

Written evidence submitted by WONDER Foundation (CWSB124)

To: UK Parliament: the Children's wellbeing and school bill Committee.

Subject: A new model of support to faster school admission arrangements for children in the UK

Executive Summary

- (1) [44% of children](#) wait between three months to over a year to enter school due to complex applications and limited places, leaving [new arrivals children](#)¹ at risk of never returning to education.
- (2) This memo highlights that the main issue is not just a lack of school places but the challenges families face navigating a fragmented school admission system. Inconsistent council guidelines, complex forms, language barriers, and digital exclusion prevent timely access to education, while councils offer insufficient support.
- (3) The current system is inefficient and harmful, leading to missed opportunities, mental health struggles, and long-term exclusion. Building on our research with affected communities, we propose two primary changes:
 - a. Standardise and Simplify the School Admission Process: Implement a user-friendly system with clear, accessible guidance, streamlined timelines, and enhanced usability to remove key barriers for families.
 - b. Introduce Family Liaison Officers (FLOs): FLOs would provide personalised support to families, ensuring timely school placements and helping them navigate challenges like appeals and additional needs.
- (4) [With 39,200 children now out of school—14,500 more than in 2022](#)—urgent action is needed. These reforms for the *School admission arrangement in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (clauses 47 to 50)*, supported by central government funding, will uphold every child's right to education and prevent long-term harm.

Background: The Cost of Being Out of School: More Than Just a Delay

- (5) The current application system for mainstream secondary schools presents considerable challenges for families arriving in the UK each year. Combined with the challenges of migration, this complex process leads to prolonged school absences for many girls—especially older ones—as families face confusing application [requirements, rejections, and unclear guidance](#).
- (6) These delays have significant costs beyond lost time: they result [in missed opportunities, social isolation, and declining mental health](#), putting girls at higher risk of underachieving and [becoming NEET](#) (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) in

¹ The term 'new arrivals' describes children who are international migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers, children of people working or studying in England and economic migrants from overseas (Bell Foundation, 2022).

future years². Every day spent out of school is a missed chance for these young people to find a [sense of belonging and stability, and these harmful effects](#) are preventable with timely and effective changes to the admissions process.

The Cause: A Complex and Disjointed In-Year School Application System

(7) Since 2016, the [WONDER Foundation](#) has partnered with the [Baytree Centre](#) to support out-of-school migrant girls in accessing education in London. This work has identified several factors that hinder especially migrant and displaced older girls' access to education, including insufficient school funding, limited places, some schools' reluctance to accept older children and [inadequate oversight](#) of the admissions process across councils. However, our recent study has shown the most critical issue is that newly arrived families with children aged 14-16 ('late arrivals') must navigate a confusing, disjointed system with³:

- a. **Inconsistent information:** Guidance varies by council, with no single point of contact. Many families face delays due to unclear instructions and differences in [school admission booklets](#), [online forms](#), and timelines. The main barrier for them is the lack of prior knowledge about the educational system to navigate this application.
- b. **Complex usability:** The [online process](#) is cumbersome, involving multiple [forms \(e-admission, common application form, in-year admission form\) and steps](#) that many newly arrived families are unfamiliar with.
- c. **Additional barriers:** no prior knowledge about the admission process and the educational system, language barriers, lack of translation, and digital exclusion (i.e., digital literacy, access to computers and the internet) leave some families unable to access the process, adding to already stressful circumstances.
- d. **Low success rates:** Even after overcoming these barriers, newly arrived families rarely secure places through the in-year admission system for years 10 and 11. As a result, they are forced to apply directly to schools, many of which lack admission authority.

The case: Jacinta's⁴ story

(8) Jacinta, a 15-year-old from Nicaragua, arrived in London in 2023 seeking asylum, dreaming of becoming a leader for change. Despite graduating with honours, her transition has been difficult— three months out of school, mental health struggles in a crowded hotel, and numerous obstacles with school admissions. After a month of navigating online applications with no response, her mother walked across South London for hours, pleading with schools to enrol her, only to face rejections and

² WONDER research (2023) shows that migrant girls face unique, gendered challenges, including exposure to violence and the pressures of male-dominated environments, which can impact their educational and personal development.

³ It is important to acknowledge that we talk about the mainstream secondary schools that it is possible to apply by the council (excluding academies and private schools from this discussion).

⁴ Pseudonymous.

concerns about her limited English. Finally, after months of searching, Jacinta secured a school place. She shared her experience: *“I feel like I was on the moon; no other people know about me... they just were like the astronauts. We want to do our best and to make our parents proud, but it’s just that we don’t feel supported.”* For her, education is a pathway to rebuild her life and achieve her goals. Jacinta’s story, like many others, shows that the cost of waiting goes beyond lost time—it includes missed opportunities, social isolation, and declining mental health.

Recommendations

Strategy 1: Standardise the School Application Process

- (9) Councils must take a proactive role in overseeing and enhancing the school's in-year admission process. The following improvements are aligned with the [5Es of usability services, promoted by the government](#).
- a. **Standardising information:** create a uniform, easily accessible guidance across councils, including how to apply information websites in accessible formats (i.e., HTML access, audio and videos), with streamlined timelines and simplified steps to make for families simpler how-to-school admission works.
 - b. **Improving accessibility:** make the e-admissions platform more user-friendly for families and offer personalized and in-person applications to accommodate those lacking digital literacy.
 - c. **Supporting system comprehension:** Include translated materials and clear information on children’s educational rights (i.e., appeal options and FAP protocols), with the admissions team's contact details readily available. Collaboration with the voluntary sector and services (the NHS and the Home Office) can enhance this communication.
 - d. **Ensuring effectiveness:** If an application is denied, councils should provide families with clear next steps, including appeal options and direct applications to schools.
- (10) Implementing these proposals requires essential investments from the government and local authorities in areas such as (1) training, (2) staffing, (3) service coordination, and (4) user-friendly digital platforms. While these initial costs may seem significant, they are dwarfed by the long-term consequences of inaction. Inefficiencies in the admissions process burden late arrivals children, including worsening mental health and fewer educational opportunities. Local authorities also face financial strain from untracked students and overcrowded schools, with educational exclusion [costing up to £2,200 per NEET individual](#) in the UK. Investing in these reforms now will create a fairer education system that benefits families and strengthens our communities.
- (11) **Policy takeaway: Implement a standardised, accessible in-year school admission system with streamlined processes, enhanced usability, and coordinated**

support mechanisms to ensure equitable and timely school placements for newly arrived children.

Strategy 2: Establish Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) for Support

(12) Local authorities recognise the importance of [effective guidance for newly arrived families](#), yet many families still struggle alone through a complex process. To support families, we propose a closer collaboration between local councils and the voluntary sector, which already offers personalised and expertise support to migrant families. Learning from their experience, local authorities could establish Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) within councils to act as the main contact to guide families from their first inquiry until their child secures a school place. The responsibilities of this team will include:

- a. **Provide comprehensive guidance:** FLOs with an in-depth knowledge of admissions, will ensure families have accurate information about the school application procedures, document requirements, and translation and access to digital resources to secure a school place.
- b. **Offer individual support:** FLOs will assist struggling families with school choices, advocate for alternative options if initial applications are denied, accompany them to school interviews, helping in signposting for specific needs (i.e., EAL courses, SEND support, uniforms, transport and free school meals) and guide them through appeals if needed.
- c. **Strengthen Child Protection:** By alerting local authorities to any case where a child's place is denied, FLOs can address cases of discrimination, safeguarding the children's right to education.
- d. **Strengthen Voluntary Sector Connections:** With over [1,460 UK organisations](#) dedicated to helping migrant and displaced children secure basic rights like education, councils have a valuable resource at their disposal. These organisations offer expertise in navigating admissions processes and supporting families. Partnering with them can help councils communicate better with newly arrived families and improve access to education for their children.

(13) Evidence shows that dedicated liaisons such as FLOs improve school [placement rates](#), [attendance](#), and [family well-being](#), creating [long-term positive outcomes](#). For example, the ["Bringing Hotels"](#) initiative for Afghan refugees in 2021 effectively facilitated access to education through this approach, providing a tested framework for the UK's broader in-year admission system.

(14) **Policy takeaway: Establish Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) within local authorities to provide personalised, end-to-end support for newly arrived families, enhance collaboration with the voluntary sector, and improve school placement outcomes while safeguarding children's right to education.**

Conclusion

- (15) Despite the challenges posed by recent [funding cuts](#), we believe that a standardised admissions process and dedicated Family Liaison Officers can equip councils to fulfil every child's right to education and prevent a generation from falling behind.
- (16) These measures will do more than shorten the wait for school placements; they will offer newly arrived children immediate access to the security and growth opportunities that education provides, allowing them to establish roots, build friendships, and find a place of belonging as soon as they arrive.
- (17) Many councils already extend essential support to migrant families (such as [Derby, and Middlesbrough](#)), but isolated efforts are not enough. By uniting around these shared practices, councils and community organisations can bridge the gaps in our education system and ensure that all children, no matter their background, have a fair new start.

WONDER Foundation

- (18) [WONDER Foundation](#) is a registered charity working locally and internationally to give women and girls the skills and opportunities to recognise their significance and reach their potential. Building on the experience of our partners in education access and our research, we aim to provide evidence and raise awareness of the longer delays in accessing education for migrant and displaced older girls in the UK.
- (19) This memo draws on [WONDER's comprehensive research](#) conducted in 2023, complemented by qualitative insights from participatory consultations with migrant and displaced communities at the Baytree Centre, IRMO, and Saint Gabriel's College with the financial support of [ROSA Foundation: Voices from the Frontline](#). These consultations included focus groups and interviews with 19 participants, alongside WONDER's evaluation of the school application process in England. For further information, contact Olivia Darby, Chief Policy and Advocacy Officer at Olivia@wonderfoundation.org.uk and, please visit our website at wonderfoundation.org.uk.

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