

Supporting refugee learners with special educational needs

Insights from a parliamentary roundtable

Introduction

Refugee learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are often invisible in national SEND strategies and data, and overlooked in research. They and their families face significant challenges in accessing the support to which they are entitled. With the UK's SEND system under review, this is a critical moment to ensure that the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children with SEND are explicitly included and addressed in national policy, and to foster a more equitable and inclusive system.

In May 2025, [Refugee Education UK \(REUK\)](#) and Professor Joanna McIntyre from the University of Nottingham's [Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe \(HERE\)](#) convened a parliamentary roundtable focusing on the intersections of refugee education and SEND.¹ The event was chaired by Darren Paffey MP, and built on [recent research](#) carried out by HERE and REUK. This briefing synthesises key contributions and recommendations from the roundtable.

Refugee education and SEND

Refugee learners with SEND are a highly heterogeneous group, with varied types of additional needs, language skills, migration histories, legal statuses, educational backgrounds and home environments.² They may be navigating a new language, education system and culture, at the same time as living with past and present trauma and, at times, undiagnosed and unsupported SEND. Yet, refugee learners and young people with SEND are often treated as if they belong to separate categories, with little attention paid to how different forms of marginalisation intersect.³ In this roundtable we sought to move beyond siloed thinking, and to identify opportunities for more connected, effective policy and practice.

¹ The roundtable was attended by 16 practitioners, policymakers and young people with experience related to refugee education, EAL and SEND. It was supported by funding from the University of Nottingham's Research England's Quality-related Research Policy Support Funding. HERE and REUK would like to thank Darren Paffey MP for hosting the meeting, and all participants for their contributions.

² Hunt, McIntyre and Robinson, 2025. [HERE's What We Know About the Educational Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities in Europe](#). Nottingham, UK: Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE), University of Nottingham.

³ Ibid.

There are profound challenges in the UK's SEND system, described in a recent report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee as having reached crisis point.⁴ Children's access to adequate support often depends on their postcode, or on their parents' ability to navigate an "often chaotic and adversarial system".⁵ In an inequitable system, children and young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds are at a particular disadvantage.

The UK Government has said that it will set out a fully-funded plan for SEND reform by April 2026. This review of the SEND system presents a rare opportunity to influence how support is delivered to some of the most vulnerable learners. Yet, while there is significant scrutiny of the SEND system, the experiences, needs and perspectives of forcibly displaced learners with SEND are largely excluded from these debates. It is imperative that refugee children and young people with SEND are not left behind in current and future education reform.

Barriers and challenges

Key issues affecting access to inclusive education and appropriate support for refugee and asylum-seeking children with SEND, as discussed at the roundtable, include:

- **Identification and assessment:** Unclear and complex procedures, poor communication and coordination, linguistic and cultural barriers and other factors can delay or prevent diagnosis and assessment of SEND for refugee learners, resulting in missed opportunities to provide effective support.⁶ Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) are less likely to be identified with SEND than other children,⁷ and tools for assessing SEND are often inappropriate for EAL learners.
- **Dispersal and mobility:** Refugee and asylum-seeking children, and their families, may move repeatedly within the UK, including as a result of 'dispersal' policies. This can result in disruption to education, potentially making it harder to build trusting relationships with teachers and schools, to navigate SEND assessment processes and to access appropriate, consistent support.⁸
- **Delays accessing education:** Refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people can face long waits to access education.⁹ This can delay identification of SEND and access to support. In addition, displaced children with already-identified SEND face particularly pronounced delays in securing school places. Delays may be

⁴ House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2025. Support for children and young people with special educational needs.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/46238/documents/231788/default/>

⁵ Ibid, P1.

⁶ Hunt et al., 2025. HERE's What We Know About the Educational Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities in Europe.

⁷ Education Policy Institute, 2021. The educational outcomes of refugee and asylum-seeking children in England. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SEND-Identification_2021-EPI.pdf

⁸ Research by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that children who move schools or have lower school attendance are less likely to be identified with SEND. The current system is ill-suited to families who are highly mobile, requiring children "to remain in one place and stay visible over long periods of time to access support". See Education Policy Institute, 2021. The educational outcomes of refugee and asylum-seeking children in England. P8.

⁹ Ashlee, A (2024). Education for Late Arrivals: Examining education provision for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system. Refugee Education UK.

most consequential for children nearing the end of secondary school, who have a limited window of time in which to access support within a school environment.

- **Isolation and discrimination:** Displaced learners with SEND may be doubly marginalised by their position both as refugees and as individuals with disabilities, and can face social isolation, segregation and negative attitudes.¹⁰
- **Teacher training and support:** Many education practitioners work exceptionally hard to ensure that all children, including refugee learners with SEND, receive the support they need to thrive. However, many report feeling unprepared to effectively identify and meet the needs of EAL learners with SEND, including refugee children, with limited access to appropriate training, guidance and resources. Access to relevant training and resources can also vary between schools and local authorities.

Recommendations for policy

If reforms are to create a SEND system that is truly inclusive, they must explicitly address and include refugee and asylum-seeking students with SEND. Key recommendations for policy, as discussed during the roundtable, include:

- **Improve policy visibility:** Ensure consistent, explicit visibility of refugee and asylum-seeking children with SEND in statutory guidance and policy frameworks, as well as in relevant school policies. This is a low-cost, high-impact change that would support early intervention, improve accountability and help address inequities in identification of and support for refugee children with SEND.
- **Invest in robust teacher training and professional development:** High-quality, research-informed training on EAL, SEND and trauma should be available to all staff. This should be integrated into initial teacher training, the early career framework, continuing professional development and school leadership programmes. It should include training on the effects of trauma on child development and behaviour, and on the identification of SEND in multilingual learners.
- **Harmonise policy and ensure coordination between departments:** The wellbeing and educational inclusion of refugee learners with SEND is influenced by multiple government departments, including the Home Office and Department for Education. A coordinated approach across different policies, departments and levels of government is crucial to minimise disruption and ensure refugee learners receive appropriate, holistic and consistent support.
- **Strengthen accountability:** Explicitly include refugee and EAL learners as priority groups within Ofsted's inspection framework.¹¹ This would help ensure consistent visibility in inspection reports, including in terms of intersections with SEND, and would incentivise schools to ensure quality, inclusive education for these learners.
- **Ringfence funding for refugee learners with SEND:** Ensure funding is available to schools to support refugee students with SEND. This must include resources and

¹⁰ Hunt et al., 2025. HERE's What We Know About the Educational Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities in Europe.

¹¹ For further information, see The Bell Foundation, 2024. 'Blog: Seven Calls to Action for the New Government to Integrate Children Who Use EAL'.
<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/news/seven-calls-to-action-for-the-new-government-to-integrate-e-children-who-use-eal/>

support to enable early identification and intervention, as well as provision of timely, effective and holistic support.

Recommendations for practice

To foster more inclusive practice, holistic, tailored and asset-based approaches are key. Recommendations for practice emerging from the roundtable include:

- **Improve screening and assessment:** Review procedures for identifying and assessing SEND and ensure that these account for individuals with a non-majority language. Develop and support the use of culturally and linguistically sensitive tools for assessing SEND needs in learners who have experienced forced displacement.
- **Strengthen engagement with parents and caregivers:** Provide accessible, comprehensive support and information to families to enable them to advocate for their children's needs. This should include information about SEND entitlements, support systems and assessment and appeals processes, and should be available in a range of languages and formats. This could be included in induction programmes to life in the UK, as well as being provided by schools and local authorities.
- **Ensure culturally sensitive approaches:** Parents, families and children may have varying experiences, expectations and perceptions related to SEND: education practitioners should adopt a culturally sensitive approach, and reflect on the expectations and assumptions they bring to their work.¹²
- **Avoid siloed thinking or a 'one-size-fits-all' approach:** Ensure tailored approaches that focus on individual learners and their unique strengths and needs. Seek to understand a child's context and experiences holistically - such as their past educational experiences, language use at home and family circumstances - in order to better support their learning and overall well-being. Consider the complexity of intersecting identities, including those that can result in multiple marginalisation.
- **Adopt strength- and asset-based approaches:** Ensure assessment processes identify areas of proficiency, not just deficit, and help raise confidence.¹³ Reflect on language used: for example, some schools are changing from EAL to multilingual learners (MLL).
- **Promote multilingualism and offer GCSEs in a range of home languages:** offering qualifications in a range of home and heritage languages can help celebrate and recognise multilingualism and linguistic diversity, as well as supporting young people to gain an additional qualification. This may be particularly beneficial for those arriving in the UK late in the school system.
- **Support collaboration between EAL and SEND practitioners:** EAL and SEND coordinators and departments must work closely together to ensure holistic support for refugee children with SEND. EAL staff training should include elements on SEND, and SENDCO training should cover working with second language learners.

¹² Jørgensen, Dobson and Perry, 2021. Supporting migrant children with special educational needs: what information do schools need and how can it be collected? University of Birmingham. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/education/publications/migrant-children.pdf>

¹³ Hunt et al., 2025. HERE's What We Know About the Educational Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities in Europe.

Further reading

This is a brief summary of a complex, nuanced and multifaceted topic. To learn more, we recommend:

- [HERE's What We Know About the Educational Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities in Europe \(full report\)](#). Hunt, L., McIntyre, J., and Robinson, A., Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE), University of Nottingham. 2025.
- [Promoting the educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities in Europe \(policy brief\)](#). HERE, the University of Nottingham, Refugee Education UK and Sirius. 2025.
- [Supporting migrant children with special educational needs: What information do schools need and how can it be collected?](#) Jørgensen, C., Dobson, G., and Perry, T., University of Birmingham. 2021.
- [Identifying SEND: Final Report on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities and contact with CAMHS](#). Hutchinson, J., Downs, J., and Ford, T., Education Policy Institute. 2025.
- [EAL and SEND: Guidance for Integrated Provision in Schools](#). The Bell Foundation, 2024.

About the organisations

Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe

The [Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe \(HERE\)](#) (led by Professor Joanna McIntyre, University of Nottingham) provides a central reference point for information relating to refugee education throughout Europe in the form of a curated, searchable Knowledge Base of academic and non-academic resources on refugee education from across the continent, published since 2015. This is supported by the HERE Network which brings together interested parties and key stakeholders in the field of refugee education through online and offline activities aimed at exchanging knowledge and developing research and practice on refugee education across Europe.

Refugee Education UK

[Refugee Education UK \(REUK\)](#) is the UK's leading charity providing education support to young refugees. Each year, our team supports several thousand refugee and asylum seeking children and young people to get into education after arriving in the UK, and to thrive academically and psychosocially in school, college or university. We provide training and best practice guidance for schools, have an internationally recognised research and evidence building team and a 13 year track-record. We are working towards a world where all refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future.