



Refugee Action response to APPG on refugees – Refugees Welcome Inquiry

September 2016

This submission reflects Refugee Action's current and previous experience working with both resettled and asylum route refugees in England and includes our recent research on refugees' access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Throughout our submission, we take integration to mean a comprehensive process by which new refugees adapt to their environments and make a home for themselves in the UK. Integration has social and economic dimensions and includes accessing services, building community relationships, undertaking education and finding employment.

1. How far does current UK policy and legislation allow newly resettled and newly recognised refugees to integrate and rebuild their lives here?

An overarching integration policy or strategy for refugees does not presently exist across the UK, or for all four UK nations. England and Northern Ireland currently have no refugee integration strategy.¹ The Scottish Government published a refugee integration strategy in 2013²; the Welsh Government's refugee integration strategy was published in 2008 and reviewed in 2013.³

Although England lacks a refugee integration strategy, policies exist across government departments that affect refugee integration. The Home Office leads on refugee resettlement programmes and the asylum system; community cohesion is led by the Department for Communities and Local Government; English language learning and access to higher education and adult skills training sits within the Department for Education (DfE)⁴; and policies relevant to job market integration and receiving benefits are led by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)⁵. There is currently no systematic, permanent mechanism for

¹Potter, M. 2014. Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland. [online]. Available at: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/ofmdfm/motions/motions/community-relations-refugee-week/refugees-and-asylum-seekers.pdf>

²The Scottish Government. 2013. New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland's Communities. [online]. Available at: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0043/00439604.pdf>

³Welsh Government. 2013. Written Statement – Update on the Refugee Inclusion Strategy Action Plan 2013. [online]. Available at: <http://gov.wales/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/previous-administration/2013/refugeeinclusionstrategy/?lang=en>

⁴See letter from Nick Boles MP to Chief Executive of the Skills Funding Agency Peter Lauener for the most recent Skills Funding Agency financial year planning. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/485969/BIS-15-615-skills-funding-letter-2016-to-2017.pdf.

⁵Department for Work and Pensions. 2015. Guidance: help available from the Department for Work and Pensions for people who have been granted leave to remain in the UK. [online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/refugees-guidance-about-benefits-and-pensions/help->

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these different arms of government to co-ordinate their work on or approach to refugee integration.

Resettled and Asylum Route refugees

Refugees resettled to the UK under the Gateway Protection Programme and the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) are entitled to various forms of integration support not statutorily guaranteed to asylum route refugees. As of the end of September 2016, Refugee Action is working with 14 local authorities, providing reception and integration support to resettled refugees on both the Syrian VPRS and Gateway.

The entitlements are consistent across locations but their implementation can vary across different providers. In general, integration support includes:

- A caseworker for a period of up to 12 months who provides “a tailored integration package with the aim of living independently and accessing mainstream services”⁶.
- Facilitation in engaging with and signing up for various services, including health, English language courses, mainstream benefits, and education for children.
- Translation and interpreter support where necessary.
- Housing upon arrival and housing support for one year.

Unlike resettled refugees, asylum route refugees are not provided with any government-funded integration support. This wasn't always the case. Refugee Action was one of the main providers in two recent refugee integration programmes, overseen and funded by the government and available to all refugees:

- Refugee Action operated one of three pilots of the government's Sunrise (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services) programme in Manchester from 2005 until 2008.
- The Sunrise pilots led to the creation of the UK-wide RIES (Refugee Integration and Employment Service), which ran from 2008 until 2011. Refugee Action delivered the RIES programme in three regions, providing refugees with advice and support on issues such as benefits and housing; an employment advice service; and a mentoring programme.

The successful impact of these programmes on refugees' integration across a wide range of indicators (including English language ability, employment rates and further study) are well documented⁷. Despite this, the government chose to end all funding for the RIES programme from 2012.

It is worth noting that, unlike resettled refugees, asylum route refugees live in the UK for the duration of the asylum application process before they attain refugee status. During this

[available-from-the-department-for-work-and-pensions-for-people-who-have-been-granted-leave-to-remain-in-the-uk#looking-for-work](#)

⁶ Local Government Association and Migration Yorkshire, 2016. Syrian refugee resettlement. [online]. Available at: http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/7632544/1.11_resettlement_guide_08.pdf/cc6c7b51-23a8-4621-b95c-a30bc3da438e

⁷ UKBA, Moving on Together: Government's recommitment to supporting refugees, March 2009

⁸ Still Human Still Here, 2016: Home Office research and policy conclusions relating to the effective integration of refugees.

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time, they are unable to access free ESOL, gain employment and receive statutory support that would enable them to live in such a way that their basic needs are met⁹ – all of which impedes their integration.

Their eventual transition to refugee status – known as the ‘move-on period’, in which they stop receiving asylum support and begin to receive mainstream benefits – is widely observed to be marred by administrative difficulties, often resulting in destitution. Inevitably, this in turn prevents refugees from integrating¹⁰.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

English language learning is central to the ability of all refugees to integrate. Attaining a sufficient level of English is the key that unlocks all other aspects of integration for refugees: employment; further education; engaging with services such as the NHS; participating in activities in their local community.

Again, there is no UK-wide strategy for ESOL. Of the four UK nations, England and Northern Ireland – unlike Scotland and Wales – currently have no strategy to provide a coherent framework for ESOL objectives or to measure the impact of the provision.

The most recent ESOL policy was published in 2010 by the coalition government in its *Skills for Sustainable Growth* strategy. Here, ESOL is identified as the means by which those who cannot speak English can “gain employment and contribute to society”¹¹. The relationship between English language learning and social and economic integration and participation is repeatedly borne out in research that has been conducted over a number of years.

In England, ESOL is funded by the Skills Funding Agency (which formerly sat within BIS and is now under DfE). These funds are channelled into the Adult Education Budget, which colleges can choose to spend on courses eligible under the funding rules¹². Refugees, whether resettled or asylum route, are not privileged under these funding arrangements; meaning that they, along with other migrants and individuals seeking adult skills courses, effectively compete for places.

⁹ There are caveats for both ESOL and employment. For ESOL, where an asylum seeker in England waits six months or more for a decision on their application, they may then apply to enter ESOL (at a reduced rate of 50% cost); for employment, where an asylum seeker waits a year for a decision on their claim they can enter employment on the condition that the work undertaken is on the shortage occupation list.

¹⁰ Carnet, et al., 2014. The Move-on Period: an ordeal for new refugees. [online]. Available at: <http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/About%20us/Research%20reports%20by%20advocacy%20dept/Move%20on%20period%20report.pdf>

¹¹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010. Skills for Sustainable Growth. [online]. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32368/10-1274-skills-for-sustainable-growth-strategy.pdf

¹² Skills Funding Agency. 2016. Adult education budget funding and performance-management rules v3. Skills Funding Agency: London. [online]. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/545722/Adult_education_budget_funding_and_performance_management_rules_2016_to_2017_V3.pdf

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In September 2016, the Home Office announced an additional £2m a year for five years (jointly funded with DfE) to provide additional ESOL support for resettled Syrian refugees¹³.

In addition to formal ESOL, charities and faith groups provide volunteer-led English lessons and more informal support. This 'community-based learning' varies in quality and provision by location, but is sometimes the only resource available to refugees.

Refugee Action trains and supports volunteers to provide English language support to refugees through all our resettlement work; and provides ESOL classes for refugees at different levels of English language, delivered by volunteers.

In addition to these projects, Refugee Action works to facilitate refugees' access to ESOL by engaging providers and relevant Jobcentre staff as appropriate.

2. The barriers that newly resettled and asylum route refugees experience

ESOL

While English language teaching is widely recognised to be a vital part of integrating refugees into UK society^{14 15}, ESOL funding has been drastically cut in recent years. In England, funding for ESOL provision fell by 55% between 2008-09 and 2014-15.¹⁶

These cuts have led to a growth in waiting lists, reduction in teaching hours, and an overall increase in barriers to English language teaching for groups including refugees – in marked contrast to the stated government policy ambitions and political rhetoric.¹⁷

Recent research by Refugee Action identified the following barriers associated with accessing ESOL as experienced by resettled refugees:

- Waiting lists for courses can vary dramatically – a direct consequence of funding cuts. As one provider explained:
"Our waiting list is over two years long for adult learners. We have about 1,200 learners on the waiting list." -- ESOL provider at a local college

¹³ Home Office, 7 September 2016. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-anniversary-of-government-commitment-to-resettle-20000-syrian-refugees>

¹⁴ Ager and Strang, 2004. Indicators of Integration. [online]. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110218135832/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdf/s04/dpr28.pdf>; Cebulla, et al, 2010. Research Note 37 Spotlight on Refugee Integration: findings from the survey of new refugees in the United Kingdom. [online]. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116062/horr37-report.pdf; Refugee Action, 2016. Let Refugees Learn. [online]. Available at: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0001/3854/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf>

¹⁵ Brahmhatt, Atfield, Irving, Lee, and O'Toole, 2007. Refugees' Experiences of Integration. [online]. Available at: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/7087/Integration_employment_and_training_2

¹⁶ Refugee Action, 2016

¹⁷ NATECLA, 2015. NATECLA Statement on withdrawal of ESOL Plus mandated learning. [online]. Available at: <http://www.natecla.org.uk/news/803/Withdrawal-of-ESOL-Plus-Mandated-Learning-July-15>

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- Some refugees are required to travel significant distances to attend ESOL classes. This can be prohibitive for individuals on limited incomes due to the cost of travel, and for those with other responsibilities such as childcare.
- Number of teaching hours available varies, and is often not enough. Some respondents had been placed in ESOL courses that were below the level at which they tested. Both of these issues are a direct consequence of funding cuts and can negatively impact individuals' learning experiences.
- Female refugees face these and other additional barriers (detailed in response to Question 4 below).

These barriers cause refugees' integration to be stymied and delayed. Refugee Action believes that refugees' ability to access ESOL is a fundamental part of the integration process and one that must be addressed by government as a priority.

While the government's announcement of £10m additional ESOL funding over five years is a very welcome start, it is restricted to resettled Syrian refugees. Refugees resettled through the Gateway programme will not benefit from it; nor will the majority of refugees in the UK who come through the asylum route (including Syrians). We believe the government should extend its funding to ensure that all refugees are entitled and able to access quality, formal ESOL teaching.

The continued shortfall in ESOL funding comes despite strong public support for refugees to be able to learn English. Recent opinion polling shows 75% of people agree that learning English is beneficial to refugees; while 73% think it is beneficial to Britain, citing refugees' ability to integrate in their local communities, work and pay taxes¹⁸.

It also comes despite evidence that support for ESOL can and should be considered as a good investment, through its role in enabling refugees to gain employment. Refugee Action's calculations show that funding for two years' ESOL teaching is effectively 'paid back' through taxation within the first eight months of employment¹⁹.

Mainstream benefits, the job market and education

For many refugees, whether resettlement or asylum route, receiving benefits is a necessary step that precedes finding work. Asylum route refugees, however, experience particular barriers with respect to initiating their mainstream benefits during the 'move-on period'. This has been investigated by the British Red Cross²⁰ and Refugee Council²¹ among others. These barriers far too frequently result in refugees falling into destitution.

¹⁸ BritainThinks for Refugee Action, April 2016. [online] Available at: http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/support_us/campaign/join_a_campaign/let_refugees_learn/britainthinks_poll_results

¹⁹ Refugee Action, Let Refugees Learn, May 2016. [online] Available at: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0001/3854/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf>

²⁰ Carnet, et al., 2014. The Move-on Period: an ordeal for new refugees. [online]. Available at: <http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/About%20us/Research%20reports%20by%20advocacy%20dept/Move%20on%20period%20report.pdf>

²¹ Basedow and Doyle, 2016. England's forgotten refugees. [online]. Available at: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/7935/England_s_Forgotten_Refugees_final.pdf

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No matter their background or route to the UK, English language is key to refugees' entry into the job market. Research published in 2010 on behalf of the Home Office notes that "refugees' English language skills were strongly associated with other integration outcomes, in particular employment" and that those with higher English language skills "at all time points after the asylum decision... were more likely to be employed than refugees with lower language skills."²²

In Refugee Action's recent research on resettled refugees' experiences of ESOL²³, all participants expressed a desire to work in order to become self-sufficient and independent; and all consistently linked English language ability with their employment prospects.

Our research highlighted that this is particularly a problem for refugees using their existing skills and expertise to the benefit of the UK. Barriers to English language learning often results in refugees finding work far below their skills, qualifications and experience; while converting existing qualifications was impossible for those unable to speak English or access ESOL.

3. Is support provided to vulnerable refugees, including those who are disabled or who have been victims of torture, adequate?

Refugee Action staff identified barriers to disabled refugees' access to PIP (personal independence payment), due to the eligibility criteria including a requirement for an individual to "have been in Great Britain for at least 2 of the last 3 years."²⁴ Clearly, this is impossible for new refugees; and nonsensical, given that these refugees have been resettled by the UK government precisely because of their disabilities.

We understand that the government has now amended this position, following representations from Refugee Action and others. Refugees will now be eligible to receive disability benefits from the date they are granted refugee status. However, this issue highlights the fact that administrative oversights and lack of co-ordination between government departments result in real and unnecessary hardship for refugees.

4. Do particular groups of new refugees, such as LGBTI refugee or refugee women, face any specific barrier to experiencing a welcome in Britain?

Recent Refugee Action research on ESOL found that female refugees face specific barriers to accessing courses²⁵. These include:

- Childcare responsibilities. Women could not attend classes when they had small children to care for during class times; where they had to pick children up from school; where there was a lack of childcare facilities; and where there were long travel times to classes that prevented them from carrying out other responsibilities.

²² Cebulla et al, 2010; 5

²³ Refugee Action, Let Refugees Learn, May 2016.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/pip/eligibility>

²⁵ Refugee Action, Let Refugees Learn, May 2016.

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- Married women whose husbands are the principal applicant for benefits did not receive the same Jobcentre referral to ESOL as their husbands. This resulted in lengthy and unnecessary delays to their ability to access ESOL courses.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Successful refugee integration is essential both for the wellbeing of refugees and for the UK. Successful integration ensures that refugees are able to fully contribute to and participate in UK society, economy and local communities.

However, the present lack of government strategies, objectives and funding instead mean that refugees' abilities to integrate in Britain are undermined, limited and frustrated.

A refugee integration strategy does not currently exist – either for the UK or within all four UK nations. Refugee Action believes it is essential that **a UK-wide strategy is put in place**; or at a minimum, that England and Northern Ireland join Scotland and Wales in putting in place a refugee integration strategy.

This would ensure greater co-ordination across government departments; and should mean that problems currently experienced by refugees caused by lack of coordination between departments are identified and resolved. It would also provide clear objectives for stakeholders across government to work towards and to measure progress against; and would clarify the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders including local authorities and statutory bodies such as the police.

We believe that the refugee integration strategy should be coupled with renewed funding and political will to learn from the successes of recent refugee integration programmes such as Sunrise and RIES, and that the government should put in place **new schemes to support the integration of all refugees** – including those who gain refugee status through the asylum route.

Finally, it is clear that access to English teaching is central to refugees' integration. Refugee Action has called on the government to take the following steps to **ensure that all refugees have timely access to free, quality English language teaching**:

1. **Create a fund specifically to support refugees learning English.** The recent announcement of £10m new government funding for resettled Syrian refugees is a welcome first step; but we calculate that a further £42m a year is required to ensure all other refugees in England can receive two years' ESOL teaching.
2. **Publish an ESOL strategy for England**
3. **Ensure full and equal access to ESOL**, particularly for women
4. **Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning**, as this would accelerate integration for those who attain refugee status.
5. **Facilitate a national framework for community-based language support**

By improving access to English, these measures would maximise the opportunities for all refugees to successfully build a new, independent life in Britain and actively contribute to UK society.

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