (Gladwell, 2021). Evidence consistently shows that access to quality education is a high priority for refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people (McBride, 2018; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024).

Yet, when young refugees arrive in a new environment, they face barriers that make accessing their right to, and the benefits of, education challenging. These include long waiting lists, complex online application processes, and a lack of school places (Ashlee, 2024). Accessing education becomes increasingly difficult the older young people are when they arrive in the UK, with those arriving later in the education system, at the upper secondary and further education levels, facing particularly acute delays (ibid). After entering mainstream education, refugee and asylum-seeking children can face further challenges, including language barriers that hinder academic progress and social integration (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018; ONS, 2024), discrimination and bullying (McBride, 2018), and psychosocial needs stemming from past traumas that impact learning and behaviour (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani, 2011). Refugee learners with disabilities can face compounded challenges, requiring a comprehensive and intersectional approach (Hunt et al., 2025).

Box 1. Definitions

Refugee

Under the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who "*owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themself] of the protection of that country*" (UNHCR, n.d.,a).

In many countries, including the UK, decisions about refugee status are made by the Government, with the term 'refugee' often referring to people who have been legally recognised as refugees.

Asylum seeker

An asylum seeker is someone who *"intends to seek or is awaiting a decision on their request for international protection"* (UNHCR, n.d.,b). It includes those who have applied for refugee status and are awaiting a final decision on their claim (ibid).

Displaced young people

In this report, we use the terms 'displaced young people', 'refugee young people' and 'newly arrived young people' to refer to young people who have been displaced from their homes and who are seeking safety and protection in the UK. This includes those with refugee status, asylum seekers and those arriving through specific humanitarian protection schemes and visa pathways (discussed below).

Practitioner

In this report, we use the term 'practitioner' to refer to individuals who are involved in supporting displaced young people, including individuals working in schools, local authorities and charities.

Special educational need or disability (SEND)

The 2014 Children and Families Act and associated Code of Practice state that a child or young person has a special educational need *"if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her"* (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015: 15). This includes when a child or young person:

> a) has significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or
>
> b) has a disability which either prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions (ibid: 15).

A disability under the Equality Act 2010 is any *"physical or mental impairment which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities"* (ibid: 16).

1.1.2. Conceptual framework

The research builds on McIntyre's theoretical framework for inclusive refugee education. McIntyre's framework draws on Kohli's theory of 'resumption of an ordinary life' (Kohli, 2014; in McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021), and brings this into conversation with Nancy Fraser's work on 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2003; in McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021).

Participatory parity

For Fraser, participatory parity is a crucial component of social justice (Fraser, 2003). It requires equitable distribution of material resources and equal recognition of and respect for all participants, in a way that enables everyone to engage as peers, on a par with others ('participatory parity') (ibid). Fraser's theory of social justice has three interrelated components: redistribution (economic equality), recognition (cultural respect) and representation (political inclusion) (ibid).

In the context of refugee education, participatory parity concerns the extent to which displaced children and young people are able to access and participate in education on a par with everyone else in society, in policy and in practice (McIntyre et al., 2020). This demands *"recognition of the needs of different groups of refugees, and importantly of different individuals within these groups, and for these to be culturally responsive without stigmatising or othering the child from the rest of society"* (ibid: 394). It also means addressing policies and decision-making processes that exclude refugee and asylum-seeking children from their right to education (ibid).

Safety, belonging and succeeding

Kohli's 'resumption of an ordinary life' theory conceptualises the experiences of displaced children as transitions through 'safety', 'belonging' and 'success' (or succeeding) (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021). Across several publications, and in conversation with educational practitioners (e.g. McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021) and young people (e.g. McIntyre, 2025) McIntyre has drawn on and further developed these concepts, applying them to the field of refugee education. In this report, we build on McIntyre's conceptualisation of safety, belonging and succeeding:

- **Safety** is a multifaceted concept, encompassing a range of physical, emotional and psychological elements, depending on the needs and experiences of the individual. Factors facilitating a sense of safety in educational settings can include a physical safe space, as well as opportunities for trust-building, experiential and social and emotional learning and for talking (or choosing not to talk) about past experiences. Consistent and explicit expectations, and the presence of advocates (including peers, teachers and senior leadership) also play an important role (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021).
- **Belonging** is a reciprocal process, involving both those who are newly arrived and the communities in which they settle (McIntyre, 2024). It is contingent upon feeling safe and valued. It is also not unequivocally positive, as it can also entail a sense of loss for what has gone before (ibid). Belonging in educational settings can be supported by an asset-based and inclusive ethos, culturally relevant pedagogies and strategies for relationship and community building (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021).
- **Succeeding** is a dynamic and multifaceted concept, and is not limited to academic performance. It is predicated upon *"feeling authentic, knowing how to make meaningful choices about next steps, and feeling valued"* (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021: 807). Experiences of success and succeeding can help young people to develop confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing, ultimately supporting a sense of agency and autonomy (ibid). It is a continuous process, not an endpoint.

McIntyre's framework for refugee education combines the concepts of safety, belonging and succeeding with Fraser's work on participatory parity. The intersection of these theories enables analysis of "*how far pupils from refugee backgrounds are treated as full members of society, capable of participating and interacting as peers in school and society"* (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021: 814).

McIntyre's framework for refugee education shaped the design of this research, including the development of data collection tools, and has informed the analysis.

1.1.3. Research scope and focus

Refugee young people are highly heterogeneous (McBride, 2020). Their access to and experiences of education in the UK may be influenced by diverse factors, including route of entry to the UK and previous educational experiences, in countries of origin and potentially in transit. One of the aims of this research, as set out above, was to understand how experiences of education vary between different cohorts of displaced young people.

This study focuses particularly on the experiences of young people arriving in the UK through humanitarian visa pathways and resettlement schemes for individuals from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. These pathways are:

- **The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP):** ARAP was launched in 2021 and ACRS in 2022. ARAP is a resettlement scheme for Afghans who worked for or alongside the UK government. Arrivals under the ARAP scheme have indefinite leave to remain; however, they are not officially recognised as refugees and so are not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention (Gower, 2024). ACRS is not open to applications; rather, eligible people are referred for resettlement through specific pathways. The total number of arrivals to the UK under the ARAP and ACRS schemes was 28,985 as of June 2024 (Home Office, 2024a). In December 2024, these schemes were brought together into the Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP).
- **Homes for Ukraine (HfU) and the Ukraine Family Scheme:** Homes for Ukraine allows Ukrainian nationals and their family members to come to the UK if they have been invited by a sponsor. The scheme allows Ukrainians to stay in the UK for a set period of time[1] with the option of extending their visa when it comes to an end (UK Visas and Immigration and Home Office, 2024b). The Ukraine Family Scheme, now closed, was a visa scheme that enabled eligible Ukrainian nationals to join family in the UK. Around 213,000 people had arrived in the UK through these schemes as of September 2024 (Home Office, 2024b). In 2024, the UK Government announced the launch of the Ukraine Permission Extension (UPE) scheme, through which individuals can apply to remain in the UK for an additional 18 months (Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, 2025).
- **The Hong Kong British Nationals Overseas (BNO) visa route**: this is a visa scheme open to Hong Kong BNOs and their family members. It is not a refugee resettlement scheme, as it is not explicitly protection-based, and Hong Kong BNO holders do not have the status of refugees (Sturge, 2025). Applicants must pay a visa application fee and immigration health surcharge, and do not automatically have access to public funds. Since this visa was introduced in January 2021, 135,400 Hong Kongers have moved to the UK (Benson and Sigona, 2024).

These are bespoke humanitarian routes that have been initiated since 2021, for people of specific nationalities in need of protection (Walsh and Jorgensen, 2024). Each scheme grants different rights and pathways to settlement (ibid). In 2023, people arriving through these humanitarian schemes accounted for around 4% of immigration to the UK. People seeking asylum on arrival in the UK (as opposed to those arriving through these schemes, who have been granted asylum prior to entry) accounted for 7% during the same period (Walsh and Jorgensen, 2024).

[1] This was initially for three years; it was reduced to 18 months for applications submitted after 19 February 2024.

Previous REUK research has examined education provision for displaced young people more broadly (see Ashlee et al., 2024). In addition, recent research by REUK and the University of Nottingham has explored educational provision in two cities, Nottingham and Oxford, focusing particularly on the experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) (Bakhtiari et al., 2025).

1.1.4. Refugee children with special educational needs and disabilities

Forcibly displaced children and young people with SEND are an overlooked group in research, practice and policy (Jørgensen et al., 2021). As with all refugee children, they have the right to an inclusive, quality education, and the role of schools in their lives is vital.

Existing research highlights the complexity of this topic. In a study by Gladwell and Chetwynd (2018), identifying and addressing SEND amongst refugee and asylum-seeking children was identified as one of the most frequent barriers to learning, with cases of both under and over diagnosis hindering children's learning. Their research found that when children do not have English as their mother tongue and have substantial gaps in prior learning, SEND can be obscured and may take longer to be recognised. Some of the professionals they interviewed had witnessed refugee or asylum-seeking children's education constrained by late assessment, linked to a "*refusal to acknowledge that a child's lack of progress may not be accounted for by language difficulties alone*" (ibid: 42).

Jørgensen, Dobson and Perry (2021) emphasise that little is known about the experiences of migrant children with SEND or about schools' approaches to supporting them, and call for further research in this area. Their research highlights the importance of themes of language, culture and communication, including the challenges of assessing SEND when children also spoke English as an Additional Language (EAL), the importance of cross-cultural literacy and cultural sensitivity amongst professionals, and the central role played by trust and relationships (ibid).

Dobson and Jørgensen (2024) draw on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a way to understand the experiences and needs of migrant children with SEND more holistically. Bronfenbrenner's framework has been widely used in research related to children and young people, including in the field of refugee education (Prentice, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's model, applied to the education environment, situates the child at the core of a complex ecological system, comprised of a microsystem (the home and classroom), mesosystem (intersections between home and classroom), exosystem (school leadership, resource allocation), macrosystem (national policy) and chronosystem (change over time) (Dobson and Jørgensen, 2024). This underscores both the importance and complexity of understanding the multiple, intersecting systems in which children (including refugee children with SEND) are located, and which influence their experiences, needs, and the support they receive (ibid).

1.1.5. Refugee education in Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire is a largely and relatively rural county in South East England. Oxford city is the main urban centre. It is comprised of five district councils: Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Oxfordshire County Council has recently been awarded 'local authority of sanctuary' status by City of Sanctuary UK (Oxfordshire.gov, 2025). It is the first county council in the UK to be awarded this status

(ibid). OCC is a key partner in the Oxfordshire Migration Partnership, a network of agencies in the county that includes the representatives from across the county council, district and city councils, Thames Valley Police and local community organisations, including Asylum Welcome, Connection Support and Refugee Resource (Oxfordshire County Council, 2024).

In recent years, Oxfordshire has seen an increase in the population of newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in the county, including those on specific schemes for people from Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong. There are also increasing numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people in schools in the county. In response to the increasing number of displaced children and young people in Oxfordshire, OCC has put in place a range of measures to facilitate their access to education, and to support schools to better respond to the needs of EAL learners.

For example, using resources provided to local authorities through the HfU scheme, OCC has made additional funding available to schools to enhance their capacity to support newly arrived refugee children and young people. Schools accessed this funding through a light-touch application process. Schools used this funding in a range of ways, including to support the establishment of EAL departments, expand EAL provision, hire EAL teachers and teaching assistants, purchase language resources (including apps, textbooks, dictionaries), and to provide wellbeing support.

In addition, OCC has created new posts within the Children, Education and Families team intended to provide tailored support to displaced children and young people, and to their families, parents and caregivers. Newly-created roles include a Schools Information Officer supporting schools to enhance their EAL provision, a dedicated SEND support worker within the Migrant Education, Employment and Adult Skills Team, and dedicated posts within the Children Missing Education team focusing on children with migrant backgrounds. Additional initiatives have included the organisation of extracurricular activities in bridging hotels (such as computer, homework and phonics clubs), educational excursions for children and families, and tailored English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and careers support for 16–18-year-olds (discussed in a separate study; see Leon and Broadhead, 2025).

2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory and participatory approach, chosen to allow an in-depth and detailed understanding of young people's experiences of secondary education in Oxfordshire. Young people's voices are often absent or overshadowed by those of practitioners and teachers in research on refugee education (McIntyre, 2024; McIntyre and Abrams, 2021). We therefore prioritised listening to and sharing the experiences and perspectives of young people with lived experience of forced migration who are currently engaged in secondary education in Oxfordshire, as well as seeking the perspectives of parents and practitioners.

In total, the study draws on the perspectives of 89 participants, including 58 young people. Data collection took place between October 2024 and March 2025.

The research methods included:

- A literature review
- An Experts by Lived Experience (EbLE) meeting
- Focus groups and interviews with young people who have arrived in the UK from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine via humanitarian schemes
- Focus groups and interviews with parents and caregivers, education practitioners and local authority stakeholders.

This section sets out the methodology used in the study in further detail.

2.1. Research approach

2.1.1. Literature review

At the outset of the research, we conducted a desk-based review of available literature (grey and academic, published and unpublished) and statistics related to refugee education in Oxfordshire. It focused particularly on statistics and existing research related to children and young people who have arrived in the UK through specific humanitarian schemes (discussed above) and of children and young people from forced migration backgrounds with SEND. The findings of this literature review are woven into this report, including in the context sections above.

2.1.2. Experts by Lived Experience meeting

We held an Experts by Lived Experience meeting (EbLE) meeting early in the research process to seek input from young people with lived experience of forced migration and of secondary education in Oxfordshire. The EbLE meeting took place within one secondary school in Oxfordshire, and included four recently arrived secondary school students from Afghanistan (two male, two female, aged 14-15). We sought participants' advice and reflections on the research priorities and on how to meaningfully carry out research with their peers. We also used the meeting to seek feedback on the structure and content of data collection activities, which influenced the methods used in focus groups. The EbLE meeting also informed the choice of focus group discussions over individual interviews as the primary method for data collection with young people.

2.1.3. Focus groups and key informant interviews with young people

58 young people participated in the research, including 50 in focus group discussions and eight in individual interviews. All participants were aged between 13 and 18 and were currently enrolled in secondary school in Oxfordshire. 19 participants were from Afghanistan, 11 from Hong Kong and 28 from Ukraine. A breakdown of participants by cohort and gender is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were organised through schools and conducted on school premises. We reached out directly to schools with information about the study and asked for their support in explaining the research to young people and in organising focus groups or interviews with those interested to participate.

In total, we conducted 11 focus group discussions with 50 participants from six secondary schools. The six schools are located in three different districts in Oxfordshire, and all are academies (with each school being part of a different academy trust).[2]

Focus groups began with warm-up exercises and a discussion of consent processes (discussed further below). They then included a mixture of open-ended questions intended to facilitate discussion with and between participants, and a creative activity (conducted in smaller groups) exploring participants' perspectives on what newly arrived young people might need to feel a sense of safety, belonging and succeeding in secondary school. They finished with a discussion of young people's aspirations and hopes for the future and their recommendations, including for school teachers and school leaders.

Most focus groups had 5-6 participants, and included young people who knew one another. Nine focus groups were conducted in English. Three were conducted in Farsi or Pashto by an REUK staff member, and one was conducted in a mixture of English and Farsi.

The sample of young people who participated in focus groups was influenced by the schools that responded to our emails and the profile of students within these schools. We engaged with significantly more young people from Ukraine and Afghanistan than from Hong Kong through focus groups.

Interviews

We also conducted eight individual interviews with young people. Seven of these interviews took place online and one on school premises. In response to the relatively low numbers of young people from Hong Kong who participated in focus group discussions, a flyer explaining the research was shared with members of the Hong Kong BNO community living in Oxfordshire by a community liaison officer at OCC. Following this, we conducted online interviews with six young people from Hong Kong.

[2] There are more academies in Oxfordshire than maintained schools (183 academies compared to 117 maintained schools, excluding nurseries) (Oxfordshire County Council, 2025). 75% of pupils in publicly funded education provision in Oxfordshire are educated in academies, including 97% of secondary pupils (ibid).

Table 1. Summary of focus groups and interviews with young people

Participants	Focus group participants	Interview participants	Total
Young people from Afghanistan	19	0	19
Young people from Hong Kong	4	7	11
Young people from Ukraine	27	1	28
Total	50	7	**58**

Table 2. Focus groups and interviews with young people, by gender

Participants	Female	Male	Total
Young people from Afghanistan	7	12	19
Young people from Hong Kong	5	6	11
Young people from Ukraine	11	17	28
Total	23	35	**58**

2.1.4. Key informant interviews and focus groups with practitioners, parents and caregivers

In addition to focus group discussions and interviews with young people, we conducted 31 interviews and group discussions with education professionals, local authority stakeholders and parents and caregivers (Table 3). The majority of these interactions (27) took the form of one-on-one interviews. We also conducted a group discussion with four parents of young people from Afghanistan. We developed separate key informant templates for each group of interviewees, but treated these templates flexibly, with interview guides varying considerably based on an individual's role.

11 key informant interviews were carried out with school staff directly involved in supporting young people from the three above-mentioned groups of young people. This included EAL leads, teaching assistants and tutors, and SENDCOs (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators). These interviews primarily took place in person with staff at the same schools as focus groups were conducted. These interviews explored participants' experiences of working with young people from these cohorts, including strengths, challenges and lessons learned related to the support that their schools had put in place.

We also interviewed 10 individuals within the county council. These interviews typically explored the kinds of support that Oxfordshire has put in place for displaced young people, including those arriving through the schemes described above, as well as good practices, challenges and lessons learned related to access to and experiences of secondary education for displaced young people. We also interviewed three

representatives of charities and third sector organisations, all with experience of working with children and young people from within the three focus cohorts. These interviews took place online.

The research design included interviews with parents and caregivers of young people with SEND and lived experience of forced migration. In practice, however, this group proved hard to recruit, and we were only able to interview two parents of young people with SEND, both from Ukraine. Both these interviews were conducted online, and explored a range of themes including interviewees' perspectives on the support their children were receiving, within and outside school.

Table 3. Key informant interviews and focus groups with practitioners, parents and caregivers

Participants	Focus group participants	Interview participants	Total
Parents and caregivers	4	3	7
Teachers and education professionals	0	11	11
Local authority stakeholders	0	10	10
Third sector organisations	0	3	3
Total	4	27	**31**

2.2. Analysis and interpretation of data

All key informant interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed in full, and translated into English where necessary. In a small number of cases, participants did not want to be recorded. In these cases, we took detailed notes.

We analysed the data using thematic analysis, an approach to qualitative data analysis that involves identifying and interpreting recurring themes and patterns within a dataset through a process of coding. We adopted a hybrid and iterative approach to the coding: we developed a coding framework based on the research questions, aims and framework and on an initial reading of the data, and adapted this as we went along, incorporating new codes and themes as appropriate. We used the software MAXQDA for the analysis.

2.3. Research ethics and limitations

The study was conducted in line with REUK's research ethics, safeguarding and data protection policies and processes, which are based on more than ten years' experience of working and conducting research with refugee and asylum-seeking young people.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. For young people under the age of 18, obtained consent was obtained both from parents/guardians and from young people themselves. Consent from parents or guardians was obtained in advance with the support of schools, while consent from young people was obtained at the beginning of the focus groups. Informed consent was also obtained from all key informants.

All participants have been fully anonymised. To preserve anonymity and avoid any risk of identification of participants, quotes from key informant interviews are attributed only to broad categories (i.e. practitioner or parent).

There are several limitations associated with the research:

- Despite considerable outreach, we only spoke with two parents and caregivers of young people with SEND. Findings related to SEND draw on these interviews as well as on the perspectives of key informants, including SENDCOs and frontline workers with significant experience of engaging with young people with SEND and lived experience of forced displacement, and on related literature. Nonetheless, this represents a significant limitation to the research.
- We spoke to a relatively small number of young people from Hong Kong (11) in comparison to those from Afghanistan and Ukraine. We have sought to supplement this with a review of relevant research. Nonetheless, the research should still be read with this in mind.

Finally, as is discussed in the findings section, the experiences and perspectives of young people between and within the three groups explored in this study are highly heterogeneous, and any generalisations must be made with caution. We have tried to draw out and reflect this diversity within the analysis below.

3. Research findings

This section presents findings from the research. Findings are presented thematically across the following sections:

Cross-cutting findings related to safety, belonging and succeeding, as well as similarities and differences across and between cohorts, are explored throughout.

3.1. Young people's recommendations for inclusive education

In focus groups, young people discussed what a newly arrived refugee student might need to feel a sense of safety, belonging and succeeding in secondary school. Participants' responses touched on a wide range of themes, including the importance of support in learning English, access to trusted staff members, being able to make friends (but also the challenges in doing so, particularly across a language barrier), and encouragement and affirmation from teachers. Their discussions also underscored the importance of recognising and building on young people's strengths and having high aspirations for them, avoiding making generalisations or assumptions about their abilities, and providing tailored, individual and holistic support as and where needed. As one participant stated:

> *"You can't generalise people. You can't put them in a huge group of refugees. You need to individually talk to this person, find out what personally, individually, they need. Because someone would like to have more connections from the first day, someone would like to make this way through by himself, because he's less social, someone would like to have all knowledge straight away in front of his desk, someone would like to explore it by himself. It's so individual, it can't be generalised."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

Young people reflected on the need for a balance between providing support and flexibility to refugee learners in a way that recognises the difficult experiences they may have been through, but doing so without singling them out or making them feel different from their peers. One participant said, for example, that teachers should:

> *"Appreciate what they're going through, or what they went through, and help them.... like, what they went through might be so hard for them to forget, help them forget these things and have a new life and start a new future, it can be through studying... and tell them, that they can do it, even though it's hard for them, but believe in them."* (Young person from Afghanistan, female)

> *"Definitely not making them feel different, like it's important to celebrate that they've come all this way, but not making them feel they don't fit in."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

Participants emphasised the need for encouragement and support in a way that recognises and builds on their strengths. This included teachers having high expectations and aspirations for displaced students:

> *"It is better to be higher up expectation… if it from the start high, it is probably going to help actually give a future for the student in the country."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

Responses are summarised in table 4, and are explored in further detail in the sections that follow.

Table 4. Young people's perspectives on fostering a sense of safety, belonging and succeeding in secondary school

What do displaced young people who are newly arrived in the UK need to feel…		
Safe and happy in school?	**Part of the school community?**	**A sense of succeeding?**
• **Friendships**: *"Friends who can help"; "Friends who can help you understand culture → holidays / events / programmes"* • **Support from trusted staff**: *"Trusted people to talk to"; "Empathy - teachers understand what you are going through"; "Someone who knows your language"* • **Language support:** *"Language barrier help"* • **School environment:** *"A safe place to go at lunchtime"* • **Ease of transport:** *"Support in getting into school (bus)"* • **Tours, inductions and buddy systems:** *"Tour and introduction to school"; "Someone to count on… like, first few days you're kind of lost in the school"*	• **Friendships:** *"Be in a group of friends with kind people"* • **Extra-curricular activities:** *"Lots of after school clubs (sports, subject related groups)"; "More inclusive clubs - no cricket"; "Find friends and take part in school activities or clubs"; "join clubs".* • **Encouragement, including from teachers:** *"Teachers letting you have a go at something even though you think you can't but you actually can"* • **Not emphasising differences**: *"Avoid to emphasise the difference between English and immigrant students"* • **Language support** • **Confidence:** *"Don't be afraid to express yourself", "smile, don't be afraid", "Confidence by believing in yourself"*	• **Academic support:** *"Lots of support from teachers with subjects you don't understand or missed"; "Teachers offering help on areas you struggle"* • **Encouragement:** *"Being appreciated - people telling you to keep it up"; "people believing in you"; "encouragement from teachers"* • **Language support:** *"Expand language knowledge", "ability to speak English"* • **Life skills and preparation for the future:** *"Part time job", "budgeting", "teach about life when you are an adult (e.g. taxes, cooking, mortgages, jobs, unis, etc."* • **Language GCSEs:** *"GCSE in their language"; extra GCSE language subjects"* • **Revision and academic success** • **Confidence:** *"Don't be afraid to make mistakes" , "ask about anything, don't be shy"*

3.2. Past experiences of education

The research underscored the significant diversity and heterogeneity of displaced young people, including in terms of their experiences, needs and perspectives. Young people's previous experiences of education varied considerably, between and within cohorts. This, in turn, influenced experiences of education in the UK. This section discusses participants' past experiences of education and their reflections on similarities and differences they have experienced in the UK.

3.2.1. Young people from Afghanistan

As a result of decades of conflict and the Taliban's restrictions after taking over Afghanistan in 2021, Afghan children and young people—especially girls—arriving in the UK may have experienced interrupted or no secondary education. Consequently, practitioners highlighted the complexities of supporting Afghan children in UK schools. For example, one interviewee reflected,

> *"You know, in the UK, school placement is based on age, not necessarily on prior exposure to education. So if a boy is 12 years old, he would go into Year 7. The same applies to a girl, but if she has never been to school before and is now placed in a secondary school, she is expected to keep up. However, she has missed out on so much foundational learning, which makes it difficult for her to engage effectively within the secondary school system."* (Practitioner interview)

While Afghan children (particularly boys) often have some prior education, it is not uncommon to encounter girls with little or no formal schooling - particularly when they have grown up in areas with higher levels of Taliban control or influence. In addition, recently arrived secondary aged girls will have been completely barred from participation in secondary education in Afghanistan since September 2021 (see, e.g., Fetrat, 2024). When placed in UK schools based on age rather than academic background, and without sufficient support, they can face challenges keeping up with a curriculum that assumes prior foundational knowledge. In this context, creating an inclusive environment, with tailored, holistic support from trusted staff members, is crucial.

Focus group findings highlighted several differences between participants' experiences of secondary education in the UK and Afghanistan. Being aware of these differences can help teachers to support students to navigate the transition to a new educational system, and to provide clear, accessible information to students and their caregivers about school life in the UK. One notable difference is the length of the school day. In Afghanistan, secondary school days are typically four hours long. In some cases, schools operate in shifts due to overcrowding or to separate boys and girls (Khairandesh, 2022). Additionally, Afghan students perceived the curriculum structure to be different, particularly in terms of subject choice. In Afghanistan, participants described having had little flexibility in selecting subjects, whereas in the UK, they noted that they had greater choice over what they studied. Another difference lies in teaching approaches and pedagogies. Participants from Afghanistan generally described teachers in the UK as being friendlier and more supportive. One student from Afghanistan said:

> *"In Afghanistan, some of the teachers were not kind to me. [But here] the way teachers behave is different. The teachers are mostly friendly and kind, and it is very good. Schools are much better here. I also made a lot of friends, and I like how teachers behave."* (Young person from Afghanistan, male)

Additional gendered differences were identified through focus groups in relation to extracurricular activities and friendship groups in the UK. Afghan students, specifically boys, reflected on being able to find friends from the local community through sport clubs. Afghan girls who participated in the focus groups generally had more friends within the Afghan community, potentially due to language barriers or parental restrictions.

Practitioners also highlighted challenges arising from differences in the educational systems of the two countries, particularly in school admissions. Unlike in Afghanistan, where families could directly identify and enrol their children in a school without capacity restrictions, the UK system involves government regulations that limit school placements. These structural differences can sometimes be difficult for Afghan parents to navigate, especially when faced with long waiting times for school placements.

3.2.2. Young people from Hong Kong

Hong Kong became a global education leader after rebuilding its system post-1997, consistently ranking near the top of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In PISA 2022, students in Hong Kong scored higher than the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science (PISA 2022 Results: Factsheets for Hong Kong, 2023).

The Hong Kong BN(O) students described several notable differences between their experiences of education in Hong Kong and in the UK. One difference is in the social networks they have. Students described building friendships as having been easier in schools in Hong Kong compared to the UK. However, in terms of pedagogy, students generally perceived the UK's education system as more inclusive and supportive. They highlighted how their teachers communicate with students and introduce subjects gradually, making learning more enjoyable. For instance, one student said: *"in Hong Kong, you're trying to, like, memorise everything, but here, you try to understand the concept. I prefer the methods of learning here [in the UK]."* (Young person from Hong Kong, male).

According to the students, another difference lies in the availability of more diverse extracurricular activities in Hong Kong schools, in comparison to the UK. However, some also noted that there were more field trips in UK schools, which they found beneficial for learning.

Additionally, young people highlighted that career-focused support in Oxfordshire schools provided them with useful insights into future opportunities. However, a practitioner with extensive experience of working with children and young people from Hong Kong in schools emphasised the *"amount of pressure on the Hong Kong students"* now living in the UK, stemming from, in her observations, the *"astonishing amount of other things that they had on their shoulders apart from the academics"* (practitioner interview). This included financial pressures, as well as translating for their parents in a range of settings.

3.2.3. Young people from Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has severely impacted the education system, with thousands of educational facilities having been damaged or destroyed since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Millions of children and young people have been displaced (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025), and many have had to adapt by studying online (Stankovic, 2025). Most of the young people who participated in focus groups were studying in schools in the UK while simultaneously working to complete the Ukrainian secondary curriculum online, including sitting Ukrainian exams. According to practitioners, this is most common where young people have already studied a part of their secondary education in Ukraine.

The findings highlight some of the experiences of Ukrainian students and differences they observe between schools in Oxfordshire and in Ukraine. Participants in this study were generally very positive about their experiences in schools in the UK, though some challenges also emerged, as discussed below. In focus groups, Ukrainian students noted that they had greater flexibility in the choice of subjects they studied in schools in the UK, in comparison to Ukraine. Another key difference mentioned by young people was the academic workload. Students had found that UK schools assign significantly less homework than in Ukraine, where long hours of study and additional tutoring were the norm. Additionally, participants highlighted differences between teaching approaches, and reflected positively on the support and guidance they had received around career development and educational pathways in schools in the UK.

Generally, participants felt that their teachers in the UK were supportive and invested in their success. However, they also described instances where their existing skills were not recognised, and they were placed in lower levels than their actual abilities. They expressed frustration with having to prove themselves capable, feeling that teachers "*thought they would do less, instead of seeing their maximum*" (young person from Ukraine, female). One young person shared an example of being advised by their teacher to take fewer A-level subjects, for example:

> *"... personally for me, it seems like the school really lower down expectations on people who came, so they expect really low results. But the actual reality was that we came, for example, me, three of us in the same classes, we had a much wider and much higher knowledges than school expect us to have. They proposed a lot of like, stuff like, getting two A levels, which I took, and I feel like it was a mistake. But it was advice.... They suggested to have two A levels instead of three. My friends took three and I decided to follow [the teacher's] advice and it feels like a mistake, a really big one. But, you never know, it's so personal, some people can take three A levels, some people can't, and they expect that if we came from Ukraine, we are uneducated or something."* (Young person from Ukraine, male).

Expressing further frustration with the process, and feeling that their abilities were being assessed based on English language skills rather than academic or subject-based expertise, another young person commented:

> *"Probably they can cut my brain and see all the knowledge I have and then give me a good grade."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

This quote highlights the young person's feeling that their knowledge is not being adequately assessed or appreciated, leaving them dissatisfied with how their academic potential is perceived and evaluated by the school.

3.3. Access to education

The waiting time to secure secondary school placements varied significantly across cohorts, with students from Ukraine and Hong Kong generally having accessed education in the UK more quickly than those from Afghanistan. This was linked, in part, to issues related to accommodation and dispersal, with many Afghan young people having been housed in temporary accommodation. For Ukrainian young people, who had arrived in the UK through the HfU scheme, the role of sponsors was significant in enabling rapid access to education, with school places secured before young people had arrived in the UK in some cases. This section explores access to school in further detail.

The students from Afghanistan who participated in this study had often experienced prolonged disruptions to their education. This was particularly the case for girls over the age of 12, as discussed above. This disruption continues in the UK, where they often face extended waiting periods before starting school. Additionally, frequent relocations and dispersal policies create further challenges, making it difficult for Afghan students to access and remain in education. Young people from Afghanistan who participated in focus groups for this study had waited, on average, between three and four months to start school following their arrival in the UK. There was considerable variation between participants from Afghanistan: for example, one participant had started school within one month of arriving in the UK, while another had to wait seven months for a place in school.

A major barrier to school enrolment for Afghan students, as identified by interview participants, is the limited capacity of schools in areas where refugee families are placed. Many Afghan families arriving in Oxfordshire are housed in the same localities, and schools in these areas quickly reach full capacity, particularly smaller village schools that cannot accommodate large numbers of new arrivals. Consequently, Afghan students often face delays in school placements, further disrupting their education. One practitioner said, for example:

> *"We would contact the schools straight away. But what's happening is that a lot of the families that are arriving, they're all being placed in the same areas, so those schools are fast becoming really, really full now, and a lot of the schools are small village schools, so the capacity is not that great anyway."* (Practitioner interview)

Additionally, due to the shortage of available places, siblings are sometimes allocated to different schools, creating challenges for parents who then need to navigate transport arrangements for children attending different schools some distance apart. Further, practitioners reported that in some cases, the associated transport costs have been prohibitive for families, leading to further delays. For example, one practitioner said:

> *"The other thing that is now becoming a bit more of a challenge is that because of the way the schools are getting really busy, we're now having to split siblings. So … one particular school might be able to [admit one of the children] …but they can't take the other one. So … we're having to split the siblings, so one will go to one school, one will go to the other school. But again, the parents are finding that*

> *difficult because they can't manage logistically. They can't manage to get both children into school at the right time, and that's another reason why, then the parents are choosing not to send their children to school. They say, … we don't have a car, or we can't afford the bus fare, and there are many reasons as to why they do not want to go further."* (Practitioner interview)

The delays in accessing education - especially for girls - can be particularly stressful for parents, as many of these girls have already been out of school for long periods in their home countries. Frequent relocations within the UK further exacerbate these disruptions, as another practitioner noted:

> *"We saw this a lot in September, we wait, we'd got offers [of school places], maybe in the July, we'd got it set up for the September, and then two weeks in, the child gets moved. And it feels sometimes like there's a lot of work that has gone into it. But more importantly, for that family, you know, they've just started in a school, and starting school is a big thing anyway, isn't it? But let alone in a new country, and then you move, it's very disruptive."* (Practitioner interview)

Despite these challenges, Afghan students, particularly girls, who participated in the focus groups expressed enthusiasm for continuing their education. They reported a sense of succeeding after starting school in Oxfordshire and spoke about their aspirations for the future, including their interest to pursue higher education in the UK to make up for lost learning opportunities.

Students arriving under the HfU scheme have experienced a notably smoother transition into education in Oxfordshire, presenting a model of promising practice. Most had started school within a month of arriving in the UK, and some in less than two weeks. Where the length of time between arriving in the UK and starting school was longer, the delay was often because they had arrived during the school holidays. A key factor contributing to this success has been the role of sponsors,[3] who played a crucial part in facilitating school admissions. Based on the findings, in many cases, sponsors initiated the enrolment process before Ukrainian families arrived in the UK, enabling a rapid transition into secondary school on arrival.

Given the relative success of the HfU scheme, policymakers are now exploring its potential application to individuals from other nationalities (Kandiah, 2023; Broadhead, 2022). Recent research also suggests a strong willingness among sponsors to extend similar support to people from diverse backgrounds, with nearly 90% of survey respondents who hosted individuals under the HfU scheme reporting a positive experience (Tyrl and Surmon, 2023). While previous research (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018) highlights the role of resettlement support workers in facilitating access to education for refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people, HfU sponsors have played a similar role on a voluntary basis. Thousands of HfU sponsors across the country have supported Ukrainian families by drawing on their local knowledge and networks. The data suggest that this support continued over time, enabling Ukrainian families to receive informal help and advice in navigating further administrative challenges. Given these, the HfU scheme presents valuable insights for the development of future policies aimed at improving educational access for displaced children.

[3] Sponsor is the term the UK government uses for hosts in relation to the HfU scheme. This is because hosts have acted as sponsors for visa applications for those they are offering to host.

The HKBNO visa scheme presents a distinct context for access to education and integration in the UK. HKBNO visa holders are subject to No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) conditions. Local authorities provide only targeted support, such as language assistance, as one practitioner reflected:

> *"Once an HKBNO applies for the visa and successfully comes to the UK, they have NRPF - they have to be self-sufficient. They have to show 6 months of financial means in order to support themselves when they come to the UK. They can study and work but cannot claim any benefits, and have to pay healthcare surcharge to access NHS services... they need to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. As a result, local authorities provide only targeted support, focusing on specific areas such as language assistance and qualification conversion."* (Practitioner interview)

Based on the findings, the process of school enrolment for children within the Hong Kong community has been relatively smooth, with most of the families demonstrating a clear understanding of application procedures. Overall, the HKBNO and HfU schemes highlight the role of prior knowledge and community networks in facilitating access to education.

Good practice 1: Tailored school admissions support for families by Oxfordshire County Council

Where possible, OCC offers individual support to families with the administrative requirements of getting a school place. Staff shared instances of accompanying families to the school and filling out all the forms together, with the help of a translator who would dial in on the phone. They would work with the families and the school to get necessary information regarding the child's medical and education history, while giving the parents an introduction to school life in the UK including the nature of mixed schools and information on potentially unfamiliar lessons like Physical Education (PE).

Practitioners noted that this service was important because even in cases where translated material is available, there may be families where both parents cannot read and write, making individual support crucial in helping the children access education.

3.4. Language and EAL provision

3.4.1. Experiences of EAL provision

For participants across all cohorts, language barriers posed challenges in the first weeks and months after starting school in the UK, and support in learning English was frequently identified as essential in facilitating a sense of safety, belonging and succeeding in school. One young person reflected, for example, in response to a question about what young people need to feel safe in school, "*first of all and the most important is the support for learning English language*" (young person from Afghanistan, female). Another said that, "*out of all of them [the challenges], in terms of education, I think language is the most important"* (young person from Ukraine, male). Language barriers made making friends harder, as well as making it more difficult for young people to show teachers what they could do; as one participant reflected, *"It's like there is a gap in your head between like, thinking and actually writing"* (young person from Ukraine, male).

Another participant, a young person from Afghanistan, reflected on her first weeks of secondary school in the UK:

> *"It was so awkward, at first, like, I just joined in, and I couldn't speak any English at first… But people were nice to me, like, when I was lost, I didn't know which class I had to go to, then they would show me around, and they would let me know where I have to be when, and they were nice to me. And I had other friends, like other Afghan friends, who could support me in the school. So it was good. I wasn't lonely, but still in my classes, there were no Afghans, so I couldn't speak to anyone, it was a bit awkward and lonely. But I got there later on, because then I knew people and I made friends."* (Young person from Afghanistan, female)

In the six secondary schools in which we conducted focus groups, participants generally reported very positive experiences of EAL provision and support. Where this was particularly effective, EAL provision extended beyond dedicated EAL hubs and EAL lessons, with teachers across the school working to create a language conscious environment. In several cases, for example, young people pointed to the difference it had made to them when subject teachers worked to make their materials accessible in other languages:

> *"In the first year, some of the teachers gave us sheets in Ukrainian, the tasks were in Ukrainian. Not all of the teachers, but some of them."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

In a small number of cases, young people had not had any additional EAL support but felt that they would have benefited from this. A young person from Hong Kong reported, for example, *"I improved my English from hearing others… at first it was a bit difficult for me because actually so many vocabularies that I didn't know, but now it's much more better."* If she had had dedicated language support, she felt it would have been *"easier to understand the language and also grammar"* (young person from Hong Kong, female)

Good practice 2: Supporting EAL learners in the classroom

One school shared good practice of requiring every newly arrived student with EAL to undergo a baseline test to assess their language needs, ensuring each student was receiving appropriate support. The school found the Cambridge face2face test to be most effective, as it has oral and written elements that give teachers a comprehensive understanding of the students' needs.

The school also created a list of subject specific terms that EAL students would come across in the classroom that they may not be familiar with. Reflecting on the rationale for this intervention, the EAL lead explained:

> *"We try to build up a bank of resources, so we might have a student who speaks English, but hasn't been [to] school here and has learned English in their own country, so when they go into science, they can understand what the teacher is saying, but they might not know what a Bunsen burner is or a litmus paper, because that wouldn't come up in any kind of English conversation or language class. So we have laminated sheets that they can take with them, with translations of all the subject specific words in English."* (Practitioner interview).

Other good practices included the use of EAL passports, similar to the SEND passport that many schools use. The EAL passport, created by the EAL team at the school, includes information on the child's academic level and suggestions for strategies that might work to support them in the classroom. When a student with EAL joins a class,

the teacher receives an email with a short note about the student and a copy of the passport so the teacher has the information required to better support them.

3.4.2. The holistic role of EAL teachers

The research underscored the significant role played by EAL staff in supporting newly arrived refugee young people, in a way that extends far beyond language learning. EAL staff acted as advocates for young people within the wider school environment, including seeking to make other teachers more aware of challenges displaced students might face. They also provided support and care to young people, acting as a consistent point of contact and helping to foster a sense of safety. This supports the findings of recent research by Kelley et al. (2025) which found that EAL staff provide the majority of wellbeing support to newcomer students.

One school, for example, had a relatively large group of Ukrainian students arrive in Spring 2022. An EAL practitioner explained:

> *"We couldn't put them into normal classrooms. First of all, they wouldn't have had the linguistic skills. But it wasn't just about that. It was, they'd arrived from a foreign country into a foreign country without their dads in really difficult circumstances... We did a lot of pastoral care, really. We played games, we just talked. We just tried to make them feel safe."* (Practitioner interview)

Another EAL staff member said, of their work with refugee students,

> *"I've also given them a freedom that they can speak to me anytime they want to... so at times, I've got that free. And I'm telling them that, you know, this time, if you need to speak to me about something very important, or you're getting bullied, or, you know, any sort of thing that you need help, come to me."* (Practitioner interview)

At the same time, participants also reflected on the challenge of building trusting relationships with children who are then moved on, as well as the challenge of having new students starting at short notice. As one EAL practitioner explained,

> *"In January, I might be expecting some more kids, I have no idea. Because every time we are getting kids, like the other day, we had a new student, and then two weeks later they had to leave, these two siblings, and we're like, oh, what's going on, you know? ... And these two students, they were, they were crying a lot when they were leaving, and they were like, of course, because they loved coming to these classes. They just loved it. And, you know, because they have got their other Afghan students with them as well, and they need that connection, and now they have to go, and they just feel it's very unfair."* (Practitioner interview)

The disruptive impact of dispersal was raised by numerous practitioners, highlighting the challenges in providing consistent support and building trust when students then have to move on. Another practitioner said, for example,

> *"I think it should be a standard, not moving them around the country... give them a chance to actually set up a base and learn. You know, they are constantly in survival [mode]. They get here, they go, we're here. They make some connections,*

> *then they're moved again. And it's just not fair. So I think wherever they go, that's where they are. You provide the provision to the community, to the schools, and they actually set up and form a life here, rather than constantly moving, constantly being on the back foot."* (Practitioner interview)

Another important theme, evident both in focus group discussions with young people and in interviews with practitioners, was the important role played by staff members who shared a language and cultural background with displaced young people. This had numerous benefits, including for young people's sense of safety, belonging and succeeding, and for relationships with parents and caregivers (discussed further below). Practitioners reflected on how their role went beyond academic learning and included explaining cultural differences to the newly arrived students and helping them adjust to school life in the UK. One interviewee, a Ukrainian staff member, reflected that she *"was kind of a bridge between students and school and the system",* and that students "*felt safe because I was there who was a Ukrainian speaker who could translate to them"* (practitioner interview).

In some cases, practitioners reported that they were struggling to retain staff or to maintain their current level of EAL provision due to lack of resources. Challenges in retention were particularly evident where roles were linked to short-term funding. Given the crucial role played by EAL staff, the research underscores the importance of ensuring that EAL provision is well-resourced and that EAL teachers are effectively supported. This also includes the provision of further professional development for EAL teachers to recognise the complexity of their work. At the same time, practitioners also underscored the importance of training for all teachers, beyond EAL leads, on supporting displaced learners, to foster a whole-school approach.

3.4.3. Peer support networks

Young people across all three cohorts spoke about the importance of support networks formed of peers with whom they had a shared background and language. These support networks played a particularly important role in the first weeks and months after arrival in a new school. Participants highlighted the sense of safety that came with having access to a community of young people with whom they could speak a familiar language, and who had similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. One participant said, for example:

> *"When I arrived UK, I didn't know English very well, and I had, like, very awful headaches because of the English environment, English words, my English family, they were basically talking at home in English, and it was very hard for me to get used to like this language... When I arrived to [school], I got a small chance to, you know, to relieve my brain sometimes, while I'm talking with my Ukrainian friends.... they really helped me, showing the directions, like where to go, or, like, how it does everything, everything works."* (Young person from Ukraine, female)

Another participant reflected that the first school she went to in the UK was *"a really big school, with lots of people that could speak our languages"* (young person from Afghanistan, female). Other students from Afghanistan who had been in the UK for longer helped her significantly, showing her around and helping with translation:

> *"They could translate what the teacher says. And because like, I knew lots of the work and stuff, what to do for Maths, Science, English and that, but I just didn't*

> *know what the question asked me to do… if I had these people in my classes, then they would tell me, and I would do it."* (Young person from Afghanistan, female)

This theme was also raised by some of the participants from Hong Kong, particularly by those who were less confident in English when they arrived in the UK. One young person said, when asked about where she can turn for help in school and in understanding lessons:

> *"I met many Hong Kong people in my school, and some in my year, and I'm friends with them, and I have some lessons with them, and they will provide some help to me… it's very helpful, because when I first come here, and I really, I can't really understand the English, and they translate to me and I can just understand most of it."* (Young person from Hong Kong, female)

Another example came from a young person who, after leaving Ukraine, had first lived in another European country, where he attended a school with almost no other Ukrainian students. He found this difficult, reflecting that he had had *"no one to talk to, no one to share my brain with."* In his current secondary school in Oxfordshire, however, there is a larger group of Ukrainian students: *"here it is a different situation, it is really better for me"* (young person from Ukraine, male). Another participant in the same focus group agreed, commenting,

> *"When you have people who understand you, not just in your own language but it's really about more mentality… When you speak with people from your region, from your country, you're speaking your language, and you can speak about really more stuff and that really helps with communication skills, and with your own feelings. Like, you feel better when you know you're not the only one who thinks the same."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

A practitioner reflected, similarly, on the value of being around peers with a shared background and familiar language, at least in the early stages, reflecting of a group of young people from Afghanistan in the school that:

> *"I think having these students together from the same country, it has made a massive difference. I would say, I think it was a great thing to have them, because now they've got their buddies with them, and they can feel comfortable and secure. And even when they're going back to their classes, they've got at least one child with them, at least one to buddy up with."* (Practitioner interview)

EAL classes and classrooms played an important role in facilitating these support networks, bringing young people together and helping to foster a sense of community. As one of the above students explained further, of the EAL classroom: *"it's kind of a safe place for EAL students, it is a place where we know that other people can go also. I mean the class itself, because of the class we can communicate in some place… if we'd been without class, it should be the situation that we have different tutor groups, different classes, we probably won't even know about each other."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

Over time, as confidence in English grew, it became easier to make friends with a wider group of peers, as one participant reflected: *'"after learning the English language, I could find more international friends. Before that, I could not."* (Young person from Afghanistan, male)

While young people appreciated having friends from a similar background, they were also wary of the risk of being treated as "*one of the minorities*" (young person from Ukraine, male) if they only had friends from their cultural backgrounds. However, the overwhelming response highlighted the emotional and mental uplift that came from having friends who understood them and helped navigate a new school and classroom in a new country, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and supporting a sense of safety and belonging.

3.5. Social and emotional learning and wellbeing

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the aspect of education that nurtures students' social and emotional skills within an academic setting, alongside their academic skills. For refugee and asylum-seeking learners it has the potential to reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers and help them navigate new cultural contexts, giving them the tools to achieve educational success and lifelong wellbeing (Gedikoglu, 2021; McBrien, 2022).

3.5.1. Cultural knowledge and training for schools

Young people from all cohorts reported that schools taking the initiative to understand the educational and cultural backgrounds they were coming from would help them feel welcomed and a sense of belonging at school. They advocated for a whole school approach where students and teachers were introduced to different cultures so that they didn't have to bear the burden of explaining their culture to their teachers and peers.

Practitioners reflected that the school's understanding of the culture and educational system the students were coming from was closely connected to the young person's wellbeing. As one teacher reflected, *"you only ever integrate into a community where you feel comfortable"* (practitioner interview). Practitioners shared examples of female students not participating in PE or students being unable to partake in free school meals unless the food was halal as instances highlighting the importance of schools taking into account the cultural backgrounds of students:

> *"They are very scared that, for example, they won't be able to wear their hijab, they're very scared that they're going to be fed food that's not halal. They've got a lot of fears and distrust about what the system is going to look like. So if somebody can sit down with them to talk through those concerns, to reassure them, to show them examples of uniform that they can wear, adjustments that can be made to clothing to accommodate their faith."* (Practitioner interview)

Recognition of cultural experiences, of the needs of different groups of refugee children, and of individuals within these groups, is imperative to ensuring that displaced children can participate in education on a par with all other children (McIntyre et al., 2020). Cultural recognition is a key component of Fraser's framework of participatory parity (as introduced above), and plays an important role fostering a sense of belonging. At the same time, this needs to be undertaken in a way that is *"culturally responsive without stigmatising or othering the child from the rest of society"* (McIntyre et al., 2020: 394).

Indeed, while young people across cohorts acknowledged the need for some additional support, particularly when they had very recently arrived in the UK, they also highlighted that they did not want to be singled out and treated differently to their peers. For example,

for some young people, having language lessons after school or additional support that didn't take them out of their regular classrooms was seen as beneficial.

> *"Some teachers think we don't understand what is going on and they start to talk to you like you were a small child, and it's a bit too much. Yeah, so I think I had a bit too much support. I mean, people are very nice to me. But sometimes they don't understand that we are the same people as them. Like, it's kind of, we're independent people as well. It's kind of hard to explain. I mean, there was just a lot of stuff going on about Ukrainians, Ukraine, Ukraine, Ukraine. It was everywhere. Yeah, it was a bit embarrassing."* (Young person from Ukraine, female)

Further emphasising their desire to not be singled out and to be recognised for their innate qualities over their refugee status, young people reflected:

> *"I would hate when people would come up to me and say, "oh, you're that Ukrainian refugee". I would hate that like - okay, you do acknowledge my situation here, and you do acknowledge that I'm at a disadvantage, and you're just [trying] to understand it. But I do not want to be judged by this. Yeah, I just want to be judged by my personality."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

> *"I was feeling that I was different, but now I think we are all human."* (Young person from Afghanistan, male)

Good practice 3: Equipping teachers to support EAL learners in the classroom

Interviews with teachers pointed to examples of good practice in supporting students and ensuring recognition of past experiences and possible needs.

In one school, for example, the EAL lead had conducted training for other members of staff to ensure that they were aware of newly arrived students and of any needs they might have. This included information on who they were, their language skills and the context they were arriving from in order to help teachers better understand some of the difficulties the students may have experienced, and to provide appropriate support.

Other schools had made use of existing resources such as REUK's Education Welcome Packs for students in languages including Ukrainian, Dari and Pashto, and The Bell Foundation's EAL Classroom Guidance for teachers. One school, for example, reported using these resources to help teachers understand what "*could feel impossible*" (practitioner interview) for students in their classrooms, especially around potentially sensitive subjects such as relationships and sex education as well as supporting students who may not have prior experience of attending mainstream mixed schools.

Another theme that emerged both for practitioners and young people was around the importance of making school norms, codes and rules clear and explicit for newly arrived young people. For example, practitioners reflected on the importance of providing newly arrived students with an introduction to school life in the UK. In addition to introducing them to the education system and different teaching styles, it was also recommended to have an orientation on British culture and school life to help students make sense of social interactions at school. This reflects McIntyre and Abram's (2021) emphasis on 'making the implicit explicit' as an important component of belonging, incorporating *"understanding of codes and rules, clear signposts and resources for navigating an education system and societal norms"* (ibid: 82). As one student shared:

> *"...maybe like, if you tell this to schools, and like, if you tell everyone you need to, schools need to, like, explain the rules, actually explain the rules. Because when we just came to school, no one explained their actual school rules... no one told us we can't use our phones. No one told us about detentions and any school rules."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

3.5.2. Relationships with teachers and peers

Young people across all groups reported that positive relationships with teachers and peers contributed towards a sense of wellbeing at school. Having supportive teachers who helped them feel seen and understood made a big difference to their motivation to study. Revision time during their lunch breaks or extra classes during the weekend were some examples shared by young people of the support they received from teachers that motivated them to do well in school. As one respondent commented,

> *"Teachers in secondary school, they really helped you... They can waste their two hours of their spare time only for you to revise, and it really gave lots of good results, especially for me, I did pass lots of my exams."* (Young person from Ukraine, female)

Alongside positive relationships with teachers, positive relationships with peers were highlighted as a key factor contributing to feelings of safety, belonging and succeeding for young people. Young people repeatedly mentioned the benefits of having a buddy when they first started at school, to help them acclimatise to the physical space and make friends. As one participant reflected:

> *"So when I just came [name of teacher redacted] he introduced me to one girl, and she became my friend, and we are friends still, now that all of her friends are now my friends, and the same, same thing that you mentioned, and this friend group it grows every single day, and we have more people coming into our friend group, and it's so nice. Like, I'm so happy that they took the right person for me, and I'm very like, that was so nice. Like, it's probably the best decision. Like school, thank you."* (Young person from Ukraine, female)

Another young person reflecting on the value of shared experience with peers as helping them feel a sense of belonging at school:

> *"What helped me, honestly - was having someone in the same situation in the same class as me."* (Young person from Hong Kong, female)

While there were mixed responses on whether young people would prefer a buddy who had a similar cultural background and shared language or a British peer as a buddy, the overwhelming sense was that having a buddy was like having someone who is like a "*bridge between you and the world*" (young person from Ukraine, male)

Highlighting the role teachers can play in facilitating positive relationships with peers, young people spoke about the importance of group work in the classroom. Reflecting on this, a Ukrainian young person shared that group work helped him connect with his British classmates, and interacting with them helped his English improve as well. Group work was recommended for its ability to organically create social encounters without refugee students having to take the initiative to make friends.

3.5.3. A safe learning environment

A safe learning environment - including a physical safe space and a teacher who helped the young people feel safe and welcome - was highlighted by participants as a key contributing factor to their social and emotional learning and wellbeing. Young people across cohorts reported that having a trusted person, usually a teacher or a tutor with a shared background, that they could reach out to for help and support contributed to their feelings of safety and belonging in school:

> *"Feeling that they are heard in school... or they can see that the school is listening to them, then they feel well, we're safe in school, because when we have a problem, we can go and report it to this individual, then they can deal with it, or they can help us with advice or guidance on how to respond to it. So therefore they feel okay, yes, we can feel safe in this aspect."* (Practitioner interview)

> *"I didn't feel like the counsellor could relate to my experiences - she was a white British woman and she was telling me she had spoken to a lot of people from HK but I didn't feel a connection."* (Young person from Hong Kong, female)

In this regard, young people reported a strong sense of agency and appreciated when they could reach out to a teacher directly when they wanted help, as opposed to having to report to certain teachers regularly or being seen as receiving differential treatment in front of their peers. Having control over how they accessed support helped them feel empowered and actively engaged in ensuring their own wellbeing.

Further, young people reported that having a physical space such as a library or a separate room where they can access the support they need helped them engage with learning in a way that made them feel safe. Reflecting on this, an EAL lead at a secondary school shared:

> *"What was helpful that they felt safe there in the in the library, and so they felt safe because I was there who was a Ukrainian speaker who could translate to them, and [name redacted] also, she knew how to work with foreign students before, because she had this experience, and she knew that she should speak slower. She should be using maybe some more simple constructs, grammar constructions, you know? And yes, she obviously knew how the system works, because she's been working for a long time, and so all of the factors, they helped, and that's why it became so successful, and students also got great results."* (Practitioner interview)

Practitioners reflected on the importance of helping newly arrived students feel safe, to ensure long-term learning outcomes. Highlighting the need to focus on their emotional wellbeing ahead of academic outcomes, one practitioner shared:

> *"We've got staff going, but how are they going to get a GCSE? And I'm like, well, at this point in time, what they need is just to be safe. They need to be in that room, and they need to know you care, and they just need to feel safe."* (Practitioner interview)

3.5.4. Discrimination and bullying

While the experience of young people in secondary schools in the county has been largely positive, instances of discrimination and bullying were highlighted by young people and practitioners in interviews. This was the case for young people across all three cohorts. Sharing their experience of racism in school, one student shared, for example,

> *"There are some people, when you just came to school, they're just being racist and saying, like, boom, boom, boom, and something like that. Like, go back to Ukraine and something like that."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

Practitioners also shared negative attitudes towards refugees stemming from parents and caregivers of students, which is reflected in the way some students interact with their refugee peers in the classroom:

> *"Some people do not accept refugees, you know, so not necessarily that they have an issue against, it's like when parents talk, they talk in front of their children…and then the children hear this, and then they go and do the same, or try and practice or use the language that was being used at home in school to create an hostile environment."* (Practitioner interview)

Young people also reported instances of feeling unsupported by teachers:

> *"Some teachers do not talk to me in class. When I ask for help, they say they will come, but they do not. They don't even provide the minimum support they give to other students. Sometimes they ignore me."* (Young person from Afghanistan, male)

Practitioners reflected that Oxfordshire has seen an increase in numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking families, and schools have responded by accepting large numbers of newly arrived students into their institutions. However, schools have not had the resources or the time to adequately train staff on supporting refugee students in the classroom. Voicing their concerns on the impact inadequately equipped teachers could have on refugee students, one practitioner shared:

> *"People [teachers] think…I don't know how to deal with that child. I don't speak that language, that makes me feel really nervous, because they're not going to understand me, and then it's going to be awkward, so I'm just going to ignore it. And I think if that happens to you five times a day, then you're feeling pretty rubbish by the end of the day."* (Practitioner interview)

Reflecting on these experiences, practitioners commented on the need for a whole school approach, creating awareness among school staff as well as parents and caregivers of the value of recognising and celebrating different cultures. They noted that building an inclusive, supportive educational environment requires sustained, intentional effort and engagement from individuals across the school, including the senior leadership. Further, practitioners recognised the need for further trauma-informed training for school staff, which could be provided by OCC.

3.6. Exams, academic outcomes and aspirations

3.6.1. Educational aspirations and expectations across cohorts

Young people across all cohorts expressed high academic aspirations, high expectations from the UK education system, and a strong enthusiasm for education, supporting findings from past research (Ashlee, 2024, Ashlee, et. al., 2022). One practitioner shared, for example:

> *"None of them will be like, 'Oh, I don't want to go to school or don't like school.' That's not the attitude at all. They're all very much like they want to go to school... they miss going to school, they miss learning. And they have so many dreams, and they have so many aspirations. And it's so nice to see."* (Practitioner interview)

While aspirations were high across cohorts, there were variations in academic expectations across and within cohorts. One practitioner described how they had been able to individualise new arrivals' timetables to allow them to showcase their strengths in relevant areas by attending specific lessons where they could thrive, whilst also having the flexibility of providing a base - in this case the library - to return to for other parts of the day:

> *"Well, I think getting children into classes as soon as we could, the only thing was we didn't want to expose them to a problem of not being able to understand what was going on. So it was a gradual process of, well, maybe you could go into a maths class, because the Ukrainian students are really better at maths than any of our kids, so they could go into maths and ace it. So that was good. We could do maths then thinking about, you know, other classes.... We put them into sports quite a bit so we just kind of staggered it. So whatever classes [they would choose to go to] they could go off and do that, then they could come back to the library and feel safe. So it was a very gradual process of integrating students."* (Practitioner interview)

Whilst the example above highlights the benefits of individualised support, we found that students within the different cohorts had varying experiences of academic provision. Students from Hong Kong and Ukraine reported more rigorous pre-migration academic experiences than they were introduced to in the UK. As noted above, students from Ukraine were simultaneously attending Ukraine school online so that they could maintain continuity and also prepare for Ukrainian qualifications. Students from Afghanistan felt that they were not receiving adequate support in schools in the UK, underscoring, again, the need for a tailored, individual approach that takes into account children's past experiences and current needs and preferences. A young person from Ukraine, reflecting on what felt like an overwhelming amount of support and their agency being overlooked, shared,

> *"When I just came teachers were like, I will help you with this. I will help you with this. I will do full stuff. What I think the most important is that you have to ask when you need help, because there was too much help, like, and it was so embarrassing for me, like, if you need help, you can ask."* (Young person from Ukraine, female)

Students from Hong Kong reported that they felt academic achievement is given higher importance in Hong Kong than it is in the UK, which can be an adjustment for students who might expect a more rigorous academic environment. Research also shows that families from Hong Kong tend to live in areas known for good schools to ensure their children have access to good quality education (Benson and Rolfe, 2023). Reflecting on this, one young person shared:

> *"The workload is quite different as well - I did find it a bit hard to get used to because in Hong Kong your academics is the most crucial aspect of your life."* (Young person from Hong Kong)

As noted above, young people also described struggling to demonstrate their prior learning and existing knowledge to teachers, particularly when they were less confident in English, and, in some cases, said they felt that teachers had low expectations of them. As one participant emphasised, "o*ur English language knowledge is not correlated with our actual knowledge in history, politics, economics and whatever."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

3.6.2. Pressure and importance put on exams

Young people who arrived in the UK at a secondary school age, and particularly those who arrived later in their educational journeys, in Year 10 or above, spoke about the high emphasis placed on exam results and the challenge they faced in catching up with their peers. Reflecting on this, one practitioner commented:

> *"Another thing that I noticed is that for those who have arrived, being around 15-16 [age], being in school... they got to GCSE level way before they were ready for it. So they were completely set up to fail it, because how could they manage an exam that is hard for a native speaker without having that language knowledge?"* (Practitioner interview)

Echoing this sentiment, a young person from Ukraine reflected on the sudden shift in classroom dynamic in preparation for A levels and progression to university, which can add to the overwhelm of a newly arrived young person, especially one who might have experienced a disruption in education:

> *"I do not enjoy probably sometimes of this big pressure, because in Year 13, you can feel this massive gap between the teachers and students. Because, I mean, I can feel and I can understand this, that's teachers are trying... to teach you to live this university life by yourself, like, you know when you will go to university, no one will help you. And I'm feeling this massive gap like I'm feeling like sometimes teachers are not helping, and I perfectly understand why. Because, you know, university is coming and you're Year 13, you have to work hard, but it is quite extreme. You know, gap for me from Year 12, yeah, where I got lots of help, and still, teachers were very good to me, and now in Year 13, it's a big pressure."* (Young person from Ukraine, female)

Young people, however, expressed determination to succeed and attain their educational goals.

> *"Like at the end of Year 10, we had those mocks, and I didn't know what it was, so I just failed all of them. But then I started to work harder, and I showed like, who I am and what I can do. And then, like, for example, for English literature, like I had two for my first mock, and I got seven for my GCSE."* (Young person from Ukraine, male)

Young people and practitioners highlighted examples of good practices that helped ease the pressure. Young people shared that providing extra time on exams helped EAL students write their answers without the additional pressure of limited time. The provision of dictionaries and other translation devices during exams, where possible, was also reported as being particularly helpful.

Good practice 4: Support for refugee students with assessments and exams

To help ease the burden of exams on refugee students, one school shared a good practice of supporting students from Ukraine by translating worksheets and providing dictionaries to use in class and on certain exams. When the students had recently arrived, their tests and assessments were translated into Ukrainian, which was eventually phased out as the students' English improved.

Similarly, young people shared examples of their school giving them access to second hand textbooks and dictionaries as well as bursaries for calculators, all of which were helpful in easing the financial and mental strain of exams.

Another example of good practice included supporting students to sit exams in their strongest languages, where these were available. One practitioner reported, for example, *"where possible, we do additional language exams... we usually have about 10 different languages."* (Practitioner interview)

3.7. Teacher-caregiver communication and engagement

Effective communication and collaboration between schools and parents and caregivers of refugee learners is crucial, with practitioners emphasising the need to ensure that parents feel empowered and connected to their children's learning journeys. In a focus group with parents from Afghanistan, for example, the overwhelming sentiment expressed was around the value placed on education, and the hopes they have for their children's success through accessing education in the UK. A practitioner reiterated the importance of parent and caregiver engagement, saying:

> *"There's always going to be complexities, and it takes time to sometimes, you know, talk through because I feel very strongly that we should be working with parents. You know, it's their children's education and it's their decisions to make, and sometimes that can take a while because of language barriers and stuff."* (Practitioner interview)

Practitioners highlighted that it is not only children and young people that are adjusting to new educational systems. Parents and caregivers, too, are adjusting to the new educational environments in which their children are now engaged, and have different

experiences and expectations, including in terms of communication from schools and involvement in their children's education. As one practitioner reflected:

> *"One of the hardest things is... in Ukraine... [parents are] used to being reported on every two weeks about how their children are doing... and we don't report in the same way. And I think it's quite hard for parents to know, you know, how is your child getting on?"* (Practitioner interview)

Recognising these differences, and how parents' expectations are influenced by what they have been used to previously, one school worked with the parents to explain the differences in the education systems between their countries of origin and the UK, including the systems of grading and reporting. Where possible, the school offered additional points of contact, including regular parents' meetings with the EAL teachers, so they felt they were sufficiently kept abreast of their child's progress.

Practitioners also highlighted the value of having teaching staff who shared a language and cultural background with refugee families to help parents feel safe and welcomed. Such staff can be *"a fantastic bridge to the parents"* (practitioner interview). Being able to communicate in their own language with a teacher at the school helps assuage fears parents may have about the wellbeing of their children and encourages them to engage with the school system in a way that helps them feel heard and understood. In one school, for example, Ukrainian teaching assistants had played a significant role in supporting and improving communication with parents and caregivers; this was not only a matter of translation, but also of understanding parents' expectations for involvement and their communication preferences. Reflecting more broadly on the need for schools to invest in building relationships with parents and caregivers, another practitioner shared:

> *"These parents, they also have trauma. They have to worry about the finances, and their first priority is making sure my child is happy, my child is healthy, they have clothes, they're going to school, accessing education, and we have food. And then the mum is worried, or the parents are worried about, 'I need to learn the language so that I can be able to talk to my children. And because I don't understand the language, I don't know what the school is telling me to do.' So in some ways, the schools should really not leave everything to the parents, because if the parents don't understand the language then the information is lost."* (Practitioner interview)

Good practice 5: Facilitating parent and caregiver interaction

In response to the need to engage with parents and caregivers of refugee children meaningfully, practitioners shared as good practice the value of having refugee parents volunteer at the school as members of the Parent Teacher Association or being employed as teaching assistants and support staff to help "*bridge the gap*" (practitioner interview) between the school and refugee families and establish open channels of communication with them.

Another practitioner shared their experience of holding coffee mornings with parents and caregivers after school drop-off, enabling them to ask any questions they may have about their child's education. The EAL staff would be available to answer questions and help build rapport between the parents and the school. In instances where parents have been upset about their child's progress or impending disruption because the family was about to be moved, staff members with a shared language were able to step in and

ease the additional pressure on the parents of having to communicate their worries in English.

3.8. Supporting refugee children with SEND

Refugee children and young people with SEND fall at the intersection of multiple overstretched systems: the SEND support system, described as being in 'crisis' (e.g. Public Accounts Committee, 2025), and systems and processes for supporting EAL learners. They risk falling through the cracks between these systems, with neither responding effectively to their needs. As existing research highlights, refugee learners with SEND can be doubly marginalised, facing compounded discrimination from their status both as refugees and as learners with disabilities (Hunt et al., 2025). While there is no available data on the number of displaced children and young people with SEND in the UK, estimates suggest that there are approximately 230,000 EAL learners with SEND in schools in England (The Bell Foundation, 2024).

This section presents findings from the research related to the identification, assessment and provision of support for refugee children with SEND. It draws on interviews with practitioners and parents of refugee children with SEND. It is important to reiterate, as noted in the methodology, the small number of interviews with parents and caregivers of children with SEND. Findings are supplemented with insights from relevant literature.

3.8.1. Identification and assessment of SEND in refugee learners

Existing research highlights the complexity of identifying and assessing SEND in refugee children and young people (Jørgensen et al., 2021; Hunt et al., 2025). This overlaps with complexities in diagnosing SEND in EAL learners. Recent guidance produced by The Bell Foundation (2024) notes that without appropriate support and expertise, schools risk conflating language needs with SEND and misdiagnosing EAL learners. Conversely, EAL can sometimes 'mask' SEND, leading teachers to hesitate in making referrals (Jørgensen et al., 2021). As a consequence, opportunities to identify SEND and provide appropriate support can be missed. Recent research shows that children with EAL in the UK are less likely to be identified with SEND than other children (Education Policy Institute, 2021).

Practitioners described facing challenges in identifying specific needs amongst refugee children, particularly when distinguishing between language barriers and SEND, with interviews suggesting a lack of appropriate expertise, knowledge and tools to assess SEND in EAL learners. One practitioner reflected, for example, that *"it's a real challenge to ascertain whether it's the SEND need or the language needs. That's our biggest hurdle for the SENDCO... there's always a challenge of determining whether there is a need."* (practitioner interview). Another commented that "*there are huge barriers for young people to be diagnosed, especially with special educational needs, because the usual diagnosis is language based*" (practitioner interview). Although there are other types of assessment available, this interviewee reflected, schools may not have access to these, with *"massive budget struggles"* posing a significant barrier. As The Bell Foundation (2024) have highlighted, schools often rely on assessment tools designed for fluent English speakers which do not provide accurate or reliable information about EAL learners.

In addition, while language plays a key role in assessment, assessing SEND also becomes more complex when trauma influences behaviour (McIntyre and Hall, 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2021). One interviewee explained, for example, that "*trauma would cause behaviours that look both local to ADHD. You would have that hypervigilance. You don't know if that's ADHD or trauma*" (practitioner interview).

The intersection of language barriers, the impact of trauma, an overstretched SEND system and a lack of expertise in identification of SEND amongst EAL learners pose considerable challenges, leading to underdiagnosis and to missed opportunities to provide support, as another practitioner reflected:

> *"Many young people arrive with a mix of like PTSD or stress, with maybe no previous literacy in their own language, no knowledge of English, and because it's so complex, I see the system, just at a certain point, I've seen social workers trying, I've seen schools and colleges raising the issues, and then at a certain point it just falls because there isn't someone who can assess properly... or sometimes they're just dismissed as, 'oh, no, it's a language issue'. So I think that is massively underdiagnosed... [and] sometimes it's not super clear who should do that diagnosis, because it's bouncing up and down between council, school, college."* (Practitioner interview)

This interviewee reflected that, "*there needs to be an initial investment to train more professionals in those methods, to be able to run that type of diagnosis, and then you have the knowledge base locally, and then it can be applied, maybe someone based not as one specific school, but somebody in the council*".

An additional challenge reflected by practitioners related to differing perceptions of SEND. Research indicates that experiences from parents' countries of origin can shape perceptions about educational inclusion, influencing their willingness to disclose information about their children (Hamilton, 2013). Practitioners in this study recounted challenges due to stigma surrounding SEND, with some parents hesitant to acknowledge their child's needs, interpreting the identification of SEND as a negative judgment rather than an opportunity to access support. One practitioner, for example, reflected, on a conversation with parents, that, "*it was almost like we were saying there was something wrong with their child, and they took it really badly.*" (Practitioner interview)

Miscommunication about SEND may delay early intervention and hinder the delivery of appropriate support. Jørgensen et al. (2021: 16) emphasise the importance of schools adopting "*a culturally sensitive approach, which acknowledges that children and parents may have cultural perceptions that are different to those of professionals, for example in relation to SEN".* They recommend that professionals "*reflect on the culturally specific expectations that they themselves bring into their work with migrant children with SEN*" (ibid: 16), and stress the importance of trust and relationships between schools and families as essential for effective engagement and home-school collaboration. Hunt et al. (2025) emphasise that parents and caregivers of refugee children are a highly heterogeneous group, with diverse views on and perceptions of SEND. It is important to understand families' expectations, perceptions and past experiences of SEND assessment and support, as well as to provide accessible and comprehensive information (with translation where needed) (ibid).

Further challenges are posed by the long wait many children and families face for assessment and support, which may be particularly challenging for children who have already faced disruption to and delays in accessing education. Given the lengthy formal diagnosis process, schools often have to make provisional assessments and provide support accordingly. A practitioner described the pressures of balancing timely intervention with formal procedures:

> *"So you're kind of battling against the time... so schools are having to make their own diagnosis and deal with that student. So now we're working on if you suspect that child is autistic, you treat as autistic, if you suspect that child has ADHD, you treat as ADHD."* (Practitioner interview)

This reflects wider challenges with the SEND system. Except in exceptional circumstances, the entire EHC needs assessment and plan development process should be completed within 20 weeks from the initial request or referral to the final plan issuance (Department of Education and Department of Health, 2015). However, many councils are facing challenges, including financial difficulties, that delay issuing EHCPs on time. On average, across England, 49.2% of plans were issued on time in 2022 (Rose, 2024). While families across the UK face challenges in navigating the SEND system and accessing timely and adequate support, refugee learners and their families face additional barriers, as discussed in the next section.

3.8.2. Navigating the SEND system

Refugee children with SEND are a highly heterogeneous group (Hunt et al., 2025). In addition to diversity in relation to type of SEND, language skills, migration experiences and other factors (ibid), the research highlighted the significant heterogeneity in students' previous experiences with SEND support. Some refugee children with possible SEND arrive in the UK without having previously had any formal identification or assistance. One practitioner working closely with migrant children with SEND, including refugee children, reported, for example, that *"the vast majority of the children that we work with have no pre-existing assessments on file"* (practitioner interview). However, others have previously had access to well-established support networks, both formal and informal.

The disruption to established networks and support systems, through displacement, represents a considerable loss - not only to the child, but also to their families and caregivers. One parent of a young person with SEND highlighted the considerable variation between the support their child received in Ukraine, and the support they received in the UK:

> *"It is different [from Ukraine], it is a lot of changes, for her, for me, and sometimes it's so hard, because it's everything new. And [name] had... a lot of support in Ukraine, so, honestly, I was surprised, but not good surprised... She needs special education programme, or probably separate didactic materials, individual didactic materials, or individual programme of education."* (Parent interview)

One of the biggest differences was that, in Ukraine, she had worked much more closely with the school to put appropriate support in place, and had also been in closer contact with teachers:

> *"In Ukraine, we work together, parents and teachers together, one team, and*

> *psychology, social worker, and speech therapist together, and we had meeting twice a year and create some special plan about separate subjects, literature, history, science, art, PE, about what will be better for [name]. Teachers would ask me what I think, "Is this okay?" … So, every time we had feedback, I had feedback from teachers and they had feedback from me. It was [an] amazing programme because it was [an] individual programme for [name].*" (Parent interview)

In the UK, however, she has had far less contact with her child's school. She has struggled to access the same level of support for her daughter in the UK, and though there is an EHCP in place, it has not led to the one-to-one, tailored support that she feels her daughter needs. Instead, she says, as a parent, she has been *"fighting three years with the system"*.

This is an experience that is shared by many parents and caregivers of young people with SEND in the UK. The National Audit Office (NAO) has identified significant financial pressures within the system and called for urgent reforms to improve outcomes for children with SEND (NAO, 2024), while a 2025 report described the SEND system as inequitable and inconsistent, with much depending on postcode or on parents' ability to navigate "an often chaotic and adversarial system" (Public Accounts Committee, 2025: 1). These challenges are exacerbated for refugee and asylum-seeking families, who may lack the necessary resources to navigate the system and advocate for their children due to language barriers, limited digital skills and lack of familiarity with the system:

> *"The system across the whole of the UK is incredibly broken, and sadly, it's often the families that shout the loudest that take priority. So if you are a white, British middle class person who can fund an advocate or can fund a solicitor and can trigger an appeal, you will often be the family that moves up the list quickly to get the specialist provision. Whereas, if you are a low income family and English isn't your first language and you don't understand your legal rights, you're more likely to just sit and wait for something to happen, because you're trusting that the process will work in your favour… the parents who trigger appeals or make formal complaints, they're typically the families who move forward. And of course, you have to have a certain level of English and confidence in challenging a system to make that happen."* (Practitioner interview)

> *"It's just the funding. That is the block. Funding is the block, because without having it… all children are kind of geared up to go to a mainstream school, aren't they? Unless they have really an EHCP, which is the support package, which would give them a special school, or some alternative provision, or even if they do have additional needs and go to a mainstream school, if they have SEND needs, there's an EHCP can supply extra, like a TA to support them, or, you know, all those different provision, and without that, it's difficult to support."* (Practitioner interview)

Importantly, parents of young people with SEND interviewed for this research felt that their children's strengths were not well recognised or supported within their schools. One parent reflected, for example, that her child's *"skills and his desire to strive"* were not recognised within the school. Another said, of her daughter, *"she is ready to take knowledge, take experience from other students, she would like to have friends, have new skills, and I don't know why teachers couldn't give, or teams, SENDCO team, couldn't give*

to her this chance." (Parent interview)

King et al. (2013) identified limited access to information as a significant barrier for immigrant and refugee families in host countries. This finding aligns with observations from parents of children with SEND. Parents had turned to online community groups on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram, where they could connect with others, exchange advice, and learn about available support in the UK. One parent described the value of these networks, stating:

> *"We have large online communities where parents share information, like 'Did you know you're eligible for this or that?' [I] found everything there... It was all on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram."* (Parent interview)

The challenges faced by students with identified SEND are intensified for those arriving in Years 10 and 11 or later. As a practitioner supporting these students noted, many have experienced prolonged periods of displacement and disrupted education, leading to anxiety and mental health difficulties. Their situation could result in students being classified as having special educational needs in order to ensure that they are able to access support. However, their late arrival into the UK school system creates additional barriers, with schools often reluctant to enrol them mid-GCSE, limiting their access to essential support and stability:

> *"If they're post-16, that is where I hit a bit of a brick wall [in providing support]... they're a really tricky group, because other than direct them to NHS services and CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] ... there's not much I can point that group of students to... The Year 10s and Year 11s, they're a really wobbly year group... recently, for example, I've met quite a few very vulnerable Year 11 students who've had a lot of displacement and been out of education for a long time, and they're struggling with anxiety and mental health, so therefore I'm classing them as SEND, and I'm really stuck, because a lot of schools are really reluctant to take them because they're all mid-GCSE mocks."* (Practitioner interview)

Finally, practitioners noted that parents of children with SEND who have an EHCP may encounter additional difficulties if placed in temporary accommodation or relocated. While an EHCP remains with the child throughout their education, frequent moves can disrupt established support, especially after a child has begun to settle into a school.

3.8.3. Learning and good practice in supporting refugee learners with SEND

OCC provides a range of support services for children and young people with SEND, including the SEND casework team. Within the SEND casework team, the council supports children and young people (aged 0-25) with learning difficulties and disabilities by managing statutory EHCPs. They assess special educational needs, oversee EHCPs and coordinate with parents and professionals, and ensure appropriate support is provided in schools. The team also handles school placement changes, annual reviews, and school applications for additional support (The Special Educational Needs Casework Team, 2024).

The team also partners with the Special Educational Needs Support Services (SENSS)[4] where they support and advise school staff on understanding SEN needs and provide assessments and specialist advice. They help young people assess needs for specialist equipment, and offer specialist provisions in resource bases within mainstream schools.

To support migrant students with possible SEND, including displaced young people, a specialist SEND support worker position has been introduced within the Migrant Education, Employment and Adult Skills Team at OCC. This includes working with young people and families in asylum hotels as well as those within the Afghan, Ukrainian, and Hong Kong BN(O) communities. The role has helped enable early identification of children and young people with SEND, meaning that the EHCP process can be initiated and young people can be directed to appropriate support pathways based on their specific needs, in some cases before a school placement has been found. One practitioner reflected, for example, that:

> *"... before the role [of SEND support worker] existed, ... [the team] used to do registration visits in the hotel, but, of course, their capacity was focused on confirming the data, get them on a list for a school. So this early identification didn't necessarily happen, because the focus was we'll get you into school, and then we'll pick up any difficulties. Whereas in the highest need cases, we can [now] be triggering an EHC needs assessment before a school place is even confirmed. So we're cutting six months off the wait time for that higher level of support."* (Practitioner interview)

Part of this role has involved the development of expertise in identifying and assessing SEND amongst EAL learners and providing more tailored, specialised support to families. The generalised SEND support offered by local authorities often lacks the necessary adjustments to effectively support EAL families, particularly in terms of communication and cultural sensitivity. Important information, such as a family's first language, their communication preferences or their migration history, are often missing from official documents such as an EHCP. As a result, schools and services may struggle to engage with these families appropriately. Practitioners underscored the importance of actively considering language needs and adapting communication methods:

> *"Most other local authorities just have their generalised SEND systems, but often what you find is that those generalised SEND systems are not equipped to cope with EAL families and are not equipped to give the time and the sensitivity that that group or family needs. ... this job would ask questions such as 'how is it best to communicate with you? Via email in your home language?' and little things like that, which because I'm thinking specifically about how to be inclusive of their EAL, other services don't make that assumption, they don't make those adjustments to accommodate them."* (Practitioner interview)

Good practice 6: Early SEND assessments for new arrivals

OCC provides an immediate assessment for newly arrived families to identify any special educational needs their children may have. As soon as a family arrives at a hotel, the council's team visits them to inquire about any special educational needs and

[4] SENSS is a countywide Special Educational Needs teaching and advisory support service.

safeguarding concerns. By conducting these initial visits, practitioners can quickly identify any concerns, initiate necessary assessments, and connect families with relevant services. If they identify that a child has additional needs, they initiate an EHCP needs assessment. This assessment determines whether the child requires an EHCP. Once in place, an EHCP ensures continuity of support, even if the family relocates to a different area.

This also includes the role of a dedicated SEND support worker for migrants that also support refugees and asylum seekers, which facilitates early engagement. The support worker triages the new arrivals as they come into Oxfordshire. This approach helps prevent delays in accessing education and initiates requests for early support for vulnerable children from the outset.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Recommendations for Central Government

- Provide local authority school admissions teams with accurate, timely information about the movement of families with school-age children into their areas, including names with the correct spelling and date of birth, so that school places can be quickly arranged. Further, details of locations of existing and new refugee accommodation in their administrative area should be shared with local authorities to facilitate a smooth and quick admissions process.

- Provide local authorities with funding that enables longer-term, consistent support for all newly arrived refugee students, regardless of mode of arrival or country of origin (see also Ashlee, 2024; Ashlee, et. al., 2023). This is applicable to both single and two-tier local authorities.

- Take steps to reduce the educational impact of dispersal. As far as possible, once a child is placed in a school, the child and their family should not be moved to a location that requires a change of school. Where this is not possible due to challenges with housing stock, availability of appropriate school places in the new location should be considered, and education information and assessments carried out by the first school should be shared with the second.

- Building on the provisions with the Children, Wellbeing and Schools' Bill that strengthen the powers of local authorities to direct academies to admit students, implementation guidance should emphasise the importance of this for newly arrived refugee children.

- Ensure that the rights and needs of refugee children and young people with SEND are made visible and explicitly addressed in SEND policy and practice, including in any reforms to the SEND system.

4.2. Recommendations for Oxfordshire County Council

- Make short-term interim provisions available to newly arrived young people to help enable smooth and quick transitions into mainstream settings. The Local Authority should continue and expand its provision of academic programmes that act as a bridge to mainstream educational institutions for newly arriving young people waiting for a place in school.

    For example, OCC could expand the remit of the Orientation Programme currently offered to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, making it available to all newly arriving refugee and asylum-seeking children.

- Introduce a programme of introduction to cultural life and school culture in the UK for newly arriving families, giving them necessary context and tools to adapt to their new environment.

- Provide further information on education provision to newly arrived refugee and asylum-seeking families.

  This could include running information sessions in hotels and community centres on services available to refugee families. These sessions could be contracted to local charities that work with specific refugee cohorts to ensure language is not a barrier to accessing the information.

- Enable and support schools to develop EAL policies, and to set up EAL departments that are empowered to work across all curriculum areas in a school. This could include:
  - Having an EAL hotline that schools can reach out to to clarify any questions or concerns they might have in supporting students with EAL.
  - Providing training for teachers to teach in multilingual classrooms, and supporting schools in being able to provide accredited training such as Certificate of Speaking English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) and Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) for EAL teachers.
  - Providing resources such as dictionaries, calculators and language learning software to help schools resource their EAL departments to adequately support EAL learners.
  - Providing guidance to secondary schools on funding for EAL learners, including when they can apply for and access EAL funding.

- Encourage and support schools to adopt an asset-based approach, recognising the knowledge and skills refugee students bring with them, by providing required resources to facilitate this meaningfully.

  For example, OCC can encourage schools to make provision for students to pick their home or first language as a GCSE subject. To ensure this, there needs to be an increase in the number of languages offered at GCSE level.

- Facilitate learning and sharing of good practice across schools by:
  - Collating and periodically updating resources (including toolkits, guidelines, relevant research and other practical material) on supporting learners with EAL, making them accessible to all secondary schools in the county.
  - Recording and highlighting good practice engaged in by secondary schools in the county and sharing them with all schools to facilitate learning amongst secondary schools in the county.

- Provide tailored interventions for young people at risk of disengaging from education and bespoke academic support interventions enabling young refugees to achieve key academic milestones, including GCSEs.

- Identify where particular cohorts of refugee children are missing out on education and dedicate resources specifically to helping those cohorts, focusing particularly on those falling through gaps of existing support (such as those without hosts, sponsors or resettlement workers).

  For example, OCC can consider intensive bridging programmes for young people that have experienced significant educational disruption. This could include an expansion of intensive educational input for those with years of lost learning while waiting for school places.

- Schools appreciated the training they have received from OCC so far. This should be expanded to include cultural literacy and sensitivity and training around the backgrounds and educational systems many displaced young people are coming from.

- Provide access to resources and training opportunities to enhance the expertise of teachers and SENCos in identifying and addressing the needs of refugee children with SEND. This should highlight the importance of a holistic approach to supporting refugee children with SEND, with support tailored to individual needs and accounting for factors such as previous SEND support, disrupted education, experiences of trauma, language barriers and cultural backgrounds.

- Provide information sessions for parents of children with SEND about the UK educational system, including children's rights, entitlements, and available support, in multiple languages. These sessions could also help create local support networks among parents and carers of children with SEND.

4.3. Recommendations for secondary schools

- Draw on expertise within refugee communities, such as by recruiting refugee parents and caregivers as volunteers or teaching staff at schools to help strengthen and support collaboration and communication between schools and refugee families. This can serve multiple purposes, including helping the school to understand the cultural context and academic expectations that families might have, providing a safe and trusted person in the school for young people to feel heard and understood, and offering parents professional experience in the UK.

- Create regular opportunities for parents of refugee students to communicate with the school in a way that is accessible to them.

    For example, practitioners shared instances of organising coffee mornings where parents could meet with EAL staff at the school, including a staff member who shared a language with many of the parents, to get an update on their child's education progress. Another practitioner shared an example of creating a Viber group for parents from Ukraine as they were more comfortable with this platform than WhatsApp or email. This is particularly important for parents of children with SEND, with frequent opportunities to check in with the school helping them to understand and to be involved in shaping the support their child is receiving.

- Adopt a whole-school approach towards supporting refugee students. To achieve this, schools should provide training and continuing professional development for all teachers, including senior leadership, around inclusive classrooms and best practices for supporting refugee children (and EAL learners). As highlighted by Harris (2025), training that leads to measurable improvements in inclusion should be prioritised.

- Ensure an asset-based approach, recognising strengths and providing individual, tailored support.

    For example, schools have developed creative ways to celebrate multilingualism and demonstrate young people's strengths and successes,

such as through young translator awards. Another example of this is providing the option of selecting your mother tongue language as a GCSE subject.

- Make provision for additional training, resources and expertise to help ensure a linguistically and culturally sensitive approach to identifying and supporting refugee children with SEND. This could be achieved by training staff on the specific challenges faced by refugee children and the effects of migration and trauma, to help them identify and support potential SEND needs.
- Support collaboration between EAL and SEND practitioners to ensure an integrated approach to supporting young people with SEND.

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