

### Context:

In England and Wales, 5.1 million people don't have English as their main language (English or Welsh in Wales). A million of those report not speaking English "well" or "at all" - more than one third of whom are UK citizens. For many, attending English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes at the right level can be the key to unlocking opportunities, supporting social cohesion, economic success, and academic achievement.

*"The first step you want to be in communicate to people, you need to learn their language, so it make it easy to communicate, to have friends, to find job, many things [sic]".* **ESOL learner (Why do you like ESOL?)**

*"I can be a teacher assistant, I can work in children's centre, I can work in the hospital because I know good English now [sic]".* **ESOL learner (What would you like to do when you finish ESOL?)**

However, while demand for ESOL is soaring, as is the need for a skilled labour force with proficiency in English, many are struggling to access the support they need as a result of policy changes and funding cuts (the Adult Education Budget, formerly the principle source of ESOL funding before the introduction of the Adult Skills Fund, declined by 56% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2016/17). Learners also face an ESOL "postcode lottery". For learners in some areas, suitable or sufficient ESOL provision is often out of reach.

## 1. Reform ESOL standards and qualifications

**What is the issue?** Many learners struggle to access appropriate ESOL. The current curriculum only aims to provide them with the basic language skills needed to survive, not the level needed to achieve their employment and education aspirations. Department for Education data for 2016-17 shows that 84% of ESOL enrolments were at entry levels 1-3 (below a level 1 qualification, equivalent to low grade GCSE results – see [Schellekens, 2019](#)). As a result, many learners are unemployed or under-employed because their English proficiency is too low.

**What needs to change?** New ESOL standards and qualifications should be developed which support effective learning for ESL speakers and provide the language skills they need to succeed in education and employment.

**Why?** The language skills ESOL provides are a tool of empowerment for so many speakers of ESL.

*"I need to equalise my degree. I need my English to be enough, good enough, that I can equalise my degree, and work in the field that I like and that I had experience in. I am psychologist. I have experience as a social worker for many years".* **ESOL learner (What would you like to do when you finish ESOL?)**

But this can only be achieved if they can access ESOL at the right level and with the right focus, i.e., on work or study, providing them with the critical skills needed to get on in life.

## 2. Address ESOL as an opportunity within Skills England

**What is the issue?** Many ESL speakers have skills and experience that are going unrecognised and unutilised due to language barriers. ESOL could be the answer, but over recent decades, ESOL policy, strategy and funding has lacked clarity and overall direction. This has left learners facing an ESOL "postcode lottery". Whilst some learners will benefit from regional authorities having greater freedom over

how they use the Adults Skills Fund, enabling them to widen access, other learners face patchy and inadequate provision.

**What needs to change?** The creation of Skills England provides an opportunity to move ESOL up the agenda, recognise its importance for helping to address skills and labour shortages, and ensure that second language speakers are able to access effective provision.

**Why?** Many second language English speakers already have the work-related skills and experience necessary to contribute to the UK economy but require language support to utilise them fully.

### 3. Recognise that investment in ESOL reaps benefits

**What is the issue?** One in every 50 working-age people in the UK could benefit from support in developing their English proficiency, opening up new opportunities for progression - roughly the same as the number of adults in the UK “economically inactive” following the COVID pandemic. A key motivation of adult learners attending ESOL lessons is to learn English for work and study. However, classes are often inaccessible for those already in employment, many of whom are doing shifts or long hours and have no way of attending classes, leaving them without much needed support. Moreover, the current funding arrangements create a systemic barrier for learners from progressing to higher levels of ESOL qualifications, which are needed for skilled employment and further education. Currently, for example, providers are artificially incentivised to place learners in the wrong sort of courses (such as, Functional Skills English) due to these being fully funded, which is both an inefficient use of funds and a barrier to progression.

**What needs to change?** Funding rules need to be more flexible and effective at meeting local ESOL demand. England also needs appropriate funding models in further education to ensure colleges are not disincentivised from offering ESOL provision. Funding models should also be considered which incentivise employers to provide ESOL at work (e.g., via the Apprenticeship Levy).

**Why?** ESOL provision should be seen as a sound financial investment. Many speakers of ESL are already qualified professionals or skilled tradespeople, so do not require training beyond language support. This is comparatively low cost and can be expected to pay for itself over time (through payment of taxes by learners in employment). Despite severe budget cuts, in some areas of the country the prioritisation of ESOL and flexible use of funding has enabled it to be delivered effectively. By enhancing the availability and accessibility of appropriate ESOL provision, more learners will be able to progress onto the higher levels needed for higher education or employment which will unlock opportunities for ESL speakers to further contribute to their communities and the country.

### 4. Improve national and regional data collection

**What is the issue?** There is currently no accurate national data on the numbers of people post-16 who need to learn English and what their levels of proficiency are. Without this critical information to guide provision, learners are left facing long waiting lists or classes which are inappropriate or unsuitable for their level of proficiency.

**What needs to change?** Data collection on the needs and levels of proficiency of ESOL learners must be a priority national action for Government. An additional field marker should be added to the individualised learning record (ILR), the data collected about learners from training providers in the Further Education and Skills sector in England, which identifies learners with other language backgrounds.

**Why?** Better data on the number of people who need to learn English post-16 is key to understanding the needs of ESOL speakers nationally and for planning and funding delivery effectively. This will ensure that provision is tailored and driven by their specific needs and will enable us to monitor its successful implementation.

## 5. Reform Ofsted to report on the curriculum and skills agenda

**What is the issue?** The proportion of learners whose first language is not English in education and training provision is high. This means that all Ofsted inspectors are likely to encounter second language speakers on a regular basis and they need good training and resources to evaluate the quality of ESOL provision effectively.

**What needs to change?** Ofsted's current reforms provide an opportunity to (re)introduce ESOL provision as a category within the inspection framework. Ofsted should also use data better and train all inspectors appropriately. Moreover, as part of Enhanced Skills Inspections, there is a need for skills and curriculum inspection teams to look beyond discrete ESOL provision, to learners' progression onto mainstream educational/vocational courses and employment.

**Why?** Ofsted has a key role to play in driving system change by raising standards across all educational settings to improve the lives of learners. But to do so effectively, there needs to be a greater focus on the needs, outcomes, and progression of ESOL learners.

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