

EVERY CHILD IS EQUAL

**BRIDGING THE CHILDCARE
GAP FOR FAMILIES WITH
NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC
FUNDS (NRPF)**

**Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz
and Lucy Mort**

March 2025

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SUMMARY

Access to high quality, affordable early education and childcare has the potential to be transformative for families. But the current system of entitlements to support with the costs of childcare is not well targeted at those families facing greatest disadvantage, despite the government's manifesto commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunity for every child.

Migrant parents affected by the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition do not get the same help with their childcare costs, regardless of how long they've been in the UK, whether they're working or living in poverty, or their children's citizenship. Families with NRPF are entitled to 15 funded hours of care for their three- and four-year-olds, and some low-income families may be entitled to care for their two-year-olds. These families are denied access to all other forms of support with childcare costs, including the extended entitlement for working parents, and universal credit support with childcare costs and tax-free childcare. The NRPF condition, which affects an estimated 148,000 migrant families with children aged one–four years, acts as a blanket ban on access to the social security system.¹

All families with young children in the UK face eye-watering childcare costs and a confusing patchwork of entitlements, which can make it harder for some parents, especially women and those earning low incomes, to work. But the impact of this on migrant families can be especially profound because most parents with NRPF rely entirely on income from employment. They are barred from accessing the income top-up function of the social security system, or any support designed to protect young children from poverty. This is especially concerning when children with foreign-born parents face almost twice the risk of relative poverty as their peers with UK-born parents (Vizard et al 2023), and around one-third of the children living in deepest poverty are in migrant households (Fitzpatrick et al 2023).

The impact of unequal access to childcare entitlements on migrant families is the focus of this report, which takes stock of how families access the system of early education and care. Our findings are drawn from a survey of 159 parents with experience of NRPF restrictions and at least one child below school age, as well as in-depth interviews with a further 17 parents.

Our research suggests that although the parents who took part see childcare as an essential enabler of work and a means of ensuring equal access to opportunities for their children, they currently use it at much lower rates than the wider population (55 per cent compared to 72 per cent). According to the parents in our sample, this is primarily the result of cost constraints faced by migrant parents. Cost was the reason given by 72 per cent of those who were not using childcare, compared to just 12 per cent among the general population (Department for Education [DfE] 2024a). Lack of access to childcare that meets families' needs is having profound consequences for parents' – and especially mothers' – ability to work and earn an income, and on children's access to opportunities and readiness to start school. While this is not unique

1 This estimate is based on Labour Force Survey data and includes non-EU migrant families as a proxy for those likely to have NRPF. It excludes full-time students because this group are unlikely to be working full time and have young children, so are less likely to be eligible for existing childcare entitlements. See section 5.2 for more detail.

to migrant families, our evidence suggests that they may be particularly negatively impacted.

WORK AND INCOME

Our findings suggest that a significant proportion of migrant parents are held back from work by barriers in accessing childcare. Two fifths of parents not currently using care reported that they or their partner were unable to get a job at all. Of those using childcare, 41 per cent said they were not able to work as much as they wanted or needed to. This has a knock-on effect on the wider household's finances. Half of parents we spoke to reported that lack of access to the childcare they need has negatively affected their household's finances. 30 per cent of parents not currently using childcare were struggling to make ends meet.

To better understand the impact of unequal access to childcare entitlements, we modelled the impact on parental income of access to different amounts of government-funded childcare using the extended entitlement for working parents. This entitlement, which was expanded by the Conservative government in 2023, gives parents earning the equivalent of the national living wage for 16 hours a week access to 30 hours 'free' childcare. Our modelling suggests that lack of access to this entitlement constrains migrant parents' working hours and take-home pay at a variety of income levels and in both single- and dual-earner households.² Migrant single parents earning low incomes and working part-time appear worst affected, finding themselves 38 per cent – or £2,600 per year – worse off compared to a single parent working the same number of hours who has access to the extended entitlement. Our findings indicate that access to the extended entitlement would make a significant difference to migrant families, enabling parents to work longer hours and freeing up resources that could be used to meet other essential costs or invest in extracurricular activities for children.

CHILDREN

We found that parents' biggest concern was the impact on their children of unequal access to support with the costs of early education and childcare. Around half felt that their children were missing out on opportunities available to other children, while 35 per cent of parents using care feared that their children would be less well-prepared for school than their peers.

The children of migrant parents face a higher than average risk of poverty, and unequal access to early education and care can exacerbate their disadvantage. This is particularly concerning for children in families facing multiple layers of disadvantage, such as single parents or those whose children have additional needs. These early barriers risk having long-term impacts on the future opportunities and wellbeing of individuals, as well as broader impacts on UK society, especially considering that around three quarters of children subject to NRPF as a condition of their leave are likely to become permanent residents or British citizens.

ACCESS DIFFICULTIES

We found that migrant parents in our sample are much less likely to use childcare entitlements than the general population, even when they are eligible for them. Just 17 per cent of parents said they use the universal entitlement, compared to 94 per cent among the general population. Meanwhile, only 10 per cent of our sample reported using the 15-hour weekly entitlement for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds,

² Take home pay is calculated after tax, National Insurance Contributions (NICs) and childcare costs.

despite this being extended in 2022 to all parents with incomes below a certain threshold, regardless of their NRPF status. Parents found it very difficult to get help understanding their entitlements and navigating the childcare system, and reported that health visitors, social workers, and school and nursery staff often provided conflicting and sometimes inaccurate information.

Drawing on these findings and considering the government's commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunity for every child, we recommend urgent change to immigration status-based restrictions on eligibility for childcare entitlements. Opinion polling suggests a majority of the public support migrant families' access to both childcare and childcare entitlements (Early Education and Childcare Coalition 2024). Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. The government should start by removing immigration status-based restrictions on eligibility for the extended entitlement. As this is fully expanded in September 2025 to parents of children aged between nine months and four years, failing to include migrant parents may further deepen existing inequalities faced by low-income migrant families.
2. The Department for Education should review uptake of the entitlement for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds among low-income families with NRPF. Specifically designed to try to close the disadvantage gap and one of the few entitlements that low-income migrant parents are eligible for, it is striking that few appear to be using it.
3. The government must also take steps to ensure that providers of family services are better equipped to help migrant families understand and take up the entitlements they are eligible for.

To fulfil its mission of breaking down barriers to opportunity and achieve the goal of ensuring 75 per cent of children are school-ready by 2029, the government should prioritise creating a properly funded, high quality and affordable system of early education and care for all families, regardless of parents' employment or immigration status. Given the complexities and disincentives that exist within the present system, especially its current inability to reduce disadvantage, fundamental reform is urgently needed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to good quality, affordable early years education and care has the potential to be transformative for both children and their families. It can have long-lasting impacts on children's outcomes throughout their lives, from educational attainment to employment and health. It also plays a crucial role in closing the disadvantage gap between lower and higher income families. For parents, access to affordable, reliable early education and care is critical to their ability to work and earn a living. Without it, parents can face severely limited employment options or be pushed out of paid work entirely, especially if they are earning low incomes (Statham et al 2022).

Yet overall, the system of early years education and childcare support falls short of realising this transformative potential. The patchwork of government-funded support leaves many parents unclear about their entitlements and still facing eye-watering costs. Providers struggle to stay afloat because support rates remain lower than the cost of providing care, leading some to close their doors and to childcare 'deserts' in some areas. Although the UK government now funds the majority of pre-school childcare in England, its support is not well targeted at disadvantaged children (Reed and O'Halloran 2024). The landmark expansion of support with childcare costs announced in May 2023 was largely aimed at supporting parents to work and has been widely welcomed by parents eligible for it. But in expanding support for this cohort, state support for childcare costs has become increasingly focussed on employment at the expense of the developmental benefits of childcare. Instead of closing the disadvantage gap, this risks further entrenching inequalities (Jarvie et al 2023; Farquharson 2024).

Against this backdrop, migrant families subject to the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition are prevented from accessing most forms of support with childcare costs, including the expanded entitlement for working parents. The unique experiences of migrant families have been largely missing from recent analysis of the early education and childcare system. This report aims to provide insight into migrant families' experiences with this system and the impact of unequal access to entitlements.

2. CONTEXT

Almost all migrants in the UK who have not yet attained indefinite leave to remain (ILR, also known as permanent residency or settled status) are likely to be subject to the NRPf condition. This acts as a blanket ban on access to the social security system, meaning those affected cannot access a prescribed list of ‘public funds for immigration purposes’, which includes most benefits such as universal credit.³ The condition was extended as part of ‘hostile environment’ measures introduced in 2012, which sought to make life as difficult as possible primarily for migrant communities.

WHO HAS NRPf?

NRPf typically affects people who have leave to remain on study, work and family visas, people who are seeking asylum, and people who don’t have a current visa (often referred to as ‘undocumented’). It applies regardless of employment status or income, or length of residence in the UK, until an individual has acquired ILR.

The condition affects around 4 million people in the UK (Leon and Broadhead 2024; McKinney et al 2024), plus an unknown number of British citizen children affected because their parents have NRPf.

MIGRANT FAMILIES AFFECTED BY NRPf RESTRICTIONS

There are estimated to be around 722,064 children affected by NRPf in the UK.⁴ Of these, just over half a million have NRPf as a condition of their leave to remain, and three-quarters of these children have leave to remain on a pathway to settlement (Pinter and Leon 2025). This means there is a strong likelihood they will become permanently resident or acquire British citizenship.

New analysis shows there are an estimated 148,000 families with at least one child aged 1–4 years who are affected by NRPf as a condition of their visa (see section 5.2 for more detail).

NRPf AND CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS

Migrant families in which both parents are subject to NRPf are barred by their immigration status from most entitlements to support with the costs of childcare, except the universal entitlement and, for those on low incomes, the support for ‘disadvantaged’ two-year-olds. The latter was opened to certain groups of parents with NRPf who meet the income criteria following litigation in 2019 (ILPA 2019), and to all eligible parents with NRPf following a public consultation in 2022.

While the extended entitlement for working parents is not a public fund for immigration purposes, those who have leave to remain subject to an NRPf

3 See section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and paragraph 6 of the Immigration rules for more detail: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-funds--2/public-funds>

4 This includes 507,064 children in families with a visa affected by the NRPf condition, plus an estimated 215,000 children in families with irregular immigration status (Pinter and Leon 2025).

condition or who do not currently have leave to remain are treated by section 12 of *The Childcare (Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Extended Entitlement) Regulations 2016* as not being in the UK for the purposes of establishing entitlement. The same test applies to tax-free childcare, meaning that migrant parents are unable to access this additional support, even if they would otherwise qualify for it on the basis of income. Table 2.1 summarises migrant parents' entitlements to support with the costs of childcare.

TABLE 2.1: SUMMARY OF CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA ACCORDING TO IMMIGRATION STATUS

Entitlement	Who is it for?	Hours per week	Can parents with NRPF access it?
Universal entitlement	All three-to-four-year-olds	15 hours per week	Yes – no eligibility restrictions except child age
'Disadvantaged' two-year-olds	Two-year-olds living in low-income households	15 hours per week	Yes – if meet specified income criteria assessed through a parallel application system
Extended entitlement for working parents of three-to-four-year-olds	Three-to-four-year-olds where both parent/s earn at least the national living wage (NLW) for 16 hours per week on average	30 hours per week	No – if subject to NRPF, treated as not resident in the UK for the purposes of the regulations
Extended entitlement for working parents of children between nine months and two years old	Children aged between nine months and two years where both parent/s earn the NLW for 16 hours per week on average	15 hours per week ⁵	No – if subject to NRPF, treated as not resident in the UK for the purposes of the regulations
Tax-free childcare	Parent/s with children under the age of 11, who are (both) working and earn at least the NLW for 16 hours per week on average	N/a – parents can claim up to £500 every three months for each child to help with costs of childcare	No – if subject to NRPF, treated as not resident in the UK for the purposes of the regulations
Universal credit support with the costs of childcare	Parent/s who are (both) in paid work and in receipt of universal credit	N/a	No – if subject to NRPF, not entitled to universal credit, which is a public fund for immigration purposes

Source: Authors' analysis

There are some limited exceptions to the above.

1. If a parent subject to NRPF is part of a mixed-status couple, with a partner who has either ILR or British citizenship, then as long as both partners meet the income requirement they can use the extended entitlement and tax-free childcare. The parent without NRPF could also be eligible for universal credit, meaning that the family could qualify for childcare support via this route.
2. Some people subject to NRPF⁶ may be granted recourse to public funds after representations are made at the point of applying for leave or lifted following

⁵ In September 2025, this will increase to 30 hours per week.

⁶ Broadly, this option is open to those whose leave to remain is based on human rights grounds, or those holding a Hong Kong British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) visa, or under Appendix Child Staying With or Joining a Non-Parent Relative (Appendix CNP). People on other types of visas may also be able to successfully apply in very exceptional circumstances, but applying to lift the NRPF condition from other types of visas entails the risk of visa cancellation.

a successful ‘change of conditions’ application, if they meet relevant criteria.⁷ However, this option is not practically open to every family with NRPf given that it carries the risk of cancellation of their leave to remain, is subject to a high evidentiary threshold, and can be a difficult application to complete successfully without specialist advice which is in chronically short supply (see Mort et al 2023). In 2023, just 2,293 successful applications were made for a change of conditions. As a proportion of NRPf households at risk of destitution,⁸ this suggests just 1 per cent of those that might need it gain access to public funds as a result of the change of conditions process.⁹

EXISTING EVIDENCE ABOUT IMPACTS OF UNEQUAL ENTITLEMENTS

Several studies identify access to childcare as a critical barrier for migrant households affected by NRPf restrictions, particularly limiting women’s ability to work. A 2021 Citizens Advice report based on a representative sample of people with NRPf highlighted that the lack of support for childcare costs was a key obstacle to migrant parents seeking employment (Smith et al 2021), while a qualitative study by The Unity Project based on interviews with 66 people found that parents with pre-school-aged children were twice as likely to be out of work as those with school-aged children (Woolley 2019). More recently, a report by the Welcoming Committee for Hong Kongers and British Future based on a sample of 96 Hong Kongers in challenging circumstances found that childcare costs presented significant challenges for parents on the Hong Kong BN(O) visa route, disproportionately affecting women. The report also noted that this cohort struggled to access information about local childcare options (Rolfe and Lau 2024).

Existing research highlights that those facing multiple, overlapping layers of disadvantage are most likely to struggle with childcare access. For instance, single parents of younger children are at greatest risk of underemployment and unemployment due to childcare challenges (Pinter et al 2020; Woolley 2019). A study by the London-based child poverty network 4 in 10, based on 16 interviews and a survey completed by over 70 parents, found evidence that children in migrant households with special education needs or disabilities (SEND) are particularly disadvantaged by limited access to early education (4 in 10 2024). Similarly, a UNICEF UK report based on two parent focus groups, three parent and 20 practitioner interviews emphasised the critical importance of access to high quality care and education for asylum-seeking families living in sub-standard hotel accommodation with little space for play (Ashlee et al 2024).

Children of migrant parents face a higher than average risk of poverty, highlighting why unequal access to childcare support is particularly problematic for NRPf families. With paid work as their only income source, barriers to employment can severely impact family finances. In 2019/20, 49.6 per cent of children with foreign-born parents in the UK for 10 years or less, and 47 per cent of those in the UK for over 11 years, lived in relative poverty, compared to 25.8 per cent of children with UK-born parents. These children were also three times more likely to experience severe poverty (10 per cent) compared to their peers with UK-born parents (3.1 per cent) (Vizard et al 2023). Unequal access to childcare entitlements exacerbates these risks, further deepening financial insecurity.

7 This happens when the applicant is either destitute or at risk of imminent destitution, there are child welfare reasons that outweigh the case for imposing the condition, or there are exceptional financial circumstances. See here for further details: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-public-funds-within-family-private-life-and-hong-kong-bno-routes>.

8 One report estimated that there are 208,000 households affected by NRPf at risk of destitution (Centre for Social Policy Studies 2024).

9 This is based on the total number of change of conditions applications granted in 2023 (2,293) (Home Office 2024) and the number of households affected by NRPf at risk of destitution (208,000) (Centre for Social Policy Studies 2024).

3.

METHODOLOGY AND RESPONDENT PROFILE

To find out more about the experiences of migrant families, we combined in-depth interviews with 17 parents with an online survey, completed by a further 159 parents, between December 2023 and May 2024. These were open to parents with at least one child under school age, with experience of the NRPF condition, either currently or in the last five years. We defined ‘migrant’ to mean anyone who did not have one of the following statuses (all of which allow access to public funds): ILR, British citizenship or refugee status.

Some survey questions and response options mirrored those used in the Department for Education’s childcare and early years survey of parents (DfE 2024a), to allow a degree of comparison between migrant parents and the wider population of parents. We were unable to construct a representative sample of parents with NRPF because of the lack of Home Office data about the demographic characteristics or total size of this population. Our data collection methods are likely to oversample individuals who have accessed legal advice or support from a charity as a result of experiencing financial hardship (often a requirement of accessing advice and support services) and underrepresent those who either have been unable to access or do not require advice and support. In the absence of other data on this issue, our analysis should therefore be understood as illustrative of *some* of the experiences of migrant parents in accessing childcare.

Separately, new data analysis estimates how many families may be affected by exclusion from entitlements to support with the costs of childcare. This analysis combines data from the Home Office’s Migrant Journey and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to estimate the number of families with children aged 1–4 years who are likely to be affected by NRPF restrictions on their access to childcare entitlements. We estimated the number of childcare hours parents require and the average hourly costs to model the impact of unequal access to childcare entitlements on parental income. More details of our methodology are available in appendix 1.

WHO TOOK PART?

Most of those who participated in this research were mothers aged 25–44 years. Just under half were from two-parent households (55 per cent). On average, there were two children per household. Almost a quarter of parents said they had at least one child with special educational needs or a disability (SEND) (24 per cent).

Most participants had NRPF at the time of taking part (66 per cent of survey respondents), and had a wide variety of different immigration statuses, including: work, study and family visas; leave as a BN(O) visa holder; no current leave to remain; and seeking asylum. Most respondents had been in the UK between one and five years, while less than a third had lived here for six years or more (29 per cent). One third (31 per cent) identified their ethnicity as African, while 15 per cent identified as Chinese, and 24 per cent were from a mixed ethnic background.

For full details of our sample see appendix 2.

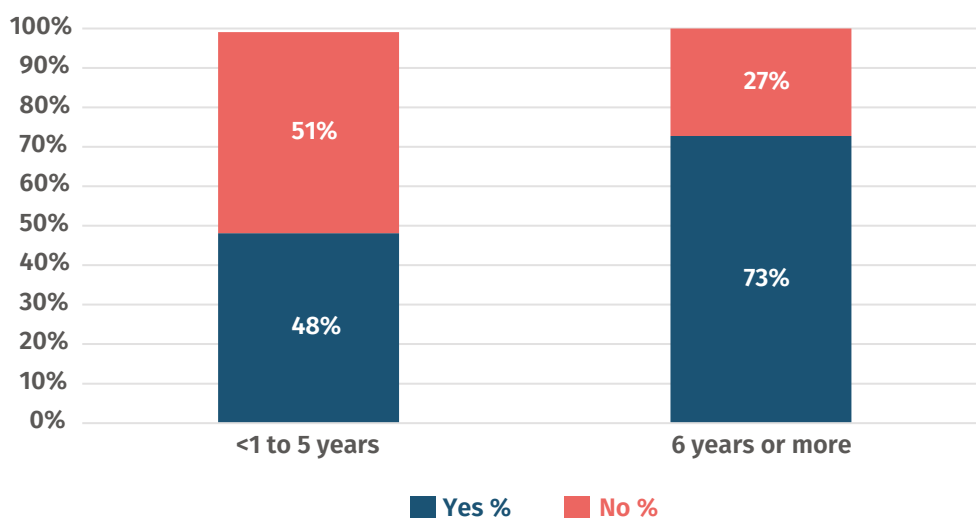
4. MIGRANT PARENTS' USE OF CHILDCARE: A SNAPSHOT

This section presents an overview of how surveyed migrant parents use the childcare system, the types of care they use and their attitudes towards it. A majority (55 per cent) of the parents who completed our survey said they were using some sort of childcare for their pre-school-aged child. This was notably lower than among the general population, where 72 per cent of children aged 0–4 years were receiving some form of childcare in 2023 (DfE 2024a).

As might be expected, use of childcare increases the longer parents have been in the UK (see figure 4.1 below). This may be because over time, parents become more familiar with and able to navigate systems in the UK.

FIGURE 4.1: CHILDCARE USE INCREASES THE LONGER PARENTS LIVE IN THE UK

Childcare use by length of time in the UK (% of respondents)

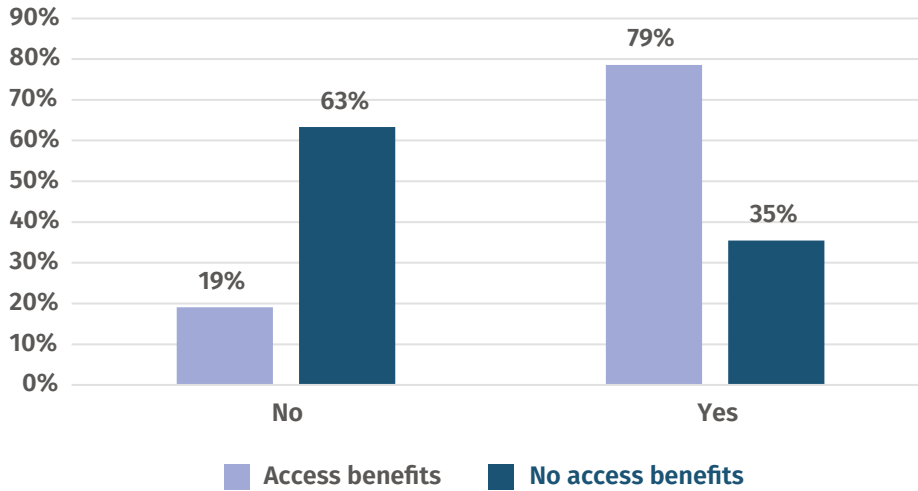


Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

As figure 4.2 shows, childcare use among migrant families where at least one parent has access to public funds was significantly higher - at 79 per cent - making them around twice as likely to use childcare compared to families where both parents have NRPF, where usage drops to 35 per cent. This highlights the pivotal role of access to public funds and, by extension, childcare entitlements in determining childcare use.

FIGURE 4.2: FAMILIES WITH ACCESS TO PUBLIC FUNDS VIA ONE PARENT ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO USE CHILDCARE COMPARED TO THOSE WHERE BOTH PARENTS HAVE NRPF

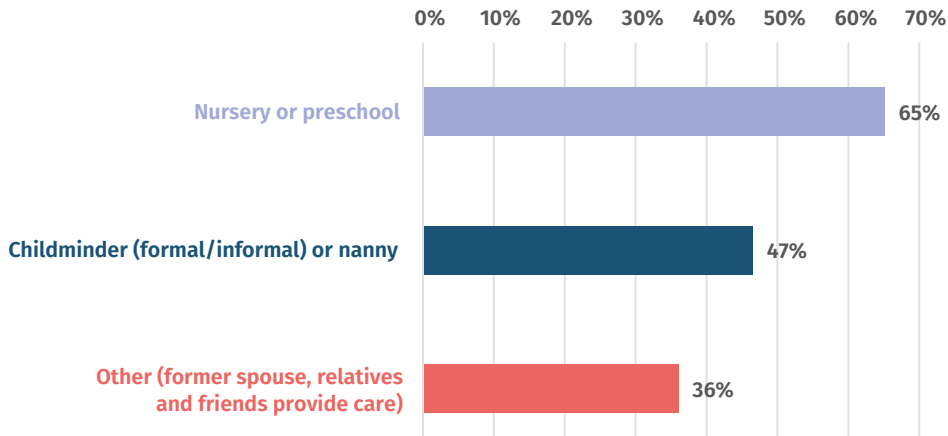
Childcare use of parents with NRPF vs those with access to benefits (% of respondents)



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

FIGURE 4.3: MOST RESPONDENTS USED A NURSERY OR PRE-SCHOOL, WHILE ALMOST HALF USED A CHILDMINDER OR NANNY AND OVER ONE-THIRD RELIED ON FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS

Type of childcare arrangements used (% of respondents)



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

TYPE OF CARE USED

Most parents who said they were using childcare sent their children to pre-schools or nurseries, followed by childminders or nannies, and informal care by friends or relatives (see figure 4.3). Our interviews, however, suggested that single parent families with NRPF in particular relied on free childcare provided by a friend or acquaintance, often in exchange for caring for another person’s

children. One single mother of three resident in the UK for 12 years told us about her ambivalence towards doing so:

“It’s not that they are qualified... But you want to go to work, and they are home with their children and it’s cheap as well because they are not qualified [...] So I would leave my baby [with] them, but it was hard.”

ATTITUDES TOWARDS CARE

Parents overwhelmingly saw childcare as beneficial for themselves and their children, expressing a strong desire for access or greater access to it. Most parents currently using childcare spoke positively about the quality of care their children received, and those providing it. One mother of a 22-month-old summed up a common view: “We really like our nursery. They’re lovely. I really think they do their best for my child.” Parents viewed access to early education and care as vital for their children’s development, particularly in building cognitive and social skills and learning English where this is not spoken at home. Many also saw it as crucial for levelling the playing field and ensuring their children are as prepared for school as their peers.

Across all the parents we spoke to, childcare was seen as essential – both as an enabler of work and as critical for preparing children for school and later life. They saw it as a necessity rather than a choice and were focussed on securing access or increasing the hours of care available to them.

5.

THE ROLE OF CHILDCARE IN ENABLING WORK AND FINANCIAL STABILITY

This section examines how access to childcare affects parents' ability to work and their household finances, highlighting the barriers they face and the resulting impact on their economic stability.

IMPACT ON WORK AND HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Almost every parent we spoke to wanted to work or increase their hours. Yet less than half of survey respondents were employed (46 per cent), with part-time work being particularly common. Many reported being unable to work – or work as much as they wanted – because they couldn't access the childcare their family needed.

For parents *not* currently using any childcare, the main problem was being unable to work at all: 41 per cent said this applied either to them or a partner (see figure 5.1 below). A father of one from Bangladesh described how he and his wife, both working nearly full time while alternating care for their one-year-old daughter, wanted to work additional hours but couldn't afford childcare or rely on family help. He reflected that:

“If my wife could also work an extra one or two days, if I could also take on more work outside of [my full-time job], then maybe we'll be in a better financial state.”

A father of two from Hong Kong who was working full time but without access to childcare echoed similar challenges:

“It's challenging when you've got children at home... my wife would like to [look for a job in the UK now]. But currently, it's not available for her. At least, if maybe we can get our daughter [into childcare] like for 15 hours... At least, her hands are free then she could look for [work].”

Several parents highlighted the unfairness of paying taxes and national insurance without receiving equal benefits. A mother of one from Australia told us:

“I've been here for four years. I have been working most of that time, at least part-time, and it's slightly arbitrary that I work, I pay taxes and yet we don't get the same benefits that other people get.”

Close to one-third of those not using care currently reported being unable to advance their careers (31 per cent), work in their qualified field (25 per cent) or take up job opportunities (23 per cent) (see figure 5.1). This was the case for Michelle, a mother of two from Hong Kong now living in Manchester.

CASE STUDY: MICHELLE'S¹⁰ EXPERIENCE

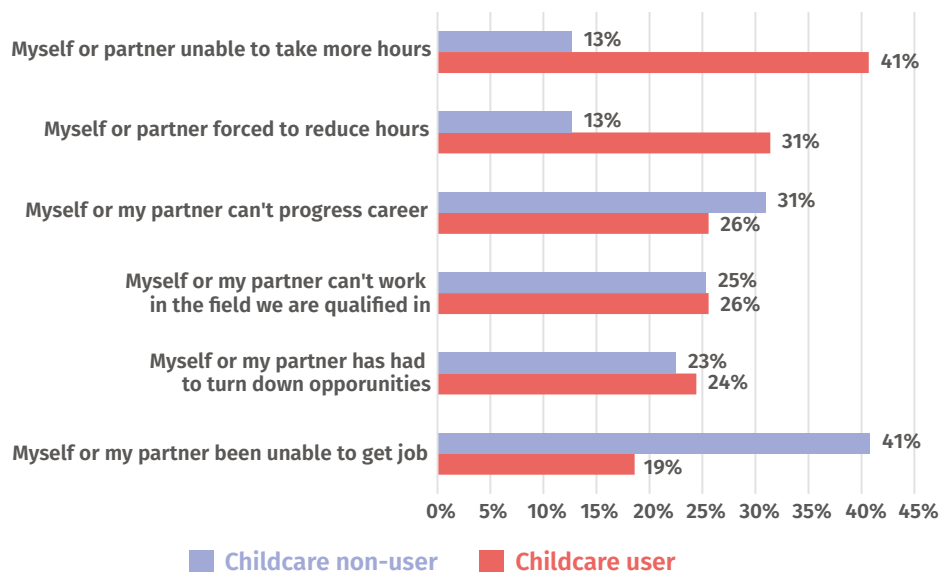
Michelle lives with her husband and two children (aged five years and 11 months). She works 27.5 hours per week, while her husband works full time. They cannot afford childcare for their youngest son and are not eligible for subsidies. Michelle works from home so she can look after her son at the same time, something she finds to be a struggle.

Soon, Michelle plans to work full time by compressing her hours over four days, leaving her husband to reduce his hours to part time to care for their son on the remaining days. She expressed frustration that they are unable to work to their full potential.

“[What I’d like to see is] just to open the childcare support, every parent can be qualified for the childcare support benefit because, when it is the case, I think more parents can go out and look for job, to fulfil their meaning of life or to earn more income and that will be good for the whole economy for the UK, as well, I think.”

FIGURE 5.1: BETWEEN ONE-QUARTER AND ONE-THIRD OF PARENTS ARE HELD BACK IN THEIR CAREERS BY CHILDCARE EXCLUSIONS

Impact of not having access to childcare that’s right for your family’s needs on parent working life (comparing childcare users and non-users)



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

For parents *using* childcare, the challenges were slightly different. While a small number reported being unable to get a job, the main issue was not being able to work as much as they wanted or needed to (41 per cent). Nearly a third said they had been forced to reduce their hours (31 per cent), while 26 per cent said they couldn't progress in their career or work in the field in which they are qualified (see figure 5.1).

In interviews, many parents expressed frustration over the 15-hours funded childcare, available only during term time. They found it incompatible with

¹⁰ All names have been changed.

the demands of the job market, particularly when providers spread the hours across five days. As one mother of three from Nigeria asked: “What can I do with 15 hours?” This frustration echoes a recent study, which found that low-income parents, regardless of immigration status, often struggled to use this entitlement effectively (4 in 10, 2024).

A mother of two daughters from South Africa who has been living in the UK for 18 years described the constraints of her situation:

“Picture this: my oldest one leaves the house at eight-thirty in the morning, she comes home about three-forty. She gets dropped at home with the bus, I have to receive her at three-forty, Monday to Friday. My youngest goes to nursery Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, one o’clock until six PM. Now, if I were to go and work, it means I would go to work maybe around one-thirty, and I should be home at three o’clock. That’s, what, two hours? How and who in their right mind is going to employ a mum who says, ‘I can only work those two hours, and I can only work these days, and I can only work during term time?’”

Half of parents using childcare said they felt stuck and unable to achieve their ambitions because the available care didn’t meet their needs (see figure 6.2).

CASE STUDY: EFIA’S EXPERIENCE

Efia is a single mother of a two-year-old from Ghana and has been resident in the UK for five years. After separating from her partner due to domestic abuse, Efia and her daughter became destitute and were housed in emergency accommodation by the local authority while she applied to lift her NRPf status. Encouraged by her local authority, Efia found a part-time job in a bakery and enrolled her daughter in nursery, believing she’d qualify for childcare support through universal credit.

However, having been incorrectly advised, she later discovered she was ineligible for universal credit – and therefore for support with the costs of childcare – due to her immigration status. Left with a £756 monthly nursery bill and earning just £950 per month, Efia quickly fell into debt. “It leaves me with nothing,” she explained.

“By the end of the month, I’m already negative. I’ve been using overdraft since last year... I pay and I use, I pay and I use, I pay and I use... but obviously, what can I do? [...] It got to the time like, you’ve got nothing in the house, you’ve got nothing, just nothing in the house.”

Despite her nursery allowing her to pay in instalments, the financial strain eventually forced her to leave her job, leaving her reliant once more on subsistence payments from her local authority.

The decision was devastating for Efia. She described the impact on her mental health and the heartbreak of removing her daughter from nursery, where she had been thriving: “She was very happy there... it breaks my heart that I’m taking her from there.” Her daughter has since experienced speech and language delays due to missing out on early education, with Efia’s health visitor also emphasising the importance of returning to nursery for her development.

Being unable to work as many hours as desired – or at all – had significant financial consequences for families. Half of those surveyed said the mismatch between their families’ needs and the childcare they could access was negatively

affecting their finances (see figure 5.2a). Many struggled to make ends meet, cut back on essentials, or cut back non-essential spending like treats or days out. Among parents not using childcare, almost one in three reported that they were struggling to make ends meet (see figure 5.2b).

FIGURE 5.2: INSUFFICIENT CHILDCARE HOURS OR INABILITY TO ACCESS CHILDCARE NEGATIVELY IMPACTS FAMILY'S FINANCES

Effects on household finances of not having access to childcare that's right for your family (comparing childcare users and non-users)

Figure 5.2a

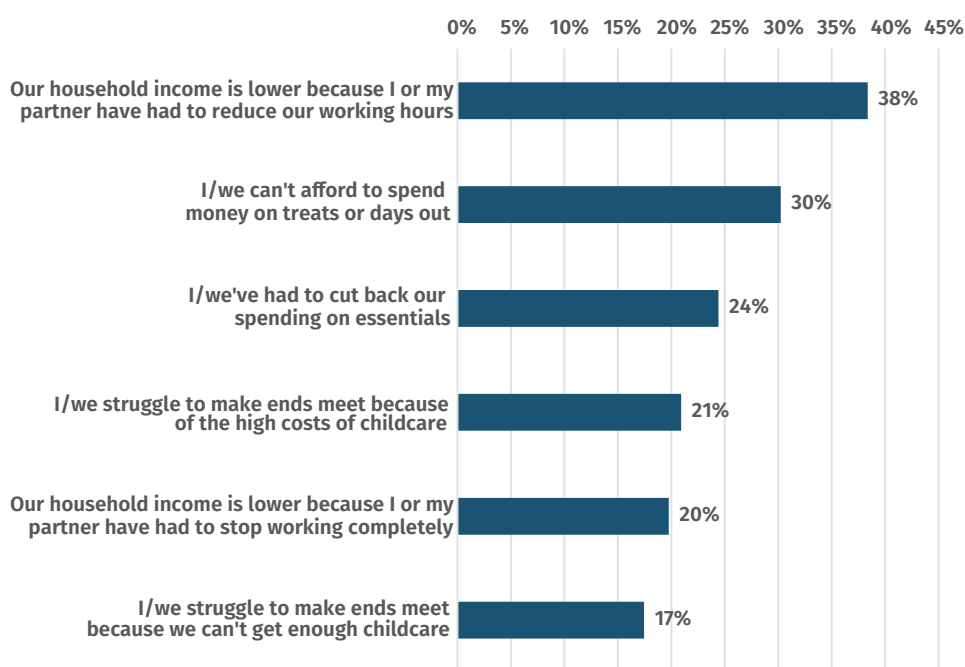
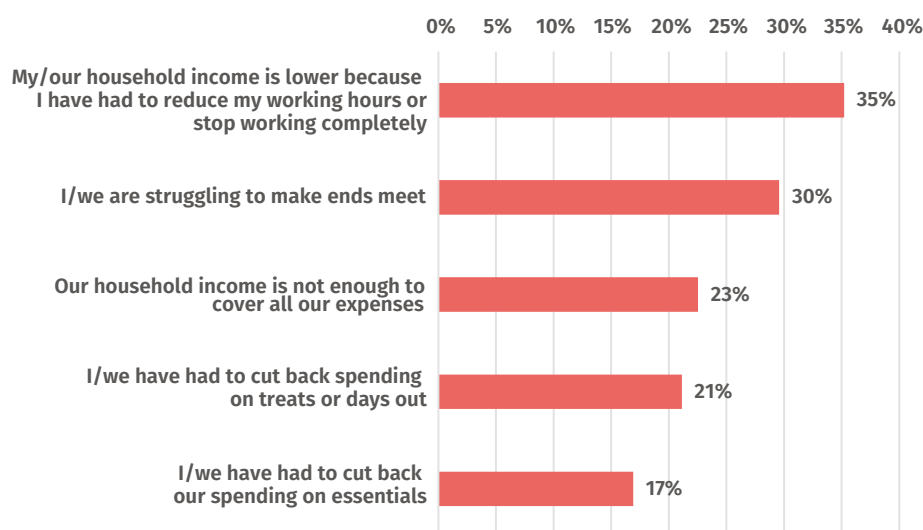


Figure 5.2b



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

In interviews, parents reported being unable to afford essentials for their children. A single mother of three from Nigeria described her desperation:

“Because we can’t afford our rent anymore, we can’t afford anything, food, nothing. We are looking for money everywhere. Whenever we see money on the floor when we go out, it was tough. And children, they have to eat.”

A mother of two from Colombia, who stays at home to care for her children, emphasised the financial strain of not having access to childcare:

“... my husband at the moment is the sole breadwinner and he has an informal job, it’s quite precarious, and he’s on the zero-hour contract, so we have no guarantee that there’s gonna be like a steady source of income for the family and as a result of that as well finding housing can become really difficult.”

She reflected that access to childcare would enable her to work, providing the family with two reliable sources of income.

Other parents highlighted being unable to afford treats for their children, such as day trips or birthday celebrations. One mother of two from Pakistan said:

“Even now I’m thinking to celebrate my son’s birthday... but I can’t because [four of us are living in a studio flat] and I don’t have any space to call his school friends to come in my house and enjoy with him.”

Debt was another common theme, particularly among parents who had borrowed money to cover visa fees and charges. A father from Bangladesh explained:

“We had to take out one loan for a visa a couple of years ago, and now, because of the changes [to visa fees and the NHS surcharge] that are coming, [and] I have to do the other visa, which means a huge amount of money...”¹¹

He added that funded childcare hours and the ability to work longer hours would help the family pay off debts faster and improve their standard of living.

MODELLING THE IMPACT OF UNEQUAL ACCESS TO CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS

Parents in our survey consistently highlighted how inadequate access to childcare that meets their needs impacts their ability to work and manage family finances. To quantify this, we modelled the financial impact of unequal access to the extended entitlement for working parents on take-home pay.

This analysis compares two scenarios.

1. The current situation, where parents with NRPf only have access to the universal 15-hour entitlement and must pay for any additional childcare (ie NRPf parent – no extended entitlement)

¹¹ Visa fees are chargeable for most types of leave to remain in the UK. They vary widely, depending on the type of leave to remain. Many have to be reapplied for every couple of years. In addition, applicants are required to pay the Immigration Health Surcharge, or NHS surcharge, a fee for accessing health care in the UK, which is paid in addition to any National Insurance Contributions. The fee was increased by 66 per cent in 2023, to £1,035 per adult and £776 per child. This fee has to be paid upfront for the duration of the grant of leave (which is often 30 months), meaning that applicants – especially those applying as a family – often face a bill of several thousand pounds every few years.

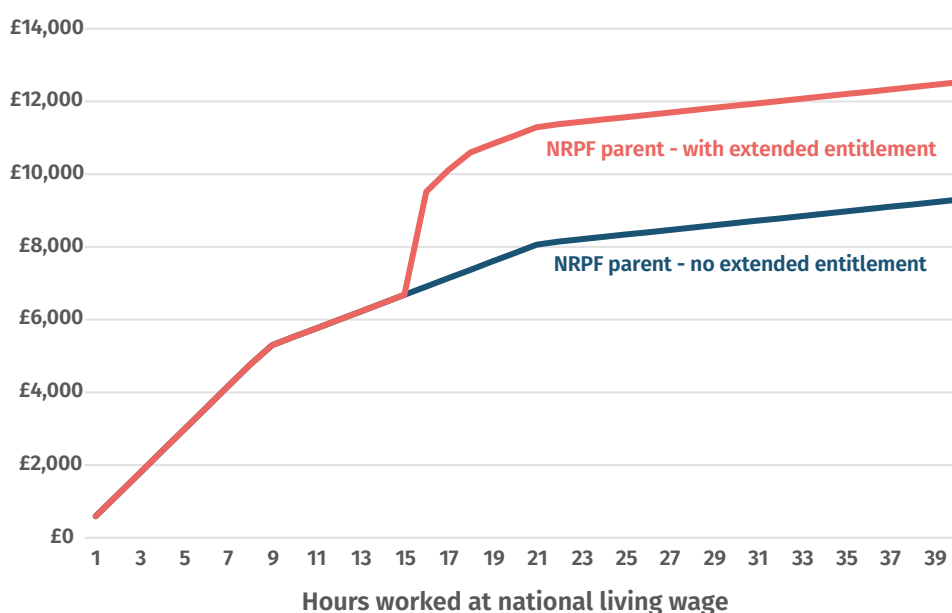
2. An alternative policy scenario, where NRPF parents are granted access to the extended entitlement (but still do not have access to universal credit or child benefit) (ie NRPF parent – with extended entitlement).

By structuring the model this way, we isolate the impact of the extended childcare offer without conflating it with broader welfare entitlements. The modelling estimates the childcare needed based on working hours (including travel time), typical childcare costs, and earnings. It then assesses how access to different levels of free childcare affects take-home pay after tax, national insurance contributions (NICs), and childcare expenses.

Single parent households

FIGURE 5.3: NRPF PARENTS WITHOUT EXTENDED CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENT EARN UP TO £3,200 LESS ANNUALLY AFTER CHILDCARE COSTS

Earnings curve for single parent earning NLW 24-25, comparing NRPF parents with and without access to the extended childcare entitlement



Source: IPPR analysis using His Majesty's Government [HMG] (2024a), HMG (2024b) and NRPF Network (no date)

As figure 5.3 shows, a single parent with NRPF working part time (16 hours per week) would take home £2,600 less annually (a 38 per cent reduction), compared to if they had access to the extended childcare entitlement. For full-time work (36 hours per week), the income gap increases to £3,200 annually (36 per cent less).

At these lower rates of pay, both parents with and without access to the extended offer face the same financial incentives up until they reach the 15-hour mark. At this point, a "cliff edge" emerges, as the parent with access to the extended entitlement qualifies for free additional hours, reducing out-of-pocket childcare costs and improving their take-home pay.

Beyond this, the returns from working additional hours diverge sharply. From the 20-hour mark, when free childcare hours are exhausted and tax and NICs become payable, both groups experience high rates of withdrawal, meaning they keep only 11p of each additional £1 earned due to rising childcare costs and deductions.

However, the parent without access to the extended entitlement remains significantly worse off.

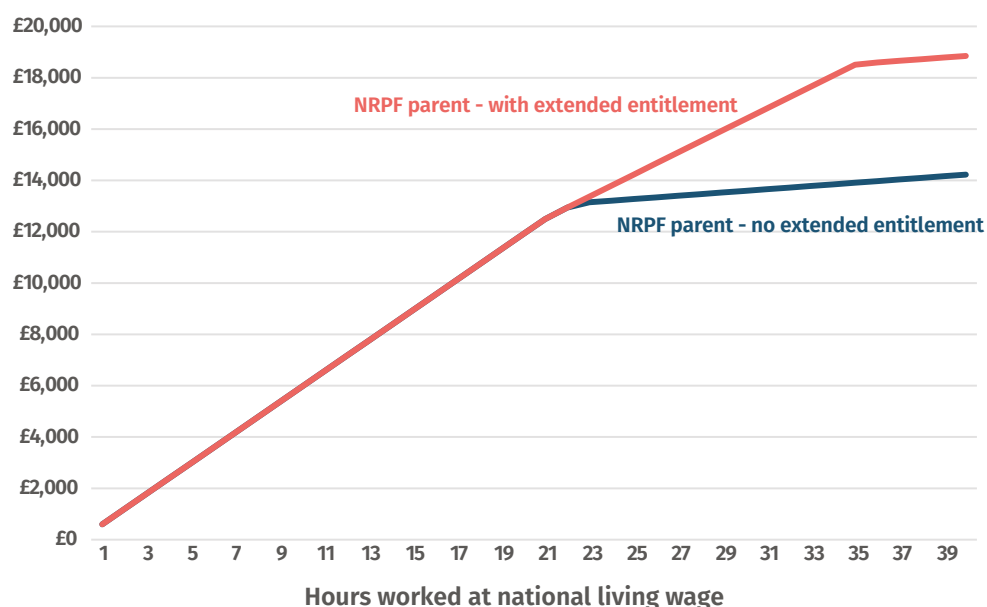
In areas with high childcare costs, such as London, low-income NRPF parents without access to the extended entitlement may even find themselves financially worse off by increasing their working hours beyond this point, as additional earnings are quickly offset by rising childcare expenses. Even for parents earning slightly more (£15 per hour), a single parent with NRPF working 16 hours per week still takes home £2,600 less annually (26 per cent reduction) compared to if they had access to the extended childcare entitlement.

Dual earner households

Comparing dual earner households – where one parent works part time and provides a portion of the childcare, and the second parent works full time – we also see this discrepancy in take-home pay. In a scenario where the second earner in a family has access to the extended childcare entitlement, they can work up to 35 hours per week before experiencing diminishing returns on their take-home pay. However, for families where the second full-time earner has NRPF and no access to the extended childcare entitlement, the drop-off point occurs much earlier – at around 22 hours per week (see figure 5.4).

FIGURE 5.4: NRPF HOUSEHOLDS SEE TAKE-HOME PAY DECLINE AFTER 22 HOURS OF WORK, COMPARED TO 35 HOURS FOR FAMILIES WITH ACCESS TO THE EXTENDED ENTITLEMENT

Earnings curve for second-earner, where first earner works part time and can provide 16 hours informal childcare, comparing NRPF parents with and without access to the extended childcare entitlement



Source: IPPR analysis using HMG (2024a), HMG (2024b) and NRPF Network (no date)

Our modelling underlines the significant financial disadvantage faced by low-income families with NRPF:

- income penalties: Under current policy, NRPF parents experience lower take-home pay after childcare costs, regardless of earnings or household structure

- work disincentives: NRPF parents without access to the extended entitlement hit financial drop-off points at fewer working hours, reducing incentives to increase employment
- greatest impact on single parents: single parents earning lower incomes are disproportionately affected, experiencing the sharpest financial penalties.

The forthcoming expansion of the extended entitlement (to include children aged from nine months to four years by September 2025) is likely to widen the disadvantage gap, as working parents with access to public funds gain significantly more funded hours.

Extending access to this offer would substantially improve the financial situation of low-income migrant families. For the one in three families struggling to make ends meet (see figure 5.2), this could help them meet essential living costs like food and accommodation. For others, it could allow parents to invest in children's extracurricular activities or better housing conditions.

HOW MANY PEOPLE COULD BENEFIT?

We estimate that there are 148,000 families with children aged between one and four years old who are affected by NRPF as a condition of their leave to remain. Of these, there are 71,000 families in which both parents are working (or in the case of single-parent households, that parent is working), and 78,000 families where at least one parent is not working. We estimate that there are also 19,000 families in which no parents are working (see appendix 1).

Based on an eligibility rate of 50 per cent, the number of families who would meet the income criteria is around 35,500, although it is difficult to provide an accurate estimate given limited accurate information on the actual incomes of families with NRPF.¹²

¹² This estimate is based on the Department for Education's calculation of an 'overall eligibility rate' of around half of all working parents meeting the income criteria for this entitlement (DfE 2024b, paragraph 9). It is not possible to produce an estimated eligibility rate for working parents with NRPF due to gaps in data, particularly on income.

6.

THE BROADER IMPACTS OF UNEQUAL CHILDCARE ACCESS ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

This section examines the broader implications of unequal access to childcare for migrant families, particularly its impact on children's development, parental wellbeing and family dynamics.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING

Parents emphasised the importance of early education and care in preparing their children for school and providing opportunities for personal development and social interaction. More than half of parents who do not use childcare (55 per cent) and nearly half of childcare users (49 per cent) expressed concern that their children were missing out on opportunities available to others due to limited access to appropriate childcare (see figure 6.1). Notably, this concern was shared both by families currently using childcare and those unable to access it, indicating that even those with access felt it was inadequate to close perceived gaps.

Parents were also aware that their children were being placed at a disadvantage by not having equal access to early education or care, fearing that this disadvantage was being locked in for the future. Among parents using childcare, 35 per cent worried their children were less prepared for school than their peers because they could access fewer hours. A Nigerian mother of three, whose youngest child, aged three, attended nursery 15 hours per week, described the experience: "Seeing children of his age group, it's really a pain what they can do... then you see us and you can see the gap, which is huge." Around one-third of those not using childcare shared this concern. As one mother from Iran reflected: "It's like they're improving, but my kid is just being left behind."

For many families, early education was seen as essential for learning English, adapting to a new culture, and preparing for primary school. A mother of two from Pakistan explained: "[It's very important] for him as well because we speak different language. My son speaks my mother tongue. He [didn't] know English, but now, he starts learning. He's able to speak now." A father from Hong Kong praised the 'Flying Start' programme in Wales¹³ for supporting his eldest child's development:

"...he was able to play, enjoy the time, even with painting, cars, or sand, or all kinds of activities, you name it. So, we can see how he developed much faster than before he joined the Flying Start... So that starting a year earlier is really important and critical for his language development, I would say."

13 A Welsh government-funded programme supporting families with children under four living in specific disadvantaged areas of Wales: Flying Start programme | GOV.WALES

However, he regretted that his younger child could not access the same services after the family moved to an area where the programme wasn't available:

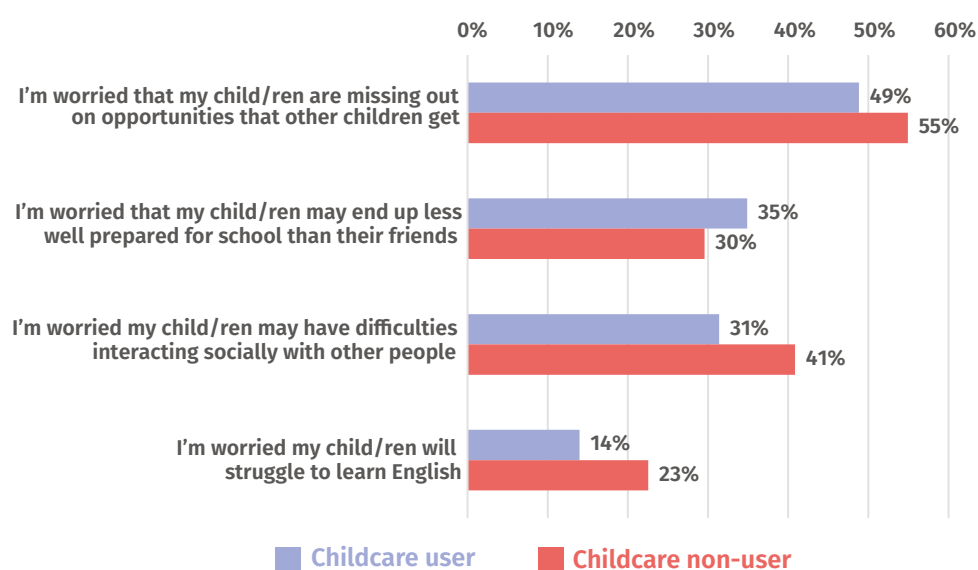
“It’s a shame, especially when her brother has the service, and we can see how much development or how much support and help to my son [it has been]. And we can’t afford and give the same thing to our daughter... as a parent, we always try to give the best to our child. But as we can’t, we feel a little bit shameful and guilty for that part, honestly.”

Parents also shared concerns that limited childcare access was hindering their children’s social skills and friendships (see figure 6.1). A mother of two from Colombia shared that she really wants her daughter to have social contact through nursery because at the moment she doesn’t have any friends, and it’s just them at home. Another mother noted that increasing her daughter’s nursery hours from 15 hours would help her feel more comfortable in group settings:

“I’m trying to argue that... if she stays longer, she will probably be more settled and more used to being out there rather than just with me.”

FIGURE 6.1: LIMITED CHILDCARE ACCESS LEAVES CHILDREN MISSING OUT – 55 PER CENT OF NON-USERS AND 49 PER CENT OF CHILDCARE USERS WORRY ABOUT LOST OPPORTUNITIES AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Impact on children of not being able to access childcare that’s right for your family (comparing childcare users and non-users)



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

Several families reported discrimination in accessing childcare. A Colombian mother recounted being told by a nursery: “We will prioritise children that are here legally, that have documents.” Others perceived unequal treatment, with children whose parents pay fees appearing to receive a better service from providers – an experience that is not unique to migrant parents and has been noted in previous research (Local Government Association 2023). A mother of three from Nigeria put it like this:

“Non-paying children, they don’t get much... from my view. They just say it like, ‘Okay, come. Bring your child in for a few hours and then pick him up.’”

These disparities had emotional consequences for children. One mother noted:

“It [leaves] a bruise on the inside for these kids when they see other children accessing what they are being denied... as a parent, you can tell that they are unhappy.”

Overall, the findings reveal widespread parental concerns about the developmental disadvantages their children face due to unequal access to childcare. Given the acute risk of poverty facing migrant families – alongside overlapping disadvantage such as language barriers and single parenthood – unequal access to early education and care is a serious concern that requires further research, as well as urgent action to ensure all children have equal opportunities to thrive.

CHILDREN WITH SEND

A significant minority (24 per cent) of our sample reported having a child with a disability or special educational need. Although our survey sample size was too small to analyse in depth,¹⁴ interviews suggested that families affected by NRPF with children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) faced multiple overlapping layers of disadvantage. Those we interviewed were almost exclusively single mothers. Many were or had recently been destitute, and were in receipt of support from their local authority or had successfully applied to lift the NRPF condition from their visa, with the support of an advice charity. While some parents worked, others had had to stop in order to look after their children with higher care needs, while still others were unable to work altogether.

As is common for parents of children with SEND (Dingley’s Promise 2023), some participants told us that their childcare providers were sometimes unequipped to meet their child’s specific needs, leaving them unable to work despite being eligible for some childcare entitlements.

CASE STUDY: IJEMMA’S EXPERIENCE

Ijemma is a single mother of four children, one of whom has Down’s Syndrome and a heart condition requiring surgery. After separating from her husband and unable to work because of her caring responsibilities, she became destitute and sought help from an immigration advice charity to lift the NRPF condition on her visa. This enabled her to access social security and, crucially, the extended 30-hour childcare entitlement for working parents when her youngest child turned three.

The extended entitlement allowed Ijemma to work daytime hours instead of juggling nightshifts with caregiving, significantly improving her wellbeing. Her daughter thrived at nursery, but limited 1:1 support for her additional needs often led to Ijemma being called to collect her. Eventually, she had to resign from her job, losing her access to the extended entitlement. Reflecting on her situation, Ijemma said:

“If I could get more support for [my daughter] when she’s at nursery, that would do a whole lot for me. Because it means my heart will be at peace, knowing she’s well looked after there... I won’t constantly keep looking at my phone if the nursery is about to call.”

14 36 out of 159 survey respondents, or 23 per cent, replied ‘yes’ to the question: do you consider that any of your child/ren have a special education need or a disability?”

Several parents reported that unequal access to childcare hours placed their children at a distinct disadvantage. A mother of two from South Africa shared her concerns about her daughter’s readiness for school, stating:

“I do think she needs more hours, just to get her ready for school... she’s going to have these sensory issues with eating [...] she could do with a lot more hours to get used to a school environment [...]. If she gets used to it right now, it readies her... By next September, maybe she would have upgraded to eating just plain pasta or spaghetti, even if it’s plain rice... otherwise how will she get through a whole day at school? It might seem like something simple, but it could make a big difference for her.”

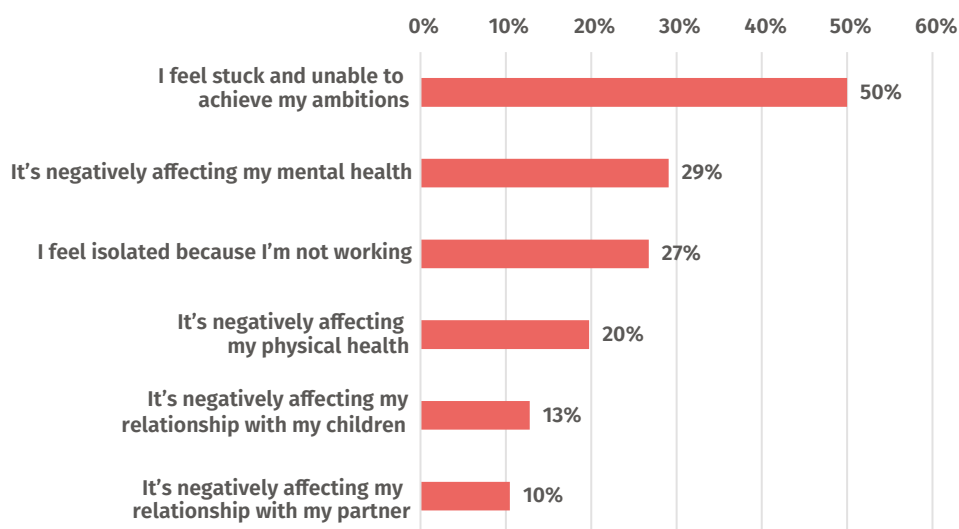
Contact with institutional childcare often acts as a trigger for formal assessments of SEND. However, this process is frequently slow, exacerbated when parents are unfamiliar with administrative and bureaucratic systems. Without early contact with childcare professionals, children’s needs are often not identified until much later, which helps to further lock in disadvantage.

PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Lack of access to suitable childcare has a profound impact on parents’ mental health and wellbeing, and parents report feeling stressed, exhausted, depressed and isolated. These challenges often stem from worries about balancing work, household finances and children’s welfare.

FIGURE 6.2: INADEQUATE CHILDCARE ACCESS IMPACTS MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH, AND HAMPERS FAMILIES’ AMBITIONS

Other effects on respondent of not being able to access childcare that’s right for your family



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

A father of one from Bangladesh described how his wife, a PhD student, was suffering from depression and struggling to keep up with her studies because the couple had no break from either working or looking after their daughter. He said:

“[This situation] puts on so much extra pressure, because immigrant families don’t usually have parents around to help look after their children.”

For many, the inability to work compounded feelings of isolation and helplessness. A single mother from Ghana described how being stuck at home affected her mental health:

“[In an ideal situation], I would just let her go [to nursery] and at least I would go to work, because [...] it helps you out of your stress and everything... because I don’t like to be in the house staying idle... I’m just stuck in the room, doing nothing... You don’t have to worry about so many things, but when you’re in the house the whole day, you think about so many things.”

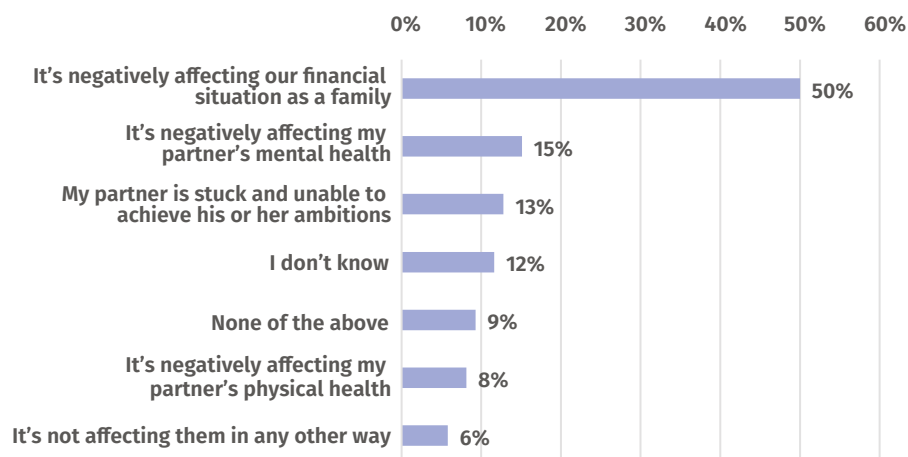
Almost one-third of parents (29 per cent) reported that lack of access to childcare negatively affected their mental health, while one-fifth noted negative impacts on their physical health or that of their partner, and 27 per cent felt isolated due to not being able to work (see figure 6.2).

Many parents described feelings of shame and inadequacy, believing they were failing their children as a result of being unable to access sufficient early education for their children. A single mother from Ghana told us:

“I feel like a bad mother, I’m not doing the best for her, but the situation is that my hands are tied, there’s nothing I can do.”

FIGURE 6.3: LIMITED CHILDCARE ACCESS NEGATIVELY IMPACTS FAMILY FINANCES, PARTNER WELLBEING AND CAREER AMBITIONS

Other effects on family of not having access to the right childcare on your family



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

Two-parent families described significant strain on their relationships due to childcare challenges. Guilt, resentment and lack of quality time were recurring themes. A father from Hong Kong described the toll on his marriage:

“...in terms of our relationships, our marriage, if we have some free time, or our self-time, so that we can adjust or moderate, or if not, it’s all time caring, then it will be really tense and exhausting.”

Inadequate access to childcare creates long-term risks for both parents and children. With many of these children on pathways to settlement and eventual British citizenship, failure to address these issues could lead to broader social and economic challenges in the future.

7. EXPERIENCES OF USING CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS

Given migrant parents' struggles to work, earn enough to make ends meet and afford the costs of care, their ability to access entitlements to support with these costs is critical.

Although migrant parents with NRPF can access the universal entitlement of 15 hours for three- and four-year-old children, and the 15-hour entitlement for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds if eligible, many parents lack awareness of these rights.

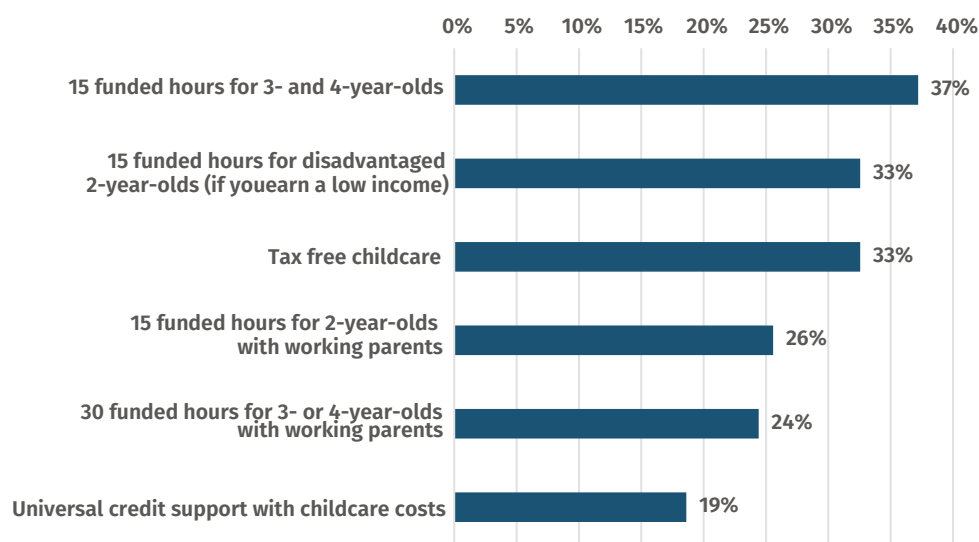
Three-quarters of survey respondents were aware that the government offers some support with the costs of childcare. Awareness of specific entitlements was also limited. Just over one-third (37 per cent) of respondents knew about the universal entitlement for three- and four-year-olds (see figure 7.1), compared to 93 per cent of parents in the general population (DfE 2024a).

The complexity of the rules meant that some parents felt completely lost. As one mother of two children from Pakistan put it:

"Honestly, I don't know any kind of things that they give, the government give to you, the childcare, how many ways they do."

FIGURE 7.1: MIGRANT PARENTS HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER AWARENESS OF CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS COMPARED TO THE GENERAL POPULATION

Proportion of respondents who are aware of various childcare entitlements

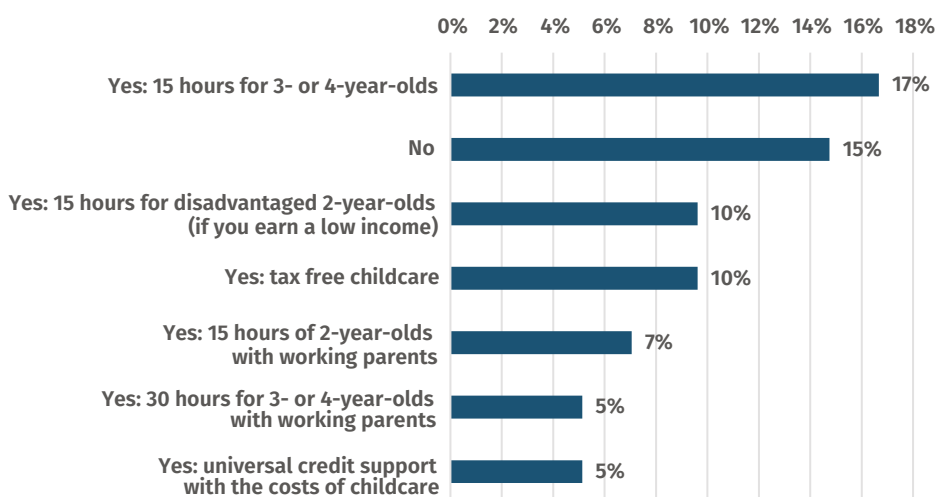


Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

The parents in our sample were also dramatically less likely to use childcare entitlements compared to the general population. Only 17 per cent report having used the universal entitlement for three- and four-year-olds, far below the 94 per cent national uptake. Just 10 per cent of surveyed families had accessed the entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds, despite it being available to those meeting income thresholds. Although it was not possible to analyse uptake of entitlements by household income, this low uptake figure suggests that eligible families may not be accessing the support they are entitled to. In comparison, DfE data indicates that 74 per cent of eligible two-year-olds among the general population benefitted from this entitlement in 2023 (DfE 2024a).

FIGURE 7.2 MIGRANT FAMILIES ARE FAR LESS LIKELY TO ACCESS CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS COMPARED TO THE GENERAL POPULATION

Use of childcare entitlements among migrant households



Source: IPPR analysis of Childcare-NRPF survey

HELP TO UNDERSTAND AND ACCESS CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENTS

Parents described numerous barriers to accessing childcare entitlements, often receiving conflicting or inaccurate information from service providers such as health visitors, nursery workers and local authority staff. One father from Hong Kong recounted how he was incorrectly advised by a health visitor and social worker to apply for child benefit, despite being ineligible due to his NRPF status. He described his frustration:

“We have told them already we are subject to NRPF, and we can’t. But they all said we are eligible, too. So we finally sent our documents and things, which cost 20 pounds for the bill. And finally, yeah, a denial, of course. So it’s really confusing and really frustrating for us.”

Some parents reported being turned away by childcare providers, even when applying for the universal entitlement, which is supposed to be available to all. A mother from Bolivia explained:

“I don’t understand why this is not something I can access. My daughter is documented, I’m the one who isn’t documented, but she’s the one that can’t access the childcare that is supposedly available to everyone.”

In other cases, parents succeeded in securing entitlements only after significant advocacy efforts, often with external help. A South African mother of a child with special educational needs described how she was initially turned away from accessing the entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds, despite meeting the income criteria. Determined to secure a place for her daughter, she sought assistance from a charity and presented official government guidance to challenge the nursery’s decision. As she put it:

“I went in with all my armour, guns blazing... I printed out something from the government website. I gave one to the social worker, one to the nursery and then I emailed one to the boss of the appeal... and I won!”

For other families, however, advocacy and persistence were not enough. A mother from Iran awaiting an asylum decision described her frustration with repeated delays and misinformation from a charity meant to help her secure a nursery place for her daughter:

“In the beginning, they were saying my daughter was too young for nursery because she was only two years old. Then, when she was almost three, I asked them again, but they kept postponing this. Despite all of my efforts and follow-ups, it never happened.”

In the context of the ‘hostile environment’ (see Qureshi et al 2020), some parents were fearful to claim support, worried that it might have consequences for their immigration status. One mother of two who had overstayed her visa explained:

“Honestly, I do [want to send my three-year-old to nursery], but I’m not sure about my status, if they’re going to allow us or not. I’m afraid of what might happen if I apply.”

This fear extended even to those with legal status. Another mother of three who had successfully lifted the NRPF condition from her visa and was receiving universal credit (but not claiming universal credit support with childcare costs) said:

“I don’t want to apply for it, and they give it to me, then after some time they tell me pay it back. Give me a fine.”

These experiences highlight the complexities of navigating two intersecting and complicated systems – the immigration and childcare systems. Few service providers encountered by parents, whether childcare providers, local authorities or health visitors, were adequately equipped to help families navigate both systems effectively. As a result, migrant parents often struggled to access entitlements that could alleviate financial pressures and support their children’s early education.

8.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Like most parents of young children in the UK, migrant parents rely on childcare so that they can work. With childcare costs eye-wateringly high for many families across the country, government support with these costs is vital to enabling parents to work, especially if they are on a low income.

Migrant parents, however, face unique barriers, including unfamiliar and complex systems, exclusion from some entitlements on the basis of their immigration status, the wider ‘hostile environment’, and a lack of services with the knowledge and understanding to support them to access entitlements. Our findings suggest that these challenges contribute to migrant parents using both childcare services and the limited entitlements they are eligible for at significantly lower rates than the general population, presenting obstacles to the government’s target of ensuring 75 per cent of children are school-ready by 2028 (Cabinet Office 2024).

Migrant families, especially low-income and single-parent households subject to NRPF, are disproportionately affected by unequal access to childcare. Our analysis shows that NRPF restrictions create a double penalty for migrant parents: they are excluded from support with childcare costs, limiting their ability to work, while also being excluded from access to income top-up from the social security system when their earnings fall short.

Already facing almost twice the risk of relative poverty compared to their counterparts with UK-born parents, children in migrant households face significant disadvantage as a result of unequal access to childcare, which is critical in preparing them for school and future opportunities. Given that three quarters of children subject to NRPF as a condition of their leave are likely to be future permanent residents or citizens of the UK, this unequal access undermines the government’s broader mission of reducing child poverty and breaking down barriers to opportunity.

Parents in our sample strongly desire to work and progress in their careers and are deeply concerned about what unequal access to early education will mean for their children’s futures. One parent reflected that the current system is:

“...creating these unequal settings, so unequal households, based on income, based on wherever you are from, so it is set up to create an unequal society.”

Another spoke about the potential that could be unleashed if all children were to have access to the same early education:

“When you show me a child that has got an early foundation educationally, then I will show you a child that will lead well and appropriately in their community.”

THE CHANGE THAT PARENTS WANT TO SEE

Parents almost unanimously wanted to see equality in access for all children, regardless of race, immigration status or ability to pay. As this mother from Pakistan put it:

“Every child is equal, no matter if they are British or if they are non-British. They are here, so they should be treated equally.”

While a mother from Nigeria said:

“Let there be no segregation because that is exactly what is currently on the ground. This segregation is huge between the children that can access and the children that cannot access.”

WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC THINK?

Polling commissioned by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition in May 2024 found that a majority of the British public support migrant parents’ access both to childcare and to support with the costs of childcare. The polling, which was based on a sample of 2,032 English adults and carried out by More in Common, found that:

- 59 per cent think that all children should have a right to access childcare and early education regardless of their parents’ immigration status, with 25 per cent opposed.
- 66 per cent think children of parents with no recourse to public funds should be allowed to access the 30-hour entitlement, with just 6 per cent opposed.

(Early Education and Childcare Coalition 2024)

Some connected the impacts of unequal access to education in early life to long-term implications, not just for their own children but for wider society. This mother from Nigeria put it as follows:

“Education is power. Education is strength and they need to give these children opportunity to have that good foundation so that they can have quality of sound education in the future. And it will actually benefit the system back anyway because the system would benefit much more from a child that has got a solid foundation.”

Others, like this father from Bangladesh, focussed on the wider economic picture:

“Ultimately [by preventing parents from working as much as they want to], you are building a less productive and resilient society, you are taking away months or years of someone’s productive life, so it’s not really helping anyone.”

Many felt that the funded childcare hours most migrant parents are entitled to are simply not enough to allow them to work, especially for single parent households, and suggested that the extended entitlement for working parents should be opened up to parents regardless of immigration status:

“They should just offer all the kids the 30 hours... they should stop doing discrimination just because we are migrants.”

One mother from Australia highlighted that the system ought to concentrate support towards those who struggle the most to pay for it:

“For us it would be great if we did have more funding, but I also see the broader picture of we don’t really need the help, whereas lots of other families do need the help and so I think if it’s more means tested then that’s fine. I guess it’d be nice if it wasn’t both means tested and tested basically on your immigration status for households who really can’t afford it and whose children might benefit more from good quality early education.”

Some parents also underlined that childcare providers needed to be better supported by the government so that they could provide the best service possible for all children, including those with additional needs. As this mother from Nigeria put it:

“Honestly, if they could support nurseries or schools more, I’m not saying just the ones that have special needs children in, in general... this would benefit everyone.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of our findings and conclusions, urgent change to immigration status-based restrictions on childcare entitlements is needed. Lifting these restrictions so that migrant families are equally included in the system of support would make an important contribution to achieving the government’s aims of increasing school readiness and breaking down barriers to opportunity for every child, but also to reducing child poverty and helping more parents back into work.

Below we set out a number of specific recommendations, primarily for the UK government.

The government should start by removing immigration status-based restrictions on eligibility for the extended entitlement for working parents. This would enable progress on a number of government objectives, especially helping more parents back into work, including those who were previously economically inactive due to caring responsibilities. It would also help to increase school readiness, protect some families from poverty by allowing parents to increase their incomes, and go some way towards giving children in migrant households access to greater opportunities.

Although far from perfect in its design, the additional support with the costs of childcare provided by this entitlement could enable a significant proportion of migrant parents to either start work or increase their working hours. As this entitlement is fully expanded in September 2025 to parents of children aged from nine months to four years, failure to include migrant parents may further deepen existing inequalities facing low-income migrant families.

The Department for Education should review uptake of the entitlement for ‘disadvantaged’ two-year-olds among low-income families with NRPF, following on from the expansion of this entitlement since 2019. Specifically designed to try to close the disadvantage gap, and one of the few entitlements that low-income migrant parents are eligible for, it is striking that few appear to be using it. It would be worthwhile exploring the reasons for this in greater depth. This may be due to the complexity of the application, which is via a parallel application process, as

well as low awareness among families, local authorities and childcare providers that families with NRPF are now eligible.

Central government should ensure that providers of family services, including local authorities, health visitors, childcare providers and schools have access to clearer and more comprehensive information on eligibility for the different childcare entitlements for migrant parents. This would enable migrant parents to better understand the support options available to them, and to make use of this support. However, it is the very complexity of both childcare entitlements and the immigration system that make it so difficult for migrant parents to understand and use the support that is available. Improving access to information about existing entitlements will be no substitute for more fundamental reform.

The Early Years Pupil Premium should also be reviewed. Not only is it currently set at a considerably lower rate than the primary pupil premium, but children subject to NRPF are broadly omitted, other than those in receipt of asylum support. This may be disincentivising providers' willingness to accept children from NRPF families, especially in areas with larger than average disadvantaged populations (Education and Skills Funding Agency 2024).

Overall, in order to achieve its mission of breaking down barriers to opportunity and the target of ensuring 75 per cent of children in the UK are school-ready by 2029, **we recommend that the government prioritises reforms that would create a system of properly funded, high quality, affordable childcare and early education open to all families across the UK, regardless of parents' employment or immigration status.** The creation of such a system must be fairly funded to ensure that providers can offer places to all children, and carefully phased so that the early years workforce can be expanded sustainably to deliver the places needed. Given the complexities and disincentives that exist within the present system, especially its current lack of focus on reducing disadvantage, fundamental reform is urgently needed.

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APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

To reach parents with NRPF, we targeted respondents through organisations which provide immigration advice and support, and then allowed this to ‘snowball’ via individual networks. Neither the interviews nor the survey are representative of all migrant parents, given the method is subject to sampling bias. Both data collection methods are likely to oversample individuals who have accessed legal advice and support as a result of experiencing financial hardship (often a requirement of accessing advice and support services) and underrepresent those who either have been unable to access or who do not require advice and support. Our analysis should therefore be understood as illustrative of *some* of the experiences of migrant parents in accessing childcare.

POPULATION ESTIMATES

We estimated the total number of migrant families with NRPF with children aged 1–4 years, to give a more tangible sense of the numbers currently barred from accessing the extended childcare entitlement for working parents currently being rolled out by government. We focussed on parents who have NRPF as a condition of their leave to remain (excluding those who are undocumented) because of the paucity of data on this latter group.

Our analysis involved three stages: estimating the number of adults with NRPF as a condition of their leave to remain using Home Office Migrant Journey data; calculating the ratio between the number of non-EU adults and the number of non-EU families with children aged 1–4 years, using Labour Force Survey (LFS) data; then combining these figures to derive a final estimate. We defined non-EU families as families where the head of the family unit and (where applicable) their partner are non-EU nationals. We used Migrant Journey data on the total number of people aged 18-plus with valid leave to remain subject to the NRPF condition at the end of 2023, for those granted leave out-of-country from 2004 onwards. We made a further adjustment to account for people granted leave in-country from 2004 onwards, using data provided by the Migration Observatory via a Freedom of Information Request to the Home Office.

We chose to exclude students to avoid skewing the results because international students are underrepresented in the LFS, and are unlikely to be both employed and have children aged 1–4 years. For the ratio, we focussed on non-EU migrants as a proxy for NRPF status, given demographic similarities, because the LFS does not contain information on NRPF status. Key assumptions include that non-EU family structures mirror those of the wider population with NRPF.

Key limitations include that the LFS suffers from low response rates, especially for migrant households. Data on in-country visa holders is outdated. We relied on 2022 figures released via a Freedom of Information request because the Home Office does not ordinarily publish these figures. The number of people entering Migrant Journey through an in-country visa is small, so this is unlikely to have a significant impact on the overall estimate. While most individuals on limited leave to remain are NRPF-restricted, a small number may have obtained recourse to public funds.

MODELLING

We used modelling to explore the effect that unequal access to childcare entitlements has on the incentives to work for parents affected by NRPF. To do this, we first estimated the number of paid childcare hours required by parents depending on whether they could access the extended entitlement and the number of hours per week they worked, and compared this to parents with access to the extended entitlement. We then modelled the impact of these differential entitlements on parents' take-home pay, after paying for childcare and for income tax and national insurance, where relevant. We modelled a number of different scenarios for different household compositions (single- and dual-earner households) and for income levels (low- and higher-paid). This allowed us to illustrate the effects of unequal entitlements on household income, and on parents' incentives to work. More information on our methodology is available on request.

APPENDIX 2: PROFILE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The majority of parents who completed our survey were women (80 per cent), aged between 25 and 44 (89 per cent). A third of parents identified their ethnic group as Black, Caribbean or African (31 per cent), and 15 per cent as Asian (Chinese). 13 per cent were from a mixed (White and Black African background), and the remainder a mixture of other ethnicities. Parents came from all regions of England, though most live in London (41 per cent), with a further fifth in the wider South East. This is likely to reflect the sampling bias, with a greater concentration of advice and support charities working with migrants in London. Interview participants reflected a similar profile, with the majority being in their 30s, and all except two were women. Participants came from 10 different countries, with Nigeria and Hong Kong emerging as the top two, and all but four live in London.

FAMILY COMPOSITION

Family composition varied widely. More than half (55 per cent) had a partner, while 45 per cent were single parents. This is close to double the rate of single parenthood in the general population, which is around 25 per cent: this may reflect sampling bias, as single-parent families may be more likely to experience hardship and therefore seek or qualify for support. There were on average two children per household, with a median age of 3.5 years. Just under a quarter (24 per cent) reported that at least one of their children has special educational needs or a disability. Interview participants had a similar family profile.

MIGRATION PROFILE

Interview participants had been in the UK anywhere between four months and 18 years. Most of the people who responded to our survey (three in five) had been in the UK between one and five years, although almost a fifth (17 per cent) said they had been in the UK for over 10 years.

Almost three-quarters of households were affected by the NRPF condition (71 per cent) at the time of completing the survey. Under a third (29 per cent) could access benefits, either directly (most likely because they had successfully applied to lift NRPF from their leave to remain) or indirectly via a partner who is not affected by NRPF.

Research participants' immigration status also varied widely. Nearly two fifths (37 per cent), had leave to remain on a study, work or family visa, while a fifth reported that they have no current leave to remain. Pre-settled status under the European Union Settlement Scheme was reported by 15 per cent, and 8 per cent were BN(o) visa holders.

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

Just under half of survey respondents were working (45 per cent), with part-time work being particularly common among our sample. This is lower than among the general population of parents in families with children aged 0–4

years, in which 69 per cent of parents are working (DfE 2024a). Taking into account partners' employment status, we found that two fifths of respondents came from households in which no-one was currently employed. Dual-earner households accounted for 28 per cent of respondents, while 32 per cent came from single-earner households.

Although interviews did not delve into details of household finances, several of the parents we spoke to were or had very recently been experiencing deep poverty and financial hardship. Some were currently being supported by their local authority or had been assisted to make a change of conditions application, both of which require families to be experiencing or at imminent risk of destitution. Among parents interviewed, just seven were currently in work of some kind, with around half of these working part-time. The remainder were not working for a variety of reasons.

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