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# OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

## How two systems lock the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children out of early education in England



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Refugee Education UK

# ABOUT US

**UNICEF**, the United Nations Children's Fund, is mandated by the UN General Assembly to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and promote the rights and wellbeing of every child. Together with partners, UNICEF works in over 190 countries and territories around the world, including here in the UK, focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of children everywhere. UNICEF has a specific role in providing advice and assistance to governments around the world in matters relating to children's rights.

**The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK)** is a registered charity that raises funds for UNICEF's global work, advocates for change for children, and works with over two million children through our Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme with local authorities, our Baby Friendly Initiative in hospitals and health centres, and our Rights Respecting Schools Award network of 5,000 schools.

**UNICEF UK's Early Moments Matter Campaign** highlights the needs of babies and young children. UNICEF UK is asking the UK Government to commit to a Baby and Toddler Guarantee – to ensure that the rights of every one of our youngest citizens are met, and future generations are able to reach their full potential.

**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 programme 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 about them at www.reuk.org.

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| Abbreviation/Acronym | Full description |
|---|---|
| **DfE** | Department for Education |
| **ECEC** | Early Childhood Education and Care |
| **HLE** | Home Learning Environment |
| **LLR** | Limited Leave to Remain |
| **NRPF** | No Recourse to Public Funds |
| **SEN** | Special Educational Needs |
| **PVI** | Private, voluntary and independent |
| **UNHCR** | The United Nations Refugee Agency |

**In the findings section, acronyms are used to refer to research participants:**

| Acronym | Full description |
|---|---|
| **FG** | Focus group |
| **KI** | Key informant |
| **PI** | Parent interviewee |
| **R&A** | Research and academia key informant |
| **LG** | Local government key informant |
| **ECE** | Early childhood education key informant |
| **VS** | Voluntary sector key informant |

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first five years of everyone's life are some of the most crucial. They are a period of unprecedented growth and cognitive, social and emotional development. They are the foundations for a life-long ability to learn, thrive, cope with adversity, be healthy and build strong relationships, providing an "irreplaceable window of opportunity to set a path towards success in primary school and later in life"1. However, the early years are also a time of risk, especially for vulnerable babies and toddlers; without access to services and support, cycles of disadvantage, poor mental health, low academic achievement and poverty can become entrenched. The evidence is clear about the vital importance of high-quality early education and care for the youngest children, especially the most disadvantaged.

Refugee and asylum-seeking babies and young children under the age of five represent one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in England. Despite this we know very little about them - how many there are and their experience of accessing vital early years services, especially early childhood education and care (ECEC). What is clear is that there are significant numbers of children whose experience of, and access to, ECEC are being overlooked. This research uncovers multiple challenges for refugee and asylum-seeking babies and young children, including barriers to learning at home, accessing adequate nutrition and support for their physical development. All children have the right for their development to be supported, enabled and guaranteed.

Against this backdrop, UNICEF UK and Refugee Education UK (REUK) undertook exploratory research into their ECEC experiences. Through in-depth focus groups and interviews, researchers heard from 15 refugee and asylum-seeking parents of children under the age of five, who came to the UK from a range of countries of origin and through a variety of means. The findings incorporate the perspectives and experiences of those who have claimed asylum and are waiting on an outcome, those who have had their status granted through asylum routes, and those who have arrived through Government initiatives for Afghanistan and Ukraine. Findings also include the perspectives and experiences of 23 experts in the refugee support and/or early education sectors, who worked in research and academia, the voluntary sector, local government and early education settings. This research highlights a myriad of findings about the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years.

# Key findings

## Refugee and asylum-seeking children's home environments can be unconducive to their early development

Many parents and key informants discussed the environments surrounding the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children, and how they often undermine positive early development. One of the most damaging environments uncovered by this research is temporary asylum accommodation, where families often live in cramped conditions with a lack of baby and child friendly space. They also rely on small, weekly asylum allowances, which limit children's learning opportunities. Research findings also suggest that asylum accommodation restricts other parts of children's development, with parents describing health issues developed from inadequate food options and poor living conditions, such as dust and damp. Key informants and parents also emphasised the lack of safety and security for the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children. Families reportedly experience "significant precarity" due to their immigration status, whether claiming asylum or on time-limited stasuses, such as Limited Leave to Remain, as well as constant anxiety about being moved from place to place by dispersal policies.

## ECEC is vital for the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families

Against this backdrop, a significant research finding is the extent to which access to an ECEC setting benefits the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children. For these children, accessing settings:

- Helps prepare them for primary school by promoting positive social, emotional and cognitive development, nurturing confidence and supporting the formation of relationships with adults and peers.
- Provides a safe space, opportunities and resources for learning and play that they may otherwise not have, including with other children of their age.
- Plays a crucial role in the healing process from traumatic experiences that they may have encountered as a result of their forced displacement.

ECEC access also benefits parents, supporting their wellbeing in the context of displacement and providing the opportunity for study or work (for those parents who have the right to work), all of which combine to help families integrate into their new environments. This research suggests particular benefits for mothers who may be particularly isolated, especially when they have childcare responsibilities. It also finds that the ECEC sector plays an important role in signposting families to other services, such as special educational needs (SEN) support, and so facilitating families' engagement with normally difficult-to-engage-with services.

## A myriad of complex barriers hinder access to ECEC, but promising practice at a local level shines through

Despite the clear value that ECEC provides to refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families, the research finds consistent and significant barriers to accessing it. This can embed disadvantage and deny them the many short- and long-term benefits of ECEC.

Key informants were concerned about current early education policy which restricts access to the additional free hours for 3- and 4-year-olds, because it is based on parents' ability to work. Alongside the restrictions to asylum-seekers' ability to work, asylum policies create other, indirect barriers to ECEC: inadequate living arrangements, enforced poverty through small weekly allowances, and perpetual instability resulting from dispersal policies. Not only do these make it difficult to secure a consistent ECEC place in a setting, they create environments that limit children's development. The findings suggest that consideration and provisions for the youngest children are "bottom of the pile" in asylum policy.

A host of non-policy related barriers were also highlighted by parents and key informants:

- Parents can be reluctant to send their children to nursery if they don't necessarily know about the value and benefits of ECEC for the youngest children, and it may not be usual practice within their culture.
- Some parents may be fearful of services as a result of being in a hostile asylum system, leading to a fear of engaging with ECEC services.
- Challenges with navigating a complex ECEC system, particularly for parents for whom English is an additional language or for whom online applications are challenging.
- Practical barriers that may be hidden at first, including difficulties finding spaces at local ECEC settings at convenient hours, and financial barriers.
- Poor flow of information which prevents local authorities being aware of children in their locality and hinders accessible and correct information reaching families.
- The level of support provided by local authorities can be sporadic and inconsistent depending on where families are living.

The many barriers uncovered arguably paint a bleak picture, but the research also revealed positive practice at the local level. From effective, well-coordinated local responses by local authorities, to welcoming and holistic practice in settings, and local organisations providing expert and practical support, this research found that local areas often deliver for their local refugee and asylum-seeking families.

### Many ECEC settings create positive environments for children

Key informants described excellent practice and approaches enabling refugee and asylum-seeking children to benefit from ECEC, despite a backdrop of limited resourcing and funding of the wider sector. Examples include:

- Considering the distinct barriers facing refugee and asylum-seeking children, such as potential trauma, culture and background, and English as an additional language, and providing contextual and equitable approaches in response, such as flexible and compassionate early transition periods.
- Practitioners taking the time to build meaningful and trusting relationships with parents, involving them in aspects of the ECEC.
- Ensuring the presence of diverse and skilled educators, and providing them with adequate training and support to respond to the children's distinct needs.
- Inclusive environments in which toys, books and classrooms reflect the diversity of the children in the setting, and where activities are 'poverty-proof', enabling all children to participate despite parents' finances.

# Conclusion

Refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years are caught in the middle of two UK policy systems: the ECEC funding and asylum systems. Each overlooks their existence and de-prioritises their rights. A key factor is the dependence of ECEC access on the parents' situation, rather than being in the best interests of the child. Similar can be said for the asylum system, which this research suggests is failing to provide children with adequate nutrition, living arrangements and development opportunities.

The effect of a multitude of barriers across both systems, is that the children are more likely to be isolated and excluded from the ECEC provision that is shown to be vital for their development, safety and wellbeing in the wake of forced displacement. These children are denied a crucial window of opportunity to go on to thrive in primary school and later in life.

This research and its recommendations provide a clear roadmap to ensure refugee and asylum-seeking children are supported to develop in their early years, by putting the most marginalised children at the heart of policy-making.


# Recommendations

Placing children at the centre of policy-making has the potential to create a cohesive, coordinated, and comprehensive system; one in which the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children have access to quality ECEC services in England. Achieving this requires action by a range of actors outlined below.

## The UK Government should support this by:

1. **Removing the systemic barriers facing parents:**
   - Widen the 30-hour ECEC entitlement to the parents of all refugee and asylum-seeking children, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds.
   - Remove the right to work restrictions placed on asylum seeking parents waiting on their claim, thereby providing the means for children to attend the additional ECEC hours, while also enabling families to escape enforced poverty.
   - Work with stakeholders such as Strategic Migration Partnerships and local authorities to ensure young children seeking sanctuary in the UK are housed in accommodation that facilitates consistent access to mainstream ECEC, promotes and maintains a high standard of physical and mental health, and provides highly nutritional food.
2. **Removing the funding barriers facing local authorities**
   - Provide additional funding to local authorities for each 'placed individual', to increase provision and capacity, and to support the varied and unique needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children.
   - Set a viable per-hour funding rate for ECEC settings to ensure all entitlement hours are free at the point of access for families.
   - Increase Pupil Premium funding to bring it in line with school levels of funding.
3. **Supporting ECEC providers to meet the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children**

- Work with academics, providers, practitioners and beneficiaries to surface and share best practice in supporting refugee and asylum-seeker children, including those experiencing trauma and those with English as an additional language.

4. **Improving data and information flow**
    - Improve mechanisms for timely sharing of information between the Home Office, Department for Levelling Up, Department for Education, and Local Authorities, to enable planning and preparation before the arrival of children in each jurisdiction.
    - Collect data and/or disaggregate data for all children from birth to five years entering England.

## Local Government can support this by:

5. **Removing the practical barriers facing parents**
    - Compile information in the most common languages for refugee and asylum-seeking families in England, including information about their rights and entitlements.
    - Simplify and streamline the application process for the disadvantaged two-year-old offer, and provide application guidelines and forms in the most common languages for refugee and asylum-seeking families in England.
    - Coordinate with other local authorities to secure ECEC places for families who are being moved to different locations, ensuring they do not need to reapply.

## Researchers and academics can support this by:

6. **Continuing to build the evidence-base and addressing gaps in knowledge on:**
    - The impact of the Illegal Immigration Act on early years experiences and access to ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children.
    - The experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking children in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and other parts of England to build on the qualitative primary research in this report.
    - Good practice in systematic support for refugee and asylum-seeking children domestically and internationally.

# INTRODUCTION

The first five years of everyone's life are some of the most crucial. They are a period of unprecedented growth and cognitive, social and emotional development. They are the foundations for a life-long ability to learn, thrive, cope with adversity, be healthy and build strong relationships, providing an "irreplaceable window of opportunity to set a path towards success in primary school and later in life".[2] However, the early years are also a time of risk, especially for vulnerable babies and toddlers; without access to services and support, cycles of disadvantage, poor mental health, low academic achievement and poverty can become entrenched.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is fundamental for children's development and vital for giving them the best possible start in life. The Department for Education's (DfE) ongoing Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) states that "attending high quality ECEC helps prepare young children to be 'school ready', which is important as a foundation for a successful educational career and long-term life outcomes".[3] While evidence shows that attending high-quality ECEC settings has a positive impact for all children, a 2004 DfE study showed that the benefits are even more significant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[4]

While attending a formal childcare setting is not compulsory, it is well established that accessing high-quality ECEC can be difficult for many children across the UK. As the UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) outlined in the Early Moments Matter report, ECEC provision is geographically patchy, often unaffordable, and disproportionately locks out disadvantaged children who stand to benefit most from vital early education and its positive lifelong impacts.[5]

What is less documented, and certainly not well known, is the effect this has on some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised children in England: refugee and asylum-seeking babies and young children under the age of five. The number of these young children is not known, but there are likely significant numbers of children in England whose experiences of accessing high-quality ECEC are overlooked.

This report presents findings from research carried out by UNICEF UK in partnership with Refugee Education UK (REUK), which contributes important evidence on the overlooked ECEC experiences of the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children. This report sets out to:

- Provide insights into the opportunities to access and thrive in ECEC for a largely hidden group of children in England;
- Increase understanding of the barriers to accessing quality ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children and what is needed to overcome these barriers;
- Identify practical recommendations for local and national stakeholders to reduce barriers and increase provision and uptake of quality ECEC.

# Terminology and scope

This research refers to **refugee and asylum-seeking children**, who are defined, for the purposes of this report, as the youngest children (under the age of five) whose parents have been forcibly displaced from their home countries, for reasons including conflict, persecution, violence and trafficking – regardless of their immigration status.

On occasion, this report specifies where findings relate to asylum-seekers or refugees only.

**Asylum-seeker** is used to refer to someone who has left their country of origin and has formally applied for asylum in the UK, but who is still waiting on the outcome of an asylum claim from the UK Government.

**Refugee** is used to refer to someone who has received an outcome on their asylum claim and has been granted protection status by the UK Government, including refugee status, humanitarian protection, and other forms of leave to remain. It is also used to refer to someone who has been granted leave to remain as part of a Government scheme (such as for Afghanistan or Ukraine).

**Early childhood education and care (ECEC)** is defined as the education and childcare provided in regulated settings from birth to the start of primary school. The term is used to refer to formal ECEC settings. While this could include childminders, this report focuses on nursery settings in both the maintained and private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) sectors. This report also includes reference to children's ability to learn outside these settings, known as their home learning environment (HLE).

# A snapshot of research on ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children

A literature review was conducted for this study (published as a separate report). It reveals significant research and evidence gaps on the experiences of ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children in England. This is a trend mirrored at the European level, with a 2019 European study on ECEC for refugee families finding that the very youngest refugee children are practically invisible in research.[6] Recent analysis by the Hub for European Refugee Education – an initiative that provides a comprehensive database of academic and grey literature on refugee education across Europe – shows that pre-primary education is the most understudied level of education across Europe.[7]

Despite this, the literature review did provide valuable insights. It underscored the importance of high-quality ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children, particularly given common features and constraints of their home environments (particularly when housed in temporary accommodation), and its lifelong benefits,

including for a child's cognitive, social and emotional development, healing from trauma, school readiness, and long-term outcomes. It also provided a strong economic and social case for investing in early childhood education for refugees, as well as establishing the many significant barriers that refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families face, including at the policy, institutional, and family level, that contribute to poor take-up of ECEC.

However, these insights are mostly drawn from the broader evidence base on experiences of ECEC for disadvantaged children in the UK more broadly,[8] or from research on ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children at a global or European level.[9] To the best of the authors' knowledge, few directly relevant studies exist in the UK context. Those reviewed tend to focus on desk-based research and do not include the voices of refugee and asylum-seeking families,[10] or examine access to childcare as a smaller focus in a broader study on refugees' and asylum-seekers' lives.[11]

# Structure of the report

The **Background and Context** section provides an overview of ECEC context for the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK by providing a statistical snapshot of the forced displacement context in the UK, and an overview of relevant policy in England**.** The **Methodology** section describes the methodology underpinning the primary research with parents and key informants and the questions addressed. This is followed by the **Research Findings** section, which analyses data from the qualitative primary research with parents and key informants. The **Reflections and Conclusions** section discusses key and pertinent research themes and their relevance in the current context. **The Recommendations** section identifies a range of evidence-based recommendations to national and local Government and researchers.

# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

**This section provides an overview of the forced displacement contexts globally and in the UK, within which the findings of this research emerged.**

## Global forced displacement overview

At the close of 2022, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that 108.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their homes because of persecution, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order.[12] This figure represented a 19 million-person increase since the end of 2021 – an increase driven by ongoing and new conflicts, including in Ukraine and Afghanistan. Globally, children make up approximately 40% of forcibly displaced people.[13] It is estimated that one in three children living outside their country of birth are refugees.[14]

Age-disaggregated data shows that children in their early years (0-4) comprise more than a quarter of all the refugee and asylum-seeking children recorded by UNHCR.[15] The number of children who are spending their early years forcibly displaced from their homes has grown in recent years: at the end of 2022, there were more than 3.1 million refugee and asylum-seeking children under the age of five recorded worldwide by UNHCR, representing a 35% increase as compared to the end of 2020.[16]

## UK displacement policy landscape

The forced displacement landscape in the UK can, at the time of writing this report and for the purposes of this research, be understood in three parts:

- The landscape for **asylum seekers**
- The landscape for **people with status granted** through asylum routes (including refugee status, humanitarian protection status, and limited leave to remain)
- The landscape for those who have been part of **UK Government schemes** (including schemes for Afghan and Ukrainian nationals).

Age-disaggregated data on refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK is not publicly available; UK Government statistics tend to group all children together and it has not been possible to attain recent data on those in their early years. However, where possible data is provided on children. For those who have engaged with the asylum system (asylum-seekers and those who were granted status through asylum routes) data is also provided on dependants under the age of 18 (children who are dependent on adults rather than having an application in their own name) – as within these figures lie the very youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children.

## Asylum-seekers

In the year ending March 2023, the Home Office recorded 75,492 asylum applications (relating to 91,047 people) – a 33% increase from the previous year. Home Office data shows that of the 91,047 people who claimed asylum between April 2022 and March 2023, 18% (16,183) were children.[17] Of these children, 65% (10,533) were dependants.[18]

While current data is not publicly available, the Refugee Council reported obtained data showing that, in 2017, 2,711 child dependant applicants were children under the age of five.[19] These babies and very young children made up nearly 50% of all child dependant applicants that year, and this pattern was broadly consistent for the prior three years of data (2014, 2015 and 2016) (see **Annexe 1**). Given this pattern, and considering global patterns set out above, it is likely that a high percentage of the 10,533 dependent asylum-seeking children recorded by the Home Office in the last year are babies and very young children.

## People with protection status granted through asylum routes

In the year ending March 2023, the UK Government made 17,872 grants of protection (refugee status, temporary refugee protection, and humanitarian protection) to people who had claimed asylum, of which 27% (4,873) were made to children.[20] Of these children, just over half (2,580) were made to dependant applicants.[21] A further 362 grants of other forms of status were made, of which 50% (178) were made for children, of which 63% (112) were dependants.[22]

## UK Government schemes: resettlement schemes

The UK Government has, since 2004, established schemes to resettle refugees fleeing conflict or countries with poor human rights records with no hope of returning home. At present, three refugee resettlement schemes exist (excluding the Afghanistan and Ukraine schemes: the Community Sponsorship scheme; the Mandate Scheme; and the UK resettlement scheme (UKRS), which, at the start of 2021, brought together three historical resettlement schemes (the Gateway Protection Programme, the VPRS (for Syrians) and the VCRS). A total of 3,781 individuals have been resettled by the schemes outlined above since January 2020, of whom 47% (1,768) are children.[23]

## UK Government schemes: Afghanistan and Ukraine

Following the takeover of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021, the UK Government set up the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) for Afghan citizens who worked for or with the UK Government in Afghanistan. As of the end of March 2023, the UK Government recorded 11,298 individuals under the ARAP scheme, of whom 54% (6,115) were children.[24] In January 2022, the UK Government launched the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), with a commitment to resettle 20,000 Afghans over the coming years. As of the end of

March 2023, Government data shows 9,113 individuals resettled under the scheme, of whom 51% were children.[25]

In 2022 the UK Government launched two visa routes for Ukrainians fleeing war: the Ukraine Family Scheme, which allows applicants to join family members or extend their stay in the UK, under which 100,900 visa applications were made; the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, which allows Ukrainian nationals and their family members to come to the UK if they have a named sponsor under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, under which 204,300 visa applications were made.[26] As of the end of March 2023, children accounted for 29% of all people who arrived from Ukraine since the schemes began.[27]

# Refugee and asylum-seeker policy

This section provides a brief overview of two policy landscapes in England: refugee and asylum-seeker policy, and ECEC funding entitlements policy. It is not intended to be an exhaustive policy analysis, but rather to provide an overview of relevant components of the two major policy landscapes that affect the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children's access to ECEC, and that are referred to in the findings section of this report. Both systems are complicated, and for the cohort of children caught in the middle of them, compounding barriers can make navigating them an issue.

The policies outlined within this section should be considered within the context of the recently passed Illegal Migration Act 2023, which will instigate rapid changes to the policy landscape, particularly the future of asylum-seeking. Analysis is yet to be done assessing the impact of this on the very youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children, although concern has been raised about its likely impact on children's rights.[28] The legislation could mean that children are unable to claim asylum in the UK and there will be a use of detention centres to house those who arrive in the UK. This changing context could therefore have a material effect on how children are treated upon their arrival and questions remain about what this means in relation in their ability to access current ECEC entitlements.

## Asylum-seekers

Asylum-seekers who are waiting on an outcome on their asylum claim are generally not permitted to work.[29] Recent research has found that this policy has a negative social and economic impact and makes the UK one of most restrictive European countries in terms of the right to work for asylum seekers.[30] Asylum-seekers are, however, generally permitted to study while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim.

Asylum-seekers can access asylum support from the UK Government if they are unable to financially support themselves. Currently there are three types of asylum support provided under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999: section 98

(temporary), section 95 (while waiting on an outcome on an asylum claim) and section 4 (if an asylum claim has been rejected). Section 95 support is, at the time of writing, set at £47.39 a week for each person in a self-catered accommodation, or £9.58 a week for those in catered accommodation.[31] There are additional payments for pregnant mothers and families with young children. This includes a weekly additional payment of £3 for pregnant mothers, £3 if families have children under three, and £5 for a baby under one.[32]

The Home Office provides asylum-seekers with accommodation if they are destitute. At the end of March 2023, the UK Government recorded 108,236 individuals in such accommodation.[33] Under section 98, this accommodation is often a full-board hotel/hostel that is intended to be temporary while waiting for section 95 support. Once granted section 95 support, asylum-seekers are dispersed to new accommodation elsewhere in the country. Widespread concerns have been raised about the living conditions and the unsuitability of such accommodation for families with young children,[34] which is supported by our primary research in this report.

## Those granted status through asylum routes

Those who have claimed asylum may receive several outcomes. They may be granted refugee status or humanitarian protection, both of which give individuals and their families recourse to public funds, an initial five years' permission to stay in the UK, an unrestricted right to work in the UK, the opportunity to apply for a refugee integration loan, and a route to settlement for those who continue to need protection.[35] While those who are part of Government schemes, as detailed in the following section, are provided with accommodation and receive support to access services and find employment, those who have received protection status from the UK Government do not receive such support.[36]

Those who have claimed asylum may be granted Limited Leave to Remain (LLR), including for private and family life reasons. This status provides a shorter window of permission to remain in the UK (2.5 years at a time) and generally does not allow recourse to public funds. It does, however, give individuals the right to work.

## Individuals in government schemes

The provisions for families who have been part of Government schemes (including the UKRS and the schemes for Afghan and Ukrainian nationals) may vary but tend to have some common characteristics. This generally includes a grant of an immigration status on arrival which will provide individuals with the right to work and access to public funds. It also includes the provision of central government funding for local authorities and others to support work with individuals – which enables individuals to receive support with accommodation, integration and access to services.[37] The schemes do, however, vary in terms of the type of immigration status granted, and accommodation models.[38] With regards to accommodation, a notable variation in recent years has been the hosting of Ukrainians in UK

households via the Homes for Ukraine scheme, whereas Afghans were typically housed in hotel/hostel accommodation while waiting for more permanent accommodation.

### Individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

The NRPF condition relates to individuals whose immigration status prevents them from accessing public funds, and generally applies to those who are 'subject to immigration control' under section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This includes those who are in the UK on a visa or have leave to remain with a condition attached (such as visitors, spouses or other dependants, and those granted limited leave to remain under private and family life rules who are not deemed to be at risk of destitution). It also includes those without an established immigration status, such as asylum-seekers and those who are undocumented.

The public funds that individuals are restricted from include Universal Credit (including support with childcare costs), child benefits and in-work benefits.[39] These public funds are vital in supporting low-income families with childcare costs, including single parent families[40] and their absence for asylum-seeking families and those with a NRPF condition has been found to have significant social, economic and wellbeing impacts.[41]

## Current ECEC funding entitlements policy

In April 2023, the Government announced an expansion of the current set of entitlements, expanding access to subsidised childcare for working households.[42] However, at present, the DfE funds three entitlements to free early education and childcare in England:[43]

- **The disadvantaged entitlement:** 15 hours per week for disadvantaged two-year-olds
- **The universal entitlement:** 15 hours per week for all three- and four-year-olds
- **The extended entitlement:** an additional 15 hours per week (a total of 30 hours) for three- and four-year-olds with eligible working parents.[44]

Government-funded ECEC is not classed as a public fund for immigration purposes, meaning that all children, regardless of their immigration status, are eligible to access the universal entitlement.[45] The youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children are also eligible to access the disadvantaged entitlement – and the fact that those with NRPF are able to access this is a new policy development brought in during the COVID-19 pandemic.[46]

However, those with a NRPF condition – including asylum-seekers, undocumented families, and some with limited leave to remain – will be unable to access the extended entitlement. Additionally, as asylum-seekers are often not able to work, they are prevented from accessing the extended entitlement.

## Table 1: ECEC funding entitlements

| **Funding entitlement** | **Age of eligible children** | **Free hours available** | **Families with protection status** (including refugee status, humanitarian protection, and indefinite leave to remain) | **Families with NRPF** (asylum-seekers, some forms of limited leave to remain, undocumented families) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **The 'disadvantaged' entitlement** | 2-year-olds | 15 hours per week | ✓ – families on a low income who are accessing Universal Credit are eligible | ✓ – families on a low income but with a NRPF condition are eligible |
| **The universal entitlement** | 3–4-year-olds | 15 hours per week | ✓ – all children are eligible | ✓ – all children are eligible |
| **The extended entitlement** | 3–4-year-olds | An additional 15 hours per week (a total of 30 hours per week when combined with the universal entitlement) | ✓ – families who have a status that allows access to public funds | ✗ – families with a NRPF condition are restricted |
| **2023 Spring Budget entitlement expansion** | 9-month–2 year-olds | An additional 15 hours per week (a total of 30 hours per week when combined with the universal entitlement) | ✓ – families who have a status that allows access to public funds | ✗ – families with a NRPF condition are generally restricted |

It is within this policy landscape that we have conducted our research with parents – the people who are experiencing the policy firsthand. This research is outlined in the next two sections, starting with the methodology.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Given the dearth of research on ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK – and in particular the lack of studies that include the voices of refugee and asylum-seeking families – UNICEF UK partnered with Refugee Education UK to conduct exploratory research. Following a review of the literature, the study used a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with refugee and asylum-seeking parents and expert practitioners.** Between February and May 2023, 25 research activities took place: two focus groups, three interviews with parents and 20 interviews with practitioners (referred to as key informant interviews). This section outlines the methodology, ethics and safeguarding process and potential limitations for this part of the research.

## Focus groups

Two focus group discussions were organised with 12 mothers of children under the age of five who were newly arrived in the UK (within approximately two years). These focus group discussions were semi-structured and designed with open-ended questions that allowed mothers to freely articulate and explore their views.

The first focus group (FG1) was held with five mothers living in asylum accommodation in London awaiting an outcome on their asylum claim across four countries of origin. A community organisation that provides conversation classes and practical support for asylum seekers recruited participants using a purposive approach, and the discussion was held at the organisation's premises. Childcare was arranged for the duration of the focus group, and a relaxed and informal space was created enabling mothers to check in on their children when needed. The focus group was carried out in English but to accommodate the varying levels of language skills and confidence within the group, the facilitator asked questions at a slow pace that allowed parents to translate on their phone and, on occasion, translate for each other (where languages were shared).

The second focus group (FG2) was organised with seven Ukrainian mothers living in London through Refugee Education UK's connections with Ukrainian networks. As with FG1, participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach. This focus group took place on Zoom, as requested by the mothers. The focus group was carried out in English and Ukrainian, with a Refugee Education UK staff member translating questions asked by the facilitator from English into Ukrainian. Participants then chose whether they wanted to respond in English or Ukrainian and, when Ukrainian was chosen, the REUK staff member translated key points on the Zoom chat so the facilitator could respond and probe as necessary.

## Interviews with parents

To provide more detailed accounts of individual experiences, three semi-structured interviews were carried out with parents who had been in the UK for longer periods of time, for approximately 10 years or more, and who had received status through the asylum system. These parents are referred to in the findings section as PIs (parent interviewees). Sampling for these interviews used a snowballing approach, with practitioners interviewed recommending parents to approach for an interview. Two of these interviews took place online, and one in person. The interviews with parents were more fluid than the focus group discussions; while a list of open-ended questions were prepared, the interviewer left space for participants to tell a story of their ECEC experiences and direct the conversation to issues that were important to them.

## Interviews with key informants

Finally, 20 semi-structured key informant interviews (referred to in the findings sections as KIs) were carried out with practitioners with relevant expertise in either the refugee sector, ECEC sector, or across both sectors. Of these interviews, 18 were single interviews and two were joint interviews, with the initially identified participant requesting the inclusion of others whom they felt had valuable insights to share. The majority of interviews took place online, but two took place in person: one at Refugee Education UK's offices, and one at a nursery. These interviews were semi-structured, but questions were adapted in advance of and during the interview to respond to the category of participant and their experience and expertise.

## Research sample

A total of 38 individuals participated in the research study: 15 refugee and asylum-seeking parents, and 23 key informants. The 15 parents were from seven countries of origin: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Ukraine, two countries in west Africa that have been anonymised, and one country in Central America that has been anonymised (see Table 2). They comprised four immigration statuses: asylum-seekers (n=5), those that had been granted indefinite leave to remain and subsequently became British citizens (n=2), Homes for Ukraine (n=7) and Limited Leave to Remain (n=1). The vast majority of participants were female (87%), with two male participants. Two fifths of participants (n=6) stated that they did not have a partner with them in the UK or were single parents. The majority of participants (80%) lived in and around London, with one participant in each of the following regions: East, South East, and Yorkshire and the Humber. Seven of the parents had experience of accessing ECEC, with six accessing nurseries or pre-schools, and one accessing childcare through a childminder.

The 23 key informants comprised four categories: research and academia (R&A), voluntary sector programmes (VS), early childhood educators (ECE), and local government (LG). Key informants' expertise spanned the refugee sector (n=5) and the early years sector (n=8), and the intersection of the two sectors (n=10). Most

key informants had either national or local level expertise and three key informants had expertise at a global level.

**Table 2: Disaggregation of parent sample (n=15) by country/region of origin**

| Country/region of origin | Number of participants (parents) | Percentage of participants (parents) |
|---|---|---|
| Afghanistan | 1 | 7% |
| Bangladesh | 2 | 13% |
| Central America (anonymised) | 1 | 7% |
| West Africa (not specified) | 2 | 13% |
| Syria | 2 | 13% |
| Ukraine | 7 | 47% |

**Graph 1: Number and disaggregation of children under the age of five represented by parents (n=18)[47]**

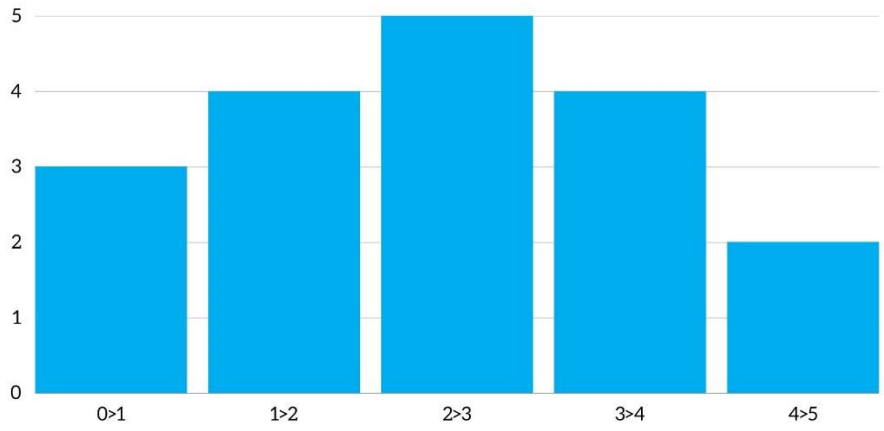


**Table 3: Disaggregation of key informant sample (n=23) by category of role**

| Category of role | Number of key informants | Percentage of key informants |
|---|---|---|
| Research and academia | 9 | 40% |
| Voluntary sector programmes | 7 | 30% |
| Early childhood educators | 3 | 13% |
| Local government | 4 | 17% |

## Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by REUK researchers. This enabled the researchers' familiarity with the research data and the development of an early coding framework. FG2 was transcribed by an REUK staff member who speaks Ukrainian, and Ukrainian excerpts of the transcript were translated by the same staff member into English.

An early coding framework was developed following transcription of a random selection of transcripts, and uploaded onto MAXQDA. This detailed four key areas for coding, which align to the presentation of findings: environmental factors affecting refugee children's early years; the value of ECEC for refugee children; access to ECEC; and experiences of ECEC. Three researchers were involved in coding, and each researcher added to the coding framework on an iterative basis. REUK's Research Manager cleaned and quality assured coded data, before the full dataset within each code was analysed for recurring and prominent patterns. In total, 23 research activities were coded (which included single interviews, joint interviews, and focus group discussions). A total of 1,042 segments of transcripts were coded, shared across the four areas of the coding framework, with more than 50% of coded segments falling under 'access to ECEC' (see Table 4 in Annexe 4).

## Ethics and safeguarding

The research adhered to both UNICEF UK's and REUK's safeguarding policies and procedures, and involved a risk assessment being completed in advance of data collection with refugee communities. Key ethical considerations of informed and voluntary consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and minimising of distress and discomfort, were at the centre of the research design and implementation. The research design was informed by REUK's ten years of research experience with refugee and asylum-seeking communities, and an ethics review was carried out by UNICEF UK's research team. Researchers were particularly mindful of the potential embarrassment or upset that could be caused if research activities made individuals feel like inadequate parents. The focus group and parent interview questions were open-ended and participant-led, and they were not focused on individual caregiving practices.

## Limitations of the research

The research findings are largely based on experiences in southern parts of England, with most of the parents participating based in and around London. While efforts were made to include experiences in northern parts of England and in other major cities, recruitment of parents was challenging and it was not feasible during the timeframe of the study. It is therefore important to recognise a likely London- and southern England-centric bias within the study findings.

# RESEARCH 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"** (K121, 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, PI1

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 mititgate 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.[48]

## 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, PI1

This was echoed by KI14 (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 imformant 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"** (KI7, 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"** (KI8, 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 supported 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.

# REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

## ECEC is vital for refugee and asylum-seeking children

Findings from this research illustrate and expand our understanding of the positive impacts that access to ECEC can have for refugee and asylum-seeking children. The benefits for children's social and emotional development, their ability to settle into a new environment, and their potential to thrive in primary school and throughout their childhood that are highlighted by this research substantiate existing evidence on the importance of ECEC for disadvantaged children in the UK, and for refugee children globally. But these findings are particularly pertinent considering what this research has uncovered about the significant precarity, hardship and insecurity facing refugee and asylum-seeking families in England, and the extent to which many young children are having their early childhood development put at risk.

This research reveals how the environments surrounding asylum-seeking children are often not conducive to vital early learning and development. Findings show that this is especially, but not exclusively, the case for those living in asylum accommodation, where families are forced to live in cramped rooms without space for their children to play and explore, where children are unable to access adequate nutrition, and where health issues with long-term consequences develop. This research provides further evidence on the unsuitability of such accommodation and living arrangements for families with the youngest children. Set against an asylum system that fails to monitor or consider the presence of these young children, and an early childhood system that also struggles to consistently track and engage with children before primary school age, these children are rendered effectively invisible and their wellbeing and development, including critical safeguarding concerns, overlooked**. However, ECEC can make this cohort of children visible and transform their life chances.**

This research shows how early childhood educators have a window of opportunity to provide otherwise unavailable space and resources for learning and play that help refugee and asylum-seeking children start primary school on a more equal footing to their peers. They can be a ray of **"sunshine"** (KI17, ECE) for families and provide them with a welcome they may not previously have received and an offer of a community of support. And they can signpost families towards vital early years and broader services crucial for their integration in the UK.

If trauma-informed and contextual, ECEC provision has transformative potential for refugee and asylum-seeking families. This research adds to the evidence base on the healing potential of high-quality ECEC for children who have been through

traumatic experiences, and how it can initiate the process of settling into a new community, unlock feelings of belonging by making friends, and establish routine and consistency that is important for self-regulation. It also indicates the value of providing parents – especially mothers on whom childcare responsibilities often fall – with child-free space and time to process their displacement, prioritise their own wellbeing and explore opportunities for study and employment (where the right to work is available). ECEC can be transformative and can shape positive futures for whole families who have been forced to flee their homes.

## The barriers to ECEC access stem from two policy systems

Despite the wide-ranging benefits of ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families, this research also reveals a disheartening reality. Findings from this research bring forward new evidence to show that this cohort of children find themselves caught in the middle of two large and complex policy systems, neither of which have been designed with the best interests or rights of disadvantaged children at the heart of their design or implementation.

ECEC policy makes parents' ability to work, instead of the level of children's needs, the qualificication for receiving the extended offer of 30-hours of free childcare for three-year-olds. Due to most asylum-seekers being denied the right to work, this research found ECEC policy intersects with asylum policy to embed structural barriers to access. Additionally, some families who are granted time-bound forms of leave have NRPF conditions that prevent their access to public funds, which includes the offer of 30 hours free childcare. In both cases, children miss out on crucial ECEC provision because of their parents' immigration status, over which they have no control or autonomy.

**The unique overlap of two systems that do not recognise children as individuals, or put their needs and rights first as policy objectives, results in the isolation and exclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking children from the support services that are vital for their early development.**

Findings from this research also reveal a cycle of exclusion. The limited availability of convenient free ECEC hours for three- to four-year-olds prevents parents who have the right to work from finding appropriate, meaningful and secure work, and then accessing enough hours for their child to become entitled to the full free 30-hour entitlement. Combined with the limited availability of local nursery places, this research portrays an ECEC system that locks out refugee and asylum-seeking parents out due to weaknesses within both its operational and policy design.

This research also spotlights broader consequences of the UK asylum system on ECEC access and quality for refugee and asylum-seeking families. Any parental

reluctance to send children to ECEC settings identified by this research was linked to fear of services and nervousness about being reported or having their asylum claim denied – a pattern consistent with broader literature on the impact of the hostile environment. The lack of perceived safety and security is a damaging element for children and their parents. The evidence is clear that stress induced and experienced as a consequence of this insecurity can affect children's development, limiting parent's capacity to form strong attachments with their young children. Additionally, dispersal policies in which ECEC considerations are largely, if not entirely, non-existent also see asylum-seeking children fall through the cracks of provision – with limited information-sharing between national and local government impeding local authorities' and local ECEC providers' ability to reach out to and engage these communities in ECEC. **Access to ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK is inconsistent and sporadic.**

This research shows how access to ECEC is largely dependent on where in the UK families are based, or indeed moved to, and the means through which they were able to seek safety in the UK. For the former, the ability of local authorities to intervene and support ECEC access for refugees and asylum-seekers within their jurisdiction depends on the funding and resourcing available in each geographical area. Those who arrived through resettlement schemes and who had been allocated and moved to a community (instead of living in temporary accommodation) seemed to be better provided with holistic wraparound support that is vital for navigating the complex ECEC system. However, the actual numbers of such resettled families within the broader refugee and asylum-seeking population in the UK are comparatively few. In this research, asylum-seekers, Ukrainians who had arrived through Homes for Ukraine, and parents who had received some form of status through the asylum system all described limited and challenging experiences of ECEC access for their babies and young children.

# Promising practice shines through

Despite the many barriers to ECEC access, this research reveals a raft of promising practices in supporting families to access meaningful ECEC provision.

Findings suggest that support from local authorities, when it exists, can be crucial in enabling families to overcome barriers. Families on resettlement schemes often have stronger wrap-around support from a local authority than asylum-seeking families. But this research also identified examples of local authorities meeting asylum-seeking families where they are, by going into temporary accommodation and registering children at local ECEC settings, or providing informal ECEC activities in temporary accommodation if take-up of nursery was low. Additionally, local authorities may be pivotal in providing settings with specialist support, such as for children with English as an additional language.

This research also emphasises the importance of the voluntary sector, particularly in filling in gaps where support from the local authority does not exist. Ample good practice was identified, and of particular note was their role in: providing practical and motivational support to families while navigating the ECEC system; and providing the space and opportunity for informal ECEC provision while parents participate in community activities and learn English.

Finally, research findings highlight the central role of ECEC settings in both access to and quality of provision. This role encompassed reaching out to local families to extend welcome, and supporting them to access their setting, through to creating inclusive, compassionate, and flexible ECEC provision that enables the participation, sense of belonging and development of all children, regardless of their background – all of this despite the significant constraints on their resourcing and funding.

## Case studies of promising ECEC practices in other countries

Globally, ECEC provision is a mix of government policy-initiated services and local NGOs responding to the needs of refugee communities in their region. An international study conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, on the major challenges and successes that larger host countries in Europe and North America have experienced in the provision of high-quality ECEC services to refugee and asylum-seeking children, found that of the countries they examined, Germany and Sweden have implemented promising policies and programmes.[49] In both countries all children are legally entitled to ECEC services from birth to age five, and Sweden has one of the highest rates of ECEC enrolment among three- to five-year-olds (95% as of 2022).[50]

In 2017, Germany implemented a nation-wide programme to work with families living in shelters, many of whom are refugees and are unfamiliar with the German ECEC system. Each participating municipality develops programmes to prepare families to access ECEC services and provides them with funding to reduce barriers they may face in accessing them. Another programme adopted by the government, called *Stadtteilmütter* (Borough Mothers), recruits mothers, who are often refugees, to work in local ECEC settings which has resulted in more effective and intimate relationships with refugee families.

Similarly, the Swedish Government has set up a fast track for newly arrived immigrants to become teachers and pre-school teachers to respond to the shortage of ECEC workforce, while also building inclusive classrooms in the process. To encourage diverse classrooms, Swedish policy sees newly arrived refugee families resettled across municipalities rather than dispersing them to a few limited locations.

In Belgium, to address the lack of coordination and ensure a holistic provision of ECEC services, a partnership was established among the relevant stakeholders. The

public ECEC agency in the Flemish region, along with Belgium's Federal Agency for the reception of asylum-seekers, and the Red Cross which manages reception centres in the country, formed a partnership to ensure all refugee families with young children can access wider early years services. These services include prenatal, postnatal and preventative healthcare, parenting support, and home visits and consultations.

There are significant lessons that the UK could learn from closely examining these systems, in creating an environment whereby children are enabled to achieve their early development and begin their integration into their new home.

# Conclusion

Findings from this research demonstrate how refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years find themselves caught in the middle of two UK policy systems – the ECEC funding and asylum systems – that overlook their existence and de-prioritise their rights. Barriers to ECEC access caused by these two systems combine with other factors to ultimately isolate and exclude children from accessing the ECEC provision that is vital for their development, safety and wellbeing in the wake of forced displacement. This ultimately denies these children the crucial window of opportunity to thrive in primary school and later in life. While this is disheartening, there is nonetheless ample promising practice occurring at a local level, with local authorities, ECEC providers and the voluntary sector going above and beyond to facilitate access to ECEC, and to ensure a quality ECEC experience for children.

**A child-centred approach to policy-making that stands to benefit children, families, and their new communities, is vital. Recommendations to this end are made below.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Placing children at the centre of policy-making has the potential to create a cohesive, coordinated, and comprehensive system; one in which the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children have access to quality ECEC services in England. Achieving this requires action by a range of actors outlined below.

## The UK Government should support this by:

1. **Removing the systemic barriers facing parents:**
   - Widen the 30-hour ECEC entitlement to the parents of all refugee and asylum-seeking children, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds.
   - Remove the right to work restrictions placed on asylum seeking parents waiting on their claim, thereby providing the means for children to attend the additional ECEC hours, while also enabling families to escape enforced poverty.
   - Work with stakeholders such as Strategic Migration Partnerships and local authorities to ensure young children seeking sanctuary in the UK are housed in accommodation that facilitates consistent access to mainstream ECEC, promotes and maintains a high standard of physical and mental health, and provides highly nutritional food.
2. **Removing the funding barriers facing local authorities**
   - Provide additional funding to local authorities for each 'placed individual', to increase provision and capacity, and to support the varied and unique needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children.
   - Set a viable per-hour funding rate for ECEC settings to ensure all entitlement hours are free at the point of access for families.
   - Increase Pupil Premium funding to bring it in line with school levels of funding.
3. **Supporting ECEC providers to meet the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children**
   - Work with academics, providers, practitioners and beneficiaries to surface and share best practice in supporting refugee and asylum-seeker children, including those experiencing trauma and those with English as an additional language.
4. **Improving data and information flow**
   - Improve mechanisms for timely sharing of information between the Home Office, Department for Levelling Up, Department for Education, and Local Authorities, to enable planning and preparation before the arrival of children in each jurisdiction.
   - Collect data and/or disaggregate data for all children from birth to five years entering England.

## Local Government can support this by:

5. **Removing the practical barriers facing parents**
    - Compile information in the most common languages for refugee and asylum-seeking families in England, including information about their rights and entitlements.
    - Simplify and streamline the application process for the disadvantaged two-year-old offer, and provide application guidelines and forms in the most common languages for refugee and asylum-seeking families in England.
    - Coordinate with other local authorities to secure ECEC places for families who are being moved to different locations, ensuring they do not need to reapply.

## Researchers and academics can support this by:

6. **Continuing to build the evidence-base and addressing gaps in knowledge on:**
    - The impact of the Illegal Immigration Act on early years experiences and access to ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children.
    - The experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking children in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and other parts of England to build on the qualitative primary research in this report.
    - Good practice in systematic support for refugee and asylum-seeking children domestically and internationally.

# ANNEXES

## Annexe 1

### Table 4: Age-disaggregated data on dependant applicants reported by Refugee Council

| | 2014 | % of yearly total | 2015 | % of yearly total | 2016 | % of yearly total | 2017 | % of yearly total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Under 5** | 2,687 | 50.65% | 2,681 | 51.54% | 3,052 | 50.02% | 2,711 | 47.94% |
| **5 - 9** | 1,312 | 24.73% | 1,337 | 25.70% | 1,640 | 26.88% | 1,589 | 28.10% |
| **10 - 13** | 746 | 14.06% | 670 | 12.88% | 809 | 13.26% | 790 | 13.97% |
| **14 - 15** | 307 | 5.79% | 282 | 5.42% | 336 | 5.51% | 319 | 5.64% |
| **16 - 17** | 253 | 4.77% | 232 | 4.46% | 264 | 4.33% | 246 | 4.35% |
| **Yearly total** | **5,305** | | **5,202** | | **6,101** | | **5,655** | |

Source: Refugee Council (2022). Children in the asylum system: 2022. Refugee Council.

# Annexe 2

## Table 5: An overview of rights and entitlements to ECEC in England as affecting refugee and asylum-seeking children.[5152]

| Free disadvantaged entitlement | 2 year-olds | 15 hours |
|---|---|---|
| Refugee and asylum-seeking families can access the free two-year-old disadvantaged entitlement if they live in England and their household income is no more than:<br>• £26,500 for families outside of London with one child<br>• £34,500 for families within London with one child<br>• £30,600 for families outside of London with two or more children<br>• £38,600 for families within London with two or more children<br>• In addition, they must not have more than £16,000 in savings or investments. | | |
| **Universal entitlement** | **3-4 year-olds** | **15 hours** |
| 15 hours per week of free childcare is provided universally to all children who are aged three to four years old. Children can receive this regardless of their, or their parent's, immigration status. | | |
| **Extended entitlement** | **3-4 year-olds** | **Additional 15 hours (30 hours in total)** |
| To be eligible for 30 hours free childcare, families must have a National Insurance number and at least one of the following:<br>• British or Irish citizenship<br>• Settled or pre-settled status granted under the EU Settlement Scheme<br>• A pending EU Settlement Scheme application<br>• Immigration permission that allows access to public funds, such as indefinite leave to remain or refugee leave<br><br>Those who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) – which includes asylum seekers, some families with limited leave to remain, as well as undocumented children – will not meet the residence requirements outlined above. Therefore, when a single parent or both parents in a household have leave to remain with NRPF, the family will not able to access 30 hours childcare. | | |
| **Universal Credit provisions[53]** | | |
| Universal Credit covers up to 85% of childcare costs for families where both parents are engaged in paid work. However, this support is unavailable to children in families restricted by NRPF conditions who cannot access universal credit regardless of low income. Furthermore, families with NRPF have no access to other vital support for children and parents like Child Benefit, Housing Benefit, Disability Living Allowance and other public funds. | | |

# Annexe 3: Further information about analysis

There were a total of 1,042 coded segments, spread across four areas of the coding framework. Access to ECEC received the largest share of coded segments; 51% of coded segments fell under this section.

### Table 6: Coding framework by number of coding segments

| Area of coding framework | Number of coded segments (n=1042) | Share of coded segments |
|---|---|---|
| Environmental factors affecting refugee and asylum-seeking children's early years | 137 | 13% |
| Value of ECEC | 177 | 17% |
| Access to ECEC | 528 | 51% |
| Experiences of ECEC | 200 | 19% |

Analysis reflected the experiences of a diverse range of refugee and asylum-seeking children. While all key informants reflected on ECEC for refugees broadly, a certain number were able to reflect and provide more nuanced insights on particular groups of refugees (as detailed in table 7) – which were factored into analysis.

### Table 7: Analysis on particular groups of refugees

| Category of refugee children | Number of parents who provided insights | Number of key informants who provided insights |
|---|---|---|
| Asylum seekers | 5 | 2 |
| Homes for Ukraine | 7 | |
| Afghan and Syria resettlement | | 3 |
| Limited Leave to Remain | 1 | |
| Undocumented | | 1 |

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