



## Consultation response

Metropolitan Housing Partnership / Metropolitan Support Trust  
Response to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills consultation:  
Focusing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) on Community Cohesion

This is a joint consultation response from the Metropolitan Support Trust and Metropolitan Housing Partnership. Refugee Support is one of the country's leading providers of housing and support for refugees and asylum seekers, and is the name of Metropolitan Support Trust's (MST) refugee services. MST is part of Metropolitan Housing Partnership, a family of social businesses that support and complement each other's work.



**DIUS Consultations**



# Developing National Priorities

## Question 1

- a) **We have proposed an indicative list of national priorities. Are there any other groups we should consider for inclusion in this list and if so, how high a priority do you consider them to be?**

Metropolitan Support Trust and Metropolitan Housing Partnership welcome the inclusion of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (who are still in the country beyond 6 months awaiting a decision on their status or cannot return home), however the 'indicative list' does not include:

- migrant workers working in low paying jobs, nor resident workers in low-paying jobs. For this group, effective communication is key. Without English, workers will have less opportunity to develop their careers and their ability to contribute to economic and social life will be constrained. Basic English is essential to ensure that they are aware of their rights and entitlements and therefore are less likely to be exploited. For some, their low income would mean that they could not afford to pay for English classes. Additionally, there is an associated cost for local authorities who have to provide interpreting and translating services for migrant workers who require help in translating documents to acquire information or obtaining services. This is particular problem in small towns and rural areas. In 2006, Refugee Support calculated that they spent over £180,000 on translation and interpreting costs.
- asylum seekers who are awaiting a 'decision to remain' (under 6 months) should be included in this list. Research shows that those who are able to access language classes soon after arrival in a new country are the most motivated and effective language learners. English language allows people to make connections with the local community. It impedes their (asylum seekers) ability to function and communicate effectively during the time when their claim is being considered. The policy of dispersing asylum seekers to live in towns and cities across the UK makes ESOL a priority in terms of community cohesion. As they are prevented from working, they should not be expected to pay for English classes. There are now reports of large cuts in basic (Level 1 and 2) ESOL provision, particularly in London, as well as tutor redundancy.
- failed asylum seekers (Section 4) many of whom remain in the country for extended periods (specifically if they have a medical condition, or are unable to return home because of circumstances beyond their control). They do not have the right to work but are keen to learn and study English to assist their children who attend school. Clarity is needed as to whether they would be included in the group of national priorities?

Additionally pregnancy and childcare are real issues for women who attend or want to attend ESOL classes. Some of the hardest to reach groups identified in the national priorities (refugees and asylum seekers) experience isolation and are unable to attend classes as they do not have childcare provision. MST receives figures from begin (basic educational guidance in Nottingham) identifying that 17.6% (113) people are currently on the ESOL waiting list and have childcare needs/barriers that may prevent them from attending ESOL classes. (SOURCE: ESOL placement Report, begin, 14 March 2008).

Males from BME groups also sometimes experience difficulty accessing ESOL in an open college situation. Cultural attitudes can prevent them from admitting that they need educational assistance particularly if they attend the same classes as their female counterparts.

Southgate College currently has 510 people on its waiting list for ESOL and it is not based in an inner city borough where you would expect there to be a higher demand.

**b) How would local plans demonstrate that those identified in the plan are in the nationally specified priority groups and, if not, why they are considered a local priority?**

No response.

**c) What evidence should be collected to ensure that the priority groups are reached?**

Evidence from research conducted by Refugee Support identifies that improving educational opportunities was identified as service user's top priority in a 2003 Survey. Only 40 percent of our service users are able to converse in English. Co-ordination between ESOL providers, Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) and Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) is crucial for sharing information and expertise, and for contacting some of the more 'hard-to-reach' communities. This must include smaller RCO's who may experience networking barriers in Local Authority areas.

**d) How would local authorities apply the national list of priorities in their area and how well do you think these priorities would meet local cohesion needs?**

It may be difficult for Local Authorities to apply the national list of priorities in their areas with regards to refugees and asylum seekers. This is because they can not account for transient populations and the groups mentioned do not necessarily have permanent, 'fixed' addresses. It is unlikely they will know how many asylum seekers and refugees live in their area.

The same could be said for migrant populations. Demand for ESOL classes has risen especially from nationals of A8 countries. As well as the changed patterns of immigration, some rural localities are confronted with demand for ESOL without having any infrastructure for its provision.

**e) How far have local authorities already assessed the priority of English language needs being met in local areas to meet the objective of community cohesion?**

Local Authorities do not always know what the local language needs are. Some populations are transient so their needs are difficult to predict or map. More use needs to be made of lettings staff working in local authorities and RSLs who are aware of the language issues faced by new tenants.

Nottingham demonstrates effective partnership working between colleges providing ESOL. Basic Educational Guidance (BEGIN) is an attempt to co-ordinate information and ESOL provision across the city. Its central role is to work in partnership with local colleges to ensure the coherence of ESOL provision across the city and its activities including organising a central database of enrolments/waiting lists and identifying ESOL contacts. It also collects and disseminates data relating to asylum seekers to all of the partners and therefore has relevant, up-to-date information on English language need in its locality. This model could be adopted in other areas.

The lack of literacy amongst participants in basic courses is a real problem. For instance up to 40% of a class may have experienced no schooling. In addition the basic ESOL class only provides for 10 weeks of one session a week. More able students are being held back by lack of literacy skills in others who have very little chance of achieving on such a short course. There is a need for more and longer basic classes where literacy issues are addressed.

Lack of basic literacy is a particular issue for some refugees and asylum seekers, many of which do not have the basic literary skills in their own languages. ESOL teachers/classes do not take this in to account and ESOL classes could be better tailored to suit the needs of illiterate or semi literate students. ESOL providers have reported low retention levels with regards to refugee and asylum learners due to poor mental health, lack of confidence in a classroom setting and poor study skills.

## Setting ESOL priorities, planning and funding

### Question 2

**a) Is the proposition outlined, building on existing arrangements, appropriate for commissioning ESOL to support community cohesion?**

Commissioning arrangements and targeting of funding in local areas (linked to LAAs) may be problematic. If the English language and literacy needs of those where English is not their first language are not prioritised then ESOL provision will be untargeted and inadequate.

Dispersal policy in relation to asylum seekers will have an effect upon local funding arrangements. It is essential that ESOL providers are given information about the numbers and basic demographics of asylum seekers arriving in their locality which will enable them to plan and secure appropriate budgets. Therefore key relationships between statutory providers and refugee communities are paramount. It is essential that community organisations representing disadvantaged non-English speaking members are represented on Local Strategic Partnerships as they will give their members voice and identify the pertinent issues for their local communities regarding integration and language.

**b) How will this be done most effectively? For example:**

- **How do we build on the work to identify and engage the hardest to reach that is already being undertaken locally by the LSC and their local authority and other community-based partners?**

The provision of family learning courses in state schools has been reduced and should be reinstated. Providing ESOL in other community settings such as a housing office, Church or community hall rather than local colleges is essential to effectively engage with refugee and asylum seeking populations. Many participants have to take two or three buses, at their own cost, to attend a class as there is an increasing tendency to run courses in colleges not out in the community.

Cultural sensitivities need to be taken in to account. Women often find it difficult to access mainstream ESOL classes for fear of travelling on public transport without an adequate grasp of English. Educational establishments can be intimidating so providing English classes in a 'neutral' venue may break down any potential barriers. Refugee Support's (Metropolitan Support) Home Learning Project has proved particularly effective when delivering ESOL to refugees. The model delivers home ESOL tuition to refugees in the home setting by qualified, experienced teachers. It also offers a 'mentoring' service of support and guidance to learners to assist them in progressing from private tuition to community learning activities (conversation groups with other mentors/mentees, volunteering opportunities, mother and baby groups, accessing local library services etc), and where possible, to classroom learning. This model strongly promotes the social inclusion of 'hard to reach groups.'

Additionally, if ESOL is target driven – relating to retention and exam results – pregnant women face discrimination as their reason for attendance is to learn some basic literacy in a short time period (due to imminent birth). For them, access to ESOL is not about taking exams and getting results, it's about the real basics that aid integration and cut down on their isolation. In some areas, they may be less likely to be accepted onto an ESOL course because of their pregnancy and lack of child care after the birth of their baby.

ESOL classes need to continue to be offered at child friendly times with free/cheap childcare provision.

- **How can we better link providers to existing planning arrangements and priorities so that they can better target their resources to develop their communities' engagement in ESOL and other learning?**

See answer to question 2a

- Are there new partners who should be involved in this process and what would be needed to engage them?

See answer to question 2b regarding refugee community organisations. There is also the potential for partnership working with the London Libraries Development Agency (LLDA) for example, around the creation of ESOL study groups at local libraries fitting in with LLDA's commitment to increase access to library services for refugees.

- c) How could the effectiveness of the proposed arrangements in supporting community cohesion be measured?**

No response.

### Question 3

**Given the role for local authorities and the variety of funding sources other than the LSC, how might local planning processes influence the setting of priorities and the allocation of funds in a way that complements the mainstream system for allocating FE funds?**

No response.

## Outreach provision and the voluntary and community sector

### Question 4

**a) How can existing outreach work be strengthened to support focusing ESOL on community cohesion?**

See answer to Q2b and below.

There is a real need to strengthen outreach work re: ESOL particularly with regards to local refugee populations. Availability and access to local ESOL classes, particularly in London is hugely problematic. People who want to attend courses have to travel significant distances to attend ESOL classes. Travel costs are problematic those on low incomes and who live a significant distance from ESOL providers.

**b) How can volunteers and the voluntary and community sector be better involved in supporting this outreach work and general ESOL provision in general and what support will they need to do this?**

As mentioned earlier, registered social landlords provide a useful route to support outreach work. They can identify areas where local people would benefit from classes and often provide space for such classes to be held in the community. Employee volunteering programmes run by a variety of firms could support qualified ESOL teachers help local people develop their literacy and language skills through specific mentoring or conversational work.

Refugee Community Organisations provide the 'voice' for local refugee communities. Co-ordination between ESOL providers and RCO's is crucial for sharing information and expertise and for contacting some of the more hard to reach communities. They have the knowledge and expertise to inform mapping exercises about local population needs and signpost to local ESOL provision. They can also provide 'safe' and familiar premises to deliver ESOL classes. Members from the refugee and asylum seeking communities can volunteer as classroom assistants, (particularly women) who can provide valuable assistance to other women in learning to participate.

## Quality and Training

### Question 5

**What programmes/resources are currently available to support professional development for teachers and others involved in improving ESOL delivery to help the community cohesion agenda and what else might be needed?**

Teachers need to be even more aware of some of the cultural sensitivities relating to refugee and asylum seeking communities. Given the diversity of language need due to population influxes from a range of countries, more could be done to train and recruit ESOL teachers from refugee and asylum seeking communities, particularly those individuals who have teaching qualifications (in their own country).

Additionally there is a need to recruit more bilingual ESOL teachers to understand and assist students who are illiterate or semi-literate in their own language.

The Learning and Skills Council need to link literacy needs alongside the provision of ESOL so that accredited ESOL trainers are adequately funded to deliver both.

## Employer engagement

### Question 6

**What would incentives employers to encourage them to contribute to their employees who have ESOL needs?**

If employers are to be actively engaged in ESOL initiatives then classes need to be tailored more so that students will learn 'work based' language that allows them to gain entry in to the UK labour market. ESOL classes/curriculum must take account of the employment needs of hard to reach groups which will aid ESOL retention and allow individuals to develop transferable skills relevant to the job market.

Trade unions play an important role in raising awareness of the benefits of ESOL training and encouraging employers to take part. Employers need to be made aware of the clear benefits that improved communication skills will bring such as increased customer service quality, reduction in staff turnover and improved staff motivation. There is also evidence to suggest that in some work situations accidents decreased where ESOL was delivered in the work place, as health and safety notices are better understood.

Employers and agencies recruiting from abroad should be obliged to contribute to the cost of their acquiring language skills up to level 1.

## Local authorities

### Question 7

**It would be particularly helpful if local authorities respondents could indicate how the indicative list of priority groups would be applied in their areas and which other groups they would propose to make priorities in drawing up a local strategy based on the need for community cohesion.**

No response

## Question 8

**Any other comments or suggestions not previously covered?**

None

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