



Wise in 5: Language Education for Refugees and Migrants in the UK and Ireland

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published March 2025. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

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	Refugee/Migrant Integration Strategy	ESOL Strategy	Policy for adult refugees and migrants to learn indigenous languages	Are there waiting lists and gaps in ESOL provision?
Scotland				
Wales				
Northern Ireland				
Ireland				
England			N/A	
Key	 Yes	 In Draft	 Previous	 No

Wise in 5: Language Education for Refugees and Migrants in the UK and Ireland

As of June 2023, over 215,000 people were seeking asylum in the UK, alongside thousands granted refugee status under Afghan and Ukrainian schemes ([House of Commons Library, 2024](#)). Demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes has consistently outpaced supply, with over [150,000 places](#) funded in England in 2023 and more than [10,000 people](#) accessing ESOL provision in Wales.

Forced migrants often face significant emotional challenges due to traumatic experiences and are eager to rebuild their lives, with language education [identified as a crucial factor](#) in fostering inclusion and integration. Language proficiency helps migrants overcome social and economic exclusion while enhancing wellbeing and a sense of belonging. However, policy approaches to language education often reflect a monolingual ideology, framing language learning as an obligation rather than a right. This perspective risks undermining the vital role language plays in promoting equity and inclusion for those seeking sanctuary ([Simpson and Chick, 2024](#)).

Policy Overview

Immigration is a reserved matter for the UK Government, but integration and language education policies are devolved to the Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish parliaments and governments. Language education is informed by policies which are specific to ESOL and Adult Learning and also policies which relate to integration more broadly. Policy and provision are piecemeal with no UK-wide refugee integration strategy. Wales and Scotland have both developed national integration and ESOL strategies, but none exist in England or Northern Ireland. Though a draft integration strategy now exists in Northern Ireland, its status in the newly re-formed government at Stormont is uncertain. The Northern Ireland [draft programme for government](#) states a commitment to addressing racism and integration but does not mention the draft integration strategy specifically.

In England, perceived low levels of English language competence amongst some members of migrant communities have [regularly been linked discursively to a host of societal and political challenges](#), e.g., the failure of individuals to integrate, poor societal cohesion, unemployment, poverty and the fostering of extremism.

Ireland does not have a current refugee integration strategy or ESOL Strategy however, in the [draft programme for government](#) the Irish Government has committed to publishing a new Migration and Integration Strategy.

Across all the nations [ESOL provision is underfunded](#), with long waiting lists, and a significant gap between policy, practice, and academic recommendations. A [report from the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development in Scotland](#) (published 2024) notes that ESOL in Scotland is in 'crisis' due to inadequate funding and highlights the need for varied approaches to ESOL.

Integration strategies in Scotland and Wales promote multilingualism, yet ESOL classes typically use English-only methods, which leaves little scope for the inclusion of home languages and indigenous languages. Experts advocate for multilingual approaches to reflect the linguistic diversity of communities and better support integration and inclusion. Focusing solely on English does not reflect the vital role of indigenous languages (Irish, Welsh, Gaelic, Ulster Scots and Scots) in the devolved UK nations and Ireland. Experts in the field recognise the need for [broader, multilingual approaches to language](#) education which better reflect the way languages are used in the linguistically rich, diverse communities in which most of us now live.

Nation by Nation

Scotland

Since 2014, Scotland has implemented three refugee integration strategies (2014, 2018, and 2024), [recognising that integration begins on “day one” of arrival](#). The [New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy](#), internationally recognised as a model of good practice, adopts a multilingual, intercultural approach, emphasising that language learning should include home languages and the language/s of the new community.

Scotland is officially multilingual with many community languages spoken and policies supporting [Gaelic](#), [Scots](#), and [British Sign Language](#). A new [draft Scottish Languages Bill](#) is currently going through the legislative process at the Scottish Parliament. However, these policies strongly focus on people who speak these languages as a mother tongue rather than the needs of new speakers.

Insufficient funding for ESOL undermines Scotland's integration strategy's goal of integration from 'day one', as [long waiting lists](#) persist. Community ESOL classes, typically a few hours per week, provided by third-sector organisations and local authorities complement, rather than replace, formal provision.

From 2007 to 2020, Scotland's Adult ESOL strategies promoted an inclusive, progression-focused approach but were discontinued in favour of a broader [Adult Learning Strategy](#) in 2022—a [decision criticised](#) by ESOL practitioners.

Wales

Although immigration is a reserved UK policy area, the Welsh Government has shown a strong commitment to supporting newcomers, exemplified by the [Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan \(2019\)](#) and its ambition to be the world's first Nation of Sanctuary. Wales is currently the only UK nation with a specific language education policy for migrants, focused primarily on ESOL. The first [national ESOL strategy](#) was published in 2014, revised in 2018, and will be updated in 2025 following a [commissioned review](#).

As an officially bilingual nation, Wales affords Welsh equal legal status alongside English, with the [Cymraeg 2050 strategy](#) aiming to increase Welsh speakers. While this strategy acknowledges refugees and migrants, no specific national policy addresses Welsh language provision for them. However, following criticism (Welsh Language

Commissioner, 2018) it is now explicit in the policy document that the Welsh language is an asset which supports social integration and belonging in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023).

The National Centre for Learning Welsh has developed WSOL (Welsh for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, which [research](#) shows enhance migrants' social networks, belonging, and wellbeing in Wales.

Northern Ireland

The draft [refugee integration strategy](#) for Northern Ireland highlights the importance of language in helping refugees and migrants feel “valued and respected,” it focuses solely on ESOL classes as the primary language education provision.

ESOL in Northern Ireland is funded through the Department for the Economy and provided by further education (FE) institutions, with free access to accredited courses for refugees and asylum seekers. However, long waiting lists force many to rely on non-accredited community ESOL classes, which, while helpful, are part-time and lack pathways into formal education. These access-related challenges are compounded for young migrants who also face long waits for school placements, often aging out of the Education Authority's statutory duty without ever receiving a school place.

[The Belfast Agreement](#) of 1998 recognises Ulster-Scots and Irish, along with the languages of “various ethnic communities” (n.p.) as important to the cultural wealth of the island; though the politicisation of Ulster-Scots and Irish during the Troubles has meant that efforts to develop these languages have primarily been driven by grassroots efforts. Repeated government shutdowns have interfered with attempts to legislate for Irish language in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The [Identity and Language \(Northern Ireland\) Act \(2022\)](#) granted official status to the Irish language, and to Ulster-Scots as a minority language. In addition to Irish and Ulster-Scots, the Identity and Language Act affirms the principle of national and cultural identity for all in Northern Ireland, however, this Act excludes reference to specific refugee, migrant, and indigenous Traveller languages like Cant or Gammon.

Republic of Ireland

Ireland is an officially bilingual nation, with the autochthonous minority language Irish being the 'first' official language and English the second. Despite this official bilingualism, publicly funded provisions for language learning for adult refugees and migrants has focused mostly on English, framed as ESOL. While there is no national ESOL strategy, ESOL provisions have expanded incrementally since the mid-1990s within the [broader framework of adult education](#). Ireland's first [migrant integration strategy](#), spanned from 2017–2020 and was subsequently extended to 2021, targeting different kinds of migration and outlining actions to improve integration services. Since then, [no new strategy has been established](#).

ESOL is managed by [Ireland's 16 Education and Training Boards \(ETBs\)](#), with each ETB operating its programmes independently. This results in [significant regional variation](#) in course availability, duration, and enrolment. The [Further Education and Training \(FET\) Strategy](#) (2020–2024) aimed to align ESOL with broader education and employment pathways, facilitating migrant integration into work or higher education.

In addition to ETB provisions, NGOs and charities like [Doras and Fáilte Isteach](#) also deliver ESOL programmes. Despite these efforts, ESOL demand continues to exceed supply, highlighting gaps in coordinated, accessible language support for migrants across Ireland.

Specific provisions for asylum seekers and refugees depend on legal status: [refugees who arrive via resettlement programmes can access an initial language and induction programme and subsequently a year of support in language/other training needs](#). There is disparate treatment for asylum seekers who must wait for their application for refugee status to be processed.

State support for Irish language learning for refugees and migrants in Ireland is minimal. [Migrants can only attend Irish classes](#) at universities or private schools if they can afford the fees or access local initiatives offering free or low-cost courses, such as [Céad Míle Fáilte](#), which specifically targets migrants.

For school-aged children, Irish language education is more structured. Key provisions include [Gaeltacht schools](#) (Irish-speaking schools in Irish-speaking areas), [Gaelscoileanna](#) (Irish immersion schools elsewhere), and the compulsory teaching of Irish in English-medium

schools. However, additional language support for refugee, asylum-seeking, and migrant children has predominantly focused on English, with limited emphasis on Irish language integration.

England

There is no England-wide strategy on ESOL despite English language learning (and testing) frequently being promoted in discourse and policy as one of the major solutions to the challenges associated with English language competence in migrant communities. Decisions about ESOL are made locally but provision is uneven – [organised and coherent in some parts of the country \(e.g., Yorkshire and the Humber\) and scant in others](#).

Funding for ESOL is fragmented, relying on shrinking adult education budgets and unstable, short-term sources targeting specific migrant groups (e.g., refugees from Syria, Afghanistan or Hong Kong). [Research](#) has found that demand far exceeds supply, and waiting lists are commonplace, while eligibility criteria for classes remain complex.

Despite these issues, the ESOL sector in England boasts a strong tradition of activism by groups such as UK-wide National Association of Teachers of English and Community Languages ([NATECLA](#)), London-based [English for Action](#), and [#LoveESOL](#), the [ESOL manifesto group](#), and the [ESOL Research Forum](#) all advocating for robust, quality ESOL provision. The [third sector](#) has grown in response to funding cuts, offering innovative, participatory, and multilingual teaching methods. Universities have also engaged in ESOL through initiatives like the [Coalition for Language Education](#), fostering dialogue on multilingualism in an increasingly diverse UK. The coalition is attempting to begin a conversation amongst language educators in all four nations across various sectors (ESOL, Modern Foreign Languages, EAL in schools, heritage language education, English for Academic Purposes) about what can and should be done to acknowledge and develop the linguistic potential of individuals, and to further societal knowledge about the nature of real-life communication in an increasingly multilingual UK.

OU and Partner Universities Research and Engagement

The OU and research partners at Swansea University, Queen's University, Belfast and The University of South Wales have signed the [Founding Statement](#) in support of the recently established Coalition for Language Education (detailed above).

In 2024 the OU participated in a consultation on the proposed Scottish Languages Bill and provided evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The OU contribution highlighted the need to cater for the needs of new speakers of Scotland's indigenous languages.

The need for and benefits of multilingual approaches to language education for refugees are highlighted in [Cox](#) (2023).

In 2023, the Welsh Government commissioned The University of South Wales and the Learning and Work Institute to review their ESOL policy. The report from that review can be accessed [here](#).

Swansea University, in collaboration with IAITH: Welsh Centre for Language Planning, is funded by the AHRC Impact Acceleration Account to develop the WSOL provision in Wales as part of the Pathways to the Welsh Language for International Migrants. See [Higham](#) (2024)

Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations:

1. Funding for ESOL is inadequate and demand for ESOL classes outstrips what is available. Often funding is not attached to key policies or is insufficient to enable policy recommendations to be realised.
2. There is currently a lack of strategic direction and coordination for language education for refugees and migrants – at cross-nation and nation-specific levels, particularly in England.
3. Where policy does exist, policy recommendations are not consistently implemented. In addition, policies focused on indigenous languages tend not to take into consideration the needs of or support for new speakers of these languages.
4. Consideration needs to be given to what can be learnt from the different policies and approaches taken in the different nations.
5. Policy should reflect the multilingual approaches to language education recommended in academic literature and recognise that English is not the sole language needed for integration and life in the UK Nations and Ireland.

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