



**TURNING WORDS INTO ACTION:**

**WHY THE GOVERNMENT  
MUST INVEST NOW  
TO LET REFUGEES LEARN**

**REFUGEE  
ACTION**

# INTRODUCTION.

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**I live in England now, and I need to communicate with people. In the future I hope to get a job, so I need to learn English for that, too – to build my future.** Azita, survey respondent (26 years old)<sup>1</sup>

Since 2016, Refugee Action has been campaigning to ensure that refugees can access the English language classes that they need in order to allow them to rebuild their lives in the UK, and integrate into their new communities.

The importance of language for people’s effective integration in the UK has been demonstrated time and again. The evidence shows that those with low English language proficiency are less likely to be in employment, something that disproportionately impacts on women.<sup>2</sup> And the effects of learning English are not just felt in the job market; the ability to speak English is also related to health outcomes, with those who speak English proficiently more likely to be in good health.<sup>3</sup> This is certainly the experience of refugees in the UK. Research shows that learning English is central to all other aspects of refugees’ integration including finding employment, meeting new people, and accessing the variety of services that people need to use as part of their everyday lives – such as the health system, schools, and transport services.<sup>4</sup> Refugee Action’s findings have also shown that learning English helps people to combat loneliness and social isolation.<sup>5</sup>

The Government has listened to Refugee Action and our partners, and has shifted its position to recognise the importance of learning English. The Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, for instance, pledged to ensure that “everyone, whatever their background, can go as far as their hard work will take them.” This included a focus on boosting people’s English language skills and a desire that “everyone living in England should be able to speak and understand English so they can integrate into life in this country.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet this stated ambition is in stark contrast to the resources the Government makes available for people to achieve this goal. Funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in England has shrunk dramatically over the past decade, from £212.3m in 2008 to £105m in 2018 – a real terms cut of almost 60% in the amount of money spent on ESOL delivery through the Adult Education Budget. This decline in funding has been accompanied by a decline in adult participation in ESOL classes by nearly 40% over the same period. This is despite the fact that providers continue to report high demand for courses.<sup>7</sup>

In this briefing, we present results from a survey of 128 refugees across England. Through this survey, we aimed to strengthen the evidence base on the demand for ESOL provision amongst refugees, and the barriers faced by those that Refugee Action works with. The following findings emerged:

- ➔ **Almost two thirds of respondents told us that they did not think they had received enough ESOL teaching hours.**
- ➔ **More than three quarters of parents requiring childcare told us that lack of childcare had been a barrier to their ability to attend English lessons.**
- ➔ **Two out of every three respondents told us that they are not confident that their current level of English makes them ready to work in the UK.**

Our findings show that provision is not currently meeting the needs of many refugees who desperately want and need to learn English. Yet so far, the Government has failed to turn words into action when it comes to ensuring that every single refugee is able to access sufficient, good quality English language lessons.

Committing extra resources would make good sense when it comes to integration, and be popular amongst the public. New polling<sup>8</sup> by YouGov for Refugee Action shows that **91% of the GB adult population** thinks that it is important that refugees who come to the UK learn to speak

English. Of those who expressed a preference, the vast majority (86%) support proposals to invest in services and resources specifically targeted at helping refugees learn English.

As the Government considers its future spending plans, the time is now to take firm action to ensure that all those who need it are able to access good quality ESOL provision. In particular, this must include a commitment to new funds and resources to ensure that all refugees can access the language provision they need to facilitate their integration and allow them to rebuild their lives.



## ALENEZI.

Alenezi is from Kuwait, and arrived in the UK four years ago. She has young children, and caring for them has been a barrier to her accessing English classes. Alenezi told us that she is desperate to learn English, to be able to integrate into her community and ensure that her children can do well in school. Her current level of English means that she can't help her children with their schoolwork, which worries her constantly: *"If I want to integrate into British society, I have to learn the language first. **If I speak***

***English, I will be able to help my children learn English, help them with homework, and help them learn the things they need to know."***

Alenezi recently started ESOL classes at a charity which provides a crèche for those learners with children. She told us that this is the only way that she is able to attend classes: *"I have peace of mind and can study."* Although she currently only has five hours of classes per week, she says that the course has increased her confidence in herself. But Alenezi knows that, to achieve her dream of being a teaching assistant, she will need to progress much further. *"I wish I could attend college, because I would be able to get full-time education, but because there is no nursery I can't. **If I didn't have this barrier to attending classes, my life would be so different. My English would be better and I would be able to rely on myself."***

# ESOL PROVISION FOR REFUGEES – FALLING SHORT OF NEED.

Refugee Action has previously spoken to ESOL providers about the challenges that they face to provide good quality, sufficient classes to their learners, in light of the drastic reductions in ESOL funding over the past decade. In July 2017, we surveyed 71 ESOL providers across England, representing a total of 35,563 ESOL learners. Our findings revealed that almost two-thirds of providers do not feel that the quantity of ESOL provision they offer is sufficient for most people's needs. The majority felt that their ability to provide high-quality ESOL classes had worsened over the past 5 years.<sup>9</sup>

The responses from ESOL providers echoed what we hear every day from the refugees we work with: that they are unable to access the hours they need, and that they sometimes face barriers – including travel costs and childcare – that further restrict their access to English lessons.

In order to explore their experiences of accessing ESOL, in April and May 2019 Refugee Action surveyed 128 refugees across England.<sup>10</sup> The survey included both people who had been resettled through one of the UK's resettlement programmes, and also those who had been granted refugee status following a successful asylum application. The vast majority of respondents (75 of a total 97 who reported their current level) told us that they currently have pre-entry or entry-level ESOL – highlighting the need to ensure sufficient investment in provision at these levels, whilst continuing to recognise that learners with more advanced needs may have very specific language development requirements.<sup>11</sup>

In some ways, the picture that emerged from our survey was encouraging. Only 11 of the 128 people surveyed had not been able to access ESOL classes at all, with over half (60%) of respondents telling us that they had been able

to access ESOL at college. Many of the rest had managed to seek out classes elsewhere, including charity provision. This reflects what we hear from refugees and people seeking asylum all the time: that they are desperate to learn English and will find any way they can to access classes. Yet whilst charity provision is an invaluable complement to formal learning, it is not an adequate replacement.



I like learning English. I need it for my future, and for the future of my children. But I had to stop studying after my child was born, and now that my husband works I have to pay for ESOL classes – but we can't afford to do that.

Mahtab, survey respondent (35 years old)

## SURVEY RESPONSES

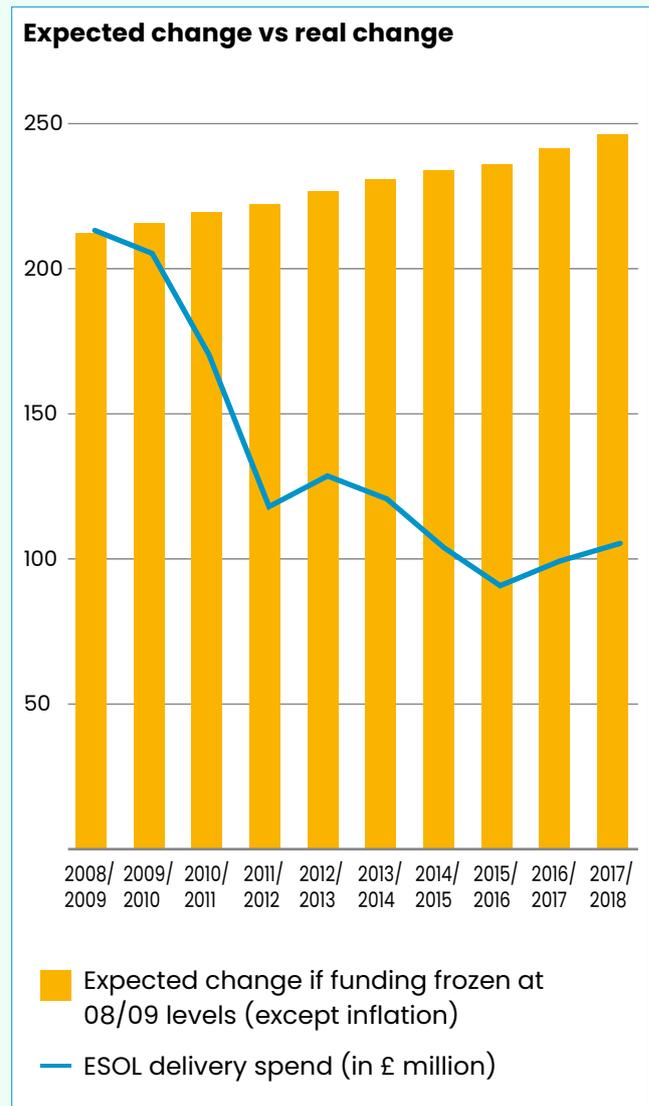
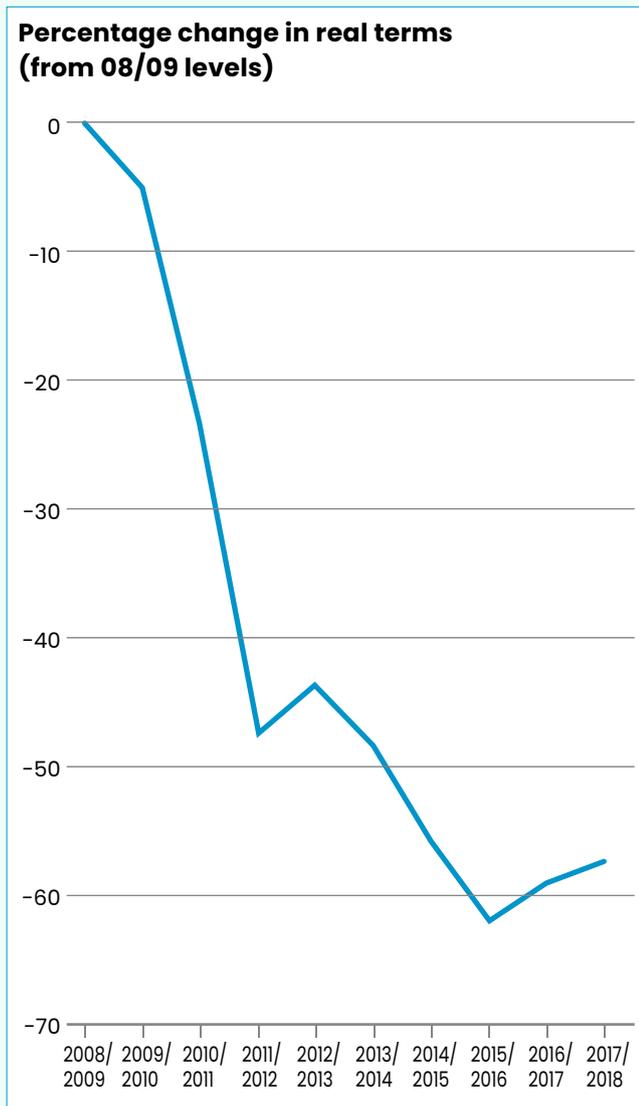
- **128** people with refugee status responded to our survey about ESOL provision.
- **67** of respondents were women, and **61** were men.
- The average age of respondents was **35**.
- **37** respondents had been resettled in the UK, and **91** had been granted refugee status after claiming asylum.
- Responses were gathered from people living across five regions of England (London, the North East, the North West, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber).

# CHANGES IN ESOL FUNDING, 2008-2018.

Despite the recognition that high-quality, well-funded ESOL is essential for people's integration, over the past decade there has been a steep decline in the funding available for ESOL provision. The amount of money spent on ESOL delivery through the Adult Education Budget saw a real terms drop of almost 60 percent between 2008/09 and 2017/18. Instead of the £245.9 million we would have expected to be available for ESOL provision in 2017/18, had real terms funding been frozen at 2008/09 levels (taking into account inflation), only £105 million was actually made available to fund English language provision. This decline in

funding provision for ESOL has been accompanied by a decline in participation, and the same time period saw adult participation in ESOL classes drop by nearly 40%.<sup>12</sup> This is despite the fact that demand for classes remains high.

Research undertaken by both Refugee Action and NATECLA has identified cuts in funding as being the single most important barrier to the ability of providers to continue to provide high-quality ESOL to learners. Yet to date there has been no action taken to address the huge fall in funding over the past decade.



Other responses demonstrated the difficulties that refugees continue to face in accessing English language lessons. Whilst most of the 79 respondents who had required financial assistance to get to and from classes told us that they had received support from colleges, charities, or Job-centre Plus to pay for travel, a quarter (24%) had not been able to access such assistance. This can mean people are forced to miss classes because they are unable to travel to them.

The survey results also show that the amount of hours people receive each week is often insufficient for their needs. Only 41% of respondents told us that they thought the number of hours of English lessons that they had received each week was enough for their needs, with the vast majority (59%) saying that they didn't think they had received enough teaching hours.<sup>13</sup> Of those who said that their hours were enough, learners had been able to access an average of nine hours per week of English lessons. Those who said that they had not received enough hours had been able to access an average of just six.<sup>14</sup> Whilst provision varied widely amongst respondents, these figures support Refugee Action's recommendation that people should be able to access a minimum of eight hours per week of ESOL lessons.<sup>15</sup>

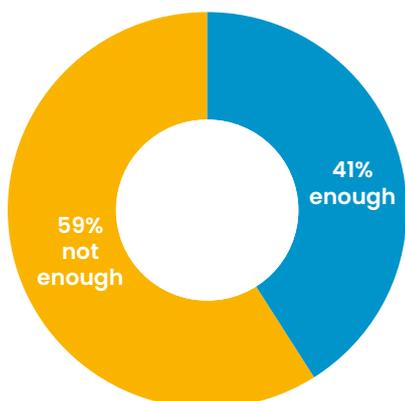
Also concerning was the fact that almost two thirds of respondents told us that they do not

feel that their current level of English makes them ready to work in the UK. As outlined above, the ability to speak English is central to people's integration in many ways, including in giving people the confidence to enter the labour market. Without such confidence, people may struggle to realise their full potential.

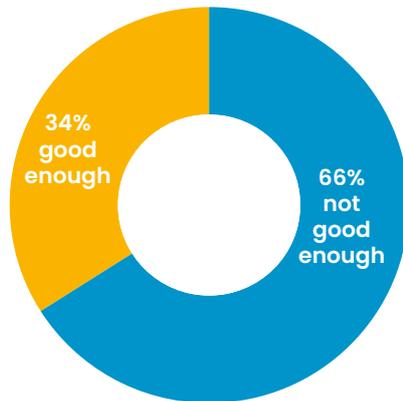
Childcare emerged as a clear barrier to learning English, with 20 of the 26 parents requiring childcare telling us that lack of childcare had been a barrier to their ability to attend English lessons. This was something that particularly impacted on women. Indeed, research suggests that certain groups – including women, older people, those with caring responsibilities, those with lower levels of pre-migration education and those in poor health – tend to have lower English language outcomes.<sup>16</sup> This was reflected in some of our survey results; whilst 34% of men stated they felt that their English was good enough to find employment, only 24% of women said the same.

Our findings suggest that provision continues to fall short for too many refugees in England. Yet their ability to successfully rebuild their lives and integrate into their new communities will be held back until they are able to access sufficient, high-quality English language lessons that effectively meet their needs.

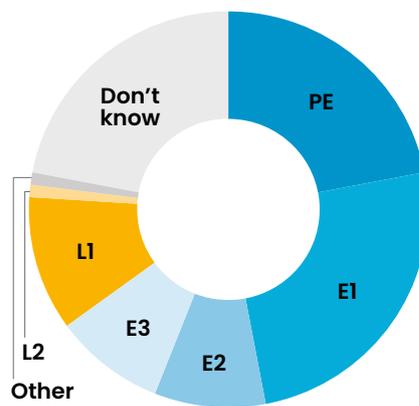
**Do you feel like the amount (hours of ESOL/English teaching you receive is enough for you?**



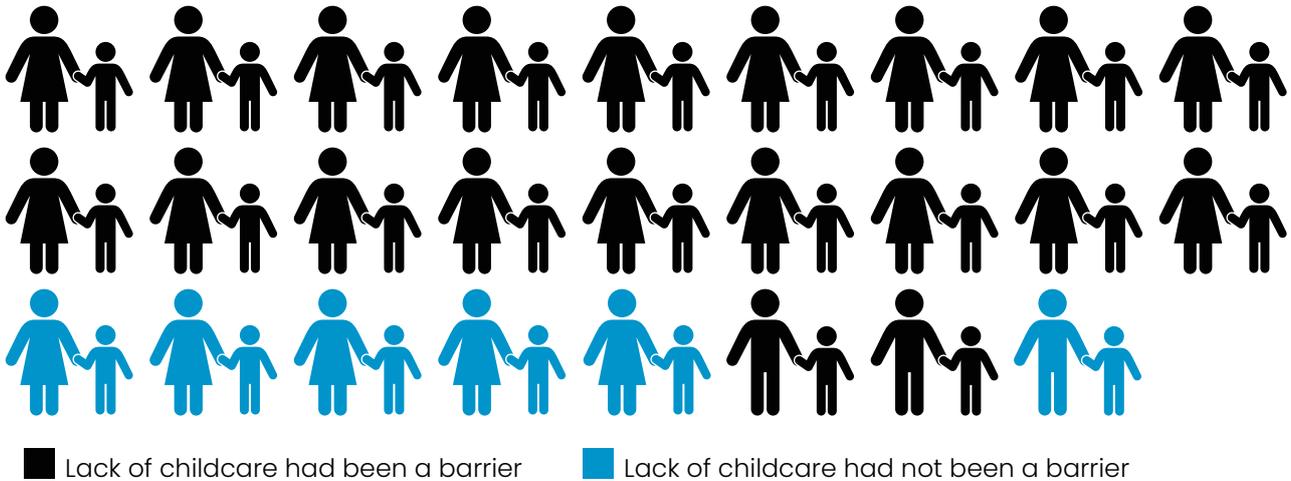
**Do you feel that your current level of English makes you ready to work in the UK?**



**Respondents beginning ESOL level**



## Is the lack of childcare provision creating a barrier to learning English?



I have only been able to take classes at this charity, because they provide childcare. That's the only way I can go to ESOL classes. I want to become a nurse but I need to learn more English before I can study. *Zara, survey respondent (23 years old)*



### MARLENE.

Marlene came to the UK from Sudan through a refugee resettlement programme. Since arriving here, she has struggled with isolation.

Marlene told us that she has had difficulty rebuilding her life and finding her place in the community. She has struggled to make friends: *"Sometimes, I go to the park or walk to town. **I want to meet people but I can't communicate with people.**"*

But despite her desire to learn English, and to eventually be able to find a job, Marlene has not been able to access the classes that she needs to help her to advance. *"I have lessons once a week in the evening. It is not enough. I am at home all the time, I feel isolated. **I feel like I live in a desert – not in a city with people around me.**"*

# THE STORY SO FAR – ALL TALK BUT NO ACTION?

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Despite the desperate need to address existing gaps in ESOL provision, the steps taken by Government to date have been patchy at best. Over recent years, we have seen an increased recognition on the part of the Government that action is required to ensure that everybody who lives in the country is able to learn to speak English. But warm words are not enough, and we are yet to see concrete changes on the ground for those who are so desperate to access the ESOL classes they need.

Our landmark Let Refugees Learn report included five key recommendations for the Government, which would ensure that every single refugee in the UK was able to access the high-quality English language provision that they need:

- ➔ Creation of a fund to specifically support refugees learning English.
- ➔ Publication of an ESOL strategy for England.
- ➔ Taking action to ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.
- ➔ Providing people seeking asylum with the right to access free English language learning.
- ➔ Facilitation of a national framework for community-based language support.

Since 2016, there has been some progress on these as a result of the Government listening and responding to calls from Refugee Action and our partners. The Government's Integrated Communities Action Plan, published in February 2019 following a twelve-week consultation on the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, outlined the Government's intentions to publish a new national strategy for English language in England by Autumn 2019, and announced a new targeted English Language Coordination Fund, intended to ensure better local coordination of English language support.

There has also been partial progress in other areas. In September 2016, the then Home Secretary announced an extra £10 million, to be spread over a five-year period, for ESOL provision for refugees resettled through the Government's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). In August 2017, an instruction was issued to local authorities that this funding must provide a minimum of eight hours a week of English teaching to refugees, starting by the end of their first month in the UK. In addition, the Home Office has committed £2.3 million, spread over four years, for local authorities to bid for to fund schemes to overcome childcare barriers to women's participation in ESOL. Some funding has also been made available – for instance through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Controlling Migration Fund (CMF) – that can be used to fund English language provision. However, there is no obligation for these funds to be spent on ESOL-related activities, and less than one third of CMF-funded projects have so far included a language component.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst these developments are welcome, it is deeply concerning that they remain limited in scope and quantity. The funding that has been made available for those settled through the VPRS and VCRS are largely restricted to one relatively small group of refugees, and the majority of refugees in the UK are not eligible for these funding streams despite the fact that they have the same needs and desires to learn the language. Other funding, meanwhile, can only be viewed as a short-term, piecemeal contribution to a larger funding crisis, rather than providing the long-term guarantee that ESOL providers need to ensure that they will be able to provide sufficient, high quality classes that match existing need.

# TIMELINE OF ESOL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2016

**2016**

- In January, then Prime Minister David Cameron announces a £20 million community fund to teach English to isolated women.
- In September, the Government announces £10 million of funding for people arriving under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.
- In November the Controlling Migration Fund is launched, including a local services fund worth £100 million that can be spent on ESOL provision.
- In December the Casey Review is published, looking at opportunity and integration in the UK's most isolated and deprived communities. The review highlighted the central role of English in ensuring effective integration.

**2017**

- The Government establishes new ESOL coordinator roles in every region.
- In August, guidance is issued on the £10 million funding for refugees arriving through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, setting out a minimum provision of eight hours a week ESOL teaching to start within a month of arrival.
- £2.3 million is allocated to overcoming childcare barriers to ESOL, to be spread over four years.

**2018**

- In March, the Government's Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper is published, with a 12-week consultation period.
- In December, the Government publishes its 'future skills-based immigration system' White Paper, laying out its long-term plans for the immigration system – including "an ambitious and well funded English language strategy."

**2019**

- In February, the Government publishes its Integrated Communities Action Plan.
- In September, the Adult Education Budget (AEB) will be devolved to six Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority. The Education and Skills Funding Agency will continue to manage the AEB in areas which do not fall within these devolved regions.
- The publication of a national ESOL strategy is due in the Autumn.

The Integrated Communities Action Plan marks a clear step forward in the Government's approach to integration in its many and varied forms. The Green Paper outlined a commitment to increase the integration support available to all refugees in the UK, including a focus on English. Later the same year, this commitment was echoed in the Government's White Paper on the UK's future skills based immigration system: "We plan to secure an ambitious and well funded English language strategy to ensure that everyone in this country, especially those with newly recognised refugee status, are supported to speak the same language."<sup>18</sup>

But despite some positive developments, and the provision of some small pots of money for certain groups of refugees, the Government has failed to act decisively to ensure that all refugees are able to access sufficient, good quality English language lessons, and to address the barriers currently faced by refugees – including those with childcare responsibilities. Crucially, there has been no commitment to increasing the overall funding made available for ESOL provision, notwithstanding the fact that ESOL delivery spend has dropped by more than half over the past decade. There has also been a failure to ringfence the funding that would be needed to ensure that all refugees in England have access to 8 hours of English classes per week, for a period of two years. This is despite the evidence to show that the cost of two years' ESOL for each refugee is effectively fully reimbursed to the taxpayer following an individual's first eight months of employment at the national average wage; and within 15 months at the lower wage of £18,000 per year.<sup>19</sup>

This failure to act decisively, and to ensure that adequate funding is available for ESOL provision, means that the Government's stated commitment to integration appears for now largely hollow, and jeopardises future Government efforts towards integration. So far, warm words have not translated into action. A concrete pledge to increase the resources available for ESOL provision is the only way that the Government will be able to show that it is truly committed to the integration of refugees, and ensuring that those who arrive in the UK in need of protection are able to successfully rebuild their lives.

## PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR INCREASING FUNDING FOR ESOL

Polling carried out by YouGov in April 2019, that included a representative cross-section of the GB population, shows the strong support that exists for additional resources to be provided for refugees to learn English.

The polling found that **91%** of the adult population thinks that it is important that refugees who come to the UK learn to speak English. Of those who expressed a preference, **86%** said that they support the proposals set out by the Government in its immigration White Paper to invest in services and resources specifically targeted at helping refugees learn English.



**I need to learn English, so I can speak to people better. My mother and my wife are both ill and I take them to the hospital. I need to speak to the doctors and understand what they are saying to me. Also, my children are at school and I need to speak to their teachers. But my children now speak better English than me!**

**Iftikhar, survey respondent (43 years old)**

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

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**Sometimes I feel down because I feel this barrier with people because of the language.**

Jules, survey respondent (61 years old)

In this briefing, we have demonstrated the gaps that continue to exist between the English language needs of refugees, and the ESOL provision that is available to them. We know that these gaps exist despite the best efforts of ESOL providers themselves to ensure that they are able to continue to provide good quality teaching, in the context of a

drastic decline in funding over the past decade. Yet to date the Government's proposals contain no new funding for English language teaching. This is despite the overwhelming evidence on the need for urgent action to increase ESOL provision, and the many benefits that this could provide to refugees, our economy, and communities across England.

Refugee Action is therefore calling on the Government to:

## **1. Create a fund to allow all refugees to receive a minimum eight hours a week of formal, accredited English language teaching for their first two years in the UK, starting from within a month of their arrival in the country or from being granted status.**

Refugee Action has estimated that this would require the Government to invest around £42 million per year to put in place. The cost of two years' worth of ESOL would be effectively reimbursed following an individual's first eight months of employment at the national average wage, and about 15 months at the lower wage of £18,000 per year.

## **2. Publish an ESOL strategy for England.**

Development of a strategy is currently underway, and publication is due in Autumn 2019. It is vital that this strategy sets clear national targets for ESOL provision and attainment; enshrines refugees' access to ESOL as an entitlement; and provides assurances that refugees will not have to wait to enrol in ESOL and to access the provision they require. The strategy should draw on the experience of those already in place in Scotland and Wales.

## **3. Ensure that all refugees are able to access ESOL, including those with additional barriers such as caring responsibilities.**

Barriers to accessing ESOL due to caring responsibilities disproportionately affect women. It is essential that funding and resources are put in place to ensure that such barriers are addressed, otherwise many people will not be able to attend even fully-funded ESOL lessons.

## **4. Provide free English teaching to people seeking asylum in England from the point of their asylum claim.**

The integration process does not begin when somebody is granted status, but as soon as they arrive in the UK. For those who are recognised as refugees after arriving in the UK, their long-term ability to integrate within their new communities will very much depend on their experiences throughout the asylum process.

## **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 a replacement for) formal, accredited ESOL learning for refugees. The Government must now urgently deliver on its commitment to establish a means for civil society as well as the private sector, local government and other key stakeholders at both local and national level, to pool resources and good practice to increase the provision and quality of community-based language support.

## ENDNOTES.

1 In order to protect the anonymity of those we spoke with, all names used in this report are pseudonyms.

2 The Migration Observatory (n.d.) 'Outcomes of Migrants in the UK Labour Market', available at <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/characteristics-and-outcomes-of-migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market/> (accessed 22 May 2019); also Office for National Statistics (2015) 'People who cannot speak English well are more likely to be in poor health', available at [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/articles/peoplewhocannotspeakenglishwellaremorelikelytobeinpoorhealth/2015-07-09](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/articles/peoplewhocannotspeakenglishwellaremorelikelytobeinpoorhealth/2015-07-09) (accessed 22 May 2019).

3 Ibid.

4 Michael Collyer, Linda Morrice, Linda Tip, Rupert Brown and Eveline Odermatt (2018) 'A long-term commitment: integration of resettled refugees in the UK', University of Sussex.

5 Refugee Action (2017) 'Safe but Alone: The role of English language in allowing refugees to overcome loneliness', Refugee Action: London.

6 HM Government (2018) 'Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper: building stronger, more united communities', available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/696993/integrated\\_communities\\_strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696993/integrated_communities_strategy.pdf) (accessed 22 May 2019).

7 See for example Refugee Action (2017) 'Safe but Alone', op cit.

8 Total sample size for YouGov/Refugee Action survey was 1,867 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 30th April - 1st May 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

9 Refugee Action (2017) 'Safe but Alone', op cit.

10 128 refugees were surveyed across London, the Midlands, the

North East and the North West. Of the 128 people we spoke with, 37 had been resettled in the UK and 90 had been granted refugee status following a successful asylum application.

11 Learning and Work Institute (2019) 'Why we need to do more to support pre-Entry and Entry Level 1 ESOL', available at: [www.learningandwork.org.uk/2019/01/09/why-we-need-to-do-more-to-support-pre-entry-and-entry-level-1-esol/](http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/2019/01/09/why-we-need-to-do-more-to-support-pre-entry-and-entry-level-1-esol/) (accessed 22 May 2019).

12 See National Statistics (2016) 'Further education and skills: statistical first release June 2014', available at:

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/further-education-and-skills-statistical-first-release-june-2014](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/further-education-and-skills-statistical-first-release-june-2014) (accessed 22 May 2019) and National Statistics (2019) 'Further education and skills: March 2019', available at: [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/further-education-and-skills-march-2019](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/further-education-and-skills-march-2019) (accessed 22 May 2019).

Funding information obtained through a Freedom of Information request.

13 Of the 116 people who replied to this question.

14 Median averages.

15 Refugee Action (2016) 'Let Refugees Learn: Challenges and opportunities to improve language provision to refugees in England', available at: [www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf) (accessed 22 May 2019).

16 Collyer et al. (2018) 'A long-term commitment', op cit.

17 See online summary of projects funded under the Controlling Migration Fund, available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlling-migration-fund-prospectus](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlling-migration-fund-prospectus) (accessed 22 May 2019).

18 HM Government (2018) 'The UK's future skills-based immigration system', Cm 9722.

19 Refugee Action (2016) 'Let Refugees Learn', op cit.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

Refugee Action would like to thank the 128 refugees across England who responded to our survey on ESOL. We are also grateful to the organisations that helped us to identify respondents.

Particular thanks go to 'Marlene' and 'Alenezi' for sharing their stories with us.



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To find out more about the Let Refugees Learn campaign visit [www.refugee-action.org.uk/campaigns](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/campaigns)



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