

**Response:**

# Justice and Home Affairs Committee Inquiry into Settlement, Citizenship and Integration

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

---

**Alastair Feeney**

Policy and Public Affairs Officer  
01223 275518  
[Alastair.feeney@bell-foundation.org.uk](mailto:Alastair.feeney@bell-foundation.org.uk)

---

**Consultation response**  
January 2026

## About The Bell Foundation

1. The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Since 2012, we have worked to improve the outcomes for learners using English as an additional language (EAL), responding rapidly to the needs of schools, providing teachers with evidence-based resources, guidance and training to support learners effectively and confidently. We have reached over 100,000 school practitioners through our programme of EAL training. In addition, in our efforts to build long lasting EAL expertise nationally, we have trained, licensed and accredited over 30 organisations and 90 trainers across the country to work regionally with 'Language for Results' our programme of EAL continuing professional development (CPD) for schools.

## Does the UK have an 'integration problem'?

2. The Bell Foundation's expertise is language education and our response focusses on this.
3. The most recent 2021 Census shows that just over one million people self-reported as having limited or no proficiency in English (1,040,347). A third of this group (346,157) held a British passport. This is an increase on the previous Census in 2011 where 863,346 had limited or no proficiency in English, of which 212,028 held a British passport. As this is self-reported this is likely to underestimate the numbers of people who have little or no proficiency in English.
4. As one third of those people who self-report as having little or no proficiency in English are British citizens, the ability to acquire proficiency in English is not innately tied to recent migration. Data on the relationship between proficiency in English and the length of an individual's residency in Britain further supports this, showing no correlation between the two variables. Indeed, the 2021 Census shows that 20.5% of people who have been resident in Britain for over a decade speak little or no English, greater than the 16.4% of people who have been resident for between five and ten years. This reflects historic patterns of migration. Additionally, the speed of English acquisition is different for different linguistic groups, underlining the fact that integration and English language acquisition is an ongoing process.
5. The national trend of growing linguistic diversity is further revealed in schools through analysis of the National Pupil Database across the last thirty years in a study commissioned by The Bell Foundation from the Education Department, University of Oxford.<sup>1</sup> The number of school-age pupils in England who use English as an Additional Language<sup>2</sup> has continued to increase over time, from just under 500,000 (7.6% of all pupils) in 1997, to 1.05 million (16.2% of all pupils) in 2013, to 1.77 million (21.1% of all pupils) in 2024. There are also 1,854 schools across England in which the majority of pupils use EAL (9.2% of all schools), predominantly within London, the West Midlands and the North-West. Across the country, pupils using EAL are also more widely distributed than ever with over 300 languages spoken in English schools. In 2013, pupils using EAL made up at least 5% of the pupil roll in just under half of English schools; a decade on, the same concentration of pupils is now recorded in over two thirds of English schools.<sup>3</sup>
6. The length of funded EAL provision is also often insufficient to allow school pupils with English as an additional language to reach a competent or fluent proficiency if they enter the education system as being new to English. This is because the 'EAL factor' in the National Funding Formula for Schools is applied for three years per pupil, when research shows that pupils entering the English school system as new to

English, at whatever age, may need at least six years of support before they achieve the highest levels of Proficiency in English.<sup>4</sup>

7. Though multilingualism is an asset, adults' ability to integrate if they speak English as a second or additional language is affected by their ability to access timely and relevant English language provision to enable them to unlock their existing skills and experience and to integrate. In schools, children who speak EAL who enter the education system aged five or younger will typically outperform their monolingual English-speaking peers by the time they sit their GCSEs. In contrast, pupils who speak EAL who arrive later into the education system see their educational attainment negatively impacted with EAL pupils who arrive in school in Year 6 and later being half as likely to achieve the expected national standard in reading compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers.<sup>5</sup>
8. The need to adequately resource English language support has been consistently recognised by a succession of reviews and inquiries. Ten years ago, the Casey Review into opportunity and integration, led by Baroness Casey, highlighted the central role of English in integrating communities, especially in areas with the greatest diversity. The review identified the need to reduce economic exclusion, inequality and segregation in the most deprived communities, recommending: "Improving English language provision through funding for community-based classes and appropriate prioritisation of adult skills budgets".
9. However, the same decade has seen declining support and funding for adult education in England, and a consistent pressure on providers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes with increasing waiting lists. According to Government data, the demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education is growing (up by 17% since 2021) but current provision is not reaching many of those who need it. Data shows that there were 160,870 adult ESOL learners in England in 2024/25. This means that only 4% of all adults in the UK who speak English as a second or additional language are accessing ESOL classes.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, classroom-based adult education spending has reduced by two thirds since 2003/4 and has been impacted by a further 6% cut to the Adult Skills Fund this year. The impact of the increased devolution of adult education funding to Mayoral Strategic Authorities within the past decade has enabled targeted and place-based interventions to meet ESOL needs but has resulted in recent policy decisions such as the Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority's planned de-funding of ESOL provision in the region altogether.<sup>7</sup>
10. These pressures fall heavily on colleges, ESOL providers, and community organisations, who must now reach an expanding learner base with dwindling resources.

### **Can a system which emphasises high skills and English language afford to be more generous in terms of integration policy?**

11. One of the areas in need of reform in the current system is that English language provision is typically funded and delivered at levels too low to allow highly skilled individuals to utilise their expertise. The majority of ESOL provision is at "Entry Level". While this is important for day-to-day living and will be an essential starting point for some people, it does not provide the technical or professional vocabulary needed to enter the labour market at a level of competence in a profession, for example, asking for clarification and repetition; the appropriate use of formal and informal language in the workplace, both in speaking and writing; writing a brief report; and understanding health and safety regulations or indeed the specialist

vocabulary required in certain professions. Consequently, highly qualified migrants who have skills to contribute to the economy can end up working significantly below their skills level. For an integration policy to work optimally, this would enable people to make a rapid labour market contribution by supporting either directly or through employers, investment in English language which aligns more closely to skills requirements. This ensures that the "high skills" are realised in the workforce, leading to higher tax yields and increased productivity. This should be an immediate priority for the upcoming qualifications review on ESOL as set out in the Skills White Paper.

12. There are three indicators of the value of increasing proficiency in English: -
  - a. that proficiency increases the likelihood of an individual being employed
  - b. that proficiency enhances an individual's earnings potential (including via improved occupational choice),
  - c. that low-level language proficiency is associated with under-employment or skills mismatches.
13. **Employment probabilities:** Evidence from Denmark (Arendt et al., 2021) evaluates a policy reform for those granted refugee status, which made language training mandatory for refugees and reunited family members and increased the duration of training (from 1,370 to 1,800 hours). The study found significant and persistently positive effects on employment rates. These accrued gradually over time starting around the time subjects had completed their language training. These persisted in the long run, where refugees receiving mandatory language training were four percentage points more likely to be employed than those who did not.
14. **Higher earnings:** In the US, a randomised control trial of adult English language training (Heller and Mumma, 2023) demonstrates that annual earnings of learners assigned to a public education programme in Massachusetts increased annual earnings by \$2,400 or 56%. Increased tax revenue from earnings gains covers programme costs over time, generating a 6% return for taxpayers. This is robust evidence as subjects were randomised into intervention and non-intervention groups. Dustmann and Fabbri (2003) show that proficiency is associated with wage returns of 21% to 23% in the UK context. Arendt et al. estimate that in Denmark, over 18 years in this case, language learning was associated with \$2,500 (USD) per year higher income (a 34% rise relative to the baseline).
15. **Skills mismatches:** In the UK, a study by Altorjai (2013) found that male immigrants are more likely to be over-qualified than UK-born employees and this is linked to language proficiency. The authors estimate the over-qualification of male immigrants in the UK, using the first wave of Understanding Society, and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS). This study suggests there is a 24% greater chance of under-employment compared to UK-born individuals.
16. Ultimately, an integration policy that facilitates higher-level language acquisition may act as a catalyst for economic growth.

### Should it be a requirement that everyone is able to speak some English before they come to the UK?

17. The answer to this question must be linked both to the reasons why people are seeking to come to the UK and the broader frameworks that Governments put in place to govern these different reasons and routes.

18. Applying a rule on English language proficiency as a universal policy (albeit recognising different levels required for different purposes) does not recognise the reality of (i) the number of people who have been resident in the UK for a significant period of time who don't speak English well or at all; (ii) the fact that people typically do wish to learn English to the level needed for work or study or integration but lack the means to do so (whether this is financial or simply the lack of easy to access high quality provision); and (iii) that this may discriminate against or in favour of certain groups of people (either on the basis of wealth, disability, or linguistic background).
19. If a high level of English language proficiency were set as a prerequisite for entry to the UK, the Government risks implementing a policy that fails to address the actual drivers of migration and at the same time does not address the fact that there are significant numbers of people who are British citizens who do not speak English well or at all (Census data 2021). Though the Immigration White Paper sets out a commitment to address the needs of this group there have been no plans from Government as to how this will actually happen.
20. Language acquisition is usually more rapid for individuals when resident in a country as daily interactions and workplace necessity when combined with structured learning will accelerate progression.

### **How do we ensure once they come to the UK, they can speak English within a reasonable time frame?**

21. For many new arrivals the barrier to learning English is not typically a lack of motivation, but a lack of access to learning formal or informal educational opportunities.
22. Many countries make it significantly easier for those individuals who need to develop their proficiency in English or the language of the host country to begin to access language tuition. In Australia, the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) provides funded tuition for permanent residents and qualifying visa holders (dependent, skilled worker, humanitarian), reaching 53,000 learners annually. Reforms to the AMEP programme in 2021 saw the removal of a 510-hour limit<sup>8</sup> on an individual's entitlement to free English tuition while also extending the funding eligibility from functional English programmes to vocational English, funding learners' development of English for the workplace. Similarly, Canada offers funded full- and part-time English or French instruction through the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programme. These courses are accessed by approximately 20% of all new arrivals to the country, reaching up to Canadian Language Benchmark Level 4, roughly equivalent to level A2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
23. While no comparable national programme exists in England, it should be recognised that the decision last year to remove the three-year residency requirement to access adult education provision has made it significantly easier for mayoral strategic authorities with administration over the devolved Adult Skills Fund to offer ESOL for new arrivals locally. This flexibility has previously been used by the Greater London Authority to expedite new arrivals accessing English classes, beginning with Hong Kongers on the British National (Overseas) visa scheme from 2021 onwards.
24. As stated in an answer to a question above, the ability for people arriving to the UK to sufficiently develop their proficiency in English is determined by the level of investment in ESOL provision. ESOL is currently subject to continued cuts, lengthy waiting lists, and in some areas, may face being defunded altogether by local authorities.

25. It must be recognised that any blanket policy on learning English to a set level would have varied levels of impact on people trying to acquire English language based on the language distance of their first language to English. In linguistics, language distance is a metric used to measure how different two languages are from one another. This is a structural measurement based on objective criteria, such as whether the languages share a common ancestor (e.g., English and German are 'siblings' in the Germanic family), phonology - how much the sound systems of any given two languages overlap, and syntax and grammar - how differently the languages organise thoughts and sentences. Research shows that operating in a linguistically distant language increases cognitive load. When languages are distant (e.g., English and Chinese), the brain must engage in more effortful retrieval. As linguistic distance increases, the temporal cost of processing increases (Segalowitz, 2010). When a speaker uses a language structurally distant from their own, the brain must work harder to suppress their primary language, leading to higher mental fatigue and slower processing speeds. (Abutalebi, J., & Green, D. W., 2007). Language distance can then be thought of as a 'cognitive tax.' The greater the distance between an individual's primary language and English, the higher the 'tax' they must pay in mental effort, time, and resources to achieve proficiency. For example, a speaker of Dutch (very close to English) can typically reach professional fluency in roughly 600 hours of study. Conversely, a speaker of Arabic, Cantonese, or Japanese (linguistically distant) may require over 2,200 hours to reach the same level.
26. Chiswick and Miller (2005) proved a direct correlation between the structural distance of a primary language and the 'rate of return' on English language training. A speaker of a distant language must exert more 'cognitive capital' to achieve the same economic output as a speaker of a close language, leading to persistent wage gaps and slower integration. This means that 'equal' access to English-language provision does not result in equitable outcomes. If the language distance feels insurmountable, the barrier to applying for benefits or voting, becomes a wall rather than a hurdle.

## ABOUT

This briefing has been developed by The Bell Foundation, a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve educational, employment and justice outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Foundation collaborates with leading universities and think tanks to develop an evidence base and works with a network of schools to develop and deliver practical solutions to help improve the attainment of pupils who are at risk of underachieving. In 2024, the Foundation supported over 22,000 teachers and educational professionals to support children who use English as an Additional Language through the training of teachers and webinars. A series of policy briefings about our three programmes, EAL education in schools, ESOL and post-16 English education, and overcoming language barriers in the criminal justice system, is available on our website here:

<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/our-work/with-post-16-and-adults/evidence/>

[www.bell-foundation.org.uk](https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk)