University of Nottingham
Institute for Policy and Engagement

Refugee Education UK

ASPIRE:
A Sustainable Place for Inclusive Refugee Education

A place-based study of Nottingham and Oxford

Foreword

Written by Mika, an REUK Youth Advocate

Education is more than just a path to academic success; for refugees and asylum-seeking youth, it is often the first step toward rebuilding a life that has been torn apart by conflict and displacement. For me, **education has been a critical foundation for rebuilding my life.** As a former student at the University of Nottingham, supported by the W.H. Revis Article 26 Scholarship, I understand firsthand the importance of education in transforming lives and creating pathways to a brighter future.

As a refugee, I faced many barriers, including homelessness, language difficulties, and the overwhelming responsibility of caring for my mother. Yet, despite these challenges, **the support I received through education helped me unlock new opportunities**. The scholarship I received was more than just financial assistance; it was a vote of confidence, a signal that someone believed in my potential and my future. This kind of support makes an incredible difference, as it did for me, and it is crucial for refugee students.

The ASPIRE research emphasises the profound impact education has on refugee students, not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well. **Education provides a sense of belonging, safety, and normality, which is especially important for young refugees adjusting to life in a new country. For many, it is a space where they can rebuild connections, form friendships, and develop skills that will shape their future.**

Moreover, it is crucial to involve young refugees in research that impacts their education. As someone who has navigated the system as a refugee, I believe **our voices are vital in shaping the policies and practices that affect us.** The ASPIRE study illustrates how engaging students with lived experience ensures that education provisions are more responsive and relevant to their needs. This participatory approach allows young refugees to provide valuable insights, ensuring that educational systems are not only inclusive but also empowering.

The findings from ASPIRE and my own journey reinforce the critical role of education in empowering refugees. It provides a sense of purpose, helps develop skills, and opens doors to opportunities that would otherwise remain closed. The study emphasises how critical it is to offer not just access to education but support that addresses the holistic needs of refugee students.

This report is not just a call to action for policymakers; it is a call to all of us to recognise the power of education in transforming lives. By investing in refugee students, we are investing in a brighter future for them and for all of us!

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This report was authored by Sediqa Bakhtiari, with Amy Ashlee, Divya Jose, Joanna McIntyre and Alice Robinson.

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About the organisations

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. Their direct programmes work supports children and young people to get into school, from primary to university, and to thrive academically and in their wellbeing. Alongside their 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 at www.reuk.org.

Joanna McIntyre is Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham's School of Education. Jo joined the School in 2010 after a number of years teaching English in secondary schools. Jo previously held the roles of Deputy Head of School, Associate Head of School, and Director of Initial Teacher Education. Jo is particularly interested in how, through the field of Education, we can understand and improve the lives of those who are marginalised or disadvantaged by society. Jo has worked on a range of funded research projects and her current work is located in the fields of teacher education and refugee education. Jo's work in the field of refugee education explores the barriers and opportunities schools face when working to support children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds. Jo's recent research projects include an exploration of the role of arts in fostering a sense of belonging for newly arrived young people in cities in Europe, a project with Swedish educators looking at implementation of an inclusive model of education for refugee pupils, and a series of research collaborations with Refugee Education UK, Jo leads the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE). She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, and a patron for Initiatives of Change (IofC)'s Refugees as Re-Builders.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACRS	Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme
ARAP	Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy
ASPIRE	A Sustainable Place for Inclusive Refugee Education
BEGIN	Basic Educational Guidance in Nottinghamshire
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EMBS	Ethnic Minority Business Service
EbLE	Experts by Lived Experience
FE	Further Education
HIC	High-Income Country
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NEST	Nottingham Education Sanctuary Team
ONS	Office for National Statistics
OP	Orientation Programme
REUK	Refugee Education UK
SEN	Special Educational Needs
UASC	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VCRS	Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme
VPRS	Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

Executive Summary

In the UK, all children have a right to education regardless of their immigration status. In England, local authorities have a duty to provide suitable full-time education to all children of compulsory school age (5-16) in their area (Ashlee, 2024), and to provide free sixth form or alternative further education to those aged 16-19 (Ang, 2024). Despite this, children and young people who have experienced forced displacement often face considerable barriers to accessing and progressing in education (Ashlee, 2024).

Most research on this subject adopts a broad, national perspective, with little research examining the nuances of educational provision for refugees in particular places. However, in many parts of the country, networks of local authorities, schools, colleges, charities and community groups seek to support access to education for children and young people from refugee backgrounds.

Recognising this gap, this project – entitled 'A Sustainable Place for Inclusive Refugee Education', or ASPIRE – set out to provide a placed-based analysis of educational provision in two cities, Nottingham and Oxford. Drawing on a qualitative and participatory approach, the research centres the perspectives and priorities of young people with lived experience of forced displacement, and those who support them.

The report explores young learners' experiences of access to and quality of education in each city. For many of the young people who participated in this research, formal and informal education represented an important new phase in their lives in the UK. It played a key role in establishing new support networks and friendships, including with peers, teachers, case workers, community members and others. For young people in this study, safety in the context of education meant not having to fear prejudice or stigma. Belonging meant feeling heard and valued, discovering areas of shared interest and building meaningful relationships. A sense of succeeding meant feeling they had a clear sense of purpose, and that their achievements were recognised.

The research highlighted innovative practices underway in each city to support the education of new arrivals. These ranged from short-term bridging programmes to longer-term support, within and outside mainstream educational spaces. Amongst the promising practices identified are provisions that ensure immediate access to education, provide holistic, tailored and flexible support, and work to foster an inclusive environment in which students feel valued, respected and able to be themselves.

The findings highlight the importance of collaboration between diverse actors, with strong networks and connections in both cities enabling different provisions to work together to share information, signpost resources and ensure more comprehensive support for young people.

Despite the promising practices identified, these place-based initiatives cannot fully overcome the broader structural and systemic barriers and challenges facing forcibly displaced young people. These include delays in accessing school places, as well as the significant disruption to education caused by dispersal, and the anxiety and instability caused by uncertain immigration status and age assessment processes. The report highlights the need for national-level policy change to ensure rapid access to quality education for young people who have been forcibly displaced.

The report makes recommendations for the national government, third sector organisations and schools and colleges. It highlights the need to increase funding for educational provisions, including schools, colleges and third sector organisations involved in supporting young people from refugee backgrounds. It calls for an expansion in the provision of support and services to older young people, recognising that opportunities to access education narrow for those over 16, and narrow further at the age of 18. It highlights the need for flexibility and support for young people going through an age assessment process and calls for greater consideration of the impact on education in decision-making around dispersal.

The report is accompanied by a toolkit summarising lessons learned from participatory research, and booklets sharing information about educational activities available to young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in Oxford and Nottingham. These are available on REUK's website here.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

Every child, irrespective of their immigration status, is entitled to a quality education, as stated by Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other international frameworks and agreements. Evidence consistently demonstrates that displaced children and their families prioritise and value this right (Gladwell and Tanner, 2014; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024). Education is important for them because it plays a critical role in their ability to build meaningful and purposeful lives in a new context (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021; Sullivan and Simonson, 2016) and helps to prepare them for their futures (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Education also brings benefits to the communities and societies in which they settle: it can lead to increased tolerance, openness, and unity between citizens and displaced populations (UNESCO, 2019) and is recognised as a social investment that contributes to innovation, economic growth and social inclusion (Bonin, 2017; Koehler and Schneider, 2019).

However, when young refugees arrive in their new environment, they face numerous barriers that make accessing their right to, and the benefits of, education challenging. Globally, of the world's 14.8 million school-aged children from refugee backgrounds, more than half are out of formal education (UNHCR, 2023b). In the UK's legal and policy frameworks, the right to education for children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds is recognised, and the UK has ratified the UNCRC. Despite this, evidence shows that this right to education is not implemented consistently across the UK (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018). The number of children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds out of education in the UK is not known due to a lack of publicly available data that monitors and tracks education access and outcomes for this group. However, existing research emphasises the extent of policy, systemic, and contextual barriers encountered by children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds and finds that on arrival in the UK, children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds may remain out of education for extended periods of time (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018; McIntyre and Abrams, 2021; Prentice, 2022).

Much research on refugee education in the UK adopts a broad and national perspective. While such research is valuable in building a national picture, there are few studies that examine and uncover the complexities and nuances of refugee education in particular places. Yet, places are "where life courses are shaped, social networks formed, and the sites of lived and felt experiences" (Madgin and Robson, 2023: 6). For refugees, place plays an important role: the places they encounter can support, or prevent, new arrivals from developing a sense of belonging, meaning, and social integration in a new context following the disruption of forced displacement (McIntyre, Neuhaus and Blennow, 2022; McIntyre, 2024). It has been argued that education can play a critical role in the development of this sense of place-based belonging for refugees (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021).

A Sustainable Place for Inclusive Refugee Education (ASPIRE) was a place-based, participatory research initiative carried out by Professor Joanna McIntyre from the University of Nottingham and Refugee Education UK (REUK) in partnership, with both partners sharing a goal of influencing refugee education policy and practice locally and

nationally. The study examined refugee education provision in two English cities – Oxford and Nottingham – from the perspective of young people with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds and those who support them in their local communities. The study aimed to:

- Conduct participatory research with those with lived experience of refugee education;
- Bring together key actors supporting refugee education across formal and informal learning contexts within Oxford and Nottingham to share expertise and knowledge of what provision currently exists; and
- Share examples of promising practices with stakeholder communities within those places and beyond.

1.2. Research context

1.2.1. Global context

Forced displacement around the world is at unprecedented levels. UNHCR estimates that, at the end of 2022, there were 108.4 million forcibly displaced people across the world, of which 40% were children (UNHCR, 2023a). While the vast majority of forcibly displaced people are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, large numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking children reach or are resettled in high-income countries (HICs); approximately 25% of the world's refugees are hosted in HICs (UNHCR, 2022).

Globally, approximately half the number of children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds are out of education (UNHCR, 2023b). At the secondary level, an estimated 41% of refugee children are enrolled in education, which falls drastically to 6% at the tertiary level (UNHCR, 2023b). Theoretically, children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in HICs should have access to models of education that are safe, long-term, and inclusive, that include them in national education systems, and that offer them access to high-quality opportunities that facilitate belonging, integration, and success in the future (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021).

1.2.2. National context

In the UK, all children, including children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds, have a right to free, government-funded education. Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that education is available for all children of compulsory school age in their local area that is appropriate to their age, ability and any special educational needs (SEN) they may have, as stipulated by the Education Act 1996.

In practice, however, for many children from refugee backgrounds, access to education is limited by numerous factors. This includes systemic barriers, such as long waiting lists and complex application processes; institutional barriers, including lack of available places; and contextual barriers, including challenges related to temporary accommodation (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018). The impact of Home Office policies around dispersal (with asylum seekers required to relocate to new accommodation, often at very short notice) can cause significant disruption to education (REUK and University of Nottingham, 2023; Ashlee, 2024). Barriers are intensified for children and young people arriving later in the

educational system, such as those arriving at a year-10 or year-11 age, when their peers are completing GCSEs, and for those arriving midway through an academic year (Ashlee, 2024).

In recent years, there have been significant policy changes in England, Scotland, and Wales, including the introduction of the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), and other government schemes for Afghans and Ukrainians. Meanwhile, there are concerns that the Nationality and Borders Act, signed into legislation in 2022, is likely to have an impact on many children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds: creating a two-tier system for refugees and penalising those who arrive through unofficial routes (EPI and Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2023).

1.2.3. Local context

Nottingham

Nottingham is a city located in the East Midlands, with an ethnically and culturally diverse population. The 2021 census published by the ONS categorised 10% of Nottingham's resident population as belonging to a minority ethnic group (Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, or African), which had increased by 2.7% from 2011.

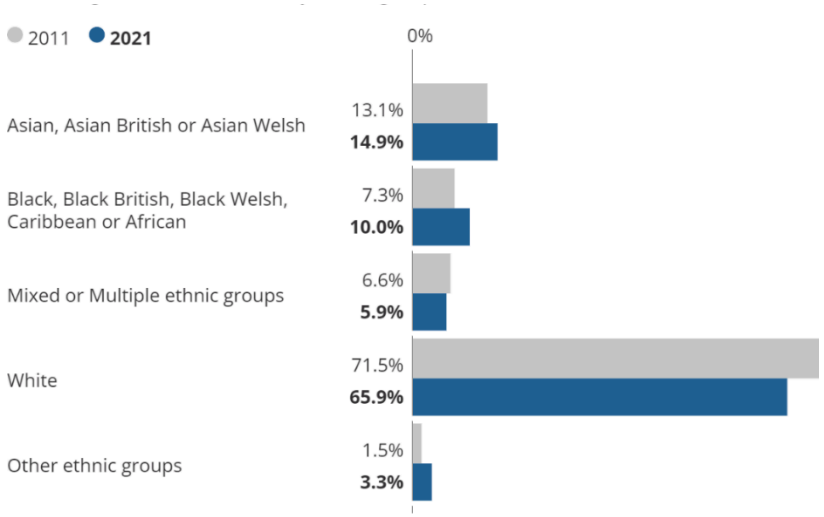

Figure 1. Percentage of Residents by ethnic group in Nottingham (Source: Office for National Statistics, 2011 and 2021 Census).

Since 2015, work to support refugees in the city has resulted in successfully resettling individuals under the VPRS and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), and Homes for Ukraine. Measures have been taken by Nottingham City Council to extend participation in new refugee resettlement schemes funded by the Home Office to the end of the financial year 2030-31 (Miles, 2022). Table 1 details the number of people settled in Nottingham through different pathways as of the end of December 2024. According to the Immigration System Statistics provided by the Home Office, out of 317 local authorities, Nottingham ranks 21st in terms of accepting different

immigration groups mentioned in this table (Home Office Immigration System Statistics, 2024).

Table 1. Number of people settled in Nottingham in different pathways as of December 2024 (source: Home Office Immigration System Statistics: Regional and Local authority data – immigration groups)

Immigration group	Number
Home for Ukraine	379
Afghan Resettlement programme	194
Supported asylum population	1535
Total	2108

Nottingham city leaders are also keen to cultivate a welcoming culture that positions the city as a place that supports all, including sanctuary seekers. There is an active group of key stakeholders working towards the city becoming a City of Sanctuary.[1] This group comprises faith groups, community centres, charities, social clubs, schools, local services, businesses, refugee organisations, and volunteers.

There are also several refugee charitable organisations in Nottingham, providing refugees and asylum seekers with advice, guidance, and signposting to statutory agencies. For example, Belong Nottingham, Refugee Roots, and Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum offer free English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and support with benefits, housing, employment, and education for all immigration statuses. NEST (Nottingham Education Sanctuary Team) offers a full-time, bespoke, holistic educational provision for newly arrived children and young people in Nottingham unable to secure spaces in schools and colleges. These provisions offer tailored support to help young refugees integrate and thrive in their education journeys. Many arts and culture institutions in the city have signed the 'Art of Belonging' pledge,[2] committing to work to create a more inclusive, diverse, and compassionate society that welcomes and supports refugees and asylum seekers.[3] These and other initiatives are discussed further in the findings section.

Oxford

Oxford is a city located in the county of Oxfordshire, in Southeast England. The city of Oxford has demonstrated a commitment to welcoming refugees and asylum seekers and helping them resettle in the local community. Recently, Oxford City Council has approved a new affordable housing plan to accommodate refugees and asylum seekers fleeing war in Ukraine and Afghanistan (Ryder, 2023). Moreover, Oxford City Council has taken steps to make the city a welcoming place for sanctuary seekers: in 2019, the City Council signed the City of Sanctuary Charter to become an accredited Local Authority of Sanctuary.

[1] City of Sanctuary UK is a movement working across the country to ensure the UK is a welcoming place of safety for all, especially for people fleeing violence and persecution. The charity supports a network of groups, which includes places and regions across the UK. You can find more at https://cityofsanctuary.org/

[2] The 'Art of Belonging' is the title of a research project which took as its premise that young, forced migrants, newly arrived in Europe, should be supported through engagement with arts and culture to achieve a sense of belonging in their new place (McIntyre, 2024).

[3] See https://challengenottingham.co.uk/art-of-belonging-pledge

Oxford has been characterised as a welcoming and diverse city. Renowned for its esteemed universities and vibrant cultural scene, Oxford offers a diverse community that embraces individuals from all backgrounds. According to Census 2021 published by the ONS, 15.4% of residents in Oxford identified their ethnic group within the "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh" category, 70.7% of people identified as "White", while 5.6% referred to themselves as "mixed or multiple," and 4.7% identified themselves as belonging to the "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, or African" category (ONS, 2023).

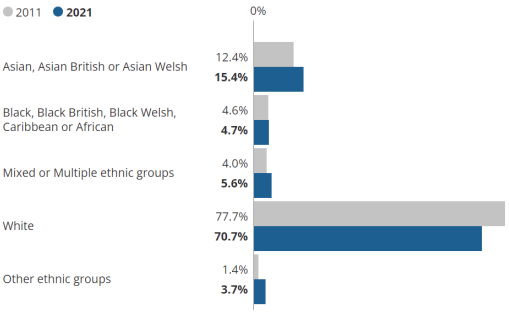

Figure 2. Percentage of residents by ethnic group in Oxford (source: Office for National Statistics – 2011 and 2021 Census).

Refugees and asylum seekers are supported by local organisations, some of which receive council grant funding, such as Asylum Welcome and Refugee Resource. These organisations provide help for a wide range of refugee needs, from applying for asylum to counselling services. Besides these organisations, there are other provisions, such as the Orientation Programme by REUK, that provide support to young people affected by displacement and crisis. The Orientation Programme includes an English language and integration programme for newly arrived UASC in Oxfordshire.

The number of people coming to Oxford through different pathways is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of people settled in Oxford in different pathways as of December 2024 (source: Home Office immigration system statistics)

Route of entry to the UK	Number
Home for Ukraine	467
Afghan Resettlement programme	110
Supported asylum population	266
Total	843

According to Home Office immigration system statistics, Oxford ranked 109th among other local authorities in the UK in terms of the population of these groups (The Home Office, 2024).

1.1. Definitions

Throughout this report, the term 'children with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds' (or variations on this) is used. This term refers to any young people from forced displacement backgrounds with a spectrum of immigration statuses. It includes those who have been granted protection status, including refugee status and humanitarian protection; those with other forms of short-term status, such as Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) and UASC Leave; as well as those seeking asylum and waiting on an outcome on their asylum claim. If a particular status is referred to, it will be specified within the report. In this report, the term 'young people' is used to cover both children and youth.

The findings section of this report refers to both 'formal education' and 'non-formal education'. Following Johnson and Majewska (2022), we understand formal learning as that which *"broadly aligns with organised, institutionalised learning models (such as learning seen in schools)"* (ibid: 4), with features that might include a structured, formal curriculum, and the recognition and certification of learning through qualifications. Informal education can be understood as *"the everyday learning that people experience throughout their lives"* (ibid: 4). Non-formal education is a hybrid of the two, referring to education and learning that might be planned and structured around objectives, to varying degrees, but that takes place outside of formal education provision (ibid).

Chapter 2: Research methodology

This section provides an explanation of ASPIRE's research methodology, detailing the place-based approach, participatory methodology, and the role of steering groups. It also outlines the methods used for data collection and analysis, and addresses research ethics and potential limitations.

2.1. A place-based approach

2.1.1. What is a place-based approach?

A place-based approach within social research stems from ethnographic research and situates the research design around a particular place (Paddock, Pottinger and Ehgartner, 2021). Place-based approaches can provide detailed, contextual and nuanced information about a phenomenon, meaning that recommendations and proposed solutions are tailored and suitable for the intended context (Vanni and Crosby, 2023).

This approach is complementary to participatory approaches. It centres on the involvement and experiences of stakeholders and communities. Additionally, as is common with participatory approaches, place-based research does not define research questions at the outset but develops them throughout the course of a study (Paddock, Pottinger and Ehgartner, 2021).

2.1.2. How did ASPIRE adopt a place-based approach?

ASPIRE centred around the experiences of education for refugees and asylum seekers in two places generally regarded as exhibiting promising practices in refugee education: Oxford and Nottingham. In doing so, ASPIRE aimed to uncover the complexity and nuances of education for refugees and asylum seekers in both places, as well as illuminate place-based positive practices and existing provisions that could be shared with refugee and asylum-seeking populations and those who support them.

ASPIRE did not set out with pre-defined research questions. Instead, the study engaged two types of steering groups with members living or working in Oxford and Nottingham to co-design and refine research questions: a steering group of key informants and experts in both places and a steering group of young people from forced displacement backgrounds with lived experience of accessing education in both places (referred to as the Experts by Lived Experience (EbLE) group (see title 'expert steering groups' in this section for more information).

2.2. A participatory approach

2.2.1. What is a participatory approach?

Challenging the traditional approach to research, participatory research focuses on a process of sequential reflection, carried out with and by research participants. Their knowledge and perspectives are not only acknowledged but form the foundation of research. Therefore, instead of the "subjects" of traditional research, this approach collaborates with stakeholders and communities in the research process (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

Participatory research enables the involvement of those impacted by the research in all aspects of the research, including methodology design, framing research questions, data collection, analysis and reporting on the findings (Harley, Lee and Wazefadost, 2022). It facilitates perspectives and understanding on subjects otherwise not considered by researchers and helps improve the quality and interpretation of data by involving those closest to the research topic (Duea et al., 2022).

2.2.2. How did ASPIRE adopt participatory approaches?

ASPIRE sought the involvement of young people with lived experience of forced displacement and those who support them throughout the research process. This happened through the establishment of the steering groups of young people with lived experience and professional key informants. Additionally, a lead member of the research team has lived experience of forced displacement. Their leadership and involvement in this research study allowed for a deeper understanding of the educational journey of young people with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds and the challenges they encounter in accessing education.

2.3. Research questions

In collaboration with young people with lived experience of forced displacement, and the steering group in Oxford and Nottingham, a set of research questions was developed that the ASPIRE research aimed to address. These questions were divided into three thematic areas, each with sub-questions, as detailed in the table below.

Table 3. Thematic areas and research questions of ASPIRE

Thematic area 1: Initial access
1. How do young people from refugee backgrounds newly arrived in Oxford and Nottingham experience and navigate the process of getting into formal and non-formal education? • What non-formal and formal provision exists within Oxford and Nottingham? • How do young people find out about this provision? • What factors enable or hinder young people's access to this provision?
Thematic area 2: Quality education
2. What do learners from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds, those that support them, and providers of education experience in terms of quality once education is accessed? • Do learners, those who support them, and education providers see the provision they are accessing as sufficient? • Do learners experience a sense of inclusion and belonging in formal and non-formal education? • Do learners experience a sense of individual progression within this provision?

Thematic area 3: Place-based learnings
3. Can we learn from current practice in Oxford and Nottingham about creating a sustainable system within a local authority which links together everyone who impacts the education of a new arrival with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds? • Are there any examples of different stakeholders working together to support the individual needs of a learner from a refugee background? If yes, what are they? • Where such examples exist, what lessons can be learned in terms of what works well and what is transferable to other contexts?

2.4. Expert steering groups

A key tenet of place-based and participatory research approaches is the meaningful involvement of individuals and communities closest to the research issue being addressed. Two expert steering groups were set up to enable this: an Experts by Lived Experience (EbLE) group, and a stakeholder steering group.

2.4.1. Experts by Lived Experience

To facilitate a participatory approach, the ASPIRE research team engaged a group of young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in Nottingham and Oxford. They formed ASPIRE's EbLE steering group. The EbLE group comprised eight young people from Nottingham and five from Oxford. These groups included both male and female participants, as well as unaccompanied minors. EbLE engagement varied in participant numbers due to circumstances in the participants' lives, reflecting the realities faced by the young people in our study. For instance, two experts by lived experience were relocated by the Home Office to different regions, despite being initially established in our study area at the time of recruitment.

These young people, often invisible in decision-making about refugee education, helped shape research questions and methodology, interpretation of research findings, and identification of practical outputs. Meetings with the EbLE group were held at three critical junctures of the project: at the inception of the project to help shape the research questions, to test the research tools before data collection, and finally, to share emerging findings from an initial analysis.

EbLE Meeting 1

The purpose of the initial group discussion was to explain the research project to the EbLE group and finalise the research questions. The group provided input into which stakeholders should be targeted through this research, and what questions we should ask them. These discussions were also helpful with refining terminology and using terms that were more familiar or culturally relevant to young people with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds.

EbLE Meeting 2

The purpose of this group discussion was to develop the research methods by trialling data collection tools that had been developed by ASPIRE researchers, specifically, the focus group discussion questions and creative activities identified, and to receive feedback from the group on what could be improved.

EbLE Meeting 3

The primary purpose of this group discussion was to present and gather reflections from the EbLE group on the findings of the research. ASPIRE researchers presented key findings from the research in a youth-friendly way and asked the EbLE group whether anything stood out to them or surprised them. This helped the research team to further interpret the meaning behind research findings and to validate them.

In addition, in this session, young people proposed the best ways to disseminate the findings with other stakeholders, including parents and young people from families that have experienced forced displacement.

2.4.2. Expert steering group

In addition to the EbLE group, ASPIRE brought together a steering group comprising six individuals with professional expertise, including representatives from local authorities, education provisions for young people with refugee backgrounds in both cities, and refugee-led research organisations. The purpose of this steering group was to provide strategic direction and technical input into the research study, helping to ensure its relevance and impact at a local and national level and to strengthen its rigour and reach. Across the course of the study, the steering group met three times to co-design the research questions, support the identification of relevant stakeholders to approach key informant interviews and focus group discussions and interpret emerging findings from the study.

2.5. Data collection and sampling

2.5.1. Data collection

Informed by the EbLE and expert steering groups, ASPIRE used two methods to gather data from participants: focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions are a form of interviewing that uses a researcher-led group discussion to generate data. This method of data collection uses the participants' discussion as a form of data collection. In particular, "there is no requirement to reach consensus or produce a decision; instead, it is the participants' conversation about the research topic that is of interest" (Morgan, 2008: 352).

In ASPIRE, two focus groups with young people were conducted in each city (four focus groups in total), using creative methods to help them articulate their educational journeys. 26 young people participated in the focus groups (see sample, below). Most young people in the focus groups knew one another as they were either friends, from the same class, or part of the same educational provision.

At the beginning of each focus group, warm-up questions were used to build trust, enhance group communication, and maintain children's interest in the topic. For instance, children were asked to talk about their favourite foods from their home countries.

After the warm-up questions, two main activities followed: "my education journey" and "mapping exercise". In these activities, young people were asked to draw or write about the formal and non-formal education provisions they joined in England. They were encouraged to explain their feelings, describe what or who helped make their journeys easier, and mention the challenges they faced along the way.

Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews are in-depth interviews that aim to gather information from individuals with firsthand knowledge of the community. While focus group discussions enable the researcher to hear from a range of participants, key informant interviews are particularly useful for obtaining depth and detail from individual participants (Morgan, 2008). Key informants are individuals who “are articulate and knowledgeable about their community” (Fetterman, 2008: 477). These experts, with their particular knowledge and understanding, provide insight into the nature of problems and give recommendations for solutions.

In ASPIRE, key informant interviews were conducted with practitioners supporting young people's educational journeys in Oxford and Nottingham. A total of 20 key informants were interviewed across these two cities.

2.5.2. Sample and sampling approach

The sample consisted of two groups: 1) young people who had experienced the UK educational system, had been in the country for at least one year prior to data collection, and were 14–21 years old; and 2) a group of professionals and practitioners, including educational practitioners, local authority representatives, and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) representatives.

The sampling method employed in this study was a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Initially, individuals and organisations were identified through desk-based mapping of support networks. Further potential participants were identified using a snowballing approach, where existing interviewees referred new participants. Young people were identified and recruited through gatekeepers and education provisions contacted by the research team.

Young person sample

A total of 26 young people were included in the research through focus group discussions. Table 4 details the characteristics of the young people engaged in this research. While data on whether young people were accompanied or unaccompanied was not collected for all participants, many of the young participants were UASC. At a national level, the majority of the UASC are male (90%) (Department for Education, 2020: 5). Mirroring this, only a few female young people were identified to join the group discussions.

Table 4. Overview of young people who participated in group discussions

Young people		
Gender	Female	3
	Male	23
City	Oxford	10
	Nottingham	16
Age	14-16 years old	8
	17-19 years old	18
Total		26

Key informant sample

In addition to young people, 20 key informants were consulted through key informant interviews. Table 5 shows information about the category of informant. Educational practitioners made up the majority of the key informants. Representatives of NGOs supporting refugees and local authority representatives were also interviewed.

In the initial research design, the research team aimed to include parents of children from refugee backgrounds in separate group discussions. However, the team was only able to interview one carer due to difficulties in finding and coordinating with this group.

Table 5. Overview of key informants

Key informants		
City	Oxford	8
	Nottingham	12
Category of informant	NGO representatives	7
	Local authority representatives	2
	Educational practitioners	10
	Parents/carers	1
Total		20

2.6. Data analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. This enabled the researchers' familiarity with the data and the development of an early coding framework. This early coding framework led to the development of the themes used in this report. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were coded manually using Microsoft Excel. The creative activities used in the focus group discussions, including the mapping and drawing exercises, were coded alongside young people's verbal and written explanations.

2.7. Research ethics

All research adhered to the University of Nottingham's ethics procedures, and ethics approval from the University's School of Education Ethics Committee was successfully obtained.[4] As this was participatory research, the design of the research and methods and tools evolved in consultation with the expert groups. At each stage, approval was obtained by the same ethics committee. Additionally, all research was informed by REUK's safeguarding policies and procedures and research ethics framework, based on 10 years of

[4] The reference for the research ethics approval for this study is the University of Nottingham, School of Education, McIntyreJ_144

research with refugee and asylum-seeking young people. In line with good practice on research with refugees, the research team remained reflexive throughout the process and conducted research activities in a way that put participants' informed consent, rights, dignity, and safety at the centre. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and, for those under the age of 18, from their parents or carers.

Chapter 3: Research findings

This section positions the voices of young people and key informants at the centre, presenting findings from the research under three thematic areas aligning with ASPIRE's research questions. The chapter is organised according to the three groups of research questions, as set out in Section 2.3.: firstly, access to education; secondly, experiences of quality of education; and thirdly, learnings from current practice in Oxford and Nottingham.

3.1. Access to education

3.1.1. Experiences of young people

During group discussions, young people were asked to describe and explain their educational journeys in the UK. Each participant chose how they wanted to share their journey; some drew, while others used timelines or wrote about their experiences. This section examines these journeys, including the challenges encountered and the factors that influenced them.

During the early phases in their new context, newly arrived young people can experience a heightened sense of *"loneliness or a liminal experience, or process of becoming detached from past belongings"* (McIntyre, 2024: 18). Young people in this research consistently described their first weeks as the most challenging part of their journey. This was attributed to a sense of isolation, a lack of or limited English language skills, and experiences of cultural differences between their country of origin and the UK.

Additionally, many reported facing a long wait before finding a place in a school or college and/or receiving their necessary documents, with negative impacts on their wellbeing. Some described inequities in experiences: having to watch their peers attend college while they were hindered by barriers, as described in the second quote below.

> *"[During the first months after arrival] I was **doing nothing, only staying home, depressed** when out of education. What else? And stressed. I will never forget those months"* (young person, female, Nottingham).

> *"I was **just at home**. I felt bad, because everyone who lived with me, they were going to college" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

When faced with an extended wait to start school or college, some young people used online resources, such as YouTube, to learn English. While engaging with such online learning was reported positively, it was evident that young people did this because they were unaware of in-person education activities or opportunities nearby.

> *"I was waiting for my documents. I was at home all the time. I started self-learning the language with YouTube videos.*
>
> *Facilitator: Did you also join any English classes?*
>
> *Young person: **I didn't know** if there were English classes I could join" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

*"**I did not know** how to find language classes, so I watched YouTube videos to improve my English" (young person, male, Oxford).*

Despite such challenges during the early stages of living in Oxford and Nottingham, young people spoke about eventually accessing both formal and non-formal education opportunities. The role of social workers in supporting young people to identify and access such opportunities was evident, as was that of community networks that made families aware of educational opportunities for their children in the local area. The role of social workers was highlighted as key in helping young people access education, including in finding places, assisting with admissions, and communicating with provisions. Social workers serve as the primary point of contact for education providers for UASC. Additionally, families under government resettlement schemes, as well as some refugee and asylum-seeking families arriving through other routes, have also received additional support from social workers when assistance was required in accessing education. Overall, data suggests that as social workers have links with different organisations and services, their support can be highly beneficial for young people. They can help young people with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds navigate the education system, connect them with appropriate resources and support services, and advocate on their behalf to ensure their educational needs are met. Their knowledge of the local community and established relationships with schools, language provisions, and other service providers can streamline the process of accessing educational opportunities.

*"When I entered UK, I didn't know where to go to find answers, and **social workers helped me** with it. She helped me find a school" (young person, male, Oxford).*

*"My support worker helped me a lot, **made my life here easier**" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

The majority of our participants expressed a strong determination to continue their education, which indicates academic motivation. Other studies (e.g. Peterson et al., 2017) also highlight this enthusiasm for education among refugee communities; young people with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds hold very positive views regarding the importance of education and are aspirational with regard to attainment and progression.

*"I'm doing my GCSE and still need help in some subjects, but **I'm motivated**. I am planning to get into college" (young person, male, Oxford).*

*"I've been registered for an ESOL course. At the moment, **I am working hard** to prepare for GCSE next year" (young person, male, Oxford).*

Many participants highlighted that they have established friendships, joined new communities, and encountered supportive individuals, including teachers, social workers, and community members, whom they can rely on in times of need. This is discussed further in Section 3.2.

Young people described how getting into education was a significant phase of their lives in the UK. They emphasised that while initially accessing education could be daunting, it opened doors to new opportunities. This included finding new friends and supportive communities, learning English and new skills, and settling into their new environment.

*"When I started college, it was very hard; everything was new, and I tried my best. Now I'm preparing for GCSE. **I met different people here**, they*

helped me understand the culture and English language" (young person, male, Oxford).

Some participants reported the importance of sports activities embedded into educational opportunities, as a way of forming new relationships with peers and creating a sense of purpose. This is further described in Section 3.3.2.

*"I joined a football club [which is] just for refugees... and **my life is getting more enjoyable** because of meeting some new people" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

The figures below are examples of the education journeys drawn by young people during group discussions. The first two (Figures 3 and 4) illustrate the initial waiting period described in this section. All of these images show that, generally, young people's emotions became more positive once they were able to access education provision, both formal and non-formal. It is worth noting that all three images illustrate challenges experienced by young people in secondary school and college. For instance, a young person in Figure 3 highlighted the language barrier and cultural differences as the main challenges in his educational journey in Nottingham. Another young person, who had drawn his journey in Figure 4, explained that he feels anxious about preparing for GCSEs and choosing a career, which is why he drew a mountain shape for the secondary school period and an indecisive face. In another example, a young person in Oxford describes finding friends as a hard part of his journey (Figure 5).

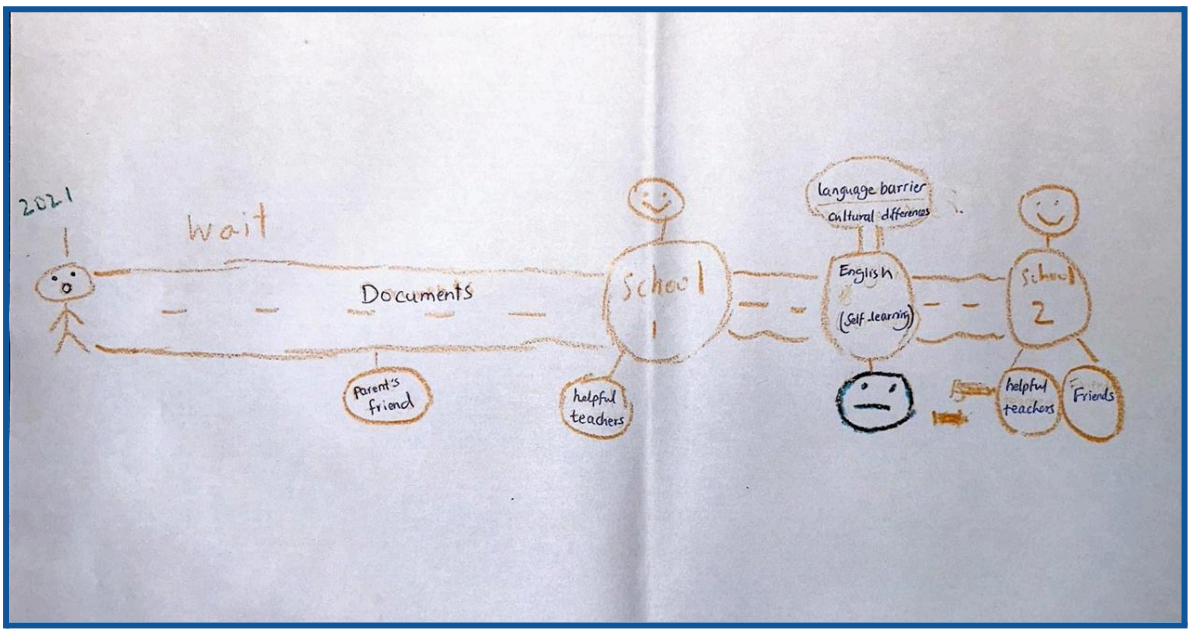

Figure 3. The educational journey of a young person in Nottingham

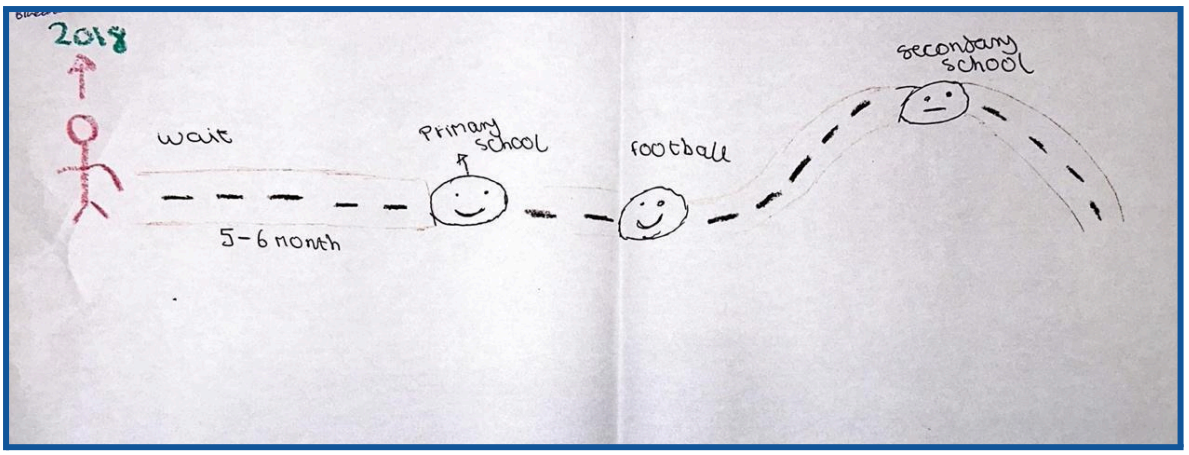

Figure 4. The educational journey of a young person in Nottingham

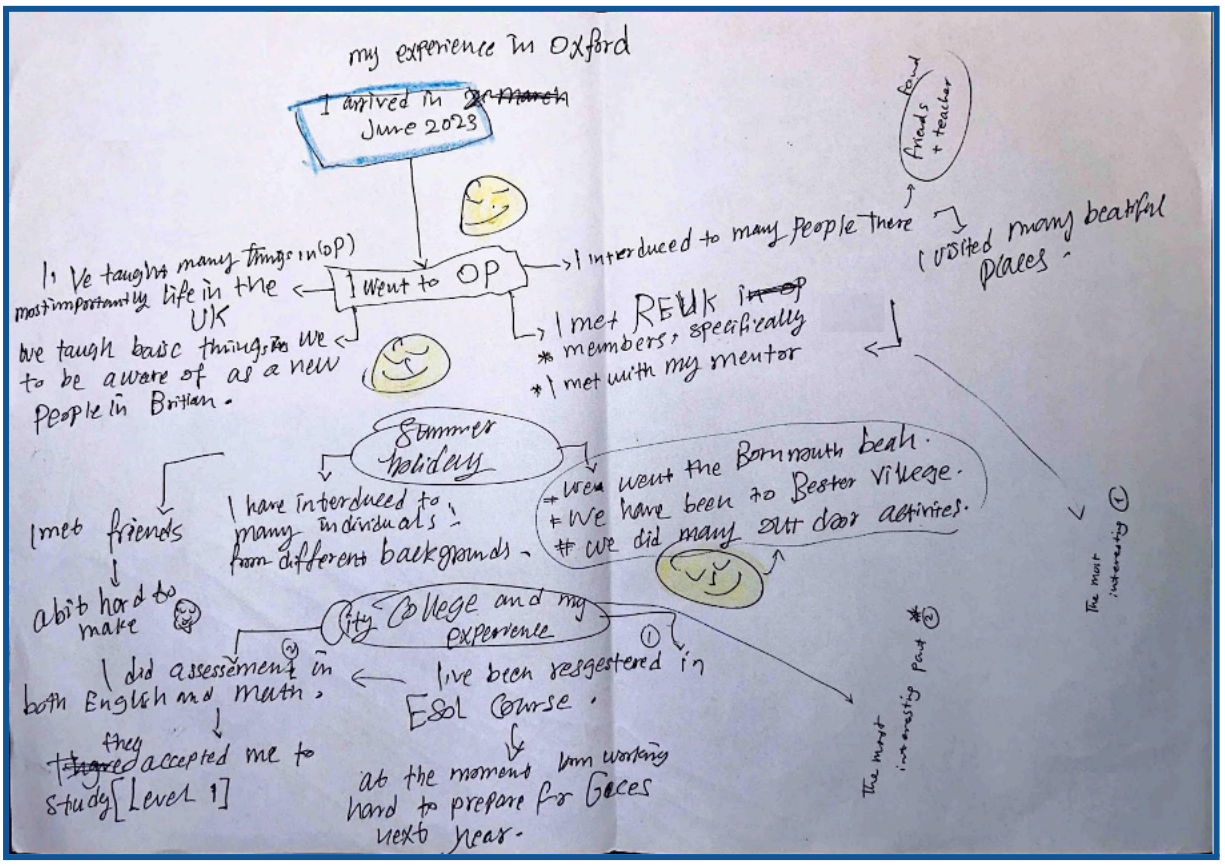

Figure 5. The educational journey of a young person in Oxford[5]

3.1.2. Challenges with accessing education

This section examines challenges with accessing education from the perspectives of key informants. Previous research shows that these challenges exist on a national scale and are not only found in Nottingham and Oxford. For instance, issues such as a shortage of teachers (UK Parliament Education Committee, 2023), inadequacy of school funding (National Education Union, 2023) and accommodation insecurity (Refugee Services Network, 2020) are evident in existing research as challenges affecting access to

[5] 'OP' in this figure represents the Orientation Programme, a welcome and induction programme for very newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). This programme is described in section 3.3.1 on promising practices.

education for young people from refugee backgrounds. McIntyre and Hall (2018) also outline challenges faced by headteachers in ensuring the inclusion of children from refugee backgrounds in their schools. This includes significant challenges related to a lack of resources, the centralisation of education funding and a reduction of regional autonomy, a growing focus on immigration control, and pressures placed on schools to improve educational performance based on narrow economistic measures.

Inadequate funding

Key informants described how limited human resources and funding within existing education provision could hinder access to education, resulting in a shortage of available places in both formal and non-formal settings.

> *"I think **funding is always an ongoing issue**" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

> *"We can't offer a place for them [young people], when classes are full. They need to either wait for the next year or they go on a waiting list, so somebody leaves. It is not that easy for us as an organisation to open up a new class, because you need a certain number of students to do that... We also need to hire another teacher. We don't have classrooms because we're fully timetabled anyway... **logistically it doesn't work**... We are reminded of budgets and things like that" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

Limited resources result in a limited number of places available, restricting the reach of such provisions and leaving many young people waiting for education.

> *"I think now we have also hit the snag that [name of a provision] only has a **limited capacity** for young people... so many of them, even if they arrive in the summer, can still be waiting" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"[Name of a provision] is the other college [that accepts young people out of education] that has been **pretty full**. I think at one point, they had like 60 students in one class" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Inadequate funding to support young people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds emerged as a key challenge in both cities, where young people may need to travel from surrounding, more rural areas to reach their education placement. Key informants described how organisations may be unable to provide bursaries or financial support to help young people cover transport costs. Therefore, with limited access to affordable transportation, especially in Oxford, funding can present a significant obstacle for learners with asylum-seeking backgrounds in accessing education.

> ***"Transport can be a big barrier to getting to education**, because you're unable to afford it... If you're not a UASC, you're in the kind of young adult range, then you're left to fend for yourselves. Bursaries is another challenge for young people [that they] come up against. Now we're at a stage where the money has all gone" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

> *"In rural areas... a lot of clients... **struggle to get in and out of the city for classes**. We're supposedly... do a free bus pass, but also accessing that has been difficult for some clients as well, so that's a bit more of a barrier for people" (local authority representative, Oxford).*

Key informants noted that inadequate funding was not only an issue in relation to access to education, but also influenced the quality of provision and the support available. For instance, they mentioned the importance of conducting a thorough assessment when young people arrive, to ensure support is tailored to their needs. However, this is not happening due to the large number of students these provisions receive.

> *"Just because of numbers [of students], we haven't got the funding or the money to be able to deal with having a **thorough initial assessment** and I think if we have a good knowledge about young people when they first arrive that can really help us to settle them quickly into their education, to make them feel safe" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

A particular area of under-funding and under-resourcing described by key informants was in relation to English as an Additional Language (EAL) support within schools, and ESOL provision within further education (FE) institutions. There is a demand for more of this support in educational provisions, as key informants described:

> *"We have been contacted by some schools... in Oxford, asking about **how to support these students** because schools who don't have even EAL coordinator, who even don't have anybody like this, really, really struggle" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

> *"There are students who are quite keen to express their dismay for not having English classes... the problem is that **there is a need for ESOL tutors**" (local authority representative, Oxford).*

Accommodation insecurity and transience

Key informants reported that young people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds may face accommodation insecurity and be regularly required to move between cities and towns. This causes significant disruption to young people's lives and to their education. Key informants described how young people face challenges continuing their education after being dispersed, often experiencing further delays and difficulties building up new support networks and making new friends, as well as a risk that their previous education might be disregarded.

> *"It has been really upsetting when young people are placed in a college in Nottingham and they're doing well, **they're starting to settle,** but they have turned 18 and got to leave foster care, got to get their own place and **they won't get accommodation** in Nottingham" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"Not only do they **lose all their social network and their friends,** but they're going to **end up out of education** for a chunk of time again. I don't think it's always explained to them, and I've had a couple this year who have been moved to [another city] and it's kind of been sold to them that they can just turn up there in January and wander into a college and continue their education from where they left" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"What's going to happen is that you're probably not going to get a place [in college]. And if you do get a place, it will be probably limited and certainly not what you were doing. So it's sort of **a step backwards for them**" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

As suggested in the first quote above, key informants noted that such changes in accommodation can intensify when an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child has turned 18 – a time when, in the eyes of the UK law, these young people become adults and so gradually transition out of care. During this time, the local authority must still provide them with some support, including a personal adviser and plan. However, some key informants highlighted the abrupt transition experienced by young people upon reaching the age of 18. They emphasised that unaccompanied young people suddenly move from a situation in which comprehensive support is provided to a situation of independent living, often leading to increased dropout rates from education and overall struggles for these young people. Some also pointed to a need for further support from leaving care workers in the process of transition. Key informants mentioned the issue of young people becoming homeless after turning 18 and receiving their asylum decision. This was particularly prevalent among Nottingham-based key informants:

> *"There is a problem in the social care system, when you get a young person that's got a foster carer and then they suddenly hit 18 and that's it. That's where we see a big drop out because they suddenly get moved into accommodation, on their own or shared. So* ***they've gone from having a real kind of wrapped around care system to where you've hit 18, you're off, you're on your own.****.. We see a lot of them struggle to attend after that or just struggle. They might have a link worker or they have a leaving care worker. But so often we hear from them that they never see these people, and so they've gone from having a really good social worker who's just helped them with everything to this, where they've sometimes never met them" (Educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"Once they gain their status, they become homeless. And we get comments from tutors at the college saying that they noticed* ***a fallen attendance or concentration once they get their status because then they're thinking of housing,*** *and they're encouraged to look at jobs rather than looking at continuing to study. It is a big part of what we find. When people are referred to our employment or careers guidance is that we keep repeating, just continue with your English, continue with your studies and it's almost like a battle against the JobCentre" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

Again, these issues are not specific to Oxford or Nottingham. For example, previous research has suggested that transitioning out of care can involve UASCs *"losing access to education, social care, financial security, shelter and accommodation and legal support"* (Chase, 2020: 440), and that many young people report not feeling prepared, and not being involved or consulted, in the transition (Meloni and Chase, 2017). Recent research has also highlighted the impact of dispersal policies and temporary accommodation on education for displaced children and young people, including the disruption caused by young people having to move out of the borough or city in which they are living and studying, often at short notice, resulting in longer commutes or in breaks to education (Ashlee, 2024). The research also highlighted that re-accessing education after moving can often be challenging (ibid).

Psychosocial wellbeing

Forced displacement can impact young people's psychosocial wellbeing and mental health, exacerbating feelings of anxiety, depression, and trauma, which in turn can hinder

their access to education (Fazel, 2018). Most of the young people who participated in focus groups are or were considered UASC. For UASC, the nature of their journey and separation from their families might have various effects, including anxiety, fear for their families' safety, and, in some cases, serious mental health consequences (Children's Society, 2018; Amnesty International, 2019). Evidence from this research suggests a reciprocal relationship between wellbeing and access to education. On the one hand, wellbeing issues, exacerbated by fears about the future, could hinder access to education by disrupting their ability to focus on learning and future planning:

> *"When they [young people] turn 18, suddenly they start having these trials to see whether they can stay in this country or need to be deported. It would put a lot of anxiety and* ***they're very much under pressure****. They cannot plan anything, they're saying 'what's the point of education, what's the point of learning?'" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

On the other hand, remaining out of education could lead to feelings of boredom and create poor psychosocial wellbeing, including signs of depression and other mental health issues.

> *"Young men, particularly in the hotels that I was working in, are* ***hugely isolated*** *because the local communities are very hostile. They're not able to even go out to the park and play football or whatever. There are* ***huge levels of boredom****. There are* ***huge levels of depression****. There are also levels of self-harm in those settings and that's mainly because people just don't have enough to do. [There is] lack of access to college and education, then being on a waiting list" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

The quote highlights how different issues, including lack of access to education, accommodation challenges, and discrimination and hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees, compound one another. The comment around hostility and isolation is supported by other recent research. In a study by Refugee Action, for example, more than one in 10 people living in temporary or contingency accommodation reported having experienced racism; while Hope Not Hate recorded 253 incidents outside hotels, hostels, and other accommodation centres housing refugees and asylum seekers in 2022, leaving their residents living in fear (Refugee Action, 2023).

Language barriers

Research suggests that a lack of English language skills poses a significant barrier to education (Alrawashdeh and Kunt, 2022). Almost all of the young people across both Oxford and Nottingham identified the language barrier as a key challenge throughout their educational journeys. Key informants similarly identified English language as a barrier to accessing education, particularly in preventing young people from accessing some FE courses when they do not meet English language entry requirements.

> *"When they arrive with very little to no English, then quite often the* ***college won't accept them****" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

In addition, key informants suggested that because of limited English language skills, provisions might not be able to identify if a young person has any special educational needs and requires additional support.

"If we identify any particular needs or emotional needs, we would then refer them through our safeguarding team or our wellbeing team for additional support. Sometimes it does not come out immediately, ***it comes out later when their language skills improve****" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

Limited digital skills

Many young people have experienced limited or disrupted education in their countries of origin or during their forced displacement (Abu-Ghaide and SIiva, 2022). Key informants described how this could result in gaps in their skills – particularly their digital skills – that could hinder their access to education in the UK.

"The first thing that our learners do when they make their way to us is they have an initial assessment, so we know what level of English and maths they have. The booking system is online... Everything is done online... but there is this ***big barrier for the learners not being able to use a computer properly****, not understanding the systems and everything else. So it was a big learning curve for all of us" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

*"****Everything is automated****, so all the young learners, if they're a looked after child, they do have an email account, but they might not be that competent at using it, for example, when we send the bus passes. But they are not able to find it... some of them have not used a computer at all" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

As the government issued a strategy for education providers and the technology industry to help improve and increase the effective use of technology in education (Department for Education, 2019), digital skills have become even more crucial for young people whose education has been disrupted.

Gendered barriers

A theme emerging from key informants' interviews was that access to education among some refugee communities could have gender-specific barriers. Sometimes gendered cultural norms, safety concerns, and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately affect girls' access to education and limit their opportunities. Based on the interviews, these issues particularly impact girls' access to non-formal education settings and/or further and higher education. Key informants suggested that some refugee families are not comfortable with their daughters being in mixed-gender environments. Despite this, girls still attend formal education, but their participation in some non-formal education is affected.

"There are definitely difficulties engaging the girls in non-formal education because it is such a male-heavy space. We have always said girls can come as well, but ***if you have 30 young boys and two girls, they're not going to want to come****... Sometimes there are real problems with kind of cultural aspects of families being OK with girls being in mixed education in the UK. And just the general kind of gender roles that appear, meaning they'll still be going to school and to college, but maybe families won't be as comfortable as with their girls accessing other educational opportunities. So yeah, that can be kind of an imbalance between maybe the boys" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Based on key informant interviews, some activities including sports require teamwork and social interaction, which can be challenging for some girls due to family gender norms and caregiving responsibilities. Access to these facilities and activities is also a barrier, particularly in Oxford, where many families live in more rural areas. Some girls find it difficult to get permission from their families to undertake longer journeys alone. Overall, compared to boys, girls seem to be more disconnected due to some family norms.

> *"Sometimes girls feel that they're expected to do traditional things such as sewing or perhaps drawing sometimes, story writing. But they're all quite **insular activities. It's not teamwork.** These are the activities that you kind of do by yourself and so they're not getting out and meeting... **They're disconnected** in that kind of way" (local authority representative, Oxford).*

Some female participants in group discussions said that they preferred not to join male-dominated environments, in particular in non-formal educational settings such as sports classes, and that women-only spaces would help them feel more comfortable.

> *"We do want sports facilities, but **just for girls**. But I could not find any just for girls in Nottingham" (young person, female, Nottingham).*

Age assessments

Children have specific age-related needs. This includes needs for care and support, health, and education. Age assessment is therefore part of assessing the needs of the child and meeting those needs through the provision of a range of services. If the young person is assessed as not being a child, responsibility for meeting the needs of that person will lie elsewhere. Hence, knowing the age of a person can be key to understanding and meeting their needs.

However, key informants identified age assessments as another challenge hindering access to education, particularly formal education – particularly if young people are age assessed as being older than they are, and are therefore unable to access school. This affects the opportunities available to them, including limiting them to ESOL courses. One practitioner commented, for example:

> *"If a person who has been age-assessed learns that they are too old to go into formal education in a mainstream school, what else do we have for them that isn't just an ESOL [course]? I have seen evidence of an age **assessment being so slow that it was irrelevant to us as a school,** but had it come through sooner I assume that young person would have been taken out of our institution and sent somewhere else. That is a **devastating limit to what that person might achieve**" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

As reflected in this quotation, the age assessment process could be slow and time-consuming. Despite the Home Office repeatedly claiming that adult asylum seekers are 'posing' as children, the work of organisations such as the Refugee Council shows that there is no evidence to support this. For instance, in 2021 the Refugee Council helped 219 children to show that they were under 18, although the Home Office was sure they were adults (Refugee Council, 2022).

3.2. Quality education

3.2.1. What is quality education?

Young refugees have an entitlement to an 'inclusive and equitable quality education' in their resettlement context (UNESCO, 2015). Previous research conducted by the research partners has led them to define quality education for learners from refugee backgrounds as a comprehensive approach that ensures inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning opportunities for all displaced individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances. It includes a safe and supportive learning environment, a culturally sensitive curriculum, qualified teachers, language support, and trauma-informed practices (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021; REUK, 2023). Quality education empowers young people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds to achieve academic success, fosters their socio-emotional wellbeing, and facilitates their integration into host communities, ultimately enabling them to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society.

3.2.2. Young people's experiences of quality education

Ordinariness

During focus groups, young people emphasised the importance of 'being like other teenagers', aligning with existing evidence that demonstrates how education provides young people with a much-needed sense of ordinariness (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021). Young people described how this sense of ordinariness emerged once they had found new friends and established supportive networks after a period of waiting.

> *"I was in Nottingham for four months, doing nothing. But I met **new friends from my country**. They showed me [name of a provision] to play football. It helped me **feel normal**. We play every Monday morning" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

Key informants elaborated on this and suggested that education provides a sense of stability and predictability to the lives of displaced young people, contributing to this sense of ordinariness.

> *"We are **their constant** [...] That's why holidays are so difficult for them. And being in a college or school, it is their **continuity and consistency"** (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

Feelings of safety

A safe space was described by young people as one in which they had no fear of prejudice or stigma. They reflected that being able to practise their religion, speak their language, and 'be themselves' brings a feeling of safety. When reflecting on the findings of the research in one of the EbLE group meetings, one of the group members said:

> *"I normally don't wear hijab, but did so during Ramadan. I was initially nervous about being out in public wearing the hijab in case it drew attention to me, but then I felt there is no difference, and it made me **feel accepted and safe**" (EbLE group member, female, Nottingham).*

McIntyre (2024) states that recognition and acceptance of young refugees' faith can help them to feel connected to their new place.

Moreover, the type of educational environment emerged as significant in creating or undermining a sense of safety. Young people expressed that when placed in an unwelcoming environment, their levels of anxiety notably escalate. The young people associated unwelcoming settings with feelings of insecurity and lack of safety.

> *"I **felt safe** at [a previous educational provision], I had **friends and supportive teachers**. Now I am studying [in another provision], my classmates are not friendly. It is difficult. We are always **feeling stressed** there" (young person, female, Nottingham).*

Young people arriving in resettlement contexts after periods of forced migration experience insecurity as they continue to face threats to their legal, emotional and psychological safety (McIntyre, 2021). Therefore, they seek environments where they feel secure and safe. Data from this research suggest that young people appreciate the welcoming behaviour of staff and the positive atmosphere of educational places. They expressed positive feelings towards environments where they can both learn and feel welcomed.

> *"People working at [name of a provision] are **nice and kind**. When we have big problems, we tell them and **they support us**. Me and my friends like here. We come every week" (young person, male, Oxford).*

> *"I was shy in primary school. Then I joined a football team. I made friends. It also made me feel more **comfortable**" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

Sense of Belonging

Young people stated that finding their interests and hobbies – often through accessing both formal and non-formal education provision – could help with building a sense of belonging.

> *"I think **most people care about safety and comfort.** It depends on what you like and your hobbies. My hobby is football. I think I am most comfortable when I play football. If you just arrived now, it will be really important for you to find out where you can go and feel comfy" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

Building meaningful relationships was another significant component in the sense of belonging described by group discussion participants. In particular, forming new friendships was identified as one of the most important elements of young people's education journey.

> *"I will never forget those [first] months, especially for me, here I am **alone, without my family**... It is difficult for me, until now, I couldn't find one girl, just one girl [from my country] here. **It is only me**. I am still not happy" (young person, female, Nottingham).*

> *"My friends and neighbours from my country **helped and made my life here a lot easier** (young person, male, Oxford)*

*"Four months without any education and without any friends. First class here at (name of a provision), **friends made it easier**. [Because] it is that feeling like there are **people from the same country, same age, same interests in things**" (young person, female, Nottingham).*

As mentioned in the last quotation above, finding people with common characteristics could foster a sense of belonging. Many young people highlighted the importance of finding people with common backgrounds in their new communities.

A sense of progression and succeeding

Evidence from this research indicates that having a sense of progression was important to young people. The data suggests that a sense of progression was evident among most of the young participants and has given them purpose and direction in their lives.

Moreover, young people had positive feelings and were encouraged when their hard work was appreciated. Consequently, this enhanced their sense of belonging as they felt valued and acknowledged.

*"[After showing pictures of him receiving trophies for his football skill] **I love football, this is my life now. My school say I am good at it**. I want to stay in Nottingham and join Nottingham Forest" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

*"I got some certificates during my last year; **I like it when I get one**. I want to continue my education in Oxford and go to university" (young person, male, Oxford).*

The role of support networks

The majority of participants expressed a strong determination to continue their education. Many highlighted that they have established friendships, joined new communities, and encountered supportive individuals, including teachers, case workers, and community members, whom they can rely on in times of need. For instance, teachers played a crucial role in supporting these young people throughout their learning journey. Whether in formal or non-formal settings, the young people appreciated teachers who helped them learn the language from scratch and provided support as they were adapting to the new system.

*"**My teacher helped me a lot** till I got to this level. Now I speak, read, write and communicate with people (young person, male, Oxford).*

*"After two years, I am getting better in English, I am happy here, **all teachers helped me** for it" (young person, female, Nottingham).*

Additionally, the role of social workers or support workers was frequently highlighted in supporting young people to access education, as described above. They helped young people with finding places, and in navigating admissions and communication with education provisions. Social workers and support workers serve as the primary point of contact for education providers for UASC as well as many families under resettlement schemes who require translation support or other assistance.

*"Having the support workers is really helpful because they've already got a link into the homes, **they're already trusted**. So for them to come*

and ask us or to talk to us, I think that's a really useful link" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).

As highlighted in this quotation, trust is a crucial component of the supportive relationships that networks provide for young people. Key informants underscored the importance of developing and sustaining trust between young people from refugee backgrounds and practitioners that support them:

> *"What I kind of tell the young people is that **I really hope that you find an adult here**, whether there is a teacher, whether it's a social worker, whether it's a support worker, **whoever that you can trust and that you can go to about**, you know, **when you're feeling bad or when you need support.** The way it really works is if someone's struggling, they tell their social worker or they tell the teacher whatever, and then they would do a referral to refugee resources" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

As Ni Raghallaigh (2014) explains, young people from refugee backgrounds can find it challenging to trust people as a result of past experiences of trauma and betrayal, anxiety around the consequences of telling the truth, not being accustomed to trusting others, being mistrusted by others when navigating an asylum system built around suspicion and disbelief, and not having strong and long-lasting relationships with others. As such, Hynes (2003) and Ni Raghallaigh (2014) argue that developing and sustaining strong and trusting relationships over time should be a priority for practitioners working with refugee communities.

3.2.3. The importance of place

In the following images (Figures 6 and 7), young people drew the important places in their cities. Places that can be seen in these images include schools and colleges, sports facilities, religious places, and shopping centres. Our group discussion findings indicate that sports facilities and clubs were particularly significant for boys. They made substantial differences in their lives in the UK, enabling them to find friends, discover their enthusiasm and interests, and connect with a new community.

> *"I joined a football team in our school. I made friends, it also **made me feel more comfortable.** So when I came to secondary school, I already had friends from football. I was shy, but became more confident after that" (young person, male, Nottingham).*

Additionally, in Figure 7, the young person emphasised the importance of the bus station near the place he is living and stated that "the bus station is very important to me, because without it, I cannot go anywhere" (young person, male, Nottingham). Many young people mentioned the importance of shopping centres, as they provide opportunities to hang out with friends.

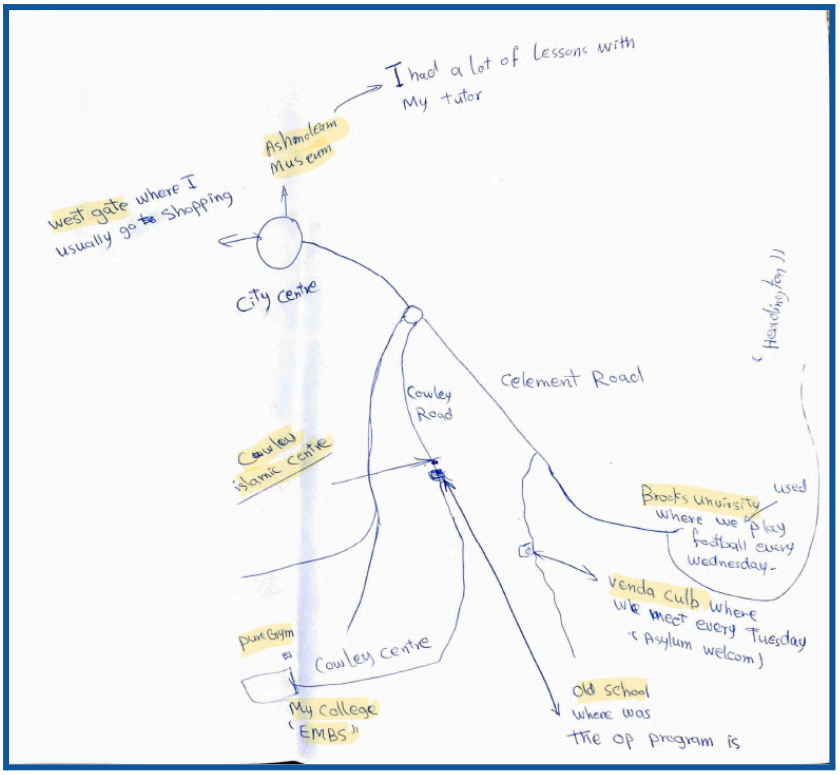

Figure 6. A drawing of important places in Oxford

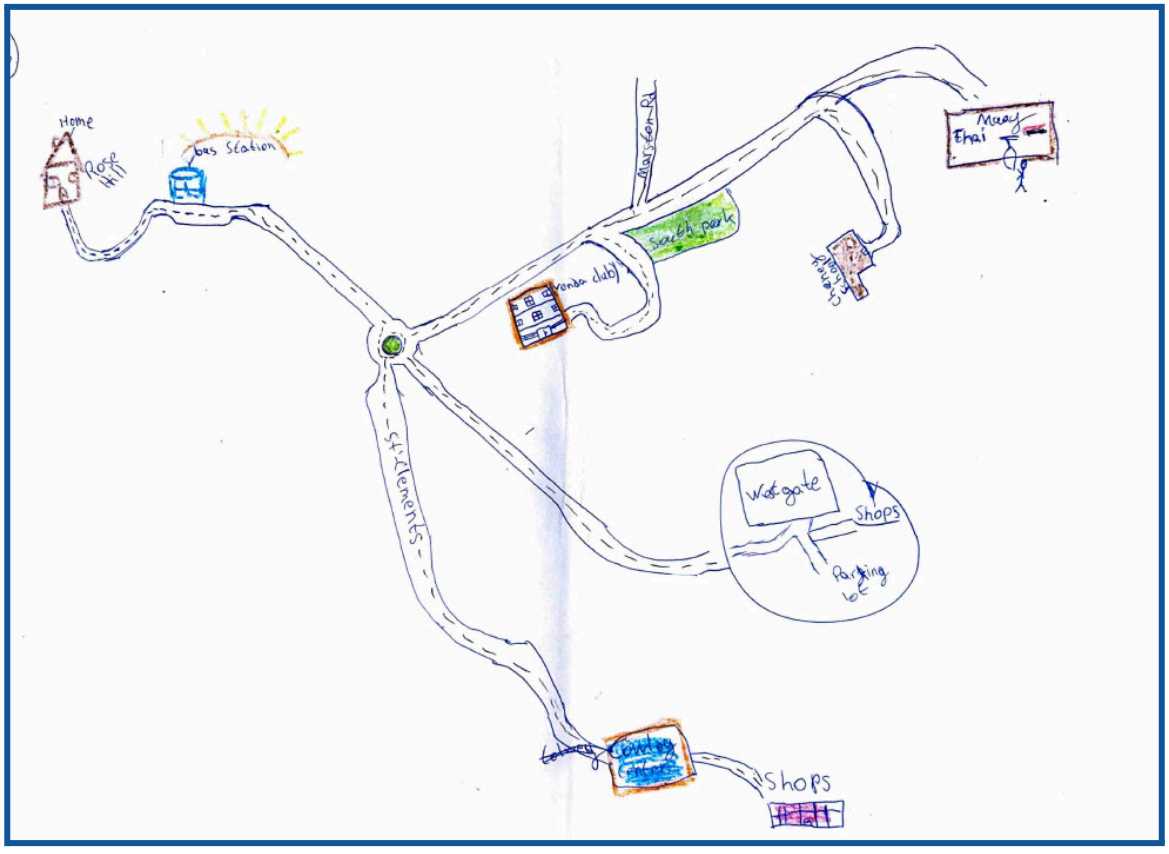

Figure 7. A drawing of important places in Oxford

3.2.4. The impact of uncertain immigration status

Not all young people who participated in this research experienced quality education in the same way. Unlike participants who found friends, accessed education, found a routine, and felt a sense of progress, young people who were waiting for decisions about their status described the situation differently. While they might have formed friendships and accessed education, they reported confusion due to a lack of a clear vision about their future. Consequently, they do not feel motivated to continue their education. A young person in this situation conveyed his feelings in the following drawing:

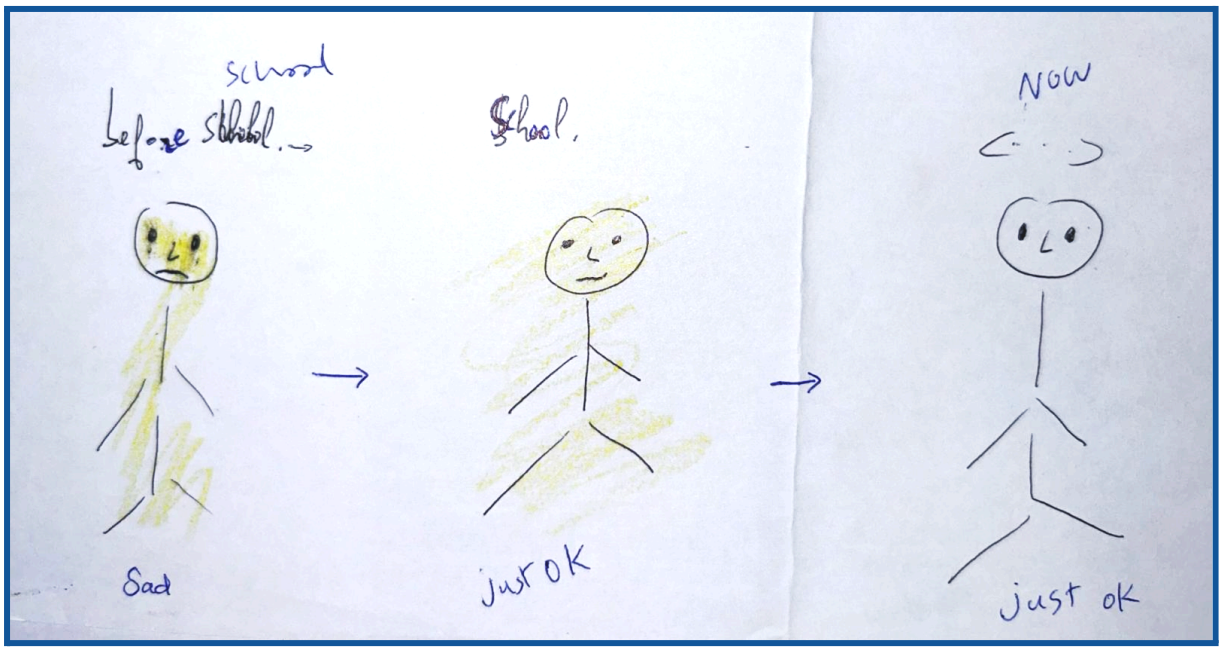

Figure 8. Drawing of a young person's education journey while still waiting for their status

3.3. Promising practices in Oxford and Nottingham

This section details initiatives identified by key informants as demonstrating good practice in supporting education access and quality for refugee and asylum-seeking young people in Oxford and Nottingham. This is not a comprehensive review of all the good practices in both places. Rather, it is an overview of promising practices reported by key informants, in terms of education provision for refugee and asylum-seeking young people in Nottingham and Oxford. The main characteristics of these practices and how provisions implement them are discussed.

3.3.1. Support to access education

While some young people experienced challenges in accessing education in Oxford and Nottingham, promising practices emerged to assist them. The support provided by these initiatives varies, ranging from helping young people to navigate the admissions process for formal education to offering flexible non-formal education for young people out of education while they are waiting for an education place. For instance, an initiative in Nottingham called BEGIN (Basic Educational Guidance in Nottinghamshire) acts as a central hub, coordinating referrals between learners and education providers for ESOL

services and facilitating communication to ensure access to appropriate educational opportunities.

> *"BEGIN started as a **one-stop shop**. So anyone in Nottingham City or Nottinghamshire who wants ESOL will ring them or apply to them. BEGIN keeps all their details on a database, and they do what we call an initial screening. They'll ring that learner up. They'll check for their eligibility if they're a part-time 16+ years old, they'll check how long they've been in the country, what the first language is. They'll get a rough idea of what their level is and then BEGIN refers them to whatever provider is the best fit for that learner. That really helps us" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"I think that the role that BEGIN plays is really key and really crucial in keeping that communication going. So they will refer to us, but they will ask other people. So they will ask the formal providers first and then come to us if their formal providers don't have space, and we will refer back to them for them to go back into formal education. I think there's quite a lot of communication that goes on through BEGIN **as the central hub** and further information, advice and guidance" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

Examples of promising practices include those providing tailored education to young people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds. Some of these are initiatives instigated by mainstream education providers, including colleges, such as EMBS Community College (Ethnic Minority Business Service) in Oxford.

> *"It is challenging when provisions fill up, and there have been times when you know **everywhere is full.** What often happens is that **EMBS tends to be the most flexible,** and they try and get another teacher and then they rejig their provision so that they can offer more classes" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Similarly, other formal provisions, such as Nottingham College, have recently adjusted their plans and classes to include more young people from refugee backgrounds. For instance, new classes for pre-entry level students have been established. The college also created another class to include learners coming later during the year. Another initiative is NEST (Nottingham Education Sanctuary Team). NEST is a specialist provision aimed at young people aged 15-19 who are new arrivals in Nottingham. This age group typically struggles to secure places in mainstream schools and colleges. NEST is one of the sites of the Hospital and Home Education Learning Centre.[6] NEST prepares young people for mainstream education, providing up to a year of sustained support.

> *"[Previously] anybody newly arrived in Nottingham, there was **no space at college**. They would have to wait until next academic year to start their education, which is part of the reason NEST came into existence because we recognised there were young people not accessing education, particularly between October and the spring" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

In addition, some non-formal provisions have created spaces that help young people access learning opportunities. An example is REUK's Orientation Programme (OP) in Oxford, a short-term bridging programme which includes education for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In addition to English language lessons, the OP provides

[6] You can read more about the Hospital and Home Education Learning Centre here: https://www.hhe.nottingham.sch.uk/

different sessions on various aspects of life in the UK, such as personal and public safety, wellbeing, and more.

> *"We found that unaccompanied minors were arriving and then they were **waiting maybe several months for school**, and they were just sitting, **having nothing to do**. They have had terrible journeys just in the past, but they don't have a hopeful activity to do. So this started specifically to address that... The Orientation Programme is a four-week program that any new unaccompanied asylum-seeking child arriving in Oxfordshire attends. It was designed for not just English lessons but also to teach them about living in this country and all the things they need to know to live here and understand the culture and understand the laws and things like that... The sessions include topics like the asylum process, respect and consent, internet safety, laws, and wellbeing" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Non-formal provisions have also helped young people join sports clubs or have even established such spaces themselves. For instance, Asylum Welcome, a charity based in Oxford, offers Venda Youth Club. It includes activities for young people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds, such as pool, table football, music, films, and video games. In the holidays, they run trips such as swimming, climbing, ice skating, and visits to the beach. They have recently started a girls' group that runs weekly outdoor activities and provides mutual support.

While facing challenges of inadequate funding and resources, organisations in Oxford and Nottingham have creatively used volunteer efforts to facilitate access to education for young people. For instance, Jacari in Oxford offers tailored English language learning opportunities for young EAL students through weekly tutoring sessions conducted by volunteer university and sixth-form student mentors.

Additionally, Nottingham City has recently set up a search system for school places, allowing families or support workers to view school availability based on their postcodes.

3.3.2. Providing quality education

In addition to promising practices in facilitating access to education, several promising practices in providing quality education were identified through the research.

Psychosocial support

Firstly, key informants discussed the importance of providing psychosocial wellbeing support for young people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds in addition to curricular activities. There are different ways in which psychosocial support has been provided, including counselling support, help with future pathways, and support with community building.

In terms of providing counselling support, NEST, based in Nottingham, not only provides curricular lessons but also focuses on young people's wellbeing. It is full-time, offering an academic curriculum leading to externally recognised qualifications, while also providing holistic education opportunities through a programme of activities, career guidance and work experience, alongside psychotherapy. It has counsellors who help address wellbeing issues among students:

*"Some of these young people have got incredibly **traumatic backgrounds** and expecting them to go and learn in a formal setting and to kind of behave in the way that we want them to, it is not necessarily conducive to their learning. At NEST, they have a much broader spectrum of curriculum and a little bit **more of a holistic approach**. I think they have counsellors there... They're a really good example of a kind of cohesive and complete, rounded education... Because that's good for their mental health, which obviously impacts on their ability to learn as well" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

Another provision that provides counselling for young people is Oxford Spires Academy in East Oxford. Their representative highlighted the need for such support, emphasising how helpful it is for some young people.

*"We've got very traumatised young people. They **can't concentrate.** They **can't sleep.** They've got these nightmares and we do try to provide counselling for them. But it's not always possible, because we don't have enough staff, or we don't have enough access to counselling, but that's what they really need. Whenever we can offer that, that really helps the students" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

Nottingham College also has wellbeing support resources including wellbeing mentors and training for these students:

"The college is very good in wellbeing support. We've got wellbeing support and two other wellbeing mentors who mainly look after adults but will help with our teenagers" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).

Sometimes the promising practices provide other forms of support, such as guidance and advice on future pathways to help young people plan for their futures. Some practitioners have identified this as a challenging step for young people's educational journey in the UK and tried to address that:

*"Sometimes **being able to actually focus** on their studies and focus on what they want to do next **is really difficult** for them. [I say to them] tell me what you want to do and we'll find a way of getting you there" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

*"The collaboration I've done this year [in British Red Cross] is with Nottingham Trent University, so we did like **campus tours,** first staff and students to explain, you know, what student life is like, how to apply for courses. So it's just given our service users **a taste of what it could look like** going to one of the Nottingham universities" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

Supporting the integration of young people into communities and facilitating community building is another crucial form of assistance reported by the key informants. Promising practices support young people to create communities and connections with each other.

*"We [at Nottingham College] create a community through the activities that we do together. There is a lot of **focus on sports, arts and food**. They're kind of the three things that definitely are pillars of building those connections between different cultural groups that we see. They share food and they love to play different music from where they're from, and things like football and boxing really brings them together*

and give them a sense of purpose" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).

Overall, key informants emphasised that the most crucial aspect of promising practices lies in treating young people as individuals, and in ensuring that they receive the attention, validation and recognition they need.

> *"We [at Asylum Welcome] often see them as kind of this one group that we're supporting, but actually for them to feel like they're individuals and they're being seen for kind of their individuality and their desires and where they're from, these things are important,* ***a valued individual within the larger group****... They don't have a family around them, and they are kind of 1 in 100 young people being looked up by social services and they don't get that level of attention that other young people may see at that age. It can feel a little bit lost in this mass. They love coming into the office [of Asylum Welcome], because people know their name and know who they are and know what their story is" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Leisure and recreational activities embedded into education provision

Educational leisure programmes represent another element of promising practice. Key informants suggested that these activities can foster cognitive, social, and physical skills through active engagement in learning that is experienced as joyful, meaningful, socially interactive, and engaging. For example, one key informant described how Vanclaron, a provision in Nottingham, integrated recreational activities into their curriculum where students learn new skills and concepts through hands-on experiences in areas like arts, culture, sports, nature, and more. They also mentioned how this approach could help support the mental wellbeing of people who are waiting for long periods before gaining access to formal education and provide a break from their daily routine:

> *"We do artistic stuff around kind of nature walking, sharing stories from different cultures and traditions around nature. We also did sports and exercises, and we did community walks together. So those weekly sessions were a* ***real godsend*** *to people and they would sit and wait for me to arrive because it was exciting to see what was coming each week. It was a* ***break from their daily routine*** *of just sitting there waiting [to access formal education]" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

Another key informant highlights the dimensions of these playful and engaging activities, through which students not only pursue academic goals but also learn about social and wellbeing concepts.

> *"We [at Asylum Welcome]* ***play games****, we try to get people to come in and do different workshops, whether it is art workshop, or it is sport or music... These activities are technically more for the social, mental wellbeing side, but I think the* ***educational side of these things*** *is like there's a big part of it" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Family-like relationships

Young people tended to describe promising educational practices as having *"family-like ties"*, or what Weston describes as the *"families we choose"* (1997). Studies illuminate how

UASC form close, family-like ties, not only with friends and their families but also in institutional settings, NGOs and foster families (Kauhanen and Kaukko, 2020).

Within educational settings, young people in focus groups associated a positive relationship with supportiveness, trust, and responsiveness. These reliable, trustworthy, and supportive relationships were often characterised as a sense of 'having a family' and 'being at home':

> *"NEST made me feel normal. We visited London, galleries, universities, cinemas together. I made **friends** here. It feels like a **family**, feels like **home"** (young person, male, Nottingham).*

Young people reported that family-like relationships bring them happiness, support, and comfort, which may in turn facilitate their progress in education.

> *"I am **happy** here, like a family. All my teachers **help** me, friends **help** me with some stuff, I get help of friends like [in] translation, [they] tell me how to use the gym, I have a social worker that **helps me with everything"** (young person, male, Oxford).*

> *"EMBS is my **favourite place**. My teachers helped me with my English and maths. Now I am preparing for GCSE" (young person, male, Oxford).*

Additionally, key informants emphasised the importance of long-term support, commitment and good communication in developing such positive relationships.

> *"I have worked with these young people for a few years now and I'm **still in touch** with students. Our very first students will still message me. They still let me know how they are. We have quite a few years of alumni now that are **still coming back** and telling us, because they know that **we care about them"** (key informant, Nottingham).*

Fostering a feeling of being heard, and of receiving attention as an individual in a warm and welcoming environment, was reported by young people and key informants as important in creating family-like ties within education provisions. Meanwhile, having responsive and approachable staff was described as a key element.

> *"Here [at NEST] **they care about us, here they know us**" (young person, female, Nottingham)*

> *"**I notice them** even if they're very quiet, even if I know them. **I get to know them**, and I ask them if they're OK because they have got so much going on in their lives" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"We're very big on a **warm welcome** and really being **encouraging and being gentle and kind**... and making sure that people are nice to each other. It is much about valuing them and being sensitive to whatever might come up and that comes up. I think in the evaluations as well that they [young people] feel supported and cared, and they say that the feeling of being supported means a lot" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Another support mentioned by the key informants to enhance the overall wellbeing of young people who might feel disconnected from their home countries is helping them with community building. For example, schools identify and connect children from the

same backgrounds, or non-formal provisions encourage young people to do volunteer tasks within their communities to find new connections:

> *"The schools [in Oxford] try and **identify a couple of kids that can speak the same language**. Luckily in Oxford, we are quite diverse, so they [schools] will often make the effort to find a child or a couple of children that can speak their language and get them to do a bit of peer mentoring and look after them" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

> *"We've had some young people help on the food bank, which is being **great for their confidence,** so that their language skills, because you have to interact with a lot of people and volunteers from the UK that they have to work as a team together" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Places for growth and success

Within educational settings, success is typically measured using performance indicators such as test results, completion rates, and other objective measures (Nysterrom, 2018). However, new arrivals face a number of challenges and barriers to accessing the dominant knowledge in the English educational system. Therefore, there is a need for an alternative conceptualisation of educational successes, which is multidimensional and encompasses indicators of future social relations and inclusion in the new society (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021).

As explained by key informants, promising educational practices are places where young people can thrive and flourish. In other words, these are the places where educational success and progression happen. Key informants stressed the significance of adjusting definitions of success to match the circumstances of young people, which includes both academic achievement and the development of psychosocial skills and resilience in their lives.

> *"There's one particular boy who had no literacy, nothing. So we thought, let's just focus on literacy and we won't focus too much on learning lots of words. Now he can read three-letter words. And that's just four weeks. He's worked a lot. It is really great to see that. To me, that is such a success. Because he's much **better prepared for life** here" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

> *"For me success is the fact they despite their background, **they come to classes every week** and they make friends with fellow service users" (key informant, Nottingham)*

> *"I can think of a couple of examples where I can only describe them as looking sort of shell shocked like [soldiers in] World War II, so traumatised by some of their experiences, but by the end of their time with us, even if they have not made huge steps academically, **they have made huge steps with their mental health** and how they were feeling and that they were able to talk and were able to recognise that their mental health is important because for so many of cultures mental health isn't spoken about, and especially young males... Some of the biggest successes I have seen are **young people coming out the other side of that** because once they can come out the other side of that, that's when they can start having successes in other areas, especially their academic areas" (key informant, Nottingham)*

This multi-dimensional approach to success helps support young people to thrive and succeed in different ways. Young people build new relationships which are characterised by trust and commitment, improve their mental health and find new interests, as well as "being able to navigate their lives and being able to cope more" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).

Flexibility

Key informants emphasised the importance of flexibility in educational provisions when supporting young people from refugee backgrounds, as this enables tailored approaches that address their diverse needs and challenges. There are different ways in which provisions showed flexibility to include young people from refugee backgrounds, such as finding ways to include children waiting for a place in formal education provision or considering different cultural values in educational settings. For instance, some provisions in Oxford and Nottingham employed creative and flexible strategies to provide access to education for young people who arrived late or lacked previous education. As an example, despite the overwhelming number of enrolment applications, the City of Oxford College has facilitated access to education by offering support sessions for online admissions. Additionally, they ensured that every student could start their classes promptly, resulting in all students being successfully enrolled within two weeks.

> *"Our enrolment team and the admissions teams were processing many applications for the whole of the college and **they couldn't get around everybody**... And we did have support sessions booked in Oxford where people could come in and go to the admissions teams to ask for help with the forms. But the reality was that because it all got so busy, they couldn't support them properly. Because we didn't want the learners to not be in college, we said bring them into class, **let them start one by one**. I will take them out of their lesson and sit with them and do the enrolment form with them and get it sorted so that we get them all done" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

Likewise, Nottingham College adjusted its plans and classes to include more young people from refugee backgrounds. For instance, Nottingham College previously did not accept learners at the pre-entry level despite high demand, and instead signposted them to other provisions. However, they have recently established a pre-entry level class to accommodate these learners. In addition, it has created another class to include learners coming later during the year.

> *"This year we have proper **pre-entry classes for 16 to 18 year olds.** In previous years we've referred them to Catch22[7] if they've been pre-entry. This year we've got some funding for that. So we've got two pre-entry classes and there's a lot of pre-entry learners" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

> *"The College only has one intake. So if we're full in September, there's no more room... For the first time, we did start a second class after the October half term just **because there was a need for that**" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

[7] Catch22 College delivers qualifications and builds skills in young people aged 16-19 (or from 14 if electively home educated), enabling them to progress on to further education, training or employment.

Promising practices have also demonstrated flexibility in terms of considering and respecting the cultural and religious values of young people. For example, a practitioner at Nottingham College highlighted how the college addressed Muslim students' need to perform their religious rituals on Fridays.

> *"We want to respect their culture and respect their routines, and it can be quite difficult when you're in an English mainstream setting... We try not to timetable lessons on a Friday afternoon. So for me, I teach on a Friday, but we only teach in the morning. So we're finished by 12 o'clock so that they can go to **Friday prayers**, and I know most teachers are doing the same. There's only a handful of lessons on a Friday afternoon, and I think NEST were doing the same. We also offer a prayer room" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

Another example comes from a former practitioner at NEST, where they tailored sports classes to encourage girls who were uncomfortable in mixed-gender classes. To address the issue of girls' participation, NEST offered girls-only classes where they could participate comfortably.

> *"When I worked at NEST, we made **sports as a part of the curriculum** and obviously girls' numbers were much lower than our boys' numbers typically. So I used to get involved with them, I used to join in with them, and I could get them engaged. And we also did **sessions for girls only.** So we did kickboxing with our girls, and it was really empowering for them. We had a closed room. They could take their headscarves off, shut the curtain, shut the doors and they absolutely loved it. And it was something that they all had really positive feedback" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

Inclusion

Promising practices create inclusive environments for young people, where they are welcomed and valued regardless of their backgrounds. Key informants suggested that inclusion can take various forms, such as establishing EAL classrooms for students with lower English skills and having diversity among staff and students, as well as smaller initiatives like providing bilingual dictionaries for different languages.

Figure 9. An EAL classroom, Bicester School, Oxford

For instance, Bicester School in Oxford has provided different places for their students to feel included such as an EAL classroom and multi-faith prayer room. Students decorate the room with posters and flags representing their countries and gather together to participate in various activities.

> *"The EAL classroom is a nice room. During lunchtime activities, which are additional to their lessons, they [young people] can come here and use different resources. We can, you know, just* ***support them with learning English****. We've got different board games as well, like language board games. So it's like* ***a relaxed way, a different way of learning*** *but also having the space to kind of feel happy and mixing with English students because sometimes they bring English friends as well, which is good because of the language as well. But they have this safe space if they want" (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

As key informants argue, having diverse individuals within the provision could foster a sense of inclusion, as young people may find others with similar backgrounds, thus facilitating connections and a sense of belonging.

> *"The diversity of our population [at Djanogly City Academy] is such that* ***no one ever feels out of place****. No one walks in and thinks, oh, there's no one else like me. There's always someone like everybody else because we're so diverse. It's one of the best things about us" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

*"I guess finding themselves [young people] in a new situation, a new classroom with people, maybe not from their country, that is a real confidence hit, and we find that people come along to classes and sessions more if they **find someone from their community** who's also from a similar background" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

The inclusion of staff from diverse backgrounds would also enhance the provision, enabling better support for young people.

*"For the homes for Ukraine, in some areas, there were **parents** who were trained in education. So they were employed by the schools... Most of the schools say that **they were invaluable, especially for communicating with the parents**" (representative of local authority, Oxford).*

3.4. Lessons from Oxford and Nottingham

3.4.1. Strong network of stakeholders

Findings highlight that a strong network of stakeholders, including organisations supporting refugees, education provisions and parents, is crucial for enhancing refugee education. This network helps with facilitating knowledge sharing, efficient resource coordination, and concerted efforts to address young people's particular situations.

The research pointed to the existence of a robust collaborative network amongst stakeholders in Oxford and Nottingham, where different actors work together in a cooperative environment, mutually supporting one another to address shared challenges.

*"I think collaboration among stakeholders works really well in Oxford. We have good relationships. We are **very involved and linked with different agencies**" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

These networks in Oxford and Nottingham exhibit several common and notable characteristics.

Firstly, key informants mentioned that although all stakeholders are involved in these networks, there is usually one (or more) focal point serving as principal point(s) of contact for coordination and exchange of information. In Nottingham, for example, BEGIN connects different education stakeholders through its multi-stakeholder Steering Group comprising Nottingham College, local authorities, community organisations, and relevant services. Through this network, BEGIN is able to signpost to different services across areas like benefits, careers, and English conversation groups (BEGIN, n.d.).

Similarly, in Oxford, the OP has established strong partnerships with various organisations, including social services, virtual schools, specific schools and colleges offering language provision. Besides, they actively refer individuals to organisations contributing to a robust network of support services in Oxfordshire (Refugee Education UK, 2024).

Recognising the importance of networks, some organisations designate dedicated roles to facilitate coordination and foster networking among the relevant stakeholders.

*"We have communication with other related organisations as there's a **project coordinator in each organisation** and we could exchange useful information and other opportunities" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

Secondly, these networks comprise a diverse array of stakeholders, including those from educational institutions, social service organisations, local authorities, and others.

> *"We [at our NGO] are **liaising all the time with different agencies**, such as the Virtual School or social services" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

Based on the data and previous research (Siarova and van der Graaf, 2022; UNESCO, 2005), effective inclusive education for students with refugee backgrounds relies on extensive interaction and continuous engagement between the practice, research and policy levels. The complex needs and circumstances of students require a more comprehensive collaboration among schools, communities, service providers and non-formal educators to ensure students can reach their full potential in education. According to past research (Siarova and van der Graaf, 2022; UNESCO, 2005), engagement with stakeholders is important for the design of policies and practices, their evaluation for the identification of uniform success factors and the dissemination of research findings to policymakers and society.

3.4.2. Tailored and holistic support

A holistic approach in education considers the overall development of a child, including emotional, social, cognitive, and physical aspects. This approach addresses the various needs of young people in the face of trauma and displacement. According to key informants, recognition of a holistic approach is significant as it suggests an understanding that student needs extend beyond academic achievement and draws a link between mental health and learning. This aligns with a holistic perspective that recognises the connection between a student's wellbeing and their educational outcomes. Hence, identifying mental health needs and having a wellbeing team would be helpful in supporting young people's educational journey.

> *"We [at Djanogly City Academy] use our EAL department to **support their transition into mainstream**. During that process, if we identify any particular needs, emotional needs, we would then refer them through our safeguarding team or our wellbeing team for additional support and then we will seek whatever support the children need" (educational representative, Nottingham).*

Addressing the mental health needs of young people is not only focused on counselling sessions; promising practices in Nottingham and Oxford employ various methods to enhance mental wellbeing of young people. These include organising trips and activities that promote bonding and teamwork, increasing exposure to local culture, and helping young people discover new interests. Some key informants highlight the potential for traditional mental health support to be alienating for people from different cultural backgrounds. They suggest that engaging in activities that stimulate the mind and promote personal growth could be more beneficial in engaging and mobilising young people's potential. For instance, encouraging individuals to explore and articulate their hopes and dreams is presented as a valuable form of mental stimulation.

> *"Often mental health support can be very alienating, particularly for people from different cultures where there's a certain language of sort of wellness that's used. So I do think that mental stimulation rather than mental health support. **Mental stimulation is the key thing** that can be provided. **So language skills and the kind of discussion about hopes, dreams, aspirations, care, guidance and advice, discussion,***

> ***cultural, educational tools,*** *things to do with cultural traditions or understanding better their environment, and also feeling that they're able to share stuff about their environment that can be educational to others. I think that all of that is what is more useful … because your capacity and your potential is being mobilised" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

In Nottingham, schools within Archway Learning Trust[8] are actively raising awareness about forcibly displaced people through a range of initiatives, including collective learning sessions focused on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers and engagement in local charity efforts to support young mothers and children in refugee camps. The schools promote equality, justice, and diversity through staff and student working groups that contribute to a 'sanctuary' environment. Additionally, it celebrates language heritage and multiculturalism, with a particular focus on supporting EAL students, ensuring diversity and inclusion are central to its educational mission.

> *"We train all of our staff…whether they're working as a classroom teacher, a pastoral leader, or a site team member as a cleaner, we all need to have an awareness of what EAL means, and to celebrate and raise the profile of different cultures in the school. So that's my kind of mantra with the [Archway] trust, and we have a School of Sanctuary approach that … So for me, the vision since 2017 has been about having that* ***pastoral care, inclusive nature, and celebratory nature of everything that is EAL*** *at the heart of all that we do. That means we have to make sure that we induct our students when they first arrive, make them feel welcome, make them feel secure and safe before we worry about their education system straight away" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

3.4.3. Strong links between formal and non-formal provision

There are different ways in which formal and non-formal education provisions work together to support the education of young people with refugee backgrounds in Oxford and Nottingham. These include:

Information sharing: Formal provisions can facilitate the connection of young people and their parents to non-formal opportunities. On other occasions, this exchange can occur in reverse, with non-formal channels also directing individuals to formal education options.

> *"Usually the non-formal places in Nottingham will come to Nottingham College and NEST [to reach young people]. The College, NEST and Catch22 are all going to be made up of young people that are just like them and then* ***once they make their friends, that's when they maybe start accessing the non-formal forms of education*** *because they don't want to go on their own" (educational practitioner, Nottingham).*

Bridging the gap: Sometimes non-formal provisions step in to offer learning opportunities while young people are awaiting placement in formal education settings, bridging the period of waiting with alternative educational opportunities. Some key informants highlight non-formal education providers' role as a "stepping stone" to help young people transition into formal education. The following quotes underscore the

[8] Archway Learning Trust is a multi-academy trust with primary, secondary and sixth form academies across Nottingham and Derby.

temporary and supplementary nature of non-formal provisions for this population while they await access to formal pathways.

> *"The teaching [in non-formal provisions] is all **very informal** so like conversational English and other things for people that can't access colleges. So their rule is mainly to **fill in the gaps** where formal education cannot" (NGO representative, Oxford).*

> *"For me, we are **a stepping stone**; We're there to help the young people get into a formal education. Hopefully we do **provide them with a community**. So by attending our provision when they are waiting for formal education, hopefully that gives them a little bit of something even if it's not everything or the perfect solution" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

Enhancement: Non-formal education can provide young people with additional support, resources, and skills that complement their formal learning experiences. Non-formal educational provisions play a valuable role in enhancing young people's knowledge, particularly in developing their English literacy skills:

> *"I'm definitely **seeing progression** in the English level of young people in the way they form their sentences and how their vocabulary is expanding. For me, because having teaching experience overseas, I think it's really **important to have fun while you learn English** and be practical like hands-on. So I think the comments that I tend to hear is I've had a lot of fun today and I really enjoyed this" (NGO representative, Nottingham).*

There are other ways that non-formal support young people's educational journey alongside formal provisions. For instance, a school practitioner in Oxford highlighted how Jacari (a non-formal provision) supports their shared mission to support young people's education both directly and indirectly.

> *With Jacari, we [as a school] have sometimes got feedback. We've got a meeting with Jacari coordinator from time to time. So we know what's going on. And I think they helped a lot. These volunteers go into houses, so if there is any issue, they can always **fill the gap**. We had a student who was placed in a foster family who were not really looking after him. So the coordinator was able to feed back and then we could just do something about it and he was moved out of his family as a result... It's a nice link and something that we would not be able to find out ourselves... [additionally] If families don't have English as well, some show this the volunteer can help with. Like **translating letters,** whatever they've got then either school, school reports, and so on. I would imagine if a school report comes and a parent doesn't understand, I'm sure Jacari's tutors can help (educational practitioner, Oxford).*

In summary, formal and non-formal education provisions in Oxford and Nottingham complement each other in supporting the educational journeys of young people through information sharing, bridging gaps, enhancing skills and knowledge, and providing additional resources to each other. By working together and leveraging their respective strengths, these provisions offer a comprehensive support system to address the diverse needs of young people.

Chapter 4: Discussion

This chapter highlights the findings from the study in relation to each of the research questions set out in Section 2.3.

How do young people with refugee backgrounds newly arrived in Oxford and Nottingham experience and navigate the process of getting into formal and non-formal education?

For many of the participants in this research, the initial stages after arriving in the UK were daunting, often involving significant periods of waiting and delays in accessing education, as well as a sense of loneliness and detachment. Many described their first weeks and months as the most challenging part of their journey. However, most of the young people also reported a sense of excitement and were looking forward to continuing their education.

A range of both formal and non-formal education opportunities exist within Oxford and Nottingham. These range from short-term bridging programmes to longer term support, and may take place within or outside of mainstream education spaces. Young people find out about these opportunities in different ways, including through social workers and community networks. In particular, social workers or support workers often play an important role in supporting young people to access education, including helping them to identify the schools, and assisting with admission and communication. Some newly arrived young people were able to find education provisions with the help of their community members.

Despite the fact that a range of provisions exists in Oxford and Nottingham, there are also numerous barriers and challenges that hinder access to education. Generally, these are not specific to these locations but rather relate to broader systemic issues. For some young people, schools and colleges were not immediately accessible due to their late arrival in the academic year or the lack of available places, leading to extended periods of time waiting for a school place. When waiting for mainstream education, non-formal education provisions provided opportunities such as English language classes, sports training sessions, and learning opportunities about culture and life in the UK.

For many of the young people we spoke to, education represented an important new phase in their lives in the UK. Education could provide a sense of ordinariness, as well as a sense of stability and predictability. Through education, they established support networks and friendships, with peers, teachers, case workers, community members and others. At the same time, challenges remained, particularly for those with uncertain immigration status.

What do learners from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds, those that support them, and providers of education experience in terms of quality once education is accessed?

Quality education refers to comprehensive approaches that ensure inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning opportunities for all children. Promising practices in Oxford and Nottingham have focused on providing quality education through various means, including psychosocial support, embedding leisure and recreational activities into education, and building family-like relationships. Additionally, these practices adopted a

flexible approach to education to adjust to young people's needs. All these elements helped young people build a sense of belonging. They were able to find new interests and hobbies and to create new friendships. These new networks not only helped them rebuild trust and confidence but also became a source of support when more help was needed.

Young people spoke largely positively about their experiences in education, both formal and informal, and analysis suggested that, generally, they feel a sense of belonging, safety and progression in the educational settings in Oxford and Nottingham in which they participate. For example:

- Participants mentioned **feeling safe** within education environments that accept them as 'who they are': for instance, when they were able to practise their religion or speak their first language without fear of prejudice. Data suggest providing an inclusive and welcoming environment is crucial for feeling safe in an educational setting.

- Young people in this study suggested that a **sense of belonging** resulted from a feeling of being valued and heard within their networks of peers and practitioners. Overall, building meaningful relationships and discovering areas of interest were helpful in fostering a sense of belonging.

- Young people reported a **sense of succeeding**, particularly when they felt they had a clear purpose and direction in their lives, and when their achievements, however small, were recognised. This had a knock-on effect on academic motivation. They believed their efforts were acknowledged by education providers (by awards or certificates). This recognition motivated and encouraged them further. In most cases, young people measured their progression through certificates and academic success. Practitioners also observed not just academic progression, but also psychosocial and other effects, including improvements in communication skills, mental health, and language skills as key indicators, suggesting the importance of a broad definition of success or succeeding.

In addition, our data shows that support networks are important for young people's sense of safety, belonging and progression. Young people from refugee backgrounds might find it difficult to trust new people as a result of past experiences; therefore, building trusting relationships is an important achievement for them. They stated that they value and acknowledge helpful resources and people who support and encourage them in the UK.

What can we learn from current practice in Oxford and Nottingham about creating a sustainable system within a local authority which links together everyone who impacts the education of a new arrival with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds?

The following table highlights the valuable actions taken by current practices and provisions in Oxford and Nottingham to create an efficient and sustainable refugee education. The actions are categorised based on access to education, quality education, sustainability and collaboration with stakeholders.

Table 6. Lessons learned from promising practices

Theme	Actions
Access to education	**Immediate access to education**: Promising practices have provided immediate access to education for children unable to attend mainstream provision, regardless of their time of arrival and age. **Non-formal provisions to bridge the gaps:** When young people await formal education placement, non-formal provisions have helped to ensure learning continues. These provisions can also provide supplementary support to young people after they enter mainstream education. These actions have enhanced access to education by ensuring that young people, regardless of their arrival time or age, can continue learning.
Quality education	**Holistic and tailored approach:** Promising practices have applied holistic approaches and tailored support that address not only the academic needs of young people but also their emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing. This support includes counselling, helping with future pathways, and community building. In addition, the level of English language and digital skills of young people have been considered through the provision of tailored support. **Leisure activities embedded into the curriculum:** Promising practices use leisure activities to help learners establish a sense of belonging, to foster a sense of community within the group, and to improve their overall wellbeing. **Inclusive environments**: Provisions created inclusive environments where students feel valued and respected, regardless of their backgrounds. **Flexibility**: Promising practices are flexible regarding young people's needs. These actions have significantly improved the quality of education by providing holistic, tailored support that addresses various needs of young people, and fostering inclusive and flexible learning environments that enhance students' wellbeing and sense of belonging.
Sustainability	**Collaboration between formal and non-formal provisions**: There is a strong link between formal and non-formal provisions in both Oxford and Nottingham. They have supported each other by sharing information, signposting and asking for each other's support. **Utilising volunteers:** Provisions, particularly non-formal provisions, have utilised volunteer resources to enhance their scope and sustainability. **Sustaining support through collaboration and place-based resources**: Current practices have enhanced the sustainability of their programmes by creating collaboration between formal and non-formal

provision, and using volunteer resources to extend and maintain their support for young people.

Building a strong network of stakeholders: Partners within a place (in this case, the cities of Nottingham and Oxford) have supported young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds collaboratively, among formal and non-formal education providers, local authorities, and third-sector organisations.

This network of stakeholders has resulted in improved information sharing, signposting and more comprehensive support for young people.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

This section outlines the research conclusions and provides recommendations based on input from key informants and steering groups.

5.1 Conclusion

This research study set out to examine educational provision for young people with asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds in two UK cities, Oxford and Nottingham. It adopted a place-based and participatory approach, shaped by the insights of expert steering committees in each city, formed of young learners and those who support them. The report has highlighted diverse efforts underway in each city, undertaken by a range of actors, to support the education of new arrivals. The report also highlights the significant and persistent challenges facing young people in the UK who have experienced forced displacement in their efforts to access quality education.

This section briefly analyses young learners' experiences of and perspectives on education in relation to McIntyre and Neuhaus' framework and concepts of safety, belonging, and succeeding.[9] Additionally, the importance of support networks which emerged in the data and their role for providing quality education is discussed.

The concept of **safety** includes feeling physically, emotionally and mentally safe, and schools can contribute to this feeling for young people from refugee backgrounds (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021). For the young people in this study, safety in an educational setting means not having to fear prejudice and stigma. They mentioned that the promising practices in Oxford and Nottingham provided a safe space for them where they felt welcomed to practise their religion, speak their language, and generally were allowed to "be themselves".

Secondly, the promising practices mentioned in this report fostered a sense of **belonging** among young people from refugee backgrounds. Practitioners in these provisions offered spaces where new arrivals could gather and engage in activities such as showcasing elements of their culture, sharing their home countries' symbols, learning English, and building positive relationships with their peers. Additionally, the feeling of being valued and heard within educational settings was reported as an important factor for young people.

The concept of belonging was also fostered by promising practices at the community level. In other words, these practices supported the young people's sense of belonging and helped them create bonds and connections with the broader community. Practitioners reported how they 'provide a community' and help young people to 'flourish within a community'.

As outlined by McIntyre et al. (2018), educational success for young people with refugee backgrounds is complex, and test-focused systems often struggle to meet their needs. However, educational provisions in Oxford and Nottingham broadened **success t**o reflect young people's realities, including both academic achievement and the development of

[9] For more information, see McIntyre and Neuhaus (2021).

psychosocial skills and resilience. Practitioners in these settings recognised young people's efforts across various aspects of their lives. This approach had a positive knock-on effect on their academic motivation and overall performance.

The findings also echoed McIntyre and Neuhaus' assessment (2021) that attending school marks a big transition for children with extraordinary experiences towards resuming ordinary meaningful lives in their new context. The sense of **ordinariness** and safety through accessing education happens by finding "predictable patterns, shapes and rhythms of living" (Kohli, 2012: 317). However, young people reported that after leaving the promising practices to other providers, they experienced a heightened sense of anxiety and isolation.

This study also emphasises the role of **support networks** in providing quality education for young people from refugee backgrounds. Although they may have physical safety, some young people reported an initial feeling of arriving at an unknown landscape. They needed to find support networks to help them explore and become familiar with their new societies. While trust is essential to form these networks, young people may struggle to trust new individuals due to their past experiences. Therefore, establishing such relationships becomes a significant milestone for them. These networks are highly valued by young people and help them navigate the daunting parts of living in a new society.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings and consultations with the steering groups, the following recommendations need to be considered to improve access to quality education for young people with refugee backgrounds. There are categories of recommendations for:

- National Government
- Schools and colleges
- All actors

5.2.1. Recommendations to National Government

Increase funding for educational provision. Additional funding should be provided to enable education providers to recruit more staff. Despite the rise in the number of young people with refugee backgrounds in the UK in recent years, there remains an inadequate workforce to support their diverse needs, ranging from English language assistance to administrative support.

Enhance support and services for older young people (18-25 years old). With most existing support focusing on people younger than 18, there is a need for more support and services for older young people. Access to education is determined by age, so when a new arrival is assessed as being 18 or older, their future education pathways are often negatively impacted. These young people should receive continued support, particularly for accessing education, until the age of 25. This support should also include assistance from local authorities, with a joined-up approach required to ensure that assistance is maintained if young people are moved to a new area. This would help ensure their successful transition into independence and access to necessary resources.

Provide flexibility and support for young people during their age assessment process. Age assessment processes for newly arrived young people can be lengthy and complex.

As those awaiting assessment often cannot be placed in schools due to safeguarding concerns, tailored provisions must be established to facilitate immediate access to education for young people while awaiting their age assessment results.

Assess the impact on education when considering dispersal. The relocation of young people to different parts of the country, through dispersal policies, can often disrupt education, something also highlighted in previous research (Ashlee, 2024). The Department of Education, the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should work together to ensure that educational access and outcomes at all levels are considered in decision-making around accommodation and dispersal. Local authorities should be provided with advance notice of dispersals involving school-aged children to ensure school or college places are arranged before relocation.

Improve communication mechanisms between social workers and education providers. Where possible and appropriate, social workers should inform education providers about the situations of young people (for example, when they are undergoing age assessments or dispersal). By keeping educators informed, they can offer additional support when necessary and address challenges the young person may encounter.

The government should provide funding to ensure access to in-person clinical supervision for staff working with young people from refugee backgrounds. This support is needed to address the challenges associated with the roles of staff in local authorities, social workers, teachers and support staff, thereby promoting their wellbeing alongside that of the young people they serve. There are some hotlines available to provide counselling, but they have been reported as unhelpful for practitioners. Instead, having in-person supervision with an opt-out approach, rather than opt-in, would be effective in supporting practitioners' wellbeing.

Ensure third sector and non-formal provisions have access to adequate funding. Such provisions are crucial for bridging gaps in access to formal education, but they require sufficient financial support to do so effectively. Access to funding should enable them to provide immediate educational opportunities while young people wait to enter mainstream education. Third sector and non-formal providers should be supported to offer immediate access to initiatives such as English language classes, introductions to UK culture and laws, and digital skills training.[10] Additionally, these provisions should receive sustained funding to continue offering complementary support to young people after they enter mainstream education.

5.2.2. Recommendations to schools and colleges

Provide specialised training for staff working with young people from refugee backgrounds. All sectors with personnel supporting refugee youth and their families should offer training that equips staff with a deeper understanding of the challenges these individuals face, including trauma, displacement, and cultural adaptation. For example, staff should receive training on trauma-informed care, cultural sensitivity, and legal rights, which would enable them to provide more effective support. This would ensure that professionals across education, social services, and healthcare are better prepared to meet the specific needs of refugee communities.

[10] Key informants have identified these areas as needing more support for young people.

Conduct thorough initial assessments. Having a thorough initial assessment for young people is often a helpful step to effectively use resources based on needs. There is a significant gap in assessing learning difficulties for individuals with limited English proficiency, as most institutions lack personnel capable of evaluating their learning needs. To address this, local authorities should establish connections between their Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services and schools and ensure the availability of translators. This will facilitate effective communication and enable accurate assessments of SEND and the wellbeing needs of young people.

Ensure a nuanced and flexible approach to qualifications so that individuals are advised to follow the most appropriate pathway for their future ambitions. The focus should be on supporting young people who need to catch up on missed educational opportunities by providing bespoke learning options. These should enable them to progress onto qualification routes, such as GCSEs or vocational qualifications, that help them reach the same level as peers who have had uninterrupted education. This approach would also facilitate access to foundation courses at universities. To support this, the government should fund pre-sessional English language courses to ensure that students can access GCSEs.

5.2.3. Recommendations for all actors

Provide holistic support. Educational providers and third-sector organisations should adopt a holistic approach that considers the overall development of young people, including their emotional, social, cognitive, and physical wellbeing. This approach should address their diverse needs and foster resilience, particularly for those affected by trauma and displacement, ensuring that students' needs are considered beyond just academic instruction.

Ensure flexibility and support while young people are going through the age assessment process. The age assessment process can be lengthy and anxiety-inducing. It may be useful for educational providers to be aware when young people are going through an age assessment process, so that they can provide additional support if needed.

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