

high

trees



Strength *in* Words

Improving access to ESOL for
people in work

About this report

This report shares the findings from the research phase of a multi-year project exploring the barriers that prevent people in work from improving their English language skills through ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

This project is led by High Trees in partnership with The Bell Foundation.



About High Trees

High Trees Community Development Trust is a multidisciplinary charity, working with 1700 people each year in Tulse Hill and across Lambeth. As part of its wider offer of community services, High Trees provides English language classes to over 250 community members every year.

High Trees is also a founding member of the Lambeth Community Research Network, a partnership working to ensure that research taking place in Lambeth is ethical, high-quality and action focused.

About the research

The research was conducted by High Trees between May 2024 – April 2025.

We would like to give special thanks to the community members who contributed their time, ideas, and experiences to the research.

We would also like to thank Lambeth Adult Learning and the various community organisations, ESOL providers, and businesses who supported the research – in particular the Indoamerican Refugee And Migrant Organisation (IRMO), The Baytree Centre, The King's Cross Brunswick Neighbourhood Association, Katherine Low Settlement, South London Refugee Association, Ripe Learning and Train2Work Academy, who all supported data collection.

None of this work would have been possible without the funding and generous support of The Bell Foundation.

Executive summary

Over one million people in England and Wales report being unable to speak English “well” or “at all”. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision offers these people the chance to improve their English speaking, reading and writing abilities. However, people from migrant and refugee communities are often unable to access the learning they need, and funding for ESOL has faced significant cuts over the past 15 years, leaving ESOL providers unable to meet demand. Without opportunities to improve their English language skills, people from migrant and refugee communities often face barriers contributing to economic and civic life and are less able to access the services and support they are entitled to.

This report outlines new research exploring the barriers to accessing ESOL experienced by people who are in work, and how ESOL providers and employers can respond to these challenges. Many of the community members who took part told us that they are prevented from accessing ESOL classes due to their working patterns, and so are unable to improve their confidence speaking English and progress in their careers. ESOL providers recognise these challenges but are limited in how they can respond under current ESOL policy. Employers, on the other hand, acknowledge the problems caused by language barriers in the workplace but often implement ad hoc solutions that do not help their staff to improve their English language skills on the job.

Through surveys and interviews, this research provides deeper insights into these challenges, and how to design alternative ESOL models for people in work.

Key findings

① Accessing ESOL is difficult for many people in work

People in work want to learn English to improve their confidence and abilities both in and outside the workplace, but many cannot attend ESOL due to changing shift patterns and their working hours.

② Language barriers create challenges in the workplace

Without support, people with lower levels of English language proficiency find various tasks at work difficult, and employees and employers must resort to temporary measures to mitigate language barriers.

③ People in work need alternative ESOL models to improve their English language skills

People in work need more flexible and affordable support to learn English, which requires ESOL providers and employers to work collaboratively.

This research also highlights ways forward. ESOL providers can take the lead by co-developing ESOL courses with learners in employment. But this work will only be sustainable if employers, ESOL commissioners and policymakers recognise the learning needs of people in work and the benefits of supporting them to reach their potential.

Recommendations

- 1 Develop flexible and bespoke models of ESOL delivery** to help more people in work to improve their English.
- 2 Improve the understanding of the impact of alternative ESOL models** and how to effectively provide those who face barriers to regular ESOL provision with the skills they need.
- 3 Build evidence of the benefits of ESOL for employers** to incentivise engagement in ESOL for work courses across different sectors.
- 4 Recognise the barriers to access in ESOL coordination and commissioning** so ESOL providers have greater capacity to respond to the needs of groups who face barriers to accessing ESOL.
- 5 Embed ESOL incentives for employers in public sector contracts** to encourage both local authorities and their suppliers to offer ESOL to their staff.

This research is the initial stage of a multi-year project, during which High Trees will deliver multiple 'test and learn' ESOL for work pilots that are co-developed with employees and employers from different sectors in Lambeth. During these pilots, further insights from learners, employers and ESOL tutors will be collected to broaden the findings and recommendations in this report.

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Background

English language proficiency and its impact on life and work

Census 2021 data shows that over one million people who don't have English as their main language report being unable to speak English "well" or "at all" – more than one third of whom are UK citizens (ONS, 2021).¹ This figure also includes 759,000 people aged 16-65, or one in fifty people who are of working age.

People from migrant communities with lower English proficiency encounter a number of challenges navigating day-to-day life, such as facing barriers to accessing healthcare and other services, engaging with schools if they have children, and securing good quality housing (Healthwatch, 2022; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016; Manzoni and Rolfe, 2019; Balas and Caggiano, 2022). It can also lead to smaller networks of social support and increased social isolation and loneliness (Isik and Birmek, 2025; Refugee Action, 2017). On other hand, higher levels of English language proficiency can mitigate these challenges as well as support people to engage and participate in their local communities more (Ahmed, 2017).

English language skills also play a key role in determining whether people from migrant communities are employed as well as their type of employment. Higher levels of English proficiency among individuals born outside of the UK improve their chances of employment, having a job requiring a higher level of skill, and earning higher wages (Migration Observatory, 2024; Dustmann and Fabri, 2003).² However, people from migrant communities are generally more likely to be over-qualified for their job, and work in flexible and temporary jobs compared to UK born workers (Slaughter and Stone, 2025; Altorjai, 2013; Bell and Johnson, 2023). At work itself, lower levels of English proficiency can also make individuals more vulnerable to breaches of their employment rights and to health and safety risks in the workplace (Modern and Barbosa, 2023; FLEX, 2021). Many migrants with lower English proficiency, therefore, end up in low-paid, unskilled, precarious and sometimes unsafe employment, regardless of their

qualifications, experience or potential. In addition to affecting employees' safety and understanding of Human Resources (HR) processes, low levels of English among workers can also negatively impact employers in other ways. For example, they may need to develop new communication methods within teams with speakers of multiple languages, relying on bilingual workers to manage safety and improve productivity (Fellows and Phua, 2025).³

Existing provision in English for Speakers of Other Languages

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision supports adult migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to improve their English speaking, reading, and writing abilities. In turn, this gives these groups the opportunity to progress in their careers, unlock new opportunities and overcome the other challenges in their lives.

In England, ESOL is delivered through local authorities, further education colleges, and voluntary and community organisations, and funded primarily through the Adult Skills Fund (ASF), which is managed by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), with the Department for Education responsible for non-devolved areas.⁴ ASF funding can be used for both formal (i.e. leads to an accredited qualification) and informal ESOL courses, with fully-funded or part-funded places offered to people that meet certain eligibility criteria.⁵

However, the ASF has faced significant cuts over the past fifteen years, and between 2009-10 and 2016-17, funding for ESOL fell by 56% (Foster and Bolton, 2018). Initially the cuts to funding led to a decline in ESOL participation rates, but the number of people attending ESOL provision has steadily risen over recent years, with a 27% increase in England between 2017-18 and 2023-24.⁶ However, funding has not kept pace with this increase in demand: although spending on adult skills has increased over the past few years, funding for classroom-based education is still roughly 40%

below 2009-10 levels (Drayton et al., 2025).

As a result, ESOL providers in different areas cannot meet demand from learners, leaving courses oversubscribed with waiting lists (Bradstreet et al., 2024a; Kaisidou et al., 2023). For those learners who are new to studying or with low literacy skills, there is also often a lack of adequate and differentiated ESOL provision to support their learning needs (Kaisidou et al., 2023; Learning and Work Institute, 2019). Similarly, ESOL provision as it is currently regulated often limits the flexibility required to meet the needs of learners more broadly (Bradstreet et al., 2024b).

In combination with a lack of adequate and flexible provision, people from migrant communities experience other barriers to accessing and sustaining their participation in ESOL (Kaisidou et al., 2023; Pomati et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2017, and WONDER Foundation, 2016). These include socioeconomic barriers, such as childcare commitments and caring responsibilities, travel and transport, housing instability, and poverty – especially when they don't meet the criteria for a fully funded ESOL place; and individual barriers, such as poor physical and mental health, social isolation, and cultural expectations around learning. For those who have jobs, work can be another significant barrier, as people working flexible or long hours may be unable to attend regular ESOL classes consistently. As a result of work and other barriers, it can be harder for learners to meet the attendance and participation thresholds they need in order for ESOL providers to be able to claim funding for their place.⁷

There have been multiple calls over the past decade for further investment in ESOL and a national strategy or framework to improve coordination and ensure provision is accessible and high-quality (e.g. The Bell Foundation and Association of Colleges, 2024; NATECLA, 2016; Paget and Stevenson, 2014). Supporting people to improve their English skills has also been highlighted as a priority in other policy areas, such as skills shortages (e.g. Lifelong Education Commission, 2022) and integration (e.g. Casey, 2016; HM Government, 2019). However, no government has yet taken steps to implement new policies or strategies that address the challenges faced by both ESOL providers and individuals who are excluded from ESOL provision.

Addressing the gaps of ESOL for people in work

High Trees Community Development Trust has been working in partnership with Lambeth Adult Learning to deliver ESOL and other adult education courses in Lambeth, London, for over 20 years. 39% of Lambeth's population is born outside of the UK, and there is a large presence of Latin American, Portuguese, Eastern European and African communities across the borough (ONS, 2021). A high number of people from these communities have English language learning needs: of the roughly 55,000 people who do not have English as their main language, over 11,000, or one in 25 people living in Lambeth, reported being unable to speak English "well" or "at all" in Census 2021.

During our time delivering ESOL, we have seen first-hand the barriers experienced by learners in work who want to access support to learn English. However, in the absence of wider initiatives and funding to address these barriers, the onus has fallen on ESOL providers like High Trees to explore new and more flexible types of ESOL.⁸ For example, in 2018-19, High Trees delivered ESOL as part of the GLA's ESOL Plus Employer Partnership, an initiative which piloted onsite ESOL provision for workers such as cleaners, security officers, retail and hospitality staff, working in partnership with employers at Battersea Power Station.⁹ At the end of the project, staff reported that they had improved their English skills and confidence using English in life and at work, which had increased their ability to effectively carry out their work responsibilities, communicate with customers and with colleagues, and to achieve qualifications or access further employment opportunities; and employers reported that they had experienced improved staff performance, engagement and morale.¹⁰ There is, therefore, potential in developing bespoke and flexible approaches to ESOL for individuals who cannot access regular types of provision.

Developing new ESOL models

Without new approaches to ESOL, people from migrant communities in work will continue to be excluded from the support they need to develop their English language skills and in turn secure good quality employment.

This project aims to build upon previous work in this area by exploring in greater depth the challenges faced specifically by individuals in work, both when they access and attend ESOL, and in their jobs when they are required to communicate in English. This also includes developing a better understanding of the role employers can play in supporting their employees to access ESOL and embed learning in the workplace. Through research and 'test and learn' ESOL pilots, learners, employers and ESOL providers will have the chance to shape new ESOL for work models, which in turn can build evidence and support calls for changes to ESOL policy both regionally and nationally.

Methodology

This project started with an initial research phase, collecting insights from three perspectives: people from migrant communities who are in work; ESOL providers; and local employers whose workforce contain a large proportion of people from migrant communities.

The aim of the research phase was to:

- 1 Better understand the challenges experienced by people from migrant and refugee communities who are in work when accessing ESOL and speaking English in the workplace.
- 2 Inform a subsequent 'test and learn' phase, where individual ESOL for work pilots, co-developed with employees and employers from different sectors in Lambeth, would be delivered and evaluated over multiple years.

Data for the research was collected via a survey for community members from migrant communities. In total, 107 community members completed

the survey. A further nine community members also took part in a co-design workshop for ESOL learners in work to shape the research and survey prior to data collection starting.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to speak to staff from six ESOL providers and two employers.

107 community members completed the survey

9 ESOL learners took part in a co-design workshop

6 ESOL providers took part in an interview

2 employers took part in an interview

Research co-design with ESOL learners

Before starting the research phase, High Trees hosted a co-design workshop with nine community members who were both enrolled on ESOL courses at High Trees and in work. The aim of the workshop was to ensure community members with experience of the challenges around accessing ESOL while in work could meaningfully shape key elements of the research design, and to ensure the project was relevant for the community members who took part, responding to their needs and concerns.

The workshop was split into three interactive, group activities:

- 1 Exploring themes related to the research questions, such as reasons why people want to learn English, the challenges people in work encounter when trying to access or attend ESOL, and to help design multiple-choice responses for questions in the survey.

- 2 Identifying the sectors and jobs that migrant and refugee communities in Lambeth tend to work in, helping to design questions in the survey and inform outreach strategies for recruiting employers for the research.
- 3 Testing LimeSurvey, an online survey platform, and its translation functionality, using a mock survey with some drafted questions for attendees to complete and feedback on.

The workshop received positive feedback, with all participants reporting that they felt that their ideas were heard and respected, and that they enjoyed the opportunity to exchange their experiences and learn from others. The learners were compensated for their time, each receiving a £20 voucher.



"I enjoyed sharing my experience about the topic and listening to other people speak about their experiences." **High Trees ESOL learner**

Survey with community members

An online survey was created to speak to community members from migrant communities who were in work, over 18, and spoke little or no English. The survey was hosted on LimeSurvey.

The survey was designed to explore work, learning English, speaking English at work, and preferences for ESOL design, with each area covered on separate pages or sections. The survey included various closed-question formats – multiple choice, multi-select, scales used to rate levels of agreement or disagreement with a statement (Likert), ranking – alongside open-questions text boxes for respondents to expand upon their answers or leave reflections. The first page of the survey included information about the research and survey, and a consent tick box, which was required before the respondent could continue to the questions.

The survey was anonymous and respondents were not asked to leave any identifiable information such as their name or contact details.

To aid accessibility, the survey was available in 14 languages: Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, English, French, Pashto, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinya, Ukrainian, and Urdu. These languages were selected based on the languages most commonly spoken by people who reported speaking little or no English in Lambeth and neighbouring boroughs in Census 2021 data, and on suggestions from community organisations who supported survey outreach and recruitment. The translations were generated by LimeSurvey using its in-built translation function, which were reviewed by multi-lingual staff members from High Trees and partner organisations where possible.

Recruitment took place through High Trees and six other community organisations who work with people from migrant and refugee communities, based in Lambeth, Wandsworth and Camden boroughs. The survey was shared via communications channels (e.g. email newsletters, WhatsApp groups) and advertised with flyers and posters.

To support community members to complete the survey, the majority of data collection took place in-person, with community members completing the survey on their phone or a tablet computer provided by High Trees. Initially, two 'coffee morning' events were hosted at High

Trees and IRMO, inviting eligible members of each organisation to talk about the research and complete a survey in person. The aim was to create a relaxed environment, listen to and respond to feedback about completing the survey, and support those who face challenges with literacy or technology to participate. Based on feedback at these events, some questions were reformatted or expanded. Recognising the benefits of collecting survey responses in-person, High Trees staff members then attended over 20 ESOL classes, welfare drop-ins and community events, such as conversation clubs, sewing clubs and homework clubs (to speak to parents), at High Trees and four other community organisations.

Data collection for the survey took place between August 2024 – April 2025. Overall, 107 community members took part in the survey (83 in-person and 24 remotely). Each community member was compensated, receiving a £10 voucher for taking part.

Survey data was stored on LimeSurvey and downloaded onto High Trees' secure database at the end of data collection. It was then cleaned and analysed using Microsoft Excel. The analysis focused on descriptive statistics, including response distributions, proportions, averages, and comparisons across different groups, and visual summaries, such as bar and pie charts.

Community members were not required to answer every question in the survey, in case they preferred not to disclose this information, did not fully understand question, or the question did not apply to them (e.g. because of the type of job they had). Consequently, the total number of responses (N) for each question varied. For questions which asked community members for a preference (e.g. when or where they would like to attend an ESOL course), there was also the option to respond with "I'm not sure" if they were uncertain. Parts of the survey also included conditional logic, where community members were only presented with a question based on previous responses – for example, only community members who reported that studying English in the UK is difficult were asked about specific challenges related to this.

Four surveys were also only partially completed (but with more than 75% of questions answered). This was a result of community members leaving in-person data collection due to other commitments (e.g. their welfare appointment started, or they had to leave to start work). The analysis and presentation of survey data have taken any missing responses into account.

Interviews with ESOL providers

Staff, including adult education managers, ESOL coordinators and ESOL tutors, from six ESOL providers – five based in Lambeth, one based in Wandsworth – took part in semi-structured interviews. ESOL providers were recruited through local adult learning networks.

The interviews explored their experience of supporting people in work to access and attend their ESOL provision; their experience, if any, of working with employers to deliver ESOL courses; and their views on how to design ESOL courses that can work for both employers and employees.

The interviews were conducted by a researcher from High Trees either in-person or online and recorded. They were then transcribed and anonymised before thematic analysis to identify different themes from across the interviews.

Interviews with employers

Team managers from two employers based in Lambeth – one delivering grounds maintenance services, the other delivering waste and environmental services – who employ a large number of people from migrant communities took part in semi-structured interviews.

The interviews explored the profile of their staff and the kind of work they do; challenges in the workplace caused by language barriers; employers' preferences for ESOL designed for their employees; and how to build buy-in for ESOL for employees across their organisation.

The interviews were conducted by a researcher from High Trees online and recorded. They were then transcribed and anonymised before conducting a thematic analysis to identify different themes from across the interviews.

Employers were recruited through Lambeth Council and pre-existing contacts. Although over 40 businesses were contacted about the research, far fewer employers were recruited to take part than expected. To improve engagement, employer recruitment shifted focus to finding businesses to collaborate with on bespoke ESOL for work pilots for the 'test and learn' phase. Further insights from employers will be collected and integrated into the wider project's findings to strengthen

the research findings presented in this report. However, it should be noted that those employers who took part in interviews and were willing to explore the possibilities of ESOL for their staff may not be representative of employers across different sectors.

Ethics

The research followed Lambeth Community Research Network's Ethics Review framework.¹¹

Initially, the project was informed by High Trees' experiences providing support to people from migrant communities in work, who often raised access to ESOL as a challenge. Through the co-design workshop and gathering ongoing feedback in-person, the research continued to be grounded in the needs and priorities of community members, as well as giving community members the opportunity to meaningfully shape different elements of the research. All community members who contributed to the research were financially compensated for their time.

ESOL providers and employers were included in the research to ensure the findings could produce practical recommendations for the ESOL for work pilots in the 'test and learn' phase. This phase will enable more people from migrant communities who are working to access ESOL provision and improve their English language skills, as well as produce further evidence that can influence both local and national skills and education related policies.

Following principles of informed consent, an information sheet and consent form were embedded at the start of the online surveys. The information sheet included details on taking part in the research, the use of data and confidentiality, withdrawing consent and leaving the survey, and contact details if anyone wanted to ask questions. At the end of the survey, contact details were provided again, together with a list of local ESOL providers and other sources of support for migrant communities. Since the majority of survey data collection took place in-person at High Trees or other community organisations, High Trees staff collecting the survey could report any issues raised by community members, so they could receive further support and signposting.

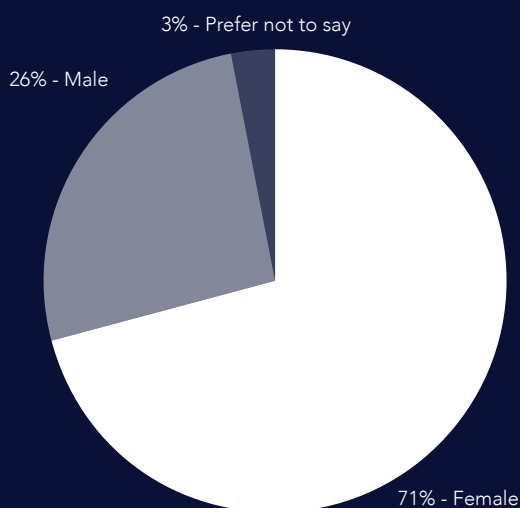
ESOL providers and employers were also provided with an information sheet and consent form in advance of their interviews, which covered similar information to the survey, in addition to how the

interview would be recorded, transcribed and analysed.

No one was asked to provide personal or sensitive information in the research activities (besides their consent form), and the online surveys were anonymous. To help ensure anonymity, all data was further anonymised by High Trees before analysis. All data was stored on High Trees' secure database. Any data stored on paper (e.g. consent forms from in-person interviews) was immediately returned to High Trees' office, scanned and uploaded to the database, and the paper copies stored in a secure place.

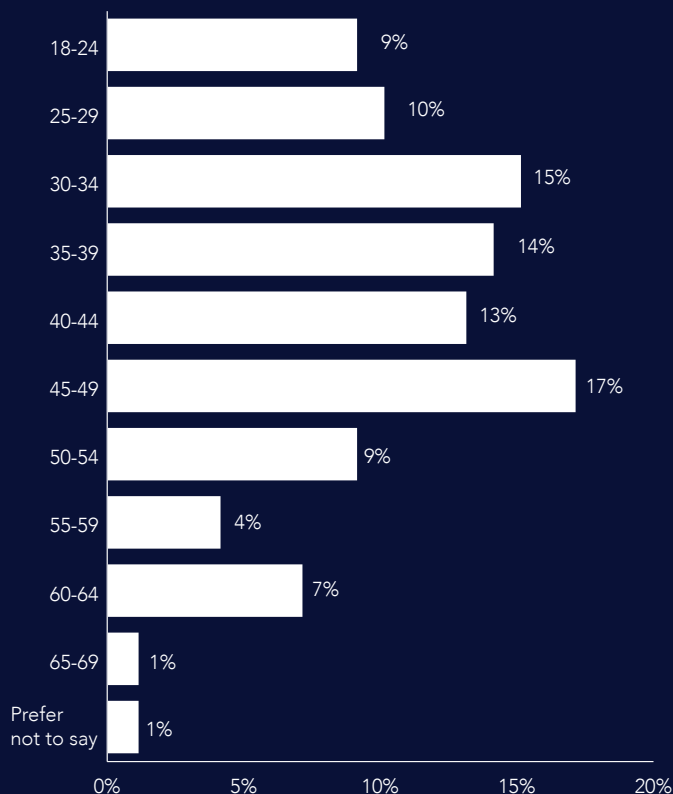
Demographics of community members who took part in the survey

Figure 1: Survey participants by sex (N = 100)



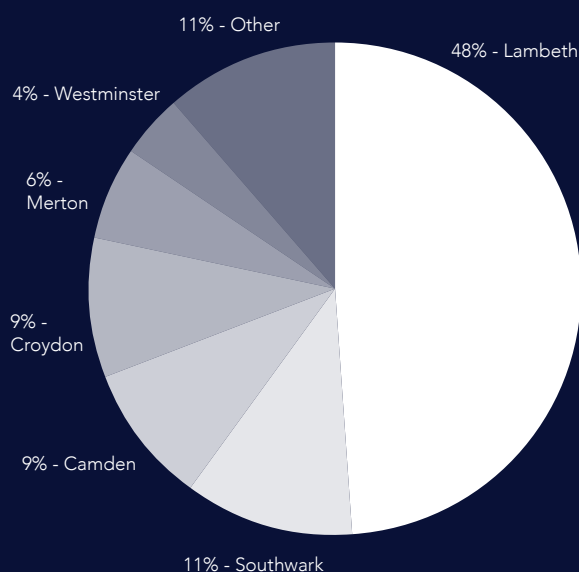
Almost three quarters of survey participants were female (Figure 1), 26% male and 3% preferred not to say.

Figure 2: Survey participants by age in years (N = 96)



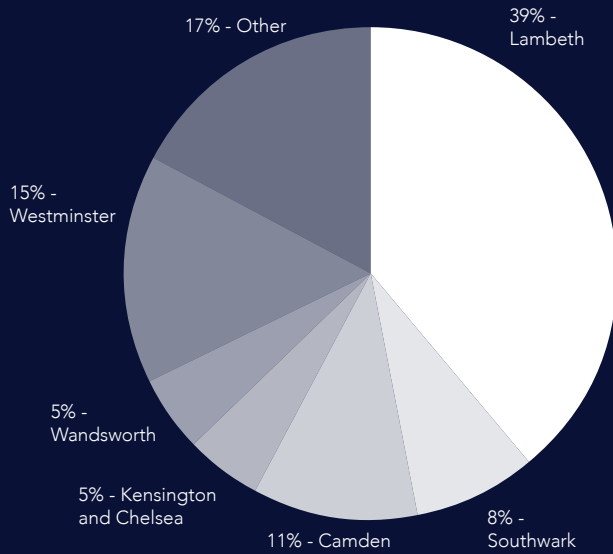
A broad range of ages took part in the survey (Figure 2). The most common age band was 45-49 (17%).

Figure 3: Boroughs where survey participants live (N = 96)



Community members living in a total of 12 London boroughs took part (Figure 3), with nearly half (48%) living in Lambeth, and 81% living in boroughs in south London.

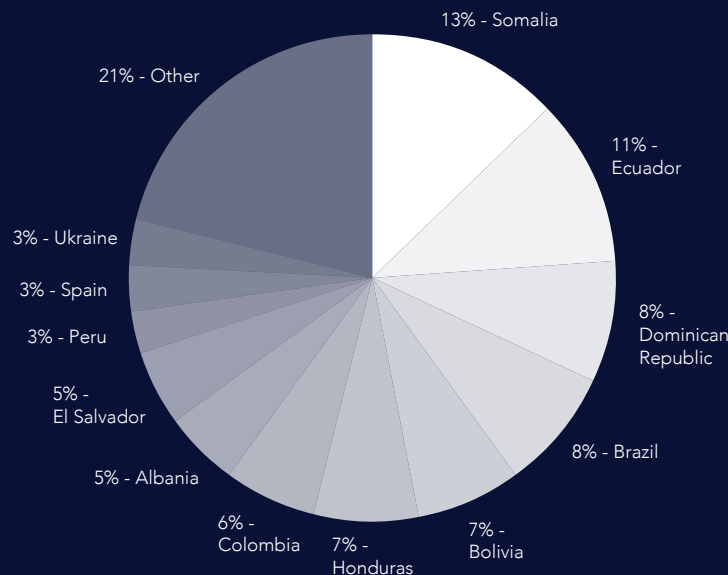
Figure 4: Boroughs where survey participants work (N = 87)



Community members worked in 17 different London boroughs in total (Figure 4). Lambeth (39%) was again the most common followed by Westminster (15%) and Camden (11%). The proportion of community members who lived and worked in the same borough (53%) and lived and worked in different boroughs (47%) was similar.

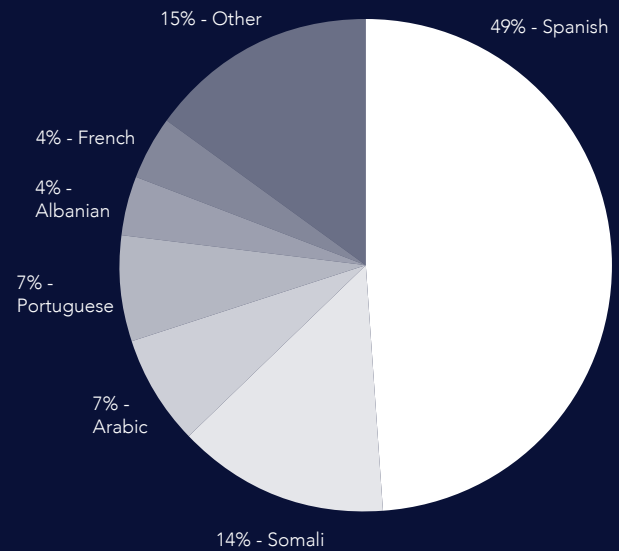
There were several invalid responses to the question on how long the community member had lived in the UK: for example, some responses were more than the age given in other answers, suggesting the question or measure of years was not clear. This data, therefore, has not been included.

Figure 5: Survey participants by country of birth (N = 89)



Community members reported 27 different countries of birth (Figure 5). The three most common responses were Somalia (13%), Ecuador (11%), and Brazil (8%) and Dominican Republic (8%). In general, a large proportion indicated that they were born in Central and South American countries.

Figure 6: Survey participants by primary language (N = 96)



Nearly half of all community members spoke Spanish as their primary language (Figure 6), followed by Somali (14%), and Arabic (7%) and Portuguese (7%). This can be compared to Census 2021 data, which shows that of those who live in Lambeth and reported not being able to speak English well or at all, 34% spoke Spanish as their primary language, 21% spoke Portuguese, 7% Polish, 4% Somali, and 3% Cantonese. The differences may be explained by not reaching certain communities within Lambeth and collecting survey responses from community members living outside of Lambeth.

Findings

This section sets out three key findings from the survey with community members and interviews with ESOL providers and employers.

Each finding combines insights from the survey and interviews. Descriptive statistics from the survey are presented as totals and percentages and in figures, alongside translated qualitative answers from open-text questions. Common themes from the interviews with ESOL providers and employers are also outlined, with anonymised extracts from interviews used to illustrate key points.

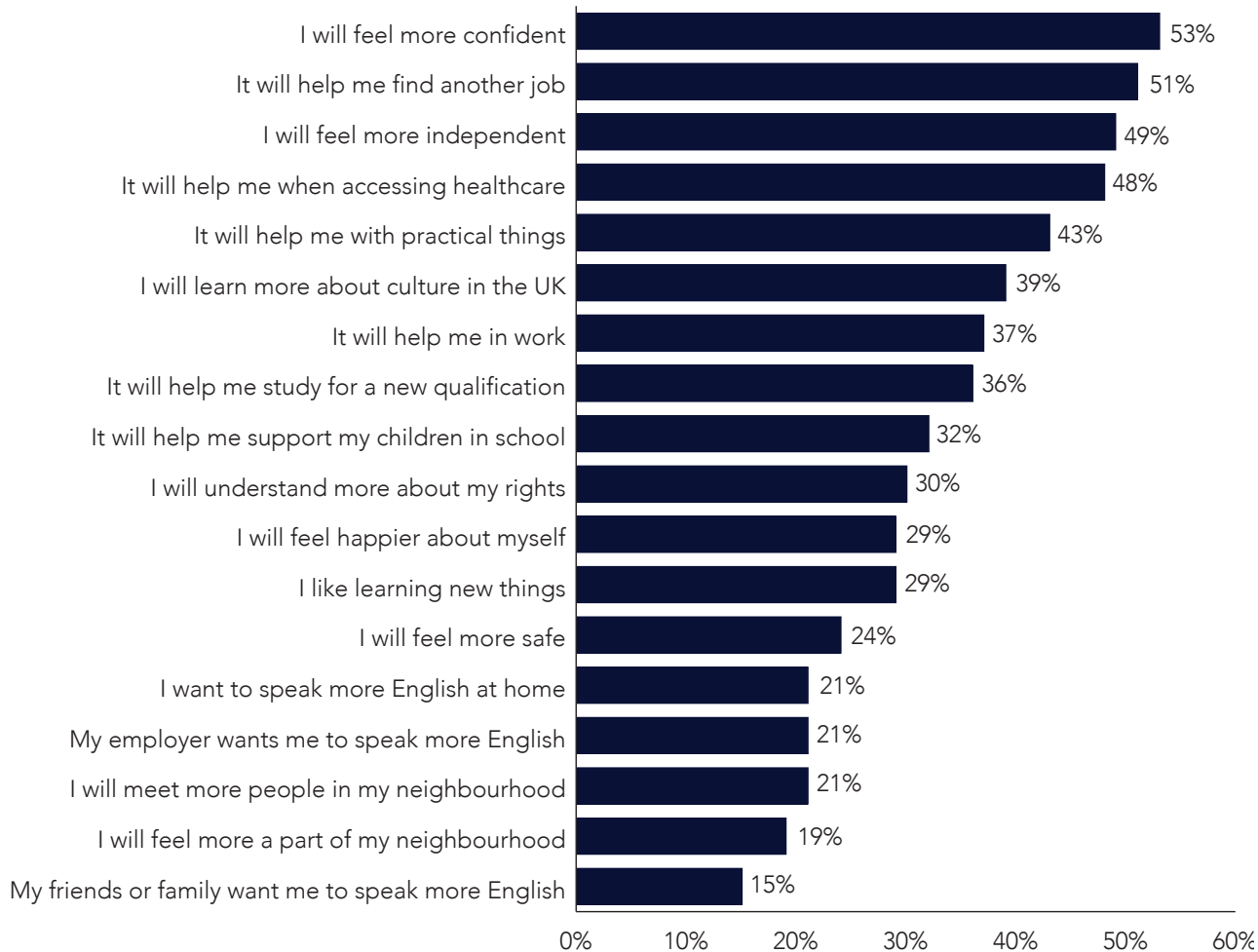
1 Accessing ESOL is difficult for many people in work

People in work want to learn English

“My desire and dreams are to continue studying and go to university, and to not depend on others.”
Community member

Every community member (100%) who took part in the survey said that they wanted to learn English, demonstrating that there is widespread enthusiasm and need for English language support.

Figure 7: Motivations for wanting to learn English (N = 107)



The most common motivations selected for wanting to learn English (Figure 7) were to feel more confident (53%), to find another job (51%), to feel more independent (49%), and help accessing healthcare (48%). Other reasons included a similar mix of work-related and non-work-related motivations, such as accessing healthcare, helping with practical things like shopping or travelling, learning more about culture in the UK, and helping them in a current job or to study a new qualification.

This mix of work-related and non-work-related aspirations was also highlighted by community members in comments.

"I want to adapt better to the city."
Community member

"Yes, [I want to learn] to have a good job."
Community member

"[I want to learn] to be able to improve my professional performance and develop myself better in this country." **Community member**

"It is important to have English to speak with the doctor." **Community member**

"I need to continue studying at university to get a professional degree and so improve my quality of life." **Community member**

"I need to speak and understand, because I don't understand many people or speak [English] much, which is difficult for me."
Community member

ESOL providers also identified a mix of potential work-related and non-work-related benefits from learning English. Improving English language skills can generally increase confidence, help people feel part of their communities, support them in making new social connections, and generally feel more integrated in the areas they have moved to. It can also make it easier for people to navigate day-to-day services such as healthcare, transport or shops.

"They won't feel so invisible if they improve their English." **ESOL provider**

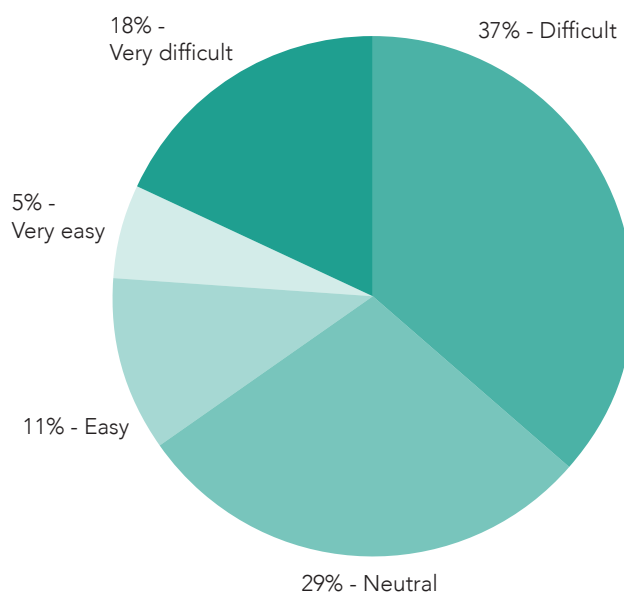
In terms of work, ESOL providers commented that without English, people from migrant communities often find themselves stuck in low-paid, insecure jobs, for which they are often overqualified. With better English language skills, they have the possibility of progressing in their careers, securing promotions or moving into other sectors which match their skills and experience and have better working hours and conditions.

Work creates barriers to accessing ESOL provision

"My jobs don't fit into the [ESOL] schedule and vice versa." Community member

Of the 107 community members who took part in the survey, 85% indicated that they are studying or have previously studied English in the UK, with 75% currently learning English in some way at the time they completed the survey. From this group, 86% are studying or had studied English on an in-person course of some sort, compared to 11% on online courses, 12% at social or community groups, and 9% through self-study. This is unlikely to be indicative of people from migrant communities in work generally, since a large number of community members who took part in the survey were recruited through ESOL providers.¹²

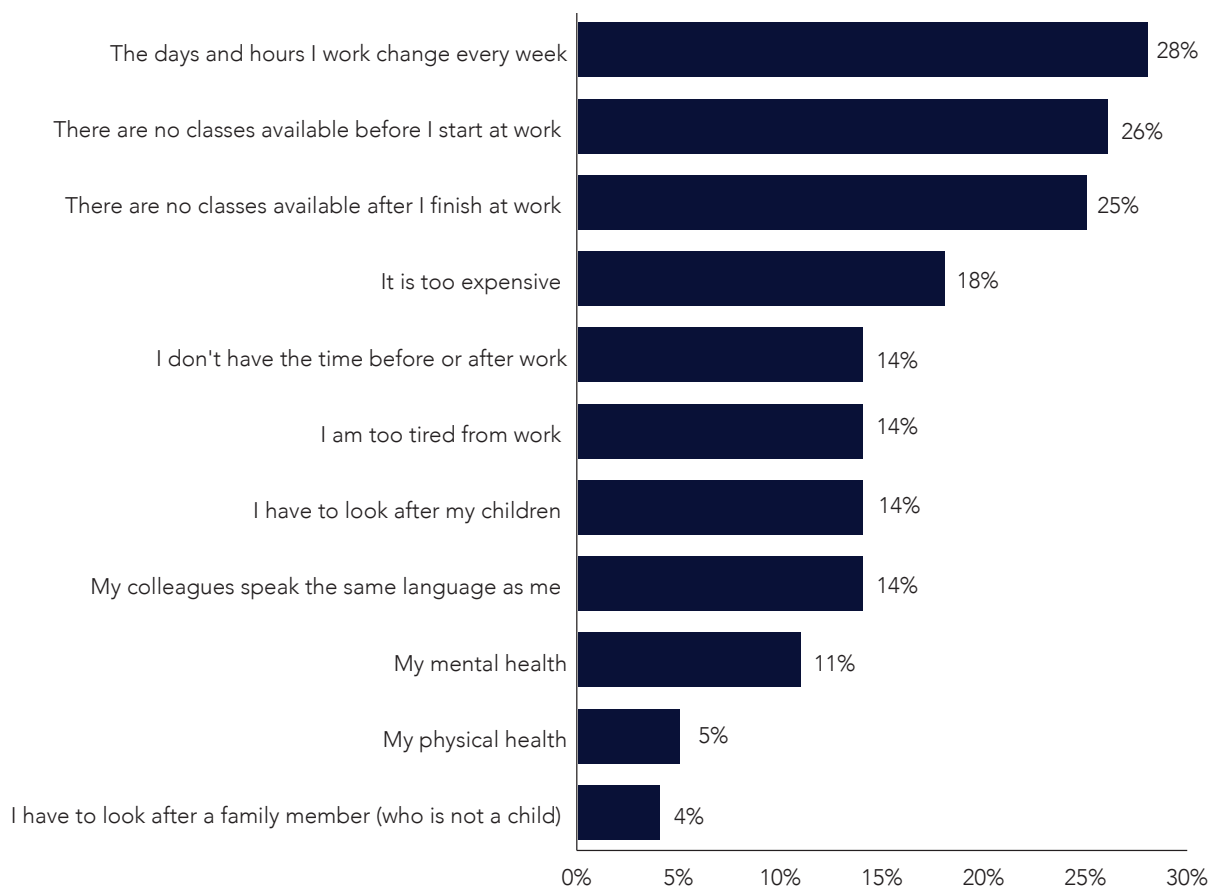
Figure 8: Difficulty studying English in the UK (N = 105)



Although many of the community members who took part in the survey had accessed some sort of English language support, roughly half, however,

said that studying English in the UK is difficult or very difficult, and only 16% said it is easy or very easy (Figure 8).

Figure 9: Challenges studying English in the UK (N =57)



For those who said it is difficult or very difficult to study English in the UK, the three most common challenges selected were related to work: the days and hours they work varies, and there are no classes before, and no classes after work. Other challenges included the cost of accessing English language support, a lack of time or energy outside of work, or balancing learning English alongside other commitments and challenges in their lives.

Similar challenges were reflected in community members' open-questions answers. A few of those who were already studying English also commented that there were not enough classes for them to improve their English, or it could be difficult to secure a spot on a course, suggesting that even those who had the time or schedule to access ESOL around work still encountered challenges.

"It is very difficult to combine the problems of living in another country with family problems, financial situation and mental health."

Community member

"[I'd like the] opportunity to have more days of classes because I only have one per week, I would like to have more to understand better."

Community member

"Sometimes it is difficult to get a space to enrol."

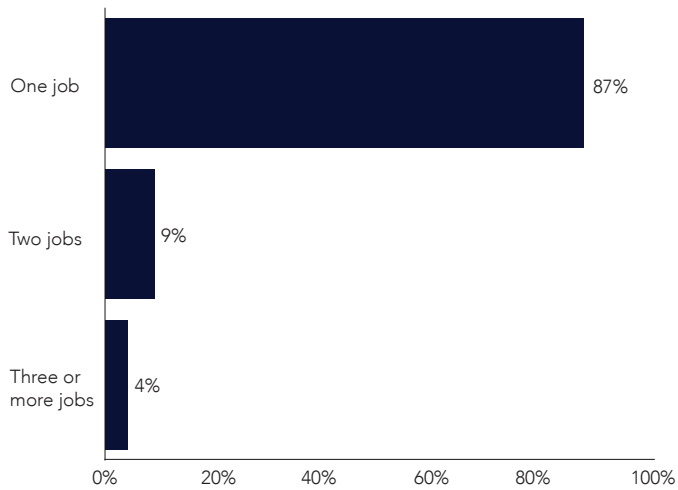
Community member

"I would like a course but I'm not financially able to afford one."

Community member

The information community members who took part in the survey provided about their employment, together with ESOL providers' experience of supporting people in work, sheds further light on these challenges.

Figure 10: Number of jobs (N = 107)



The vast majority of community members worked one job (87%), compared to two jobs or three or more jobs (Figure 10).

Community members worked across a range of sectors (Figure 11). Cleaning and housekeeping (42%), hospitality (20%), and health and social care (15%) were the three most common.¹³

The majority of community members (63%) reported working jobs with fixed hours rather than working flexible hours, either on a flexible contract or as self-employed (37%)(Figure 12).

Figure 11: Job sectors (N = 104)

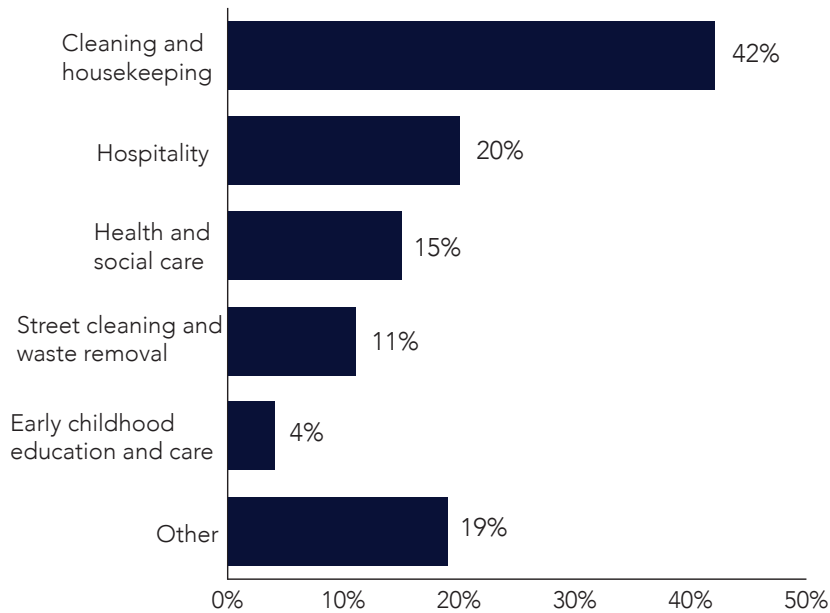


Figure 12: Working arrangements (N = 100)

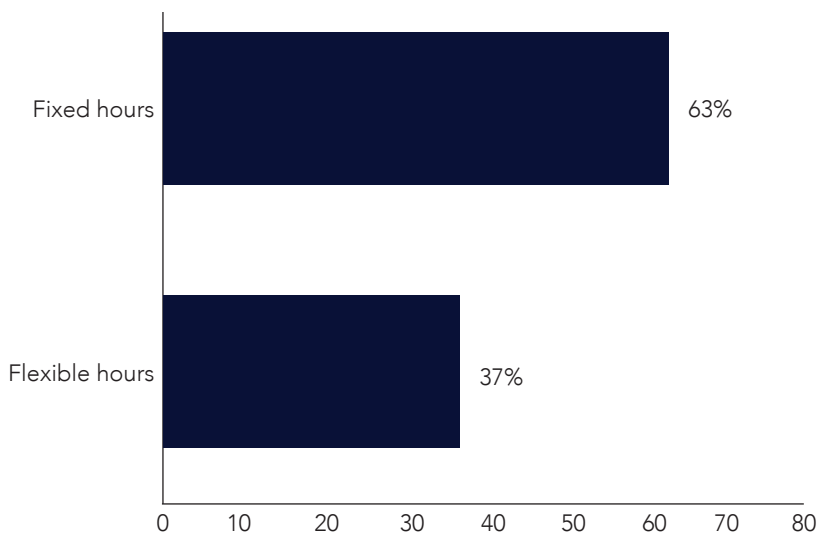


Figure 13: Working arrangements and working days (N = 100)

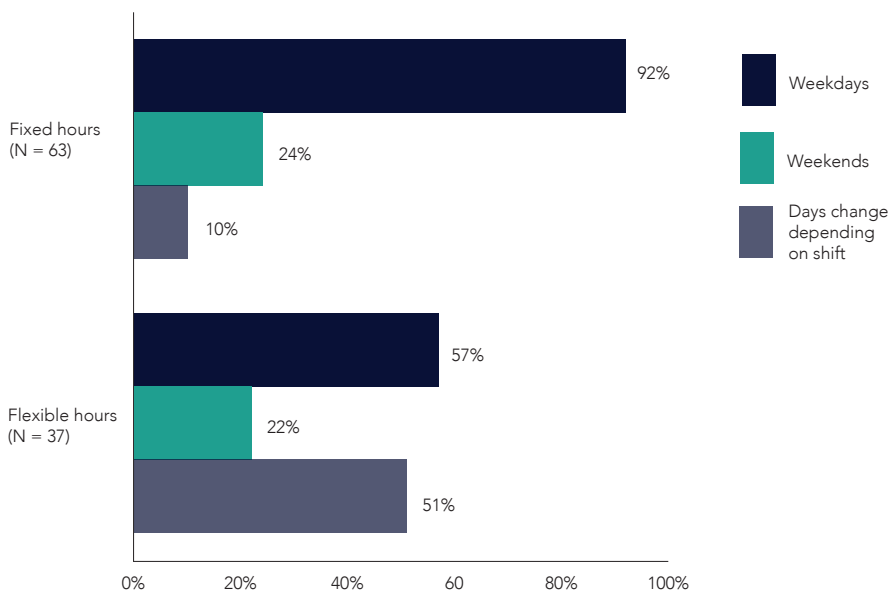
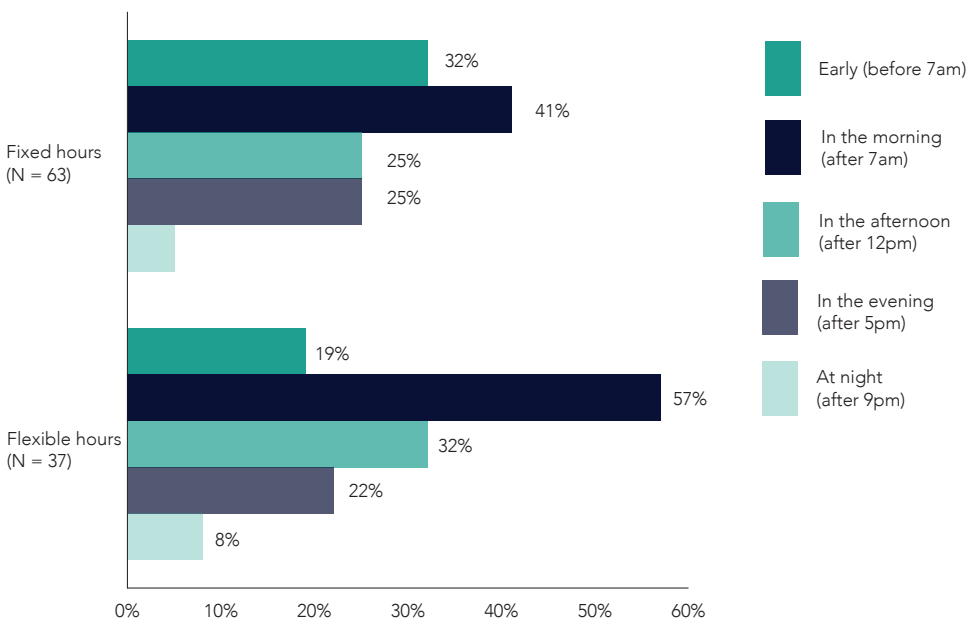


Figure 14: Working arrangements and work start time (N = 100)



92% of those who worked fixed hours reported that they work on weekdays (Figure 13). Of those who worked fixed hours on weekdays, 41% began work in the morning (after 7am) and 25% in the afternoon (after 12pm). Similarly, 57% of people who worked flexible hours reported that they work on weekdays, with 57% starting work in the morning (after 7am) and 32% after 12pm (Figure 14). This means that many people tend to be at work during the daytime, Monday to Friday, or at times when ESOL provision is most frequently offered by ESOL providers.

As all ESOL providers reflected in their interviews, many people's work schedules do not fit with the times they deliver ESOL courses – and enrol new learners – which tends to be in the morning or afternoon during the week. This could explain why so many community members reported the lack of classes before and after work as a challenge when studying English.

On the other hand, 51% of those who worked a job with flexible hours reported that the days they work changes depending on their shifts (Figure 13). As ESOL providers pointed out, if a worker's days and shifts are not fixed, they find it very difficult to attend the same ESOL course week to week. As a result, learners are unable to fulfil the attendance and participation thresholds attached to ESOL provision funded by local authorities via the GLA. Consequently, they often have to drop out due to changes in their shift patterns – with some ESOL providers commenting that up to 50% of people in work drop out of their ESOL courses, primarily for this reason.

“So, sometimes we have attendance issues because their shift changes suddenly and they can only attend the Monday class and not the Thursday, for example.” ESOL provider

There was some variation in reported work schedules across different job sectors, but there is too little data to draw firm conclusions. There are, however, some notable differences between the most represented sectors: 93% of individuals working in health and social care generally work fixed hours, compared to 74% in cleaning and housekeeping, and 52% in hospitality (Figure 15). This suggests that potential barriers to accessing ESOL could vary across different sectors.

Figure 15: Sectors and working arrangements (N = 83)

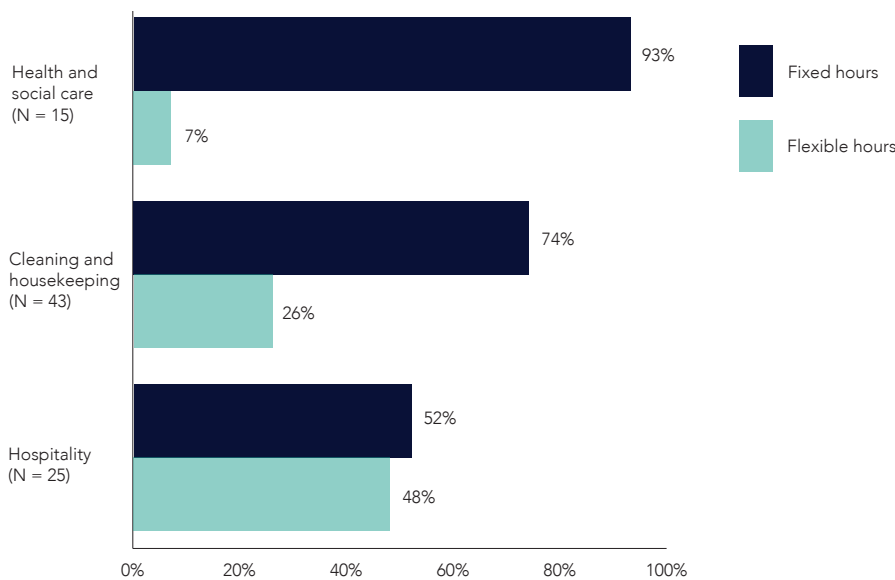
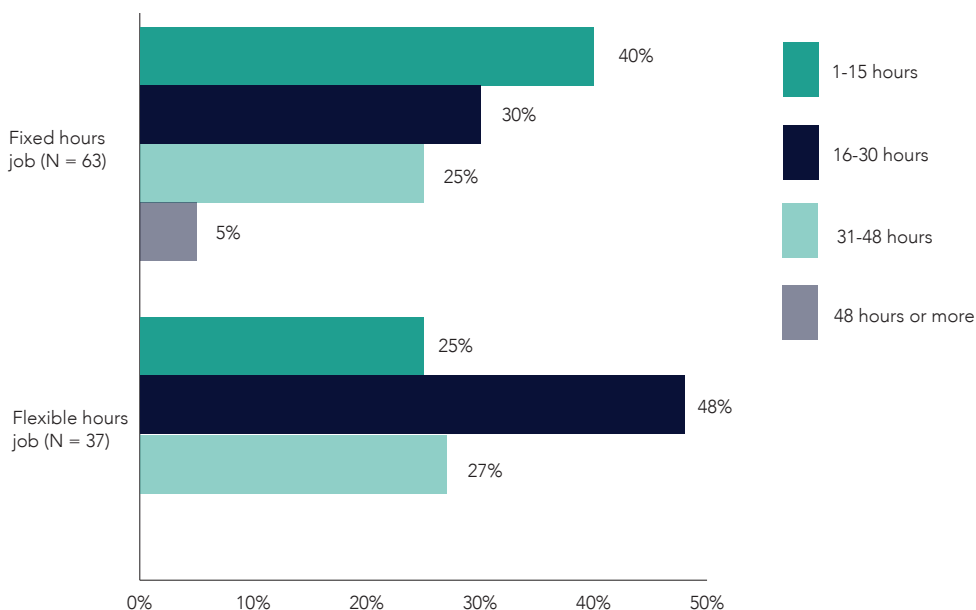


Figure 16: Usual hours worked per week and working arrangements (N = 107)



The majority of both those who work fixed hours and flexible hours worked part-time or up to 30 hours per week (Figure 16). ESOL providers noted that learners on their courses who are working are often working part-time in order to have enough time to attend ESOL classes and for other commitments like childcare. However, a notable proportion of community members working both fixed hours (30%) and flexible hours (28%) reported that they worked up to 48 hours per week or more, leaving them very little time to access English language support. ESOL providers also mentioned that sometimes people are just too tired from long hours at work (alongside other commitments) to be able to attend or fully focus on a course.

Many people, therefore, cannot access or attend ESOL provision for different reasons related to their working patterns, and so miss out on the potential benefits for themselves, their education and their employment.

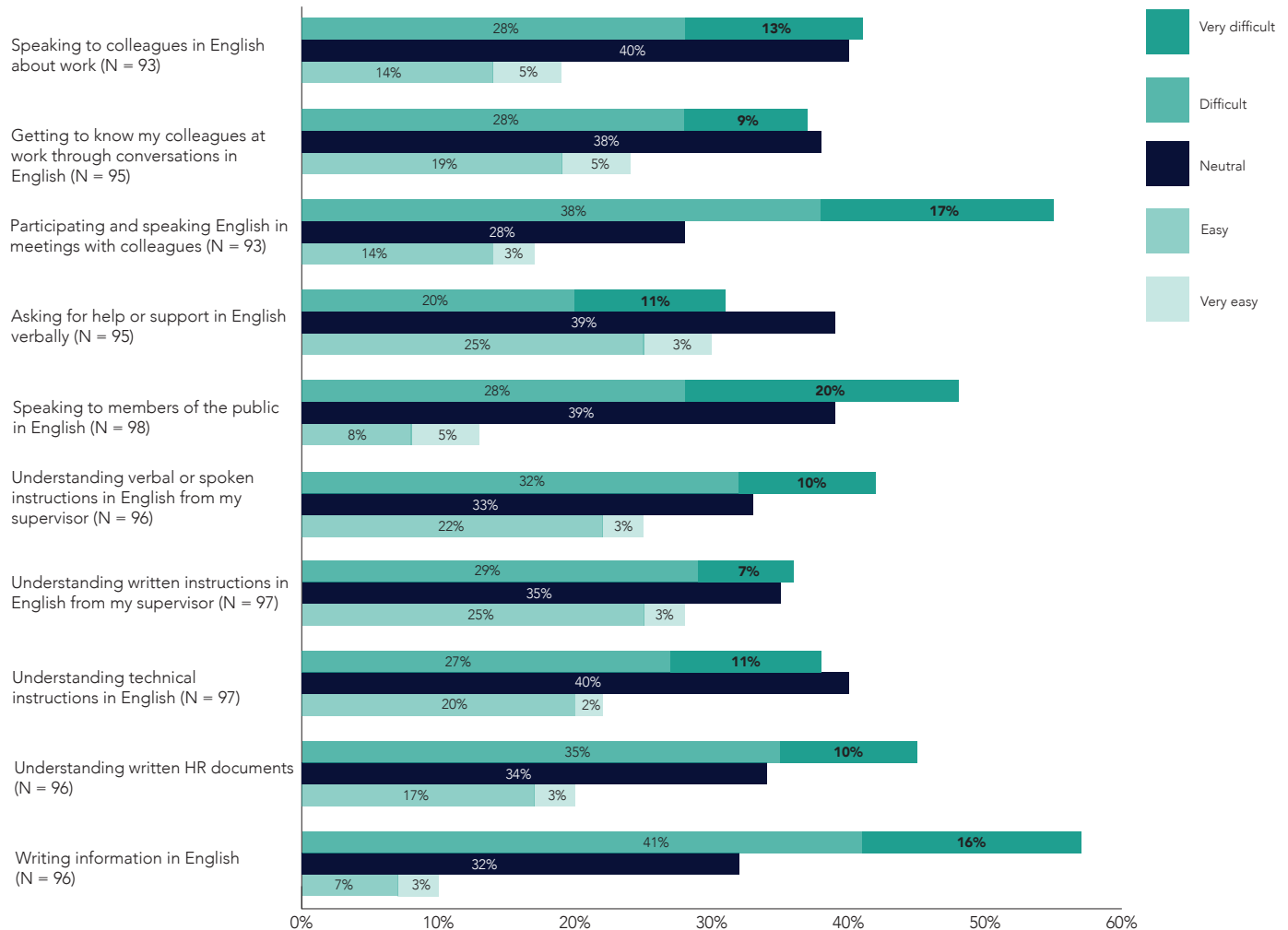
ESOL providers emphasised that they try to be as flexible as possible to accommodate people who are working and their individual circumstances, recognising the challenges caused by both fixed and flexible working arrangements. For example, they adapt their timetable, blend in-person and online provision, or provide resources for self-study. However, they are constrained by the lack of flexibility in attendance and participation allowed by funders and commissioners. Many ESOL providers either currently offer or previously coordinated alternative provision, such as conversation classes, where students can drop in and out based on their availability. However, the funding available for these alternatives is limited, making it difficult to sustain or expand them.

2 Language barriers create challenges in the workplace

People face a number of challenges speaking English at work

“The boss wanted to talk with me, but I couldn’t talk with them.” Community member

Figure 17: Difficulty of tasks involving English at work (N = 102)



Community members selected tasks they are required to complete at work which involve speaking English, and then reported how difficult they found each task (Figure 17). Generally, community members reported that they found the majority of tasks at work involving English more difficult or very difficult rather than easy or very easy. The three tasks most commonly reported as difficult or very difficult were writing information in English (57%), participating in meetings (55%), and speaking to members of the public (48%). Understanding HR documents, understanding verbal instructions, and speaking to colleagues were the next three most difficult tasks. This suggests people encounter challenges across various types of tasks at work requiring different English language skills.

In addition to echoing these challenges, a small number of open-question answers indicated that challenges speaking English at work could affect community members’ wellbeing too.

“I feel bad when I can’t speak English [at work].” **Community member**

“Communication with my co-worker is difficult.” **Community member**

“Understanding [instructions] when listening is my greatest difficulty.” **Community member**

“It is difficult during busy, noisy shifts to understand English.” **Community member**

Employers similarly identified various day-to-day challenges that their staff encounter caused by lower levels of English language proficiency at work, such as not being able to follow HR processes (e.g. reporting lateness or sickness), and failing to understand instructions or Health and Safety procedures, making it harder for employees to do their jobs well and safely.

“Top of the list [of challenges] needs to be the potential safety impacts, being confident that they understand clear instruction and can operate in a safe way.” **Employer**

Employers were also aware that employees who spoke little or no English found it challenging when they were required to speak to or interact with members of the public or customers. Employers shared concerns about the consequences this had for their public image and for staff if these situations led to confrontations.

“If they’re on the street, sometimes the public will try to engage with them, and they won’t know what they’re saying. And that could be perceived as rude – not a great image for us, as a company.” **Employer**

These challenges created hurdles and extra administrative load for employers, such as needing to translate documents or create visual aids for staff. In some cases, for example when managing more complex HR issues or following accidents, employers were also required to hire translators and interpreters.

“If we have any kind of procedural things to go through, we’ve got to hire translators.”
Employer

Another challenge for employers was not being able to train and upskill staff effectively. Although they would coordinate training for staff, employees with lower levels of English language proficiency found it harder to pass the relevant assessments, meaning they were not qualified for certain tasks. This in turn limited both the amount and type of work their employer could offer them, and opportunities for progression within the business. Similarly, they were less likely to be able to apply and interview successfully for promotion.

“I really want them to do well, and I’d like to upskill the guys because it makes my job easier.” **Employer**

“When they ask you in an interview, ‘tell me about yourself,’ how do you express yourself if English is not the main language? There’s that kind of stuff.” **Employer**

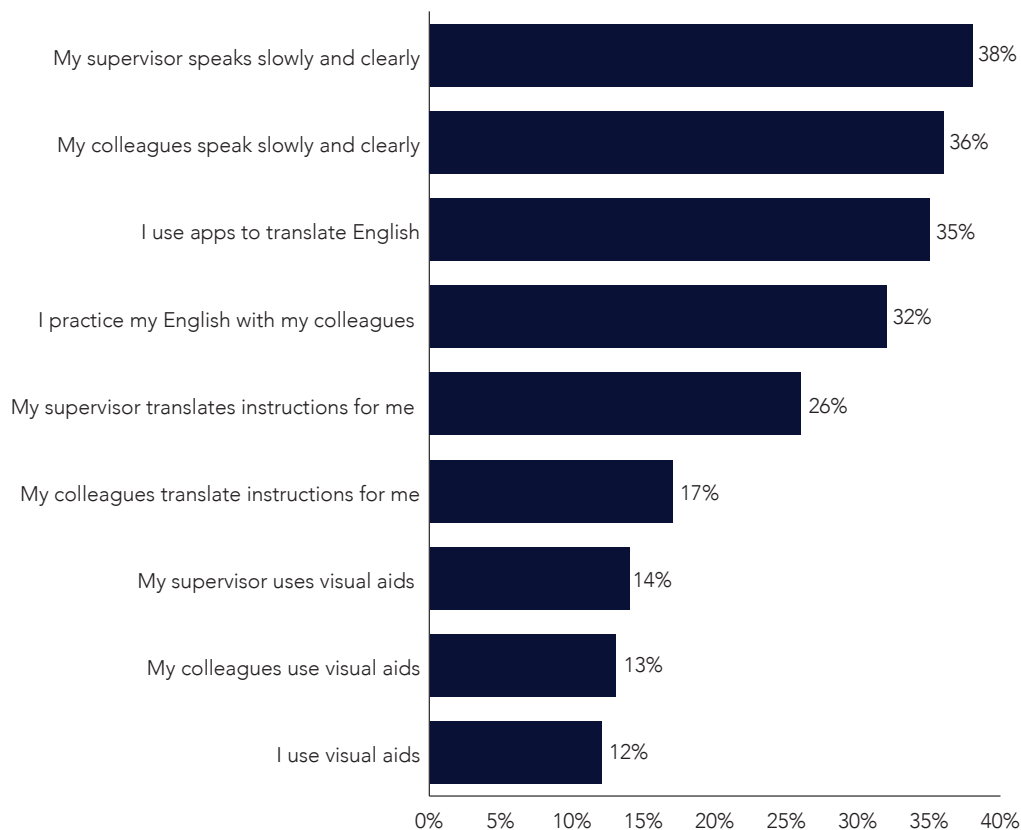
Finally, employers also recognised that employee wellbeing could be impacted by language barriers in the workplace. For example, if an employee did not speak the same language as any colleagues, they may not be able to get to know their colleagues and so feel excluded or isolated at work. Alternatively, if they are experiencing workplace stress or challenges outside of work, they will not be able to raise this with their supervisor easily. If these types of challenges could not be identified and addressed effectively, they had the potential to lead to bigger problems longer term.

“They could be suffering workplace stress and not be able to communicate that that’s an issue.” **Employer**

Employers and their employees need support and extra resources to overcome language barriers

“They translated instructions on how to use cleaning products.” Community member

Figure 18: Support to speak and understand English in the workplace (N = 102)



Community members reported different ways they overcome the challenges they experience at work (Figure 18). The top three most reported were relying on supervisors to speak slowly and clearly (38%), relying on colleagues to speak slowly and clearly (36%), or using apps like Google Translate (35%). More than one in four people also reported that their supervisor translates instructions for them.

Some community members indicated in their answers that they rely on colleagues and friends at work to help them, particularly with translation. A few also mentioned using Google Translate to help with reading (e.g. emails, documents). This could also explain why some tasks involving reading (e.g. written or technical instructions) were reported as less difficult than those involving writing, listening or speaking, for which relying on aid from an app may not be possible.

“Sometimes I get help from my co-workers.”
Community member

“For emails, we use Google [Translate].”
Community member

Employers also reported that they rely heavily on multi-lingual supervisors and other team members who speak the same languages as employees with limited English language skills, to help with HR processes and training new staff, and often grouped staff together on this basis.

“A lot of the problems are circumvented by someone else doing the translation. So, for instance, if someone’s sick – and our sickness procedure is they need to call in – it’s always done by a colleague.” **Employer**

However, ESOL providers pointed out that putting people in the early stages of learning English with colleagues or supervisors who speak the same language prevents them from practicing and improving their English language skills on the job; generally, ESOL learners who are required to speak English at work (e.g. in public facing roles) show greater progression. Inadvertently, then, employers

are perpetuating the challenges they experience in the workplace through this approach. Some community members stated that speaking to colleagues and hearing English regularly at work helped them to learn on the job.

"Sometimes I hear the phone conversations in English, which helps [me learn]." **Community member**

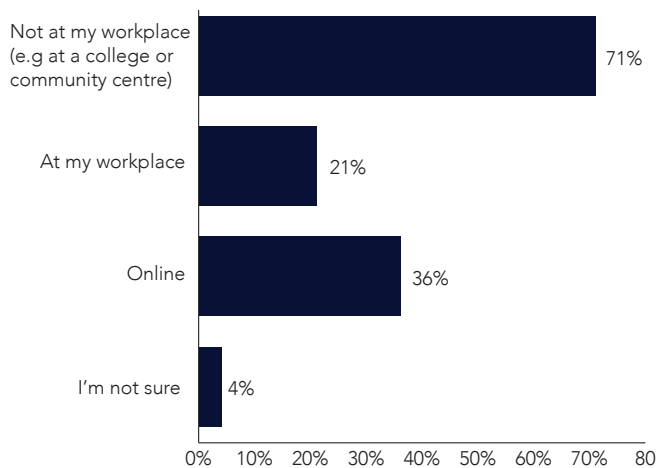
"Talking to the colleagues [helps me learn]."
Community member

3 People in work need alternative ESOL models to improve their English language skills

ESOL provision for people in work needs to be flexible and affordable

"Flexibility is important." Community member

Figure 19: Preferred location for ESOL courses (N = 105)



Community members, employers and ESOL providers were all asked for their preferences about what ESOL provision for people in work should look like (Figure 19). The majority of community members (71%) wanted to attend ESOL outside of their workplace (e.g. at a college or community centre), compared to 36% online and 21% at work. Community members did not provide further information for this question, so the reason for this preference is unclear. One explanation may be that community members with jobs in certain sectors – such as cleaning, social care – tend to work off-site, where ESOL courses wouldn't be possible. However, this needs to be explored further and considered when co-designing ESOL courses for people in work with employees and their employers.

In contrast to community members, ESOL providers generally felt courses would be more successful if they were hosted at the workplace, as this would allow the tutor to embed learning in employees' day-to-day work more effectively and have access to objects from the workplace to use within classes. It can also motivate employees, by showing that their employer is invested in developing their English language skills. Finally, it makes more sense to provide an ESOL course in the workplace if it takes place during or close to work hours, so employees can attend more easily

before, after or between shifts.

"The benefit of having it at the workplace is that everyone's already there, and they don't need additional time for travelling." **ESOL provider**

However, this all depends on whether the employer could provide safe, appropriate and sufficient space and facilities for teaching, and if not, a community setting could work instead. Furthermore, a course at a different location to work could help employees develop a mindset for learning, especially if they don't associate their workplace with positive experiences.

"You're outside your workplace; you're now in your studying place. It creates a study-culture environment." **ESOL provider**

Employers similarly had different perspectives on the best location for ESOL for their employees. One employer suggested that outside of work could help employees relax and engage more freely in learning, whereas the other felt hosting them onsite could be more accessible for staff, depending on where they lived, and would allow supervisors to support their teams to attend and engage in the course.

"I think away from the workplace is really good. I think they'll feel it's a much safer environment, in terms of being able to put themselves out there [in classes]." **Employer**

"If they're local to Waterloo, Tulse Hill isn't the easiest location, for example." **Employer**

Both ESOL providers and employers recognised that employees' preferences, together with practical considerations, need to be considered during the development of ESOL for work courses. Employers felt that this would enable employees to engage in and persevere with the course, which was one of their key concerns.

“The challenge is everyone learns differently. So, if you’re really going to get buy-in and get people to stick at it, we need to tailor it to what suits them best. There’ll be some people who don’t want to do it in the work environment, and they want to do it away from work. We need options.” **Employer**

Although online provision could support people in work with long hours and other commitments to learn more flexibly, both ESOL providers and employers pointed out that literacy and digital skills could be a barrier for a significant proportion of learners, and this approach would, therefore, not be as accessible as in-person. From an ESOL provider perspective, it also required tutors with a strong background in online teaching for it to be effective; and funding often doesn’t extend to online provision, meaning they would be required to look for other sources to finance it.

“People can’t even read or write in Portuguese, they have a problem in their own language. So, IT is a bit limiting.” **Employer**

“With some people it [online provision] can work, but in our experience it’s not easy, because of the low-level literacy.”
ESOL provider

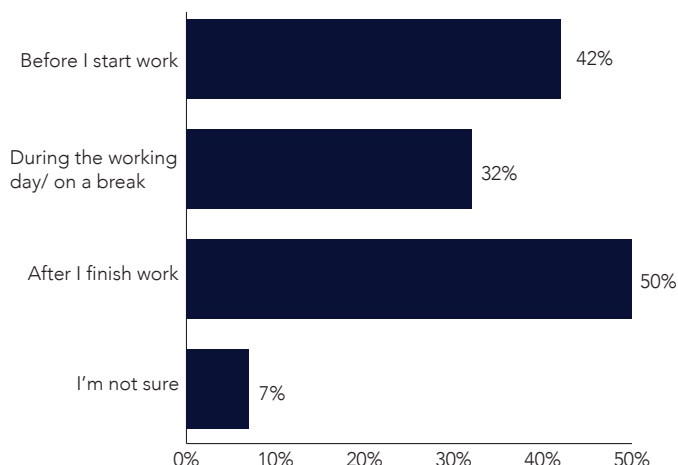
“Online learning is a different teaching methodology. If you’ve got a member of staff trained in that, then that’s fantastic, if there are students who do want to access it.”
ESOL provider

Some employers, on the other hand, were keen to offer ESOL during the working day, as they felt it would help with engagement and send a positive message to their employees that they wanted them to develop new skills. In contrast to community members, employers felt their staff would be too tired to engage fully in a course if it started after working hours.

“If you want anyone to turn up, it does have to be during working hours.” **Employer**

“They need be in the right mindset for education. That’s not necessarily in their hi-vis, their boots, having come off the back of hours of hard work.” **Employer**

Figure 20: Preferred timing for ESOL courses at workplace (N = 105)



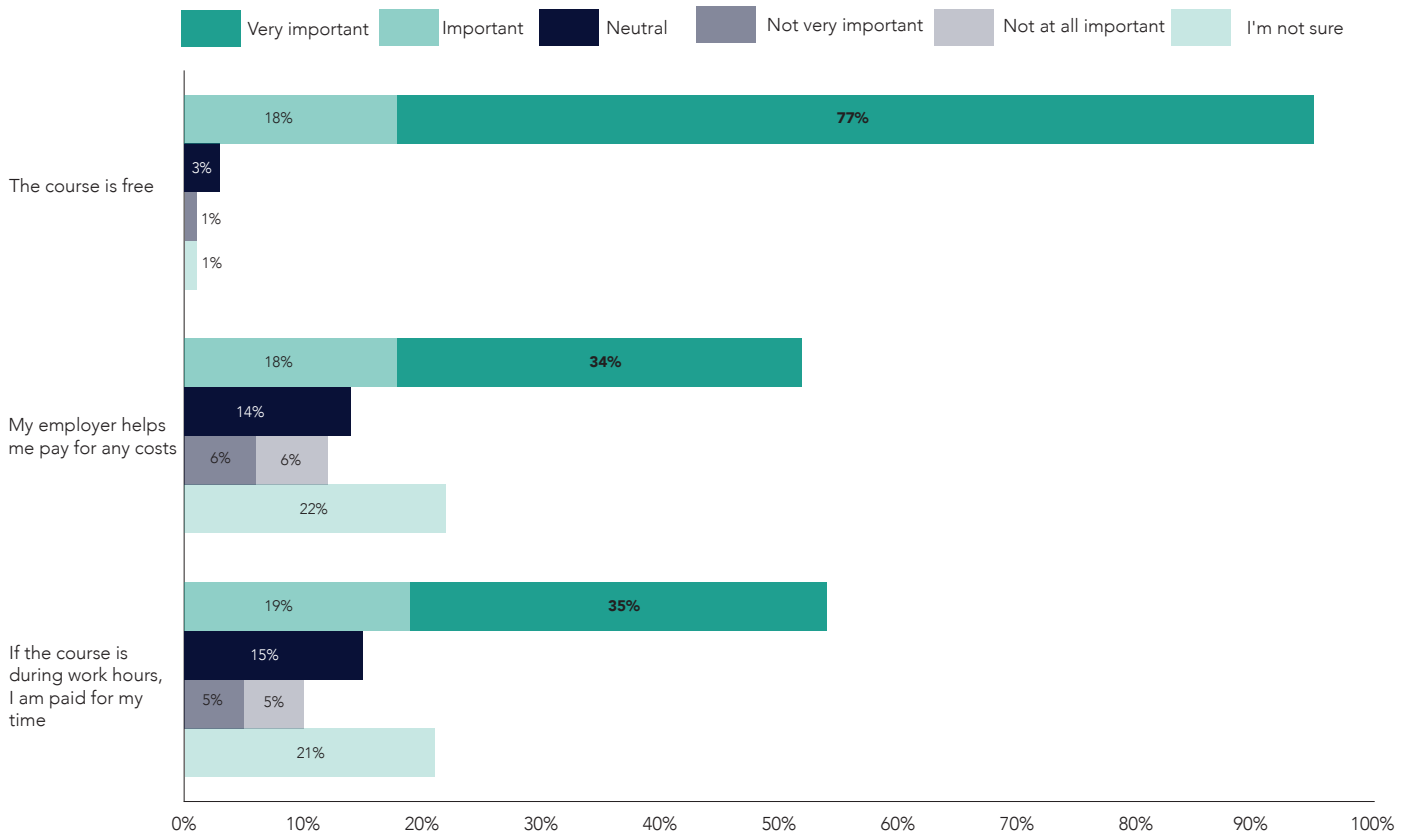
If ESOL courses were provided in their workplace, the most common preference among community members was for after work, but overall the number who selected this option was only slightly higher than the number who selected before work (Figure 20). Attending during the working day (e.g. during a break between shifts) was the least popular preference.

Employers were also supportive of offering their employees paid time off during the working day – either as part of social value commitments in public sector contracts, or as recognition that ESOL fell under in-house training and general upskilling. However, operational considerations would take priority, and they would only be able to offer this if there were enough other staff available to provide cover, or if the course took place during less busy times of the year (if the type of work is seasonal).

“I don’t think it’s fair to penalise the guys when we’ve got to do in-house training. It’s not their fault. We need them to upskill, and we can take the hit.” **Employer**

“We need to make sure it’s a happy balance for our clients. In one way, they could fine us for not meeting our social value targets. But then, if we’re taking everybody out of work to do these courses to achieve our social value targets, are we going to get detrimental effects on our day-to-day work?” **Employer**

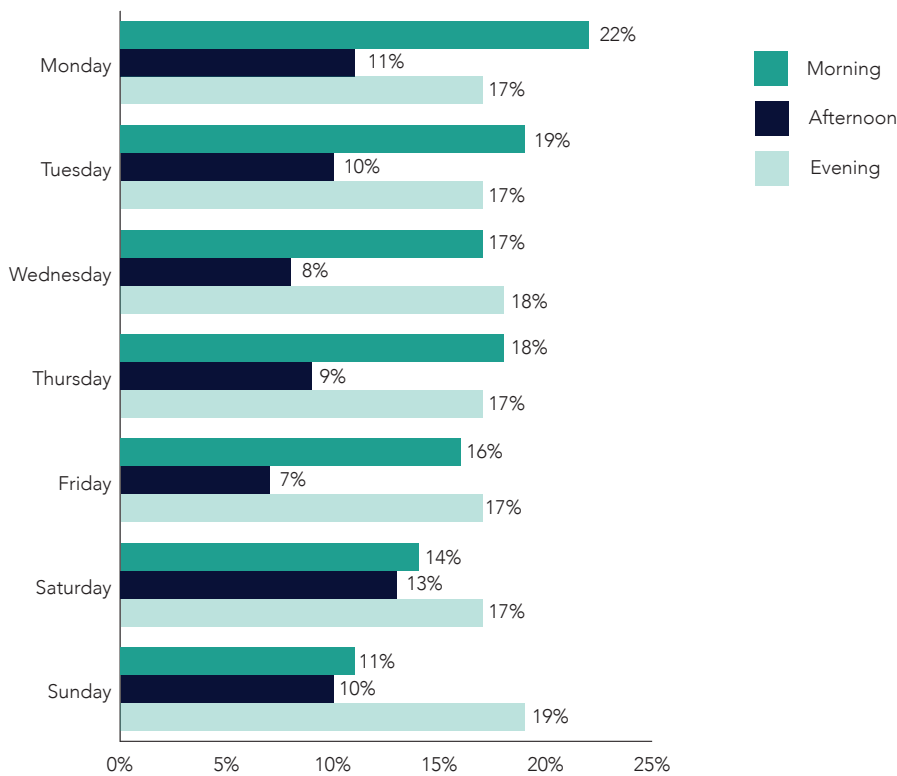
Figure 21: Financial preferences for ESOL for work courses (N = 105)



Around half of community members (54%) also indicated that they felt it was either important or very important for their employer to give them paid time off if the course was during work hours (Figure 21). If not, nearly all community members (95%) felt it was either important or very important that course be free, and 52% felt it was either important or very important that their employer helps with any costs – reflecting the financial barriers many community members experience when accessing English language support.

“It would be a great support if they could be given for free.” **Community member**

Figure 22: Preferred timing for ESOL courses outside of work (N = 102)



If ESOL courses took place away from work, in another setting such as a college or community centre, community members generally showed a preference for the morning or evening compared to the afternoon (Figure 22). However, the days and times when community members were available were evenly spread throughout the week. This suggests that employers and ESOL providers need to consult employees during the development and design of a course to ensure they are available, and perhaps even offer multiple, flexible options if the course takes place outside of work.

ESOL providers echoed this, stating that people in work required flexibility and a broad range of options for ESOL classes, and that timetables should respond to learners' schedules as much as possible. ESOL providers already try to be as flexible as possible within the limits of being able to claim funding for learners.

"We do as much as we can, as long as it doesn't put their funding in a critical situation, because then we don't want the attendance to be too critical for their funders. So, sometimes we try to set home studies for the days that they miss so they still catch up. We want to make sure they will still be successful if they were to take an exam." **ESOL provider**

Furthermore, ESOL providers in general either currently offer or are open to offering classes in

the evenings and weekends to help meet demand from people in work who cannot attend classes during daytime hours. However, for some it had been challenging to find tutors to teach these courses, or to have enough support staff available to manage their facilities during these times.

"Ideally we could look at more outside work hours classes as well, but then it comes to tutor availability – if they start at 9, you can't expect them to finish at 7." **ESOL provider**

The biggest barrier, however, is the general lack of funding available for ESOL provision, which ultimately determined ESOL providers' capacity to be flexible and offer extra provision at different times.

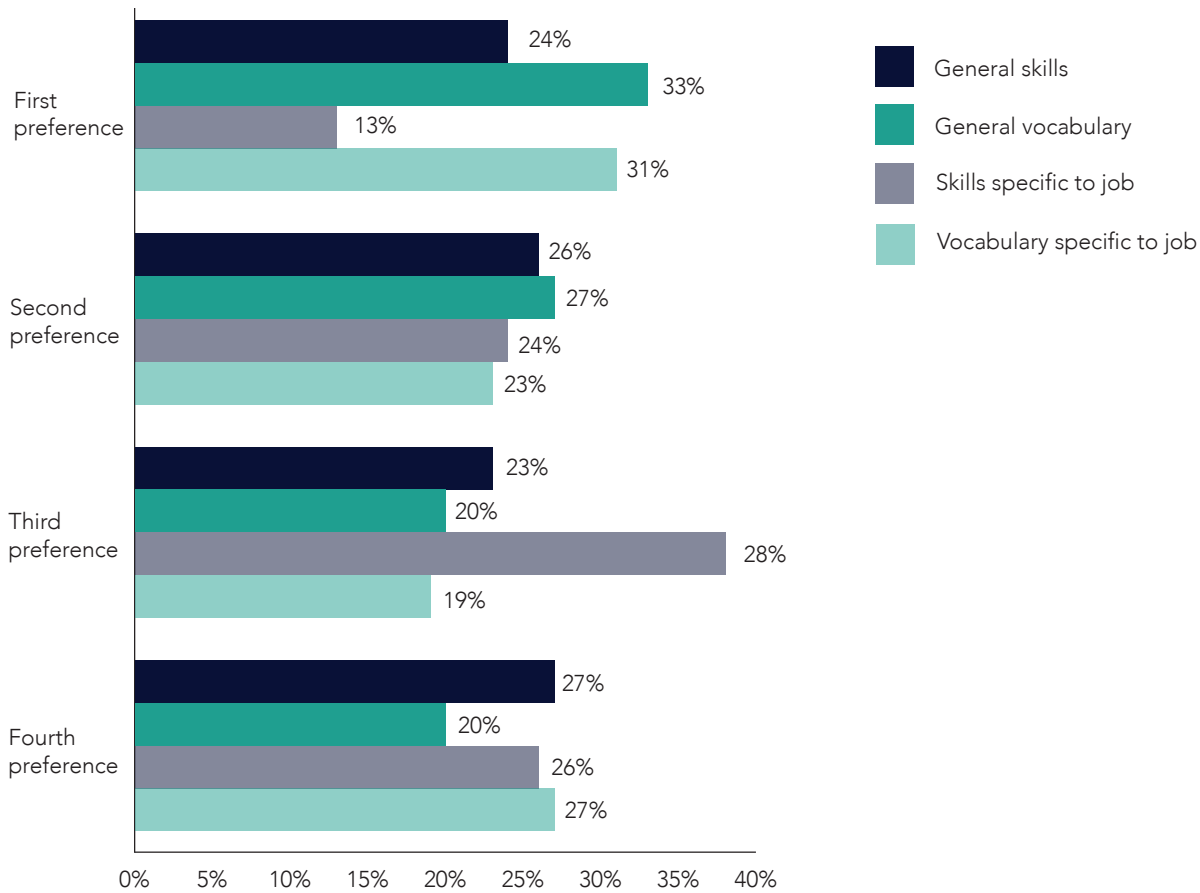
"We are trying to deliver a course at the weekend, but the biggest challenge for us in terms of providing ESOL is lack of funding. Every college in the vicinity, their waiting list is until next year. The demand is massive." **ESOL provider**

"The restriction is funding. The local authority is not too keen on funding all online courses. That's something that we would love to do, because we receive all these requests from the learners, especially working people." **ESOL provider**

ESOL provision for people in work should balance general and work specific skills

"I'm starting from scratch." Community member

Figure 23: Preferences for general and work-related learning (N = 104)



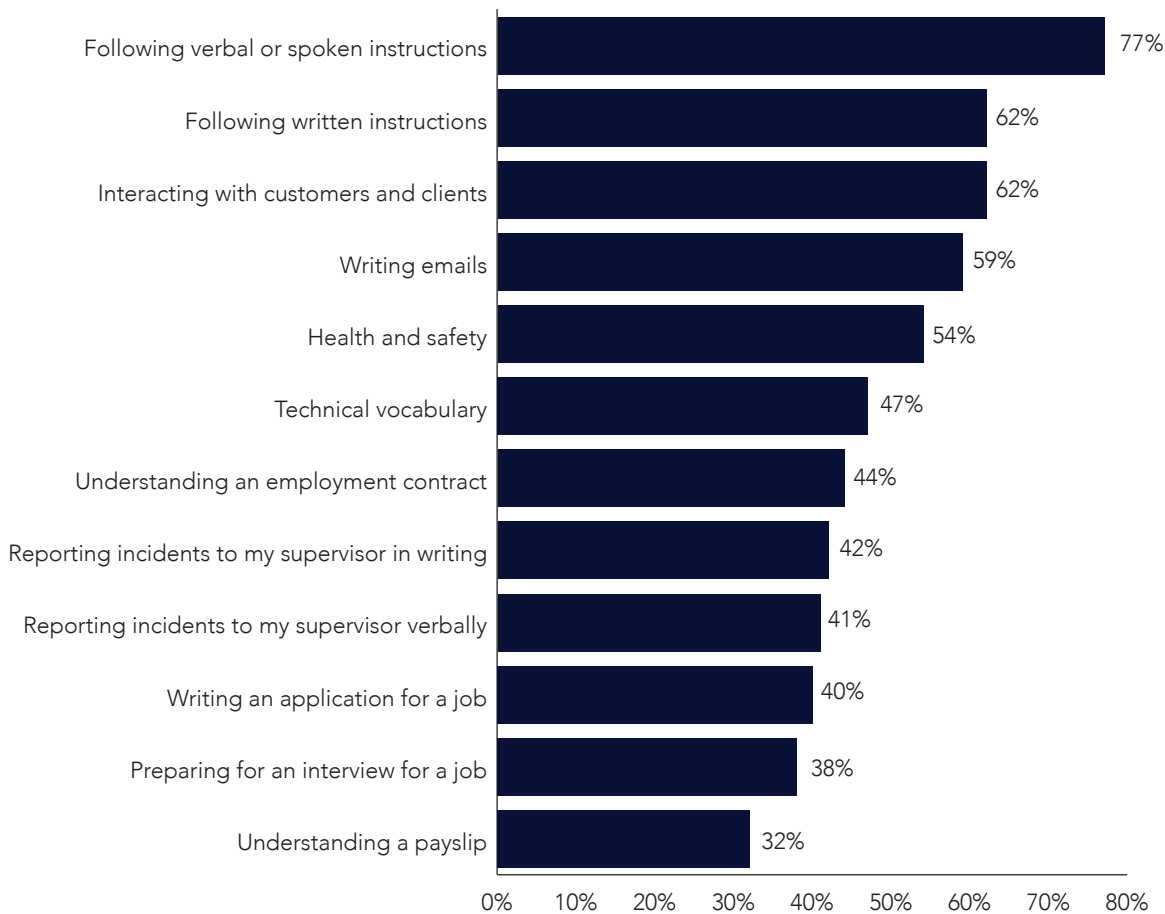
Community members were asked to rank what skills and vocabulary they would want to learn through ESOL classes (Figure 23). Generally, vocabulary was ranked higher than skills, and general vocabulary higher than work-related vocabulary. Similarly, general skills were ranked higher than work-related skills, although overall the difference in proportions was small. This may reflect the motivations for learning English that community members reported in other questions, which included both employment-focused and wider aspirations.

More general skills were also highlighted by community members in their answers.

"I want to learn more of writing and speaking."
Community member

"[I want to] know how to understand English people's body language."
Community member

Figure 24: Work-related skills that community members want to improve (N = 104)



Community members also selected what work related skills they wanted to improve (Figure 24). The top three most selected were following verbal instructions (77%), following written instructions (62%), and interacting with customers (62%), which mirror some of the workplace challenges that employers in particular raised concerns about, and indicates that a large number of people in work want to improve basic rather than specialist skills. In general, however, nearly one in three community members selected the least common skill – understanding a payslip – suggesting that there is a broad range of topics and skills that could be included in ESOL for work courses.

Employers had similar suggestions when asked about what skills they wanted their employees to develop, which included interacting with members of the public, understanding health and safety instructions, and reporting incidents. However, when roles involved the use of technical equipment and machinery, they wanted a greater emphasis on work-specific content compared to general English language skills.

*“It can’t be generalised, because it’s all quite specific machines.” **Employer***

In contrast, and more in line with community members’ preferences, ESOL providers pointed out the importance of including general English language skills and vocabulary, with many suggesting a 50/50 split. General skills and vocabulary can help to improve overall confidence speaking English and provide ‘scaffolding’ for learners to build work-related skills and vocabulary. ESOL providers also reflected that people in work were likely to be more motivated by learning general skills than very work specific content, since they could not use the latter in their day-to-day lives.

“The 50% general [skills and vocabulary] will just improve their confidence – if they feel encouraged to speak English, then that will get them interested in speaking English at work.”

ESOL provider

“Things like reporting an accident, speaking to clients, in order to do that, you sort of have to build it up in stages.”

ESOL provider

“You see that your students are not always ready to jump into work jargon or abbreviations because they really need their basic English first.”

ESOL provider

Employers, employees and ESOL providers need to be open and adaptable to make collaborative ESOL courses work

“We can’t just teach them in one week, and voila, they will be able to apply it and incorporate it into their work easily.” ESOL provider

ESOL providers all shared the view that ESOL for work courses need to be developed in collaboration with both employees and employers. Doing so can enable ESOL providers to understand the needs and motivations of both employers and their employees, and to determine what practical considerations – such as the location and timing of the course – work best for both parties. Furthermore, although all ESOL providers are already equipped with work-related content from their wider ESOL delivery, employers can provide more specific materials, such as employees’ role descriptions, forms and documentation from the workplace, or qualifications staff need to complete, which can be combined with more general ESOL content.

“There are going to be limitations in terms of rota, time off the job, resources. So, it is nearly always that the employer has to choose the time and day that works for their service.”
ESOL provider

“It’s a two part thing. One is your regular ESOL delivery – without teaching them past tense, you can’t teach them present perfect for example. But the other part is the handbook and their evacuation plans, their this and that, because their managers tell them this is something they need to understand.”
ESOL provider

Half of the ESOL providers who took part in an interview had previously worked with employers on bespoke ESOL courses for their employees. In some cases, they had approached a business to offer ESOL, in other cases a business had approached them asking for English language support for their staff. However, they described how working with employers to deliver ESOL could be challenging. Firstly, employers often don’t understand ESOL, and in particular the importance of teaching general English language skills to support more work specific learning and to motivate learners. As a result, there can sometimes be a tension between what the employer wants, what employees want, and what the ESOL provider feels is the correct approach.

“The business is really keen to tailor their curriculum as much towards hospitality as possible. But what happens when the students

come and ask you, ‘I want to call my GP?’ So, there’s a bit of a mismatch. But you need to make both parties as happy as possible, of course.” **ESOL provider**

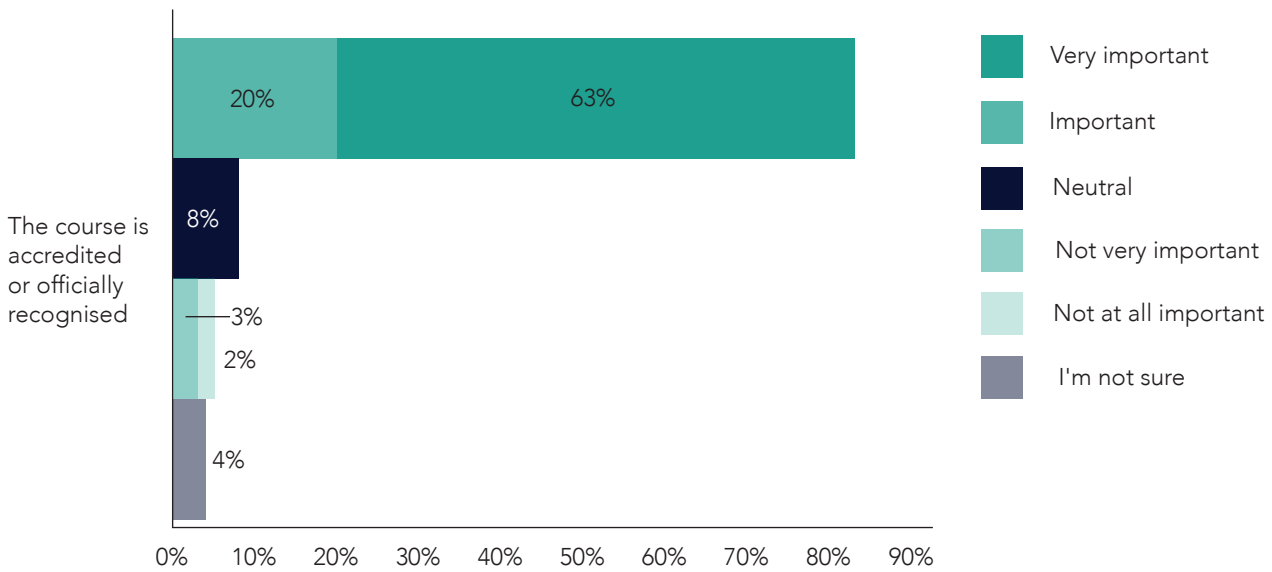
ESOL providers generally agreed that people looking to improve their English required one or two classes per week – or up to 4 hours – over at least 12 weeks to progress. Beyond this, employees may also need further courses to continue their progression. Similarly, ESOL providers also pointed out that employees with literacy challenges would need extra support, such as one-to-one time with a tutor or volunteer, additional classes, or signposting to another specialist organisation. However, employers were not always likely to grasp this at first and so may have unrealistic expectations of how much progress can be made during a single ESOL course. This can stem from both a lack of understanding about ESOL in general and also from the fact that employers do not have the necessary knowledge or experience to correctly assess the English language levels of their staff. It is important, therefore, to set and manage expectations with employers.

“You need to be honest and upfront about managing expectations. Because the employer will just say, ‘oh, we’ve got people who need help with English’, and we can’t expect them to know whether they’re Level 2, Level 3, Pre-Entry or Level 1. And many employers will have no idea how long it takes to take someone from Pre-Entry to the level of taking an exam or some sort of qualification. So, it’s really about in early conversations, being very realistic.”
ESOL provider

Related to this, there were cases where employers had assembled a cohort of employees with different levels of English, which made it difficult for ESOL providers to deliver courses that met the varying needs of learners, unless the employer agreed to facilitate multiple courses for different levels.

“After the first class, the tutor feedback made it clear that there were advanced level learners and beginners. So, we ended up having a higher level and a lower level, and having that division accepted by the employer because it wasn’t possible.” **ESOL provider**

Figure 25: Preferences for accreditation on ESOL for work course



ESOL providers also discussed the importance of managing expectations with employees too. Some ESOL providers recognised that many learners are motivated by the prospect of receiving certification after completing an ESOL course, and in the survey, a large majority of community members (83%) said it was either important or very important that an ESOL course they completed was accredited (Figure 25). However, for some learners, especially those with literacy challenges, progressing to a qualification is unlikely to be possible within a single course, and given the tailored nature of ESOL for work courses, they will not be able to receive accreditation. ESOL providers must, therefore, be honest with employees as well as employers.

“Students want to prioritise courses that they can get certification at the end for, you know, with exams. So, it’s a matter of understanding from a student perspective that look, you will get there, but this is an essential step that you need to take.” **ESOL provider**

Both ESOL providers and employers also felt it was important to get buy-in from across the business both before and during the course. This includes from operational staff, who can make sure employees have dedicated time set aside to attend ESOL classes. Employers also identified the need to secure buy-in from other senior staff who manage operational or learning and development budgets to financially support ESOL courses for their staff.

“Students want to attend, but they say, ‘but my manager said, ‘clean two more rooms before you go to class. Do this before you go to class.”

The direct line managers, they’re in a pickle because work must continue, the show must go on, and I understand they can’t deny an extra room cleaning request. So, they need to be buying in on every level of the organisation, and every level of the organisation needs to be supporting attendance, not just kind of the key contacts or the key people who’ve been sort of designing and liaising with you about the course.” **ESOL provider**

“We’ve got our operations management team. We need to make sure that it lands in the right way at that level. And then that’s for them to sell and share with their supervisors and make sure that the people are getting the right level of support.” **Employer**

Recommendations

The findings from this initial research phase demonstrate that many people from migrant communities find it difficult to access current ESOL provision if they are working and cannot gain the benefits of improving their English language skills. As a result, they are unable to progress in their careers or lives, and both they and their employers experience various challenges in the workplace. ESOL providers, on the other hand, are aware of the demand for ESOL from people who are working and the barriers they face but are limited in both resourcing and delivering provision to respond to this.

The following recommendations propose different ways to address these issues and produce further insights to improve ESOL provision for people in work.

1 Develop flexible and bespoke models of ESOL delivery

Current ESOL provision does not work for people in work. New models can offer greater flexibility for people with long hours or changing work patterns and the opportunity to develop courses in consultation with businesses and their staff. These models, however, need to be tested and evaluated to explore alternative provision that balances the needs of employees, employers and ESOL providers. Exploring new models of delivery also provides opportunities to create and develop new accreditation for ESOL provision. This will help more people in work to improve their English, so they can fully utilise the skills and experience they have.

2 Improve the understanding of the impact of alternative ESOL models

Current ESOL provision has been shown to support people from migrant communities to navigate everyday life, increase social inclusion and participation, and improve employment and educational outcomes. However, the lack of recognised alternative models – such as those designed for people in work and delivered collaboratively with employers – means there is little understanding about the potential benefits

of adapting ESOL models and curriculums beyond increasing access for those who face barriers. Evaluating the impact of alternative models for ESOL learners who are working can help evidence how to most effectively provide those who face barriers to regular ESOL provision with the critical skills they need to get on in life, and ensure that alternative models offer high quality teaching alongside wider accessibility and flexibility. There is also scope to explore the potential return on investment to be gained from upskilling people in work.

3 Build evidence of the benefits of ESOL for employers

Although some employers have shown a willingness to support their staff to access ESOL provision alongside work, there is currently little engagement from businesses in these opportunities. Evaluating the impact of pilots and new ESOL models from an employer perspective can generate evidence on how ESOL can benefit businesses, which can incentivise buy-in across different sectors. This evidence should respond to businesses' priorities, such as staff productivity, health and safety, customer satisfaction, and employee retention and wellbeing. At the same time, ESOL providers and commissioners should look at ways to familiarise employers with ESOL teaching approaches and qualifications.

4 Recognise the barriers to access in ESOL coordination and commissioning

ESOL providers cannot meet current demand for ESOL, especially when people are working and need alternative provision, due to restrictive and poorly incentivised funding models. Increasing flexibility in the commissioning process will increase ESOL providers' capacity to respond to the needs of the communities they work with and ensure groups who encounter barriers to accessing ESOL do not face ongoing exclusion. Regional and local ESOL coordinators and commissioners should work with ESOL providers to review planning, funding and delivery to identify gaps and opportunities, while continuing to support established community-based ESOL delivery.

5 Embed ESOL incentives in public sector contracts

Public sector contractors and developers are already encouraged to provide social value through the Social Value Act 2013 and Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 respectively, both of which include commitments around skills and employment. The critical role ESOL plays in developing skills and improving employment outcomes should be recognised in these frameworks, providing a mechanism to leverage both local authorities and their suppliers to offer ESOL for people working on public sector contracts. This route also has the potential to create further investment in ESOL from businesses and new funding streams.

ESOL for work pilots

Following the research phase, High Trees has begun to develop new ESOL pilots for people in work.

The aim of the pilots is to offer people in work the opportunity to access ESOL more easily; engage employers in providing English support and personal development for their staff; shape new resources and tools for ESOL delivery; and generate further evidence to guide both local and national policy development.

The research findings informed three initial pilots, which included:

- ① Two courses for a team of Grounds Maintenance operatives from the Parks department at Lambeth Council, facilitated by Lambeth Adult Learning and designed with input from the team leader.
- ② A sector-specific course for cleaners, with learners recruited across community organisations in Lambeth.
- ③ A flexible, evening course for people working in different sectors who cannot access daytime ESOL provision.

The evaluation of these pilots has demonstrated that learners built confidence across different skills, such as speaking and reading. As a result, learners reported that they felt more able to keep themselves and others safe at work, felt happier and more satisfied at work, and felt more able to understand their employer's HR policies and procedures.

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“Learning how to speak about health and safety has been very helpful, to stop incidents and protect myself.”

Learner from Grounds Maintenance pilot

High Trees will continue to co-design and evaluate pilots, gathering insights from learners, employers and ESOL tutors to broaden the findings from the initial phase and contribute to recommendations and resources over the next two years. The findings from the pilots will be shared in future reports.



Co-designing future pilots

To plan future pilots, High Trees also hosted a workshop with 10 people from migrant communities who are working across different sectors – including cleaning, hospitality and transport – to examine the headline findings from the initial research phase and explore how to design ESOL for work courses. Attendees were recruited from High Trees' networks and compensated £20 for their time.

Attendees took part in three activities:

- 1 Reviewing the six most common barriers to accessing ESOL identified in the survey, and exploring their individual experiences of them to provide wider context.**
- 2 Creating a personal 'menu' for an ESOL for work pilot, including the location, timings and course content.**
- 3 Identifying local employers in different job sectors to approach for future pilots.**



The workshop highlighted that barriers affect different groups in varying ways: women were more impacted by childcare responsibilities than men, for instance. Preferences for ESOL model design also varied across different groups and sectors, emphasising the importance of co-designing new ESOL courses with employees and employers. For example, those who worked daytime hours preferred evening classes, and some attendees wanted to attend ESOL on site rather in a community setting in order to reduce the amount of time and money spent on travel.



Endnotes

1. The exact figure is 1,040,346. However, since Census data is self-reported, it not always an accurate estimate in terms of both actual numbers and levels of English language proficiency.
2. Employment rates also vary across migrant men and women, and based on which countries people have migrated from (Migration Observatory, 2024).
3. There is limited research focusing on the UK or England in this area, but research on low levels of English proficiency in workplaces from elsewhere in the world suggests other challenges include employee retention (e.g. Madera et al., 2014).
4. The Adult Skills Fund replaced the Adult Education Budget (AEB), the previous primary source of ESOL funding, in 2024. The Department of Education took over responsibilities for managing the Adult Skills Fund from the Education and Skills Funded Agency in 2025.
5. ESOL is usually funded for adults aged 19 or over who are unemployed, on certain benefits, or earning below a low-income threshold, dependent on immigration status and length of residency in the UK. Devolution of the ASF to the GLA and MCAs has provided some limited flexibility in these criteria, such as a three-year residency waiver for Londoners on certain, long term, immigration routes (see e.g. Kaisidou et al., 2023).
6. There were 114,330 ESOL learners in 2017-18 and 145,730 in 2023-24. Data from the Department of Education: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/a8472df2-41bd-4b22-4918-08dbb04c73a2> and <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-catalogue/data-set/544f733e-75cb-499f-aaec-03a3eaa8675e>
7. These thresholds vary across different local authorities and MCAs but tend to be set at 80-90%.
8. There has been no public funding for ESOL in workplaces since 2011-12 (Foster and Bolton, 2018).
9. Other examples of ESOL for work initiatives include West Suffolk College's ESOL for Employers partnership scheme (www.wsc.ac.uk/employers/6949-esol-for-employers); Public and Commercial Services Union's ESOL pilot for ISS employees (www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/english-esol-classes-iss-london-employees-pilot-launched); Learn English at Home's (LEAH) ESOL in Workplaces toolkit (www.learnenglishathome.org.uk/esol-in-workplaces/); and JET's ESOL Learner to Salary Earner project (www.jetnorth.org.uk/esol-learner-to-salary-earner---else) in Newcastle and English for Action's ESOL for Work programme (www.efalondon.org/esol-for-work) in Hackney, London, which both combine ESOL classes and employability support.
10. See https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/evaluation_report_-_esol_plus_employers_201912v2.pdf for an evaluation of the pilot, and https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mol_esol_plus_employer_partnership_report_2021_fa.pdf for guidance for both employers and ESOL providers developed from learnings from the pilot.
11. www.lambethresearch.com/ethics-review-process/
12. ESOL providers reported that the proportion of their learners or students who were in work varied considerably, from one or two per class at some to a majority at others.
13. Sectors under 'Other' included Personal care services (hair and beauty), Retail, Storage and warehousing, Manufacturing, Transportation and delivery, Construction, and Grounds maintenance and gardening.

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