



STRANDED DREAMS

The need for targeted education provision for young refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland



MAY 2025

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"We feel frustrated, as we know we have the potential, but the system is holding us back. Despite the challenges, we are holding onto our dreams, Wyassam to study medicine and Hossam business. But without proper access to education and language support, our futures remain uncertain. We hope with support, we can achieve our goals and contribute to society."

Hossam and Wyassum, 20-year-old twin brothers from Sudan, who have been unable to access education since arriving in Belfast in January 2024.



INTRODUCTION

For teenagers and young adults who arrive in Belfast, fleeing war and persecution, the relief of a fresh start is often quickly overtaken by feeling abandoned by our education system. Their life goals, dreams and aspirations are stranded because they can't access opportunities to study, to integrate with peers and to contribute to a better future for themselves and the community they have made home.

In this short paper, we set out the experience and rights of these young people, benefits of implementing more appropriate provision, a survey of what's been tried and learnt and specific recommendations of what is required to meet their needs. Our proposals are founded on Anaka Women's Collective's work over three years supporting young people to find appropriate educational opportunities, input from educationalists and organisations and importantly the views of the young people themselves. They share their voices and stories throughout.

Education is compulsory in NI from age 5 to the end of the school year in which a child turns 16. The NI Department for the Economy has primary responsibility for further and higher education and skills development for people in Northern Ireland over 16, whether they were born here or elsewhere.

As we will set out, targeted action by the Department for the Economy is needed to support these young people to fulfil their huge potential and ambitions.

Meanwhile, the costs of failing to provide appropriate education are high for both the young people affected and for Northern Ireland's goal of creating an integrated, thriving economy and society. As an issue which cuts across departmental responsibilities, action by the Department for the Economy needs to be supported by the Department for Education, Education Authority, Department for Communities and the Executive Office, which holds overall responsibility for integration.

As the Programme for Government 2024-2027 states:

We want everyone to benefit from a fair and inclusive society where everyone flourishes, no one is left behind and everyone is made to feel welcome... we are committed to bringing forward actions to address the issues of integration and racism. [1] (p. 71)

This cannot be achieved for the hundreds of young people in or newly emerged from the immigration system who are currently frozen out of education without targeted, resourced and appropriate action by government. We set out the many innovative responses by the education and voluntary sectors – these offer valuable learning and show how a successful programme should operate, but such small-scale pilot schemes cannot be a substitute for meaningful statutory provision.

BACKGROUND

THE NUMBERS

It is hard to establish figures for how many newcomers between the ages of 16 and 24 are excluded from education and training. Other published data, though, allow us to piece together a sense of the scale of the issue. At the end of December 2024, there were 2,730 people receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland, [2] 1,940 of whom were based in the Greater Belfast area. [3]

Home Office figures released under the Freedom of Information Act show in 2023 and 2024, a total of 1,918 households in NI moved on from the asylum system after having been granted refugee status – though some will have subsequently chosen to move elsewhere in the UK.

In addition to those in the asylum system, other young migrants face similar challenges with access to education – here too numbers are difficult to establish. Across all ages, the 2021 census showed that 124,300 people in Northern Ireland (6.5% of the population) were born outside these islands – a number that is rising across all council areas. [4] Some 20,200 (1.1%) said they could not speak English well or at all. [5]

There has been a significant rise in the number of students from minority ethnic or newcomer backgrounds in Northern Ireland schools. [6] The NI Department for Education's annual school census for 2024-5 shows that there are 4,910 newcomer post-primary pupils – defined as those without a sufficient level of English to engage with the curriculum – 3.1% of the total enrolment [7].

This is a rise of more than 1,300 since the 2019-20 school year. We also know from our work with asylum seeking families that from the age of 13 or 14, a significant number of new arrivals try but fail to secure a school place – so do not appear in these enrolment figures at all.

In February 2025, NISRA statistics found a total of 22,000 young people from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland aged 16 to 24 are not in education, training or employment – we can assume a portion were born elsewhere. [8]

Each of these statistics suggests a growing number of newly-arrived young people in the immigration system resident in Northern Ireland and in need of education provision. With almost 5,000 post-primary school pupils designated as newcomer, it is reasonable to expect that the number of young people aged 16-24 is also in the thousands. A single charity, Anaka, is in touch with more than 200 young people in this age range excluded from education in Greater Belfast alone. Recent years have seen those seeking asylum and those granted refugee status dispersed across Northern Ireland.

Amlak is 18 and has been living in Belfast for 18 months: "Currently, I am studying ESOL Skills for Life, but this course doesn't provide the academic English I need, and it is not enough to apply to university. If I had received the right support, I would have mastered English by now and been closer to completing my GCSEs."

"Without proper support in schools or intensive programmes to help students learn the language quickly, we often fall behind our peers – not due to a lack of effort, but because of the language barrier. Education is a right for everyone. Language should not prevent anyone from reaching their full educational potential and achieving their dreams."

THE NEED

A 2023 survey carried out by PPR and Anaka amongst 35 Belfast asylum seekers aged 16-25 who were out of education revealed that 40% had completed high school before coming to Belfast and another 40% had attended high school but had yet to graduate. The remaining 20% had not had access to high school education before. Since arriving, less than 30% had been able to access English classes; two thirds described their level of English as beginner or pre-intermediate. [9]

The experience of fleeing war or persecution is hugely disruptive to the lives, education and wellbeing of these young people. Unfortunately, this often continues on arrival here. Some travelled as unaccompanied minors; others came with a parent or family group. Some spent years in limbo while seeking safety, reaching Northern Ireland after time in other countries. Most are claiming asylum as a result of civil unrest, with Afghanistan, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Palestine and Somalia common countries of origin. Others are escaping human rights abuses, such as involuntary conscription or imprisonment in Eritrea or fear of the death penalty for their religious or political beliefs in Iran, Iraq or Kurdistan.

Once they reach Northern Ireland, young people in the asylum process may face many months or years before their claims are decided. During this time, they are housed in

temporary accommodation, often contingency hostels in former hotels. This could be for weeks or months, even though it has been judged unsuitable for more than emergency housing. [10]

Accommodation is often cramped, with families housed in one or two hotel rooms, and living on £8.86 each a week for transport, toiletries and other essentials. People are denied the right to work and they may be moved repeatedly. When refugee status is granted, families are moved at short notice from Home Office, often to NI Housing Executive temporary accommodation, potentially far away, disrupting schooling.

While children seeking asylum are entitled to attend school, often there are delays, lack of spaces and problems accessing uniform, transport or language support to make this possible. Those arriving in the second half of the academic year can face particular barriers to securing a place.

Education is currently compulsory, and there is a statutory obligation to provide it, until the end of the school year in which a young person turns 16. Education Minister Paul Givan has launched a consultation on extending compulsory education to 18: "Even though most young people currently remain in education and training until age 18, some, particularly some of our most vulnerable, do not. Regrettably, a young person's background remains a key factor in whether they progress to post-16 education."

[11]



Yet even with the current age, the closer a young newcomer is to 15 or 16, the harder it is to find a secondary school place. [12] Once 16, they are told they aren't entitled to a school place, yet also informed that they are too young to enrol for further education. [13] Exclusion from school, whatever its source, is devastating for many young people who were on the cusp of graduating high school or enrolling in university in their home country and who see younger siblings attending school, learning and making friends, while they are isolated, with lives on hold.

The recently published evaluation of an education programme for young 16+ refugee and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland found:

These children find themselves in an indeterminate educational state due to their age, interrupted or little formal education, and English language proficiency. As a result, they cannot access formal secondary, further or higher education, and no alternative, sustained and bespoke government-funded provision has been made available... Any provision delivered has been considered scant, reactionary and piecemeal rather than planned. [14]

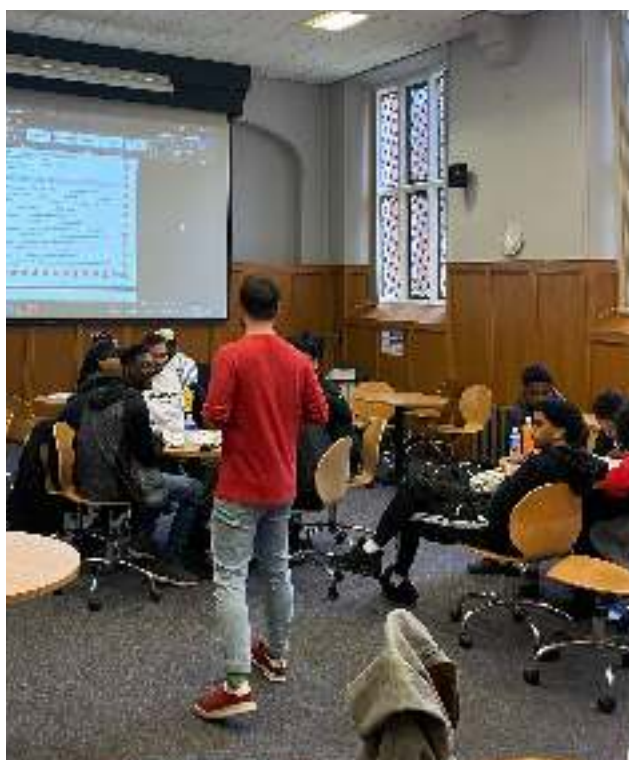
BARRIERS TO LEARNING

The young people involved in Anaka's education project have varied needs and experiences of education. Many have high aspirations and described themselves working towards a wide range of professions and roles. A minority speak good English and act as interpreters for their families. In a 2024 participatory research project carried out by young participants with Morgan Mattingly at Queen's University, they identified many barriers to accessing education: [15]

- English is a substantial barrier: two-thirds described their English as beginner or pre-intermediate and felt they could not access education at this level. Even those with good English found a lack of qualifications or academic English blocked them.
- A lack of provision and spaces in existing classes mean they can't improve their English. Several young people reported they couldn't even get on waiting lists for ESOL classes at Belfast MET as they were so over-subscribed. Waits of one to two years were reported – an inconceivable delay for a young person to even start their learning journey. Instead, they are directed to once-a-week community classes, which may also lack spaces and focus as they attempt to cater to mixed abilities and ages.
- Many of the available classes are too basic and progress at too slow a pace with just 1–5 hours a week. Some young people were advised it would take many years to attain the necessary English qualifications to allow them to pick up their education where they left off.
- Provision is not age-appropriate – 16-year-olds' only option may be a mainstream adult class, not with their peers, but with their parents and grandparents' generations. They reported feeling demoralised, uncomfortable and not challenged enough.
- ESOL courses are often designed around the needs of young European learners or adults, focusing on basic English for daily life, rather than equipping students for further study. Previous education or qualifications are not recognised, so many programmes assume no prior learning. Content needs adapted to be relevant, accessible and purposeful for this group of learners.

What emerges is a need for age-appropriate opportunities which offer intensive English support alongside other learning and skills to prepare young newcomers to access further and higher education.

Anaka's work and this proposal address young people aged 16–24 due to the specific needs of these learners and to accommodate the disruption to life and education experienced, which may take some time to overcome. This is both a moral imperative and an effective strategy. Focusing on this wider cohort will ensure any programme has the flexibility to address different needs and experiences and to ensure they are able to transition to mainstream education or employment, fulfil their potential and contribute to the economy and society of Northern Ireland as they wish to.



Rawan is 17 years old and from Syria. She arrived in Belfast from Denmark, where she attended school. She was enrolled here to study GCSEs but soon felt she had to drop out because of lack of support:

"I asked for support multiple times but received nothing. As time went on, I felt more and more isolated. I started looking for alternative ways to study and I am now studying Cambridge English B2 at Belfast MET. While my English has improved, I don't have a certificate from Denmark that allows me to enter university.

"A great solution for people like me would be to create a programme for students who have a good level of English but no official certificates. This programme should allow students to choose their subjects and, by the end of it, receive a qualification equivalent to GCSEs and A-Levels, so they can access university like everyone else.

"One of the few places that supported me after I left school was Anaka Women's Collective. Through their 16+ Education Programme, I have been able to connect with other students, find a supportive space, and work together for change.

"Despite all the obstacles, I refuse to give up. I know that one day, we will get everything sorted, and I will catch up to my dream of becoming a successful lawyer. But my goal is bigger than just my own success—I want to help change the system so that no one else has to go through what I did. I strongly believe that everyone should have equal access to education, regardless of their background."

WHY A TARGETED SCHEME IS NEEDED

STATUTORY AND HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

While questions of immigration and refugee policy are reserved matters, responsibility for education, integration and language policy are devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive. Public bodies are obligated to meet the educational needs of young newcomers by a number of international standards:

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 28 gives all children up to the age of 18 the legal right to education, without discrimination. [16]
- The 1951 UN Refugee Convention includes the legal right to decent work (Articles 17-19 and 24) and the right to education (Article 22), specifically that states "shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible" in access to post-primary education. [17]
- Article 26 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states "everyone has the right to education" adding "technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." [18]
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 13 ratified by the UK Government in 1976, also protects the right to education, applying equally to everyone regardless of birthplace or legal status. [19]



Domestically, the Northern Ireland Executive's own commitments – including in the Programme for Government, to "a fair and inclusive society where everyone flourishes" – require it to address the needs of this group of young potential learners. Policy and funding allocations to improve NI society, economy, mental and physical health cannot exclude or discriminate against those not born here.

The Department for the Economy's 2021 Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland emphasised the need to "open up educational pathways, empowering everyone in our society to reach their potential". It includes in its overarching goals addressing skills imbalances and supporting economic inclusion, to "support as many people as possible to reach the qualification levels that will offer viable and sustainable opportunities." [20]

Yet while it states the Department's intention to establish a lifetime guarantee of access to level 2 education (GCSE or equivalent) and a commitment to identify gaps in provision, none of the words refugee, migrant, asylum seeker or ESOL even appear in the Skills Strategy document – a gap that needs to be addressed.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The UK Commission for the Integration of Refugees found if asylum seekers received free English classes from arrival and tailored employment support, the net economic benefit to the UK economy would be £1.2bn within five years. [21] The Commission argues this can only be achieved with action by devolved governments and local councils. It advocates that all children should be able to access school immediately, with pathways "for refugee and asylum seekers to meet their full educational potential by recognising qualifications and providing access to further and higher education".

People who come to Northern Ireland seeking safety and who are able to work can support themselves and their families financially, contribute to the Northern Ireland economy, including with tax and national insurance, and require less state support.

The University of Oxford's Migration Observatory found higher skilled migrants contributed more to the UK economy than low skilled, and that young workers could contribute more over their working life than those who arrived at an older age. [22] Suitable education will allow young people to access higher quality jobs at an earlier stage, and ultimately contribute more.

Refugee employment support organisation Breaking Barriers [23] identifies the following key gaps for newcomers accessing the jobs market and being able to support themselves:

- Lack of UK work experience, and gaps in CV due to lengthy asylum process
- Qualifications not recognised
- Language barriers
- Public misconceptions and discrimination
- Limited understanding of the local job market and lack of networks

A tailored programme to address these specific issues, particularly among young people on the cusp of adulthood, would allow them to have a full and long working life, contributing to the local economy for decades to come.

Conversely, failure to do so would risk substantial economic harm to these young people in terms of lost employment and development opportunities, alongside significant potential cost to the state in future years through factors dependency on benefits or poor health associated with unemployment and economic exclusion.



MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

Young participants in Anaka's education programmes have reported isolation, depression, anxiety and seeing no future for themselves due to lack of educational opportunities. Many of these young people have already fled violence, war and persecution to reach Northern Ireland – a lack of contact with peers and daily routine undermines any hope of normality and healing as they seek to overcome these traumatic experiences.

The potential mental and physical health impacts of an extended period without daily structure, social connection, meaningful activities or sense of agency, now or in the future, cannot be underestimated.

Further, young people who feel doors to education, training or employment closed to them are significantly more vulnerable to exploitation in the black market economy, grooming by criminal gangs, paramilitaries or human traffickers.

Those who have been able to secure a course said they felt more motivated, focused and less isolated than before. However, available programmes are short-term, loosely-structured, over-subscribed and under-resourced, often being run by volunteers themselves. Current inadequate provision – while providing a stop gap for some learners – is unable to restore the sense of dignity, direction and purpose which is fundamental to these young people's wellbeing.

Naim is 17 years old and from Palestine. She arrived in Belfast last year: "My friends and I were eager to begin our studies and integrate into a new environment, believing that the education system here would help us reach our goals and build a better future. Unfortunately, things did not go as expected.

"We waited a long time and were told to wait for the registration period at Belfast Met. When registration finally opened, we were all excited, but the process was incredibly brief—only 15 minutes for hundreds of people.

"It was a frustrating and discouraging experience, forcing us to wait once again. Without the right educational support, our dreams are delayed, and it feels like our potential is not being fully realized.

"We are calling for a faster and more accessible education system for people like us, immediate opportunities to avoid long delays and continue working towards our goals. I hope our voices will be heard and we can receive the support we need to achieve our dreams and help build a stronger future for generations to come."



SOCIAL & INTEGRATION BENEFITS

Access to English learning and knowledge about Northern Ireland life and systems are vital for integrating into community here. As already noted, the Programme for Government states: “we are committed to bringing forward actions to address the issues of integration and racism”, yet Northern Ireland has no agreed refugee integration strategy or English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) policy.

The benefits of both, to nations that have them, are undeniable. The New Scots Integration Strategy 2024 states:

Evidence shows that if people are able to integrate early, particularly into education and work and with appropriate housing, they have better health and wellbeing outcomes as well as being more able to make positive contributions in communities and economically. [24]

A 2023 review of Wales ESOL policy identified five centres where ESOL courses specifically for young adults were provided. The study found:

ESOL classrooms are in a unique position to play a greater role in fostering a sense of belonging, understanding and participation in Welsh society, yet teachers and providers need to be supported in facilitating this use of the ESOL classroom. A restrictive syllabus and / or a lack of appropriate teacher education can obstruct implementing an approach that facilitates the emotional and psychological wellbeing, in addition to language development that ESOL provision can bestow. [25]

The Draft NI refugee integration strategy, published for consultation in 2021, identifies a number of priority outcomes, including outcome 4: Refugees and Asylum Seekers are supported to achieve their full potential. [26] To deliver this, it sets out these goals – which cannot be achieved without tailoring support to the specific needs of young refugees and asylum seekers:

- “Provide support for employment, including ensuring ESOL is available in a timely manner for all who need it and education, training and volunteering opportunities are accessible.”
- “Ensure asylum seeker needs are identified and recognised in the proposed ESOL strategy, and that the direction proposed takes into account their unique and specific needs and circumstances.”
- “Ensure pathways to work strategies take account of the circumstances and needs of refugee and asylum seekers.”

Indeed, the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland (Dec 2023) noted that better integration of young newcomers into education could have positive impacts on learning for all students:

Experience elsewhere – particularly in London – is that young newcomers are often highly aspirational and play a significant role in raising standards of attainment in schools. However, a first step is obviously to ensure that proper provision is in place for them to learn English. [27]

Conversely, failure to support newcomers of all ages to learn English and fully integrate into Northern Ireland society will undermine community cohesion and create the conditions for ongoing fracture, distrust and tension within fragile communities.

WHAT'S BEEN TRIED

The lack of responsive statutory provision has left voluntary groups and education providers trying to meet needs with little funding or support. This summary of previous programmes and what was learnt from each shows the breadth of dedication among academics and across the community and voluntary sector to fill this gap. Yet the piecemeal nature of the response to date is a result of the absence of a matching level of engagement by the state.

CONWAY EDUCATION CENTRE YOUNG PERSON'S STEPPING STONES PROJECT 2021-2022

Conway Education Centre has a long history in community-based education and has been at the forefront of providing learning opportunities for newcomers of all ages. Recognising the lack of provision for young learners aged 16+, they piloted an intensive course for 12 young people aged 16-19 supported by a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The overall aim was to offer a tailored, learner-centred approach which promoted confidence, resilience and mental health while facilitating their successful transition to mainstream education, training or employment.

For four days a week over an academic year, the programme offered sessions in a wide range of topics covered in the early years of post-primary education. Classes included science, history, geography, digital literacy and creative arts, but with interactive, flexible approaches accessible to young people with varied levels of English and previous educational experiences.

This Content and Language Integrated Learning approach meant that students improved their English at the same time as to enhancing their knowledge in a range of subjects and growing their confidence and engagement with learning.

A fundamental element was personal and social education, provided in collaboration with charity Extern. These sessions were vital to promote the young participants' mental health, confidence and resilience, creating the conditions for academic progress.

Results showed significant improvement in learners' overall wellbeing and English language development and a link between these factors. The programme has been shared as an example of best practice in inclusive and sustainable practices in refugee education [28] and offers a successful, homegrown model for more comprehensive provision for all newcomer young people here. Despite this, the programme ceased when funding ended.



ALL SAINTS COLLEGE YEAR 12 AND POST-16 GCSE PROGRAMME

2022-2023

All Saints College secondary school developed a programme for 10 students aged 15-17 who arrived part way through the two-year GCSE course, had some English and were living in contingency housing, or who had already completed year 12, but did not reach grade D in English or Maths; they received extra support to focus on these core skills and improve their results.

The programme offered GCSE English and Maths, with extra teaching time in both, a GCSE in a home or second language where available, an OCR certificate in Art and Design, physical education and careers guidance. Participants received school uniform through the school's PTA and were included in pastoral care services. Some also accessed other courses and extracurricular activities. A review of the programme found: [29]

- Participants in the first group performed well and received qualifications up to A* and Distinction; three went on to take mainstream A Levels at the college.
- The second cohort did not improve outcomes dramatically, pointing to a need for earlier intervention and varied pathways including vocational course.
- English as an additional language support with a focus on academic English was vital
- Extra class time in English and Maths was necessary and paid off
- Pupils benefitted greatly from becoming part of the school community and could access a range of other practical and wellbeing support
- One pupil withdrew due to ongoing issues related to trauma – highlighting the need to include trauma support in wraparound provision to allow young people to succeed.
- The programme was only possible due to additional funding from the Education Authority and despite its successes, ceased when funding ended.

ANAKA & THE KIND ECONOMY LEARNING PROJECT

2023-PRESENT

Through their work to support women and families in the immigration system, Anaka Women's Collective became aware of an increasing number of young adults unable to access any educational opportunities. To fill the vacuum, in summer 2023, Anaka organised a network of volunteer, qualified teachers in the asylum system here to offer Saturday classes for young people 15 and over. [30]

The classes started with 30 young students and quickly rose to around 60, teaching English, maths and computer skills in three classes. The programme also included activities, trips and history classes.

This hastily-organised, small-scale intervention, operating without funding, gave many young participants their first opportunity to learn here, to connect with peers and in some cases to leave their cramped hotel rooms for meaningful activity.

Anaka and the Kind Economy project began supporting the young people to raise awareness of the lack of educational provision for this age group, and to involve the young people in defining what provision would meet their needs. They opened opportunities for the young people to speak with a range of educational providers, political representatives, officials at council, Education Authority and NI government level, unions, the media and more. They worked on a project with prominent author and artist Oliver Jeffers, who drew the young people and their aspirations for an exhibition in the Long Gallery at Stormont and featured on the BBC and in the Irish News to press for more appropriate provision.

By gathering the young people regularly and involving them in advocating for more appropriate provision, their mental health, self-confidence, social skills and motivation noticeably improved.

A number of the programmes which followed were influenced by this work, though none has yet gone far enough to adequately meet the needs and rights of the young participants.

Anaka has also run a number of other short-term programmes, including a summer school in 2024 with two volunteer teachers at English A2 and B1 level, focusing on grammar, writing, speaking, vocabulary, reading, Irish history, storytelling and dictionary use. More than 40 young people participated.



Rana, now aged 19, arrived in Belfast at 17 years old from Sudan: "Due to instability and safety concerns in Sudan, my family and I had to leave. I had already completed high school in Sudan and was preparing to start university to study business administration.

"But when I arrived, I was shocked by the reality—there was no clear educational pathway for someone my age. My English was weak, and I had missed the registration period for Belfast Met College because I arrived in October. Schools would not accept me due to my age.

"My only option was to seek out informal learning opportunities through organizations and churches, hoping to continue my education in any way possible.

"Then, I found Anaka Women's Collective. They made an incredible effort to provide us with what we needed, offering English and mathematics classes, as well as preparation for the B1 Cambridge exam. Their constant support gave us a sense of belonging - we knew we weren't alone in this struggle. They actively raised awareness about the challenges we face and advocated for our right to access formal education.

SELF PROGRAMME, QUB TESOL AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS DEPARTMENT

2023-PRESENT

The Self-Expression, Education, and Living for the Future (SELF) programme is a collaboration between Anaka and the MSc Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Applied Linguistics course at Queens University Belfast. It was initially piloted as a voluntary project with Masters students and expanded to include PhD students with teaching experience. A programme building on the pilot received grant funding from The Economic and Social Research Council and Queen's University Belfast.

SELF offers weekly one and a half hour sessions with a high volunteer teacher to participant ratio. Young participants join in with presentations and discussions, choosing topics, leading discussions, engaging in group work and feeling they have some agency in shaping what and how they learn.

Attendance and engagement have been high, and Anaka staff members with experience of the asylum system have joined the sessions, offering support, continuity and familiarity with students' context and experience.

The young people reported they valued being in a university setting and mixing with peers in higher education, saying it motivated them and boosted their self-confidence after extended periods out of formal education. QUB student volunteers also reported benefits of participation including teaching experience:

Participating as a volunteer for SELF has really shown me the need for these students to have a place, to find community while they learn a new language and live in a new place. I love seeing the students participate and get excited about language in safe space together. It's very important for them to have this. (Annie, volunteer teacher)

I was very happy to participate in helping such talented and inspiring individuals. I really admire their resilience, and hard work in adapting to a new language and culture (...) I also found a deep appreciation for translanguaging and being able to use Arabic to assist them in their English learning. (Hawra, volunteer teacher)

While the SELF team continue to work towards some formal accreditation for the sessions in the coming academic years, at present accreditation is still a major barrier to continuing education.



BELFAST MET & OTHER FE COLLEGES

Historically, all-age beginners ESOL courses at NI's largest further education college, Belfast MET have been one of the only educational opportunities available to young people in the Greater Belfast area. In reality, however, these courses can be so over-subscribed that they are not in fact 'available' at all for many.

In August 2024, when young Anaka participants gathered for support with applying when online registration opened, within 15 minutes the online system had closed. They were later told that 400 applications were received in that short time, with many participants being unable to register or even get on a waiting list – a devastating outcome for the young people, some of whom had waited months for the chance to enrol.

In addition to this, the lack of suitability of these programmes for young learners has already been set out above. While entry-level ESOL courses are so over-subscribed, more advanced English classes are often inaccessible because of lack of availability of assessments, lack of formal qualifications and lack of access to foundation courses. Indeed, an ESOL Skills for Life certificate is often not considered a sufficient qualification to access many other further education courses.

In 2024, The Belfast Met launched the ESOL for Transitions programme tailored for young people in the asylum system aged 16 to 19. This promising programme offered 5 days a week included a fast track ESOL course and qualification, support with maths, digital and personal development, pastoral support and guidance over a seven-month period. Again, places were so scarce that most young people could not access the provision. Yet the learning from this model should be incorporated into plans for universal provision for this age group.

Northern Ireland's five other further education

colleges all provide ESOL courses across their multiple campus and at up to five different levels. Yet all courses are offered part time with around 3 hours of teaching a week; none address the need for a more holistic and intense course of study to open pathways into full time education for these keen young learners.

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL WITH REFUGEE LANGUAGE 2023-2024

When Anaka approached Belfast City Council for support with running programmes for 16+ young people and highlighted the lack of provision, the council responded with a funded programme to unlock more English teaching provision for those with intermediate English. It was a collaboration between the council, which provided funding, Refugee Language, who supplied a suitable teacher, Queen's University which provided a space for the three-hour weekend classes, and Belfast MET and the council who funded exam fees.

The key success of this programme was that it included funding for exams and qualifications for participants. 30 young people took part, with 15 taking the Cambridge University B1 English exam and 10 passing. A number of these young people were able to progress to take the B2 English course at Belfast MET.

Reem is 21 and arrived in Belfast in November 2022: "I thought I would have better opportunities, but the reality has been very different. The system makes it extremely difficult to access education, and the process is much slower than I expected."

"I tried many times to enrol in Belfast Met College, but I was always told to wait—sometimes for a whole year! When I finally started studying, I was placed in Entry 1 and 2, which took me two years to complete. This was a long time just to improve my English, and it delayed my progress. If I had received the right support, I could have already applied for university by now."



GLASGOW CLYDE COLLEGE 16+ PROGRAMME

Glasgow Clyde College 16+ programme was designed initially to meet the needs of unaccompanied young people but widened to provide 'Routes to Learning' lessons for this age group generally. The basis of the course is that before young people can begin to think about future education, they need to gain both confidence and qualifications in English, in a trauma-informed setting.

The course is full time, five mornings a week over 2 years with separate classes provided for different English levels. Teaching includes outdoor learning and technology skills, focusing on identifying strengths and talents of the young people and creating a nurturing and peer group approach.

After 12 years, the programme was documented to inspire other providers. In their "Routes to Learning Handbook" it states:

As well as being able to access ESOL courses, this group of young people need to learn with their own peer group. Not only is this pedagogically appropriate it also gives the young people an opportunity to build social relationships and connections with each other.

Given their level of vulnerability and need this group also need extensive guidance and support as well as an age and context appropriate curriculum. [31]

LEICESTER COLLEGE

Leicester College offers a holistic ESOL programme for 16 to 18-year-olds, aimed at helping them gain access to further education or employment opportunities. The course includes modules in English, maths, ICT, office skills, guidance, citizenship, history and science, alongside exposing them to a range of vocational skills.

As a first step, students' English and maths abilities are assessed and students are placed at one of five levels. During the course, weekly assessment allows the student to progress to the next level when they are ready. Teaching is accompanied by a programme of sports, educational visits, organised work experience and employability support. At the end of the highest level of this course, they can access higher-level ESOL or other academic courses, or move into employment. [32]

OUR PROPOSAL

Based on the learning from these small-scale, pilot programmes in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, and the experiences and views of young people, below we set out what provision is necessary to meet their needs and rights. We propose a two-year flexible, rolling programme for those 16-24, allowing newly-arrived young people to start quickly and to accommodate their varied needs and the challenging situations they have endured.

The programme should offer three levels of English taught at recognised A1, A2 and B1 levels, and the opportunity for progression for those starting out with minimal English. While English classes should be streamed, it is important young people are integrated for other classes, to foster peer support, social connections and wellbeing.

The focus should be '**ESOL Plus**': an intensive programme to help young people achieve appropriate English skills to progress to further or higher education, training or employment, along with opportunities to study varied topics and subjects, and take part in activities to orientate them to learning and life in Northern Ireland, build their confidence and resilience. An accredited course is vital to help young people overcome the lack of recognition of previous education and allow this programme to become a gateway to further study.

Anaka's 16+ participants want to study full time, or four days a week – they are hard-working and keen to overcome setbacks and barriers to achieve their goals quickly.

This core course needs wraparound provision, including:

- Additional support with maths, science and other academic subjects, including creative arts and outdoor learning, to give participants the opportunity to use English in a variety of topics and settings.
- Per feedback from Anaka participants, more background on life in Northern Ireland, our history, culture, government and systems. Including a module with talks, visits and learning for life and work in Northern Ireland over the two-year programme would also support integration, not only for participants, but also ripple out to their families and wider communities.
- Opportunities to build peer support among the young participants and to connect with local young people through exchanges, visits and joint projects– which would make a significant contribution to integration.
- Recognising the trauma experienced by many of these young people and to support retention and completion of the programme, provision for personal and social education, trauma interventions, counselling and wellbeing activities.
- Support with study skills, careers advice, gaining work experience and coaching in applying for jobs and interviews – opportunities available to their peers attending secondary school in Northern Ireland.

While such a programme will meet the needs and ambitions of many more young newcomers, some will not be ready to engage due to their level of English, the trauma they are dealing with or their additional educational needs. Pre-entry support should be available for those who need it to prepare them to successfully take part in this programme.

Special Educational Needs assessment and support must be available for these young people even beyond statutory education age, as they have missed the opportunity to have their needs appropriately identified and met before the age of 16.

IMPLEMENTATION

Given the small numbers, this programme should be delivered in partnership with existing educational settings such as colleges and university campuses. This also normalises these spaces for young people with lived experience of the asylum system and in turn, integrates these young people with their peers who are also studying for their future.

Referrals should come from frontline agencies supporting those in the immigration system, such as Anaka Women's Collective, Red Cross, Home Office accommodation providers and social services.

The scheme needs to be free for participants and funded by the Department for the Economy, as part of their duty to develop skills and help Northern Ireland's people overcome barriers to employment. Statutory funding should cover teaching, accreditation, materials and additional programme costs such as wellbeing support and careers advice. The Home Office could also be asked to contribute through refugee integration funding.

Support with public transport costs or free travel cards are also necessary to allow the programme to be truly accessible to participants, who have very limited means and may need to travel to find their nearest centre.

Since 2022, all children and young people up to the age of 21 in Scotland can apply for free bus passes, while Wales piloted a scheme to offer free bus and train passes to people seeking international protection.

Given the concentration of young refugees and asylum seekers in Belfast it should be piloted here, though with a goal of rolling it out in other parts of Northern Ireland. A substantial pilot programme would begin to address provision for young people in Belfast while also allowing the Executive to co-design it with their input, to explore how best to implement it Northern Ireland wide and the budget needed to make it available to all young people who need it.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR NI EXECUTIVE

- In 2025, establish a working group from government, academia, the education sector, the community and voluntary sector and including representatives of the young people themselves, to explore possibilities for implementing the above proposal.
- Involve the Stormont Education Committee in this process and activate the NI Assembly Research and Information Service (RAISE) in gathering and analysing relevant information.
- Design and run a pilot project in the Greater Belfast area by the start of 2026-7 academic year, accommodating a minimum of 45 young people.
- Explore NI funding sources as well as possibilities for allocating Home Office funding (integration and other) to build on and roll out this pilot beyond Belfast.
- Reach out to other devolved governments for information and advice on their own initiatives.
- Report publicly every six months on progress made to date.

FOR EDUCATORS

As we've set out, addressing this gap in provision primarily lies with the NI Executive. However, we offer the following recommendations for those already teaching young newcomers, based on the learning and experience of the programmes outlined:

- Recognise the skills, knowledge and ability of these young people and avoid seeing them exclusively through the lens of their English ability. Many of the young people supported by Anaka were achieving top scores before circumstances forced them to flee, turning their lives and education upside down. English could be a third or fourth language for some, and operating in multiple languages is a skill and an asset that should be valued.
- A rigid focus on narrow and traditional qualifications will perpetuate exclusion from education of young people willing to learn. Therefore, it is important education criteria for courses are more flexible in considering the qualifications of young people and in particular look for equivalents to GCSE English, such as International GCSEs, qualifications in English as a Second or Additional language and more.
- Learning from the programmes detailed, education providers should offer additional support with English when newcomer students enrol on other courses, attend to their wellbeing and personal development and use varied teaching methods and learner-centred approaches to meet the diverse needs of students.
- The value of collaboration with the community sector has been key to the success of several of the programmes outlined, as well as involving people with lived experience of the asylum system in planning and delivering courses. Not only do they offer firsthand experience and bilingual skills, as staff or volunteers they are powerful role models to young participants.
- As the newcomer population grows in Northern Irish schools, teacher training courses should include more content on the needs, experience and strategies to support young people to learn and thrive in the classroom, playground and school community. Training and professional development in this area should also make this knowledge available to current teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is dedicated to the many resilient, brave and aspirational young people who have overcome great challenges to make their home in Northern Ireland and despite many obstacles, continue to seek to make life better for themselves, their families and the wider community. It has been compiled by Chris McCartney with Areeg Fareh and Saher Idris (Education Project Organisers at Anaka Women's Collective) and with the immense support, input and feedback of Asma Haroun (Anaka), Paige Jennings (PPR), Declan Flanagan, Juana Simpson, Mel Engman, Sultan Turkan, Morgan Mattingly and Pauline Kersten.

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Anaka is a Belfast-based collective of women, many with lived experience of the asylum system, who organise to support each other, share skills, address their needs collectively and advocate for their rights. Anaka Education Project supports families to access education in Northern Ireland and address barriers for women and their children to fulfil their potential. The Education Project is funded by Belfast Charitable Society, Anaka is grateful to the Society for making this report possible, and their other funders; The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, LFT Charitable Trust and Necessity.

Add your voice to the campaign for equal access to education for young people at the QR code or <https://www.nlb.ie/take-action/stranded-dreams>

Anaka Women's Collective
c/o PPR, Community House, 6A Albert Street Belfast BT12 4HQ
Email: anakacollective@gmail.com
Instagram: @anakacollective
Facebook: Anaka Women's Collective
X: [@AnakaCollective](https://twitter.com/AnakaCollective)



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MAY 2025

