NICCY
PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE



Rights Without Borders

Examining Safeguarding Rights for Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children in Northern Ireland Through the Lens of the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030

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Home

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.
You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well. The boy you went to school with, who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory, is holding a gun bigger than his body.

You only leave home when home won't let you stay.
No one would leave home unless home chased you. It's not something you ever thought about doing, so when you did, you carried the anthem under your breath, waiting until the airport toilet to tear up the passport and swallow, each mournful mouthful making it clear you would not be going back.

No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land. No one would choose days and nights in the stomach of a truck, unless the miles travelled meant something more than journey.

No one would choose to crawl under fences, beaten until your shadow leaves, raped, forced off the boat because you are darker, drowned, sold, starved, shot at the border like a sick animal, pitied. No one would choose to make a refugee camp home for a year or two or ten, stripped and searched, finding prison everywhere. And if you were to survive, greeted on the other side— *Go home Blacks, dirty refugees, sucking our country dry of milk, dark with their hands out, smell strange, savage, look what they've done to their own countries, what will they do to ours?*

The insults are easier to swallow than finding your child's body in the rubble.

I want to go home, but home is the mouth of a shark. Home is the barrel of a gun. No one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore. No one would leave home until home is a voice in your ear saying— *leave, run, now. I don't know what I've become*.[1]

[1] Home by © 2022, Warsan Shire (Available at: HOME - Warsan Shire - Kenya - Poetry International)

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Appreciation is also given to colleagues and stakeholders across statutory services who contributed data, feedback and guidance throughout the process. Finally, thanks are extended to all those working to promote and protect the rights and wellbeing of all children and young people.

Foreword

As Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, I am pleased to present this report examining the experiences of children and young people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds. This work provides an important insight into how effectively our systems, services and society are responding to the needs and rights of some of the most vulnerable children living in Northern Ireland ('NI').

Children and young people who arrive seeking safety and sanctuary bring with them resilience, strength and enormous potential. However, as this report highlights, they may also face significant challenges, including barriers to accessing services, experiences of exclusion, and, in some cases, exposure to racism, discrimination and prejudice. Under Article 22 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children who are seeking refugee status or who are refugees are entitled to special protection and assistance and must be afforded the same rights and opportunities as every other child. It is therefore essential that we recognise these realities and take meaningful action to ensure that all children, regardless of their immigration status or background, can grow up safe, included, respected and supported to reach their full potential.

This report rightly places the voices of children and young people at its centre. Their experiences and perspectives provide a powerful reminder of the importance of listening to children and ensuring their rights are not only recognised in policy but realised in practice. The findings also highlight the critical role played by community and voluntary organisations, alongside the need for greater coordination and leadership at a statutory level.

The NI Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy (2020-2030) set out a clear vision for improving outcomes for all children. This report challenges us to consider how effectively that vision is being delivered for children and young people from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds. It is clear that more must be done to ensure that their rights are fully respected, their voices are heard and their contributions are valued.

I encourage all those with responsibility for children's services, policy and practice, to reflect on the findings and recommendations set out in this report and to take forward the actions required to build a more inclusive, equitable and rights-respecting society for all children and young people.

Most of all I want to see political leadership. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the racist violence we have seen year on year in NI, and not to question what we have learnt and what will be done to ensure it does not happen again. We have seen how violence has been driven by small numbers of people, and supported by political voices,

giving cover to far right influencers who have spent years normalising division and whipping up hate. This often happens online, making things appear bigger and more organised as social media offers these sinister elements a massive megaphone.

No matter who they are, where they come from or what they look like, every child and young person has the right to live safely, free from discrimination, racism and fear. I want to see our laws strengthened to provide greater protection for all children and young people, including asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people. I also want to see a concerted effort to tackle misinformation and disinformation that fuels prejudice, division and hostility towards people from different backgrounds.

Government departments and public bodies should strengthen efforts to promote equality, inclusion and respect for children's rights through the development and implementation of a clear, actionable and adequately resourced Framework for Race Relations and Refugee Integration Strategy, supported by robust monitoring, accountability and measurable outcomes.

A coordinated approach is needed to prevent and respond to racism, hate-motivated behaviour and discrimination, including improved data collection, public awareness campaigns, anti-racism education and targeted support for children and young people affected by hate incidents.

Schools have a particularly important role to play in fostering respect, inclusion and understanding. Anti-racism should be embedded across school policies, culture and practice, supported by a curriculum that celebrates diversity and inclusion. In line with Article 29 of the UNCRC, education should support the development of every child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential, while fostering respect for human rights, parents, cultural identity, language, values and different cultures and backgrounds.

Investment should also be increased in shared education, youth programmes and opportunities that bring children and young people from different backgrounds together, helping to challenge prejudice, build positive relationships and create a more inclusive society for all.



Chris Quinn
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Executive Summary

NICCY has a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. Thie report examines the experiences of children and young people from asylum seeker and refugee (‘ASR’) backgrounds in NI through the framework of the Children and Young People’s Strategy ('CYPS') 2020-2030 and the rights contained within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ('UNCRC').

The CYPS sets out a vision that all children and young people should be happy, health and connected; valued and respected; living in safety and with stability; experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing; enjoying learning and achieving; living in a society which respects their rights; participating positively in community and society; and living in a society which promotes equality and good relations. This report seeks to assess the extent to which these outcomes are being realised for children and young people seeking asylum and refuge in NI.

The report draws upon views and experiences of children and young people with lived experience of seeking asylum and refuge, alongside evidence gathered from practitioners, community and voluntary organisations, government departments, statutory agencies and published research. It combines qualitative evidence from direct engagement with children and young people with analysis of policy, legislation and available administrative data.

Throughout the research, children and young people demonstrated remarkable resilience, adaptability and determination despite often experiencing significant adversity both before and after arriving in NI. Many described aspirations for education, employment and active participation in their communities. They spoke positively about friendships, supportive youth workers, community organisations that helped them feel welcome and included. However, the evidence also demonstrated that many have faced barriers which have impacted their ability to fully realise their rights and achieve positive outcomes across some areas in their lives.

The findings show that children and young people from ASR backgrounds experience some interconnected challenges spanning health, education, housing, safety and social inclusion. These challenges cannot be understood in isolation. Instead, they reflect the cumulative impact of displacement, trauma, uncertainty regarding immigration status, poverty, family separation and difficulties navigating complex systems and services.

In relation to health and wellbeing, children and young people described some challenges accessing timely healthcare or accessing specialised services. However, examples of

positive support were identified, participants highlighted inconsistencies in access to services and the need for more culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches.

This report also highlights the central role of education in supporting integration, wellbeing and future opportunities. Schools were frequently identified as places of safety, belonging and support. However, some children and young people reported barriers including delays in securing school places, change of school location, access to language support, challenging transitioning between educational settings and experiences of bullying, racism and discrimination. Particular concerns emerged regarding access to further and higher education, as well as ESOL and further educational or occupational opportunities for those approaching adulthood.

Safety and stability emerged as a significant area of concern. Children and young people described the impact of living in temporary accommodation, uncertainty surrounding asylum decision-making processes and fear relating to racism and community tensions, the latter only being disclose in private. Evidence gathered during the research indicates that accommodation arrangements, safeguarding responses and wider support structures do not always adequately meet the needs of children and young people, particularly those who arrive unaccompanied or who have experienced significant trauma.

The findings also demonstrate the impact of poverty in activities that many other children take for granted. These experiences can affect children's wellbeing, educational participation, social connections and a sense of belonging within their communities.

Across all outcomes, children and young people consistently emphasised the importance of being listened to and treated with dignity and respect. While examples of meaningful participation were identified, these examples were provided by community and voluntary sector organisations, not the statutory agencies of government bodies. Their experiences reinforce the importance of ensuring that children seeking asylum and refuge are recognised first and foremost as children whose rights and best interest must be protected.

As previously noted, the report identifies significant strengths with NI's statutory, voluntary and community sectors. School, youth services, community organisations and specialist support providers play a significant role in helping children and young people navigate challenges and build positive futures. However, the evidence also highlights gaps in service provision, inconsistencies in practice and a lack of strategic coordination across some areas of policy and delivery.

Overall, the findings indicate that while progress has been made in supporting children and young people from ASR backgrounds, substantial challenges remain in achieving the

ambitions set out within the CYPS. Many children continue to experience unequal outcomes when compared with their peers and too often their rights are dependent upon where they live, the services available locally or the support of individual organisations.

This report concludes that a more coordinated, strategic and child rights-based approach (CRBA) is required across government and statutory agencies. The experience of children and young people presented throughout this report demonstrate the urgent need to address inequalities, strengthen safeguarding and support systems, improve access to services and ensure meaningful participation in decision-making. If the vision of the CYPS is to be realised for all children and young people from ASR backgrounds, they must be explicitly recognised, included and supported within policy and practice.

The voices in this report also provide a powerful reminder that children and young people from ASR backgrounds are not defined by their immigration status. They are children and young people with hopes, ambitions, talents and rights. Their experiences offer important lessons for policymakers, service providers and communities seeking to build a NI in which every child can thrive.

NICCY promotes the following recommendations:

Outcome 1

1. Improve access to primary healthcare and information;
2. Strengthen trauma-informed and culturally appropriate mental health services;
3. Ensure consistent access to interpretation and continuity of care.

Outcome 2

1. Improve equitable access to play and leisure opportunities;
2. Support inclusive community-based provision;
3. Establish a clear statutory and strategic framework for play and leisure;
4. Implement a CRBA in local government, including the planning system.

Outcome 3

1. Assess what are the barriers to timely access to school places;
2. Strengthen language and additional support provision;
3. Improve coordination and continuity of education.

Outcome 4

1. Strengthen safeguarding governance and accountability;
2. Improve multi-agency responses to exploitation and trafficking;

3. Embed safeguarding across accommodation and community contexts

Outcome 5

1. Address financial insecurity and NRPF related barriers;
2. Improve access to education, training and employment pathways;
3. Strengthening accommodation standard and asylum financial support.

Outcome 6

1. Embed participation and contribution across statutory services;
2. Strengthen and sustain investment in the community and voluntary sector;
3. Develop a coordinated, cross sector approach to youth participation.

Outcome 7

1. Strengthen a rights-based approach across services and education;
2. Develop targeted responses to racism and hate motivated behaviour;
3. Promote positive attitudes and meaningful interaction among young people.

Outcome 8

1. Strengthen a coordinated approach to equality and integration;
2. Embed anti-racism and inclusion across services;
3. Increase access to inclusive shared spaces and programmes.

After the completion of the report, we gave NICCY's recommendations to the children and young people involved in the research. Throughout the report, they have added their own recommendation under certain outcomes. They reflected the changed that they said were needed to improve the experiences of asylum seeking and refugee children in NI. Participants collectively and confirmed that they agreed with all those presented.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People ('NICCY') was created in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NI) Order' (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in NI. Under Articles 7(2)(3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities.

The remit of the office is children and young people up to 18 years, or 21 years, if the young person is disabled or was in the care of social services. In determining how to carry out these functions, the paramount consideration is the rights of the child, and the Commissioner is required to base all his work on the UNCRC.

Aims and objectives

This report will examine how effectively children and young people from asylum seekers and refugee communities are safeguarded in NI, drawing on available government data alongside children's lived experience. This report therefore seeks to examine how procedures and structures operate, and where gaps could place children at risk.

By centring children's rights and voices, this report aims to highlight the support provided by government departments, relevant authorities, statutory agencies, and practitioners to strengthen responses and ensure that every child in NI is protected and in receipt of their rights, without exception.

Background

In 2021, NICCY commissioned a scoping report, 'A Hostile Environment – children and families affected by immigration status and No Recourse to Public Funds' ('A Hostile Environment') in response to the growing concerns of children and families in NI who were affected by No Recourse to Public Funds ('NRPF').[2] More specifically, the report sought to show their access to referral pathways, services and support to ensure that children's welfare, health and development was being effectively safeguarded and promoted. It also highlighted the importance of Article 2(1) of the UNCRC, which holds that:

> *'States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex,*

[2] NICCY,'A Hostile Environment: Children and families affected by immigration status and No Recourse to Public Funds'. (Available at:niccy-nrpf-paper-final-7-october-2021.pdf)

language, religion, political to other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.'[3]

'A Hostile Environment' highlighted several key issues and recommendations for policy and practice. The report concluded that it was 'difficult to ascertain the extent and impact of NRPF on families and children', that there is 'a lack of relevant disaggregated data for NI specifically depicting the numbers of NRPF affected families and children…[and] a lack of clear information on how issues of destitution and extreme poverty as a result of NRPF are managed in NI.

In 2021, NICCY commissioned 'The Impact of COVID-19 on the Planning and Delivery of Children's Services: A Rights Review' which explored how the pandemic affected children's rights and services across NI.[4] Through it, ASR children were identified as having been disproportionally affected by the pandemic and public health restrictions, by having experienced heightened exclusion and barriers to accessing support, effecting their education, housing, social isolation, health and mental health impacts, digital exclusion and inconsistency in providing culturally responsive services including translation.

This report has also been informed by and builds on the 'Priorities for Action' developed by the Refugee Asylum Forum ('RAF') which includes specific issues raised relating to children and young people – on barriers to education, inadequacies of contingency accommodation, access to appropriate health services amongst others.[5] The RAF have also called on the NI Executive to improve transparency, including through the provision of data, budgets for asylum dispersal and refugee integration.

Furthermore, several themes raised within the 2010 National Children's Bureau report, 'New to NI: A study of the issues faced by migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children in NI' remain relevant today. These include challenges in navigating the education system, delays in school placements, experiences of racism and discrimination, difficulty with transfer tests and admissions and challenges in identifying and supporting children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability ('SEND'). Gaps in data and disaggregated statistics as well as the ongoing impact of those who were subject to NRPF conditions were also highlighted. Many of these themes were repeated in a report published by Queen's University, Belfast ('QUB') in 2016 outlining asylum seekers' and

[3] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Available at: Convention on the Rights of the Child |)OHCHR)
[4] NICCY, 'A New and Better Normal – The impact of Covid-19 on the planning and delivery of children's services: A Rights Review' (2021) (Available at: qub-report-for-niccy-final-aug-2021.pdf)
[5] Law Centre NI, 'Refugee and Asylum Forum: Priorities for Action 2023'. (Available at: lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Priorities-for-Action-.pdf)

refugee's experiences of life in NI.[6] The absence of data about asylum seekers and refugees affecting service design and provision was again raised in this report.

NICCY undertook this work as a mapping exercise to identify current issues within the immigration system and to better understand the challenges faced by children and young people arriving in NI. It sought to assess whether existing safeguarding structures are sufficiently robust to protect their welfare and rights. In addition, NICCY aimed to examine the data being collected to determine whether a comprehensive picture can be presented under the 'Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030' ('CYPS') and associated datasets. The 'NI Outcome Monitoring Report 2017-2025' was published in 2026 by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership ('CYPSP') and presents a comprehensive picture of how children and young people are faring across eight key outcomes.[7] Whilst it contains statistics on migration and the migrant population in NI, on the minority ethnic population across local government districts, interpreter requests and other population indicators, it does not contain disaggregated data on children and young people who are asylum seekers or refugees.

This report also seeks to examine the overall experiences and rights of children and young people from ASR backgrounds living in NI through a children's rights lens. It combines data analysis with the lived experiences of children and young people, alongside engagement with statutory, community and voluntary stakeholders. It is not intended to be an exhaustive research piece but provide an exploration of the eight outcomes of the CYPS, alongside available data, with the experiences of children and young people interwoven through it.

It is structured across several thematic chapters; the first outlining the legal and policy context. Chapter Two sets out the focuses specifically on the framework, underpinning the report. It examines the application of the UNCRC to ASR children and outlines the relevance of key rights principles and considers domestic legislation, safeguarding duties and strategic frameworks relevant to children and young people in NI.

Chapter Three sets out the methodology and ethical framework underpinning the report and subsequent chapters examine children's rights across key areas linked to the eight outcomes of the CYPS. The report also considers the role of government departments, statutory agencies and voluntary organisations in supporting ASR children and identifies

[6] Murphy, F., & Vieten, U. M. (2017). Asylum seekers' and refugee's experiences of Life in Northern Ireland: Report of the first study on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in NI - 2016. Queen's University Belfast. (Available at: brochure_2_2017.pdf)

[7] See: New Report Highlights Changing Picture for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland – Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP)

gaps in policy implementation and data collection. The final chapter provides conclusions and recommendations aimed at strengthening a coordinated, to ensuring that ASR children in NI can fully realise their rights regardless of immigration status.

Chapter 2: Legislative, policy and rights context

Under the UK's constitutional arrangements, immigration and asylum policy and legislation are excepted matters, with responsibility discharged through the Home Office. Asylum seeking and refugee children and families placed in NI are accommodated under UK-wide laws and policies, even though they are living in and receiving support from, devolved services.

Immigration law with the UK has evolved over decades. The Immigration Act 1971 was a major piece of legislation that reshaped immigration control in the UK as it introduced the concept of the 'right to abode' meaning only certain people had an automatic right to live and work in the country. The 1971 Act also gave stronger relating to entry, detention and deportation, creating the foundation for the modern immigration system.[8] The 1988 Immigration Act also made changes to the 'right to remain'. From 2012, a 'hostile environment' was articulated as a Home Office strategy and as a governing approach. Led by then Home Secretary, Theresa May MP stated:

> *'The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal migration…What we don't want is a situation where people think that they can come here and overstay because they're able to access everything they need.'* [9]

This led to further legislative reform, including the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016. From 2017, the Windrush Scandal began to emerge, where hundreds of Commonwealth citizens, many of whom had been wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights, impacted by the hostile environment policy.

There has been an intensification of focus on immigration policy in recent years, and it became framed as a 'tool' of deterrence.[10] The Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 have resulted in tougher rules, extended enforcement powers for relevant authorities and the introduction of relocation policies. Following the change of UK Government, plans to relocate people seeking asylum to Rwanda were discontinued in July 2024. The underlying UK-Rwanda treaty was subsequently formally terminated with effect from 16 March 2026.[11]

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[8] Immigration Act 1971 (Available at: Immigration Act 1971)
[9] See: Theresa May interview: 'We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception'
[10] UK Government, 'The UK's Points-Based Immigration System Further Details' (Available at: The UK's Points-Based Immigration System – Further Details), p.12
[11] See: Has the government ended the Rwanda migrant agreement? – Full Fact and Timeline of policy and legislative changes affecting migration to the UK (1983 to 2025) | Electronic Immigration Network

Alongside the legislative change the UK at this time was transitioning from its membership of the European Union ('EU'), which brought issues relating to rights, borders and travel into sharp focus in NI. The Windsor Framework, created to address problems with the NI Protocol, also seeks to protect equality legislation in NI by ensuring there would be 'no diminution' of certain rights, safeguards and equality protections set out in the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement ('the Belfast Agreement') as a result of Brexit, which does impact on those within the asylum and refugee systems.[12] Article 2 of the Windsor Framework is significant when it relates to the implementation of immigration law in NI, and in the UK Government is required to 'keep pace' with any changes made by the EU to the six main equality directives as well as case law of the EU Court of Justice.[13] The Belfast Agreement commits signatories to upholding the mutual respect, civil rights and religious liberties of everyone in the community and with a list of rights, including the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity.[14]

The Belfast Agreement also states that the UK Government will complete incorporation into NI law of the European Convention of Human Rights ('ECHR'), with direct access to the court and remedies for breach of the ECHR including power for the courts to overrule Assembly legislation on grounds of inconsistency. The ECHR as enacted through the Human Rights Act 1998 provides rights that are particular rights relevant to asylum seekers and refugees which include protections from slavery and forced labour, the right to liberty and security, and the right to a private and family life as well as the freedom from discrimination.[15]

In addition, the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights ('CFR') also is relevant in terms of the application and processes of those rights as they relate to the application of the Windsor Framework. The CFR binds EU institutions and member states only when implementing EU law and the ECHR binds all Council of Europe members, including non-EU countries, across all nations.[16]

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[12] For more information, please see: The Windsor Framework

[13] NIHRC, 'Windsor Framework Article 2 and the rights of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Briefing and Recommendations' (2023) (Available at: NIHRC-Briefing-Note-on-Asylum-and-WF-Article-2-20-Nov-2023.pdf), p.5

[14] The Belfast Agreement (Available at: The_Belfast_Agreement_An_Agreement_Reached_at_the_Multi-Party_Talks_on_Northern_Ireland.pdf), p.20

[15] NIHRC, 'Windsor Framework Article 2 and the rights of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers' (Available at: NIHRC-Briefing-Note-on-Asylum-and-WF-Article-2-20-Nov-2023.pdf,) p.10

[16] Ibid., pp.11-12

The NI context

Children seeking asylum or living as refugees in NI are entitled to the same safeguarding and welfare protection as all other children living in the jurisdiction, even with immigration policy remaining as a reserved matter. Responsibility for children's services, health, education and safeguarding is devolved and delivered through statutory agencies and relevant authorities. As a result, ASR children and young people who are placed in NI under Home Office dispersal arrangements fall with the scope of NI's child protection and welfare framework. This means that, regardless of immigration status, public authorities must consider and uphold the rights, safety and wellbeing of children and young people. The Executive Office (TEO) has a key role in liaising with the UK Government on migration policies and works with departments to ensure local needs and circumstances are considered in the development of UK migration policy and legislation, and also co-ordinates funding from UK Government to support refugees and asylum seekers to relevant departments and agencies.

The primary legislative framework governing the protection and welfare of children is the Children (NI) Order 1995 ('the 1995 Order') which establishes the principle that the welfare of the child shall be the court's paramount consideration and places duties on authorities to safeguard and promote children's wellbeing.[17] The 1995 Order places duties on Health and Social Care Trusts ('HSCTs') and other relevant authorities for children who are in need and looked after. A central principle of the legislation is that the welfare of the child must be paramount consideration when courts or public authorities make decisions affecting them.

Complementing this, the Children's Services Co-Operation Act (NI) 2015 ('CSCA') places a statutory duty on key bodies to cooperate in improving the wellbeing of children and young people, to ensure that services are better coordinated and responsive, reflecting a whole system approach to child welfare.[18] The CSCA also places the responsibility on a range of public bodies, including government departments to ensure in planning, commissioning and delivering services that support children's wellbeing.

A key mechanism through which the CSCA is to be implemented is the Children and Young People's Strategy ('CYPS'), published in 2020, which sets out a shared cross-government framework for improving outcomes and wellbeing for children and young people. The CYPS

[17] The Children (NI) Order 1995 (Available at: The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995)
[18] The Children's Services Co-Operation Act (NI) 2015 (Available at: Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015)

identifies priority outcomes which are intended to guide policy development and service delivery across government departments and public bodies.[19]

This legal and policy context illustrates some of the complex governance framework within which children from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds experience life in NI. Whilst recognising that immigration and asylum policy are reserved matters determined by the UK Government, children and families who are dispersed to NI live within a devolved system responsible for delivering health, education, social care and safeguarding services. As such, these children are protected by the same child welfare and safeguarding structures as all other children living in NI. At the same time, wider human rights protections, including those arising from the Belfast Agreement, the ECHR and the Windsor Framework, continue to provide an important foundation for ensuring that rights and equality protections are upheld. Within this, the CYPS provides a key cross-government framework for improving outcomes for children and young people and for coordinating the work of public authorities responsible for wellbeing.

[19] NI Executive, 'The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030'(2021) (Available at: final-execuitve-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030)

Chapter 3: Children and young people's rights

International rights frameworks

The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 ('the Refugee Convention'), along with its 1967 Protocol, forms the cornerstone of the international refugee protection framework. It established a framework of fundamental human rights to which refugees are entitle and provided the internationally recognised definition of a refugee, and highlighted the need for international cooperation, including the sharing of responsibilities among States to respond effectively.[20]

The UK ratified the Refugee Convention in 1954 and acceded to the 1967 Protocol, committing to uphold the protections set out for refugees under international law including protection from refoulement and providing access to fundamental rights such as protection, basic welfare, and due process.[21] In the UK, asylum seekers and refugees have distinct rights and entitlements, particularly while their asylum claim is being processed. Asylum seekers are individuals who have applied for refugee status and are awaiting a decision, while refugees have had their claim approved and been granted protection. Recognised refugees generally have access to employment, healthcare, education and most public funds, whereas people seeking asylum are subject to more restricted entitlement while their claims are considered.

Whilst the Refugee Convention applies equally to children and adults, there are no child-specific provisions included within it. Article 22 of the UNCRC acknowledges that children who are asylum seekers or refugees need special protection and encourage States to take appropriate measures to ensure they receive appropriate protection and assistance to enjoy their rights.[22] The complementary relationship between the two international instruments therefore affords protection for children and young people. The UNCRC provides the central rights framework underpinning this report and is particularly relevant to the experiences of ASR children and young people, including:

- Article 2 which protects children from discrimination regardless of immigration status;
- Article 3, requiring the best interests of the child to be a primary consideration in all decision affecting them;

[20] The Refugee Convention 1951 (Available at: The 1951 Refugee Convention | UNHCR UK)
[21] Amnesty International, Session 4: Refugee and Asylum Rights (Available at: Session_4_REFUGEE_AND_ASYLUM_RIGHTS.pdf)
[22] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Available at: Convention on the Rights of the Child | OHCHR)

- Article 6 on the right to life, survival and development;
- Article 12, which recognises the right of children and young people to express their views and have them take seriously.
- Article 22, which specifically requires states to provide appropriate protection and assistance to ASR children;
- Article 24 on the right to healthcare;
- Articles 26 and 27 relating to an adequate standard of living and social protection; Articles 28 and 29 on access to education and the development of children's full potential;
- Article 31 on the right to rest, play and leisure; and
- Articles 19, 34 and 39 concerning protections from violence, exploitation, trauma and recovery from harmful experience.

International human rights law, as well as the UNCRC, requires the UK State Party to implement measures ensuring the rights of displaced children and young people seeking international protection to have their best interests taken as primary consideration, as well as to prevent their prolonged detention and removal.[23]

This was also reaffirmed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's ('the UN Committee') Concluding Observations to the UK, in 2023, which recommended that the principle of the best interests of the child is consistently applied in all policies, programmes and legislative, administrative and judicial proceedings affecting children, including in relation to migration and asylum procedures.'[24] Furthermore, the UN Committee specifically recommended that the UK Government and NI Executive:

> '*Strengthen measures to ensure that all asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children have equal and prompt access to education, health services, housing, psychosocial support, and social protection including benefit entitlements.*'[25]

Published in 2005, General Comment No. 6 focuses on the rights and protection of unaccompanied and separated children, including child refugees and asylum-seekers. It stresses the need for an adequate standard of living, material assistance and support programmes, housing, family tracing, the appointment of a guardian, and protection from trafficking and exploitation. In 2017, the UN Committee published General Comment No.

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[23] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child - General Comment 6 (2005) Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin (Available at: "Microsoft Word - GC6.doc)

[24] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. (Available at: Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Important to note that the NI Executive has no jurisdiction.)

[25] Ibid., para 50(d)

22 with the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. It focused on the rights of children in the context of migration, including those who are refugees, asylum-seekers, or undocumented. The UN Committee has also provided specific guidance on the obligations of States and their obligations with respect to countries of transit and detention.[26]

Overall, the international legal framework provides a clear foundation for the protection of children and young people seeking asylum or recognised as refugees. The Refugee Convention establishes the core legal definition and protections for refugees, while the UNCRC strengthens these protections by recognising the specific rights, needs and vulnerabilities of children within migration and asylum contexts. Together, these instruments emphasis that children and young people seeking international protection must be treated first and foremost as children, with their best interests, wellbeing and rights placed at the centre of decision making. At the same time, emerging commentary highlights the importance of recognising the agency, resilience and lived experiences of children and young people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds, rather than viewing them, solely through the lens of vulnerability.

While the UK has ratified the UNCRC and is bound by its obligations under international law, the Convention has not been directly incorporated into NI domestic law. As a result, the rights contained by the UNCRC do not have direct domestic legal enforceability, although they continue to inform policy frameworks within legislation and practice. Despite this, children and young people in the asylum seeking and refugee system are rights holders in NI.

[26] Optional Protocols and General Comments of the UN Committee - General Comment No. 6 and No. 22. (Available at: Optional Protocols and General Comments of the UN Committee - Niccy)

Chapter 4: Methodology

This report has been informed by previous publications, as outlined above, as well as some of the experiences of children and young people and using the CYPS as an assessment framework.

The CYPS was developed under the CSCA which requires government departments and key public bodies to work collaboratively to improve the wellbeing of children and young people through coordinated planning and service delivery. As such, it represents the primary policy framework through which children's services are expected to operate across NI. Although the CYPS is designed to apply to all children living in NI, its outcomes-based framework provides a useful structure for assessing whether the experiences of children from ASR communities are adequately recognised and supported within the mainstream services.

The CYPS identifies a number of priority outcomes for children and young people including being healthy, safe, learning and achieving, experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing, and living in a society which respects their rights. Image 1 below shows the eight outcomes of the CYPS:

Figure 1: Outcomes of the Children and Young People's Strategy, 2020-2030



Source: Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030[27]

[27] NI Executive, 'Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030' (2021) (Available at: Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 | Department of Education)

These outcomes reflect a holistic understanding of children's wellbeing and align closely with the principles with the UNCRC, particularly the requirement that the best interest of the child much a primary consideration in all actions affecting them. Given the CYPS's strategic importance, its outcomes have been used as a framework to examine how effectively existing policies, systems and services respond to the needs and rights of children and young people from ASR backgrounds.[28] To examine the CYPS as an analytical framework, a number of possible indicators for the eight wellbeing outcomes that could be applied to evaluate the experiences of children and young people from ASR backgrounds in NI were considered. A copy of these indicators, as they relate to the CYPS outcomes is provided in *Appendix 2*.

More importantly the CYPS emphasises the need for joined-up, cross-departmental working. This is particularly relevant for children from ASR communities whose experiences often intersect with multiple systems and agencies. Evaluating services through the CYPS framework therefore provides a structured way of assessing whether cooperation across departments and agencies are affectively safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of these children, using a 'whole system approach'. In this context, examining the experiences of children from ASR backgrounds through the CYPS outcomes allows the report to consider how well existing systems support their wellbeing.

Finally, by applying the CYPS, an assessment of the policy commitments made by Government in relation to children's wellbeing can be made, and if this is being realised for children and young people from ASR communities. By mapping available evidence and the voices of children and young people against the Strategy's outcomes, the report sought to identify both areas of good practice and potential gaps which may require strengthening.

Engagement

In undertaking this report, NICCY began with hosting a roundtable workshop in December 2024 with participants from a range of groups and organisations working with children and young people in the ASR system. It was agreed that mapping of legal responsibilities, functions and accountability in relation to the lives of children and young people seeking international protection in NI should be undertaken, and an examination as to what this revealed about how well their rights are being safeguarded.

The roundtable also identified several challenges and ethical concerns about data collection in the context of fear, trauma and lack of trust in authorities; tensions between recognising children first as rights-holders rather than by immigration status while still identifying need for additional protections; limitations in existing data, and challenges in

[28] Ibid.

data sharing between the Home Office and devolved administrations. These issues were also understood within the wider context of a UK immigration system historically designed to be hostile, which significantly constrains the rights and experiences of children and young people seeking international protection.

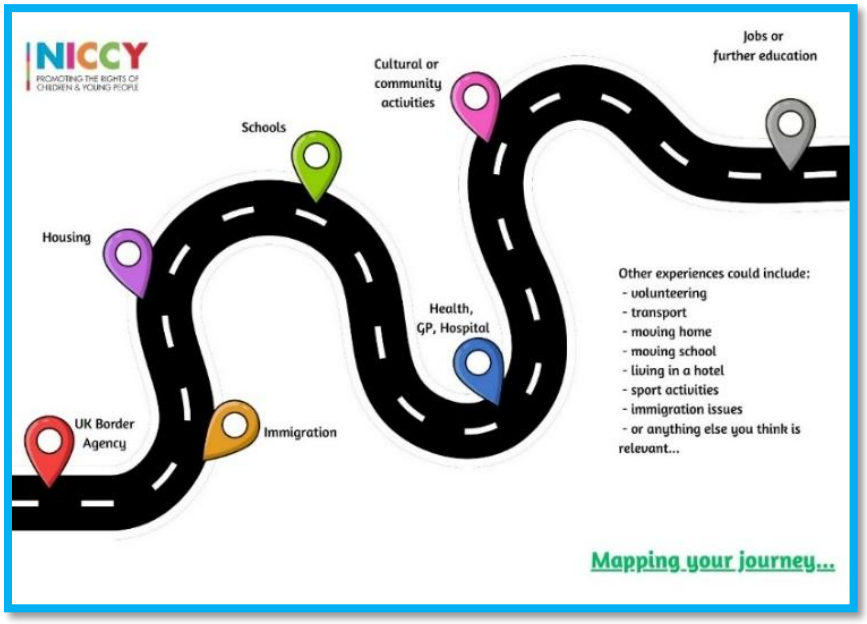
Therefore, this report adopted a mixed methodological approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to develop an understanding of the experiences and safeguarding needs of children and young people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds living in NI. Information and statistics were requested and gathered from a range of government departments, statutory and voluntary organisations working with children and families in NI. Where possible, the data was mapped across different policy areas to identify patterns, trends and potential gaps in service provision. A copy of the data requested, and that which was returned, is available in *Appendix 1*.

Given the limitations of existing, disaggregated data, ethical concerns, and the focus on outcomes rather than processes alone, quantitative data is used to map structures, responsibilities and system level patterns, while qualitative data provides the necessary depth to understand lived experiences, rights impacts and the sum of realities behind the key 'touchpoints'.

Qualitative insights were drawn from engagements with children and young people through workshops with already established groups such as the Ubuntu Project with Barnardo's and Voices of Young People in Care ('VOYPIC'). Two workshops were held for each group, one focusing on capacity building and rights awareness, with the second on using art to tell their stories about their experiences.

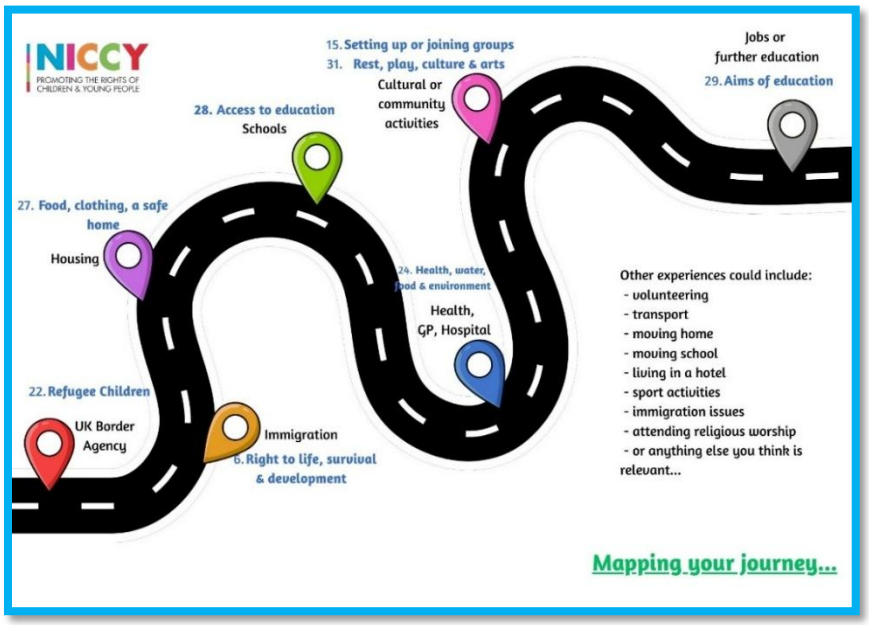
To enable this, 'roadmaps' were developed, whereby the young people drew a blank road and used signs from the Highway Code to interpret moments of their lives from arrival to NI to the present. Areas discussed included border control, applying for asylum, accommodation, education, health, play and leisure, community activities, opportunities and support, alongside anything else related to their lives which they felt important to include. The below image shows a 'map' to explain to each group how they could outline their story:

Figure 2: Mapping their journeys



The 'map' was also related to relevant rights of the UNCRC to show the importance of their rights as children and young people, which helped them recall their knowledge back to their first workshop, provided below:

Figure 3: Mapping their journeys and UNCRC rights



Capturing the perspective of children and young people themselves is particularly important in the context of safeguarding and it also reflects the principles of the UNCRC,

which affirms their right to express their views in matters affecting them and to have those views taken into consideration. The inclusion of their voices brings important insight into the barriers and opportunities they encounter within systems, and their experiences help to highlight where policies and services are working effectively and where improvements may be required.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of children and young people involved in the project, careful attention was given to ethical considerations throughout with appropriate approvals sought. All engagement adhered to established ethical principles relating to parental/guardian and informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and safeguarding.

Where young people's contributions were included, they were anonymised to protect their identity. Particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not place children and young people at risk, and that discussions were conducted in a safe and supportive environment. Children and young people were also free to remove themselves from the research or not take part at any stage. Information was used responsibly and in line with relevant data protections procedures and legislation.

Chapter 5: Mapping the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030

Outcome 1 – Children & young people are people are physically and mentally healthy

Introduction

Outcome 1 of the CYPS focuses on ensuring that children and young people are physically and mentally healthy, with access to appropriate healthcare and support services.[29] For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, health and wellbeing are shaped by a range of factors, including experiences prior to arrival, the process of displacement and the conditions in which they are living. Key actions proposed under this outcome are:

- To enjoy long, healthy, active lives;
- To care for others and we help those in need; and
- We give our children and young people the best start in life

Many children have experienced trauma, loss, disruption, or adverse experiences, which can impact both physical and mental health. According to Public Health Wales and the Home Office, up to a third of children who are refugees settling in European countries are thought to be affected by mental health disorders.[30] Access to healthcare services including GP registration, mental health support and specialist services, is therefore critical. While healthcare is generally available, barriers such as language, lack of awareness, cultural differences and system navigation can limit access to appropriate and timely support. Access to mental health services can be challenging, with long waiting times and limited culturally appropriate provisions impacting children's ability to receive support.

Wider determinants of health, including poverty, housing conditions, social isolation and experiences of racism, also play a significant role in shaping wellbeing. For children living in unsuitable accommodation, or experiencing financial insecurity, these factors can contribute to poorer health outcomes. In addition, uncertainty around immigration status and future outcomes can create ongoing stress and anxiety for both children and families.

[29] Ibid., p.33
[30] Public Health Wales, Adverse Childhood Experiences in child refugee and asylum seeking populations. (Available at: ACEs-in-Child-Refugee-and-Asylum-Seekers-Report-English-final.pdf), p.3

These issues engage the UNCRC, including the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to an adequate standard of living and that the children's best interests are to be a primary consideration. It is therefore of crucial importance that healthcare systems and wider supports are accessible, responsive and equitable for children and young people from ASR backgrounds. In this section, number of indicators and associated data were considered for this outcome, including access to GPs and primary care, mental and physical health data, together with the issues raised by children and young people.

Access to GP registration and primary care

Access to primary healthcare services, including GP registration, is a key entry point to the health system. People seeking asylum are entitled to register with a GP; however, evidence indicates that barriers persist in practice, including administrative challenges, lack of documentation and language barriers.[31]

Research by the British Red Cross found that over half of refugees in the UK, not specifically NI, and people seeking asylum reported difficulties accessing GP services, often due to a lack of understanding of entitlements or challenges navigating the system. Delays in GP registration can result in unmet health needs, particularly for children who may require timely access to vaccinations, developmental checks, and ongoing care. For newly arrived families, the absence of clear and accessible information can further compound these challenges.[32]

Mental health and trauma support

Children and young people from ASR backgrounds may have experienced significant trauma, including exposure to conflict, displacement, loss and uncertainty. Evidence suggests that refugee children are at increased risk of mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.[33]

Despite this, access to appropriate mental health and trauma-informed services remains a challenge. In NI, waiting times for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services ('CAMHS') are already under pressure, with data indicating that thousands of children are waiting for support.[34] However, there is no data specifically for children from ASR backgrounds in NI in

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[31] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), pp.85-88

[32] British Red Cross, Offline and isolated: The impact of digital exclusion on access to healthcare for people seeking asylum in England. (Available at: British-Red-Cross-Offline-and-Isolated-report.pdf)

[33] See: Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors | Save the Children's Resource Centre

[34] Department of Health, 'CAMHS Waiting Time Statistics for Northern Ireland (March 2025)' (Available at: Publication of "CAMHS Waiting Time Statistics for Northern Ireland (March 2025)" | Department of Health)

relation to CAMHS as the data is usually presented on the basis of age, gender and geographical region only. For children from ASR backgrounds, additional barriers such as language, cultural differences and stigma can further limit engagement with services. The lack of culturally appropriate and trauma-informed provision may result in unmet or delayed mental health needs, impacting children's overall wellbeing and development. Therefore, there does appear to be gap in accessible data on mental health and trauma support levels for children and young people with ASR backgrounds.

Interpretation and communication barriers

Access to interpretation and translation services is essential to ensuring that children and families can engage effectively with healthcare services. Without appropriate language support, there is a risk that individuals may misunderstand medical advice, struggle to communicate symptoms or disengage from services altogether. According to the NI Public Services Ombudsman's ('NIPSO') report, 'Lost in Translation,' the legislation and guidance that place a duty on GP practices to provide interpreting support. However, concerns raised with NIPSO, together with initial analysis of interpreting request data, indicate that there may be considerable variation among GP practices in their use of interpretation services.[35]

The NIHRC also highlights that inconsistent access to interpretation services can act as a significant barrier to healthcare.[36] The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health explicitly states, in its guidance for paediatricians that it is not appropriate for other children or young people, or family members, to act as interpreters, or for people not trained as interpreters to perform this role.[37] This can also impact on the quality and safety of care provided. For children and young people, effective communication is particularly important in ensuring that their needs are understood and appropriately addressed.

Vaccination and screening access

Access to vaccination and screening programmes is a key component of preventative healthcare. Children from ASR backgrounds are entitled to access routine immunisations; however, evidence suggests that uptake may be affected by disruption, lack of information and frequent movement between accommodation settings.[38]

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[35] NIPSO, 'Lost in Translation' 2025 (Available at: Lost in Translation | NIPSO)
[36] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), p.87
[37] RCPCH, 'Children and young people seeking asylum and refugees - guidance for paediatricians' (Available at: Children and young people seeking asylum and refugees - guidance for paediatricians,)
[38] Fazel, M, Panter-Brick, C, et al., Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors. (Available at: Case study short summaries.pdf)

Across the UK, studies have identified that migrant populations may have lower vaccination uptake rates, particularly where there are barriers to accessing primary care or gaps in health records.[39] In NI, continuity of care can be further impacted by dispersal arrangements, making it more difficult to ensure that children receive timely care which has implications for both individual health outcomes and wider public health.

In terms of data, the Public Health Agency publishes annual Immunisation and Vaccine Preventable Diseases Reports, which includes the childhood immunisation in the UK, collating data quarterly and annually for children aged 1, 2 and 5 years old. It is not however, disaggregated in terms of status.[40]

Children's voices

Through the focus group sessions, young people's experiences using healthcare systems here were mapped. Within these visual and narrative accounts, many of the young people identified positive experiences, noting their access to services when needed:

> *'I went to hospital before school. Everything was good and I had GP register after.'*
>
> *'Brother went after being sick. Easy. Very nice staff.'*
>
> *'Hospital is easy to access.'*
>
> *'Got injections because of tuberculosis.'*

However, the roadmaps also revealed barriers and challenges at different stages of their journey, with some children illustrating points of delay, confusion and sometimes difficulty in accessing services:

> *'[Under road marking 'END' sign] This image shows how my family health journey feels with delays and barriers in accessing proper care and hospital support. It has reached a dead end.'*
>
> *'I'm there three and half months and I [do] not have GP.'*
>
> *'It is not good. GP we don't get whenever we need appointment we don't get.'*
>
> *'The GP is too busy and you have to wait months or weeks to get an appointment.'*

These experiences highlight how access to healthcare is not always straightforward, with gaps emerging along the way that can impact children's ability to receive timely and

[39] Doctors of the World, A Look Back. (Available at: A look back at 2021 - Doctors of the World)
[40] Further vaccination data in NI was not requested as part of this report, in addition to what is publicly available.

appropriate support. Significant gaps remain in the availability and quality of healthcare data relating to ASR children and young people. Data on GP registrations, waiting times, waiting lists, mental health services and wider health outcomes are not routinely disaggregated by both ethnicity/race and then age, making it difficult to assess access to services, identity inequalities, or to understand the specific experiences of children and young people seeking asylum.[41] Improved data collection and reporting are required to support evidence-based policy development and ensure that disparities in healthcare access and outcomes can be effectively monitored and addressed.

Conclusion

Overall, while children and young people from ASR backgrounds are entitled to access healthcare services in NI, the evidence suggests that this access is not always equitable, consistent or responsive to their needs. Identified barriers relating to GP registration, language and interpretation, mental health provision and continuity of care highlight structural challenges within the system that can delay or prevent access to appropriate support. These challenges are often compounded by wider factors, including poverty, housing instability and the ongoing uncertainty associated with the asylum process, which can negatively impact both physical and mental health outcomes.

The findings also point to a disconnect between policy and legislative entitlements and the lived experience, where children may technically have access to services but face practical barriers in navigating and engaging with them. In particular, the lack of trauma-informed and culturally appropriate mental health provision, alongside inconsistent access to interpretation services, raises concerns about the quality and accessibility of care. Similarly, disruptions caused by accommodation and housing arrangements can affect continuity of care, increasing the risk of unmet health needs, however data on this was not readily available.

From a broader systems perspective, these issues suggest that current approaches are often reactive rather than preventive, with services responding to need rather than proactively addressing barriers to access. This highlights the importance of a more integrated, CRBA ensuring that healthcare provision is designed around the needs of children rather than requiring children to navigate complex systems under their UNCRC rights. Strengthening early access, improving co-ordination and addressing structural barriers will be essential to ensuring that children from ASR backgrounds can achieve positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

[41] NISRA, 'General Medical Services for Northern Ireland: Annual Statistics 2025/26' (Available at: General Medical Services for Northern Ireland: Annual Statistics 2025/26)

Recommendations

1. **Improve access to primary healthcare and information**: Health and Social Care services should ensure that children and families are supported to register with GPs promptly, including the provision of clear, accessible health information and proactive outreach at the point of arrival.
2. **Strengthen trauma-informed and culturally appropriate mental health services**: Investment should be made in trauma-informed and culturally responsive mental health provision, including reducing waiting times and improving access to specialist support for children who have experienced displacement and trauma.
3. **Ensure consistent access to interpretation and continuity of care**: Health services should guarantee consistent access to interpretation and translation services, alongside improved coordination across services to ensure continuity of care, particularly where children are moved between accommodation settings and Trust areas.

In this section, the participants people additionally recommended:

1. Make sure records are kept on background information, so children and young people don't have to keep retelling their story.

Outcome 2 - Children & young people enjoy play and leisure

Introduction

Outcome 2 of the CYPS recognises the importance of play, recreation and leisure opportunities in supporting the wellbeing and development of children and young people. Access to safe and inclusive spaces for play and leisure enables children to build social connections, develop confidence and experience enjoyment as part of everyday childhood. For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, opportunities to participate in play, sport and community activities can also support integration, emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging within their local communities. Key actions proposed under this outcome are:

- To enjoy long, healthy, active lives; and
- To have an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential

The outcome also reflects Article 31 of the UNCRC which recognises the right of every child to rest, play, leisure and to participate freely in cultural and recreational life. Ensuring that children from ASR backgrounds can access these opportunities is therefore an important part of safeguarding their wellbeing and supporting their rights to experience childhood in a safe and inclusive environment. In 2011, the UN Committee published General Comment No. 17 which highlighted the critical role of play in children and young people's lives.

Conceptually, play is framed as primarily concerned with recreational or developmental enrichment. However, from a rights-based and safeguarding perspective, play constitutes protective social infrastructure. The absence of play in a child's life can act to compound vulnerability whilst its presence can help to mitigate risk, support resilience and promote integration.[42] This section examines the right to play for asylum seeking and refugee children in NI through the lenses of international rights obligations, domestic policy architecture and safeguarding practice.

Playboard NI notes that the original play strategy was replaced by CYPS, but because of this, the structural policy environment reveals several limitations, including a lack of sufficient duty placed on local authorities relating to play, no mandatory cross-departmental coordination mechanism specific to play and that monitoring of equitable access is inconsistent.[43]

[42] Playboard NI: Right to Play and Asylum-Seeking/Refugee Children in Northern Ireland: A Rights-Based and Safeguarding Analysis (supplied by Playboard to NICCY for this report only)
[43] Ibid.

Play restores a degree of agency and normalcy as it allows children to construct meaning, negotiate identity and rebuild social networks - it enhances the visibility of community structures, therefore, reducing isolation. Playboard NI also found that accommodation constraints, poverty and material deprivation, community tensions, inconsistencies in access to childcare and policy fragmentation as key area that converge to produce structural exclusion from play for ASR children and young people in NI.[44] Children from ASR backgrounds who may live in temporary accommodation settings, need access to safe, appropriate, culturally responsive play opportunities that may depend on the voluntary sector intervention rather than an embedded entitlement.

Regional Strategy on play and leisure

The NI Executive's approach to children's play and leisure has developed gradually alongside wider children's policy. A key milestone was the publication of the 10-year Strategy for children and young People in 2006, 'Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge' which established a set of high-level outcomes for children's wellbeing, including health, learning, safety and participation in society.[45] Within this, play and leisure were recognised as important contributors to achieving positive outcomes.

Building on this, the 'Play and Leisure Policy Statement' was published in 2009, which recognised play as an essential part of childhood and emphasised the responsibility of government and communities to promote opportunities for rest, play and participation in cultural and leisure activities.[46] The policy reflected the principles of Article 31 of the UNCRC.

To support its delivery, the NI Executive introduced a 'Play and Leisure Implementation Plan,' in 2011 which aimed to ensure that a higher value was placed on play and children and young people would have improved access to facilities.[47] The plan also emphasised the need for cross-departmental cooperation and engagement with communities and voluntary organisations in developing play opportunities for children.

Responsibility for play and leisure policy initially sat with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. In 2016, the policy remit transferred to the Department of Education ('DE'), where it became more closely linked to broader children's policy.[48] The Department

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[44] Ibid.
[45] OFMDFM, 'A Ten-Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland'. (Available at: A Ten-Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016)
[46] See: Play and Leisure Policy Statement for Northern Ireland
[47] OFMDFM, Play and Leisure Implementation Plan Narrative (Available at: Play and Leisure Implementation Plan Narrative)
[48] Department of Education, 'Play Matters' (Available at:Play Matters | Department of Education)

for Communities' ('DfC') 'Active Living: The Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland - 2022-2032' was published in 2022, has a specific focus on children and young people, and mentions barriers for ASR communities, however there are no specific outcomes for this group within the strategy.[49] Within the CYPS framework, the enjoyment of play and leisure is recognised as a key outcome for children's wellbeing and development, however there is no separate, regional strategy for play and leisure.[50] Moreover, all monitoring reports from the CYPS do not include 'play' as a reporting factor or indicator in their annual reports.[51]

Across NI, local councils have developed play strategies, play investment or play-related community frameworks. However, review of these strategies indicates that ASR children are rarely identified explicitly as a distinct group within local play planning. Instead, councils tend to frame inclusion through broader concepts such as equality, shared spaces, accessibility, good relations, community cohesion and support for newcomer communities.

Belfast City Council demonstrates one of the strongest links between play, inclusion and newcomer integration. Whilst its play and leisure strategies do not specifically focus on ASR children, the council's 'Inclusive Cities Action Plan' and Good Relations work recognise barriers of racism, exclusion and limited access to community participation. The Action Plan references Refugee Week activities, anti-racism work and improving access to services for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.[52] In 2022, the Council decided to grant free leisure membership to anyone on the asylum-seeker register and housed in Belfast.[53]

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has incorporated inclusion principles through its Council of Sanctuary approach and wider community planning work. While the council's play provision emphasises accessibility and shared community spaces, there is limited direct reference to the specific play needs of ASR children. The Council's Sanctuary

[49] Department for Communities, Active Living: The Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022-2032) (Available at: Active Living)
[50] NI Executive, Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 (2021) (Available at: final-execuitve-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030), p.43
[51] See: Publications – Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP)
[52] Belfast City Council, Belfast's Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy. (Available at: Belfast's Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy)
[53] Belfast City Council, Equality screening outcome report: Concessionary, free leisure centre membership for asylum-seekers (Available at: Equality screening outcome report: Concessionary, free leisure centre membership for asylum-seekers)

work nevertheless promotes inclusion, participation and belonging for newcomer families.[54]

Mid Ulster District Council's community development and inclusion strategies reference diversity, community cohesion and support for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Council documents identify partnership work with organisations supporting migrants and refugees and emphasis safe and inclusive communities. However, ASR children are not specifically identified within play or planning frameworks.[55] Derry City and Strabane District Council's play and community wellbeing approaches emphasis inclusion, accessibility and shared spaces. Good relations frameworks promote intercultural understanding and community participation, through references to ASR children remain indirect.[56]

Other councils generally reference inclusion through disability access, shared community use, neighbourhood wellbeing, Good Relations, and equality screening processes. However, there is little evidence within publicly available play strategies that ASR children are specifically recognised as a group facing distinct barriers to accessing play and leisure opportunities.

Overall, this would suggest a need for a coordinated regional play strategy for NI that recognises the various needs for all children, including those from ASR backgrounds, ensuring that access to safe, inclusive and culturally responsive play opportunities is embedded consistently across all council areas and government departments, which includes adequate reflection of children's rights.

Impact of transport on play and leisure

The Local Links pilot ('the Pilot') was established to provide asylum seekers living in NI with free travel on Translink services for a six-month period. The Pilot was launched in November 2023 and over the course of its operation, more than 3,000 travel cards were distributed. Its main aim was to support efforts to disperse asylum seekers across NI.[57] Financing originated from dispersal funding provided by Home Office, allocated to government departments by the Strategic Planning Group for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and delivered by the Department for Infrastructure ('DfI'). One of its stated objectives was to enable child and young asylum seekers to participate in

[54] Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, Play Strategy Review 2024- 2029. (Available at: STRATEGYREPORT-NEWRYMOURNE), pp.32-40
[55] See: Play Parks | Mid Ulster District Council
[56] Derry City and Strabane District Council, Play Strategy. (Available at: A4_DCSDC_Play_Plan_Summary_09-21.pdf)
[57] Child travel cards were provided to participants aged between five and 16 years old, while adult travel cards were provided to those aged 17 years and above.

educational, social and sport activities leading to improved physical and mental health, educational outcomes and greater sense of integration into new communities.[58]

Further to the Pilot ending in 2025, an evaluation was conducted, with specific findings in relation to children and young people, showing high proportions of parents/guardians were likely to bring their children the park or attend a community event, visit friends or family or take part in social activities, and after school clubs.

The evaluation also captured the experiences of some of the users, showing how important it was for meeting basic needs:

> '*Where I live, there is only one small gas station. It does not have essential things for my children, like nappies, wipes, fresh food. With the pass, I can go to other towns or big supermarkets to get what my child needs*.'

> '*Children are always asking to go places; to do things they have heard their friends talk about. We have to say no to them every 30 single time as we cannot afford it. The travel card let us say yes*.'

Parents emphasised its importance in ensuring their children's academic progress and social development and enabled children to engage in sports and other community activities, providing children with a sense of normality and joy:

> *'It was not just a bus pass to my family, it was a link to all activities, including fun activities with our children. They joined sports clubs, met friends after school.... It was a six-month window of happiness, with no worries about travel.'*

> *'I do not want to be stuck in the house all of the time with my toddler and my baby, but there is nothing near to us. With the pass, I have been going from Ballykinler to mother & baby groups in Newcastle & Downpatrick. It is so important for my 3 children's development that they can play and interact with others. If I do not have the card, we are home every day*.'

Parents could accompany younger children on their journey to school, engage with teachers, and attend school meetings. This had been particularly important to families of children with special needs. Parents had also been motivated to enrol in ESOL classes as they had the means to travel, enhancing their ability to support their children academically.

[58] Department for Infrastructure, 'Local Links' Pilot: Evaluation Report. (Available at: Local Links Pilot Evaluation Report | Department for Infrastructure)

> '*It might be a bus card to anyone else. For us, it is physical health, spiritual health, mental health, community…it impacts every part of our lives. It is, for me, unexplainable. It is freedom*.' [59]

This card was referred to as the 'Hope card' or 'Freedom card,' symbolising not just physical mobility, but emotional empowerment enhancing integration and giving asylum seekers the opportunity to contribute to society.

Participants in the evaluation of the scheme called for its continuation, emphasising the need for a sustainable solution to address the critical role public transport plays in supporting asylum seekers, with prioritisation to be given to vulnerable or rural residents.

In considering access to play and leisure opportunities for ASR children and young people, geographical placement and access to safe, suitable indoor and outdoor spaces is important. Whilst the Pilot may have assisted families in accessing different areas of NI served by public transport and within their local areas, and beyond, the physical buildings and locations of the accommodation provided, temporary or permanent, also can restrict a child's right to play. In 2024, NICCY visited a number of contingency accommodation locations in Belfast noting a lack of access to outdoor or indoor space for children to play. In one location, a small play area was facilitated with some toys for younger children, but no obvious dedicated play areas were apparent. Proximity to local parks were noted, however, it was unclear if children and young people were availing of these areas.

NICCY's 'A Place to Call Home' research found inadequate conditions across a range of temporary settings meant that participants lived in largely uninhabitable conditions – families in hostels and single lets enduring cold, damp and disrepair. Cramped conditions compromised children's right to privacy, their ability to study and play, as well as affecting families' ability to spend time with one another. Transitions into secure housing were more sustainable where participants were satisfied with the location in terms of access to local amenities, play opportunities, proximity to informal supports, familiarity and safety. This highlights the need for holistic planning for children and young people and their families.

NICCY's review of the impact of COVID-19 and restrictions on children and young people also found that young people subject to immigration control were particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation and stress due to a lack of social and other activities and visits during the pandemic. Concerns were expressed about reductions in face-to-face contact with key professionals, such as social workers and legal representatives, including in relation to preparing for key events such as asylum interviews with the Home Office. Young people's experiences also highlighted the particular difficulties for separated and asylum-seeking

[59] Ibid., pp.26; 29-30

children who may have arrived in NI just prior to, or during, the pandemic period and who did not have pre-existing friendship networks, school or college connections, or sporting or faith community links to draw on.[60]

Children's voices

As there is limited research and data on the right to play in general in NI, NICCY sought to ask children and young people from ASR backgrounds about their experiences, on the topic of play and leisure. For those that were engaged, their responses were mostly positive, but some were also negative. One young person commented on their experience of socialising with other young people in their contingency accommodation in their hotel:

> *'All friends have left, not many people left at the hotel.'*

It could be suggested here that when placed in contingency accommodation, they meet children and young people from other families and form friendships. Once moving to dispersal accommodation, the mutable system of accommodation through the asylum system can leave children and families feeling displaced and unsettled all over again. As they can move to a different part of the country, they lose their friendships formed and social connections.

Another young person echoed the same issue:

> *'Made new friends in the hotel. They all moved away.'*

Another young person intimated their worries over making friends:

> *'Making friends will not be easy but the step to socialising.'*

According to Play Wales, socialisation is a very important part of play as it benefits children and young people with skills such as practicing social roles, learning cultural rules, interacting with children's culture, preparing them for adulthood, challenging social norms and establishing social hierarchies.[61] If there are limited opportunities, combined with trauma, it could lead to a poorer understanding of interacting with others, roles and isolation.[62]

Overall, the young people involved in the focus groups had mostly positive experiences of socialisation, joining groups, receiving support and learning new skills. In relation to joining

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[60] NICCY, 'A New and Better Normal: Children and Young People's Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic' (Available at: niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/media/3882/niccy-covid-report-main-report-final-aug-21.pdf)

[61] See: Play-deprivation-2024v2.pdf

[62] Playboard NI: Right to Play and Asylum-Seeking/Refugee Children in Northern Ireland: A Rights-Based and Safeguarding Analysis, p.5

new groups, most young people spoke about the organisations they belonged to currently, which seem to present them with many opportunities):

> *'Joined the organisation Barnardo's and meeting other people exploring many other things.'*

Others expressed other areas of interest outside of their youth group:

> *'Wednesdays Church, Thursdays Barnardo's.'*

> *'Wellness Wednesday, enjoy going, interacting and doing crafts.'*

However, some noted that it took a while to be able to join groups or having the opportunity to meet others:

> *'Today I'm in a couple of different groups, however it took half a year before I was in any groups or activities.'*

In general, both groups of young people expressed that they were very appreciative of everything they have experienced to date:

> *'VOYPIC has supported me everywhere when I need help. They have always been there for me and I truly appreciate [support workers] who help a lot to young people and to us. They help us to involve with other organisations. They help us when we need help.'*

Young people also expressed that some of their most basic skills were learned through these support groups, including how to ride a bike.

Conclusion

Across the focus group discussions, an apparent theme emerged from the voices of children and young people was the absence of a clear, visible government-led approach to play and leisure provision. Many participants described their experiences of play, sport and recreational activities as being largely facilitated through community and voluntary sector organisations, rather than through coordinated statutory provision. While these experiences were often viewed positively and clearly played a vital role in supporting inclusion and participation, reliance on such provision also highlighted gaps in consistency, accessibility and sustainability. This suggests a need for stronger strategic leadership and coordination at a government level to ensure that all children, including those from ASR backgrounds, can access their right to play in a consistent and equitable way.

The insights gathered from these focus groups highlight the central role that play and leisure opportunities can have in supporting the wellbeing, inclusion and development if children and young people from ASR backgrounds. These experiences illustrate both the value of accessible, inclusive activities and the barriers that can limit participation, including transport, cost and awareness of opportunities alongside geographical location. Importantly, the voices of children and young people emphasis that play and leisure are not simply additional services, but a fundamental part of feeling safe, connected and able to experience childhood. These findings reinforce the need for a coordinated, CRBA to ensure that all children are supported to access safe and meaningful play and leisure opportunities within their communities, with data and information being collected and collated on participation, in turn helping regional and local government strategies

Recommendations

Play, and access to it, is a cross-cutting policy issue affecting, amongst others, the Departments of Health, Education, Communities and Infrastructure as well as TEO. Based on the above, NICCY recommends:

1. **Improve equitable access to play and leisure opportunities:** Government and public bodies should take targeted action to address barriers such as transport, cost, location and awareness, ensuring that children and young people from ASR backgrounds can access safe and inclusive play and leisure activities.
2. **Support inclusive community-based provision:** Sustained investment should be provided to community and voluntary organisations to expand inclusive play, sport and recreational opportunities that promote integration, social connection and wellbeing for children and young people from ASR backgrounds.
3. **Establish a clear statutory and strategic framework for play and leisure:** The NI Executive should develop and implement a strong, clearly defined policy or statutory framework for play and leisure for all children and young people, ensuring that responsibility for delivery, coordination and accountability is clearly assigned across departments. This framework should recognise play as a fundamental right, aligned with Article 31 of the UNCRC and ensure consistent, equitable provision of play and leisure opportunities for all children, including those from ASR backgrounds.
4. **Implement a CRBA in local government procedures, including the planning system relating to play and leisure:** Councils should consult with young people in relation to what they would like to see and do in their local communities, including in the planning processes on the right to play. Councils should also ensure that their play strategies incorporate the CYPS outcomes.

Outcome 3 - Children & young people learn and achieve

Introduction

Outcome 3 of the CYPS focuses on ensuring that children and young people have access to high-quality education and opportunities to learn, achieve and reach their full potential.[63] For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, education plays a critical role not only in academic development, but also in supporting integration, stability and wellbeing within a new society. Key actions proposed under this outcome are:

- To have a more equal society; and
- To have an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.

Children arriving in NI may face a range of barriers to education, including language challenges, interrupted or limited prior schooling, trauma-related impacts and differences in education systems. While many schools provide support through English as an Additional Language provision and pastoral care, access to consistent and tailored support can vary. In addition, experiences of racism, bullying or social exclusion within school environments can further impact children's ability to engage fully in learning and feel included.

Education settings are also key spaces for promoting inclusion, understanding and positive peer relationships, particularly in the context of increasing diversity. However, gaps in awareness, resources and training may limit the extent to which schools are equipped to respond effectively to the specific needs of ASR children. This can affect not only educational attainment, but also children's confidence, participation and sense of belonging.

From a rights-based perspective, these issues engage the UNCRC, particularly the right to, and aims of, education, non-discrimination and to have their best interests considered. Considering this through CRBA provides an opportunity to assess how effectively education systems in NI support inclusion, achievement and equal access for children and young people from ASR backgrounds. Some data is collected and published on some areas in education for newcomer children and young people, including by the CYPSP.

Data is published annually by NISRA on enrolment figures, in funded pre-school, primary, post-primary and secondary, and special education. Within the CYPS, there is limited information on the experiences of ASR children and young people, with some indicators and data published relating to the numbers of newcomer children, and those not in

[63] NI Executive, Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 (2021) (Available at: final-execuitve-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030), p.51

education, employment or training. According to the annual enrolment figures, in 2025/26, there were nearly 21,000 newcomer pupils accounting for 6% of the school population. This has risen by over 3,300 pupils since 2020/21, although the number of newcomer pupils in schools in NI has decreased, in line with decreasing populations in pre-school education. The growth in diversity in the school system may be explained by increased levels of migration among school age children over the last number of years.[64]

Education funding and support

Through a data request sent to DE, they have provided NICCY with a range of funding supports for schools in responding to the educational needs of children and young people from ASR backgrounds. This includes Home Office asylum dispersal funding, alongside funding associated with refugee and resettlement programmes, including the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, Homes for Ukraine and the Afghan Resettlement Programme. Departmental data sets out allocation across these programmes from 2022 onwards:

Table 1: School programme funding for children and young people from ASR backgrounds, 2022-2026

Year/Programme	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	Totals
ASR Dispersal	£915k	£835k*	£366k**	£1,119k	£3,235k
Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme	£42k	£2,325k	£780k	£0***	£3,427k
Homes for Ukraine	£3,911k	£946k	£421k	£0	£5,278k
Afghan Resettlement Programme	£-	£-	£120k	£307k	£427k

Source: Department of Education data request [65]

In addition to funding for schools, EA released guidance in March 2024, 'Good Practice Advice & Guidance for Schools Receiving Newcomers Including Pupils Seeking Asylum'.[66] It draws on advice from educational psychology, as the guidance promotes a relational, trauma aware and individualised approach to supporting children from ASR backgrounds.

[64] NISRA, 'Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2025/26' (Available at: Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 202526)
[65] Department of Education data request,. Please note the following figures in the table: *£795k plus an additional £40k from DLUHC Children and Young People's Resettlement Fund bringing the total funding to £835k in 2023/24. ** £339k plus £12k to support families being relocated due to hotel closures and £15k additional funding for Schools of Sanctuary = £366k in total. *** DE will shortly receive £280k from income held by Department for Communities ('DfC') to support arrivals throughout the remainder of the scheme. Data received January 2026.
[66] EA, IES Newcomer Good Practice Guidance for Schools. (Available at: IES Newcomer Good Practice Guidance for Schools.docx)

It emphasises the importance of creating safe and predictable school environments, building trusting relationships with children and families, avoiding assumptions about children's experiences, supporting social connection and belonging, and responding sensitively to behaviour or emotional needs which may arise following disruption, displacement or significant change. Schools are also encouraged to work collaboratively with families and relevant services, including educational psychology, where additional support is required. More recently, there has been over £32 million allocated to schools supporting newcomers in 2025/26.[67]

Access to school places

Access to a school place is not always immediate for children from ASR backgrounds. Evidence from across the UK indicates that some young people, especially those arriving mid-adolescence, can spend extended periods out of education, in some cases several months.[68] Delays are often linked to limited school capacity, administrative processes and challenges in identifying appropriate placements or from moving accommodation.

For children with SEN, these delays can be more significant. The NI Audit Office has highlighted ongoing pressures within the SEN system, including delays in assessment and limited availability of appropriate provision.[69] Where children from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds require additional support, these pressures can result in prolonged periods without access to education. In a study from QUB focusing on children coming from Syria to NI in 2019, there was an acknowledgement that some teachers felt under resourced in training or knowledge of helping children from ASR backgrounds. They also felt there was much to consider such as trauma, mental health and language barriers when helping children with SEN provision. However, there is not much research in term of statistics in this area.[70] Overall, time out of education or missed learning opportunities can have significant consequences, including loss of learning, reduced opportunities for social integration and increased vulnerability to isolation and safeguarding risks.

Further Education enrolment

Further Education ('FE') plays a critical role for young people who arrive after compulsory school age, providing pathways into learning, training and employment. However, access

[67] Department of Education, 'Common Funding Scheme for the Local Management of Schools 2025-26' (Available at: Common funding scheme 2025-2026.pdf), p.137
[68] See: Teenage asylum seekers arriving after start of school year in 'no man's land', report says | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian
[69] NIAO, Impact Review of Special Educational Needs. (Available at: Impact Review of Special Educational Needs (HTML) | Northern Ireland Audit Office)
[70] Supporting Refugee Children with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland (Available at: Supporting Refugee Children with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland LOGOS.pdf), p.17

to FE is not always consistent for young people from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds.

Research highlights that young people seeking asylum are often directed into limited courses, particularly English language provision, regardless of their prior qualifications or aspirations.[71] In addition, barriers such as uncertainty around eligibility, lack of financial support and restrictions linked to immigration status can limit access to appropriate courses. Where young people are unable to access suitable FE provision, they may experience periods of inactivity, which can impact confidence, wellbeing and future progression opportunities.

The Department for Economy (DfE) publish records every year in regard to students from ASR backgrounds about their enrolments, admission to all courses and ESOL. The figures below are for ESOL courses dating from 2016-2025:

Table 2: Number of mainstream funded ASR students and enrolments in ESOL courses by FE College (2016/17-2024-25)

Academic Year		FE College						Total
		BMC	NRC	NWRC	SERC	SRC	SWC	
2015/16	Students	220	0	0	0	0	0	**220**
	Enrolments	595	0	0	0	0	0	**595**
2016/17	Students	350	15	25	40	10	0	**445**
	Enrolments	955	15	30	90	30	0	**1,120**
2017/18	Students	420	30	5	110	35	0	**605**
	Enrolments	1,075	35	5	255	90	0	**1,465**
2018/19	Students	505	120	0	145	70	15	**855**
	Enrolments	1,265	170	0	440	190	15	**2,090**
2019/20	Students	460	115	0	155	60	20	**810**
	Enrolments	1,115	200	0	325	130	25	**1,800**
2020/21	Students	400	110	0	90	75	85	**755**
	Enrolments	1,010	135	0	185	195	100	**1,625**
2021/22	Students	640	115	0	135	40	65	**995**
	Enrolments	1,530	120	0	280	90	75	**2,100**
2022/23	Students	815	75	80	275	35	45	**1,330**
	Enrolments	2,000	85	90	630	95	55	**2,960**
2023/24	Students	800	65	0	150	25	25	**1,065**
	Enrolments	1,920	70	0	400	50	25	**2,465**

Source: Department for the Economy, Further Education Ad Hoc Tables[72]

[71] Geraghty. T, McStravick. C, et al. New to Northern Ireland: A study of the issues faced by migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children in Northern Ireland. (Available at: Microsoft Word - NTNI), p.34

[72] Department for the Economy, FE Tables. (Available at: Further education ad hoc tables | Department for the Economy)

Table 3: Number of students and enrolments of Asylum Seekers and Refugees by age band and FE College in 2023/24

FE College	Age Band	Students			Enrolments		
		Asylum Seeker	Refugee	Total	Asylum Seeker	Refugee	Total
Belfast Metropolitan College	16	20	15	**40**	40	40	**85**
	17	25	45	**65**	70	140	**210**
	18	25	25	**50**	85	105	**190**
	19	20	25	**45**	55	80	**135**
	20-24	105	70	**175**	250	175	**425**
	25 and over	405	350	**755**	905	880	**1,785**
	Total	**600**	**530**	**1,130**	**1,405**	**1,420**	**2,825**
Northern Regional College	16	0	0	**5**	0	5	**5**
	17	0	5	**10**	0	15	**15**
	18	5	5	**10**	15	10	**20**
	19	0	5	**5**	0	10	**10**
	20-24	10	10	**20**	20	15	**30**
	25 and over	35	40	**75**	45	50	**90**
	Total	**55**	**65**	**115**	**80**	**100**	**180**
North West Regional College	16	5	0	**5**	5	0	**5**
	17	5	0	**5**	10	0	**10**
	18	0	0	**5**	0	5	**5**
	19	0	0	**5**	0	0	**5**
	20-24	15	0	**15**	15	0	**15**
	25 and over	35	10	**45**	40	25	**65**
	Total	**60**	**15**	**75**	**70**	**35**	**110**
South Eastern Regional College	16	5	0	**5**	15	5	**20**
	17	0	5	**5**	0	5	**5**
	18	5	5	**5**	10	20	**30**
	19	0	5	**5**	0	15	**15**
	20-24	0	10	**10**	0	25	**30**
	25 and over	55	100	**155**	135	250	**390**
	Total	**65**	**120**	**185**	**165**	**325**	**490**
Southern Regional College	16	5	5	**10**	5	15	**15**
	17	5	10	**10**	5	25	**35**
	18	0	5	**5**	0	15	**15**
	19	0	0	**5**	5	5	**10**
	20-24	5	15	**20**	5	25	**30**
	25 and over	10	10	**25**	20	20	**40**
	Total	**25**	**50**	**70**	**40**	**105**	**145**
South West College	16	0	0	**5**	0	10	**10**
	17	5	5	**10**	30	10	**40**
	18	5	5	**10**	5	30	**35**
	19	0	10	**10**	5	25	**30**
	20-24	0	5	**5**	0	15	**15**
	25 and over	0	25	**25**	5	55	**60**
	Total	**15**	**50**	**65**	**45**	**150**	**195**

Source: Department for the Economy, Further Education Ad Hoc Tables[73]

Access to English language support is a key factor in enabling children and young people to engage with education. In NI, schools report increasing linguistic diversity, with approximately 90 languages spoken across the school system.[74] Despite this, ESOL

[73] Please note, this table includes only enrolments on ESOL courses but also includes pre-ESOL courses. Department for the Economy, FE Tables. (Available at: Further education ad hoc tables | Department for the Economy)

[74] RaISE, Oracy Education in Northern Ireland. (Available at: Assembly Research and Information Service Research Paper - Oracy Education in Northern Ireland)

provision is often limited by available resources, resulting in variability in the level and quality of support provided. Evidence suggests that some learners experience delays in accessing ESOL support or receive insufficient hours of provision, which can impact their ability to access the curriculum and participate fully in school life.[75] Without adequate language support, children therefore may face additional barriers, which can contribute to disengagement and lower attainment.

Access to FE courses beyond English language provision remains important but can be an uneven pathway for young people from ASR backgrounds. Data from the DfE indicates the FE enrolment spans a wide range of subject areas, including vocational, professional and technical courses, with participation influenced by factors such as age, prior attainments and mode of study. However, available data online suggests that participation in non-ESOL courses is more limited for these groups, with many learners initially concentrated in language provision before progressing, if at all, to wider courses. Barriers to enrolments in broader FE provision can include uncertainty around eligibility, lack of recognised qualifications, financial constraints and limited guidance on progression pathways. As a result, some young people may experience restricted access to courses that align with their skills and aspirations, which can impact longer term education and employment outcomes.[76]

Attendance and disrupted education

Attendance for children from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds is often affected by disruption linked to the asylum system, particularly frequent moves between accommodation settings. Individuals seeking asylum in NI may be moved multiple times during the process, impacting continuity of education.[77] Disrupted attendance has a direct impact on educational outcomes and highlights the need for more responsive systems that recognise and address the impact of structural disruption on children's education.

These disruptions can result in gaps in attendance, delays in re-enrolment and interruptions to learning. Current attendance systems do not always capture the reasons for absence, particularly where absence is due to system-related factors rather than individual circumstances.

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[75] Commission on the Integration of Refugees, Integration of Refugees in the UK Exploring the Integration Experiences of Refugees and People Seeking Asylum in the UK (Available at: CIR Neighbourly Lab Report P4[1].pdf), p.43

[76] Department for the Economy, FE Tables. (Available at: Further education ad hoc tables | Department for the Economy)

[77] Murphy, F., & Vieten, U. M. (2017). Asylum seekers' and refugee's experiences of Life in Northern Ireland: Report of the first study on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in NI - 2016. Queen's University Belfast (Available at: brochure_2_2017.pdf)

Bullying

Children from ASR backgrounds may be at increased risk of bullying, including racism and social exclusion. Evidence highlights that experiences of discrimination can impact children's sense of belonging and engagement within school.[78]

The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016 ('the Act'), which came into effect in September 2021, establishes a statutory definition of bullying, with a focusing specifically on pupil-to-pupil behaviour. The Act acknowledges that bullying may manifest in various forms and can be driven by a broad range of motivating factors. Importantly, it imposes clear obligations on Boards of Governors to develop, implement, and regularly review anti-bullying policies. Schools are now required to record all incidents of bullying, including the underlying motivation and the outcome, thereby ensuring that responses are both appropriate and traceable. The legislation provides a comprehensive list of potential motivations that schools must record, reflecting Section 75 categories, including those relating to race and ethnicity. This framework assists schools in identifying issues between pupils from different racial minority backgrounds and in implementing suitable interventions to address racist bullying. Recording the motivation behind bullying incidents is critical, as it enables the identification of specific issues such as racist bullying, where schools may benefit from specialist support. However, while the Act mandates that schools document the motivation for substantiated bullying incidents, it does not require them to share this data with the DE.[79] As part of this report, a data request was made to DE regarding the levels of racist bullying in schools, on a number of different data points, available at *Appendix 1*.

DE stated that they did not hold information on the specific datapoints but stated that the NI School Omnibus Survey is conducted annually to obtain comprehensive feedback from schools on a broad spectrum of educational matters. They said that in the most recent cycle, they incorporated targeted questions to assess the extent to which schools are implementing and engaging with the provisions of the Act. One question relates to the motivation of bullying incidents, with 4.2% of incidents being reported as motivated by 'SEN/disability, race/ethnicity, or other'.[80]

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Department of Education, Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 Statutory Guidance for Schools and Boards of Governors (Available at: Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 - Statutory Guidance for Schools and Boarrds of Governors)

[80] NISRA, 'Northern Ireland School Omnibus Survey 2024 - June 2025' (Available at: Research report template)

DE also stated that ETI conducted focused visits in 19 post primary schools in June 2024. These visits involved discussions with staff about their strategies for tackling bullying-type behaviours, examining relevant documentation and internal data, observing lessons, and speaking with pupils. Additionally, learner questionnaire responses from the 2024-25 academic year were conducted to provide further insight into pupils' perceptions of safety and addressing bullying efforts (almost 1,400 Key Stage 2 children in primary and nearly 6,500 pupils across all key stages in post primary completed during the questionnaires inspection activity). To supplement this work, the ETI would visit primary schools in January 2025 to review governors' actions, with a full report shortly afterwards.[81] It is NICCY's understanding that this report has not been published.

DE also stated that they are working closely with the EA to explore gathering anonymised regional data on bullying (from the information recorded by school on Bullying Concern Assessment Forms) as part of the wider the Education Information Solutions Programme.

Relating to other data sources, the EA's Addressing Bullying in Schools Implementation Team ('ABSIT') holds records of the cases referred to them. In 2024/25, ABSIT dealt with 327 cases of bullying type behaviour and 23 (7%) of the cases were identified as being motivated by race. In terms of numbers of incidents, or alleged incidents, recorded by primary and post primary schools with race as a motivation (since data collected), DE pointed to the above answer. No further data was provided to this specific request.[82]
As we know, bullying can lead to reduced attendance, lower participation and negative impacts on mental health. For some children, experiences of exclusion can compound existing challenges related to language barriers and adjustment to a new environment.

Addressing bullying requires a whole-school (and whole-society) approach that promotes inclusion, diversity and respect, alongside targeted support for children who experience discrimination. It is therefore crucial that information is accurately recorded by schools, and reported centrally, alongside, adhering to Section 75 legislation and DE's Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Policy.

Admissions and refusals of schools

Access to school places in NI can be affected by admissions practices due to shortages in areas of high demand, with some schools reluctant to admit children from ASR

[81] Education and Training Inspectorate, Post-primary Insights Report September 2021 – September 2024 (Available at: Post-primary Insights Report - September 2021 to September 2024)
[82] Ibid.

backgrounds.[83] This may be due to perceived challenges relating to language needs, additional support requirements or capacity pressures. Evidence from across the UK suggests that late arriving children, particularly those in exam years, can face significant difficulties in securing placements.[84]

As part of our data request to DE, NICCY asked about waiting times for school places for children and young people in the asylum system, or who have refugee status, including a breakdown of those with SEND (see Appendix 1). NICCY was informed that the EA's Intercultural Education Service ('IES') does not hold a full list of asylum seekers awaiting a school place at any point in time as IES only records those families who engage with the service and request support in finding a school place. Data is also not held by DE or EA on the number of school admissions or refusals of enrolments of children and young people in the asylum system, or those with refugee status at either primary or post-primary level.

The absence of comprehensive data on school admissions and refusals, both generally and specifically for children and young people from ASR backgrounds, presents a significant gap in understanding access to education. Without this information, it is difficult to assess the scale of potential barriers, identify patterns of exclusion or ensure accountability within the system. The lack of visibility risks masking inequalities and limits the ability of policymakers and service providers to respond effectively, highlights the need for improved data collection and monitoring to ensure equitable access for all children. In DE's most recent consultation on pupil attendance, the draft 'Attendance Matters' Strategy, newcomer pupils are identified, however there is no specific mention of ASR children and young people.[85]

Special Educational Needs

Children who have Special Educational Needs (SEN) alongside English as an additional language can face complex challenges with the education system. In practice, it can be difficult to distinguish between difficulties arising from language acquisition and those linked to underlying learning needs. Evidence highlights that children learning English as an additional language are at risk of both under identification and misidentification of SEN, particularly where assessments are carried out without sufficient consideration of linguistic and cultural context.[86]

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[83] See: Children from newcomer, refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds prolonged wait for school places | News | Queen's University Belfast

[84] See: Teenage asylum seekers arriving after start of school year in 'no man's land', report says | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian

[85] Department of Education, 'Attendance Matters' (2026) (Available at: Layout 1)

[86] Northern Ireland Audit Office, Impact Review of Special Educational Needs. (Available at: Impact Review of Special Educational Needs (HTML) | Northern Ireland Audit Office), pp.14-16, 23-25

Where appropriate assessment does not take place at an early stage, children may not receive the support they require, which can impact their ability to engage with the curriculum and progress alongside their peers. Research indicates that delays in identification of SEN are associated with poorer educational outcomes and increased risk of disengagement.[87] In addition, behaviours linked to frustration, trauma or language barriers may be misinterpreted as behavioural difficulties rather than unmet educational needs. This reinforces the importance of specialist, culturally informed assessment approaches and targeted staff training to support accurate identification and intervention. Without this, children may experience ongoing disadvantages and reduced opportunities to achieve.

According to research conducted by QUB in 2019, 'Supporting Refugee Children with Special Educational Needs in NI', until the experience if providing sanctuary to a number of refuges with disabilities from Syria in 2011, understanding disability prevalence was limited due to both gaps in research and the stigma surrounding disability.[88] Parental perceptions of need also appear to differ, with research suggesting that concerns about delayed language development may be prioritised over cognitive or developmental issues when children first engage with education services. This may reflect either differing understandings of development or the greater immediacy of communication barriers. In addition, cultural beliefs can influence families' willingness to seek assessment or accept SEN labels, as fears of stigma, social exclusion, or their child being singled out may act as barriers. These factors further complicate the accurate identification of SEN in children with English as an additional language and highlight the importance of culturally informed approaches within assessment and support processes. Neither DE nor the EA holds SEN information cross-referenced with immigration status.

Welcome Hubs

'Welcome Hubs' had been developed as a key mechanism to support newly arrived children and families in accessing education, providing initial assessment, guidance and coordination. In NI these hubs were intended to support school placement, identify needs and facilitate transition into education settings, particularly for newcomer pupils.[89] For many families, Welcome Hubs represented a critical first point of contact, helping to navigate what can be a complex and unfamiliar system. However, Welcome Hubs were 'stood down' in 2024 as according to DE, and children seeking sanctuary are mainstream

[87] See: Immigrant Students at School (EN)
[88] Elliot, C. et al., 'Supporting Refugee Children with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland '(2020) (Available at: Supporting Refugee Children with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland LOGOS.pdf
[89] See: Newcomer Support | Education Authority Northern Ireland

within the school population. As part of our data request, NICCY asked about previous budget allocated to the hubs and the numbers that had been operational.

One Welcome Hub was set up in Malvern Primary School and one post primary hub at Glengormley Integrated. These hubs no longer operate as a stand-alone welcome hub. The schools can apply for additional funding as required from the Asylum Seeker and Refugee Dispersal Fund if/when made available, in line with other schools hosting children from the asylum community. A smaller local version was then established in Carnalridge Primary School, Portrush.

The Welcome Hub in Malvern Primary School provided support for children typically from the age of 4 to 11 with the post primary welcome hub supporting those older children from around age 11 up to age 18 (with compulsory education ending age 16).[90]In terms of budget, £79,000 was allocated to Malvern and Glengormley in 2021/2022 for the first year. A further £113,000 was allocated in 2022/2023. Carnalridge PS was to receive £24,000 in 2025/2026 financial year.

Evidence from across the UK suggests that the effectiveness of Welcome Hubs is influenced by capacity, consistency and the level of coordination with wider education services. Variability in provision across regions can result in unequal experiences for children and families, with some experiencing delays in assessment and school placement.[91] Where communication between hubs, schools and support services is not well coordinated, this can contribute to gaps in provision and delays in accessing education. Bringing back the role of Welcome Hubs in NI, including ensuring adequate resourcing and clearer referral pathways, could be important in improving early access to education and supporting positive outcomes for children from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds.

Other barriers

NICCY was made aware of challenges for some families in gaining a school placement due to a change in the operational policy by EA in September 2024. EA advised this arose because of a shorter average stay for families in initial hotel accommodation together with resulting resource implications and disruption for children and schools. DE agreed for IES to no longer seek immediate school placements based on hotel addresses as had previously been in place, but families would be informed that it is better to wait to make an

[90] Data request from Department of Education.
[91] OECD Reviews of Migrant Education Immigrant Students at School, Easing the Journey Towards Integration. (Available at: Immigrant Students at School (EN))

application for school when in MEARS dispersal housing, due to the longer-term nature of that accommodation.

It is NICCY's understanding that any parent who sought a placement could do so but that support from IES staff would not be provided around transfer/admission forms, meals, transport, uniforms etc. MEARS, Barnardo's, Sure Start, and EA Youth Service were engaged in discussions around the potential for hotel-based activity sessions during this waiting time. NICCY were also made aware of difficulties experienced by some families when applying to the EA's School Uniform Grant. EA advised NICCY that a uniform exchange had been created to alleviate some of impact this was having.

Children's voices

Children and young people's responses to their educational experiences were varied. Focusing on the positives, feedback from the focus groups included:

> '*No problems with education here, I think.'*
>
> '*Is good. Education is good, we get help.'*
>
> *'First school was in the evening and far away place, taking bus and train. I was scared but after I said I would continue, it was changed after a week. I am very happy at my current school. Waiting to finish my ESOL. Taking step by step.'*

Some young people, mainly from the UASC group, spoke about their future aspirations with education and hopes for employment:

> *'Went to my school. ESOL then that moment I was progressing well and I passes the examination. Then I went to Rutledge College. My goal is to become a nurse in future and work in Royal Hospital.'*
>
> *'University: by the time you will adapt, learn the language and other things needed, so that would mean the end of difficulties for you.'*
>
> *'Goals/future: to study hard, to be strong, to have a good job. I don't like laziness.'*

Difficulties such as language barriers, delays in starting school and access to school came through strongly by both groups who engaged with NICCY. Some were still waiting to start school and had been told that were no places yet and had not, as far as they were aware, received any information on when that would change. One young person stated they waited for four months to get into a school whilst living in a hotel. Others who had experience in school expressed challenges, including delayed starting and issues with examinations:

'Social work didn't took me to the school until I was 16 years and so the study was lost. Here I lost my mind without school and nobody helped me. They enrolled me in a college with people older than me and that's where my mind went astray. I never saw children my own age'

'Got enrolled in school. Had to choose subjects I did not enjoy and would not be able to go into the university course I wanted. Not allowed to sit for exams.

'Transfer to new school: The difficulties lie ahead – different languages, cultures, education system and even your look can make studying very hard.'

These experiences point to a journey that can be uneven, where progress is interrupted and support is not always consistent, affecting both learning and confidence and their futures.

Conclusion

Overall, NICCY recognises the range of ongoing work, guidance and dedicated funding in place to support children and young people from ASR backgrounds within education. However, some evidence highlights that while children and young people from ASR backgrounds have a clear entitlement to education, with supports in place, their experiences within the system are often shaped by delays, disruption and inconsistent support. Barriers to accessing school places, particularly for those arriving mid-year or with additional needs, can result in extended periods out of education, impacting both learning and integration. These challenges are further compounded by pressures with the system, including capacity constraints, moving schools, variability in ESOL provision and delays in SEND assessment and support.

The findings also demonstrate that educational experiences are closely linked to wider structural factors, including accommodation instability, frequent movement and system navigation challenges, all of which can disrupt attendance and continuity of learning. In addition, experience of bullying and exclusion highlight the importance of ensuring that schools are not only accessible, but also inclusive and supportive environments for all children.

There is a clear gap between policy intent and lived experience with existing systems not always sufficiently responsive to the needs of children from ASR backgrounds. Children and young people's experience have shown inconsistencies in admissions practices, variability in support provision and lack of coordinated pathways into education can limit opportunities for children to achieve their full potential.

Addressing these challenges will require a more coordinated, child-centred approach, ensuring that access to education is timely, support is consistent and barriers are proactively addressed. Strengthening early intervention, improving data collection and accountability of regional authorities and ensuring that services are responsive to the specific needs of this group will be essential to improving educational experiences and outcomes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to improve access to education and educational outcomes for children and young people from ASR backgrounds:

1. **Assess what the barriers to timely access to school places are and take appropriate action to address these:** The DE and relevant bodies should ensure that children from ASR backgrounds are not disadvantaged in accessing a school place without delay, including review of where and when demand is highest, with resulting consideration of what extra support is needed.
2. **Strengthen language and additional support provision:** Investment should be increased in English language support within FE along with SEN provision in general, ensuring that children receive timely, appropriate and consistent support that enables them to access the curriculum and achieve their potential.
3. **Improve coordination and continuity of education:** A more coordinated approach should be implemented across education and wider services to ensure continuity of education, particularly where children are moved between accommodation settings, including improved data sharing and clearer processes to support attendance and progression.

In this section also, the participants recommended the following:

1. Provide accessible and free English language classes several times per week. Children and young people should also be able to pass through ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) levels at their own speed.

Outcome 4 - Children & young people live in safety and stability

Introduction

Outcome 4 of the CYPS focuses on ensuring that children and young people are safe, protected from harm and supported within stable environments.[92] For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, safeguarding considerations are particularly significant, as their experiences are often shaped by a complex interaction of immigration policy, trauma, and wider societal factors. Key areas under this outcome are:

- To have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other;
- To care for others and we help those in need; and
- To have created a place people want to live and work, to visit and invest.

Responsibility for asylum accommodation and support sits with the Home Office, which has a duty to ensure that individuals, including children, are accommodated in conditions that are safe and appropriate. In NI, accommodation provision is contracted to the Mears Group which includes dispersal and contingency accommodation, which includes hotel-based provision. Facilities such as Drumkeen House, which operates as an immigration and border processing centre, represent key point of entry into the asylum system, all of which, the Home Office has sole responsibility for. However, it is the government departments and relevant authorities in NI that have a statutory responsibility for safeguarding, not the Home Office. Mears staff are trained in safeguarding, but there is a service under the charity Migrant Help to help those from ASR background to report issues, called 'AIRE' (Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility).[93]

Concerns had been raised regarding the suitability and quality of some accommodation in NI, including issues relating to overcrowding, instability, isolation and limited access to services, all of which can impact children's safety and wellbeing.[94] For example, the Home Office response to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration ('ICIBI') inspection in 2024 acknowledges safeguarding and welfare concerns within contingency asylum accommodation for families and children in NI. The inspection identified issues relating to staff vetting, safeguarding training, data sharing and communication between agencies, alongside concerns regarding the suitability of prolonged hotel accommodation for children and families. The Home Office accepted or partially accepted all

[92] NI Executive, Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 (2021) (Available at: final-execuitve-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030), p.61
[93] Mears IMSP060AW: Safeguarding Children & Vulnerable Adults Policy & Procedure Safeguarding Policy & Procedure and Asylum services | Migrant Help
[94] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), p.201

recommendations, including commitments to strengthen safeguarding oversight, improve interagency information sharing and review support arrangements for asylum seeking families. The ICIBI report also reaffirmed duties under Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.[95] However, as referenced above, there are various bodies also included in the safeguarding responsibilities for ASR children and young people, but overall responsibility for safeguarding lies with the local HSCTs.

Independent Guardian Service

These structural factors can increase children's vulnerability to wider safeguarding risks, including exploitation and trafficking. In NI, statutory provision for an Independent Guardian Service ('IGS') was established under 'Section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.'[96] The service, commissioned by the DoH and delivered by Barnado's, supports separated children, including those who are victims of potential victims of human trafficking, to navigate complex systems and processes and to safeguard their rights and best interests.[97] For UASC, according to the Minister of Health, the HSCTs have developed specific reception and assessment placements. An additional focus is placed upon trafficked and potentially trafficked children who are referred to the IGS for support. A Multi Agency Risk Assessment Meeting is held within 48 hours of all arrivals to develop an immediate safety plan. Children are to be assisted to get access to an immigration solicitor who will advise and oversee asylum applications, and the relevant Trust will support the young person to access ESOL, appropriate education or training places, develop independence skills and engage in voluntary work. Healthcare, appropriate next accommodation, cultural and religious needs, emotional welfare and support are assessed and supported on an ongoing basis. Once a young person gets a positive asylum decision, they are supported to access work, social housing, and support as per leaving care obligations, remaining in place until at least 21 years of age and, if engaged in education, until they are 24.[98]

Figures provided by the DoH in the table below show that the number of referrals to the IGS have increased over the last number of years, in particular from 2022. This increase has

[95] Home Office, Response to an inspection of asylum accommodation in Northern Ireland. (Available at: Response to an inspection of asylum accommodation in Northern Ireland - GOV.UK)
[96] Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (NI) 2015 (Available at: Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015)
[97] See: Independent Guardian Service | Barnardo's
[98] AQW 29255/22-27 (Available at: AIMS Portal)

occurred despite a change in DoH's interpretation of the relevant legislation, which resulted in access to the service being more focused upon those eligible for the service.

Table 4: Number of referrals to IGS, by year, 2018-2024

Year	No of referrals to IGS
2018	54
2019	31
2020	28
2021	48
2022	81
2023	88
2024	96

Source: Department of Health data request[99]

Racist attacks and homelessness

Children from ASR backgrounds may also be exposed to racism, hate-motivate incidents and community hostility, which can further undermine their safety and sense of belonging. Recent unrest across NI including 'racially motivated' riots and disorder in 2025, involved attacks on homes, intimidation and violence directed towards minority ethic communities, with families forced to flee or take measures to protect themselves.[100] During the riots in the summer of 2025, there were some families who had to leave their accommodation with a total of 9 households being accepted as homeless from the 1st - 30th June 2025 due to 'Hate Crime: Race'. Five were in the Mid and East Antrim council area, with the other four between Belfast and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon. Less than five households were provided with temporary accommodation by NIHE. Of the households accepted as homeless in this period due to 'Hate Crime: Race' under five children were provided with temporary accommodation in June 2025, across the three council areas.[101] According to the 'Homelessness Bulletin April – September 2025', 49 households presented as

[99] Data request obtained from Department of Health NI.
[100] BBC News (Available at: How a peaceful protest in Ballymena descended into hate-filled violence - BBC News)
[101] Northern Ireland Housing Executive, FOI 946. (Available at: Information on racist violence or intimidation.) Note: The Housing Executive is unable to provide homelessness data for July 2025 to present as requested, as this forms part of the DfC Homelessness Bulletin which is yet to be published for this period. In line with the code of practice for statistics, we are unable to provide these figures in advance of publication. This data was extracted from a live database and may differ from previously published figures. Where there are less than 5 cases, the data has been anonymised to prevent specific cases/individuals being identified in line with current data protection best practice.

homeless due to 'hate crime', and 251 due to 'violence/risk of violence' in the same period.[102]

The National Referral Mechanism

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) provides a framework for identifying and supporting victims of trafficking and modern slavery, including children. In January 2021, according to the NIHRC, 38 children and young people in NI had been identified as potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking.[103] However, the 2023 International Organisation for Migration (IOM) report on the NRM in the UK, including in NI, showed that during the first half of 2023, no children were referred to the NRM in NI as potential victims of exploitation occurring within the UK. This absence of referrals does not necessarily indicate an absence of child exploitation but may reflect difficulties in recognising exploitation and referring children through the NRM. In the first half of 2024, the number of people referred in NI who reported having experiences exploitation while they were children increased by 80% compared with the equivalent period in 2023. This category includes people who were adults at the time of the referral and is therefore distinct from the number of children referred during the reporting period.[104]

Taken together, these issues highlight the need for a holistic and coordinated approach to safeguarding, recognising that children's safety is shaped not only by formal protection systems, but also by the environments in which they live. Examining Outcome 4 through a rights-based lens therefore provides an important opportunity to assess how effectively safeguarding systems and services protect children from harm and promote safe, stable and supportive environments for children and young people from ASR backgrounds.

Accommodation

Accommodation arrangements for people seeking asylum play a critical role in shaping the safety, stability and overall wellbeing of children and young people. In NI, accommodation is provided under Home Office contracts and delivered by providers, Mears Group, including a combination of dispersal housing, Houses in Multiple Occupation ('HMOs') and contingency accommodation, including in hotel settings. While intended to provide

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[102] Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin – April to September 2025. (Available at: ni-homelessness-bulletin-apr-sep-2025-tables.ods
Note: Intimidation criteria was removed from the points system on 1 April 2025 and two new categories, 'Hate crime' and 'Violence/Risk of violence', have been introduced.)

[103] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), p.139

[104] IOM UN Migration, Northern Ireland NRM Data Analysis Briefing, 2023 Annual Review. (Available at: https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1381/files/documents/2024-04/iom_uk_ni-nrm-annual-review-2023.pdf)

essential shelter, concern has been raised regarding the suitability and safety of some accommodation arrangements, particularly for families with children. However, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee ('the Home Affairs Committee') report on the management of asylum accommodation highlighted significant and systemic concerns regarding both the quality and oversight of accommodation provision.[105]

The report found that the quality of asylum accommodation is 'highly variable' with many individuals placed in inadequate or unsuitable conditions, despite substantial public expenditure.[106] Concerns relating to overcrowding, poor living conditions and lack of suitability were identified, particularly in shared accommodation such as HMOs, where families may experience limited privacy and unsuitable environments for children across the UK. The Home Affairs Committee further highlighted that the increasing reliance on hotel-based contingency accommodation, often intended as a short-term solution, has become a prolonged feature of the system raising serious concerns about its appropriateness for vulnerable individuals, including children.[107] The Law Centre NI also notes that about 10% of asylum seekers are living in hotels and in addition, the term 'hotel' is associated with 'luxury', however, the hotels in use are buildings that were previously used as hotels have been refitted and are essentially now blocks of accommodation with most amenities stripped out or cordoned off.[108]

In addition to concerns about physical conditions, the Home Affairs Committee identified significant weaknesses, including a failure to effectively monitor providers or enforce performance standards.[109] Evidence also pointed to broader systemic failings, including a lack of strategic planning and over-reliance on private contractors, which has contributed to inconsistent standards and gaps in safeguarding provision across the UK.[110] These issues are particularly concerning in the context of children and young people, who may be exposed to environments that do not adequately protect their safety or support their development.

The wider context of community tensions and protests linked to asylum accommodation further impacts children's safety. Public and political scrutiny across the UK, has highlighted how the location and use of asylum accommodation, particularly hotels, can contribute to community tensions and, in some cases, protests and hostility, which can

[105] UK Home Affairs Committee, Asylum Accommodation. (Available at: Asylum accommodation), p.21
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., pp.24-26
[108] See: Refugee facts and statistics: Northern Ireland briefing resource | Law Centre Northern Ireland
[109] See: Asylum accommodation
[110] Ibid., p.5

create environments of fear and instability for residents.[111] For children and young people, exposure to such environments can significantly affect their sense of safety, wellbeing and belonging.

The recommendations from the ICIBI Report and the findings of the Home Affairs Committee demonstrate that accommodation is a central component of safeguarding. The persistence of substandard conditions, weak oversight and reliance on temporary accommodation raises serious concerns about the ability of the current system to provide safe, stable and child-centred environments. In the NI context, this is particularly significant when considered alongside the 1995 Order and the statutory duty on authorities to safeguard and promote welfare.[112] Where children are living in unsuitable accommodation or exposed to instability and risk, there are important questions as to whether these duties are being fully realised in practice. These issues directly engage the UNCRC, including the right to protection from harm, the right to an adequate standard of living and the best interest of the child being a primary consideration. Ensuring that accommodation meets these standards is therefore essential not only to safeguarding children, but to upholding their rights within both domestic and international legal frameworks.

Protests and community tensions

Across NI, there has been a notable increase in the number of 'anti-immigration' protests in recent years, including the outbreak of disorder and riots in 2025. The protests are not isolated incidents but are frequently connected to wider on and offline activity that contributes to heightened tensions within local communities. In 2025, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) published a report into the role of social media in anti-immigration protests and racist incidents, identifying how misinformation and anti-migrant narratives have been used to mobilise opposition to sites used to accommodate people seeking asylum.[113]

For children and young people such protests can have direct, as well as indirect, safeguarding implications. Where accommodation sites become focal points for protest activity, children may be exposed to fear, disruption and instability. Online narratives can translate into real world intimidation and hostility, creating environments where residents may feel unsafe and this activity can escalate, with some protests linked to broader

[111] Ibid., p.53
[112] See: The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995
[113] CAJ, 'Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report' (2025) (Available at: PRINT Rabble report,) pp.10-13

patterns of racist intimidation and disorder.[114] For children, this can undermine their sense of safety and belonging, particularly where accommodation is already temporary or unfamiliar and protest activity can significantly affect the overall safety and suitability of living arrangements. Accommodation must be considered as part of the contextual safeguarding environment, extending beyond the physical conditions to include the wider social context in which children are placed.

Participation and the Practice of Rights recently published a briefing on 'heatmapping' which describes how statutory agencies in NI use a system to access the safety and suitability of areas for asylum placements. The process involves the PSNI, the NIHE and TEO providing information to the Home Office and Mears regarding potential risks in council areas. They use a 'RAG' traffic light system: green being suitable for procurement, amber meaning that there may be concerns but placements can proceed with monitoring and red indicating that procurement should not proceed due to safety concerns.

The heatmapping process shows that authorities are capable of highlighting areas where families seeking international protection may face increased risks of racist intimidation or violence. However, it raises concerns that simply 'avoiding unsafe' areas may not be sufficient to protect children and families, particularly following racist violence and hostility directed towards asylum seekers in NI. This questions whether current placement approaches fully uphold the safety and wellbeing of families seeking protection.[115] Therefore, ensuring that accommodation is safe for children therefore requires not only appropriate housing standards, but also proactive measures to address risks arising from community hostility, protest activity and misinformation, to protect children's wellbeing and stability.

Safeguarding responsibilities for children and young people from ASR backgrounds sit across a range of sectors. As the commissioning authority, the Home Office has a duty to ensure that accommodation provided to families and children is safe, suitable and subject to appropriate safeguarding standards, including through contractual arrangements with Mears.

During a recent meeting between NICCY and Home Office in 2026, safeguarding duties and the responsibilities of the Asylum Safeguarding Hub ('the Hub') in the Home Office were raised. The Home Office advised that it has a statutory duty to provide accommodation to destitute asylum seekers and the Hub acts as an interface between the Home Office, statutory safeguarding partners, and accommodation providers around safeguarding.

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[114] Ibid., pp. 30-32

[115] Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), 'Policy Brief: What is Heatmapping?' (Available at: -Policy Brief | What is 'Heatmapping'?)

It is NICCY's understanding that after being established in 2016, the Hub receives referrals from a range of sources and recognises many asylum seekers are faced with language barriers, lack of a family/friend support structure and are not familiar with UK systems. Referrals are reviewed and actioned on a case-by-case basis.

The Home Office stated that their safeguarding duties are delivered through our accommodation providers and dependant on the type of accommodation that is provided depends on the oversight a provider may have. Accommodation providers are required to be trained to respond to concerns, including signposting and making referrals to those with statutory responsibility. Providers are also required to inform the Home Office of any concerns they have/referrals they make and a 'first responder' style model is operated, but the Hub also reviews referrals and may make additional referrals if a different course of action is required.

Additionally, the Home Office chairs a monthly Asylum Support Contracts Safeguarding Board, where officials and contracted partners meet to discuss issues, trends and share best practice, and meet with providers individually to discuss complex cases.[116]

NICCY sought clarity from the Home Office relating to any statutory role for safeguarding to which officials advised that 'responsibility for statutory child protection functions in NI rests with the relevant HSCTs and that their role is primarily to identify concerns and make referrals to appropriate safeguarding agencies.' However, the Home Office said they remain 'subject to its duty under Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 to make arrangements that have regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the UK when exercising its immigration and asylum functions'.[117]

As the contracted provider, Mears holds operational responsibility for ensuring that accommodation environments are managed in a way that supports safeguarding, including identifying and responding to risks, maintaining appropriate living conditions and liaising with statutory services. However, evidence suggests that there can be inconsistencies in safeguarding practice, including challenges in communication, reporting and coordination between accommodation providers and local services in NI.[118] These gaps may impact on the timely identification of risk and the ability to respond effectively to safeguarding concerns involving children.

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[116] Information provided to NICCY through the course of internal emails and requests for information, including through periodic meetings with Home Office officials.
[117] Information provided to NICCY through the course of internal emails and requests for information, including through periodic meetings with Home Office officials.
[118] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), pp. 90-94

Drumkeen House, the immigration and border processing centre for NI, also represents an important point of contact for children, young people and their families. During a visit to Drumkeen House by NICCY in July 2025, there were some concerns regarding safeguarding raised. Firstly, NICCY staff witnessed an aggressive approach to a man by security staff, happened in front of people, including families with children. NICCY had been informed that all people in Drumkeen House were protected by Section 55 of the' Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009', whereby they have the responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. However, it did raise questions over appropriate training and awareness, including trauma-informed practice. NICCY also raised questions in relation to vulnerability checks, health concerns shared with Mears, was assured that the wellbeing and safety of adults and children is taken seriously and that all relevant matters would be referred to statutory agencies such as the PSNI, HSCTs and safeguarding teams. Trauma-informed practice training was currently underway within staff teams and NICCY was informed that all migrants have access to Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility which is a 24/7 helpline where asylum seekers can raise concerns about accommodation or support services and log their need for support.

These arrangements highlight the fragmented nature of safeguarding responsibilities within the asylum system, where accountability is shared across the Home Office, private contractors and devolved services in NI. It is essential to ensure that safeguarding standards are consistently applied across all parts of the system regardless of the stage at which a child or young person is at in their asylum or refugee journey.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are among the most vulnerable groups within the asylum system, as they arrive in NI without the care or protection of a parent or legal guardian. As a result, they require a heightened level of safeguarding, care and support from statutory services. In NI, UASC are treated as children in need under the 1995 Order and responsibility for their care rests with HSCTs, which must act to safeguard and promote their welfare.[119]

UASC often have complex needs arising from their experiences prior to arrival, including trauma, displacement, loss and, in some cases, exploitation or trafficking. Evidence highlights that these children may be at increased risk of mental health difficulties, social isolation and instability, particularly where there are challenges in accessing appropriate

[119] SBNI, Working Arrangements for UASCs (Available at: WORKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE WELFARE AND SAFEGUARDING OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE)

services and support.[120] In addition, uncertainty around immigration status and lengthy asylum processes can contribute to anxiety and insecurity.

The UN Committee's General Comment No. 6 emphasises that unaccompanied and separated children are entitled to special protection and assistance, and that States must ensure their best interests are a primary consideration in all actions affecting them.[121] It also highlights the importance of access to appropriate care arrangements, legal representation, and services that support children's development and wellbeing. Therefore, UASC are entitled to the full protection of the UNCRC.

Information provided by the DoH shows that there have been increasing numbers of UASC in NI. In 2014/15, 16 young people presented as UASC, rising to 26 in 2018/19, 39 in 2019/20, dropping to 20 in 2020/21, then increasing from 66 in 2021/22 to 94 the following year. In 2023/24 113 presented, with 154 presenting in 2024/25 respectively.

Port arrival data is information refers to information collected by birder authorities about people arriving at a country's port of entry such as airports, seaports, including details about their arrival, immigration status and any asylum claim made on or after arrival. This information relating to specific arrival ports is not captured by the DoH, as many of the young people self-present either to the Home Office in Belfast or to the PSNI. The port of arrival information that is available is therefore 'self-described', unverified and unclear in many cases.

The above numbers also include those are who arrived under the National Transfer Scheme ('NTS'), since NI joined the scheme in February 2023.[122] In 2022/23 there were two young people arrived under NTS, in 2023/24, there were 12, and in 2024/25 there were 22 NTS transfers. In all of these cases, the arrival was by small boat to Kent.

The above data for UASCs arriving at NI show that there has been a significant increase over the last 10 years, and the UN has stated their concern for the increasing numbers globally due to their particular vulnerabilities. The increase could be due to various humanitarian crisis over the world in places such as Sudan, Palestine and Ukraine. [123]

The experiences of UASC highlight the importance of robust, child-centred safeguarding systems, with clear accountability and coordination across agencies. Ensuring that these

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[120] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), pp.95-98

[121] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6. (Available at: General comment No. 6 (2005): Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin | Refworld)

[122] See: Unaccompanied asylum seeking children: national transfer scheme - GOV.UK

[123] UNGA, 'Rights of the Child', UN doc A/RES/71/177 (30 January 2017) para 46.

children receive consistent, high-quality support is essential to protecting their rights and promoting their safety, stability and long-term outcomes.

Exploitation

Children and young people from ASR backgrounds may face heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking issues and abuse, particularly where they experience instability, lack of support or uncertainty around their immigration status. Unaccompanied children and those separated from family members are especially vulnerable, as they may lack protective networks and be more susceptible to coercion or manipulation. Evidence suggests that risks can include labour exploitation, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation, often occurring within complex and hidden environments.[124]

The NRM is the UK's framework for identifying and supporting potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking, including children. Under this system, children can be referred for assessment where there are concerns that they have been exploited, triggering access to support and safeguarding measures.[125] This process is supported by statutory services and specialist organisations, with a focus on ensuring that children are recognised as victims and provided with appropriate care and protection.

However, concerns remain regarding the effectiveness and consistency of the NRM in practice, particularly in relation to children. Research indicates challenges including delays in decision-making, variability in identification and referral processes, gaps in multi-agency coordination.[126] For children and young people, these issues can impact access to timely support and may increase vulnerability to ongoing harm. However, more recently, the 'Devolved Child Decision Making' pilot has been introduced, where the Home Office has transferred responsibility to regional authorities such as the Department of Justice, DE and DoH. The pilot scheme, already in place across 20 sites in the UK, aims to strengthen existing partnerships and multi-agency collaboration with safeguarding organisations in NI, leading to more coordinated and integrated safeguarding responses at the local level.[127]

In response to these risks, the IGS, plays a key role in supporting trafficked and separated children.[128] Independent Guardians provide advocacy, guidance and continuity of support, helping children to navigate complex systems and ensuring that their needs and rights are

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[124] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), pp. 95-102
[125] See: Modern slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2025 - GOV.UK
[126] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), pp.100-102
[127] See: Ministers welcome pilot scheme to better support child victims of exploitation | Department of Health
[128] See: Independent Guardian Service | Barnardo's

prioritised.[129] This service is widely recognised as an important safeguard within the system, although access and capacity remain important considerations.

From a safeguarding perspective, the risks associated with exploitation highlight the importance of early identification, coordinated responses and child-centred practice. These issues directly engage with the Children's (NI) Order 1995 and the UNCRC, including the right to protection from exploitation and the right to protection from harm. Ensuring that systems such as the NRM operate effectively is therefore essential to protecting children from exploitation and promoting their safety and wellbeing.

Children's voices

The voices of children and young people from ASR backgrounds highlight the complexity of their experiences in relation to safety and stability, particularly within accommodation and the wider asylum system. For many, arrival in NI brought a sense of safety, relief, and basic security, with access to food, shelter and support described as important positive aspects of their experience. As one young person shared with NICCY during the focus groups, they had:

> *'Food to eat and a place to live at where we feel safe.'*

Another described their accommodation as:

> *'Safe, kind, and providing an opportunity to meet new people.'*

For some children, hotel and shared accommodation settings also provided opportunities to form social connections and friendships, which contributed to a sense of belonging. One young person described how living in a hotel 'felt like a big family.' While others spoke positively about staff support, noting that staff treated them well.

These experiences demonstrate the importance of relationships and support networks in shaping children's sense of safety. However, alongside these positive experiences, children also described significant challenges relating to accommodation conditions. Several young people spoke about prolonged stays in hotels, lack of routine and feelings of isolation, with one stating they had:

> *"No energy left to be in the hotel with the same routine every day doing nothing."*

Others described their stress and frustration linked to delays and uncertainty around housing, including waiting extended periods to be moved or having promised accommodation withdrawn. Experiences of overcrowding, lack of privacy and unsuitable

[129] SBNI, Working Arrangements for UASCs (Available at: WORKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE WELFARE AND SAFEGUARDING OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE)

living conditions, including issues such as accessibility and access to appropriate food, were also highlighted. Feelings of fear, discomfort and insecurity were evident in some accounts, particularly where young people felt unsupported or alone. One participant described feeling "so scared, very uncomfortable" in their accommodation, while others expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support provided, including concerns about inconsistent engagement from social workers. These experiences suggest that safeguarding is not experienced consistently and can vary depending on individual circumstances and support structures.

Children also reflected on their experiences of the asylum and immigration system, describing feelings of uncertainty, lack of control and anxiety about the future. One young person described feeling:

> *"Restricted and powerless."*

While others spoke about the process being:

> *"Difficult and tiring."*

Despite this, some children also acknowledged positive interactions with professionals, particularly during initial arrival and support from immigration or social workers. Whilst it was not written on the 'maps' young people did mention reaching out to support services themselves for advice.

Overall, children's voices highlight that safety and stability are shaped not only by physical accommodation, but also by relationships, support, stability, and a sense of control over their lives. While many children recognised the safety they had found in NI, their experiences also point to gaps in consistency, support, and communication. These perspectives reinforce the importance of listening to children's lived experiences to better understand safeguarding in practice and to ensure that systems respond effectively to their needs.

Conclusion

Overall, safeguarding for children and young people from ASR backgrounds in NI is shaped by a complex and at times fragmented system of responsibilities. While there are established frameworks, including statutory duties under the 1995 Order, and mechanisms such as the NRM, the evidence highlights ongoing challenges in how these are implemented in practice. Issues relating to accommodations conditions, oversight of providers, risks of exploitation and wider community hostility demonstrate that safeguarding risks extend beyond individual services and are influenced by broader structural and environmental factors.

The findings suggest that current arrangements do not always provide consistent, coordinated and child-centred response required to fully protect children from harm. Gaps in accountability, variability in practice and pressures within the system can impact the timely identification and response to safeguarding concerns. Strengthening safeguarding therefore requires a more integrated approach, ensuring that responsibilities are clearly defined, systems are joined up and children's needs remain central across all aspects of policy and service delivery.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to address identified safeguarding gaps and strengthen protection for children and young people from ASR backgrounds in NI:

1. **Strengthen safeguarding governance and accountability:** The Home Office, alongside departments and agencies, should establish clear lines of accountability and enhance mechanisms to ensure that safeguarding standards are consistently applied across accommodation and support services.
2. **Improve multi-agency responses to exploitation and trafficking**: A coordinated, multi-agency approach should be strengthened to identify and respond to risks of child exploitation, including the effectiveness and timeliness of the NRM and ensuring access to appropriate support services. Also, increased access to appropriate services, recommending a formal meeting between the core professionals supporting the children and young people which would include an assessment of need, risk and actions to be taken.
3. **Embed safeguarding across accommodation and community contexts**: Accommodation provision and wider community responses should be designed with safeguarding at their core, including risk assessment, access to services and proactive measures to address community tensions, ensuring that children are protected both within accommodation settings and in the wider communities in which they live.

In this section also, the participants recommended the following:

1. Make sure unaccompanied young people are placed in housing near their support systems.

Outcome 5 – Children & young people experience economic and environmental wellbeing

Introduction

Outcome 5 of the CYPS focuses on ensuring that children and young people experience economic and environmental wellbeing, including access to adequate resources, stable living conditions and opportunities to progress in further and higher education and employment. For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, this outcome is particularly significant, as their experiences are often shaped by structural and policy related barriers that can impact their standard of living and overall wellbeing. Key proposals under this outcome are:

- To live and work sustainably – protecting the environment;
- To have a more equal society; and
- To have more people working in better jobs

Many families seeking asylum are subject to NRPF restrictions. NRPF, broadly speaking, is a condition imposed on the majority of migrants with temporary status which prevents them from accessing most social security payments and can place families at heightened risk of poverty and financial insecurity.[130] Furthermore, asylum support rates remain significantly lower than mainstream benefits and restrictions on employment compounds economic hardship.[131] While supporting mechanisms such as TEO's Crisis Fund provide some short-term assistance for individuals in crisis in NI, these measures are limited in scope and are not designed to address longer term financial vulnerability.

Children and young people from ASR backgrounds may also face barriers in accessing further and higher education, as well as pathways into employment, due to eligibility criteria, financial constraints, immigration-related restrictions and disrupted education.[132] These barriers can limit opportunities for progression and contribute to longer-term disadvantages. As has been discussed in Outcome 4, housing arrangements can also have significant impacts on stability, isolation and disruption to education and support networks.[133]

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[130] NICCY, 'A Hostile Environment: Children and families affected by immigration status and No Recourse to Public Funds'(Available at: niccy-nrpf-paper-final-7-october-2021.pdf), p.12
[131] Refugee Council, Asylum Support Rates and Living Conditions (Available at: 29/03/2006)
[132] British Red Cross, 'Young Refugee Strategy 2030.' (Available at: Young-refugee-strategy-june-2025.pdf) p.12
[133] Home Affairs Committee (2023) (Available at: Asylum accommodation), p.45, p.45

These issues engage key provisions on the UNCRC, including the rights to an adequate standard of living and the right to education and the ramifications of the NRPF condition for families and children specifically, conflict directly with these obligations. Families who are subject to NRPF can live in extreme poverty and, at times, experience homelessness and destitution. In August 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended that the UK Government and NI Executive revise the no recourse to public funds rule and ensure that it does not expose migrant households to a higher risk of poverty and precarity.[134]

Examining Outcome 5 through this lens provides an opportunity to assess how effectively systems and policies support the economic wellbeing of children and young people from ASR backgrounds, and whether their rights are being realised in practice.

NRPF and the Crisis Fund

In 2021, NICCY commissioned and published research into the NRPF and its operation in NI, which highlighted that navigating the range of statutory policies and support channels can be extremely challenging for NRPF families.[135] The complexity is even more acute in situations where immigration status is unclear. This is because primary legislation prevents the Trust from providing accommodation and financial support in some instances. There were inconsistent practices between HSCTs and evidence of some migrant families who have been refused support by their local Trust. A clearer, more coordinated process is urgently needed to avoid families being 'bounced' between statutory services.[136]

NRPF restrictions are a significant driver of poverty and instability for some ASR families in NI. As access to many social security payments and housing supports is removed, this increases the risk of financial hardship, food insecurity, unsuitable accommodation and social exclusion. This can lead to families struggling to meet basic living costs, access to transport, purchase school uniforms or participate fully in their own lives.

In 2012, TEO piloted a migrant Crisis Fund ('the Fund') which was made permanent in 2014 and has operated ever since, albeit on a stop-start basis. The Fund has proven to be an invaluable source of support, distributing relatively small sums of money to migrants

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[134] UN CERD Committee, 'Concluding Observations on the Combined Twenty-fourth to Twenty-sixth Periodic Reports of the UK of Great Britain and NI' (2024) (Available at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4062539?ln=en), para 48.
[135] NICCY, 'A Hostile Environment: Children and families affected by immigration status and No Recourse to Public Funds' (Available at: niccy-nrpf-paper-final-7-october-2021.pdf)
[136] LCNI and Housing Rights, Homelessness assistance for migrant victims of racist intimidation: proposals to improve support response. (Available at: LCNI-and-HR-proposals-on-homelessness-assistance-for-migrant-victims-of-racist-abuse_June-2025_Final.pdf), p.6

experiencing financial hardship due to a crisis. One of the benefits of the Fund is that it can be distributed extremely quickly by partner organisations, across NI and who can also provide a holistic range of support. Typically, the Fund is used to help with essential living needs for a short period of time and is a trusted source of support.137

NICCY requested data from TEO on the Fund allocation over the last three financial years. The overall budget was £564,000, between 2022 and 2025, with £188,000 allocated annually.[138] The Red Cross are contracted to deliver this fund in NI along with other community and voluntary organisations:

- Inter-Ethnic Forum;
- Omagh Ethnic Communities Support Group;
- Niacro;
- YMCA North Down;
- Flourish NI;
- Community Intercultural Programme;
- South Tyrone Empowerment Programme;
- Extern;
- Building Communities Resource Centre;
- The Welcome Organisation;
- Women's Aid - Belfast & Lisburn; and
- Women's Aid – Foyle.

According to the TEO, the following figures are relevant to families claiming the fund with children under 18 years old:

- 2022-23
    - 33.85% of the beneficiaries had under 18 dependents;
    - 559 under 18 dependents were part of 285 claims.
- 2023-24
    - 30.6% of beneficiaries had under 18 dependents;
    - 574 under 18 dependents were part of 253 claims.
- 2024-25
    - 23.5% of beneficiaries had under 18 dependents;
    - 478 under 18 dependents were part of 285 claims.

[137] Ibid., p.8
[138] The data here relates to the Fund only, does not include funding made available to councils or other Departments by TEO for example, to local councils to address issues around racial and social cohesion.

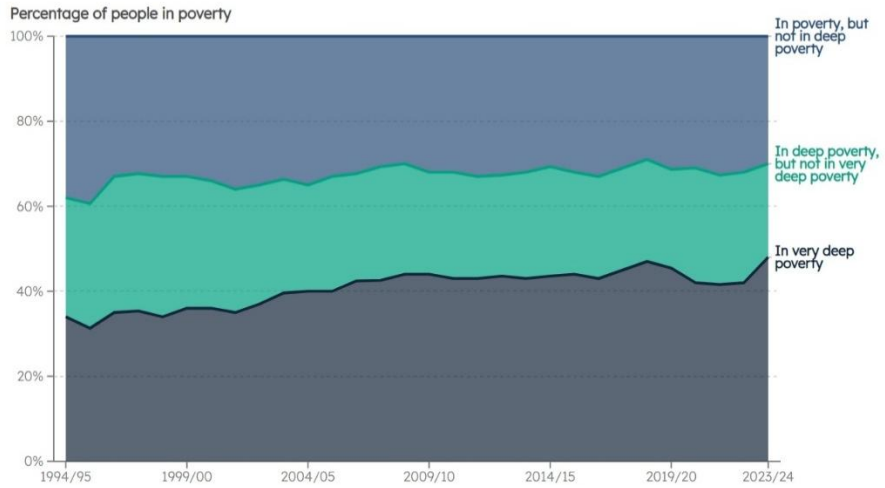
Due to the risk of destitution for those in the asylum process, including those subject to NRPF, the Fund is seen as a welcome addition for those from asylum seeking backgrounds. And even though the number of requests for the Fund have lowered over the last three years, it is evident that it can be difficult for families and children to survive on Asylum Seeker Support. Therefore, it could be suggested that the Fund being more permanent could help families out who need it the most.

In conclusion, for children and young people, NRPF can impact access to basic necessities, participation in school, social activities and overall wellbeing. The financial constraints associated with NRPF highlight structural inequalities that directly affect children's ability to experience an adequate standard of living. The Fund provides short-term financial assistance to individuals and families experiencing immediate hardship and whilst this support is an important safety net, it is reactive rather than preventative and does not address the underlying causes of financial insecurity. For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, this can result in ongoing uncertainty and instability, rather than long-term financial security.

Poverty and the Cost of Living

Broader trends in poverty and the cost-of-living pressures across NI further compound the challenges faced by families from ASR backgrounds. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that poverty rates remain high, with certain groups experiencing disproportionate levels of financial hardship.

Figure 4: Percentage of people in poverty, UK, 1994/5 to 2023/24



Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Households Below Average Income, 2023/24, Department of Work and Pensions [139]

[139] Ibid. p.35

Accommodation and asylum support

In the UK, individuals seeking asylum may be entitled to different types of support depending on the stage of their application and their circumstances. The main forms of support are provided under Section 95, Section 98 and Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Section 95 support is for people who have ongoing asylum claims and are assessed as being destitute. This includes accommodation and financial assistance to cover essential living needs, and the support continues until a decision is made on the asylum claim.140

Section 98 support is an initial short-term option provided to individuals who have just applied for asylum and are awaiting a decision on their eligibility for Section 95 support. It is usually offered in initial accommodation and does not include regular financial support beyond basic needs. The provision is intended to ensure that individuals are not left destitute while their application for longer-term support is being processed.[141]

Section 4 support may be available to certain refused asylum seekers who are destitute and meet one of the statutory eligibility conditions such as medical issues, lack of travel documents or other legal barriers. This is more limited than that provided under Section 95 and is usually in the form of accommodation and non-cash financial support rather than direct cash payments.[142]

Home Office data shows that over the last three years, there has been a total of 14 family groups in NI in receipt of Section 4 support: seven in 2023, five in 2024 and two in 2025.[143] Currently, those applying for asylum avail of the following monetary support when living in NI and the rest of the UK:

Table 5: Asylum support payments if living in full-board accommodation

Situation	Amount
Adult and CYP + 4 yrs old in self-catering accommodation	£49.18 p/w
Adult and CYP + 4 yrs old in full-board accommodation	£9.95 p/w
A baby under 1 years old (additional amount)	£9.50 p/w
A child aged 1-3 years old (additional amount)	£5.25 p/w
A pregnant woman (additional amount)	£5.25 p/w

Source: Home Office[144]

[140] NRPF Network, Home Office asylum support (Available at: Section 95 asylum support | NRPF)
[141] NRPF Network, Home Office asylum support (Available at: Section 98 support | NRPF)
[142] NRPF Network, Home Office asylum support (Available at: Section 4 asylum support | NRPF)
[143] Numbers of families in receipt of Section 4 support as at 31st December in each year listed.
[144] Home Office: Asylum support payments if living in full-board accommodation (Available at: Asylum support: What you'll get - GOV.UK)

The length of time children and young people can spend in the asylum process is also of concern. Despite moves by successive UK Governments to reduce the asylum backlog and improve decision making times, delays remain substantial, with many applicants waiting prolonged periods, meaning children and young people continue to experience extended uncertainty.[145] As of December 2025, there were 48,700 asylum cases awaiting an initial decision, and figures below from the Home Office show that the majority of days taken from the initial application to the first outcome case are over one year:

Table 6: Applications-to-first-case-outcome by days and number of children, 2025

Applications to first case outcome days bands	**Number of children and young people**
0-182 days	104
183-365 days	257
365+ days	446

Source: Home Office

Depending on the circumstances, asylum seekers are accommodated in different types of support accommodation in NI, 'contingency', 'dispersal', 'initial' and 'subsistence only'. The majority of those seeking asylum will be accommodated in 'dispersal' which can be houses/flats across NI, followed by those in 'contingency' usually in hotels. In December 2025, there were 12 people receiving 'subsistence only' support, which means that they receive financial assistance only. The Home Office provided figures for the current numbers of asylum seekers living in NI and their type of support is listed in the table below:

Table 7: Asylum seekers in receipt of Home Office Support March 2024-December 2025 (Northern Ireland only)

	Year							
Accommodation	**Sept 2024**	**Dec 2024**	**Mar 2025**	**Jun 2025**	**Sep 2025**	**Dec 2025**	**Dec 2025**	**Mar 2026**
Contingency Accommodation – Hotel only	327	418	288	246	242	268	236	265
Contingency Accommodation – Other	22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dispersal Accommodation	2244	2285	2246	2228	2240	2247	2064	1942
Initial Accommodation	39	27	92	45	67	81	65	43
Subsistence	-	-	11	16	17	12	14	20
Grand Total	**2632**	**2730**	**2637**	**2535**	**2566**	**2608**	**2379**	**2270**

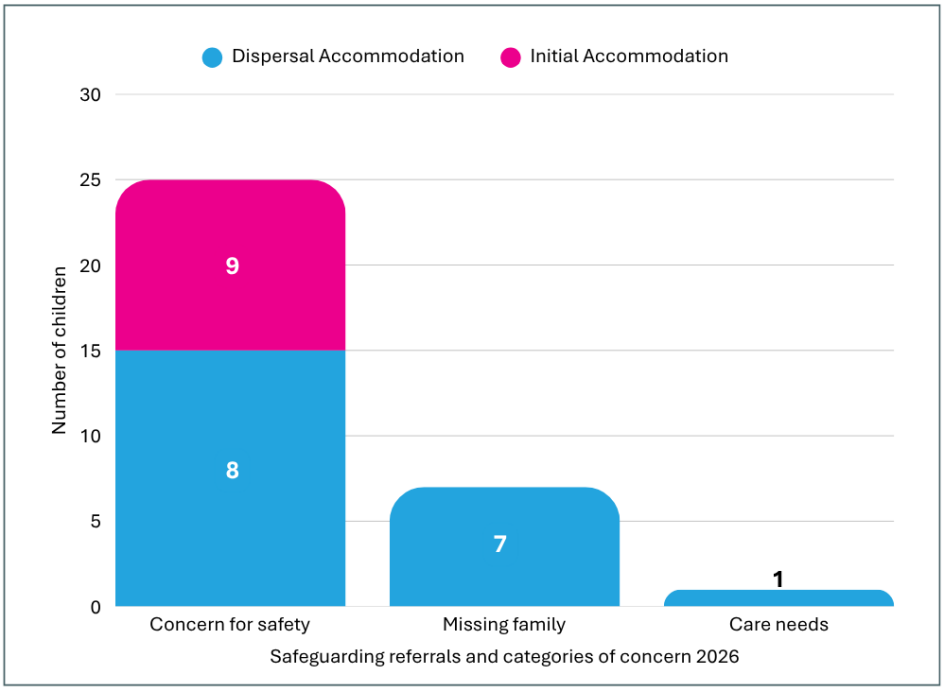
[145] The Migration Observatory, The UK's Asylum Backlog (Available at: The UK's asylum backlog - Migration Observatory)

Source: Home Office: Immigration System Statistics[146]

As noted above, most asylum seekers are living in dispersal accommodation, which is longer-term accommodation after their initial asylum claim has been made. Some are still in contingency accommodation, which in this case is a hotel, but there is a lower amount in initial, which is accommodation upon arrival. The subsistence category is for those not in Mears Group accommodation, but just receiving financial support payments through Aspen Cards, for example, they may be living with a friend, but like all asylum seekers, are not eligible to work or receive state benefits.

The Home Office also provided NICCY with statistics relating to children and young people whereby safeguarding referrals were made while in Mears Group facilities as of March 2026:

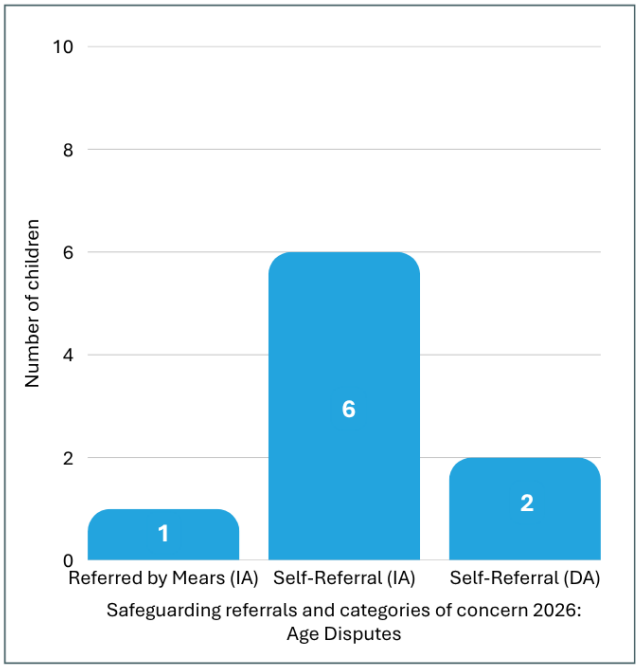
Figure 5: Safeguarding referrals and categories of concern, 2026.



Source: Home Office[147]

[146] See: asylum-seekers-receipt-support-datasets-jun-2026.xlsx
[147] Home Office data request.

Figure 6: Safeguarding referrals and categories of concern: age disputes, 2026



Source: Home Office[148]

As Outcome 4 notes, the concerning issue with the level of support for asylum seekers, and their accommodation provision, is that both can have a serious impact on children's stability, wellbeing and access to services.

Further and Higher Education and employment

As highlighted in the Chapter on Outcome 3, there are various issues and barriers faced by young people aged 16 to 18. This included difficulty accessing ESOL courses, no place in secondary education and difficulty, due to language barriers, accessing Further Education and Higher Education ('FE' and 'HE'). This also impacts on employment opportunities in the longer term. Lack of access to educational opportunities limits capacity to contribute or experience economic wellbeing, especially those who are UASC and 16+ years old, who are particularly more vulnerable in this instance.[149]

The UNCRC gives children and young people the right to educational opportunity, however, General Comment No. 6 from the stated that States should ensure that access to education is maintained during all phases of the displacement cycle and every UASC, irrespective of status, is to have access to education in the country that they have entered in. The Committee further recommended that UASC should be registered with appropriate

[148] Home Office data request.
[149] See: Northern Ireland: Young asylum seekers face restricted access to education - BBC News

school authorities as soon as possible and get assistance from the State to maximize learning opportunities.[150]

Overall, access to further and higher education is critical in enabling children and young people from ASR backgrounds to progress and realise their potential. However, existing barriers relating to eligibility, cost and immigration status can limit these opportunities and contribute to longer-term disadvantages. General Comment No. 6 emphasises that should ensure access to education for UASC on the same basis as nationals, including opportunities for further and higher education and should remove practical and administrative barriers to participation. Ensuring equitable access to FE and HE is therefore not only a matter of opportunity, but a key component of upholding children's rights and supporting their long-term integration, development, independence and contribution to the economy.

Children's voices

The voices of children and young people from ASR backgrounds provide important insight into the barriers they face in access further and higher education, as well as pathways into employment. Across discussion, some of the young people spoke about their aspiration for the future, including attending university, gaining qualifications and securing meaningful employment. However, these ambitions were often accompanied by uncertainty and frustration, with participants highlighting challenges relating to eligibility, financial constraints and a lack of clear information about available and opportunities and underline the importance of ensuring that systems and services are responsive to the needs and rights of young people as they transition into adulthood.

Many spoke about their worries about FE and HE and gaining qualifications:

> *'Life has stopped until I join university again and get my education.'*
>
> *'Enter the university will be a bit hard.'*
>
> *'Aiming to university, I am not understand how the things is going on.'*

Others spoke about their frustrations about obtaining employment in the future, and becoming independent:

> *'There are no jobs.'*
>
> *'Hard to get job in easy way.'*

[150] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6. (Available at: General comment No. 6 (2005): Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin | Refworld)

Finally, others spoke about hardships in general in relation to affording essentials:

> *'Need winter clothes. Heater expensive.'*

> *'Transport: a little difficult and expensive.'*

These perspectives highlight the importance of listening to and valuing the voices of children and young people when considering access to education and employment. Their experiences provide a clear reminder that policy and practice must be shaped by those directly affected, ensuring that barriers are addressed and opportunities are made accessible in a way that reflects their needs and aspirations.

Conclusion

Overall, the evidence highlights that children and young people from ASR backgrounds face a range of structural and systemic barriers that impact their ability to experience economic and environmental wellbeing in NI. Issues relating to NRPF restrictions, poverty, limited access to education and employment, and the suitability of accommodation all contribute to financial insecurity and instability both directly and indirectly. While some support exists, including crisis-based interventions and community provision, these often are insufficient to address longer-term needs or to ensure equitable outcomes.

The experiences shared by children and young people further reinforce the gap between commitments and the reality of their lives, particularly in relation to aspirations for education and employment. The CYPS specifically recognises the importance for children and young people to have opportunities to develop appropriate knowledge and skills so that they can become economically active, find gainful employment and avoid poverty, however it is difficult to show how this is being progressed and support being effectively put in place for young people in the asylum system. Barriers to progression not only limit opportunities, but can also impact confidence, wellbeing and prospects. The reliance on short-term or fragmented support highlights the absence of a fully coordinated CRBA to addressing economic inequality for this group. Furthermore, there is no data or information on children's environmental well-being, therefore, NICCY cannot comment on this area.

This raises important concerns about the extent to which children's rights to an adequate standard of living, education and development are being realised in practice. Addressing these challenges will require a more coordinated, long-term and child-centred approach, ensuring that all children and young people, regardless of their immigration status, are supported to achieve economic stability and to access opportunities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen economic and environmental wellbeing for children and young people from ASR backgrounds in NI:

1. **Address financial insecurity and NRPF related barriers**: Government should take steps to mitigate the impact of NRPF restrictions on children and families, including reviewing access to financial support and ensuring that no child is left without an adequate standard of living, in line with Article 27 of the UNCRC. NICCY's recommendations previously made in 'A Hostile Environment' should be implemented.
2. **Improve access to education, training and employment pathways**: Relevant departments and institutions should ensure that children and young people from ASR backgrounds have equitable access for FE and HE, training and employment opportunities, including clearer guidance, financial support and removal of administrative barriers.
3. **Strengthening accommodation standard and asylum financial support**: The Home Office and relevant authorities should ensure that dispersal and contingency accommodation is safe, suitable and child-centred, with particular attention to stability and access to services. In addition, asylum financial support rates should be reviewed and increased where necessary to ensure that children and families can meet basic needs and experience an adequate standard of living.

In this section, the participants additionally recommended:

1. Young people and their families also want the right to work while they are waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

Outcome 6 – Children & young people make a positive contribution to society

Introduction

Outcome 6 of the CYPS focuses on enabling children and young people to actively participate in and contribute to their communities and wider society. This outcome recognises children and young people as active agents, whose voices, experiences and contributions are valuable and should be supported across all aspects of their lives. For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, opportunities to contribute and participate are particularly important in fostering a sense of belonging, inclusion, equality, respect and identity within a new society and their new communities. The key proposal for this outcome is:

- To give children the opportunity to live in an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.

This outcome is closely aligned with Article 12 of the UNCRC which affirms the right of children and young people to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight. It also reflects the broader principle that children should be recognised as rights holders with the ability to influence decisions and participate in society.

Outcome 6 examines areas such as youth work, children and young people acting as carers and the seldom heard voices of children and young people. This section will focus on examples of youth work that supports ASR children and young people and how their programmes help support seldom heard voices. Its indicators include areas such as:

- Engaging in meaningful participation;
- Contribute to and be part of the discussion;
- Engage in activities in local communities;
- Help support children and young people to develop socially and emotionally; and
- Building arenas for children and young people to be involved in the co-design and co-production to which all government agencies are committed.

There is no data held on how children and young people from ASR backgrounds participate in society. However, there is some limited available data across some areas of Outcome 6, such as the number of children and young people engaging in youth work or the extent to which ASR children and young people take on caring roles. As a result, the chapter highlights examples of project focused work as illustrations of good practice, with a

particular emphasis on participation and ensuring that children and young people's voices are heard.

Through NICCY's research, we worked with VOYPIC and the Ubuntu Project from Barnardo's to collate the voices and experiences of ASR children and young people on this issue. These organisations were chosen for this section as we had worked with VOYPIC and Barnardo's in regard to data collection for this report and last year, we were invited to an event with NI Youth Forum in relation to a project involving young people from ASR backgrounds.

Ubuntu NI

'Ubuntu' is an ancient word which appears in several African languages. Roughly translating to "I am because we are" at its core it recognises that each person's identity and well-being are shaped by our relationships with others.

Barnardo's Ubuntu Project, funded by The National Lottery UK Fund, operates across Hertfordshire, Northern Ireland, and Scotland supporting children, young people, and families seeking sanctuary in the UK. Ubuntu use this term as they support regardless of the path taken to seek protection including those seeking refuge and those claiming asylum. This work is carried out via three strands including Ubuntu Practitioners Network, Ubuntu Youth Voice Network and a Community development strand.

Ubuntu NI's Youth Voice Network operates in line with the Lundy Model of Participation and is guided by five core principles: Connection, Compassion, Confidence Building, Challenging and Change Making.

This Network welcomes young people aged 12-19 from across Northern Ireland who have arrived seeking sanctuary. providing travel reimbursement to help ensure everyone can access Ubuntu NI programmes. As established members progress through the Network, those aged 18+ can become Young Leaders, empowering them to guide and inspire the next generation.

The Network creates opportunities for young people to engage directly with key stakeholders, influencing policy, research, and decision-making to ensure their voices are truly seen, heard, and valued. The Ubuntu Youth Voice Network is a collaborative platform where young people share their experiences, highlight the challenges they face, and work together to propose and drive solutions that create meaningful change.

The Practitioners Network and Community Development strand is a community-based initiative that focuses on strengthening connections between voluntary and statutory organisations across NI. It supports organisations to build upon community capacity

through delivery of workshops, sharing best practice and influencing policy to improve outcomes for sanctuary seeking families.

Overall, Ubuntu NI aims to support integration, wellbeing and access to services by fostering collaboration, amplifying young people's voices and helping communities create more inclusive and supportive environments for families seeking sanctuary.[151]

VOYPIC

VOYPIC is a regional charity in NI that supports children and young people who are care-experienced to have their voice heard and to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. Through its advocacy, participation programmes and policy engagement work, VOYPIC enables young people to contribute meaningfully to service design, policy development and wider societal change. By promoting children's rights and supporting young people to influence decision-making processes, the organisation reflects the principles of Outcome 6 of the CYPS and Article 12 of the UNCRC, recognising children and young people as active agents with valuable perspectives and contributions to make.[152]

Since 2023, VOYPIC has been running a support group for UASC and is a perfect example of organic, youth-led work after a need was identified by young people for advice, support and connections. VOYPIC asked a group of young people, "What do you need? And what would we do with funding?" and a dedicated support worker throughout the week was employed, with a weekly, drop-in established.

The DoH's Learning and Development team would also visit the group once every six months to determine what other needs could be met for the young people. Gender-separated swimming classes with culturally appropriate swimwear for the girls were held, therefore adapting activities to their cultural needs. There is also opportunity being put in place for the young people to be trained as peer mentors and volunteer at their drop in. A number of young people have also completed qualifications. Through being involved in the project from the beginning and most importantly, co-designing the project, young people are now an integral part of the delivery of the project.

In 2025, VOYPIC published the 'Show Us You Care' manifesto which involved the lived experiences of children and young people having their voices heard on decision making.

[151] See: UBUNTU NI | Barnardo's
[152] See: Your Voice - VOYPIC

Many young people had also been involved in the 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services' in 2023.[153]

The community and voluntary organisations ('CVS') funding, resourcing and budgetary pressures have reached a crisis point in NI and many CVS rely on annual, non-ringfenced funding. It is NICCYs understanding that for this financial year 2026/27, VOYPIC are considering a 'reframing' of this project and are looking outside of government structures to ensure its sustainability. The emphasis on amplifying young people's voice, promoting agency and influencing decision-making highlights the importance of ensuring that all children, regardless of background, are supported to contribute meaningfully to the systems and services that affect them. This approach reinforces the need to extend similar participation opportunities to children from ASR backgrounds, ensuring their experiences are recognised and their voices inform policy and practice across NI.

Northern Ireland Youth Forum

The NI Youth Forum (NIYF) is an organisation that promotes the voices of young people and they work with 11–25-year-olds on a range of areas such as mental health, housing, homelessness, poverty, education, environment, policing/justice, transport, inclusion and diversity and peace building.

They established the 'Leaders International – Youth Social Action' project in 2024 which engages young people with lived experience of seeking asylum in NI to develop skills, confidence and leadership. The project empowered participants to take an active role in identifying issues affecting their lives and to contribute to solutions within their communities.

NIYF have recently created a new programme, 'Empowering Learning through Advocacy', building on the to the Leaders International work, focusing on capacity on children's rights, on personal development skills, examining identity, is youth-led and helps young people tell their stories about arriving to NI, as asylum seekers.

Young people created resources, including an education booklet and a short film, to support others seeking asylum, while also developing their own voices and experiences.[154] The initiative has helped reduce isolation, build confidence and promote meaningful participation, enabling young people to contribute positively to society and influence services and support available to their peers.

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[153] VOYPIC, Show Us You Care: A Call to Action From Care Experienced Young People' (2025) (Available at: Show-Us-You-Care-Call-to-Action-FINAL.pdf)

[154] See: Leaders International - Youth Social Action - Northern Ireland Youth Forum

This project is another clear example of how children and young people from ASR backgrounds can be supported to actively contribute to society, aligning with Outcome 6 of the CYPS by promoting participation, leadership and the meaningful inclusion of young people's voices in shaping services and support.

Conclusion

Overall, there is no particular data held on children and young people from ASR backgrounds and how they contribute/participate to/in society. However, the examples of organisations such as Barnardo's, VOYPIC and the NIYF and other community-based initiatives demonstrate the significant contribution that children and young people from ASR backgrounds are making across NI. These initiatives highlight the importance of participation, leadership and youth voice in enabling children and young people to contribute positively to their communities, in line with Outcome 6 of the CYPS.

Nonetheless, it could be suggested that there is a strong reliance on the CVS to facilitate these opportunities, with limited evidence of a consistent, coordinated statutory approach. While these organisations play a vital and often innovative role, reliance on non-statutory provision can lead to variability in access and sustainability. This underscores the need for stronger strategic leadership and investment at a government level to ensure that all children and young people from ASR backgrounds are supported to participate and contribute meaningfully, regardless of their circumstance or location, with an added layer of support needed for those who are unaccompanied.

Recommendations

A coordinated and sustainable approach to participation is essential to ensure that all children and young people from ASR backgrounds are recognised not only for their needs, but for their valuable contributions to society, therefore, NICCY recommends the following:

1. **Embed participation and contribution across statutory services:** Government departments and public bodies should ensure that opportunities for participation and positive contribution are systemically embedded across education, health and community services, such as the use of the Lundy Model of Participation, which would also ensure feedback to children and young people, and also reducing reliance on ad hoc or localised provision.
2. **Strengthen and sustain investment in the community and voluntary sector:** Recognising the key role of community and voluntary organisations, sustainable funding should be provided to support, expand and stabilize programmes that

enable children and young people from ASR backgrounds to participate and contribute.

3. **Develop a coordinated, cross sector approach to youth participation:** The NI Executive should establish a coordinated framework for youth participation, ensuring clear leadership, accountability and consistency in how children and young people from ASR backgrounds are supported to engage, influence and contribute across society.

Outcome 7 – Children & young people live in a society which respects their rights

Introduction

Outcome 7 of the CYPS focused on ensuring that children and young people grow up in a society where their rights are recognised, respected and upheld in practice.[155] This outcome is particularly significant for children and young people from ASR backgrounds, whose experiences may be shaped by discrimination, prejudice and in some cases, hate-motivated behaviour. Experiences of racism, bullying and hostility can undermine children's sense of dignity, safety and belonging, compounding important questions about how effectively their rights are being realised within society.[156] Key proposal for this outcome is:

- To have a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity.

This outcome is underpinned by the principles of the UNCRC, including the right to non-discrimination, the right to protection from all forms of violence and the requirement that children's rights are known, understood and promoted. A CRBA therefore requires not only protection from harm, but also the active promotion of children's rights across society, including schools, communities and public services. Examining this outcome provides an important lens through which to consider how societal attitudes, behaviours and systems impact on the rights and lived experiences of children and young people from ASR backgrounds.

Evidence indicates that children and young people from ASR backgrounds may be disproportionately affected by racist hate crime, bullying and negative peer attitudes, both within school settings and in the wider community. Recent data from the PSNI shows that race-related hate crimes consistently represent the largest category of recorded hate crime, highlighting the ongoing prevalence of racism within society.[157] The NI Human Rights Commission has also highlighted concerns relating to racist incidents and crimes, noting wider structural issues around racial inequality, legislative gaps and the need for improved monitoring.[158] This outcome also has other strands such as faith, LGBTQ+ rights, transgender rights, however on further examination, there is little data recorded in these areas apart from a recent report in June 2024 'We are getting hurt,' commissioned by the Migration Justice Project, the Law Centre NI and Rainbow Refugees, whereby they

[155] NI Executive, 'Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030' (2021) (Available at: final-execuitve-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030), p.83
[156] PSNI, 'Hate Motivation Statistics'(Available at: Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31st December 2025)
[157] Ibid.
[158] NIHRC, 'The 2022 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland' (2022) (Available at: 2022-NIHRC-Annual-Statement-2022.pdf), pp.68-70

stipulated that out of the 23 respondents to their survey, most had been affected by homophobia hate crime. Two of their recommendations did include children, one that unaccompanied children from the LGBTQ+ community are housed by the HSCTs to ensure better protection and that the RIS strategy should include tailored support to those from the community, including children.[159]

For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, exposure to such attitudes can impact not only their safety, but their confidence, identity and willingness to participate in everyday activities. These experiences directly engage Outcome 7 of the CYPS, as they raise important questions about the extent to which children's rights are recognised and respected in practice.

Racism and hate-motivated crimes

Racism remains a significant and persistent issue within NI, with race-related incidents and crimes and consistently representing the largest category of recorded hate motivation. Recent figures show that racist hate crime has reached record or near record levels with over 1,280 race hate crimes and more than 2,000 related incidents recorded, representing some of the highest levels since data collection began.[160] Data also indicates that race hate incidents have increased significantly in recent years, surpassing sectarian incidents in scale and reflecting changing patterns of diversity and discrimination within society.

The PSNI records highlight the scale and persistence of hate motivated incidents and crimes within NI. In the year ending March 2025, there were approximately 3,297 hate incidents and crimes recorded with race-related incidents (around 1,800) and race-related crimes (over 1,180) representing the highest levels since records began in 2004/05. Race remains the most prevalent form of hate motivation, exceeding other categories such as sectarianism, religion, disability and sexual orientation. Longer-term trends data also shows that levels of race hate incidents have increased significantly in recent years with several of the highest monthly figures recorded between 2024 and 2025.[161]

The Hate Crime Advocacy Service offers support to victims of hate and signal crimes across the different protected characteristics in NI, whether or not the crime has been reported to the police. Referrals are accepted from all agencies and self-referrals to the

[159] LCNI, 'We are Getting Hurt: Safe accommodation for LGBTQIA+ people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland' (2024) (Available at: We Are Getting Hurt)
[160] Information available from the PSNI and NISRA (Available at: Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31st December 2025 and Race incidents and crimes were the highest recorded since the data series began in 2004/05 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)
[161] PSNI, 'Hate Motivation Tables' (Available at: Hate Motivations Tables Period Ending 31st December 2025.xlsx)

consortium of CVS organisations involved in the service. The number of referrals to HCAS for 'race' is notable in the last three years:

Table 8: Number of referrals to the Hate Crime Advocacy Service, by nature of hate crime, 2023-2026

Hate crime	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Disability	75	53	52
Sexual orientation	137	164	94
Transgender identity	44	23	26
Race	528	880	980
Religion	23	33	33
Sectarian	202	208	178
Not specified	4	8	4
Total	**1013**	**1369**	**1367**

Source: NI Assembly[162]

For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, these statistics are particularly concerning. While PSNI data is not disaggregated by age in a way that isolates children's experiences, the prevalence of race hate crime or incidents within communities and public spaces suggests that many children are likely to be directly or indirectly exposed to racism, hostility and discrimination. This may occur in schools, in their neighbourhoods and other environments, shaping young people's everyday experiences. Young people have told us about the hate and bullying they experience online, via social media apps. Some have felt targeted online because of their skin colour, and that harassment is normalised. The incident describes how anti-immigrant narratives circulating online contributed to tensions that escalated into local harassment and hostility, affecting nearby minority ethnic communities and creating a climate of fear. It is presented as an example of how online hate can spill into real-world incidents in areas connected to schools and young people.[163]

Such exposure can have significant implications for children's wellbeing, sense of identity and ability to participate fully in society, particularly for those who are already navigating the challenges associated with displacement and integration. The Law Centre NI and Housing Rights as part of the Migration Justice Project, produced a series of recommendations on improving the support response and homelessness assistance for

[162] Data in relation to breakdown of number of referrals by constituency and by nature of hate crime is provided by HCAS (Source: https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionsummary.aspx?docid=465097) 2025/2026 is for April to December.

[163] CAJ, 'Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report' (2025) (Available at: https://caj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Mapping-Far-Right-Activity-Online-in-Northern-Ireland-Project-Report.pdf), pp.24-26

migrant victims of racist intimidation, highlighting the particular challenges caused by the NRPF condition, thwarting the ability of statutory agencies in NI to respond to urgent needs.[164]

NI does not have specific hate crime legislation; however, the Minister of Justice has introduced the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc.) Bill to the NI Assembly which includes an 'aggravator model' for hostility and for vulnerability, which would include enhanced sentencing. The aggravated offence model will provide a system-wide response to the criminalisation of the hate element of crimes. In part, this is to deliver on some of the recommendations made by the Independent Review of hate crime legislation in NI, published in 2020.[165] From a rights-based perspective, the prevalence of racist hate crime directly engages Outcome 7 of the CYPS, as well as core principles of the UNCRC. Where racism and hate-motivated behaviour are present, this suggests a broader societal failure to fully realise these rights in practice. Addressing hate crime therefore requires not only a response to individual incidents, but also a broader effort to challenge discriminatory attitudes, promote understanding and ensure that children from ASR backgrounds are able to grow up in environments where their rights are recognised, respected and upheld.

Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The 2025 'Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in NI' report provides important insight into how societal attitudes may shape the experiences of children and young people from ASR backgrounds.[166] Drawing on data from the Young Life and Times Survey of 16-year-olds, the report highlights a mixed picture of attitudes, with both positive and concerning trends evident. While just over half of respondents (51%) agreed that there is a duty to provide protection to refugees, only 34% believed that NI is a welcoming society, and just 26% agreed that refugees positively contribute to society. In addition, 64% of young people reported that media coverage negatively influences perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers, and only one third expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage with them.[167]

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[164] LCNI and Housing Rights, Homelessness assistance for migrant victims of racist intimidation: proposals to improve support response (Available at: LCNI-and-HR-proposals-on-homelessness-assistance-for-migrant-victims-of-racist-abuse_June-2025_Final.pdf)

[165] Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, as introduced (Available at: Official Reports https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/executive-bills/mandate-2022-2027/criminal-justice-sentencing-etc.-bill/criminal-justice-sentencing-etc-bill---as-introduced----fpv.pdf)

[166] NISRA, Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland 2025 (Available at: Young People's Attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland)

[167] See: Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland - Background Quality Report

These findings are significant in the context of Outcome 7 of the CYPS, as they highlight how societal attitudes among peers can directly impact whether children and young people from ASR backgrounds experience their rights as being recognised and respected in practice. Where attitudes are shaped by misinformation, limited interaction or negative narratives, this can contribute to environments in which discrimination, exclusion or hostility may occur. The findings suggest that further efforts are required to promote understanding, challenge negative perceptions and create opportunities for meaningful interaction, ensuring that all children can grow up in a society where their rights, dignity and identity are respected.

Conclusion

Overall, the evidence highlights that while there are clear policy commitments to promoting children's rights, the lived experience of children and young people from ASR backgrounds suggest that these rights are not always fully realised in practice. Experience of racism, negative attitudes and hate-motivated behaviour undermine children's dignity, safety and sense of belonging. Strengthening efforts to promote understanding, challenge discrimination and embed a rights-based culture across society will be essential that all children can live in an environment where their rights are recognised, respected and upheld.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen a child rights-based approach across services and education:** Government departments and public bodies should ensure that children's rights are actively promoted, understood and embedded in practice, including through education settings, in line with Article 42 of the UNCRC to foster a culture of respect, inclusion and equality.
2. **Develop targeted responses to racism and hate motivate behaviour:** a coordinated, cross-sector approach should be implemented to prevent and respond to racism, bullying and hate crime, including awareness campaigns, anti-racism education and support for children affected by hate-motivated incidents. Consideration should also be given to strengthening the collection and reporting of data, including the PSNI recording and publishing more detailed information on hate-motivated incidents involving children and young people, to better understand the scale and impact of these experiences and inform targeted interventions.
3. **Promote positive attitudes and meaningful interaction among young people:** Investment should be increased in programmes that challenge negative perceptions and promote understanding, including shared education, youth

initiatives and opportunities for meaningful engagement between children and young people from different backgrounds.

Outcome 8 – Children & young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted

Introduction

Outcome 8 of the CYPS focuses on ensuring that children and young people grow up in a society where equality, inclusion and good relations are actively promoted and protected.[168] This outcome is particularly relevant in NI where building and sustaining good relations remains a key priority. Key actions proposed under this outcome include:

- Treating children and young people fairly and equally;
- Promoting diversity and mutual understanding; and
- Children and young people living in interface areas.

Initiatives such as Together: Building a United Community ('T:BUC') emphasise the importance of creating shared, inclusive and cohesive communities, while the Racial Equality Strategy (RES) for NI aimed to provide a framework to tackle racial inequalities, promote respect for diversity and strengthen social cohesion.[169]

In addition, the development of the 'Refugee Integration Strategy 2022-2027' ('RIS') aims to reflect a growing recognition of the need for a coordinated approach to supporting people seeking sanctuary to build their lives in NI.[170] Emerging from commitments within the RES, it aims to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are treated fairly, feel safe, can exercise their rights and are supported to realise their full potential as valued members of society.

For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, these policy frameworks should be central to shaping their experiences of belonging, safety and inclusion. Addressing racism, discrimination and social exclusion, while promoting positive attitudes and meaningful interaction across communities, is essential to ensuring that these children can fully participate in society. Outcome 8 therefore provides an important lens through which to examine how effectively policies and services in NI should support equality, integration and good relations for children and young people from diverse backgrounds.

[168] NI Executive, 'Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030' (2021) (Available at: final-execuitve-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030), pp.89-90
[169] TEO, T:BUC (Available at: About Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) | The Executive OfficeRacial and equality Strategy 2015-2025)
[170] TEO, 'Draft Refugee Integration Strategy' (Available at: Draft Refugee Integration Strategy)

T:BUC

T:BUC provides a structured framework for promoting good relations through a range of targeted programmes and measurable outcomes. Delivered by TEO, the strategy focuses on building positive relationships, increasing shared space and reducing division across communities.[171] It is underpinned by four key priorities:

- Our children and young people;
- Our shared community;
- Our safe community; and
- Our cultural expression.

Each of these priorities are associated with outcomes and indicators to measure progress which includes improving attitudes between young people from different backgrounds, increasing the use of shared spaces, reducing hate crime and promoting a stronger sense of belonging and respect for cultural diversity.[172] Progress is monitored through tools such as questionnaires, which assess changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours resulting from engagement in programmes.[173]

For children and young people from ASR backgrounds, these programmes could be highly beneficial, as they aim to provide practical mechanisms for fostering inclusions, building relationships and addressing prejudice. However, effectiveness depends on the extent to which ASR children are actively included and supported to participate. Applying the T:BUC framework in this context highlights the importance of ensuring that good relations work evolved to reflect increasing diversity, so that children and young people from ASR backgrounds are not only present within these initiatives but are fully included in shaping and benefiting from them.

While the T:BUC strategy provides a valuable framework for promoting good relations, it has been traditionally focused on addressing sectarian division within NI, with less explicit emphasis on racial equality and the experiences for children and young people from ASR backgrounds or any other minority ethnic communities. For example, most of the indicators used for reporting and monitoring are centralised around being 'Catholic' or 'Protestant'.

As a result, the specific needs and experiences of children and young people from ASR backgrounds are not fully reflected within programme design or delivery. Although T:BUC

[171] TEO, T:BUC (Available at: About Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) | The Executive Office)
[172] Community Relations Council, T:BUC (Available at: Together: Building a United Community Information | Community Relations Council)
[173] TEO, Good Relations Outcomes (Available at: Good Relations Outcomes | The Executive Office)

programmes aim to foster inclusion and mutual understanding, NICCY would be concerned that without a more explicit focus on race, migration and cultural diversity, children from ASR backgrounds and other backgrounds may remain underrepresented or experience barriers to participation. This highlights the need for a Good Relations policy to evolve in line with demographic changes, ensuring that initiatives are inclusive of all communities and actively address issues such as racism, discrimination and social exclusion. Since the Belfast Agreement, the Census data shows us that there has been a rise in people from ethnic minorities from 0.8% to 3.4% of the population.[174] Therefore, strengthening the alignment between T:BUC, a new RES and a new draft Framework for Race Relations (2026-2028) alongside the RIS will be important in ensuring a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to good relations for all children and young people in NI.

Racial Equality Strategy, 2015-2025

The RES aimed to provide the Executive's overarching framework for addressing racial inequalities and promoting a more inclusive and cohesive society. It aimed to eliminate racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. It also recognised that issues such as education, employment, health, housing and justice are interconnected in shaping outcomes for minority ethnic communities. Key priorities include tackling racism and hate crime, improving access to services, promoting participation and representation and supporting integration. The RES also emphasised the importance of data collection, awareness raising and partnership across statutory and community sectors to deliver meaningful change.[175] Finally, there is also a new consultation out for a framework for race relations, which is to build on the RES going forward.

While the RES represents an important commitment to promoting racial equality, its impact in relation to children and young people from ASR backgrounds is less clearly defined. The broad nature of the RES meant that the specific experiences and needs of ASR children, including those relating to immigration status, language barriers, trauma and access to services, were not always explicitly addressed. In addition, there is limited evidence of targeted measures focused specifically on children and young people within this group, or of how outcomes are monitored for them in practice, as highlighted in the Independent Review of the RES, which identified gaps in implementation, leadership and

[174] RaISE, Northern Ireland Economy and the Budget (2025) (Available at: Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: Northern Ireland Economy and the Budget: initial considerations for 2025/26)
[175] TEO, Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 (Available at: Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025)

measurable progress.[176] The Equality Commission NI has also emphasised the need for stronger delivery mechanisms and improved monitoring of outcomes for minority ethnic communities.[177]

As a result, there is a risk that the distinct challenges faced by ASR children may have been insufficiently recognised within wider equality frameworks. This highlights the need for a more child-focused and migration sensitive approach, ensuring that policies not only address racial equality in general terms but also respond to the particular safeguarding, participation and wellbeing needs of children and young people seeking asylum or living as refugees in NI.

Refugee Integration Strategy

The RIS for NI was developed by TEO as a cross-departmental framework to support the integration of people seeking asylum and refuge, building on commitments set out in the RES. The RIS recognises the need for a coordinated approach to ensure that individuals are treated fairly, feel safe, can exercise their rights and are supported to realise their full potential as valued members of society.[178] It is underpinned by a set of high-level outcomes focused on promoting respect, safety, access to rights and opportunities for progression, alongside a Delivery Framework which aims to support collaborative work across departments and sectors. The RIS also aims to emphasise the importance of engagement with stakeholders and those with lived experience.[179]

While the RIS represents an important step towards a more coordinated approach several challenges remain in relation to its scope and implementation, particularly for children and young people. Concerns have been raised regarding the lack of clarity in delivery, leadership and measurable outcomes, as well as the extent to which it reflects the specific needs of different groups, including children and young people, such as those who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children .[180] In addition, the absence of clearly defined implementation framework and robust data monitoring mechanisms may limit its effectiveness in addressing inequalities in practice. More broadly, stakeholders have highlighted that, in the absence of strong statutory leadership, much of the work supporting integration continues to be driven by the community and voluntary sector,

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[176] Zazai, S., 'Independent Review of the progress on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-25' (2024) (Available at: Independent Review of the progress on the implementation of the Racial)
[177] Equality Commission NI, Delivering Race Equality in Northern Ireland (Available at: ECNI - Delivering Race Equality in Northern Ireland)
[178] TEO, Refugee Integration Strategy (Available at: Refugee Integration Strategy)
[179] Ibid.
[180] See: Barnardo's NI_Draft Refugee Integration Strategy.pdf

leading to inconsistencies in provision.[181] This suggests that, while the RIS sets out an important vision, further development is required to ensure that it delivers meaningful and measurable outcomes for children and young people from ASR backgrounds within NI. At the time of writing, the Executive Office has published a draft Framework for Race Relations, focusing on four key areas: removing structural inequalities; tackling racism and hate crime; ensuring fair access to public services; and strengthening community cohesion. These priorities reflect the voices of those with lived experience and are informed by evidence, consultation, and international best practice.[182]

Conclusion

Overall, while NI has a number of policy frameworks aimed at promoting equality and good relations, the experiences of children and young people from ASR backgrounds suggest that these commitments are not always realised consistently in practice. While there are positive examples of inclusive initiatives, gaps remain in how effectively policies respond to increasing diversity, particularly in addressing racism, promoting inclusion and ensuring equitable access to shared spaces and opportunities. Data was requested from local councils in relation to their work with the local PCSPs and good relations, but not all responded to the request and those that did, did not record ASR interactions or had it in their Good Relations work plans. The continued reliance on CVS provision further highlights the absence of a fully coordinated, system-wide approach. Strengthening alignment across policy frameworks, alongside a more explicit focus on the needs and experiences of ASR children, will be essential to ensuring that all children and young people are supported to live in a society where equality, inclusion and good relations are actively promoted and upheld.

Recommendations

NICCY proposes the following recommendations to strengthen the promotion of equality, inclusion and good relations for children and young people from ASR backgrounds:

1. **Strengthen a coordinated approach to equality and integration:** The NI Executive should ensure greater alignment and coordination between T:BUC, the Racial Equality Strategy and the Refugee Integration Strategy, with clear leadership, accountability and measurable outcomes to promote equality, inclusion and good relations for children and young people from ASR backgrounds. Consideration

[181] LCNI, An effective Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland? Wishful Thinking (Available at: An effective Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland? Wishful thinking | Law Centre Northern Ireland)
[182] TEO, Consultation on the Framework for Race Relations (Available at: Consultation on the Framework for Race Relations | The Executive Office)

should also be given to broadening the focus of T:BUC, indicators beyond traditional sectarian measures to racial equality, cultural diversity and children from different backgrounds too, such as those with disabilities, LGBTQAI+ and other religions, for example.

2. **Embed anti-racism and inclusion across services:** Public bodies should take proactive steps to tackle racism and discrimination, including anti-racism training, inclusive policies and awareness training across education, health and community services, ensuring that children from ASR backgrounds feel safe, respected and included.
3. **Increase access to inclusive shared spaces and programmes:** Investment should be enhanced in shared education, youth programmes and community initiatives that bring children and young people from different backgrounds together, ensuring that ASR children are actively included and supported to participate in good relations activities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations

This report has examined the experiences of ASR children and young people in NI through the framework of the CYPS and the UNCRC. Drawing together quantitative data, stakeholder engagement and the loved experiences of children and young people, the findings demonstrate both the resilience of children seeking sanctuary and the significant barriers which continue to affect the realisation of their rights.

While examples of compassionate and rights-based practice were identified across education, healthcare, community organisations and voluntary organisations, the evidence throughout the reports highlights that many children continue to experience instability linked to immigration policy, accommodation arrangements and an inconsistent provision. A recurring theme across all outcomes was the extent to which community and voluntary organisations have often filled gaps in statutory support.

Outcome 1

When considering Outcome 1, the findings demonstrate that there are many gaps in data examining ASR children's access to timely healthcare and mental health support. However, there were difficulties relating to GP registration, interpretation provision, emotional wellbeing support and continuity of care were identified at times. While examples of good practice exist, a more coordinated and culturally responsive approach is required to ensure children can fully realise their rights to the highest attainable standard of health.

Recommendations

1. **Improve access to primary healthcare and information**: Health and Social Care services should ensure that children and families from ASR backgrounds are supported to register with GPs promptly, including the provision of clear, accessible information and proactive outreach at the point of arrival.
2. **Strengthen trauma-informed and culturally appropriate mental health services**: Investment should be made in trauma-informed and culturally responsive mental health provision, including reducing waiting times and improving access to specialist support for children who have experienced displacement and trauma.
3. **Ensure consistent access to interpretation and continuity of care**: Health services should guarantee consistent access to interpretation and translation services, alongside improved coordination across services to ensure continuity of care, particularly where children are moved between accommodation settings and Trust areas.

4. **Young people's recommendation**: Make sure records are kept on background information, so children and young people don't have to keep retelling their story.

Outcome 2

On Outcome 2, play, recreation and social connection were identified as essential protective factors for children's wellbeing, recovery and integration. However, barriers including poverty, transport difficulties, accommodation instability and limited access to safe community spaces often restricted opportunities for play and participation. The absence of a comprehensive regional play strategy inclusive of ASR children further contributes to inconsistent experiences across NI.

Recommendations

Play, and access to it, is a cross-cutting policy issue affecting, amongst others, the Departments of Health, Education, Communities and Infrastructure. NICCY recommends the following:

5. **Improve equitable access to play and leisure opportunities:** Government and public bodies should take targeted action to address barriers such as transport, cost, location and awareness, ensuring that children and young people from ASR backgrounds can access safe and inclusive play and leisure activities.
6. **Support inclusive community-based provision:** Sustained investment should be provided to community and voluntary organisations to expand inclusive play, sport and recreational opportunities that promote integration, social connection and wellbeing for children and young people from ASR backgrounds.
7. **Establish a clear statutory and strategic framework for play and leisure:** The NI Executive should develop and implement a strong, clearly defined policy or statutory framework for play and leisure for all children and young people, ensuring that responsibility for delivery, coordination and accountability is clearly assigned across departments. This framework should recognise play as a fundamental right, aligned with Article 31 of the UNCRC and ensure consistent, equitable provision of play and leisure opportunities for all children, including those from ASR backgrounds.
8. **Implement a CRBA in local government, including the planning system:** Councils should consult with young people in relation to what they would like to see in their local communities, even consult their local youth councils or school children.

Outcome 3

Education was consistently described as one of the most important stabilising influences in children's lives. However, children and stakeholders reported challenges relating to school placements, English language support, SEN provision, disrupted attendance and experiences of bullying and racism. While many schools demonstrated strong commitment to inclusion, the findings suggest that access to education alone is insufficient without wider investment in trauma informed, anti-racist and rights-based school cultures.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to improve access to education and educational outcomes for children and young people from ASR backgrounds:

9. **Assess what are the barriers to timely access to school places:** The DE and relevant bodies should ensure that children from ASR backgrounds are not disadvantaged in accessing a school place without delay, including review of where and when demand is highest, with resulting consideration of what extra support is needed.
10. **Strengthen language and additional support provision:** Investment should be increased in English language support and SEN provision, ensuring that children receive timely, appropriate and consistent support that enables them to access the curriculum and achieve their potential.
11. **Improve coordination and continuity of education:** A more coordinated approach should be implemented across education and wider services to ensure continuity of education, particularly where children are moved between accommodation settings, including improved data sharing and clearer processes to support attendance and progression.
12. **Young people's recommendation:** Provide accessible and free English language classes several times per week. Children and young people should also be able to pass through ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) levels at their own speed.

Outcome 4

The evidence gathered throughout this report highlights serious concerns regarding accommodation instability, safeguarding, poverty and insecurity experienced by some ASR children and families. Hotel based contingency accommodation, repeated moves and prolonged uncertainty were found to negatively impact children's wellbeing, development and sense of safety. Stakeholders also highlighted concerns regarding racism, intimidation

and the placement of families in areas where tensions may exist. The findings reinforce the importance of safeguarding systems, interagency cooperation and child centred approaches which place children's rights and best interests at the centre of accommodation and immigration decision making.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to address identified safeguarding gaps and strengthen protection for children and young people from ASR backgrounds in NI:

13. **Strengthen safeguarding governance and accountability:** The Home Office, alongside departments and agencies, should establish clear lines of accountability and enhance mechanisms to ensure that safeguarding standards are consistently applied across accommodation and support services.
14. **Improve multi-agency responses to exploitation and trafficking**: A coordinated, multi-agency approach should be strengthened to identify and response to risks of child exploitation, including the effectiveness and timeliness of the NRM and ensuring access to appropriate support services.
15. **Embed safeguarding across accommodation and community contexts**: Accommodation provision and wider community responses should be designed with safeguarding at their core, including risk assessment, access to services and proactive measures to address community tensions, ensuring that children are protected both within accommodation settings and in the wider communities in which they live.
16. **Young people's recommendation:** Make sure unaccompanied young people are placed in housing near their support systems.

Outcome 5

Poverty emerged as a cross-cutting issue affecting children's ability to access education, leisure, transport and essential goods. NRPF restrictions and delays within the asylum system contributed significantly to financial hardship for some families. Although emergency supports such as the Crisis Intervention Scheme and Crisis Support Fund provided important assistance in some cases, reliance on discretionary and crisis-based interventions cannot replace sustainable, rights-based approaches to child poverty reduction and social protection.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen economic and environmental wellbeing for children and young people from ASR backgrounds in NI:

17. **Address financial insecurity and NRPF related barriers**: Government should take steps to mitigate the impact of NRPF restrictions on children and families, including reviewing access to financial support and ensuring that no child is left without an adequate standard of living, in line with Article 27 of the UNCRC. NICCY's recommendations previously made in 'A Hostile Environment' should be implemented.
18. **Improve access to education, training and employment pathways**: Relevant departments and institutions should ensure that children and young people from ASR backgrounds have equitable access for FE and HE, training and employment opportunities, including clearer guidance, financial support and removal of administrative barriers.
19. **Strengthening accommodation standard and asylum financial support**: The Home Office and relevant authorities should ensure that dispersal and contingency accommodation is safe, suitable and child-centred, with particular attention to stability and access to services. In addition, asylum financial support rates should be reviewed and increased where necessary to ensure that children and families can meet basic needs and experience an adequate standard of living.
20. **Young people's recommendation**: Young people and their families also want the right to work while they are waiting for a decision on the asylum claim.

Outcome 6

Children and young people repeatedly demonstrated resilience, leadership and a strong desire to contribute positively to their schools and communities. Community organisations, youth groups and participation programmes created important opportunities for belonging, empowerment and social connection. However, barriers linked to poverty, racism, uncertainty and limited access to services continued to restrict opportunities for full participation for some children and young people.

Recommendations

A coordinated and sustainable approach to participation is essential to ensure that all children and young people from ASR backgrounds are recognised not only for their needs, but for their valuable contributions to society, therefore, NICCY recommends the following:

21. **Embed participation and contribution across statutory services:** Government departments and public bodies should ensure that opportunities for participation and positive contribution are systemically embedded across education, health and community services, such as the Lundy Model of Participation, which ensures

feedback to young people also, therefore, reducing reliance on ad hoc or localised provision.

22. **Strengthen and sustain investment in the community and voluntary sector:** Recognising the key role of community and voluntary organisations, sustainable funding should be provided to support, expand and stabilize programmes that enable children and young people from ASR backgrounds to participate and contribute.
23. **Develop a coordinated, cross sector approach to youth participation:** The NI Executive should establish a coordinated framework for youth participation, ensuring clear leadership, accountability and consistency in how children and young people from ASR backgrounds are supported to engage, influence and contribute across society.

Outcome 7

The findings highlight ongoing gaps in awareness and implementation of children's rights in relation to ASR children across systems and services. Experiences of racism, discrimination and exclusion demonstrate that some children continue to feel unsafe, unheard or marginalised within society. While there have been important policy developments and growing recognition of children's rights approaches in NI, stronger implementation, accountability and child rights awareness are required to ensure that the rights of ASR children are consistently respected and upheld in practice.

Recommendations

24. **Strengthen a rights-based approach across services and education:** Government departments and public bodies should ensure that children's rights are actively promoted, understood and embedded in practice, including through education settings, in line with Article 42 of the UNCRC to foster a culture of respect, inclusion and equality.
25. **Develop targeted responses to racism and hate motivated behaviour:** a coordinated, cross-sector approach should be implemented to prevent and respond to racism, bullying and hate crime, including awareness campaigns, anti-racism education and support for children affected by hate-motivated incidents. Consideration should also be given to strengthening the collection and reporting of data, including the PSNI recording and publishing more detailed information on hate-motivated incidents involving children and young people, to better understand the scale and impact of these experiences and inform targeted interventions.
26. **Promote positive attitudes and meaningful interaction among young people:** Investment should be increased in programmes that challenge negative

perceptions and promote understanding, including shared education, youth initiatives and opportunities for meaningful engagement between children and young people from different backgrounds.

Outcome 8

The experiences shared throughout this report demonstrate the importance of promoting inclusive, welcoming and cohesive communities for children seeking sanctuary. Positive examples of integration, intercultural engagement and community solidarity were evident across NI. However, experiences of racist hostility, misinformation and protests linked to asylum accommodation continue to undermine children's sense of belonging and safety. The findings reinforce the importance of anti-racist approaches, community cohesion work and public leadership grounded in children's rights, equality and dignity.

Recommendations

NICCY proposes the following recommendations to strengthen the promotion of equality, inclusion and good relations for children and young people from ASR backgrounds:

27. **Strengthen a coordinated approach to equality and integration:** The NI Executive should ensure greater alignment and coordination between T:BUC, the Racial Equality Strategy and the Refugee Integration Strategy, with clear leadership, accountability and measurable outcomes to promote equality, inclusion and good relations for children and young people from ASR backgrounds. Consideration should also be given to broadening the focus of T:BUC, indicators beyond traditional sectarian measures to racial equality, cultural diversity and children from different backgrounds too, such as those with disabilities, LGBTQAI+ and other religions, for example.
28. **Embed anti-racism and inclusion across services:** Public bodies should take proactive steps to tackle racism and discrimination, including anti-racism training, inclusive policies and awareness training across education, health and community services, ensuring that children from ASR backgrounds feel safe, respected and included.
29. **Increase access to inclusive shared spaces and programmes:** Investment should be enhanced in shared education, youth programmes and community initiatives that bring children and young people from different backgrounds together, ensuring that ASR children are actively included and supported to participate in good relations activities.

Ultimately, it is critical to remember that asylum seeker and refugee children are first and foremost children. Their rights to safety, education, healthcare, play, participation and

dignity do not diminish because of immigration status. While immigration policy remains a reserved matter, NI's public authorities retain clear responsibilities under domestic legislation, the CYPS framework and international human rights standards to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of every child within its jurisdiction.

The findings of this report present an opportunity for government departments, statutory agencies, schools, health services and wider society to move beyond reactive and crisis driven responses towards a more coordinated, child centred and rights-based approach to supporting children seeking sanctuary in NI. Moreover, the findings demonstrate the importance of incorporating the UNCRC into domestic law in NI. A strengthened rights-based framework would help ensure that asylum seeking children and young people are consistently recognised as rights-holders, with their best interests, participation rights and access to services embedded across policy and practice. Such an approach would support greater accountability in addressing the inequalities and barriers identified throughout this report.

Appendix 1

Requests made for data by Department/agency

Department/Agency	Questions/Information sought	Returned data
Department of Education	No's of 'welcome hubs' in primary and post primary schools & associated budgets (since data collected) Nos of children and young people without a school place & length of time including those with SEND (since data collected) Budget allocated to ESOL in primary and post primary schools (since data collected) Nos of young people 15+ not in education Total budget allocated to primary and post primary schools to support children and young people in the asylum and refugee systems (since data collected) Levels of racist bullying in schools (since data collected) School admissions and refusals of children and young people in primary and post primary education and types of school (since data collected)	Yes
Department of Health	Numbers of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland (each year since data collected) Arrival ports, and breakdown of locations by a. number and b.	Yes

	percentage (each year since data collected) Numbers of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum accessing the Independent Guardian Service (each year since data collected) Numbers of vulnerability assessments undertaken of unaccompanied children and young people (each year since data collected). Please provide any breakdown of percentages of a. physical ill health and b. mental ill health raised through such assessments Numbers of age disputed cases and relevant outcomes for unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum (since data collected) Numbers of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum on the waiting list for a Personal Advisors (since data collected) Numbers of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum who are currently residing in non-standard accommodation (since data collected) Numbers of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum waiting for legal representation (since data collected)	
The Executive Office	Annual budget and monitoring data (over the last 3 years)	Yes

	Details on how data will be collected to monitor impact of strategy on outcomes for CYP Details on current strategic priorities in relation to CYP	
The Home Office	Details on the mapping of safeguarding roles and responsibilities between devolved administration, Mears and HO. (As per the accepted recommendation of the ICIBI's Inspection of asylum accommodation in NI) Nos and length of time of CYP in the asylum system in NI No of children and young people identified as potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking No of families in NI in receipt of Section 4 Support (over the last 3 years)	Yes
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	How many people, not households, are currently deemed to be in housing stress? How many people, not households, currently have FDA status? Of those people with FDA status, what is the breakdown by (i) age, (ii) household type and (iii) local government district? How many people, not households, are currently being accommodated in nonstandard accommodation? Annual expenditure on non-standard accommodation by NIHE, in each of the last five years.	No

	Figures on how many children and young people have been placed in non-standard accommodation this year, to date. If available, a breakdown of the numbers over the last five-year period, by year. Details on the average, and total, length of stay/duration of children and young people in non-standard accommodation in each year, over the last five years Numbers of young people (21 and under) who are in receipt of housing points because of intimidation. Details of how the NIHE is recording intimidation/abuse/violence when assessing housing points for an applicant, who would have qualified for intimidation points under the previous Rule 23. Numbers of families in mixed hostel accommodation. Number of children and young people arriving in NI through the Family Reunion system that are known to NIHE, by year, for the last five years. Of those children and young people who have arrived in NI through the Family Reunion system, how many are in TA and average length of stay, by year for the last five years. Numbers and percentage of Temporary Accommodation locations with access to a kitchen. Include, if available, the numbers of families with children and young people with access to a kitchen within TA.	

	What information is held by NIHE relating to families with No Recourse to Public Funds? What is the NIHE response in an emergency situation should a family, in dispersal accommodation, having to leave their house, therefore homeless, who have No Recourse to Public Funds? When the first monitoring report of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan will be published. An update on the progress on Action 13 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan to development of a new Rule (e.g. Rule 84a) to facilitate allocations of permanent accommodation for young people leaving care with specific criteria to prevent homelessness for this cohort of customers. An update on the progress of Action 18 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan to – Develop improved systems and procedures for Data Collection to gain a greater understanding of the trends, applications and acceptances to enable the Housing Executive to consider the provision of accommodation suitable to meet the needs of this cohort of LGBTQIA+ young people.	

Appendix 2

Table 1: Potential areas to examine under the CYPS

CYPS Outcomes	Relevance for ASR Children and Young People	Possible indicators for examination
1. To be physically and mentally healthy	Many ASR children and young people may have experiences trauma, displacement, interrupted healthcare or barriers to accessing services. Ensuring access to physical and mental health support is critical for their wellbeing.	Access to GP registration, mental health and trauma support services, interpretation services in healthcare and vaccination and screening access.
2. Enjoy play and leisure	Opportunities for play, recreation and leisure are important for children's development, emotional wellbeing, social connection and sense of normality. For ASR children, access to safe play and leisure spaces can also support recovery, belonging and inclusion within local communities.	Access to youth clubs, sports, arts and recreational activities, affordability and transport, availability of safe play spaces, after-school clubs, community activities, barriers linked to language, poverty or accommodation location.
3. Learn and achieve	Education plays a central role in supporting stability, integration and long-term wellbeing for children arriving in a new country. ASR children may face language barriers, interrupted schooling and challenges navigating the education system.	School enrolment rates, access to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses, educational attainment, school attendance, experiences of inclusion or bullying.
4. Live in safety and stability	Stable accommodation and safeguarding support are essential for children seeking asylum, particularly	Safeguarding referrals, accommodation and its conditions, support provided to

	for those living in dispersal accommodation or for those who are unaccompanied.	unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, experiences of discrimination or racism, child protection measures and stability of placements.
5. Experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing	Families seeking asylum often face financial restrictions and limitations on employment, which can impact children's living conditions and access to resources.	Access to basic necessities, financial support systems, access to school meals and essential services, impacts of poverty on wellbeing.
6. Contributing positively to society	Participation and inclusion are important for children to build a sense of belonging, confidence and agency within their communities.	Opportunities for youth participation, involvement in school and community decision-making process, access to youth voice structures, volunteering and civic participation.
7. Living in a society that respects their rights	Children from ASR backgrounds must have their rights recognised and upheld within safeguarding, immigration and service systems.	Awareness of children's rights among service providers, children's participation in decisions affecting them, access to advocacy and support services.
8. Living in a society that promotes equality and inclusion	ASR children may face discrimination, racism or barriers to accessing services due to language, immigration status or cultural differences.	Inclusive policies in schools and services, availability of interpretation and cultural mediation and measures promoting good relations and integration.

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