Parliamentary briefing – English language support for refugees

October 2017

Refugee Action is a national charity which works to enable asylum seekers and refugees in the UK to rebuild their lives. We are the leading provider of integration services for resettled refugees in the UK, and we provide advice and support to thousands of asylum seekers and refugees every year. We also campaign with a wide range of partners to achieve change; and are partners in the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which is focusing on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers throughout October.

The issue

- Every day, we work with refugees who are determined to learn English. They know that this is the key to building successful, independent lives in the UK.
- Without English, refugees are unable to find work, study, volunteer and become part of their local community. This leads to many refugees feeling lonely and isolated.
- Government funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in England fell from £203m in 2010 to £90m in 2016 – a real terms cut of 60%.
- New Refugee Action research shows refugees waiting up to three years before they can start English lessons; with women facing even greater barriers to learning.
- This is despite strong and growing evidence that English language teaching is the single most important contribution to refugees’ and others’ ability to integrate.
- Investing in ESOL also makes sound economic sense. The cost of two years of ESOL classes for each refugee is fully reimbursed to the taxpayer following an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage.
- The £10m funding over five years for additional ESOL teaching announced by the Home Office in September 2016 is very welcome - but this will benefit only resettled Syrian refugees, leaving the vast majority of refugees in the UK locked out.
- There is strong public support for change – recent independent polling shows 60% of the British public believe the Government should fund English for all refugees.

Our recommendations

Refugee Action’s Let Refugees Learn campaign is calling on the Government to act on five essential recommendations, to ensure all refugees can access the English learning they want and need:

1. Create a fund to support all refugees to learn English, to ensure a minimum eight hours a week teaching for refugees’ first two years in England. This would require an investment of £42 million per year.
3. Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.
4. Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning.
5. Facilitate a national framework for community-based language support.

Refugee Action believes everyone seeking sanctuary in the UK should be able to live, not just survive. So we make sure people can find the basic support they need and have the chance to rebuild their lives.
New research

- In theory refugees in England are eligible for fully-funded ESOL provision on the condition that they have attained refugee status and meet necessary income requirements.
- New Refugee Action research shows that in practice, the picture is very different.
- We surveyed 71 ESOL providers across England in July 2017, representing more than 35,000 ESOL learners. We found that:
  - Despite attempts made by providers to meet demand, 63% said the quantity of ESOL provision they offer is insufficient for most people's needs.
  - Over half (52%) said that their ability to provide high quality ESOL classes has worsened over the past five years.
  - Of those which had waiting lists, 45% said that learners can wait an average of six months or more for classes. One provider had 800 people on their waiting list; another told us that learners can wait for three years to be assigned to a course; and another that the wait could be 'indefinite'.
  - 77% of providers either had no facilities for childcare or said what they provide is not enough for the needs of most learners. This disproportionately affects women refugees' ability to attend classes.
  - Of those providers with waiting lists, 80% said insufficient government funding was the main reason for long delays.
  - Two thirds of all providers (66%) told us that an increase in government funding would be the one thing that would most improve their ability to provide adequate quantities of high quality ESOL lessons.

More information on ESOL, integration and refugees

- In recent months Louise Casey's review for the Government on integration and opportunity; two APPG on Social Integration reports on the integration of migrants; and the APPG on refugees' report on integration have all made clear the importance of English to successful integration; and called on the Government to increase funding for ESOL.
- ESOL provision is devolved to each UK nation. Refugee Action’s research focused on ESOL in England, where policy for adult learners is the responsibility of the Department for Education. Most ESOL is financed through the Adult Skills Budget and administered by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). ESOL is a regulated programme made available through providers – usually Further Education colleges.
- The seven new mayoral combined authorities, plus the Greater London Authority, will assume responsibility for ESOL in their areas from September 2018.
- Asylum seekers in England are only eligible for co-funding for ESOL at 50% of cost and only after they have waited for over six months for a decision on their asylum application – Scotland and Northern Ireland provide free and immediate access.
- In January 2016 the then Prime Minister announced a new, one-off £20m fund to provide English language tuition to Muslim women. It aims to combat radicalisation in long-standing communities, and therefore refugees don’t benefit from this.
- The Home Secretary announced in September 2016 an extra £10m over the next five years for ESOL provision for Syrian refugees resettled through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). While this is a very welcome step, it does not go nearly far enough – the funding supports one small select group of refugees to integrate while neglecting the rest (including refugees resettled through other Government programmes; and Syrians who came to the UK as asylum seekers).
Refugee Action has worked closely with officials on the implementation of the funding. This has resulted in a recent instruction to local authorities that the funding must provide a minimum of **eight hours a week** English teaching to refugees by the end of their first month in the UK; a new year-long post in every region to help councils commission additional ESOL services and support community ESOL; and £2.3m spread over the next four years to **overcome childcare barriers** to ESOL.

The Government also launched the Controlling Migration Fund in November 2016, which aims to mitigate the impact of immigration on local communities. It includes £100m over four years from which local authorities in England can bid for funding to tackle “local service impacts”, which can include funding for ESOL provision. Yet local authorities are under no obligation to fund ESOL and if they choose to apply for ESOL projects, there’s no guarantee they’ll be successful.

These measures are very welcome, but do not constitute the **comprehensive response** needed to ensure that **all refugees** can access the English language learning they want and need, to fully integrate into UK society and economy, unlock their potential and build new lives for themselves and their families.

Refugee Action believes the Government’s forthcoming response to the Casey review and new National Integration Strategy, both expected this autumn, provide the **ideal opportunity to invest in ESOL for all refugees**.

"Life is up and down. Sometimes lonely. Life isn’t easy… I come here and talk to people and have less depression. I go to English class and feel strong" – Maryam

“What is most important is language. If you speak the language you can make friends with your neighbour” - Klajdi

Refugees’ and asylum seekers’ views, from ‘**Safe but alone**’

**Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness**

- The cross-party Commission on Loneliness was established by Jo Cox MP shortly before her death to examine the impact and scale of the growing problem of loneliness, to identify solutions and encourage people to ‘**start a conversation**’.
- Co-chaired by Seema Kennedy MP and Rachel Reeves MP, the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness is working throughout 2017 with 13 partner organisations, including Refugee Action, to shine a light on different aspects of loneliness and the positive steps we can all take to combat it.
- During October, the Commission is focusing on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers.
- The Commission is working with Government, businesses and voluntary groups and will make recommendations at the end of the year on how we can reduce loneliness.

**For more information** on Refugee Action’s Let Refugees Learn campaign; or any other issues concerning refugees and asylum seekers, **contact Paul Hook**, Advocacy Manager at Refugee Action, on 07725 638925 / 0207 952 1540 / paulh@refugee-action.org.uk