

ESOL provision in the South East of England: Understanding local capacity

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Executive summary

Using funding from the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) has engaged Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to deliver an English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) capacity building programme in the South East of England. The programme aims to meet the language and integration needs of Ukrainians, as well as other refugee cohorts across the South East, and ultimately support improved outcomes for refugees learning ESOL. This research was designed to inform the roll-out of the capacity building programme, as well as to inform feedback to government on ESOL policy by contributing to a better understanding of the challenges, opportunities and support required at both policy and practice level to boost opportunities for participation in ESOL. The mixed-methods research used an online survey and individual qualitative interviews with ESOL providers to explore the level of demand for ESOL provision in different areas of the South East; eligibility for funding and how this affects the supply of ESOL provision; and how providers plan their ESOL provision to meet local needs.

Key findings

The current shape of ESOL provision in the South East

- A greater number of providers are offering lower level ESOL.
- Most providers have non-accredited provision as part of their ESOL offer.
- Most providers described progression into employment as a key intended outcome of their provision.

Planning ESOL provision

- Some providers collaborate with other ESOL providers to plan their provision, coordinating timings or levels to complement one another, and nearly all of providers collaborate with local stakeholders.
- Some providers do not collaborate with other local ESOL providers.

Overall supply and demand

- Nearly all providers reported that demand has increased for ESOL.
- Most providers felt that they are not meeting demand for ESOL in their local area.
- Most providers described refugees and people seeking asylum as a significant part of the demand for ESOL provision in their area.
- Ukrainians and Hong Kong British Nationals Overseas (HKBN[O]s) are generally accessing higher-level ESOL while Afghans and Syrians tend to access lower-level ESOL.

Excess demand for ESOL

- There is generally a greater demand for lower-level ESOL in the South East.
- Lower-level ESOL provision is more likely to be oversubscribed than higher-level ESOL provision and tends to have the largest waiting lists.
- Nearly one-quarter of providers reported that all their classes are full.
- However, most learners are enrolled within 12 weeks of expressing interest in joining an ESOL class.

Challenges with ESOL provision

- Most providers felt that funding is a key factor in decision-making about their provision.
- In particular, providers highlighted the six-month residency restriction as a challenge for funding people seeking asylum to participate in ESOL.
- Recruiting qualified ESOL tutors is a challenge as contracts are often sessional, zero-hour, and low-paid, and many applicants do not have ESOL qualifications.

Barriers to participation in ESOL

- Childcare was the barrier to participation in ESOL mentioned by most providers.
- Other barriers include the cost and convenience of travel and transport; housing instability and the relocation of people seeking asylum; financial insecurity and digital poverty, and mental and physical health barriers.

Key messages

Key messages for providers

- **Collaboration between providers:** There is a need for more, and more effective, collaboration and communication between local ESOL providers to discuss common challenges, new funding opportunities, and to share best practice.
- **Collaboration between providers and local stakeholder organisations:** Improved collaboration and communication is required with local stakeholders and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to help providers predict incoming demand.

Key messages for the capacity building programme

- **Local coordination of ESOL provision:** There is a need for more frequent and effective coordination between local providers, and with local stakeholder organisations. L&W has provided three local authority adult learning services in the South-East with a small grant to fund a local ESOL coordination initiative.
- **Access to qualified ESOL tutors:** Recruiting and retaining qualified ESOL tutors is a key challenge, largely due to the low pay and unstable contracts often offered to ESOL

tutors. L&W and SESPM have focused much of the capacity building programme on offering ESOL tutor training qualifications and CPD for current ESOL tutors.

- **Informal, non-accredited provision:** There is a need for more flexible, tailored, and non-accredited provision with a reduced focus on exams and qualifications to meet the diverse and distinct needs of learners. L&W and SESPM are funding conversation club training and general CPD for ESOL tutors and volunteers.

Key messages for wider policy development

- **Fragmentation in funding:** ESOL funding is sourced from various government departments. It could be beneficial if funding was centralised to eliminate the need for providers to navigate diverse funding and eligibility rules, thereby reducing complexity in delivering services to different groups of learners.
- **AEB funding for HKBN(O)s:** Although HKBN(O)s can access ESOL through the Hong Kong Welcome Programme, few providers seem to be actively utilising this funding. Extending AEB funding to HKBN(O)s could make it clearer for providers to understand how they can provide funded ESOL for this group.
- **Six-month residency rule on access to AEB funding for individuals seeking asylum:** Permitting people seeking asylum to access AEB-funded learning from their point of entry could significantly improve their education prospects and contribute to their successful integration into UK society.

1. Introduction

The Homes for Ukraine scheme was launched in March 2022, joining the previously announced Ukraine Family Scheme. From the outset of the programme, Strategic Migration Partnerships have worked with local authorities, voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations, and wider service providers within their region to prepare, welcome and support Ukrainian guests and their hosts. Under Homes for Ukraine, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) announced further funding to increase capacity for Ukrainians to access English Language training, focusing particularly on English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) capacity building and delivery.

With this additional funding, Learning and Work Institute (L&W) has delivered a capacity building programme in the South East of England on behalf of the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM). The programme aims to meet the language and integration needs of Ukrainians, as well as other refugee cohorts across the South East, and ultimately support improved outcomes for refugees learning ESOL. The programme included grant-funded support for i) initial teacher training ii) volunteer training and iii) local capacity building activity, such as local ESOL co-ordination activities. This research was designed to inform the roll-out of the capacity building programme, for example, by identifying priority areas for the deployment of newly trained teachers and/or volunteers, or areas where greater local co-ordination of provision could support more learners to access provision which meets their needs.

This work also aims to inform feedback to government on ESOL policy by contributing to a better understanding of the challenges, opportunities and support required at both policy and practice level to boost opportunities for participation in ESOL. The research focuses on demand for ESOL provision in different areas of the South East; eligibility for funding and how this affects the supply of ESOL provision; and how providers plan their ESOL provision to meet local needs.

1.1. Policy context

In recent years, the UK has seen an increase in immigration following geopolitical events in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong. In response, the UK Government has launched new resettlement schemes for Ukrainian and Afghan arrivals, as well as visas for Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas). 2022 also saw a significant increase in applications for asylum, reaching the highest number since 2002.

In March 2022, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) launched the Homes for Ukraine scheme (formally known as the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme). Through this scheme, UK-based sponsors commit to providing accommodation for at least six months after the arrival of their Ukrainian guests. As of 2 January 2024, the scheme has received 219,700 applications, 178,400 visas have been issued through the

scheme, and 140,800 visa-holders have arrived in the UK¹. The South East region resettles one of the largest proportions of arrivals from Ukraine.

2021 census data indicates that, in the South East of England, there are 40,921 adults who have low-level English skills, and 7,072 who lack basic English skills². It is important to support migrant communities who lack basic English skills to access ESOL provision, not only for social and cultural integration, but for unlocking migrants' skills, talent and potential that can both improve their own wellbeing and contribute to the economic growth and competitiveness of the national economy.

1.2. Report structure

This report summarises findings from the research and highlight key messages for SESPM and ESOL providers in the South East. The remainder of the report will be structured as follows:

Chapter 2: Methodology

Chapter 3: Shape of provision in the South East

Chapter 4: Supply and demand for ESOL in the South East

Chapter 5: Challenges with ESOL provision in the South East

Chapter 6: Key messages

¹ [Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme \(Homes for Ukraine\) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukraine-family-scheme-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme-homes-for-ukraine-and-ukraine-extension-scheme-visa-data)

² [Language, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/people-population/migration-immigration)

2. Methodology

This project adopted a mixed-methods approach, with data gathered through qualitative fieldwork, and an online quantitative survey with ESOL providers in the South East.

The online survey collected data about the format of providers' current ESOL offer (e.g., levels, hours per week, enrolment points); the type of ESOL they are providing (e.g., accredited/non-accredited, vocational provision); the main characteristics of their provision; funding eligibility; the level and type of demand for ESOL; and how they manage excess demand. The questions were merged with a Home Office survey exploring waiting lists for ESOL provision to reduce the burden on providers.

Interview participants were recruited from a sample of survey respondents who indicated an interest in a follow-up interview. The interviews explored the topics covered in the survey in further detail, as well as barriers to participation in ESOL experienced by migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum.

2.1. Sample

The online survey was distributed to SESPM's network of ESOL providers in the South East and received a total of 22 responses. Of these, 11 respondents work for local authorities, seven for further education colleges, three for voluntary or community sector (VCS) organisations, and one who did not ascribe themselves to any of these categories. Survey respondents work in 17 different local authority areas, across the four sub-regions of the South East. Most work in Hampshire and Isle of Wight (9 respondents) or Surrey and Sussex (6), with fewer in Thames Valley (4) and Kent (3).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 providers delivering ESOL across the South East. These included local authorities, four further education or sixth form colleges, and two VCS organisations. Interview participants work in eight different local authority areas and are spread across the four sub-regions of the South East. Reflecting the make up of survey respondents, most are working in Hampshire and Isle of Wight (5) or Surrey and Sussex (4), with fewer in Thames Valley (1) and Kent (1). These participants are working in a range of job roles, including ESOL curriculum managers, programme officers, and coordinators.

2.2. Limitations

This research provides an insight into the ESOL landscape in the South East, as well as the challenges, opportunities and support required to boost opportunities for participation in ESOL. The study's main limitations are:

- **Small sample size:** The quantitative survey engaged 22 providers, 11 of whom participated in the qualitative interviews. This small sample size increases the risk of sampling bias and cannot accurately represent the diverse characteristics, needs, and challenges of the larger target population (around 180 ESOL providers in the South

East³), making the findings more susceptible to random variability. The findings from this research must therefore be understood as an exploratory snapshot of ESOL provision in the South East, rather than a comprehensive representation of the region.

- **Participant diversity:** The research sample is disproportionately weighted towards research participants delivering ESOL in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, as well as those working in local authorities⁴. This bias limits the potential to draw accurate conclusions about the broader target population as the sample may not equitably capture the unique ESOL landscapes and distinct migratory trends that exist across the different regions of the South East. It must therefore be understood that the perspectives and experiences of local authorities and providers working in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight might be overrepresented in comparison to VCS organisations and providers working in Kent, who comprise a smaller proportion of the sample.

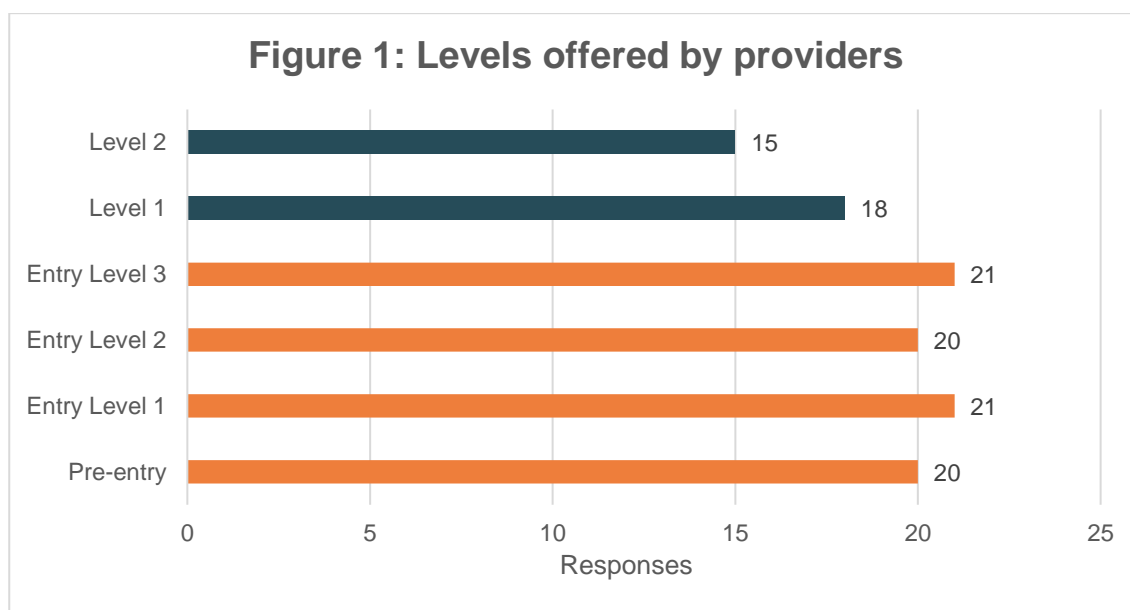
³ [South East ESOL Providers Map - Learning and Work Institute](#)

⁴ As outlined in chapter 2.1., half (11) of survey respondents and nearly half (5) of interview participants work for local authorities, while around two-fifths (9) of survey respondents and nearly half (5) of interview participants are based in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

3. Shape of provision in the South East

3.1. Current provision

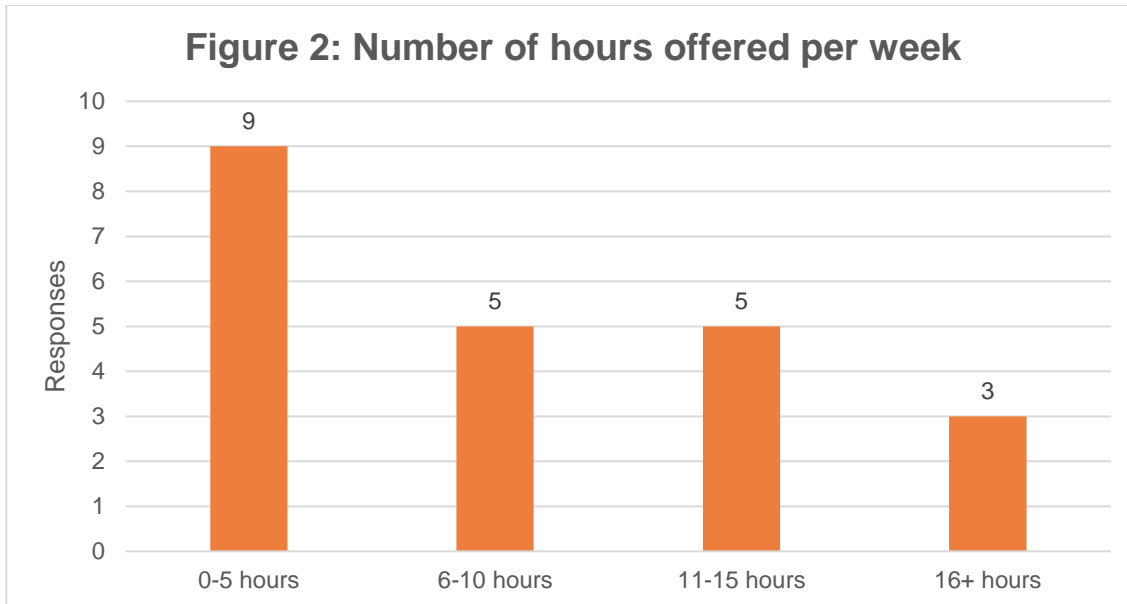
Survey findings show that most providers responding to the survey offer ESOL provision from Pre-entry to Level 2, with almost two-thirds offering courses at all levels. The survey indicates providers are most likely to offer lower level ESOL, with nearly all respondents saying their organisations offer Pre-entry (20), Entry 1 (21), Entry 2 (20) and Entry 3 (21). Eight out of ten respondents (18) said their organisation offers Level 1 provision and nearly seven out of ten offers Level 2. It is likely that this distribution of provision is in response to increased demand for lower-level ESOL; however, the slightly more limited offer of higher-level ESOL risks restricting the ability of providers to respond to demand from learners with higher-level needs and limits opportunities for learners to progress through levels.



Q7. At what levels do you offer ESOL provision?

Base: All respondents (22)

The survey indicates that **providers are most likely to offer learners up to five hours of ESOL provision per week** (9 respondents) (Figure 2). More than one fifth of respondents (5) offer 6-10 hours or 11-15 hours of ESOL per week, and three respondents offer 16 hours or more. The minimum offered was one hour per week, while the maximum was 24 hours.



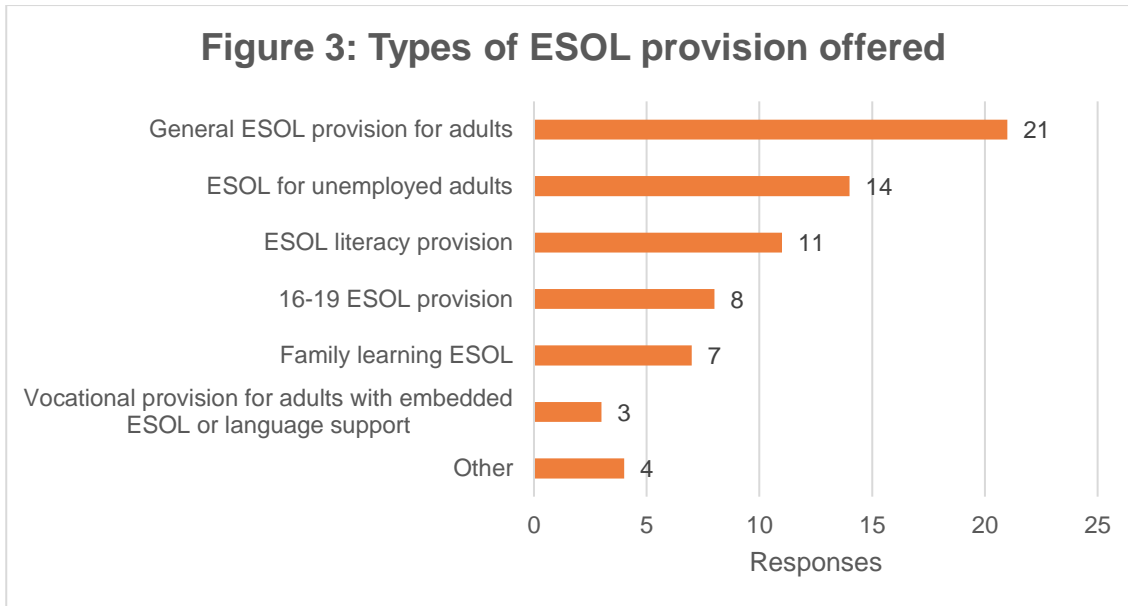
Q8. How many hours per week does your organisation’s ESOL provision typically offer?
 Base: All respondents (22)

The most common type of provision offered is ‘general ESOL provision’, with all survey respondents reporting that they deliver this (Figure 3). This was followed by ESOL for unemployed adults (14) and literacy provision (11). Fewer respondents offer family learning (7) ESOL provision, and just under one-fifth (4) offer other types of ESOL provision, including ESOL embedded with digital skills, employability skills, and/or maths, as well as conversational ESOL.

Only three respondents offer vocational ESOL provision. While this is likely in response to the high demand for lower-level ESOL evidenced throughout this report (*see section 4.2*), this lack of vocational provision is concerning considering the demand from highly skilled migrants, particularly Ukrainians, for higher-level, vocational ESOL learning. The skills, talent and potential of this group are often hindered by language barriers. Vocational provision can be used to address this barrier, both improving their own wellbeing and contributing to the economic growth and competitiveness of national and local economies.

Only eight respondents reported that they offer provision for learners aged 16-19; however, this is likely reflective of the fact that seven respondents are working in further education colleges, who are most likely to be delivering provision to young people.

Figure 3: Types of ESOL provision offered



Q12. What types of ESOL provision do you offer?

Base: All respondents who did not skip this question (21)

Most survey respondents (18) offer non-accredited ESOL provision, and some (5) *only* offer non-accredited ESOL provision. Providers use their non-accredited provision in a range of ways, including to deliver lower-level ESOL (4), conversation clubs (4), or bridging courses to prepare for accredited provision (4). Providers also use their non-accredited provision to combine ESOL courses with other skills such as maths or employability skills (3) and to deliver community learning (2).

Most interviewees conveyed that they offer non-accredited provision because some learners are not interested in formal qualifications. These learners may need targeted support in specific areas, such as the vocabulary of maths or employment. Some interviewees also expressed that there is enough accredited provision in their local area, and that their provision is focused on complementing and filling gaps in existing formal provision. This includes, for instance, bridging courses to prepare learners for accredited provision. Some providers offer non-accredited provision to meet local demand for very low level ESOL, particularly people with no literacy skills, who they perceive to be under-served by accredited provision.

One interview participant explained that they offer non-accredited provision so they do not risk losing achievement funding when people seeking asylum are relocated before they have completed their course:

“It’s very important with the asylum seekers, who are making up a large bulk of our learners at the moment, that the provision’s very flexible. So, for example, we are about to lose 20 of our learners next week when they are moved out of the city. So, if we had those learners on accredited courses, that would cause us serious,

serious issues financially... there's absolutely no way we could function with those learners on accredited courses.” (Local authority)

Although only one provider reported altering their provision to accommodate for the relocation of people seeking asylum, the issue arose as a significant theme of L&W’s recent research report *Supporting London’s Migrant Communities Through the Adult Education Budget*⁵. The research highlights how housing uncertainty impacts the engagement of people seeking asylum in two main ways. Firstly, the fear of being unable to commit to finishing a course due to potential relocation discourages many from enrolling. Secondly, learning providers, wary of the potential for early withdrawal, often enrol people seeking asylum in short, non-accredited courses, which may not be the most suitable for their learning needs.

Most interview participants offer non-ESOL provision for ESOL learners., this provision includes courses in maths, employability skills, vocational ESOL, and essential digital skills. Most of these providers conveyed that they offer non-ESOL provision because it contributes to their wider aims of progressing learners into employment and further education, and meets demand for other basic skills. One participant emphasised that offering non-ESOL provision to their ESOL learners is important for pastoral care and aligns with the information, advice and guidance they provide:

“We capture their aims, their learning goals. And we can then support them in mapping a process of learning for them, either with us or with another provider, so that they know what they need to do. They might present and say, 'I want to be a doctor,' for instance, or 'I want to go on to university' and we will help them and support them to achieve their learning trajectory, and signpost them to relevant courses.” (Local authority)

For participants who do not offer non-ESOL provision to their ESOL learners, this was largely because some providers, particularly VCS organisations, do not offer any provision other than ESOL.

Most interview participants described progression into employment as a key intended outcome of their provision. Participants who mentioned this as a key focus made particular reference to highly skilled Ukrainians who are relying on ESOL to move on from low-skilled roles and enter the higher-skilled positions they held in Ukraine:

“Most of the Ukrainians are really work hungry and frustrated that they are qualified as a pharmacist or as a psychologist and can't work at those professions. They're working in the hospitality industry and the only way to get out of that is English language learning.” (VCS organisation)

⁵ Learning and Work Institute, 2024. [Supporting London’s Migrant Communities Through the Adult Education Budget](#).

Most participants also mentioned sociocultural integration as an important intended outcome of their ESOL provision, seeking to support learners with accessing key services such as registering at a GP and enrolling their children at school, and to encourage learners to become active citizens in their local communities. Some participants, particularly colleges, are focused on progression onto further learning, while some discussed the importance of equipping their learners with English skills for day-to-day life:

“I’d say the key outcomes are around social engagement, really. I think because we are tending to work with people that are very new to the city, and new to the UK, it’s about settling in. It’s about people finding their feet. It’s about providing them with the language skills that they need to function in a new place.” (Local authority)

A minority of interviewees mentioned wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem as outcomes, and one participant emphasised the importance of language for learners expressing their identity in a new country, particularly for Ukrainians:

“They are often already well-qualified professionals, so they need their English to get work to support their kids, but also to give themselves an identity here in the UK. I teach the higher-level classes, so I really see that. They want to be able to give people their opinions, as they would in Ukrainian, in English. It’s, I think, for them, quite an identity thing as well.” (Further education college)

3.2. Planning ESOL provision

Most of the providers interviewed have a single ESOL curriculum planning period in the year. However, of these providers, most reported that they could make changes to their provision throughout the year in response to emerging demand. At the same time, some providers run entirely flexible programmes where delivery is reactive to demand and their ESOL curriculum can be altered at any point.

Some providers collaborate with other providers to plan their ESOL provision, mostly to coordinate timings or levels to complement one another:

“I was talking to the ESOL person from [a local college] and they’ve got tutors who like to teach the high levels in the evening. My tutors like the low levels in the daytime. So we decided rather than her trying to offer everything in the evening, she’ll concentrate on the higher ones, and we’ll do the lower levels. There are providers that I talk to regularly and we do chat about what we’re offering.” (Local authority)

Some of these providers who offer informal or non-accredited ESOL provision coordinate with providers in the area who deliver formal accredited provision to plan how they can best support learners who are enrolled on these courses. For example, these providers can offer sessions to help learners revise for the ESOL exams they are taking at college. One of the providers interviewed is a member of a local network of ESOL providers who share information about capacity and availability of ESOL provision in the area:

“[The] Network is chaired by the director of [a local VCS organisation], so she and her administrator kind of collate the offer from all the different providers every term and that's put onto a spreadsheet which is on their website. Everyone's able to access that and see which courses are running with which provider, each day, at which level, and where there's spaces as well.” (Local authority)

Some providers reported that they do not collaborate with other local ESOL providers. Of these providers, some they do not have positive relationships with the other ESOL providers in their area, with some claiming that local colleges are not working together since a competitive relationship has been established between them:

“Their general model is a business model. Their mentality is more, 'We've got to make sure that we're alright first.' I think they can be a bit more reluctant to share ideas or to share resources than some of the other providers in the city.” (Further education college)

A minority of providers explained that they cannot collaborate with local ESOL providers because they are the only ESOL provider in their area. One provider also highlighted the challenges of GDPR in coordinating ESOL provision, pointing out that providers can share class timings with one another, but little else, in order to protect learners' personal data:

“In terms of GDPR we can't say, 'When's Jane coming? Is Jane coming on a Tuesday and Wednesday?' In which case we'll do Thursday and Friday, because you can't share that kind of data unfortunately. So, we do talk to them, and we do seek to liaise but it's largely them telling us 'These are when our lessons are going to be,' and then we change our lessons to try and fill the gaps when they aren't.” (VCS organisation)

Evidence from local ESOL hubs and co-ordination networks across the UK demonstrates that it is possible to overcome these barriers with data sharing⁶. For instance, Manchester ESOL Advice Service (MEAS) is an online service funded by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) where local authorities have worked in partnership to help people join suitable ESOL courses in their local area. The service uses a 'screener' to gather information about ESOL learners when they engage with MEAS, offer prospective an initial assessment of their English skills, and advise them on the level and type of course or other support that would best meet their needs. At MEAS, the screener is completed either directly onto SmartSurvey using a laptop or, if providers are unable to do this, a paper form is completed and the information then transferred onto SmartSurvey as soon as possible. Once a place is offered to a learner and they accept it, there is a “warm handover” to the provider and the Smart Survey data is sent to the provider to enter into the enrolment form. Data sharing agreements are in place between providers and there is a statement on the screener form about data sharing.

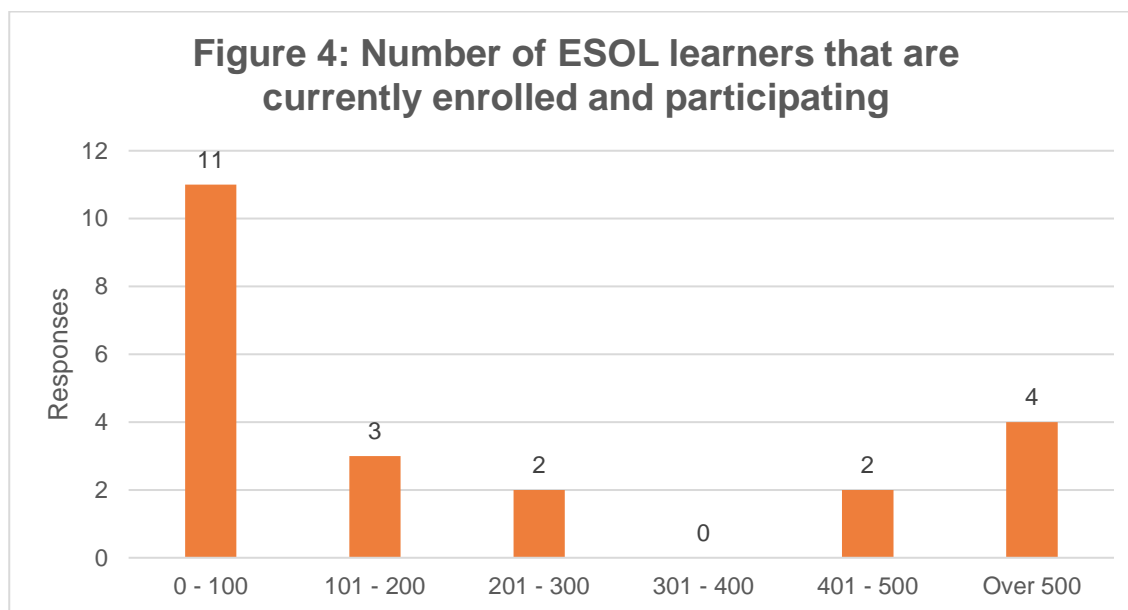
⁶ Learning and Work Institute, 2020. *ESOL Local Coordination: Summary Workshop Report*. Unpublished.

In contrast, **nearly all of the providers interviewed collaborate with other local stakeholders**. Local authorities are often contacted by providers to secure extra funding for ESOL provision and to access intelligence from resettlement teams that can help predict incoming demand for ESOL. Providers collaborate with VCS organisations for the same purpose of gathering information about new arrivals and predicting demand. Some liaise with Jobcentre Plus to ensure that learners can fit their appointments with work coaches around their ESOL classes.

4. Supply and demand for ESOL in the South East

4.1. Overall supply and demand

Most interview participants do not believe they are not meeting local demand for ESOL. Despite the increasing demand for ESOL outlined later in this chapter, **half of survey respondents (11) reported that they are delivering a relatively small provision** of between 0 and 100 learners, while only one in five (4) reported supporting larger cohorts of over 500 (Figure 4). There is considerable diversity in the supply of ESOL, with the fewest reported number of learners being 20, and the greatest number being 1,705.



Q15. How many ESOL learners do you have now that are currently enrolled and participating?

Base: All respondents (22)

Just over three out of five survey respondents (14) of described refugees and people seeking asylum as a significant part of the demand for ESOL provision in their area. Of this group, over one-third (5) mentioned Ukrainians, while two respectively mentioned Afghans, Syrians, and Hong Kong British Nationals Overseas (HKBN(O)s). Another two respondents also mentioned high demand from settled South Asian communities.

Nearly one-third of survey respondents (7) indicated that **demand is mostly for lower-level ESOL** (i.e., Pre-entry, Entry Levels 1 and 2). One quarter (6) identified unemployed or low-paid adults as a key group driving demand for ESOL provision, while nearly one-fifth (4) mentioned young people or children.

Most interview participants reported that Ukrainian learners generally require accredited ESOL at higher levels (i.e., Levels 1 and 2). This group were generally understood to often have a high level of English language skills upon arrival, and to be largely focused on gaining ESOL qualifications in preparation for work:

“By far our largest cohort is Ukrainian women because they've come over with their children, left the men behind. They are noticeably more highly educated, more motivated. They're working or they're claiming Universal Credit.” (Sixth form college)

Some interview participants also mentioned HKBN(O)s as a group that is accessing higher-level, accredited ESOL. On the other hand, some participants reported that refugees arriving from Afghanistan and Syria often require entry-level ESOL and sometimes have no literacy skills:

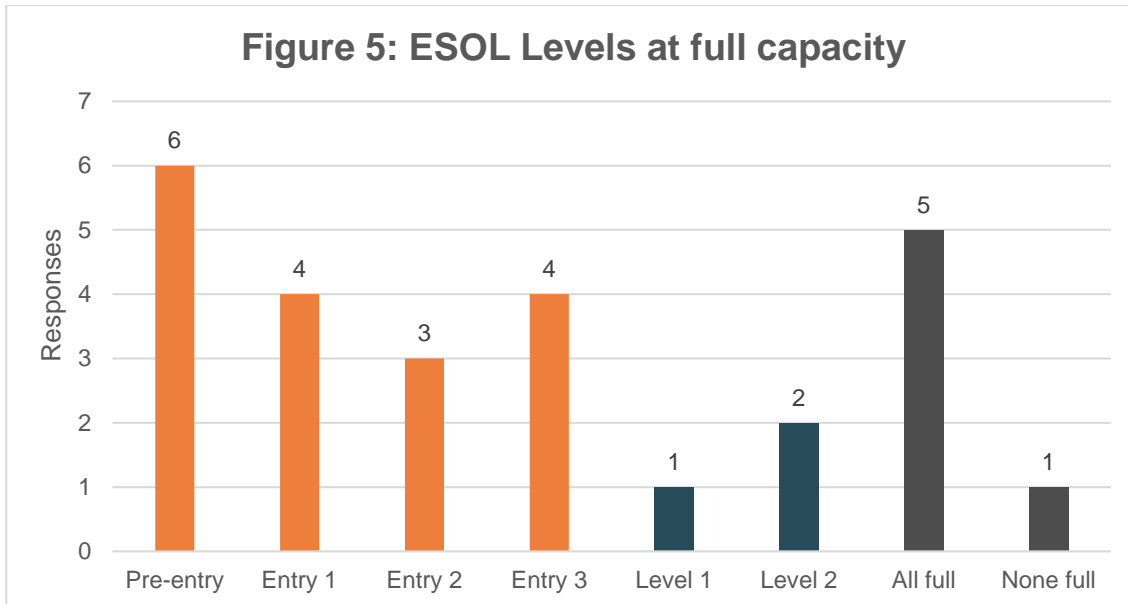
“A lot of people from Afghanistan and Syria, for example, are often illiterate in their first language, and have often had very impacted education or very limited education. So, their challenges in the classroom are not just language, but their ability to study, concentrate, take notes and, in some cases, the concept of language isn't there. If they don't read or write in their own language, then teaching them in a second language is challenging.” (Further education college)

Nearly all interview participants reported that demand has increased for ESOL provision in recent years. Most credited this increase largely to the Ukrainian resettlement schemes, as well as an increase in people seeking asylum, and/or new bridging hotels having opened in the area. Some interview participants mentioned that, following a decrease in demand for ESOL during the Covid-19 pandemic, demand has now reached pre-pandemic levels and they are having to increase provision again:

“[There is] Much more demand than supply... I think last year I planned for 1,000 enrolments and we ended up with 1,800 enrolments, so that meant we were rushing to recruit additional teachers and trying to find additional rooms in the college.” (Further education college)

4.2. Excess demand for ESOL

Survey findings indicate a greater demand for lower-level ESOL provision (Figure 5). Nearly one third of providers offering Pre-entry level ESOL classes (6) reported these classes to be at full capacity. One fifth of providers offering Entry 1 (4) and Entry 3 (4) classes say these classes are at full capacity. This is followed by Entry 2 (3), Level 2 (2) and Level 1 (1). At the same time, **nearly one-quarter (5) of survey respondents reported that all their classes are full**, a finding that was echoed by most interview participants.



Q17. Are your ESOL classes at full capacity? If so, which levels are at full capacity?
 Base: All respondents (22)

However, some interview participants reported that none of their classes are oversubscribed. For these providers, this was not because demand is low in their area, but because they find flexible ways of ensuring that they can include learners in their classes; for example, by increasing class sizes where space permits this.

Lower-level ESOL provision is generally more likely to be oversubscribed than higher-level provision. Most interview participants reported that their Pre-Entry provision is their most oversubscribed provision, followed by Entry 3, Entry 1, and Entry 2. No interview participants reported that their Level 1 or Level 2 provision is oversubscribed, and some providers highlighted that demand is low for these courses. Evening classes are in high demand from learners who are employed, and morning classes are in high demand from learners with children.

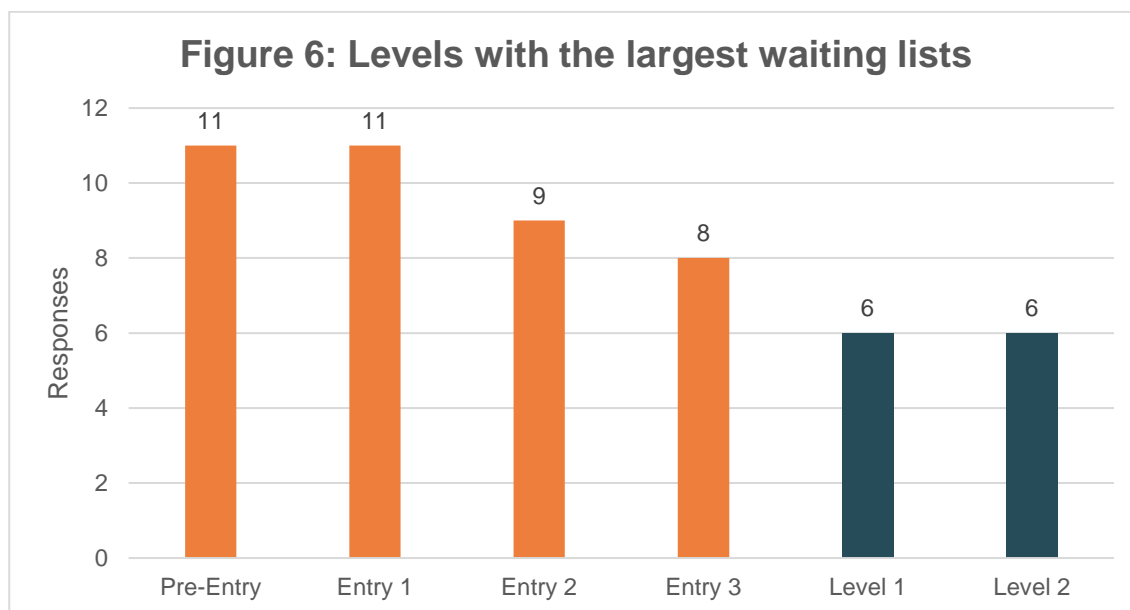
All interviewees said they signpost prospective learners to other ESOL providers in the area. The provision that they signpost to is generally informal or non-accredited and delivered by VCS organisations, rather than accredited provision. This is typically because local accredited provision is at full capacity or there is a lack of alternative accredited provision in the area. One participant reported that all the ESOL providers in their local area use the same ESOL initial assessment and can signpost learners to alternative provision without them having to undergo another assessment:

“All the providers use the same ESOL initial assessment. So, if we assess a learner and find that we don't have a space for them to start at the next available date at that level, we can then send them on with that initial assessment to another provider who does have space.” (Local authority)

Most providers indicated they use a waiting list. Of the survey respondents who do not use a waiting list, most do not consider a waiting list to be necessary as they feel that their provision is meeting demand in the local area. Other reasons included perceiving waiting lists to only be used by further education providers, and believing that the waiting list would be so long that people would not get a place this academic year, thus giving false hope. Some providers without a waiting list did not have one due to a lack of capacity to administrate this:

“Once we’ve started teaching, we don’t have any time to do individual assessments. We assess quite carefully at initial assessment to put them into the right level class, and in order to run a waiting list that would work, we’d have to do the assessment first so that we knew it was a waiting list for Entry 2, or a waiting list for a Level 2. We just haven’t got the time or the manpower to do it.” (Sixth Form College)

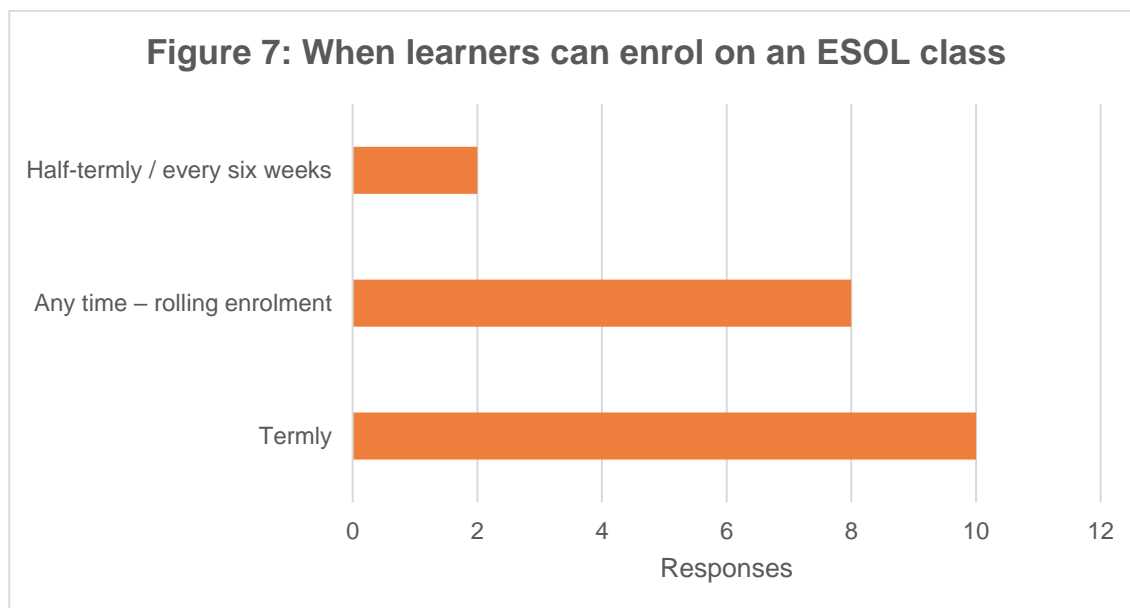
Lower-level ESOL courses tend to have the longest waiting lists (Figure 6). Of the survey respondents who use a waiting list (15), nearly three-quarters (11) reported that Pre-entry and Entry 1 have the largest waiting lists, followed by Entry 2 (9) and Entry 3 (8). This supports the earlier finding that demand is greater for lower level ESOL, with fewer respondents (6) reporting Level 1 or Level 2 as having the largest waiting lists.



Q20. How many people are waiting at each level?
 Base: All respondents who use a waiting list (15)

Most (13) survey respondents reported that the number of people on their waiting lists varies at different times of year. These respondents mentioned longer lists in September and at the end of the academic year, and shorter lists in the summer holidays and at the beginning of new terms. Some interview participants ask prospective learners to return at their next enrolment point when provision is at full capacity.

Half of survey respondents (10) have termly enrolment points. Four in ten (8) can enrol learners at any point (rolling enrolment) and one in ten (2) have half-termly enrolment points (Figure 7).



Q10. When can learners start on an ESOL course, assuming places are available?
 Base: All respondents who did not skip this question (20)

When asked what proportion of learners on their waiting list go on to enrol on an ESOL course with them, survey respondents' mean average answer was 73%. Respondents were also asked to estimate the proportion of learners waiting for an ESOL course who they would expect to enrol in the same term, the next term, or the next academic year. Learners are most likely to enrol at the next term (mean average response of 56%) or the same term (48%), with far fewer likely to enrol at the next academic year (16%).

Survey data indicates that most learners are enrolled within 12 weeks of expressing interest in joining an ESOL class. Interviewees explained that, while it is important that learners can readily access ESOL provision when they need it, providers must consider how enrolling learners mid-way or near the end of a course can impact the quality of provision. They are also often restricted by wider operational and curriculum constraints. Some interview participants also highlighted that the relocation of people seeking asylum is the most common reason that spaces will open on ESOL courses, meaning that waiting times are various and unpredictable.

Of the survey respondents who have a waiting list (15), most allocate learners to places using a 'first-come-first-served' approach (12) when space become available, with others allocating learners based on the supply and demand for certain levels of provision, as well as learner need. Interview participants explained that they use a blend of 'first-come-first-served' with priority for learners with high need, such learners aged 19 and under, people seeking asylum, and refugees.

Four-fifths (12) of respondents using waiting lists offer alternative provision to people on waiting lists. Of the providers who do offer alternative provision to those on waiting lists, over four-fifths (10) offer these learners informal ESOL or community learning, half (6) offer them maths provision, one-third offer them essential digital skills training (4), and one quarter (3) offer them provision in English or employability skills.

The qualitative interviews highlighted that where providers do not offer alternative provision to learners on waiting lists, this can be due to ESOL being their only provision. This is particularly the case for VCS organisations that do not have any other courses to refer their learners to. Some other participants explained that they will refer learners to other providers but not internally:

“If a learner wants an evening course and we don't offer it at that level, or we don't have space, I'm fairly familiar with what's on offer with other providers so we're able to say, 'Try this provider if that's what you need.' We get a few learners asking for online provision, and as far as I'm aware there's only one provider running online courses, so I would refer them there.” (Local authority)

5. Challenges with ESOL in the South East

5.1. Funding

Most survey respondents (19) and interview participants assess learners for funding. Of the interview participants, the two VCS organisations were the only providers that do not assess learners for funding because they are either funded through local authorities or private charitable donations.

While most interview participants claimed that they have not had to turn away many prospective learners away due to their ineligibility for Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding, some have had to do this. **Around half of survey respondents (12) highlighted that people seeking asylum who have not been resident in the UK for longer than six months constitute a significant number of those who are found to be ineligible for AEB funding.** This was also the most common barrier mentioned by interview participants:

“Asylum seekers, stuck in hotels, six months they're here before they're eligible for funding. I think it's really hard-, even community non-accredited provision, they have to meet the residency requirements. Even if you're working with a small provider, such as a specialist provider that's dealing with women and children, all those people still need to meet residency requirements and they don't.” (Local authority)

Nearly one-fifth (4) of survey respondents and some interview participants highlighted ineligibility barriers for migrants on spousal visas who have not been resident in the UK for longer than three years (the three-year ordinary residency requirement). Other groups highlighted as ineligible by survey respondents were migrants on student visas, some trafficked persons, and those not claiming Universal Credit or who are over the salary threshold to receive AEB funding.

A minority (3) of survey respondents and some interview participants mentioned HKBN(O)s as an ineligible group. Although HKBN(O)s are ineligible for AEB funding unless they meet the three-year ordinary residency requirement, this group is eligible for ESOL funded through the Hong Kong Welcome Programme. This funding is administered by local authorities, who are responsible for providing up to £850 of ESOL per HKBN(O) in their area each year⁷. In addition, SESPM liaises between local authorities and diaspora organisations in the South East to streamline the provision of ESOL for HKBN(O)s settled in the region. This work includes distributing and gathering data from surveys to determine the wants and needs of Hong Kong learners and sharing findings with ESOL providers to help inform provision. SESPM promotes the offer of ESOL in the Hong Kong community and delivers in-person and online ESOL information sessions in English and Cantonese.

⁷ [Information for Hongkongers in the South East - South East Strategic Partnership for Migration \(southeastspm.org.uk\)](https://southeastspm.org.uk)

To address gaps in the AEB funding eligibility criteria, most interview participants said their organisations signpost ineligible individuals to informal or community provision, and one refers them to fee-paying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) schools if they can afford to self-fund. Some participants conveyed that they have to tell people seeking asylum to wait until they become eligible after six months, but one highlighted that they begin the enrolment process at five months to speed up the process.

Most interview participants believe that funding is a key factor in decision-making about their provision. As mentioned in Chapter 3.1., one provider conveyed that they are not offering accredited ESOL provision due to the risk of financial losses when people seeking asylum are relocated mid-course:

“It’s the main reason that we’re not offering accredited provision. In a way it would be nice to be able to give our learners that progression in-house from non-accredited to accredited, but with the types of learners that we work with it seems like too much of a financial risk to do that.” (Local authority)

One further education college who offers accredited ESOL for people seeking asylum reported losing £300 per learner who does not complete their course. Another local authority provider mentioned that, while HKBN(O)s can claim the local authority tariff or some can afford to self-fund, these learners are often deprioritised in place of AEB-funded learners. This helps to ensure that the provider meets their AEB allocation or they risk funding being clawed back by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA):

“Providers like ourselves are given an allocation from the ESFA to spend. We need to fully utilise that, or risk claw-back. And therefore, ever-diminishing amounts of money. So, you know, we would love to be able to have all of the Hong Kong BN(O)s in our provision. But it’s just not possible, because they take up spaces that we need to populate with AEB-funded learners. Otherwise we’re at risk of not meeting our allocation and claw-back” (Local authority)

5.2. Other challenges experienced by ESOL providers

Other than funding, **most interview participants mentioned recruiting qualified staff as a challenge restricting their ability to provide ESOL.** These participants highlighted that the contracts offered to ESOL tutors are often sessional, zero-hour, and low-paid, which do not attract qualified tutors to the sector, particularly with the financial insecurity faced by many due to the cost-of-living crisis:

“You’re not attracting, necessarily, people who are qualified, because of the cost-of-living crisis, people want to have a secure wage... I interviewed somebody in the summer, and he was like ‘Sorry, I’ve had an interview somewhere else, and they’ve offered me a permanent contract, so I won’t be coming.’ It’s just like, we’ve just lost somebody who had DELTA.” (Further education college)

Some also mentioned that many applicants have EFL but not ESOL qualifications, and that the number of qualified ESOL tutors decreased during the pandemic as in-person provision ceased and finding work became more difficult:

“Since the pandemic the number of people who were sessional ESOL teachers has gone down, because if you were sessional during the pandemic, you probably weren't able to earn any money at all unless you managed to cobble together some online thing. A lot of people left that area of work. It's come back a bit but we still find it's quite hard to recruit.” (FE College)

Finding and affording suitable venues is a key challenge in delivering ESOL provision for some providers. One described how they have been forced to move from a community venue to on-site provision due to financial reasons, where they must now compete over classroom space. A college highlighted that attempting to expand their ESOL provision mid-year is difficult as many rooms in their building are already booked for the year at this point.

5.2. Barriers to participation in ESOL

Most interview participants cited childcare as a barrier to participation in ESOL.

These participants described how learners with children struggle to fit their ESOL classes around their childcare responsibilities:

“Schools in [the area] are full, so you'll get allocated wherever you're living, it could be the other side of town. If you're a mum and you've got to drop your kids and then try and get to your educational provider, you know, that has an impact on whether people can engage in learning.” (Local authority)

Previous L&W research has demonstrated that childcare is a significant barrier to education for many migrants, particularly those with young children below school age⁸. However, the availability of childcare services, such as crèches, has been limited, especially following the pandemic, largely because providers believe that current funding is not enough to cover childcare provision. Most interview participants in previous research conveyed that they are either unable to provide a crèche service due to limited staff capacity or a lack of funding to cover this. While some colleges have a crèche, these services are oversubscribed and insufficient to meet demand.

Not all interview participants identified the cost and convenience of transport for learners as a significant barrier to participation in ESOL. The cost of travel is a barrier particularly for low-income households and people seeking asylum. Not all providers are funded to cover learners' travel costs and, for those who can fund travel, rising transport costs in some areas are outpacing travel bursaries. Some providers based in rural areas

⁸ Learning and Work Institute, 2024. *Supporting London's Migrant Communities Through the Adult Education Budget.*

mentioned that the local public transport offer is limited as locals tend to rely on cars as their primary form of transport:

“Public transport's expensive, and of course there's not much of it... most people around here would travel in by private transport, so those who haven't got it are restricted from accessing quite a lot of things, including ESOL provision.” (Sixth form college)

Some interview participants highlighted that migrants' housing instability disrupts their ability to participate in ESOL learning. People seeking asylum, and those in bridging or temporary accommodation, who can be relocated suddenly, are particularly affected. This leads providers to enrol them in short, non-accredited courses that may not always best fit their learning needs. At the same time, when people seeking asylum living in bridging hotels are granted refugee status, they are given only 28 days to find new accommodation. This leaves many homeless as they struggle to find a home in this short timeframe:

“We have a large number of students now who will write to their teacher saying, 'Sorry, can't come to class this week I am now homeless. I've got my letter.'... expecting somebody from a traumatic background who doesn't speak English as a first language to get themselves sorted within 28 days is very difficult.” (Further education college)

Some interview participants highlighted that participation in ESOL is also restricted by some learners' financial insecurity. This leaves them in digital poverty and leads them to prioritise taking extra shifts at work over attending ESOL classes. Some discussed the impact of stress, trauma, and other mental health conditions, particularly for refugees and people seeking asylum, on learners' motivation, confidence, and overall ability to engage in ESOL. Also mentioned by a minority of participants as barriers to participation in ESOL were health and mobility issues restricting learners' ability to physically access in-person provision; double enrolment causing greater oversubscription of provision; and the funding ineligibility barriers outlined in Chapter 5.1.

Interview participants are using a range of approaches to address these barriers.

Some providers are offering highly flexible, online ESOL provision to ensure that employed and parent learners can fit their classes around their childcare and work commitments. Some offer crèche services to address childcare barriers, although, as mentioned previously, these are often oversubscribed. To address barriers with travel and transport, one provider is reportedly spending over £10,000 per year to fund learners' bus tickets, one is delivering ESOL in community venues that can be accessed easily and cheaply, and one is hosting online classes. Some participants reported providing their learners with laptops, phones, and data packages to address barriers with digital poverty and access.

For learners with mental health barriers, one provider is funding a personal development and wellbeing tutor for ESOL whose job is to support students with difficult pastoral needs,

and one refers these learners to local support services. Some participants also highlighted the importance of their ESOL provision as a form of indirect mental support by allowing learners access to a safe space where they can share their feelings and worries with others:

“One of the things I think that quite a lot of us have recognised is that, actually, English classes is quite a good way of, just for a moment, not worrying about those thing... it's also a safe space where people feel they can talk if they want to.” (VCS organisation)

6. Key messages

This chapter presents key messages informed by the research, focused on enhancing the system and promoting access to ESOL learning for migrant communities, refugees, and people seeking asylum in the South East. It is important to note, however, that further research is required to validate and expand upon these findings, as the small scale of the study means that it cannot be entirely representative of the region as a whole. The following messages are primarily aimed towards three audiences: (i) ESOL providers in the South East, (ii) SESPM and L&W, in relation to the ongoing capacity-building programme, and (iii) wider policy actors, including the Home Office, Department for Education (DfE), and DLUHC.

4.1. Key messages for providers

(1) Collaboration between providers: Some providers highlighted the need for more, and more effective, collaboration and communication between local providers. This is primarily to discuss common challenges, new funding opportunities, and to share best practice. One way for ESOL providers to increase collaboration could be to collectively introduce a centralised hub in each local authority area where learners can access ESOL classes and information on where to complete an initial assessment and enrol in provision.

“I think what would be amazing and what we talk about in the ESOL network a lot is this idea of there being a central kind of hub for new ESOL learners to engage with, which collates all the information and deals with initial assessment and finds the best place for that learner.” (Local authority)

(2) Collaboration between providers and local stakeholder organisations: Some interview participants felt that improved collaboration and communication is not only required between ESOL providers, but also with local stakeholders and VCS organisations. These participants conveyed the challenges of predicting demand for ESOL in their area as information about new arrivals is often shared at the last minute, leaving providers little time to make any necessary preparations. More joined-up working with local authorities’ resettlement teams, VCS organisations and other stakeholders who receive information about new arrivals could help providers to predict demand earlier, leaving them more time to arrange tutors, timings, and locations for classes to accommodate these new learners.

4.2. Key messages for capacity building programme

(3) Local coordination of ESOL provision: As outlined above, some research participants emphasised the need for more frequent and effective collaboration and communication between local providers, and with local stakeholder organisations. To address this need, L&W has used part of the ESOL capacity building funding allocated to SESPM to provide three local authority adult learning services in the South East with a small grant to fund a local ESOL co-ordination initiative, with a focus on areas of high demand for ESOL. To date, we have awarded three grants, and activities supported

include mapping local ESOL provision; networking and partner engagement; creating an online portal containing details of local ESOL provision; developing a website to act as a single point of information on local ESOL provision; and scoping the feasibility of developing and implementing standardised initial assessment across the UK.

(4) Access to qualified ESOL tutors: Throughout the research, several providers identified recruiting and retaining qualified ESOL tutors as a key challenge, largely due to the low pay and unstable contracts often offered to ESOL tutors. Most of these providers mentioned a need for funding to hire more staff on more stable contracts, under improved working conditions, and with higher pay. Some providers highlighted the importance of training and recruiting new, younger ESOL tutors, rather than relying on retired teachers.

“I’m noticing the TESOL qualification is being offered by fewer colleges, and the online ones are great, but they don’t give them proper teaching practise with students, there needs to be more training available... It’s having that, you know, regular supply of potential tutors because if you’re only getting people who are coming out of teaching then-, they’re lovely because they’re more mature, they know what they’re doing but you’re not getting new tutors coming in.” (Local authority)

In response to this issue, L&W and SESPM have focused much of the capacity building programme on offering ESOL tutor training qualifications and providing continuing professional development (CPD) training for current ESOL practitioners. For instance, to address the lack of tutors with ESOL teaching qualifications in comparison to EFL qualifications, L&W has included an ‘EFL to ESOL’ course in the CPD programme in which current ESOL practitioners who possess EFL qualifications are trained for teaching ESOL. Other prevalent issues highlighted in the research include the high demand for pre-entry ESOL, mental health barriers for ESOL learners, and large class sizes. L&W has provided training to help ESOL tutors address these challenges through funding short CPD courses on literacy and phonics for ESOL learners, trauma informed practice, and working with mixed ability classes.

The capacity building programme can help train individuals who already have an interest in ESOL teaching. However, further work is needed to address fundamental issues with low pay and insecure work to attract more ESOL tutors to the sector who might otherwise have been disinclined.

(5) Informal, non-accredited provision: A VCS organisation highlighted the need for more flexible, tailored, and non-accredited provision with a reduced focus on exams and qualifications to meet the diverse and distinct needs of learners. This participant reported that the achievement of a formal ESOL qualification is often less significant to their learners than the ability to secure employment or achieve their goals, and a more personalised and tailored approach might therefore be beneficial in providing these learners with the necessary tools to meet their specific needs. This tends to be the case

for learners who have a high level of English yet need specialised support with terminology for moving into high-skilled work.

“There are people with needs at different levels, people who want to go into work, people who want to go into education. In some cases, it might better to have a less formal but more tailored approach to those people having the tools they need to get on with the rest of their lives. You know, it's going to be unimportant to them whether they have a particular level, what's much more important is they can go and get work.” (VCS organisation)

In response, L&W and SESPM are supporting the delivery of non-accredited provision by funding conversation club training and general CPD for ESOL tutors and volunteers.

4.3. Key messages for wider policy development

(6) Fragmentation in funding: At present, ESOL funding is sourced from several different Government departments, including DfE, DLUHC, the Home Office, and Department for Work and Pensions. It could be beneficial if funding was centralised to eliminate the need for providers to navigate diverse funding and eligibility rules, thereby reducing complexity in delivering services to different groups of learners.

(7) AEB funding for HKBN(O)s: Although HKBN(O)s can access ESOL through the Hong Kong Welcome Programme, few providers seem to be actively utilising this funding, potentially due to a lack of awareness of its existence. Some interview participants therefore expressed that they would like AEB funding to be extended to HKBN(O)s to make it clearer for providers to understand how they can provide funded ESOL for this group.

(8) Six-month residency rule on access to AEB funding for individuals seeking asylum: The enforced delay that prevents individuals who are seeking asylum from accessing AEB-funded learning is a barrier both to effective engagement and to effective language learning, with wider negative implications for learners' integration and progression. Permitting people seeking asylum to access AEB-funded learning from their point of entry could significantly improve their education prospects and contribute to their successful integration into UK society.