

LEFT OUT, **LEFT OUT,** LEFT BEHIND **LEFT BEHIND**

**A STUDY ON THE BARRIERS TO ESOL IN THE
LONDON BOROUGH OF WALTHAM FOREST**

MARCH 2020

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES PROGRAMME



WALTHAM FOREST ESOL SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT (SPOC)

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About us

The Single Point of Contact (SPOC) is an independent advice service based in Waltham Forest, working to support residents who want to learn or improve their English access English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in the borough. Our work is funded by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), as part of the Connecting Communities programme in Waltham Forest. The borough is one of the five integration areas across the UK currently delivering strategies aligned with MHCLG's Integrated Communities Green Paper. For further information on the programme, please see: <https://ourplacewf.org/>

Aims

The aim of this report is to stimulate discussion and change policy to improve ESOL provision locally, across London and nationally. It is aimed at policy makers, practitioners and anyone interested in the quality of ESOL provision in England and Wales.

The ESOL SPOC has spent the last year carrying out research on the barriers that prevent potential or existing ESOL learners from accessing, attending or progressing in ESOL in Waltham Forest. The results of this research are presented in this report, which aims to inform the commissioning of a new ESOL offer, also led by the SPOC. The first section provides background information on ESOL at a national and local level. The second section identifies existing barriers to learning and makes recommendations for policy and practice change that, if implemented, will lead to a more successful ESOL provision.

Context

ESOL is the term used in the UK for English language provision for people over 16 who speak a language other than English as their first language and who are learning English as a second or additional language. Provision is offered at a range of levels including Pre-entry, Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2. In addition to accredited ESOL provision, learners can access non-accredited programmes such as RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement).

Adult ESOL courses are mainly funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). There are additional funding streams available which allow providers to support learners not covered by AEB. AEB was devolved to the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2019. That same year, the GLA included a proposal to fully fund all ESOL up until Level 2 in its consultation on the Skills for Londoners Framework.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the participants in this research who gave us their time, views and expert knowledge to help us understand the kinds of barriers that learners face when accessing ESOL. This includes ESOL learners, partner ESOL providers, teachers, volunteers, caseworkers and community outreach officers. We would like to thank all our internal colleagues and external services who provided us with invaluable data for the report. Special thanks are due to Estera Choksi for sharing her journey through ESOL in words and images. We would also like to thank Hayley Sims, Evaluation Lead at the London Borough of Waltham Forest, and Laura Cotton, ESOL lecturer, for their input and feedback on the final manuscript.

1. Executive summary

This report is aimed at policy makers, practitioners and anyone interested in the quality of ESOL provision in England and Wales. It aims to stimulate discussion and change policy to improve ESOL provision locally, across London and nationally.

Waltham Forest is home to an enriching ethnic and linguistic diversity, with 48% of residents being from a minority ethnic background. Multilingualism is common amongst our residents, yet 14,250 people in the borough still report that they cannot speak English well or at all, according to the 2011 census.

Language proficiency levels in Waltham Forest are lower than the national average, which reflects the number of new arrivals in the borough and across London. According to the 2011 census, 1.6% of the population in England and Wales did not speak English well or at all in comparison to 6% in Waltham Forest. Changing migration fluxes in the last decade may have affected the levels of language proficiency in the borough, yet it is likely that a high demand for ESOL persists.

It is imperative to provide those residents who wish to learn or improve their English with adequate ESOL provision. Failing to do so may prevent 6% of our local residents from finding work, accessing services and supporting their children in school. Not providing them with learning opportunities can affect their confidence and independence, limit their capacity to make friends and get to know their neighbours, ultimately impacting on Waltham Forest's shared social fabric.

The current ESOL provision available in the borough seeks to equip these residents with the tools they need to live functionally and fulfil their aspirations. A wide range of ESOL courses are available – at different times, in different formats and locations – to ensure all residents can access a suitable opportunity. In 2018/19, approximately 2000 learners benefitted from the existing provision.

Despite this, residents who wish to access ESOL courses still face a number of barriers which can prevent them from enrolling, attending or progressing. These barriers are linked to the particular needs ESOL learners often experience as a group but also to the funding and regulations underlying the existing provision. Below are the barriers we have identified in the course of this research and which fall into the following categories:

HEALTH

CHILDCARE

WORK

GENDER

YOUNG PEOPLE

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Followed by these are the recommendations and measures we believe need to be implemented, at a local, regional and national level, to address them.

Health

The biggest barrier identified by all participants involved in this research is health – both physical and mental. Poor health was found to limit learners' physical capacity to access ESOL provision, to affect learners' attendance and to impact on their capacity to learn when in the classroom. Trauma and poor mental health were found to be intimately related to the latter.

Childcare

The lack of in-house childcare provision in ESOL has also been identified as one of the largest barriers preventing learners with childcare commitments from accessing courses. The insufficient number of in-house crèches makes it close to impossible for parents with children under 5 to access ESOL, whilst heavily affecting attendance for parents with school-age children.

Work

Our research showed that learners in work – particularly those working in shift patterns and with precarious contracts – experience severe difficulties when seeking to access and attend ESOL classes. This group is often unable to meet the attendance thresholds required by most providers as they are either unavailable at the class times or exhausted from long days at work and so physically unable to attend.

Gender

The access and experience of ESOL was found to be different for male and female learners. While women are more likely to be affected by childcare-related barriers, men were found to be more likely to face work-related ones. Our research also suggests that women's experience of ESOL may be limited by cultural barriers, gender-based violence and eligibility criteria.

Young people

The barriers experienced by young people were found to mainly affect their learning once they are already enrolled. Young ESOL learners have specific health needs – resulting mostly from trauma and the experience of separation – which impact on their social integration, emotional well-being and feelings of loneliness.

Systemic barriers

In practice, learners' complex needs – which, when unmet, become barriers – are interrelated and often overlap. What we have found is that the lack of flexibility in formal ESOL provision is creating insurmountable barriers to access, learning and progression for the most vulnerable and marginalised learners.

This lack of flexibility is manifested in the eligibility criteria used, the attendance thresholds set, the qualifications required and the curriculum used in ESOL. This is further compounded by the funding cuts that have hit ESOL in the last decade. Our research suggests that informal ESOL provision plays a specific role in catering for the needs of vulnerable learners, yet that both formal and informal learning programmes need to be supported to provide learners with an overall complementary provision.

BARRIERS	RECOMMENDATIONS	LOCAL COMMISSIONING
HEALTH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The inclusion of measures to promote flexibility in ESOL in the national strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curriculum development focused on health-related language learning - Informal and shorter courses with a creative element
CHILDCARE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The creation of additional, streamlined and ringfenced funding for in-house crèches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ESOL courses with crèche facilities across the borough - Curriculum development aimed at parents
WORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The roll-out of additional co-funding models focused on provision on employers' premises - A more extensive use of informal learning approaches to support learners in work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal courses delivered on employers' premises - Curriculum development with work-related focus
GENDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The replacement of 'household income' as an eligibility criterion with 'personal income' or a free ESOL entitlement 	
YOUNG PEOPLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustained funding and the roll-out of additional provision for young people such as mentoring and counselling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New offer for young people incorporating extracurricular activities as well as learning and well-being support
SYSTEMIC BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A more flexible approach to attendance and progression thresholds - The widening of non-accredited provision and its funding criteria - The widening of eligibility criteria and the acceptance of self-declarations by funders - The creation of an up-to-date ESOL curriculum and resources - The reinstatement of PGCE Level 5 qualifications as requirements for teaching ESOL - The adequate funding of ESOL combined with effective local coordination models across the UK 	

2. Introduction

Waltham Forest is enriched by its diversity: by those people born in the borough and by those coming in from other areas of London and the UK; by the 37% of residents who were born abroad; by the 48% of residents who are from a minority ethnic background; and by the 64% of children and young people who are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups¹.

The ethnic makeup of our residents translates into a hyper-diverse linguistic landscape, with dozens of languages being spoken every day in homes, businesses, buses, high streets and parks across the borough. A number of our residents communicate in more than one language on a daily basis, yet in 2011 14,250 reported not speaking English well or at all².

As we know, speaking English is vital to go about everyday life, make friends, find and progress in work and access services.

Accordingly, the Waltham Forest ESOL SPOC was set up to improve access to ESOL opportunities in the borough: to ensure that all those who wish to learn or improve their English can do so in a way which suits their goals and needs. Nevertheless, we know that, despite the service we offer, a number of barriers still prevent learners from having a successful ESOL journey in the borough.

This research has been undertaken to understand what is pushing learners out, holding them back or leaving them behind in ESOL.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods used in this research and whose insights inform it. The following chapters outline: the demand for ESOL in the UK and in Waltham Forest; the importance of ESOL and the difference it can make to learners' lives; the existing ESOL offer in Waltham Forest and an average learner profile. Finally, Chapter 7 presents the barriers identified in the borough and the national and local recommendations necessary to address them, followed by our conclusions.



¹ London Borough of Waltham Forest. (N/A). A Shared Plan for Connecting Communities in Waltham Forest. Available at [link](#).

² London Borough of Waltham Forest. (N/A). Statistics about the borough. Available at [link](#).

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach using participatory methods was employed to gather insights on what enables and prevents learners from accessing ESOL in Waltham Forest. This data was contrasted with the main findings of the existing literature on barriers to ESOL in the UK and London, and similarities between the two sets of data are highlighted in Chapter 7.

Both learners and practitioners were engaged with to ensure that the report is informed by first-hand experiences and professional insights. We have sought, wherever possible, to involve a diverse range of learners from different ethnic backgrounds, genders and levels.

A total of 67 participants were involved in this research. Below is an outline of the methods used to engage with different groups:

INTERACTIVE WORKSHOPS	INTERVIEW	PHOTO-VOICE
31 ESOL TEACHERS ENGAGED THROUGH WORKSHOPS AT PROVIDERS' VENUES	21 LEARNERS, TEACHERS, MANAGERS, VCS REPRESENTATIVES AND SERVICE PROVIDERS INTERVIEWED	1 LEARNER INVOLVED IN A PARTICIPATORY PHOTO-VOICE
14 MEMBERS OF THE SOMALI WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION ENGAGED AT A MORNING CAFÉ	INTERVIEWS WERE QUALITATIVE AND SEMI - STRUCTURED	THE LEARNER WAS ASKED TO REPRESENT THEIR ESOL JOURNEY IN PHOTOS AND THEIR OWN WORDS

4.

Language proficiency and the need for ESOL

4. Language proficiency and the need for ESOL

Understanding language proficiency and the main languages spoken in the UK and in Waltham Forest is essential to contextualise the demand for ESOL and common learner profiles. Language proficiency refers to a person's command of English, whereas the main language refers to the language most commonly used by that person, often in the household. The latter provides us with valuable information on the levels of multilingualism and of English proficiency present in the UK and Waltham Forest, yet cannot be analysed as an accurate marker of proficiency alone. The section below briefly outlines key data at a national and local level.

National Background

According to the 2011 census³:



92% of the population spoke English as their main language

Polish, Punjabi and Urdu were the most common other languages



1.6% of the population did not speak English well or at all

Men and women in the 25-44 age group reported the lowest proficiency



More women reported lower English proficiency levels

Respondents with lower proficiency were **more likely to be in lower skilled jobs and have higher health needs**

The 2011 census was the last occasion in which a full analysis of languages spoken was carried out. Due to changing fluxes of migration, including a drop in new arrivals and an increase of non-EU migration, it is increasingly likely that the population's English language skills have changed⁴.

³ Office for National Statistics. (2013). 2011 Census: Detailed analysis - English language proficiency in England and Wales, Main language and general health characteristics. Available at [link](#).

⁴ Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. (2018). The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century. Available at [link](#).

There are other indirect data sources which can provide us with more recent information on languages spoken in the UK.

Data from the 2018 Labour Force Survey (LFS)⁵ indicates that:



50% of foreign-born adults had English as their first language at home

Use of English has increased over time

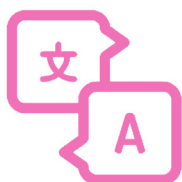
Up from 29% who had been in the country for 0-2 years



68% of foreign-born population residing in UK for 15 years has English as their first language at home

London Borough of Waltham Forest

According to the 2011 census⁶:



74% of LBWF residents spoke English as their main language

Polish and Urdu were the most common other languages



Chingford residents were more likely to have English as their main language...

...in comparison to **Leyton and Leytonstone** residents



6% of LBWF residents reported not speaking English well or at all

Leyton and Leytonstone residents were more likely to have lower proficiency levels



There was a **12%** drop in the number of new arrivals to LBWF in 2018

And a **17%** drop in National Insurance Number applications from EU nationals

⁵ The Migration Observatory. (2019.) English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK. Available at [link](#).

⁶ London Borough of Waltham Forest. (N/A). Statistics about the borough. Available at [link](#).

The recent shift in international migration patterns in the borough suggests that the main language and English proficiency scenario captured by the 2011 census may have changed. More recent data sources may provide us with a better picture of the current situation. According to the latest figures from the School Census⁷ in 2019:



49% of primary school pupils had English as an additional language...

...in comparison to **43.4%** of secondary school pupils

Urdu, Romanian, Polish and Turkish were the most common main languages

Other relevant sources of data include the number of translation and interpretation requests placed by Council staff to the Language Shop in 2018-19⁸. During this timeframe, the main languages requested for interpretation services included Urdu, Romanian, Turkish, Polish and Albanian.

⁷ Data retrieved from Waltham Forest's 2019 Schools Information Dashboard (unpublished).

⁸ Unpublished data provided by the Language Shop based on the 2018/19 usage report.

5.

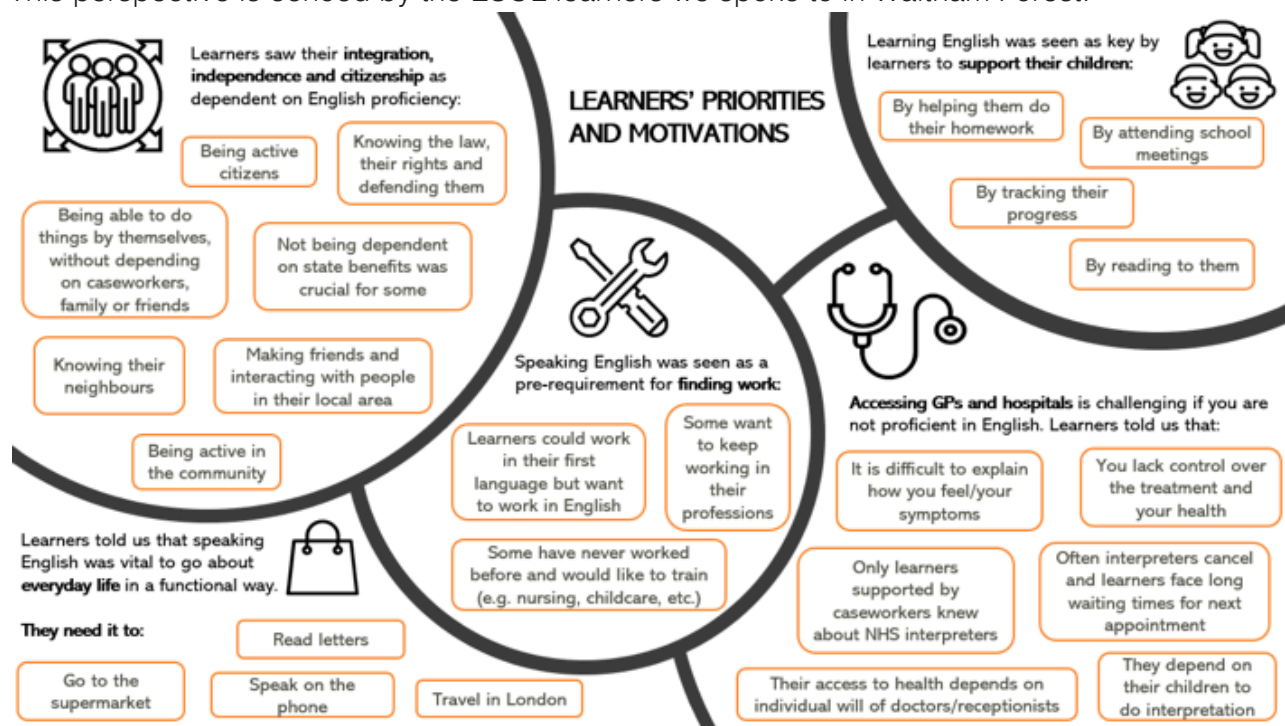
**“If I spoke English, I
would already know all of
my neighbours”:**
the importance of ESOL
from a learner’s
perspective

5. “If I spoke English, I would already know all of my neighbours”: the importance of ESOL from a learner’s perspective

The importance of ESOL

The importance of English language proficiency and its impact on social integration is well documented. The 2016 Casey Review – a landmark review into integration and opportunity in isolated communities in the UK – sets poor English language skills as a key barrier to integration and social and economic mobility⁹. Several other reports also emphasise the importance of ESOL and the benefits it can bring to migrants. Demos report *On Speaking Terms* refers to the impact ESOL can have on people’s independence and confidence and on the extent to which it can improve migrants’ access to healthcare and education¹⁰. The Greater London Authority’s *English Language for All report*¹¹ focuses on the economic benefits of English proficiency, whereas Refugee Action shines light on how English language skills enable refugees to make friends, be independent, feel integrated and find work in its report *Let Refugees Learn*¹². This literature is in line with recent research carried out on the relationship between language learning and levels of integration experienced by resettled refugees in the UK¹³.

This perspective is echoed by the ESOL learners we spoke to in Waltham Forest.



⁹ Department for Communities and Local Government. (2016). The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration (p. 97). Available at [link](#).

¹⁰ Demos. (2014). *On Speaking Terms* (p. 10). Available at [link](#).

¹¹ Greater London Authority. (2012). *English Language for All* (p. 5). Available at [link](#).

¹² Refugee Action. (2016). *Let Refugees Learn* (p. 1). Available at [link](#).

¹³ Morrice, L., Tipp, L. K., Collyer, M. & Brown, R. (2019). 'You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication': English language learning among resettled refugees in the UK, *Journal of Refugee Studies*.

Case study – Estera's journey through ESOL

We asked Estera – an ESOL learner in Waltham Forest – to tell us about her learning experience, the barriers she has experienced and the impact of ESOL on her life, through photos. This is Estera's story in her own eyes and words.

I am Estera and I am an ESOL learner. I attended English classes in Waltham Forest from September 2019. I would like to share my experience about barriers to accessing English for Speakers of Other Languages also I would like to show what benefits I have because I participated at ESOL Entry 3.

BARRIERS

When I came to the United Kingdom 10 year ago from Poland I didn't speak English at all. I left my country because of personal reasons. At the beginning it was really hard without command of English. I felt like a child who couldn't express herself. I felt lost and unsafe but that was my choice to be in London. I met amazing people which helped me learn English basic. And what was very important in my life I met my husband to be – he is British citizen. He doesn't know Polish so to communicate we have to use English. He taught me lots. This time I was like a sponge. I learnt many new vocabularies and I learnt about life in this country. I fell in love with my husband and Great Britain. I enjoyed being part of English community. This time I realise I need more to know the English language. Especially when I was pregnant for the first time and I had to go with my husband everywhere (doctors, hospital, antenatal classes) to feel confident.

That was in 2010 and the Waltham Forest Council built a new Learning Service at Queens Road, and I passed this place and wished to come here one day...

After that I was very busy with my children and I forgot about myself. My children and family was my priority – I didn't regret any second I spent with my children. I love to be mum.

One day I went to a playgroup at Low Hall Children's Centre and a play worker asked me if I would like to learn English. I said of course and he arranged my assessment. Assessor qualified me for ESOL entry 2. Unfortunately this time there was no crèche so I couldn't go.



When my older daughter attended Year 1 I felt I needed to sort out my English because I couldn't help her with literacy homework. I tried my best, when I taught her I learnt too but I still was not enough.

My friend Maria, parent from Barclay Primary School, advised and pushed me to an ESOL provider to join classes. Happily from September 2019 all my children were in Barclay Primary School from 9am to 3pm and finally I had time for myself and for my education. I went to ESOL assessment again and I qualified ESOL entry 3.

BENEFITS

From September my children and I started school. I was a bit nervous, because I started a new chapter in my life.

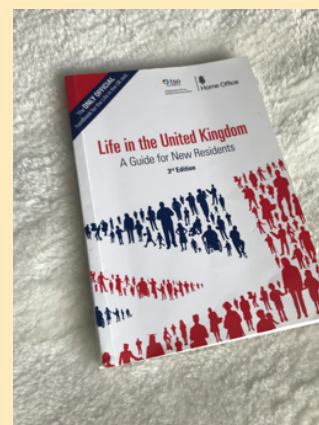
In the beginning at school I thought I didn't know anything about English language but my teacher praised my and other learners' skills, motivated to work harder. My brain was useful again and I also felt younger.

I met amazing students. We built a close relationship, exchanged telephone numbers, and made a Whatsapp group to update information if someone missed session. We helped each other to learn better and we still do. We made a friendship which lasted longer I hope. We celebrated the winter season party in December and the youngest learner's birthday.

When you read this now it sounds as though easy to study, but it was hard work and sometimes I have to sacrifice myself.

If I will be single, without children, without responsibility – study will definitely be easier, but I have a family and being a student is a small part of my existence. When you are mum of three children you are never bored. From time to time my children were not well or there was something to do, children's homework, family events and other duties. So many times I had to revise or do my homework at night when everybody is sleeping so I can concentrate. I didn't complain because it was worth it. I could give up and stop attending school but I didn't because if I start something I would like to finish with full responsibility. That thinking helped me finish ESOL entry 3 and give me a chance to do the next level.

After just one semester I am more confident, when I have to go myself to GP or hospital. I could write formal letters, respond to emails, and fill form. I could read English books, not advanced yet, but I know that will change. I enjoyed watching morning news on BBC, reading newspapers like Metro, Evening Standard or BBC news online. I feel like a proper citizen again. I would like to be a proper British citizen and prepare myself to take the 'Life in the UK'.



6.

The ESOL offer in Waltham Forest

6. The ESOL offer in Waltham Forest

ESOL provision

A wide variety of ESOL courses are available in Waltham Forest and include daytime and evening classes on different days and times, Saturday classes, accredited and non-accredited courses, embedded ESOL programmes (ESOL plus childcare, for example), informal conversation clubs and classes with a crèche.

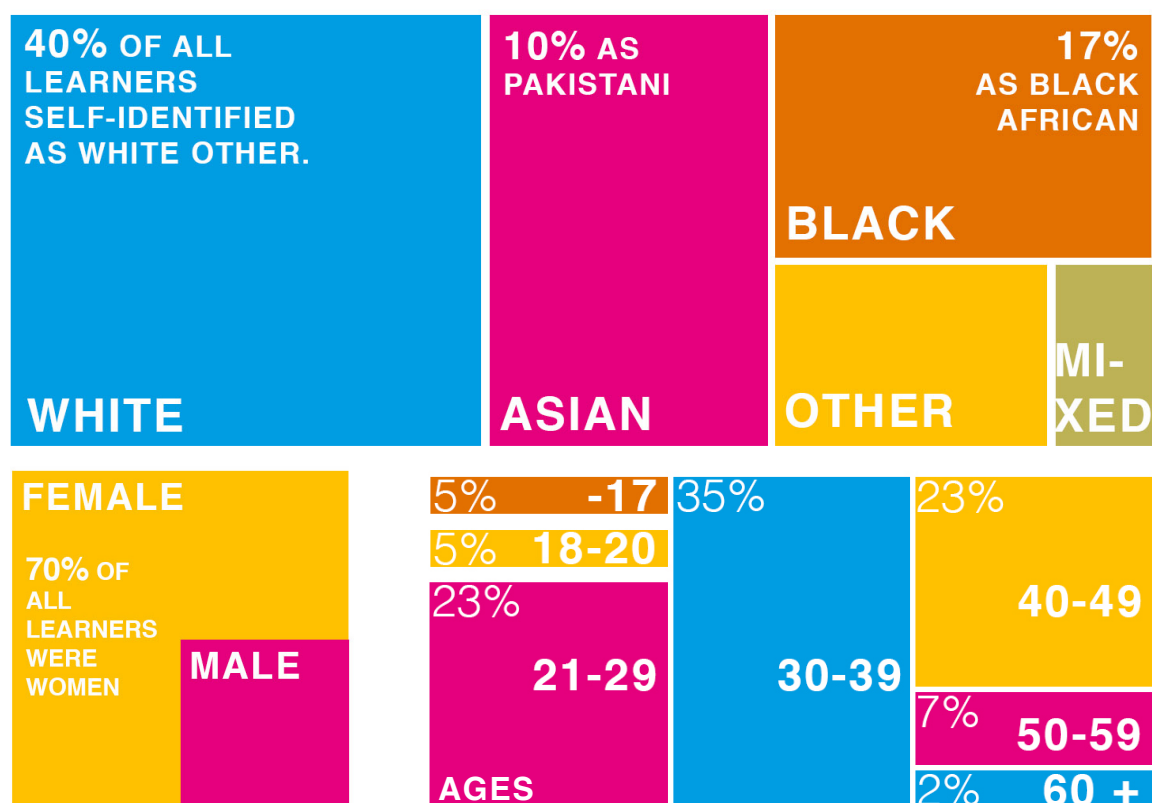
Because of the efforts that both statutory and community-based providers have made to expand their funding streams, ESOL is effectively free of charge for all residents in informal provision, and for most residents in formal courses. This includes asylum-seekers after six months of residency, residents on dependent or spouse visas, learners in work and on inactive benefits if their annual household income is lower than £28,000.

This is due to the effective use of discretionary funding to supplement the Adult Education Budget¹⁴. Additional funding options used to support ESOL learners in the borough include: MHCLG and Lottery-funded courses and Learner Support Funds. This effectively means that, in contrast to the national picture, eligibility has not proven to be a main barrier in Waltham Forest. In the 'barriers' section of this report, we will outline and provide recommendations on the areas of unmet ESOL need in the borough.

Learner's profiles

It is vital to understand who is already accessing ESOL provision in the borough. In the 2018/19 academic year, 2049 learners enrolled in ESOL courses in Waltham Forest.

This is their profile.



¹⁴ ESOL provision funded by the Adult Education Budget (AEB) can be accessed for free by learners aged 19 and over who are in un-employment and in receipt of specific benefits. In addition to this, there is specific residency criteria which learners must meet to be able to access provision free of charge. For further information see ESFA funded adult education budget (AEB): funding rules 2019 to 2020/14

7.

Barriers to learning and recommendations

7. Barriers to learning and recommendations

Substantial research has previously been carried out on the barriers that ESOL learners face when accessing ESOL. This body of research captures the particular needs of different learners – refugees, asylum-seekers, women and settled communities, for example – across London and the UK.

This report seeks to enrich the existing literature by examining ESOL provision and its accessibility at a borough level by drawing on rich qualitative data. The exploration of barriers to ESOL below summarises the information gathered through a review of existing literature on the subject combined with insights from learners, teachers, managers, voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) and Council staff, collected through semi-structured interviews, workshops and a participatory photo-voice project. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality.

The barriers included under each section may affect learners at different stages of their journey: some may prevent individuals from accessing the existing ESOL offer, others will affect their attendance, whereas some barriers will impact on their progression. The first section focuses on individual barriers, whereas the following section places these in a systems context to understand how they come into play with the existing provision. The sections below are not an exhaustive list of all barriers currently experienced by learners in the borough but, rather, a snapshot of the key barriers identified by stakeholders and of specific needs expressed by particular groups of migrant learners.



Health

The main barrier to ESOL identified in Waltham Forest is health – both physical and mental. This concurs with research carried out by the Learning and Work Institute on ESOL provision in London. This GLA-commissioned study found that providing refugee learners with timely access to necessary health services can improve their ESOL attendance rates, especially if they are recent arrivals. The report concluded that the lack of support for refugees with wider needs, such as mental health issues and experiences of trauma, was a significant barrier for this group¹⁵. A study on the ESOL needs in the Harehills neighbourhood in Leeds produced similar findings: that the process of migration can result in a range of physical and mental health complications, some related to trauma, which affect learners' access and attendance to ESOL classes, which ultimately impacts on their learning¹⁶.

In the specific case of Waltham Forest, learners – with different migratory experiences – and practitioners told us about the impact health complications can have on learners' ability to access, attend and focus during ESOL classes.

Physical health problems, particularly those which impact on mobility, were said to be amongst the main barriers experienced by older learners in the borough. Several teachers mentioned that this situation was particularly frequent amongst older learners in settled communities¹⁷, some of whom are at risk of social isolation. A similar situation was reported by a representative of the Somali Women's Association (henceforth referred to as SWA; now known as Family and Youth Support Association) who had experience of supporting several of her users who, due to mobility issues, cannot physically access formal provision. The relation between physical and mental health, on which there has been extensive research carried out¹⁸, is evidenced in learners' lives in Waltham Forest. Hodan, one of the users at SWA, told us she experiences severe back pain on a daily basis and that she struggles to move as a consequence. She said this has affected her emotionally and that she currently feels depressed.

Physical health-related barriers appear to be extensively experienced by learners across the borough. In one interview with a Latin American couple currently attending ESOL classes in Waltham Forest, Ana told us about the daily pain her husband experiences as a result of health complications associated with a previous case of pneumonia. The pain often prevents him from attending classes and he can no longer work as a result of his health, yet, for a long time, they were not aware they were eligible for state benefits. Due to the language barriers they experience, it is often their young son who must interpret for his father during JobCentre sessions.

Health inequalities, levels of deprivation¹⁹ and access to ESOL appear to be intimately linked as explained by an ESOL lecturer in the borough:

“Lives become more chaotic the less you have, so there could be issues with the landlord, or issues with paying their rent, or issues with their health, issues with the children in school, and all of those things do impact on your health, whether it's mental or physical or both.”

Martha, ESOL Lecturer

¹⁵ Learning and Work Institute. (2017). Mapping ESOL Provision in Greater London (p. 24). Available at [link](#).

¹⁶ Simpson, J., et al. (2011). ESOL Neighbourhood Audit Pilot (Harehills, Leeds) (p. 49).

¹⁷ The extent to which health barriers are experienced by older migrants is relevant for discussions on access ESOL but also key to consider in the context of wider programmes targeting this group, such as those focused on social isolation.

¹⁸ It is thought that approximately 30% of people with a physical health condition also experience a mental health problem. See: Barnett K., Mercer S., Norbury M., Watt G., Wyke S., Guthrie B. (2012). Research paper. [Epidemiology of multimorbidity and implications for health care, research, and medical education: a cross-sectional study. The Lancet Online](#)

¹⁹ According to the 2018 Health Profile for England “people living in the most deprived areas spend nearly a third of their lives in poor health, compared with only about a sixth for those in the least deprived areas” (Health Profile for England: 2018. Chapter 5: Inequalities in Health). The state of health inequalities in Waltham Forest may be estimated based on the borough's deprivation levels: the borough currently sits as the 35th most deprived nationally according to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation.

In Waltham Forest, similarly to the national picture, we found that health problems can also impact on learners' capacity to attend ESOL classes, once they are already enrolled. This situation was particularly evident amongst refugee families. According to Cristina, one of the caseworkers supporting the families:

“Especially in the first six months, the families have so many appointments to set up – hospital appointments – or just needing more time to recover [which] will mean that they'll miss classes, which means their attendance gets marked and they get kicked off the course.”

Both learners and practitioners identified that physical and mental health can limit learners' ability to attend classes and, often, to meet the attendance threshold set by ESOL providers²⁰. One practitioner said this makes some providers see learners with multiple – including health – needs as *“bad statistics”*. What we have found is that the stories that lie behind the numbers paint a much more complex picture.

Saima, one of the refugee learners we interviewed, talked about experiencing the feeling of a heavy weight on her chest whenever she left the house. This, she said, was caused by having recently fled her home country, leaving her family behind and arriving in a completely new country. She told us that, for a period of time, she didn't feel well enough to attend ESOL classes and that one day she would like to work with children but thinks she's not prepared to do so yet. Saima's story coincides with findings in existing research: that learners who have experienced trauma prior to, or during, the process of migration grapple with its impact on mental health and their ability to regularly attend ESOL classes. High levels of vulnerability and experiences of trauma contribute to daily challenges which are exacerbated by busy, ever-changing schedules filled with health appointments and other commitments. This reality – experienced by many learners in the borough – clashes with the current attendance criteria in formal provision.

Learners' health – particularly mental health – was also found to have an impact on “their ability to concentrate, learn and focus”, as mentioned by one of the ESOL lecturers interviewed. We found that this barrier was predominantly experienced by learners who had experienced trauma, namely refugee learners. One caseworker told us about a refugee family she had supported in Waltham Forest. They were constantly worried as their 19-year-old son was still in their home country and, as a result, found it close to impossible to focus on something as complex as learning a new language and writing system.

The impact of mental health illnesses on students' learning experience manifests itself in a variety of ways in the borough. Nabil – a refugee learner currently attending a further education college and 1:1 bespoke sessions – noted how difficult he found it to learn and recall new words in English. He attributed this to his age but, rather, there might be links between his experience of trauma, memory loss and reduced concentration²¹. As a result of this, both Nabil and his wife blamed themselves for not progressing fast enough. This appeared to have a damaging impact on their confidence and lead them to individualise what is, in fact, a structural problem related to their journey as refugees fleeing from a war zone. These experiences might be further compounded by the impact of medication on learners' capacity to retain information, as noted by several practitioners interviewed.

²⁰ The issue of attendance thresholds, where they stem from and how they impact on learners' access to ESOL is discussed in detail in the last sub-section in chapter 7 on systemic barriers

²¹ For further information on literature in this field see: Gordon, D. (2011). Trauma and Second Language Learning among Laotian Refugees, *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*; and McDonald, S. (2006). Trauma and Second Language Learning, University of Toronto Press.

Learners' language barriers was found to limit their access to healthcare and, consequently, to negatively impact on their overall health – including sexual health – on their confidence and well-being²². Out of all the learners interviewed, only those supported by a caseworker were aware of their entitlement to a free NHS interpreter, which is at odds with NHS guidance²³. Instead, the learners who we spoke to relied on members of family, including minors²⁴, to provide interpretation. One of our research participants reported not being able to access contraceptive advice as she was dependent on her 11-year-old son to speak to staff members and felt this was inappropriate.

Some ESOL providers in Waltham Forest have the capacity to refer learners who have disclosed a mental health illness to counsellors but it falls short in providing adequate support to learners, due to a lack of sufficient resource and capacity. What we have found is that teachers often take a central role in listening to learners who have disclosed information regarding their mental health and signposting them to existing services, whenever possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

Recommendation 1. A review of the current attendance and progression thresholds should be carried out by ESOL providers, funders and Ofsted, particularly in light of the New Inspection Framework. This would provide learners who experience complex needs with the flexibility in provision that would allow them to learn, progress and access opportunities²⁵.

Recommendation 2. The forthcoming ESOL strategy for England should recognise that a blanket attendance and progression policy, whether set out by funding guidelines, Ofsted or individual providers, fails to meet the complex needs of migrant and refugee learners.

Local commissioning

In order to widen access to provision for learners who are experiencing health issues, the SPOC will commission an offer which incorporates:

1. Curriculum development with the aim of facilitating discussions on health, including mental health, which will also provide migrant residents with the language needed to discuss their health-related issues. A model such as that provided by Bromley by Bow Centre²⁶ could be adapted and trialled for the local context in Waltham Forest.
2. Creative, informal, shorter courses which include a focus on conversation and an element of gentle exercise or community-based activity, e.g. gardening or arts and crafts. This would provide a more flexible offer for learners who are experiencing mobility issues and for whom formal provision is not suitable as a result of the health-related barriers they are experiencing.

²² Demos. (2014). On Speaking Terms (p.27). Available at [link](#).

²³ According to the 2018 [Guidance](#) published by England NHS, "patients should be asked about their language requirements and communication needs at registration with a primary care provider" and this information should be kept in their patient record.

²⁴ The NHS guidance stipulates that "the use of anyone under the age of 16 for interpretation is not acceptable in any circumstance other than when immediate and necessary treatment is required" and that this practice raises serious safeguarding issues.

²⁵ This recommendation is further explored under the sub-section on systemic barriers.

²⁶ For further information on the Centre's work on health-themed ESOL teaching resources, please see [link](#).

Childcare

The lack of in-house childcare provision and its impact on learners with children was flagged as a main barrier by all learners, practitioners and managers involved in the research. These findings coincide with those of national research. A study on ESOL needs in Leeds found that there was a *“lack of adequate, accessible childcare at times and locations suitable for parents wishing to study ESOL”*²⁷. A report by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement noted that the *“lack of ESOL classes with a crèche acted as a barrier to people participating economically and in public life”*²⁸; whereas a Refugee Action report points to the almost complete absence of *“facilities for childcare provision”*²⁹ and its impact on learners’ capacity to access ESOL.

The situation in Waltham Forest mirrors the national picture: currently, only one ESOL provider in the borough offers childcare provision. They do so by partnering with Children and Family Centres and accessing additional funding streams to the Adult Education Budget. Nevertheless, this provider told us about the difficulties involved in accessing the funding streams available due to eligibility criteria and the resource and time involved in setting up provision. It is worth noting that new funding streams aimed at increasing childcare provision in ESOL have been announced in recent years³⁰. It is nevertheless vital to ensure funding for childcare is accessible and sustainable. Despite the childcare provision available for 2-, 3- and 4-year olds³¹, learners and practitioners alike expressed the need for in-house childcare provision, as discussed below.

According to teachers and managers working at the two largest ESOL providers in the borough, childcare provision did exist previously in the borough and its impact on learners’ access to ESOL was visible. Sarah, a coordinator at one of the providers told us they

“Were able in the past to offer a great service (...) in a couple of venues we had a crèche venue that was literally half a minute up the road and I think that was very reassuring for parents that they could drop their child - they were either in the same building or [very] close.”

Following funding cuts, this provider could no longer offer a crèche. The absence of a crèche has immediate impacts on learners. A week prior to our interview this provider had had to turn down a mother who had childcare responsibilities but whose schedules – including those of the nursery her child attended – did not match those of the classes available.

²⁷ Simpson, J., et al. (2011). ESOL Neighbourhood Audit Pilot (Harehills, Leeds) (p. 48).

²⁸ Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. (2018). The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century (para 423). Available at [link](#).

²⁹ Refugee Action. (2017). Safe but Alone: The Role of English Language in Allowing Refugees to Overcome Loneliness (p. 8). Available at [link](#).

³⁰ An example of this is the funding provided by MHCLG as part of the Integrated Communities English Language Coordination Fund. For further information see [link](#).

³¹ Parents can access free childcare for their 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds if they meet specific criteria related to benefits and their employment-status. For further information see [link](#) and [link](#).

What we found is that the lack of childcare provision hits parents with children under five the hardest. Childcare is largely unaffordable and nursery times often clash with those of ESOL classes, our research shows. An example of this is the situation of one of the refugee families resettled in the borough:

“There’s a couple of single parent families and, one of them, the child is under nursery age. There’s no way the parent is going to be able to access ESOL because of childcare provision.”

Cristina, Caseworker

According to practitioners, accessing ESOL becomes easier for parents with school-aged children as ESOL class times are mostly aligned with school times. Nevertheless, we heard of parents who had to drop off their children at different schools before attending their own class; and of parents who routinely have to leave their class early to pick them up. Operating under such tight schedules was seen to affect parents’ attendance. The disappearance of after-school clubs was thought to compound and worsen this situation. We also found that even in those circumstances where timings are aligned and children are in school, the child’s well-being inevitably has a direct impact on the parent’s attendance. As one of the ESOL coordinators told us, *“[if] a child is ill, a mother is off”*.

The situation is further aggravated for lower level learners with childcare responsibilities. One of the learners who we spoke to, Ana, had only recently been able to start attending classes. She hadn’t been able to do so for months as she had to care for her daughter who was still in nursery, and could not find a class that suited her availability. Her daughter has now gone on to reception, which means Ana is now able to attend her ESOL class and is enjoying it. Due to language barriers, she had issues applying for her daughter’s place in reception and liaising with the school. This meant her daughter could only start attending reception after the term had already started and that Ana could not attend the ESOL classes she had already enrolled on to.

Childcare, as a barrier to ESOL, disproportionately affects women in Waltham Forest³², which is similar to the national picture³³. As a result, the absence of childcare provision can have deeper implications such as entrenching gender inequality: parents generally cannot attend ESOL classes simultaneously and so fathers are more likely to attend as mothers take care of the children. This may have further implications on women’s isolation and independence. Cristina acknowledges the difficulties they have encountered in tackling this issue:

“We’re very very keen that it’s not just the women who end up staying at home so we’re like ‘you both need to do College and we’ll try and find a way’, but sometimes that’s not possible.”

The solution to this barrier must, however, be drawn according to parents’ preferences. Learners consistently told us their ideal scenario would include an in-house crèche where they can easily check on their children. Having children in the classroom alongside parents was seen as a disruptive model which can negatively impact on the latter’s capacity to concentrate.

³² This coincides with the findings of the report Understanding the Barriers to Employment for Economically Inactive Women in the London Borough of Waltham Forest (unpublished), according to which childcare provision “has been shown to be vital when engaging the most marginalised groups of women in ESOL” (p.24).

³³ Refugee Action. (2016). Let Refugees Learn (p. 3). Available at [link](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

Our research findings strongly suggest that in-house crèches would have an invaluable impact on the parents' ability to access classes and progress in their learning.

Recommendation 1. Additional funding, ringfenced for childcare within ESOL provision, should be provided in order to incentivise ESOL providers to offer in-house crèches. This could be offered through AEB or other funding streams.

As argued in the last section, a streamlined ESOL funding system for both formal and informal provision is vital to enable providers to access funding without having to apply to a variety of different sources.

Local commissioning

In order to increase the number of courses with in-house crèches, the SPOC will be commissioning a pilot offer which includes:

1. ESOL courses with crèche facilities in at least four different hubs across the borough, on the same premises where ESOL courses are delivered.
2. Curriculum and resource development to enable parents to develop the language they need to access services for their children and to support them in school.

Work

Work commitments are an important barrier to ESOL in Waltham Forest, pushing some learners out of provision and preventing others from accessing it.

There are commonalities between the local picture and the situation across the country. A Department for Education report describes learners' work commitments, especially shift-patterns, as hindrances preventing some from accessing suitable learning opportunities³⁴. Similarly, other research has found that the combination of learners' work commitments with a primary focus on daytime ESOL provision solidifies this issue as a barrier. Even in those cases where there is a variety of timings available, it can be challenging for learners to find suitable provision due to changing shifts, heavy workloads, precarious contracts and changes to their employment status³⁵.

One of the central issues mentioned by managers and teachers alike is that those who are hit the hardest by this barrier in Waltham Forest are learners currently working in shift patterns and precarious conditions. Both managers and teachers agreed that this group of learners can often see their shifts changed at very short notice, which prevents them from attending classes with the regularity expected in formal provision. Learners' inability to access or continue learning due to changing shifts impacts on their ability to upskill which, with limited time to job search, can trap those in low-paid, unstable employment in a cycle of precariousness.

Catherine, who works as a senior staff member in one of the ESOL providers in the borough, noted that the group of learners who has the least support are those who:

“Come one day, don’t come the next, and then come again, and then can’t come, because [of] their jobs, their boss changed their shifts, they’ve worked six days that week and they’re just absolutely knackered.”

This is echoed by Sarah, an ESOL coordinator, who acknowledged how difficult it can be to combine a full-time job with ESOL: *“It’s time consuming, isn’t it, to give up two evenings a week, potentially, when you’re working full time?”*

Similarly to the health discussion, once this group of learners is enrolled, they often require a level of flexibility which is not commonly found in formal provision – whether daytime or evening – in Waltham Forest. Indeed, learners in employment must meet the same attendance threshold set out to all learners.

Our research shows that this barrier is mainly experienced by male learners, which, for some of the stakeholders consulted, can account for the current gender ratio in ESOL provision in Waltham Forest. The evidence and insights we’ve collected suggest that, amongst ESOL learners in Waltham Forest, men are more likely to be in work than women, who are more commonly responsible for caregiving.

A possible solution for this barrier is to work with employers in order to deliver ESOL classes at their premises. Despite being an adequate way to facilitate and streamline the access of learners in work to suitable provision, engaging with employers has proven to be riddled with difficulties for providers in Waltham Forest. One provider told us:

³⁴ Department for Education. (2019). English for Speakers of Other Languages: Access and Progression (p. 12). Available at [link](#).

³⁵ Simpson, J., et al. (2011). ESOL Neighbourhood Audit Pilot (Harehills, Leeds) (p. 50).

“We’re always exploring things like working with employers, you know, to offer classes maybe at the place of employment and that sort of thing. Invariably they pose quite a lot of challenges (...) you have to have employers who are motivated to do it, who have suitable premises, who are prepared to let learners be available and then you still have a lot of logistical issues about people being there at the same time. The levels as well, you might have a huge range of levels and that does pose challenges about what sort of course you deliver.”

Sarah, ESOL Coordinator

Catherine, who works at a non-statutory ESOL provider, shared similar experiences, and particularly emphasised the difficulties associated with persuading employers of the benefits of up-skilling their employees and securing their commitment and funding. It is worth noting that because of shift patterns, not all workers can attend the same session every week. This has financial implications for the provider seeking to deliver a free and accredited course that matches learners’ availability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

ESOL course delivery on employer premises would have a positive impact on the needs of learners in work who, because of precarious or shift work, are unable to commit to formal daytime or evening ESOL provision.

Interviews with current providers, however, clearly show that attempts at building relationships with employers for this purpose have been made but resulted in significant difficulties. As an example, shift work often means that learners cannot attend every lesson and, in some cases, only fortnightly: this makes it not financially viable for statutory providers, as lecturers’ timetables need to be consistent week on week.

Recommendation 1. Sustainable co-funding models, such as the GLA-funded ESOL Plus Employer Partnership pilot, should be made available to complement current ESOL funding streams, in the absence of a centralised funding system.

Recommendation 2. Current informal learning approaches should be used more extensively to tackle the barriers faced by learners in work. If the RARPA model is used, eligibility criteria should be widened to ensure that the offer is open to any worker, not just those who are eligible for AEB.

Local commissioning

1. The SPOC will make some funding available for providers with established relationships with employers that are willing to take part. This funding will be used for informal models in order to ensure financial viability for the providers involved. It will also cover curriculum development with a work-related focus.

Gender

The extent to which learners access to ESOL is intertwined with their gender has already been briefly discussed in the childcare and work commitments sections above. We have seen that childcare-related barriers disproportionately affect women in Waltham Forest, as they do throughout England³⁶. We have also seen that work-related barriers are mainly experienced by men as a result of traditional gender roles.

Additional markers of how the experience of ESOL may be different for men and women include levels of need. When consulting with ESOL specialists we heard that, as women are more likely to be at home, they may experience a higher level of need than men, who are more likely to acquire language within their working environment. Indeed, according to the 2011 census, “6 out of 10 people who reported being unable to speak English well or at all, were girls or women (over half a million)”³⁷. Yet, ESOL specialists also hint at the fact that men are less likely to be motivated to progress in ESOL once they’ve reached a sufficient level of functionality, “which allow[s] them to do what they need to do and then their motivation drops”. This may be related to expectations attached to gender roles, which cast men as primarily responsible for economically providing for their family.

A substantial number of teachers, managers and learners pointed to cultural barriers as preventing women from accessing ESOL. Anecdotal evidence includes women marrying into a family which is unsupportive towards them studying; women who are only allowed to attend community provision (e.g. local community centre); women who are not allowed to attend ESOL classes by their partners or only if the teacher is a woman/if the class is women-only. Emma, a volunteer with experience of running a women-only ESOL class in Walthamstow, told us that, for most of her learners, the class was the first and only way they could access ESOL as most of their husbands would not allow them to do so otherwise. One learner told us about the difficult and often oppressive situation fellow female learners have to endure and how this affects their attendance.

ESOL classes become possible safe spaces for women against this backdrop, including for those who might be experiencing gender-based violence, be it physical, psychological or economic. One learner told us, “*When I started learning English I felt free.*” For her, attending ESOL was a way to progress further, leave the house and possibly find a job in the future. Similarly, Carla, a teacher at one of the ESOL community providers, told us they support a high number of domestic violence (DV) survivors and that, “*It usually takes a long time before they really get involved and be free. That’s when you see the most growth really: when they realise that this is for me and I could be safe here.*” She told us about one of her learners for whom ESOL class was an opportunity to speak to family members she wouldn’t be able to contact otherwise:

“Her main reason for coming to class was that she could phone her sister. The class started at 10 o’clock. She was there from 9 o’clock outside the building phoning her sister. She couldn’t phone her from home, so when we went out on a trip you’d notice that in all the photographs she’s got her back to the camera because she’s on the phone. That’s the only time she got. So you have to structure any advertising in a way that they know this is a place they can make an excuse to come to.”

³⁶ Refugee Action. (2016). Let Refugees Learn (p. 33). Available at [link](#).

³⁷ London Borough of Waltham Forest unpublished report Understanding the barriers to employment for economically inactive women in the London Borough of Waltham Forest (p. 21).

Carla's last sentence chimes with a number of techniques deployed by ESOL providers – both statutory and non-statutory – to ensure the classroom is a space of safety and freedom for its female learners. We were told of providers who support women to attend without their husband's knowledge; who tailor the letters sent to the learners' homes; and advise learners to frame classes and outings as a governmental requirement. Sarah, an ESOL coordinator at one of the providers involved in the research, describes the importance of ESOL classes for women:

“They can have discussions, they can have opinions, they find out about each other, other cultures and learn more about life in the UK and see the sort of possibilities that there are for them. (...) I think we really need to treasure what we do for women. (...) I think we give these women a fantastic opportunity, in an environment where they feel secure and they can have a voice.”

Accessing what is, for many, a safe ESOL class does not come without challenges. The existing eligibility criteria³⁸ learners must meet to enrol in ESOL poses disproportionate problems for women. Learners who are on a dependent visa, including a spouse visa, are funded to access provision through discretionary streams³⁹. Anecdotal evidence shared by ESOL providers in Waltham Forest indicates that the grand majority of learners on a spouse visa are women. This has substantial implications on women's capacity to access ESOL, which becomes dependent on their partner's immigration status and willingness to provide the evidence required for enrolment. This coincides with what we heard from one of the providers with extensive experience of supporting vulnerable female learners:

“It's quite difficult when you're asking for someone's husband's passport (...) If someone has come to the UK as a spouse or to marry, they have to prove that their partner has lived in the UK long enough for them to gain that free learning.”

This barrier is further compounded by the remaining eligibility criteria used to determine whether learners have the right to access ESOL free of charge. One of the criteria attached to the Learners Support Fund is household⁴⁰, rather than individual, income. If female learners are economically inactive, yet their partner's earnings exceed the threshold, the learner's capacity to pay the fees is dependent on the partner's decision and commitment to their spouse's learning. We heard of a number of cases in which female learners are prevented from attending ESOL classes as their husbands are unwilling to pay. In addition to this, and as noted by the ESOL specialists we consulted and raised by the Runnymede Trust and Refugee Action⁴¹, if female learners are economically inactive and not entitled to benefits, as their partners are in employment, they might not be entitled to ESOL. In some cases, the family might be living in extremely precarious conditions: *“If you have a family with three or four children and the husband is earning say just above £16k, that is not enough. The women are in need to learn English to get work, but they aren't eligible for the courses”*⁴².

³⁸ See [ESFA funded adult education budget \(AEB\): funding rules 2019 to 2020](#) (p. 13) for further information.

³⁹ There is scope for providers to access Learners Support Fund discretionary funding where learners do not meet AEB's residency criteria. This is the case for learners who hold a spouse visa or any other type of dependent visa. Providers decide how to allocate this funding, depending on local needs.

⁴⁰ For further information on Learner Support see [link](#).

⁴¹ Refugee Action. (2016). Let Refugees Learn (p. 3). Available at [link](#).

⁴² Runnymede Trust and Women's Budget Group. (2017). Intersecting Inequalities. Available at [link](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

Recommendation 1. The use of 'household income' as a measure to establish eligibility should be replaced by a 'personal income' system or, preferably, a free ESOL entitlement model as advocated by the GLA.

'Household income' as a criterion has the potential to discriminate against women, particularly those who are likely to be in some form of financially abusive or dependant relationship.

Further strengthening of the collaboration between ESOL providers and organisations supporting women in Waltham Forest would have a positive impact on those who experience heightened vulnerabilities. This could lead to the creation of additional women-only spaces, whether in the form of ESOL/Conversation courses or simply as spaces to talk and support one another.

Young people

The barriers discussed in previous sections have been identified across all forms of provision, including formal and informal. They affect adult learners in their grand majority, yet also coincide with some of the needs experienced by young learners in the borough, mostly regarding health. The specific experiences of young ESOL learners appears to be largely absent from the existing literature. The section below is based on interviews and discussions with teachers.

In Waltham Forest, only one of the providers involved in this research has a specific ESOL offer for 16-18-year-olds. According to anecdotal evidence provided by teachers, learners' main countries of origin are Afghanistan, Albania and countries located in the Horn of Africa. A substantial number of these young learners are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)⁴³ who are being looked after by the local authority, and young people who have been granted refugee status. According to an internal, unpublished report, UASC account for 37% of all children in care of Waltham Forest and their main educational barriers include:

HAVING LITTLE OR NO PREVIOUS FORMAL EDUCATION

LOW ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

ISOLATION

TRAUMA

Indeed, learners' background determines the types of barriers they experience when seeking to access ESOL. Poor health, especially mental health, is overwhelmingly experienced by young learners in Waltham Forest, especially amongst UASC and young refugees. The traumatic experiences young learners endure⁴⁴ in their country of origin and on their journey to the UK can have a severe impact on their physical and mental health.

According to guidance produced by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, it is common that UASC experience sleep and behaviour disturbances, with this group being at risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of past experiences of bereavement, torture or trafficking, for example⁴⁵.

Young learners' experience of migration and separation and their specific set of health needs can lead them to feel socially isolated and lonely – the main issues identified by teachers supporting 16-18 learners. This barrier mostly affects learners' learning experience and progression. Learners speak of a lack of spaces where they can socialise, a lack of outings and interactive elements, such as sports, alongside ESOL, and a lack of advice and counselling support available to them. Learners commonly express an interest in doing more activities outside the classroom to practice their English and report an insufficient response to their requests.

⁴³ UASC is commonly defined as a child or young person seeking asylum without the presence of a legal guardian.

⁴⁴ The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published [guidance](#) on the health needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, outlining the way in which their experiences of separation and trauma may impact on their physical and mental health.

⁴⁵ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. (2019). Refugee and Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children and Young People – Guidance for Paediatricians (p. 8). Available at [link](#).

They also generally identify English proficiency as a pre-requisite to making new friends, combating isolation and loneliness and being independent.

These are barriers affecting learners' well-being and development, both from a social and learning perspective, which have been found to be deeply linked to funding cuts to local authorities. The lack of spaces, networks and services highlighted by young learners tells a wider tale underpinned by deep cuts to youth services in recent years⁴⁶.

Indeed, local authorities in the UK have cut 40% of spending on youth services over the past three years. Funding cuts also impact on the support UASC receive from local authorities, which can ultimately affect their access to a range of services. Teachers told us they often try to support young learners in finding additional activities and services, but that their lack of capacity and poor links with the provider's support services can hinder these attempts.

The teachers involved in this research identified further barriers to young people's learning experience, namely IT and literacy needs, combined with a curriculum that is not sufficiently tailored to this group's particular needs. The latter will be discussed in further detail in the following section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

Despite their statutory entitlement to free ESOL courses, whether through EAL support in schools or in further education/sixth form settings, learners under the age of 19 often experience a very high number of barriers which require additional provision.

Recommendation 1. Additional provision for young people should be made available, covering elements of mentoring, literacy and IT support, counselling and a number of extracurricular activities with the aim of overcoming loneliness and increasing social integration.

The ideal scenario is one where local authorities, and youth services in particular, are in receipt of sustained funding, as the impact of these services on young people's wellbeing, ability to access opportunities, as well as violence reduction, is well documented⁴⁷.

Local commissioning

1. In Waltham Forest, we will be commissioning an additional offer which has proven successful in other boroughs, such as CARAS in Tooting⁴⁸, and will include a space for learners to access extracurricular activities as well as learning and wellbeing support.

⁴⁶ This figure was obtained by the All Parliamentary Party Group (APPG) on Knife Crime through Freedom of Information requests to inform their new report on the link between cuts to youth services and the rise in knife crime. For further information, see [link](#).

⁴⁷ See the Big Lottery Fund's report on Preventing Youth Violence [here](#).

Systemic barriers: THE TRINITY OF FUNDING, REGULATIONS AND COMPLEX NEEDS

The sections above have primarily focused on the various individual needs experienced by ESOL learners in Waltham Forest which, when unmet, result in barriers preventing access, attendance and progression in ESOL. This section will be dedicated to a discussion of how different needs relate to each other, often resulting in complex needs, and what the interplay is between existing provisions – both formal and informal.

Through this discussion, we will identify further structural barriers which have been found to impact and aggravate the barriers previously enumerated, namely health, childcare, work, gender and young people.

The need for flexibility in formal ESOL provision

Despite having been presented individually, the barriers and needs included in this report are seldom experienced by learners in an isolated way. This has already been briefly touched upon: physical and mental health needs can stem from employment or financial related concerns; childcare needs are intimately related with the learner's gender; physical health needs may result in social isolation and impact on the learner's mental health.

For a substantial sub-section of ESOL learners in Waltham Forest, these needs are underpinned and aggravated by their experiences of migration and, often, by the levels of deprivation they experience. As discussed above, mental health needs, in particular, can be a direct result of the process of migration, namely of trauma experienced both in the country of origin and on the journey itself.

Learners' journeys and migrant backgrounds may lead them to have a range of different needs which are intimately related to an overall experience of deprivation resulting from structural inequalities. This relationship has been documented by a range of reports⁴⁹ analysing the high prevalence of poverty amongst migrants in the UK. At a local level, the link between migrant learners' needs, their immigration background and high levels of deprivation is evidenced by the percentage of unemployed learners in the borough in the 2018/19 academic year – 63%; and by the testimonies of teachers who speak of learners living in poverty who have to choose between 'having food on the table' or learning English. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, despite cross-cutting, different migrant experiences – that of an EEA economic migrant in comparison to an asylum-seeker – will result in different levels of vulnerability and impact on the likelihood of experiencing multiple needs.

As indicated, learners' needs may overlap, resulting in complex needs – often described as one or more needs which can exacerbate each other, affecting the person's wellbeing. When unmet, these needs can develop into obstacles preventing learners from accessing suitable ESOL provision. One of this report's central findings is the way in which the lack of flexibility in formal ESOL provision is excluding a substantial number of learners, especially those with multiple needs, from ESOL.

⁴⁹ For further information on the relationship between the migrant population in the UK and deprivation levels see Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2016). England's most disadvantaged groups: migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers; Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2016). Foreign-born people and poverty in the UK; Pemberton, S., Phillimore, J. and Robinson, D. (2014). Causes and experiences of poverty among economic migrants in the UK.

The stakeholders involved in this research project depicted one cohesive picture of the existing formal provision: that of a rigid, target-based system built to deliver linear learner journeys. Catherine, who works in one of the non-statutory ESOL providers in the borough and is part of a national ESOL policy body, described the current “mechanisms, the funding” as forming an inflexible formal offer composed of:

“10 sessions, this many days a week, this many hours per week and everyone is going to attend every single session and everyone is going to pass a qualification and everyone is going to walk into a job. It’s assuming a very average learner in that sense.”

The image of the ‘average learner’ vividly clashes with that of the learner grappling with complex needs.

The rigidity of formal ESOL provision stems, for the most part, from the criteria attached to funding and set by Ofsted regulation⁵⁰. ESOL teachers and managers alike raised concerns about the way in which both impact on the requirements placed on learners – ranging from attendance thresholds to eligibility criteria, the curriculum and the link between qualifications and funding. This is noted by Sarah, an ESOL coordinator at one of main formal ESOL providers:

“The funding is geared towards getting people through levels and exams and moving them on but, in reality, with ESOL learners it’s not just one straight line that goes through.”

Indeed, the existing requirements adopted in formal provision were found to act as barriers preventing or affecting access to ESOL in Waltham Forest for those learners with complex needs, as they clashed with their changing schedules, physical limitations and administrative complications.

Eligibility

As discussed in Chapter 6, in comparison to other boroughs, eligibility criteria is not, in general terms, a substantial barrier for most learners in Waltham Forest. This is due to the diverse streams of funding used by providers in Waltham Forest, which permit them to support learners who might not meet the above-mentioned criteria set by AE⁵¹. Nevertheless, as discussed under the section regarding gender, the analysis of household, rather than individual, income, combined with the need to be in receipt of benefits, might disproportionally limit women’s access to ESOL. This barrier also affects learners on work visas who have not resided in the UK for more than three years, as well as those without the documents required by providers who ask for proof of address and benefits as opposed to self-declarations. A representative of an ESOL provider in the borough further noted that eligibility criteria can also become a barrier to hard-to-reach groups as a result of the evidence required:

“If they’ve been through an asylum process they might have lost documents, you know. A lot of people don’t retain ID documents well because they’ve been moved from place to place. And then you also need to get proof of address (...) and [it] can be harder to get than proof of ID because, again, I might not be on my household bills because it’s all in the other person’s name, it might not be on the Council Tax, even my doctor won’t give a letter out anymore (...) so there’s nothing to prove that you live at your address anymore.”

Catherine, senior staff member at ESOL provider

⁵⁰ See [Ofsted’s Further Education and Skills Inspection Framework](#).

⁵¹ ESOL providers can use a range of AEB and discretionary funding – including the Learner Support Fund – to support learners into free provision.

Attendance

A further barrier affecting learners' permanence in ESOL is related to the existing attendance targets adopted by formal ESOL providers. Despite there not being a nationally defined attendance threshold or set of rules, Ofsted's inspection framework⁵² associates high attendance rates with quality of provision. Anecdotal evidence in Waltham Forest suggests the attendance targets set in formal provision range from 80% to 90% – a rate which is undeniably difficult to meet by learners who have work or childcare commitments, physical and mental health needs or constant health appointments, as previously discussed.

In addition to this, learners' attendance might be affected by changes or issues in their country of origin, as noted by an ESOL coordinator:

“There's the nature of the fact that you're dealing with people who have, quite often, family in other parts of the world. So relatives who suddenly become sick or something happens somewhere else, and then they're there for 2 or 3 weeks.”

Non-compliance of attendance targets on behalf of learners – regardless of whether they've been adequately justified – may result in their exclusion from the course they're enrolled on. Evidence suggests that attitudes towards attendance vary from provider to provider, as the decision-making process takes place at a local management, rather than national, level. The human impact of a strict approach to attendance is substantial and hits the most marginalised and vulnerable learners the hardest.

Qualifications

A third type of barrier associated with the rigidity of formal provision is the focus placed on qualifications and exams. Currently, learners have access to two types of provision in formal ESOL settings: accredited and non-accredited. In the case of accredited courses, students are required to pass exams at two or three different stages in the academic year. In addition to this, there are non-accredited learning programmes available, such as RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement), which could be viable alternatives to exam-based provision. The goal of this type of non-regulated provision is to ensure providers have more flexibility to support learners with particular needs – ranging from literacy to no previous education – using a tailored approach.

Despite being an effective method to cater for individual and complex needs, learners can only access non-accredited courses for a limited amount of time. After having accessed a limited number of GLH (Guided Learning Hours) of non-accredited provision, ESOL funding regulations require that learners move on to a qualification for their learning journey to be fundable. One ESOL teacher described the excessive focus on qualifications as an inability on the funder's and the provider's side of *“not seeing things as different”*.

The excessive focus on passing exams and the extent to which this can limit teachers' ability to tailor the curriculum to learners' needs and priorities was one of the main themes highlighted by ESOL teachers across different providers. As preparing learners for exams becomes one of the curriculum's central concerns, teachers find themselves with less and less time to personalise the learning experience.

⁵² See [Ofsted's Further Education and Skills Inspection Framework](#).

In addition to this, the focus on standardised exams and qualifications overlooks the unequal levels of education and schooling experience different learners have. In a classroom setting as diverse as ESOL, learners with literacy needs may be found sitting side by side with learners who have already completed higher education degrees. Their educational background impacts on the former's confidence and on how quickly they can progress. As a representative of an ESOL provider put it:

“Some people haven't learned before so don't have techniques, practices in place and actually a lot of the teachers' time is spent creating those habits, behaviours, and less on grammar.”

Ultimately, the existence of specific needs within a format which requires learners to obtain key qualifications at key times affects their capacity to progress onto the next level. This concern was voiced by Sarah, an ESOL coordinator at one of the providers in the borough:

“We do find we get learners at a particular level, often around E3/L1, some of the jumps within the national curriculum, and learners do struggle to move sometimes, and sometimes we feel they would really benefit from a ‘getting ready for’ type course. Other people just need more time at the level and [we're] trying to balance those needs”

The argument for 'needing more time at the level' also applies to lower levels, namely Pre-Entry and Entry 1, where learners are likely to experience additional barriers due to low levels of literacy and lack of schooling in their country of origin. This situation was raised by Cristina, a caseworker supporting refugee families, in relation to their initial access:

“I think that can be quite disheartening, when most people when they arrive they really need the alphabet. But then, going into a course halfway through the year, combined with the fact that there will be fluctuating levels in that class even though it's all Pre-Entry, that can also knock people's confidence.”

The cumulative impact of the barriers discussed above is that those learners who experience the most complex of needs and the highest levels of vulnerability can often find themselves left out of provision or left behind in the classroom. The inability to pay for ESOL, attendance-related exclusions and difficulties completing qualifications are all telling examples of how one size does not fit all in formal provision.

Curriculum

The lack of an ESOL strategy and, as a result, an up-to-date ESOL curriculum has been identified as a significant barrier to effective learning for ESOL students.

As touched upon in the previous section, exam-focused learning means that the curriculum is designed around what exam boards deem to be appropriate functional English. Practitioners, support workers and learners raised what is, for them, an excessive focus on exams and the lack of meaningful learning of functional English. Francisca, an ESOL teacher at one of the local providers, spoke specifically about the need to steer the curriculum towards everyday life and equip learners with relevant vocabulary.

Regrettably institutions are in a position whereby statutory funding of ESOL is highly dependent on exam passes. This is detrimental to teaching and learning in multiple ways.

ESOL teachers, whose performance is often measured on exam success, are disincentivised to deliver creative and enjoyable lessons that are relevant to the lives and needs of the students in their classroom.

As a result, resources are not always authentic, up to date or appropriate to the profile of the classroom. Teachers already juggling a heavy workload admit to not having the time or motivation to create imaginative and creative lessons, instead relying on exam-style practice.

A decade of austerity and education funding cuts entails that ESOL departments, and education providers in general, are financially squeezed. The impact on the learners means that, with the exception of RARPA, if they are not able to progress on to the next level – for whatever reason – they cannot continue their studies. This only serves to create a learning system whereby learners who experience barriers to their access to education – learning needs, often undiagnosed, chaotic lives, health issues, changing work schedules – are excluded from education.

Anecdotally, it is broadly acknowledged that ESOL departments taper off as the levels get higher, as students are less able to pass exams having missed out on learning the basics. The dilemma that managers find themselves in is whether to exclude learners from ESOL or whether to push them up through levels, which inevitable means that the goal posts are widened and the overall quality of teaching and learning is compromised. In turn, this means that a Level 1 qualification from one ESOL provider will be a different level to a Level 1 qualification from another provider.

The lack of freedom in the content of the curriculum means that teachers cannot produce meaningful resources that are tailored to the individual needs, interests and lives of their learners. This was confirmed by the learners who we spoke to, some of whom identified the general character of the curriculum as an obstacle to effective learning and progress.

It has also been identified that the curriculum does not always provide a learning structure that is representative of the beliefs, ethnicities and diversity that is reflected in society with an overrepresentation of white, Eurocentric and western values.

Emma, a volunteer responsible for running a women-only class, sheds light on this issue:

“The books were all for Europeans learning English. I found they didn’t really work, because they all assumed that you knew about life in Europe, so I thought they couldn’t really relate to that.”

This is also contrary to the Ofsted guidance on teaching observations⁵³ which requires planning to be inclusive and resources to be representative. We have found that there are a number of teacher initiatives aiming at producing more culturally-sensitive materials, yet capacity issues can often limit their development.

The recent introduction of compulsory topics such as British Values and the Prevent strategy are viewed by many ESOL teachers as a tick box exercise. Lecturers receive very limited training on the purpose and intentions of these teaching topics – and, crucially, on how these should be used to promote critical thinking – and often have limited understanding themselves. The lack of development of relevant, age and level appropriate resources means that these topics are not handled in a sensitive way or taught effectively. Adversely, this can have a detrimental effect whereby learners feel victimised because of their religion or beliefs, which can strengthen hostility and hinder cohesion between groups.

Many ESOL teachers stress the importance of teaching a curriculum which is politically and socially relevant and explores important topics such as ethnic and religious diversity, LGBT rights, and gender equality. They also point out that preparation for such important topics is time consuming and arduous as, unlike mainstream education, resources for teaching ESOL are outdated and limited.

⁵³ For further information, please see Ofsted’s current [consultation](#) on the 2020 initial teacher education (ITE) inspection framework.

The role of informal and community learning

Informal and community-based ESOL provision in Waltham Forest plays a central role in filling the gap created by the rigidity of formal provision and providing more flexible, personalised support to those learners who are often characterised as “*hard-to-reach*”.

Providers delivering community provision in Waltham Forest described their approach to supporting these groups as, “*We go to people rather than people coming to us*”. What we heard is that this defining factor makes it possible to support communities who might not feel confident in accessing more formal provision. According to the Somali Women’s Association, this lack of confidence might be due to language barriers themselves; whereas, “*Negative previous learning experiences may put them off from coming back to studying*” as mentioned by Fallou, the learning coordinator at one of the providers delivering community learning. Caseworker Cristina speaks of, “*A gap between knowing all the opportunities that are available and actually going and getting over the doorstep and attending these classes*”.

Moving provision closer to learners depends, in a large measure, on infrastructure and accessibility. The importance of location in community learning has been documented in existing literature that points to how community spaces can be perceived as safe spaces by vulnerable learners⁵⁴. What we heard from providers specialising in community learning is that not every learner will be able to attend training centres and that an effective way to improve access is by using co-location in community centres. As Catherine, a senior staff member, explains:

“I think community ESOL works well when you’re working in a community centre that’s already got other stuff happening because your role is to get people in to get engaged with whatever’s happening there as a hub, rather than creating that hub.”

Making provision genuinely suitable to learners is also dependent on assessing and addressing their needs in a holistic way. Esma, a teacher delivering community learning in the borough, discusses how vital this approach is, hinting at how compartmentalising learners’ education and overlooking wider needs and experiences can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the provision:

“We just try to help them in a holistic way. It’s not just improving their English because otherwise it wouldn’t work – if they’re having lots of problems in their lives and they’re learning English, you have to have the whole thing going right.”

For this particular provider, a holistic perspective is vital as many of its learners experience complex needs, often linked to financial vulnerability and hardship. Staff put learners in touch with advice services to address these wider needs yet note that there is a shortage of such services in the borough.

Informal and community-based provision seems to play an additional role that has been identified both in national literature⁵⁵ and on the ground in Waltham Forest: that of providing a transitioning moment for learners who are currently unable to access more formal provision. In this sense, community provision can equip learners with a safe space and the necessary tools to build their confidence and bring them closer to their next steps. This bridging role is described as providing, “*That first steps safety kind of familiarity that people need in order to then work towards potentially accessing things that are a lot more daunting or unfamiliar or further away*”, as a representative of a community learning provider puts it.

⁵⁴ Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. (2018). The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century (para 420). Available at [link](#).

⁵⁵ A [report](#) commissioned by the GLA to the Learning and Work Institute on ESOL provision in London confirmed “the importance of informal non-accredited learning pathways, for those not able to access formal learning immediately” for resettled Syrian refugees (p. 5).

As we have seen, community learning is often best placed to support learners with the most complex set of needs in a personalised way. Nevertheless, it is crucial to ensure both formal and informal provision are meeting learners' needs in a complementary fashion.

As pointed out in a report produced on ESOL provision in Leeds, *"ESOL needs to be provided both at the mainstream and the community level, and these dimensions of provision need to be closely coordinated"*⁵⁶. The implication of this acknowledgment is that it is essential to promote more flexibility in formal provision and strengthen funding for community learning. A strong complementary ESOL offer across the borough enables learners to access the type of provision that suits them best, whether that is formal ESOL provision at a further education college for a refugee learner or community learning for a learner who would prefer a smaller-scale, local class.

The effects of funding cuts and deregulation

The barriers outlined in this report are related to and underpinned by the most fundamental issue in the ESOL sector: funding cuts. According to Refugee Action's Turning Words into Actions report, the *"amount of money spent on ESOL delivery through the Adult Education Budget saw a real terms drop of almost 60 percent between 2008/09 and 2017/18"*⁵⁷. The impact of these cuts is far-reaching: it limits providers' counselling offer, their capacity to provide a crèche on premises and to deliver learning programmes in the community. Funding cuts also have a detrimental effect on class sizes, teachers' salaries and capacity. This, in turn, limits the time teachers have to provide more personalised support, in- and outside the classroom, and to adapt resources to ensure they are tailored to their learners. Learners' access, attendance, experience of learning and progression is directly affected as a result of this, as we have seen throughout this report.

The sharp decrease in ESOL funding has been accompanied by a parallel and, possible, interrelated trend: the active deprofessionalisation and deregulation of ESOL teaching in the last decade. Following the *Lingfield Review on Professionalism in Further Education*⁵⁸, published in 2012, the government scrapped the requirement that ESOL teachers should hold one of the several generic teaching qualifications, such as a Diploma in Education and Training (DET) or a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). This has affected the overall professionalism of teaching ESOL which can directly affect the level of expertise of teachers, as voiced by ESOL managers. This issue was raised by Catherine, who, at the time of the interview, worked at one of the providers consulted and was involved in national ESOL policy making:

"A lot of places now rely only on teachers having CELTA qualifications and for a lot of people it's 'oh that's fine', but what you're comparing is an 8-week programme versus a year-long PGCE university-led programme, with an in-depth placement, generally."

From Catherine's perspective, this trend has direct consequences on students' learning experience, particularly on teachers' capacity to manage mixed level ESOL classes and adequately differentiate depending on learners' levels and needs. She recalls carrying out an observation of:

"A mixed level [class] but due to the teacher's lack of skill and expertise, that teacher had created a situation where the higher level students hated the lower level students, were disparaging towards them within the same session and, you know, kind of saying 'They're slowing me down, why are they here?'"

⁵⁶ Simpson, J., et al. (2011). ESOL Neighbourhood Audit Pilot (Harehills, Leeds) (p. 4).

⁵⁷ Refugee Action. (2019). Turning Words into Actions (p. 5). Available at [link](#).

⁵⁸ For the final report of the Independent Review Panel, please see [link](#).

Issues stemming from mismanaged mixed level classes have been raised in national literature and include *“frustration at not progressing their learning”*⁵⁹, which resulted in non-attendance, poor rates of progression and tensions amongst learners who feel either left behind or held back⁶⁰. In Waltham Forest, this barrier to learning was raised repeatedly by teachers, learners, managers, caseworkers and volunteers. Cristina, a caseworker supporting refugee families in the borough, told us:

“This is a subject that we talk about quite a lot with the families [...] The frustration about, ‘We’re in a beginners class, but it’s not beginners level’, ‘Everyone else knows how to speak, they just don’t know how to write, and we don’t know how to speak or write’”

This situation is worsened by the size of classes, as noted by a teacher – *“learners don’t feel they have a chance to really get to grips with things because the teachers are dealing with 25, 28 people”* – and by learners’ literacy, educational background and study skills, which require time and expertise to manage and differentiate.

The deprofessionalisation of ESOL teaching has also led to an increase in the number of volunteers taking up teaching positions, especially in community provision. Similarly to the consequences previously outlined, this can negatively impact on learners’ capacity to learn and on their experiences in the classroom, possibly preventing them from accessing ESOL in the future. A volunteer with experience of leading on an informal ESOL class voices her concerns in relation to the topic:

“I’m not qualified to teach English with people with no English whatsoever. That’s a big problem. I think that, for that [purpose], they should use (...) people who have had some training. That is another problem with so many of the learners, if not all, I was worried that if they felt they couldn’t follow the class they were the sort of people who would see it as ‘it’s me’ (...). It’s very likely my fault that my approach isn’t the right one for them. And they think it’s their fault.”

⁵⁹ Refugee Action. (2016). Let Refugees Learn (p. 3). Available at [link](#).

⁶⁰ Department for Education. (2019). English for Speakers of Other Languages: Access and Progression (p. 81). Available at [link](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

Recommendation 1. A more flexible approach regarding attendance and progression thresholds, on the part of providers, funders as well as Ofsted, is needed to ensure that a substantial number of learners with complex needs are not left out of education and can continue having access to accredited ESOL courses.

The argument whereby high levels of attendance are required to support learners with their employability skills does not take into account the important role that education in its intrinsic value plays in people's lives. The impact that language learning – and education in general – for parents has on their children's education should also not be overlooked.

Recommendation 2. A more extensive use of non-accredited provision is required to accommodate learners' needs. This includes a higher number of guided learning hours per RARPA course, i.e. longer courses, and the option of funding RARPA for two consecutive terms, semesters or years for very vulnerable learners.

This is particularly relevant for Pre-Entry and literacy provision, where a comprehensive offer should include shorter courses for learners with strong study skills and longer, year-long options for those with complex needs, including literacy.

Recommendation 3. Eligibility measures should be based on individual circumstances as opposed to 'household' indicators, as discussed in the 'Gender' section, and should include residents on work visas. A self-declaration option for benefits and income should be accepted by funders, wherever possible, in order to remove barriers for the most vulnerable.

Recommendation 4. After the publication of the ESOL strategy for England, an up-to-date ESOL curriculum should be devised: this should actively promote the diversity of our communities and assist/equip teachers in tackling potential issues of prejudice or hate speech, by encouraging critical thinking.

Recommendation 5. An ESOL strategy should acknowledge that teaching ESOL goes beyond language learning and a four-week CELTA/TEFL qualification does not cover all the elements needed by tutors in the classroom. PGCE level 5 qualifications should be reinstated as requirements and funding should be made available for applicants.

A clear distinction between the role of a fully-qualified teacher and that of a volunteer should be drawn: volunteers play a very important role in integration and informal learning programmes, but they should not be a substitute for an investment in paid teachers within formal learning.

Recommendation 6. Finally, a well-funded ESOL entitlement for residents, regardless of immigration status, together with an effective local coordination model, would enable learners to have access to the most suitable course in their area based on their individual needs as soon as they arrive in the UK. ESOL funding should include childcare provision as well as administrative support for providers. From a learner's perspective, this approach will avoid language fossilisation and will have a positive impact on integration. From a provider's perspective, it will increase their capacity as less time will be dedicated to applications to different funding streams.

8.

Conclusions

8. Conclusions

Accessing, learning and progressing in ESOL is a vital opportunity for residents who wish to learn or improve their English, impacting both on individual lives and on the wider social fabric. As one of the research participants puts it: ***“In one way, it is all the same, in that the people want to integrate and participate in the world around them.”***

Despite being brought together by a common ambition, ESOL learners are an incredibly diverse group who require an equally diverse provision. What this report has found is that the rigidity of formal ESOL in Waltham Forest – which accounts for the majority of courses available – compounded by funding cuts witnessed in the past decade, limits the sector’s capacity to adapt to learners’ needs. This results in a number of barriers preventing some learners, often those with the most complex needs and acute vulnerabilities, from accessing adequate provision. The ultimate implication of this trend is that the most marginalised learners experience an unequal access to ESOL, thereby deepening the inequalities affecting every other part of their lives.

Our recommendations seek to trigger wider changes in funding and policies which can counter-act the barriers hereby reported. This is particularly vital in light of the recent devolution process to the Greater London Authority and the latter’s interest in providing equal and universal access to ESOL in the city.

Our commissioning plans seek to create new, tailored provision at a borough level which addresses the issues and supports the groups identified in the report. Despite not tackling the systemic challenges producing a number of these barriers, this new provision can provide personalised support and an immediate response to the calls of the learners, practitioners and officers involved in this research.



9.

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9. References

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