The ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project

Evaluation Report

October 2020

"The Learning English website - it's a process not a product!" ESOL provider

"It's so frustrating when good services like this are set up and then two or three years later, they're disbanded and something else comes along. It would be great if this could continue to be developed, particularly given the amount of work that's gone into it so far and the buy in from local providers which would indicate that the service is appreciated!" (Local authority lead for ESOL)

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Contents

Introduction

This report presents the findings of the independent evaluation of the ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project. The evaluation was commissioned and overseen by Liz Maddocks, Integration and Partnerships Officer at Migration Yorkshire. It was conducted by Richard Malfait and Nick Scott-Flynn who provide independent evaluation services for organisations across the UK. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to explore the project impact against its target outcomes and to identify learning through its delivery from September 2019 until the completion of the funded period in September 2020.

The report summarises the main themes on impact, value and learning gathered in stakeholder feedback, drawing upon individual evaluation contributions received from 45 stakeholders. The feedback has been collected by individual interviews, through Regional Networking Event participation and online survey completions. Stakeholder consultation took place between May and September 2020.

The evaluation would not have been possible without the help and participation of all the contributing stakeholders and we are grateful to everyone who has given their time and shared their views in the consultation process to date.

Project background and outline

The ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project was jointly funded by thirteen[1] participating local authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber region and by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The project commenced on 1st April 2019, with Migrant English Support Hub (MESH) sub-contracted by Migration Yorkshire to deliver the project. MESH had already developed an earlier website for Leeds (Learn English in Leeds). The LEL model was featured in the DEMOS report On Speaking Terms (2014) and the draft ESOL Strategy for England (NATECLA 2016). It was presented in both cases as an example of good practice in coordinating English language provision in an area, promoting effective placement and progression in learning. Most recently, the LEL resource was

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[1] Bradford also joined the partnership in summer 2020 bringing the total number of participating local authorities to fourteen.

identified and described as a model of good practice in the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, published 15th March 2018 by MHCLG.

The ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project (henceforth also referred to as the 'project' or the 'ERPR') aimed to expand and improve upon the LEL site across Yorkshire & Humber. The main elements of the project delivery were:

- The design and establishment of a regional 'Learning English' online resource that aimed to build a full list of ESOL provision (formal and informal) across Yorkshire and Humber.
- The planning and facilitation of a series of four Regional Networking Events to give ESOL providers and practitioners opportunities to network, improve signposting and share good practice.

The project aims and the target outcomes forming the basis for its delivery were:

- To increase awareness of and access to ESOL provision for migrants across the Yorkshire & Humber region.
- To increase knowledge of current ESOL provision including gaps and barriers, for local authorities and a broader strategic audience including the Home Office and MHCLG as well as local ESOL providers.
- To enable additional resources for ESOL (currently available through the Syrian Resettlement Programme) to be better targeted to address gaps, meet needs and avoid duplication.

The evaluation explored how well these aims and outcomes had been achieved.

Executive summary and recommendations

> *"It [the project] is working, we not only have better knowledge than we had six months ago of the ESOL provision, but we can now access better ESOL provision, although the Covid-19 has created some challenges." (Local authority lead)*

> *"It [the project] makes so much sense to have this as a centrally coordinated resource. Far too much time is spent in ESOL re-inventing the wheel and this has saved tutor time. If it's available longer term and continues to be developed, this will become a very valuable resource." (Stakeholder with ESOL role)*

The ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project was publically launched in September 2019. Since then the project has effectively established, refined and developed the 'Learning English (Yorkshire and Humber)' online resource to progressively build an accessible, user-informed source of information on ESOL provision across the region. Feedback from ESOL providers and other stakeholders who work with refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants in the region has been emphatically positive on the value and impact of the project. The Learning English website has enabled learners to find ESOL provision in the locations, times, formats and skill levels that suit them best.

Stakeholders have commented that the design of the web resource makes it quick and easy to use by ESOL practitioners and staff who support clients for example, in Jobcentres and refugee-assisting projects. The web resource has also been accessible and used to a lesser extent by ESOL learners - sometimes with the help of a tutor or support worker, or independently if the learner has sufficient language ability and IT access. Stakeholders have especially valued the refinements and improvements incorporated by MESH into the design of the Learning English web resource – done so in response to the feedback and suggestions from stakeholders. An example in this respect has been the inclusion of information on the growing range of online ESOL provision (some of which is free) established by providers in response to the disruption of classroom delivery due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Evaluation feedback also confirms that ESOL practitioners and others who support people with ESOL needs, have actively engaged with and benefitted from the four main Regional Networking Events organised and facilitated by MESH as part of the project delivery. These events included two that were delivered in person in Leeds and Sheffield and two that were converted into an online format (Zoom) in order to enable delivery and participation during the Covid-19 lockdown period. All of the networking events were fully booked within days of invitations being disseminated and participation at each was high (see the table on page 16). Stakeholders confirmed that the content in each event

was relevant, interesting and useful. They especially valued the opportunity to meet with other ESOL providers and people working with the same client or learner groups to discuss good practice, teaching tools and issues. MESH's approach of inviting and acting upon participant suggestions for content and process was welcomed and helped ensure the value and usefulness of the events for participants.

A key learning area has been in the adaptation and trialling of networking events in an online format. While the venue-based events were very well attended and useful for participants, the online format has also offered some advantages. For example, several busy ESOL teachers and other participants found it easier and cheaper to engage in online events due to there being no travel time or cost implications. Online delivery formats for similar meetings and networking events have consequently been identified as a valuable and supplementary option for inclusion in future project design and delivery.

The 12 month 'live' delivery period for the project began at its launch in September 2019 and is a relatively short time to evaluate the full impact of the project. However, despite the challenges presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear from stakeholder feedback that the Learning English resource and Regional Networking Events have effectively supported the achievement of the project aims. Awareness of ESOL provision in Yorkshire and Humber is being increased and consequently learners, teachers and support workers are better able to search and find suitable classes and ESOL providers.

Gaps and barriers in provision are being identified which in time will inform and enable more targeted development and interventions. The sharing of ESOL teaching practices, experience and learning is being supported and facilitated through the Regional Networking Events and the establishment of new contacts and peer relationships. An additional project benefit reported by evaluation stakeholders is that the regional network of ESOL providers is being strengthened and expanded. This has been especially valued by practitioners who work alone or in small organisations outside of city hubs and often in relative isolation.

Stakeholders in all the evaluation consultation groups have been clear in their enthusiasm and support for the retention and continued development both of the Learning English regional resource and the Regional Networking Events. If continuation funding for the resource is confirmed[2] it is hoped that new or existing ESOL providers in the region that have not yet registered with Learning English will routinely choose to do so. Providers who are currently registered will also be encouraged to more

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[2] Update note - continuation of funding has recently been confirmed (September 2020)

consistently and quickly update and adjust information on their ESOL provision as and when it changes.

Looking ahead, many stakeholders anticipate that the ability to offer and support learner access to online ESOL provision will be a necessary capability and response to the measures taken to the address the Covid-19 pandemic, such as restrictions on movement. There is a need for and a collective ambition to develop and share good online skills and tools – to do so has been a strong theme in stakeholder responses when asked to identify learning points, improvement and development suggestions to inform future development of the project.

Finally, a bullet point statistical analysis of stakeholder responses to evaluation questions relating to the aims and intended outcomes of the ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project is included below. It further underlines the effectiveness and value of the project's delivery since it was launched in September 2019:

- Ten of twelve lead officers (83%) in local authorities that have contributed funding to the project confirmed that that the Learning English website is meeting their expectations (based on their own review of the resource or upon feedback received from colleagues who use it). Two replied 'I don't know'.

- Thirty-seven of forty-two evaluation respondents (88%) have 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the website and networking events (combined) are helping to increase knowledge of current ESOL provision including gaps and barriers, for local authorities as well as local ESOL providers.

- Thirty two of thirty six respondents (88%) who have used, reviewed or received peer feedback on the Learning English website 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that it is helpful.

- Twenty-seven of twenty-eight evaluation stakeholders (96%) that have participated in a Regional Networking Event, 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the event had been useful for them (for example in helping share information about ESOL provision and practice and to build ESOL networks).

- Forty of forty-two evaluation respondents (95%), 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the Regional ESOL Provision Resource and network facilitation support would be useful to sustain and develop in the future? Two replied 'I don't know'.

Recommendations

The evaluation recommendations offered below draw upon the experience and views of stakeholders as expressed in evaluation consultations, most of which were completed between May and August 2020 (when the prospects for future project funding, continuity or development were unknown).

1. **Sustain and continue to develop both the Learning English website and Regional Networking Events -** stakeholders in all groups and local authorities have confirmed that both strands of project delivery are helping to map and strengthen ESOL accessibility and provider networks in the region. There is strong agreement that the need and value for the work will be long-term and that a coordinated regional response is both the most effective and cost-efficient approach.

2. **Aim to develop a long-term sustainability and funding strategy** - to enable the online resource and networking events to be sustained on a long-term basis.

3. **Promote and advocate regional and free accessibility to ESOL learning and resources by all who need them -** including asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants. The ability to access ESOL classes and to develop skills and confidence in using English is fundamental to building independence, employability, community participation and broader integration.

4. **Continue the user engagement and co-production approach -** both in the development of the Learning English website and in planning content and delivery of networking events. MESH's approach in encouraging dialogue, feedback and suggestions on design and content in both areas has been a key factor in ensuring the website and events have been relevant and useful for users and participants.

5. **Encourage registered providers to update their information in Learning English -** details of ESOL provision, including dates, times and venues (or online provision) need to be routinely updated by providers in order to ensure that it is up to date and accurate information. This request and responsibility should continue to be messaged to registered ESOL providers.

6. **Continue to promote the Learning English website in order to build its profile and levels of engagement -** encouraging registration by new ESOL providers and those not yet registered. Inclusion of online classes or other types of remote access to learning are likely to be especially useful for the foreseeable future as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions.

7. **Continue to develop and include remote and online accessibility as a supplementary format for future networking events -** the Zoom based online networking events have been valued and enjoyed by almost all the participants consulted in the evaluation. In particular, for many ESOL providers with limited time or resources for travel in the region, the online format has sometimes

proven to be a more accessible, convenient and cheaper way to participate in an information, support and learning network. Venue-based events are also valued and should remain part of the delivery model when circumstances allow (that is post-pandemic).

8. **Explore ways of continuing to build and support learner access to online ESOL access -** whilst several ESOL providers have established or are in the process of establishing online ESOL provision, stakeholders have commented that some learners (or prospective learners) do not have the necessary access to smartphones, computers or tablets that is essential in order to be able to engage in online ESOL classes and support. Similarly, some learners do not have the necessary skills in using software or simply cannot afford the data amounts required. It is suggested that MESH work with regional providers to explore potential for the provision or loan of equipment and support to help overcome these challenges.

9. **Review and consider the stakeholder suggestions received for improvement and development of the Learning English web resource and networking events -** examples are included in the main body of this report and additional examples are included in a separate appendix.

10. **Share the ERPR Project model, delivery experience and learning with other regions** - the model and delivery of the project has been effective and could usefully inform ESOL related planning and work in other regions.

Evaluation methodology

Stakeholder consultations: The list of priority stakeholders invited to contribute in the evaluation was developed with input from Migration Yorkshire and MESH. It originally included 69 individuals from the four main stakeholder groups to be consulted. These included local authorities, ESOL providing organisations, other support and signposting organisations and a small sample of ESOL learners. Twenty-one additional or alternative contacts were subsequently added by local authority stakeholders on the basis that they were felt likely to have a more experience-based perspective on the project delivery. Access to the evaluation was further broadened through encouraging MESH team members and local authority stakeholders on the priority list to share the online survey link with peers, colleagues and learners (in the final phase). As part of the evaluation ESOL providers were invited to encourage feedback and discussion relating to the Learning English website and their views on barriers (and solutions) to accessing ESOL. Unfortunately, classroom based ESOL provision was suspended when the first lockdown measures were introduced in March 2020. Some ESOL providers adapted and

started to offer online ESOL classes or groups but this was limited during the evaluation period.[3] This may have contributed to the low response rate of learners to requests for phone or group-based consultations and online survey completion as part of the evaluation (three online learner responses were received).

In total, consultation interviews or online survey responses have been completed by 45 individuals, including practitioners and lead workers based in 12 local authorities and 12 other organisations (see table below):

Consulted stakeholder categories	No.
Internal stakeholders (Migration Yorkshire and MESH)	5
Local authority leads (from 12 Local Authorities)	12
Local authority workers (other roles linking to ESOL in the region)	7
ESOL providers & practitioners (ESOL organisations)	12
DWP & other referring or signposting organisations in the region	6
ESOL learners	3
Totals	45

Data review: The following documents have also been provided by Migration Yorkshire and MESH for information and review as part of the independent evaluation: Website analytic reports; network event feedback; ESOL Regional Coordinator reports from previous years.

Summary of findings and themes of feedback

Thirty-seven (88%) of forty-two evaluation respondents have 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the website and networking events are helping to increase knowledge of current ESOL provision including gaps and barriers, for local authorities as well as local ESOL providers.

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[3] Update: In November 2020 the Learning English website listed a variety of online classes and activities offered by 12 organisations in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

Feedback received from all sources (including that gathered at the Regional Networking Events) was consistently very positive and emphasised the value and shared support for the ERPR Project. The effectiveness of the project model is also clearly reflected in the Learning English Analytics Report and in statistical analysis of stakeholder responses to the Likert format questions that formed part of the independent evaluation consultations. Both sets of data confirm that good progress and impact against the project aims and target outcomes was achieved in the delivery year, despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (see later notes). For example, between late September 2019 and the end of September 2020:

- In total 143 organisations registered and inputted information about their ESOL provision on the Learning English website.
- The website was used by 8252 people. This included 1053 'new users' during September 2020 (website use dipped temporarily during the first Covid19 lockdown period between March and the end of August 2020).
- More than 35,750 page views were recorded.
- 186 individuals from over 60 organisations participated in at least one Regional Networking Event (including Zoom format events) delivered by the ERPR Project.

The Learning English website - value and impact

Thirty-two out of (88%) of thirty six respondents who have used, reviewed or received peer feedback on the Learning English website, 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that it is helpful.

Ten out of twelve lead officers in the Local Authorities that have contributed funding to the project confirmed that the Learning English website is meeting their expectations (based on their own review of the resource or upon feedback from colleagues who use it).

The Learning English website addresses a long-standing regional need: Most stakeholders (88%) who have used the Learning English website confirmed that its development has effectively responded to a long-standing need. That is, to create an accessible, coherent region-wide resource of information on ESOL provision across Yorkshire and Humber. Some described how fragmented and difficult it has been before now to find and access accurate and up to date information on ESOL provision locally and regionally. The Learning English website is an easy to use resource and contains information on a growing number and range of ESOL classes, including those that are free and those provided online.

The information is uploaded by providers who have chosen to register with the resource. Several evaluation stakeholders reflected that funding and establishing the project as a regional initiative and resource not only provided a logical, effective response to a regional need but was also financially efficient.

> *"I regularly use the website. My role is to provide volunteer English teachers for refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds who are unable to attend mainstream ESOL classes for a variety of reasons. The site has been extremely useful to help me signpost our learners to provision when they reach a point that they can now attend classes (e.g. improved health, children now at nursery etc.) Many learners are very limited in the time they can attend and the distance they can travel, so having such a clear search system is invaluable and means we can support learners to transition from home teaching to attending classes. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, the site has also been very helpful for being able to signpost learners to online provision as well as useful websites and resources."* (ESOL provider)

> *"Our local authority have embedded the use of the website into their work. It has worked really well. I know from talking to people at the Refugee Council that they have used it and found it useful, as has my local library." (Local authority lead for ESOL)*

> *"It gives easy access to information to support individuals when looking for ESOL provision; good overview of what is available in the area; good to network with others; important part of the information, advice and guidance for ESOL learners and providers; An opportunity for us as a learning provider to be listed on the website to advertise our ESOL provision." (ESOL provider)*

> *"I have used it and found it helpful for finding out what provision is available in other areas / cities. It is useful to be able to signpost and refer clients to classes and projects when they move to a new area." (Referral organisation).*

> *"The website redesign has simplified use and enhance accessibility. Development workers engaging with local providers has enabled more effective re-mapping of provision in the city and across the region. This strongly contributes towards our strategic agenda by improving our understanding of the citywide provision." (Local authority stakeholder)*

Building the Learning English profile and engagement: Despite the challenges and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, MESH and Migration Yorkshire have successfully established and launched the Learning English online resource. ESOL providers and organisations working with refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants have been supported in understanding its purpose and how to use it. The proactive approach to introducing, explaining and 'walking through' the website purpose, how to register, update and use the resource has been effective in building its profile and levels of engagement by ESOL providing and signposting organisations. The relationship building and liaison work undertaken by MESH team members coupled with the series of Regional Networking Events

have been key in this process. Website promotion and registration support were a priority goal and activity for MESH during the first six months of project delivery through until when the pandemic restrictions began. The Covid-19 pandemic (and 'lockdown') caused an immediate suspension of ESOL classes and between March and September 2020 visits to the Learning English website dropped dramatically. However recent website analytics have confirmed a sharp increase in Learning English visits with 1053 new users recorded in September 2020.

Strengthening ESOL networks and complementing other resources: Evaluation stakeholders often commented that the Learning English web resource combined with the networking events have helped ESOL providers to learn about and build links with other practitioners both locally and further afield. Contacts, relationships and communication between ESOL providers and also other organisation working with learners have been supported and strengthened by the project overall.

> *"It was good to see the online resource - to be able to see the resources in a particular area. People can self-service and see other providers in the areas. Adult learning has been cut and cut and cut. Anything that helps to build the networks has got to be good. It's an 'official' resource - this is important and it's good to be able to see who is who. In the past, some asylum seekers have been taken advantage of by providers who were charging inappropriately." (Local authority lead)*

> *"The hub can only help. I don't use it, but I know a lot of people who do, and they say it's good. It complements and supplements our work and the ESOL schemes that we provide." (Local authority lead)*

Developing the regional map of ESOL provision - work in progress: As already identified, the ERPR project has been effective and successful in identifying and beginning to map a range of ESOL provision across the Yorkshire and Humber region. However, stakeholders including within MESH and Migration Yorkshire are aware that there are ESOL providers that have not yet registered and uploaded their class information. This might be because they are not yet aware of the Learning English web resource or because they have chosen not to register for other reasons. Just three evaluation organisation-based stakeholders (of 42) 'disagreed' that the website is helpful, either on the basis that the details of known providers from their locality were not yet included or that they haven't been able to identify new provision so far.

> *"The Learning English website - it's a process not a product!" (ESOL provider)*

> *"It didn't seem to list all the known ESOL providers in the area. I also hoped they may have come up with some that I didn't know about. I am not sure who has been informed about it outside of my*

> *team. Was it my job to tell other organisations or did MESH contact other organisations and tell them about it? If so, which organisations did they tell?" (Local authority lead)*

Some feedback (and a small number of similar queries on how the resource works) possibly indicated a lack of clarity over how ESOL providers are registered and how information is uploaded or updated (and who by). These are both ESOL provider responsibilities and choices (i.e. not MESH functions). Networking events, website guidance, reporting and liaison with stakeholders throughout the launch and delivery of the project has largely helped to build clarity and understanding of these roles. Whilst many (speculatively most) ESOL providers have registered with the Learning English web resource some organisations may ultimately choose not to do so.

Helping to identify and fill gaps: In progressively building and maintaining an online directory or map of regional ESOL provision, the Learning English website coupled with facilitation of network events and dialogue within the growing ESOL network, is also helping to indicate gaps in provision and resources.

> *"Refugees and support workers can go to one place (the Learning English website) and find a class that suits. Or indeed establish that a class does not exist." (Refugee support organisation)*

> *"It has increased accessibility of mostly free sessions, classes led by voluntary sessions. The lack of free accredited ESOL from college providers for those seeking asylum is still a gap." (Referral organisation)*

Design, functionality and user responsiveness: Migration Yorkshire and MESH team members who lead in the design and development of the region wide Learning English resource emphasised the value of being able to build on MESH's previous work (led by Dr James Simpson) in researching and establishing its precursor- the Learning English Leeds website. The expertise of the website design company (Feel Created Ltd) and the collaborative working relationships established between the respective organisations was also identified as one of the strengths in ERPR Project delivery that contributed to its success. Almost all the evaluation contributors praised the Learning English resource for its content, layout, functionality and ease of use. Throughout the launch period and subsequently, MESH placed emphasis on inviting, valuing and responding to feedback and suggestions from stakeholders on the website design, functionality and content. As and when technical glitches, possible design improvements or content suggestions have been identified or suggested, they have been quickly and effectively responded to.

> *"MESH asked for feedback in the early stages - it was very good to ask. I said the free classes tab is at the bottom and needed bringing up high - and they brought it high very quickly." ESOL provider*

A resource for signposting and referral organisations: Refugee support organisations and mainstream support organisations working with people with ESOL needs have emphasised how useful the Learning English website is for helping clients to find and access ESOL classes based on locality and needs.

"Having all the information of the offers from partners in one place is brilliant support. The website is really easy to use." Referral organisation

"Typing in a postcode and narrowing down search (is a strength). It's quick which is important. Work coaches are only with someone for between 10-20 minutes. " DWP stakeholder

"It gives people options. Most of our work coaches live in Leeds but might not know the whole area well. It takes a lot of time to build up knowledge (of ESOL provision)." DWP stakeholder

Learner accessibility: During the project year the Learning English website has aimed to establish a useful, easy to use regional resource that can be used by ESOL practitioners and signposting organisations working with refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants. Whilst this was the primary user group envisaged it was also anticipated that the resource could be used by ESOL learners with IT access and sufficient language proficiency (or assistance). ESOL providers and staff in support organisations have confirmed that some learners and clients have been able to use the website. Teachers and advisers have also jointly accessed the website with their students or clients to search for ESOL provision based on their needs.

"All the Jobcentre staff have used this website to support our customers where English is not their first language to access ESOL training and conversation clubs in their community I would say that most of the Work Coaches have used this website" (DWP stakeholder)

"I haven't actually used the website, but I do think that it is a valuable tool for support workers to help refugees find classes that suit their needs." (Refugee support organisation)

"It is so good at showing what provision is near a learner. It is also great because it is so inclusive. It's particularly useful for not only finding information about provision but also allows learners the choice to look in other areas not only locally." (ESOL provider)

Whilst evaluation consultation responses from ESOL learners have been minimal, two of the three respondents confirmed that they had visited the website and found it to be useful.

"I think it is helpful because when we use the website, we at least practice English." (ESOL learner)

Some ESOL practitioners commented that first stage, beginner learners and those without access to IT will struggle to make use of the resource.

> *"I think it is useful for organisations who are referring clients to classes, but it is too complicated for most of our clients to use because of their low level of English and IT skills." (ESOL provider)*

> *"I'm not sure how our learners would access the website to find out about courses, especially the low-level learners, unless they have a social worker or other support. Issues with language and technology would be barriers, as we have discovered during lockdown when we were thrown into teaching remotely." (Local authority ESOL provider)*

Ongoing need: There is a strong and shared view that the Learning English website is effective, is achieving its intended outcomes and should continue to be maintained (and developed) on a long-term basis.

> *"I think the website, and team behind it have been really strategic and have planned things out very well. It would be great to have some consistency in this, instead of returning to a patch-work quilt approach (like before). Please try to keep it going. A lot of resources that are local, regional or national are started but not maintained. Please keep the pace behind this project, as it would be devastating to see it waste away." (Local authority lead)*

Regional Networking Events - value and impact

Twenty-seven (96%) of twenty-eight evaluation stakeholders that have participated in a Regional Networking Event, 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the event had been useful for them (for example in helping share information about ESOL provision and practice and to build ESOL networks).

> *"I have not been able to go to the regional network events but, staff have been from the Jobcentre and have given feedback to me about how the events were great for networking and sharing good practice". (DWP stakeholder)*

Delivery format and participation: Originally four 'in person' Regional Networking Events were included in the twelve-month ERPR delivery plan. These were planned to take place on an approximately quarterly basis in venues in Leeds, Sheffield and Hull. The first two networking events took place as envisaged in Leeds (Nov 19th) and Sheffield (Feb 13th) with both being well attended. The third and fourth network events were adapted into online 'Zoom' events due to Covid-19

restrictions and took place on May 11th and June 22nd. Additional online events were also facilitated by MESH during the delivery of the project. The table below shows participation bookings for each event:

Date	Location	Content summary	Participant bookings
19/11/2019	Leeds	Networking event	87
13/02/2020	Sheffield	Networking event	63
11/05/2020	Online	Networking event (replaced the Hull 'in person' event.	30
22/06/2020	Online	Networking event	40
6/07/2020	Online	Networking event	46
10/09/2020	Online	Networking event	60
14/09/2020	Online	Networking event	40
		Total participant bookings	366

The independent evaluation team were made welcome as observers at each networking event and informal feedback was gathered in the plenary and discussion sub-groups. Supplementary project evaluation questions were also included in MESH's event feedback processes. Participant feedback was consistently positive on the content, value, design and facilitation of the events. Stakeholders also offered very relevant and useful suggestions on content and possible areas to develop or improve (see later examples). The main feedback themes are summarised below:

Design and relevance: The Regional Networking Events aimed and were designed to offer networking, information and skill sharing opportunities for ESOL providers and those working with ESOL learners across the region. The first two events included information provision and walk through demonstrations of how to register and use the Learning English website. Additional content and focus were also built into the design of each event and was informed by participant suggestions and requests captured in feedback on a rolling basis. Each event (both venue-based and in online formats) was fully booked and well attended. Positive feedback ratings and comments on their design and usefulness were received from almost all (96%) of the evaluation stakeholders who confirmed that they have participated in an event. MESH routinely invited and responded to suggestions and requests when shaping the content and focus of the events. This was a contributory factor in ensuring that they

were relevant and useful for participants. A range of participant needs and content suggestions have been proposed by participants to potentially inform future events if ongoing funding is confirmed.

> *"I really got to have an opportunity to speak with others who are running very similar programmes to mine or different ones. I learned a lot from meeting with other people. I think the event allowed for that very well, and that was one of the main reasons I wanted to go. It was also great because I saw some people in ESOL who I have worked with before, and it is really interesting to hear about what they are doing now, and how some of their ideas could positively impact my programme." (ESOL provider)*

Introducing the Learning English website: The content in the first two networking days included a Learning English introduction session aimed at explaining the resource purpose, showing participants how to register their organisation, how to upload information and use the website. A 'Q&A' and feedback session was also facilitated to gather content and improvement suggestions. Participants confirmed that the sessions were both informative and valuable. Many subsequently registered their organisations and uploaded details of their ESOL provision. The inclusion of 'walk through' demonstrations for the Learning English resource was welcomed in evaluation feedback from participants.

> *"I think having someone there to show me how to make changes onto the website was really useful as it made me do it!" ESOL provider*

Networking and sharing good practice: Evaluation responses have confirmed that the events provided a very welcome and valuable opportunity for ESOL providers to meet up (in person or subsequently via Zoom), to share information about practice, experiences, challenges and tools with other providers from both their own and wider regional localities. Some ESOL tutors commented that they largely work alone or in small teams and can feel quite isolated - the network events were therefore valued for providing an opportunity to meet others who share similar roles and ESOL providing experiences. The Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing restrictions on movement and classroom delivery have increased isolation both for many teachers and students rendering opportunities to stay in touch with peers even more important.

> *"I went to the first one in Leeds, then Sheffield and the online event (May 11th). At the first one in Leeds I got as much from 'after' the event as during it. It was useful to meet people I knew and didn't know and to hear from people about what they're doing. At the one in Sheffield I met colleagues from college and now we're following through discussion about developing networks locally and sharing some of the resources. The Zoom event on 11 May was also OK! It went well and has led onto different things and is helping us to develop new way of working and keeping people linked." (Local authority lead)*

"The networking event was very useful, and I picked up a lot of networking myself. It was a great event for putting names to faces." (DWP stakeholder)

"It was very good to meet up with a lot of colleagues and discuss specific issues relating to ESOL for refugees. I thought the consultation was long overdue." (ESOL provider)

Discussing, issues, needs and solutions: The networking events have also provided opportunities both through the formal agenda, informally in breaks and also through follow up contact, for participants to discuss gaps in provision or resources, challenges and possible responses to address or reduce barriers to ESOL access. This been valuable in the context of successive and substantial cutbacks in ESOL funding and accessibility over several years. It has also been very useful in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact in ending classroom-based provision for much of 2020. The networking events in May and June both received very strong feedback on the value and relevance of the subgroup sessions and discussions concerning the use of IT and online practice to work with and support ESOL learners.

"I always find networking events invaluable, both for the formal presentations and activities and for the informal networking that takes place. It's always rewarding to be able to speak to like-minded people who are faced with similar challenges and be able to bounce ideas around away from the day job, perhaps going away with some new approaches." (ESOL provider)

"It was really useful to discuss similar issues we were all facing as well as hearing what has been going on at a more strategic level around Yorkshire. Seeing such joined up thinking and a desire to connect, share and give the best possible service has been very encouraging." (ESOL provider)

The online networking events - a useful format and learning experience: The Zoom based, online events on May 11th and June 22nd replaced the venue-based networking events that formed part of the twelve-month project delivery plan. Stakeholder feedback on the design and MESH's facilitation of the online events was consistently very positive and confirmed the effectiveness of the online format. Several stakeholders and MESH team members commented that in some ways the online format offers several benefits that venue-based events do not. For example, venue hire costs are expensive relative to the cost of a Zoom subscription. Additionally, both planning time and money are saved through not having to anticipate, order and provide participant beverages and refreshments. Some evaluation stakeholders (especially ESOL teachers who are not based centrally) reflected that the online format can make it easier for them to participate as they don't have to book out a half or whole day in their diary in order to travel to the event (or incur travel costs). For these reasons,

network event feedback included suggestions that online events and formats would sometimes be a useful alternative or supplement to venue-based events in future project design and delivery.

Ongoing need and value (networking events): Stakeholder consultations identified a strong and consistently held view that there is an ongoing need for and value in the type of networking events delivered by the ERPR project (including online events). Stakeholders feel that they are effective in helping to build ESOL provider, signposting and referral networks and in raising awareness of provision (and gaps) to support the targeted development of ESOL skills and capacity in the region (supporting the intended aims and outcomes of the project). This is especially relevant and valuable in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the need to develop and share safe online and (eventually) classroom practices, tools, and learning. It was also expressed as a priority stakeholder need in the historical context of fragmented ESOL provision, networks and 'big picture' awareness in the region.

Stakeholder views on gaps and challenges in ESOL access

"From our research, the lack of ESOL funding is central to this and piecemeal funding arrangements are hindering future planning." (ESOL provider)

Evaluation stakeholders were asked to share their experience and views in relation to gaps in regional ESOL provision. The main themes and some examples of feedback are summarised below. Additional examples can be reviewed in a separate appendix.

Funding and fragmentation of provision (regionally and nationally): ESOL providers identified cuts in funding coupled with the loss of national strategic and policy frameworks as a huge and fundamental challenge impacting ESOL provision and learner access across the UK.

"The issues have been the same since the end of the Skills for Life policy and the removal of funding and a policy framework for the sector... The general picture is one of fragmented ESOL provision locally, city-wide and regionally, which is in urgent need of coordination. The erosion of the cohesive framework afforded by Skills for Life until a decade ago led to a return to the fragmented picture of ESOL provision of previous times. This has not been addressed effectively by central government in the intervening 10 years. The reliance on the third sector and increasingly on the voluntary sector for ESOL provision is a very worrying but now well-established trend." (ESOL provider)

"Continuity of funding (is a challenge). Funding is often short term - you get things established and then when it gets going you can run out of funding." (ESOL provider)

> *"(We're) constantly looking for funding - you have to fit to what the funder is wanting to fund." (ESOL provider)*

Shortage of provision and progression routes: Feedback commonly emphasised that in many areas of Yorkshire and Humber there is simply not enough provision or the right level of provision which contributes to long waiting lists and a lack of progression routes.

> *"There is a gap in provision for 16-19 year olds and for 14-16 year olds." (ESOL provider)*

> *"Provision is simply not long enough in my area with some accredited provision only being 3 hours per week." (ESOL provider)*

> *"College provision (in Leeds) has grown before lockdown. But there are such long waiting lists." (ESOL provider)*

> *"There is a massive shortage of ESOL in the region and a massive under estimation of the numbers of ESOL learners." (ESOL provider)*

Access for low ability learners: Insufficient funding and the fragmentation of provision are felt to have especially impacted ESOL access for those with the lowest skill levels and lacking confidence or ability to ask for help in finding and using suitable classes.

> *" Support is needed for learners with limited literacy and language skills who would benefit from more individualised learning and additional learning support." (ESOL provider)*

Childcare and travel costs: Lack of access to free childcare or financial support to cover the cost of childcare and travel were identified as common barriers to ESOL access by several ESOL practitioners and support workers in client support and referral roles.

> *"There are still issues with childcare especially for women. Colleges used to have crèches in outreach settings, but all those settings are now closed." (ESOL provider)*

> *"My role is to work with refugees and asylum seekers unable to attend classes. The main barriers for them not being able to access are primarily childcare and the cost of public transport." (ESOL provider)*

Lack of IT access or skills: Lack of access to IT resources and skills was identified as a barrier and gap in provision in many consultation responses. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift from classroom based to online ESOL provision has increased the gaps and barriers for learners or prospective learners who are not able to access Smart phones, tablets or computers or who do not know how to use the necessary software and social media applications.

> *"Lower ability ESOL students have often limited access to IT and sometimes limited knowledge of IT. In the Covid-19 reality this is even more restricted, so online learning is a challenge." (ESOL provider)*

> *"I think if people have poor or no access to technology, then they are currently excluded from any classes. When things open up again, it may be blended (some home learning/online and some in person). I think that programmes will start again, and will be as flexible as they can, but less learners will be able to participate at a time, so demand will be high, and capacity low across the region." (ESOL provider)*

Stakeholder feedback and suggestions to inform to inform project future planning and development

Forty (95%) of 42 evaluation respondents, 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the Regional ESOL Provision Resource and network facilitation support would be useful to sustain and develop in the future. When asked if the resource should be why it would be good to sustain and develop the existing resource one response was:

> *"... to build on the good work and practice already in place; to provide networking opportunities and current, valid, relevant and up to date information on regional/local ESOL provision; to maximise access to good quality ESOL provision; to support organisations and individuals in sharing good practice and overcoming barriers. This is a really good development and a positive way of networking between ESOL providers. It's a very useful website that is accessible to learners too. I would like to see it continuing in the future to support ESOL in our area and bringing providers together." (Local authority lead)*

At the time that most evaluation consultations were completed, continuation of funding for the ERPR Project had not been confirmed. Evaluation stakeholders were asked to reflect and comment on whether (or not) they felt there was an ongoing need for or value in sustaining the Learning English resource and Regional Networking Events. The main themes of response and examples are summarised below:

Sustaining and building on the project in future: To date, 40 of 42 respondents have confirmed that they would like for both elements of the ERPR Project to be sustained on a long-term basis (two people responded 'I don't know').

> *"It's useful for MESH to be bringing things together. I got a much clearer picture of what there is and what the gaps are. Really helpful for us to have the regional overview. It's no one's core job in ESOL so having someone doing it centrally and regionally is really important." (Local authority lead)*

> *"This is a really good development and positive way of networking between ESOL providers. It's a very useful website that is accessible to learners too. I would like to see it continuing in the future to support ESOL in our area and bringing providers together." (ESOL provider)*

> *"It's really helpful for us to have the regional overview (through the project). It's no-one's core job (in our local authority) so having someone doing it centrally and regionally is really important." (Local authority lead)*

Several evaluation stakeholders emphasised that refugee and other migrant integration ultimately benefits the whole community and is generally considered essential in the context of wider community cohesion. The ability of individuals to communicate in English is fundamental to this. There is also recognition that the opportunities, options and funding available to support ESOL access vary greatly for prospective learners. For example, ease or possibility of access to ESOL can be dependent on geography and availability or lack of local provision, mobility, ability to travel and affordability. Entitlement to free ESOL provision also varies substantially depending on how an individual came to the UK - for example as an asylum seeker or as a refugee with pre-determined status on a government resettlement programme. Some stakeholders strongly advocated the principle and wider potential community benefits of building the regional ESOL network and accessibility with the aim of benefitting all categories of asylum seekers, programme or non-programme refugees and other migrants.

> *"Online resources, for example small units and exercises - would be a good thing to develop more in future. Anything that could benefit asylum seekers and wider groups as well (is needed). When this project (ERPR) was first mentioned this is part of what I wanted - so that we could build resources (not just course information) online and make it more accessible too." (Local authority lead)*

The ERPR Project is felt to have made a great start in responding to an agreed, shared and long term need to coherently map and improve ease of learner access or signposting to ESOL provision. The model of jointly funding and 'buying into' a regional resource is felt to have been an effective and financially efficient way of addressing the need so far. Regardless of the funding challenges and

possibilities in future, there is a strong and commonly shared desire amongst stakeholders to continue to build on the progress made to date. To not do so (in their view) would risk wasting the investment already made and losing the valuable resources, skills and learning of the project.

> *"It's so frustrating when good services like this are set up and then two or three years later, they're disbanded and something else comes along. It would be great if this could continue to be developed, particularly given the amount of work that's gone into it so far and the buy in from local providers which would indicate that the service is appreciated!" (Local authority lead for ESOL)*

> *"Please try to keep it going. A lot of resources that are local, regional or national are started but not maintained. Please keep the pace behind this project, as it would be devastating to see it waste away. " (Local authority lead)*

Covid-19- impact and responses: ESOL provision and ERPR project delivery were inevitably disrupted by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most ESOL classes across the region were suspended in March 2020 and have remained so throughout the lockdown period. MESH also report that whilst the use of the Learning English website was progressively building (including repeat visits) prior to Covid-19, usage fell dramatically during the first national lockdown period. Lockdown restrictions began to be relaxed in July and August and some ESOL providers began to contemplate possible returns to classroom-based teaching within safe boundaries. However, the current emergence of a second wave of Covid-19 infections have triggered new lockdown measures, and at the time of writing (October 2020) we understand that no classroom based ESOL provision is being delivered. Several evaluation stakeholders have commented that social distancing and space management requirements in classroom environments are likely to remain difficult challenges for ESOL providers, especially where space is already limited. Some ESOL providers have delivered or are planning to offer some online ESOL provision, but this is generally limited and in its early stages. The Learning English website is providing the facility for tutors and organisations to share information on any online resources and ESOL provision that they are beginning to offer. Online provision is emerging as a viable and accessible method of providing and accessing ESOL support for some but not all learners during the restrictions and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Most providers are keen to return to a classroom-based approach as quickly as possible when it can be done safely, and they report similar hopes on behalf of many learners.

> *"It (Covid-19) impact will be massive, (Covid-19 impact). If we don't manage to return to face-to-face provision not many people will be interested. They have said they do not enjoy doing anything online." (ESOL provider)*

Developing and sharing online ESOL practice and resources: Evaluation stakeholders commonly anticipated lack of access to suitable IT, limitations in Smart phone applications, a lack of Wi-Fi access and data capacity as increasingly common barriers to ESOL learning during the pandemic lockdown and recovery period. Individuals with the lowest levels of English ability and confidence were also identified as facing particular learning challenges in a remote learning environment. Several stakeholders described a growing need for ESOL providers to be supported in developing online teaching capabilities, practices and tools.

"Looking at the website now, I can see that it has some useful links, although not to teaching resources. We could do with more access to pre-entry ESOL teaching resources." (ESOL provider)

"There needs to be a readiness to utilise online platforms and from what I gather training need for both tutors, volunteers and ESOL learners. I think we will need to move towards blended learning. Not all learners have access to the necessary equipment and some smaller providers may also have cost implications to utilise some of the online platforms on a larger scale." (Local authority lead)

"Support (is needed) for practitioners and providers attempting to move teaching online, and for students to gain access to online teaching, are the priorities. MESH/LEY&H can help here, but we need to be very aware of the inequalities (e.g. in digital access and access to information) that are exacerbated by the crisis." (ESOL provider)

"Many people will only be able to access remotely. However, those with basic English and financially struggling may not be able to afford Wi-Fi or the correct equipment. Provision of these would really help. Also, small tutorial videos in learner's home languages about how to set up the learning platform, e.g. Zoom, Google Classrooms etc." (ESOL provider)

"The current situation has imposed a number of restrictions on all of us and impacted on life and work. ESOL learners are often key workers, also faced with family/personal responsibilities with limited network of support having family and friends in other countries. Some learners have been excluded from accessing ESOL provision online for various reasons. Learners with limited English skills struggle even more and would benefit from tailored additional language support. It's important to have access to technology and ICT skills to slowly embrace different ways of learning and teaching. Offering various models of blended learning including online as well as traditional classroom delivery with physical contact and real time online contact and tutorials would help to reach individuals and make adaptations to a new way of living and working." (ESOL provider)

Concluding comments

We hope that this evaluation report provides a useful summary of stakeholder views on the impact, value and learning of the ESOL Regional Provision Resource Project and that the findings and recommendations offered usefully inform future planning and development. Key stakeholders have engaged very openly, reflectively and constructively throughout the evaluation which is greatly appreciated. Migration Yorkshire, MESH, MHCLG and the local authorities that have helped to fund the project can be justifiably proud of its effective delivery and achievements both before and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Richard Malfait and Nick Scott-Flynn, October 2020.

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About the evaluators: Richard Malfait and Nick Scott-Flynn have provided independent project evaluation, service development and interim management services for organisations across the UK voluntary and statutory sector since 2001. Prior to this, both were employed in a variety of operational and senior management roles based in statutory and non-statutory support organisations, working directly with a range of vulnerable client groups with often complex needs. Evaluation and consultancy clients have included small to medium sized organisations and projects working locally with individuals and families experiencing poverty, destitution, mental ill health and destitution. Other clients, often providing services on a wider UK or overseas basis, include Refugee Action, the British Red Cross, the Refugee Council, Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships, the Home Office, Action Aid, Islamic Relief and VSO.

Appendix: List of organisations consulted in the evaluation

Forty two stakeholders from 24 organisations across the Yorkshire and Humber region contributed in the evaluation and are listed below:

Barnsley Council	Migration Yorkshire
Bradford Council	North East Lincolnshire Council
Calderdale Council	North Lincolnshire Council
Bradford Ecumenical Asylum Concern (BEACON)	Refugee Council
DWP (Department for Work and Pensions)	RETAS
East Riding Council	Rotherham Council
The Heeley Trust	Sheffield Council
Hull Council	St Vincent's
Learning 4life-GY	Wakefield Council
Leeds Asylum Seeker Support Network	WEA (Y&H)
Leeds City Council	Welcome 2 English
MESH	York Council

Additionally three ESOL learners based in Leeds also completed an online evaluation questionnaire.