

Improving Education Outcomes for Displaced 16–19 year olds in Oxfordshire

LEARNING REPORT

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Disclaimer

COMPAS does not have a Centre view and does not aim to present one. All views expressed in the document are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of funders, those providing feedback, COMPAS or the University of Oxford. *Competing interests: The author(s) declare none*

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Executive Summary

Background to the research

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) has seen a significant **rise in the number of newly arrived displaced young people in recent years** in light of the new humanitarian visa pathways for people arriving from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. Oxfordshire County Council have identified a number of challenges for older teenagers, aged 16-19 arriving post-compulsory school age with accessing education, employment or training. As a result, OCC's Migrant Education Team have set up a bespoke service to provide education and careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) to newly arrived young people aged 16-19. With additional funding from the Ministry of Defence, the team have also set up an intensive programme with ESOL, functional skills, Duke of Edinburgh training and education/careers advice for Afghan 16-18 year olds who are not in education and living in transitional accommodation.

This research, commissioned by Oxfordshire Migration Partnership, explores the profile and educational needs of 16-19 year olds arriving on these visa pathways to better understand their aspirations, map their pathways to information and guidance and understand the barriers and opportunities for designing and delivering this support and for young people in accessing it.

Experiences of young people

Displaced young people are a varied group with wide-ranging experiences, both pre- and post-arrival in the UK and this is particularly true when considering the diverse experiences of those from Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Ukraine. However, there are some key cross-cutting themes across all groups.

Social and relational factors:

Young people arriving aged 16-19 years old are at a **key transitional stage of their lives**. They are adapting to a new culture, language and environment and may have moved at haste from their home country, often without having had the time to prepare for emigration. They are arriving at a critical stage within the UK education system which focuses heavily on exam results which in turn determine young people's trajectories. They are also transitioning to adulthood, finding their identity and navigating the bridges between their culture and traditions at home and within their family, and UK culture, with some young people feeling disconnected and isolated from their peers. Adapting to a new environment and culture can lead to a **shift in family roles and dynamics**, as young people experience loss and separation, with some close family members not being able to move to the UK with them and older children taking on **additional responsibilities**

caring for younger siblings and acting as language and culture brokers to help the family navigate life in a new country.

Practical barriers:

Across all three cohorts, there is a **need for English as an Additional Language (EAL) support, including intensive ESOL classes** for Afghan and some Ukrainian students, to help young people learn or progress in English and be able to participate in the wider curriculum.

Both Afghans and Ukrainians experienced **long delays accessing education due to limited college places available and limited flexibility to enrol mid-year**.

Across all three cohorts, there was a **lack of clarity on young people's rights and entitlements to education and training in the UK**, both amongst professionals in schools, colleges and Jobcentre Plus and amongst parents who are also new to the UK with limited knowledge of the UK system and unable to advise their children.

The vocational path within the UK education system is already harder to navigate and less well-signposted than the academic path, with limited centralised information on courses and pathways to follow (Farquharson et al., 2022). Displaced young people trying to navigate the vocational path are at an increased disadvantage, having to make educational choices with limited information available.

Young people identified the need to pass their **English and Maths GCSE as a basic stepping stone to be able to progress** but did not necessarily receive the support to access and be able to pass the exams. Young people were often acutely aware of the financial pressures on their families, impacting their decision-making around their future.

Many displaced families live in more rural locations across the county, with **limited and costly public transport, hindering young people's ability to travel to college or find accessible employment**.

Systemic barriers:

Young people experienced varying degrees of **uncertainty regarding the future, with a recurrent theme of feeling in limbo, wasting time and needing to wait**. Afghan young people found themselves in limbo for months waiting to be allocated a college place to progress with their education:

- Most *Afghans* we interviewed were in transitional accommodation for extended periods, waiting to hear when they would be moved to a new region across the UK and potentially at very short notice
- *Ukrainians'* short-term visa with no pathway to settlement in the UK hindered their ability to fully imagine a future in the UK and progress towards their aspirations

- Whilst *Hongkongers* do have a pathway to settlement, they are subject to international fees for Higher Education and young people felt they needed to put their education and futures on hold until they had secured 5 years residency or even acquired citizenship to move forwards

Very few parents were in work and those who were had struggled to find meaningful work suited to their skills and experience. As a result, young people had **limited exposure to how people find work in the UK and were also conscious of the additional pressure on family incomes.**

Many young people and their families had also experienced **othering, prejudice and racism in the UK.** Young people emphasised the **need to be pro-active and assertive** to cope with systemic barriers and the uncertainty of their future and to feel like they were moving forwards and progressing towards their goals.

In addition to the cross-cutting themes, we also identified themes for each cohort:

Afghan young people's experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrupted education prior to arriving in UK • Young people needing intensive ESOL to be able to progress into education and/or employment • Significant delays accessing education and a lack of clarity of when they will start at college, impacting their wellbeing • Housing uncertainty, waiting to be allocated settled accommodation in a yet unknown destination within the UK or for those who were in settled accommodation, their families' contemplating moving elsewhere in the UK for better work opportunities and to be closer to extended family
Hongkonger young people's experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High costs of international tuition fees hindering young people from progressing into higher education with some choosing to wait until they had citizenship or had accumulated five years of residency in the UK to be entitled to home fees for higher education • Apprehension about jeopardising their immigration status and losing their BN(O) visa if they were out of the country for too long, if they applied for recourse to public funds or if the Government chose to change or suspend the visa scheme • Reluctance to seek support, unless in crisis, and preferring to rely on family and community instead • Security concerns regarding privacy and data
Ukrainian young people's experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precarity of their short-term visa with no clear pathway to settlement in the UK, hindering their ability to imagine and feel invested in a future in UK • Young people juggling two parallel education systems simultaneously, following the Ukrainian system alongside the UK system, to keep their education options open • Schools and colleges not recognising the additional workload young people are undertaking which can involve up to 3-4 hours a day of additional study

Pathways to information, advice and guidance

Displaced young people have high aspirations for their future in the UK, with supportive families eager for them to make the most of the opportunities available in the UK, though often limited by a lack of experience of the UK education system.

However, there is **unequal access to realistic pathways to fulfil their aspirations across the three cohort** and some displaced young people are unaware of the practical steps needed to achieve their goals in the UK.

Oxfordshire provides a range of pathways to information and guidance across including through the local authority's specialist team for migrants aged 16-19, education and careers advice within secondary schools and FE colleges, jobcentres, third sector organisations, resettlement caseworkers and through young people's families and local community. However, different migration routes have different access to these pathways depending on whether they are in education or still waiting, which lower tier authority they are living in, which resettlement or visa scheme they are on, what local services they are able to access and for Afghan young people, whether they are in transitional accommodation or settled accommodation.

Current challenges in designing and delivering support

Like many local areas, Oxfordshire has mobilised quickly to develop rapid support to meet the needs of newly arrived young people with highly diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Front line professionals consistently highlighted the delicate **balance of managing young people's expectations whilst not shattering their aspirations**, in a challenging environment with limited pathways into meaningful education.

There are systemic challenges in designing support. The local authority has **limited data on the numbers, location and profile of displaced young people**, which hinders planning. Similarly, it has to **tailor support for both a settling population laying down roots in the council and a transitional population** who may be moved at short notice. Creating partnerships with schools and colleges is an important stepping stone for the council yet there had been **challenges trying to engage with the schools and colleges for older teenagers**. Limited public transport for young people to commute to college is a serious barrier to engagement. The **limited spaces available in local schools and colleges in Oxfordshire** does not meet the level of need and demand.

Local programmes of support have developed **rapidly in a changing policy landscape with short-term central government funding, administered by different departments and restricted to particular cohorts**, hindering local authorities' ability to deliver efficient programmes at pace in response to the high numbers of new arrivals. This has led to necessary,

but unhelpful short termism in some provision, with staff operating on short term and temporary contracts, with little ability to plan for the future.

Finally, **community tensions in parts of the county** created additional pressure and a need for community cohesion work.

Improving education outcomes for displaced young people across Oxfordshire and beyond

To improve education outcomes for young people at a [service level](#), there is a need to:

- **Promote existing advice and guidance services** by disseminating publicity materials and referral information on the 16-19 team to boost both professional and self- referrals
- Provide accessible **online information for young people/ families on local education and training opportunities**
- **Tailor support through a more holistic needs assessment** of newly arrived young people, building on Oxfordshire's current model of undertaking EAL assessments with Afghan young people in transitional accommodation
- Where feasible, **support young people with tailored individual plans**, helping young people to identify specific courses that would help them move towards their goal, sharing information on the relevant costs and stepping stones required, providing bespoke support for young people with additional needs
- **Agree a lead professional to take responsibility** to ensure young people are enrolled and attending education
- **Upskill local stakeholders** on displaced young people's needs, right and entitlements in the UK to be able to better advise young people on their education, training and employment options
- **Recruit multi-lingual staff speaking community languages** to build trusting relationships with young people and their families
- **Combine accredited intensive ESOL schemes with practical training and employability skills for a wider group of displaced young people**, building on the existing bespoke education model for Afghan young people in transitional accommodation, Oxford City Council's PRS Employment Project and the Home Office evaluation of the Vulnerable People's resettlement scheme

To improve education outcomes at a local authority level, there is a need to:

- **Centralise data held across the county**, improving data-sharing between the upper-tier and lower-tier authorities and setting up joint case recording systems to minimise duplication and ensure efficient joint case-working
- **Expand ESOL classes and conversation clubs** for young people across the county

- Alongside wraparound support providers, **develop orientation programmes to life in the UK for young people and families**
- **Build partnerships with colleges to agree referral pathways for mid-year arrivals and to set up additional local provision** where possible for young people in more remote areas struggling to commute
- **Map existing private schools bursaries/scholarships** and developing partnerships to build on these opportunities
- **Expand and develop existing services like the Oxford City Council funded [School Advocacy Project](#) across the county** and widening the scope to include 16-19 year olds
- **Build links with local employers to offer work experience and shadowing opportunities**
- Set up referral pathways and partnerships with **therapeutic support providers**
- Explore **training models developed in other areas to upskill new arrivals through accredited training**, such as West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership funding to train Ukrainians as ESOL teachers
- **Align the support provided to young people in families with the support provided by the virtual school team to unaccompanied young people** to ensure all newly arrived young people receive ongoing support throughout their academic trajectory
- **Alongside wraparound support providers, bring together local communities to help build connections** through youth and community groups, sporting activities, buddying/mentoring schemes and celebrating cultural diversity across Oxfordshire
- **Consider pooling funding, where possible, across schemes** in order to offer longer term contracts and build institutional expertise

Improving education outcomes for displaced young people at a national level

With an absence of national policy or strategy around education and inclusion for displaced young people, local authorities continue to rely on short-term funding schemes from central government, with restrictive eligibility criteria leading to local schemes operating in silo, focused on one cohort. **Central government need to take a more coordinated approach, engaging with the valuable learning from local government across the different schemes to develop guidance and inform new iterations of funding humanitarian visa schemes that allow councils to develop inclusive services supporting displaced young people into meaningful education and employment progressing towards their aspirations.** The Government's (2024) [Get Britain Working White Paper](#) Youth Guarantee commitment should be a stepping stone for ensuring that newly arrived young people are better supported into education, employment and training. Similarly the Devolution White Paper (2024) offers opportunities to pool disparate, short term funding schemes into a single settlement for local government, allowing for longer term planning and a recognition of support for newly arrived young people as an important new function for local government.

The policy landscape has changed throughout our project – since finishing fieldwork, the Home Office has announced changes to the Afghan resettlement schemes, streamlining the two current schemes into a single Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP) ([Home Office, 2024](#)). New arrivals from spring 2025 onwards will now be in transitional accommodation for up to 9 months.

The Home Office, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence should work collaboratively to ensure all Afghan children aged 16- 19 access quality accredited education and have access to education and careers advice and guidance whilst they're in transitional accommodation.

In addition to working jointly across government departments:

The *Home Office* should explore pathways to settlement for Ukrainians to provide stability for young people and families planning their future. The Home Office should also review the use of the NRPF visa condition for Hongkongers on the BN(O) visa and in the meantime, ensure that there is more clear information disseminated on rights and entitlements for Hongkongers subject to the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' visa condition.

The *Department for Education* should develop guidance on best practice supporting all newly arrived young people into and throughout their education, in line with existing guidance for supporting unaccompanied children ([Department for Education, 2017](#); [Department for Education, 2018](#)).

The *Department for Education* should also consider reviewing the residency requirement for home fee status from five years to three years for BN(O) visa holders, in line with the Scottish Government's example and with the Ukrainian and Afghan humanitarian schemes.

The *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government* should draw on the research findings and implications to inform future iterations of funding schemes for resettlement and humanitarian programmes and ensure that local authorities are upskilled to better support Hongkongers experiencing financial hardship and subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' visa condition.

The *Ministry of Defence* should draw on learning from Oxfordshire's innovative model for young people to encourage other local authorities to explore bespoke education and careers support for young people in transitional accommodation. The Ministry of Defence should also align the Afghan Resettlement Programme with UKRS by providing cultural orientation for Afghan families and provide pre-arrival additional background information on families to local authorities so they can put in place support to better meet their needs.

The *Department for Work and Pensions* should ensure that jobcentres provide the appropriate support to advise newly arrived young people on their options and into meaningful education

and employment, drawing on findings from ensure the Work and Pensions Committee [inquiry](#) into Jobcentre reform.

Full Report

Background to the research

Since Oxfordshire County Council has seen a **significant rise in the number of newly arrived displaced young people in recent years**, in light of the new humanitarian visa pathways for people arriving from Afghanistan¹, Hong Kong and Ukraine. As the lead statutory agency responsible for ensuring all resident children are in education, Oxfordshire County Council have identified a number of challenges for older teenagers aged 16-19 arriving post-compulsory school age, at a critical stage of their education, with accessing education, employment or training.

This research, commissioned by Oxfordshire Migration Partnership, explores the profile and educational needs of 16-19 year olds arriving on these visa pathways to better understand their aspirations, map their pathways to information and guidance and understand the barriers and opportunities for designing and delivering this support and for young people in accessing it. The ultimate aim of the project is to ensure that newly arrived 16-19 year olds in Oxfordshire have pathways to information and guidance on their education and career options in order that they can ultimately have meaningful and fulfilling lives and careers.

Our research questions included:

- What is the profile of 16-19 year old newcomer populations, arriving with their families from Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong?
- What are the educational and employment aspirations of newly arrived young people and their parents/ guardians?
- What are the pathways to information and guidance on education and careers for this group in Oxfordshire and how does it compare to neighbouring and comparable local authorities in its approach?
- What are the tools and options available to provide appropriate advice, guidance and provision?
- What are the current barriers and opportunities in a) designing and delivering this support, b) for young people in accessing this support and c) within the different groups

¹ Throughout this report, we will be referring to Afghan young people as people who have arrived with their families through the Afghan resettlement schemes; however, we note that many Afghan young people have also arrived separately as asylum-seekers, and often unaccompanied, due to the limitations with accessing humanitarian safe routes and will have very different rights and entitlements in the UK. Research on education outcomes for Afghan asylum seeking young people is published in [United Nations University Working Paper 2018/57](#)

of young people (based on for example nationality, gender and other relevant factors, including SEN)?

Profile of the 16-19 year old newcomer population, arriving with their families on humanitarian pathways from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine

It can be challenging to capture accurate and reliable data on a mobile population that may be arriving into one local authority but eventually settling in another. Drawing on Home Office Immigration statistics, Freedom of Information requests, information shared by local authority staff and the Independent Schools Council and a Migration Observatory survey of BN(O) status holders, we make the following estimates of the number of children on the three schemes in Oxfordshire:

	Total number of children	Aged 16-19	Total number of people
Afghan schemes (ARAP + ACRS)	396	>58	734
Hong Kong BN(O) scheme (estimates)	698	282	2,449
Ukraine Sponsorship (Home for Ukraine) Scheme	821	212	2,638
Ukraine Family Scheme (estimates)	521	-	1,004

Sources: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Reg_01 and Emails from Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council and West Oxfordshire District Council

However, these numbers are only estimates with multiple caveats, as there is an extremely limited dataset available due to:

- gaps in available data from central government
- challenges with data-sharing between the county council and city/ district councils in a two-tier local authority
- ongoing fluctuation in numbers as new people arrive in the UK or move in/out of Oxfordshire

Our secondary data analysis² of the numbers in Oxfordshire indicates that the local authority has the 4th highest number of Ukrainian arrivals under the Ukrainian Sponsorship Scheme, the highest number of Hongkonger children in independent schools across the country and is in the top ten local authorities for the highest number of arrivals, under the Afghan resettlement scheme. This is partly due to Oxfordshire housing a Ministry of Defence army base with service

² For more information, see <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publication/improving-education-outcomes-for-displaced-16-19-year-olds-in-oxfordshire-existing-data-and-limitations>

family accommodation which has been used as a transitional accommodation until people are offered settled accommodation around the country.

Essentially, Oxfordshire have significantly high numbers of newly arrived displaced young people for a county council that traditionally hadn't been that involved in supporting high numbers of migrants. Whilst Oxford City Council has resettled refugee families for the last decade, resettlement and the integration of newcomers is still a relatively new area of work for the county council and district councils and hence, a steep learning curve to set up an infrastructure and services at a fast pace, particularly across a two-tier local authority.

Methodology

The study involved a mixed methods approach with fieldwork taking place between September 2024 and January 2025. The methods included:

- Analysis of existing secondary data to establish of the numbers of displaced young people and to benchmark Oxfordshire against its neighbours and other demographically similar local authorities
- Rapid evidence [review](#) of existing approaches across the UK, areas of best practice and policy gaps
- Interviews with 26 key local stakeholders (including participants from the county council, city and district councils, ESOL tutors, colleges, charities, wraparound support providers, community groups and regional government)
- Interviews with 18 young people and 11 parents
 - 11 Afghan teenagers and 2 parents]
 - 4 Hongkonger teenagers and 8 parents
 - 3 Ukrainian teenagers and one parent
- Focus groups with 10 Afghan young people
- Discussions from knowledge exchange roundtable with staff from local authorities, third sector organisations, DWP, colleges, community interpreters, academic researchers and follow-up conversations with ESOL tutors, Strategic Migration Partnership staff and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

Limitations

With a rapidly evolving policy and funding landscape, Oxfordshire County Council were keen to receive the findings and implications for policy and practice within a short timeframe to be able to plan their services accordingly. Despite extensive outreach to all three cohorts through frontline caseworkers, ESOL tutors, community groups, colleges, church and faith community groups, we were reliant on practitioners referring young people to the research team within a four-month window and were not able to undertake a long-term ethnographic study. As a result,

the young people and parents taking part may not necessarily be representative of the wider cohort from each country:

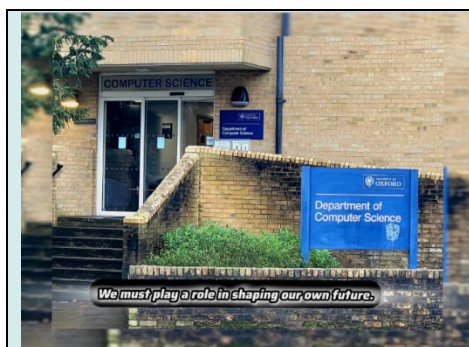
- Most Hongkonger young people interviewed were in independent schools and as parents had significant security concerns regarding their privacy and data, parents preferred to be interviewed than the children
- The majority (73%) of the Afghan young people interviewed were living in transitional accommodation, which is likely to have compounded their feeling of liminality, as they awaited to hear where their families would be moved to in the UK

Despite reaching out extensively to colleges, only one college staff member agreed to be interviewed. We had hoped to also speak to central government officials including the Ministry of Defence who are responsible for families arriving on the Afghan resettlement schemes and staff from the Jobcentre Plus, however staff from neither organisation were available for interview.

Young people's aspirations

"[Earth science] - I've liked maps since I was like four or five and I just like the law of the landforms. I'm most interested in like natural disasters really, like earthquakes and volcanoes, also climate change." (Hongkonger young person, male, 18 years old)

"I would love to be a psychologist – I really like to listen to people's stories and give advice." (Afghan young person, female, 17 years old)



"[Computer science] – we must play a role in shaping our future." (Afghan young person, male, 18 years old)³

³ The Afghan young people who attended focus groups were invited to share a captioned photo to represent their aspirations for the future.

"[Police force] – the order of human systems and a powerful, law-abiding society." (Afghan young person, male, 17 years old)



"My parents own a business IT company and my dad used to teach me tiny things from my childhood - he was like 'this is how business works, this is what you do', and even now like recently he was like 'do you want to sit in on my meeting?' I was listening and writing notes and I had 20 something questions, after the meeting. Other than that, I'm really good at business now. We were writing mock exams recently and I asked my teacher who had the highest grade and she said I had the highest grade from 60 people who wrote that mock exam." (Ukrainian young person, female, 16 years old)

Young people's aspirations included medicine, computer science, psychology, engineering, natural sciences, filmmaking and business. Their families were very supportive of young people's aspirations and eager for them to make the most of the opportunities available in the UK. Parents' primary motivation for relocating to the UK was for security and safety, however they were also driven by ensuring their children were able to access better opportunities and thrive and therefore were fully committed to supporting them to reach their goals. Whilst young people had high aspirations, the reality is that the three cohorts have unequal access to realistic pathways to achieve their goals. The trajectory to get there was not a linear and gradual process as many young people could not access, and often were also unaware of, the practical steps to reach their education and employment goals.

Pathways to information and guidance in Oxfordshire

There is a range of pathways to information and guidance for displaced young people across Oxfordshire. However, not everyone will have access to each of the pathways listed below as it may depend on whether they are in education, which district council they are living in, what local services they are able to access and for the Afghan young people, whether they are in transitional accommodation or settled accommodation.

Provider	Details
Oxfordshire County Council bespoke service for migrants aged 16-19	As part of Oxfordshire County Council's efforts to support children and young people arriving on the Afghan and Ukrainian humanitarian visa schemes into education, in 2024 the Migrant Education Team set up a bespoke team to provide education and careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) to newly arrived young people aged 16-19. With additional funding from the Ministry of

	<p>Defence, the team have also set up an intensive programme with ESOL, functional skills, Duke of Edinburgh training and education/careers advice for Afghan 16-18 year olds who are not in education and living in transitional accommodation</p> <p>Oxfordshire's bespoke service is an innovative model, welcomed by local authority staff and partners, and upheld as model of good practice for other local authorities working with displaced young people</p>
Secondary schools	<p>Young people in state schools in Oxfordshire received advice on Higher Education options, however they felt that advice was not tailored to options for young people on short-term visas in the UK who may not be able to access student finance or whose visa may expire during their degree. Professionals also highlighted that in Oxfordshire, there is currently limited careers advice provided in state schools, as the main IAG provider for state schools in the county went into administration in 2024. Young people in independent schools in Oxfordshire had received advice on Higher Education, however they felt that advice was primarily focused on applying to specific universities/courses, not necessarily on future careers</p>
Further Education (FE) Colleges	<p>Young people felt there was a significant gap in careers advice in FE colleges and wanted more information on stepping stones to progress post ESOL. FE College Staff reiterated that careers advice provision within colleges was generally limited to young people aged 18 or over. One local college had been able to use the post-pandemic Education & Skills Funding Agency funding to provide additional one-to-one time with students to cover educational needs and plans for the future</p>
Jobcentre Plus	<p>Some young people aged 19, the Jobcentre was their only pathway to advice and guidance however as they commented, the Jobcentre's primary focus is on finding work, not on providing education or careers advice</p>
Third sector organisations	<p>Refugee Education UK offer education mentors and conversation clubs for displaced young people, as well as a 4 week orientation programme for unaccompanied young people, funded by Oxfordshire Virtual School. Whilst the orientation programme is focused on unaccompanied young people, three young people who had arrived on the resettlement schemes with their families had attended too, with support from the district council</p> <p>Asylum Welcome and Aspire in Oxford offer employment support for refugees and displaced people, however their employment services are primarily targeted at adults and not young people</p>
Family and community	<p>Many displaced young people choose to rely on family and community for advice and guidance and pathways, however it depends on the family/community's understanding of the UK system and local options</p>

Cross-cutting themes across the three cohorts of young people

As our [Rapid Evidence Review](#) highlighted, displaced young people are a diverse group with wide-ranging experiences, both pre- and post-arrival in the UK. Young people encounter social and relational barriers, practical and systemic barriers hindering their ability to progress towards their aspirations. Our research findings indicate some cross-cutting themes across all three cohorts, however these may not necessarily be representative of everyone's experiences upon arrival in the UK.

Social and relational contexts

Young people arriving aged 16-19 years old are at a **key transitional stage of their lives**. Firstly, they are adjusting to the liminal stage of adapting to a new culture, language and environment and may have moved at haste from their home country, without having had the time to prepare for emigration and leaving their home country behind. Secondly, they are arriving at a critical stage within the UK education system which focuses heavily on exam results which in turn determine specific trajectories young people can take. Thirdly, young people are also at a critical life stage transitioning to adulthood, finding their identity and navigating the bridges between their culture and traditions at home and within their family, and the culture they experience in college.

Adapting to a new environment and culture can lead to a shift in family roles and dynamics, all whilst navigating an unfamiliar educational system and environment where young people may encounter systemic challenges and discrimination. The family environment had shifted for many young people who experienced **loss and separation, with close family members staying behind**. Ukrainian young people's fathers had stayed in Ukraine, resulting in a new household structure with their mothers as the lone head of household in the UK. For Afghan families, key family members including their siblings aged 18 and aunts or uncles who played a key role in their daily lives had not been able to travel to the UK. In Hongkonger families, there had often been a shift too with some young people initially migrating alone to attend boarding school for their GCSEs or A-Levels before their family had joined them a year or two later. In other families, the father had stayed behind in Hong Kong and the households were also adapting to a new household structure, with their mothers as the lone head of household. Existing research (Refugee Education UK, 2021; Rolfe & Benson, 2023; Ryan et al, 2022) indicates the impact of loss and separation on young people's mental health and well-being, which was echoed in our findings as young people and parents described missing close family members who they worried about and were unsure when they would be reunited:

"My eldest sister is still in Afghanistan. She is over 18 so she couldn't come with us to the UK. We're upset, she is upset but what can we do? We stay in touch and speak everyday on video call." (Afghan young person, female, 16)

Parents often felt that **moving to UK had been a career sacrifice for them, with more limited opportunities and therefore as a result, felt heavily invested in their children as the next generation thriving and achieving:**

"I'm here for my children specifically because I'm getting old, but I would like their future to be brighter and better." (Afghan father)

"Ukrainian society is quite interesting. Everything is around children, everything for the children, because we expect that our children have to live better than we do. And this is this kind of our main driver and this is one of the main reasons that many of Ukrainian women just kind of took their children and relocated, so our children don't get the wrong way." (Ukrainian mother)

Young people often spoke more English than their parents and as the **older sibling were taking on roles as language and culture brokers to help the family navigate life in a new country:**

"I'm the oldest and it's my responsibility [to help with the younger siblings]. I have got to make sure they're doing great at school, and outside too doing daily activities, taking them to park to play football. I'm the only one who can speak English so I have to speak to their school." (Afghan young person, male, 19 years old)

Many young people struggled with feeling **isolated and disconnected from their peers in the UK**, talking about the challenges of making real friends and sometimes only finding genuine connection with other newly arrived young people. All children may struggle with isolation and loneliness post-migration as they adjust to a new environment and language, however it can be more intense for older children arriving at an age where many of their peers have strong established friendships:

"I always used to be extroverted as a person and I always want to have like friends. Everyone pretty much has friend groups already by the time I was in. It was also making it hard cos I didn't really know what people were saying, you know, like imagine just a person being like [pulls a blank face] all the time. And I was not understanding what half of what people were saying and especially teenagers cos they spoke fast, they talk with slang. It was stressful to like be there and teachers tried to be like, this is a new student, she's from Ukraine and everyone was like, good, they were just doing their own things and I wasn't like that much of a deep connection with anyone." (Ukrainian young person, female, 16 years old)

Young people's feedback demonstrated that they wanted to **build connections and form genuine friendships and were eager to find opportunities to socialise with their peers**, through conversation clubs, youth groups and leisure activities.

Young people were eager to get into mainstream education and ideally secondary school to be able to progress with their education. However, **adapting to a new learning environment and way of studying led to mixed experiences**. Hongkonger young people in general found the UK system less high pressured and more supportive and had felt more able to thrive, however the classroom environment could feel challenging to start with:

"I remember, coming to, like, school in Oxford, it was just like people were, like, not even that they raised their hands. But, you know, it'd be really like a dynamic conversation in English, for example, like, people would be interjecting. And it'd be really nice, like a discussion. Whereas back home, my teacher being like 'please raise your hands up, like someone please answer'. I was quite shy because of that, but I wasn't used to being in a classroom where people were like fighting to understand. Like that was really different. Like back home, people were fighting not to answer. So eventually I remember setting something for myself, like you have to say at least one thing during one class when people were saying 2-3 things a class. I was like, you're saying one thing like. You're putting your hand up, and then I remember I got to a point where my friends are like we can tell where you like, just like get so nervous. You blush. And I'm like, yeah, I know, feel myself getting around. But, you know, at the end, it was fine. I was contributing, like, not blushing." (Hongkonger young person, female, 18 years old)

For some young people, the pressure to keep up with exams and fully engage in English language was particularly challenging. Professionals talked about some **young people feeling embarrassed to speak English in a mainstream secondary school class** and instead felt more comfortable and less self-conscious in college, where they could choose a specific focus, instead the broader Key Stage 4/5 curriculum.

Afghan young people who had managed to access college described how the **British learning style focuses much more on self-study than they were used to** and the importance of finding time to do the bulk of the course at home in your own time which could prove challenging when juggling additional responsibilities and with limited digital access:

"Like they are teaching 20% English in the college. We need to study in the home like 80% to improve." (Afghan young person, male, 19 years old)

Practical barriers

All three groups identified a **need for additional EAL support** upon arrival to the UK. For Afghan young people, this was often the first step they needed before entering mainstream education provision and many felt that they need intensive ESOL to be able to progress at pace:

"ESOL is only two hours a week. It would take me 15 years to learn English at that pace."
(Afghan young person, male, 19 years old)

"I was doing the GCSE in and English and Maths [at FE College]. However, in GCSE English, they know that I'm not originally British, that it's not my native language, but for some reason they just wasn't caring about that. They were given to me only like 2 hours of English for my first year. And like I [am still] struggling with passing my English GCCE until now [2 years later]."
(Ukrainian young person, female, 18 years old)

For the Hongkongers, additional ESOL support was often more about deepening their understanding of the English language to be able to keep up within the main curriculum, particularly if they had missed Years 9 and 10 in the run-up to GCSEs. Within Hongkonger church communities, parents sometimes volunteered to help tutor young people sitting their English GCSE students to catch up on missed content.

All the young people had anticipated being able to access education immediately upon arrival and at the same level they had previously been studying. However, unlike Hongkongers, both Afghan and Ukrainian young people had experienced **long delays in accessing education upon arrival due to limited college places available and not being able to start mid-year**, which we explain in more detail on pages 19-21.

Mukhtar⁴ had arrived in the UK at the age of 18, with his family and siblings. He feels nobody has given him any help, information or suggestions and that he has had to do it all himself. He ended up doing his own research on what to do and what pathway to take. He tried to enrol at a local FE college but was told he needed to wait 6 months for a space. Once he finally started at college, the level of the course was too low and he was told he would need to wait till the following September to start at the appropriate level. He realised that it could end up taking almost 2 years to wait for the right course from the start of the process. He has added his name to the waiting list in case a Level 2 space comes up. In the meantime, he decided to self-study instead and bought books to teach himself vocabulary. He heard about a private

⁴ Please note that where names are mentioned in this report, these are pseudonyms used to protect the identities of the participants we interviewed.

college offering scholarships, through a local charity, for students at an intermediate/upper intermediate level. He managed to secure a 12-week scholarship and so is studying for free. His English course is only around 10 hours/week, and his scholarship only lasts for 3 months. The college also have an evening class which he attends but he leaves early as there aren't any later buses back to where he lives. Once his course finishes, he is going to look for a job. Mukhtar was now going to the Jobcentre and stated that "people need to focus on your education options and give them a chance, instead of just focusing on work. I wish I had been given help earlier on accessing GCSEs."

The vocational path within the UK education system is already harder to navigate and less well-signposted than the academic path, with limited centralised information on courses and pathways to follow (Farquharson et al., 2022). Displaced young people trying to navigate the vocational path are at increased disadvantage due to the **lack of clarity on displaced young people's rights, entitlements and available pathways:**

- Professionals in schools, colleges and the jobcentre were not always aware of migrant young people's rights to education, apprenticeships and home fees status for higher education:

"When I first arrived, my host family asked to come one of the educational council workers. And this man, he was very good, very supportive, but in the same time he was very confused with what they have to do with me because I was already 16 and they cannot put me to school, to sixth form and they cannot give to me last year of GCSE, because I wanted to do business or hospitality. So they said maybe you want to go and try to do that in college but for some reason, they put me on the wrong course and I was doing for a year, a cookery class." (Ukrainian young person, female, 18 years old)

- Parents who are also new to the UK had more limited knowledge and understanding of the UK system and struggled to provide the relevant advice to support their children with making decisions and planning their future

"I don't know what my options are here so how can my parents understand? All my parents know is that I want to be a doctor but they don't know what path I should take here. Back in Afghanistan, they knew as it was our language and they knew what to do, what to study but here they don't." (Afghan Young Person, female, 16 years old)

Young people across all three cohorts raised **concerns about financial pressures impacting their decision-making around their future**, even for children in wealthier families. Most of the young people we interviewed were the eldest child in the family and were acutely aware of the financial pressures on their families and felt a strong sense of responsibility towards ensuring that their education and career choices did not impact on the family further:

"I'm going to owe my family a lot of money after studying for years [at university in the UK] because I'm paying the international fee and my peers, they're like paying the local fees now. So yeah, that's why I'm like more focused on like working to get a job and to repay. This is like £200,000 combined to study four years. It's so expensive, man. I have to get a job immediately, I cannot study anymore." (Hongkonger young person, male, 18 years old)

Young people's education choices are also constrained by the local availability of courses and young people's ability to travel (Farquharson et al., 2022). Oxfordshire is a large and predominantly rural county and new arrivals may not have the capital to buy a car or convert their driver's licence and journeys by public transport can take up to two hours. Young people and their families raised the **challenge of living in more rural remote locations than they were used to, with more limited transport, hindering their ability to travel to college or find employment:**

"Our host family lived in house in a hamlet, just 10 houses and nothing, just fields around from all sides and forests. I'm originally from the capital of Ukraine, so I'm from like the biggest city. They used to drive me to the train station and we came into Oxford every morning at 7am when nothing was open. Literally everything was closed. Even my college doors were closed until like 8:30. I was sitting in the train station in Oxford and just waiting until then." (Ukrainian young person, female, 18 years old)

"One of my friends, he's working in a restaurant in the city centre. There are two buses going from here to Oxford. One and half hour arrive from here to Oxford. I talk to the manager: 'Eleven o'clock is the last bus is going.' He's saying, 'No, we can't leave you like this time, you need to stay until two o'clock.'" (Afghan young person, male, 19 years old)

Systemic barriers

As we have highlighted, young people are navigating a key transitional stage, which is further compounded by a sense of **uncertainty regarding the future and confronting ongoing systemic barriers making them wait and wasting their time:**

Hassan, aged 16, had arrived in the UK from Afghanistan at the age of 14 with his family. They were initially housed at a reception site in a different region, before being moved to Oxfordshire. Hassan was still awaiting a college place and reflected on the lengthy delay: "A year and eight months has been wasted just by telling me, wait for the school and then by the time when the schools were available, I turned 16 and that was such a waste of time so, I mean, in that way it's slow...I wished that as soon as I arrived I would have started school and from school I would have been in college and I would have continued like that."

For Afghans, **the wait for a college place but also for moving house to a yet unknown destination within the UK once a local authority offered them settled accommodation.** Whilst

this was a key worry for Afghan young people and parents in transitional accommodation, Afghan families in settled accommodation also felt uncertain about where they would live. Families had found it particularly hard living in remote rural locations with limited employment opportunities nearby and were instead planning on relocating to larger cities in the North to be closer to extended family and be able to find work.

Ukrainian young people and parents felt uncertain about the future due to the **precarity of their short-term visa with no clear pathway to settlement in the UK which hinders their ability to imagine a future in UK**:

"Living with a half-packed suitcase is exhausting [...] we cannot afford to think philosophically about aspirations." (Ukrainian mother)

Hongkonger young people also felt a sense of **uncertainty about the future and needing to wait until they had citizenship or had accumulated five years of residency in the UK to be entitled to home fees for higher education**. Parents also talked about the precarity of the BNO visa and their fear of jeopardising it if their children travelled out of the UK for too long or if the family applied for recourse to public funds:

"We're definitely going to put a citizenship [application in]. Coming here, the passport was like the goal. My mum's really been on that. Like, she's really careful about days spent abroad. And my mum and me, we've actually already done the citizenship test. We don't actually have to do that until we're applying, that's years away. Because I think one thing about Hongkongers who have moved over, they're really hyper aware of new sources that come in, like policy changes, like they're really on top like. My mum's really like, guys don't go travelling, you gotta stay here, we're gonna make sure our days are fine." (Hongkonger young person, female, 18 years old)

Young people's parents had struggled to find work in the UK and for those who had managed, they'd experienced deskilling into more junior or low-skilled work and were earning lower incomes than in their home country. As a result, young people had **limited experience and exposure to how people find work in the UK and were also conscious of the additional pressure on family incomes, which weighed heavily on them**.

Discrimination and prejudice impacted all three communities. Whilst none of the Afghan young people or parents raised this directly, numerous professionals raised the issue of community tensions with the arrival of Afghans into more rural villages and towns:

"There has been some racial tension in that area. We've also got racial tension now in [another area] really badly. Sad, isn't it? But that's just how it is. Also, some of it is sprung from the school

as well, you know, just getting on top of just clamping it out, you know, racism, bullying, things like that and things on the school bus.” (County council staff)

The majority of Hongkongers highlighted the othering, prejudice and open racism they had experienced in Oxford itself as well as around the county. Some young people had experienced bullying, many of the parents had experienced name-calling in the street:

*“We are being labelled something like ‘Covid source’ or they call ‘c**** c***’, so it’s quite horrible. We are not asking for affirmative or special treatment but just stop that please. Even my daughter when she was walking alone in the morning, some white men stopped her and make fun of her, it’s quite horrible.” (Hongkonger mother)*

Research has highlighted how Ukrainians have experienced othering and prejudice in the UK, feeling they’re perceived to be uneducated and low-skilled (Jones & Kogut, 2024; Kuznetsova et al, 2024). Some Ukrainians felt that people made assumptions about their education and home culture:

“[It would help if people would] actually think of us as worthy of anything at all, because surprisingly, people think we’re some kind of degenerates who don’t have anything and we don’t know anything.”

Whilst it is important to recognise how young people’s circumstances can make them more vulnerable, it is important to move beyond a deficit-based approach and instead take an asset-based approach, recognising young people’s strengths and resilience (McIntyre & Abrams, 2020).

Young people reiterated the need to be active agents to cope with getting through the transitional phase of liminality and uncertainty to feel like they were moving forwards.

Whether this was through focusing on additional self-study, putting themselves forward in class to practise their English, chasing colleges to be added to the waiting list, researching scholarships or through proactively seeking to meet and mix with their peers, young people emphasised the need to find motivation to keep focused and keep yourself going.

In addition to the cross-cutting themes, we also identified particular themes for each cohort.

Afghan young people’s experiences

Need for intensive ESOL and long delays accessing education

ESOL is the key priority for most Afghan young people, who felt they **needed intensive ESOL classes in the first instance to be able to progress in the UK**, and yet they experienced **long waiting lists, a lack of courses available and no option for mid-year entry**. With the rise of the

Taliban, all of the Afghan girls had had a disrupted education, missing out whole academic years and were conscious of having missed key parts of the curriculum.

Young people who were not in education and living in transitional accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence had been able to access Oxfordshire's bespoke provision for Afghan young people aged 16-18, covering ESOL, functional skills and working towards a Duke of Edinburgh award as well as receiving education and careers advice and guidance. Young people's feedback on the provision was positive and they highly valued the support and teaching provided by their tutors. However they also felt frustrated that whilst the provision was "*better than nothing, it should be better than nothing*" and felt that they should be in college, gaining qualifications completing accredited training and progressing with their education. They were also aware that their older siblings aged 19-21 were not able to access any education or employment, and were "*just sitting at home*". Young people in the bespoke ESOL provision were unclear about when they would be starting college and who was helping them apply or chase up the college. Some of the local authority staff informed us that the colleges were no longer accepting young people who were in transitional accommodation after several students had dropped out the previous year once they were moved to settled accommodation. However, the majority of the young people believed they were enrolled in college and awaiting a start date.

Young people who were in settled accommodation had also experienced long delays waiting for a college place and weren't able to access the bespoke provision provided by the council, as it was restricted for funding reasons. Even when young people were eventually able to access college, they found a **lack of intensive courses** and instead were only studying a few hours a week restricted to limited time slots only, with some young people only being offered evening classes in Oxford itself, when they lived over an hour away by bus.

Mira arrived in the UK at the age of 17, fleeing Afghanistan with her parents and younger siblings, and was housed in a bridging hotel for seven months. She was very grateful for the support that her younger siblings had received and how the family had eventually been rehoused in a house outside the city. However, Mira had to wait for nearly a year before starting ESOL at a local FE college. The college were only able to offer her evening classes and so she had to take a bus for 1.5 hours to travel and have her father collect her as the buses had stopped by the time she finished. She was eventually offered a daytime class, however since the Home Office has transitioned to a digital immigration system with e-visas, Mira was having issues with providing valid ID documents and at the time of the interview, was worried she might lose her place as the college were no longer accepting her ID documents.

Wasted time

As highlighted, all three cohorts felt uncertainty regarding the future and confronting **ongoing systemic barriers making them wait and wasting their time**. For Afghan young people and

families, this was exacerbated by the long delays young people had faced and, in some cases, were still facing, leading to bitter disappointment and frustration. Even young people who had previously lived in bridging hotels and been in the UK for over two years felt they were treading water and not progressing into education or employment:

"It's too bad feeling...No job, no course, no English, no college. I need to study; I need to learn something. I need to work or something, like I don't have nothing. Just I stay in [my] room."
(Afghan young person, male, 19 years old)

Parents also felt frustrated watching their children wait, stuck in limbo and worried about the **impact on their well-being**:

"The impact is really bad [on my daughter who is 16 and still waiting to start college since arriving 8 months ago] so she's saying 'why would I be in this country anyway? Because in Afghanistan there's no education [but] at least we would be living with our relatives or [speaking] the language that I can speak to people. Here, I'm not at school, I don't speak the language, I'm not learning the language.'" (Afghan father, living in Service Family Accommodation)

"[My 20 year old son] was in the first year of university in Afghanistan studying computer science. They told him to go and register yourself with Oxford College and he went, he registered and he hasn't got nothing from the college yet. He's looking for a job but he can't find a job because there's no jobs. I'm very stressed. I don't know what to do and I'm very concerned that, you know, I don't want him to start taking drugs or meet the wrong people. In Afghanistan we have some control over our children but in this country there's no control over children. Of course my upbringing is not like this, he's listening to me but when they don't have anything to do, you know what, they will find somewhere to get themselves busy which I'm concerned about. He is young, he would like to, you know, help me, he would like to, you know, study as well but we cannot really do anything." (Afghan father)

Young people felt a sense of injustice about who gets to study, who has to wait and were aware of the different support other Afghans in the community depending on whether they were in settled or temporary accommodation:

"At least temporary families they do have someone to even, you know, make a complaint but we don't have no-one, when we would like to speak to a support worker they don't even help."
(Afghan father living in Service Family Accommodation)

Professionals had raised concerns about **gendered expectations** within Afghan families, however it was not directly raised by the girls and young women we spoke to, who felt that their families were supportive of their education plans and eager for them to make the most of

opportunities. Most professionals felt that parents were very supportive of their daughters' aspirations and advocating for them to pursue education. However older brothers seemed to play a key part in family dynamics, as the girls disclosed that their older brothers had completed the paperwork on their behalf for their college enrolment. Moreover, several professionals highlighted how the Afghan girls felt more comfortable in single sex groups and may prefer to study in a single-sex environment. Our rapid evidence review highlighted the importance of advisers and educators acknowledging the cultural and gendered responsibilities that may be expected of girls and young women within their communities (Hunt et al., 2023) and that young women may be more comfortable pursuing their education in single-sex spaces (Wonder Foundation, 2023). However, staff must also be mindful of their own internalised cultural norms and expectations and not systematically steer young women towards gendered pathways, focusing on health and social care whilst steering young men towards more 'masculine' pathways or into employment (Wonder Foundation, 2023).

Many of the Afghan girls were focused on pursuing on medicine. Community workers explained that the choice of university courses in Afghanistan is often limited for women and medicine is sometimes seen as the only the respectable option for women. Mira, aged 20, explained that in Afghanistan:

"We had only two choices: become a doctor or become a teacher. So if like I didn't get these two things, [my options are] like staying at home or get married." (Afghan young person, female, 20 years old)

Others were put off working in roles with the government or judiciary after seeing family members experience challenges. Zahra, now 16, had initially wanted to be a judge, after seeing women from her extended family working in government and judiciary. However, since the rise of the Taliban, she was acutely aware of the security issues her family had experienced and was adamant she no longer wanted to work in a role that 'belongs to the government' but instead was hoping to move into business studies, once she had improved her English language skills.

Restricted pathways to employment

With limited English within their family, Afghan young people felt they hadn't received enough information **in their language on pathways to careers, different options within different careers, the costs involved including tuition fees, the length of time to train and which specific courses to take to help them reach their goals.**

"I've had some help looking into my options in the UK – I've been told that it's very hard and that you need to study very hard. A few people came and gave us information but I don't understand it all. I need information from the beginning so I can understand the process and then it will be better." (Afghan young person, female, 18 years old)

Young people were aware that for certain careers, they needed to attend higher education which they knew involved tuition fees and that they could apply for loans but weren't clear on the detail or the cumulative amount involved.

For young people aged 19 and over, the jobcentre was the only pathway to advice and guidance. However, as Mukhtar aged 19 found:

"The focus is on jobs but not on education. People can have their jobs but they also need education. But the whole focus is on jobs. When the jobcentre call you, it's all about jobs. They never mention anything about education. Even my parents are now saying find a job".

The jobcentre had suggested warehouse jobs to Mukhtar but he wanted to still be able to study to keep learning and build transferrable skills. He was beginning to feel the pressure to find work from both the jobcentre and his family, however the reality, as other Afghan young men had found living outside the city of Oxford, was a dearth of local part-time jobs available and challenges applying for work, without any UK work experience. **Very few of the parents or older siblings had found work in the UK and it was therefore challenging to have first-hand experience and advice on applying for and finding work in the UK. With limited insight into the UK job market and a lack of information on their options, young people sometimes found it hard to imagine their long-term future and careers, beyond trying to access an ESOL course or find work.**

Family and well-being needs

Afghan young people and families often had **lower digital literacy and access to digital technology**, compared to other displaced groups. In some cases, the local authority provided equipment. However, this was limited to one device per family and in many families, there were 4+ children all sharing it for their homework. Many parents were still learning English and often the young people were learning at a faster rate than their parents and taking on an additional role **translating for the family**. Young people were often the eldest children and had subsequently taken on additional **caring responsibilities for their younger siblings, which could impact their availability and capacity to engage with education or employment**. Professionals also observed this, seeing young people taking on caring roles for younger siblings and acting as the first point of contact for professionals:

"16 to 19 year olds invariably end up being the ones that support their parents in those things. So as soon as they've got a bit of English, they'll go to younger siblings' school pick up and drop off. And I'll be the one that will phone an older sibling rather than a parent sometimes, because it's easier to actually communicate with the older sibling and explain what's going on, someone's got an exam or someone hasn't been in, like, what's happening. So they end up in those positions themselves." (Further Education College staff)

Both families and young people also talked about the **financial pressures** they were facing and were aware their families were on limited budgets, with benefits being capped as they were large families. The Jobcentre did not always recognise the informal unaccredited education young people were taking, including the council's bespoke provision for 16-18 year olds, impacting parents' access to child benefit for their older children or young people's access to Universal Credit.

Families in transitional accommodation were able to access wraparound support from Mears, commissioned by the Ministry of Defence. **Families in settled accommodation were able to access support through council funded resettlement caseworkers. However, as the young people highlighted, resettlement caseworkers primarily focused on the family as a whole and did not have capacity to provide one-to-one support for young people:**

"I'd like to be studying English for now, I need to improve my English... I told to my caseworker... The caseworker is so slow. She is telling me, "I will let you know. I will check this". I am waiting for now two months... One thing she did do, she sent me one link from [local college]. She says, "You can check there to see what you can do". So, I check this, show this email to my father also. So, my father say, "I'm not understand what is this saying?" My father say, "We will take my case up with caseworker. We need help on this, we can't do this... so, she's coming after two months but she's come for help for the family, not for me. [They help with] any gas problem in home, any home problem, like hospital, GP, like child school, like this, so she's contacted my father, she's everything doing with my father. [But] I need one case worker for myself and not for my family. So, anyone help me personally." (Afghan young person, male, 19 years old)

In addition to needing one-to-one support, young people also flagged the **importance of needing therapeutic support** both for them as young people, but also their families and for professionals and teachers to understand what they had gone through.

Housing uncertainty

The Afghan community in Oxfordshire, arriving under the ARAP scheme, is split into two [groups](#): people in settled accommodation receiving support from the city or district councils and families in transitional accommodation temporarily living in accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence and waiting to be allocated settled accommodation elsewhere in the UK. The families had all initially lived in army camps upon arrival to the UK before being moved to transitional accommodation for service families on the Ministry of Defence army base. **Transitional accommodation has been designed as short-term accommodation for up to six weeks, however many of the families had been waiting for months. Once they were allocated accommodation, they were then often moved within days.**

Families in settled accommodation had previously lived in bridging hotels for several months and whilst the living conditions had been challenging, they felt they had benefitted from local authority staff and third sector organisations providing interim support and education in the hotels. Whilst the move into settled accommodation had been welcome, families had then found themselves in more isolated rural communities, with limited local college places available and few migrant support organisations or youth groups nearby. **Young people were reliant on limited and costly public transport to travel to colleges and both parents and young people had struggled with trying to pass their UK driving licence, let alone be able to afford a car.**

Across families in both settled and transitional accommodation, there was a sense of still living in limbo, with uncertainty about the future. **Young people in transitional accommodation felt uprooted, not knowing when they would move to a new area, how they would find a college there or be able to start afresh and acutely aware that they could be moved at any point with very short notice. Some families in settled accommodation also felt a sense of transience as they had struggled to find work locally and were eager to move to larger cities in the UK to be closer to extended family members and where they hoped to find more employment opportunities:**

Abdullah is a father who has been living in settled accommodation for the last 8 months and was planning to move his family to a city in the North of England to be closer to family and have a better chance of finding work in the long-term.

"I think if a council accepts someone and give them an offer to come and live here, they should have enough space to educate them. Why would they leave us in an open space and we cannot do anything... We're living in the middle of nowhere because here we cannot even find a job. I'm exhausted because I cannot even find a job around here. They brought me to a military location, there is no factories, there is no proper shops. I would like to work anywhere but I cannot find a job here because there is not enough facilities to look for a job. My wife has an uncle living in [a city in the North] and my wife medically it's called depression but in Afghan language we say 'a ghost' which is affecting her health. So basically when she goes to [stay with them] because the family's around her, she's happy, so not many attacks will happen, rather than she live here in an isolated place".

Young people also talked about feeling isolated in their current community and wanting to live in a more urban environment with access to supermarkets and shops, but also importantly opportunities to socialise with the local community, practice their English and make friends.

Whilst none of the Afghan young people or parents shared experiences of discrimination or racism, local authority staff and partners all raised concerns of community tensions in parts of the county and were aware of racist incidents of bullying in schools, which they were seeking to address reaching out to youth groups, sports clubs and community organisations to try to bridge

the divide and bring the community together. Local schools were bringing together partners to support individuals through Oxfordshire's Community Around the School Offer (CASO). Parish councils, wraparound support providers and the county council were proactively working together to involve Afghan families in local community events, included running an Afghan food stall at the annual village fete and inviting the local community to Afghan celebration events at the village hall.

Hongkonger young people's experiences

Education

Our sample included Hongkonger young people in both independent schools and state schools and so young people's experiences of education and careers advice differed depending on the type of school they were in. Several Hongkonger parents talked about using agents in Hong Kong for advice on finding and applying for independent schools in the UK. Once young people were in school, **some still struggled with the language and felt they needed additional EAL support.** Whilst independent schools would provide this, young people in state schools often accessed EAL support through volunteer tutors within the Hongkonger church community who provided support to each other. Oxfordshire County Council's Migrant Education team had identified that some Hongkongers' English levels were not at the required level to sit GCSEs or A-Levels at the same time their school year-group peers do. As a result, they had secured funding through an initiative funded from MHCLG and approved through the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration, to pilot tailored careers advice, liaising with both young people and their families, on the option of pursuing functional skills and access courses delivered at Further Education Colleges as another acceptable university entrance route.

Young people in state schools had received some support with careers, helping them to identify courses in higher education, however many had researched courses themselves focused on their own interests and passions. Young people in independent schools in Oxfordshire had received advice on Higher Education, however the advice was primarily focused on applying to specific universities/courses, not necessarily on future careers.

Hongkongers' key worry in relation to education was being able to afford international fees for higher education, even for children studying in independent schools. Most of the young people were planning to progress to university, however some young people were planning to take 1-2 years out, after school to work instead to reduce the costs as families were under financial pressure in the UK, facing exorbitant international tuition fees and with parents earning less in the UK than in Hong Kong. Several of the young people were planning on holding off going to university until they had lived in the UK for five years or applied for citizenship. They also knew of people within the community who were moving to Scotland instead, where undergraduate

students were entitled to home fees after 3 years of residency in the UK. However, some parents were worried that a gap may be a waste of time for young people treading water, losing their motivation and not able to gain meaningful experience in the meantime:

“Most of our friends, [their children] came here to study sixth form or GCSE, they may need to take gap year. So at least one or two years, because financially they may not be able to support their kids. I think it's a big issue to most of the BN(O) holders. To the student to just stop everything because one year, two year and studying attitude will be negatively impact. [Facing] international student fees. Their family may not have sufficient money. Because working here, the pay is not as high as in Hong Kong because most may not find their own professional jobs. You have to do some like work in supermarket or driving for delivery services. So, they may not have found a good job with good high pay so they will not be able to support their kids. The kids, if they take gap year to stop studying for one or two years, they may not have the motivation anymore because you stop the engine when you study it. You have to cool down for two years and then rerun the engine again. They told me that they may spend time to learn driving so that they can get the driving licence and then some of them say that maybe go back home to Hong Kong to visit some friends. I think they are wasting their time unless they really find something that is meaningful. The purpose of taking gap year is not really find a job or experience in life, it is because of money.” (Hongkonger father)

Young people talked about **negotiating their aspirations with their families** - they felt there was often a societal expectation of moving into certain careers however all of the young people had been able to negotiate with their parents who were acceptant and supportive for them to pursue their desired career in fields including psychology, natural sciences and aviation.

Financial pressures

Financial pressures were a recurrent theme, even for families who were able to pay private school fees. School fees and international student fees were taking up a large proportion of their expenditure and many families were under financial pressure, struggling to find work in the UK and conscious that their financial assets were locked in Hong Kong and were unable to easily withdraw money from bank accounts in Hong Kong. Some had chosen independent schools just for sixth form but had put their younger children into state schools as they could not afford the fees long term throughout their education. One mother talked about needing to work two different jobs just to be able to cover her child's tuition fees.

Unlike Ukrainian and Afghan nationals, **BN(O) status holders are subject to the ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition, unable to access social security even if facing financial hardship.** A recent report from the Welcoming Committee for Hongkongers (Rolfe & Lau, 2024) highlighted the **financial challenges many Hongkonger households have faced settling in the UK, often finding living costs and university tuition fees higher than anticipated, struggling**

with no credit history and rapidly working their way through the savings they had set aside for buying property or setting up businesses. Research indicates that there are more significant levels of financial insecurity and destitution within the BN(O) community than previously thought (Leon, 2025). However, many Hongkongers are also reluctant to apply for support, even if facing financial hardship, due to a lack of understanding of their rights in the UK and the fear of ramifications on future applications to extend their leave in the UK (COSLA, 2025; Rolfe & Benson, 2023; Rolfe & Lau, 2024). Some may even interpret 'NRPF' as not being entitled to any information from public organisations, including schools and Jobcentre Plus and therefore may be reluctant to approach schools or support services even for advice (Benson & Rolfe, 2023; Rolfe & Lau, 2024). Local government departments, including council career services and college course providers, are not always aware of BN(O) status holders' rights and entitlements in the UK or their eligibility for different resources, including the option to apply to have the NRPF visa condition lifted (Rolfe & Lau, 2024).

Children were conscious of the financial pressures their families were experiencing and felt a **sense of responsibility and debt to their families.** They had seen their parents in previous senior roles in Hong Kong and now struggling to find work in the UK and/or facing down-skilling into lower paid and more junior employment. Some parents were working multiple jobs just to be able to cover the costs of tuition fees.

Precarious immigration status

Hongkonger young people wanted to settle and build a new life in the UK – none of them were planning to return to Hong Kong unless there was political change. They felt it was a life they had left behind and were hoping to be able to apply for citizenship once they had achieved five years of residency in the UK. However, both young people and parents were **apprehensive about jeopardising their immigration status and losing their BN(O) visa if they were out of the country for too long or if they applied for recourse to public funds.** One parent explained that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) had suggested she applied for additional benefits as her child had SEN, however she was unclear about her entitlements and worried of the repercussions so chose not to explore it further:

"In the end, because it's so uncertain about whether it will affect our BNO path, I choose not to. Probably I will end up in a big trouble. So, I choose the safe way It seemed to me that the [no recourse to public funds] policy is not very consistent so far, and then no one have said anything very assuring. And then you know, the government can change from cutting the few support, so anything could happen. I do not have trust so try to make the safe way."
(Hongkonger mother)

Many families had already sat the Life in the UK test in preparation for their citizenship application. **Despite the BN(O) visa offering a pathway to settlement in the UK, many Hongkongers felt it was a certain precarity to their status:**

"I think it depends on the government if they change the plan. I don't know. With will the government change the plan for BN(O) visa holders? If they change and don't allow us to say, then I can't stay here right. Hopefully, they won't change and then I can stay here. I really don't know the long-term plan." (Hongkonger mother)

Some families were also fearful that if the BNO path was curtailed and they no longer had the right to live in the UK, the ramifications of returning to Hong Kong having applied for a BNO visa posed further risks:

"We have no idea what will happen. The first batch of people from Hong Kong who arrived. I don't know if they have got [indefinite leave to remain] yet because we have to see. In the future, there may be changes, maybe for UK, for China, Hong Kong. I have no idea. So it's just that we will try to see after five years if we can get the residency. We are actually quite scared, you know, for us it's a risk and challenge to do this. If not for our son, I may not have done it, the application, because it's really a risk. Five years. Who knows, right? And also even in Hong Kong, we don't know if there any political changes that the government will apply on us, those with the BN(O) visa. There is a risk for us." (Hongkonger father)

Security concerns

Existing research has flagged how some Hongkonger families may still be concerned for their safety in the UK, keeping a low profile as they settle through fear of repercussions for family members in Hong Kong (Rolfe & Chan, 2022). Many of the Hongkongers we interviewed had significant concerns regarding their privacy and data. As a result, many used a pseudonym to engage with us and requested to do the online interview with their camera off. Both young people and parents talked about trying to actively avoid mixing with mainland Chinese people in the UK and some were wary of socialising with other Hongkongers too:

"For now, Hongkongers are afraid to let them let others know their identity. Because we do not know who are the spies from the CCP. So even in the same church, in the same cell group, we do not know one another's full name. We got some groups, but we do not even get the phone numbers. [There are] probably just one or two families nearby that we feel like safe to share [our details with]. Yeah, it's quite sensitive to ask the full name." (Hongkonger mother)

Research with the Hongkonger community in the UK has highlighted some Hongkongers may be mistrustful of official advice in the UK and prefer to rely on information in Cantonese shared through social media channels. Our findings showed that people weren't wary of approaching

the council but instead had limited knowledge or experience of how they could help beyond providing ESOL classes for adult learners. More importantly, the community took pride in showing resourcefulness and self-reliance. Young people and parents had often done their own research into pathways and options and if in doubt, turned to the community for advice instead of relying on the council or statutory bodies. As several participants explained, Hongkongers would not necessarily reach out and ask for help unless in crisis, as people did not want to be dependent on the state.

Family and well-being needs

In some families, the parents had more limited English and so children took a lead on language brokering as well as additional caring responsibilities, including some children translating for their parents during our research interviews.

“A friend from Hong Kong moved on the same visa route a year before me and she had to rush her GCSES in the span of nine months, the core ones, she had to get it done to move on with everyone else. And she felt a bit isolated and rushed and had to handle like everything educational alone. Like, in terms of understanding even forms, like what the schools are asking. She had to deal with that because her dad's back in Hong Kong. Her mom's here with her brother. She's just had to deal with even finding schools for her brother. And she was stressed you know, not even knowing if she had a school or not.” (Hongkonger young person, female, 18 years old)

Whilst Hongkongers may be perceived by education professionals as more self-sufficient and needing less support, recent research has highlighted recently arrived Hongkongers talking openly about their mental health, including depression, anxiety and PTSD (Rolfe & Chan, 2022). A survey of 100 Hongkonger young people (13–21-year-olds) showed that “49% of respondents felt that they do not fit into British culture or cannot be their authentic selves” (Thrive LDN, 2025). Whilst some of the young people had made close friends in the UK and were building a new network of friends and connections, others felt isolated and disconnected from their peers, struggling to make genuine friends in the UK. Some young people still felt a stronger connection with their peers back in Hong Kong. Others felt that having left on the BN(O) visa, they no longer belonged in Hong Kong but struggled to find a foothold within the UK:

“They feel isolated, not because of the school, but because they think that they lost everything when they come in the UK, because they cannot contact or they won't like to contact their old friends in Hong Kong. They think that they leave Hong Kong then they will not be one of them and they don't want to contact their old friends in Hong Kong. Some of them will like to start a new life in the UK, but they cannot make good friends here. They escape from Hong Kong

and they feel they are not able to be one of them, one of the group in Hong Kong anymore.”
(Hongkonger father and community leader)

Some young people had experienced bullying and racism at school and parents frequently talked about the prejudice and racism they had experienced in both the city of Oxford and in towns across the county:

“Even when there are some news about how mainland China has done something bad to the UK whoever, we will know. One time we have got the bins spilled onto our doors and windows. And then my friends had their car scratched by key. It's difficult to stand up to explain [why we left Hong Kong to come to the UK], because if we stand up to explain, we will become the target of the spies from CCP.” (Hongkonger mother)

Parents identified a need for more community awareness with the wider local population around the situation in Hong Kong, the historic ties Hong Kong has with the UK and why so many Hongkongers had decided to leave to counter the existing negative narratives they had experienced.

Ukrainian young people's experiences

Education and employment

Most Ukrainian young people had been helped to enrol into school or college and council community liaison officers flagged that those who had been able to access secondary education had been able to progress into further/higher education, with many of them thriving. However, as Calyna's example illustrates, this was not the case for everyone. Calyna now aged 18, had arrived at 16 and had ended up in FE colleges on vocational courses whilst still repeatedly trying to pass her GCSE in English, with minimal input from the college. Oxfordshire County Council has now put in place ESOL provision for young Ukrainians like Calyna to help them to prepare for the IELTS exam instead as an additional proof of English language proficiency. Even **young people who were in secondary education still found they needed additional EAL support, particularly with trying to pass their English GCSE.**

Temporary visa hindering plans for the future

Unlike Afghans and Hongkongers, Ukrainians do not have a route to settlement in the UK and existing research indicates that Ukrainians' time-limited immigration status impacts communities' ability to feel settled and invested in their future in the UK (Benson et al., 2024; Kuznetsova et al, 2024). This was echoed in our findings as a key theme was **the uncertainty Ukrainians faced with a short-term visa impacting their ability to plan for the future.** Young people wanted to stay in the UK and had started building their lives here but felt in limbo with a

precarious visa. Irina had fled Ukraine with her family and temporarily lived in another European country, learning a new language, before settling in the UK. She was now 16, preparing for her GCSEs however despite wanting to stay in the UK, she felt uncertain about the likelihood - even if she applied to extend her visa, it would expire in the middle of her A-Levels:

"It depends from my visa because if I won't have the ability to stay, like I won't have my passport allowing me to stay here, I will have to leave probably. Like we don't even have enough time in our visa to finish the school. [My visa] ends in the middle of year 13. So, I wouldn't be able to even finish the school here to get like the [exam certificates] I've worked all the time for. Like years of being here to do school to not even finish it. To be forced to go like somewhere else. Honestly, I'm trying not to think about it cos I have my parents thinking about it. But sometimes when my mum starts talking to me about it, I'm like, that's actually deep, like that's a deep problem. She's like, yes it is, go do your work now. And I go, OK. I'm going back to do my work and I'm trying not to think about it. I don't want to [move to another country] cos I feel pretty known here right now and I don't really want to go anywhere else and start from zero again."

Calyna is 18 and had been in the UK since she was 16 – whilst it was beginning to feel like home, she was also unsure about whether she would be allowed to stay and had **friends who were already planning to return to Ukraine to feel some sense of stability**:

"It's beginning [to feel] like home. You are feeling here more comfortable than in your real home. In this moment it is your home and you don't want to lose your chance to stay here. You want to be here. [However] Right now I don't have this feeling [that I will be able to stay in the UK] unfortunately. Like a lot of my friends, they already decide for themselves that when their host family agreement to stay in their houses will end, they will go back to Ukraine...they want to stay here, but they can't because of this immigration status thingy. I have one [friend who has] already gone back and she is saying 'yes, it is loud, it is not safe, but at least I'm feeling that no one will ask me to leave'."

All of the Ukrainian young people we interviewed had simultaneously **juggled two parallel education systems, attending school/college in the UK, whilst attending online Ukrainian classes or focusing on self-study for up to 3-4 hours a day to keep their options open in case they had to move back to Ukraine**. All had been focused on ensuring they passed the Ukrainian school qualifications. Initially this was out of necessity as they imagined the war may be over soon and they did not to lose any time or fall behind with their education. However, as the war prolonged and without a route to settlement in the UK, young people pursued both educational systems to keep their options open in case they were no longer able to stay in the UK. Young people and their parents did not feel that schools and colleges recognised the additional workload Ukrainian students juggle. One young person's priority was focusing on his Ukrainian exam qualifications instead but had attended secondary school in the UK simply as a tick box

exercise to ensure his mother did not experience any difficulties with his school attendance. This was echoed by a parent who articulated the immense challenge Ukrainian young people faced, trying to stay motivated whilst preparing for two sets of key exams simultaneously:

"Practically speaking they don't have any reasons to [sit their A-Levels] because their visas expire in the middle of their year 13 at school so even before the start of the A level, so what's the point? And they're not eligible for student visa while they're at school. They are perfectly capable, and they're willing and they're motivated. But they're preparing in parallel for A-Levels and for Ukrainian exams knowing that their visa expires in the UK and they're getting back to Ukraine. What would you choose because it's impossible to prepare yourself for two sets of hugely important exams, in two different languages?" (Ukrainian mother)

Young people had tried to explore options with their visas, including applying for a student visa in the long run. However, they were concerned that even if they were successfully granted a student visa, the rest of the family's visas would expire and they would not be able to stay in the UK, leading to the family being separated yet again.

Existing literature evidences the challenges Ukrainians have faced with finding employment that matches their skills and experience (British Red Cross, 2024; British Red Cross, 2025). **With a temporary visa due to expire, some Ukrainian young people are finding they are not eligible for apprenticeships either** (Kuznetsova et al., 2024)). Indeed, a Ukrainian parent explained how employers are reluctant to employ and train up Ukrainians as their visa expiry date approaches, leaving Ukrainians in further limbo struggling to secure work.

Family & Well-Being

"Most of the fathers are in Ukraine. Some of them are in in the army [or] work for the army. And probably it affects the situation, affects them as well because fathers are sitting there, they cannot move out of the country. And they cannot help physically, they can't help. Because my husband goes crazy every single time that something happens, I need physical help and I'm being alone with [my child] now in my hands and I cannot do anything because I don't have anyone." (Ukrainian mother)

Family dynamics had often shifted for Ukrainian young people, with their fathers staying behind in Ukraine and moving in with hosts who for some, had been supportive in helping them with navigating the UK system. Council community liaison officers had also come across cases of families where the hosts had taken on additional caring responsibilities for children and young people when their mothers had had health issues or needed to travel back and forth to Ukraine. Host accommodation sometimes came with the disadvantage of living in more rural areas with limited public transport, lengthening young people's commutes to school/college and work. Some young people were also aware of the **increased financial pressures their families were**

under, needing to send money to relatives in Ukraine as well as paying for additional tutoring to try to keep up in both education systems.

As highlighted earlier, Ukrainian young people were also trying to navigate new friendships and whilst some had found meaningful connections with new friends, it was often with other migrants who they had bonded with. Feedback from both young people and practitioners reflected that many young people who had arrived in their later teens experienced **isolation and loneliness, struggling to connect with their peers. Young people were eager for opportunities to socialise and speak to other young people to build connections and feel less lonely:**

"I was feeling like that my first whole year here. I had my couple of friends from Poland, and I was speaking with them every day by phone. But I didn't had no one except of my mom or my other Ukrainian 2 friends. And I didn't had no one to talk with except my mom, and sometimes our host family. But [now in college], I have my three Ukrainian friends who were in the same course as I did. And we unite, we were just together, and it was for us easier to be together than separate. One thing what can make the difference if you will have here maybe some sort of speaking clubs sometimes for everyone who need just to speak with someone. It will be more helpful. Because sometimes even [if] you are living here and you know already the mentality of British people, even sometimes it's still hard to us understand them and maybe also like in the same way they are finding it hard to understand us. And because of that, it's a lot of confusion going on with this. And just a barrier because when you're coming here, you don't have a lot of friends. You have just probably the person with who you came, and you have to find your own here and get friends. And it's sometimes very hard to do that. It just will be helpful if it will be like some sort of group meetings like as we do have in my community. We find it difficult to find someone except Ukrainians to talk with." (Ukrainian young person, female, 18 years old)

Current barriers in designing and delivering education and careers advice and support

There are numerous challenges for local authorities seeking to design and deliver bespoke support for displaced young people. In this section, we explore barriers at the service level, local authority level and the systemic level.

Service level barriers

Designing a service for a diverse group of young people with wide-ranging needs, levels of education and pre/post-arrival experiences in the UK, can be challenging. Whilst professionals highlighted the need for inclusive services meeting the educational needs of a wider group of newly arrived young people (including young people seeking asylum or have been granted refugee status), they also emphasised the **importance of not taking a 'one size fits all' approach.**

Oxfordshire County Council had experienced **challenges engaging with and setting up partnerships with schools to provide advice and guidance for older displaced children,** despite proactively reaching out trying to build links. Local authority staff felt that this may be down to several reasons: duplication of work, limited staff time and capacity but also a tension between which groups were being prioritised over others. Some council staff felt that schools saw the services as treading on their toes when advice and guidance was already being delivered in schools, others felt that school staff just did not have the time or capacity to engage with new services. Others felt that there may be reluctance to engage due to community tensions around new arrivals being prioritised over other groups. In 2024, the main careers advice provider in the county had gone into administration and staff reported a gap in careers advice for young people across the board. Some local authority staff both in the lower-tier and upper-tier authorities felt there may be tensions about specific groups of new arrivals exclusively being provided with more support when there were already gaps in support for all young people, including other newly arrived migrants and asylum- seekers, across Oxfordshire and the risk of fuelling further community tensions across the county:

"Some of the schools are like we've got people from this country and this country and so why can't you help them? That's not what the funding is for so it makes it very difficult. Schools have a limited amount of money anyway for career provision for everything. So they're like 'we can only afford to buy a careers advisor for X amount of days a year, we could actually do with more of this. Why are you only supporting that group of people?' and it actually doesn't help all the things that's been going on with immigration and riots and all that kind of stuff. So I really don't think that helps with that divide and people's opinions. I think it sort of goes some way towards creating more animosity sometimes." (Local authority staff)

Local authority barriers

Oxfordshire is home to relatively high numbers of newly arrived displaced young people for a county council that historically has not been involved in supporting high numbers of migrants. Whilst Oxford City Council has resettled refugee families for the last decade, **resettlement and the integration of newcomers is a relative new area of work for the county and districts councils and hence, a steep learning curve setting up services at pace across a two-tier local authority.**

Local authorities have a statutory duty to identify and support young people aged 16-18 who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), and to encourage their participation in these areas, however one of the key issues for Oxfordshire was the **limited dataset they held on the numbers of, location and profile of displaced young people across the county**. As a two-tier local authority, there were significant challenges with data-sharing between the lower tier authorities and the county council, however the council had set up regular themed meetings, bringing together local authority staff in both tiers, designing a Memorandum of Understanding for ESOL provision and were striving towards improving data-sharing. Whilst some central government data on Ukrainians and Afghans was shared with the county, there was no administrative data held on where Hongkongers were settling. As a result, county staff struggled to identify where the need was across the county and where to prioritise their efforts to reach out and support young people. Even when young people had been identified, there were still data-sharing challenges without a consistent case recording system in place for local authority practitioners to establish if anyone was already working with the young person/family and if so, what work had already been undertaken.

Oxfordshire also face the challenge of needing to **tailor support for both a settling population who are laying down roots in the county, as well as a transitional population like the Afghan families who had been placed in temporary accommodation and may be moved at short notice**. However, the reality is that many 'transitional' families are still spending months in the area even over a year awaiting a transfer and at an often crucial moment in young people's educational journey and so identifying how best to support families during an indeterminate interim period proved challenging.

As a large geographic county, the local authority needs to consider the **limited public transport available** for young people to commute to college and consider setting up partnerships with neighbouring local authorities as **young people's closest college might be in another local authority** including Wiltshire, Reading or Buckinghamshire.

Systemic barriers

Rapidly evolving policy landscape

The introduction of bespoke humanitarian visas with separate rights and entitlements for each cohort adds to the complexity for frontline practitioners who are already operating in a **rapidly changing policy environment, hindering professionals' ability to stay up to date and provide correct information to families on their rights and entitlements**:

"There are lots of challenges because of constant changes, political change, changes in terms of who can come, who cannot come, and what they entitled to. And because it's so new still

amongst many professionals, there is still so much misunderstanding, misconceptions and confusion: who can access ESOL, who cannot access ESOL. So you know it's very confusing for young people, for their families, for their parents, because they don't know and often professional staff either provide conflicting information, advice, because it changes.” (Lower-tier local authority staff)

In some district councils, there had been very **limited prior engagement with refugee communities** and in some areas, arrivals had come in at a rapid pace and hence resettlement workers were struggling to set up the necessary infrastructure to be able to meet people's needs:

“The overall bigger picture is that the volume of people coming our way, [and] the infrastructure is not quite in place yet. So, there are things that are sadly being missed, but we're all absolutely sort of snowed under with, it's just incredibly busy and really fast-paced and in. Just the amount of families coming and still coming, we've not been able to really start to get creative and we've liaised with the council, and we've presented to them the lack of nursery and early years [spaces] and 16 to 19 year olds resources. But we're not set up. We tried to bring ESOL in house, but it's just so time consuming to try to build these structures and we don't have the time because we have more families coming and we're sort of building the foundations as we go. And there are things that we could get much more creative on, if we had the time, resources.” (Lower-tier local authority staff)

In contrast to the UK's resettlement scheme, local authorities receive **minimal background information in advance** from the Home Office on families arriving through the Afghan resettlement schemes, compounding the challenges education and resettlement staff face trying to identify suitable education placements for young people in advance.

Unaccompanied displaced children in the care system may benefit from having a dedicated social worker or a virtual school advocating for their access to education and training, however there is **no obvious statutory champion helping children in displaced families navigate the UK education system or advocating on their behalf** (Leon, 2025):

“Having someone that was just really tracking their educational journey and making sure that they were accessing education [would make a difference]. Because with our UASC that come in, there's the virtual school person [who] basically tracks their education from the moment they arrive, and they will have three meetings [with us and them] a year. I feel like there are eyes on these learners [unaccompanied young people] and there is someone there, a social worker is acting as a corporate parent so you know they would be getting the attention that we would hope and expect that a young person in a family situation with a parent or a guardian would have. But I think there just isn't that for young people that come through resettlement schemes because they come with their families, they come with their parents.

And I think the expectation is, is that that [they would be] having these conversations with college or having those conversations with their children. But the reality is, is that they don't necessarily have the English language skills to be able to have those conversations with us... They don't understand the educational system, so they don't really even know what maybe their children are learning, they don't know how long it's likely to take. I really think there's just that missing link. And if they had someone that was like advocating for the 16- to 19-year-olds, then things could be picked up.” (Further Education College Staff)

Restricted and short-term funding

Local authorities are operating in a rapidly changing policy landscape with **short-term central government funding, administered by different departments and restricted to particular cohorts, hindering local authorities’ ability to deliver efficient programmes at pace in response to the high numbers of new arrivals, without the data and infrastructure to do so**, and often juggling staff on very short-term temporary contracts. Not only is funding restricted to cohorts, but there is often a lag between both guidance and funding being issued and councils needing to set up services:

“Guidance and funding often comes way after you having to manage things on the ground. But you know it will come, but you just have to sort of get on with it really. Get getting hold of [central government departments] and asking them questions isn't always immediate. Sometimes it can be, sometimes it isn't.” (County council staff)

Local authorities are already operating on restricted budgets, but are also needing to factor in funding for digital equipment for resettled families to access information online as well as covering transport costs for some pupils living in more remote areas to be able to commute to school or college. Central government funding delays and discrepancies across different cohorts has a direct impact on local authority staffing, with **key resettlement post holders on very short-term contracts** (3-6 months), hampering local authorities' ability to retain staff, build trusting relationships with partners and develop expertise within the teams:

“There's a lot of a lot of staff changes and it's very difficult to build something sustainable because every month I hear about someone leaving and then it's very hard to build something sustainable for young people, for our clients and between us as professionals if we don't have any kind of stability, but definitely, if employment contracts could be better for staff to really become specialists in the areas then they could better help young people navigate.” (Local authority staff)

Community tensions hindering cohesion work

Moreover, community tensions in parts of the county created additional pressure and a need for community cohesion work. As families' experiences highlighted, prejudice and discrimination are almost normalised in their daily experiences, reinforcing the need to address existing tensions and raise awareness of the challenges people face, to bring people together within the community:

"The problems that we're seeing now, is we've got, you know, large numbers of migrants coming to the smaller towns and one big issue is it can be quite racist and full of 'stop the boats' attitude you know. They're very strong on poppy culture and armed forces, obviously because we've got the army bases here, for generations their families have been involved in that. The Afghans are kind of different because there is that army aspect. Sometimes the Afghans are accepted and then others are like well, no, it shouldn't be any of them, none of them should come over." (County council staff)

The council had sought to bridge divides through sports days, local markets and fairs providing opportunities for local families to share their food, culture, and handicraft.

Moving forwards

Young people and families' recommendations for improving outcomes

Across the three cohorts, young people and families themselves raised key cross-cutting recommendations for better supporting newly arrived young people including:

- More ESOL support, including intensive provision and the need for shorter waiting lists for college, with flexibility for mid-year entry
- Peer mentoring/ buddying schemes to support young people were also prioritised, not only for building connections but also understanding more about pathways others had taken and how they had navigated challenges
- Young people and families were keen to receive more information in their language on career pathways, including the practical steps needed, specific courses to take and the length of time and costs involved
- There was also a need for one-to-one support and advocacy to find specific courses, choosing pathways and help with completing and chasing up applications
- Finally, young people and families identified a key need for further orientation to life in the UK and opportunities for socialising with the local community, practicing English and making friends

In addition to the above, the three cohorts also identified specific needs moving forwards:

Afghan young people and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To open up the bespoke ESOL and functional skills provision to young people aged 19 and to young people in settled accommodation • Ensuring the bespoke ESOL provision caters for different levels within the class and provides accreditation • Therapeutic support • Ensuring resettlement caseworkers spend one-to-one time with young people to support with their educational needs • Support with learning to drive
Hongkonger young people and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England should mirror Scotland's model of offering home fee status for HE after 3 years residency • Additional ESOL classes for young people who are in school/college • Support finding work experience, as newly arrived families have limited networks • Community cohesion work to bring together newly arrived residents and local population • Raising awareness of tensions in Hong Kong and why people have come to the UK
Ukrainian young people and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathways to settlement in the UK to offer stability to young people and families • Tailored HE and Careers Advice for students with limited leave to remain, student finance and specific info on pathways/ scholarships for displaced students • Additional tutoring for English & Maths GCSE and support on understanding what is expected in exams/how to answer • Teachers to understand the pressures Ukrainian students are under following both UK and Ukrainian curriculum and exams

Improving education outcomes across Oxfordshire and beyond

To improve education outcomes for young people at a [service level](#), there is a need to:

- **Promote existing advice and guidance services** by disseminating publicity materials and referral information on the 16-19 team to boost both professional and self- referrals
- Provide accessible **online information for young people/ families on local education and training opportunities**
- **Tailor support through a more holistic needs assessment** of newly arrived young people, building on Oxfordshire's current model of undertaking EAL assessments with Afghan young people in transitional accommodation
- Where feasible, support young people with tailored individual plans, helping young people to identify specific courses that would help them move towards their goal, sharing information on the relevant costs and stepping stones required
- **Agree a lead professional to take responsibility** to ensure young people are enrolled and attending education

- **Upskill local stakeholders** on displaced young people's needs, right and entitlements in the UK to be able to better advise young people on their education, training and employment options
- **Recruit multi-lingual staff speaking community languages** to build trusting relationships with young people and their families
- **Combine accredited intensive ESOL schemes with practical training and employability skills for a wider group of displaced young people**, building on the existing bespoke education model for Afghan young people in transitional accommodation, Oxford City Council's PRS Employment Project and the Home Office evaluation of the Vulnerable People's resettlement scheme

To improve education outcomes at a local authority level, there is a need to:

- **Centralise data held across the county**, improving data-sharing between the upper-tier and lower-tier authorities and setting up joint case recording systems to minimise duplication and ensure efficient joint case-working
- **Expand ESOL classes and conversation clubs** for young people across the county
- Alongside wraparound support providers, **develop orientation programmes to life in the UK for young people and families**
- **Build partnerships with colleges (including in neighbouring local authorities) to agree referral pathways for mid-year arrivals and to set up additional local provision** where possible for young people in more remote areas struggling to commute
- **Map existing private schools bursaries/scholarships** and developing partnerships to build on these opportunities
- **Expand and develop existing services like the City Council School Advocacy Project across the county** and widening the scope to include 16-19 year olds
- **Build links with local employers to offer work experience and shadowing opportunities**
- Set up referral pathways and partnerships with **therapeutic support providers**
- Explore **training models developed in other areas to upskill new arrivals through accredited training**, such as West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership funding to train Ukrainians as ESOL teachers
- **Align the support provided to young people in families with the support provided by the virtual school team to unaccompanied young people** to ensure all newly arrived young people receive ongoing support throughout their academic trajectory
- **Alongside wraparound support providers, bring together local communities to help build connections** through youth and community groups, sporting activities, buddying /mentoring schemes and celebrating cultural diversity across Oxfordshire
- **Consider pooling funding, where possible, across schemes** in order to offer longer term contracts and build institutional expertise

Improving education outcomes for displaced young people at a national level

With an absence of national policy or strategy around education and inclusion for displaced young people, local authorities continue to rely on short-term funding schemes from central government, with restrictive eligibility criteria leading to local schemes operating in silo, focused on one cohort. **Central government need to take a more coordinated approach, engaging with the valuable learning from local government across the different schemes to develop guidance and inform new iterations of funding humanitarian visa schemes that allow councils to develop inclusive services supporting displaced young people into meaningful education and employment progressing towards their aspirations.** The Government's (2024) [Get Britain Working White Paper](#) Youth Guarantee commitment should be a stepping stone for ensuring that newly arrived young people are better supported into education, employment and training. Similarly, the Devolution White Paper (2024) offers opportunities to pool disparate, short term funding schemes into a single settlement for local government, allowing for longer term planning and a recognition of support for newly arrived young people as an important new function for local government.

The policy landscape has changed throughout our project – since finishing fieldwork, the Home Office has announced changes to the Afghan resettlement schemes, streamlining the two current schemes into a single Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP) ([Home Office, 2024](#)). New arrivals from spring 2025 onwards will now be in transitional accommodation for up to 9 months in serviced accommodation and hotels alongside reduced use of the Ministry of Defence Estate. As a result, the current transitional service family accommodation is likely to be closed, with families needing to be moved on into settled accommodation at pace. **The Home Office, Department for Education and Ministry of Defence should work collaboratively to ensure all Afghan children aged 16- 19 access quality accredited education and have access to education and careers advice and guidance whilst they're in transitional accommodation.**

In addition to working jointly across government departments:

The *Home Office* should explore pathways to settlement for Ukrainians to provide stability for young people and families planning their future. The Home Office should also review the use of the NRPF visa condition for Hongkongers on the BN(O) visa and in the meantime, ensure that there is more clear information disseminated on rights and entitlements for Hongkongers subject to the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' visa condition.

The *Department for Education* should develop guidance on best practice supporting all newly arrived young people into and throughout their education, in line with existing guidance for supporting unaccompanied children ([Department for Education, 2017](#); [Department for Education, 2018](#)).

The *Department for Education* should also consider reviewing the residency requirement for home fee status from five years to three years for BN(O) visa holders, in line with the Scottish Government's example and with the Ukrainian and Afghan humanitarian schemes.

The *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government* should draw on the research findings and implications to inform future iterations of funding schemes for resettlement and humanitarian programmes and ensure that local authorities are upskilled to better support Hongkongers experiencing financial hardship and subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' visa condition.

The *Ministry of Defence* should draw on learning from Oxfordshire's innovative model for young people to encourage other local authorities to explore bespoke education and careers support for young people in transitional accommodation. The Ministry of Defence should also align the Afghan Resettlement Programme with UKRS by providing cultural orientation for Afghan families and provide pre-arrival additional background information on families to local authorities so they can put in place support to better meet their needs.

The *Department for Work and Pensions* should ensure that jobcentres provide the appropriate support to advise newly arrived young people on their options and into meaningful education and employment, drawing on findings from ensure the Work and Pensions Committee [inquiry](#) into Jobcentre reform.

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IMPROVING EDUCATION OUTCOMES FOR DISPLACED 16–19 YEAR OLDS IN OXFORDSHIRE

[Improving Education Outcomes for Displaced 16–19 year olds in Oxfordshire](#) (2024–2025) is a research and knowledge exchange programme, funded by the Oxfordshire Migration Partnership, exploring the educational and employment needs and aspirations of newly arrived 16–19 year olds arriving in the UK with their families on the three bespoke humanitarian schemes from Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong.

THE GLOBAL EXCHANGE ON MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

The [Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity](#) is an ambitious initiative at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) opening up opportunities for knowledge exchange and longer-term collaboration between those working in the migration field.

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