



A report on the English Language and literacy
classes at Providence Row Housing Association
(PRHA)

By Sarah Halsey

English language and literacy teacher

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Thank you to The National Lottery Community Fund for funding the role of the English Language and literacy teacher and supporting this vital work.

About the author

My name is Sarah Halsey and I am the English language and literacy teacher at Providence Row Housing Association (PRHA). I am a qualified teacher and have worked in the homelessness sector since 2009, beginning as a volunteer at New Horizon Youth Centre in London.

I spent nine years working at Providence Row Charity, a day centre based in east London supporting people experiencing homelessness. I worked as part of a team to coordinate and run the Learning and Wellbeing programme, as well as doing support work and teaching.

In November 2020 I launched the Reading, Writing and ESOL Project, with the aim of offering trauma informed ESOL and literacy support to residents in hostel accommodation. I developed and ran the programme, which delivered lessons across six hostels run by three housing associations, including PRHA, for four years. As part of my work with the project I have also worked to raise awareness of the need for learning provision for people experiencing homelessness and developed a programme of training for people working in the homelessness and adult learning sectors.

In February 2024 I began a funded role as the English Language and Literacy Teacher at PRHA.

Executive Summary

Background to this report

ESOL and literacy classes have been running at Providence Row Housing Association (PRHA) since December 2020. These were initially delivered on a voluntary basis through The Reading, Writing and ESOL Project, until funding was secured for the role of an English Language and Literacy teacher in June 2023, with the post being in place from February 2024.

The purpose of this report is to examine how effective the English language and literacy provision at PRHA has been at meeting the needs of residents. It looks at ways in which the provision has worked well, the challenges of delivering this support and the learning that has been gained from running these lessons.

There is a considerable amount of need for literacy support among people with experience of Homelessness (Olisa, Patterson and Wright, 2010, St Mungo's, 2014, Ellingwood, Dimitris, and Sanders 2024). While the level of ESOL need is much less understood, statistics show a rise in homelessness among groups who are likely to need support with English language, such as refugees and those with no recourse to public funds (Homeless Link, 2024), while existing community learning services offering ESOL support are known to be stretched beyond capacity (Refugee Action, 2017). Given this situation, it is reasonable to assume that there is a significant need for English language support among people experiencing homelessness also.



Alongside this need, research also shows that people experiencing homelessness face significant barriers to accessing adult learning provision, for a broad range of reasons (St Mungo's, 2014, Jones, 2018).

What has this report found?

This report shows that the delivery of the English language and literacy classes has been extremely successful at meeting the learning needs of residents and that taking part in learning has been found by both staff and residents, to have had a wide range of profound benefits. The report found that:

- residents who took part in lessons had a range of support needs, with 76% having a diagnosed mental health need, 71% having a disability and 52% having a support need relating to drug or alcohol use.
- despite these and other barriers to taking part in learning, overall attendance at lessons in the time covered by the report was 72%, with the average length of attendance at lessons being seven months, and just over a quarter of attendees (26%) attending for 12 months or more.
- staff felt there was a significant need for both English language and literacy support and the delivery of lessons in hostels:
 - 100% of staff felt there was a need for English language and literacy support among residents, with 76% of staff describing a significant need.
 - 94% of staff felt it was very important for learning provision to be offered within hostels.
 - 94% of staff said that they saw learning provision for people experiencing homelessness as more important as a result of classes running in their hostels.

Residents also described the importance of learning provision for people experiencing homelessness:

‘...if you don’t have reading or writing...everything is gonna be lock...you can’t use the new technology, laptop, telephone...so is better have to go start something make you learn for your life...’ (resident)



‘It’s everything. First of all, it takes our mind off the rubbish and crap that we’re so scared of. It just helps. You leave with a smile.’ (resident)

- Residents and staff report a range of benefits that have come from taking part in learning, including:
 - 82% of residents reported increased confidence in three or more skills (speaking, reading, writing or listening).

- 50% of learners surveyed for this report were also taking part in other learning opportunities.
- Residents and staff described that taking part in learning had led to:
 - improved confidence in skills.
 - improved communication between residents, staff and wider support services and reduced isolation.
 - enjoyment, positivity and fulfilment.

These and many other benefits support residents to achieve greater independence and control over their lives, while also having a profound impact on their wellbeing and quality of life.

The service is rooted in an understanding of the learning and wider support needs of people experiencing homelessness and developed with the needs of these specific learners in mind. This has been done through consultation and collaboration with learners and staff, as well as learning from research and other services in the sector. The principles of trauma informed care underpin the planning, delivery and evaluation of lessons.



The service is designed specifically to make learning as accessible as possible for residents, including through the following approaches:

- Delivering lessons in hostels, to remove the need to travel to unfamiliar places, which can be a significant barrier
- The majority of provision being one to one, to allow for a highly personalised approach to learning and remove the barrier of working in a group, which is challenging for many.
- Allowing residents to attend lessons under the influence of substances, as long as it is safe and they can take part. This enables the building of relationships and routine, to support longer term attendance.
- Working in collaboration with residents, hostel staff and managers to reflect on, review and develop the provision to ensure it continues to offer the best support possible to residents.

This report and the work of residents, staff and myself over the last five and a half years shows beyond doubt that people experiencing homelessness have the desire and the ability to take part in learning, rediscover and build their skills and fulfil their ambitions. While there is always more to learn and improvements that can be made, this project has built a solid foundation for a service that helps people change their lives for the better. Through writing and publishing this report, we hope to share our learning with other services and stakeholders.

Methodology-how this report has been written.

This report has been written by the English language and literacy teacher at Providence Row Housing Association using a mixed method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data.

Attendance and demographic information are based on attendance at the English language and literacy classes between February 2024 and March 31st 2026.

To understand residents' experiences of the lessons in depth, each resident attending classes at the time the report was planned was invited to take part in questionnaires and interviews about their experiences. 12 residents completed questionnaires and 11 took part in interviews. One interview was only partly completed as the resident had difficulty understanding some questions and had limited time to complete the interview. Two questionnaires were completed with the help of a member of staff translating for the resident.



Managers and staff working in hostels where lessons were offered were invited to take part in an online survey to give their feedback on the provision. Staff had the option to complete the survey anonymously or give their name. 17 members of staff took part in the survey.

For a full breakdown of the questions included in the resident and staff questionnaires, interviews and surveys, please see the appendix.

Why does this provision matter?

For this report, residents and staff were asked about the benefits of the English language and literacy classes, why they were important and if there was anything they would like funders and commissioners to know about the lessons. I would like to begin by sharing with you some of their thoughts.

‘These lessons should not just be considered desirable, they should be considered an essential part of any commissioned services which supports people with histories of trauma and multiple exclusion.’ (member of staff)

‘I want to learn more because before my life I been in dark, now I been in light because now I can read, I can text message. I’m happy. I’m feeling good.’ (resident)

‘Learning is everything...there’s loads of things that went with it. You start getting confidence in yourself. Even dressing properly, I wasn’t washing properly. I’d given up. It’s all different. I’m starting to see life differently.’ (resident)

‘...You can do it. Always have the belief in yourself. Coming here [to the lessons] makes you come out of yourself and gives you the confidence. I’m like the cat whose got the cream when I’ve come out of here [the lessons].’ (resident)

‘The lessons have provided a lifeline for...residents who have benefited greatly from the provision.’ (member of staff)

‘I saw the participants grow in confidence across all aspects of their life... Providing a second chance for residents, who can now engage with education at their own pace...grows internal belief about what they can do in this world.’ (member of staff)

I have seen the profound benefits that come from offering English language and literacy support in hostels. These lessons offer both hope and healing and it has been my great privilege to take part in this work, alongside learners and colleagues.

The need for ESOL and literacy support among people experiencing homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness may be in a range of different situations, including rough sleeping, in temporary accommodation, experiencing 'hidden' homelessness (for example sofa surfing or living in cars) or statutorily homeless (Crisis, no date).

The need for literacy support among people experiencing homelessness has been well documented through research in recent years, including:

- A survey of Thames Reach service users was carried out amongst 101 people in supported housing, found that:
 - Over a third had difficulty understanding what they read.
 - 55% needed help to fill in forms.
 - 46% had trouble writing letters.(Olisa, Patterson, Wright, 2010)
- Assessments with 139 St Mungo's Broadway clients found that 51% did not have basic English skills (i.e. would not achieve a grade G at GCSE). This compares to 15% of the overall adult population. (St Mungo's, 2014)



The need for ESOL support has received far less attention and I have not been able to find any research on this specifically, which is telling in and of itself. As a sector more work need to be done to understand the support needs of this group.

Without specific data in this area, we can infer a potential level of need by looking at other information:

- Research by Homeless Link (2024) found that 'Accommodation providers and day centres...reported substantial increases in refugees accessing their services, at 44% and 71% respectively...alongside a 46% increase of people with no recourse to public funds presenting to day centres.' They added 'This is reflective of the increase in the numbers of non-UK nationals experiencing homelessness; 27% of people found sleeping rough on a single night in Autumn 2024 were non-UK nationals, the highest proportion since records began.'

- In February 2026 the BBC reported that ‘There has been a five-fold increase in the number of refugee households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the last four years...’ (Sheikh, R, Pavlyuk, K, 2026)

While it is important to note that not all refugees, people without recourse to public funds or non-UK nationals will need support with their English language, it is reasonable to conclude that many will. Within this context it is important to note that evidence tells us people in need of ESOL support face significant barriers to accessing it:

- Crisis reports members may not be able to access ESOL provision because of their status (for example being an asylum seeker), difficult enrolment processes and missing ‘...strict enrolment periods.’ (Crisis, no date)
- In the report Locked Out of Learning, Refugee Action found that ‘Several providers reported refugees waiting over a year for English lessons’ and that among providers surveyed, the average waiting list size was over 700 people. (Refugee Action, 2017)



This data illustrates an increase in homelessness among groups with a high possibility of needing English language support and significant barriers to accessing that support in the wider community. Taken together, it is reasonable to conclude that there is likely to be a significant level of unmet need for ESOL support among people experiencing homelessness.

Within PRHA, 100% of staff felt there was a need for English language and literacy support among residents, with 76% of staff describing a significant need. One member of hostel staff felt that the level of need among residents was likely to be underestimated:

‘When we have surveyed residents previously, far more than expected have demonstrated need in this area. Often it is something that people mask or hide due to feeling shame. There is likely even greater need than we know.’
(member of staff)

The development of English language and literacy support at PRHA.

December 2020



Mid July-
September 2021



September 2021



2022 - 2023



February 2024



February 2025

The first lessons in PRHA hostels began in December 2020. Due to the restrictions in place because of Covid 19, lessons initially took place over the telephone or online.

From December 2020 to January 2024 lessons were run on a voluntary basis in three PRHA hostels, Crimscott Street, the Dellow hostel and Daniel Gilbert House.

I worked with hostel staff and residents to conduct an evaluation of the work of the Reading, Writing and ESOL Project. In May 2023, this evaluation was used as evidence in a funding bid to The National Lottery Community Fund, to secure funding for the role of an English Language and Literacy Tutor. The evaluation is available to read here:

https://www.readingwritingesol.org/_files/ugd/5e5822_84713d44ebc34f0185fb8cdbb8a7f9d5.pdf

The first face to face lessons began in hostels.

Lessons continue. Surveys are completed with residents to better understand their needs in relation to literacy and English language support.

Funding from The National Lottery Community Fund for an English language and literacy teacher is secured in July 2023. The post is for 12 hours a week.

I began the funded role of English language and literacy teacher, working across two hostels, Crimscott Street and Daniel Gilbert House.

The role of the English language and literacy teacher was expanded to 24 hours a week, allowing lessons to be offered in two additional PRHA hostels, Heather Lodge and Providence House, with additional hours offered at Daniel Gilbert House.

Who has taken part in the literacy and ESOL classes and why?

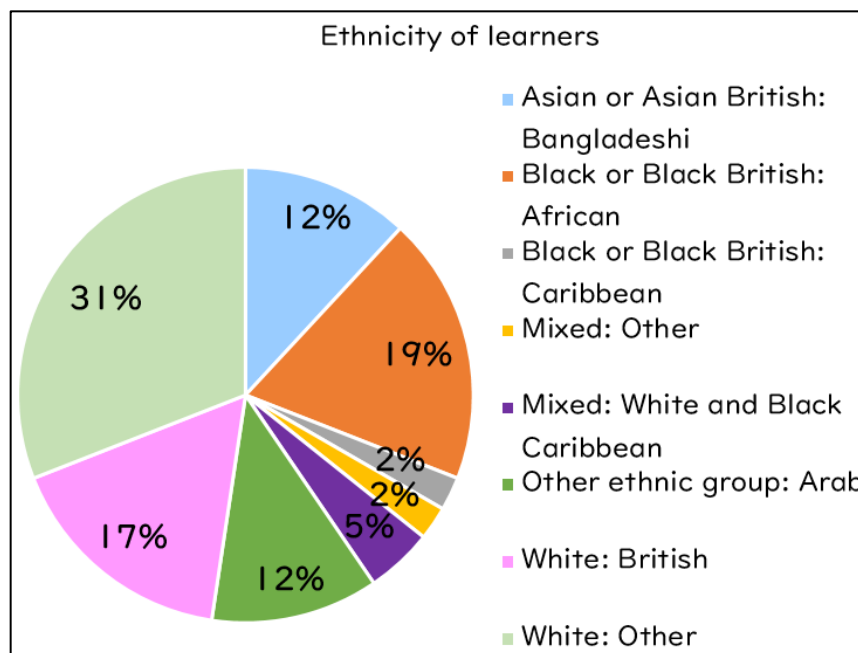
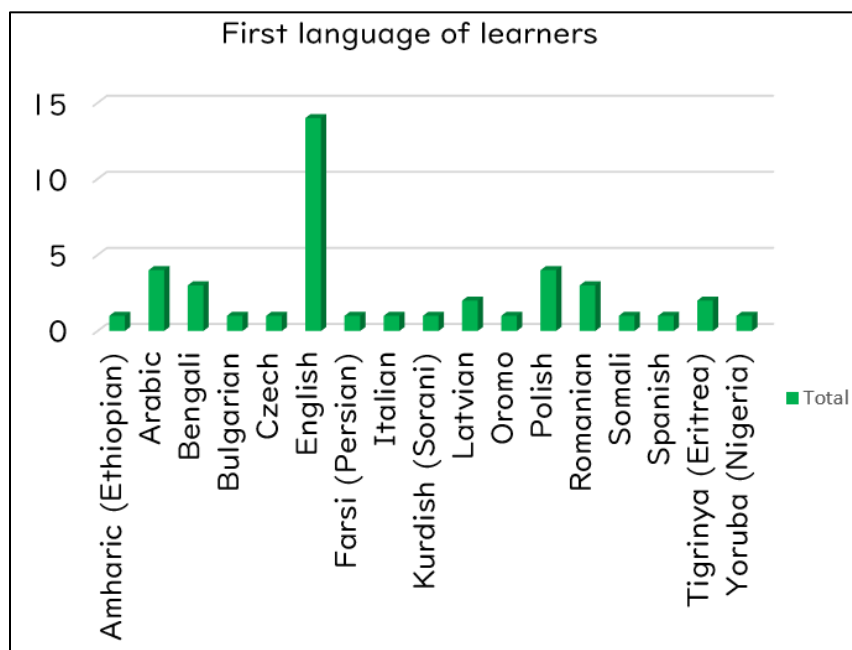
This report focuses on the period during which the literacy and ESOL classes were funded, from February 2024 to March 31st 2026. In this time lessons have been run in four PRHA hostels:

	Number of residents	Level of support needs among residents
Crimscott Street	21 residents	Medium
Daniel Gilbert House	87 residents	High/complex
Heather Lodge	29 residents	Medium/high
Providence House	33 residents	Medium/high
Total	170 residents	

In the time covered in this report:

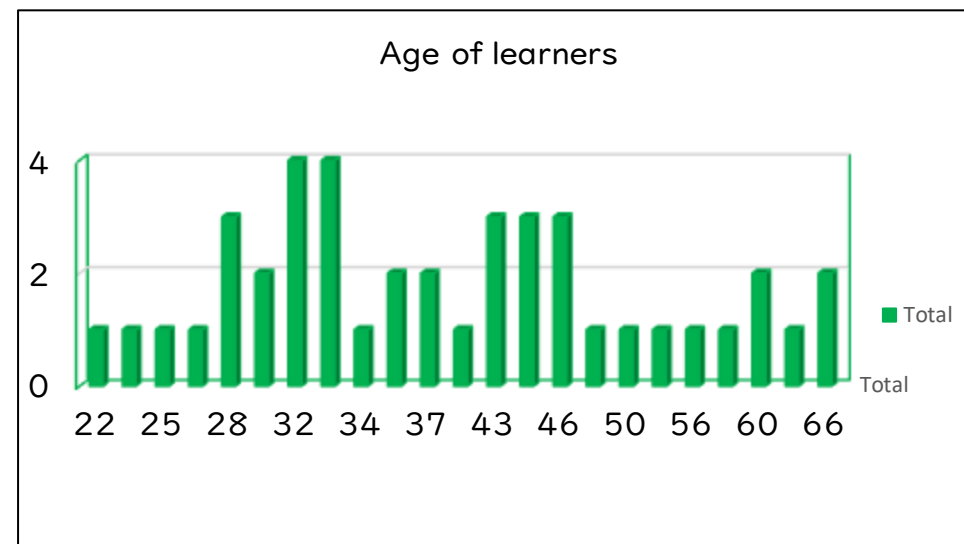
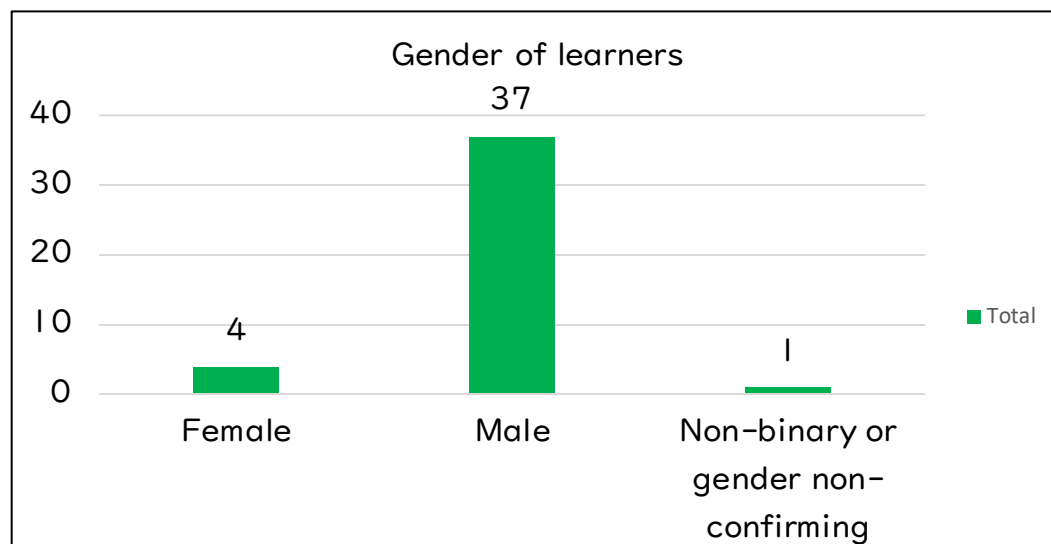
- 25% of residents across the 4 hostels had contact with the service.
- There were 1082 contacts with the service, either for 1-1 lessons or the group ESOL class which ran in one hostel. The majority of these contacts were lessons but the number also includes meetings about lessons which were either attended, cancelled or which the resident did not attend without giving prior notice.
- 66% of these contacts were for ESOL lessons and 34% were for literacy lessons.
- Lessons were attended by 39 residents, with three residents recorded as having cancelled or not attended meetings with the teacher to discuss classes. This means that overall, 42 residents had contact with the service over the period of time covered in this report.

Demographic information.



White other was the most common ethnicity of learners, followed by white British, with the third most common being Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi and Other ethnic group: Arab. 14 residents spoke English as their first language, with 28 having a first language other than English.

The most recent available data (from 2024-2025) shows that 66% of residents in the four hostels where lessons ran spoke English as their first language and yet there was a higher uptake of lessons among those with English as a second language. It is well documented that while many people with experience of homelessness have lower levels of literacy, they often experience a significant amount of shame in relation to this, which can prevent them from seeking support (Olisa, Patterson and Wright, 2010). The fact that 33% of residents with English as their first language attended lessons highlights there was a good level of success in reaching these learners, however it is important to ask if more could be done to encourage them to take part.



When looking at gender, the vast majority of attendees identify as male, with only 4 women and 1 non binary or gender non confirming resident taking part. Across the four hostels at which lessons were offered, 83% of residents are male, 16% are female and 1% are non binary or have undergone gender reassignment. Given these statistics, it is perhaps to be expected that lessons would have a significantly higher proportion of male attendees than female or non binary attendees. However, even taking this into account, it is important to question whether the service could do more to understand and meet the needs of female and non binary residents and whether there are additional barriers to learning that are experienced by these residents.

The age range of attendees varied, with the youngest attendee being 22 and the oldest 66. The average age of attendees was 40.

The support needs of residents attending lessons

It is well documented that people experiencing homelessness often have multiple, interrelated support needs (Shulman et al, 2023). As well as having a significant impact on individuals' health and wellbeing, overlapping support needs can present an added barrier to accessing services and opportunities in the wider community, for a multitude of reasons.

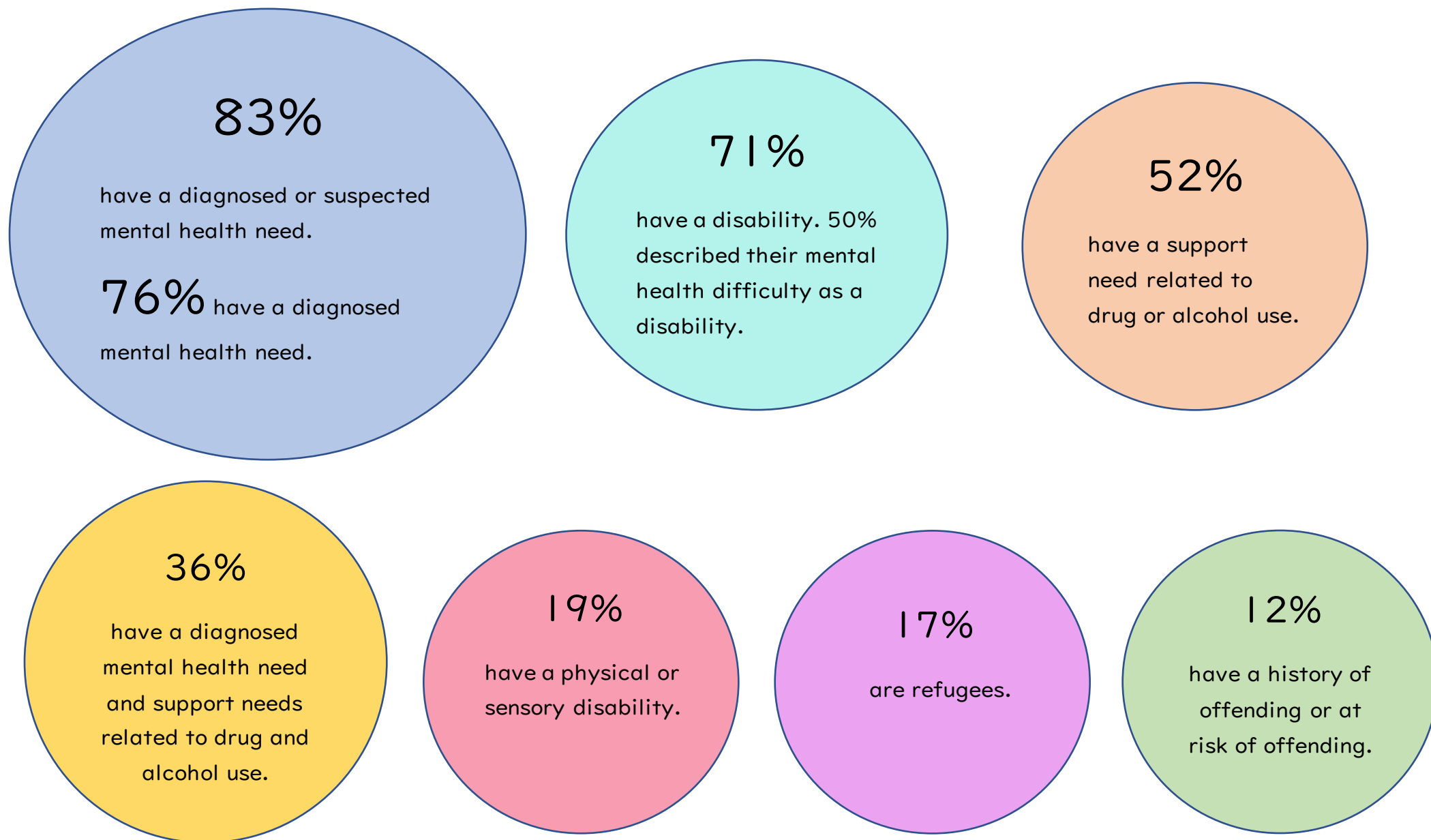


Of the learners who took part in the English language and literacy classes:

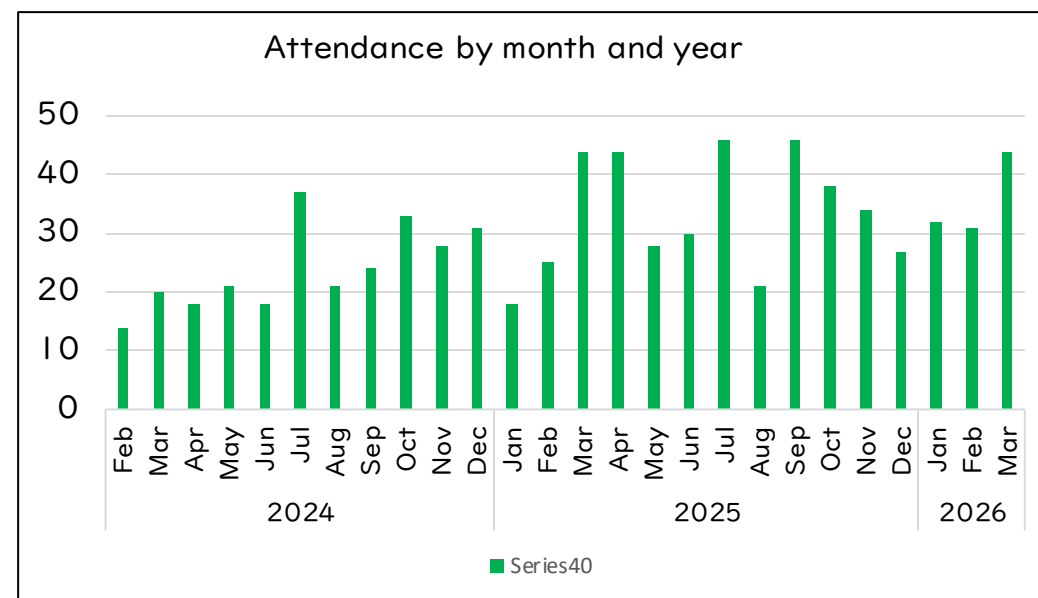
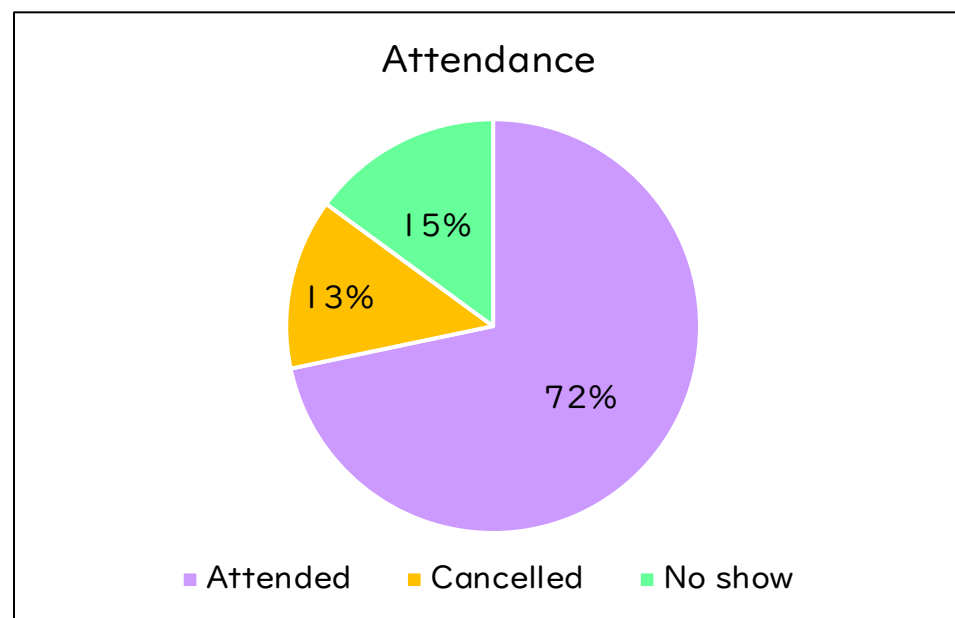
- 100% identified a support need in one of the following areas:
 - Having a mental health diagnosis
 - Drug use
 - Alcohol use
 - Being a refugee
 - Having a history of offending or being at risk of offending
 - Having a physical or sensory disability
 - Having a learning difficulty
 - Being a rough sleeper
- 71% had support needs in two or more of these areas
- 31% had support needs in three or more areas.

Within a learning context, it is important to understand learners' different support needs and how they may interlink. This enables greater understanding of the impact people's support needs may have on their ability to take part in learning and how they experience of the learning environment. Alongside this, it is crucial to understand what approaches support these learners and to recognise the challenges residents overcome to attend lessons.

The 42 residents who had contact with service described the following support needs and disabilities:



Lesson attendance—the achievements, the challenges, what helps learners attend?



Given residents' many and varied support needs, and the multitude of ways these can impact their lives, it is significant that the overall attendance rate for classes was 72%. In addition, the average length of attendance at lessons was 7 months, with just over a quarter of attendees (26%) attending for 12 months or more. These attendance figures demonstrate that despite the many challenges they face, hostel residents are capable of attending learning provision and sustaining their participation. It challenges the perception by some that these learners are 'difficult to reach' and highlights how, with the right support and provision, they can and do succeed in learning.

What are the challenges to attendance?

Where reasons were given for missing or cancelling lessons, the most common reasons were:

- being busy at the time of the lesson
- being unwell.

As previously highlighted, disabilities and health difficulties are incredibly common among this group of learners and it is reasonable to conclude that illness, as well as a high number of health appointments, could have a significant impact on their ability to attend lessons.



Similarly, when learners who took part in the questionnaire part of the survey for this report were asked if there was anything that made it difficult to attend lessons:

- 67% reported at least one difficulty.
- 33% cited physical or mental health difficulties.
- a quarter identified substance use or difficulties sleeping.

Two learners shared how work and lots of appointments made lesson attendance and taking part in learning generally, difficult at times:

‘Sometimes Universal Credit not enough. I have to look for job [which makes it difficult to come to class]’ (resident).

‘As well even try to find some different schools or something like that but for the moment got so much appointment with the doctor, this one, this one, this one...but I will try to look for some school and for some college or something.’ (resident)

When staff were asked what the challenges were in supporting residents to access the literacy and English language classes in the hostel, encouraging residents to attend and difficulty keeping appointments was one of the most common.

‘One of the key challenges is creating a consistent structure around attendance and engagement. This requires staff to continuously promote the lessons and remind residents, particularly those who may struggle with substance use, to try to reduce use in the days leading up to the session.’
(member of staff)



‘Most are reluctant to attend so this really tests and challenge the staff skills and ability to convince their client to attend classes.’ (member of staff)

In my experience, reluctance to attend can often stem from lack of confidence, uncertainty about taking part in lessons, or the need to prioritise other activities. For some residents, it may take a considerable length of time for them to feel ready to take part in lessons, which is one of the reasons long term provision is so important.

The importance of taking into consideration residents cultural and religious practices was also highlighted by one member of staff:

‘Having the sessions on a Friday has also made it a bit tricky with timings for Muslim residents as they attend prayers at the mosque’. (member of staff)

Due to other activities taking place at this hostel throughout the week and the availability of the teacher, Friday was the only day lessons could run in this hostel. In situations where learners wanted to attend and there was a conflict with Friday prayers, lessons were offered in the morning whenever possible. However, for some learners morning lessons were challenging for a range of reasons, including difficulties sleeping and the effects of medication.

Despite making adjustment whenever possible to enable learners to attend lessons and Friday prayers, the day of provision may have been a barrier to attendance in this hostel. Additional funding for the teaching role which would allow the teacher to be available on other days, as well as taking the learning from this situation when planning future lessons, would both help to ensure classes are as accessible as possible for all residents in the future.

What helps learners attend?

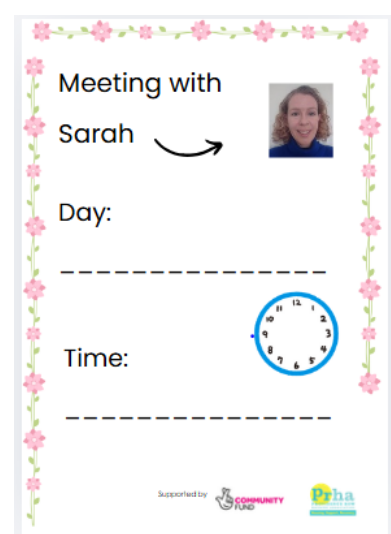
Consistency and regularity

For some learners, it can take a significant length of time to build up a routine and adjust to meeting weekly for lessons. Some learners shared anecdotally that the lessons were the only regular commitment they had on a given week and it was not uncommon for learners to be unsure of the day or date when attending classes, especially at the beginning of working together. Consistency and regularity of lessons is vital in establishing a routine of learning and establishing lessons within learners' weeks.

Reminders

When I began working with learners, I always asked if they would like a reminder of their lesson and if so, how they would like to be reminded. If learners requested text message reminders, we would agree when these would be sent. One learner highlighted this as helpful:

'You have timetable and then it's not give you never stress because every Thursday you send me message 'tomorrow you have class' and then you ready.' (Resident).



I also offered residents a poster that they could put up in their flat, as a visual reminder of the lessons (pictured).

Support from staff

The input of the hostel staff team is crucial in supporting learners to attend lessons and sustain their learning. Being in the hostels with residents throughout the week, staff are in an ideal position to remind learners of their lessons and offer encouragement, as one staff member described:

'Consistency from staff is essential in encouraging attendance, including regular reminders and ongoing motivation.' (member of staff)

Staff also expressed that understanding and flexibility on the part of the teacher were helpful:

‘Varying engagement of residents provides a challenge but this is helped by Sarah being so flexible and understanding.’ (member of staff)

Visual records of attendance

Once in lessons, there was also a routine of marking learners’ attendance on a calendar they would keep with them in their folders (pictured), so that they could keep track of their attendance. This idea was introduced as a result of reflective practice, where I spoke about how learners sometimes seemed to have a different sense of time than I did. For example, thinking they had missed one week of classes when they had missed three.

Calendar 2026 UK							I came to class ☐ I didn't come to class ☐ No class ☐		
January							February		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31									
March							April		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31									
May							June		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31									
July							August		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31									
September							October		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31									
November							December		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31									

Bank holidays 2026

1 January	New Year's Day	6 April	Easter Monday	25 May	Spring Bank Holiday	25 December	Christmas Day
3 April	Good Friday	4 May	Early May Bank Holiday	31 August	August Bank Holiday	26 December	Boxing Day
						28 December	Substitute day

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On the suggestion of the reflective practice psychotherapist, I introduced the calendars as a visual record of attendance, with a key at the top, so we could mark the lessons learners attended, didn't attend and when no class was running. As well as recording attendance in a tangible way, calendars were also helpful in recording breaks in lessons and some learners used them to keep track of other appointments they had throughout the week. Recognising improvements in attendance and remarking on consistent attendance often gave learners a great sense of achievement.

Learners attending on time was also recognised as significant by one member of staff, as a sign of commitment and of how much they valued the service:

‘...a small thing like turning up on time can mean a big effort for someone with complex support needs and is testament to how much [they] appreciate this support.’ (member of staff)

Motivations for taking part in learning.

In my experience, particularly when working with people with experience of trauma and possible negative experiences of education, it is vital to begin by understanding their motivation for learning and learning needs and ensuring these are met during lessons.

Unsurprisingly, learning and developing skills was a key motivation for residents taking part in lessons. Of the 12 residents who took part in interviews for this report, six spoke about improving their skills as a reason for starting lessons. Residents spoke about wanting to build skills for a range of reasons, including to fulfil their dreams, complete everyday tasks and increase confidence:

‘I start lessons because I want to make my dream come true. I want to learn first, learn reading, writing because I want to see life but I have dream already for myself. I want to do it.’ (resident)

‘...my keyworker was coming to my flat and asked me about filling the form and I say that sometimes I don’t know how to read and I don’t know how to write. She was look for teacher for me to start learning English so that I can read and I can write from there.’ (resident)

‘To help me with the writing and spelling and the reading and that and to have confidence in myself as well.’ (resident)



Other residents spoke about there being an expectation at PRHA that residents would take part in courses and this being their motivation for starting lessons:

‘They say to me when I arrive here you need to do lessons so I start...’ (resident)

Other residents spoke about how they first attended to see what lessons were like and then chose to continue:

‘Here in PRHA it’s ‘you must go to course, you must something do’...then later when start it’s ‘yes, why not?’...First when I coming it’s go see what is this...[later] coming you and you are a great teacher and some English practice because not so much we can speak outside.’ (resident)

‘I just wanted to learn a bit more and see how the process was, see what I had to do and when I liked it what I saw I thought ‘I’ll have that’.’ (resident)

The opinions expressed by these two residents highlight the importance of a positive initial experience and residents being able to see from an early stage that the lessons will benefit them in the ways they are looking for. Time to reflect at the end of lessons, as well as regular reviews of learning goals and how learners are experiencing the lessons, create space for adapting and developing lesson content and approaches to teaching in collaboration with learners.

How does this provision meet the needs of residents?

This provision has been designed and developed with the needs of learners experiencing homelessness at its heart. This has involved working with residents and staff to adapt learning provision to meet the needs of residents effectively, including identifying barriers to learning and removing them. We have done this in many ways, including:

Offering lessons in hostels.

One of the most important aspects of the English language and literacy lessons at PRHA is that they are offered within hostels. Both staff and residents highlighted the importance of this during their surveys and interviews:



- 94% of staff said that they thought it was ‘very important’ to have learning provision offered within the hostel.

One common reason given by staff for the importance of provision in hostels was the barriers residents faced to accessing learning opportunities elsewhere and the challenges of working with provision in the wider community:

‘Many of our residents are destitute, experience PTSD, and may struggle with substance misuse. As a result, they often find it difficult to conform to the expectations of mainstream educational institutions. Without learning provision within the hostel, they would be at significant risk of missing out on opportunities to develop skills and improve their circumstances.’ (member of staff)

‘Many residents may have had disrupted education—on-site learning removes barriers like travel, cost, or anxiety about formal settings.’ (member of staff)

One member of staff highlighted the barriers presented by the lack of available, accessible adult learning provision in the wider community:



‘As we have seen with one of the residents who was trying to access ESOL classes locally, there can be long waiting lists, impenetrable bureaucracy, limited options for people who may be between levels.’ (member of staff)

When asked about the amount of learning provision locally that is easily accessible to residents nearly half of staff members (47%) felt ‘there is very little provision’, with 53% responding ‘there is a reasonable amount of provision’. It is surprising that opinion was split this evenly, given that most qualitative feedback from staff described residents facing significant barriers to accessing learning outside the hostel.

Some residents also expressed reluctance to attend lessons in the wider community and highlighted the convenience of learning in the hostel where they felt safe and comfortable:

‘No...it’s too far away. I’m better is coming 10 seconds and I’m here. I’m last night drinking but I’m still talking to you. Imagine it’s three miles away [the resident expressed it would be difficult to travel].’ (resident)

‘With you I got it in the hostel where I feel safe anyway...’(resident)

The importance of creating a safe, consistent, reliable learning experience is important for all students, especially those who have experienced high levels of trauma. For some people, past experiences of education were traumatic, so returning to a learning environment can trigger difficult memories and associations. By situating lessons within hostels, residents can take part in a familiar environment, with a support network of staff available should they need support during or after a lesson. Close proximity to hostel staff was also beneficial for me as the teacher, providing ease of communication and support.

When asked what challenges residents face when attending classes/courses outside the hostel, staff members raised the issue of stigma and concerns about being judged:

‘[the] stigma of being a substance user [and] lack of a trauma informed approach.’
(member of staff)

‘Residents have reported that they feel embarrassed and feel they would be judged accessing external classes.’ (member of staff)

The extent of stigma faced by people experiencing homelessness is well recognised, with one piece of research with this client group finding that 85% of participants reported unfair treatment in public settings (including in shops and on public transport) (Guise et al, 2024). It is important to recognise the significant barrier that stigma, or the fear of stigma, could play in preventing people from accessing learning opportunities in the wider community.



Negative experiences of external services may not be due solely to people being homeless but also related to their level of English. One member of staff expressed the concern that:

‘Clients are being refused rehab because of their lack of English.’ (member of staff)

When I followed up with him about this, he described the following situation:

‘I’ve taken one client to rehab and English wasn’t his first language...I could understand him, other staff at the hostel could understand him...the manager [of the rehab] didn’t have the patience to understand him...[the manager] wasn’t listening...[the resident] was turned down because of lack of English.’ (member of staff)

This situation highlights the risk of potential discrimination by services on the grounds of people's level of English and the profound impact this could have on their wellbeing and quality of life. It is extremely concerning that a service would turn someone away on the basis of their level of English, when those working with them have identified no such barrier.

Interestingly, one learner made the point that taking part in learning can counter stigma and change other people's perception of someone who is homeless, leading to support:

'People like seeing people learning 'Oh look he's a junkie but he's learning.' So people help. Even a librarian, knows you're on the street, puts a number down and you call [and get help]. People get sympathetic.' (resident)

Working with learners using substances-making learning accessible

It is well documented that there is a high prevalence of substance use among people with experience of homelessness living in hostels:

- A report by Homeless Link found that among accommodation providers 76% of residents had alcohol dependency needs and 81% had drug dependency needs (Homeless Link, 2024).
- 52% of the learners who took part in lessons at PRHA had a support need related to their drug or alcohol use.

With this in mind, when lessons were first established, I consulted hostel managers and staff about how to ensure learning opportunities were accessible to residents using substances. We agreed that residents would be allowed to attend lessons under the influence of substances, as long as it was felt to be safe for both the resident and the teacher and the resident could take part in learning.



Over the five years of offering lessons in hostels I have seen the positive impact of this approach in supporting residents to establish and maintain a long-term routine of

learning, alongside their substance use, which benefits their overall wellbeing in a wide range of ways. I have been told anecdotally by residents and staff that some learners have made changes to their substance use based around their participation in lessons, in some cases decreasing their substance use the day before or on the day of lessons.

In resident interviews for this report, two residents described how taking part in learning offered an alternative to substance use, with one describing:

‘I’m love drinking alcohol and I drink a lot but when I’m going for the different courses, it’s like six, seven hours I’m forget about the drinking.’ (resident)

One learner also spoke about how coming to lessons changed his perception of himself, including in relation to his substance use:

‘It opened my mind and made me expand. I was a no-good junkie. I felt like nothing. I started doing this and I know what I’m talking about and I’ve got confidence. It’s so different.’ (resident)



Other learners spoke about how substance use can help in a learning environment, aiding self-expression and reducing anxiety:

‘I sometimes coming and I was drink but it’s some moment when that help. You can speak very freely.’ (resident)

‘...some people...if they drinking, or taking some different things...he’s not shy, not scared or something... it’s much easier to communicate some people as well.’ (resident)

Staff who took part in the survey universally supported the approach of allowing residents to attend lessons under the influence of substances, for a range of reasons:

‘...if this was an exclusion criteria ESOL opportunities would not be accessible to the vast majority of ...residents...we have seen residents engage very meaningfully

when under the influence and this can have a really positive effect over time of reducing substance use...' (member of staff)

'It is a brilliant client-focused approach that is rarely found in the community and therefore making learning as accessible as possible for this specific client group.'
(member of staff)

'For many of our residents, abstinence is a very high bar, but they are able to minimise their usage to remain safe. This approach and flexibility has allowed many more people to access the sessions...' (member of staff)

Interestingly, residents who took part in interviews for this report had a much more divided opinion about allowing residents to attend lessons under the influence of substances. Of the nine residents who answered this question, five agreed with the approach and four disagreed. Where residents disagreed with the approach, respect and safety were key concerns:



'...you know study, you have to come clean. Come clean because respect the class, respect yourself, respect the teacher... I think it's not good for somebody come the class high or drunk.' (resident)

'When you go to college you can't go smelling of alcohol or using drugs...I wouldn't come to lessons if I've had alcohol because it's not fair on the tutor and if you're with other people it's not fair on them and you're not helping yourself either.'
(resident)

Residents who agreed with the approach highlighted the need for drinking in moderation on the day of lessons and safety:

'If you absolutely drunk better not coming but a little bit, yes, why not? [the resident said when he's been drinking] faster reaction, faster answering, you can feel free.' (resident)

‘For me, don’t make me difference. If someone’s on drugs or been drinking it don’t make me difference if they don’t make some stupid things on the lesson or be the dangerous for different people. Cos I understand some people coming that have a drinking problem, some people using drugs.’ (resident)

It is important to acknowledge that one to one learning makes it easier to work with learners who are under the influence of substances, while groups require a different approach. In the group, we have a group agreement which is put together in consultation with learners. As part of this process, when asked what they think about residents attending under the influence of substances, learners consistently agree that as long as people can take part in the class and were not disruptive, they should be allowed to attend. However, if their behaviour is not conducive to learning, they should be asked to leave and come back the following week.

I believe this approach has been vital in offering a fully inclusive, accessible service to learners using substances. Supporting these learners to take part enables the building of a relationship and establishes a routine of learning. Activities related to learning, such as the use of a calendar to mark learner attendance, the storing of work in a personal folder and setting and reviewing learning goals reinforces structure, routine and progression. This can lead to profound, long term, benefits.



Offering one-to-one and group provision.

With the exception of one ESOL group running in one hostel, all other provision was delivered in a one-to-one setting. Some of the learners in the ESOL group had attended one to one classes before the period covered in this report. As part of the questionnaire, residents were asked ‘Do you prefer to learn 1 – 1, in a group, don’t mind/either’. Their answers are detailed below:

1 – 1	In a group	Don’t mind/either
9	1	2

As we can see, the majority of residents preferred one to one provision. There were a range of reasons given for this, including the need to build confidence and feeling uncomfortable around other people.

‘For first time one-to-one is ok. This is important because if you learning by group some people not have confident, not understand. If one-to-one you understand and then you ask the teacher. [When you get better] going in group is ok.’
(resident)

‘I get nervous when I’m around other people and I get paranoid.’ (resident)

When asked if there was anything that was particularly helpful/effective about the way the English language and literacy lessons are run, 88% of staff selected the offer of one-to-one support.

From a teaching perspective, one to one provision allows for a highly personalised approach to learning. It can also be vital to build learners’ confidence and help them to overcome previous difficult or traumatic learning experiences. I think that it is especially important to be able to offer one to one provision to literacy learners, as they often experience a degree of shame in relation to their skills, making attending a group very difficult.



Some residents and staff also highlighted the importance of group provision. Two residents spoke about the support from other learners and the sharing of ideas that comes from being in a group:

‘I’m like to come to the English class, especially it is some more groups...sometimes it’s like if you doing one-to-one, you go much stressful. If you got ... more people you always can give him to answer the question. It’s much easier.’ (resident)

‘Group is good because more people share their opinions. Everybody have different ideas from English class. Maybe I don’t know something, he knows, maybe I know [something he doesn’t].’ (resident)

When asked what could be improved about the lessons, two members of staff suggested groups, with one highlighting how this may be more effective in encouraging attendance:

‘Offering group sessions in communal areas such as the lounge could help raise awareness and encourage attendance. A more informal, visible setting may help residents...especially those who may be anxious or reluctant to join structured one to one classes.’ (member of staff)

There are a multitude of benefits that come from learning with others, including increased social interaction and developing skills in working with others. I believe, particularly for people with experience of trauma who may find relationships with others difficult, the contained, predictable setting of a learning environment presents a vital opportunity to get to know others.



From the varied perspectives of staff and residents, we can see that the ideal would be for residents to have access to both one to one and group provision, as this would allow them a choice in how to take part in learning. With limited funding and capacity, it is not possible to offer this to residents currently.

Supporting residents to access other learning opportunities.

An important part of the work with residents is making them aware of other learning opportunities in the wider community and with their support workers, helping them to access these when they wish to.

Of the twelve residents who took part in the questionnaire for this report, six were taking part in other types of learning. Four of these six learning opportunities were the result of my working with residents and hostel staff to support residents to access further learning opportunities, including college courses and one to one reading support offered by Read Easy.

At the hostel in Crimscott Street, in house Digital Skills lessons run by Southwark Adult Learning service began after I contacted the Head of Service to explore possibilities for working together. Lessons have now been running in the hostel since November 2024,

giving residents a fantastic opportunity develop vital digital skills and experience working with a community learning provider.

This collaboration and successfully supporting residents to access learning opportunities outside of hostels highlights how having a teacher present in hostels working in one area can support residents to access learning through other providers, increasing awareness of other learning opportunities and enabling residents to widen their network of support.

One learner spoke about how he was unsure about starting to work with another learning provider and asked my advice:

‘...first time I go meet my new teacher...I speak to you before. I say ‘I’m not been comfortable for new person or read with him one to one’. You give me advice, you say me ‘... just try it, if you don’t like it, just stop’. So I try it, so she’s...good teacher...I learning very well...so I’m happy.’ (resident)

This resident describes how an existing relationship with a teacher can support learners to make new connections, not just by giving them the confidence of experience but by having an additional person to ask for advice and support. It also emphasises how being reminded of the choice to opt out of a service, as well as opt in, can give residents the courage to try something new.

Supporting the teacher to support residents – the provision of reflective practice

I was fortunate to have access to reflective practice throughout the majority of my time working as a teacher at PRHA. I had consistent, one-to-one sessions with a psychotherapist, to discuss anything that had come up in lessons that I might need support with. This was particularly important as I was working with learners who had experienced, or were experiencing, a high degree of trauma. It was not uncommon in lessons for learners to speak about very difficult experiences, or issues they were struggling with and I found the emotional impact of this aspect of the work significant. Alongside support from colleagues and my manager, reflective practice was



an invaluable opportunity to reflect on and process these experiences, among many others.

The range of topics covered in reflective practice was huge, including how to support individual learners, work with group dynamics and navigate different aspects of running learning provision within the homelessness sector. As the only teacher working at PRHA, these sessions were vital in giving me space to think not only about my work with learners but also about my teaching practice more widely. They supported me in my work, leading me to implement changes in my approach which directly benefitted both residents and myself. They were also a vital support to my wellbeing.

In May 2025, my reflective practice sessions came to an end as the funding for the service was cut. At the time I knew this was a huge loss and was concerned about continuing to undertake the work I did without this vital support. As I envisaged, it was a significant challenge and served to highlight to an even greater degree the importance of this service. It is hugely positive that PRHA has now secured funding to reintroduce reflective practice, including for the role of the English language and literacy teacher.

How have classes benefitted residents?

Both staff and residents describe a range of ways in which the reading, writing and English language lessons have had a positive impact on residents' lives. As already explored, this has included the benefits of in-house provision, support for learners using substances and the opportunity to offer one to one learning support. This section of the report summarises some of the other benefits that have been highlighted.

Enjoyment and the positive impacts of learning

Many residents spoke about their enjoyment of the lessons and the positive impact learning had on their lives:



‘Enjoy because this my dream. I feel good when I read...my mind free...I feeling free... When me reading, I don’t want to focus for nothing [else], just only focus my dream...’ (resident)

‘I enjoy learn improve language. I love languages. I would love to learn more. The important to improve myself and grow in some way.’ (resident)

One learner described that taking part in learning had profound benefits for his attitude toward his wellbeing and self-care:

‘...Learning is everything...there’s loads of things that went with it. You start getting confidence in yourself. Even dressing properly. I wasn’t washing properly. I’d given up. It’s all different. I’m starting to see life differently...People notice it.’ (resident)



This learner’s experience shows how significantly taking part in learning can positively impact many other areas of life and contribute to positive changes. Many members of staff described similar, far-reaching impacts, with one member of staff stating:

‘I have seen improvement in [residents’] confidence, independence, routine, speech, mental health & wellbeing, as well as better engagement with staff and residents.’ (member of staff)

Anecdotally, learners told me that taking part in learning often gave them something positive to focus on and helped to take their minds off stresses and worries. Some learners described the lessons as calming. One member of staff observed this in a resident he worked with:

‘the ESOL classes had a calming effect on ...[a]...resident, there were days the resident would be causing staff issues before the class so I would worry about how the class would go, but the resident always left the class much more relaxed and with no issues.’

Staff also described residents looking forward to lessons, feeling pride in their achievements and how lessons help to build routine:

‘A resident I work closely with now gets the Metro newspaper and takes pride in reading the articles...another resident mentioned how they look forward to the sessions each week.’
(member of staff)



‘Both residents look forward to their weekly session and are proud of their achievements.’ (member of staff)

‘one resident really looked forward to the sessions and it provided their life with routine since it was the only thing they regularly attended.’ (member of staff)

Anecdotally, some learners have said that the literacy and English language lessons are the only regular, fixed activity in which they take part each week, contributing to routine and structure in their lives. It is well recognised that having a routine contributes to better mental health and provides predictability in our lives (UCLA health, 2026), something that may be particularly beneficial for people with experiences of trauma. Yet again, we can see how taking part in learning has positive impacts for people beyond lessons themselves.

Improved skills and recognition of achievement

As part of the questionnaire for this report, residents were asked about their confidence in different skills over the time they had taken part in lessons. They were asked if their confidence in reading, writing, speaking and listening had gone down, stayed the same or gone up.

Of the 11 residents who took part in this section of the questionnaire:

- 91% felt that their confidence had gone up in at least one skills area
- 82% stated that their skills had increased in three or more areas
- 45% described an increase in all skills.
- 9% felt that their skills had increased in one area only.
- 9% felt that their skills had stayed the same throughout.

When asked in interviews what they enjoyed about lessons, a number of learners spoke about the fact their skills had improved:

‘I just enjoy the newness of it. It was all new. Showing me how to read words. I didn’t know how I would learn a word and then when you showed me how to sound words out that was key and I knew I could do it.’ (resident)

‘...what I learn with you now, I read one book with you...two books, or three books, something like that...so I’m happy now, I feeling good.’ (resident)

It is important to note that improvement in skills is central to feelings of enjoyment and positivity for these learners. In my experience, for learners to sustain motivation it is vital that there is both an enjoyment of lessons and that learners can see tangible progress in their skills as soon as possible.

Staff also commented on the improvement in skills they had observed in residents and the benefits that come with this.

‘I have seen improvement in both spoken and written English in the clients attending.’ (member of staff)

‘Residents’ literacy skills have improved, allowing them to read and understand important correspondence like appointments, which promotes independence.’ (member of staff).



The fact that staff observe improvements in a range of residents’ skills, including spoken and written communication and reading skills, demonstrates the impact of the lessons beyond the classroom. Through taking part in learning, residents are able to both express themselves more fully and understand information communicated to them, vital skills for living independently.

Recognition of progress and achievement is incredibly important when working with learners. For literacy lessons, I often use the That Read Thing programme, developed by Tricia Millar, which supports learners to develop their reading, writing and spelling skills

using age-appropriate phonics. As part of the programme, learners receive certificates as they progress through the different stages and residents have taken great pride in this.

Each year we hold a Celebration of Achievement for learners who have taken part in classes. Learners receive a certificate of participation (pictured) and a gift in recognition of their work, most recently having the choice between a clock or a calendar. These events are hugely enjoyed by residents and provide a vital opportunity to celebrate residents' success.



Connection, communication and confidence

Connection with others is a fundamental human need and the ability to communicate with people is central to connection. Loneliness and isolation are detrimental to many aspects of our physical and mental wellbeing and are often more acute among people with experience of homelessness. Research with rough sleepers has found that 62% of participants 'said that they often felt isolated from others, compared to approximately 6% of the general population reporting that they often or always feel lonely' (Sutton-Hamilton and Sanders, 2023).

For many people, especially those with experiences of trauma, communicating and connecting with others can be a daunting prospect. The English language and literacy classes give people space to rediscover, develop and practice their communication skills, building confidence within a safe, predictable environment. This opportunity is often badly needed, as one resident described when asked how he felt before he started the classes:

'Now I know how I felt. I didn't know at the time. Inadequate. Even though I knew things it didn't seem to matter because I didn't think anyone would want to listen. I didn't have no confidence.' (resident)

One resident spoke about communication as one of his motivations for starting lessons:

‘English class is important because if you no start English first the life is hard for me and then no contact with the people. No Communication. That’s why I’m start.’
(resident)

When asked what he enjoyed about the lessons, one resident highlighted the connection that happened during the class between he and I and how this increased his confidence in interacting with and supporting others outside the class:

‘Just sitting here and having a conversation with you ... gives you the confidence to come out of yourself. To be able to speak to other people and help myself...’
(resident)

As this learner describes, the importance of the connection between a teacher and student cannot be underestimated, both in terms of working together in lessons and how it can support learners to build confidence in connecting and relating to others outside the classroom. His experience also highlights that the lessons have an important social aspect for many learners, who enjoy being with another person or part of a group for the opportunity it gives them for company and companionship, as well as improving skills.

Another resident described connection with others through sharing the same skills and being able to access the same opportunities as others:

‘...it’s important to me because if you know how to read you can go to college, you can go to university, you can mingle with people. Everybody is reading and writing and me I can’t read and write. I want to be like other people.’ (resident)



Staff members described residents’ improved communication skills, both with staff members and other residents:

‘I have also noticed that residents who were previously isolated are now more engaged and interacting with others. Communication between residents and staff has improved, as they feel more able to make themselves understood.’ (member of staff)

In addition, it was noted that some residents were better able to communicate with staff in relation to their support:

‘This English class has helped one of my clients build his confidence in speaking with staff for support. It has also improved his communication skills with staff and other residents.’ (member of staff)

‘The positive impact has been huge. From increased confidence, speaking & literacy ability & engagement, to opening up trauma-informed discussions about a resident's preferences and support needs outside of the sessions...’ (member of staff)



The link between increased confidence and communication skills and residents being able to express their needs and wishes is a crucial one. It demonstrates how taking part in learning empowers people to advocate for themselves and have control over different aspects of their lives. The ability to communicate their needs and wishes to others, including support services, benefits the residents and services working with them.

Living independently and thinking of the future

Supporting people to gain and develop English language and literacy skills is vital to helping them live independently and have control over their lives. In this way it is integral to the work of hostels in preparing people to move into independent accommodation.

As discussed, the barriers to independent living faced by many people with low literacy are numerous, including difficulties with understanding written communications such as letters and completing tasks which require writing and spelling skills, for example filling in forms and writing letters. (Olisa, Patterson and Wright, 2010).

Staff members recognised the link between literacy and English language skills and independent living, with one commenting:

‘Some individuals may struggle with reading, writing, or completing forms, which affects daily living and independence.’ (member of staff)

Both residents and staff recognised that the need for a good level of English language and literacy skills is key in residents being able to manage their own lives. When asked why the English language and literacy classes were important to him, one resident said:

‘Important because I need learn...I need see life...if you don’t know how to read...you’re living alone, you got some letter. What you gonna do with the letter? Sometimes the letter is very important...’ (resident)

When asked why he had wanted to start lessons, another resident spoke about the importance of English for employment and the fact he was able to manage health appointments by himself because his English had improved:

‘Provide myself, so it’s easy to find a job...it’s easy to communicate some different stuff like hospitals...before, some people I have to ask to come with me, now I can do myself. That is much easier.’ (resident)

Building skills for independent living and employment was cited by one resident as something she would advise other resident to think about if they were considering lessons:

‘It is good to know how to read and write properly so that you can go anywhere, maybe job, you want to fill a form you can fill it by yourself, no problem.’ (resident)



Staff members also observed that taking part in lessons had benefitted residents in terms of attending appointments and working with other agencies, as well as moving into their own accommodation:

‘English lessons will help residents building their self-esteem and confidence to continue to [be] able to communicate independently. Residents can advocate well

with other external agencies ie Job Centre, GP/Hospital and dentist should they have to attend appointments on their own.’ (member of staff)

‘...so many of the residents who have joined the sessions have gone on to successfully move on to independent accommodation, citing the classes as playing a key role in building their confidence and skills towards this big step.’ (member of staff)

Taking part in learning can also encourage people to think about their goals for the future and working towards them. As part of the questionnaire for this survey, learners were asked about their interests in working, volunteering and studying elsewhere. Of the 12 residents who took part in the questionnaire section of the survey, 100% expressed an interest at least one of the following, detailed as follows:

Studying somewhere else in the future (e.g. the library, college, university)	58%
Doing training/volunteering in the future	58%
Starting work in the future	50%
Getting a qualification in literacy/English	50%
Studying another subject (for example catering, maths, digital skills, gardening)	42%

Learners gave a range of reasons for wanting to take part in these opportunities. Two learners spoke about wanting to help others through volunteering, with one learner speaking about how many people had helped him since he came to the UK, so as his life gets better, he wants to help people in the UK. Another learner expressed:

‘When you're volunteering you can talk to people and try and help them get off drink and drugs.’ (resident)

Learners also spoke about how increasing their skills would help them to progress:

‘If you learn more English, it's easy to find a job and communicate to people. For digital skills, it's easy to find other types of work, for me not just building/construction, something like office job.’ (resident)

'[I'm] Interested [in] university because I want to make my dream come true...I want to do course acting. This is my dream. (resident)



The goals these learners have for the future highlights how taking part in learning supports people to think about and make plans for their future, as well as helping them to identify the steps they need to reach their goals. For many people experiencing homelessness, there is an understandable focus on the present and ensuring that their current needs are met. Within a learning environment, there is space to start thinking about the future.

The importance of taking part in learning provision for people experiencing homelessness.

As part of the interview for this report, residents were asked how important they thought it was for people experiencing homelessness to be able to take part in learning or study. Of the eleven residents, nine expressed that they thought it was important, for a broad range of reasons:

'If you been homeless, gonna thinking for drugs, gonna thinking for go stealing...but if you start reading with class, you been busy you don't have any time to do for crime or something.' (resident)

'That is very important...because it will help them to express themselves and feel safe studying as well.' (resident)

'It's everything. First of all, it takes our mind off the rubbish and crap that we're so scared of. It just helps. You leave with a smile.' (resident)

The views of these learners' express realities that many people without experience of homelessness would not be familiar with, such as the fear felt by many and the risk of becoming involved in crime. They also highlight that learning offers positive experiences, such as the opportunity to feel safe and enjoy something, all of which may be additionally valued by people experiencing homelessness.

One learner also described how he had supported a friend who was homeless to access learning with a service he is working with:

‘I have now my friend homeless...he want to learn read, writing, so I speak with my other teacher. I give him the detail...this...stop him for the crime, stop him for the trouble, he learn something for himself. Maybe he gonna get better life.’ (resident)

This learner’s description of how study could potentially help his friend reflects what he sees as both the protective power of learning, helping people to stay away from ‘trouble’ and the possibility it opens up for people to improve their future.

94% of hostel staff who took part in the survey for this report said that they see English language and literacy provision for people experiencing homelessness as more important since it has begun to run in their hostel. This change in thinking is interesting to note and highlights how, when learning provision is delivered alongside other support within hostels, its value can be more readily understood and experienced.

Some learners felt there was no need to differentiate between people who were homeless and people who were not when thinking about learning provision:

‘I think everyone can start study, whether is homeless or not homeless, so don’t make difference honestly.’ (resident)

It is important to recognise that for some people experiencing homelessness learning may not be a priority or offer the benefits identified by others. Equally, some may be able to access learning opportunities within the wider community and feel comfortable to do so.



I would argue that when taken together, the feedback from staff and learners I have worked with, along with research (St Mungo’s, 2014), suggests that it is incredibly important for people experiencing homelessness to have access to learning provision. In addition, to best meet the needs of learners and counter the reality of discrimination and exclusion from services, I believe it is crucial that there are specialist services within the homelessness sector that meet this need.

What have we learned?

Offering learning provision within hostels presents a precious opportunity to work with a varied and unique group of people. In order to make lessons as accessible these learners, we have learned there are a number of approaches that are important. These include:

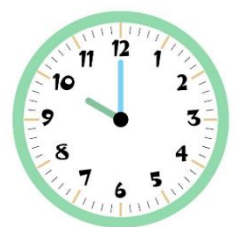
Applying the principles of trauma informed care to all aspects of the provision.

It is well documented that people with experience of homelessness have a far higher likelihood of having experienced trauma than the general population. Research by Oasis Community Housing with people experiencing homelessness found that 92% had experienced trauma, with almost 45% reporting experiencing trauma as a child (Irving and Harding, 2022).

Among other potential impacts, we know that experiences of trauma, especially in childhood, ‘...can dramatically affect learning through decreased cognitive capacity, poor memory and concentration, language delays, and the inability to create and sustain positive relationships with peers, teachers, and carers’ (Brunzell, Waters and Stokes, 2015).

In my experience, these challenges may mean learners need help in a number of ways, including:

- support with anxiety about meeting the teacher for the first time and needing a significant amount of time to feel comfortable with the teacher and other learners.
- remembering the day and time of a lesson.
- recalling learning from previous lessons.
- relaxing and focusing in lessons.
- taking in and retaining new information.
- navigating hypervigilance and increased sensitivity to the body language and tone of voice of the teacher or other learners.
- support with activities that require abstract thought, self-reflection or critical thinking.



- Navigating changes and transitions, such as breaks in lessons or lessons coming to an end.

With an understanding of this, teachers can work with learners to provide a unique opportunity for healing and growth through learning. This includes:

- developing a working relationship and building trust.
- communicating experiences, ideas and opinions.
- using techniques to support with retaining and recalling information.
- speaking to residents about the impacts of stress on learning and wellbeing and techniques to counter this.
- embedding grounding and relaxation techniques into lessons, with the agreement of residents.
- celebrating achievements.
- working together to recognise and address challenges.
- managing transitions and changes carefully.
- discussing the end of lessons with learners and if and how they would like this to be marked. I did this by writing the learner a letter summarising the work that had been done and their achievements.

These are just some of the ways the learning environment can help individuals to build skills and resilience that will benefit them in all areas of their life.

Working together

The success of this provision is rooted in hostel staff, managers and the teacher working together with residents to offer and develop this provision. When lessons were first established in hostels in December 2020, the idea to offer them over the telephone was based on a previous learner's suggestion to work in this way. It enabled lessons to run when many residents did not have access to online programmes such as Zoom. This spirit of listening to residents and adapting the provision in response to their needs and ideas has continued.



Similarly, liaising with and learning from hostel staff when working with residents has been vital. Staff have played a pivotal role in promoting lessons, encouraging and facilitating attendance and offering feedback and ideas about the delivery of lessons. Simply put, without working together, this provision would not have been able to run.

Keeping the referral process simple

The number of steps between residents expressing an interest in lessons and meeting with the teacher are as few as possible. Provided there is an available lesson, the process of registering for and starting lessons is as follows:

Learners are referred for lessons by their keyworker or they can self refer.



Learners have an initial meeting with the teacher. This is an opportunity to get to know each other, talk about the lessons and the skills learners want to work on.



Learners begin lessons. Learning goals are agreed and reviewed each quarter, as part of a broader discussion about the residents' experience of the lessons.

Building relationships and working towards trust.

Many of the people living in hostels have been repeatedly let down by individuals and systems that should have supported them. For some, this makes it incredibly difficult to consider working with someone new, let alone take the step of doing so. When learners come to meet me, I recognise that this act in itself takes a tremendous amount of courage for some. I do my best to be open with learners, emphasise the control and choice they have in their learning and highlight that our work together is based on collaboration. I also appreciated that consistency and reliability are vital to enable us to work towards trust, which sometimes takes a long time to establish.

Offering long term support.

As discussed, establishing a routine with learners and building trust can take a significant amount of time. In my experience, in most cases, short courses do not allow for this. The fact that PRHA secured funding for the role of a teacher for three years was vital in allowing the time needed to set up and develop provision in hostels.

Learning from others and listening to learners

Research by St Mungo's (2014) laid out many of the barriers to learning faced by people experiencing homelessness, as well as approaches that could make learning support more accessible and effective. The provision of learning in small groups or 1 - 1 settings by staff who had a good understanding of the support needs of people experiencing homelessness was recommended, as was '...teaching at a variable pace tailored to individual participants.'



The lessons which have been run at PRHA hostels over the last five years have applied these principles, among others, in the following ways:

- With the exception of one ESOL group, all lessons are run on a one-to-one basis.
- Residents who are interested in lessons can meet with the teacher before committing to classes. This is so that we can get to know each other, the resident can find out more about the lessons and we can discuss their needs and interests.
- Learning goals are based on the skills learners identify as wanting to work on, as well as those that emerge from initial assessments and as lessons progress.
- Each quarter there is a review of the lessons and learning goals, to reflect on progress and areas to work on.
- With the majority of lessons being one to one, the pace of learning is set by the student and the teacher working together.
- Lessons are flexible, where possible, in terms of timings and duration.
- Lessons are open to people who have been using substances on the day, as long as they can take part in learning and it is felt to be safe by both the learner and the teacher.

Understanding support needs within the context of learning.

It is well recognised that mental and physical health issues and substance use are some of the most common support needs among people with experience of homelessness (Homeless Link, 2024). It is important to note that, at 71%, the percentage of learners taking part in lessons who have a disability is nearly three times that of the general population, at 25% (Stiebahl, S, Danechi, Harker, R, 2025). 76% have a diagnosed mental health need, compared to 20% of the general population in England (Centre for Mental Health, 2025). In addition, residents often have multiple, interconnected support needs, as we have seen.



In addition, one support need that is particularly important to consider when working with learners with experience of homelessness is Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Instances of TBI are higher among people with experience of homelessness, with one study finding that 48% of homeless participants reported a history of TBI (Oddy et al, 2012). TBI can impact vital skills for learning, including planning and organising, concentration and memory (ibid).

It is vital that any teacher working with learners with experience of homelessness has an understanding of these support needs, among others, and takes the time to understand how they may impact a resident's experience of learning. Working together, difficulties can be navigated, supporting residents to have a successful and enjoyable experience of learning.

What are the challenges of running this provision? What could be improved?

By far the biggest challenge identified by staff was encouraging and supporting residents to attend, as has been explored in the section of the report on [attendance](#). Other challenges and suggested areas for improvement involved the availability, length and regularity of lessons and having an appropriate learning space within the hostels.

Availability and regularity of lessons.

With twelve hours of learning provision a week across four hostels, there are limitations to the amount of support that can be provided. This can be a particular challenge when the window of opportunity to engage residents is narrow, with motivation sometimes declining significantly when there is a waiting time for lessons.



When asked what were the challenges in supporting residents to attend lessons in the hostel, one staff member said:

‘Residents refusing to attend and those who do want to attend, no availability due to classes being limited.’ (member of staff)

Similarly, when asked what could be done to make the lessons better, more regular lessons were requested by both staff and residents:

‘at one point residents requested that we offer two sessions per week. This shows how valued the classes are.’ (member of staff)

‘I will like to see once a week if possible [increase] to twice or increase in the hours.’ (member of staff)

‘...just one time a week only two hours, is little bit short time. [I asked the resident what he would prefer and he said] two or three times a week and little bit longer, 3,4 hours.’ (resident)

While some people may be comfortable to study for long periods of time, it is important to consider that for many, especially those with additional learning needs or experiences of trauma, maintaining focus for long periods can be very difficult. In my experience, one hour of study for one-to-one lessons and one and a half or two hours for group lessons work well for most learners. I agree that more than one lesson a week would be beneficial for some learners in terms of building a more consistent routine of learning and consolidating previous learning.

The need for continuity

When asked if there was anything that would improve the lessons or anything they would like to change about lessons, some learners spoke about wanting them to continue:

‘I don’t wanna like the classes stop. I want to learn more...’ (resident)

‘I don’t want to stop it.’ (resident)



Staff also expressed this sentiment when asked if there was anything they would like commissioners and funders to know about the lessons:

‘Not to stop as it makes a lot of difference in lives of the people we support.’
(member of staff)

‘I think it's really important that we continue to offer these classes even if residents don't always attend them...just by having it accessible to them it will help people to think about their future and learning/training.’ (member of staff)

One member of staff expressed concern about the impact on residents if lessons did not continue:

‘With the increase we are seeing in our residents being excluded from positive support services for a variety of reasons...it would be a catastrophic shame to see ESOL be included in this.’ (staff member)

These expressions of the need for lessons to continue and concerns about what will happen if they don’t, are perhaps indicative of the wider challenge within the homelessness sector to maintain continuity of services in the face of significant funding challenges. Research into the provision of literacy and numeracy services within the homelessness sector concluded that:

‘While government policy and related funding does not recognise and support such provision, it is likely to remain piecemeal and highly contingent on the contribution of volunteers and short-term funding opportunities’ (Jones, 2018)

Within this context it is perhaps to be expected that both residents and staff would want to emphasise the importance of continued provision. PRHA’s decision to seek funding for the role of a salaried English language and literacy teacher for three years demonstrates commitment to this service and recognition within the organisation of the need for long-term learning provision. It also allowed time for lessons to be embedded within hostels, evaluated and adapted over time to best meet the needs of residents.

Space for learning

The physical space within which learning takes place is incredibly important. Having a familiar room in which to work each week is a vital part of ensuring that lessons feel predictable and consistent, both for learners and the teacher. Working within hostels, lessons took place in rooms that had other uses, such as resource rooms and meeting rooms. This occasionally presented challenges, as rooms would sometimes be needed for other activities, necessitating a change in rooms for the lesson. However, across the four hostels, these disruptions were minimal.



When asked what could be improved about the lessons, one member of staff said:

‘We haven’t got the most ideal spaces for the sessions...I would love for us to have a more trauma-informed space...’ (member of staff)

Key recommendations and conclusion

PRHA recognises that there is a significant and enduring need for literacy and ESOL services for this client group, and that supporting residents in these areas is crucial to improving their quality of life and prospects for the future. With this in mind, we have identified the following key recommendations, both for the service within PRHA and for the wider homelessness and adult learning sectors.

Key recommendations for PRHA

- Every step should be taken to continue and develop this vital work. PRHA will seek to secure future, long term funding for this provision, ideally that which will enable it to expand and meet the needs of a greater number of residents.
- Future funding for this work needs to ensure the delivery of a service designed to be specific to this group, including in terms of flexibility around attendance, delivery in hostels and the offer of one-to-one support.
- Partnerships with other learning providers in the community should be explored, to broaden the range of learning opportunities available to residents.
- Thought should be given to how we can make lessons more accessible to women, non-binary residents and residents in need of literacy support, who are currently under represented among learners.
- Through the delivery of the ESOL and literacy lessons, PRHA has gained valuable insights into the need for this provision and crucially, approaches that work to support residents in their learning. It should work to share this knowledge, as well as highlight the need for this provision, to wider stakeholders.



Key recommendations for the wider homelessness and adult learning sectors.

- Funding for learning provision within services is extremely limited (Jones, 2018), leading to a lack of vital support for those we work with. Homelessness services need to come together to lobby for recognition of this funding need and for funding itself, to ensure much needed learning services can be provided.
- Significant work needs to be done to raise the profile, and recognise the importance of, learning provision within the sector. Establishing a network of

organisations that offer learning support to people experiencing homelessness could facilitate this, as well as enabling the sharing of good practice and support.

- More needs to be done to understand the learning needs of people experiencing homelessness, not just within the context of ESOL and literacy but in every area. Services working with people experiencing homelessness should seek to gather information from those they work with about their learning needs and interests and how they would like these to be met.

Conclusion

As this report demonstrates, the literacy and English language lessons at PRHA have been successful in delivering accessible learning provision to residents facing high levels of exclusion, leading to a multitude of profound benefits. With 72% attendance over the last two years, it is clear that even with the significant barriers they face to learning, residents want to take part in learning and achieve great success when they do so.

It has been shown that improved literacy and English language skills and access to learning opportunities benefit residents in every area of their lives. They facilitate connection and offer enjoyment, build skills and give people greater control over their lives. The importance of this provision cannot be overstated.



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Appendix-questionnaire, interview and survey questions for staff and residents

Questionnaire and interview questions for residents

Questionnaire

1. Before starting these lessons, when was the last time you took part in any learning activity?

2. Have you ever been told, or thought, that you have an additional learning need (e.g. dyslexia, ADHD, Autism)? I can tell you more about these if it's helpful. Tick 1

Yes ☐ No ☐ I'm not sure ☐ Prefer not to say ☐

3. Do you prefer to learn: 1-1? ☐ In a group? ☐ Don't mind/either ☐
Why do you think this is?

4. Is there anything that makes it difficult for you to come to classes?

Tick as many as you want to:

Busy life ☐	Lots of appointments ☐
Work ☐	Difficulty remembering lessons ☐
Physical health issues ☐	Attending other classes/courses ☐
Mental health issues ☐	Living in a noisy environment ☐
Drug/alcohol/substance use ☐	Problems sleeping ☐

Something else (please tell me) ☐

Prefer not to say ☐

5. Is there anything that makes it difficult to study during lessons? Tick as many as you want to:

Difficulty focusing/concentrating ☐

Mental health issues ☐

Difficulty remembering learning from last lesson ☐

Tiredness ☐

Stress/worry/having other things on your mind ☐

Substance use ☐

Feeling uncomfortable in a study environment ☐

Problems with eyesight ☐

Physical health issues ☐

Problems with hearing ☐

Prefer not to say ☐

6. Are you taking part in any other type of learning or study? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, can you say where this is?

7. Are you interested in any of the following? Tick as many as you want to:

Getting a qualification in literacy/English ☐

Studying another subject (for example catering, maths, digital skills, gardening) ☐

Studying somewhere else in the future (e.g. the library, college, university) ☐

Doing training/volunteering in the future ☐

Starting work in the future ☐

Can you say why or why not?

Using your skills independently.

Think about your skills since you started coming to English language/reading and writing lessons.

Tick ✓ the box below that describes how you feel.

How confident do you feel about...		My confidence has gone down 	My confidence has stayed the same 	My confidence Has gone up 
Reading and understanding without help from anyone else?				
Writing and being able to say what you want to without help from anyone else?				
Speaking and being able to say what you want to without help from anyone else?				
Listening to and understanding what people say without help from anyone else?				

Is there anything you would like to say about this?

Interview questions for residents.

1. What made you decide to start lessons? How did you feel before you started them?
2. What do you enjoy about having lessons? Why are they important to you?
3. Is there anything about how the lessons run that you find particularly helpful (for example that they are in the hostel, the structure of them, the length of time they are for)?
4. The lessons were set up to try and make learning as accessible as possible for people experiencing homelessness. How important do you think it is that people experiencing homelessness are able to take part in learning/study?

What part (if any) do you think learning plays in helping people recover from homelessness?
5. If you are comfortable to talk about it, do you have any support needs related to your mental or physical health or substance use? Does taking part in learning help with this?
6. These lessons are open to people who have been using substances on the day of class. Residents can attend lessons under the influence of substances as long as it is felt to be safe and they can take part in learning. What do you think of this approach?

If you feel comfortable to say, have you come to lessons under the influence of substances and if so, how has it affected your learning?
7. How do you think the lessons could be better? Is there anything you would like to change?
8. How would you feel about going to classes/lessons outside the hostel?
9. What advice would you give to someone in your position who is thinking about taking part in lessons?
10. This report might be read by people who commission or fund services. Is there anything you would like them to know about these lessons?
11. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Survey questions for staff

1. How important do you think it is to have learning provision offered within the hostel?

Very important

Quite important

Not very important

Not at all important

Please explain your answer

2. Has having English language and literacy classes in the hostel changed how you think about the importance of learning provision for people experiencing homelessness?

Yes, I see it as more important.

Yes, I see it as less important

No, I don't feel any differently.

3. What (if any) positive impact have you seen English language and literacy classes have for residents who are attending? These could be improvements in their skills or benefits in other areas of their life outside of reading, writing and English language skills.

If you can give particular examples, **without using residents' names**, that would be very helpful (for example, one resident looks forward to the session every week...)

4. Is there anything you think is particularly helpful/effective about the way the English language and literacy lessons are run? You can tick as many options below as you want to and/or write your own answer:

- Support for residents to work on their reading and writing and English language skills.
- The fact the lessons are run in the hostel
- The offer of one-to-one support.
- Increasing awareness of other opportunities to study in the community.
- The offer of flexible lesson days/times/lengths of lessons (where possible).
- The fact that the project is founded on trauma informed principles.
- Decreasing isolation through regular contact.
- Supporting residents to build routine.

Something else (please tell me)

5. To what extent do you think there is a need for English language and literacy support among your residents?

There is no need

There is very little need.

There is a moderate need.

There is significant need.

Please give any more information you would like to

6. These lessons are open to people who have been using substances on the day of class. Residents can attend lessons under the influence of substances as long as it is felt to be safe and they can take part in learning. What do you think of this approach?

7. As a staff member, what are the challenges in supporting residents to access the literacy and English language classes **in the hostel**?

8. What could be done to make the English language and literacy classes better?

9. Outside of the literacy and ESOL lessons in the hostel, how much learning provision is there **locally that is easily accessible** to residents?

There is very little provision.

There is a reasonable amount of provision.

There is a lot of provision.

10. As a staff member, what challenges do you see residents experience when they want to attend courses/classes **outside the hostel**?

11. This report might be read by people who commission or fund services. Is there anything you would like them to know about these lessons?