



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'](#) and briefing paper ['Locked out of Learning: a snapshot of ESOL provision in England'](#).

UPDATE: On Sunday 4th September 2016, 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 that funding for ESOL in England has been cut by 55% over the past eight years, 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 people can wait for years 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 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, 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.*

In September 2016, the Government announced £10 million over the next five years for Syrian resettled refugees to be given English language lessons. Whilst this is an important step, it will only benefit a select group of refugees and leave many others behind. All refugees must be given access to the English language learning they want and need.

The Government has also set up a 'Controlling Migration Fund' that aims to mitigate the impact of immigration on communities. This includes £100m over four years for "local service impacts" which can include funding for ESOL provision. Yet local authorities will be under no obligation to fund ESOL through this scheme.

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. Furthermore, almost two thirds (60%) think the Government should fund English language classes for refugees.

We also know that there is broad political support for refugees learning English. The Prime Minister, 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". Influential reports by Dame Louise Casey and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration have also made clear that English language learning is vital for effective integration.

It is clear that supporting refugees and asylum seekers to learn English is a worthwhile investment: two years' of ESOL provision would effectively be 'paid back' within eight months of employment. Plenty of other 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 1522. 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 MP briefing (in this pack) 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
- 60% of British people think that the Government should fund English language teaching to refugees³
- More than any other factor, learning English demonstrates commitment to adapting to life in the UK, and enables productive contribution to the nation's economy⁴
- 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)⁵
- Recent research from Refugee Action shows that some refugees are waiting up to two years to access English classes⁶
- 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 Ipsos MORI (2017), upcoming release as part of ongoing immigration series in partnership with Unbound Philanthropy. Latest data available at: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3732/immigration-one-of-the-biggest-issues-for-wavering-EU-referendum-voters.aspx>

⁴ Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009): *A New Approach to English for Speakers of Other Languages*

⁵ Refugee Action (2016): *Let Refugees Learn* Available at: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0001/3854/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf>

⁶ Refugee Action (2017): *Locked out of Learning: a snapshot of ESOL provision in England* Available at: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/resource/locked-out-of-learning-a-snapshot-of-esol-provision-in-england>

MP briefing

Print this out and leave it with your MP

English language learning: importance and barriers

Refugee Action, City of Sanctuary 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 English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). 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. [Latest research](#) from Refugee Action shows that some refugees are waiting up to two years to access classes.

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 over the past eight years. 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, an overwhelming 91% think that refugees have a responsibility to learn English and almost two thirds (60%) think the Government should fund English language classes for refugees. Politicians of all parties – Theresa May included – have also highlighted just how important English language learning is to refugee integration. Influential reports by Dame Louise Casey and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration have recently emphasised this point.

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 Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme 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 and briefing paper ['Locked out of Learning: a snapshot of ESOL provision in England'](#).

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.

Template letter to MP

Adapt this to suit your style – remember, the more personalised the letter is, the bigger the impact. Feel free to write to your MP and also go and see them, phone them, invite them to an event – the more contact the better!

Dear [name of your MP],

Refugees are people, like you and me. They have been forced to flee their homes by war or persecution. When they arrive in the UK, they have the chance to rebuild their lives in safety.

But these new lives are extremely challenging if they can't speak English. Without it, refugees can't integrate properly or find work. Even the smallest things are hard – catching a bus, going to the doctor, making friends with their neighbours.

Learning English – in an accredited, formalised way, such as ESOL – is crucial, and refugees know it. They are keen and willing to learn. But cuts to funding, gender bias and other systemic problems have created barriers to learning. Refugee Action has identified long waiting lists, not enough teaching hours, being assigned the wrong class, living prohibitively far from courses, and childcare worries as commonly faced problems. Latest research shows that refugees can wait up to two years to access classes.

I am asking you, therefore, to write to the Prime Minister with the following requests:

1. Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English (*the announcement of £10m extra funding for Syrian refugees to learn English is commendable but does not go far enough – the government should fund ESOL for all refugees*)
2. Publish ESOL strategies for England and Northern Ireland in alignment with the rest of the UK
3. Ensure full and equal access to ESOL for all, 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

It is worthwhile investing in refugees' learning. It is calculated that two years' of ESOL provision would be 'paid back' within eight months of employment. Research suggests that English language learning, more than any other factor, is crucial for refugees' social and economic integration and participation.

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. Politicians of all parties – Theresa May included – have also highlighted just how important English language learning is to refugee integration; influential reports from Dame Louise Casey and the APPG on Social Integration recently emphasised this point.

In this context of both widespread support and urgent need, please write to Theresa May to ask her to act on the five requests above.

Yours sincerely,
[your name]

P.S. For more information, please see Refugee Action's report ['Let Refugees Learn'](#).