

# LANGUAGE MATTERS

Exploring English language provision in community-based settings

BY **DR DONNA KERNAGHAN**

March 2023



# Introduction

Northern Ireland is home to more people from an ethnic minority background than ever before. Data from Census 2021 shows that one in 15 people or 6.5% of the Northern Ireland (NI) population was born outside of the United Kingdom (UK) and Republic of Ireland (ROI).<sup>1</sup>

People come to live in NI for a range of reasons. Recent figures from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)<sup>2</sup> on international migrant trends found that the majority of migrants came to NI for work (33.4%) or family reasons (28.2%) with a further 15.7% coming to study. Around 10.8% of migrants came to NI to seek asylum.

Unsurprisingly, this demographic shift has resulted in a significant rise in the number of languages spoken here. Census 2021 results indicate that 4.5% of the population living in NI do not have English or Irish as their main language. Most people who did not have English as a main language reported they could speak English well or very well (73.8%) with 19.1% reporting they could not speak English well. A further 4.6% reported that they could not speak English at all.

Despite rising numbers of people from an ethnic minority background working and living in Northern Ireland, there has been little policy development by the Northern Ireland Executive to address the specific needs of this population. Evidence gathered by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in

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IN NORTHERN IRELAND (NI) WERE BORN OUTSIDE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM (UK) AND REPUBLIC OF IRELAND (ROI).

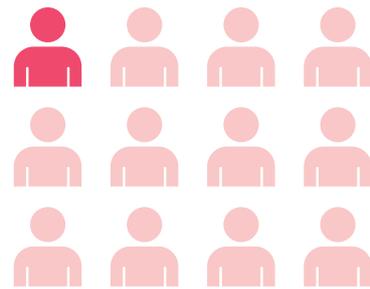
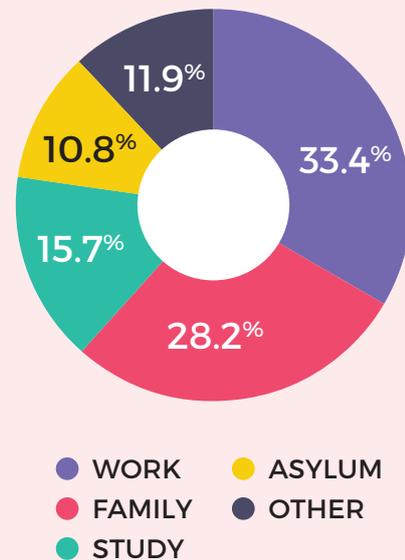


Figure 1:  
REASONS WHY  
MIGRANTS COME TO  
NORTHERN IRELAND



<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022) Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin - Country of birth.

<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2021) Long-Term International Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland 2020.

Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup> found issues affecting minority ethnic communities were often overlooked by policy makers with little indication of strategic planning in devolved matters. Crucially, this report also highlighted there is a systemic lack of accurate data on ethnic minorities despite this being identified as a gap in the first Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005 – 2010.<sup>4</sup> Although the need for a robust data monitoring framework was again set out in the subsequent Racial Equality Strategy 2015 – 2025<sup>5</sup>, no progress in this area has been made.

## Spotlight on Belfast City Council Area

Belfast remains the most diverse council area in Northern Ireland with nearly 10.0% of the population born outside the UK or ROI. This is reflected by the proportion of people who do not have English or Irish as a main language and the range of English language abilities from those who can speak English very well to those who cannot speak English at all. Belfast has also seen a dramatic increase in the number of asylum-seekers placed in hotels in the city centre while their claims are processed. In June 2021, just 14 asylum-seekers in Northern Ireland were staying

in hotels but by April 2022, the number of asylum-seekers living in hotels had increased to 1,067. Ten of the 14 hotels used in Northern Ireland as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers are located in Belfast. As asylum seekers may have experienced trauma, loss and persecution on their migration journey they can be particularly vulnerable with complex physical and mental health needs for both adults and children. Language is often a barrier experienced by asylum seekers in being able to access support and communicate with others. The need for additional support for growing numbers of asylum-seekers in the Belfast area has increased demand for a range of services provided by local community organisations.



<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Second Report of Session 2021–22 (2022) The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005 – 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Racial Equality Strategy 2015 – 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022) Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin - Country of birth.

<sup>7</sup> The Detail (June 2022) Major rise in hotel use for asylum-seekers: “It feels like we are in a prison”

# Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the Language Matters project was to investigate the current levels of English language provision delivered by community groups in three areas of Inner South Belfast including the Market, Donegall Pass and Lower Ormeau and to explore the challenges faced by both community organisations and learners from an ethnic minority background. Specifically, the main objectives of the study were to:



Gain an understanding of current English language provision in community-based settings in Inner South Belfast;



Investigate the challenges faced by community organisations delivering English language classes;



Explore what barriers learners from an ethnic minority background may encounter in accessing English language provision;



Identify any potential areas for development of community-based English language provision in the future.

# Methodology

The Language Matters research was mixed method in nature and conducted over two phases as outlined below:

**PHASE 1:** An online survey was developed to investigate the services provided by local organisations for ethnic minority communities with the specific purpose of exploring the current English Language provision delivered by community groups in three areas of Inner South Belfast. The survey was disseminated to partners in the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership (ISBNP) during February 2022. A total of 17 community organisations working with ethnic minorities responded to the survey.

**PHASE 2:** Eight focus groups with 43 participants from an ethnic minority background were conducted during April - June 2022. Participants were drawn from ten different countries including Sudan (n = 11), China (n = 10), Somalia (n = 6), India (n = 5) and Syria (n = 5). Most participants were multilingual having either two first languages or having learnt an additional language. The most common first language of participants was Arabic. Translators were available for all focus groups with four groups being held with a translator present. All focus groups were single gender with six focus groups held with 35 females and two focus groups held with eight males. All focus groups were recorded, with participants' consent, for the purposes of conducting thematic analysis. Please note that all extracts from the focus groups have been quoted verbatim to capture the authentic expressions of the participants.

# Key Findings

## Current ESOL provision

### Delivering Community-based English Language Classes

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes are typically held in community centres or rooms owned or hired by the community organisation. Results indicate that organisations in the South Belfast area work with on average 13.2 different languages. Polish (82.4%) and Somali (82.4%) were the most common languages spoken by service users followed by Arabic (76.5%), Syrian (64.7%) and Romanian (58.8%) as shown in Figure 2. Other languages accounted for 47.1% and included Farsi, Telegu, Romani and Russian.

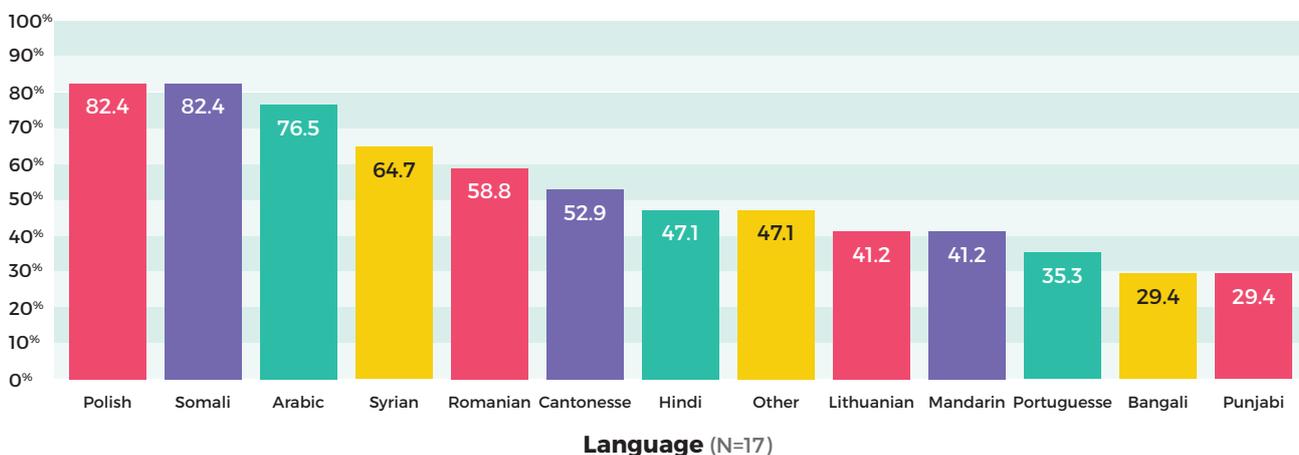
All organisations provided their English language classes free for participants although the number of classes per course varied by organisation. Most courses lasted less than a typical school term with a third of courses lasting for six weeks (33.3%) or between eight and ten weeks (33.3%).

A further third of organisations provided longer programmes lasting between 25 to 30 weeks in duration (33.4%). The majority of organisations delivered between 1 – 8 hours of ESOL classes per week. One organisation reported delivering 20 hours of classes per week.

While most organisations had some access to a qualified English language teacher (57.1%), findings show community organisations relied on volunteers to deliver ESOL classes with 49.2% of organisations supported by volunteers with an accredited teaching qualification. A further 28.6% of community organisations used volunteers with no accredited teaching qualification. As a consequence, community organisations tended to offer non - accredited ESOL courses which reduced learners' opportunity to gain qualifications necessary for employment or future study.

Figure 2:

Languages of Service Users



Community organisations identified multiple challenges to providing English language classes. Results show that the top three most common challenges faced by organisations are:



### **1. LACK OF CHILDCARE PROVISION:**

100% of community providers recognised the lack of childcare as a challenge to providing English language classes. Many community organisations were unable to provide creche facilities as they did not have a suitable room with enough staff or volunteers to care for young children. To accommodate parents with school aged children, organisations tended to hold ESOL classes in the mornings only to allow for the school run which limited when English classes could be held. Similarly, classes did not run for long periods during school holidays. The lack of childcare provision was recognised by all providers as a barrier for parents, specifically mothers, to access ESOL classes.



### **2. FUNDING**

87.5% of organisations identified the cost of delivering accredited ESOL courses as a challenge. Most organisations who delivered ESOL classes (57.1%) did so without any funding. Participants reported that the funding their organisation did receive was limited as it was often for a single year, focussed solely on tutor costs with additional costs of room hire, creche and associated administration costs rarely covered by funders. This short term approach to

funding makes it difficult for community organisations to plan ahead or increase their provision to meet the demand for English language classes they see on the ground.



### **3. COLLABORATION BETWEEN STATUTORY AGENCIES AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS:**

87.5% identified the lack of support from statutory agencies to provide community-based ESOL classes as challenging. Similarly, there was recognition that a lack of coordination amongst community organisations who provide ESOL classes was also a barrier within the South Belfast area (75.0%). Suggestions from participants included the need for investment to develop partnership working between statutory agencies and community organisations which includes a recognised pathway for learners and referral system.

In addition to these challenges, community organisations also face challenges related to the needs of their service users. The majority of organisations recognised that people who could benefit from English language classes often have poor awareness of the provision available in the community (81.3%). It was also the case that community organisations were striving to meet the needs of learners with a diverse range of language backgrounds (62.5%). Poverty was identified by respondents of the survey as a key barrier for people from an ethnic minority background to access community-based classes as their focus had to be on survival.

## The Value of English Language

Participants of the focus groups were drawn from a diverse range of circumstances with some participants having lived in Belfast for a number of years, while some people had newly arrived within the past couple of months. Similarly, some participants had knowledge of English before they came to Belfast, while others had no knowledge. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data found that participants identified three common motivating factors for learning English as outlined below:

### 1. INTEGRATION:

The primary motivating factor for participants to learn English was to integrate and interact with people living in Belfast. This was often described as being able to carry out everyday activities such as shopping, accessing services such as the GP and talking with neighbours. Participants also highlighted that they needed a good level of English language to successfully pass their UK Driving Licence and Life in the UK test. Being able to communicate in English was seen as central to participants being independent and making a life here:

☞ *“We cannot have a natural life or an equal life without the language. The language is very important for making friends, getting a job, for everything.”*  
MALE FROM SYRIA

☞ *“To learn more English is very important. If I want to get a driving licence, I need good English. If I need to go out to the shops or something like that I need English so it is very important for me to learn more English.”*  
FEMALE FROM CHINA

### 2. EMPLOYMENT:

Many participants had established careers in their home countries including backgrounds in teaching, nursing, financial services, engineering and academia. These participants were keen to learn or improve their English as a way to continue in their field of work while living in Belfast. For other participants, English language was viewed as a gateway to employment or volunteering. Key to this was achieving qualifications from an accredited source. The need for qualifications was particularly strong for male participants. All male participants were focussed on gaining certificates to demonstrate their level of English. They regarded English accreditation as essential to resuming their careers here. In contrast, while some females placed importance on completing accredited English language courses, female participants were more likely to be motivated to learn English as a way to support their family.

### 3. CHILDREN'S EDUCATION:

Participants of the focus groups had over 70 children between them living in Northern Ireland. In many instances, participants reported that their children's first language was English as they were not proficient in their parents' home language. Parents viewed education, including learning English, as a priority for their children and wanted to improve their own understanding of English in order to support their children's education. This included helping their children with homework and being able to communicate with teachers, other school staff and parents.

☞ *“Of course, we need to learn English because my children will go to the school and I have to learn the English to try to help them with their studies.”*  
FEMALE FROM SUDAN

## Learners' Perspectives of Community-based English Language Provision

Overall, findings show learners had positive experiences of attending ESOL classes within their local area. Participants reported that ESOL classes in a community-based setting provided them with opportunities to regularly connect with others, access other services and learn new skills. However, participants identified a number of areas in which the current provision does not meet their needs. These included:

*"I have been learning English since about ten years ago. Not recently up until my son went to school, now I have free time I learn English. It's much better than before [children in school] I have more time to myself."*

FEMALE  
FROM  
CHINA



### CHILDCARE:

Findings show a stark difference between males and females as no male participants identified the lack of childcare as a barrier to their learning. Many women reported that they could not attend ESOL classes when they had preschool children as there was no facilities and they recognised that classes were unsuitable for young children. In this way, mothers reported that the lack of childcare within community-based settings effectively barred them from accessing English language classes. Mothers often had to wait until their children were of school age to have more freedom to attend, although this was limited to morning times when the children were in school.



### LACK OF ACCESS TO ACCREDITED ESOL COURSES:

The consensus of the sample was that classes in community-based settings had good quality teaching and were useful in improving their English.

☞ *"It is at a very good level here. I compare it to Belfast Met. She does grammar with us, conversations and reading. It is good."*

MALE FROM SYRIA

☞ *"It is less than my level but I found it very useful for grammar and reading. They do have an academic level here I think."*

MALE FROM SYRIA

However, male learners were clear that community-based settings did not meet their needs in terms of providing recognised ESOL qualifications. Male learners reported that they needed a qualification to demonstrate their English language ability in order to secure employment or study further. For this reason, they preferred attending the FE college as they could work towards a nationally recognised qualification.



### **MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE ENGLISH NEEDED:**

Learners wanted to have more opportunities to interact in English. This included more taught hours per week for longer periods of time plus greater opportunities to practice English in informal, social settings. Participants felt this was important as the class was often the only place they were able to use English as English was not spoken at home or within their community.

☞ *“I would like, if it is possible, to have more days as I am a beginner. It is more difficult. I have one class per week then I have to get out and pick up my kids. I would like more days.”*

FEMALE FROM PORTUGAL

☞ *“We don’t want to live as another society. We want to be part of this local society.”*

MALE FROM SUDAN



### **WAITING LISTS:**

Findings also show that learners had to wait to access ESOL classes held by both community organisations and FE colleges. This suggests that demand for English language classes has exceeded the capacity to deliver in the South Belfast area.



### **DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN LEARNERS:**

Results show that the breadth of abilities and English proficiency within classes can be problematic for learners, particularly those with good levels of English, to access teaching at the right level.

*“There is the problem with the levels of other students. They are different and you can’t learn much as most of them are low, or like a beginner.”*



MALE  
FROM  
SYRIA

## Areas for Future Development

There was broad consensus amongst community organisations that development was needed in the following areas in the future to improve ESOL provision in South Belfast:



### **PROGRESSION FOR LEARNERS:**

100% agreed or strongly agreed that the lack of clear and consistent progression pathways limits how much community groups can support ethnic minority communities learn the appropriate level of English language.



### **COLLABORATION:**

100% agreed or strongly agreed that improved coordination amongst community groups would increase the capacity to deliver ESOL classes at different levels. The majority of participants (87.6%) also agreed that improved collaboration with further and higher education centres would be an effective way to better support learners.



### **FUNDING:**

93.7% of organisations agreed or strongly agreed that further investment is needed to develop key skills of staff and volunteers to deliver ESOL classes within the community.



### **INCREASE PROVISION:**

75.0% of organisations would like to deliver English language classes. Interestingly, 29.4% of organisations who do not currently deliver English language classes would like to in the future indicating the potential for growth in this area.

**Learners also suggested areas that could be developed in the future:**



### **LESS ONLINE LEARNING:**

The majority of learners felt face to face classes were better compared to online lessons. The main reason participants preferred face to face classes was the importance they placed on the interactions with both their teacher and classmates.



### **INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES TO SOCIALISE:**

Participants also highlighted that regular interactions with local people should be further developed by community organisations as one way to improve their English and encourage integration. Participants suggested that social events or smaller one to one meetings with local people would provide opportunities to develop mutual understanding between cultures.

# Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of the Language Matters research a number of key areas have been identified as requiring further consideration. The following recommendations have been made as the basis of improving ESOL provision from the perspectives of both community organisations and learners:

## Recommendation 1:

### An ESOL Strategy for Northern Ireland

The Department for the Economy should deliver an ESOL Strategy for Northern Ireland to provide strategic oversight of ESOL provision. The ESOL Strategy should be evidence based, fully funded and include the following:



#### **A PLACE- BASED APPROACH:**

A place-based approach would provide flexibility in how varying local contexts could effectively meet the different needs of learners. Planning should be based on regular data collection and consultation with learners to identify specific needs with ability to tailor provision at a local level to meet changes in demand.



#### **FUNDING FOR THE COMMUNITY SECTOR:**

Funding should be specifically allocated for the community sector within the ESOL Strategy. Sustainable investment is necessary to develop community-based ESOL provision and should include funding for qualified teachers, staff training and costs for delivering accredited ESOL courses. Funding should

also include the recovery of the full costs associated with providing ESOL classes including childcare provision.



#### **EXTENSION OF ACCREDITED ESOL COURSES IN THE COMMUNITY:**

Provision of accredited ESOL courses should be extended beyond FE colleges to widen access to qualifications for learners in community-based settings. This should be free of charge for at least all Pre Entry and Level 1 learners with eligibility on par with criteria used for FE colleges.



#### **MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATION:**

Support for multi-agency collaboration including the development of strategic partnerships between the community sector, FE colleges and statutory agencies. Consideration should also be given to develop a shared understanding of progression pathways for learners and innovative ways of working together such as a multi – agency referral system to better coordinate service delivery within local communities.

## Recommendation 2: Service Delivery in Community- Based Settings

Building on the strengths of community – based settings identified in this research, further improvements could be made in the following ways:



### CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNERS TO PRACTICE ENGLISH:

ESOL provision should be increased in both duration and intensity. Courses should be longer in duration with more frequent classes during the week to increase opportunities for learners to practice English. Opportunities to practice English language outside the classroom setting should be encouraged.



### DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN LEARNERS:

Greater recognition of the diversity amongst ESOL learners is needed to ensure learners access the most appropriate level. Special consideration should be given to adopting different teaching strategies to meet the specific needs of women, older people, those with no or low education and those with high levels of pre-migration education.

## Recommendation 3: Community Involvement

Recognising that integration is a two-way process, community involvement could be increased in the following ways:



### OPPORTUNITIES TO SOCIALISE TOGETHER:

The creation of regular opportunities for local people and ethnic minority communities to interact socially should be encouraged within local communities by community organisations to build mutually positive relationships and support integration.



### RAISING AWARENESS OF ESOL CLASSES :

A multi-agency dissemination plan should be developed to increase general awareness amongst ethnic minority communities about services available in their local area with specific reference to ESOL classes. Schools, places of worship, local council and health services should be considered key partners in promoting and disseminating information about available services for ethnic minorities within the local community.