

Evaluation of the London City Strategy ESOL Pilot: final report

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This report presents findings from research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies as part of the evaluation of the London City Strategy Pathfinder ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Pilot. The research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The two-year ESOL Pilot was designed to demonstrate how work-focused ESOL training provision can support access to sustainable employment for people who speak English as an additional language: the main target group was parents with ESOL needs who were in receipt of benefits or tax credits.

The ESOL Pilot was located within the London City Strategy Pathfinder (CSP) areas of East and Southeast London and West London, which face typical inner-city problems of social deprivation and worklessness. They are also areas with large, well-established Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities with disproportionately high rates of unemployment. One of the main aims of the ESOL Pilot was therefore to address some of the key barriers to employment faced by members of these communities.

This was a qualitative study, consisting of an inception phase, followed by two waves of qualitative interviews with participants, provider staff and other stakeholders. In total, there were 175 interviews conducted during the course of the research.

Key findings

The key findings from the research are as follows:

Partnership working on the Pilot

- Twelve providers were originally contracted to deliver the ESOL Pilot, eight in East and Southeast London and four in West London. Most providers were experienced in delivering ESOL and employability training programmes to disadvantaged and unemployed groups. The ESOL Pilot covered all 11 London boroughs in the CSP areas, there was an overlap of Pilot activity in some boroughs, with reports that this led to duplication of effort and competition between providers in the earlier stages of the project.
- Partnership working was a distinctive feature of the Pilot, both at the operational and strategic levels. Most of the providers were working in partnership with community-based organisations to deliver the Pilot outcomes: either through formally sub-contracted arrangements or service level agreements (SLAs). All providers reported that they relied to some extent on a range of informal partners and networks for referrals to the Pilot, this allowed access to a wide range of community venues with on-site crèche facilities. These partnership arrangements were reported to have worked well, although management of contractual arrangements could at times be challenging and time-consuming.

- Partnership working at the strategic level was more problematic. A number of strategic partners were involved in some way with the Pilot (including the DWP, Jobcentre Plus, East and Southeast London and West London CSPs, and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) preceded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC)) and this could have contributed to the sense of confusion noted by some stakeholders and providers about its overall priorities and sense of direction. This was reflected in changes made to the eligibility criteria of participants and lack of clarity as to whether the focus of the Pilot was on the ‘learner journey’ or employment outcomes.
- An apparent lack of synergy between the Pilot and the Single Points of Access (SPAs) based within the East and Southeast London CSP, was raised as an issue. Although it had been anticipated that these would be a major source of referrals to the Pilot, in practice, this only happened to a limited extent.
- The series of provider workshops organised by LLU+ based at London South Bank University, which took place during the second year of the project proved successful. The workshops facilitated networking and the sharing of good practice between the providers and were generally well received.

Engaging and recruiting participants

- In the later stages of the Pilot, most providers indicated that they either had met their recruitment targets or were very close to doing so. Providers used a range of strategies to recruit eligible participants to the Pilot. The most successful recruitment strategies by far were community outreach and face-to-face contact and engagement with parents at various community locations.
- Providers relied to some extent on making use of the existing links and networks established by their community partners. Only a few providers relied on their links with Jobcentre Plus, as they were not originally intended to be a referral source for this Pilot.

Profile of Pilot participants

- The key characteristics of participants on the Pilot were as follows: approximately three quarters were women; most were in the 20–45 age range; the majority were of Black or Asian origin; and a very large proportion were out of work. This was, therefore, generally in line with the key target group for the Pilot.
- Participants faced a number of barriers to accessing employment, including: low levels of spoken and written English; lack of vocational skills and appropriate qualifications; lack of UK work experience; lack of confidence; health issues; and lack of access to appropriate and affordable childcare. A significant minority of research participants had come to the UK with high levels of professional skills and qualifications, including degrees. For these individuals, key issues tended to be improving their English and gaining recognition for overseas qualifications.
- Women with children of pre-school age were less likely to be seeking employment in the shorter term. Individuals who were more flexible regarding working hours, types of jobs and travel-to-work distances were considered by providers to have a better chance of securing a job on completion of the programme. Some providers became more selective about who they recruited onto the programme and towards the end of the Pilot had targeted those who were more job-ready and more motivated to find work in the shorter term.

Approaches to project delivery

- The Pilot framework allowed the providers considerable autonomy in the way they delivered their individual programmes. However, a broadly similar approach to project delivery was adopted by providers, for example, in course structure and timing, curriculum content and location. In most cases, the programmes consisted of a series of short, flexible courses of 10–15 weeks’ duration with varying hours of attendance per week, depending on individual needs. Some project staff questioned whether longer courses would have been more appropriate for participants who were such a long way from the labour market.

- All the providers designed ESOL programmes with a strong emphasis on employability; there was a broadly similar focus on language and vocabulary useful for developing ‘generic’ employability skills. Some programmes offered IT training, which was popular with participants and could help improve jobsearch skills. Many also organised employability workshops, which provided a useful opportunity for participants to put their work-focused language skills into practice, for example, through writing up their CVs or taking part in mock interviews.
- In most cases, a staff member had a particular remit for working with ‘job-ready’ individuals to help them look for suitable vacancies and prepare them for interviews. They often took on an employer engagement role as well.
- Work placements were seen by both providers and participants as a valuable means of gaining experience of the UK workplace. In a few instances, a work placement was reported to have led to a more sustainable job outcome. There was considerable variation among providers in their approach to offering work placements: for some it was an embedded feature of the programme, whilst others were not offering any, or only to ‘job-ready’ participants.
- The childcare support provided varied considerably across the Pilot sites, with some providers reporting they had managed to offer provision to only some of their participants, if it was available at the venue. Some parents, who would otherwise have been eligible to attend the Pilot, were therefore unable to attend.
- Other practical support offered to Pilot participants included: payment of travel costs, advice about benefits and, in a few cases, in-work support for those who had found jobs.

Participants’ views of the Pilot

- Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with their experience of the ESOL Pilot and said they had benefited by improving their language, employability and IT skills. Some said that the programme had helped increase their confidence in their English and in looking for work, and some had recommended the Pilot to friends and family. Areas for improvement suggested by participants included longer courses; more opportunities to practise their spoken English; and a clearer division of the classes according to language ability and level.
- In most cases, the participants interviewed said they were keen to find work, either in the shorter or longer term. Many women participants were particularly interested in finding work in the childcare field, for example, as classroom assistants, playground supervisors or nursery school workers. The appeal of this type of employment was the benefit of work with flexible hours to fit in with their childcare commitments. Other respondents were hoping to undertake further training on completion of the programme, such as a higher-level ESOL course, childcare course or other form of vocational training.
- Participants interviewed after they had completed the course reported that the main outcomes for them had been an increase in their confidence in speaking English, improvements in jobsearch skills and a better understanding of the labour market.

Participant support and childcare issues

- Most providers reported that identifying resources for childcare had been a major issue for them. There had been an initial expectation that providers would be able to access funding through the Childcare Affordability Programme (CAP) but this ended in March 2009. Although another pot of money was made available by the SFA, not all parents were eligible for this and, because of communication issues between the SFA and providers, not all providers were aware it was available.

Employment outcomes

- Most of the providers viewed the 20 per cent target for employment outcomes as a challenge and, in the earlier part of the project, were struggling to achieve this. In the later stages, more resources were channelled into supporting participants into employment and providers made better progress towards meeting their targets. Reasons for the difficulty in meeting employment outcome targets included the distance of many participants from the labour market, increased competition for jobs and some participants were reported to be reluctant to look for work. To improve employment outcomes, some providers became more selective in their approach to recruitment and targeted individuals who they considered more 'job-ready'. This strategy reflected the tensions within the Pilot between the original aim of helping the hardest-to-reach individuals and pressure from funders to achieve the employment targets.
- Job outcomes secured were typically in entry-level occupations in areas such as retail, cleaning, security, care work, hospitality, catering or administration.

Soft outcomes and other progression pathways

- Most providers anticipated that the 'learner journey' towards employment was likely to extend beyond the Pilot. Alternative progression routes were therefore viewed as a more realistic prospect for the majority of participants. These included further training, particularly higher-level; accredited ESOL courses; more vocationally focused programmes; or progression into voluntary work.
- The development of 'soft skills' was another important outcome from the Pilot, even if these were not formally recognised as such. The most frequently cited soft outcomes for participants were increased self-confidence and motivation, and improved communication skills, employability and jobsearch skills.

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You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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