

Policy recommendations summary

A national policy framework for ESOL: What needs to change

Now is the time for a national policy framework for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), based on the principles of equitable access to high-quality, local provision across England.

Developing English language proficiency is essential both for enabling people to contribute their skills to the economy and for community and social cohesion. It is important both for individuals new to the country and for those UK citizens with limited English proficiency. The most recent Census data tells us that UK citizens account for one in three people who report not speaking English well or at all.

A national policy framework must articulate the value of ESOL and its role in enabling people both to work and to participate in and contribute to society. Key elements for delivering this include clear and stable funding streams, regional coordination, and a standards framework that meet language needs for life and work.

Here are our recommendations for a national policy framework:

1. Define core principles, expectations, and accountability measures for ESOL when monies are devolved

A national framework and set of expectations regarding ESOL provision must be established by central **Government** as part of the devolved Adult Skills Fund (ASF) system.

A framework should take the form of guiding principles and accountability measures. Alongside language standards (see below), this would grant regions greater flexibility and responsiveness to local demand, whilst asserting the importance of funding an entitlement to ESOL, and why this is important for local economies and for community and social cohesion. This should be underpinned by measures that require devolved authorities to report on and demonstrate oversight and outcomes of provision in their areas and that facilitate sharing of good practice.

Read more in our report [Supporting ESOL in Devolved Authorities](#).

2. Align new ESOL standards to the Common European Framework for Reference for Languages (CEFR)

As the **Government** reviews ESOL, [developing ESOL standards](#) modelled on existing, evidence-based frameworks is key to promoting effective teaching and learning. Implementing ESOL standards would also enable equitable and portable assessment across the country. Providers agree on the need for an ESOL reference framework so that they can develop courses for learning in a variety of settings from community centres to colleges and for different purposes such as language for work, study, and daily life, as well as appropriate qualifications.

ESOL standards should now be aligned to the existing language framework of the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR), which is used all over the world to describe learners' language attainment. The CEFR is already used in some parts of Government and internationally. Adopting this framework would promote greater consistency and coherence and give ESOL provision the flexibility to address local need.

3. What Works? Create a mechanism to share effective practice, research, and evidence

Devolution has created a fragmented landscape in which authorities and providers duplicate effort and reinvent the wheel due to a lack of shared information and good practice in ESOL. Unlike other parts of the education and skills system, there is no national “What Works” centre tasked with developing, evaluating, and disseminating evidence-informed approaches to English language teaching and learning and nor does ESOL fit neatly within the defined remits of other “What Works” centres.

Consequently, practitioners, providers, and local areas lack a shared evidence base, and effective approaches are neither systematically identified nor widely shared. As more funds are devolved, **Government** through a national policy framework should ensure that good practice is robustly evidenced and accessible to decision-makers in devolved authorities across the country.

4. Deliver more provision that embeds ESOL into vocational training

ESOL learners can end up in lower skilled jobs when they have not been able to develop the language proficiency needed to unlock their existing skills and experience. ESOL must function to equip more learners with the language they need to be work-ready or to progress in education.

[Some providers](#) and regions are already offering programmes that integrate specialist language learning into vocational programmes, supporting and accelerating progression to higher level qualifications and improving employability chances for ESOL learners. This way, those who have a high level of professional expertise can learn the technical English they need to enable them to contribute their skills to the economy. Our [2026 review of the ESOL qualifications and curriculum](#) sets out our recommendations in further detail.

England also needs funding models in further education (FE) to ensure colleges are not disincentivised from offering ESOL provision, and approaches which encourage employers to provide ESOL at work.

Many ESOL learners have come from countries where education, recruitment practices, and workplaces are very different from the UK. To help support this transition, appropriate careers education, advice, and guidance [should be embedded into ESOL provision](#) from the start.

5. Recognise that investment in ESOL reaps benefits

ESOL provision is a sound financial investment. Adults who have high English proficiency are more likely to be employed and engaged in their communities, so prioritising ESOL offers a saving to the public purse by equipping people with the language skills to contribute.

[Over one in every 50 working-age people in England](#) could benefit from the enhanced educational and employment opportunities offered by developing their proficiency in English and nearly half of this group are British citizens or long-term residents.

Attending ESOL classes at the right level can be life-changing for many. For workers with long hours or shifts, for example, ESOL in the workplace opens up new opportunities to gain vital language skills.

Yet the main source of funding for ESOL, the Adult Skills Fund (ASF), has halved in real terms since 2009, and ESOL policy and strategy have lacked clarity and overall direction. This has left learners facing an ESOL “postcode lottery”. Ultimately, this underinvestment in adult education must be addressed to enable increased investment in ESOL and unlock the economic rewards it can bring. Read our [data and literature review which considers the economic benefits](#) of investing in ESOL.

Multilingualism is a valuable resource: as individuals become proficient in English, they are not only able to enter the workforce but can also bring language skills that benefit employers, local communities, and the economy.

6. Resource ESOL as an essential driver of community cohesion

Government at both a local and national level should recognise that developing English language proficiency is central to social integration and must ensure that there are resources to deliver this. Analysis shows how this approach can ensure individuals have the tools to navigate daily life and can be active participants in society.

In order to accelerate integration into society, the Government should consider [the funding approaches taken by other countries](#) where those who are new to the main language are entitled to a sufficient number of free or subsidised lessons to enable them to make progress.

7. Improve national and regional data collection to better understand the impact of ESOL provision

There are currently very limited accurate national data on the numbers of people aged 16 and over who need to learn English and what their levels of proficiency are.

[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.

Sector stakeholders including ESOL providers and strategic authorities agree on the need for better data on the number of people who need to learn English post-16. Accurate national data would help them plan and track students' needs and progress better, as well as ensuring value for money.

At national level, gathering baseline and exit learner data should also be a priority for the Government. **At regional level**, additional data should also be collected to demonstrate learner progress and outcomes. These data points would help to improve and better target provision to meet local ESOL needs.

8. Digital provision: One size doesn't fit all

Policy responses must resist a one-size-fits-all digital solution and prioritise teacher-mediated approaches that match technology use to learner need, language proficiency, and context. There are both benefits and challenges associated with online provision, and digital tools should be seen as a supplement to ESOL provision, not a replacement.

For learners in the earlier stages of learning English, understanding spoken language online can be harder than face-to-face learning. Studying online can also prevent learners from communicating and forming essential social bonds with classmates. Many adult learners may also not have access to digital devices, which would exclude them from online provision. However, for those who live in rural areas with large distances to travel to classes, or for parents with limited childcare options, online or hybrid provision may be their preferred choice.

The human dimension of ESOL provision shouldn't be underestimated. [Evidence tells us](#) that situated language learning with a trusted practitioner results in better outcomes for learners and their social integration. Provision must also develop learners' digital literacy alongside English language skills, while maintaining flexible delivery models that do not exclude those with limited digital access or confidence.

Using learner outcome data, providers should actively monitor whether the mode and delivery of provision are optimal for and appropriate to their learners' needs.

Read more in our position paper: [Digital Learning Technologies for ESOL Learners](#)

9. Invest in workforce development

ESOL learners are a hugely diverse group, with a range of distinct learning needs. Investment is needed to both recruit ESOL practitioners and provide continuing professional development (CPD).

Resources must be sufficient to enable providers to invest in staff training that promotes effective teaching, learning, and assessment in ESOL contexts to better support speakers of other languages in both ESOL and vocational courses.

ESOL providers should ensure that CPD is subject-specific and equips tutors with the technical and pedagogical skills to utilise new technologies and platforms in their teaching. This should include training in trauma-informed practice, now recognised as an essential pedagogical skill for ESOL and vocational tutors working with refugee populations.

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