

## Case Study

### Strategic Outreach Match Funded English Café Project February – July 2023

**Mission statement** – To support people who are living either permanently or temporarily in Wolverhampton or Telford to improve their English Language skills and to enable them to progress onto IELTS preparation courses and eventually onto a university level course or into higher level employment. The project also aimed to support community cohesion, combat isolation amongst refugee and asylum seeker communities and to signpost to different agencies, services and free cultural activities in Telford & Wrekin and Wolverhampton.

#### **Problem statement**

There is an access gap in higher education: Members of refugee groups do not have the English Language levels, knowledge, skills, educational qualifications and/or support that they need to progress to higher education. Therefore, there are inequalities in different people's opportunities to achieve their educational potential.

#### **Long term goal**

To raise aspiration and attainment for refugee groups through English Language sessions and IAG sessions to support them to meet university-level requirements for English language and study skills.

#### **Background**

The English Café project offered participants the opportunity to attend formal English Language classes in both Telford and Wolverhampton to practise their English and the possibility of a progression pathway to IELTS preparation classes. Learners were offered the opportunity to visit the University to look at the facilities, speak to subject staff and have one-to-one IAG sessions with an Education Guidance Advisor in Wolverhampton (or online) and meet with Council Job Services staff in Telford. The project aimed to overcome concerns that University study may not be accessible for these groups. These groups of students are traditionally underrepresented in Higher Education (HE), so the English Café engaged with learners to ensure they understood the opportunities available to them and more importantly that HE is available and accessible to them. There is often a feeling among refugees that they might not be welcomed in HE, and the project worked hard to dispel this.

#### **Activities**

English Café was offered in two locations: Telford and Wolverhampton.

The group in Telford was made up of refugees and migrants. Some had leave to remain, some had pre-settled status. When the Café was originally offered in 2021/2022 through University Centre Telford, there were a huge number of learners from Ukraine who joined as part of the Government's scheme. None of the original learners from Ukraine returned in February 2022 as some had returned to Ukraine and others had moved into employment in the UK. The latter was a beneficial outcome, as they are now contributing to the local economy and are part of their new community. This year, the Café attracted some new learners from Ukraine, previous and new learners from Iran, Hong Kong, Spain, Venezuela, Moldova, Hungary, Japan, the Sudan, India, and Peru.

## **Attendee numbers - Telford**

There were a total of 27 formal registrations in Telford. 4 extra learners from Ukraine joined for one class but didn't return due to either finding the class too easy or difficult. 4 learners from Hong Kong joined during the last couple of weeks of the programme.

## **Educational/employment background/aspirations - Telford**

Many of the learners had professional qualifications from their own countries and their only barrier to entering higher level employment or higher education was their level of English Language skills. This is why it is crucial to address this issue and break down this barrier.

One learner from Ukraine was a respiratory consultant, one a dentist in Venezuela, one worked in social media marketing, one was a teacher of Ukrainian language and literature, a learner from Hong Kong was a Psychiatric Nurse, two learners from Afghanistan want to go into Medicine.

## **Activities and Outputs**

### **Support from Telford and Wrekin Council's Job Box Teams**

Learners were invited to attend the monthly Jobs Fairs held in the Southwater Building and to have individual appointments with Career Advisers from Job Box Services and the National Careers Service. Some learners took up these opportunities but didn't find them overly useful, as they were being advised to look for roles which were at too high a level for them in terms of the English Language expectations. The employers that were present at the Jobs Fairs didn't always match their employment interests.

Some of the learners from Afghanistan were in receipt of benefits, so had regular appointments with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Initially when they started at the English Café (when it was offered through University Centre Telford), it was negotiated with the DWP advisers that the English Café was a provision that they would recommend and that it was seen as valuable for their clients' progression.

### **Volunteer Tutors in Telford**

The project recruited 3 Volunteer Tutors in Telford, two of whom had supported the Café for several years, and a new graduate and who had just completed a CELTA qualification. Tutors support in the classes, sometimes sit with the learners, or walk around the class offering help and take part in all the activities.

In addition, the team set up a Facebook group through University Centre Telford and this has continued. One of the Volunteer Tutors posted regular information about relevant events going on in Telford and continues to arrange walks and picnics to provide other opportunities to speak English. This also enables learners to participate in local activities and events and to feel part of their local community thus helping to tackle social isolation.

## **Short term outcomes**

*What knowledge and skills did learners gain because of the programme?*

Improved English Language skills, knowledge of work-related vocabulary, how to write a CV, knowledge about Telford and the local area, groups that they can join, volunteering that they can take part in and knowledge of the university and what they could study.

*What attitudes and behaviours might change?*

Learners reported an increased self-belief and self-worth, a greater ability to make friends and chat with learners from other countries, an increased ability to reach out and start to contribute to their community and feel that they can make a valuable contribution. This in turn supports their integration into society and their mental health can then start to improve. They understand the benefits of volunteering and being able to be an active member of their new communities.

### **Employment including higher level employment**

Cody, one of the Telford learners, had completed an HND in Civil Engineering in Hong Kong and had 20 years of experience working in this field with the Hong Kong Government. The project team put her in touch with a local company <https://www.sladenassociates.com/> who carry out civil engineering projects. They asked Cody to provide them with an up-to-date CV, as they may be able to offer her some part-time work.

Another learner, Ina, applied for a role at the University in social media and marketing. She has a BA in Marketing from Moldova and could apply to the University for a Postgraduate qualification.

One learner from Hong Kong secured a full-time role at Ricoh having studied at English Café for a few months. Her mother had struggled a lot with her mental health since moving to the UK from Hong Kong. She said that the English Café helped her so much in terms of making friends and feeling more settled in the UK and Telford and regaining her confidence and sense of self-worth.

### **Introduction to the Wolverhampton English Café**

In Wolverhampton, the project lead had to establish the Café membership from the ground up, as classes had not been offered in the city before. In order to achieve this, the project lead went out to visit City of Sanctuary and the Refugee and Migrant Centre and set up links with the Ukrainian Centre, Adult Education Services, and the WVCA. All these organisations referred learners to the Café. In Wolverhampton more of the learners were asylum seekers. They were keen to learn and to escape from the monotony of life in a hotel. Some had been there for over a year with their young children awaiting a decision from the Home Office about their asylum application.

### **Attendee numbers - Wolverhampton**

23 individuals registered for the Café.

Initially, attendance was low, and it was slow to pick up. The Café had a core group of learners who attended regularly including an Iranian couple, a couple from Afghanistan with their young daughter, an asylum seeker from El Salvador, and a learner from China who attended with her son, a young man from Turkey (whose son occasionally attended) and a lady from Hong Kong. However, gradually attendance picked up. 3 other learners from Iran started attending every week, a learner from Sri Lanka and the husband of the learner from Hong Kong. A young woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo also attended some weeks alongside a female asylum seeker from Turkey.

## **Activities and outputs - Wolverhampton**

### **Short term outcomes**

*What knowledge and skills did learners gain because of the programme?*

The learners developed more confidence in their English Language skills, knowledge of day-to-day English, knowledge of the university and what they might study and the support that is on offer.

*What attitudes and behaviours might change?*

Learners developed more of a sense of self-belief and generally felt more positive about their lives in Wolverhampton and the UK. They were appreciative of the respect and dignity with which they were treated by staff at the University.

### **Long term outcomes**

#### **Educational/employment background/aspirations**

One learner from the Wolverhampton group was interested in studying Criminology and so Debbie (a UoW student volunteer) supported her by taking her to some of her lectures.

One learner was a nurse in his home country and his wife was working as a nurse at one of the local hospitals. However, due to really struggling with his English he was working in a Turkish restaurant. Other learners were working in part-time jobs, one in a pizza shop.

Asylum seekers are not permitted to work, but one is now volunteering at the Refugee and Migrant Centre so that she can support others who are in a similar position to herself and her family.

Some of the University's TESOL students attended the classes to observe the teaching and to gain experience. These students were able to develop their skills for their future careers in TESOL.

## **Outputs – Telford and Wolverhampton**

### **Cross University collaboration and Working Group**

An informal working group was established following a series of posts on Twitter discussing the decision made by the Taliban in Afghanistan to ban girls and women from studying at school and university and the English Café offer. Amongst other things, the working group discussed the general lack of opportunities offered at the University for asylum seekers.

The group used the English Café as a starting point, as there were three young women from Afghanistan who were members of the English Café in Telford. The group discussed what else the University could offer to asylum seekers and refugees that would benefit them in terms of higher education, their wellbeing, and their sense of worth. The project lead will start up the Working Group again in the new academic year.

As a result of the working group, the University Chaplain and project lead have kept in touch and now offer those living in the Britannia Hotel the option of joining international students for a free cooked lunch at the Chaplaincy on a Tuesday. Many of the English Café learners who attended the Summer School have since taken up this offer and have really enjoyed the food and the company. This includes one young woman from Afghanistan who is from the Telford group and had joined Summer School on her own.



## Activities and Outputs

### Cultural trips

The project lead organised two cultural and educational trips for the English Café learners and their families in both locations. These were very well received and were enjoyed by all who took part. The team ensured that they provided written explanations of where the learners were going and what was on offer for each visit. These included pictures and history in simple English, so that they could get the most out of the trips.



*Dina and Amir from Iran in the Royal Shakespeare Company Tower, Stratford upon Avon*

### Emotional and well-being support

The project lead provided ongoing nurturing and monitoring of learners in collaboration with other teams across the University. For those who were asylum seekers living in the Britannia Hotel in Wolverhampton, the team endeavoured to include them in activities that during the summer. These included the cultural trips, Summer School and the lunches and gardening activities taking place in the Chaplaincy.

## Financial support with travel

### Bus tickets

Some learners in the Wolverhampton group and one of the volunteers asked for support with their travel costs to and from English Café. Following advice from the Aspire to HE team the project lead bought 110 National Express day rider tickets for use on the bus and tram network across the West Midlands. These were greatly appreciated by the learners in Wolverhampton and ensured that they could continue attending English Café.

### Progression to Summer School

Summer School is offered every year by the Global Opportunities team at the University. English Café learners were offered the opportunity to join Summer School for free, so that they could all practise their English together. 10 learners from Wolverhampton (8 of whom were asylum seekers) took up the opportunity and attended the classes in July and were joined by 3 learners from Telford.

## Feedback from learners about the English Café classes

Data from evaluation forms completed by 14 learners across both locations

1) How would you rate English Café?	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average	Below average
	8	5	1		
2) Has your level of English improved?	A lot	Quite a lot	A little	Not at all	
	7	6	1 (new student)		
3) Do you feel more confident speaking English now?	A lot more	Quite a lot more	A little more	Not at all	
	5	7	2 (1 new student)		
4) Has English Café helped in other ways e.g. making friends?	A lot	Quite a lot	A little	Not at all	
	6	4	4		
5) Would you like to study at university?	7				
6) Are you interested in studying an IELTS course (for university)?	9 (1 already studied IELTS)				

### 7) Has coming to English Café helped in other ways e.g. making friends?

Making friends, being part of the community, more confidence for communication, 'easier said when dining out', 'I met lots of different cultures people and I got to know English better'.

### 8) Have you any ideas for improving English Café?

More focus on practising the four skills, more classes per week, teaching of more idioms and slang, English for work, practise the British accent, more grammar, provide the written information to take away, more oral practice and more practice of restaurant language, 'In my opinion English café need to be bit more increase writing skills is better'.

## Other feedback from learners – Wolverhampton and Telford

*"Thank you for such an amazing learning experience, Thank you Teachers! I know how hard you work for students and it is difficult to teach most people whose second language is English. You are very patient and full of information. I really enjoyed English Cafe vibe they are very nice kind and friendly people".*

*"I greatly appreciated you for agreeing to be one of my personal reference. Your account of my character helped me to get a chance as a volunteer at Dawley & Malinslee Community Library. I look*

*forward to this opportunity that you helped make possible. Again, thank you very much for your continued support.”*

*“Good afternoon, I don't know how to thank you for your kindness, I can only say from the bottom of my heart that I love you and thank you, yes I will attend the class in September and I am free on Fridays and I don't have classes, I had a master's degree in my country and in the field I was working as a journalist and because I have the experience of this work, I want to study journalism in England and continue my studies, thank you again.”*

*“Of course my kids are so happy and they are enjoying themselves. Also we need to give you very special thanks for organising this event and make our day memorable.*

*Once again Wolverhampton University gives us very good opportunity and remarkable experience.”*

### **Long term goals**

The goal to improve English Language levels was partially achieved as some learners made good progress and moved up a level. However, the key variable was the amount of time that learners could commit to the classes and to practising English outside of the classroom. The classes were only for two hours each week and many students asked for more classes which was just not possible given the resources available. The levels of English of many of the learners were lower than expected, so the starting point was lower, and consequently, no-one was ready to start an IELTS preparation course in September 2023. There were, however, several people who were interested in this as a future option as IELTS qualifications are useful for university study, higher level employment and for visa applications.

### **Overall success of the English Café project**

#### **Outcomes**

Work with refugees, migrants and asylum seekers is very complex and learners face and present with multiple barriers and issues. A programme such as English Café can't resolve everything. Projects can offer English classes as a starting point, however, teams must be prepared to take on a lot of work in terms of ongoing support and nurturing.

#### **Note from the project lead: Paula Harrison**

“One of the main difficulties we faced was that levels of attendance were not consistent due to the many other commitments that learners have (especially those who are settled or settling in the UK). It is shocking to hear firsthand the levels of depression and trauma experienced by asylum seekers and others who were forced to leave their home countries such as people from Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong. Providing friendly, safe spaces for people to practise their English and to meet others in a similar position and to start to establish friendships and networks in the UK is a vital first step. Offering a warm welcome and a hand of friendship and treating people with respect is also crucial, as this restores their faith in the UK where they don't always receive the welcome they expected. We aim to nurture change, positivity and practise inclusion and acceptance.

The impact that the Home Office decision making process and the much publicised delays in this process, have on individual learners and their lives, is huge. Those families who were living in the Madeley Court Hotel in Telford have now all moved on. There is only one learner from a group of 7 who can access the English Café next year, as the others have all been moved out of area. Whilst it is

positive for families to be moved into houses, it is very difficult to move away from friends and the life that they have established in Telford. It is particularly difficult for those who have children who have settled in schools in Telford and are then uprooted again. Please see a useful news item below.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66502379>

Those who are awaiting the results of asylum applications or appeals cannot work or make any long-term plans. Their lives are on hold. Some have lived in the Britannia Hotel for more than a year. One of the children told me that she used to have beautiful things in Iran, but her grandfather is looking after them for her now. The impact of what she and her parents have experienced will impact the whole of her life, as is the case for everyone who has been affected by the trauma of having to leave their relatives, homes, lives, and possessions.”

### **Final thoughts and long term goals**

Refugees and migrants are a target access group for University Access and Participation Plans which are monitored by the Office for Students. It is crucial that these learners are offered fair access to higher education and support to achieve successful outcomes. The English Café programme has gone some way to increasing learners’ knowledge of the opportunities available in higher education in the UK and the progression pathways on offer. Their aspirations have been raised and their levels of attainment have improved. The University will be offering the Café again next academic year in both locations to continue this vital work.

The goal is that the population of higher education institutions is representative of the population as a whole and outcomes are equal across demographic groups so that refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are included as part of this.