

Language Difficulties and Access to English Classes

Many migrants arrive here with a good standard of English but still experience difficulties because it is insufficient for the standard needed in order to work at the level of their qualifications. Others have difficulty with local English usage.

Language difficulties

Many migrant workers who come here already have excellent English. Many nurses, for example, are not just chosen because their qualifications are recognised here but also because they have been educated through English. Other medical professionals must satisfy an English language test before they are able to work here. However, other new migrants are likely to be working below the level of their educational attainment and expertise, because their qualifications are not recognised, or their English is not good enough. Accents and local dialects can add additional communication challenges.

In some of our traditional migrant populations, such as the Chinese or Bangladeshi communities, a proportion of people may have very little English and this has made it difficult to integrate in society or to understand important information. Researchers listening to the experiences of the Bangladeshi community in 2000, found that a family did not know their 6-year old child was dying until the day he died because an interpreter was not offered to them. Public services are now much more aware of language issues. The equality obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act have encouraged this.

‘Minority ethnic groups had difficulty accessing services due to the language barrier – now there are more efforts to inform them of the services available.’

*How Public Authorities Provide Services to Minority Ethnic Groups:
Emerging Findings Discussion Paper*
www.nccri.ie/pdf/Service_Provision_Report.pdf

Northern Ireland now has a regional translation service for the health service. Translation services are more widely available for migrants in recent years in Northern Ireland, with most service providers using **thebigword**, the approved supplier of translation and interpreting services to Government departments. These services are not always used, however. Human Rights Commission researchers looking into homelessness were concerned to find that Housing Executive officials still used children as translators, although some realised that it was inappropriate.

‘Sometimes there are questions you wouldn’t want a child to be asking a mother, if domestic violence or something.’

No Home From Home, p42.
[www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/108/No_Home_from_Home_Exec_Summary\(September_2009\).pdf](http://www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/108/No_Home_from_Home_Exec_Summary(September_2009).pdf)

One of the biggest complaints is the cost of English classes. Some far sighted employers run free classes for their employees and some local authorities, support organisations, charities and churches also provide language and

conversation classes. For most people, learning English remains an expensive matter and classes are often not available at times that can be fitted in around work. This has a significant effect on employment potential as well as integration. A report on European migrant workers notes that,

‘Many work irregular hours in isolated locations and cannot access classes in universities or town centres, and work-focused language tuition is most likely to improve labour market prospects.’

*The UK's New Europeans;
Progress and Challenges Five Years After Accession, p. 32.*
www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/new_europeans.pdf

English Language Classes

Support groups report difficulty with the current ESOL (English as a Second Language Classes

- Too expensive
- Content is inappropriate to their needs
- Venues are inaccessible
- Time does not fit in with their work schedule.

These difficulties can be worse for people in certain situations e.g. people working in rural areas. Mothers of young children can be particularly isolated, without the money for classes and isolated from social contacts. Some employers have adopted positive practices to help migrantworkers including running classes in the workplace. Others companies have invested in multi-lingual workplace signage.

‘Some companies reported having signage in up to 12 different languages’

Economic, Labour Market and Skill Impacts of Migrant Workers in NI
www.delni.gov.uk/the_economic_labour_market_and_skills_impact_of_migrant_workers_in_northern_ireland.pdf