

# MESH

## What is it?

MESH – the Migrant English Support Hub – will be a free, online platform providing a ‘one stop shop’ for adult migrants wanting to develop their English language skills to choose the most appropriate ESOL class and plan progression across provision. It will enable learners, potential learners, and those who advise them to find information relating to specific needs, such as class type (e.g. basic conversation, English for Employability, Academic English for Higher Education, etc.), locality, times of lessons, cost and crèche provision, and so on. MESH will also act as a shared learning and development network for providers of ESOL and other English classes to migrants in Leeds. The MESH project is being driven by RETAS, the leading education and training charity for the refugee and migrant sector in Leeds, who will coordinate a forward-thinking partnership of organisations to develop this sustainable interactive resource. MESH does not seek to offer ESOL classes itself, but rather offers the tools to enable the transition to more relevant, strategic, and sustainable provision across the city.

## Why do we want it? What came up at the conference?

A key aim for the Migrant Third Sector is to support new migrants in integrating successfully into life in Leeds: the opportunity to learn English is central to this. However, ESOL provision across the city is fragmented, connections between providers are not coherent, and information about courses is neither held anywhere centrally nor kept up to date. Mesh will address these problems by providing a highly accessible, comprehensive, and up-to-date online directory to ESOL provision in Leeds. It will also provide a space to enable the sector to communicate in order to share develop practice and plan strategically to meet the language education needs of learners. Achieving these goals will have the additional effect of reducing pressure on, and costs of, interpreting and translation services, positively affecting the quality of service for Leeds service users.

Participants in the Refugee Week workshop on MESH (around 40 people) were unanimous in their perception of the need for a resource like MESH and in their support of the project.

- Participants felt that MESH had the potential to offer ‘something for everyone’ in the ESOL sector and that while teachers, volunteers, and learners should be at the heart of the project and have input into its design and development, many other stakeholders should also be involved. These included the major providers (such as colleges), voluntary groups, refugee and migrant organisations, community groups, social services, Area Support Teams, faith groups, hostels, dispersal centres. The ongoing support of LCC was seen as essential.
- Funding was seen as vital to the development and maintenance of MESH. Ideas for funding sources included online advertising, sponsorship, European funding, charities and trust funds (e.g. Rotary Club). Online advertising would call for the employment of an advertising manager.
- Getting providers to take part in the project was seen as a significant issue addressed in the first instance by creating an outstanding resource and recruiting the main providers, such as Leeds City College. Awareness would be spread by word of mouth (learners and providers). The obvious advantages to providers were seen as incentives. Other ideas included social media, links to LCC sites, and publicising through the Home Office, City of Sanctuary, Welcome to Leeds, RETAS, Citizens Advice, Refugee Council, Angel Lodge, Pafras, Leeds City College, Compace(?) Pack (housing), libraries (e.g. Compton Road), etc
- Getting providers to update content was highlighted as the most difficult problem. Suggestions included a paid site manager, who would coordinate entering and updating of content, getting LCC to host the site, and offering small financial incentives for the updating of content at, for example, quarterly intervals.

- It was generally agreed that planning should continue to be led by RETAS and the University of Leeds team in conjunction with LCC. Various kinds of technology (websites, apps, etc) were discussed. It was felt that paper –based media should not be overlooked.

### **What should we do next?**

Future work on the MESH project, it was felt, would involve three separate but interlinked strands, involving different kinds of skills.

1. Development Work to map and categorise the existing ESOL offer in Leeds (over 6 months)
  - Map Leeds ESOL offer – build on existing picture, using desktop and outreach research techniques
  - Categorise and describe provision and progression routes (with support from University of Leeds)
2. IT specialist website development to produce a prototype technical solution (Web solution, app development, or portal approach) (Over 6 months)
  - To be developed in conjunction with steering group of: migrant learners, area support teams, refugee third sector, schools/ education, University of Leeds, Leeds Migration Partnership and Leeds City Council Community team.
  - Testing of provision – with learning providers being able to adjust/ update their own entry; and learners and advisors able to easily interrogate the information and use the full functionality of the resource
3. Development work, carried out by the partnership of organisations led by RETAS, to cultivate a sustainable business model for MESH after the initial development work – exploring social enterprise/ co-operative / scope for paid advertising and other sustainability models to keep the resource up to date.