

RESEARCH WITH PARENTS: FINDINGS

This section puts the voices of parents, practitioners and professionals at its heart, presenting detailed findings from the research under four thematic areas:

1. Environmental factors affecting refugee and asylum-seeking children's early years
2. The value of ECEC for refugee children and their parents
3. Access to ECEC – the barriers and how they can be overcome
4. Creating positive ECEC experiences – strategies for such experiences, and constraining factors.

Environmental factors affecting the early years

While not a focus of the research, participants described the ways in which their environment impacted the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children's experiences and development. Data was coded and arranged according to the nurturing care framework – the UNICEF and World Health Organization (WHO) framework widely used in the early childhood development sector detailing five components necessary for early childhood development: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for learning. The components below are presented in order of how frequently they emerged in the research data.

Figure 1: The Nurturing Care Framework, WHO and UNICEF (2018)



Early learning opportunities

Issues relating to early learning opportunities – or lack thereof – for refugee and asylum-seeking children were evident in just over half of research activities. The most discussed issue, raised by both key informants and parents, was the limited space for babies and the youngest children to learn and develop in their home environments. While a lack of space was described by parents not living in asylum accommodation (P1, refugee mother and P2, refugee father), it was most frequently mentioned by key informants with reference to families accessing asylum support and living in asylum accommodation. The issue was also particularly prominent in the focus group with asylum-seeking mothers (FG1). For example, KI2 (R&A) said that when families live in hotel accommodation provided by the Home Office, **“the kids are in a room all day [...] they don’t have a play space [...] and they don’t have many toys”**, and one asylum-seeking mother noted that **“we are staying in a hotel for one room, it’s not room for the baby to grow up”** (asylum-seeking mother, FG1). Asylum-seeking mothers found that the only area within hotels with sufficient space for children to play was the reception area, which was neither child-friendly nor safe.

Access to learning opportunities in the local community was also discussed and data suggests variability depending on geographic location. Asylum-seeking mothers in FG1 and Ukrainian mothers in FG2 who could take their children to parks and were able to meet up with other families from similar backgrounds positively described these experiences as helping their child learn and build confidence. The Ukrainian mothers who lived in rural locations, however, reported more limited local opportunities and isolation.

Research activities with parents also suggested that financial barriers could prevent parents from making the most of local learning and play opportunities even if they were available. For example, asylum-seeking mothers in FG1 discussed how the money they receive from the Home Office does not enable access to indoor play areas:

“If I want to take him to indoor place where he can play [...] you have to pay a ticket for you and for your child, and to pay transport [...] [The money from the Home Office] it’s not gonna be enough”

Asylum-seeking mother, FG1

Safety and security

Participants highlighted a range of risks to refugee and asylum-seeking children’s safety and security – a theme that emerged in just under half of research activities. It was particularly prominent in FG1 with asylum-seeking mothers and in interviews with key informants who had experience of engaging with families in asylum accommodation. Key informants described **“awful living conditions”** (KI19, VS) that were unsuitable for children – including overcrowding, outbreaks of violence,

dampness, and rodents – where they lived for protracted periods of time while their families' asylum claims were processed.

Asylum-seeking mothers in FG1 were particularly concerned about a lack of child-safe spaces for children in asylum accommodation. For example, one mother said **“in the new hotel, it is very dangerous for kids, there is a lot of tables, and glass, the wood [...] his face is scratched, because the corners”** (asylum-seeking mother, FG1). Echoing this, KI19 (VS) observed **“a lot of accidents in the house [dispersal accommodation] due to it being overcrowded”** and KI2 (R&A) described asylum accommodation as giving **“really no regard for the safety of the children”**.

Key informants also described the **“significant precarity”** (KI21, VS) that asylum-seeking families may find themselves in. This included experiences of **“enforced poverty”** (KI2, R&A) **“destitution and homelessness”** (KI21, VS) and location instability with families being **“shipped from pillar to post”** (KI10, R&A) by dispersal policies. This precarity was particularly linked to the youngest asylum-seeking children but was also associated with undocumented children and children whose families had received temporary visas, such as those with LLR – both groups being unable to access public funds. This precarity was described as rendering children in their early years **“ridiculously vulnerable”** (KI19, VS); as suggested by KI1 (VS), **“when children are not in school, it means nobody is actually aware of them”**. With access to education in the early years not compulsory, participants described how children under the age of five are often **“invisible”** (KI3, R&A; KI2, R&A; KI1, VS), which could lead to unaddressed development and wellbeing issues, including safeguarding concerns.

Responsive caregiving

A third of research activities touched upon caregiving dynamics in refugee and asylum-seeking families. This was particularly evident in research activities with key informants and mothers (FG1, asylum-seeking mothers; FG2, Ukrainian mothers; and PI2, refugee mother) – with the latter particularly highlighting the value and meaning of motherhood in the context of displacement. When asked what their hope for their children's future was, one mother said **“I want him to be the best, and I hope him to have a better life than my life”** (asylum-seeking mother, FG1). This sentiment was echoed by KI1 (VS) who stated these parents **“go through so much”** yet are still able to prioritise their child; they said **“every decision that they're making is for their child [...] I think they give the mama bear a whole new meaning”**.

However, participants also alluded to the strain that being a refugee or asylum-seeker in the UK had on parents' mental and physical wellbeing and, sometimes, their capacity for caregiving. Coming to terms with their displacement, adjusting to their new environments, separation from immediate families (such as fathers remaining in Ukraine), separation from extended family and community networks (both by virtue of fleeing to the UK and dispersal in the UK), the impact of poverty,

and the re-traumatising nature of the asylum process were all factors that could undermine parents' **"capacity to be with their child"** (KI20, VS).

Good health

A quarter of research activities described factors linked to the health of children. In particular, vital health services, such as GPs, were described by key informants as sometimes being inaccessible due to several factors, including: **"a lot of gatekeeping"** (KI21, VS) and asking for proof of residence that could be deterring and challenging for some; the fear of judgement and feelings of shame about their ability to look after their children in adverse circumstances; the fear that asking for help with health would lead to social services taking children away; and financial barriers, such as being unable to afford bus passes.

The ways in which asylum accommodation impacted on children's health also emerged from research activities. One mother described how her son had developed new allergies because of the dispersal accommodation that they were living in.

"My boy has never had any allergies since we've been here [in the UK], but three months he had allergies of dust. So his nose, his eyes, he starts coughing. So I found out that he got allergy from there [asylum accommodation]. So this as well is not nice because [...] I am trying to move forward, I don't want to get more bad, and now we are having problems about the place"

Asylum-seeking Mother, FG1

KI19 (VS) provided further insights into this, sharing that they had seen "really awful" health issues in hotels, including, "infected bed bug bites", "breathing difficulties due to mould and damp", and "poor muscle tone because babies haven't had any floor time".

Adequate nutrition

The focus group with asylum-seeking mothers (FG1) and interviews with two key informants (KI19, VS; KI21, VS) revealed inadequate nutrition for young children in asylum accommodation. The food in hotels was described by practitioners who had worked with families in such accommodation as **"disgusting"** (KI21, VS) and **"grotesque"** (KI19, VS). One asylum-seeking mother in FG1 said **"sometimes our babies not like the southern food [...] we need to cook something special for our babies [but it is] not possible in hotel"**.

The health issues resulting from poor nutrition were also evident in FG1. Asylum-seeking mothers reported how their children experienced constipation and

diarrhoea, and KI19 (VS) who worked with families in hotels observed **“everybody's losing weight, mothers are thinking that they can't breastfeed their children because they're not getting enough nutrition”**. And because nutrition is such a serious concern, one key informant suggested that some parents may be unable to prioritise other areas of their children's lives; **“anything other than [their] child's basic needs [their] health and their food [is] very hard to think past”** (KI20, VS).

The value of ECEC for refugees

Research participants highlighted the perceived importance of access to ECEC, and three key areas emerged: benefits for children; benefits for parents; and onward access to crucial services.

Benefits for children

School preparedness

There was a recurring perception among participants that accessing ECEC can yield long-term benefits for children throughout their schooling journeys. This was evident in just under half of research activities with key informants and in all but one discussion with parents. Data suggest that ECEC has the **“capacity to transform children's life chances, to level up to give children the opportunity to realise their potential”** (KI10, R&A) and has **“knock-on effects on general cognitive development, social development, emotional development”** (KI9, R&A) which could support their progression throughout school in the UK.

English language development was a key perceived benefit of ECEC. Key informants and parents demonstrated how even attending a small number of early learning sessions could lead to children picking up some English conversation skills. For example, one asylum-seeking mother said **“the child likes it [going to nursery]. She started to really improve her English, especially once she went to the nursery.”** Echoing this and emphasising the benefit of longer term and consistent engagement in ECEC, one father described how initially his child **“wasn't very confident to speak or say a full sentence”** but, by the end of the first term at nursery he had observed improvements in speech and language. Reflecting on this, the father said: **“I'm glad that I took them [to nursery] actually because I'm sure it will help them when they move to school”** (refugee father, PI1).

ECEC was also reported as crucial for the formation of **“good social relationships with peers or adults”** (KI9, R&A), which key informants and parents stated was helpful for getting children ready for school. According to KI3 (R&A), **“[ECEC] really assists children in their socialisation because they are learning about cultural norms, they're learning about their learning, about playing with peers, all the all the things that every child needs to know”** (KI3, R&A). Participants also suggested that ECEC could help develop children's confidence. For example, KI1 (VS) described how the children whose mothers were accessing services that

involved an informal ECEC component were **“more able to cope [and are] happy to interact with other children and babies and just seem [to be] able to go out and have more confidence”**.

It is worth noting that three research activities with parents (FG2 with Ukrainian mothers, PI1 with a refugee father and PI2 with a refugee mother) revealed how some parents may want ECEC to provide more structured and academic learning for children, particularly for three- and four-year-olds, in order to better enable school preparedness. For example, one mother from Ukraine in FG2 said **“the kindergarten had a strategy to allow the child to do what they want, play however they want, and there was no intensive learning, so it is me who teaches her”**.

Space and opportunities for play and learning

Another benefit of ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children, as perceived by participants in 40% of research activities, was the space and opportunities for learning and quality play that it provides. Key informants suggested that such experiences may be lacking for some children, **“particularly when they’re living in awful living conditions that are not conducive to play or learning”** (KI13, LG), as previously described in [Section 4.1.1](#). KI1 (VS) stated that accessing ECEC **“allows them to be a child [because] staying in a hotel is not the life of a child, being cooped up in a room all day is not what a child needs at all”**.

Access to toys and resources in ECEC settings, including watching cartoons on devices, was also reported as important and could give children the **“really important stimulation that [they] don't get in their home”** (KI2, R&A). Additionally, the opportunity to make friends and play with other children was particularly valued by the parents whose children had accessed ECEC. When asked whether their child liked being in nursery, one father said **“I’m sure they do [like being in nursery], and this is the reason: they always asked me to be there and they make friends”** (refugee father, PI1). One mother highlighted the value of the routine – as further discussed in the following section – alongside the value of play in nursery settings.

“My son loves his daily routine. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he attends his pre-school from morning to lunch time and he loves being there. He always asks me if he could stay longer, he loves to play there”

Ukrainian mother, FG2

Healing from traumatic experiences

Data suggest that ECEC could have transformative and, at times, **“unbelievable”** (KI9, R&A) effects on refugee and asylum-seeking children who have experienced trauma. While this did not emerge in research activities with parents, it was reported in just under half of research activities with key informants, and across all

four key informant categories: early childhood educators, local government, voluntary sector and research and academia. Key informants described how ECEC can support **“children to develop this sense of belonging in their host’s space”** (KI3, R&A), which can, in turn, help them **“to understand what’s happened to them”** (KI3, R&A). The **“structure that nursery provides [...] the routine and predictability [...] helps [refugee children] to heal”** (KI13, LG). A story of such healing effects of ECEC provision can be found in Box 1.

Box 1: The healing potential of ECEC



KI1, who has experience of working with asylum-seeking mothers and young children in the voluntary sector, described the impact of attending a nursery for a child who had experienced a traumatic journey to the UK with their mother. They described how **“on the way here, the boat had flipped and the little boy and his sister ended up in the water with her”**, and had briefly experienced separation. KI1 described the severity of the separation anxiety caused by this experience, providing an example of a time when the mother disappeared from the child’s view for a brief period and the boy **“started shaking and crying and screaming [...] as if his whole entire world had ended”**.

KI1 discussed the noticeable effects that being in nursery had for the child, saying that after a month in nursery **“he was a different child”** who was able to function and even thrive when separated from his mother. Reflecting on the importance of this opportunity for healing during the early stages of a child’s life, KI1 said **“had he started that [healing] at Reception that would’ve been a whole other challenge because the longer I think the child goes without dealing with a lot of those issues, the harder it becomes to work on them”**.

Benefits for parents

Research participants also highlighted the possible benefits of accessing ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking parents.

Supporting wellbeing

Participants in just over a third of research activities suggested that access to ECEC can lead to positive wellbeing outcomes for parents. This was particularly apparent in discussions with parents, with those accessing ECEC reflecting on how it has benefited them, and those waiting to access ECEC (particularly those whose children were soon to be aged two) describing the difference they thought it would make to their wellbeing. For example, one mother in FG1 said that, in October when her child is due to start nursery, **“we will start a new life”**. Additionally, the lack of access to ECEC was linked by parents to stress and anxiety, particularly when children were not seemingly meeting key early development indicators. For example, one father reflected on the situation for a refugee family he knew who could not get a nursery place for their child:

“That has a huge impact on the parents, because they are now worried that why he is unable to speak, why he’s not playing with other kids, does he have any problem, what he is going to be doing at school”

Refugee father, P11

Key informants provided further detailed insights on how access to ECEC could help in “relieving some of the pressure on parents who are looking after [children], especially mothers who are looking after children [and tend to be] quite isolated” (KI1, VS) and prevent them feeling like they are “putting out fires constantly all the time” (KI1, VS). This was reportedly beneficial for single mothers living in one room in asylum accommodation with multiple children by giving them child-free “time for themselves, you know, to deal with other issues” (KI2, R&A). One key informant suggested that sending children to an ECEC setting also gave parents the opportunity to heal from traumatic experiences, providing “time for them to process what’s happened” (KI13, LG).

Providing the opportunity to study and work

Participants suggested that another benefit of ECEC is providing parents with the time to study or find employment (if they have the right to work) in order to further their own aspirations and goals. This was particularly prominent in research activities with parents, with all but one discussion with parents describing this benefit. Mothers who were not currently accessing childcare for their children discussed how they thought that access to ECEC would free up their time to study. Reflecting on her excitement about her child turning two and becoming eligible for 15 hours of childcare a week, one mother said:

“I am excited for myself as well because I want to start college. I want to do something of myself, I am tired. I've been waiting for my case from 2020, nothing to do, just sleeping, eating... I feel my life, my time, it's going... I feel I am wasting my time, so I want to do something, I want to move, I want to be... be like independent mum”

Asylum-seeking mother, FG1

This benefit was also reported by mothers who were accessing ECEC, who reflected on how this had enabled them to study college courses or attend English classes run by local organisations.

In addition, Ukrainian mothers in FG2 described how accessing some form of childcare enabled them to find employment, by freeing up time to apply for appropriate jobs and take up employment if offered it. However, even though they had the right to work, these mothers described how the limited and sporadic nursery or childcare hours they were offered made finding meaningful employment difficult, as further described below. One mother also detailed the barriers to attending her chosen course of study at college, which was limited by the free childcare hours that she could access. This caused her to need to work to afford childcare, ultimately causing significant strains on her wellbeing. It was only with the support of her college that she eventually had her childcare funded through the college, which is detailed further in Box 2.

Supporting mothers' integration

Evidence from this research suggests particular benefits for mothers whose children access ECEC. A quarter of research activities with key informants alluded to gender norms around motherhood, where the responsibility for childcare lay predominantly on women's shoulders. Key informants who worked with resettled Afghan and Syrian families suggested that gender roles and expectations of women prioritising childcare over all else were often exacerbated by separation from extended family networks who would typically contribute to childcare. In this way, forced displacement could leave a **"burden on the mother"** (KI16, LG), that could be lessened through accessing childcare support. One key informant who supported resettled Afghan and Syrian families (KI14, LG) observed the impact of this on women:

"[Men] integrate quite well into their communities [...] But the women get a little bit left behind because they're at home with the children. So if they aren't going into nurseries or accessing childcare, then the mums become really socially isolated at home. Yeah, they don't get to advance their English learning [...] So it really has a massive impact on our women particularly"

Key Informant 14, LG

In this way, sending their children to ECEC **"provides [mothers] with an opportunity to engage with other people in a community"** (KI1, VS), helping them build social networks, reducing isolation and ultimately supporting integration into a local community.

Enabling onward access to services

The value of ECEC also appeared through signposting families to other vital services within their community and across the UK). This benefit was only mentioned by one parent (PI3), but frequently expressed by key informants, emerging in just under half of research activities with them. Services that families could be signposted to included early childhood development services or programmes, GPs, foodbanks, events, employment support organisations for families. One key informant who worked at a nursery said:

“Our passion is about acknowledging where these families come from, what they've been through, how can we best support them or signpost them. We can't do it all but we know where to signpost and we know what's in our city”

Key Informant 15, ECEC

Additionally, ECEC was described as a window of opportunity for the diagnosis of special educational needs (SEN) and ensuring that families can access appropriate early intervention services and medical support. Without access to education, key informants suggested that children are **“missing some very crucial diagnosis”** (KI1, VS) that could mitigate long term impacts. Participants also communicated that ECEC settings – often by virtue of understanding the individual child and/or through routine assessments – are uniquely placed to identify emerging SEN issues and make appropriate referrals.

Barriers to accessing ECEC

Findings from this research centred on barriers to access – with half of all coded segments categorised under enrolment of children into ECEC settings – rather than quality of ECEC experiences once enrolled. This is illustrated by KI7 (R&A) who stated **“I have to say, I think the biggest problem is not for those who actually get to access [ECEC]; it's for all those that are left out”**.

Despite the many benefits that ECEC has for refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families, participants described a complex interaction of barriers that made access to it difficult.

ECEC funding and policies

The most commonly reported barriers to ECEC access were around funding and policy. These were mentioned in all research activities with parents – regardless of immigration status or length of time in the UK – and two-fifths of research activities

with key informants. The under-funding and under-resourcing of the ECEC sector was the primary concern. KI13 (LG) stated that **“nurseries are completely underfunded”** and KI19 (VS) expressed that funding for ECEC has been **“decimated”** in recent years. The inadequacy of funding reportedly led to an **“increasingly privatised system”** (KI10, R&A) and the **“depletion of school nurseries”** (KI13, LG) and state nurseries. The fees charged by private providers, which key informants suggested were inconsistent, could undermine access for refugees and asylum-seekers with limited financial means. Additionally, KI13 (LG) had observed through their work with refugee and asylum-seeking families that some **“don’t feel as comfortable in private nursery as they might do in a school nursery”**.

The complexity of the ECEC funding policy in the UK was also a concern. Research activities with parents made clear their confusion about their child’s rights and entitlements to ECEC provision. Key informants described ECEC policy as **“very patchy and piecemeal”** and could **“vary really significantly on the age of the child and the income status of a family”** (KI5, R&A). Participants made clear that the early years system is a **“complicated system for everybody to navigate”** (KI7, R&A), and that this could leave refugee and asylum-seeking parents who are unfamiliar with the UK context and have limited English **“struggling to navigate this highly complex system of different entitlements”** (KI5, R&A).

Key informants described how funding entitlements for ECEC, particularly the extended offer for three-year-olds, are preoccupied with benefits for parents; as articulated by KI21 (VS), **“the policy rationale [...] is not about children at all, the beneficiaries are the parents”**. Key informants argued that many children are excluded if their parents are unable to work, including because of their immigration status.

While most participants were focused on the barriers to accessing available ECEC provision for children over the age of two, two key informants and one parent were concerned by the fact **“there’s no provision at all for the very youngest children”** (KI5, R&A). Paying for childcare for these children could be extremely challenging for many families and meant that the youngest children were unable to access vital learning opportunities.¹

Immigration and asylum policy

Barriers to ECEC caused by the UK immigration and asylum system were also reported in nearly two-thirds of research activities. It was a particular concern for voluntary sector key informants, with four-fifths of these key informants reporting

these barriers. Data suggests that there are a **“lot of exclusions that exist in the current system, including those that are linked to residency and immigration status”** (KI21, VS), with participants regretting that children’s ability to access ECEC is dependent on their parents’ situation rather than their best interests. One key informant suggested that childcare considerations within the asylum system are overlooked, saying:

“They [Home Office] clearly know that children are there because they need to count people. But I think, you know, when they’re planning and making decisions, it seems like they’re very much an afterthought. And and certainly when when it comes to thinking about childcare, or anything like that, that’s just sort of the bottom of the pile”.

Key Informant 2, R&A

Key informants agreed that, on paper, refugee and asylum-seeking children, including undocumented children, were able to access the disadvantaged entitlement, even if their parents had no recourse to public funds. However, KI13 (LG) suggested that this did not extend to some families, noting Albanian families who have **“prohibitive visas”** are rendered ineligible for disadvantaged entitlement for two-year-olds. They said that these families are **“desperate to send their children to nursery, but they can’t, the visa is stopping them [...] so their children are massively missing out on early years experiences”** (KI13, LG). Despite this, participants most frequently highlighted a parent’s immigration status as a barrier to the extended entitlement of 30 hours of free childcare. Key informants reported that the NRPF condition created **“discrimination”** (KI2, R&A) by preventing access to childcare, as did the lack of the right to work for asylum seekers.

Participants described how the location instability caused by being involved with the immigration and asylum system were detrimental to ECEC access. Interestingly, such barriers were not mentioned by asylum-seeking mothers in FG1, but were mentioned by mothers from Ukraine (FG2) and one father with LLR (PI3), who were concerned by the frequency of housing and accommodation changes experienced by refugees. Ukrainian mothers described the frequency of moves between host families and how this presented barriers to accessing ECEC, and one father reflected on the situation for refugees who receive status through the asylum system, saying:

“When the parents got the refugee status, they’re facing housing problem, and they’re moving from one place to another place [...] so in this case, I think the children are suffering because they’re.. maybe they’re getting their housing far away somewhere, no nursery school or anything”

Refugee father, P13

Key informants were keen to emphasise the **“vulnerability of temporary [asylum] accommodation”** (KI19, VS) and illustrated how frequently asylum seekers are required to move. The transient existence of refugee and asylum-seeking families – which was overwhelmingly linked by key informants to dispersal policies – could make getting an ECEC place difficult. This was attributed to the fact that **“providers want stability”** (KI10, R&A) and that it can be **“very difficult to find settings that would only take a child for a term or two”** (KI12, VS).

Parental reluctance to send children to ECEC

Nearly two-thirds of research activities evidenced the barriers to ECEC caused by parental reluctance. Conversations with parents and key informants suggested that parents might have **“mixed feelings”** (KI3, R&A) about sending their child to nursery, with a driving force behind this being anxiety and worry for their child’s wellbeing. This could be a challenge for families who had experienced separation on their journeys to the UK and felt **“anxiety around [...] splitting up the family and people going to different places”** (KI8, LG). These mixed feelings were expressed by one single mother:

“I am so excited to take him to the nursery. But sad at the same time. I don't know how it's going to be. 'Cause I have never left him anywhere, it's always me and him, there is no one to leave him [with], no family, no partner, no friend. So, it is going to be the first experience”

Asylum-seeking mother, FG1

Mothers from Ukraine also described worry about the health and hygiene standards at English nurseries, and how this could be off-putting. They emphasised the difference from Ukrainian nurseries, and how **“here in England, there is tradition to take ill kids with fever and affected by viruses to nurseries [...] so every time my child would come in contact with ill kids, she would get home ill. It is impossible to understand”**.

Key informants described how reluctance could also stem from cultural practices in early childhood development. Key informants described how families may be unfamiliar with the concept of early childhood education and **“not see the value in early years’ services”** (KI8, LG). Sending children to an education setting at such a young age could be **“a little bit alien”** (KI14, LG) to families, particularly if it was not **“culturally something that is the norm where they’re from”** (KI16, LG). Data suggests that this could particularly prevent families from taking up the disadvantaged two-year-old offer, with **“the idea that there are entitlements at two [being] maybe quite challenging for some people”** (KI5, R&A). Gendered cultural norms may also present barriers for some families and, in this research, this

was particularly associated with resettled Afghan and Syrian families. KI14 (LG) described a couple of **“very traditional families where the mums wouldn’t have even gone out of the house, particularly without chaperons, so the idea of doing the school run [...] would be quite difficult”**.

The impact of being involved with the asylum system was also reported by key informants to contribute to parents feeling **“nervous”** (KI14, LG) about accessing child-centred services and ECEC provision. Families might be unfamiliar with **“different services being so interested in what they’re doing as a parent”** (KI14, LG) and could be fearful of their intentions, particularly if they had negative previous experiences with services. For example, KI19 (VS) had observed how some asylum-seeking and undocumented families had interacted with services that were **“actively being aggressive [...] threatening to take children away and threatening deportation”**. Key informants also noted a wariness about access to ECEC jeopardising their asylum claim. KI1 (VS) suggested that **“some of the parents worry that they might be reported for something”** (KI1, VS) and KI7 (R&A) described that some may be **“wary of [ECEC] providers’ having their personal information”**, and so preventing enrolment.

Parental knowledge and capacity to access

Separate to parental reluctance was a lack of knowledge about or the capacity to apply for funded entitlements, which emerged as a barrier in three-fifths of research activities. This mostly related to language barriers, making finding out about and applying for a place in local nurseries **“really daunting”** (KI14, LG). KI20 (VS) said that the nursery application process **“wouldn’t be straightforward for any parent, let alone a parent who doesn’t speak English”**. However, conversations with parents suggest that this experience is contextual, with two asylum-seeking mothers in FG1 who had applied for nursery, with limited English, describing the nursery application form they completed as **“easy”**.

Key informants also suggested that parents may be unaware of their rights and entitlements or the availability of local nurseries, particularly if they are separated from support networks and communities. For example, one key informant suggested that many refugee families miss out on the opportunity to find out crucial ECEC information through **“word of mouth”**, particularly if they are newly arrived in the UK and **“don’t have a social support network”** (KI7, R&A). **“Misconceptions”** (KI5, R&A) may emerge, particularly if families are from countries where **“the kids don’t start school till later [and] just assume it’s the same here [...] and they assume that it’s something that they’d have to pay out of pocket”** (KI1, VS).

Finally, digital literacy could create barriers to access. One refugee father, when reflecting on barriers affecting his peers, stated:

“There needs to be more support available to parents, especially to refugee parents [...] I know there are ways to do online, especially nowadays, a lot of

these families, they don't have knowledge of, you know, using online tools, computers and all that"

Refugee father, P11

This was echoed by K114 (LG) who suggested that the Afghan families they had supported needed practical support with completing online applications and navigating digital information.

Practical and 'hidden' barriers

Practical barriers were disclosed that made the reality of accessing ECEC provision challenging, even if funded entitlements were available. Just under half of participants described difficulties with finding a suitable place for their child in local settings due to lack of spaces. This was an issue of particular concern to parents, with all but one research activity with parents highlighting this barrier. Among the parents who participated in this research, this was a barrier reported by those living in urban areas where nurseries were oversubscribed. For example, P3 (refugee father) said that, when applying for a nursery place for their children in Sheffield, **"I apply for three or four nurseries [...] nearly three full"**. However, this barrier also was present for those in rural locations, particularly Ukrainian mothers living in smaller towns and villages, where fewer nurseries existed, drastically reducing options and meaning places in local nurseries filled up quickly.

Data shows that, even if an ECEC provider had a place available, hidden barriers could emerge. This was particularly linked to inflexibility of hours offered to families, which could be scattered and inconvenient. For example, mothers from Ukraine explained that they were only offered a couple of childcare hours per day spread out over the week, and that this practically prevented them from finding meaningful employment. For example, one mother who was a professor at a university in Ukraine, said:

"I have only [...] nine hours of care on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, for only 3 hours a day. What kind of job can I get? Only cleaning for this time. I am a little bit upset, I understand my English is not great, I can't work in university in England but I don't want to do cleaning. I have no place in the nursery and I just sit at home on benefits, it is a difficult life now"

Ukrainian mother, FG2

Other hidden barriers were financial, such as paying for food, appropriate clothing, and transport, and were linked by key informants and parents to asylum support. For example, one key informant stated:

“Although the childcare might be free, they have to pay for food, or they have to pay for nappies. I mean, those things are, I guess, sort of the same for everyone, but when you're on £5 a day [on asylum support] and there isn't sufficient allocation for your basic needs, but certainly not anything extra for children's needs [...] you struggle with that”

Key Informant 12, R&A

Additionally, some nurseries were reported to be charging parents **“top up fees”** (KI12, VS) or requesting a **“deposit [...] just to get on a waiting list for a nursery”** (KI14, LG), which they could not afford. This appeared to be the result of being underfunded by the Government, with KI12 (VS) describing how **“some providers really limit the number of genuinely free places because [they] certainly can't afford it”**.

Poor flow of information

Just under half of research activities evidenced the inadequacy of information flows – the lack of **“joining up of information”** (KI20, VS) – between key actors in the ECEC provision for refugee and asylum-seeking families. This was a concern raised mostly by key informants, and could create several barriers to access.

First, key informants discussed the absence of **“national record-keeping”** (KI19, VS) on refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years because attendance in education is not compulsory. Second, key informants reflected on the insufficient flow of information between national and local government, with the asylum dispersal policies rendering children effectively invisible. KI8 (LG) described the lack of **“pre-information”** that local authorities are given about the arrival of asylum-seeking families in their area, hindering their ability to plan for or provide meaningful early years support for families, including pregnant mothers and young children, stating:

“One of the main challenges that we heard was around the process of people being placed in councils. And the lack of information about this. So, kind of, people being put in hotels or facilities and councils not necessarily being informed about the number of children that are there, the age of the children and even when they'll be arriving, how long they'd be there. And then information about when they're being moved on again”

Key Informant 8, LG

One key informant suggested that some local authorities may know about the presence of asylum-seeking children in their area, and **“data may exist at a local level”** (KI5, R&A), but that they are not necessarily sharing this data with ECEC providers who, in turn, are unable to engage in outreach to these families. Additionally, information that reaches ECEC providers and families may also be inaccurate, with KI21 (VS) indicating that **“the responsibility really should be with**

the government and with local authorities to know their stuff [about rights and entitlements] better”.

Participants were also concerned about the impersonal nature of information which relied on families’ digital literacy and language skills. While KI5 (R&A) recognised the presence of information on the government website, they indicated **“I just don’t think you can beat the human contacts on a local level, to sort of help demystify and to help people navigate [the ECEC] system”** (KI5, R&A). Most parents who participated in FG1 and FG2, and PI3, suggested that they were required to find out information for themselves with inadequate support from the local government. For example, one mother said:

“I know some girls got help from the council in their search but in my case the council wouldn’t even reply to my email and then they just gave me the list of nurseries [...] I was very disappointed with them. There was no help”

Ukrainain mother, FG2

Sporadic local authority involvement

Access to ECEC was described as dependent on geographic location – or, as articulated by KI2 (R&A), **“incredibly patchy”** and **“hit and miss”**. A large component of this was the extent to which the local authority provided support with access, which could **“vary from place to place”** (KI8, LG) – a concern raised by 40% of research participants. This was mostly expressed by key informants, and not overtly by parents. There was a consensus among participants that local authorities should make sure that refugee and asylum-seeking children, like all other children, get access to early education opportunities. And, while some examples of excellence emerged, data suggest that the provision of proactive support is limited.

Key informants suggested that local authority involvement appeared to be dependent on several factors. Firstly, the extent to which they were aware of refugee and asylum-seeking children in their area was dependent on information sharing between national and local governments. Secondly, it seemed dependent on the funding that was available to them – for both early years, and as refugees and asylum-seekers. Participants suggested that there have been **“significant reductions”** (KI5, R&A) in holistic support aimed at families, such as Family Information Services, in recent years, yet these have typically been crucial in enabling access to ECEC settings for refugees and asylum-seekers through signposting. While some local authorities continued to **“invest in the early years [...] in spite of all the [budget] cuts”** (KI12, VS), others were left **“firefighting [...] particularly in children’s social care”**, making the prioritisation of holistic early years support **“not easy in the current climate”** (KI12, VS).

Participants also suggested a **“funding gap”** (K17, R&A) for local authorities in providing support to refugee and asylum-seeking families in their area. For some groups of refugees, particularly those who are part of Home Office resettlement schemes, the Hong Kong British Nationals Overseas scheme, or Homes for Ukraine, were accompanied by **“funding streams”** (K18, LG) that could be used to fund early years support for these groups.

While issues of delays in this funding being made available was referenced by participants, the main concern was the lack of funding local authorities receive to support asylum-seeking families with childcare or early education issues.

Overcoming barriers

While participants’ responses were predominantly focused on common barriers to ECEC access, examples of good practice and factors that support access to ECEC despite the range of challenges that exist were evident.

Support from local organisations, groups and individuals

Support from local organisations, groups and individuals was – along with support from the local authority, as described in the proceeding section – the most commonly reported enabling factor to ECEC access, and was reported in half of research activities and particularly emphasised by parents. Parents and key informants described the importance of support from a range of organisations, including independent advice organisations, local councils, charities, religious networks (including churches and mosques), community groups, and host families (as part of Homes for Ukraine). The value of this support appeared to be wide-ranging and included ensuring the accessibility of information about rights and entitlements to ECEC, and the provision of practical support with navigating the complex ECEC system. The voluntary sector was described as particularly crucial in providing parents with active support with applications for funding and nursery places, including by accompanying parents to registration, and providing motivation and encouragement despite setbacks, as shown by the experience of a single mother in Box 2.



Box 2: The value of voluntary sector support

PI2, a single mother of a two-year-old, described in detail her experience of accessing childcare funding through a college. Towards the end of a long and challenging journey with multiple bureaucratic hurdles, PI2 reported feeling dejected and on the edge of giving up pursuing childcare funding through her college, saying **“I was like, you know, it’s not the end of the world, I’m only in my 20s, people fulfil their dreams in their 30s, their 40s, even their 50s. I give that motivation to myself after crying”**.

Describing the invaluable support and advocacy from a local voluntary sector organisation in accessing funded childcare, she said: **“[name of voluntary sector support worker] has been very well motivated about that childcare, you know, he always told me ‘I’m not that person who will give up, I will do it until they qualify for it’ [...]. Then [he] emailed directly the lady [...] and last week, end of March, he called me to say ‘you know what, the college are paying childcare’. I was dancing, jumping around”**. Refugee mother, PI2

Key informants also described the value of local community spaces, and provided examples of local churches or libraries being used to create **“informal support networks”** (KI7, R&A). Parents also emphasised the importance of charities filling gaps in the absence of a formal ECEC place by providing support for families with child-centred components. For example, one mother from Ukraine stated that, amid a lack of available childcare provision in her local area, **“I managed to find one ESOL course, that is a charity, that has a room for kids to play while parents are at the lessons [...] I am going to this course twice a week, one and half hours together with a baby”** (mother, FG2).

Some evidence suggests that community organisations and groups can help shift mindsets about the value of ECEC where parents might be reluctant, by demonstrating to parents the value of ECEC learning and play opportunities. For example, one key informant stated:

“You find that parents who’ve gone to like ‘baby and meet clubs’ [...] they’re very keen on getting their child a nursery school placement, like, really really keen. And to be honest, most parents, even the ones that are unsure, once they’ve gone into the school and looked at it and seen how happy their child is to just have a place to play [would want to send their child to ECEC]”

Key Informant 11, VS

Support from local authorities

The other most commonly reported enabling factor to ECEC access was local authority support, when available. This emerged in three-fifths of research activities, and was particularly highlighted by key informants. In particular, the **“wraparound support”** (KI1) – or the holistic support to families with various aspects of their lives – from the local authority was consistently reported as valuable, when it existed. While participants suggested that this is often absent for asylum-seekers and Ukrainians in the UK (who seemed to initially access support from host families but who may have now moved out of host family arrangements), this type of support tends to be available for families who arrive in the UK on government resettlement schemes.

In this research, it was mentioned in relation to families from Afghanistan and Syria who had arrived in the UK via Government schemes. In particular, the holistic support provided by a caseworker could help families with the process of accessing funding and applying for nursery places. KI3 (R&A) also reflected on how Syrians in the UK are **“given support through local authorities [...] so it’s a very supported experience for the children”** (KI3, R&A). Some participants expressed the desire for this support to be better aligned to Scotland, where there **“seems to be a lot more better integrated support”** (KI2, R&A).

Box 3: Holistic support from Dorset Council



Two key informants worked for Dorset Council as caseworkers, and provided support to resettled Afghan and Syrian families as they were welcomed to their new communities. They described how part of their role was **“getting children into school or into nursery places”** by providing practical support such as finding an appropriate place, applying for the right funding, accompanying families to enrol and register. This was part of a broader package of holistic support which involved **“setting up new homes and welcoming new families”** and working with families to ensure they had applied for government funded schemes that they are entitled to, including funded childcare entitlements.

Some examples of local authorities engaging in specific outreach activities for asylum-seekers in hotels emerged. For example, KI13 (LG) described how the service they worked for within the local council offered support to families with English as an Additional Language (EAL) – including many refugee and asylum-seeking families – with finding and applying for nursery places. Additionally, KI8 (LG) reported a local authority that:

“...tried to provide travelcards to help people access different provision in London, but the take up remained quite low. So they started trying to run sessions again in those areas [where takeup was low] and doing stay and play sessions, for example, in hotels themselves”

Key Informant 18, LG

Support from nurseries and ECEC settings

Nurseries going out of their way to create welcoming environments for refugees and asylum-seekers was reported by just under half of participants as making a difference in families’ ability to access ECEC, and was particularly prominent in research activities with key informants. For example, KI10 (R&A) discussed a **“pedagogy of welcome”**, a term coined by KI3 (R&A) through their academic work, which recognises that **“welcome for all families starts not just in the building, it starts in the community and how you engage that community to see the early childhood setting as a place for them”**. Examples of such intentional welcome were evident in the data, and included: nurseries hiring a diverse staff team who could reach specific cultural communities, overcome language barriers and make families feel welcome; the specific outreach and tailored open days that some nurseries run that allow parents to **“come with their child, let their child look at how the nursery runs [...] just to give them that confidence that actually their child is going to a safe place”** (KI1, VS); and the simplification of application processes.

Strategies for positive ECEC experiences

This section focuses on the insights provided by participants on the ways in which ECEC providers can ensure high-quality and meaningful experiences for refugee and asylum-seeking children, when they are able to access their provision. It also reflects briefly on some of the constraints that ECEC providers may face.

Equitable and contextual approaches

Just over half of research activities demonstrated the importance of equitable and contextual support for refugee and asylum-seeking children within ECEC settings. Key informants particularly emphasised this theme, with KI3 (R&A) stating that ECEC providers **“need to think about equity because refugee children need more [...] than the average child”**. They suggested that such equitable approaches needed to be contextual and avoid homogenising the support needs of this group of children. For example, KI15 (ECE) stated that **“you can’t just talk about what all refugees need, other than individual approaches”**. One asylum-seeking mother in FG1 also emphasised the importance of individual approaches. Reflecting on how

the nursery her daughter accessed could improve their provision, she suggested that there needed to be a greater focus on each child in the classroom, **“because every child is special”**. Taking into consideration the distinct journeys families have made, the possible impact of trauma, their cultural background and previous educational experiences and expectations were all reported as crucial in the development of tailored and contextual ECEC experiences for refugee and asylum-seeking children.

A core element of equitable and contextual approaches that was raised during research activities, with five key informants and two parents, was a flexible and compassionate transition period for children, particularly if children have been affected by trauma or separation anxiety. As illustrated by KI16 (LG), making room for a phased entry into an ECEC setting can act as a supporting factor for both children and their parents:

“I think there needs to be sometimes a greater understanding of where the refugee families have come from, and taking into account their background [...] I think sometimes they just need to have that...kind of slightly more gentle, slightly more relaxed approach to things, especially, initially”

Key Informant 16, LG

Meaningful relationships with parents

Just over half of the research activities highlighted the importance of ECEC providers taking the time to build **“meaningful relationships with families individually”** (KI3, R&A). KI5 (R&A) suggested that the decision to send a child to nursery is a **“really big decision”** for refugee and asylum-seeking parents, and that participation in ECEC **“needs to be based on feelings of trust, of being listened to, of being a partner in those early years”**. Key informants who worked at a nursery (KI15, KI17 and KI18) emphasised that the process of developing such trust with parents could be slow and require persistence. They said that it **“is one of the things that proves the most difficult”** (KI18, ECE). But, demonstrating the rewards when it is built, KI17 (ECE) described one refugee father saying **“[name of nursery] is my sunshine”**.

Engaging with parents to understand their child’s background and culture, and incorporating elements of this in the classroom were reported to help parents feel like a ‘partner’ in their child’s early education. This was also described as helping children to feel connected to their environment and develop a sense of pride in their identity. For example, one key informant with previous experience of working in early childhood settings said:

“I had a Kuwaiti family in one setting I was working in. And, I didn’t know, but it was National Kuwait day. And the mum wanted to do something so

she came in, she dressed up in her national costume. She shared food with the children. And the little girl was able to kind of get really proud of who she was”

Key Informant 3, R&A

Key informants also highlighted how building relationships with refugee and asylum-seeking children’s parents could help overcome a challenge previously mentioned around parents/carers not understanding the value of early childhood education, particularly when it was creative and play-based. For example, one ECEC setting described how they organised a day for parents to come and observe a day at the nursery, to understand what their children were learning and how the activities undertaken were supporting their development. Similarly, another setting put together an early years session for parents to help them understand and recognise the importance of ECEC for their child.

Skilled and trained early childhood educators

Just under half of research activities with key informants suggested that the presence of a skilled and trained team of early childhood educators could enhance the ECEC experiences for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Key informants described the importance of ensuring staff were equipped to address language barriers and ensure meaningful learning and experiences for the youngest children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Key informants based in Brighton and Hove (KI13, KI15, KI17 and KI18) demonstrated the value of external partnerships and engaging specialist expertise and training for this purpose (see box 5).

Key informants also highlighted the importance of periodic training for all staff at ECEC settings, in order to create a sensitive, high-quality and inclusive setting. KI9 (R&A) stated that **“getting the right people trained in the right way to work with [refugee children] makes a lot of difference”**. Key informants particularly emphasised the importance of trauma-informed training and ensuring that staff are able to respond to the distinct needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children appropriately. Summarising this, one key informant stated:

“I think the best services are those that are culturally responsive, that employ people from the context that they’re migrating from, you know, refugees themselves. And then understand the trauma that people have gone through. So, they develop their services to be responsive to that and to be sensitive to that”

Key Informant 14, R&A



Box 5: Creating an inclusive nursery environment

Acorn Nursery in Brighton and Hove, is one of several in the area accredited as a Nursery of Sanctuary, as part of the Schools of Sanctuary scheme. Three key informants were linked to this nursery and described a range of promising practices for creating an inclusive environment for refugee and asylum-seeking children in their setting. Alongside ensuring books in a range of languages and with pictures that reflected the diversity of children in their classroom, they also **“make sure all our [persona] dolls are diverse and reflect our community”**.

These key informants also described an intentional approach to overcoming language barriers, including drawing on makaton (a visual form of communication that uses signs and symbols) and visual images to communicate with children with limited language skills. They also described their efforts to make ‘home corners’ more diverse and inclusive for refugee learners, saying:

“Previously home corners in early years settings used to have a bit of dressing up clothes, plastic tea sets, a pretend washing machine and a pretend cooker along with a bit of plastic fake food. They're very different now [...] At Acorn we take a very different approach. We use a range of different resources. The resources are open-ended [...] different fabrics, we include real objects and play foods, these reflect the experiences of the children in our nursery and also introduce them into new experiences. We try to avoid tokenisms, like chopsticks just at Chinese new year. We celebrated refugee week and we noticed when we had a tent in the garden the focus was on children being on their holidays, once we incorporated it in our home corner we noticed it generated conversations of living in a tent and how it might feel to be a refugee”

Finally, they shared an example of poverty proofing their setting. They said:

“As a Nursery of Sanctuary we strive to be as inclusive and aware of our individual families' lives as much as possible. When World Book Day took place we knew that this would likely be a new concept to some of our families and we wanted to think of a way to celebrate that would be relatable and accessible to everyone. By celebrating ‘bed-time stories’ nobody had to buy an outfit and everyone could participate as this is a concept most families could relate to, wearing our pyjamas and snuggling up together to read a book”

Possible constraining factors

While examples of promising strategies were evident, participants discussed constraining issues that could make implementing these on a consistent and wider scale challenging for ECEC settings. The underfunding and under-resourcing of ECEC was by far the most commonly reported constraining factor. This was referenced by over three quarters of key informants. For example, one key informant said:

“I really sympathise with nurseries, I think it's often not a case of an individual nursery not wanting to reserve this incredible amount of goodwill [and be flexible for refugee learners]. It's often the structures that they're working with their lack of funding, it's their staffing issues, it's their stresses”

Key Informant 13, LG

The underfunding of the sector reportedly resulted in **“minimum wages”** which negated the possibility of engaging a **“highly skilled”** workforce, which key informants perceived to be crucial in providing quality support to all children. Additionally, wages could lead to ECEC staff feeling undervalued and unsupported and result in high turnover. For example, KI13 (LG) reflected that **“refugee children suffer as a result of structural [challenges] [...] the underfunded and under-resourced sector makes it much more difficult for those children”** (KI13, LG).

When nurseries have put in place strategies to support refugee and asylum-seeking children, data suggests it is largely dependent on the presence of a committed and dedicated Nursery Manager. However, reflecting on the pressure these Nursery Managers face, KI5 (R&A) said **“that is already more than a full-time job, I think the demands around that are huge”**. They further suggested that while many Nursery Managers tend to undertake **“multidisciplinary work”**, it is **“not recognised or funded”** (KI5, R&A), which could practically limit the scope of what is possible.

Finally, limited funding for ECEC provision ultimately reduced the availability of funded places. Some key informants suggested that increasingly, providers are having to offer families times that they struggle to fill, such as between three and six in the afternoon. These slots were described as inconvenient and **“not in the best interests at all of a child”** (KI12, VS), and participants suggested that they do not prepare children for the realities of attending primary school.

ⁱ From April 2024, eligible working parents of two-year-olds will get a new offer of 15 free hours per week of free childcare. From September 2024, eligible parents will get 15 free hours from nine months until their children start school, and from September 2025, they will get 30 free hours from nine months until the start of school.