

MP briefing

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English language learning: importance and barriers

Refugee Action, City of Sanctuary, STAR and Unison, through their work with refugees and asylum seekers, have identified English language learning as a critical issue when it comes to social and economic integration. When refugees and asylum seekers can speak English, they can find work, make friends, join local groups; in short, they can contribute to their community. It benefits the individual, and it benefits society as a whole.

But refugees and asylum seekers face significant barriers to accessing quality English language courses such as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). These barriers include long waiting lists, insufficient teaching hours, enrolment into classes at the wrong level, prohibitive distances from places of learning, and problems with childcare and other barriers that specifically affect women.

ESOL is the primary way for refugees and asylum seekers to access high quality English language learning. Refugee Action calculates that there has been a 55% cut to funding for ESOL in England since 2009. But investing in refugees' learning is shown to pay off; two years' of ESOL provision would be effectively 'paid back' within eight months of employment.

There is also widespread public support for increasing refugees' access to English learning provision. 73% of the British public are of the opinion that Britain and local communities benefit from refugees speaking English, and an overwhelming 91% think that refugees have a responsibility to learn English. Politicians of all parties – Theresa May included – have also highlighted just how important English language learning is to refugee integration.

What we are calling for

We are asking the government to do the following:

1. **Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English.** This should give all refugees who need it free, accessible ESOL for their first two years in England. The recent Home Office announcement of £10 million funding for ESOL provision is an important step, but to limit it to Syrian refugees resettled through the VPRS is not good enough. It is madness to help one group of refugees integrate while neglecting the others.
2. **Publish ESOL strategies for England and Northern Ireland in alignment with the rest of the UK.** These should set clear national targets for ESOL provision; enshrine refugees' access to ESOL as an entitlement; and ensure that refugees do not have to wait to enrol in ESOL.
3. **Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.** This could include improved access to childcare facilities, and funding for travel for those that live far from their place of learning.

4. **Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning.** Free teaching should be given from the point of claiming asylum, regardless of the status of their application (as it currently is in Scotland and Northern Ireland). This would allow people to start integrating as soon as they arrive.
5. **Facilitate a national framework for community based language support.** Community support for refugees wishing to learn English can be a vital complement to, but not replacement for, formal learning. A government-led framework would enable all parties to come together and share ideas, experience and best practice. This would increase the provision and quality of community based English language support.

What we are asking you to do

Please write to the Prime Minister to ask her to support these suggestions. For more detailed information about the research behind these asks, see Refugee Action's ['Let Refugees Learn'](#) report.

Thank you for supporting people who desperately need our help to stay safe, and for working to ensure they are able to successfully build a new life here in the UK.