

# Public Participation: My Right to Belong

## Background: What is the problem

The UK has a rich history of migration to be celebrated. A third of London's population was born outside the UK with around a 100 different languages being spoken in the capital. This diversity opens the possibility for a truly unique community, city and country whereby new perspectives, histories and values are exchanged.

However, our groups tell us a different story. A story where migrant and refugee communities feel isolated, unheard and underrepresented in public life. Groups tell us about their worries: for young people, crime and unemployment; isolation of women; men battling low self-esteem and mental health problems. They tell us that their communities have weak relationships with mainstream institutions, like the police, local councils or schools resulting in powerlessness and isolation.

**What is it to belong?** To belong is to live with dignity. It is a two-way process of feeling valued and respected whilst also giving back to the wider community. To belong, is to thrive: be it in private and public life, education, social life, leisure and culturally.

Traditionally, integrating new communities has focused on; learning English; British citizenship; and public democratic engagement like volunteering opportunities or voter registration drives. **Can you think of other ways to make our communities belong? Examples:**

- **Build Local Power:** Do you know who sits on the governing board of your child's school? Do you know how residents shape health and social care policy in your area? Are refugees and migrants represented on local decision making boards? Getting represented on local decision making boards is an organising strategy in the US- let's learn from them and get researching
- **Belonging after Brexit:** [Theresa May says Article 50](#) will be triggered before March 2017. Migrant communities are feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their future here, as well as being affected by the surge in hate crime after the referendum. How can we organise ourselves to get migrant voices heard and actively shape policies to claim the rights, citizenship, security and livelihoods?
- **The fight for Education:** Last year David Cameron argued that migrant communities needed to do more to learn English, in particular he argued that [Muslim Women were left behind in the language stakes](#) . Yet with funding cuts, ESOL provision is often very poor. Could you lobby your local educational provider to do more? Take inspiration from students at Oxford and SOAS who campaigned for their Universities to provide scholarships for refugees to study.
- **Employment and Volunteering:** Employment and volunteering helps build confidence and public participation. Could your group lobby employers demanding they make their recruitment policies accessible- this could be through HR policies, mentoring, training. Additionally, we are told of examples when asylum seekers are refused volunteering opportunities as workplaces are not always aware they have the right to volunteer- could you change this?

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- **Voter Registration drives:** If we want to be experts in voter registration drives in time for the next General Election- we need to start now! [There are local elections coming up in 2017.](#) Voter registration is a good way of discussing rights, power and participation.

## Why does this matter?

This year's referendum result exposed a lot of deep rooted tensions- increase in hate crime and the disenfranchisement of the white working classes. Migrant and refugee communities are feeling vulnerable- exposed to hate and unclear on their future. Now is the time to build confidence and public representation.

## What are the political opportunities?

The government will be negotiating the terms of leaving the EU which will impact the lives of everyone in the UK. How can we build our power and influence to secure the rights of migrant communities to remain in the UK?

Additionally, the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has [recently appointed a Deputy Mayor for Social Integration.](#)

This is something we campaigned for as members of London Citizens. How can London groups influence the Mayoral office to ensure their voices are heard within the new strategy for London communities?

## Who is working on this already?

There are lots of organisations doing work in this area- have a look to see what their strengths and weaknesses are and how we could add value by using a community organising approach.

- **Local councils-** Research your local borough council to understand local decision making structures
- [Mayor of London-](#) has recently appointed a Deputy Mayor for Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement, Matthew Ryder QC. Can we build a relationship with him?
- [AIRE Centre](#) - specialising in European's rights, published papers on how Brexit could affect migrants in UK
- [Citizens UK](#) - national community organising alliance- taking action on civic engagement and the refugee crisis
- [British Futures-](#) Think Tank reporting on relevant issues like, UK post Brexit; Citizenship and life in the UK
- [Refugee Council](#) run a programme called' Refugees into Jobs: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/rj>
- [Breaking Barriers-](#) a charity focused on getting refugees into work through 121 advice and building relationships with corporate partners
- [Action for ESOL:](#) campaigning to secure ESOL
- [Article 26 \(Helena Kennedy Foundation\):](#) campaigning for educational bursaries for refugees and asylum seekers
- [Operation Black Vote:](#) The power of voting and political participation, focusing on minority communities
- [Operation Traveller Vote:](#) The power of voting and political participation, focusing on traveller communities

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## What next?

1. **Decide the Issue:** Does your community feel they are well represented in public life? Do they take an active role in participating in public life? If not, what's stopping them and what's the impact? What issue do people care about most? What one aspect would make a worthwhile, winnable campaign that could change your neighbourhood?
2. **What don't we know:** How much do you know about a lack of public participation in your community or areas? Do you know what could change things? Have you asked the community, spoken to civic leaders, done some research, gathered stories?
3. **Create an action:** Who could make the change you want on this issue? Who is your target? What creative action would get a reaction from them to get you to meet them?
4. **Can you name the problem?** Is there a snappy name that encapsulates these ideas, but is positive and proactive?