English language provision for New Scots

Chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.

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# Terminology and list of abbreviations

In line with Scottish Government policy, this report uses the term ‘New Scots’ to refer to: individuals and family members who arrive in Scotland under various refugee resettlement schemes; people who are claiming asylum and resident in Scotland; individuals who receive refugee status or another form of leave such as Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary leave and their family members; people who arrive in Scotland to be reunited with a family member who is a refugee; young people who are claiming or have claimed asylum or have been trafficked into the UK. The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy is also relevant to other displaced groups such as survivors of human trafficking and people who are stateless.

ALS – Adult Learning Strategy

CELTA – Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

COSLA – Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages

LA – Local Authority

NSRIDP – New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project

NSRIS 2 – New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (second iteration)

SRC – Scottish Refugee Council

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# Introduction

This publication is a chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the main report, we provide interpretive frameworks through which integration can be understood, a comprehensive overview of research findings concerning refugee integration in Scotland, and a series of recommendations to inform the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. The findings and recommendations presented in this chapter are based on academic research conducted by the University of Glasgow as part of the New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project (NSRIDP), a partnership project led by the Scottish Government with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts (RILA) at the University of Glasgow. The project sought to expand good practice and innovation in the context of integration in Scotland, as well as conduct primary research on refugee integration in Scotland to support the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (NSRIS). This chapter extract is focused on English language provision for New Scots and is aimed at New Scots, ESOL providers, those working in resettlement, policymakers and other key stakeholders in Scotland.

# ESOL provision in Scotland

*“So, I've got seven classes [a week...] I can't say no [to the learners] because I know there's people waiting [for ESOL classes and] they really want to do it. They're getting pressure from the Home Office, if you're not learning English you're not integrating. It's not fair, and sometimes it's up to two years for waiting lists.”* (Mary, volunteer community group ESOL teacher)

English language education has been identified by UK policy makers as fundamental to supporting integration and improving community cohesion.[[2]](#footnote-2) On reviewing the research that has been done on refugee integration in Scotland, it is clear there is a demand from refugees and asylum seekers for help to improve their English. This allows them to be able to communicate, find employment, and access information on healthcare, housing, or any other service they require.[[3]](#footnote-3) English language education also plays an essential role in shaping refugees’ future and personal plans as well as enhancing their well-being and health.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, learning English is essential to having a democratic voice, reducing isolation, and engaging positively with the host community.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although the Scottish Government has made efforts to make English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision in Scotland free-of-charge for asylum seekers and refugees (unlike the UK strategy of waiving fees depending on immigration status),[[6]](#footnote-6) there has been noticeable underfunding with respect to demand for these classes and to support the aims of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (NSRIS).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Indeed, in Glasgow in particular, even formal college ESOL classes are over-subscribed – which has led to learners in Glasgow waiting for over a year for a college ESOL place. Oversubscription for ESOL is not limited at a Local Authority (LA) level. In one of the other LAs in which fieldwork was conducted, for example, ESOL teachers reported that they were only just able to provide 6-8 hours of ESOL per week. However, once students had progressed and were able to move on to ESOL classes provided by the local college, their classes were reduced to 3-4 hours per week (with students enquiring from their LA teachers if they could return to the lower level in order to access more hours of teaching).

Local authorities play a key role in the provision of ESOL for New Scots. In many cases, ESOL classes provided by LAs tend to be those delivered at the beginner levels and combine with resettlement support offered by the council:

*“If we're looking purely at ESOL for refugees and asylum seekers, they're coming in at a very vulnerable state and it is the Local Authority who has the statutory responsibility to care for these individuals through housing and education for the children and registering for GPs […] So language support is part of that.”* (Greg, Local Authority)

In addition, resettlement officers have the opportunity to get to know people resettled to their Local Authority and often know if someone has specific needs (e.g. related to trauma, disability or childcare) or aims; for example, these officers can help navigate New Scots onto more advanced courses offered through colleges. It is important to note that, throughout Scotland, colleges generally provide more advanced ESOL classes. LAs will refer New Scots onto college courses after they have surpassed the introductory level ESOL classes offered by LAs. While LA ESOL classes can be targeted at New Scots specifically and taught by persons with knowledge and experience of working with vulnerable individuals, this is not the case for most classes provided by colleges.

# ESOL governance

The governance and provision of ESOL in Scotland is complex, diverse and lacking in unified direction. In some circumstances this diversity can be due to geographical differences where, for example, some LAs have managed to house New Scots in close proximity to one another and others have been forced to house New Scots spread across areas. However, it is impossible to overlook the uncertainty caused by recent Scottish Government funding changes in the delivery of ESOL; the general complexity of funding arrangements for ESOL; the decision not to review and renew Scotland’s ESOL strategy; and legacies of diverse past approaches to ESOL across LAs. In this section we briefly examine each of these factors in turn.

Scottish Government funding changes in 2018 gave priority to full-time accredited ESOL courses delivered by colleges and redirected how funding for ESOL was distributed across Scotland. Where LAs previously received funding directly through an ESOL plan, the Scottish Funding Council now provides colleges with funding to run ESOL classes and colleges are able to work with LAs and other third sector organisations to provide ESOL at a local level. While in some locations collaboration between colleges, LAs and third sector organisation was reported as working well, with a clear divide in purpose between ESOL delivered by the college and the LA, Laura (third sector) noted that where she works low-level community classes are taught by the college, the Local Authority and the third sector organisation that she works for. This leads to providers competing for the same students:

*“There’s no central hub [to plan local ESOL delivery...] it is crazily complicated and [the providers] don’t really speak to each other because everybody’s a bit protective. They’re all chasing after the same people, because their funding depends on numbers, and so everybody wants [the students].”* (Laura, third sector)

Stakeholders gave various interpretations of the decision to change the funding system for ESOL in Scotland, including the view that the Scottish Government had believed LAs were not suitably joining up services and that LAs were not suitably capturing data concerning those accessing their services. The result of these changes is that some LAs and colleges have managed to find a means to collaborate and reduce competition for funding through defining specific remits, while others have not:

*“Loads of local authorities have had a really difficult time […] Some local authorities have completely obliterated their ESOL and said that’s delivered by the college. It doesn’t exist in [redacted Local Authority] anymore, the college does all the ESOL provision. The reason you can do that is because you’re not clear about what’s different [between LA and college ESOL provision].”* (Alice, Local Authority)

Another aspect of the complex funding arrangements concerning ESOL is how ESOL funding connects to other budgets for further education and how this interconnection can result in New Scots being given contradictory advice by well-meaning supporters. While one of our practitioner stakeholders said they advised New Scots to attend full time college ESOL courses as soon as possible, others would advise them to stay in LA ESOL classes for longer in order to not use up their allocated three years of college bursary funding, in case they would later want to go on and study an HND course. The funding situation for New Scots is further complicated by the fact that most will attend college ESOL courses on a part-time basis through a college fee-waiver if they are unemployed. However, if they succeed in gaining employment, then they are unlikely to be able to use their bursary to attend college part-time and would not be eligible for a fee waiver for college fees. As a result, New Scots can find themselves in a Catch-22 situation regarding employment, ESOL and higher education. This is, understandably, a confusing situation for both New Scots, LA resettlement coordinators and other supporters to navigate.

Research has previously found that these funding changes had the effect of reducing the availability of part-time ESOL courses, increasing competition for places, and leaving non-accredited courses in a vulnerable position.[[8]](#footnote-8) These changes disproportionately affect newly arrived New Scots, especially as they are more likely to attend informal classes if they lack the connections to be aware of such courses and/or the linguistic ability to navigate the registration process.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many New Scots, especially women with childcare commitments, struggle with the time commitments of full-time ESOL courses despite the [support](https://www.daynurseries.co.uk/advice/a-guide-to-free-childcare-in-scotland-for-2-3-and-4-year-olds#:~:text=All%20three%20and%20four%2Dyear,receive%20some%20form%20of%20support.) that the Scottish Government has put in place for free childcare. As Maryam noted, *“[None] of the English classes that I wanted to register at provide childcare or crèche for kids under school age. I couldn’t start in the college unless my youngest child started a full-time nursery.”* New Scots reported difficulties accessing nurseries within walking distance of their homes, particularly problematic given the lack of free transport for asylum seekers in Scotland.[[10]](#footnote-10) They also struggled to ensure that nursery times overlap with ESOL classes.

A further effect of the complex funding situation for ESOL in Scotland is that money for ESOL classes can come from various pots of funding and LAs are able to utilise this as they best see fit. While this arrangement grants flexibility, it is also creating inequalities amongst New Scots. For example, while some LAs pool money together from funds they receive from the Syrian and Afghan resettlement schemes to deliver ESOL classes to all New Scots, other LAs separate ESOL provision between those on resettlement schemes and people seeking asylum – so that the latter receive far less ESOL provision. Interviewed stakeholders pointed to the Home Office guidance that resettled refugees should receive eight hours of ESOL per week for their first 12 months or until they have a certain level of proficiency,[[11]](#footnote-11) while there was no similar guidance from the Scottish Government concerning New Scots in general and there has been no specific funding allocated for ESOL provision for Ukrainian arrivals.[[12]](#footnote-12) As a result, the amount of ESOL classes offered to non-resettled New Scots also varies depending on the Local Authority.

Not all practitioners felt that New Scots at the lower ESOL levels required eight hours of ESOL per week, as long as their learning could be continued and supported through outside-the-classroom initiatives (such as language classes or employability classes taught in English) where New Scots can practice their language skills in other contexts. These views are supported by the [Sharing Lives, Sharing Languages](https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Sharing_Lives_Sharing__Languages_REPORT.pdf) project, which enabled peer groups to bring together non-native English speakers and local community members under the coordination of peer educators with the aim of complementing the existing ESOL provision through group-based activities which aided language acquisition.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Uncertainty concerning the number of hours of ESOL to provide for New Scots is, according to some stakeholders, compounded by the lack of a revised ESOL strategy for Scotland after the previous strategy expired in 2020. While the aim of Scotland’s new Adult Learning Strategy (ALS) is to incorporate ESOL into the wider aims and context of adult learning, interviewed stakeholders noted that the ALS makes almost no mention of ESOL and provision for vulnerable adults:

*“One of the big concerns [regarding the ALS] is that there was already such an ambiguous funding arrangement for local authorities for ESOL. This just further reduced the visibility of ESOL by having it on a random page in a large document rather than saying, ‘Here's Scotland's ESOL strategy. This is how we help refugees and migrants learn English.’”* (Greg, Local Authority).

During a meeting of ESOL practitioners, stakeholders were concerned over the fact that the Scottish Government has committed to a review of the ESOL strategy but no indication has been given as to when this will happen. Practitioners noted that the previous strategy could be used to in funding meetings to highlight the importance of ESOL in Scotland – although this view was not shared by all. For example, other stakeholders noted how funding for ESOL for New Scots comes predominantly from the UK Home Office and the resettlement schemes anyway, and that the ESOL Strategy for Scotland had not improved funding availability. In addition, stakeholders were of the view that the new ALS views learning progression as a means to assist people entering or moving through college, yet it does not consider the role of adult education (including ESOL) in working with vulnerable people or that learning English is a key element of integration.

The variation in ESOL approaches across Scotland is also due, in part, to legacies of past decisions and ESOL planning at level local government. Separate from funding decisions, variations in approaches across Scotland include differing opinions concerning the need to offer ESOL certificates; reported lack of standardisation across ESOL classes; varying levels of understanding of how to plan and manage classes with vulnerable learners; and differing views concerning how ESOL progression should be understood in the context of New Scots. Stakeholders also reflected on the effects of government funding for ESOL in the past having been put to use by some LAs through adult literacies departments rather than ESOL specialists. They argued that, as a result, in some LAs ESOL is taught with an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) mindset rather than focusing on the needs of those learning it for life in the UK. Moreover, stakeholders noted that the quality of ESOL provision between LAs varied depending on the staff they were able to commit to ESOL-related work. As Lydia stated, *“[some LAs] don’t have an ESOL coordinator at all and [others] have an ESOL coordinator, ESOL employability coordinator, and a refugee and asylum seeker coordinator. So ESOL [provision] is very, very patchy.”*

# An intercultural approach to ESOL

It is also important to note that LAs have encountered cultural difficulties in teaching ESOL with New Scots who have arrived through resettlement routes. Such difficulties extend beyond the need to offer childcare and women-only classes and speak instead to a need to communicate that integration always has to be multi-directional and trauma-informed. For example, with the recent arrival of refugees from Afghanistan, some LA resettlement leads worried that there was a large “cultural gulf” between Scottish and Afghan cultures and that this would affect ESOL delivery and further integration. In this case LA leads were referring to resettled Afghan refugees’ reluctance to join ESOL classes that weren’t aimed solely at resettled Afghans. During the course of a discussion concerning the provisions being made for resettled Afghan refugees, one LA lead was reminded of the cultural challenges they still experience with resettled Syrian ESOL learners that they have not yet managed to overcome:

*“Syrians for the most part live in a patriarchal society [and...] many are suspicious of how we do things in the UK […] In particular we’ve had cases where Syrian women that have come [to Scotland] as single women/mothers being treated very badly by other Syrians […] treated with suspicion. How are you then supposed to include those Syrian women in ESOL classes?”* (Lydia, Local Authority)

Despite the assistance that resettled refugees have received in Scotland, it is important to be mindful of the continuing effects of the refugee journey that most New Scots (including resettled refugees) have experienced. *"You get the sense that people [in the sector] have grown frustrated with the Syrians,”* said Adam (third sector), *“that after five years their English should be better and that they should be in work. But people forget just how vulnerable most of these families were before arriving and the challenges they still experience.”* This viewpoint was echoed by Eleanor (Local Authority), who stated that *“Most of the Syrian [families] lived in the camps together. The separation anxiety within [the] families is off the scale [and the men] feel as though they have to drop everyone off at school and be home when they return […] They want to help their wives go to the supermarket [and] they don’t want their wife going alone to the supermarket.”* LA resettlement leads such as Eleanor viewed this separation anxiety as being part of the reason for resettled Syrians’ slow progression in learning English and finding full-time employment. Others, such as Alice (Local Authority) worried that resettled adult Syrians were quickly becoming a *“lost generation”* despite the best efforts of LAs. *“What we found with the Syrians is [that initially] a lot of the men would come [to ESOL classes]. They were […] really positive and wanted to learn. [They thought they would] learn English within six months, they’d get jobs, and their families would live happily ever after. […] But they’re not able to do that and [learning] English is hard. You can see their mental health dip; you can actually see them withdrawing.”*

In order to approach these challenges, stakeholders saw the need for ESOL teaching to be more holistic and to be linked more closely to the [Social Practice Model](https://www.cdn.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CLDMS-Social-Practice-in-Adult-learning-2014.pdf) for Community Learning and Development that was previously developed in Scotland. The challenges being experienced by resettled Syrian refugees pointed to the need to ensure that those teaching ESOL to refugees are able to understand the circumstances of those they are teaching, and adapt teaching training they have received (such as the Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA)) to the needs of New Scots learners:

*“Most of our learners are beginner, pre-elementary or even absolutely no English, no literacy, pre-literate. These staff do not come out of CELTA with the skills they need to work in communities. They have no literacy skills; literacies are not taught in CELTA. They certainly don’t have community work skills. I always say every time I’d much rather have a community worker, I’ll teach them how to teach ESOL.”* (Alice, Local Authority).

In the above quote, Alice mentions the need to train ESOL staff in order to deliver a more holistic ESOL approach in which ESOL is not solely about language acquisition, but also about supporting integration in a wider sense. However, one of the other challenges faced by ESOL providers is the high turnover of ESOL teachers given the lack of funding for ESOL provision and the high demand for ESOL classes:

*“Retention [of ESOL teachers] is a really big issue at the minute […] especially recently [as the] capacity of staff to deliver has been so limited and it's a very difficult pathway for ESOL volunteers to get accredited and employed with the local authority. So there's a real over-reliance on volunteers. And whenever you're a volunteer if you're the local authority planning provision you can't plan long term because these volunteers are going to still have normal jobs a lot of the time.”* (Greg, Local Authority)

While some cultural adjustment is required within arriving populations, it is equally the case that receiving communities need to broaden their perspectives to ensure that ESOL is not seen as a technical fix to a ‘language problem’ or ‘language barrier’ but rather is framed within an intercultural approach. Effective ESOL provision will differ for different cohorts of New Scots; both formal and informal ESOL provision are merely part of the multilingual, intercultural approach required for successful integration.

Such ESOL provision requires intercultural community development and training to be developed fractally (i.e replicated at scale from small local community groups to the level of national institutions) within arriving and receiving communities and organisations. ESOL cannot and should not be seen as, for instance, a fix for socio-cultural isolation, patriarchal norms, or the integration of women and care-givers into the workplace. However, delivering intercultural ESOL still requires sufficient funding in order to retain trained ESOL teachers and institutional memory of best-practice.

It can be easy for judgement of English learners or those arriving with multiple vulnerabilities to grow to become a source of conflict, particularly if the ESOL-related needs and desires of New Scots do not accord with the delivery plans or norms implemented at organisational level. An intercultural and community development approach to ESOL, within a multilingual context, can mitigate these potential conflicts and allow for a variety of approaches and attitudes to learning.

As part of the proposed review of ESOL in Scotland, there should be a wider recognition and adoption of the understanding that ESOL classes need to be combined with outside-the-classroom activities through which New Scots learners can practice their English and combine language learning with the acquisition of new skills. Findings from the [Sharing Lives, Sharing Languages](https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/sharing-lives-sharing-languages/#:~:text=The%20Sharing%20Lives%2C%20Sharing%20Languages,their%20English%20outside%20the%20classroom.) project, as well as the projects funded by NSRIDP, have highlighted the benefits of bringing people from different communities together to practice English outside the classroom. As one participant of an NSRIDP project noted, they feel less ‘judged’ when attending outside-the-classroom activities, which give them the freedom to try and express themselves. Another participant stated, *“I feel more comfortable as now I know that I'm not the only one facing difficulties talking in a new language. I like that I have been sociable, meeting new people every week instead of sitting at home doing nothing."* This understanding of ESOL as being part of a holistic mechanism for integration is therefore integral to learning English, applying those learnings and forging connections across social groups.

# Recommendations

* More guidance should come from the Scottish Government concerning the minimum amount of ESOL classes that New Scots should be entitled to. While ESOL provision should remain devolved to Local Authorities, such guidance should remove distinctions in levels of ESOL provision between resettled New Scots and people seeking asylum.
* More efforts must be made to standardise ESOL provision across Scotland, including at beginner levels. Certificates can be used to show progress, though providers should be mindful of the fact that sitting tests can be a stressful experience for those not used to formal education structures.
* ESOL funding arrangements should be reviewed in order to prevent New Scots from losing access to college fee waivers if they gain employment.
* More clarity needed from the Scottish Government concerning which funding streams Local Authorities and colleges can access in order to fund ESOL for New Scots. This information should be made available for New Scots, LA resettlement coordinators and support groups in order to prevent New Scots receiving conflicting information from well-meaning sources.
* Greater consistency and quantity of formal ESOL classes across local authorities as well as adequate resourcing of the ESOL sector, so that there is sufficient contact for efficient learning to occur. More ESOL funding is needed for this to occur.
* A bespoke ESOL strategy should be developed for carers of young children to ensure they are able to fully avail themselves of opportunities for ESOL. Ideally this will include provision of childcare for New Scots from arrival.
* The new Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland must address its stated aim of reviewing ESOL provision by taking note of the research in this report; in particular the responses from New Scots regarding the inadequacy of the Adult Learning Strategy in addressing their ESOL needs.
* ESOL should accompany the provision of accommodation, alongside education and schooling, and of healthcare, as vital to integration. This is particularly important given that asylum dispersal accommodation is to be expanded beyond the city of Glasgow.
* ESOL providers should consider the wider importance of ESOL in the context of integration, with targeted lessons taking place around employment needs, with the understanding that ESOL should not be seen as a fix for wider issues linked to socio-cultural isolation.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* ESOL provision – for new learners in particular – must be planned through a holistic Community Learning and Development model, with informal ESOL classes outside the classroom (e.g. outdoor educational activities) embedded into ESOL planning and provision.[[15]](#footnote-15)
1. The full report can be accessed at <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_900243_smxx.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Phillimore, J. (2010) ‘Monitoring for Equality? Asylum Seekers and Refugees’ Retention and Achievement in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)’. *International Journal of Inclusive Education15*(3), 317–329. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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8. Meer *et al* (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the ‘Communities, culture and creativity’ section of the main report: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_900243_smxx.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bolt, D. (2018). *An Inspection of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. August 2017 - January 2018.* London: Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. Retrieved from: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705155/VPRS_Final_Artwork_revised.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It should be noted that the UK Government does not provide funding for people seeking asylum to study ESOL. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hirsu and Bryson (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See the Employment section of the main report. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See the Communities, culture and creativity section of the main report. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)