



**Hina Bokhari AM**  
**Chair of the Economy Committee**

Sadiq Khan  
Mayor of London  
(Sent by email)

CC: Jules Pipe, Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills and Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice

21 April 2023

Dear Sadiq,

## **Barriers to work for asylum seekers and refugees**

I am writing to you in my position as Chair of the London Assembly Economy Committee regarding the Committee's investigation into barriers to work for asylum seekers and refugees in London.<sup>1</sup> This follows a meeting held by the Committee on 18 January 2023, which was attended by the following guests:

- Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice
- Jules Pipe CBE, Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills
- Dr Tara Povey, Policy and Research Manager, Refugee Action
- Matthew Powell, Chief Executive Officer, Breaking Barriers

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of the investigation, the Committee followed the below definitions:

- Asylum seekers: [according to the Refugee Council](#), an asylum seeker is 'a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded'
- Refugees: [according to the Refugee Council](#), 'in the UK, a person becomes a refugee when government agrees that an individual who has applied for asylum meets the definition in the Refugee Convention they will 'recognise' that person as a refugee and issue them with refugee status documentation'.

- Niloha Rangel, City of Sanctuary Ambassador and refugee doctor
- Siân Summers-Rees, Chief Officer, City of Sanctuary<sup>2</sup>

Our investigation aimed to understand the barriers that asylum seekers and refugees face when accessing employment in the UK, and why these barriers exist. We also scrutinised the actions taken by you in relation to the employment support available to this group and discussed additional action that you and the Government could take to reduce barriers and increase employment rates.

At our meeting, the Committee heard that since 2002, people seeking asylum in the UK are only able to apply for the right to work after they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for over a year. Prior to 2002, people seeking asylum could apply for permission to work if they had been waiting for six months or more for an initial decision on their asylum claim.<sup>3</sup> In December 2022, 109,641 people in the UK had been waiting for a decision on their initial asylum application for more than six months.<sup>4</sup>

Guests informed the Committee that refugees and asylum seekers face several barriers to employment, including language barriers; workplace discrimination; lack of specialist services to guide them through the process; lack of knowledge and experience of the UK labour market; limited provision of skills and training; digital exclusion; costs of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) tests and having qualifications translated; and long periods of isolation on very low levels of asylum support. It is therefore vital that the GLA strengthens support for asylum seekers and refugees in London to enable them to integrate faster and build a new safe home in London, including through supporting them to access employment.

## **ESOL provision and access to technical language skills**

According to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Refugees, ‘being able to speak, write and read in English is key to being able to access support, to gaining employment and to taking part in community activities’.<sup>5</sup> Jules Pipe told the Committee that the GLA is committed to expanding ‘the eligibility for access and funding for the Adult Education Budget’. This is welcome, as the AEB remains the main source of funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision in London. The Committee heard that ESOL provision supports approximately 40,000 people with English language needs in London at a cost of nearly £40 million per annum.<sup>6</sup> Guests argued that ESOL provision in London could be strengthened in terms of both access and the quality of the provision on offer.

At the Committee’s meeting, Matthew Powell noted that ESOL provision is ‘patchy’ and ‘highly variable from local authority to local authority’, with people ‘waiting very, very long periods of time [to access provision]’. Additionally, Tara Povey stated that ‘often’ ESOL provision is in areas which are ‘very difficult in terms of having to get transport to that area’. Guests noted that having to travel long distances to access ESOL provision acts as an additional barrier for asylum seekers and refugees. Guests also discussed the importance of providing technical language training to asylum seekers and refugees to enable them to become ready for employment in specific professions (the example of medicine was given at the meeting). Niloha Rangel noted that ‘when you apply for a role even the job description can be very difficult to understand if you do not know the technical language’.

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<sup>2</sup> London Assembly, [Agenda for Economy Committee on Wednesday 18 January 2023, 10.00 am | London City Hall](#), 18 January 2023. Meeting transcript for [Panel 1](#) and [Panel 2](#).

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Library, [Asylum seekers: the permission to work policy](#), December 2022

<sup>4</sup> Home Office, [‘Asylum applications awaiting a decision’](#), [Asylum and resettlement datasets](#)

<sup>5</sup> APPG on Refugees, [Refugees Welcome?](#), April 2017

<sup>6</sup> GLA, [English Language \(ESOL\) for Resettlement](#), 11 January 2022

**Recommendation 1:** *The Mayor should carry out a review of ESOL provision across London, with the aim of identifying where there is not enough high-quality provision. In response to this review, he should address any gaps in provision and ensure that asylum seekers and refugees can reach learning centres by public transport without having to travel for long distances.*

**Recommendation 2:** *The Mayor should work with London employers to develop training programmes that provide technical language skills to asylum seekers and refugees for specific professions, as well as the technical language skills related to recruitment and job descriptions that are essential to gaining employment.*

## **ESOL Plus and gender-specific support**

The APPG on Refugees highlights gender-specific challenges faced by women refugees, as ‘the timing of ESOL classes, as well as the lack of childcare facilities, can prevent women from being able to learn English’.<sup>7</sup> At the Committee’s meeting, Debbie Weekes-Bernard noted that ‘the employment gap for refugee women is bigger than it is for refugee men’ and that therefore access to English language support remains crucial for women. Debbie Weekes-Bernard brought attention to the Mayor’s ESOL Plus Programme, which funded three different pilot projects: ESOL Plus Employers, ESOL Plus Arts and ESOL Plus Childcare. This programme ran between 2018 and 2021 and was aimed at improving access to ESOL for Londoners with English language needs.<sup>8</sup> The evaluation for the ESOL Plus Employers programme found that ‘employers agreed that the course had improved their employees’ customer service and communication skills, and were generally satisfied with the course’.<sup>9</sup>

The Committee welcomes your ESOL Plus Childcare initiative, which allocated £80,000 of funding to two training providers to deliver pilot projects to meet the needs of learners with childcare responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> Considering nearly 95 per cent of ESOL Plus Childcare participants were women, we recommend that this initiative is resumed across the capital to bridge the gender employment gap faced by women refugees.<sup>11</sup>

**Recommendation 3:** *The Mayor should resume the ESOL Plus projects that were particularly catered towards helping women refugees to access ESOL provision. In particular, offering more ESOL provision with access to free childcare would help bridge the gender employment gap faced by women refugees.*

## **Community building and integration support**

The Committee welcomes your initiatives to tackle barriers to integration for select groups of asylum seekers, particularly your tailored interventions to support asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Hong Kong, and Ukraine, including the Hong Kong Integration Programme.<sup>12</sup> We also welcome initiatives to support wider groups of refugees and asylum seekers, such as the Asylum Welcome project.

Debbie Weekes-Bernard informed the Committee that, as part of the Asylum Welcome project, the GLA is working with 11 boroughs in both inner and outer London to support integration for people seeking asylum. The Mayoral Decision for this project stated that ‘an evaluation will also be commissioned to ensure learnings from the programme can comprehensively feed into relevant fora in London overseeing asylum’.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> APPG on Refugees, [Refugees Welcome?](#), April 2017, p. 7

<sup>8</sup> GLA, [Supporting the ESOL Sector](#), March 2023

<sup>9</sup> GLA, [ESOL Plus Employer Partnership: Evaluation Report](#), December 2019

<sup>10</sup> GLA, [Supporting the ESOL Sector](#), March 2023

<sup>11</sup> GLA, [MQT 2021/2246: ESOL for women in London](#), 28 June 2021

<sup>12</sup> GLA, [MD2831 Migration Programme](#), 5 September 2021

<sup>13</sup> GLA, [Mayoral Decision 2831](#), 30 September 2021

Committee notes that the evaluation of this project is yet to commence and requests that you share the findings once they are ready.

**Recommendation 4:** *The Mayor should share the evaluations of the pilot 'Asylum Welcome' project upon its completion with the Committee.*

### **Navigating the UK labour market as a refugee or asylum seeker**

Guests at the Committee's meeting noted that asylum seekers and refugees have limited knowledge of the UK's labour market and would benefit from targeted support to navigate it. Niloha Rangel stated that refugees and asylum seekers 'need specialist service advice to know where to go and not only by word of mouth'. Similarly, Siân Summers-Rees emphasised that 'a seamless advice provision where people are able to be signposted in a really fast and easy way' would help refugees and asylum seekers to navigate the labour market. Moreover, guests discussed how lack of proper knowledge of the UK labour market makes asylum seekers vulnerable to the risk of exploitation and poorly paid jobs.

Jules Pipe informed the Committee that there are networks of integration hubs in London as part of the No Wrong Door initiative, which provide support to asylum seekers and refugees. However, guests suggested that there could be better synergies between different parts of the system to improve advice services available to those in need.

**Recommendation 5:** *As part of the No Wrong Door initiative, the Mayor should develop focal points to provide tailored advice to refugees and help them navigate the labour market. The Mayor should also publish manuals and information on the Migrant Londoners Hub for asylum seekers and refugees with information about the availability of language and skills training in London.*

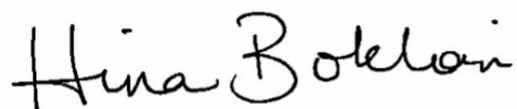
### **Tackling digital exclusion**

Guests at the Committee's meeting noted that digital exclusion is a pressing barrier to work faced by refugees and asylum seekers, especially given the growth of digital service provision since the pandemic. Matthew Powell noted that 'a lot of people within the refugee community are increasingly isolated and excluded as a result of them being unable to either access provision or access the labour market because of their inability to either utilise technology or have access to technology'. While Debbie Weekes-Bernard informed the Committee about programmes for digital training in London, she acknowledged that they require a certain level of digital skills prior to enrolment and particularly noted that 'there is a lot of digital support and I do recognise that digital support is not for everyone'.

**Recommendation 6:** *The Mayor should update the Committee on how his Digital Access for All mission is supporting refugees and asylum seekers, in particular in relation to reducing barriers to employment. The Mayor should also lobby the Government to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers have access to appropriate digital devices and support.*

The Committee would welcome a response to this letter by 9 June 2023. Please send your response by email to the Committee's clerk, Jack Booth ([jack.booth@london.gov.uk](mailto:jack.booth@london.gov.uk)).

Yours sincerely,



Hina Bokhari AM

**Chair of the Economy Committee**