

# GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY CONSULTATION ON ADULT EDUCATION

## **Helen Bamber Foundation submission**

August 2021

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with Survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty and believes that all survivors should have safety, freedom and power. Our work alongside survivors shows us that with early and appropriate care and support survivors build the strength to move on with their lives (or strength to fly). Our multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries, specialist programmes of therapeutic care, a medical advisory service, a counter-trafficking programme, housing and welfare advice, legal protection advice and community integration activities and services.

### **Introduction**

A key focus of HBF's work is addressing the needs and risks of individual survivors of trafficking and the factors that render **them** more susceptible to being re-trafficked. In a different country, far from everything they knew before they were trafficked, many survivors will not speak or understand English and can feel isolated and scared. Loneliness and isolation, poverty and lack of support are the greatest threats to victims after trafficking because these situations increase susceptibility to other threats. They may feel desperate to take work that is offered, or love, friendship or a home that is offered, only to suffer further deceit and be trafficked onward. They can be forced into dependency on others who violate and exploit them. In this context, HBF believes that access to appropriate education, training and employment is a vital part of the fight to prevent re-trafficking and to enable survivors to rebuild their lives.

Another area of significant concern to us is the impact of backlogs and delays in decision making on survivors in the asylum system and the impact this has on their integration after arrival. At the end of March 2021, there were 66,185 people awaiting an initial decision from the Home Office, three quarters of whom had been waiting for an initial decision for

more than six months, the highest for over a decade.<sup>1</sup> With the government's current proposals for the asylum system including nothing that would address this backlog, we fear that the issue of delays will only worsen and the number of people stuck in limbo will increase. In this context, it is all the more important that those seeking asylum who do not have the right to work (because of government policy which can only be seen as punitive) have access to educational opportunities instead and that there is sufficient use, and understanding of, the current Adult Education Budget regulations.

We would like to see the acquisition of English language and other basic skills seen as a priority and that further steps are taken to address the structural and financial barriers that often prevent survivors from participating in learning. Asylum seekers who have not been waiting for six months for a decision are currently not eligible for free courses. However, the integration process should begin 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 depend on their experiences throughout the asylum process.

This briefing draws on HBF's experience of supporting clients access education and work and also the direct views of 17 HBF clients. Of those clients, 12 are in the asylum system, 5 have a form of leave and 11 are currently in education.

### **Q1a. What are the key considerations for creating effective guidance on good subcontracting and effective working?**

The GLA aims to “empower the widest number of providers across London's skills and employment system to ensure that Londoners can access the best and more relevant support” through sub-regional integration hubs. There are currently over 5,000 people seeking asylum living in London<sup>2</sup> and this work must take into consideration their distinctive needs.

The Home Office's 'Allocation of Accommodation' policy<sup>3</sup> outlines that when allocating accommodation “it is offered on a 'no choice basis' and as a general rule is provided outside London and the South East and only in areas of the UK where the Home Office has a ready supply”. Caseworkers must, however, consider requests to be allocated accommodation in London, the South East, or another specific location and “consider whether there are exceptional circumstances that make it appropriate to agree to the request”. The policy makes clear those who are receiving treatment at Freedom from Torture's London centre or at the Helen Bamber Foundation, should generally be provided with accommodation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/living-in-limbo-a-decade-of-delays-in-the-uk-asylum-system-july-2021/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/asylum-migration-and-refugees/refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

<sup>3</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/990240/allocation-of-accommodation-v6.0-gov-uk.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/990240/allocation-of-accommodation-v6.0-gov-uk.pdf)

within travel zones in London so that they can make full use of the range of therapeutic and integrative services the Foundations provide.

In January 2019, it was announced that the contract for providing accommodation for asylum seekers for the next 10 years, AASC (Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract), had been awarded to Clearsprings in London. In London, Clearsprings has been using subcontractors to procure and manage properties.

**Recommendation:**

- As part of its work on subcontracting and effective working, the GLA should work with Clearsprings and London Councils to undertake an analysis of the locations and needs of asylum seekers in London to ensure that there are adequate education and training opportunities for them.

**Q1b. How can partners in London work together differently to develop sustainable infrastructure that supports a more joined-up integrated skills, careers and employment offer?**

HBF has supported clients to join courses that involve obtaining skills for employment. In our experience, these courses are often not linked to actual opportunities for employment. Despite being able to learn useful new skills, clients in this situation feel no closer to their desired outcome is securing a job. We feel that the development of more employment programmes where there was a partnership with a company who could then offer a range of appropriate job opportunities would be beneficial.

**Q6a. What are the key considerations that you would like to see in our future commissioning of new adult education provision?**

HBF supports clients to access ESOL classes and other forms of further education. A significant part of this support involves helping them to navigating existing college application and enrolment processes. This can be time consuming and complex because:

- There is no single London-wide process. Each college operates independently and with its own systems and funding system so for those in the asylum system a significant amount of support is required to ascertain whether or not they are eligible for funded course and what the process for applying is. For those seeking asylum, courses are not funded by every college and a lot of research is required.
- Accessing colleges often requires that the individual already has English language skills because relevant documentation is not translated and no interpreter services are provided. Many clients noted that having no or very little English meant they could not understand or find classes, courses or training themselves. Individuals recounted not knowing how to find out about opportunities and when attempting to, not being able to understand anything so they could not proceed. They had to rely on other people recognising what they need and helping them, which does not

happen if they do not have a support network. It is vital that colleges are required to take further steps to accommodate learners for whom English is not their first language. Digital information should be translated.

- Communicating with colleges can be difficult because not all staff are sufficiently trained on their policies. HBF staff often need to liaise with multiple people and it can feel like a lottery as to whether they will find an individual who knows the answer. Many clients felt that providers of classes, courses or training often did not understand their situation, the immigration system or eligibility requirements. One client said, *“Before I got my papers every college asked for status and every college had a problem with me”*.
- Some colleges require certain forms of evidence to demonstrate eligibility that can be impossible to provide. For example, some colleges will only accept asylum seekers who are accommodated in Home Office accommodation and will require evidence of Home Office support. Our clients may have evidence of their status as an asylum seekers, including a Bail 201 form and letter from their solicitor, but will be living with friends or family and will be rejected because they not in receipt of asylum support.

We find it particularly challenging to find ESOL classes for our clients, either through government-funded colleges or charitable organisations. We believe it is vital that the AEB funds more ESOL<sup>4</sup> and functional skills courses (such as Maths and IT) for those in the asylum system.

#### Recommendations:

- The GLA should ensure that funding for further education colleges for ESOL and vocational courses for people claiming asylum is more widely available.
- The GLA should help develop and deliver further guidance and training on the eligibility and evidence requirements for those seeking asylum and those granted status to all colleges. This should aim to ensure that all staff have an understanding of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers appropriate to their role and that the documentation requirements for admission are reasonable and flexible and do not exclude anyone who is entitled to study.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2019, Refugee Action reported that “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.” See Refugee Action (2019) *Turning Words into Action*, at <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Turning-Words-into-Action.pdf>

### Q7a. What are the key considerations for outreach and promotional campaigns about adult education and how can we ensure these effectively engage London's communities and places facing educational disadvantage?

In HBF's experience, organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees are well linked up with each other, but rarely receive information from providers outside the sector. Little is done to promote colleges or training opportunities to those claiming asylum so we would recommend that this group be identified as one in particular need of targeting through outreach and promotional campaigns. In doing so, the following issues would need to be taken into account:

- Language barriers are an ongoing problem so materials and campaigns would need to include sufficient translation. One client had the following experience and explained that *"it is useful when things are written in my language. I still struggle to find places and get scared when I have to plan a route by myself. It might help if someone showed me the way on the first day."*
- One client also recommended that *"information in different languages [should be] available in places where people go regularly - possibly the mosque, church, GP, community centres."*
- The steps it takes to find, enrol and join a class are complex when facing several barriers and have often ended in clients giving up. Individuals need early intervention and 1-to-1 support all the way through the process. One client explained that *"we need intervention and help at early stage. We've been through so much before even getting to UK. We need education support from the start to prevent further mental health issues"*.
- Organisations specialising in work with refugees and those seeking asylum have the necessary skills and understanding of the needs of this group and the risks they face. It would be beneficial if non-specialist organisations and colleges also had this understanding and appreciation of their needs in order to facilitate integration – further guidance, training and examples of best practice should be shared.
- Financial and physical barriers (including travel and childcare) are also important to note – see answers to questions 6a and 9b for more on this.

### Q9a. What are the key considerations for the GLA in improving digital connectivity and access to devices for learners?

The pandemic has really brought home how much we all rely on being able to access a computer and the internet on a regular basis. One college/charity with whom we have a partnership is providing ESOL classes remotely by zoom only and it may be that this becomes a more popular means of delivering adult education. If this is the case, further efforts to support digital inclusion are essential. The clients we work with will need access to a computer and access to the internet, but often we find that grants for laptops are only made available to those who have already been granted refugee status. Many of our clients do not have reliable internet access at home, due to no wifi, not being able to afford data or

bad signal. One client said that their crowded accommodation meant access to stable internet was impossible.

Most of our clients do not have access to a tablet or laptop. They had to join classes on their smartphones, some did not have smartphone and had to rely on donations from charities. Engaging in an online class, with a teacher and fellow students via a small screen was very challenging and for some the reason they could not complete the class. In addition, one client noted they do not have the IT skills to know how to join an online class even if it was accessible.

### Q9b. What are the key considerations for stimulating more opportunities for accessing physical learning settings for learners who are unable to engage in digital learning or in more formal classroom settings?

If we are to encourage more opportunities for accessing physical learning settings, then a significant barrier for those in the asylum system is travel expenses. The location of the class, course or training is very important; many clients noted their participation is dependent on the time that it takes to travel to the class and how much that travel costs. Individuals claiming asylum and in receipt of section 4 subsistence allowance only receive £39 a week, £4.70 of which is meant to cover travel. This means budgeting for travel is very difficult. Many clients will simply not be able to afford it or will go without in order to. As one HBF client told us: *"It costs £13 per day, so I cut back on food in order to attend classes."*

While some clients will be eligible for learners support funds, they are often told by colleges that they are not, as staff do not have a sufficient understanding of the eligibility criteria and assume that those without status or with no recourse to public funds are ineligible.

Childcare is also a fundamental problem for clients whose children are not in school – lack of childcare often prevents our clients from joining formal college settings and greater options for participation of those with children has actually been a benefit of remote learning (if not necessarily the optimal learning experience). One client was very pleased when her health worker helped her to claim 15 hours free childcare for her young son, so she could attend college, but without her health worker she would have not have known about this option.

#### Recommendations:

- The GLA should ensure that sufficient funding and resources are in place to enable all those seeking asylum to be able to access ESOL, including those with additional barriers such as caring responsibilities, from the point of their asylum claim. Where existing provision exists, further steps should be taken to advertise its availability and support individuals to access it.
- Learning providers should provide alternatives to online application and registration processes so that they are accessible to all those in the asylum process.