

ESOL and Volunteering

Summary Report of the Expert Stakeholder Seminar

20th March 2019

1. Background

1.1 **This report summarises the views and evidence presented by the Task and Finish (T&F) group on ESOL and volunteering convened by Learning & Work Institute (L&W) as part of its programme of stakeholder engagement for the Department for Education (DfE).** The aim of the T&F group is to inform the government's proposed new English language strategy for England. The activity took the form of a half-day expert seminar which brought policy makers from DfE and the Home Office together with interested members of the National Advisory Group on Peer Volunteering and Learning (NAG) and the Voluntary and Community Sector Learning and Skills Forum (VCSE Forum).

1.2 **The focus on ESOL and volunteering reflects current cross-government concern to strengthen English language learning for adults, within a wider social integration agenda.** L&W and DfE agreed that drawing on the expertise of the NAG and VCSE Forum provided an opportunity to look in detail at the role and value of volunteers and volunteering, which play an increasingly important part in local ESOL delivery. In particular, these stakeholders could shed light on the distinctive contribution of peer volunteers – i.e. adults who have themselves been English language learners. The government's *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper* (March 2018), proposed the creation of a network of volunteer-led “conversation clubs” to support English language learning at local level and the development of new resources to support volunteers. However, responses to the strategy consultation revealed concern at placing too great an emphasis on conversation clubs and volunteer-led learning in isolation from or as an alternative to more formal provision.¹ In its *Integrated Communities Strategy Action Plan* (February 2019), it was announced that further development work will be done, led by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to identify how the needs of learners and volunteers in volunteer-led provision can best be met.

2. The current policy context

2.1. The ESOL sector has experienced significant change in recent years. Reductions in mainstream ESFA funding have been accompanied by the introduction of numerous new but fragmented and less well-resourced funding streams and delivery programmes. **Yet the level of need for English language learning remains significant and demand far exceeds supply in some localities.** Data from the 2011 census presented at the seminar shows that over three-quarters of a million people cannot speak English well, and this figure is likely to under-estimate the actual level of need. Adults who have limited English language face disadvantage in the labour market and challenges in accessing other services

¹ HM Government (2019) *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper: summary of consultation responses and Government response*, p. 16.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/777160/Integrated_Communities_Strategy_Government_Response.pdf

such as health and housing. Almost half of this cohort have lived in the UK for more than ten years, and groups such as women, asylum seekers and refugees face specific barriers to accessing suitable provision.

2.2 The proposed English language strategy for England is a cross-government response to this issue. Announced in February 2019 as part of the *Integrated Communities Strategy Action Plan*, the strategy is currently under development and due to be published later this year. As part of the development phase, a range of possible solutions have been identified to improve the overall ESOL offer. Key areas currently being considered were shared with the group, and include:

- Improving co-ordination and signposting;
- Encouraging more flexible provision;
- Improving the quality of provision;
- Improving the use of online resources and technology;
- Helping learners to access support and progress;
- Taking a logical approach to English language levels across visas.

2.3 The policy input from DfE and Home Office prompted a discussion of some **key issues relating to the current funding and planning of ESOL**. Participants identified a number of challenges and suggested how policy could better support local delivery.

- **Greater diversity of funded entry points and provision are needed, particularly for adults with pre-Entry levels of English.** Under the current system, the funding can drive learners onto courses which are not suitable for them. For example, learners may be enrolled on accredited courses for which they are not ready, or onto project provision with a strong employability component, even if these do not reflect their individual needs and circumstances.
- **There is also a (possibly widespread) practice of enrolling ESOL learners onto Functional Skills English courses – including Family English in schools - because this is the only viable funded option.** Mixing ESOL learners and native speakers in a single class in this way presents significant challenges from a learning, teaching and assessment point of view. Particularly at Entry levels, native speakers often have a history of unmet learning needs, while ESOL learners will require considerable support with the basics of English language acquisition.
- **Many providers are stitching ESOL provision together using funding from a range of sources, which contributes to patchy and inconsistent access and opportunities in different localities.** Project funding from initiatives such as the Flexible Learning Fund and Controlling Migration Fund is being used to fill gaps in local delivery but cannot be a substitute for adequate mainstream resourcing.
- **There are very high levels of motivation among ESOL learners who are parents and want to be able to support their children’s learning and communicate effectively with schools.** There is scope to do more to work with schools to develop provision to engage parents, especially mothers who are unable to access existing opportunities.
- **A learner entitlement for ESOL up to Level 2 would help to address the funding challenge.** This would give ESOL parity with English and Maths and promote equality

and fairness by putting ESOL learners on an equal footing with adults who are native English speakers. It would also recognise that some learners will take longer than others to progress and achieve,

- **Better local coordination of ESOL provision is well recognised as providing the key to securing a more consistent, accessible and effective local offer, but this must be adequately resourced.** Examples of local good practice such as that in Hackney demonstrate what can be achieved. The key to its success is quarterly partnership planning, which brings providers together to plan and address competition, duplication and gaps across the borough. A single point of contact for learners can help to address some of the barriers to engagement and access. However, where local co-ordination currently exists, it is often funded via short term funding for which organisations regularly have to retender. This results in a lack of consistency, weak sustainability, and inefficiency and waste as: a) different localities are setting up different platforms and duplicating the development of systems and processes; and b) systems and processes created by one organisation are abandoned if it loses a contract, and the new contractor sets about recreating them from scratch.
- **Improving local coordination requires collaboration and trust between providers, which means changing the prevailing culture.** In many local areas there is a culture of competition which impedes learners' access to suitable provision. For example, the results of initial assessment carried out by one provider may not be accepted by another, so learners have to keep repeating the process.
- **Progression for ESOL learners would be facilitated by more flexible funding and better local coordination.** Progression is not a straightforward, linear process, as individuals may be able to achieve at a certain level in one mode (e.g. speaking and listening) but be working at a much lower level in another mode (e.g. writing). Funding should enable learners to move up and down levels across modes if needed. Local coordination would open progression routes within a geographical area which might not be available through a single provider.

3. The role of volunteers in ESOL

3.1 Participants were unanimous in stating that **the key to defining the role of volunteers in ESOL is distinguishing between what is appropriate for individuals who have a professional background and qualifications in English language learning and those who do not.** Although there are some instances in which volunteers may be qualified teachers acting in a voluntary capacity (e.g. voluntary teachers delivering Talk English courses²), it is more usual that ESOL volunteers do not have this experience and expertise. Under these circumstances, it is not appropriate, and indeed would be exploitative and potentially harming, for them to be expected to teach English. The distinction between “volunteering” and “voluntary work” can be helpful for understanding the boundaries between different kinds of unpaid roles.

3.2 **The VIME model³, developed by ELATT and three European partner organisations, was felt by the group to be a powerful aid to conceptualising the role and contribution of volunteers.** The model shows that volunteers can have the greatest impact on language learning on non-formal settings such as conversation clubs. The

² <https://www.talk-english.co.uk/introduction/volunteer/>

³ <https://www.elatt.org.uk/projects/the-vime-project>

overlapping formal, informal and non-formal elements of the model reinforce the notion that the roles of professional teachers and volunteers are complementary and mutually supportive. Many volunteers may not be able to teach English, but they can support language acquisition.

3.3 Many adults who are volunteering in roles which involves an element of supporting English language learning do not recognise themselves as part of the “voluntary ESOL sector”, even if they are aware that such a sector exists. Examples include people in refugee welcoming roles, who may be working in a highly informal way with little or no organisational infrastructure to support them. While they are at the opposite end of the language learning spectrum from ESOL teachers, becoming an ESOL teacher is often presented as the only option open to them if they want to develop their role. However, it may not be appealing as they are motivated by a desire to help, not to teach. More needs to be done to raise awareness among people in these roles of what support is available to them as volunteers, and how to access it.

3.4 Participatory approaches, which promote equality between learners and volunteers, generate greater benefits for both parties than those based on hierarchical relationships. Creating an environment in which people feel valued and on an equal footing with others is highly motivating for language learning as it builds learners’ motivation and confidence to express themselves. Volunteer-led activities need to present a different model and dynamic from the teacher-class archetype. For that reason, it is vital that initiatives such as conversation clubs involve a significant proportion of fluent English speakers. Evidence suggests that the ideal balance of volunteers to learners is 1:4. Peer volunteering, which recognises and values the shared lived experiences of volunteers and learners, can help to foster participatory practice. Group members described examples of effective practice in which peer volunteers facilitate conversation clubs in partner organisations where both the volunteers and the learners are accessing other services, e.g. Children’s Centres.

3.5 As the VIME model confirms, volunteers can play a critical role in supporting ESOL students not only with language learning but also with cultural awareness and social integration. For example, Talk English Friends are volunteers who provide informal support to English language learners, which includes not only accompanying them both to language classes and conversation clubs, but also to helping them to find out about and access wider services and activities in the local area. For language learning, the opportunities outside the classroom are important for reinforcing learning in the classroom. Fluent and native English speakers often do not realise the value that they could add to ESOL settings in a volunteering capacity, and more attention should be paid to engaging them in these roles.

3.6 Peer volunteers can play a unique and vital role in facilitating multilingual approaches in the ESOL classroom, supporting learners to understand and engage with key elements of the formal language learning process. For example, in assisting the delivery of multilingual approaches to activities such as goal-setting, developing ground rules and equality, diversity and inclusion, volunteers help to promote inclusion and build learners’ motivation.

4. Support for volunteers

4.1 The group reiterated the important point that volunteers are not a cost-free option. It is vital that organisations and initiatives that involve volunteers provide consistent, on-going support. From the outset, volunteering programmes should include structured

support and opportunities for reflection by volunteers. Ideally, initial volunteering activities should be undertaken as part of the training, so that volunteers are adequately supported with their first steps into the role. Providing adequate and effective support costs money and needs to be adequately resourced, and indeed the role of volunteer co-ordinator may be only paid role associated some activities.

4.2 Policy interventions to strengthen the funding and planning of ESOL, like those outlined above, offer scope to improve support for volunteers. Currently, the funding system creates barriers to resourcing volunteering and especially peer volunteering, and some funding for large scale national projects (e.g. *English My Way*) presents the formal ESOL teaching context as the norm. The focus should be on establishing flexible funding streams to support the development of high-quality volunteer-led provision which complements formal courses, rather than just looking like “ESOL on the cheap”. The volunteering role is central to supporting social integration within the context of language learning.

4.3 The co-ordination of ESOL volunteering could be undertaken through systems and processes that are developed to improve the overall co-ordination of ESOL in a local area. This integration and alignment of volunteering with wider ESOL delivery would strengthen the coherence and complementarity of formal, informal and non-formal provision, and have the added benefit of opening up a wider range of roles, experiences and progression opportunities to volunteers.

4.4 The overall sense of the group was that some organisations have robust and effective approaches in place to support volunteers, but many do not. The challenge, therefore, is to disseminate, incentivise and promote good practice. It was suggested that the offer of training and development to build the capacity of organisations to support volunteers could act as a powerful driver of improvement.

4.5 Group members described a range of examples of current activity and approaches to support volunteers in ESOL. For example:

- NATECLA is developing a framework of good practice and resources to support voluntary ESOL teachers.⁴
- At Redbridge Institute, people taking on conversation club facilitator roles initially undertake shadowing so that they have a clear idea of what role entails.
- WEA has historically had different models operating across the nine regions, in some cases linked to particular projects that have been funded from various sources. The organisation is currently mapping and reviewing this activity with a view to developing a more consistent approach.

4.6 Enabling progression to formal teaching for those that want to take this route should be built into volunteer support. This means providing stepping stones from volunteering to full professional training and qualification. A current barrier to progression is that suitable short (15-hour) Level 3 courses which would offer an entry pathway are not eligible for loan funding and students are often not in a position to be able to fund themselves. It was suggested by the group that it would be helpful if the position on loans could be reviewed.

⁴ <https://www.natecla.org.uk/content/668/For-volunteer-ESOL-teachers>

4.6 Professional ESOL practitioners may be concerned that the involvement of volunteers represents and undermining or devaluing of their own role and is simply the deployment of cheap labour. These reservations need to be acknowledged and taken seriously. Being explicit about the ways in which volunteers support and complement ESOL professionals is critical for fostering strong and beneficial relationships on both sides. This will entail clearly defining the role and intended contribution of volunteer roles to show how it is distinct from and supportive of formal teaching, and could include approaches such as pairing volunteers and practitioners.

5. The outcomes of volunteering

5.1 The group anticipated that the ESOL strategy will give clarity on what outcomes are currently valued from English language learning and, by extension, what is expected from volunteering in the sector. It was noted that outcomes articulated through the strategy will be cross-departmental and understanding these will be essential for enabling the sector to make a powerful case for funding.

5.2 Social integration is emerging as a priority outcome, both nationally and within devolved areas (e.g. the Greater London Authority) to which ESOL volunteering is likely to be making a significant contribution. It was suggested that it would be helpful to identify some consistent outcome measures which could be applied across provision, and which move beyond simply measuring qualifications, to focus on language learning, language acquisition and social integration.

5.3 Volunteering delivers outcomes for both learners and volunteers, and tracking and understanding outcomes for volunteers is key. This is not simply an exercise to support volunteer management, but will also pick up on wider outcomes in relation to e.g. social integration, health and wellbeing, to demonstrate the value that the activity adds across a range of social policy areas.

5.4 Self-reporting of outcomes by volunteers must be done in a way that encourages reflection. Posing the question, “What has changed?” can be a powerful way of uncovering individual narratives of impact. Collaborating with adults who are volunteering to design and develop meaningful measures, as well as participatory approaches to evidence collection, would greatly enhance understanding of what the outcomes are and what can be learned from the volunteering experience.

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