LANGUAGE MATTERS

STATS & STORIES

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Exploring English language provision in community-based settings

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Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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).[1] Unsurprisingly, this demographic shift has resulted in a significant rise in the number of languages spoken here. As NI is a predominantly English-speaking country, learning English plays a significant role in being able to live independently, communicate with others, access services and gain employment.

The community sector in NI plays a key role in providing a broad range of support services to ethnic minority communities to aid their integration. This includes the provision of English language classes. In order to further explore the role of community organisations in South Belfast in providing classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership commissioned Stats & Stories to conduct a scoping exercise to establish the current levels of English language provision delivered by community groups and the challenges faced by both community organisations and ESOL learners from an ethnic minority background.

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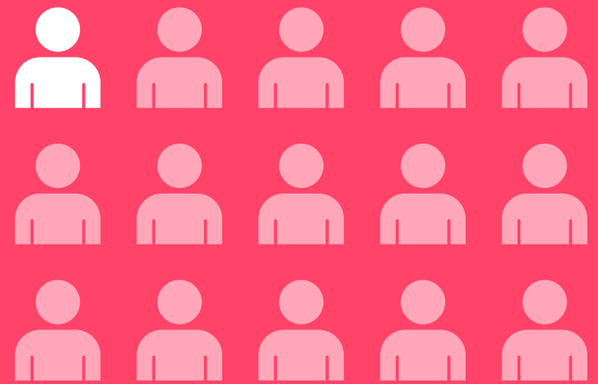
IN NORTHERN IRELAND (NI) WERE BORN OUTSIDE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM (UK) AND REPUBLIC OF IRELAND (ROI).



[1] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022) Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin - Country of birth. Available here.

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;
- Explore what barriers learners from an ethnic minority background may encounter in accessing English language provision;
- Investigate the challenges faced by community organisations delivering English language classes;
- 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 organisations provided for ethnic minority communities in South Belfast 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 with a total of seventeen organisations working with ethnic minorities responding to the survey.

Phase 2

Eight focus groups with 43 participants from an ethnic minority background were conducted during April - June 2022. All focus groups were single gender with six focus groups held with 35 females and two focus groups held with eight males. Translators were available for all focus groups with four groups being held with a translator present. 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

76.5%
Community organisations offered community support and social activities

64.7%
health and wellbeing activities

58.8%
adult training and family support

35.3%
Just over one third of organisations offered English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.

ESOL 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%).

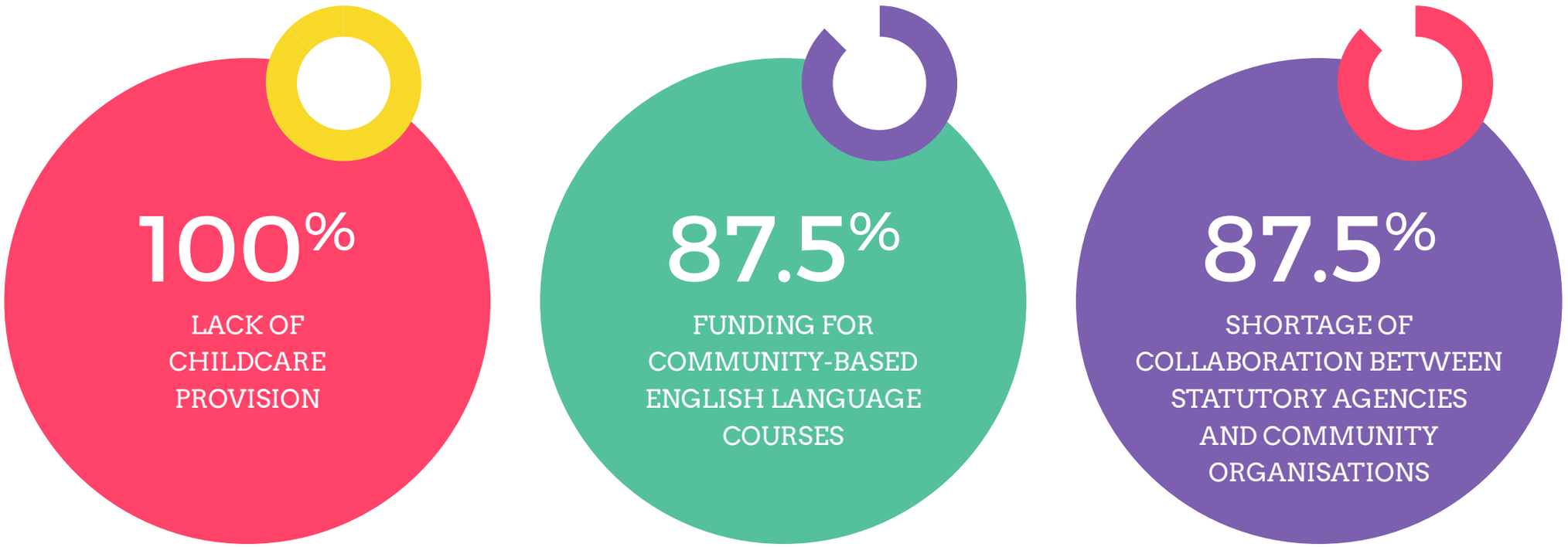
57.1% of organisations used a qualified English language teacher to deliver classes with 49.2% using volunteers with an accredited teaching qualification. A further 28.6% used volunteers with no accredited teaching qualification.

57.1% of organisations delivering ESOL classes did so without any funding.

All organisations provided their English language classes free for participants.

Challenges Faced by Community Organisations

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



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:

Childcare:
The lack of childcare provision in community-based settings was identified as a barrier, particularly impacting women's participation.

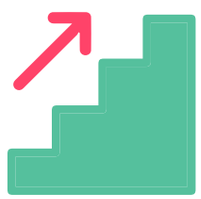
More opportunities to practice English needed:
Learners wanted to have more opportunities to interact in English. This included more taught hours per week for longer periods of time plus greater opportunities to practice English in informal, social settings.

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.

Waiting Lists:
Findings also show that learners had to wait to access ESOL classes held by both community organisations and FE colleges suggesting that demand is exceeding capacity to deliver in this area.

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:



Progression for Learners

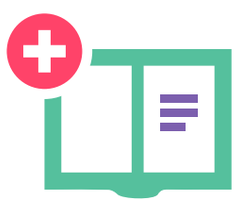
100% agreed or strongly agreed that the lack of clear and consistent progression pathways limits how much community groups can support ethnic minority communities learn the appropriate level of English Language.

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

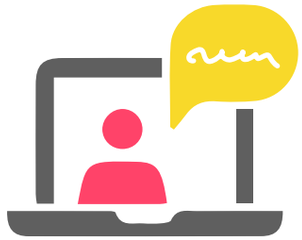
93.7% of organisations agreed or strongly agreed that further investment is needed to develop staff and volunteers' key skills to deliver ESOL classes within the community.



Increase Provision

Results show that the majority of community organisations (75.0%) 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 ways in which ESOL classes should develop 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 for mutual understanding to develop.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

PART 1: BACKGROUND

Introduction

The population of Northern Ireland is more ethnically and culturally diverse 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).[2] Unsurprisingly, this demographic shift which includes migrant workers as well as refugees and asylum seekers has resulted in an increase of people who do not have English as their main language living in NI. As NI is a predominantly English speaking country with English as the main language of 95.4% of the population, learning English plays a significant role in being able to live independently, communicate with others, access services and gain employment.

The community sector in NI plays a key role in providing a broad range of support services to ethnic minority communities to aid their integration. This includes the provision of English language classes. In order to further explore the role of community organisations in South Belfast in providing classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership commissioned Stats & Stories to conduct a scoping exercise to establish the current levels of English language provision delivered by community groups and the challenges faced by both community organisations and ESOL learners from an ethnic minority background.

95.4%

OF PEOPLE LIVING IN NORTHERN IRELAND SPEAK ENGLISH AS THEIR MAIN LANGUAGE.

[2] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022) Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin - Country of birth. Available here.

Ethnic Minority Communities in Northern Ireland

The past twenty years have seen a shift in the ethnic and cultural demographics of the population in Northern Ireland. People come to live in NI for a range of reasons. Recent figures from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)[3] 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. As a result, there has been a significant rise in the number of languages spoken here. For those that lack English, this may be an obstacle in terms of gaining employment, social integration, gaining access to information and services and in communicating their needs to others.[4] Key data drawn from NI Census 2021 shows an increase in those born outside of the UK or ROI, language diversity and English language proficiency.

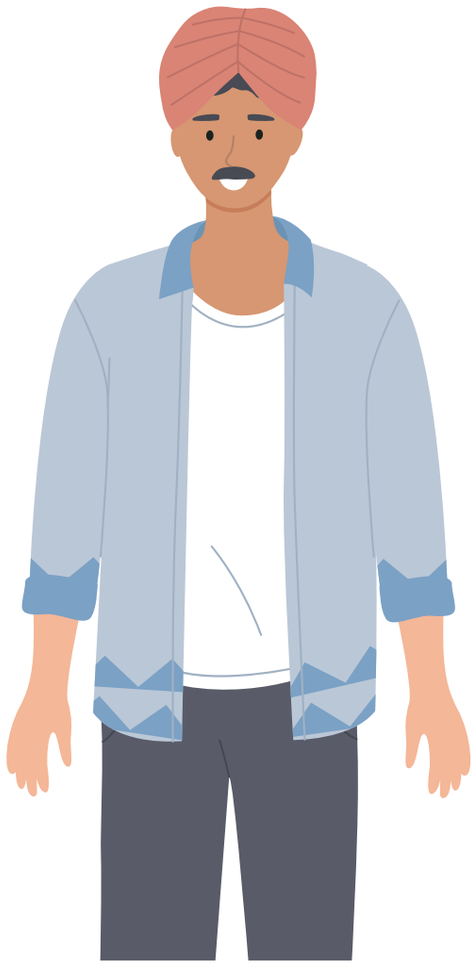
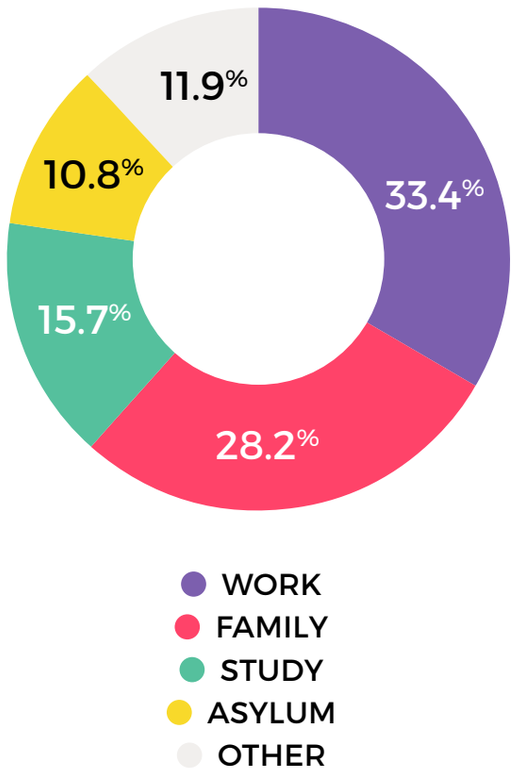


Figure 1:

Reasons why migrants come to Northern Ireland



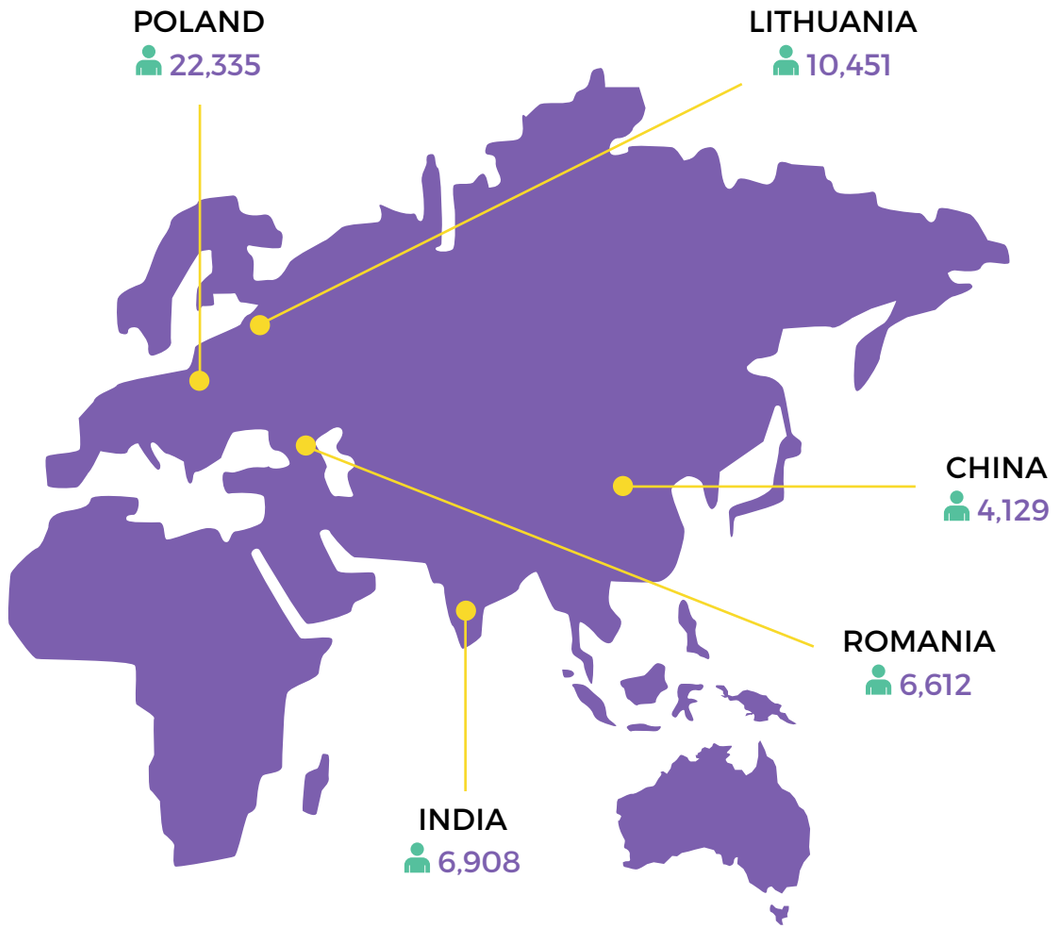
[3] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2021) Long-Term International Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland 2020. Available here.

[4] Kernaghan, D. (2014) Believe in Childcare? An investigation into the childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. Available here.

Country of Birth

Number of people living in NI who were born outside the UK and ROI.

The number of people living in NI who were born outside the UK and ROI has increased from 81,500 people in 2011 to 124,300 people in 2021. This accounts for 6.5% of the total population living in NI in 2021 compared to 4.5% in 2011. Of those born outside the UK and ROI, 3.5% were born in a European country within the European Union (EU) with the largest numbers drawn from Poland (22,335), Lithuania (10,451) and Romania (6,612). A total of 2.8% were born from other countries around the world such as India (6,908) and China (4,129). A further 0.2% of NI residents were born in European countries outside of the EU. The top three council areas with the highest percentage of residents born outside the UK and ROI is Belfast (9.8%), Mid Ulster (9.2%) and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (8.6%).



Languages

A diverse range of languages are now used in NI. Census 2021 results indicate that 4.5% of the population living in NI do not have English or Irish as their main language. Figure 2 illustrates the most prevalent main languages within this group across NI. 'Other languages' accounts for 40.1%, followed by Polish (25.4%) and Lithuanian (11.4%).

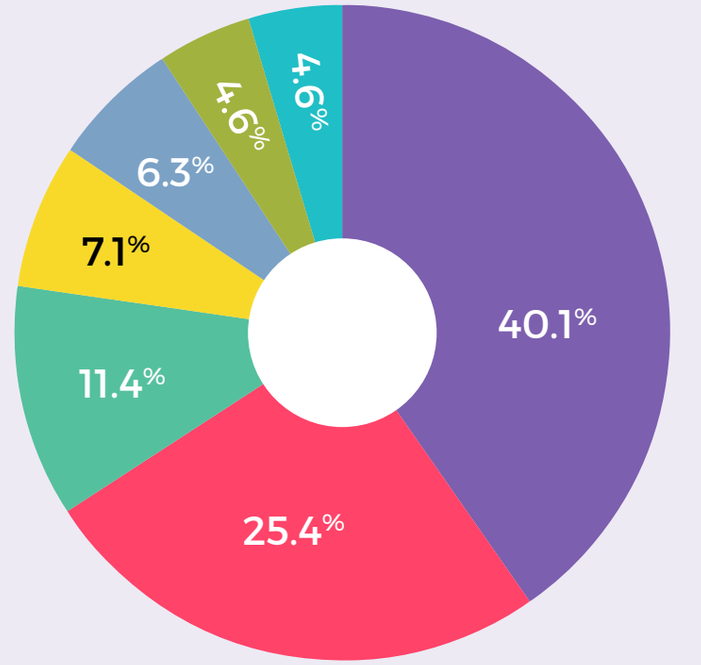
Results show local variations of people who do not have English or Irish as their main language with the highest rates in Mid Ulster (7.7%), Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (6.2%) and Belfast City Council areas (6.2%). Ards and North Down Council area had the lowest rates of variation with 2.1% of people not having English or Irish as their main language.

English Proficiency

On a NI basis, 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. Compared to all other council areas, Belfast City Council has the highest numbers of people who report they can speak English very well (11,300) or well (7504). Underlining the range of English language proficiency within the area, Belfast City Council also had the highest number of people who could not speak English well (3728) or at all (830).

Figure 2:

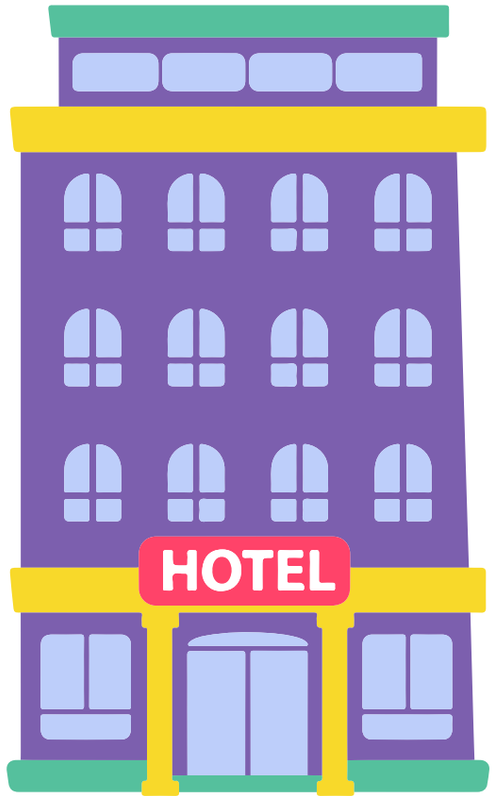
Main Language Other than English or Irish in Northern Ireland



Source: Census 2021

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.[5] 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. Ten of the 14 hotels used in Northern Ireland as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers are located in Belfast.[6] 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.[7] 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.



10/14

OF HOTELS USED IN NORTHERN IRELAND AS CONTINGENCY ACCOMMODATION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS ARE LOCATED IN BELFAST.

[5] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022) Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin - Country of birth. Available here.

[6] Law Centre NI (May 2022) Law Centre submission to the Advisory Committee to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Available here.

[7] The Detail (June 2022) Major rise in hotel use for asylum-seekers: "It feels like we are in a prison" Available here.

Northern Ireland Policy Context

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 Northern Ireland[8] 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.[9] Although the need for a robust data monitoring framework was again set out in the subsequent Racial Equality Strategy 2015 – 2025[10], no progress in this area has been made. This absence of data has contributed to an inadequate understanding of the diverse needs within ethnic minority communities in different areas of Northern Ireland and a lack of strategic planning of services. One example of this, which specifically affects ethnic minorities, is English language provision.

Northern Ireland does not currently have a strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)[11]. Up until the Census 2021 data was released in September 2022, organisations had to rely on outdated data about ethnicity, country of birth and language from Census 2011 for service planning. This is problematic as the context of migrant working changed as a consequence of Brexit in 2016. In addition, Northern Ireland began to participate in UK wide refugee resettlement schemes and received more asylum seekers which changed the demographics of people settling here. Figures indicate that under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme 1853 individuals have been welcomed to Northern Ireland between 2015 - 2022.[12] Up to date data is needed to understand the scale of the need within different ethnic minority communities and provide appropriate provision which meets the needs of those who want to access English language provision.

The following sections outline research on factors which should be considered in providing effective ESOL provision followed by a brief outline of the current ESOL provision in Northern Ireland.

[8] 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. Available here.
[9] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005 – 2010. Available here.
[10] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Racial Equality Strategy 2015 – 2025. Available here.
[11] While the Department for the Economy (DfE) conducted a consultation with providers of ESOL classes and ESOL learners in 2021 no ESOL Strategy has yet to be published. Key findings from the DfE consultation highlighted the need for better communication around available courses, lack of enough places to meet current demand for ESOL classes and identified childcare provision as a requirement to support learners access ESOL classes.
[12] Parizzi, L (2022) Annual ESOL Regional Coordination Report Northern Ireland 2021- 22. Available here.

ESOL Provision: What Works?

To date, much research about ESOL has focussed on barriers which prevent learners accessing classes. These barriers include the cost of classes, travel costs, lack of childcare provision, lack of information about classes, waiting lists and lack of higher level classes.[13] Less research or evaluation has been undertaken to understand which approaches to English language acquisition are most effective in providing good outcomes for learners. Work from other parts of the UK can provide some insights into what works for a range of learners to improve their English language. Demographic characteristics of individual learners have been identified as a factor in English language acquisition. Results drawn from a large scale, longitudinal study of refugees[14] who have been resettled to the UK found that pre-migration education, age and gender are significant predictors of lower language proficiency:

Pre-migration Education:
Results show how levels of education prior to arrival in the UK affected participants' English language capabilities. Those who had no education before arrival in the UK had worse English than those who had any level of education. In addition, those who had been to university had significantly better English than any of the other groups.

Age:
Findings show older age was related to lower levels of language. Reasons identified included shame and not wishing to be exposed or humiliated by making mistakes and the perception of being too old to learn.

Gender:
Males rated their language proficiency more highly than women. Findings indicate that this was due to males having more educational opportunities prior to migration with women carrying out more childcare and caring responsibilities which limited access to courses.

[13] Morrice, L., Tipp, L.K., Collyer, M. and Brown, R. (2021) 'You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication': English language learning among resettled refugees in the UK. Journal of Refugee Studies. Available here.
[14] Ibid.

As well as taking into account demographic characteristics, consideration of how and where ESOL classes are organised also seem to play a role in supporting positive outcomes for learners. An evaluation of the ESOL for Integration Fund (EFIF) was launched by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in 2020 with the purpose of encouraging the integration of communities by improving language proficiency. The fund adopted a localised place based design where classes were held in community settings such as community centres, adult education centres, places of worship, arts centres, schools, library or council buildings.

There were two elements of the EFIF:

1

Teaching:

The Fund provided two hours per week of English language sessions to individuals with little or no English. The programme focussed on the four components of reading, writing, speaking and listening and all taught sessions were required to be led by qualified Level 5 + ESOL tutors. In addition to the taught sessions, all learners had to agree to attend one information session.

2

Social Club:

Up to 25% of the funding in each area could be used to provide leisure and social activities with the aim of creating opportunities for learners to practice English in an informal setting.

[13] Morrice, Linda, Tipp, Linda K, Collyer, Michael and Brown, Rupert (2021) 'You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication': English language learning among resettled refugees in the UK. Journal of Refugee Studies. Available here.
[14] Ibid.

A total of 6,508 enrolments were recorded across 30 local authorities in England.
Key results of the independent evaluation of the EFIF[15] included:

- **English language proficiency scores improved:**
  Results found improvement was stronger for speaking and listening than for reading and writing. Nearly a quarter (24%) of participants moved up at least one level in speaking and listening, compared with 16% who did so for reading and 18% who did so for writing.

- **Improved social integration among learners:**
  Learners reported more frequent interactions in English with the proportion speaking to three or more individuals in English over the previous week increasing from 34% to 62%. Among participants with children, more felt confident speaking to people at their child's school in English, increasing from 8% to 29% by the end of their course. Learners were more likely to 'definitely agree' that people from different backgrounds get on well in their local area with 23% of participants at the start compared to 33% at programme end.

- **Reduced Digital Exclusion:**
  Digital literacy and use of technology increased over the programme.[16] Before the course 30% of participants had used technology three or more times a week which increased to 53% following the course.

Participants also reported a range of other benefits of attending the course. This included improved knowledge of health and wellbeing, reduced social isolation, improved mental health and increased motivation to progress in learning. Results of the evaluation found that these positive outcomes were influenced by the use of Level 5-qualified ESOL tutors and the use of community spaces for delivery. Delivery by community providers was seen as key to recruiting learners who were traditionally more 'hard to reach' and providing local context to the course. In terms of improvements, both learners and staff reported that longer courses and more frequent classes would have a greater impact of learning.

More class time in longer programmes was felt to be particularly important for learners with low levels of English in order to support their language acquisition and progression. Recognising the significant variance in learners' level of proficiency, staff recommended that streaming learners by ability would have been beneficial in the programme. Participants also highlighted that the lack of sustainable funding available to build on the EFIF programme meant that it would be difficult to continue delivery of ESOL classes in this way.

[15] Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (August 2022) Evaluation of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for Integration Fund Final report. Available here.
[16] Please note authors were unable to identify how much this result was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

ESOL Provision in Northern Ireland

Currently most ESOL provision in Northern Ireland is delivered through six regional further education (FE) colleges. The FE colleges offer structured, non-accredited and accredited programmes that may lead to formal, recognised qualifications such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and those developed by Cambridge English Assessment. Both qualifications are based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which is an international standard for describing language ability and was developed to form a common basis to understand the different levels of language proficiency. The CEFR describes in a comprehensive way "what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively."[17] CEFR presents six Common Reference Levels.

These levels have been divided into three broad categories:

The descriptions of levels in the CEFR are skills-based and take the form of 'can do' statements to describe what learners can independently do as illustrated in Figure 3. The benefit of using this approach is that there is a shared understanding of levels and qualifications based on the CEFR that can be recognised globally. Figure 4 shows how qualifications provided by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and those developed by Cambridge English Assessment relate to the levels of the CEFR.

[17] Council of Europe (2001) Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Available here.

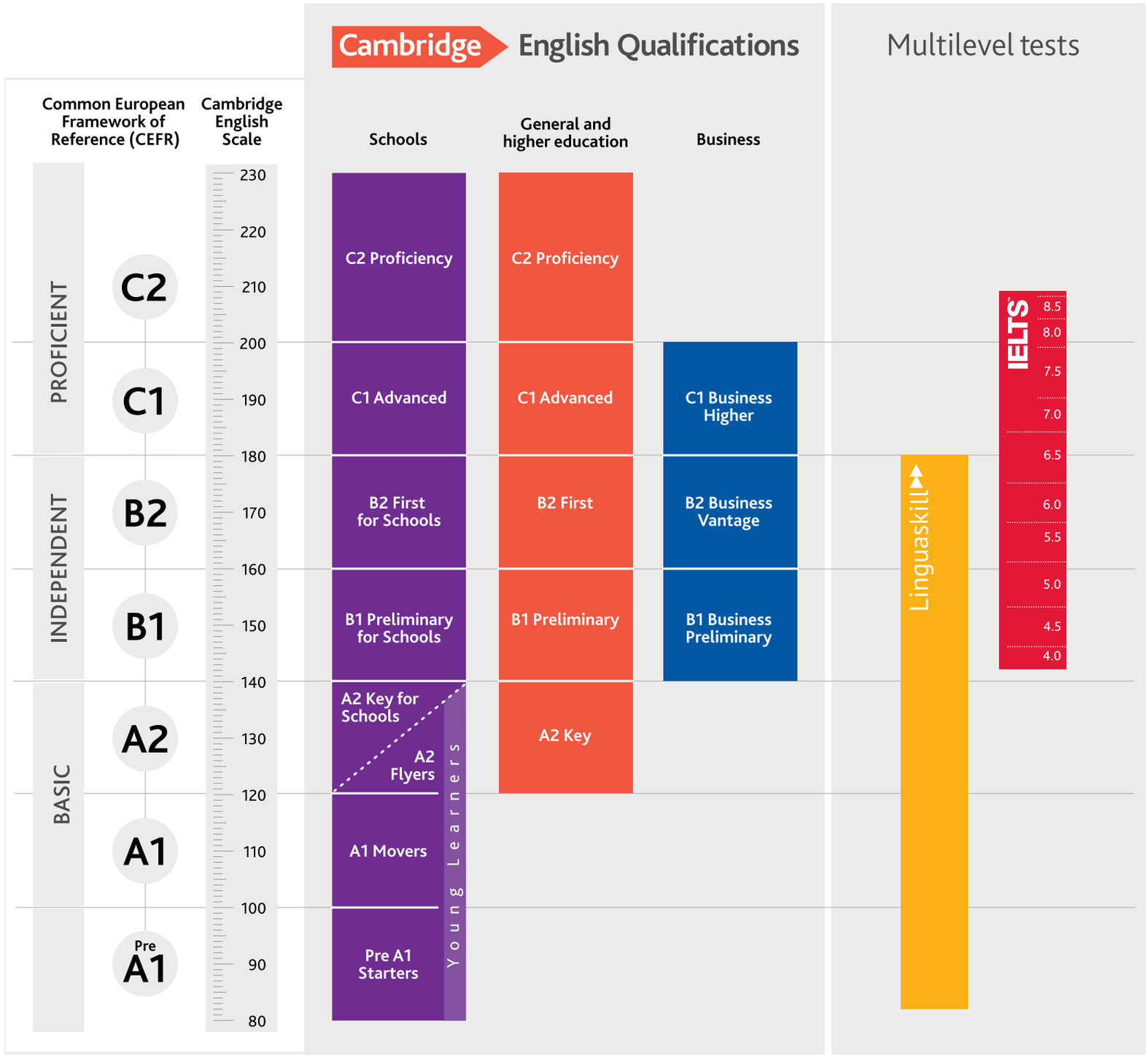
Figure 3: Common European Framework of Reference for Language Global Scale

Source:
Council of Europe, 2001

Basic User	Independent User	Proficient User
A1 Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.	**B1** Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.	**C1** Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
A2 Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.	**B2** Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	**C2** Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

Figure 4:

How CEFR relates to Qualifications Available in Northern Ireland



Source:
Cambridge English Assessment

All potential learners are assessed by FE colleges before the start of the course to ascertain which level best suits their needs. Groups eligible for a funded place on an ESOL[18] course include:

- Asylum seekers;
- Refugees;
- Those granted Humanitarian Protection;
- Participants in the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP);
- Participants in the Afghanistan Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS);
- Participants in the Ukrainian Family Scheme;
- Participants in the Ukrainian Sponsorship schemes, commonly referred to
- as 'Homes for Ukraine'; and
- Those under the Ukraine Extension Scheme who have been granted 6 months leave.

For those who do not fall within the categories above, colleges' normal fee policies will apply. Typical fees for a part time accredited course of six hours a week for one academic year are £350 while a more intensive course of up to 17.5 hours per week would cost a learner approximately £900[19].

Community organisations also provide ESOL programmes supporting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to learn English and encourage progression to vocational/FE courses. Most ESOL programmes in a community-based settings are free for participants, non-accredited and have been developed as a response to the need in the local community. There is no sustainable funding for community and voluntary groups to provide ESOL classes and services tend to rely on support of volunteers or other non-teaching staff.

[18] Department for the Economy Circular Number: FE 10/22 (August 2022) Access to English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Classes in Further Education Colleges. Available here.

[19] Estimates based on Belfast Met Prospectus. Available here.

PART 2:
METHODOLOGY

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.

Aims and Objectives

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.

The 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 organisations provided for ethnic minority communities in South Belfast 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 with a total of seventeen organisations working with ethnic minorities responding to the survey.

Phase 2

Eight focus groups with 43 participants from an ethnic minority background were conducted during April - June 2022. All focus groups were single gender with six focus groups held with 35 females and two focus groups held with eight males. Translators were available for all focus groups with four groups being held with a translator present. 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.

PART 3: **RESULTS**

Section 1:

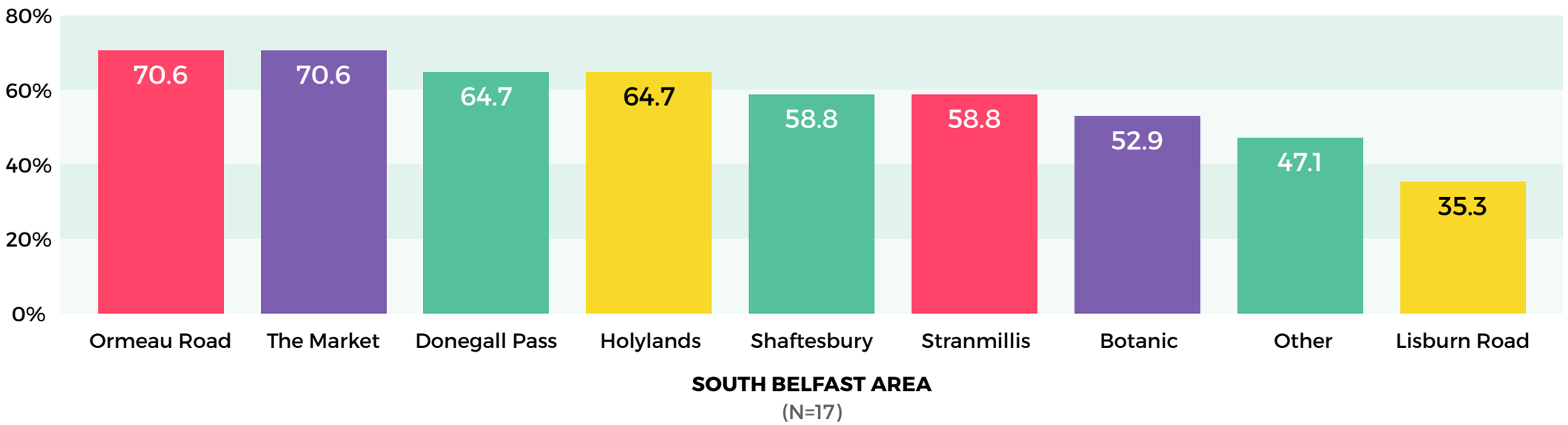
Overview of Key Demographics

Organisations Working with Ethnic Minorities in South Belfast

Participants were asked how many people from an ethnic minority background does their organisation support on an average week. Most organisations reported supporting between 1 – 30 people from an ethnic minority background (41.2%) with 29.4% supporting between 31 – 40 in an average week. Three organisations (17.6%) who provided childcare, community development and English language services support over 100 people from an ethnic minority background in an average week.

Organisations operated across a wide range of areas with the majority of groups working in the Inner South Belfast areas of the Ormeau Road (70.6%), The Market (70.6%) and Donegall Pass (64.7%) as shown in Figure 5. Places reported as 'other' included the Village area and Ravenhill.

Figure 5:
Areas of South Belfast Organisations Provide Support for Ethnic Minorities

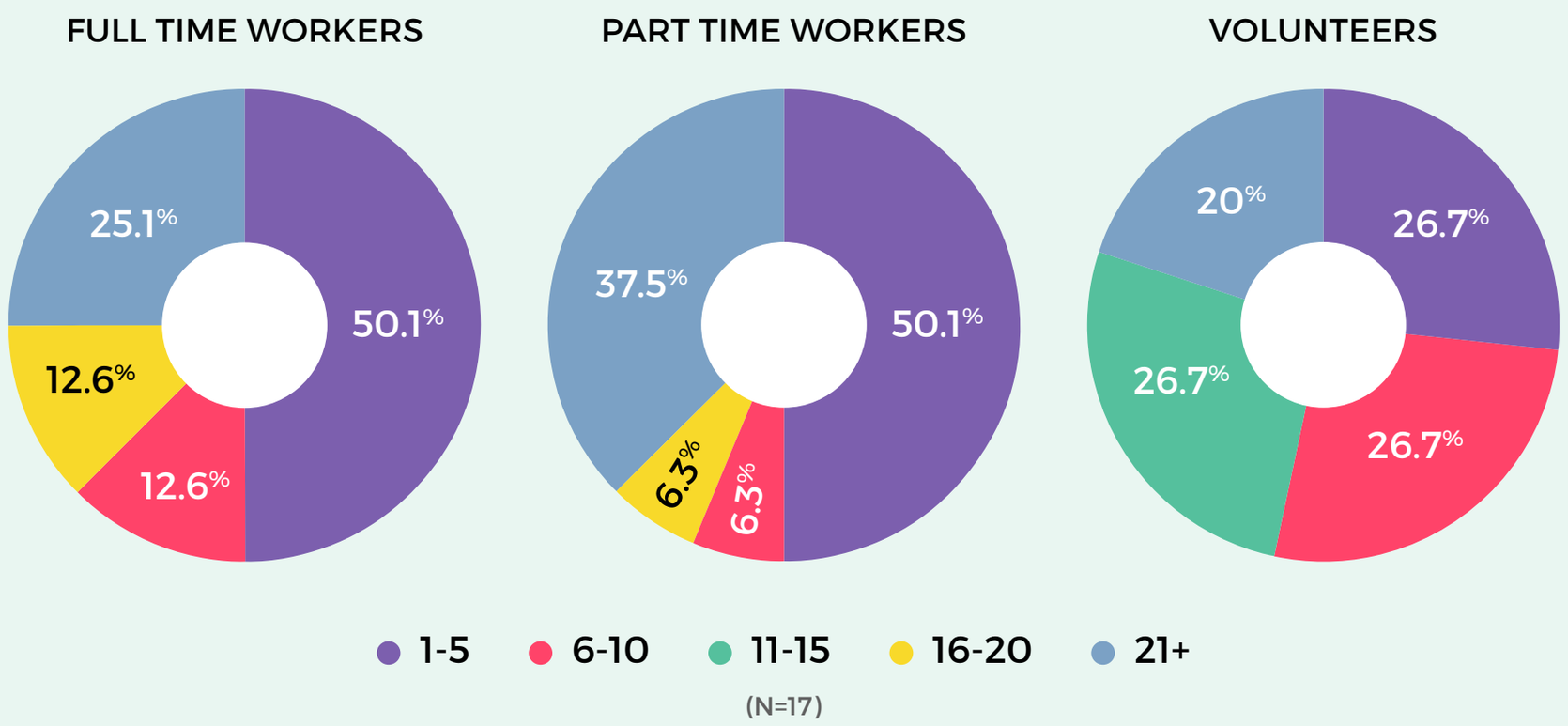


Profile of Workforce

Participants were asked to estimate the workforce of their organisation in terms of full time workers, part time workers and volunteers. Findings indicate that most organisations employ between 1 – 5 full time workers (50.1%) and 1 – 5 part time workers (50.1%). The use of volunteers is wide spread across the organisations as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6:

Breakdown of Workforce by Staff and Volunteers

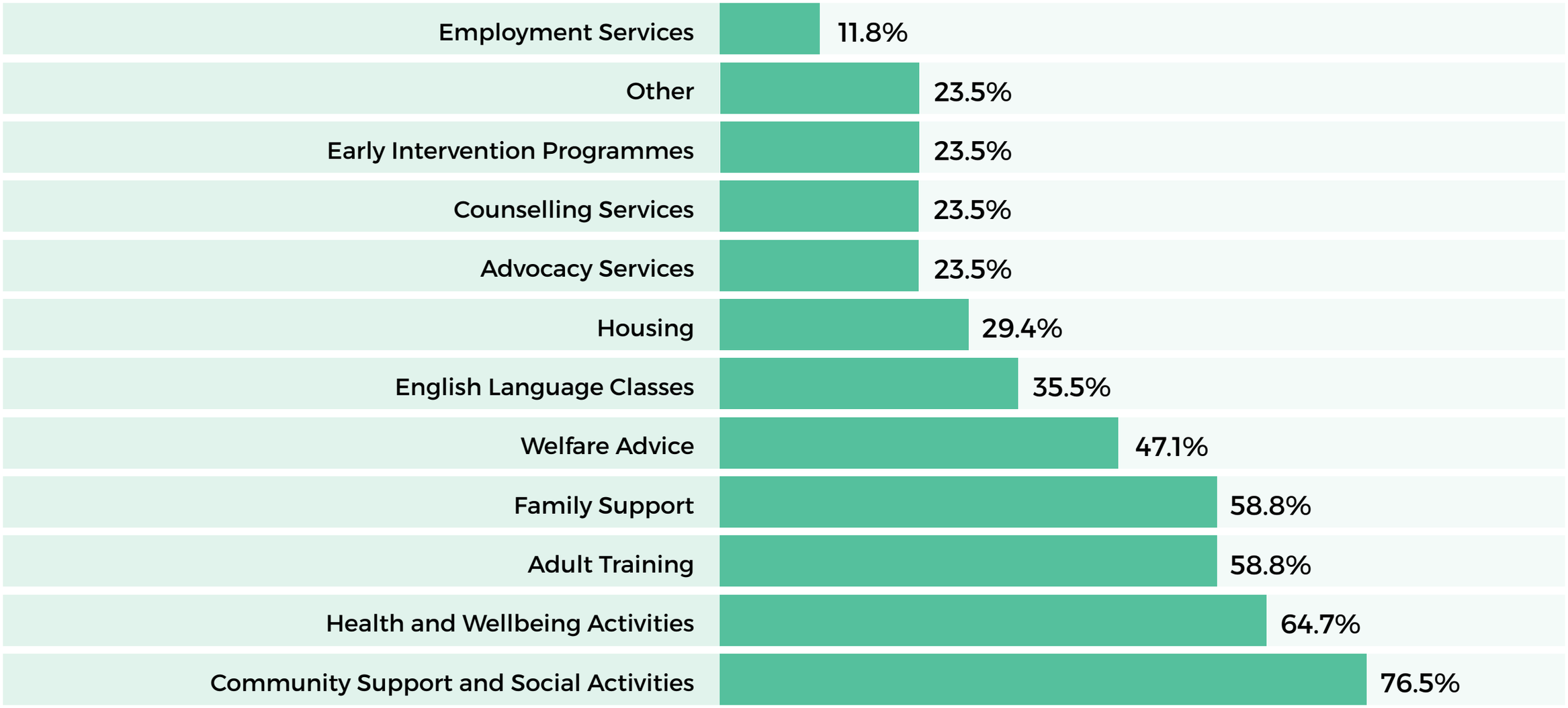


(N=17)

These organisations offered a broad range of services to people from an ethnic minority background as illustrated in Figure 7. Results show that on average organisations offered 4.7 types of services to support ethnic minorities including housing, employment and training, childcare, advice and opportunities to integrate with the local community. Organisations most frequently offered community support and social activities (76.5%), health and wellbeing activities (64.7%), adult training (58.8%) and family support (58.8%). Just over one third (35.3%) of organisations offered English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.

Figure 7: Range of Services for Ethnic Minorities

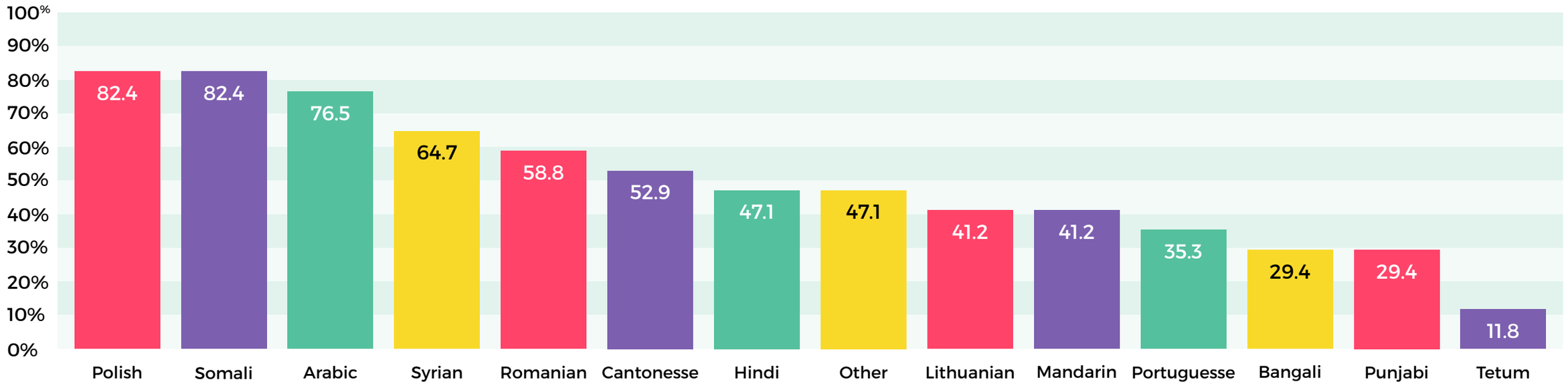
(N=17)



Organisations identified that they worked with service users with 22 different languages. 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 8. Other languages accounted for 47.1% and included Farsi, Telegu, Romani and Russian.

Figure 8:

Languages of Service Users



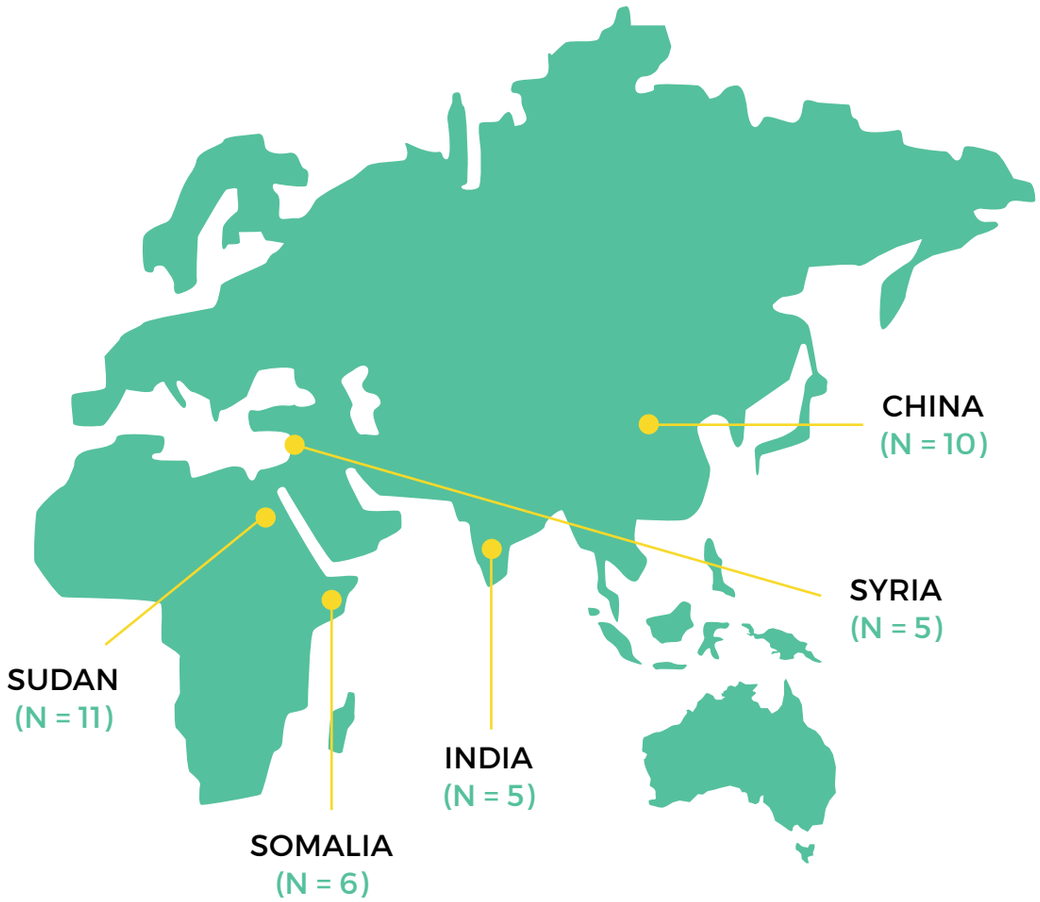
Interestingly, the top three languages spoken by participants who attended ESOL classes provided by community organisations in South Belfast were Arabic, Somali and Syrian.

Learner Profile

The key demographic information about focus group participants includes:

Country of Birth:

Participants were drawn from ten different countries including Sudan, China, Somalia India and Syria.

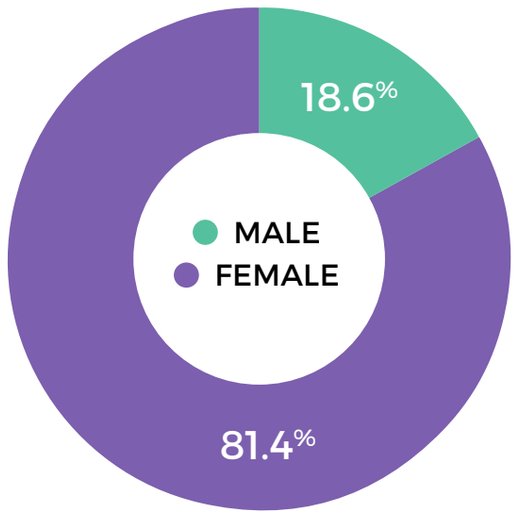


Language:

Most participants were multilingual having either two first languages or having learnt an additional language. The most common first language of participants was Arabic.

Gender:

The majority of the focus group participants were female (n = 35) with eight males.

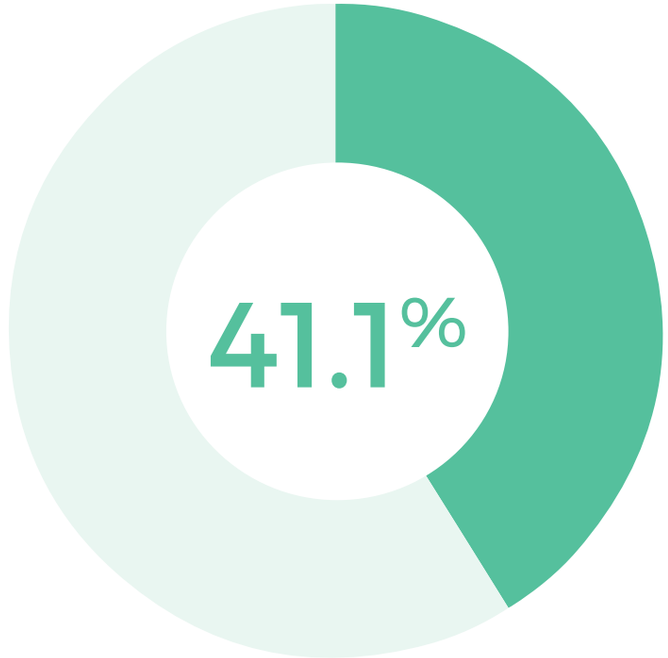


Section 2:

Community-based English Language Provision

Organisational Perspectives

This section explores what community-based language provision in South Belfast looks like from the perspective of the organisations who deliver classes for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Seven out of the 17 participating organisations of the survey provided ESOL classes in South Belfast (41.1%). The following section will explore how community-based English language classes are delivered and what challenges organisations may face.



41.1% OF PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS PROVIDED ESOL CLASSES IN SOUTH BELFAST

Source: Census 2021

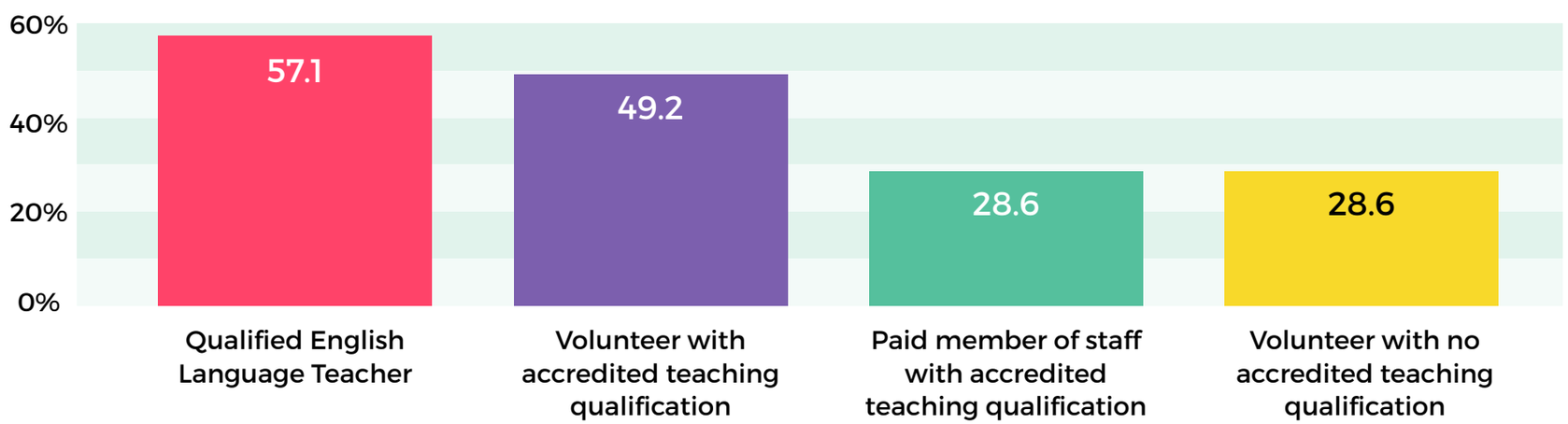
Delivering Community-based English Language Classes

ESOL classes are typically held in community centres or rooms owned or hired by the community organisation. Results show that the duration in weeks of English language classes 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 have some access to a qualified English language teacher (57.1%), findings show community organisations rely on volunteers to deliver ESOL classes. As shown in Figure 9, 49.2% of organisations are supported by volunteers with an accredited teaching qualification with a further 28.6% using 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 9:

Who Delivered English Language Classes

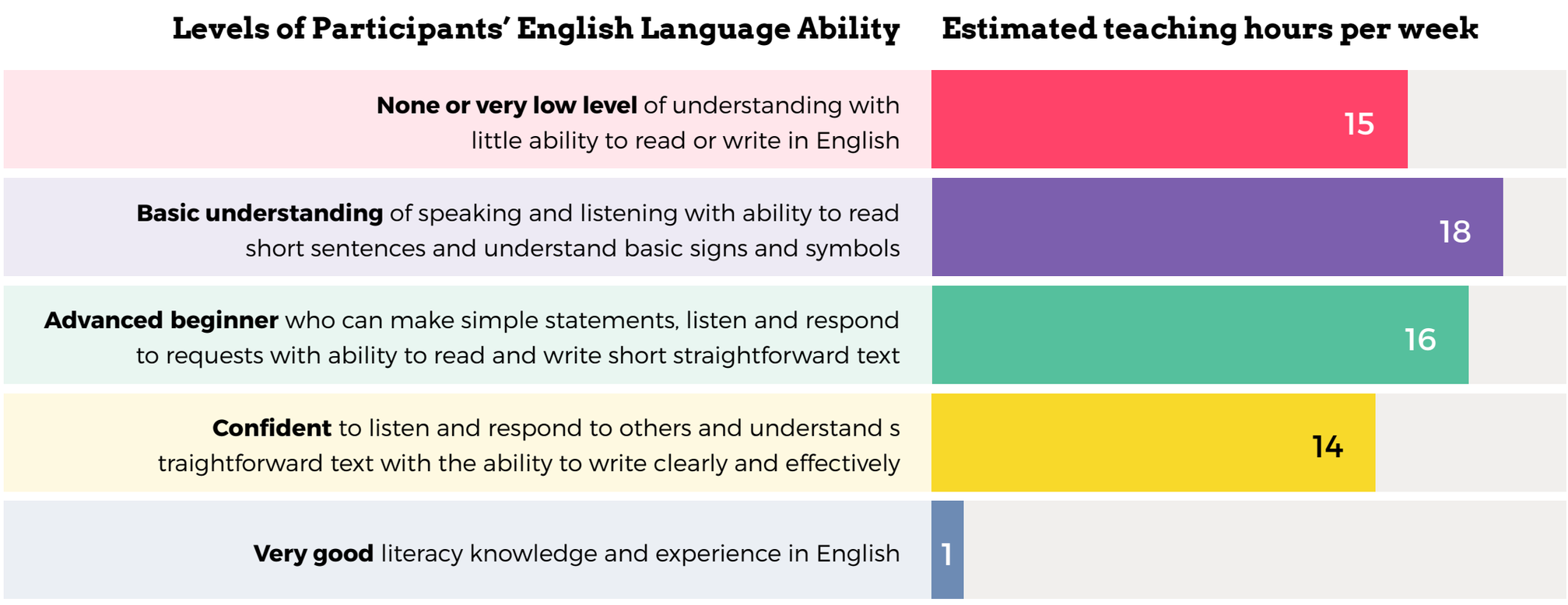


(N=7)

Significantly, findings show that teachers and volunteers in community organisations support learners across a very broad range of abilities. In addition to teaching learners with different languages, teachers and volunteers may teach learners with no English language to those with very good literacy as displayed in Figure 10.

Figure 10:

Estimated teaching hours per week by Participants' English Language Ability



(N=7)

>1/3

OVER ONE THIRD OF THOSE ON THE WAITING LIST WERE PERCEIVED AS HAVING NO ENGLISH

Organisations were asked to estimate how many people attended ESOL classes per week. Figures ranged from six to over 50 learners accumulating to upwards of 160 people per week. Half of these organisations reported that they needed to use a waiting list as demand for ESOL classes exceeds their capacity to deliver. Organisations estimated that they had 109 people on a waiting list for English language classes. Over one third of those on the waiting list were perceived as having no English (34.7%) and 28.4% were perceived to have a basic understanding of English.

- *"We have huge demand for every class, around 150 learners register each term."*
- *"Our waiting list is currently at 20 and this is without us advertising that we run English Classes."*
- *"Waiting list is chiefly due to the lack of childcare. Many ethnic minority women who are on our waiting list have young children and at any given time we have 8 to 10 people waiting for a childcare place in ESOL classes."*

In order to manage the demand for ESOL classes in the area, the majority of organisations (57.1%) used some form of criteria around who can access their classes. Criteria to access classes could be based on immigration status, age or level of English language proficiency. One organisation's criteria was based on membership.

- *"Learners must be either refugees, asylum seekers or low income migrants."*
- *"Usually we are assessing people at an intermediate or upper intermediate level as our classes are based on language for work."*

This model of service delivery which typically provides short term English language programmes and relies on volunteers to support learners of varying abilities from different countries is challenging for community organisations in a number of ways. These challenges will be discussed in the following section.

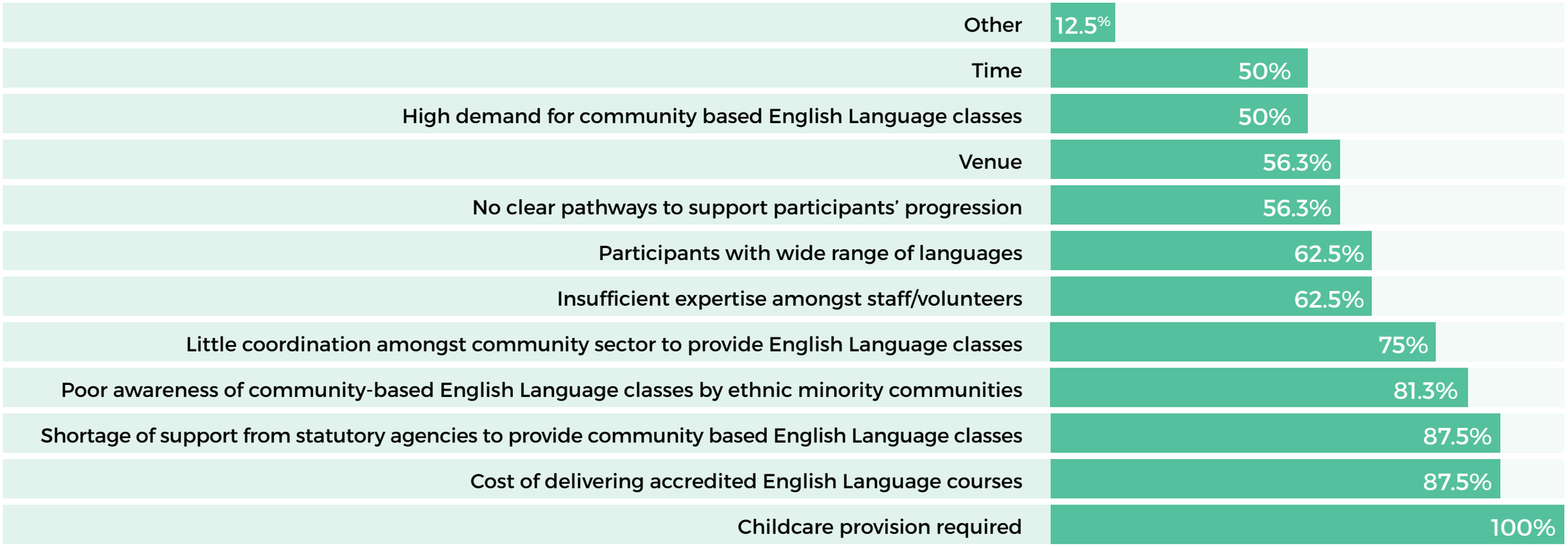
Challenges of Delivering English language Provision from an Organisational Perspective

All participants of the survey were asked to identify the challenges that community organisations may face when providing ESOL classes. As shown in Figure 11, organisations identified multiple challenges to providing English language classes. Results show that the top three most common challenges of organisations are lack of childcare provision (100%), funding for community-based English language courses (87.5%) and shortage of collaboration between statutory agencies and community organisations (87.5%). These three issues are discussed below.

Figure 11:

(N=17)

Challenges to Providing English Language Classes faced by Community Organisations



Childcare

All community providers recognised the lack of childcare as a challenge to providing English language classes. This was problematic in a number of ways. 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 as highlighted by participants in the survey.

"The lack of time and having both childcare and family responsibilities is also one of a barrier most ethnic minority women can experience in accessing community-based English Language classes."

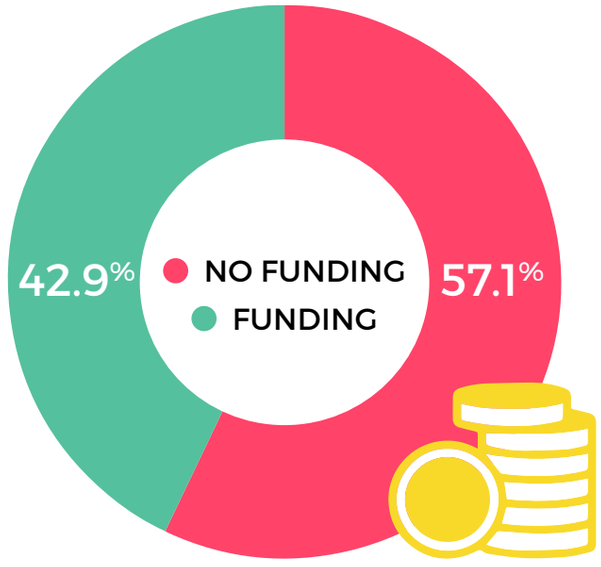
"Mothers who are single parents or who are main carers not having childcare to attend a daytime course."

Funding

The cost of delivering accredited ESOL courses for community-based organisations has been identified as a challenge by the majority of organisations (87.5%). All organisations provided their English language classes free for participants. However, participants report that little funding is available for them to deliver ESOL classes. As shown in Figure 12, 57.1% (n = 4) of organisations that delivered ESOL classes did so without any funding.

Figure 12:

Percentage of Organisations who Receive Funding to Deliver English Language Classes



Participants reported that the funding their organisation did receive was limited as it often was on a single year and was focussed solely on tutor costs. 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:

- *"Securing the funding is getting more and more difficult. Lots of this type of funding has been cut over the years making it more difficult to provide classes."*

- *"The lack of finance to deliver accredited ESOL and pay an ESOL teacher. We rely heavily on our volunteers (one of whom is a trained teacher), however they don't necessarily have the correct skills set. The area has a very high demand and we simply can't accommodate it, therefore we have a very long waiting list."*

- *"We get very little financial support from outside organisations, many of whom have little knowledge of the demand for classes."*

Participants highlighted that the total costs to community organisations for provide ESOL classes such as room hire, creche and associated administration costs are rarely covered by funders.

"It is not enough to just provide a ESOL tutor and an accredited pathway - there is a lot of wrap around work and support that is required from the Community group to support and sustain the ESOL learners. Sometimes it can take a few hours just to enrol a student and decide the correct level for them and organise additional support. This is true of ongoing monitoring of the learners' attendance and support in addressing the barriers to their progress. This aspect is often overlooked by funders and providers. Community groups are just expected to provide this support and it is not often acknowledged."

A total of 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 include the need for investment to develop partnership working between statutory agencies and community organisations which includes a recognised pathway for learners and referral system:

- *"I believe we need to form a stronger network amongst community groups, the civil service and language providers such as myself. We need to adopt a referral system. We need large amounts of financial investment into supporting BAME groups and language provision."*

- *"At our face to face classes we are often over subscribed and many people don't have our entry level requirements, referring out to other organisations is hugely problematic as classes change all the time and subscriptions are always high. There needs more structure to the learning and a greater focus on pathways to developing stronger skills in reading/ writing and speaking."*

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 is 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 was on survival:

- *"In a lot of cases people have very low income levels and barely scrape by day to day. They also feel isolated due to economic and language barriers. The main barrier they have in accessing EL classes locally is that there is no provision."*

- *"Ethnic minority users of food bank services are often struggling to get food on the table and manage their children's needs so they don't have time to think about resolving their language issues."*

Section 3:

English Language Classes from Learners' Perspectives

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. In this way, participants of the focus groups had various levels of understanding of English. The section begins with understanding participants' motivation to learning English, followed by exploring their perspectives of learning English in a community-based setting.

The Value of English Language

While acknowledging that participants have different needs in relation to English language, 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.

Although participants emphasised the importance of acquiring English to integrate into society, a theme identified throughout the focus groups was the difficulty learners had in understanding local accents. Participants reported that it could be challenging to communicate with local people due to the speed of their speech or use of colloquialisms and this effected their confidence:

"I cannot understand their accent or fast English. Sometimes I take my daughter to the creche, and I am sitting there for an hour and a half and there is a lot of people speaking but I cannot understand them. I see people sitting there for one hour, and one hour and a half just like talking together, enjoying their time. I just want to understand but never understand. I need this course."

FEMALE
FROM SUDAN

"We are new, and we want to speak with them [local people] we want to mingle with them but sometimes the accent, there is hesitation to speak."

FEMALE
FROM INDIA

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:

- *"That is a main concern of mine, I am looking for a new job. If I stayed at home, I am comfortable to speak in my mother tongue language, definitely it won't improve my English communication skills. By interacting with local people and English speakers only will I improve myself."*
  FEMALE FROM INDIA

- *"For me because I have studied aerospace engineering it would help me to get into the field of an engineer role which I guess English is one of the main things, the main requirements in order to join a company. They will be asking for English as one of the conditions of entry."*
  MALE FROM SUDAN

- *"I want to learn English, I want to speak, I want to be an interpreter."*
  FEMALE FROM SUDAN

Key to this was achieving qualifications from an accredited source. The need for qualifications was particularly strong in both focus groups with 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, females in this group 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.

Learners' Perspectives of English Language Provision

Overall, participants reported positive experiences of accessing English language provision in community-based settings such as community centres, churches or drop-in centres run by charities. Participants found community-based English language classes to be good quality, convenient and accessible as all classes were free. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data from the focus groups identified multiple benefits of attending community-based language provision including the opportunity to connect with others, access other services and learn new skills as outlined below.

Connection:
The opportunity to meet and build relationships with others in the local community was identified by most participants as a benefit of learning English in a community-based setting. Connection came from two main sources: teachers and staff and other service users. Learners spoke of good relationships with teachers. Teachers supported both their English language and provided help with a range of other issues such as form filling, talking about NI culture and history and having extra time at the end of classes for informal conversations.

Classes within the community also provided a regular place to meet and socialise with other people attending the class. Participants reported that this reduced their social isolation and increased their sense of belonging within the community. This was particularly significant for women with children who reported that their interactions outside of their home and culture were limited. Specifically, women reported attending a community setting was the only opportunity they had to practice English as they spoke in their first language at home and with others of a similar background. It is also important to note that women reported that they felt safe attending English classes based in their local community as they could attend female only classes.

Accessing Other Services:
Reflecting the range of services community organisations as presented in Figure 7, participants also recognised there were multiple benefits of attending their local community centres to support their integration, search for employment and support for their family. Staff in community-based organisations were often viewed as the first place participants sought advice and support around how to access services such as the GP, welfare or schools.

Learning New Skills:
By attending English language classes, participants also had the opportunity to take part in other activities that supported their English acquisition. Participants spoke about taking part in a range of courses such as Essential Skills in Maths and ICT, Beauty Therapy and Nail Art. Opportunities to learn new skills such as cooking or yoga were also available in addition to social events.

FEMALE FROM INDIA

Challenges from a Learners' Perspective

Participants in the focus groups were asked if there was any way in which English language provision in community-based setting could be improved. Drawing on their experiences as a learner, participants identified a number of areas in which the current provision does not meet their needs.

These areas include:

Lack of Childcare:

Reflecting one of the main challenges organisations identified in Section 2, the lack of childcare provision was identified by most participants as a barrier for accessing English language provision in a community-based setting. 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:

- *"Some English classes they don't accept to have your kids with you. They don't have childcare services."*
  FEMALE FROM SUDAN

- *"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

Women also noted that afternoon or evening classes were not suitable due to their caring responsibilities with many women also voicing concerns about travelling alone at night.

Lack of Accredited Courses:
Unlike most females, the majority of males in the focus groups had experience of attending accredited ESOL programmes in Belfast Met and within a community-based setting. In this way, males were able to compare how ESOL classes were delivered in different settings. The consensus of the group 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. As discussed in Section 2, organisations represented in the survey recognised that delivering accredited courses within a community-based setting was challenging due to funding and lack of staff expertise to deliver courses. 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.

Mixed Abilities in Class:
Males also raised concerns that community-based settings accommodated too many learners with different levels of English language within one class. Learners could be drawn from multiple language backgrounds with a broad range of English language abilities. As a result, participants suggested that it can be difficult for learners to access a course at the right level which suits their needs, particularly for those with good levels of English.

MALE FROM SYRIA

Viewed within the context of long waiting lists for ESOL classes in both community and FE college settings, accommodating more learners within a class may be one way organisations manage oversubscribed courses. Male participants reported that they had to wait for a place at Belfast Met with three participants currently on a waiting list suggesting that demand for classes has exceeded available places.

Lack of practice:
This was a central theme throughout all the focus groups. As community-based English language classes tended to be for 1 – 2 hours once a week, participants reported that this was not enough time to practice English. Learners wanted access to more English classes throughout the week. 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

- *"Sometimes you come to the class and it's the right class for you, but you can't practice later on, you can't use it."*
  FEMALE FROM SOMALIA

Specifically, women highlighted that they did not have the same opportunities as other family members as their husbands or children could interact with English speakers at work or school.

- *"We need English classes because lack of practice and also the children when they come home we speak in our home we speak our mother tongue, we can't speak in English with them. So our children our husband they are okay because husband working, children are in school so they are easily learning, right? But I'm a homemaker, so many of my friends are homemakers and we are facing difficulties to speak with other people because our grocery or anywhere we are out we are facing difficulty to speak fluently with people."*
  FEMALE FROM INDIA

- *"We all have to do practice and you have to find people to speak with them, for example, my husband speak in Arabic and there is no other people around me to speak with in English and practice my English with them. That's why I have to go to park with my kids and try to hear other people while speaking English."*
  FEMALE FROM SUDAN

Participants recognised this lack of practice resulted in them taking many years to learn English or improve. As a result, they often did not have confidence to engage in English with others:

- *"I want to feel confident for living here. I try to speak here. I have only my own language friends here, I don't have other friends, that is the problem. I don't get a chance to speak in English with others."*
  FEMALE FROM INDIA

- *"The problem is with our community those who are from the same country they want just to speak their language. That is why for you to learn it is so difficult."*
  FEMALE FROM DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

- *"I don't have a lot of chance to talk. That's why I have forgot most of the things I have learnt."*
  FEMALE FROM CHINA

This lack of confidence was exacerbated by the experiences many participants had of trying to communicate with English speakers in their local community. Participants reported that local people could be impatient with them as they tried to talk in English or they spoke too fast for them to understand:

- *"Sometimes if your pronunciation is not like the locals they just say, "Ah, I don't know what you are saying."*
  FEMALE FROM CHINA

- *"My concern is when I want to talk with any people a little bit I hesitate because ah my education is good but lack of practice you know."*
  FEMALE FROM INDIA

- *"Some people will slow down to help us understand but then sometimes they just give up. There are not many people who are willing to slow down, listen and communicate."*
  FEMALE FROM CHINA

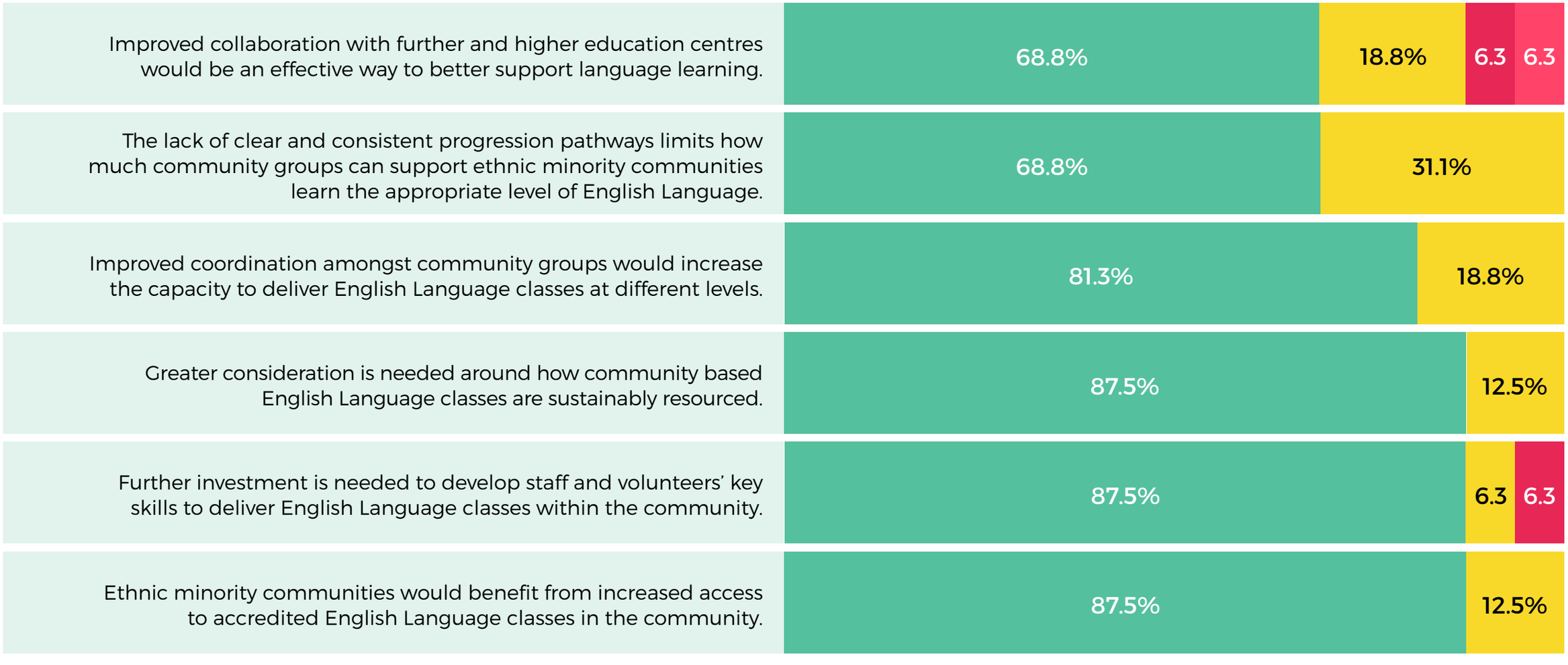
In addition to more English language classes, participants were keen to have greater opportunities in community-based settings to practice English through interacting with others, particularly local people. They felt that this would provide multiple benefits in terms of improving their English, understanding local accents and supporting their integration into the local community.

Section 4:
The Future

In this section, participants of the survey were asked to consider a number of statements about how community-based ESOL classes may be further developed. Drawing from both the responses to the statements and the qualitative data, three main areas for future development emerged. As displayed in Figure 13, there was broad consensus amongst community organisations around funding, progression for learners and collaboration as outlined below.

Figure 13:

Organisations' Perceptions of the Future



Funding:
Results indicate that funding was important in two main ways.
All participants agreed or strongly agreed that greater consideration is needed around how community-based ESOL classes are sustainably resourced. The majority of participants (93.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that further investment is needed to develop staff and volunteers' key skills to deliver ESOL classes within the community.

- *"The area requires funding so the voluntary and community sector organisations can develop appropriate language learning and to increase the capacity of our BAME residents to feel more integrated and also improve their opportunities for employment."*

Progression for Learners:
The lack of access to accredited English language courses was recognised by both community organisations and learners as a gap in provision. All agreed or strongly agreed that increased access to accredited ESOL courses in the community setting would be beneficial for learners. It was also the case that 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.

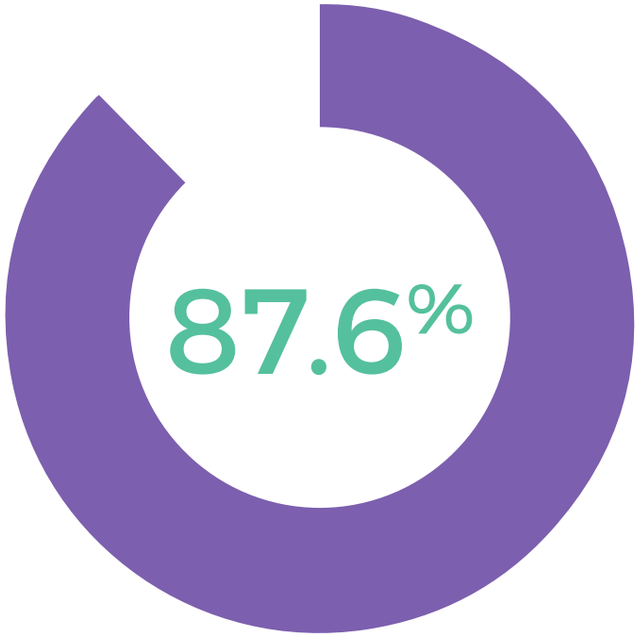
- *"There is huge scope to enhance Belfast and NI by supporting people needing ESOL learning but developing pathways and links to progression is absolutely key. A well thought out and structured programme that has excellent outreach into communities is key!"*

93.7%

AGREED THAT FURTHER INVESTMENT IS NEEDED TO DEVELOP STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS' KEY SKILLS TO DELIVER ESOL CLASSES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.

Partnerships:
Findings show that organisations recognise collaboration as vital to future development. All participants 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.

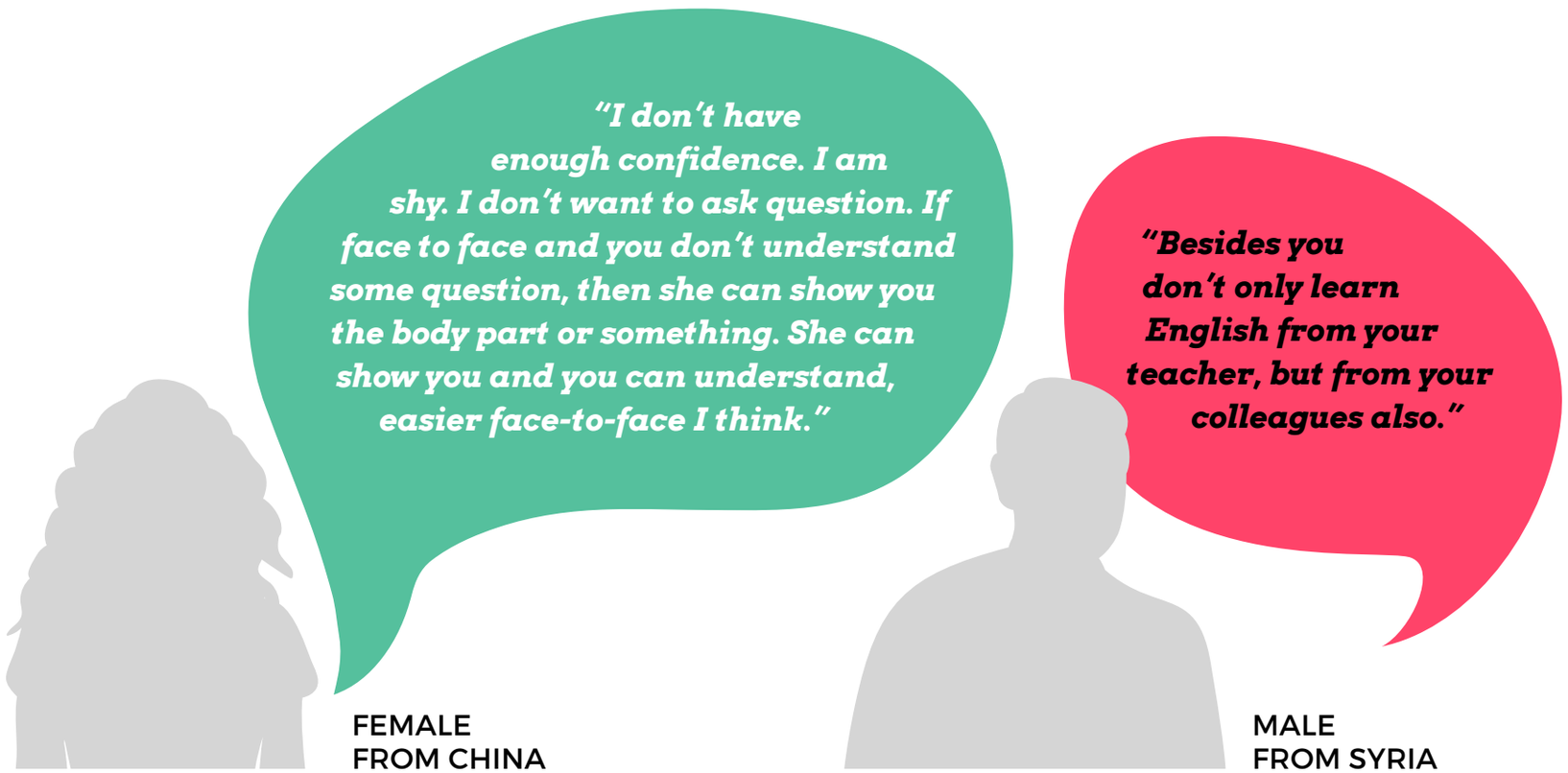
In terms of the future, results show that the majority of community organisations (75.0%) would like to deliver English language classes. Interestingly, 29.4% of organisations who do not currently deliver English language classes would like to in the future indicating the potential for growth in this area.



OF PARTICIPANTS AGREED THAT IMPROVED COLLABORATION WITH FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION CENTRES WOULD BE AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO BETTER SUPPORT LEARNERS.

Learners' Perspectives on Future Development :

Focus group participants were asked to share ideas of how ESOL classes in the community could be improved and developed further. Participants of the focus groups were asked about their views on online learning. Most learners had some experience of online learning due to lockdowns during the COVID19 pandemic. Overall, the majority of participants 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. Learners particularly valued the opportunity to ask questions which they felt improved their English.



Some participants also reported that they preferred going to a class as they were able to focus better without distractions at home or that their internet connection was not good:

> *"Sometimes the internet is not great and too many noises. Some people can put on the TV. And the kids, keep quiet, keep it down!"*
> FEMALE FROM SOMALIA

The exception to those who preferred face to face was one female focus group who had experience of participating in an online course with other people outside of their usual class. They identified benefits to online learning as convenience and ability to continue with caring responsibilities while learning.

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. As previously outlined, participants often felt unable to speak to local people in their everyday lives due to lack of practice, low confidence or previous negative experiences. Participants suggested that social events or smaller one to one meetings with local people would provide opportunities for mutual understanding to develop.

MALE FROM SYRIA

PART 4: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Population of ethnic minority communities living in Northern Ireland

During the past twenty years the population of ethnic minority communities in living in Northern Ireland has increased from 1.8% in 2001 to 6.5% in 2021, yet there has been very little strategic planning to develop a response to the needs of this group. The Language Matters research sought to investigate the current levels of community-based English language provision in Inner South Belfast from the perspectives of both community organisations and learners from an ethnic minority background.

Results showed that all ESOL learners placed value on learning English with integration into the local community as their primary motivation to learn English. Findings identified gender differences in learners' motivation to learn English. Males were more focused on gaining qualifications for employment or further study while females were more likely to report that they wanted to improve their own understanding of English to support their children's education. 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.

Learners also highlighted a number of ways in which provision could be improved. The lack of childcare provision in community-based settings was identified as a barrier, particularly impacting women's participation. Learners wanted to have more opportunity 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. 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. Findings also show that learners experienced waiting lists for ESOL classes held by both community organisations and FE colleges. This indicates a need to increase available places in all settings in Belfast, including extending the provision of accredited ESOL courses accessible in community-based settings.

Community organisations recognised many of the challenges identified by ESOL learners and sought to deliver English language provision within the context of a number of structural challenges which require system change to address. The challenges faced by community organisations include:

Childcare:
Childcare has been identified by both organisations and learners as a significant barrier to accessing ESOL classes. Findings show that the lack of childcare provision specifically impacts women. As a result, women may experience social isolation and take much longer to learn English. Investment by community organisations in suitable venues and trained staff is necessary to support women with dependent children to access ESOL classes.

Funding:
Despite high demand for ESOL classes in the community, findings show that the majority of community organisations delivered ESOL classes without any funding. Organisations suggest that this situation is unsustainable without funding allocated to support community organisations cover the full costs associated with providing ESOL courses. Lack of funding in this area limits the potential of organisations to develop their ESOL work further to offer accredited ESOL qualifications or increase provision to meet the demand and reduce waiting lists.

Collaboration:
Most participants recognised that further work was required to develop effective partnerships with statutory agencies to support English language provision. While partnerships between community organisations have been operating for some time in the area, participants acknowledged that greater co-ordination amongst organisations that provide ESOL classes would be beneficial. Suggestions for establishing greater multi agency collaboration include developing a referral system that matches learners with the most suitable local organisation that can cater to their needs in terms of English language ability, literacy or childcare provision. Consideration should be given to other ways in which statutory agencies and community organisations can collaborate to raise learners' awareness of ESOL provision in the community and make the greatest use of available resources to provide services that support a diverse range of English language learners.

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

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 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.

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.

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.

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

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

Recommendation 3:

Community Involvement

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

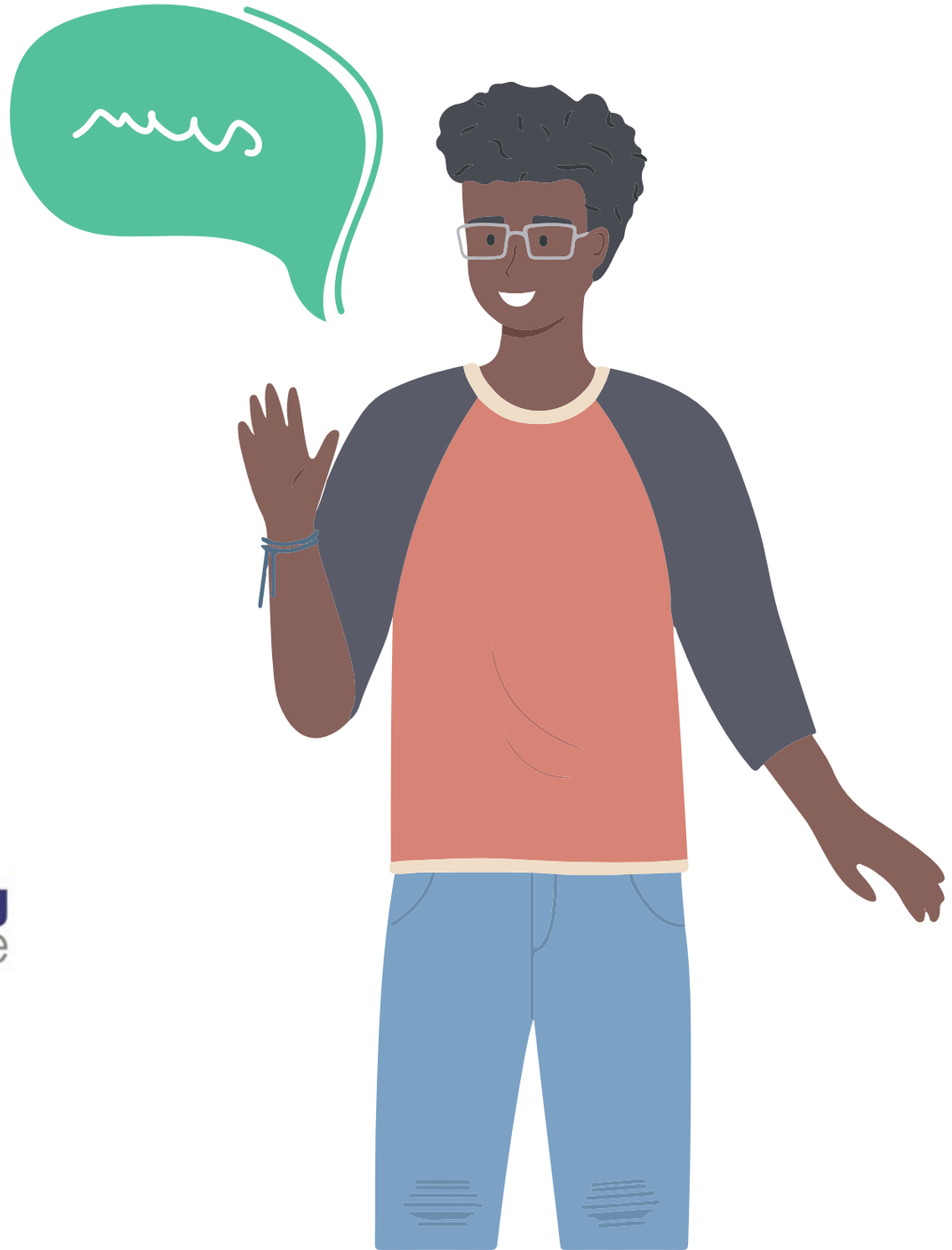
Opportunities to Socialise Together:

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.

STATS & STORIES



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