

Education for displaced young people who arrive late in the education system

Policy brief

This brief presents top-level findings from a Refugee Education UK (REUK) research study on education provision for displaced young people who arrive in the UK late in the education system. It makes evidence-informed policy recommendations aimed at national and local government.

Detailed policy recommendations are made to:

- Create an intentional and coordinated approach to integrating late arrivals into the education system
- Appropriately and safely monitor and track access to education for displaced young people
- Reduce the educational impacts of dispersal
- Fund and resource appropriate, short-term interim provision

At the secondary education level, policy recommendations are made to:

- Ensure displaced children access education, no matter what time of year they arrive
- Support and enable schools to accept late arrivals

At the further education level, policy recommendations are made to:

- Address the complexity of information about further education entitlements
- Ease further education admissions and enrolment processes



Introduction

Education is a right for children, as enshrined in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This right is not suspended when children are forced to flee their homes. The UK is a party to the UNCRC and, therefore, recognises and protects the right to education for all displaced children. However, this right is far from guaranteed in reality. Evidence demonstrates that a multitude of barriers make accessing education difficult for displaced children, and that these accumulate and become increasingly complex as they progress through education [1]. Delays in accessing education are particularly acute for those arriving late in the education system, at the upper secondary and further education (FE) levels [2].

A new research report from REUK highlights the education experiences of late arrivals – young people, aged 13–19, who have been forcibly displaced from their homes (for reasons including war, conflict, trafficking and persecution) and arrive in the UK late in the education system. The research used a mixed methods approach and reflects the experiences of more than 400 individuals, predominantly practitioners from the charity, education and local government sectors. It involved an online survey with 180 practitioners; an analysis of 222 queries to REUK’s advice line from late arrivals and those who support them; and interviews and focus groups with 23 practitioners.

Key research findings

Late arrivals may remain out of education for extended periods of time

- Nearly two thirds (62%) of 133 survey respondents reported instances of late arrivals not accessing any form of education for prolonged periods.
- Just under half (47%) of 222 queries to REUK’s advice line were about young people not currently in education. These queries included young people out of education for six months and over a year.
- Those left out of education may experience negative effects on their wellbeing and safety: they may face isolation, a deterioration of mental health and vulnerability to exploitation, instead of making meaningful progress and contributions to life and society in the UK.

Accessing secondary education becomes increasingly difficult the later young people arrive

- Research findings demonstrate that accessing education becomes particularly challenging for those who arrive mid-year in Year 11 when their peers are preparing for GCSEs. 80% of 112 survey respondents thought it was difficult or very difficult for a young person to get a secondary school place after the winter break of Year 11.
- Young people who arrive at a Year 11-age may encounter enhanced challenges. Schools are unlikely to accept them, and they may remain out of education until they turn 16 – the age that they are generally eligible to access FE. This period of time was described by survey respondents as a “no-man’s-land”.
- The top four barriers to secondary school access, as reported by 121 survey respondents, were: the complexity of placing in-year arrivals; a lack of available school places; changes to or uncertainty with young people’s accommodation, including because of dispersal policies; and schools being unable or unwilling to accept late arrivals.

Accessing a meaningful FE place can be challenging for late arrivals

- While getting a place in college was generally perceived as easier than getting a place in secondary school (37% of 141 survey respondents thought it was either difficult or very difficult to get a place in college), this mostly related to getting a place on an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course.
- Getting a place on an FE course with components that advance young people’s career or education aspirations was described as more challenging, including because of course entry requirements. Research participants reported how, in this way, young people’s options and opportunities narrow at the FE level.
- The top four barriers to FE access, as reported by 145 survey respondents, were: a lack of available FE places; changes to or uncertainty with young people’s accommodation placements, including because of dispersal policies; unclear or inaccurate information about accessing FE as a refugee or asylum seeker; and complex admissions and enrolment processes.

In the absence of school or college places, the charity sector is often left to bridge gaps

- When asked what practice they had observed in the absence of a school or college place, 75% of 133 survey respondents reported temporary, informal education provision run by charities or voluntary groups. This was followed by interim education activities coordinated by the local authority, reported by 49%.
- Respondents described challenges facing charity sector and local authority provision, reporting how it is often under-funded, under-resourced and stretched, and so undermining its reach and impact.
- While the charity sector was perceived to play a crucial role in bridging gaps in education whilst children are waiting for school or college places, findings emphasised that it should not be considered a replacement or substitute for accessing education in a supported, mainstream education environment.



Policy statement

While displaced children and young people have the right to access quality education, many who arrive in the UK late in the education system remain out of education for prolonged periods of time.

These children and young people sit idle and isolated within homes or insecure temporary accommodation, exacerbating underlying mental health conditions and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

They are prevented from accessing the positive benefits of education to integration, wellbeing and a meaningful future, and from making a positive economic and social contribution to the UK.

There is currently no strategy from the Government to address this issue. But REUK believes it can and should be addressed. Doing so would benefit and advance cross party efforts to tackle inequality through educational attainment.

Ensuring late arrivals can access their right to education requires a coordinated and intentional approach from the Department for Education, the Home Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, local authorities, and secondary and further education institutions.

The remainder of this policy brief provides detailed policy recommendations at:

- The overarching level
- The secondary education level
- The further education level

Overarching recommendations

Create an intentional and coordinated approach to including late arrivals in the education system

While UK law requires all children to access education, there is no comprehensive strategy or policy for ensuring that this happens in a timely manner for displaced children who arrive in the UK late in the education system.

- The Department for Education should develop a late arrivals strategy, in consultation with other relevant departments, for ensuring that all late arrivals are able to seamlessly and continuously access their right to education, irrespective of the time of year that they arrive. This should include processes for identifying late arrivals, timely admissions, and components of short-term, interim provision that facilitate and expedite access to mainstream education. There should be a particular focus on those young people who arrive in Year 11. REUK is able to draft the details of such a strategy, drawing on findings from this research study alongside our technical expertise and experience of running interim provision in partnership with local authorities.
- The Department for Education should ensure that this strategy is translated into clear information and guidance that is effectively disseminated to local authorities, schools and multi academy trusts. As above, REUK is happy to collaborate on this task.
- The Department for Education should develop and disseminate guidance for school and college staff to build awareness of the education rights and entitlements of displaced young people, and on appropriate enrolment and admissions processes. REUK and The Bell Foundation would be happy to provide existing resources and assist with any further development.
- The Department for Education should implement an alternative approach to lagged funding to ensure schools and colleges receive appropriate funding for students who arrive after the census date.
- Statutory guidance for England states that an education placement should be secured for all looked after children,

including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, within 20 school days of coming into care. The Government should consider extending this to all categories of displaced children, including those in families and not under the care of the local authority.

Appropriately and safely monitor and track access to education for displaced young people

The Government and other agencies are rightly focused on children missing from education, an issue which has grown significantly since the pandemic. Statutory guidance identifies children of new migrant families as one of the groups of children at particular risk of missing education [3]. This research corroborates this, but particularly shines a light on the distinct issues affecting those from forced migrant backgrounds.

Current statutory guidance states that, in order to meet their duty in relation to children missing from education, local authorities should ensure “there are effective tracking and enquiry systems in place” [4]. Evidence from this research, alongside existing research [5], suggests that this is not currently happening for all displaced children. While data is currently collected on access to education for children from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Hong Kong, it is not collected more widely. This means that the reality of how many displaced children are out of education, and how long they remain out of education, is not known.

- The Department for Education should update statutory guidance on children missing in education to reflect the experiences, needs and rights of forcibly displaced children. REUK is able to collaborate on this task.
- The Government should build on current monitoring and tracking provisions for children from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Hong Kong, safely extending them to all displaced children.
- With many state-funded school admissions going through local authorities (with the exception of some multi-academy trusts), local authorities should collect data on registration in education for all displaced children. They should be assured that they may do so without sharing this data with departments responsible for immigration enforcement.

Reduce the educational impacts of dispersal

Findings from this research show that current dispersal policy, and the constant uncertainty and instability it generates, causes significant disruptions to late arrivals' education. It leaves young people out of education for long periods of time, resulting in safeguarding and wellbeing risks. This disruption must be recognised and, as far as possible, minimised. At present, the impact of dispersal on a child's education is only considered if the child is in their final year of school or college and preparing for GCSE, AS or A-Level exams [6]. Education considerations should be extended for all displaced young people who arrive late in the education system.

- The Department for Education should work collaboratively with the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that, within accommodation and dispersal policy, educational access and outcomes at all levels is an explicit consideration when deciding whether to disperse a young person. As far as possible, families with children who are late arrivals should not be dispersed once they have secured a school or college place.
- If dispersal is unavoidable, the Home Office should provide advance notice to local authorities about the dispersal of families with compulsory education-aged children in order to allow the arrangement of school or college places before the relocation takes place. There are precedents for this: a number of considerations are included in the Good Practice Notes of the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children that require advance communication with both the sending and receiving local authority [7]. This demonstrates that there are multiple circumstances already requiring higher levels of communication and planning around moves; and education should be added to this.

Fund and resource appropriate, short-term interim provision

Research findings emphasise that, amidst a reality of late arrivals struggling to access education places in a mainstream environment, short-term interim programmes and bespoke initiatives provided by local

authorities, charities and education institutions bridge an important gap. This provision must be appropriately resourced and funded.

However, while interim provision plays a vital role, it should not be considered a replacement for newly arrived children receiving integrated, supported education in a mainstream environment – and it must work to support this end.

- Where there is a local need (including but not limited to the presence of temporary accommodation in the area, or the resettlement of refugee families), agile and responsive local plans should be developed and implemented. These should ensure the coordination, facilitation and implementation of interim, temporary provision to both meet the needs of late arrivals, and expedite their transition into mainstream settings.
- A multi-stakeholder approach is required to coordinate a coherent offer that creates appropriate pathways to progression for these learners. FE Colleges, as anchor institutions in the tertiary system, should play a major part, alongside schools, mayoral combined authorities, local authorities, sixth forms run by academies and schools, training providers, and the voluntary sector. This should include:
 - Structured orientation programmes aimed at preparing very newly arrived young people for mainstream education [8];
 - Accelerated pathways within schools or colleges with strong enrichment and contextualised English language provision for those learners who need to develop their proficiency in English [9];
 - Short-term, interim provision where an appropriate mainstream school or college place is not yet available [10].
- The Department for Education should commission the development of initial guidance on standards and good practice for short-term provision. This should include a framework for monitoring and tracking outcomes for young people who access this provision [11].

Secondary education recommendations

Ensure displaced children access education, no matter what time of year they arrive

Findings from this research show that a lack of education places in secondary school can prevent many late arrivals from accessing education. This can be particularly challenging for those who arrive in the middle of an academic year, with young people in Year 10 and Year 11 particularly falling through the cracks and missing out on vital education in school environments.

- The responsibility for ensuring that there are sufficient school places in each area falls to the relevant local authority. However councils have no powers to open new maintained schools or to compel academies or free schools to expand to meet demand. Findings from this research suggest that many are not taking children with asylum-seeking or refugee backgrounds and are reluctant to do so. Therefore, the Department for Education should consider whether to reinstate local authorities' responsibility for coordinating all in-year applications for schools within their administrative area, including for multi-academy trusts, to ensure no child falls through the cracks.
- The Department for Education should ensure data is tracked and monitored, including pupil wait times for education places.
- The Home Office should provide local authority school admissions teams with regular and accurate updates about the location of existing and new refugee and asylum seeker accommodation within their administrative area.
- Local authorities with asylum seeker accommodation in their administrative area should ensure families in this accommodation are aware of their children's right to education and supported to apply for school places. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should fund and resource local authorities to undertake this vital work, recognising that there are precedents for this work at the local authority-level for resettled refugee children that could be expanded upon to reach asylum-seeking children.

Support and enable schools to accept late arrivals

Findings from this research suggest that schools may feel unable to offer education places to late arrivals because of a lack of funding, resources, specialism and capacity to provide meaningful and supported placements at this education stage. This is particularly the case for children who arrive late in the year when additional resources will not be available for the school. There are successful examples of the Government providing funding uplifts to schools to support the education of resettled refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine that can be broadened to reach all displaced children.

- Consideration needs to be given to funding mechanisms that can incentivise schools to accept late arrivals. This could include:
 - Building upon and extending the positive provision of funds for schools for resettled refugee pupils from Afghanistan and Ukraine; and
 - Uplifting the English as an Additional Language (EAL) factor for this group, or ensuring that the EAL factor is available for longer than three years for schools accepting displaced pupils [12].
- The Department for Education should create sustainable education funding uplifts for all displaced children, regardless of country of origin or immigration status, to enable schools to provide the support these learners need. Where there are knowledge gaps, schools should be made aware that asylum seeking children in families are eligible for Pupil Premium funding, and the level of this funding should be raised to the same level of Pupil Premium for looked after children.
- The Department for Education should ensure that all schools are reminded and fully aware of current arrangements to support late arrivals in their schools, including the ability to exclude some late arrivals' GCSE results from their results profiles at the upper-secondary level, and the extension of free school meals to children with no recourse to public funds.
- The Department for Education should develop guidance for school leaders on how to embed whole school EAL provision, and existing teaching assistants should be equipped to strengthen in-class EAL support for newly arrived children.

- Local authorities, alongside voluntary sector organisations, should be supported to coordinate the sharing of resources between schools where a need is identified (for example, the translation of documents and guidance into first languages prominent in the local area, and the sharing of well-being and mental health resources across schools).

Further education recommendations

Address the complexity of information about FE entitlements

Research findings underscore the complexity of FE rights and entitlements for displaced young people. This can result in limited, poor quality, inaccurate or incomprehensible information being provided to young people and those who support them.

- The Department for Education should provide frequent updates and accessible information to local authorities, mayoral combined authorities, and colleges on Education, Skills and Funding Agency (ESFA) policy, including any changes to guidance. Given the particular complexity of the rights and entitlements of those from displacement backgrounds, a subset of this guidance should be tailored to the rights and entitlements of refugees and asylum seekers, and dissemination aimed at those who support displaced learners, including parents and carers who are new to English.
- Mayoral combined authorities and local authorities with asylum seeker accommodation in their administrative area should ensure young people aged 16–19 in their accommodation are aware about their rights and entitlements to college funding. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should consider funding and resourcing local authorities to undertake this vital work.

Ease further education admissions and enrolment processes

Research findings show that admissions and enrolment to college can be a significant barrier to education access for displaced young people. This is particularly the case when there is a lack of staff who are trained on and knowledgeable about the rights and

entitlements of displaced young people (particularly asylum seekers) to FE funding and provision, and on how to communicate effectively with learners, parents and carers who are new to English. Unnecessary documentation requests and information, advice and guidance (IAG) written in complex English can pose significant barriers to getting enrolled in FE. It is vital that displaced young people are able to access their right to education and enrol in FE as early and quickly as possible.

- The Department for Education should consider extending current post-16 education entitlements so that late arrivals are able to get three years of funding if they arrive after post-16 admissions but before the age of 20. This will help ensure that all late arrivals get a decent chance at thriving in education.
- With research findings showing that funding barriers particularly affect asylum seekers who are 19, the Department for Education should explicitly include asylum seekers as eligible for funding for ESOL provision within ESFA guidance.
- The Department for Education should provide guidance to IAG teams at colleges on enrolment of displaced students, including what documentation they need and need not request [13].
- The Department for Education should retain a tolerance level for certain groups of learners – including late arrivals – for its English and maths condition of funding [14]. This would recognise that most late arrival 16–19 year old students cannot be expected to learn English or maths to a sufficient level to be able to study for a GCSE in either subject within an academic year.
- The Department for Education should provide clear and easy to understand information on the English education system at the FE level for parents and carers of late arrival learners. This will enable them to understand their rights and support them to navigate complex funding and entitlements.



The research underpinning the brief

With support from The Bell Foundation, REUK undertook research examining the experiences of accessing education for late arrivals – defined as young people, aged 13–19, who have been forcibly displaced from their homes (for reasons including but not limited to conflict, persecution and trafficking) and are newly arrived in the UK. The research adopted a mixed methods approach involving:

- A nation-wide survey with 180 education and refugee support practitioners;
- An anonymised analysis of 222 REUK advice line queries;
- Focus groups with 12 expert practitioners on policy recommendations; and
- Interviews with 10 institutions and organisations implementing promising practice in this area.

Read the full research report here:
www.reuk.org/late-arrivals-research

Endnotes

- [1] Ashlee, A, and Gladwell, C, (2020). [Education transitions for refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK: Exploring the journey to further and higher education](#). UNICEF UK.
- [2] Gladwell, C, and Chetwynd, G, (2018). [Education for refugee and asylum-seeking children: Access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales](#). UNICEF UK.
- [3] Department for Education (2016). [Children missing education: Statutory guidance for local authorities](#).
- [4] Department for Education (2016). [Children missing education: Statutory guidance for local authorities](#), p.6.
- [5] Chanut, M (2023). [Invisible or ignored?: The long road to education for migrant girls in England](#). The Wonder Foundation.
- [6] Home Office (2024). [Allocation of asylum accommodation policy: version 12](#), p.10.
- [7] Department for Education and Home Office (2023). [National Transfer Scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children: Version 6.0](#).
- [8] Successful orientation and bespoke programmes are currently provided by the voluntary sector (e.g., REUK). Local authorities, schools and colleges could learn from, adopt or adapt these to meet local demand.

- [9] See Module 5 of the REUK and University of Nottingham online teacher education programme, 'Supporting Refugee Children in Schools', which outlines approaches to accelerated learning.
- [10] See the full research report for examples of such provision.
- [11] REUK would be willing to develop such guidance, drawing on our existing and previous research, alongside our technical expertise and experience running short-term provision in partnership with local authorities, mayoral combined authorities, schools and colleges.
- [12] We are aware that this is practice or policy in New Zealand, New South Wales Australia, and Alberta Canada whose assessment of EAL needs accounts for factors including the timing of arrival and refugee status.
- [13] REUK is able to collaborate on the development of such guidance, based on our technical expertise and experience of supporting refugees and asylum seekers to successfully enrol in college.
- [14] These tolerance levels are currently being phased out.

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

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