LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE

ESOL provision for 16-19-year-olds

Availability, challenges and opportunities in the South East of England

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About Learning and Work Institute

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Executive summary

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) and funded by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to better understand and strengthen ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision for 16–19-year-olds across the South East of England.

This research responds to growing concerns among colleges, local authorities and resettlement teams that young asylum seekers, refugees and other migrant learners face significant barriers in accessing the English language learning they need to progress in education, employment and wider integration. The study combines a regional mapping exercise of ESOL provision with in-depth qualitative interviews with colleges, local authorities and voluntary and community groups.

Key findings

Overall availability is strong, but significant gaps remain

Of 37 FE colleges across the region, 34 offer ESOL provision for 16–19-year-olds, indicating broad coverage. Most colleges provide Entry Level ESOL, especially at Entry 2 and Entry 3, reflecting high demand at these levels. However:

- **Pre-entry provision is limited**, offered by only half of colleges despite clear need among newly arrived young people with very low English or limited literacy.
- **Higher-level ESOL (Level 1 and 2) is less common**, partly because learners often transition into Functional Skills, GCSEs or vocational pathways at this stage.
- **Geography, transport networks, and housing placements can still make provision inaccessible**, even where it technically exists.

Demand is rising, especially among UASC

Colleges and local authorities consistently report growing demand for ESOL among 16–19-year-olds, driven by increases in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) across the region. Some colleges are routinely oversubscribed, with waiting lists long enough to run additional classes - if rooms and staff are available. Demand is most acute at Entry Levels and pre-entry.

A shortage of places and infrequent enrolment windows create long waits

Most colleges only enrol new ESOL learners in September, with a smaller intake in January. This leaves many young people, particularly UASC who arrive throughout the year, waiting six months to a full year to start learning English. The lack of regular intakes, combined with limited room capacity, lack of staff, and funding barriers for pre-entry levels, mean that:

- **Young people often remain out of education for long periods**, increasing risks of isolation, disengagement and delayed progression.
- **Local authorities struggle to find interim community-based provision**, with many small providers unable to run viable classes due to inconsistent learner numbers.

Learners have complex needs requiring trauma-informed, holistic support

Many 16–19 ESOL learners, especially UASC, have experienced trauma, disrupted education and unstable living circumstances. As a result, they require:

- **Trauma-informed practice**, flexible attendance policies and proactive pastoral support.
- **Practical help** such as travel assistance, bursaries for food and equipment, and support navigating digital platforms.
- **Clear guidance on expectations of formal education**, particularly for those with little or no prior schooling.
- **Specialist behavioural and classroom management skills** among teachers, due to cultural diversity, tensions among learners, and the need to maintain safe and inclusive spaces.

Provision often does not align with learners' aspirations

Many young people arrive with strong motivation and high aspirations—for example, wanting to pursue university or professional routes. Yet:

- **Limited opportunities for embedded ESOL or combined ESOL-vocational pathways** mean learners often spend long periods studying only English.
- **Some learners spend years in classes that do not match their proficiency level**, particularly where pre-entry learners are grouped into Entry 1, slowing progress.

Pastoral and wellbeing teams are under pressure

The high proportion of UASC learners creates heavy pastoral workloads, including safeguarding, attendance monitoring, mental health referrals and liaison with social workers. Some colleges have responded by creating dedicated ESOL pastoral leads, which has significantly improved support.

Promising approaches are emerging

This research identifies several effective practices that could be scaled or replicated:

- **Regular or year-round intakes** through unit-based assessment or tailored learning programmes.

- **Partnership models** between colleges and community organisations to deliver pre-entry, unaccredited or bridging ESOL.
- **Tailored Learning-funded short courses** to support learners with "spiky profiles" or those awaiting a full ESOL place.
- **Vocational taster sessions**, guest speakers and community activities to boost confidence, integration and motivation.
- **Strong local ESOL networks** that coordinate provision, reduce duplication and share innovation.

Recommendations

For national policy and funding

- Increase 16–19 ESOL funding to match rising demand and prevent long waiting periods.
- Enable and fund pre-entry 16–19 ESOL within Study Programme rules.
- Expand flexible funding models (e.g., Tailored Learning) to allow year-round starts and targeted provision.
- Recognise the additional support needs of UASC in funding allocations.
- Consider an enhanced education plan (similar to an EHCP) for young refugees and asylum seekers, enabling continued 16–19 provision up to age 25.
- Expand Virtual Schools' remit to support young migrants and refugees.

For colleges

- Implement flexible intake models and expand use of modular or tailored provision.
- Recruit specialist pastoral staff for ESOL learners, especially UASC.
- Provide organisation-wide training in trauma-informed practice and behaviour management.
- Develop more embedded ESOL and combined ESOL-vocational pathways.

For local authorities

- Establish or strengthen local ESOL partnerships and networks.
- Work strategically with college senior leaders to influence provision planning.
- Commission community-based pre-entry ESOL, informed by clear mapping of local need.
- Provide travel, digital access and practical support to reduce barriers to learning.

Introduction

Between April 2025 and March 2026, Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) and funded by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to enhance local infrastructure and partnerships to strength ESOL support for resettled refugees across the South East of England. As part of this work, L&W carried out a small-scale research project to explore what provision is available across the South East for 16–19-year-old English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners.

The research built on the identification, through L&W's regional ESOL co-ordinator role, of ESOL for 16–19-year-olds as a key issue for stakeholders. As such, its aim was to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges, opportunities and support required at both policy and practice level to boost opportunities for participation in ESOL for 16-19 learners. This report shares the findings of the research.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages. The first stage consisted of **desk research to map current ESOL provision for 16–19-year-olds offered by Further Education colleges across the South East**. This involved accessing information on colleges' websites to explore the levels and nature of the ESOL provision they offer to 16-19 learners. This information was then analysed to produce a short mapping report of the provision on offer across the region, which has been incorporated into this report.

The second stage of the research involved **online qualitative interviews with a sample of colleges and local authority resettlement teams across the region**. The sample was structured to ensure representation from each of the four sub-regions in the South East: Hampshire and Isle of Wight; Kent; Surrey and Sussex; and Thames Valley. Organisations were selected for interview based on the findings of the mapping exercise and existing knowledge of good practice in delivering ESOL for 16–19-year-olds. The interviews aimed to identify the key challenges in meeting the demand for ESOL amongst 16-19 learners, as well as different and innovative approaches in overcoming these challenges.

In total, 10 interviews were conducted with four local authority resettlement teams, four FE colleges and two voluntary and community organisations who deliver ESOL in the community. The findings of the interviews were analysed thematically to explore levels of demand for ESOL amongst 16-19 learners in different areas of the South East; identify key challenges in meeting this demand; the needs of 16-19 ESOL learners; challenges in meeting this cohort's needs; and any approaches that work well in delivering ESOL to 16-19 learners.

Findings

Availability of provision for 16–19-year-olds across the South East

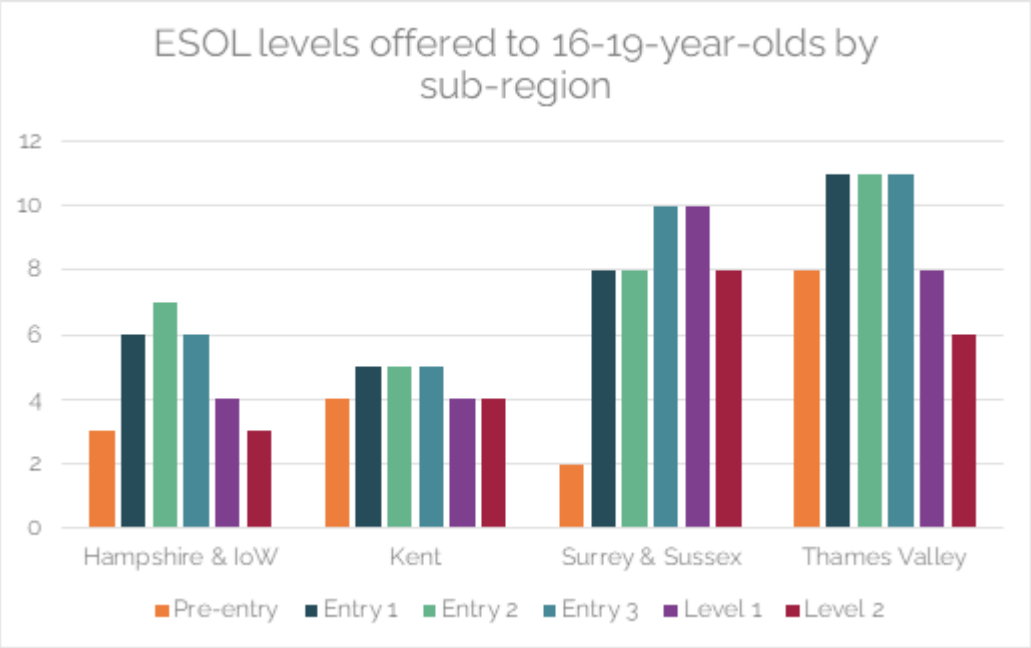
The mapping exercise identified a strong overall spread of provision across the region, with 34 of 37 colleges in the South East offering ESOL to 16–19-year-olds. The geographical distribution of provision revealed a generally strong regional coverage, with some minor gaps concentrated in specific sub-regions.

Provision was most consistent in Surrey and Sussex, where every college mapped offered ESOL to 16-19-year-olds. The other three sub-regions each contained one college that did not offer ESOL provision, despite otherwise strong coverage. These differences may reflect localised factors such as funding priorities, demographic variation, or institutional capacity. Other factors, such as availability of housing for resettled families and transport links, also mean that although coverage across the region is strong, individuals may still face challenges in accessing ESOL learning.

While most colleges offered a range of ESOL levels, there was notable variation in the level of provision colleges offered to 16-19-year-olds. Entry-level was the most common level of ESOL provision for 16-19-year-olds in the region, with Entry 3 being the most widely available, offered by 33 of the 37 colleges. Entry 2 and Entry 1 follow closely, available at 32 and 31 colleges respectively. In the qualitative interviews, colleges explained that this focus on Entry Level provision was the result of high learner demand at this level. In comparison, Pre-entry ESOL provision was significantly less common, available at only half (17) of colleges. Colleges involved in the qualitative interviews explained that they tended not to offer Pre-Entry ESOL due to reported challenges in funding arrangements for this level of provision.

Level 1 and Level 2 ESOL courses were offered by 27 and 22 colleges respectively. In the qualitative interviews, colleges explained that at these higher levels, learners met the English proficiency requirements for Functional Skills courses, GCSE pathways, vocational courses or other mainstream programmes, and so tended to move into these to progress towards their longer-term goals. For example, Canterbury College uses Gateway Skills for Life qualifications for Entry Level learners, and then their Level 1 learners move onto Functional Skills English and a Level 1 Employability Skills qualification. They put this in place in response to learner feedback that their third year of ESOL was too similar to the previous levels. Moving learners onto mainstream programmes also suited colleges as they felt that these programmes were more efficient in terms of claiming funding. This may explain the lower availability of Level 1 and Level 2 ESOL courses in the region.

The chart below shows the levels of ESOL provision available to 16–19-year-olds in each sub-region of the South East. Of note is the relatively small amount of pre-entry courses available in Surrey and Sussex, but otherwise there is a very similar picture in each sub-region, with most ESOL provision for this age group concentrated in the Entry Levels.



Structure of ESOL provision for 16–19-year-olds

Most of the colleges involved in the research were middle-sized colleges that have merged and grown in recent years. As such, their ESOL provision for 16–19-year-olds tended to be considerable, often delivering four or more courses simultaneously, across different levels.

The size of the 16-19 ESOL cohort tended to vary between colleges, and even between campuses within the same provider. Consequently, some colleges and campuses were able to run more classes and therefore streamline learners into specific groups based on their language proficiency. For example, one college had three Entry Level 1 groups and could differentiate learners who were unable to write in their own language, unable to speak English but were literate in their own language, and could speak some English and write in their own language. Where cohorts were smaller, groups tended to be more mixed ability, for example, combining high Entry 3 and Level 1 learners.

One college explained that they group all their 16+ ESOL learners together to ensure they have a large enough cohort to put on courses at all levels, from pre-entry up to Level 2. This meant learners could progress quickly as they were at the right level for their skills, and the college could also offer different times to learners to fit with their other commitments: they ran a morning, afternoon and evening option at one campus.

Demand for ESOL provision amongst 16–19-year-olds

Colleges and local authority resettlement teams across the South East agreed that demand for ESOL amongst 16-19 year olds had either remained consistent or increased in recent years. In some sub-regions, demand had increased sharply since the pandemic. In these areas, interviewees attributed this increase to the rise in the

number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). This is supported by data on the number of UASC in the South East, which increased by 75 per cent between 2021 and 2025 (from 820 to 1,440)[1]. Consequently, colleges explained that the majority of their ESOL learners at 16-19 were UASC who had been placed into the care of the local authority.

Some FE colleges reported being consistently oversubscribed for their 16-19 ESOL provision. For example, one college reported that their waiting list for their Entry Level 1 ESOL course was long enough for them to run another group. However, they were restricted in doing this mainly due to rooming and lack of space, but also teaching availability. This meant that they were almost fully subscribed for their next September intake, despite only being in the autumn term of the current academic year.

Generally, colleges reported that demand for ESOL amongst 16–19-year-olds tended to be focussed at lower levels: mainly Entry Level 2 and 3, though some areas reported high demand for pre-entry provision that they often could not meet due to funding challenges. One college reported high demand at Level 1 because of learners progressing through levels, creating a "pinch point" at this stage.

Challenges in meeting demand for 16-19 ESOL provision

Interviewees raised several key challenges in meeting the current demand for ESOL provision amongst 16-19 learners in the South East. These included: lack of available provision; colleges' restricted enrolments throughout the year; and a lack of community-based or alternative ESOL provision for 16-19 learners.

Lack of provision and regular intakes

The overall reflection from local authority resettlement teams was that there is not enough ESOL provision to meet the demand amongst 16-19 learners across the region. They reported young people regularly being put on waiting lists because courses were full.

This challenge was exacerbated by colleges' lack of regular enrolments: some colleges had a January or spring intake but most only had intakes in September. Most colleges would infill spaces created by learners dropping out, but this would often only create space for a small number of those on the waiting list. Colleges also explained that they were restricted in taking on new learners beyond February or March as after this stage, there were not enough teaching hours left in the year to get learners up to the level needed to pass their exams.

This created a significant challenge for local authority resettlement teams, as UASC and families with children arrive in the UK throughout the year. Several resettlement

[1] Department for Education (2025) Children looked after in England including adoptions.

workers gave examples of young people arriving in the autumn or even late summer having to wait a full year before they could enrol onto an English course.

> "...it's absolutely devastating for a young person to have to wait an entire academic year to be able to carry on with their studies in a substantial way." *(Local authority resettlement team)*

When exploring this challenge further with colleges, it became apparent that the main restriction on offering more classes at levels with high demand was the lack of room availability on their sites. Colleges were dealing with a huge increase in demand for ESOL since the pandemic and, while they were working to expand their provision to meet this demand, they were limited by the physical size of their campuses and the rooms available to use. In addition, colleges explained that the funding did not always match the demand. For example, while demand amongst 16–19-year-olds is often concentrated at lower levels, colleges may not have the resources to run Entry Level 1 courses, and pre-entry qualifications for 16–19-year-olds are not fundable.

Lack of community-based provision

Local authority resettlement teams described a distinct lack of community-based or other alternative provision to enrol learners on while they wait for the next intake at college. A small number had some funding available to pay for UASC to attend private provision, until space became available at the local FE college. One local authority also described using funding to pay for one-to-one tuition. This required a trade-off though, as using funds for this provision meant that the local authority could not cover costs for other provision, such as progression courses for those doing well, because they were having to pay for foundational learning.

One local authority team explained that the lack of community-based provision was again due to the increased demand for ESOL, and the council's limited ability to expand provision to meet this. This local authority described the length of time it takes for the local authority to respond to needs and commission provision, especially for those with additional needs. Their resettlement team started with Afghan families in hotels and had to establish general provision, which then became more targeted as the team learned more about families' and young people's needs.

> "It's taken an incredible amount of time to get to this point, which is where we do have a Hampshire offer and you can navigate it with online courses, with community groups, within our SLAs and our ATLs." *(Local authority resettlement team)*

An alternative challenge for local authorities attempting to get young people onto community-based or other provision was that providers need enough learners to make courses viable. To draw down enough funding, providers often needed classes of 15-20 learners, but local authority resettlement teams may only have five or six learners

turn up throughout the year. Two local authority resettlement teams gave examples of local training providers ending their ESOL courses because there was not a consistent cohort.

Effective approaches in meeting demand from 16-19 ESOL learners

The research identified some effective approaches that organisations were adopting to meet the increased demand for ESOL provision amongst 16-19 learners. These included: using Tailored Learning and unit-based programmes to have a year-round intake of learners; referring learners to provision on other college sites; working with community-based partners to deliver unaccredited provision; and councils commissioning more tailored pre-entry community ESOL provision.

Year-round intakes

Two colleges explained how they deliver regular intakes of ESOL learners throughout the academic year. One took on new learners termly by using Ascentis as their awarding organisation. The college enrolled learners on a unit each term: the Autumn term was reading, spring term was writing and the summer term was speaking and listening. The exams with Ascentis are teacher assessed so if learners fail, they can retake within a couple of weeks instead of waiting months.

> "So somebody rocks up at the end of October, we're not saying, 'tough', we're saying, 'you've only got to wait a month and a half and we'll be starting another course'. But also it helps us because we are funded... having a load of people who start a course and then end up at a different bit of the country, that's not good for our achievement rates, so it works for both parties." *(FE College)*

However, this did create a challenge for the college in the level of work it created for teachers, who not only had to teach the course but run the assessments. In addition, because the college only had a certain amount of funding, they had to use some teaching hours to deliver the exams. This meant that learners had two or three weeks' less time to reach exam level, to account for potential retakes and transitioning into the next term. Nevertheless, the approach worked well in meeting the needs of learners who arrive throughout the year.

A second college also made a strategic decision to take on new ESOL learners. This worked for their usual accredited programme until Easter. After this, it could be a challenge to get learners up to the level needed to pass their exam and therefore draw down funding. Instead, because there are only 150 hours left of the academic year at this stage, the college used Tailored Learning programme funding to create a shorter, unaccredited course for learners to enrol on, until they could join the main accredited programme in the coming September. The Tailored Learning programme

was set up for adults, but the college could infill spaces with 16-19 learners, as long as enough adults attended to cover the costs of the course.

Referring learners to other sites

One college had recently merged with two others into one larger college group. As a result, they were now able to cross-refer learners to their other sites, so if one course was full, ESOL staff could signpost learners to another local college within the group. Previously, their sites were competitors, so the college felt this had improved the overall local offer and access to provision for 16-19 ESOL learners.

Working with community partners

When discussing the challenge of meeting the needs of pre-entry 16-19 ESOL learners, one college described their work in partnership with a local VCSE organisation. This organisation ran a 14-hour-a-week unaccredited ESOL course for pre-entry and Entry Level 1 learners on the college's site. The college gave the organisation the room to use for free; in return, the charity fed them learners who had progressed to the level of English needed to join their Entry Level 2 course. The college felt this was a win-win partnership.

> "...that really helps. We don't even have to assess them. So it's a great collaboration that they get the rooms and we get less workload."
> *(FE College)*

This college also felt this approach worked well for learners because they got a lanyard and college ID, so it felt like they were on a "proper" course. They reflected that some learners were reluctant to attend the VCSE organisation's courses in the community because they did not see how it would help them progress towards their goals, whereas the college was recognised and valued as a formal provider.

The Rural Refugee Network in Hampshire recognised that there was a lack of community-based 16-19 ESOL provision, and in response developed their Youth Discovery project, which supports 16–19-year-old Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People. The project not only supports young people to learn English, but also to build relationships with each other and the local community, experience and understand the local environment and feel more confident, empowered and settled. A full case study of the Youth Discovery Project can be found in the Annex of this report. The project is currently supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, but local authorities and colleges could explore how they can work in partnership with RRN and similar voluntary organisations to boost community-based ESOL provision for 16-19s.

Local authorities commissioning more community provision

Local authority resettlement teams tended to highlight one-to-one tuition as an effective way to plug the gap for young people on waiting lists. As mentioned above, one local authority could fund this for young people on college waiting lists if

all other options are exhausted. However, some local authority teams said they were now unable to afford this due to increased numbers of UASC and limited funding.

Some local authorities spoke about new provision they were introducing to boost pre-entry ESOL in their local areas. For example, one local authority's new contract for their community ESOL provision incorporated the delivery of accredited ESOL in the community, which will expand provision for pre-entry learners. The resettlement team at this local authority met with tutors to learn what worked well in teaching very low level and illiterate learners, and brought these techniques into their new contract. This included methods such as recording and playing back speaking on the phone, using prompts, pictures, learning one-to-one or in pairs, and meeting in small groups for the social aspect of learning. The new provision will be delivered in people's homes to break down barriers to participation in formal education and support adults and young people to progress to formal education at college.

Similarly, to address the challenge of 16-19s missing out on a college place and having to wait a long time for the next intake, another local authority put together a package of three hours of ESOL each day for 16–19-year-olds in families on the TSFA scheme. This had Functional Skills English and maths embedded, as well as visits twice a week from a careers advisor to help with college applications, explain about Higher Education and support longer term ambitions. It also included elements of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, such as group expeditions. To prepare for TSFAs closing, the council were planning to redeploy staff working with these families to bolster pre-entry ESOL provision across the county and enable more 16+ learners to access this.

Needs of 16-19 ESOL learners

The qualitative research explored the needs of 16-19 ESOL learners, and the support they require to access, engage and progress in English language provision. Participants identified six key areas of need: a trauma-informed approach; practical and financial support; support to understand expectations in formal education; strong classroom facilitation and behaviour management; and senior management buy-in and college culture.

Trauma-informed approach

Many interviewees emphasised that 16-19 ESOL learners – especially UASC – had experienced significant trauma and consequently had quite high mental health needs. This can impact on their engagement in education in a range of ways, from affecting their sleep and therefore their attendance and punctuality at college, to their ability to concentrate and learn in class. As such, a trauma-informed approach was seen as crucial in providing effective support for them to engage and succeed in ESOL learning.

Local authority resettlement teams and wider stakeholders reflected that at times, colleges did not seem to provide the trauma-informed and holistic support that these learners often needed. They gave examples of colleges using their usual warning system for lateness and absences, without trying to understand the reasons behind this; having disciplinary meetings without a supportive adult present, so learners did not understand what is being said; and expecting learners to engage fully in the classroom setting, when they had no previous experience of formal education. For those who had arrived at a younger age and been in school, this lack of a trauma-informed approach in FE could come as a shock, as resettlement teams reflected that schools tend to have much more holistic and understanding support in place.

> "When they're in a school, they would understand this person has been trafficked. This person has been orphaned. This person has been abused. And if they're in a school environment that is like, well, their rope is so much longer, they have so much more understanding, the teachers and professionals around them. But in college that all seems to go away.... it's more punitive." *(Local authority resettlement team)*

Colleges themselves acknowledged that there can be a tension between supporting learners and meeting the needs of the business, for example, ensuring that learners are attending and making progress.

Resettlement teams and VCSE organisations highlighted a range of practices to introduce a trauma-informed and holistic approach to supporting 16-19 ESOL learners. These included:

- a warm and welcoming environment,
- being buddied up with someone who speaks their language,
- having a timetable they can understand (for example, with pictures or translated into their home language),
- a regular schedule and consistency, along with some warning when things are going to change
- proactive monitoring of attendance so that if they stop going to college, it's picked up quickly and reasons behind this are explored
- Taking time to understand the reasons behind absences, lateness or issues with behaviour, and putting appropriate support in place to address these.

Practical and financial support

Interviewees highlighted a range of practical and financial support that 16-19 ESOL learners need to engage and progress in learning.

Resettlement teams explained that young asylum seekers and refugees can be placed all over the region, sub-region and county, so travel support was a strong need amongst 16-19 ESOL learners. This was especially the case for those placed in rural areas with limited transport networks. Learners often needed support with the costs of transport to and from college, as well as travel training so they knew how to get to college and could navigate trains or buses in a new language. The time taken to travel to and from college could also be an issue: resettlement teams explained that some families could be quite protective of their children, especially of their girls, and not want them travelling in the dark.

Wider financial support was also a key need identified by interviewees. This included providing bursaries for equipment and laptops; providing funds for lunches; and accessing bursaries for other costs. Most colleges provided support with these costs and staff emphasised the importance of ensuring that learners were accessing all the financial help they were entitled to.

Most interviewees spoke about the practical support required by UASC. Colleges and local authority resettlement teams alike reported that this group faces many additional barriers to engaging in education, such as missing college to attend interviews and hearings about their asylum application, being moved at short notice if they are in dispersal accommodation, anxiety about their status creating mental health problems, and changes in their status leading to changes in the support they are entitled to. All of this means that UASC need an understanding and flexible provider with additional wellbeing and practical support in place.

Understanding expectations in formal education

A common reflection from colleges was that 16-19 ESOL learners with little experience of education before coming to the UK often needed additional support to understand the expectations of the classroom and how to learn. They explained that it does not necessarily come naturally for young people to know how to sit and listen to the teacher, do small group work, manage their own learning, complete their homework and so on.

Colleges also found that this lack of previous education experience could create "spiky profiles" for learners. For example, some were very good at speaking and listening because they had practised this a lot but were unable to write in their home language, let alone in English. These learners needed targeted provision to help them get up to speed on areas where they needed to improve.

Colleges also highlighted learners who had not attended education in their home country and had no literacy in their own language experienced considerable challenges in learning English. This often meant they found it more difficult to engage in ESOL learning; as such, they needed more focussed support and targeted provision to help them participate in the classroom.

Strong classroom facilitation and behaviour management

Skilled teachers and strong classroom facilitation was highlighted as a need for 16-19 ESOL learners amongst colleges for several reasons. Colleges explained that there could be tensions between learners from different countries, especially if they were at war. Some interviewees reported examples of racist language amongst learners and some potential culture shocks, for example around Pride month and the treatment of women, that learners needed to adapt to.

This all required careful and expert management of the classroom culture and environment, and for colleges to ensure teachers had the skills and confidence to address these issues as soon as they arose. Colleges' responsibilities around this is captured in the Prevent Duty, which requires FE colleges to promote a safe environment - for discussion of sensitive topics and to promote British values, which are defined as including democracy, rule of law, liberty and mutual respect and tolerance. Cultural orientation training could also help with this, so that learners understand the expectations and norms around behaviour and attitudes towards others, the laws of the country and what is acceptable before they start college. Resettlement teams felt this was more of an outstanding need for UASC, as families tend to receive this as part of their resettlement package.

One group that was consistently highlighted by interviewees as needing additional support in the classroom was young Afghan women. One local authority had discussed this with local partners in one of their recent ESOL Network meetings, where they discussed the challenge of some young males dominating the classroom which makes parents less confident to send their daughters to college. To address this, colleges needed a well-managed learning environment so that quieter learners and young women – including those from Afghanistan – were not intimidated by more boisterous learners.

Strategic and contextual support

Several colleges and resettlement teams highlighted the current backdrop of the animosity towards asylum seekers and refugees as a challenge. This sometimes meant that young people felt unwelcome not only at college but in the country more widely. Two colleges mentioned that some non-migrant learners had put up flags around campus or been on anti-migration marches. This created some tension between groups of learners and had also led to some ESOL learners putting on a "tough guy" attitude, resulting to behavioural issues in the classroom. To address this, learners required support and understanding from college staff within and outside of the classroom, as well as opportunities to integrate with non-migrant learners to break down barriers. A few examples of this are provided below, such as involving ESOL learners in community volunteering days and vocational carousels.

A few colleges also reflected on the difference that the buy-in from their executive team makes to the way that ESOL provision for 16–19-year-olds, and all other ages, is viewed across their organisation. One college explained that they have a relatively new executive team who now understand that ESOL is a core part of the college's offer to the local community, and that learners are committed and high achieving, if they have appropriate support in place. In comparison, another college felt that ESOL was not a priority for their executive team and that they did not understand the needs or challenges faced by their learners. Consequently, they found it difficult to address policies or practices which disadvantaged ESOL learners (such as a "digital first" approach) or make the case for additional support and teaching staff. The importance of senior management buy-in suggests that for local authority resettlement teams, making links with providers at a strategic level, as well as the operational level, could be helpful in securing provision that responds to local needs.

Challenges in meeting needs of 16-19 ESOL learners

Interviewees identified a number of key challenges in meeting the needs of 16-19 ESOL learners, including available provision not matching their aspirations or level of English proficiency; high demand on pastoral staff; lack of support for digital skills of learners; language barriers to additional support; and learners ageing out of provision.

Provision not matching aspirations

A strong theme amongst all interviewees was that the provision available to 16-19 ESOL learners often does not match their aspirations and motivations. Most colleges agreed that 16-19 ESOL learners are generally highly motivated to gain English skills to help them progress towards their goals. However, their high aspirations can be challenging to meet, as they need to get to a certain level in ESOL before they meet the requirements of mainstream programmes such as GCSEs, A Levels and vocational courses. This can be frustrating for learners. As one college explained, sometimes "reality dawns" about the long road ahead of them and motivation can "dip" at this point.

This can be especially challenging for learners who arrived in the UK at late school age and are used to studying a range of subjects alongside non-migrant learners. It can then be a shock to get to college and find out they cannot take the same route as their peers because they do not have GCSEs, and need to achieve ESOL qualifications before moving onto other courses. Local authority resettlement teams spoke about their frustration at colleges' lack of combined or vocational ESOL provision which would enable young people to learn ESOL alongside other subjects. Similarly, those who arrive in the UK between the ages of 16-19 miss out on the chance to get GCSEs which can also create a challenge for their progression.

> "...they're used to being at school, where they're doing art, they're doing PE, they're being included in everything that all the children are being included in. And then all of a sudden, they say 'No, you have to sit through five hours of English, that's it every day.' And that's boring because they've got aspirations, they've got stuff they want to get on with, and then they get disengaged." *(Local authority resettlement team)*

To tackle this challenge, colleges spoke about being explicit about how current learning links to exams or learners' long-term goals, to help them understand why they were being taught these topics.

> "I think more so than a lot of the non ESOL learners, they very much want to know what it's building towards for them." *(FE College)*

Linked to this, many interviewees spoke about the need for more embedded ESOL provision and combined ESOL/vocational courses that learners could access at Entry Level. This would enable learners to improve their English proficiency while also gaining skills relevant to their career goals, keeping them motivated and engaged. Very few providers in the region offered this type of provision at Entry Level.

Colleges also highlighted careers advice and information as important to help learners understand the steps they need to take to get into university or work. However, to access this, learners need a certain level of spoken English in order to have a meaningful discussion with a careers advisor.

Provision not matching levels

As well as provision not matching learner aspirations, interviewees identified a key challenge in finding provision which matched learners' levels in ESOL, particularly for those with little or no proficiency in English.

As described above, fewer colleges in the South East offer pre-entry ESOL compared with other levels. In the interviews, colleges explained that this was due to challenges in funding for provision at this level, and their limited resources to run these courses. One college had previously used their Tailored Learning programme funding to create an unaccredited pre-entry course and infilling their 16-19 learners. However, they did not have the resources to run this year-on-year. Consequently, their current pre-entry learners were grouped in with their Entry Level 1 learners, which could create challenges for teachers in meeting learner needs in the classroom.

One local authority resettlement team reflected that this approach of grouping pre-entry learners in with Entry Level 1 learners could create an additional challenge in that learners may be attending courses or college regularly, but not making much progress. This may be difficult for the local authority to identify unless the learner stopped attending, which then flagged the young person as NEET. This resettlement

team had examples of some learners attending ESOL classes regularly for one or two years but still being at pre-entry level, because they were not learning much in the classroom setting.

High demand on pastoral staff

A high proportion of 16-19 ESOL learners are UASC, which can create a high demand on pastoral staff as they are regularly requested to attend Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, respond to requests from social workers, and manage any safeguarding and wellbeing issues that arise as a result of young people being in care.

This group are highly vulnerable due to their traumatic childhoods and journeys to the UK, but also the precarious nature of their living circumstances. For example, many are at risk of homelessness when they leave care at 18 or gain refugee status. They may be moved far away, without regard for their education or what this means for their ESOL learning. Their finances can also change with their asylum or care status, and they may become more reliant on the college, charities and foodbanks for financial support. The funding that colleges can draw down also changes if UASC are offered leave to remain and are no longer asylum seekers. Colleges explained that the funding context is very complicated for this group which can create issues in knowing whether learners are eligible for courses or if their eligibility changes throughout the year.

One college reported that at one point, the pressure on their pastoral services became so much that the executive team decided that they could not take any more UASC learners. The college overcame this by recruiting a designated pastoral lead just for ESOL students. At the time of the research, she had 78 learners on her caseload.

Lack of support for digital skills

A common reflection from staff at colleges was that their organisation pushed a digital agenda without understanding the needs of their ESOL learners. Colleges spoke about learners struggling to access their college emails, key information on the student intranet and even their college timetables, because they were not familiar with using laptops, emails or online portals.

> "...the college doesn't really understand it because they're like, 'go digital, go digital' and you're like, how can you go digital with people who: number one, they can't speak English; number two, they haven't been in school. They know how to use a smartphone – that's it. They don't know how to use a mouse or use a laptop properly... you're skipping, like, 10 years of someone's education." *(FE College)*

Language barriers to additional support

Colleges highlighted that some 16-19 ESOL learners had learning difficulties, such as ASD, ADHD or dyslexia. However, it could be difficult to get a diagnosis because

they needed to be assessed by a specialist who was fluent in their home language as well as English, so that they could differentiate between a language barrier and a learning difficulty. As a result, ESOL learners often did not get access to arrangements like extra time in exams or flexibility on deadlines, or to have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP).

Similarly, several interviewees highlighted that accessing support for mental health needs was difficult for 16-19 ESOL learners because most counselling was only available in English, and learners needed it in their home language. In addition, culturally, many can find it difficult to talk about how they feel or even admit they have mental health challenges. This created a compounded challenge of appropriate support being available and learners agreeing to access it.

Ageing out of provision

One college spoke about the challenge of supporting learners to achieve a sufficient ESOL level to progress onto mainstream provision before they turn 19. Once they are 19 on 1st September, learners age out of study programme and other 16-18 provision and must move into adult provision. At this stage, it can be difficult for learners to access A Levels and other courses which match their needs and motivations. This college spoke about the "race against time" to get learners to Level 1 ESOL before they turned 19 so they could continue to be funded and access provision relevant to their goals.

> "It's really sad actually because so many of them have aspirations to be doctors, dentists, engineers. They just can't get the English skills in time to get onto a programme." *(FE College)*

Approaches that work well in meeting the needs of 16-19 ESOL learners

Through the qualitative research, a range of good practice in meeting the needs of 16-19 ESOL learners was identified amongst colleges and local authority resettlement teams.

Dedicated wellbeing and pastoral staff

To address the workload for pastoral staff created by the high proportion of UASC learners, some colleges had recruited dedicated wellbeing and personal development officers for their ESOL learners. One college recruited a Wellbeing Coordinator who looked after all their foundation learners, including ESOL learners. The Wellbeing Coordinator contacted learners – and their families or foster carers – if they were late, and followed up on any concerns about their health and wellbeing.

Similarly, another college recently introduced two Personal Development and Wellbeing Mentors for ESOL learners. The ESOL lead had found that much of the personal development and wellbeing materials produced by the college were not appropriate for ESOL learners due to the language level or learners' trauma and

experiences (for example, leaflets about knife crime). To address this, they brought in the Personal Development Mentors who support learners with any issues they are experiencing outside of the classroom, such as homelessness or around their asylum claim. The primary focus of the roles was to support adult learners, but they could also use some of their time for 16–19-year-olds. The college found that this approach relieved a lot of the pastoral burden from teaching staff who were often very committed and wanted to help learners as much as they could.

As mentioned above, another college overcame the additional pastoral pressure of supporting UASC learners by recruiting a designated pastoral lead for ESOL students. The college also had a dedicated safeguarding officer for ESOL students because they are at high risk of being exploited. For example, they have had situations where students have not turned up to college, but they are also not at home. The designated teacher can follow this up in line with the college's safeguarding procedures and take action if they are concerned about their safety.

Partnerships between colleges and local authorities

There were several examples of colleges having close working links with local authority Looked After Children and leaving care teams. College staff often attended PEP meetings and helped with plans to start preparing UASC to leave care.

There were also more specific examples of programmes that colleges had delivered in partnership with local authorities. One college was working with their county council to run bespoke programmes for 15-year-old refugees and asylum seekers who were struggling at school. This was funded by the council and involved a range of activities, including a six-week intensive summer programme. This worked well in terms of supporting slightly younger learners to develop their language skills and prepare to join college in the September. The college had also started to run taster days specifically for ESOL students so they could visit the college, meet their teacher and sit in a class. Both these pre-enrolment activities meant that the college could get to know students before they joined, which helped in making their transition to FE successful.

In one local authority, the Virtual School commissioned the English as an Additional Language (EAL) Coordinator at the council to help place UASC into appropriate education courses. The EAL Coordinator attends young people's first PEP meeting and works with the college they are placed with to make sure they understand their needs. The Coordinator felt that this model worked well; they used their EAL expertise to identify learner needs and make recommendations to schools and colleges about good support and provision.

> "Our kind of specialist knowledge works really well and also we work with different communities from around the world all the time. So we're aware of like lots of different cultural differences... we're really well placed, especially more with school age, to really hold schools to account for improving their EAL practice." *(Local authority resettlement team)*

Networks and wider partnerships

Interviewees provided numerous examples of networks and working groups focussed on ESOL that brought together relevant local organisations to share knowledge and practice. For example, one local authority set up an ESOL Network Group which meets every few months to discuss challenges, provision currently available across the county, solutions to identified barriers to provision for potential learners. This has enabled key organisations involved in the delivery of ESOL to reduce duplication of work, share best practice and work together to address challenges facing migrant families in the county.

Similarly, a second local authority runs an "ESOL employment cell" and an "ESOL education cell", both of which meet fortnightly. These groups involve representatives from the county council as well as district councils and voluntary sector organisations, and aims to ensure good communication across public and voluntary ESOL providers. As a result, this local authority felt that they had strong, up-to-date insight about current provision, challenges and innovations in ESOL across their county.

On a more informal basis, one college explained that they have regular meetings with local employers, schools, the council and refugee charity projects to share the college's ESOL offer and check if there are any gaps. These often take place as individual meetings at review points during the year. The college highlighted the benefits of this approach for the development of their ESOL programmes, ensuring they are meeting the needs of learners and employers alike.

Using Tailored Learning and apps to address skills gaps

Two colleges used Tailored Learning to create unaccredited short courses to plug gaps for learners with "spiky profiles". One delivered a considerable amount of unaccredited courses through Tailored Learning programmes. The courses developed for ESOL learners covered a range of subjects, including ESOL with numeracy for those who need additional language support to progress onto Functional Skills maths; an ESOL literacy class for those who are not literate in their first language; and an ESOL with digital course which teaches the skills needed to use college emails and systems. The college ran these courses at three hours a week. The courses were effective not only in supporting learners to develop additional skills but also in helping the college to meet extra demand when they did not have space for learners on their main provision.

> "So we might have somebody that's managed to get one of the modules in ESOL, but then they're not ready for the next module, which logically they would take next term. So rather than just saying, "bye bye", we'll put them into one of the unaccredited courses, to hopefully give them extra time to develop that skill before they move on." *(FE College)*

Another college also used Tailored Learning to run "bridging courses" for learners who had completed one level, but were not yet ready to progress to the next level of ESOL, or were missing one of the modular qualifications (for example, reading).

A third college used Century to support ESOL learners with their maths. They explained that learners complete a diagnostic assessment and then the app creates pathways, exercises and tests for learners to complete, based on how well they performed in the diagnostic. This was just one tool that the college used to support ESOL learners to progress in maths, as it did not suit all learners: some loved it and were happy working through it in class and at home; others much preferred to talk, play a game or work in small groups.

Vocational carousels with non-migrant learners

At one college, the highest level ESOL learners (at Entry 3/Level 1) joined other vocational learners in the college for three hours of teaching a week. This gave ESOL learners the opportunity to try out some vocational provision to see if they enjoyed it, and to mix with non-migrant learners.

> *"...we found that some learners love that because they're working with a teacher who doesn't have the ESOL experience, and they're in class with native learners as well. However, we've had other learners where it petrifies them."* (FE College)

Learners who found this experience daunting often related this to previous poor experiences of learning with native English speakers at school, particularly when they first arrived in the UK. However, overall, the college felt that this was an effective approach to overcoming the issue of learners feeling frustrated at only learning ESOL.

Interestingly, another college had previously trialled this vocational carousel approach and found that it did not suit their learners. Learners rotated around different vocational subjects every half term. However, learners would often skip the class if it was a subject they were not interested in, and would miss out on three hours of learning a week for half a term. The college were planning to try this again next year as they now had a different demographic of learners; 80-90 per cent of their 16-19 ESOL learners were UASC with vocational interests and some skills from their home country.

Guest speakers and trips

Guest speakers and visits were consistently highlighted by colleges as important in supporting learners to raise their aspirations and motivate them to learn English, get to know their local area and interact with native English speakers. For example, one college had a "community week" twice a year where students across the college went out and volunteered in the local community. The college ensured that their 16-19 ESOL learners participated in this to build connections with the local area.

Colleges also invited in local charities or projects to deliver workshops or talks on specific topics that learners need support with. For example, one college worked with a local migration advice charity to deliver mental health workshops and one-to-one sessions with UASC learners. Similarly, another college hosted talks from a local charity about healthy relationships. These not only equipped learners with knowledge and techniques to address some of the challenges they were experiencing, but linked learners with local services that they could access once they had progressed on from college.

Re-assessing learners throughout the year

At one college, learners completed mock exams each term and, if students were performing better than their initial assessment indicated, the college will move them up levels to speed up their progression. The college found this effective in helping learners achieve their Level 1 ESOL qualifications and move into courses that match their motivations more quickly. This addressed some learners' frustrations at not being able to learn subjects directly related to their goals, as well as some of the challenge identified above of learners "ageing out" of provision.

> "Because if they get the higher qualification, they can go off into vocational or A level and do what they actually want to do. So we try and push them as much as we can to get the higher qualifications."
> *(FE College)*

Funding statements of comparability

To support 16–19-year-olds (and adults) to demonstrate their levels of qualification achieved in their home country, one local authority would pay for an ENIC statement of comparability. They did this for refugees and migrants with Entry Level 3 English and above to support them into work, training or education. Below this level, the local authority asked learners to focus on English language learning as colleges and employers would not take them on other courses or jobs until their proficiency in English improved.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The following recommendations are drawn from the findings of this research. They set out proposed actions for policy, colleges and local authorities to boost opportunities for participation in ESOL for 16-19 learners.

For policy and funding rules

- **Overall, there is a need for 16–19 funding to keep up with demand for ESOL provision across the South East** and avoid young people having to wait a significant amount of time to start learning English, and therefore integrate, progress towards their goals and contribute to their new communities.
- **There is a clear call for an expansion of pre-entry provision for 16-19 ESOL learners**. 16-19 Study Programme guidance should clearly identify how funding can be used to deliver this level of provision for those with little or no English proficiency, or literacy in their home language.
- **The use of Tailored Learning by some colleges to create flexible provision which meets learner needs shows a need for this type of flexible funding for 16–19-year-olds**, as well as for adults. This will enable college to create year-round provision for new arrivals, as well as targeted provision for those with "spiky" profiles to progress.
- **Funding arrangements should also recognise the additional time needed by pastoral and wellbeing staff for UASC learners**, including to meet learner needs and the requirements of social service involvement
- Complementing broader Government initiatives, such as the Youth Guarantee, which aims to prevent long-term youth unemployment, **policymakers should consider developing an enhanced education plan for young adult refugee and asylum-seeking learners**, similar to an EHCP, which recognises their additional needs and enables them to stay in 16-19 provision up to the age of 25. This would enable colleges to support learners to achieve their goals and meet their aspirations, increasing the number who can move seamlessly into the workforce and contribute to the economy.
- **Government should also consider expanding the remit of Virtual Schools to support migrant and resettled refugee children,** in recognition of the fact that they need more and different support to non-migrant children. Currently, Virtual Schools support children with a social worker, those who have previously had a social worker and those in kinship care arrangements, who are aged from 0 to 18.

For colleges and learning providers

- **Colleges should adopt the good practice identified through this research, for example, the use of Tailored Learning and/or unit-based provision to enrol 16-19 ESOL learners throughout the year**. This would overcome a significant challenge for young people and local authority resettlement teams.
- **Colleges should consider recruiting dedicated pastoral resource for young ESOL learners**, especially UASC. This can greatly reduce the pastoral burden on teaching and other wellbeing staff.
- This research suggests that **staff at colleges would benefit from additional training, learning and development to more effectively support 16–19-year-old asylum seeking and refugee learners**. This might include training on taking a trauma-informed approach, as well as behaviour and classroom management. This learning and development should be targeted at senior leaders as well as finance, admin, teaching and pastoral staff, so there is a shared understanding and embedding of needs of young migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking learners across providers.
- **Colleges should explore ways to develop more vocational and embedded ESOL programmes or short courses**. Vocational carousels may work for some groups of learners. Tailored Learning can also provide opportunities for learners to engage in short embedded ESOL courses.

For local authorities

- If it does not already exist in their local area, **local authorities should set up an ESOL network or partnership group which meets regularly and discusses available provision, challenges and solutions in the local area**. This should include local authority resettlement teams, Virtual Schools, education and training providers, VCSE organisations and interested employers where possible.
- **More local authorities could establish partnerships between the Virtual School and EAL Coordinators** to support effective transitions of UASC from school to FE.
- **Local authorities should also develop stronger relationships with strategic and senior staff within providers**, rather than just operational and pastoral staff, to influence the types and levels of provision available to 16-19 ESOL learners in their area.
- **Local authorities should work with local ESOL teachers, community groups and VCSE organisations to map the gaps in provision and the needs of migrant families and young people**. They should then use this to inform their delivery and commissioning of community-based ESOL provision to ensure it meets local need.

- **Local authorities and providers need sufficient resources to deliver the government's decision to disperse families on resettlement teams**, ensuring their needs are met, reduce barriers to provision and support them to integrate into their new communities.

Annex: Rural Refugee Network's Youth Discovery Project

Introduction

The Rural Refugee Network (RRN) was set up in 2016 to help bring refugees to safety in the UK and support families and young people across Hampshire to integrate, thrive and rebuild their lives.

This case study focusses on Rural Refugee Network's Youth Discovery project, which supports 16–19-year-old Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People to learn English, build relationships with each other and the local community, experience and understand the local environment and feel more confident, empowered and settled.

Context and background

In December 2021, RRN set up a pilot project specifically aimed at supporting young people aged 16-19 who came to the UK alone and are in the care of the local authority. This was in response to the lack of community provision available to this group, particularly in rural areas of Hampshire where there was little on offer outside of city hubs and limited transport networks.

The pilot project aimed to help participants experience and understand the local environment and to feel more confident, empowered and settled. It involved a monthly activity day and a three-day residential in the South Downs National Park, to connect young people to the local community and nature.

Feedback on the pilot from participants, volunteers and foster parents was very positive, with the formal evaluation reporting that young people made friends, felt a stronger sense of belonging, and enjoyed a deeper connection to nature and the environment.

However, young people, the local Virtual School and foster parents highlighted that what young asylum seekers and refugees really needed was support to learn English, and this was a distinct gap both in the pilot and the local area.

To address this, RRN ran a session with young people on the pilot's residential to co-design what their English provision would look like, if they could get funding for it. Young people said that they wanted fun, to learn English for everyday life and – importantly – to engage with British people and learn about British culture.

From this, RRN designed a project which continued the monthly outing and annual residential for young asylum seekers and refugees but also included a weekly drop-in session for additional English language learning and wider support. RRN successfully applied to The National Lottery Fund for funding for a three-year project, which started in 2024.

Delivery approach

The Youth Discovery Project delivers a range of activities which aim to build and consolidate young people's skills, networks and confidence. These include:

- A weekly drop-in in Portsmouth where young people learn English, build connections with peers, gain independent living skills and can access wellbeing support
- A monthly outing to the South Downs and other local places of interest, to build young people's knowledge of their local area and get them out into nature.
- A quarterly community meal, where young people can apply their newly learned skills and build links with the local community.
- An annual residential for young people to have fun, deepen relationships and have much needed time away from daily pressures.

All activities are supported by staff and trained volunteers, some of whom have been able to secure paid roles with RRN. This includes a part-time coordinator who works with stakeholders to promote the drop in, deals with any safeguarding issues and oversees the running of the programme. A youth worker and ESOL tutor then work with the volunteers to deliver the sessions.

Structure of the drop-ins

Three of the four weekly drop-ins each month involve ESOL learning. The ESOL tutor focusses on a specific topic in each session based around ESOL for everyday life. Young people can bring specific topics they want to learn about.

On the fourth week each month, RRN invites an external speaker to talk about opportunities available to learners locally. This might include volunteering opportunities, other youth groups, community spaces and projects. RRN also brings in external facilitators to deliver employability workshops and creative activities. The week before the external speaker session, the ESOL tutor will focus on preparing young people with the language needed to engage in the upcoming topic.

Young Ambassador Scheme

The project has now been running for long enough that some young people have settled and moved on from the programme. For those who want to stay involved, RRN is about to start a Young Ambassador Scheme in partnership with UNLOC. This enables learners to take part in leadership and public speaking training, and become Young Ambassadors for the project. They can then support other young people who are joining the project to help them settle in.

RRN already has one Young Ambassador who was a participant on the programme. They now volunteer and provide in-class support to new learners. For those who share

the same first language, they can also provide initial translation support to help them settle into the programme. This benefits not only the learner but also the ESOL tutor. RRN aims to build on this and establish a youth board to guide the project in the next two years.

Partnership working

The Youth Discovery Project benefits from practical support in-kind from Bedales School, who have hosted "discovery days" for the group's monthly outings and also fundraised for the project. Many of the activities have also been funded by the South Downs National Park Youth Action Fund and Nordson Corporation.

RRN also has close working relationships with other professionals supporting learners. This means that if a concern or issue arises during one of their sessions, they can communicate this back to the young person's social worker or other support worker so they receive the individual support they need.

Outcomes and impact

Evaluations of the project have identified a range of key outcomes and longer-term impacts for participants.

An important outcome for young people has been improvements in their English. Learners spoke about improving their speaking, listening and reading skills and feeling more confident to use these in everyday situations. As a result, they had been able to go to the shop and ask for items, felt more confident speaking to people out in the community, and were able to engage more meaningfully at college. Some could see the links between improving their English and finding work.

> "[W]hen I came the first time I didn't have the confidence to speak English, but now I'm not shy because I have a lot of confidence to speak with other people." *(Participant)*

This outcome was supported by the monthly trips and visits to local places of interest, which enabled participants to learn more about British history and culture. Meeting new people in the community had encouraged some to start volunteering.

> "I started… volunteering. I meet a lot of people and speak to them to improve my English and get skills for work." *(Participant)*

Another key outcome young people identified was the relationships they have built, both with each other and with the adults supporting sessions and monthly trips. This had helped young people improve their wellbeing, make friends and feel more settled in their community and the UK.

> "I feel relaxed when I see all my friends here and enjoy talking with each other and feeling confident when I talk in English." *(Participant)*

Success factors

RRN highlighted several factors that they believe have led to the success of the programme:

The use of volunteers from diverse cultures

Having a strong group of volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds enables RRN to provide much needed translation and additional support for young people joining the project. This not only reduces the burden on the ESOL tutor, but also helps new learners feel settled more quickly, and can even enable assessments of additional learning needs to take place where appropriate.

Building links with the local community

Working with external facilitators and organising visits to local cities and nature reserves has been key in helping young people feel more connected to their local community and settled in the UK. In addition, it has helped to promote a positive image of refugee young people – especially young men – in their local area. In the current backdrop of animosity towards this group, it has been positive to show many different visitors that they are very keen to learn and enjoyable to work with.

Taking a trauma-informed approach

RRN are committed to taking a trauma-informed approach to the delivery of the programmes. This is particularly important when working with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking young people, as their needs are very different to those who arrive with their families. As such, RRN source trauma-informed training for their own staff before they start any new projects. This helps them create a welcoming and supportive space for young people to participate in.

Creating a dedicated community space for young refugees

RRN argues that language learning is not sufficient in itself for young refugees and asylum seekers. It is important that this is provided in a dedicated community space for young people who are refugees, where they can be with other young people from their culture and talk about their experiences. Taking a trauma-informed approach is key to building this safe space for young people. The Youth Discovery Project evaluations so far have shown that a supportive community of local volunteers and young people from diverse cultures with shared experience provides a safe space to learn, understand their local environment, be creative, enjoy the outdoors and have hope for the future.

Further information and contact

For further information about the Rural Refugee Network and their Youth Discovery Project, visit their website.