



# ESOL in the East Midlands

An Evaluative Report exploring English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision across the East Midlands Region, with particular reference to provision catering for the needs of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the region

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# 1. Summary & Introduction

## 1.1. Summary recommendations

This report details themes and issues in the delivery of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision across the East Midlands, a diverse region with different histories and patterns of migrant settlement. The report is based on research carried out between April and July 2024.

The report raises vital issues about ESOL delivery. The needs and challenges of ESOL learners in the region are highlighted, particularly those of refugees, asylum seekers and other forced migrants. It highlights the barriers that prevent learners from attending or making the most of current provision, such as unstable housing and childcare responsibilities. It also highlights the challenges posed by the funding landscape, such as repeated applications to rounds of funding for smaller community organisations, and the issues raised by the spread of provision across several very different delivery sectors.

The report recognises the resilience of both learners and providers. It emphasises the many instances of good practice across the region, such as innovative and collaborative partnerships between different types of ESOL providers, and celebrates the extraordinary social energy that underpins the delivery of ESOL, sometimes in the most difficult of circumstances. This positive social energy is a fantastic regional asset which provides a robust base on which to develop ESOL provision in the East Midlands.

Section 4 presents recommendations for action on the basis of our research. Briefly, these recommendations are in the following areas:

- **Consolidate and develop collaborative networks** in the ESOL sector both within defined localities and region-wide across the East Midlands.
- **Ensure ESOL provider representation at wider multi-agency meetings** in order to advocate for vulnerable ESOL learners.
- **Extend the complementarity of provision** by developing models of collaboration between providers in different sectors, to ensure that learners can access a range of classes in a week, and to address specific learner needs and aspirations.
- **Share the experience and ways of working** of those areas where there is an established ESOL infrastructure with areas whose ESOL provision is sparser due to historic patterns of migrant settlement.
- **Develop cross-border agreements** with providers adjacent to the borders of East Midlands, to facilitate learner access to a wider range of provision.
- **Improve access to information about ESOL classes** for learners and those that advise them by developing a user-friendly, continually updated database of classes, and/or ensure information is available to newly-arrived migrants through key community spaces including hotels.



- **Promote access to trauma-informed delivery training and crisis support**, building on existing expertise in the region and through multi-agency networks.
- **Improve provision for learners with literacy and SEND issues** by providing literacy and SEND training for ESOL staff and establishing ESOL SEND protocols in collaboration with external SEND professionals.
- **Boost support to community sector ESOL providers** in a way that recognises their vital contribution to ESOL delivery across the region, by coordinating strategic and practical initiatives to build capacity.
- **Establish a resource providing information and advice about ESFA funding** to enhance provider capacity to manage frequent changes in funding regulations, including developments around devolution.
- **Expand access to accredited provision** by supporting third sector organisations to become registered centres for the delivery of accredited learning in areas of high demand.
- **Promote employer engagement with ESOL** by establishing a forum for providers and employers and modelling good practice.
- **Ensure inclusive learning is valued** in ESOL provision so that classes are available which focus on English in non-work contexts, to improve accessibility for marginalised groups, especially older learners.
- **Support professional development around AI** and its everyday use by learners, to facilitate integration of AI as a teaching and learning tool in the ESOL classroom.
- **Develop and disseminate an information resource clarifying the English qualifications landscape** for ESOL learners and others.
- **Recognise the voices of forced migrant communities as a rich social and cultural asset**, and explore ways to develop and build on this asset, both within the context of ESOL delivery and more widely, through a range of linked initiatives.

## 1.2. Report context

This report was commissioned by East Midlands Councils (EMC) to examine and evaluate English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision in the East Midlands area. It is a substantive contribution to the comprehensive review of English Language provision in the East Midlands undertaken by East Midlands Councils, as part of its delivery of the Government's English Language support programme.

The report aims to evaluate existing ESOL services in the region, assess learner outcomes, pinpoint gaps in service delivery, and provide recommendations for improvements, with a particular focus on the experience of refugee, asylum seeker and other forced migrant learners in the region. Most frequently, these learners are catered for alongside other migrants accessing ESOL provision, so their experience must be seen within this context, and the report findings may frequently be projected onto this broader scale.

Stuart Young, Executive Director of East Midlands Councils, comments that 'ESOL provision plays a vital role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, providing them with the essential

skills required to integrate into their new communities and access employment... This evaluative exercise will allow us to better understand the varying levels of ESOL provision across the region, assess delivery and outcomes, and formulate recommendations on where and how this needs to be improved and resources better directed.'

The research that informs this report has been undertaken by MESH, the Migrant English Support Hub. MESH is a registered charity dedicated to supporting adult migrant language learners primarily in the Yorkshire & Humber region. With core funding from the regional Strategic Migration Partnership (SMP), [Migration Yorkshire](#), MESH works with colleagues and stakeholders across this region to break down barriers and improve access to learning for adult migrants.

At the heart of MESH are two online resources which help achieve this aim. The [Learning English in Yorkshire and Humber](#) (LEYH) website provides information for learners (and those supporting them) looking for English classes and associated training provision close to them. They can use this site to find face-to-face or online classes and free classes. There are also links to useful regional information resources for migrant groups. The [Learning English Plus](#) (LE+) website provides support for those supporting migrants in Yorkshire & Humber. It provides valuable resources and information on training, including news and information about migration, refugees and asylum seekers and how to support them. LE+ also offers a collection of Learning Resources freely available to practitioners to download and use in the classroom, including a suite of resources built by the MESH team with themes and content specifically geared towards the migrant experience in the region.

MESH also supports the sector and learners with face-to-face training and networking events. Our aim is to facilitate collective action and joined-up thinking in the provision of ESOL, working to create opportunities for the overlapping yet diffuse sectors of language learning and migrant/refugee/asylum seeker support to come together to discuss common issues, make connections and initiate collaboration.

The day-to-day work of MESH ensures that we collaborate closely with Migration Yorkshire, the SMP for Yorkshire & Humber. We were therefore delighted to have the opportunity to bid for the tender to work with the East Midlands SMP, part of the East Midlands Councils organisation, on this project. In March 2024, we bid to undertake the work commissioned by EMC. We were awarded the contract in April 2024. The MESH team has been networking with stakeholders across the region, gathering data and preparing the project outputs over a 20-week period between mid-April and the end of August 2024.

### 1.3. Project Objectives

The key project aim was to undertake research to map ESOL provision across the East Midlands region and explore both good practice and challenges faced by the sector in delivering high quality provision to refugees and asylum seekers. The project has been guided in the evaluation of provision by benchmarking criteria set out in the Migration Yorkshire 2021

report [ESOL for Refugees: A Toolkit for Commissioners and Practitioners](#), which itself was based on research carried out as part of the Suitable and Effective ESOL for Refugees (SEER) project, delivered by Migration Yorkshire in collaboration with SMPs across England, and funded by the Home Office.

On the basis of this research, the project objectives have been to deliver the following outputs:

1. A register based on quantitative investigation of the ESOL provider landscape in the East Midlands, accounting both for accredited (formal) settings, such as colleges, and non-accredited (informal) settings, such as charities, voluntary organisations, conversation groups and others.
2. A final evaluation report considering and making recommendations on a range of issues laid out in the EMC Invitation to Tender. These issues are:
  - Identification of under-served areas, gaps in provision (in terms of curriculum content or provision capacity), and barriers to access.
  - Comparison of current provision in each of the 10 upper tier Local Authority areas with established criteria of effective ESOL provision, with suggestions for developing current services to match this benchmark more closely.
  - The extent to which access to accredited ESOL provision enables future employment and/or access to Further/Higher Education.
  - Reflections and recommendations based on the lived experience of asylum seekers and refugee ESOL learners, both current and former, including instances of learners paying for tuition via private providers (and the underpinning reasons for this), and the types of additional support that they would find most useful.
  - The localities which exhibit the highest level of need and priority for targeted action, and recommended measures to improve ESOL provision in these areas, including the support and development needs of ESOL providers in all settings.
  - What additional training needs asylum seekers and refugees require and how these should be met.
  - The features and characteristics of the most effective provision in the East Midlands, based on the outcomes achieved by learners.

We have conducted our research in two stages.

**Stage one** culminated in the delivery of an interim report which provides a quantitative snapshot of the ESOL landscape in June 2024. This report was based on desk-based research and substantive networking with colleagues across the East Midlands, including an online regional networking event attended by approximately 40 stakeholders from across the region. Our interim report is supplemented by a dynamic map which provides a graphic representation of ESOL provision across the East Midlands, prepared on the Padlet application.

**Stage two** involved the gathering of qualitative data which underpins this report. The method used to gather this data is outlined in the next section.

## 2. Methodology

This report is informed primarily by qualitative data gathered through a variety of methods over the past 3 months. We began contacting ESOL providers in May 2024. Our project worker had online conversations with a range of provider managers and ESOL practitioners, and also made visits to the East Midlands area to meet people in person. In all cases these conversations were informal, without a structured question framework. The primary purpose was to make connections and begin to understand the issues and challenges of the sector. The data gathered from these conversations are in the form of notes made by our project worker.

Similar preparatory data was gathered via discussions in our Regional Networking meeting held online on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2024, and via the Evaluation form which we requested people attending this meeting to complete. 38 people attended the event, and 10 people went on to complete the evaluation form.

The qualitative data gathering phase of the project commenced formally on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2024, immediately after the submission of our Interim (Quantitative) Report. Our strategies for gathering data were threefold:

- **Interviews** with providers and other stakeholders from each of the 10 upper tier local authority areas. In each area, we aimed to interview at least one person working at a more formal, AEB-funded provider, and one working in the community (or related) sector. The data gathered here consists of transcripts of 16 in-depth interviews. These transcripts are supplemented by emailed communications from different contacts, particularly those with whom we were not able to arrange interviews.
- **Focus groups** consisting of ESOL learners and ex-learners – predominantly forced migrants/refugees/asylum seekers – from each of the 10 upper tier local authority areas. We worked with local partners – mostly community sector organisations – to arrange these focus groups. The data gathered here consists of transcripts of 10 focus groups conducted by the MESH team, with groups ranging from around 20 people to 3 people. Where we had larger groups, we split them into two smaller groups in order to allow more space for people to speak. In some cases our focus group conversations were assisted by the presence of interpreters.
- **An open online questionnaire** circulated to providers and others across the whole of the East Midlands region. We used mailing lists compiled by us in the mapping phase of this project to circulate this questionnaire and were helped also by circulation via EMC social media channels. The data gathered here consists of 24 in-depth responses.

In all cases, our approach to data gathering was based on structured question frameworks developed from the benchmarking criteria set out in the Migration Yorkshire ESOL for

Refugees toolkit, as stipulated in the EMC Invitation to Tender. A coded version of these criteria is reproduced at Appendix 1 of this report. We used the codes to process data from transcripts, mapping comments made against different aspects of the criteria.

In order to develop appropriate question frameworks for each of these three bodies of data, we worked closely with our Advisory Group. This is one critical instance of the work of the Project Advisory Group, which has met monthly throughout the project to guide and advise us on progress. The Advisory Group includes those with local knowledge of the area, FE professionals, SMP professionals, those with experience of delivering informal provision, and forced migrants with experience of learning English in the UK.

All electronic data gathered in this phase of the project has been kept on a secure server and was anonymised within two days of being gathered. Consent was gained from all participants to use their words as data, either electronically or in hard copy form. We used hard copy consent forms in English, Arabic, Dari and Ukrainian for our focus group participants. Hard copy consent forms were scanned and stored on a secure server within two days of being gathered. Hard copies were then destroyed.

## 3. Evidence, Results and Discussion

### 3.1 The learners: refugees, asylum seekers and others in the East Midlands

The distribution and diversity of learners across the region is complex. There are some very well-established migrant communities who settled in the region many years ago. Leicester, Nottingham and Derby all have well established South Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities that have been part of the demographic landscape of these cities since the 1960s and 70s, and before this. Leicester has grown from its position as one of the major centres of settlement for East African Asians in the early 1970s into a superdiverse urban space. The 2021 census shows that nearly 60% of its population are from ethnic minority groups.

By contrast, some areas – predominantly rural areas – do not have such a long history of settlement of migrant groups. Rural Derbyshire is recorded as nearly 91% ethnically white in the 2021 census, and Rutland nearly 95%. The population of Lincolnshire is recorded as nearly 96% white in the 2021 census. At the same time, Lincolnshire does have a history of seasonal migration related to the agricultural sector, with many migrants coming from Eastern Europe in order to fulfil specific temporary labour niches.

In recent years, these settled positions have been made more complex by new patterns of migration and settlement, much of it driven by specific strategies of government. These new developments are related to new waves of forced migration in an unsettled world. Over the past decade or so, Britain has developed managed settlement programmes in response to specific crises – the Syrian war, the Afghan crisis, and most recently the crisis in Ukraine – which have been managed by dispersal through different local authorities.

In addition, new approaches to the settlement of asylum seekers have developed, with many being dispersed into areas with comparatively less experience of minority ethnic settlement.

A further recent development has been the creation of opportunities for Hong Kong residents to settle in the UK since 2021 via the BN(O) visa programme. Although the majority of BN(O)s have chosen to settle in London and the North West, around 8% have settled in the East Midlands region.

For the East Midlands, this developing situation has resulted in new pockets of migrant communities and new challenges related to the development of infrastructure to support these communities. Many asylum seekers have been dispersed to the major urban centres of Leicester, Nottingham and Derby, but there is also an asylum seeker presence in smaller urban centres in pockets across the region. Some are temporarily housed in hotels, others in hostels or shared houses.

Due to the particularity of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, Ukrainians have settled widely across the region. Their settlement does not necessarily follow the urban logic of other forms of settlement, with, for example, many more settled in the Derbyshire Dales than in Derby itself. By far the largest number of Ukrainians settled in the region are based in North and West Northamptonshire.

By contrast, the largest number of Afghans settled in the region via the ARAP and ACRS schemes are to be found in and around Nottingham. This is also the case with BN(O)s from Hong Kong.



These diverse patterns of settlement related to managed settlement schemes and asylum seekers have brought migrant groups to a range of places with different histories of migration. Some refugees and asylum seekers find themselves in highly diverse urban centres, living in the midst of a range of existing migrant communities. Some find themselves in areas with less diverse populations, with less of a multicultural 'feel'.



Unsurprisingly, the educational profile of new migrants across the region is equally diverse. Many Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians arrive in the UK with strong educational and professional backgrounds. In our focus groups we met psychologists, engineers and health professionals. We met people with postgraduate qualifications, including PhDs. We also met people with a lot of language proficiency. People learning English often already have multiple languages - if they are a refugee or asylum seeker, they may have been in a range of contexts where they had to pick up different languages before they came to the UK, and ESOL is the latest in a string of learning situations they have been in over the past few months or years.

At the same time, we met many people with little or no educational experience. As is often the case, people who have grown up in very unsettled political and economic situations frequently experience disruption of their education, or even a lack of any education. Such people often find learning situations extremely challenging. For many ESOL learners, learning to learn is as important as learning the language.

One frequent common theme was trauma. The learners we met frequently talked – sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely – about the struggles they faced as a result of experiences of disruption, war, family loss. Mental health concerns and isolation loomed large in the daily experiences of many learners.

A Farsi-speaking learner who was a GP in their home country spoke of social isolation and of the trauma which stopped him and his wife from coming to class. As Christians they joined their local church, and it was eventually the church that provided a bridge from that isolation and enabled them to come to ESOL classes.

People have frequent anxieties about status, housing and money. The trauma of the experience of loss, the uncertainty associated with their status and that of their families, and the disruption of moving from place to place were all significant. In one focus group learners likened their lives as asylum seekers to being a ghost or being in a maze.

**“We are ghosts. Till we get the right to remain, no one accepts us anywhere.”**

(Focus group participant in Nottingham)

**“I am somehow like a maze. I don’t know how to start where to start.”**

(Focus group participant in Nottingham)

In this context, learning English sometimes assumes a significance beyond the important challenge of understanding. Learning English becomes a way of addressing trauma, and of assuming a new or different form of identity, a different kind of belonging. These focus group participants articulate this idea:

*We need comfort. We need to be comfortable with our place of living. We need to understand people and to use language for our, I don't know in English, but in my language, I use my language not only for work or only for communication, but I also show myself and try to realise myself via language.*

*We feel lack of language. Yes. We can't joke. We can't play words. We really can't be ourselves. So the only people who you can be yourselves with are fellow Ukrainians.*

**“English is like a passport”**

(Focus group participant in Stamford)

These quotations show the importance of learning English. Many people have taken to learning with huge enthusiasm, again showing how important this activity is to helping people to settle. Sometimes this importance is expressed in terms of love!

*I love attending any English class, come rain or shine, morning or night, because I fall in love with learning English.*

Although it is heartening and instructive to see the role played by English learning for some migrants, we should also acknowledge that for others the language presents a huge challenge. As one focus group participant said:

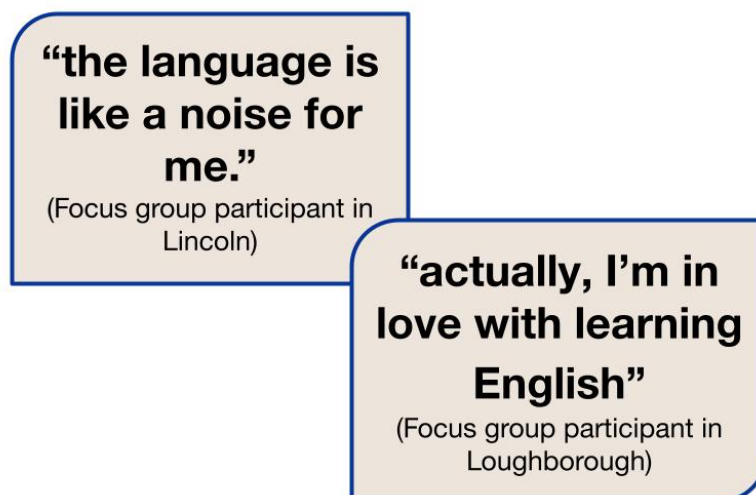
*Sometimes when I can't understand, I feel I can't breathing.*

Listening, understanding and communicating in the context of everyday learning is a particular challenge. Even for those who learned some English before they arrived, the challenge of negotiating everyday English and the diverse range of accents they encountered is often huge. One Ukrainian focus group participant commented that

*After arriving here, I just realised that here it is real English, not the globish I used to learn in Ukraine.*



Another participant used the evocative phrase ‘all the walls come through to me’ when describing trying to unpack a particular accent. An Arabic GP told us through an interpreter that he feels ‘ashamed that [people] might laugh at him or something if he says something wrong’.



Even while expressing these concerns, so many of our participants also expressed aspirations to move on. We met people who wanted to be hairdressers, doctors, mechanics, nurses, electrical engineers, accountants, HGV drivers, vets and to work in IT.

*When his English is improved, then he'll go for an electrician course at the college (interpreter speaking).*

*When I was young, I said that I would get my PhD, and I did. And today I am telling you that I will learn English and then I will become a doctor.*

People pursued these aspirations not just by learning English, but often by supplementing this learning by taking up a range of volunteering opportunities – working in shops, in hospitals and in organisations, especially third sector organisations such as those offering support to refugees and asylum seekers. This evidence demonstrates the enormous energy and determination of people to move on, to do well for themselves and also to be part of the society in which they are settling.

This determination was evident even when the challenges are great. We heard a story from a qualified health professional who tried to volunteer in a hospital while waiting for her asylum claim to be decided. She filled in a series of forms to enable this, even though a lot of the questions being asked were difficult to answer because of her status and her experience of flight from her home country. In the end she was offered only a role helping to prepare food in the hospital kitchen – not a role supporting clinical work, as she had anticipated.

Other focus group participants faced the challenge of displacement even after coming to the UK. As an asylum seeker, being moved to another temporary place of residence may occur even at short notice. For example, Ukrainians on the Homes for Ukraine scheme can find themselves homeless if the relationship with their hosts breaks down.

Such crises can have a huge impact on people who may just be beginning to reach out and make connections within a locality, including connections to agencies delivering English. As we explore in section 3.5, it can take time for people with limited language skills to find English provision even if it is available in an area. To be moved or re-housed at short notice means having to establish such connections all over again in another unfamiliar place.

Even while facing these challenges, forced migrants in the East Midlands showed great determination and resourcefulness to prepare themselves for new lives in a new place. As we explore in the next section, ESOL providers frequently operate as a crucial source of support in facilitating this process.

## 3.2 The challenges of delivering ESOL in the East Midlands

**“There are millions of joys. It’s sort of in our blood, isn’t it? It’s an incredible job”**  
(Provider in Leicester)

Providers face challenges delivering ESOL, and this section describes the primary concerns providers voiced to us. We discuss the crisis work ESOL providers do, and the effect it has on them. We also discuss ESOL tutor recruitment issues.

A common sentiment amongst ESOL tutors, volunteers and providers is that their role is a privilege. Aside from their professional role, tutors and volunteers knew that they were ‘not just’ a teacher, they were also a friend to many learners. There were many examples of smaller community providers for whom their organisation was a vocation, so they try to run it ethically – including this representative of a CIC in Nottingham:

*I run my business through compassion, understanding and empathy, and I have teachers that reflect that as well. I also hire a significant number of teachers from diverse backgrounds, who have been through a refugee or asylum process, because I think that's incredibly important to have that further understanding.*

Providers are increasingly having to act as crisis support workers in addition to their role delivering ESOL, especially when homelessness and mental health problems are involved. As one tutor comments:

*We're bringing in microwaves and cookers because in the shared rooms that they have there's no place to cook anything.*

Some providers noted little structural local government provision, especially for asylum seekers. When MESH visited smaller community organisations, several of them were also food and clothes banks, such as Open Hands in Leicester, and Broxtowe Community Project. The juxtaposition of ESOL and crisis alleviation projects demonstrates the precarity of living situations for many migrant learners.

**“we're not just  
teachers, we're  
social workers...”**

(Provider in  
Northamptonshire)

A key issue is the disruption of learning often associated with the precarity of forced migrant learners' lives. Providers dealt in different ways with the dispersal to different parts of the country of asylum-seeking learners. Pragmatic responses were typically supportive in nature, such as a volunteer tutor trying to contact providers in the area a learner moved to in order to pass on information, but finding that this was very difficult and haphazard.

Colleges told us they tried to be flexible to accommodate learners who had moved or been dispersed, so they could at least come back for exams. Some colleges moved exam dates so that learners could sit early, but this was at the risk of lower results. One provider told us of the effect dispersal has on college resources, and the strain on the staff:

*We are put in a threadbare situation having to do all of these different things to advocate for individuals that are seeking asylum so they can have English tuition, but the structure of funding negates that. We then have to be creative; we have to make applications to the Adult Learner bursary for 85 asylum seekers. All that hard work that the staff and the organisation have done, all that wonderful community that the learners have come into. They finally feel that they're progressing, we can help them address their trauma, we can support them, we can teach them English. It's very much like a family. And then they are ripped from that and dispersed.*

'Brutal' was a word a provider used to describe the dispersal of asylum-seeking learners. Providers talk about having to be 'adaptable' and 'flexible'. We were told that in one college, colleagues in the psychology department were providing group counselling sessions for ESOL staff, such was the effect of the constant upheaval. The professional relationship with the learner is intact, but there is also the human relationship with another person - providers feel the loss of learners who get moved suddenly, saying things like 'we never saw them again' and 'just when you get to know people...'

Because of the multiple roles often taken on by ESOL teachers, there are some issues with the range of skills needed to do the job. Some colleges have staff training weeks and are well set up to deliver CPD opportunities to staff in person and online. However, there was a gap around trauma training and literacy training. A provider told us:

*There is little help with trauma. We have wellbeing mentors who can help with advice but not access to counselling for students or teachers. Staff had a small amount of training on trauma, but this is the big gap that we are probably not set up well to deal with.*

To address this need, a free online [module on trauma-informed ESOL](#) that tutors and volunteers can access has been designed by the University of Leicester.

## **Recruitment and retention**

Despite the clear commitment of many ESOL practitioners, providers in colleges and Adult Learning said that there was still a chronic lack of ESOL tutors. They cited as barriers to recruitment the lengthy paperwork, long hours, low salaries and the insecurity attached to the kind of contracts that can be offered to tutors. Many posts advertised were on a part-time basis, paid at an hourly rate – so-called ‘zero hour’ contracts.

Providers mitigate these problems in different ways. For example, there are different ways of approaching preparation and marking time, with employers enhancing the hourly rate to take marking and preparation into consideration. Some providers are aware that travel between venues and setting up time are also issues for tutors.

An ESOL manager at Leicester College talked about ‘the sheer need for teachers in ESOL and English’. They have had some success in providing professional development opportunities for existing Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to do an Award of Education and Training (AET); they are also looking at how Sector-Based Work Academies could work for Teaching Assistants.

Other providers have found there was no shortage of people wanting to teach ESOL, but (in colleges) a PGCE or at least a Level 5 qualification is needed, and often potential recruits don’t have the requisite qualifications, or qualifications which are not focused on delivery of ESOL specifically. A provider in Derby said, ‘I feel like I’ve been recruiting my entire life’.

An initiative funded by EMC which tries to address recruitment issues is Flying Cows Learning. Flying Cows offers teacher training courses up to Level 5 free to those on settlement programmes and BN(O)s in the region, including teaching practice in classes also delivered by Flying Cows.

In some areas, ESOL jobs are precarious due to fluctuating rolls. For example, in Rutland Adult Learning, learner numbers are currently low. Rutland is an affluent area; migrants often find it too expensive to find accommodation and there are few employment opportunities. Because of low learner numbers, staff restructuring has recently more than halved their tutor numbers to only 4, and so moving into the academic year 2025-26, they find themselves without a full ESOL offer.

### 3.3 ESOL landscape and funding in the East Midlands

The East Midlands is a diverse region, with rural and urban areas. The challenges for different areas are therefore diverse and, in some instances, unique. There are established Adult Learning services in each of the upper tier local authority areas, with colleges serving all areas. In some cases, such as in Stamford, Lincolnshire, the nearest large college is across the regional border in Peterborough, and traditionally, those wanting educational courses in that area travel to Peterborough.



There is a range of third sector provision, developing in different ways across the region depending on historical, social and cultural factors. Churches and Christian groups stand out as providers of conversation cafes. In Nottingham for example, there is Aspley Church, St Christophers, St Nic's, Cornerstone, The Vine and Refugee Roots. There are cultural associations delivering ESOL, some in partnership with Adult Learning, and some provided from other 'pots' of money, such as the Bosnia and Herzegovina Centre in Derby, and the Bangladeshi Youth and Cultural Shomiti in Leicester. There are refugee forums, such as Derbyshire Refugee Solidarity, and several Towns and Cities of Sanctuary, such as Northampton Town of Sanctuary, who deliver ESOL from the local library.





Some Community Interest Companies and other Social Enterprises deliver ESOL in the larger urban centres. The WEA is active across the region. It does provide some face-to-face provision, but it is distinctive in being a major provider of online provision.

Private language schools also deliver online provision, alongside face-to-face provision primarily in the larger urban areas. Some of these schools provide subsidised spaces for forced migrant learners, although there is no systematic provision along these lines.

Some providers reported instances of questionable practice amongst private language schools, although not necessarily providers based in the area. An example of this is accepting fees from learners and awarding them a certificate at a level that the learner is not capable of, which ultimately deskills and demotivates the learner. A college provider stated:

*Learners think they'll do an online course at the same time as they are doing ESOL at college [...] and it will improve their English. Some learners get qualifications without even taking exams. Some of them have to be withdrawn from college courses after three weeks, having ostensibly completed a functional skills Entry level.*

This also has an impact on learner confidence and employment opportunities, because these learners apply for jobs with a certificate for an inflated level of English, only to be rejected at interview. A college provider in Northamptonshire told us they were trying to set up an advisory board together with Adult Learning and some private providers. The hope is that a policy will be developed and a code of conduct will emerge which will regulate practice - the current situation consists of individual complaints by organisations contacting awarding bodies in an uncoordinated fashion.

One significant feature of the ESOL landscape in the East Midlands is BEGIN. Established in 1982, BEGIN (Basic Educational Guidance in Nottingham) stands out as a unique organisation in the region. It is a central information, advice and placement service for ESOL learners in Nottingham, as well as the adjacent boroughs of Broxtowe, Gedling and Rushcliffe. Located in Nottingham College, BEGIN is governed by a partnership that includes the College alongside other stakeholders including third sector providers. BEGIN supports grassroots collaborations and regularly compiles ESOL data to support the planning of ESOL provision, including informal conversation groups. BEGIN runs regular partnership meetings to draw providers together. It encourages engagement with other stakeholder services and supports

funding applications. In recent years BEGIN has increasingly taken on the role of a central point of contact for learner placements with providers across the city.

In 2017 BEGIN was commissioned to produce a significant report on the state of ESOL in the Nottingham area, *ESOL Potential Nottingham: Students, Provision, Gaps and Recommendations*. This report mapped provision, highlighted gaps and made the case for a local ESOL strategy. It is an example of the kind of strategic planning that can be achieved if a collaborative, cross-sector infrastructure exists.

Providers of all sorts can be responsive to local need. Following the war in Ukraine, Chesterfield College expanded its provision from one evening class a week to intensive daytime classes 3 times a week. The demand has not dropped since then; it continues with arrivals of learners at a local asylum hotel.

Providers talked about the fast-changing ESOL landscape, and how they were flexible in response to demand. A smaller provider in Northampton told us that historically most of their learners were South Asian women, but that recently there has been a change, and now more learners are from Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. In the Leicester area, Highfields and St Matthews were traditionally key areas for migrant arrivals, and now the Roma community are starting to arrive in greater numbers so Leicester is adapting to this.

Larger providers in Lincolnshire were trying to respond to demand for ESOL, and to be flexible in terms of funding and courses. Contracts are awarded on an annual basis. For example, the provider might be contracted to deliver 10 ESOL courses, 10 Employability courses and 10 Developing Confidence courses. However, if requests to deliver more ESOL courses come from the DWP, some of the Developing Confidence courses could be converted to ESOL as a way of coping with the additional demand. This may impact on timetabling, which has a knock-on effect in terms of learners accessing accurate information about classes.

## **Funding: Colleges and Adult Education**

Nationally, the ESOL sector has been chronically underfunded for some years. A recent report by the Bell Foundation notes that this has resulted in a fall in ESOL enrolments – by as much as 36% between 2009/10 and 2017/18. This fall in enrolments has come despite rising demand, new settlement patterns (see 3.1 above), and at a time when ‘the need for a skilled labour force with proficiency in the English language is arguably greater than ever’ ([Bell Foundation](#) 2024: 4).

The funding squeeze has impacted the East Midlands as much as other areas. One significant consequence noted nationally is also very evident in this region: rising waiting lists for classes. In its 2017 report, BEGIN noted this as a significant issue in Nottingham, where

*provision may be reaching only 50% of around 8,600 adults with language needs. Crucially...there are only 2,400 places per year within formal provision with accreditation routes.*

The 2,400 figure referred to here relates to ‘formal provision’ in colleges and Adult Learning services (the broader figure of 50% provision includes ‘informal’, community sector provision). At the time of writing, much ESOL in colleges and Adult Learning is funded by the Adult

Education Budget (AEB), an ESFA fund that supports the delivery of education and training to adults. Providers report that AEB funding is subject to frequent changes, and that in most cases these changes place further restrictions on eligibility for different migrant groups. As one provider commented:

*Providers need inclusive and consistent funding regulations if we are to manage funding effectively and invest in people's prior education/work and promote community cohesion.*

As it happens, a complete new funding regime comes into place September 2024, as the AEB is replaced by the Adult Skills Fund. The purpose of the ASF is to

*support adult learners in non-devolved areas to gain skills which will lead them to meaningful, sustained, and relevant employment, or enable them to progress to further learning which will deliver that outcome [...] and within this, there will be Tailored Learning (replacing community learning), which 'supports wider outcomes such as to improve health and wellbeing'.*

Despite the challenge of another major change, some providers who were previously offering AEB courses are hopeful that with the ASF, funding will become 'more relaxed', and it will be easier for learners to get funded places. Nevertheless, providers fear that although there will be an increase in funding, some funding is going down, as non-accredited courses won't be able to be delivered under ASF, instead being delivered under Tailored Learning, which is restricted and less flexible. One provider noted that with AEB another class could be added, but with Tailored Learning, it is fixed, so once the allocation is reached, it will not be possible to respond to new needs.

At present, core programmes in large colleges, especially Entry levels, are full to capacity. Colleges are using some of the non-regulated funding for short courses like work skills or driving theory test for 10 weeks to build learners' confidence, then they are in the system, and start to know what they are doing, and can be moved onto core courses at an appropriate time. Where there were no more funds for ESOL, Adult Learning colleges have been using some Multiply funding to do *Maths with ESOL* courses:

*The learners attending the Multiply courses are ESOL learners. Ideally, when they joined, they would have wanted an ESOL course instead. But there was no ESOL additional funding at the time. So they learned their English through Maths.*

A problem providers faced with asylum-seeking learners being dispersed to other areas or regions is that of 'guided pathways' into formal ESOL, where learners have to complete at least two units of a level (reading and speaking or writing and reading) throughout the academic year otherwise the college/Adult Learning service can't recover their funding. If there is no assurance that learners will finish the course, this is a funding issue. Some colleges were open to using discretionary funds for asylum seeker learners, and many said they did 'everything in their power' not to turn people away. Providers could in theory refer learners to alternative provision, but this depends on those making the decisions knowing about what other provision is available in the area.



## Funding: Community Provision

Most community providers are either charities, CICs or supported by religious organisations. For these community providers, funding is again a major pre-occupation. One Nottingham provider said:

*As a young company and a CIC, I have struggled incredibly with accessing finances. And whilst £10,000 to start us off from the lottery was absolutely amazing and was the brilliant springboard that we needed, it's been a constant struggle.*

In our interviews some community providers suggested that wider support, a less punitive approach (for example, if the funders deem the organisation's GDPR policy inadequate, to offer advice) and more opportunities for funding would be useful. Another suggestion was that smaller organisations needed firm contractual agreements and firm payment plans/dates, which would help CICs, for example, to access business loans (because proof exists of income). A provider stated:

*because we had nothing, we could get nothing. It is incredibly stressful and incredibly difficult, but it could have been made easier.*

Another provider told us that their organisation was constantly going through funding crises, having to complete very detailed funding applications. They were

*up to my neck with lottery applications and monitoring reports and goodness knows what. I'm only technically working one day a week, but it's a lot more.*

A provider in Northampton said:

*I think you lose hope, to be honest. Before, we used to have 10 staff, then it went to 8, then 5, then three. Now it's only two. So I've got the manager – myself, who is also the coordinator of many projects. And then I've just got a caretaker who oversees the building and looks after the maintenance. I'm doing it all myself. I feel like full-time is not even enough.*

Another said:

*It's a horrible thing to have to constantly be in a state of anxiety about whether or not you're going to be able to continue, even in your own job, and for the organisation to continue depending on the funding. We have been extremely lucky, and we're very fortunate to be here, because I know charity organisations have shut down. But thankfully, we're still here. We're here to support the community, to make a difference. And we love what we do - it's for the people.*

A few smaller community providers stated that they did not need additional funds for ESOL, as it was 'built into what we do'; they absorbed the costs themselves. But most smaller providers are obliged to bid for a diverse range of funds such as National Lottery, LEAP, REACH, BNO or Coop Community Fund. Some non-AEB and private providers subsidise asylum seeker learners who can't pay for themselves via funds generated by a small pool of independent IELTS or OET learners.

## Devolution – the East Midlands Combined County Authority

Devolution will have an effect on the way Adult Learning operates in some areas of the region – Nottinghamshire, Nottingham, Derby and Derbyshire are becoming the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA). Having been formed only in March 2024, with the first mayor being elected in May 2024, it is still early days for the new combined authority.



Devolution means a devolved budget for adult education for this area, with the potential for new partnerships to be forged. At the time of the research, providers were uncertain how these changes would affect ESOL – some were quietly optimistic, others were apprehensive.

Having taken control of the Adult Skills Fund on 1 August 2024, the new authority is consulting local stakeholders in order to set priorities, to create ‘a more responsive skills system tailored to the needs of residents, businesses, and [the] region’s economy’. The new authority has stated that it would like to allocate funding for ‘tailored adult skills initiatives, to help the people who need it most’ (<https://www.eastmidlands-cca.gov.uk/what-we-do/>).

In Yorkshire & Humber the devolved authorities in West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire have worked with the Strategic Migration Partnership, Migration Yorkshire, to facilitate connection with ESOL providers and so enable new forms of flexibility to meet the needs of residents with ESOL needs. In particular, the Migration Yorkshire Regional ESOL coordinator has worked to facilitate connectivity through Regional ESOL network meetings, and to advise on specific initiatives.

### 3.4 Initial Assessment

In this and the following two sections, the report focuses on aspects of ESOL delivery related to the key benchmarking criteria provided by the Migration Yorkshire 2021 report [ESOL for Refugees: A Toolkit for Commissioners and Practitioners](#). These criteria provide a framework for exploring different aspects of the delivery process, split between three key themes: initial assessment, access to provision, and ways of managing and tracking progression. As indicated in section 2, our conversations with interlocutors were framed partly by these themes.



First, we discuss initial assessment (IA). This process is undertaken to enable referral into provision appropriate to the learner's existing level of competence, and to help tutors understand some of the learner's needs and aspirations. Some providers will follow up on IA with Diagnostic Assessment - a more fine-grained assessment of competence which helps to plot bespoke progression targets and develop Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). The benchmarking criteria indicate that IA should happen quickly after arrival in an area, and that it should explore language level, the needs of learners, and the barriers that might prevent them from accessing learning.

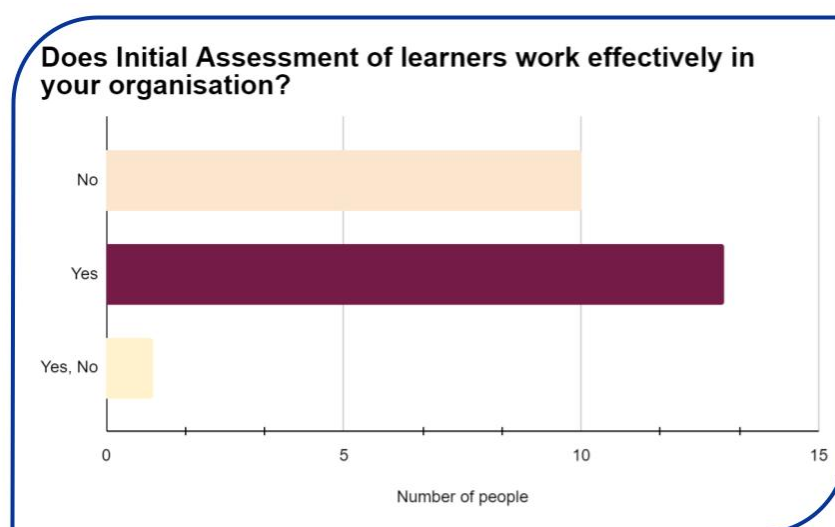
From a learner's perspective, the distinction between types of provider was not always evident, but variations in IA were.

*In this group, they don't give learners a chance to find out or realise what level they are at.*

*Yeah. I have been tested, some tests and go to these courses. Amazing.*

Some people told us that their IAs were carried out differently in different places, and this made them confused. For example, they said that their IA did not always ask about health concerns which might impact on their attendance; one learner said they had had a referral to informal ESOL by their doctor for mental health reasons - she was unable to attend college class due to low attendance related to her caring responsibilities. Some learners worried that

information divulged at the IA was sometimes not shared with tutors, making it ineffective, but we do not have evidence from providers that supports this point.



Learners' experience of, and providers' approach to, the task of IA can be variable. There are sometimes good reasons for this. The above graph shows provider responses to a question on IA in our online questionnaire. It appears to indicate that quite a high proportion of providers feel that IA does not work effectively for them, but often (if not always) this is because a provider then goes on to say that IA is not appropriate for their kind of delivery. It is difficult to generalise, but from the data we have collected it is clear that there is a distinction to be made between the approach of formal Adult and Further Education providers and community providers to AI. Our approach as laid out here is structured on that basis.

## IA in Colleges and Adult Learning

Initial Assessment was carried out primarily by colleges and Adult Learning Services, with some colleges saying they had a robust initial and in-depth diagnostic assessment process that they have developed in-house, performed by teachers who place every week and are very familiar with the levels. Other colleges sit down with learners, have a conversation and do a piece of free writing with them, then use diagnostic assessments once learners start class. If the initial assessment is not correct, learners can easily be moved up or down. Many providers used a combination of these strategies.

Experienced providers are aware that for confident, literate or educated learners, IA can work well and for other learners it can sometimes be a lottery, depending on many factors including their health on that day. Mitigating this, one college in Derby offers a 3-week, 15-hour *Introduction to ESOL* course where the tutor takes time to assess learners prior to placing them in a class. A great deal of IA provision responds well to people's needs and takes account of the aspirations of different learners.

The online tool BKSB (Basic Skills and Knowledge Builder) is used by several providers. Many use it without encountering any problems, and said it was good as it allowed 'spiky profiles' to emerge. However, others said they had gone back to using bespoke, often paper-based materials, because of concerns that BKSB is not designed specifically for ESOL learners. BKSB targets Functional Skills learners; providers found that many aspects needed teacher

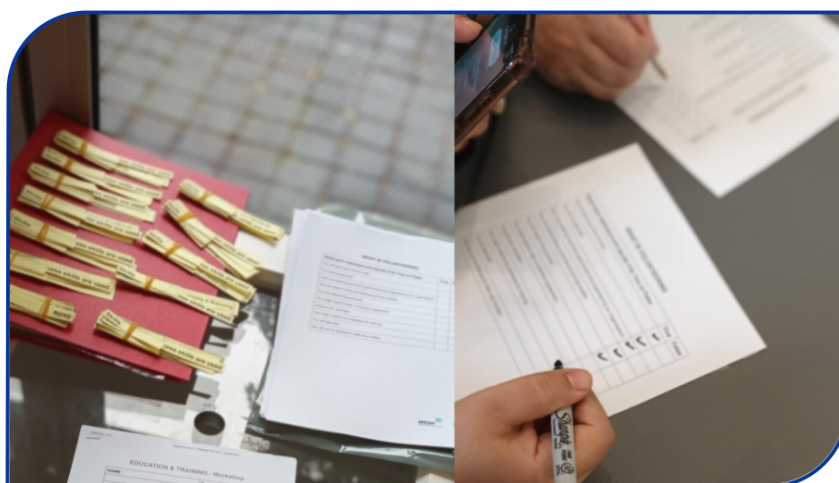
explanation, so it was just as labour-intensive as doing a paper-based assessment, but less reliable. One non-AEB provider in Nottingham indicated that their own online alternative to BKSB is currently in development.

Some tutors carrying out IAs commented that they frequently had to reassure learners not to worry; this is not a test, but a genuine enquiry about what level they need to be at. Several providers commented that if the IA was sent to the learner, or allowed to take place online at home, learners might seek help from family members, therefore artificially inflating their level, only to have to be placed in a more appropriate lower level subsequently. Persuading learners that they needed to be in a different class was sometimes difficult, especially if they had had the chance to settle and make friends.

## IA and Community Providers

Many third sector organisations stated that they took a necessarily relaxed approach to IA. There are different reasons given for this. Many recognised that they are offering a different kind of provision, often as a supplement or complement to more formal provision. Some directly indicated that they saw themselves as ‘filling the gap’ that inevitably appeared in more formal provision. As one community provider put it,

*Our teachers are all ESOL trained and experienced, but we only run one afternoon a week, so we signpost to [the local] College for ILPs and formal courses that offer qualifications.*



Another important point expressed by community providers was the informality of community provision. Providers indicated that it is important to offer a relaxed, open-door approach, precisely in order to ensure that the provision remained accessible to people whose lives are often unpredictable and who had different pressures on their time. In this context, IA is sometimes perceived to be either unworkable or unhelpful:

*We try to have no barriers to entry, they can turn up whatever level.*



*We ran 2-hour drop-ins for asylum seekers from nearby hotels. Offered refreshments, games, social interaction and informal English classes. We would not know week by week which asylum seekers would attend so simply offered a Beginners and an Improvers class on a different topic each week. The opportunity for English conversation was valued but no formal assessment took place.*

At the same time, forms of IA do take place within this context. Some ‘verbally assess’ beforehand, with volunteer tutors at conversation-style classes making an *ad hoc* judgement about whether the level was Beginner or Intermediate. Depending on the classroom layout, learners can then be differentiated in a more fine-grained way according to who turns up to the drop-in class. One provider said, ‘we ask them to tell us if they thought the lesson was too easy or difficult’. Some used ‘self-assessment’, simply asking learners whereabouts on their learning journey they would place themselves. Another smaller provider commented:

*We assess much more informally and suggest moving up or down our classes as we recognise abilities.*

It is important to emphasise that these very informal approaches to IA, or indeed the open door approach of not assessing just welcoming, has its own value in the ESOL ecology. It provides a different kind of ‘feel’ to the learning, one which is often appreciated by learners.



## **A city-wide approach to IA**

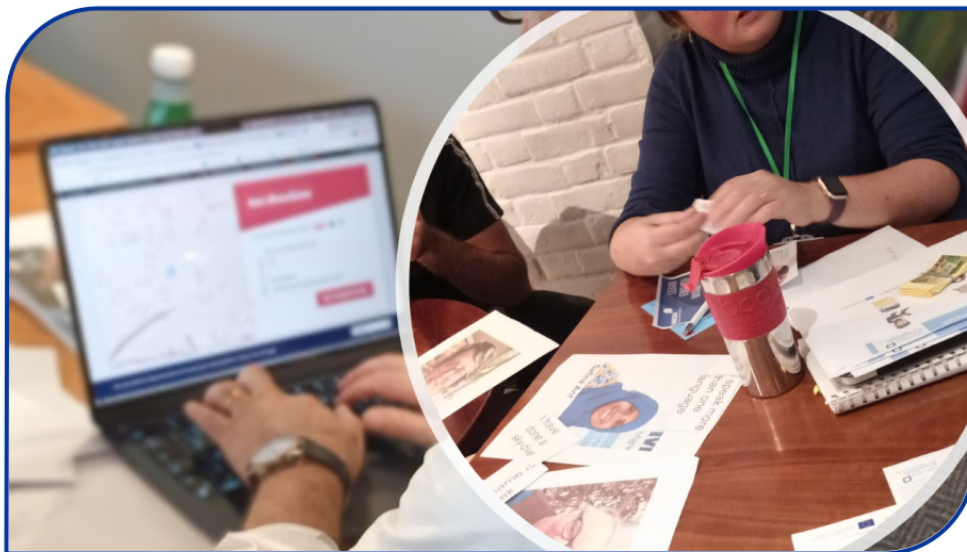
One significant facet of provision in the East Midlands region related to Initial Assessment is the offer in Nottingham, in the form of the central information, advice and placement service BEGIN (see also Section 3.3). BEGIN serves as a first point of contact for ESOL learners across the city of Nottingham, and a large part of BEGIN’s current work is referral. It refers learners to classes across FE/AE and third sector provision. First contact is usually via a web-based form asking for personal details. This is followed up usually by telephone. The telephone conversation acts as a relatively informal IA:

*We've never had the resource to do complete face-to-face. We have a telephone screen tool based on name, address, telephone, email, residency, benefits and working and income and that type of stuff. And through that, we'll be listening for grammar. Then we'll ask some pointed questions to try and get more about their vocab and grammar ... We train staff to listen to the grammar and pointed questions about reading and writing.*

This initial screening enables BEGIN to refer learners appropriately. The volume is large: an anticipated 3,000 to 3,500 learners a year. Further IA is anticipated post-referral within partner organisations. A distinctive element of the BEGIN offer is that they maintain contact with learners even after initial referral:

*We work with people not once, not twice, but at least three times, if not 10 times. And even after they get into college, sorting out people's problems for them, we'll get them into formal accredited provision.*

This interesting model addresses some of the concerns that learners may have about lack of consistency in IA, and it also to some extent brings provision in different sectors together, providing a sense of coherence to ESOL as a sector.



Similar models operate in some other areas of the country. For example, in Manchester the city-wide [ESOL Advice Service](#) provides one-to-one IA followed by referral to providers across the city. The system has now been replicated across the whole of the [Greater Manchester region](#). In Blackburn, providers in different sectors have worked together to develop a single IA document, which is then delivered by the different providers within their organisations. These different approaches show ways in which IA could be developed across the East Midlands region. The example and experience of BEGIN, developed over many years, provides a major regional asset.

### 3.5 Access

In this section, we focus on benchmarking criteria around the issue of access. This is a broad area that covers the ways in which people find out about and join classes, the availability of different kinds of learning to suit different learning styles, the barriers that may prevent people from accessing the provision they need, and the ways in which learners are treated with sensitivity relative to their situation and cultural background.

#### Finding out about and attending the right class

**“I’ve never seen  
place that starts  
from zero, for people  
who don’t know .”**

(Focus group participant  
in Derby)

**“When you are new,  
you don’t know where  
to look. So, you don’t  
see it.”**

(Focus group participant in  
Derby)

To learn English, potential learners need to know about classes available to them. Providers use a range of means to advertise and to reach learners, but the issue of being new in a place and not knowing how to find out about ESOL was raised by many learners.

Online information can be ‘hidden’ behind several front pages of college or Adult Learning websites. Larger providers can offer English for different constituencies (literacy learners and 16-19 year olds as well as adult ESOL learners), and learners sometimes do not know which ‘English’ course they should be searching for. Some may struggle to use search facilities. Sometimes websites require the learner to register first and fill out a pre-assessment form before they can have access to any information at all. Some websites are out of date or give level details without venue details – learners have to go to another page to find out where their class would be.





Connecting to potential learners via social media can have a limited reach – many learners are not ‘connected’, or their English is not at an appropriate level. Some ESOL information is on a social media platform learners cannot navigate, or *only* advertised on social media, nowhere else. Older learners might not have access to social media.

Even notices pinned on a library or health centre noticeboard can be overlooked by those who do not know to look there. These means of advertising ESOL classes are problematic for learners whose English is pre-Entry level.

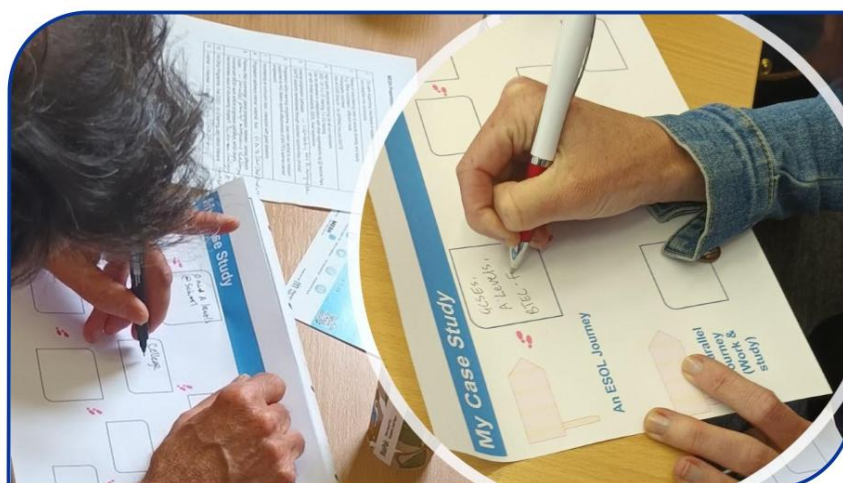
In focus groups, we found that word of mouth was a key way learners found information about ESOL classes. Some were given information by staff in asylum hotels, but others said nobody there knew anything about ESOL:

*When we were living in the hotel, we didn't know about English classes. All of a sudden we saw a friend and we said is there an English class? He said, yeah, I know only one. And when we found one, we found the other ones too.*

Many learners heard about classes from a friend or other contact. Several learners said they felt a responsibility to let others know about classes, as they knew what it was like to be new and not know where, or how to look.

Some learners spoke of community and religious organisations as vital sources of information about classes. This, however, does depend on having some level of social engagement. As indicated in 3.1, for many forced migrants social isolation is the norm, meaning that there are few opportunities to talk to people and find information. Churches were often a first point of contact, through which class information could be gathered. It is also clear that for asylum seekers, hotels operate as *de facto* community spaces, in which potential learners are able to support each other with information and advice.

Not just accessing classes, but accessing the *right* class sometimes depends on institutional or bureaucratic factors which are frustrating for learners. We heard of a learner who joined an informal library conversation class and gained confidence, but then had to wait almost a whole academic year before he could start into a structured, non-accredited pre-Entry course the following September. He was frustrated that staggered (termly) intakes to college did not happen in this area.



Another learner lived with a host family ‘across the border’ in Staffordshire, but her children were at school in nearby Ashbourne. The mother couldn’t go to classes in Ashbourne because her postcode was Staffordshire, and if she attended classes in Leek, she couldn’t get to the school to pick her children up because the buses were so infrequent.

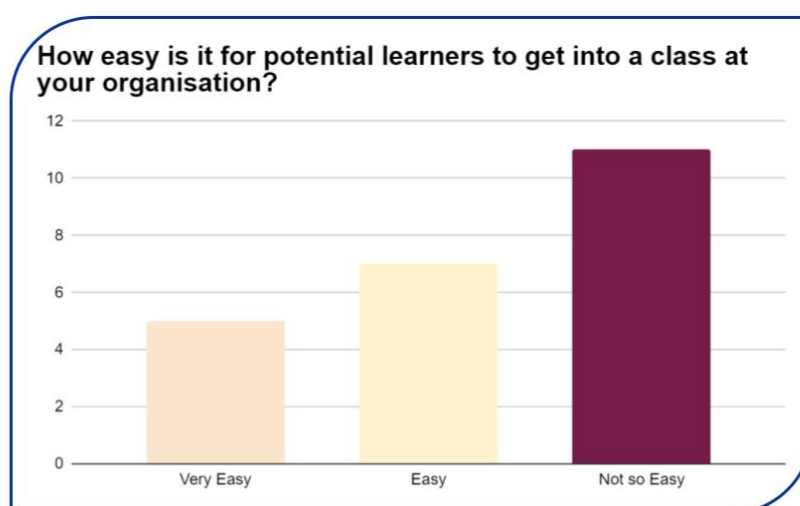
Sometimes IA has an impact on learner capacity to progress. If the IA somehow misses the mark with an individual learner, they can feel out of their depth in the class assigned to them. They get ‘lost’ if the class is not appropriate for them, and they lose their motivation to learn:

*They put me in English level 2 with an assessment. Which is really hard for me. I got to level 2 and the teacher told me “Why are you here?” And I said I didn’t know...*

Non-accredited pre-Entry courses provide a solid foundation to English without the added pressure of having to perform in exams. Many providers were aware of the great importance of pre-Entry courses to establish a baseline and prepare for accredited courses.

Nevertheless, some colleges have only recently developed their pre-Entry courses. Prior to this, learners would have been placed in an Entry 1 class and struggled – possibly even performed well in one or two of the elements like reading and listening, been moved to Entry 2, but then struggled further.

Some areas of the region are underserved in terms of pre-Entry provision. In Lincolnshire we were told there was a small segment of the older established economic migrant population who have been in the UK for many years (perhaps spouses of people who gained employment) who are quite isolated due to not being able to access basic ESOL. Some areas had no pre-Entry provision, with some areas of rural Lincolnshire such as Gainsborough being an example of this, due to the lack of availability of tutors. In our online questionnaire, we asked providers ‘how easy is it for potential learners to get into a class at your organisation?’ Just under half said, ‘not so easy’, and just over half said it was ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ (see graph below).



Sometimes the funding for ESOL classes is not available, and this is the reason for the gap in pre-Entry provision. Northamptonshire, for example, suffered a reduction in AEB funding for the year 2023-24, where classes were reduced from 22 to only 4 in number (and these online). The provider’s judgement was that lower level classes are not appropriate for online delivery,

so sought other routes to lower level provision, adapting classes under other funding streams to accommodate ESOL learners.

## Starting ESOL classes

*There's a lot of waiting. A lot of waiting to do.*

A common experience of asylum seekers is that they have to wait for 6 months to qualify for funded ESOL. During this period of waiting, many learners engage with informal provision. Church and community groups are vital, because they enable people to start classes quickly. Expressing that he appreciated this time to learn informally, one learner said:

*Because if I didn't have a work and I don't have papers, it's a good time for me. This is my shine!*

Waiting was a theme for learners – waiting over summer when no summer schools were available, waiting on waiting lists, and maybe doing an online class out of necessity. Waiting lists in colleges sometimes stretch into the hundreds. As one provider commented:

*It is...a very long list with maybe a year to wait.*

Providers have different strategies for dealing with this. One provider stated that their waiting lists were quite small, because they get the list up to about 9 or 10 learners of the same level and then launch another class. This relies on having funding, however. Others said they were lucky to have the flexibility if they secure funding to offer short summer courses while people wait. Providers felt that summer schools kept learners motivated over the long holiday.

**"That's what I learning in the beginning in the UK. Waiting. Yeah. A lot of waiting. Patient. Always patient."**

(Focus group participant in Nottingham)

**"Before seven months, when I reach here, they told me, wait, wait, we'll call you. Last time they told me, now it's full, but we'll join in September."**

(Focus group participant in Mansfield)

Some providers flagged issues with learner engagement having an impact on class allocations after IA. For example, a learner may be assigned to a pre-Entry class after IA, but for different reasons may not continue in that class. Some colleges said they had a policy of being flexible regarding allocating classes, because 'you never really know who's going to come through the door' at the beginning of term. Should they find post-IA that Entry 1 classes are oversubscribed and Entry 2 undersubscribed, they can re-purpose classes accordingly. There was the strong feeling amongst providers that with the upcoming changes around devolved funding budgets

in some local regions, speedy access to ESOL should be prioritised, as there is a need for people to access classes quickly if they are to successfully integrate.

A successful model is that of Derby Adult Learning Service. If a waiting list arises close to exams, they usually offer alternative classes - *ESOL for Life Skills*, or *Introduction to ESOL* classes, so learners are ready for enrolment at the next intake. This model was adopted because they found that if they kept a large waiting list, when they eventually contacted those learners, they didn't always respond. In addition, these preparatory classes enable the provider to assess learner commitment before the new academic year begins.

Community providers offering conversation-style drop-in ESOL are typically flexible and do not have waiting lists. Some community providers told us they had between 40 and 70 learners turning up for classes some weeks; the only restriction was the capacity of the room. Some providers with limited capacity have a strict 'first come, first served' policy. For example, one provider welcomes only the first 15 people into their weekly class. Some organisations, realising that the long-term aim of their learners was to get a college place, ensured that the learners had all the right information, advice and guidance to get on any waiting list (even if they were an asylum seeker and had to wait the requisite 6 months) to be in the right place when the time came.

## Varied Learning

The benchmarking criteria emphasise the benefits of varied learning in a range of settings, with different levels of formality, responding to need. Participants in focus groups told us that despite wanting formal college or Adult Learning classes, they also wanted informal ESOL, because learners found conversation café-style classes helpful and friendly, as they helped combat social isolation, increasing their social capital as well as building confidence in English.

One specific issue raised concerned older learners, particularly women, accessing ESOL. Because the focus was frequently on progression into employment, these older learners felt isolated, and at times demotivated. They did not want to progress into employment, they wanted to learn English for social reasons, such as being able to speak with their grandchildren's friends, or to get on a bus and ask for a ticket. Some older learners might have problems with their memory and need to repeat a class or a level.

**"I want to speak more and speak face to face, but now the tendency is online, online, online. It's not good."**

(Focus group participant in Wellingborough)

**"Last Saturday, we went to a little hike with Derbyshire Refugee Support. This activity makes people close each other..."**

(Focus group participant in Wellingborough)

Online classes are often available, but not every learner likes to learn this way – many learners told us that they needed face-to-face classroom time with real people. A learner said:

*I meet new people, new experience. When online, it's impossible.*

Learners are resourceful and independent in their search for learning. Many told us they valued voluntary work as a way to develop their English. They also found other non-classroom-based ways of learning, like complementary (Maths or IT) provision in libraries. One Bengali speaker with a passion for Chinese and Korean film dramas told us how she learned English from these films by turning on English subtitles!

Many learners told us about their use of AI and technology and the value of ChatGPT. Some learners even said they chatted to ChatGPT as a way of practising English, and as a way of combating the barrier of low level literacy, as it helps with speaking and listening practice. An interpreter said on behalf of a learner:

*He does not read or write in Arabic, but he speaks to the phone and it speaks back to him. It writes the sentence in English. Can he read it in English though? No.*

Another learner commented:

*And then if you don't know vocabulary, and then ask in your language, and then it will answer you in English. And then explain to you in your own language.*

ESOL classes consisted of different levels of structure; there was a balance to be struck between too structured, and too loosely organised. Learners on the whole valued smaller-sized classes, feeling 'lost' in large classes. Whereas informal provision was popular as a complement to formal classes, the downside is that it can be a little chaotic and more difficult to learn.



Ultimately, most learners aspired to get a place in college when they were entitled to it, but colleges can be intimidating, overwhelming, busy places for those not used to them. One learner commented on being asked to contribute on the class board:

*What would I do on the board? I know nothing, I don't even know how to write my name in my own language.*



Providers said they try to mitigate the stark ‘squareness and harshness’ of the classroom through varied approaches to learning. For example, they used object-based learning, encouraging learners to bring in valued objects in order to encourage the use of senses and emotions to consolidate memory. A Northamptonshire-based college has a whole-department philosophy based on distributed cognition, where they use physical and emotional learning as deductive learning strategies – using basic poetry to teach adjectives, for example, moving around the class to stick vocabulary on objects.

Here and in other colleges, challenging approaches are sometimes used with different groups at different levels. One approach at higher levels is flipped learning. A ‘flipped’ classroom presents a non-traditional approach where the tutor asks learners to watch a specific video or do research on a topic at home. They then come back into the classroom and present to their peers, resulting in more substantial learning and deeper understanding. At lower levels, one approach is to put learners’ ILPs in different seats every day, so they are required to speak to somebody different. These approaches demonstrate different degrees of structure and formality in the classroom.

Providers are imaginative with the different structured learning opportunities they offer learners. A college in Leicestershire took learners on a trip to the Houses of Parliament. A group in Nottingham had a class in a supermarket, with the ‘community champion’ taking them round so they could talk about and handle fruit and vegetables – a lesson using distributed cognition as a teaching technique.

The same group had an *ESOL for Integration* course, which heavily featured community visits as sites of learning. Learners were given £5 in Primark - they had to negotiate buying something then tell the class what they had bought and why. A Northampton community provider encouraged learners to bring in recipes and then to teach others how to make that dish (often with ready-made samples).

**“Sometimes we’re  
talking, sometimes  
we’re writing, yeah.  
Sometimes we’re  
singing together.”**

(Focus group participant in  
Loughborough)

As a way of mitigating some of the issues of mixed level groups, one Leicestershire provider ensured that a lower level learner was ‘mentored’ by a higher level learner, thus decreasing the formality of the classroom environment. In a *Multiply Cookery with ESOL* course an Entry 2 learner, who had been an economist in her home country, was able to help explain concepts to a pre-Entry learner, who had not had any schooling since she was 13, making the classroom environment friendly and accessible.

As a disparate group of individuals, learner opinions were split about whether there was enough structure and grammar in classes, but almost unanimously, learners wanted more classes, more frequently in the week, and for longer (see also section 3.7). Some have the funds to pay for private classes 'I was attending IELTS class at that time because I was free, I didn't have anything else to do'. Short courses such as *ESOL and Laughter Yoga* or *ESOL and Scandinavian Crochet* offered by some of the larger colleges in the region certainly provide different degrees of formality, and according to providers are very popular with learners.

College and Adult Learning courses were offered at different times of day, which tended to be accessed by different cohorts of learners. Working learners (which might include refugees) typically might want one day a week evening classes, whereas an asylum seeker cohort might want more daytime provision as they have the time and are often lower level. Asylum seekers in hotels typically wanted 3 day a week courses.

In community conversation-style classes ESOL is more informal and often does not follow a curriculum. Learners can then ask for lessons about things they need to know about such as 'making an appointment at the GP' or 'the school system in England'. Individual learners have individual needs to practise English according to their specific circumstances; community provision can be vital for addressing such needs.

## Barriers to learning

Many learners are new to the UK, and are having to negotiate the practical, legal and psychological aspects of being a refugee or asylum seeker, so there can be several concurrent barriers to learning.

Most colleges ask at IA about barriers to access, and many have learning support or discretionary funds which can be used to help with childcare, food and transport costs and more. Often the person learners turn to first for help and advice is their ESOL tutor, who is often the person who spends the most time with them. Learners spoke a lot about the support they got from their teachers, both in formal and informal settings. They could get direct advice from them, and they also received signposting to further services, support or advice.

**"Not just a teacher, she's a friend. She helps a lot, especially for families with kids. A lot of advice, a wide knowledge about our surroundings, our area, environment."**

(Focus group participant in Stamford)

Other professionals who are involved with learners see the social as well as the learning value of English classes. One learner had lost her place at college due to her attendance being low

because she was the carer for her mother and attended a lot of hospital appointments. Her GP had 'socially prescribed' ESOL for her mental wellbeing, and she felt that classes were a lifeline for her.

One community group in Northamptonshire who sponsored Syrian families had a 'put a face on it' approach. The group said they found it useful to have a named key person who was the 'ESOL coordinator' for those learners, so learners always knew who to turn to for advice and support.

**“Yeah, but I don’t think  
so I’m going because  
they dismissed for me  
because my attendance  
low.”**

(Focus group participant in Leicester )

A barrier to access that learners often will not express but that providers perceive, is that the hurdle of starting afresh in a new country with people you do not know can be totally overwhelming. In Nottingham, providers have partnered up to look at creative ways of incentivising attendance of single, mostly homeless males. They created a Community and Family Learning video that was subtitled in English, featuring learners talking about their experiences with ESOL. Lincolnshire Adult Learning overcomes the barrier of being new to ESOL by doing the IA at the Job Centre Plus, so that the learner meets the tutor 1:1 at a place they already know. This provider found that attendance rates at classes increased significantly as a result.

**“It’s very difficult because I do  
not drive and here this public  
transport is very, very strange.  
Because sometimes you can  
get to some place, but you  
can’t go back. Why?”**

(Focus group participant in Stamford)

The motivation to actually turn up at a class is affected by many factors, and the greatest of these by far is learner mental health issues, notably depression and/or PTSD. Poor mental health can be exacerbated by culture shock issues, such as everything being unfamiliar – the accent of English, the weather, the food, the sense of humour, the realisation that there is an



expectation that a person must achieve a certain level of English before being considered for most jobs. Colleges often refer learners to in-house counselling, or externally to GPs. Smaller organisations face the same challenges with learners, and typically staff and volunteers go to great lengths to signpost the learner to support services in the community. Volunteers are freer to 'befriend' learners, going to football matches with them, even on one occasion, taking them into their own house as a guest.

Practical barriers to accessing learning include not having enough money for bus fares to get to college or to pay for a decent meal, or not being able to attend some or all the classes due to childcare. Women are often disadvantaged more because they tend to take on the childcare responsibilities.

Learners, especially asylum seekers, frequently experienced poverty, and so free bus passes from providers were very much appreciated, as was the money some colleges give from their discretionary funds for learners to be able to eat a meal in the canteen. Some providers had on-site nurseries, and others were able to help with nursery fees so learners could attend classes.

Most areas of the region had online classes to mitigate some of these access issues, however learners found some aspects of online learning problematic. Not everyone had access to a laptop or Wi-Fi (although some providers such as the WEA can loan electronic devices) and not everyone was digitally literate.



Community organisations are often able to accommodate children in conversation classes, either with the parent, or in a creche organised by volunteers. Some Adult Learning providers hold classes in local schools exclusively for parents of children at that school to eliminate the barrier of having to rush for pick-up time.

One community provider in Derbyshire actually loaned bikes to learners. In Market Harborough, sponsors on the Homes for Ukraine scheme donated a car to a family so that they could get to ESOL classes. Some community organisations were even able to provide fees-paid places for asylum seekers or refugees. One private sector provider in Nottingham used profits from fee-paying learners to subsidise or pay the fees of asylum seekers. Another has scholarship places for refugees in partnership with RefuAid. Other practical support that providers give to learners via signposting, information, advice and guidance included health,

local or cultural knowledge such as 'who can help me with my mental health?', 'how do I get a bus to?' or 'when should I tip?'

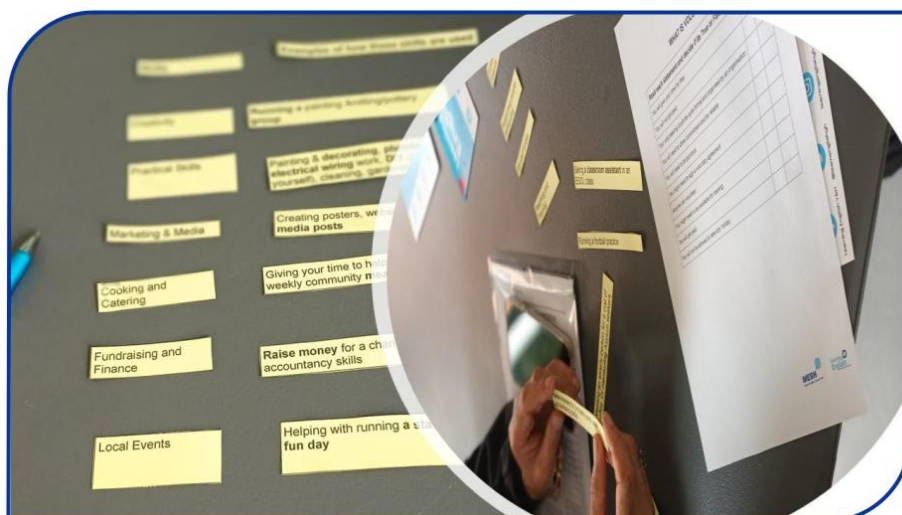


Some learners have low level literacy as a barrier to accessing ESOL. But some learners arrive at adulthood without literacy in their first language, and they function in the world. One tutor commented on a learner:

*She was illiterate in Persian as well. And she's probably early forties [...] all her life she hasn't been able to read and write.*

Literacy skills are assessed at IA or in Introduction to ESOL courses. Tutors find that this can be an area of shame for learners, who sometimes attempt to hide it by saying 'oh, I forgot my pen today' or 'I don't have my glasses'. Tutors are often careful to offer speaking and listening first and offer more time in the classroom as lower level literacy learners typically take longer progressing through each level. Identifying issues with literacy is a major challenge for all providers, particularly with learners who are pre-Entry.

Having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) means that accessing ESOL can be difficult for learners, and assessing for SEND is a challenge for providers. At IA, learners will typically be asked about SEND needs in a 'self-assessment' approach, or even just be given a form and expected to tick a box. ESOL learners are just as likely to have dyslexia as any other learners, but colleges typically said that they struggled with SEND assessments in ESOL, because SEND specialists tended to interpret the issue as due to lower levels of English. Many learners do not know about or admit to these needs. Many providers raised the question of how it is possible to assess adequately for SEND with a learner whose English is at a low level. College and Adult Learning providers said they did not have the capacity to provide diagnoses, but where a dyslexia issue has been identified, they did attempt to provide reading rulers, or print resources on green, yellow or blue paper. They also signposted learners towards help in being formally assessed for SEND.



In some instances, there were cases of learners arriving with diagnoses, which needed to be culturally mediated – and translation tools were a help in this, because what is seen as a learning difficulty or disability in one culture might not be in another.

## Culture and Experience

A key area related to access in the benchmarking criteria is about creating learning spaces responsive to the diverse cultural contexts within which people live and acknowledging the sometimes traumatic experiences they have been through.

Some providers spoke of creating a non-judgmental, friendly and relaxing environment whilst still focusing on ESOL. Others spoke of the ‘traumatic disclosures’ that get made in ESOL classrooms. Some learners spoke of the practical problems that emerged as a result of the disruption of war and/or sudden flight. One focus group participant spoke, through an interpreter, of his frustration at not having proof of qualification:

*He just did not receive his certificate. The war was like that.*

The extent to which staff were trained in trauma-informed delivery varied across the region. Some colleges and Adult Learning services do not have trauma-informed delivery training for their staff at all but spoke about being aware that this was something they should rectify. In conversations with community providers there was an awareness that learners who were refugees or asylum seekers should be treated sensitively, but there was no capacity for training. One provider in Leicestershire had a class of Ukrainians who, around the time the government were making an announcement about extending leave on visas, were too stressed to concentrate.

In colleges and Adult Learning, there were examples of good practice around trauma-informed delivery training, such as at Chesterfield College, who were seeking College of Sanctuary status and training all college staff from reception staff to tutors in trauma-informed delivery. At the same college, staff noticed that one of the questions on a City and Guilds speaking and listening exam was about describing your journey to the UK. They immediately had a meeting with City and Guilds to point out how inappropriate this could be.

One related area articulated by focus group participants was frustration. Frustration at not being able to work at a similar level or in an occupation they are used to, because of their level of English; and frustration with bureaucratic demands that are sometimes difficult for forced migrants to meet. Some learners spoke with dismay about the inflexibility and bureaucracy of a system which, for example demands that they provide a reference from someone who has known them for 5 years, when they have been in the UK for less than a year and are not able to contact referees in their home country. Sometimes these frustrations can be brought into the ESOL classroom.

**“These systems are not made for people who may be in your kind of situation [...] You don’t let me to work. You don’t let me to be fruitful people in a country.”**

(Focus group participant in Nottingham)

Other learners who may have been professionals or skilled workers in the past usually accepted that they would first need to take a job that requires fewer qualifications whilst they improved their English. At the same time, they expressed frustration at the amount of time it can take to work through ESOL stages.

Learning English is therefore sometimes tied up with issues around taking pride in having had a certain occupational status in the past, and the incapacity to resume this level due to forced migration. The painstaking process of learning a new language can, in this sense, reinforce a sense of loss; another window into the trauma of forced migration.

**“When you’re delivering to a group that’s got such high levels of trauma, there are times where you just have to go with it. Put everything else to one side.”**

(Provider in Leicestershire )

**“Building social skills, learning about culture, being tolerant towards each other. This all helps learners who are coming from trauma backgrounds...”**

(Provider in Derby )



## 3.6 Progress

In this section we focus on benchmarking criteria around the issue of progress. The criteria map a learning environment conducive to progress, in which learners understand and are made aware of the progress they are making. There should be opportunities to express concerns if learners feel they are not progressing as anticipated, and there should be clear links made to opportunities in employment and further learning that are opened up as English learning progresses.

### A stable and appropriate learning environment

The benchmarking criteria rightly emphasise the importance of a stable environment for learning English. This is a prerequisite for any form of learning. Unfortunately, there are implicit instabilities in the lives of many forced migrants which prevent this learning from happening.

Asylum seekers can be moved to alternative accommodation at very short notice. Amongst those in our focus groups, some learners had been moved from place to place (including a family with children with learning disabilities who had been moved 5 times), sometimes with less than 24 hours' notice. One learner said that with each move he progressively lost his possessions until everything that he owned was in a plastic bag. Many of these learners who have been moved or dispersed do not have a laptop or even a pen and notebook with which to learn. This kind of disruption and instability is extremely unsettling and traumatising.

For those who achieve refugee status, the satisfaction and relief of obtaining some level of security is often tempered by the realisation that they will likely have to move to another part of the country. This can lead to homelessness, with all the instabilities and uncertainties that this brings. In such circumstances, learning can be very seriously disrupted.

**“I am trying to boost my knowledge to boost my education and experience in order to find a job as easy as possible. But they do not let me. So after receiving a visa I should, for example, leave the flat. And maybe I should be homeless.”**

(Focus group participant in Nottinghamshire)

**“I feel that my vocabulary and my learning, my level improve, little improve. So, but enduring, I more, I try more learning vocabulary and more practice, speaking practice”**

(Focus group participant in Lincoln)

ESOL classes take place in classrooms or community buildings such as church halls, and the learning spaces are often good or adequate. ESOL also takes place in other kinds of spaces such as cafes, for example a college course in *ESOL and Catering* in Derby, which provides

the opportunity to blend natural acquisition of English with structured learning (employability skills and a food hygiene certificate).

Friendly and home-like environments were common in community provision. One community organisation in Leicester uses a classroom which is also a music studio, with keyboards, guitars and drum kits around the space – one participant new to the UK in our focus group happily pointed to them and declared that he wanted to be a musician.



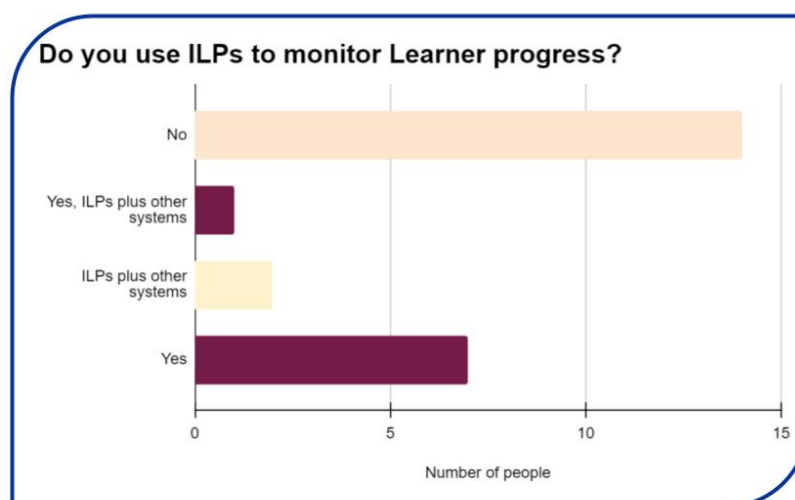
Smaller community organisations who do not own their own premises borrow or hire rooms or halls, which tend to be in community centres or repurposed older buildings whose rooms were not intended for classrooms. There is often a kitchen attached, and tea and biscuits are served. An example is Maun Refuge in Mansfield, where classes take place in an unassuming 1970s community centre in the middle of a housing estate. The room has sofas as well as tables and chairs, and there is a record player, books and games – a very welcoming and unintimidating atmosphere, even if a little worn!

In some community provision, issues such as noise levels due to children being in the same room, broken tables or lack of computers and other resources were highlighted in focus groups. This is attributable to the limitations of community settings with limited funds, and learners realise that in community settings, the space is used for multiple functions. Some organisations expressed a wish that they did not have to constantly find funds for learning resources.

## Making progress with learning

The graph below indicates responses in our online questionnaire to a question about the use of Independent Learning Plans (ILPs). As this demonstrates, the extent to which learning plans are used varies across the region, but there is no doubt that monitoring progress takes place systematically in formal settings. College and Adult Learning use a mixture of ongoing portfolio work, ILPs and pre-prepared booklets to monitor learners' progress, so that learners can see the incremental gains made.





A college in Derby sets targets agreed with learners, monitors achievement of targets via class work and formative testing and goes through a developmental cycle with the learners over the academic year. Learners at college in Leicester have termly 1:1 meetings with tutors, and also a visit from the careers advisor, who comes to the class and talks about internal progression and long-term goals.

Despite these structures to help people understand progress, some learners commented that qualifications were complicated. It is not easy to understand progress because there are so many different qualifications that relate to English learning: Functional Skills, ESOL levels, GCSE, CFER, IELTS. For many learners, this qualifications landscape is very difficult to follow, and to relate to any prior learning they may have from another country.

Many providers recorded progress on ILPs, but there were also varied approaches to this kind of tracking. At lower levels, Leicestershire Adult Learning splits targets down to several fine-grained levels of alphabet skills and letter-forming skills, and includes conversation classes as legitimate onward destinations, not just employment or further education. This is especially important for elderly learners, and for other learners who might have memory issues or learning problems. Progress made might be relatively slow, but individuals need to have the autonomy to decide for themselves what a realistic measure of progress looks like.

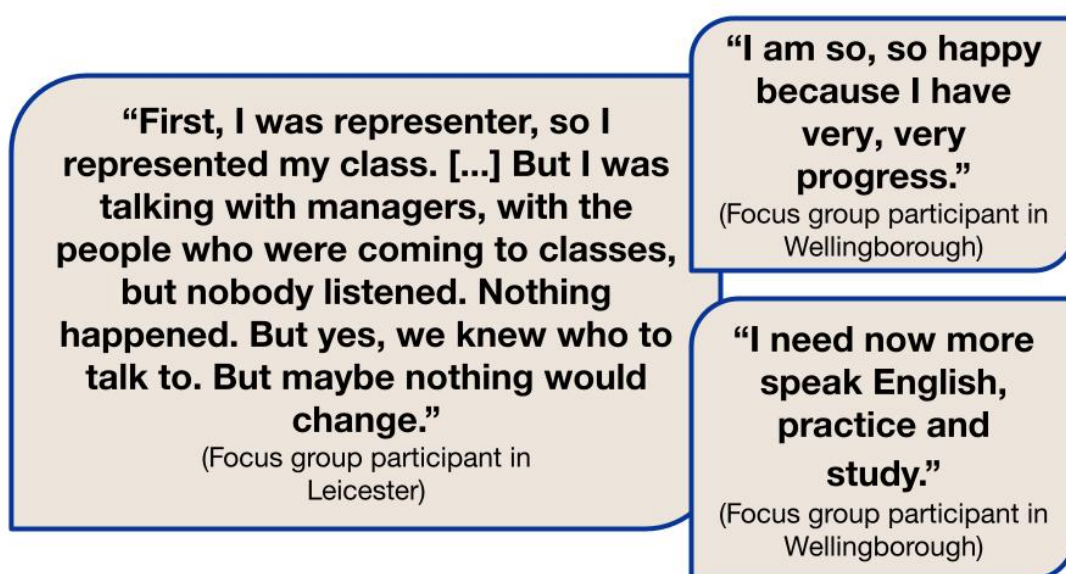
Progress for learners is not just about marks and passing tests, as this learner articulates:

*There is an organisation called City and Guilds. So, what they do, they have like a contract, so they take the exams from the student, they assess the students, and the students should pass these levels. And the teachers, what I understood, they don't focus on language.*

In order to take the emphasis away from progress being only about tests, one community provider in Nottingham uses life attainment scores alongside academic progression scores, asking questions such as 'how do you feel about your living situation, about your job? What would you like to get from learning? Do you need to speak to your children's teacher, your doctor?' This is done at the beginning and at the end of the course.

Smaller community providers generally have an informal approach to learners' progress. Some learners expressed that progress is not always clear, because the lessons in community contexts with mixed level classes sometimes seem a bit random to learners. Some smaller

providers followed textbook curricula loosely, whereas others asked learners what they needed to learn. In such classes, the focus is on conversation practise and socialisation, rather than monitoring and testing. Learners often combine this with or use it as preparation for college courses.



Several providers spoke of the difficulty of getting meaningful feedback or evaluations of their offer from lower level learners. This problem had partly been surmounted by making sure that feedback forms were delivered to learners in written English, so that learners can then use translation software (Say Hi! or Google Translate) to first understand, and then to translate their own input into a higher level English than they are currently capable of.

Some providers emphasise to learners that they can feed back in their home language if they wish. This way, a 'genuine' response is collected. Others spoke of ensuring a welcoming, friendly and accessible atmosphere, such as a manager's 'constantly open-door policy' where learners felt free to pop in and chat; feedback was therefore collected in an informal way.

Many providers are careful to reassure learners that negative feedback is permitted - some learners feared they 'would not be allowed to learn' if they did this. One Nottingham provider plans to capture the home language spoken in the enrolment form, so that they can set up focus groups with an appropriate interpreter, to try and capture good feedback at the end of the course.

## Learning English and Moving on

**“I want to open  
a coffee shop.”**

(Focus group participant in  
Derby)

**“I understand my  
English is not so  
good because I  
need a level three.”**

(Focus group participant in  
Northampton)

Learners strongly feel that ESOL classes help with preparing for work, and that volunteering is an important way to practice English. Other ways learners prepared for employment was to attend employability classes at libraries or other local centres – an employability course in Northampton was rated highly by the learners, who found it very useful. Learners valued the language of ‘soft skills’ learned in such classes which they deployed in interviews. They knew the importance of learning English to progress and to develop a position in society.

**“Practice. I  
speak now, I  
start to speak  
with my  
neighbours. Hi,  
Bye. Hi, Bye.”**

(Focus group participant  
in Wellingborough)

**“What will happen after I  
finish English class?  
After I improve, I think I  
hope, I really hope that I  
can find an interesting  
job.”**

(Focus group participant in Stamford)

Most colleges and some Adult Learning services are able to provide in-house careers advice, and some arrange talks by the local volunteer agencies. Guidance and support from trained careers advisors at Student Services is available to learners in many colleges, for example a 30-minute appointment to talk about future plans. Some colleges have a progress coach, where learners can talk about job applications and CVs. In one college, if learners progress to Level 2 they have a session dedicated to Next Steps, with information on GCSEs, IELTS courses, and other options to study in the UK. Some of this provision is tailored specifically to ESOL learners, but often it is generic provision, part of the infrastructure of the institution.

Nottingham College offers an *ESOL Plus* course to help students transition from ESOL to vocational areas. Chesterfield College offers *SWAPs* (Sector-based Work Academy Placements) which are short courses offered as an introduction to vocational areas such as Teaching Assistant or Police force, which are offered in partnership with the DWP. In Derbyshire, Adult Learning curriculum managers are aiming for partnerships with catering employers, to offer direct placements. They also have in-house Teaching Assistant courses, which a lot of women progress on to because they want to be lunchtime assistants - work that fits in with their childcare responsibilities.



Below is a story told by a tutor at an Adult Learning provider in Leicestershire. We have reproduced this in detail to demonstrate the way in which ESOL provision can create a kind of pathway to employment and greater integration.

*I had one student who was a very keen cook, couldn't get a job here because she didn't have any experience in England. So we've got an eco village which does a range of sort of refills, cakes, vegetables and everything. And they've got a community fridge and they're advertising for volunteers in the cafe. So I suggested to my learner that it would be a good thing for her to do and got her to send the CV in. And then she got a job working in the cafe. And then she was working with an agency for rural employability. They worked with her on a CV. And again, it was just giving her the confidence. And now she's got a job working in the kitchen. And she'd been there a couple of weeks earlier with the family and said, oh, I want to work here. Saw the job advertised, but then because she had experience volunteering, she's got the job. So she's got like 20 odd hours a week.*

Smaller community providers often did not have the resources to offer opportunities for links to employment or vocational courses, but we heard of many enrichment trips organised to local places where learners can enquire about volunteering opportunities. In addition, many community providers have the flexibility to respond to individual needs.

A community provider in Lincoln refers learners to the job club and money management course run by Christians Against Poverty, and they also encourage volunteering at the local community grocery and food bank. A community organisation in Nottingham is able to offer

their own *ESOL for Work* programme, a 12-week programme involving both Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and careers advice from a specialist.

In Ashbourne, specialist medical language support was paid for under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, to enable a doctor to start working as a phlebotomist. However, opportunities like this are still rare. Forced migrants who want to carry on working in the profession or job they had in their home country often find they do not have the right level of English/specialist vocabulary, and/or the requisite knowledge and understanding of conversion routes to enable them to gain access to appropriate employment in the UK. This is an area where creative responses are required in order to respond to specific needs.

One interesting facet of provision in the region is the involvement of some employers. Especially in Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire but also in other areas across the region large, local employers provide ESOL classes for employees on the premises, paying them to attend classes in work time. This is sometimes done in collaboration with the local college or Adult Learning service. Because prior to Brexit, Lincolnshire was an area with a large number of Eastern European economic migrant workers, this relationship has been established for some time and can be seen as mutually beneficial for both migrants and employers.

### 3.7 The learner voice: more learning opportunities

A very common comment amongst ESOL learners was that although they appreciated and enjoyed their classes, they wanted more of them. This comment was made so often in the 10 focus groups we held that we felt it was important to highlight it through a separate section in the report.

**“One little day...”**  
(Focus group participant in  
Lincoln)

The focus group participant speaking above is making the point that they had English class on only one day per week, when they had time to attend more often than this. Classes once a week were problematic partly because of the lack of continuity. As one Arabic-speaking learner indicated through an interpreter:

*He knows that one class per week won't be enough. By the time he comes to the next class he will have forgotten it.*

Participants also emphasised that having more classes would enable them to progress more quickly. As another learner commented, ‘It would be great to have an English class every

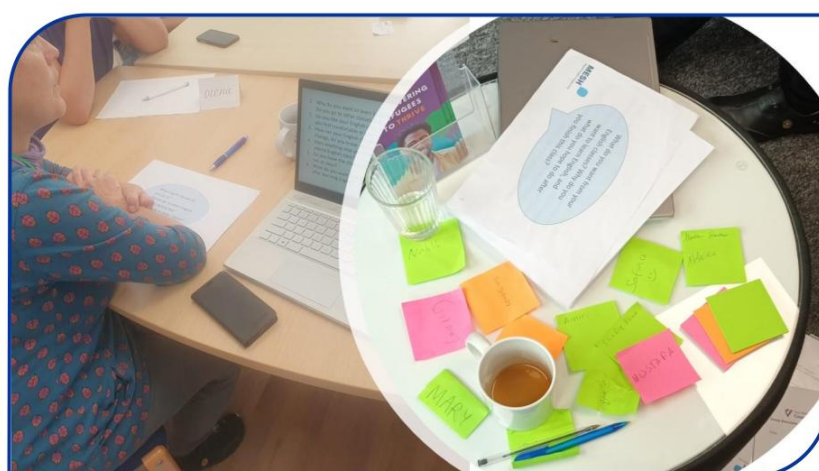


day.’ Three days a week was frequently cited as optimum, allowing people to build up a continuity of learning whilst also allowing them to attend to other facets of their life.

Interestingly, some participants compared their experience of language learning provision to that of other countries. As forced migrants, many participants have transnational links to friends and family who may be settled in a different country. In Stamford, Ukrainian participants told us about provision in Germany:

*Ukrainian refugees go to German classes every day. I've heard this. Four or five hours a day. But they have good results after half a month, for example. Yes. Really good results. If you have zero in Germany, the circle is quicker. It will be two after half a month. Half a year. And it's really helpful to find a good job.*

Our approach in focus groups was to ask a series of questions about specific issues, then to ask people if they had anything to add, anything they would like to tell EMC. At this point, the issue of more classes was frequently raised. It is perhaps not unsurprising for people to ask for more classes! Putting on more classes, however, has an immediate budgetary implication. More classes means more money committed to ESOL provision, in whichever of the sectors this provision may be delivered. In addition, AEB-funded providers are constrained by regulations which restrict the number of classes an individual learner can access.



Representative bodies and advocacy groups have consistently made the point that budget cuts over the past 20 years or so have severely hampered the delivery of ESOL in England. A 2016 NATECLA report notes that ‘on the face of it, there is a great deal of consensus...about the importance of everyone in society being able to speak English’, but governments have consistently failed to put the funding and responsive regulatory regimes needed to facilitate this in place ([Towards an ESOL Strategy for England](#), p. 9).

Although we recognise and support the need for more funding for the delivery of ESOL, it is also important to address this issue through another area of development recommended in NATECLA’s strategy document:



*Collaboration between providers and wider partners to deliver classes, support and guidance on progression pathways in an integrated way which meets learner needs. (Towards an ESOL Strategy for England, p. 3)*

We know that in many places in the East Midlands different kinds of provision are available, via multiple funding sources. For example, college-based provision may be available in close proximity to third sector, sometimes more informal provision. In one case, we noted informal provision advertised as taking place in the same building as AEB-funded provision. When we consulted focus group participants about this, we discovered that they could not access this informal provision because the sessions took place at the same time as their adult learning classes.

One way to ‘create’ more classes for learners is to ensure that existing local provision is complementary and coordinated. That is, if local classes delivered by different providers are timetabled in relation to each other, to avoid clashes, and perhaps include some element of mutual communication, then the learner’s experience will be enhanced and provision will be more comprehensive. This may be difficult but it can happen. Indeed, we witnessed some element of complementarity occurring in Loughborough between local FE classes and classes at a local third sector provider. Developing systems around this principle could enhance the experience of learners with relatively limited budgetary implications.

In addition, this approach may address to some extent the need for some learners to gain access to support to pursue aspirations and training needs relative to specific career goals. As noted in sections 3.1 and 3.5, some refugees and asylum seekers with professional experience and/or qualifications expressed frustration at the amount of time it can take to work through ESOL stages, and complexities associated with gaining access to their professional field in the UK. In section 3.6 we noted that there are instances of provision that address this need, but these are exceptions, and creative responses are required to facilitate wider provision. Having an understanding of the potential resources and capabilities of local organisations may help providers to make appropriate referrals for complementary provision. One third sector provider in South Yorkshire, for example, complements standard ESOL classes with English for medical practitioners sessions led by a volunteer health professional.

What this emphasises is the significance of communication and collaboration between providers. As it happens, this is a concern which several providers expressed to us in the course of our research, as discussed in the next section.

### 3.8 The provider voice: more networking and collaboration

**“It’s always useful to talk with others about their experiences and to be able to have more resources and contacts.”**

(Provider at regional network meeting)

Like the previous section, this section is presented because comment on the theme explored here was so prominent in our discussions with interlocutors in the East Midlands. This time, however, the emphasis is on the provider voice rather than the learners/migrants. Providers were keen to emphasise the need for networking, for communication with others facing similar challenges to themselves.

**“We always informed about services such as housing, legal support, informal conversation groups, etc so that we can signpost learners appropriately. It would be great to have all this information readily available in one place.”**

(Provider at regional network meeting)

Networking takes on several distinct aspects for ESOL providers. There is the networking which establishes the support that providers, tutors, teachers, volunteers and others involved with ESOL learners need to be effective and to safeguard their own mental well-being. Then there is the kind of networking that makes use of a multi-disciplinary, cross-agency approach to find the best support from appropriate professionals for learners in crisis. Thirdly, there is networking which is ESOL partnership working, undertaken to find practical solutions and to ensure complementarity of provision. Each of these three types of networking is taking place across the region to differing degrees.



ESOL tutors say they need positive, constructive support to carry out their role effectively, as there are several potential challenges in the profession. Some examples of these challenges are:

- 'Holding' the psychological distress of traumatised individuals
- Difficulties with intercultural communication
- Lack of resources (both practical and human)
- Tech issues, especially related to online and hybrid delivery

Providers told us that to be effective in the face of these challenges they really need local and regional networks, including opportunities to meet, expand their knowledge base, share good practice and learn together. There were examples of ESOL networks in some areas such as the quarterly Derby ESOL Networking Forum, which collates information from all local providers and shares information about current provision. Some providers share information via broader ESOL forums such as the JISCMail ESOL-RESEARCH digest.

The most distinctive example of a local network is the Nottingham-based offer, BEGIN (see also sections 3.3 and 3.4). BEGIN's role is double facing, providing on the one hand a direct link to learners through their placement service, and on the other a focal point for providers across the area. BEGIN coordinates a local provider network and collates data which enables providers to see where the demand is coming from. BEGIN also acts as a hub for providers – they know that it is important to contact BEGIN to inform them that a new group is being set up and ask for learner referrals. BEGIN-type models have started up in other parts of the country (for example, Manchester), but there are currently no comparable services in other parts of the East Midlands, and no cross-region provider network in place.

Providers also said they want the establishment of a wider, multi-disciplinary support network. A college provider in Leicester told us that their support workers, instead of classroom work, were engaged in practical support such as crisis intervention for homeless learners -

especially asylum seekers - and making referrals to external support agencies such as legal advice and healthcare. Most providers were profoundly affected by the close contact they had with learners in crisis and went to great lengths to try to help before, after and alongside the ESOL work they were doing. However, the crisis work they were having to do was not sustainable and meant that time and energy was being diverted away from ESOL.

Although not strictly an ESOL support network, the area of Leicester is appreciated by providers as a good area for ESOL delivery because there is a solid foundation of many decades' worth of multi-agency networking and collaboration: according to one provider, 'we all speak to each other'. There is a bi-monthly multi-agency forum in Leicester (not just about ESOL but also concerning related services such as housing). One provider told us 'Leicester is blessed with many joined-up services, and being a Racial Disparity Challenge area, services have many bi- and tri-lingual staff'. Conversely though, another Leicester provider said that 'there are many gaps, and people are trying to fill them independently'. There is still work to be done.

A third type of networking is practical and complementary ESOL [partnerships](#). Building partnerships can be an effective way of enriching the experience of ESOL learners, and of counteracting issues related to under-investment in the sector and as exemplified above, the demand from learners for more provision. There are some good examples of this happening across the region. For example, Leicester City of Sanctuary (LCoS), a small community provider, has developed strong links with the local University. Alongside their regular ESOL classes at a local community centre, LCoS arrange visits for learners to the Sanctuary Suite at the University, where learners can have initial assessments and attend a range of courses, including courses which are part of a CELTA course for trainee ESOL teachers. In addition, the University of Leicester offers four Sanctuary Scholarships to asylum seekers each year, including a support package. One learner from LCoS has made use of this scheme.

Some private providers we spoke to expressed an aspiration to collaborate with local colleges and Adult Learning services. For example, one private provider said:

*We would like to extend provision of scholarship places for refugees/asylum seekers. But as a private language school this is very difficult. If we were able to do this more, we could really help make an impact on waiting lists at the college and other similar funded ESOL providers. Our recommendation is for the council to work together with private language schools to develop partnerships.*

One such partnership between a private provider and Adult Learning is through Upbeat Communities, a charity which provides ESOL from its base in Derby. Upbeat Communities is effectively a site for collaboration between Derby Language School, a private provider, and Adult Learning (DACES) to offer ESOL to resettled families.



Further cross-sector examples of collaborative working are provided by the DWP, which makes good formal partnerships with providers across the region. A DWP manager told us that when they put on resettlement events promoting local support, they always invite an ESOL provider, and some JCPs even host ‘ESOL speed dating’ events. The DWP in Northamptonshire has an *In-work Progression ESOL* programme for people working part time.

Many Job Centres deliver the Home Office *Refugee Employability Programme* (REP), which includes an ESOL element (smaller providers also deliver the REP - Leicester City of Sanctuary partners with TWIN Employment to deliver it). The DWP put the *In-work Progression ESOL* out to tender, and partnerships emerge from this - Leicester College runs a summer school for asylum seekers as a result. The DWP often partners with WEA or smaller providers - in Northampton with ACCA (Afghanistan and Central Asian Association) and with Dostiyo, a women’s group who get referrals from them: ‘we have a close relationship, I have a contact there, so they have our details’. Lincolnshire JCP also has a useful [district provision tool](#) - a public facing database of local multi-agency support used to signpost customers, which includes some information on local ESOL provision.

### **Examples of networking, partnerships and innovative working in the region.**

As we have seen in the section above, many East Midlands colleges, Adult Learning services and third sector providers work with other ESOL providers, community groups, libraries, health services, charities and cultural organisations to provide ESOL opportunities. Many of these innovative partnerships are unique to a particular area and are a testimony to the determination of providers to offer a wide range of English learning opportunities. Below are some examples of these partnerships:

- [Lincoln College is in partnership with Nottingham City Council teaching Syrian refugees at a special provision at Newark College.](#)



- Learners at Integrate in Nottingham are doing *Life Skills* modules (digital skills, citizenship, healthy cooking, career planning, CV writing, how to pay your bills, budgeting) with Barclays.
- DALs in Derby has strong links with local cultural groups like QUAD, Baby People and Artcore, combining ESOL with different creative activities.
- Kettering Community Unit partners with Northamptonshire Adult Learning to offer courses, and they also offer work experience for learners in their own charity shop and in the office.
- University of Nottingham has the Nottingham Advantage module *English Language Support for Refugees and Migrants in the Nottingham Area*. Trainee teachers provide English language sessions in different venues through the academic year. A number of organisations and schools partner with them.
- In Nottingham, Small Steps Big Changes, funded through the National Lottery Community Fund is in partnership with NHS primary care services to run a family mentor service in Hyson Green & Arboretum. ESOL falls under the outcome 'Talk and communicate'.
- In Leicester, the Race Equality Centre (TREC) has developed a non-accredited transitioning to work course called *ESOL and Health and Safety at work*. This was created in partnership with the Fashion Workers' Advice Bureau who share the same building in Highfields after jointly identifying a gap in this provision for local garment workers.
- The WEA partners with the MOD in Leicester to deliver courses for a specific group of ex-British services Afghan refugees to gain qualifications for employment.

The collaboration between East Midlands colleges, Adult Learning services, third sector ESOL providers and other organisations is important because partnerships make ESOL classes more accessible and appealing to a more diverse range of people. Different organisations can bring to the ESOL table different strengths and expertise, and by working together with traditional ESOL providers, diverse cultural and educational needs can be addressed. Integrating ESOL with different social and cultural groups can aid social cohesion – giving local traditional populations the opportunity to meet new neighbours from different cultures, and helping ESOL learners integrate into UK society, giving them unique language-learning opportunities, but also giving them broader opportunities to socialise with established groups of people from their area. This all has a positive effect on mental health, which we know is a major issue for many migrant ESOL learners.

## 4. Recommendations

In this section we present some recommendations based on this report as a contribution to a future ESOL strategy for the East Midlands. The recommendations are developed on the basis of our interactions with forced migrant learners (and those who have been learners in the past), ESOL managers in colleges, adult learning and community provision, tutors and volunteers in these organisations, and other stakeholders.

The recommendations are made as a way of addressing concerns raised through these interactions, and through observations/reports of good practice across the region. In most cases, we offer them as considerations for East Midlands Councils and other regional and local authorities. We understand that they will also be of interest to ESOL providers, and we are clear that they cannot be implemented without the support and active collaboration of providers across the region. They will also be of interest to learners, whose voice we hope is present throughout the report and the recommendations.

### 4.1 A focus on networking and collaboration

A major challenge to developing a coherent ESOL offer nationally and regionally is the distribution of provision across different sectors, and the historic tendency for providers to work in isolation to address needs. Section 3.8 demonstrates that there are plenty of examples of localised networking and collaboration which counter this tendency. There is also a major resource and model provided by BEGIN, which has been working in the Nottingham area to promote collaboration over decades.

Regional authorities need to build on this good practice to consolidate and develop collaborative networks within defined localities and region-wide across the East Midlands (see also 4.4). These networks could address multiple needs:

- Discussion of common themes and sharing good practice.
- Development of consistent approaches to Initial Assessment, including the development of multi-provider or centralised IA.
- Provide spaces for localised collaboration to ensure complementarity of provision (see 4.3).
- Develop resources for learner referral to volunteering opportunities in order to complement and boost English learning.
- Share good practice and resources related to learner progression, such as sessions focused on next steps.
- Development of regionally-focused learning resources accessible to all providers.

- Disseminate information on training opportunities and other sector-relevant themes
- Raising the profile of the region in national contexts through the development of an East Midlands branch of the national association, NATECLA.

## 4.2 ESOL provider representation at multi-agency meetings

There are city-wide and county-wide multi-agency forums across the region such as the one in Leicester (see section 3.8). The business of these forums is concerned with joined-up working between related services including housing and mental health. ESOL providers should be involved in the networking and collaboration which takes place in these forums. ESOL providers already have regular, sustained contact with forced migrant learners, so their advocacy on behalf of learners who are vulnerable (in addition to the contribution made by existing council refugee support) to such forums would be a valuable asset.

## 4.3 Extending the Complementarity of Provision

Section 3.7 indicates that learners often express a desire to learn more quickly, and in a way that is more focused on their aspirations and needs. Section 3.1 gives insight into the range of aspirations of refugees and asylum seekers and the diverse skills and experiences they carry with them. As one provider put it, ESOL provision can seem ‘one-paced’ and sometimes limited for people who want to progress in different ways. Given the current funding trends, it is recognised that the challenges posed by this set of issues cannot immediately be addressed by putting on further and more diverse classes.

An alternative approach is to develop the complementarity of existing provision. A common perception is to see informal, community-based provision as a kind of preparation or holding space, whilst learners work their way up the waiting lists of more formal providers. Although this is sometimes necessary, there is also scope to promote these different forms of provision as complementary to each other, part of a portfolio of learning undertaken by individual learners.

With increased collaboration (see 4.1), providers could work to ensure that local classes complement each other in terms of timing and coverage, to ensure that learners get the best possible experience of existing provision. As section 3.7 notes, this approach could also address specific aspirations and training needs, by drawing on collective networks to develop bespoke provision.

The regional authority should look to support and promote the development of models of complementarity to enable learners to access classes and associated provision simultaneously. Note that this recommendation relates to NATECLA’s proposals for a National ESOL strategy, which calls for planning and monitoring of local ESOL provision and sharing knowledge, expertise and resources ([Towards a National ESOL Strategy for England](#), p. 3).

## 4.4 Sharing experience and ways of working across the region

There are disparities in ESOL provision across the different areas of the region (see section 3.3). Cities in the region which have long histories of migrant settlement such as Leicester have many different third sector providers existing alongside Colleges and Adult Learning, delivering a diverse range of ESOL provision. Other areas of the region such as Lincolnshire do not have this extensive ESOL infrastructure, and much of the now-existing provision has been set up either for European economic migrant workers or specifically as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. We recommend that protocols are established to enable the sharing of experience between Authorities across the region. This could include a network or forum with regular meetings where providers can discuss best practices, challenges, and successes and share resources, teaching strategies, and experiences (see also 4.1). Providers should feel empowered to discuss the extent to which the model of areas such as Leicester can be transposed or utilised in part by areas such as Lincolnshire.

## 4.5 Cross-border learner agreements

Some ESOL learners face barriers accessing classes due to catchment area restrictions (see section 3.5). Cross-border ESOL learner agreements should be in place to help to eliminate this barrier. Cross-border agreements should also facilitate the sharing of resources, including teaching staff, materials, and facilities, which can enhance the choice, and the quality of education provided to learners.

## 4.6 Accessing information about ESOL classes

Section 3.5 demonstrates that potential learners are hampered in joining ESOL classes because they are not always able to access sufficient or accurate information. Providers may advertise ESOL classes online, on social media and by putting leaflets and posters up in shopping centres and libraries, but frequently these are missed or not understood. Our research suggests that the most common way learners find out about classes is word of mouth. Information was typically transmitted or shared between peers or other trusted individuals in community spaces such as churches, cultural centres and asylum hotels. Regional strategies to address this may include:

- Develop a managed cross-region database of classes and associated provision, accessible to potential learners and those that support them. Managing this database implies constant updating, to ensure information remains accurate.
- Recognise the importance of word of mouth as an informal means of conveying information, and provide strategic interventions to facilitate this. This may include the regular provision of information at key sites such as local churches, community centres and hotels. It may also include the delivery of information and advice sessions in these spaces.

- To reach pre-Entry learners, information about ESOL classes should be translated into appropriate community languages in different localities. Appropriate languages to be identified through regularly updated region-level statistics on settlement and dispersal patterns.

## 4.7 Trauma-informed delivery training and crisis support

Section 3.1 demonstrates that many ESOL learners have experienced trauma due to war, displacement, loss and other life events. Ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment will provide a more positive learning experience for learners and improve educational outcomes. In addition, Colleges and Adult Learning services in the region face challenges around providing crisis support for some ESOL learners, and support staff are stretched to the limit dealing with issues such as mental health crises and homelessness. Practitioners themselves need support due to their proximity to these issues (see section 3.2). There should be a focus on developing capacity to deal with these issues:

- Build on the knowledge and experience of exemplary resources available in the region at University of Leicester Sanctuary Seekers Unit (and others) to make trauma-informed delivery training available not just in colleges and Adult Learning services but also for volunteers and staff providing ESOL in smaller community organisations, and support staff.
- Make resources and training available, and develop referral models to external agencies, to facilitate crisis support, building on multi-agency networking (see section 4.2).
- Provide CPD opportunities across the region, in different sectors, to support practitioners addressing trauma in the classroom.

## 4.8 Literacy and SEND issues

Section 3.5 shows that some ESOL learners have limited literacy in their home language, and others may have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Our research indicates that dealing with literacy issues alongside ESOL can be challenging, and that IA protocols and generic SEND assessments can sometimes fail to pick up issues with ESOL learners. Providers and regional authorities should consider a number of ways to address these issues:

- Develop standardised methods to gauge existing literacy levels at initial assessment designed specifically for ESOL learners.
- Provide CPD to enhance sensitive and effective teaching and learning strategies to support simultaneous English language acquisition and literacy skills development.



- Provide opportunities for ESOL providers to collaborate with SEND professionals, interpreters and cultural experts, and work towards consistent delivery of culturally responsive SEND assessment practices and multilingual assessment tools for ESOL learners (see also 4.2).
- Provide and disseminate sector-wide protocols for referral of ESOL learners to external SEND professionals for wider SEND assessments.
- Provide CPD and other resources to enhance capacity to meet the needs of SEND ESOL learners in the classroom, across the region, available to practitioners in different sectors.

## 4.9 Supporting Community ESOL

There are a whole host of examples in this report of the ways in which community providers make a vital contribution to ESOL delivery in the region. Community sector providers would benefit from greater strategic and practical support from an accessible, centrally-coordinated source. This support might include:

- Information on funding sources and advice on funding applications.
- Support for volunteer teachers, including CPD, with reference to guidance provided by the national association, [NATECLA](#).
- Access to CPD through collaboration with local ESFA-funded providers.
- Support funds to facilitate improvement of community learning environments through grants to provide, for example, Wi-Fi, data projectors, learning resources.

## 4.10 Addressing concerns around ESFA funding changes

In section 3.3 we report that ESFA-funded providers are hampered in their capacity to deliver ESOL by frequent changes in funding regulations. 2024 sees major changes here, with the introduction of the Adult Support Fund, and in addition the impact of devolution on some parts of the region. Providers would benefit from access to a centrally coordinated resource providing information and advice on funding changes and the impact of devolution, and/or a regular forum in which to share knowledge and understanding of these challenges. There is a major concern that the changes will hamper capacity to expand provision in response to need, and to fund additional provision such as summer schools/introduction to ESOL classes. This issue should be central to addressing concerns around funding changes.

## 4.11 Expanding accredited provision

Section 3.5 records the frustration of many learners waiting to gain access to accredited provision in colleges and Adult Learning centres. This reflects the desire of learners to gain

qualifications in order to work towards wider aspirations related to employment or further training. In addition, asylum seekers are hampered in gaining access to ESFA-funded provision by restrictions on their recourse to public funds.

Some accredited provision does exist in third sector organisations, beyond the ESFA funding framework. The regional authority should look for opportunities to expand this provision, by supporting more third sector organisations to become registered centres for the delivery of accredited learning. Organisations need institutional support to navigate the route to registration, and access to financial support to help with registration costs.

At the same time, a focus on supporting third sector organisation in this way should not detract from the valuable informal provision that many third sector providers deliver. This provision is also critical to a successful and inclusive offer across the region (see section 4.9)

## 4.12 Employer engagement

Section 3.6 shows that there are instances of collaboration between ESOL providers and employers in pockets across the region. This can be an effective route to reaching out to learners who may otherwise find it difficult to attend classes. It is also an important opportunity to demonstrate to employers that ESOL can operate as a form of CPD, by enabling employees to develop their language skills. In a situation of constrained funding for ESOL, this may open up new opportunities for investment in the sector. The regional authority should look for ways to promote employer engagement in ESOL provision. Possible ways forward are:

- Establish a network or forum that brings together ESOL providers and employers.
- Model existing good practice related to 'in-employment' ESOL provision in employer forums.

## 4.13 Valuing inclusive learning

Some ESOL practitioners commented that ESOL provision is overly focused on 'preparing' learners for employment, often in low paid jobs. Some forced migrants expressed a concern that members of their community - particularly older people - felt marginalised because of this focus on employability in ESOL, particularly formal ESOL classes (see section 3.5). Many people identified English learning as an important way of developing their sense of belonging in their new home (section 3.1).

In order to ensure provision that addresses the needs of all ESOL learners, the regional authority should:

- Embed and promote a principle of 'inclusive learning', encouraging and supporting the provision of classes which focus on English in non-work contexts as well as English for employment, and address the needs of potentially marginalised groups.

- Provide region-wide CPD on delivering ESOL to marginalised groups such as older learners.

## 4.14 The use of AI as a teaching and learning tool

Section 3.5 demonstrates that many ESOL learners use AI tools such as ChatGPT independently to enhance their English-learning experience, both instead of and alongside their ESOL classes. The regional authority should promote research into this independent usage as a form of complementary learning, and explore ways in which to build on it with teaching and learning strategies in the classroom.

## 4.15 Understanding the qualifications landscape

The relationship and equivalent status of different measures of progress in English learning (ESOL Skills for Life, GCSE, Functional Skills, CFER, IELTS) is complex. Some learners reported that their capacity to access classes and map their own progress was hampered by this complexity. The regional authority should develop and disseminate an information resource which makes the relative level of different measures clear in a form accessible to learners and those that advise learners.

## 4.16 Listening to and promoting the voices and experiences of refugee and asylum seeker ESOL learners

One pleasure of doing this research has been the opportunity to talk with and listen to the stories and views of many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers across the region. These voices inform this report. They are also a valuable resource for both the ESOL community and wider communities across the region.

Listening to the voices and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers empowers ESOL learners, giving them a platform to express their experiences, challenges, and successes. This can help them reclaim their identities and foster a sense of belonging. It can also model pathways to progression, showing how ‘people like us’ have gone on to achieve a variety of life and/or professional goals.

Listening to these voices more widely can raise awareness about the issues faced by refugees and asylum seekers, providing insights into the complexities of migration and the resilience of individuals, potentially influencing public perception and policy. It can also build connections between learners and the wider community, fostering empathy and support networks.

Our final recommendation is for the regional authority to explore ways to work with and build on this rich regional asset. Some initiatives to consider are:

- Development of a database of pathways to progression, demonstrating the routes taken by refugees and asylum seekers to achieve professional and life goals, incorporating their ESOL journeys alongside other aspects of their development.

- Development of model lesson plans and resources based on this database, for use in ESOL classrooms with learners at different levels.
- Establish a provider-learner forum to explore production of new learning resources based on learner experience, and to listen to the views of learners on ESOL delivery across the region, as a source of sector development.
- Commissioning a group of learners to produce a filmed 'Introduction to the East Midlands' (or more locally), for distribution amongst providers and stakeholders across the region, to use as a learning tool and more widely to promote the migrant voice in the East Midlands.
- Development of a dedicated oral history project to promote the voices of forced migrant ESOL learners, to share stories of journeys and settlement experiences in the East Midlands and celebrate the region's diversity.

## 5. Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the good will and support of the many people we talked to in the East Midlands during the spring and summer of 2024.

- First and foremost, we would like to thank the many learners and ex-learners who gave up their time to join one of our focus groups, providing their thoughts on their experience in an open and engaging way.
- It would not have been possible to have our focus groups without the active support and generosity of a range of providers and stakeholder organisations. We thank all those who helped us to set up focus groups, including communicating with learners and others to ensure that we had a great range of people to speak to.
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- Esther Derbyshire, Head of Adult & Community Education, Leeds City College.
  - Clare Jackson, MESH Regional ESOL Project Coordinator
  - Iryna Kutsemakhina, community project worker, Sunflower ESOL Hub, Scarborough.
  - Helen Robinson, ESOL teacher and PhD Researcher, University of Leeds School of Education.
  - Emma Taylor, Yorkshire and Humber Regional ESOL Coordinator.
- Finally, we are grateful to the MESH Trustees for their support in the set up and implementation of this project.

## 6. Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### ESOL for Refugees: A Toolkit for Commissioners and Practitioners

##### **Benchmarking Criteria**

###### A. Initial Assessment

1. Refugees are assessed in a way that identifies their existing language skills and individual barriers to learning as well as reflecting their daily lives and needs.
2. Happens quickly after refugee arrives or is recognised by government as a refugee.
3. Initial assessment enables referral into a mix of provision appropriate to the existing learning level and tailored to reflect the individual need.

###### B. Access

1. Access to classes at the right level, including pre-entry and Entry level 1.
2. Start classes quickly, without a long wait.
3. Opportunities to learn in a range of settings outside of the classroom, especially initially. Those new to learning environments do not feel intimidated.
4. Learning opportunities offer different amounts of structure and degrees of formality, and can be accessed in a complementary way according to learner needs.
5. Basic literacy teaching is included for those with little or no formal education prior to arriving in the UK.
6. Provision is adjusted to overcome barriers that hinder refugees from accessing English language provision in order to enable equal access.



7. Practical support is available: financially (fees, transport, childcare), and a multi-agency response to needs.
8. Refugees are treated with sensitivity to their cultural background and journey to the UK.

### C. Progress

1. Refugees enjoy a stable learning environment where they can develop a positive, trusted relationship with their ESOL teachers.
2. All ESOL provides adequate conditions for learning (such as those highlighted by the Volunteers in Migrant Language Education (VIME) project). For example, language used should be comprehensible even though learners may not understand all the individual words; learners should be able to ask for clarification; there should be opportunities to practise so the learner starts to speak English without conscious effort.
3. Refugees are able to make regular progress that is part of their learning plan and regularly revisit this with support staff to adjust to their progress, changing circumstances and expectations.
4. Refugees have genuine opportunities to feed back if they do not feel they are progressing or if the learning is not relevant to them.
5. Opportunities and links are made to employment and vocational courses where appropriate.
6. Refugees have opportunities for conversation practice outside of ESOL classes.
7. Measures of progress are realistic for the individual and recognise both increased confidence and proficiency.

Migration Yorkshire 2021

## Appendix 2

Phase 1 on this project resulted in the production of a quantitative report providing a dynamic snapshot of ESOL provision across the East Midlands in the summer of 2024. Although this picture is always changing, we provide [HERE](#) a version of the report as at August 2024.

A graphic representation of provision can be consulted on the Padlet platform [HERE](#).

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