



Let Refugees Learn: Activism Pack

Introduction

Refugees are people, like you and me. They have been forced to flee their homes by war or persecution, often leaving behind virtually all their worldly possessions. Once they have been recognised as refugees here in the UK, they have a chance to rebuild their lives in safety.

But new challenges very rapidly arise. Challenges like learning English.

Without speaking the language, life in the UK is very limited. It's hard to participate when you can't communicate with people around you. Through our work, we know that refugees in the UK have great determination and desire to learn English. They know that it is essential to making friends with their neighbours, to education, and above all to finding work.

Currently, the primary way for refugees to learn English is through the English for Speakers of Other Languages programme (ESOL). In recent years funding cuts have resulted in shortages of these classes. As a result, refugees in the UK are finding it harder to acquire vital language skills to put them on track to successful integration.

This needs to change, and fast, so that refugees can access the classes and the support they need. And it won't only help these individuals – it will also enable them to contribute to wider society, meaning that we all benefit.

We can make this change. We are asking our MPs to write to the Prime Minister, asking her to make it easier for both refugees and asylum seekers to access ESOL. Together, our collective people power can help refugees build a new, safe life in the UK – one where they are integrated fully into their communities.

In this pack you will find an outline of the problem, the suggested solutions, and ways to get your MP involved in the campaign. For more detailed information of the problem and the policy changes, see Refugee Action's report ['Let Refugees Learn'](#).

UPDATE: On Sunday 4th September, the Home Office announced an extra £10m funding for ESOL over the next five years for Syrian resettled refugees.

This is an important win – the result of the support from people like you all over the UK. This could mean better job prospects, better relationships with their community, and a better life for the Syrian refugees resettled by the UK.

But this doesn't go far enough. This measure will benefit some refugees, but leaves many, many others behind. It's madness to help one group of people integrate while at the same time neglect the others. We are determined to ensure that every refugee can access the English language learning they need. It's important to make sure the government knows that this funding isn't nearly enough.

The problem

Language is the key that unlocks an integrated, fulfilled life in the UK. Without it, people arriving in Britain are unable to work, to make friends, even to go to the doctor or get on a bus. Having reached safety, people want to build a new life here. Knowing how to speak English is absolutely essential for this; for a life where refugees can fully participate and fully contribute.

The primary way for refugees to access English language learning is through the English for Speakers of Other Languages programme (ESOL). ESOL courses are provided by institutions across the UK, which receive funding from government for enrolling refugees. Voluntary initiatives, community based support and charitable schemes – such as the ones run by Refugee Action – provide crucial support, but they cannot be more than a complement to (and certainly not a replacement for) formal, accredited ESOL training.

Our calculations show a 55% cut in spending in England on ESOL since 2009, eroding and undermining refugees' ability to integrate into their communities. Because of these cuts, there are several significant practical barriers that prevent people from accessing the teaching they need:

- **Long waiting lists.** Funding cuts are resulting in fewer classes and therefore people are waiting much longer before starting courses.
- **Being assigned the wrong class.** People are being enrolled in the wrong class for their level of ability because the appropriate class is full. This slows down their learning, and causes frustration.
- **Distance.** Courses can be far from where a refugee is based, making it too costly (in both time and money) to attend.
- **Learning hours.** A lack of funding means too few learning hours per person per week, making progress for individuals frustratingly slow.

Many of these barriers disproportionately affect women. In addition, the main mechanism for obtaining ESOL is via job centre referrals, and it's usually the male member of the household that registers with the job centre. This leaves the women out of the system entirely. Where women are able to register, a lack of childcare can prevent them from attending lessons. This is especially true if the classes are far away.

Currently, England has no ESOL strategy – unlike Scotland and Wales. This makes it difficult to apportion funding effectively and ensure people are receiving the support they need. A strategy could also make use of the many excellent community based voluntary initiatives to teach refugees and asylum seekers English.

There is also inconsistency across the UK as to the rights of asylum seekers who have not yet been granted refugee status. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, all asylum seekers are eligible for free ESOL classes as soon as they claim asylum there, and regardless of status. However, in England, asylum seekers are not eligible for support until they have been awaiting the result of their application for more than six months. Even at this point, they are eligible only for 50% funded lessons; the rest they have to pay for themselves.

The solutions

We have five key things we want the government to do to address the problems and barriers described above, and increase people's access to learning English:

1. Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English – *so that all refugees can have free ESOL classes for their first two years in the UK*
2. Publish an ESOL strategy for England and Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK – *so that funding is spent in the right ways to ensure refugees can access high quality teaching*
3. Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women – *so that anyone regardless of gender or economic status or ability can access suitable teaching*
4. Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning – *so that they can start to integrate with their host communities while awaiting the outcome of their asylum application*
5. Facilitate a national framework for community based language support – *so that all the voluntary organisations can share ideas and experience and provide the best community based support possible as a supplement to formal teaching.*

Update: The Home Office recently announced £10 million of funding over the next five years for Syrian resettled refugees to be given free English language lessons. While this is an important step, it will only benefit a select group of refugees and will leave many others behind. It's madness to help one group of refugees integrate while neglecting others. All refugees must be given access to the English language learning they want and need.

We know that the public are strongly in favour of refugees being able to learn English, with 73% of the opinion that Britain and local communities benefit from refugees speaking English. An overwhelming 91% think that refugees have a responsibility to learn English, and 40% would even consider volunteering to help teach English.

We also know that there is broad political support for refugees learning English. The Prime Minister Theresa May, speaking as Home Secretary in 2010, said that "speaking English is key to integration". Yvette Cooper, speaking as the Shadow Home Secretary in 2014, said that "everyone coming to live in Britain should speak English, or learn to speak English as a first step to integration".

It is clear that supporting refugees and asylum seekers to learn English is a worthwhile investment: our calculations show that two years' of ESOL provision would be effectively be 'paid back' within eight months of employment. Plenty of other external research shows that English language learning, more than any other factor, is crucial for social and economic integration and participation.

In this context of overwhelming public support, and at a time of such need, it's crucial that we act now.

What you can do

We need our MPs to get behind us in order to get the government to take more action. There are many ways you can reach and influence your MP; we've included a few suggestions below but feel free to think outside the box! These ideas are not mutually exclusive – feel free to do a combination of more than one.

If you're not sure who your MP is, you can find them using your postcode at <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>. If you're part of a group or branch that covers more than one constituency, try and speak to all of your MPs or invite them all to an event.

Remember, your MP is there to represent you in parliament – it doesn't matter how much of an expert they are (or aren't), or how much you know (or don't): the key is to show them that this issue is important to you.

Please let us know how it goes – email us at campaign@refugee-action.org.uk or ring the office on 020 7952 1511. Please forward any correspondence or ask us for advice if they've come back to you with questions.

Write to your MP: you can write to your MP at their constituency office, or at the Houses of Parliament – just write their name, and then House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA.

If you have a personal story to tell about an experience of learning English, or a refugee in your area learning English, then start with that – the more personalised, the better. If you work with refugees, you could ask them to write about their experience learning English and what it means to them.

Then include the problems around English language learning, and the five action points we've listed. Ask them to write to the Prime Minister on your behalf with these action points.

You'll find a template letter at the end of this pack that you can use as a starting point.

Email your MP: your MP's email address will be listed on their parliamentary page from the link above; it should also be on their website. You can use the template letter at the end of this pack as a starting point for writing your email.

As with the letter, feel free to include personal stories, and attach photos if they are relevant.

Meet your MP: most MPs hold regular surgeries in their constituencies, often on a Friday. You can make an appointment to go and see them and talk through your concerns. This isn't as daunting as it sounds – remember, your MP may know very little about this issue; and even if they know more about it than you do, it's your concerns that they have to listen to as your representative. Use the template letter or the briefing as an outline to talk through. Remember to leave the included MP briefing with them to remind them of what you've talked about.

You may also want to agree some specific action points, and follow up with them later. Don't forget to mention on social media that you've gone to see them: public pressure can be really useful here!

Arrange a photo call: MPs love free publicity. If you're feeling creative, why not arrange a learning-themed visual stunt and invite your MP and local media? Have a look online at photos [like this one](#) for inspiration. You can put the photos out on social media as well – don't forget to tag your MP in them, and ask them to put them out on twitter or Facebook as well. Use the hashtag #LetRefugeesLearn so that we can find your photos and share them.

Invite your MP to an existing meeting: it might be that you or your group run an English conversation class, or a 'welcome refugees' meal, or faith-based meeting that includes refugees. Whatever it may be, inviting your MP is a great way to get them to meet the people behind the policies, talk with concerned constituents and also give them a great photo opportunity.

Quick facts

Have these to hand when you're meeting your MP

- 91% British people think that refugees have a responsibility to learn English¹
- 73% people think that Britain and local communities benefit from refugees speaking English²
- More than any other factor, learning English demonstrates commitment to adapting to life in the UK, and enables productive contribution to the nation's economy³
- Two years' of ESOL provision could be effectively 'paid back' within eight months of employment through income tax and national insurance contributions (calculated at the national average wage)⁴
- Although the recent announcement of £2m per year for the next five years for helping Syrian refugees learn English is a good start, it goes nowhere near far enough. The funding will only help a small group of adult refugees who have arrived in the UK from Syria through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, and leaves out refugees from all other countries and all asylum seekers. It's madness to help one group while neglecting others.

¹ BritainThinks poll for Refugee Action (2016) Available at: http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/support_us/campaign/join_a_campaign/let_refugees_learn/britainthinks_poll_results

² As above

³ Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009): *A New Approach to English for Speakers of Other Languages*

⁴ Refugee Action (2016): *Let Refugees Learn* Available at: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0001/3854/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf>