

# Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

## Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Notes from informal engagement session

Maryhill Integration Network Tuesday 6 June 2023

Theme – English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)/interpreters

Group one (Pam Gosal)

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

Participants in this group expressed their concerns and frustrations about ESOL provision in Glasgow. There are not enough seats on courses, which leads to long waiting lists, often for more than one year. This restricts the opportunity to integrate and meet others within and from their community, which feels very isolating.

Some have tried to self-learn by, for example, watching and listening to TV or YouTube videos but they felt it would be easier if, in the absence of attending ESOL courses, they were able to meet friends or others within their community who have a level of English which helps them feel supported.

One participant explained that while she can understand English, it can be difficult to follow different accents/dialects – this is a particular challenge especially when on a video or phone call. Sometimes it is easier to understand information put in writing.

Another participant said that he had had a good experience on an ESOL course with a good teacher. He was concerned, however, as the teacher has said that due to college budget cuts they may not be there much longer. This has also impacted on provision of internet and bus passes.

## Interpreters

The participants agreed interpreters are very important particularly for things like hospital or solicitor appointments.

It can be difficult to access interpreters, but one participant did note a positive example of solicitors contacting her in advance of an appointment to ask if she needed an interpreter.

All of the (3) participants mentioned concerns about interpreters:

- “They don’t always interpret the words said”
- “They forget, so make stuff up”
- There is a lack of trained interpreters.

## Group two (Kaukab Stewart)

### English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

One participant has volunteered as an ESOL tutor. There is huge demand, but a shortage of tutors. He is able to work but can’t look for jobs as he does not yet have leave to remain. It has been five months since he was told he would find out in a month. This is extremely frustrating as the delays mean his qualifications are going to waste.

The same participant noted also that, as some asylum seekers have little English and can’t access ESOL provision they tend to go to their cultural stores (eg Arabic) for shopping. While this makes communication easier, it is more expensive.

Another participant noted the post-its from group 1 about there being not enough seats on ESOL courses in Glasgow. He commented that for cities or towns outside Glasgow, for example Falkirk, there is “no access at all” to ESOL.

### Interpreters

There was agreement among the participants that the system for accessing interpreters is not functioning well. There are significant waiting times, a lack of consistency in the standard of interpreting, no initial contact from some services to ask whether an interpreter is needed. It was suggested there should be a review of any contracts with interpreters.

## Group three (Paul O’Kane)

### Interpreters

This group focused more on provision of interpreters, which they find very frustrating and isolating.

One woman said she has to “stand in” as a translator for friends in different settings as there is a lack of interpreters. There are also cultural factors that should be taken into account, but there seems to be a lack of understanding and choice in this cultural context, which can be very isolating.

Much of the time, interpreters focus on language, but it is “so much more than that”.

One woman provided a couple examples of things she finds frustrating. She referred to the Migrant Helpline which when providing options, the first option is to “tell you in English to pick a language”, which isn’t going to mean much to someone who doesn’t understand English.

She also gave an example of the different dialects in Swahili which in some circumstances can create confusion. She felt that assumptions are made. As she understands and can communicate in English she asked “why can’t I just get stuff in English?”.

All of the women in this group referred to a “lack of trust” in interpreters. Do they have the relevant training? Do they actually translate word for word?

## English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

For those who are able to access ESOL courses, the point was made that it shouldn’t necessarily focus on ‘standard’ English. The question is “are you being taught language [and words] that is actually needed” to help an asylum seeker navigate the system and their new environment.

“It can be scary”. ESOL is not easily available or accessible due to financial and transport restraints. So, as others in previous groups mentioned, they try to self-learn- by watching tv and or YouTube, but this means essentially staying inside accommodation and being isolated.

One potential solution put forward was if portable radios and headphones were provided, individuals could still get “out and about” while listening to a lot of English.

## Group four (Maggie Chapman)

### Interpreters

This group also focused initially on interpreters. One participant made the following observations:

- “It is shockingly easy to qualify as an interpreter”
- “Lack of accuracy in translating breeds a lack of trust”
- “Every word counts in a person’s asylum journey, so it must be accurate. Any inaccuracy creates further delay and frustration.”
- “There needs to be a better vetting process for interpreters.”

She also noted there are gaps in the provision of Urdu, Persian and Kurdish interpreters.

There was a comment that interpreters who might not be native Arabic speakers – or who are not familiar with different dialects – just make stuff up.

## English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

One woman teaches ESOL on a voluntary basis, so is not sure about provision more broadly. She did identify, for those who have limited or no English, it can present challenges in, for example, accessing lawyers or other services and where to go for shopping.

Participants considered there is a backlog in accessing ESOL “due to the system”, as there is an assumption that all asylum seekers need ESOL. Those who do require ESOL then have to wait a long time, which leads again to a lack of integration. Then, for those who are able or who might want to access higher, costs are prohibitive. “The system is back to front”.

## Group five (Karen Adam; Fulton MacGregor)

This group agreed with much that had been noted by the previous four groups. They agreed there was a lack of consistency in interpreting services.

One woman gave an example of an interview she had given via an interpreter, with the interpreter providing a written translation to a lawyer. The translation was sent direct to the lawyer without the woman having first been given sight of it, to ensure it accurately reflected her words. It didn't. But she couldn't change it as it was in writing. She had to wait for another interview to be arranged (with a different interpreter). This took a long time, during which she was stuck in her house and left feeling isolated.

Both women in this group were keen to attend ESOL courses (2 per week), but the expense associated with travel etc prevents it. They both find this “really, really stressful”.

## Themes from round table discussion

### MSPs

- Every word in asylum journey counts
- Practical – free bus travel would help to access services and with mental health
- Impact on mental health is trauma x2
- Access to mental health services, PTSD/ trained counsellors
- ESOL– make sure it's accessible to all, pathway to go to your solicitor, speak and understand the language
- Mother and Baby – Such a difference in standards of accommodation not suitable to meet mother and babies' needs; state treatment of children leaves much to be desired.
- Dignity, Fairness and Respect. There is a lack of this in how people are being treated and the Scottish Government could do better.

## Participants

- I hope this time our voices are really heard and something comes from this
- Accessibility – ESOL Classes are there, but they need to be able to access them and also have a space to practice their English. Opportunity to build networks and inclusivity.
- Interpreters – so inaccurate; there needs to be a proper approved qualification; there is a lack of regulation; inaccuracies have such a negative impact and can devastate people's journey; there are no consequences for interpreters who share confidential information
- Hotel Accommodation – Can be very traumatic; have a 'watchdog' for the accommodation.
- Impact on mental health will never end; support from organisations such as Maryhill Integration Network, Refuweege, Refugees for Justice and others has saved/helped us
- Lack of respect in accommodation, Mears/operators access to accommodation with no notice; respect is getting less and less each day
- Migrant Help: don't get much out of it; they're not doing much to help; another level of the Home Office.