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Language programmes evaluation

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Glossary of terms

AEIOU	Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects and Users
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DfE	Department for Education
EBacc	English Baccalaureate
ELA	English Language Assistant
EPI	Extensive Processing Instruction
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GEM	German Expert Mentor
GPP	German Promotion Project
HHCL	Home Heritage and Community Languages
KS	Key Stage
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
MFL	Modern Foreign Languages
MFLPR	Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review
MLA	Modern Language Assistant
LEO	Language Educators Online
NCLE	National Consortium for Language Education
NPP	National Priority Projects
SCITT	School-Centred Initial Teacher Training
SLN	Strategic Learning Network
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UCL	University College London
UKGC	UK – German Connection

Organisations and acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from 2025 (year 2) and from 2026 (year 3) of the 3-year evaluation of the Department for Education's (DfE) language programmes which support the teaching and learning of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in English schools. The evaluation aimed to understand how well these programmes have been implemented and delivered, what works well and what could be improved, and potential (combined) impacts. These programmes include the new network-based language support model involving Strategic Learning Networks (SLN), a series of National Priority Projects (NPPs) and a professional development platform Language Educators Online (LEO); the long running Language Assistants Programme run by the British Council; and the German Expert Mentors (GEMs) from the Goethe-Institut's German Promotion Project (GPP). Findings from year 1 of the evaluation, which focused on the previous hubs-based model that was discontinued in December 2024, were published separately as an interim report.[1]

Overview

This research found that MFL teachers are passionate about the value of their subject and about improving teaching and learning. They greatly value opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other, and this is a key driver for getting involved in the various programmes evaluated in this report. However, MFL is one of many competing priorities in schools. The priority given to MFL within a school has a significant impact on teachers' ability to engage with these programmes.

SLNs, NPPs, GEMs and Language Assistants are all national programmes which are delivered locally and supported by an expert body. This seems to be an effective way to enable MFL teachers to tap into bigger structures and expertise whilst facilitating localised communities for collaboration and support.

Learning from the new model

SLNs

The SLN model has great potential to support MFL teaching and learning. Where networks are working well, they provide teachers and leaders with valuable subject-specific professional development, peer-support and opportunities to share good practice. However, currently, the reach and level of engagement of SLNs across the country is uneven. Membership ranges from 10 to 188 schools per SLN, with varying levels of engagement, and whilst some networks provide extremely high-quality support, others are able to offer much less to their members.

[1] The year 1 evaluation report and details of the Language Hubs model can be found at Language programmes evaluation - interim report

What is working well

- SLNs are particularly important for teachers who do not already have access to peer support, either because they are a sole practitioner, in a small MFL department or because their school does not have links with others.
- SLNs which are working well offer professional development and networking opportunities which are perceived as high-quality and align with teachers' interests and priorities. Regular newsletters signpost teachers to useful evidence-based resources.
- It is important for professional development to be offered in ways which meet different needs. In-person events are hugely appreciated but webinars are also a convenient way to support attendance and maintain contact. It is useful to be able to offer a range of dates and times (during/after the school day) and a mixture of in-person and online events.
- SLN leads appreciate the way that the new model enables them to work with more network schools than was possible in the Hub model. However, establishing a network of engaged schools takes time and effort. SLN leads have built on the connections formed during the Hub model and leveraged existing relationships from other networks to develop their SLN.

Challenges

- Delayed information about funding and a lack of alignment between the funding cycle and rhythm of the academic year created difficulties during the set-up of SLNs and NPPs. Government funding operates on a financial year cycle and late confirmation made it hard for the DfE to get information to schools in good time. Multi-year funding would help iron out this problem.
- Current funding is reportedly not sufficient to cover the time which SLN leads or network school staff need to run or engage with SLNs and NPPs. This capacity issue is a prominent theme.
- The success of an SLN and NPP is dependent on the skills and experience of the SLN lead. However, the skills needed for this role are not necessarily developed in the course of being an MFL teacher or head of department. Such skills include design and delivery of CPD, working at scale, networking and school improvement. It is important to consider how SLN leaders are prepared.
- The dependency of the current model on the SLN lead creates a situation in which there is a single point of failure: if the SLN does not have the requisite skills, or leaves, the whole network is at risk. This is a design fault which needs to be rectified for the model to be successful.

NPPs

NPPs offer opportunities for deeper collaborative work between the SLN lead school and staff from a select number of schools in their network. Projects are designed in response to evidence-based national priorities.

What is working well

- Staff directly involved in NPPs are often passionate about the work and its local impact. Reported benefits include improved teaching, learning and leadership, cross-phase and cross-curricular collaboration and, indirectly, staff retention. Key mechanisms of change include coaching, supportive observation and feedback, and collaborative pedagogy and resource development.
- Staff involved in NPPs appreciate the freedom to shape their project in response to local needs and interests. Projects which have practical applications are particularly valued, for example those which focus on classroom pedagogy, curriculum and leadership development.
- It is important that participating schools have the capacity to commit to their project. A selection process involving the SLN lead's knowledge of and communication with local schools is an effective way to determine which schools are best placed.

Challenges

- There is huge variation in the type of NPPs, how they are working and the impact they are perceived to have had. It can be challenging to design a project which is both manageable and generates transferable insights. Given the resource involved in carrying out a project, improvements to the model are needed to ensure they are useful to both the schools involved and those beyond.
- Currently, there is not enough time or resource for teachers to effectively evaluate the impact of NPPs or to disseminate findings. This means that impact is often limited to participating staff/schools and may be difficult to sustain. These features will need to be built into the life cycle of projects to inform future planning and scale impact.
- SLN members not involved in an NPP are often unaware of their existence. Better join-up between SLNs and NPPs would allow the work of each to be more visible to the other. This would enable the breadth offered by one and the depth offered by the other to complement each other.

NCLE and LEO

- The one-to-one support offered by NCLE experts to SLN leads has been enormously helpful and appreciated.

- The CPD delivered by NCLE has potential but there is room for improvement. Evidence from this evaluation suggests that the content needs to be more aligned to the needs of classroom teachers, and the delivery needs to be more engaging and accessible.
- LEO is intended to be a one-stop shop for high-quality MFL training and resources and has great potential to achieve this aim. However, problems with implementation mean that teachers are not currently able to use it as effectively as possible and take-up is therefore low. The site needs to be fully populated with appropriate content and easier to navigate to enable teachers to make use of what should be a valuable resource.

Learning from the GEM programme

- The GEM programme is working well to provide valuable support and guidance to German teachers. Benefits include increased teacher confidence, curriculum development, pupil engagement and sustained German provision.
- Recent expansion has helped geographical reach. However, there is room for more growth to ensure German teachers throughout the country have access to support from the GEM network.
- The Goethe-Institut provides high-quality advice, guidance and resources to support the work of GEMs and German teachers.

Learning from the Language Assistants programme

- The work of Language Assistants is greatly valued, and almost all schools would like to have one. However, the cost of employing a Language Assistant is often prohibitive, particularly when recruited through the British Council programme, which is seen as expensive.
- Language Assistants participating in the British Council programme are largely positive about their experience, feeling that it offers valuable personal and professional growth, including helping to cement career plans. Many English Language Assistants (ELAs) plan to use their experience to work abroad or hold an international facing role, and many Modern Language Assistants (MLAs) plan to return home to use their English language skills, including working in teaching. This has an implication for the future pipeline of MFL speakers and teachers for the UK.
- The majority of Language Assistants would recommend the programme to others. However, there are some issues which should be addressed:
    - there needs to be greater clarity about the role of Language Assistants so that host schools deploy them appropriately

- there are logistical (e.g. visa) and financial barriers (e.g. timely payments) which need to be overcome. The cost of living in placement countries can lead to unexpected expenditure and reliance on savings and parental support, which has implications for inclusion

- settling-in can be challenging, particularly for those in schools where they are the only Language Assistant or in rural or remote locations. This highlights the importance of schools creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere and access to other Language Assistants.

1: Introduction

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and The National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake a 3-year evaluation of a selection of the Department's Language Programmes which support the teaching of languages and culture in schools in England.

At the outset the research focused on the Language Hubs programme. Following the decision in December 2024 to discontinue the programme, the evaluation was refocused to build on learning from Language Hubs whilst exploring early implementation of a new network-based language support model which began in September 2025. The new model involved launching 14 Strategic Learning Networks (SLNs) each coordinated by a lead school, and a series of National Priority Projects (NPPs) to focus on specific areas of challenge in language education, and free facilitated professional learning for language teachers via its Language Educators Online (LEO) platform.

This report presents findings from 2025 (year 2) and from 2026 (year 3), the final year of the research. Findings from year 1 (which is focused on a hub-based model for supporting language provision) were published separately as an interim report.[2] Comparisons with findings from year 1 are provided where appropriate.

Research context

The research is set against concerns about the state of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) education in England (Winchester, 2025[3]). Most notably that the number of entries for languages taken at GCSE has been steadily decreasing (especially among disadvantaged pupils), a longer running decline in the number of entries for MFL A levels (since the mid-1990s), and a more recent decline in the numbers studying MFL at undergraduate level.

The national curriculum ensures students from ages 7 to 14 are taught an MFL. However, this only applies to Local Authority Maintained schools and is until the end of Key Stage 3 (KS3). Like most subjects, MFL is not compulsory at KS4. The Teaching Schools Council's Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review (MFLPR[4]) commented that 'fewer than one-half of pupils take a language at GCSE' (2016, p.2) and argued that the vast majority of young people should take a GCSE in an MFL. The most recent British Council Language Programmes survey finds little change, reporting that fewer than one-half of GCSE students in state schools in England study an MFL.[5] DfE statistics show that since the 2009 to 2010 academic year the number of entries for MFL GCSEs has remained steady but low, accounting for just 7% of all GCSE entries. Entries for MFL A levels have

[2] The year 1 evaluation report and details of the Language Hubs model can be found at Language programmes evaluation - interim report
[3] Modern foreign language education in England
[4] Modern Foreign Language Pedagogy Review
[5] Language Trends England 2025

been declining since mid-1990s and now represent less than 3% of all A level entries. This is in part due to subject choice expanding considerably in post-16 education which creates even greater competition for MFL subjects and other options for students to follow. The statistics also indicate a significant fall in the numbers of pupils and learners taking GCSE or A level in German. This follows the downward trajectory of French language entries but from a much smaller base. Although the study of German and French have decreased in popularity, study of Spanish has increased over time. In the 2024 to 2025 academic year 32,215 pupils were entered for a German GCSE compared with 127,034 for a French GCSE and 131,059 for a Spanish GCSE. In that year, there were 2,062 entries for German A level compared with 6,310 for French A level and 7,644 for Spanish A level.[6]

There are a number of challenges to attaining the goals of more pupils taking MFL GCSEs, attaining good grades, and enjoying and becoming confident in languages. These can include the varied quality of language teaching and the low supply of suitably qualified specialist teachers (MFL is acutely impacted by teacher shortages). Furthermore, perceptions among some school leaders, parents and pupils that being able to speak other languages is not necessary or relevant, coupled with a lack of real-world opportunities for pupils to use their languages, has led to a de-prioritisation of languages, particularly in the context of schools facing funding pressures over recent years. There is also a perception that GCSEs in languages are more demanding than other subjects, and lead to lower grades, with German viewed as particularly complex (Mills & Tinsley 2020[7], Parrish 2021[8], Winchester 2025[9]).

Language programmes in scope

Strategic Learning Networks

The National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE) is leading development and support for Strategic Learning Networks (SLNs).

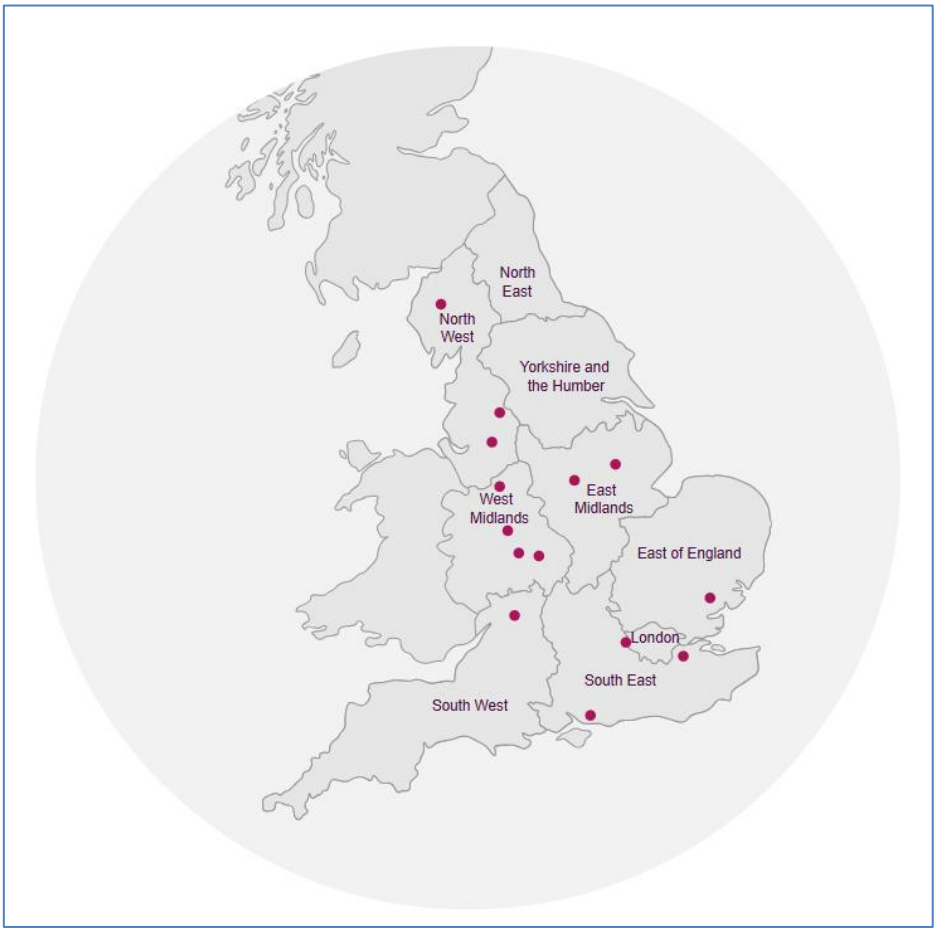
- There are 14 regional, virtual Language Networks spread across the country bringing together primary and secondary schools to share expertise, strengthen practice, and champion high-quality language learning. In most areas, SLNs have built on existing partnerships and approaches developed through the Language Hubs programme.
- Funded by the DfE from September 2025, each SLN is coordinated by a lead school[10], working with NCLE experts. SLNs aim to respond directly to regional needs, helping schools grow confident, well-informed language departments. They

[6] Data reported in Winchester, 2025, extracted 9 December 2025 from ‘Subject timeseries data, Key stage 4 performance’ and ‘Time-series – A level subject entries and grade by sex, A level and other 16 to 18 results,
[7] Boys Studying Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE in Schools in England
[8] Feminisation, masculinisation and the other: re-evaluating the language learning decline in England
[9] Modern foreign language education in England
[10] In September 2025, the 14 SLNs established were led by 19 lead or co-lead schools.

work as communities of practice to raise the profile of languages and strengthen teaching and learning nationwide.

- The 14 networks are spread across England covering the East Midlands, East of England, London, North West, South East, South West and West Midlands.[11] In some regions, networks have combined to form a supra-network in order to offer economies of scale, greater connection and collaboration and more flexibility and choice (e.g. the West Midlands Supra-network). There is currently no network serving schools in Yorkshire and Humber or the North East.

Figure 1: Language Networks Map



Source: NCLE, 2026

National Priority Projects

NCLE is also coordinating a series of 16 NPPs across the country which aim to enhance the quality of languages teaching and learning[12]. Each NPP is:

- led by a SLN which provides the supporting infrastructure (SLNs can lead more than one NPP)

[11] NCLE Language Networks
[12] NCLE National Priority Projects

- funded by the DfE (providing up to £35,000 per SLN to support participating schools)
- delivered on the ground in their region and involve teachers working across several schools to focus on a specific area of interest to tackle issues within language education
- designed to drive meaningful change through research-informed action in classrooms, addressing 12 national priorities or overarching themes and schools' local or regional needs. Examples of these priorities include: reducing barriers to language learning; curriculum innovation; teacher professional learning; home, heritage and community languages (HHCL); and transition from KS2 to KS3.

Language Educators Online (LEO)

LEO is a new free online learning platform for language teachers. LEO has been developed at the UCL Institute of Education in collaboration with national and international experts including the Goethe-Institut. It is delivered by NCLE (which is part of the UCL Institute of Education) and funded by the DfE. It is a modular learning platform aimed at supporting language teachers to build knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence in languages teaching, helping them to motivate and engage pupils and improve learning outcomes. LEO introduces the latest ideas and cutting-edge approaches like AI for the languages classroom.[13]

British Council Language Assistants programme

The Language Assistants Programme is administered by the British Council and originally started in 1905. It delivers on a series of bilateral agreements between the British Council (on behalf of the DfE) and Education Ministries in partner destinations worldwide. The programme arranges placements to support the teaching of language and culture and to provide opportunities for real world language experience within the curriculum, bringing languages and culture to life through the interaction of native speakers with young learners. It also provides unique training opportunities to develop skills for prospective teachers. The programme arranges:

- placements in overseas schools, colleges and universities for UK residents, who assist with the teaching of English. These are UK university students and graduates who teach in classrooms around the world to promote the English Language and UK culture (known as **English Language Assistants or ELAs**)
- placements in UK schools, colleges and universities, for non-UK residents who travel from abroad to teach in the UK and assist with the teaching of French, Spanish, Mandarin, German and Italian (known as **Modern Language Assistants or MLAs**).

[13] NCLE Language Educators Online

The British Council sets out that MLAs work a minimum (standard) of 12 hours per week and receive a gross monthly salary (with any additional hours worked charged at a fixed hourly rate). The British Council rates include a London weighting and are calculated relative and pro-rata to the minimum monthly pay for unqualified teachers in England and Wales. Host institutions are expected to meet the salary costs of the Language Assistants they employ.

Additional language promotion programmes

The German Promotion Project (GPP) is part of the new SLN approach forming a dedicated strand (and was also part of the former Languages Hub programme). The GPP is run by the Goethe-Institut and seeks to tackle the decline in uptake of German at GCSE. It aims to raise the profile of German and the benefits of studying German and to provide relevant resources. This includes the recruitment and training of German Expert Mentors (GEMs). The GEM programme was developed as one of the main upskilling offers within the GPP and has become an important teacher-support strand. It provides targeted coaching, mentoring and professional development for teachers of German, enabling support to respond to both the needs of individual teachers and to wider priorities within a school. Overall, the GPP (and GEMs) feeds into a wider UK-wide programme 'GIMAGINE', but the GIMAGINE initiative is not analysed as part of this evaluation.

Continuing on from the interim report (phase 1), a light touch evaluation approach was taken to the UK-German Connection (UKGC) by repeating some high-level questions related to the programme in the surveys with school staff. The UKGC is a bilateral, not-for-profit government agency which aims to build youth exchange and collaboration between the UK and Germany through visits, language courses and CPD for teachers.

Research aims

The evaluation aimed to bring together learning from across DfE funded language programmes to understand how well they have been implemented and delivered, what works well and what could be improved and potential (combined) impacts. The evaluation was split into 2 phases as support for language provision changed from a hub-based model to a network-based model.

- The interim report[14], published in 2025, presents findings from phase 1, which involved surveys and qualitative fieldwork carried out in summer and autumn terms in 2024 with staff and pupils involved in the Languages Hub programme.
- This report presents findings from phase 2 and focuses on SLNs, NPPs, and LEO (the new network-based approach to supporting MFL provision) whilst continuing to evaluate the Language Assistants Programme and the GPP initiative. It draws on data gathered in 2026 from staff and pupils involved with SLNs and NPPs and

[14] Languages programmes evaluation: interim report.

findings from fieldwork in 2025 and 2026 with Language Assistants and GEMs. Comparisons to earlier findings are made where possible and appropriate, to see how the programmes have evolved, the new model has been implemented, and the impacts noticed.

More specifically phase 2 of the evaluation looks at how well the new network model is supporting language teachers in schools to innovate, develop and collaborate:

- how have teachers experienced the SLNs? What has worked well and what has been challenging?
- how have teachers experienced the NPPs? What has worked well and what has been challenging? What have been the benefits or impacts? Any areas for development?
- how sustainable is the model? How will learning so far shape future practice? What plans do teachers have to continue and expand the model?

Methodology

This report contains key findings from surveys, interviews and case study visits, which took place throughout spring and summer 2026. It also contains findings from fieldwork with Language Assistants (surveys and interviews) and GEMs (interviews) in 2025 and 2026. Surveys sought to understand experiences of the relevant programmes. Interviews and case studies were designed to gain deeper understanding and insights.

Surveys

Survey with lead schools

Surveys were sent out to the lead contact of each SLN with instructions to distribute to all staff in their school involved with the network (thus some schools submitted multiple responses). These were designed to collect views of language teaching and learning, as well as experiences of the languages network programme. The online survey was launched in March 2026 and remained open until June 2026. Table 1 shows the total number and spread of responses from staff at SLN lead schools.

Table 1: Survey responses by SLN (lead schools)

SLN	Sample (N)	Response (N)	Response spread (col %)
7	1	12	23.5
9	1	12	23.5
3	1	9	17.6
4	1	4	7.8
12	1	4	7.8
1	1	3	5.9
13	1	3	5.9
5	1	2	3.9
6	1	1	2.0
10	1	1	2.0
2	1	0	0.0
8	1	0	0.0
11	1	0	0.0
14	1	0	0.0
Total	14	51	100

Source: Lead schools, IES staff survey, 2026

Survey with network schools

SLN leads provided contacts of staff in their network schools who had not opted out of taking part in research. 788 contacts were received from 13 networks. The numbers of contacts from each network varied considerably from 10 to 188 (Table 2). This may be due to different interpretations of who counts as part of the network, with some SLN leads providing contacts in schools they were very engaged with and others providing every school they had contacted. Again, network school contacts were asked to distribute the survey link to staff in their schools involved in the SLN or NPPs. Responses were received from 178 staff across 136 schools, indicating that some schools submitted multiple responses (the largest was 27 responses from one network school).

Table 2: Survey responses by network (network schools)

SLN	Sample (N)	Response (N)	Response rate (row %)	Response spread (col %)
12	188	65	34.6	36.5
6	120	21	17.5	11.8
11	134	19	14.2	10.7
10	38	11	28.9	6.2
13	136	10	7.4	5.6
4	20	9	45.0	5.1
5	29	9	31.0	5.1
8	25	8	32.0	4.5
7	50	7	14.0	3.9
1	10	6	60.0	3.4
3	13	5	38.5	2.8
9	14	5	35.7	2.8
14	11	3	27.3	1.7
2	0	0	0	0.0
Total	788	178	22.6	100

Source: Network schools, IES staff survey, 2026

In the final year of the evaluation, the surveys with staff at lead schools and network schools asked questions about schools' engagement with language programmes SLNs, NPPs, British Council Language Assistants Programme[15], and the GPP initiative. It also covered current language teaching and students' views on language learning.

Survey of Language Assistants

All Language Assistants from the 2024 to 2025 academic year cohort participating in the British Councils' Language Assistants Programme were sampled for the 2025 survey and similarly all Language Assistants from the 2025 to 2026 academic year cohort were sampled for the 2026 survey (with contacts provided by the British Council)[16]. Fieldwork took place between May and June 2025, and May and June 2026. The surveys focused on their views and experiences of the programme, as well as any support they received

[15] The research did not survey Language Assistants Programme schools specifically. The existing sample was utilised to find out about language assistants use in general. The findings from staff on use of language assistants are therefore not representative of the programme.
[16] Although only MLAs on placement in English schools were included in the 2026 survey

and their future plans (questions remained the same between surveys). Table 3 shows the total number of responses from Language Assistants.

Table 3: Language Assistants survey responses

Year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Statistic	**Sample (N)**	**Response (N)**	**Response rate (row %)**	**Sample (N)**	**Response (N)**	**Response rate (row %)**
ELA	1525	472	40.0	902	263	29.2
MLA	674	425	63.1	518	256	49.4
Total	2199	897	40.8	1420	529	37.3

Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

It is worth noting that approximately one-half of responding Language Assistants were students (at the time of their placements), and the rest were no longer studying. Of those who were students, ELAs tended to be undergraduate students (98% in 2026 and 96% in 2025) whereas MLA students tended to be postgraduate students (70% in 2026 and 64% in 2025), many of whom were studying for teacher training.

Survey analysis

The lead school and network school survey responses were combined to allow for comparison in analysis and reporting. Similarly, findings for Language Assistants in each year were combined to allow for comparison of experiences of ELAs and MLAs. Survey data were cleaned to remove short partial responses. Data were then analysed using SPSS to draw out key findings through frequencies, cross tabulations and tests of association (including ANOVA and chi square to determine if there is a relationship between variables).

Some survey questions were multiple response, in these cases the percentages quoted are likely to sum to greater than 100%. Many of the survey questions were asked using a 5-point Likert scale, for example, from strongly disagree to strongly agree or very poor to very good. In general, the results for these questions are presented in tables and described in the narrative to show ‘positive’ compared with ‘negative’ results. Strongly agree and agree are combined together and presented as agree and similarly good and very good are combined together and presented as good (unless otherwise stated) and strongly disagree and disagree are combined and presented as disagree. Statistically significant differences are noted in the text where these could be analysed. These differences are also indicated in the tables using the following approach: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, and *p<0.05. Base sizes are noted in the tables as Total (N). In some tables the bases can vary a little due to missing values (such as don’t know or not applicable), where this occurs the largest base (N, max) is quoted.

Caveat in interpreting staff survey results

Response profiles are unevenly spread across lead and network schools (as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2) so responses may be skewed towards larger networks or networks with greater engagement (generating a better response rate). This means that not all networks are represented in the survey responses, and some respondents will be commenting on the same network (although each giving their own perspective on the network model).

Interviews and case studies

Case Studies

Six case studies of network lead schools were conducted to gain deeper insight into experiences of SLNs and NPPs. Except in 1 instance, case studies involved a visit to the school to observe MFL lessons, conduct student focus groups, and interview staff such as the network lead, a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), a languages teacher and teachers involved in the NPP in partner schools. Two case studies involved visits, observations, pupil focus groups and staff interviews in a primary school involved in the NPP as well as the lead secondary school. There was no in-person visit for 1 case study school as the NPP focused on curriculum development and it was felt that lesson observations and student focus groups were not appropriate. In this case, staff interviews took place remotely.

Two of the case study schools had also participated in phase 1 of research and could therefore provide a longitudinal element. Four phase 1 schools were unable to participate in case studies again so 4 additional case study schools were selected, 1 of which had participated in a staff interview in the earlier phase. The sample aimed to achieve variety in terms of geographical region and NPP topic.

The case study focus groups were conducted in Key Stage groupings and included pupils from KS2-KS5. The focus groups were invited to discuss their views on the importance of languages and their experiences of language learning at school. Where pupils had direct experience of an NPP, they were also asked about this. Consent was obtained from parents in advance through an opt-out form sent by the school. Pupils provided verbal consent at the start of each focus group. An information sheet and privacy notice were given to parents and pupils.

Lesson observations used semi-structured observation frameworks that incorporate the AEIOU model (focusing on Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects and Users) that allowed identification of key elements of the lesson, as well as observing how pupils were engaging.

Staff interviews

A number of online interviews were conducted with staff in non-case study schools to gather insights into how the SLNs and NPPs have been implemented, how well they are running and their impacts. These participants were selected from those who had opted in to further research from the staff survey. This group was supplemented by a further recruitment of network schools in areas which were not represented in the survey sign-up. Overall, the sample aimed to achieve representation in terms of geographical region with a balance between lead schools and network schools. However, it is likely that the sample was skewed towards schools which were more engaged with the model. Interviews were semi-structured to allow individuals the opportunity to discuss what was important to them as well as to generate comparable data. Participants were given an information sheet and privacy notice and asked to provide verbal consent at the start of the interview.

Overall

In total the qualitative fieldwork ran from March to June 2026 and involved:

- 37 interviews with language teachers (involving 43 staff) from 17 lead schools and 20 network schools. These were mainly from secondary schools covering 11 out of 13 SLNs.
- 6 case studies of network lead schools that included 22 teacher interviews, 10 pupil focus groups (55 pupils in total from KS2-5) and 11 lesson observations (Spanish, French and German from KS2-5).

GEM interviews

Semi-structured, online interviews were conducted with 8 German Expert Mentors (GEMs) in May 2025 and May 2026. In 2026, for many GEMs this was the third time they were interviewed over the course of the 3-year evaluation, and they were invited to reflect on changes over time in their experience of being a GEM, perceptions of impact, and awareness of other aspects of language teaching. However, 1 ‘new’ GEM was interviewed who had not been involved in the earlier phases to replace 1 of the original GEMs who was not available for interview this time.

Language Assistant interviews

Semi-structured, online interviews with 20 Language Assistants were conducted in June and July 2026: 10 with ELAs and 10 with MLAs; and 20 interviews in May and June 2025: 10 MLAs and 10 ELAs. The interviews focused on experiences of their placement, their thoughts of the application process and support received, and future plans once they had completed the programme. Language Assistants were selected to interview from those who completed the Language Assistants survey and had opted in for further research. Those who opted-in were randomised and selected based on placement country (ELA), first language (MLA), school setting (ELA) and overall quality of their experience. This allowed for a spread of experiences and backgrounds.

Qualitative analysis

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. A coding frame was developed, based on themes and topics covered with data being coded and input into a single data analysis framework in Microsoft Excel. Deductive, thematic analysis was undertaken to identify themes, patterns and differences. Observation data was written up and added into the framework.

This approach allowed for effective synthesis and triangulation of data from different sources to ensure consistency alongside flexibility. Throughout the report, teacher quotes have been identified with a number and a letter (either L for Lead school or N for network school), and Language Assistant quotes have been identified as either ELA or MLA. The case study schools have all been given pseudonyms. At some points, identifiers have not been used to fully preserve anonymity.

Some short accounts of practice in the case study schools have been included in this report to illustrate the ways in which schools work to improve the teaching and learning of languages.

2: Language learning and teaching

This chapter provides a brief background to language teaching in the schools in this study.

Attitudes towards learning languages

The teachers interviewed for this research were passionate about the value of learning a foreign language, speaking of the skills gained and the doors that having another language could open for students. They also saw value in exposing pupils to other cultures and the attributes such as tolerance and curiosity which they believed this promotes.

Surveys of pupils in years 7 to 11 in phase 1[17] found high engagement with language learning and a general interest in taking languages. However, teachers were aware that not all students wished to pursue the subject to exam level. Surveys with language teachers in this phase (phase 2) found staff in lead schools were more positive than those in network schools about students' intentions for language learning at GCSE, but across both groups few think students will take a language A-Level. This follows patterns found in phase 1 where staff in hubs were more positive than those in other schools (see Table 24 in the appendix).

The research found 2 key factors affected MFL take up: status of MFL in schools and students' attitudes and beliefs about learning MFL. Teachers interviewed felt MFL had a unique place in the secondary curriculum, a core subject in some respects but one with lower status than other core subjects. The status of and amount of curriculum time given to MFL varied across schools. Teachers felt support from the SLT, alongside enough curriculum time, was critical for the status and success of MFL. The status of MFL was higher in schools where there was a concerted effort to value and celebrate languages and cultures. Indeed, several interviewees noted how participation in the previous hub programme had raised the status of MFL in their schools and encouraged more students to study languages.

The surveys found staff were positive about students' attitudes to language learning. Staff believed their pupils are engaged and interested in learning languages and about other cultures, and understand how learning a language could be useful to their future learning and careers. Once again, staff in lead schools were more positive than those in network schools, particularly around pupils' confidence in their language abilities and in achieving good GSCE grades in languages. This reflects general patterns found in phase 1 which compared staff in hub schools with those in other schools (see Tables B and C in the appendix).

Pupils taking part in focus groups (largely those who were keen on learning a language), described it as 'fun' and reported satisfaction from learning a new language. Their views suggested that languages had status and were valuable. Learning about the culture and

[17] Languages programmes evaluation: interim report

country associated with a language was also important to students. However, staff interviews highlighted how some parents questioned the value of languages, which tended to be overshadowed by the high status of STEM subjects, and that parents' views could influence pupil attitudes. Additionally, staff felt that languages were perceived as 'difficult' [18] and discrepancies in GCSE grading between languages and other subjects was having a discouraging effect. Teachers hoped the new GCSE would lead to higher grades and would help shift pupils' perceptions and make MFL more attractive. They also reported problems associated with the transition between KS2 and KS3 in languages caused by variable experiences of MFL at primary school.[19] This meant pupils can arrive at secondary school with limited experience and it can be hard for teachers to stimulate interest and enthusiasm. The staff survey found that only one-half of language teachers in our sample felt they understood what went on in their feeder primary schools (see Table 27 in the appendix). These concerns are reinforced by the findings of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.[20]

Focusing on Home Heritage and Community Languages (HHCL), these are languages other than English used in daily life at home, in school and in local communities and include languages such as Arabic, French, German, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Urdu, Welsh.[21],[22] The survey found staff were positive about pupils recognising the value of HHCL (see Table 26 in the appendix). Staff felt pupils who speak a HHCL, believe it could be useful for their future career or work and useful outside the home environment. This view was stronger amongst staff in network than lead schools. These views on the value of HHCL were echoed in the interviews and case studies where teaching HHCL was seen by staff as very important and pupils in focus groups spoke positively about the opportunity to study their home languages. Pupils felt this enabled them to maintain connection to their wider family and culture. However, staff recognised logistical challenges to offering HHCL, leading to great differences in schools' offers. Staff described how some schools provided lessons outside of curriculum time alongside exam preparation support whereas others offered very little other than the opportunity to take the exam itself. Teachers stressed how difficult it can be to find and fund language expertise to support GCSE exam preparation and to find examiners for GCSEs. This is particularly challenging when there are several HHCLs, each with only a few students, some of whom may speak, but not read and write, confidently. Teachers felt this was an area that was ripe for collaboration between schools.

[18] This was reflected in the pupil survey in Phase 1 (2024), where key reasons for deciding not to take a language GCSE were interest in other subjects and perceived lack of fit with other GCSE choices, and a lack of confidence to study languages at GCSE.
[19] Staff spoke about variation in quality (teachers lacking specialist knowledge) and quantity (curriculum time allocated) of KS2 language teaching, and the focus on KS2 SATs squeezing out time for MFL in Year 6.
[20] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Building a world-class curriculum for all
[21] See Association of Language Learning, HHCL Advisory Group Vision and Goals, HHCL Advisory Group paper
[22] The latest school census finds 21.6% of pupils in England were recorded as having a first language known or believed to be other than English so bring with them lived experience of at least one other language and culture

MFL teaching and pedagogy

The MFL curriculum offer is less standardised than many other subjects and there are varied mechanisms to decide which language(s) each pupil studies, for how long and at what frequency. Most schools offer 2 languages, most commonly Spanish and French. Although German is offered in only a minority of schools, the staff interviewed were very proud to be doing so and frequently spoke about the high-quality support they receive from the Goethe-Institut.

MFL staff felt MFL pedagogy needs to be different from other subjects, and various pedagogical approaches were in use in schools. Many staff spoke about having been strongly influenced by the 2016 Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review (MFLPR) which emphasises the role of phonics and grammar.[23] Some also spoke enthusiastically about the 'speak first' approach which promotes immersion in the target language and prioritises speaking above reading and writing: 1 school was proud that their Year 7s do not take pen to paper for their entire first term (L8). Others found the Conti approach (or Extensive Processing Instruction (EPI)), which focuses on sentence builders, hugely helpful. Because of what staff see as the uniqueness of MFL teaching, they welcome opportunities for subject specific professional development, a key aspect to the SLN offer (see Chapter 3).

An unexpected finding was the strong link between MFL and literacy made by several staff. Staff felt both that strong literacy teaching supported MFL and that MFL can be used as a vehicle to improve low literacy levels (a priority for many schools). Teachers tended to reference the MFLPR in these discussions, and it may be that its explicit focus on grammar and phonics has been instrumental in encouraging teachers to develop this link between MFL and literacy.

Teachers commented that teaching MFL requires particularly strong behaviour management skills. They explained that MFL benefits from short, sharp tasks that require classes to switch between activities quickly and smoothly, with lots of paired talk. This ensures lessons are interactive, varied and move at a brisk pace to produce high levels of engagement and enjoyment. They made comparisons between this and other subjects, where pupils in other subjects can be given longer individual or group tasks requiring less whole-class teacher intervention. MFL teachers therefore need to have excellent command of the classroom, able to facilitate the end of one task and begin the next seamlessly as well as structure paired talk carefully so all pupils contribute. This was corroborated by observations of MFL classroom practice and pupil feedback.

[23] Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review was a review of evidence about current teaching and effective pedagogy of MFL at KS3 and 4. It was commissioned by the Teaching Schools Council and published in 2016. It made a series of recommendations for schools and teachers, which focused on grammar and phonics alongside vocabulary, including understanding and building on the grammar taught in KS2 English.

Staff felt that taking students on residential trips to other countries is integral to learning a language. However, pupils' access to such opportunities is varied. Schools can be constrained by available resources (staff time/additional workload and trip costs) as well as issues such as safeguarding, and pupils can be constrained by the costs which can be substantial. Staff were therefore concerned about the inclusiveness of trips. Staff reported that bringing visitors into the school benefits all students and so many work to make this happen.

Summary

The research suggests an uneven and somewhat fragile MFL landscape in English Schools. Languages are valued by many teachers and pupils, but their provision and success depend heavily on individual schools' priorities, leadership, resources and expertise. DfE's language programmes therefore seek to build system capacity and reduce variation through school-to-school collaboration, stronger subject leadership, specialist professional development, improved pedagogy, greater status for MFL, better transition between phases, and shared solutions for scarce provision such as HHCL expertise.

3: Language networks

This chapter draws on the experience of staff working in lead and network schools, alongside pupil focus groups and classroom observations in case study schools, to explore how SLNs and NPPs are working.

Setting up the Strategic Learning Networks

The small group of survey respondents in SLN lead schools who were involved in setting up their network (N=12) tended to feel well supported by the specialist advisor from NCLE, well prepared, and confident to lead the network. Additionally, more respondents among this small and engaged group found the process of setting up the SLN straightforward than those who did not (which differs from findings from the hub-based model outlined in the interim report). Similarly, more found they had enough time for network activities than did not. These findings suggest the experience of setting up the network was positive overall. However, their responses were broadly neutral in relation to it being straightforward to recruit network schools and having enough time to plan and coordinate the network, suggesting these were areas of challenge.

Several SLN lead schools had been involved with the previous hub programme and interviews highlighted the extent to which participants had drawn on their learning as part of this, likely contributing to the positive survey responses. These participants also tended to compare the 2 models, voicing that they appreciated the more inclusive nature of the network model and the opportunity to invite and work with more schools than was possible within the hub model. As 1 lead said:

> …it was nice, to be honest, to go to that 'anyone can join' model because I think it was always before we had these 7 schools that we were focusing on but it felt a bit exclusive...So now it's an easy message: ‘Yes, it's open to everyone. Everyone's welcome’. *(L8)*

Setting up the network often involved utilising previous relationships. SLN leads spoke extensively about leveraging relationships from existing networks to increase engagement with the SLN, for example because their school is a teaching or subject hub, was a hub lead school, runs School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) and/or is part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT):

> Because we were part of the previous iteration of the NCLE project, we've already established these partner schools…what we [also] had to do was go out to the broader school network in the county and get those schools on board. And we were able to do that fairly easily because we have those connections through other avenues. *(L17)*

Motivations for involvement

The most common drivers among network schools (N=127) for participating in their SLN were:

- to improve teaching practice (80%)
- to be part of a local network of language teaching practice (78%)
- to increase pupil engagement in language learning (65%).

More than one-half of respondents said that they were motivated by wanting to innovate their language curriculum (59%) and to become part of the national learning network and community of practice for language teaching (51%), while 47% said that they became involved to increase pupil attainment in languages. Other less frequently cited reasons included improving the transition from primary to secondary school language teaching and improving progression to higher level language study. These findings suggest that teachers are keen to invigorate language teaching and engagement in their schools and feel the best way to do this is alongside others as part of a local network.

Challenges to setting up

Despite generally positive attitudes to setting up SLNs, several problems with the process emerged. The way the transition from the hub model to the network model was organised caused considerable frustration. There were gaps in communication and funding which made it difficult for SLN leads to plan and deliver, and interrupted engagement for network schools. A few SLN leads decided to continue to support collaboration and deliver CPD despite lack of confirmed plan or funding. This involved working at risk but enabled network schools to experience 'continuous service' *(L11)*. However, most network leads had to stop during this hiatus which meant a 'lull in momentum' *(L8)* and cancelled training, affecting morale:

> We had a training session booked. Everyone was ready to go, and then, 'That is not happening'. *(N19)*

> Everything that had been building pretty much just fizzled away. *(N11)*

The timing of this transition was also challenging. Announcements about funding, the new model and the window of time allocated to the work were not aligned with the rhythm of the school year and associated lead-in times to allocate staff and plan activities. This created difficulties which, staff felt, would have been avoided if there had been a continuous 3-year funding plan:

> It came right at the end of the summer term. Then you have a 6-week break and then it was almost like you had to hit the ground running in September. Schools don't really work like that. And it's also not really how you develop partnerships, is it? You develop partnerships by building trust and raising awareness and getting people on board. And when the time frame [for our NPP] is September to March, really tight, that's very, very hard to do. *(L17)*

The time needed to build trust so that 'people [are] willing to be vulnerable with you about their challenges' *(L16)* was noted by several participants.

Network schools who had been involved in the hub model were able to engage with the network model more easily than those who had to be recruited from scratch. However, participants mourned the change because of the reduction in the depth of involvement:

> It's felt like the main difference is that there's a lot less in-person support, and that there are a lot more online presentations. *(L2)*

> I don't need to tell you that our network meeting each half term does not see the same impact as intense school to school support. *(L16)*

Clarity about what is on offer and how to get involved are key, but not all network schools experienced clear or timely communication. When teachers felt bombarded with information or that it's 'too complicated' *(N2)* to work out what's being offered where, when and by who, they disengaged. SLN leads recognised that:

> ...the core messaging is really important particularly for the new heads, new leaders. They just need to understand what we do and how we fit...it needs to be easier to communicate to schools who we are, who we're acting for and why we're doing this and what value we would add to them. *(L17)*

Experiences of the network

The majority of staff from lead schools (N=35) agreed that they had provided advice and support to network schools, with 87% having done so around resources and planning, 79% around teaching practice and curricula and 75% around supporting and encouraging students to study languages. More than one-half (57%) felt that the SLN was very or extremely effective at improving language teaching at their network schools, and a further one-third (31%) felt it was fairly effective.

Experiences of network schools

Although NCLE hold some information on network membership and activity, there are limited mechanisms for lead schools to gauge level of reach and engagement of network schools with their SLN. Schools can sign up and then have no further involvement:

> Getting the schools to join is the easy bit…and then whether they're engaged, yes, is another question. *(L8)*

Unless they administer their own surveys or systematically gather feedback (which some do), attendance at CPD events is the only way SLN leads can monitor reach and engagement. They have no way of knowing whether their newsletters are read or how information and learning is disseminated or used by schools.

Survey responses and interviews shed some light on this issue of reach and engagement. Those in network schools generally reported positive experiences from participation in their SLN (Table 4). More than 4 in 5 respondents felt that staff at their SLN had a good expertise in relevant languages and language teaching (86%), the process of signing up was straightforward (86%) and they experienced good communication from the lead school in their SLN (83%). However, they were broadly neutral about having enough time for network activities, with 40% agreeing that they did have sufficient time but 35% disagreeing. This mirrors findings from the lead schools that time was a challenge. For lead schools this was about having time for planning and coordination; for network schools this was about time for engagement in activities. This constraint may be reflected in the finding that less than one-half of staff in network schools reported that they regularly engaged with the resources, support and activities run by their SLN (Table 5). This reflects sector-wide challenges and constraints around having sufficient time and resource, and as such are not unique to (nor caused by) SLNs.

Table 4: Experiences of being part of a network

Experiences	Agree	Disagree
Straightforward process of signing up	85.7%	1.0%
Staff at SLN have good expertise in languages/ teaching	85.6%	1.0%
Good communication from the lead	82.9%	4.8%
Straightforward to engage with SLN	79.4%	3.7%
I feel part of a network of practice involving SLN	69.9%	9.7%
I feel supported by the SLN	69.2%	5.6%
Being part of the SLN has improved my language teaching	58.9%	5.6%
I have enough time for network activities	40.0%	34.5%
Total (N, max)	110%	110%

Source: Network schools, IES staff survey, 2026

Table 5: Extent of engagement with resource, support and activities from your SLN

Extent of engagement	Percentage
Never	4.7
Rarely	14.0
Sometimes	36.4
Often	31.8
Always	13.1
Total (N, max)	107

Source: Network schools, IES staff survey, 2026

Generally, staff in network schools felt well supported by their SLN. The vast majority reported receiving advice and support in terms of language teaching resources and planning (82%), teaching practice and curricula (80%), and with supporting and encouraging students to study languages (72%). These patterns closely mirror the views of lead schools on what they had delivered to network schools. Overall, 4 in 5 (81%) network staff rated the support received positively, thus 82% would recommend being part of the SLN to other schools.

However, interviews with staff highlighted significant variation in terms of the quality and reach of SLNs across the country. Many staff spoke of SLNs as an extremely useful source of support, offering vibrant opportunities to collaborate and learn from others. However, some staff in network schools were confused or unaware of the work of their SLN and reported poor engagement. There were teachers who felt they got very little from their network, in 1 case ’a few emails’ (N11), and others who did not rate the quality of collaboration:

> That collaboration among teachers, in my opinion, was very weak because, yes, we did go to the webinar, yes, we did go to the event, but it was not a strong support team in the area. *(N15)*

In addition, there were several who declined to participate in an interview citing their lack of involvement which made them feel they had nothing to say.

Factors affecting the engagement of network schools

The variation in network schools’ experiences of SLNs identified in the interviews seemed to be due to several factors. In a few cases, lack of engagement may reflect lack of perceived need. For example, MFL staff in MATs that provide plentiful opportunities for collaboration between trust schools talked about not needing to share practice and collaborate through an SLN. However, levels of engagement are more often affected by logistical considerations, the quality of the offer, capacity and the skills of the network lead.

Logistical considerations

The main components of the SLN offer were CPD and a regular newsletter. Face-to-face CPD elicited the strongest praise, but people also appreciated the convenience of webinars, so long as this does not lead to 'over-saturation of online activities' *(L10)*. Teachers in rural schools may have to travel long distances to join face-to-face training, which can be a barrier to engagement. At the same time, their relative isolation can make face-to-face events particularly powerful. The opportunity to talk to others was seen as of equal value to the quality of the training:

> I think that probably was one of the things that was most impactful. It was this idea of going to a place where you would learn something because it was very structured and a lot of content was delivered, but you also have this chance of networking and sharing ideas with other people. I think that was definitely really powerful. *(N8)*

Flexibility about timing of events was important: some teachers wanted CPD during the school day and others after school. In 1 region, 3 SLNs have joined to create a supra-network and use this infrastructure to offer network schools multiple dates and locations for the same collaboratively designed CPD. This has had a positive impact on attendance and engagement.

Teachers often appreciated the regional focus – the opportunity to meet colleagues from local schools who may share similar challenges and/or offer the chance for further contact:

> I think you don't get many chances as teachers now to all come together and the fact that that's happening locally, I think that's what made it a good attendance. *(L17).*

This aspect comes to the fore at face-to-face events, and once connections are made, webinars can offer a convenient way to maintain contact.

Quality of the offer

Identifying and responding to need and then putting in place high-quality training – offering the right training at the right time – are crucial. A head of department in a network school praised the ability of their SLN lead to do this successfully and identified it as key to engagement:

> I think they are such good quality, that's why they get so many people attend. And they really get to the nub of what teachers need at that point, because the relationships are so good with the people who run the network and I can't quite put my finger on it, but they understand intrinsically what people need. *(N12)*

Across all networks, network schools spoke most positively about CPD that aligns with their current priorities. There were several comments about the value of recent CPD which focused on aspects of the new GCSE specification. Others talked about CPD which had enabled them to develop their HHCL offer, which is an area several schools are keen to improve.

A consistent theme was that strong relationships are at the root of successful networks. Successful networks are run by a SLN lead who is good at building relationships, listens to what people need and sets up opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop between staff in network schools:

> Where you have the personal relationships or where you can build on those, then that is the absolute key to it. That's what will make people reply to emails and stay with you really. *(L8)*

Where networks were working well, they offered opportunities for much valued collaboration. Although this collaboration was appreciated by everyone, participants emphasised that it is especially important for teachers whose circumstances limit their access to professional dialogue with other MFL teachers and leaders. This includes teachers in rural or standalone schools, teachers in small MFL departments, primary school teachers and those new to their role:

> We are in a trust, but we are a trust of one school at the moment, so we don't have other schools to work with and talk to…. I felt it was important that I was part of the wider languages network purely to make sure that I'm building those connections, learning new things from people, and just keeping up to date on languages generally. *(N1)*

> It's hard sometimes, being a bit of a lone wolf, not having somebody within school to be able to say, 'How would you teach that?' or 'What do you think about this?'. But having that wider network that I've met through the X Language Network is really beneficial. *(N6)*

> The support is brilliant and the feeling like you belong, because again, in my situation, I'm very lonely on the third floor. *(N13)*

Where networks are working well, there is a palpable sense of community and collective support. Participants in these networks talked about the valuable professional relationships they had formed, the reassurance and practical help they have received, and the energy that talking to others has given them:

> I know that with these meetings, if I wanted to, I could turn around to one of the people and say, 'Oh, could I come and see you or could we-' you know, and they would. Like I say, this collaboration is very strong. You can feel it when you're in there. Everybody wants to lock-in, we all want to help. *(N13)*

Part of the sense of community comes from having a subject-specialism in common, which facilitates deeper conversations about pedagogy than are possible in whole school CPD contexts:

> I love it because it's a bunch of us that are all into languages. I have to sit in every briefing or every staff meeting, and they always talk about Maths or Science or PE or History. Languages tends to get overlooked a little bit. So I love when it's a full day of, 'Right. What does language look like in the classroom? Right. How are we going to build up assessment? How are we going to get more people involved?'. *(N13)*

Such a collection of subject specialists also provides an external perspective on issues which can feel overwhelming or perplexing when tackled alone. Participants found hearing about the practice or approaches of others reassuring, giving them new ideas and suggesting new solutions to problems.

Some network leads also benefited from collaborating in ‘supra-networks’ across a region. These offer useful economies of scale by sharing workload across the network leads (for example taking turns to write the monthly newsletter or dividing up the tasks associated with CPD design), using collaboration to refine ideas and increasing access to events by being able to offer multiple dates and locations for the same CPD.

Capacity

In the interviews, network schools often cited time and funding as the reason why they were not as involved in the network as they would have liked to be. This aligns with findings from the staff survey (Table 4). In turn, lead schools expressed frustration about network schools signing up for CPD sessions that they do not attend, though are sympathetic to the capacity issues which they suspect lie behind such non-attendance. Middle leaders (heads of department) are the people most often involved in the SLN, partly because classroom teachers do not have capacity. However, middle leaders are also short of time. This Head of Department articulated such difficulties:

> If I am going out saying, 'Who wants to stay at work for an extra hour to watch this?', most people, they say, 'Actually, no, I would rather not. I want to see my family at home. My school day is finished'. So I am trying to find ways of putting it into directed time, which I shouldn't do. I should not be asking people to just do extra work, it is not fair…[but] directed time is limited. *(N19)*

In addition, the capacity of lead schools was identified as a major factor in network schools’ involvement, as this determined the level of support they could offer and therefore how valuable the networks were. Many lead schools said they were putting more time into the network than had been planned for because current funding is barely enough to design and run termly CPD and write a regular newsletter.

> It’s challenging to maintain the work with less time and money. It feels like a reliance on goodwill to make sure it gets done. *(L1)*

When schools in their network approach them for support with specific issues, they do not have time to respond in the personalised way they would like:

> There's a bit of a question about what my capacity is. I don't have capacity to help this individual school with this specific question. I can give some advice, and I can point in the right direction, but I can't any longer go out and visit them in the way that I used to do that. So then I kind of try and redirect them towards the universal webinars that I'm delivering that they may or may not attend. *(L10)*

This lack of time gave rise to unfavourable comparisons with the hub model in which participating teachers had more funded time to visit and support each other and collaborate.

Some SLN leads have found ways around the limitations on their time by linking network schools to each other rather than trying to provide support themselves:

> We can really see the strengths of each individual school, and you've got to just step back sometimes and think, 'Well, actually, they can support each other in ways’. And it's just putting them together in the right groups with the right focus that is working quite well. *(L16)*

In this way, SLN leads have acted as repositories of information about schools and their needs which have enabled them to match teachers appropriately. However, it requires considerable skill and experience as a network lead to recognise and employ such solutions and the network schools still need to find time for the ensuing collaboration.

The desire to both give and receive support and to collaborate with others was clearly there, but constraints on the time of those both giving and receiving support could make this difficult. Many of those interviewed felt that more time and funding were necessary for the new model to reach its full potential and were keen for the DfE to enable this.

The SLN lead

SLN leadership is a critical role which requires skills beyond those acquired as a matter of course through being a teacher or even head of department, such as working at scale, networking, CPD design and delivery, and school improvement. Senior leadership, MAT-wide roles, SCITT or teaching hub leadership all provide opportunities to develop such skills. Those SLN leads with this experience noted how beneficial it was and their network schools were aware of the ‘extra’ *(N13)* they were getting as a result. One commented:

> She knows everyone. She knows their school. She knows what they're like. She knows their department. So again, a plethora of knowledge...[to have more networks] you would need to, like, duplicate Lead X, [we] have, like, a jewel. You need someone like her to run it. Honestly, she's just, she's so good at it. *(N13).*

Some leads felt they did not yet have the necessary skills and needed the time and opportunities to develop them, 1 explaining 'I'm a teacher, not a networker…that was a new skill for me' *(L10)*. The position also comes with additional pressures:

> Being the SLN lead is dependent on me. If I changed jobs, I don't know what would happen. I think it would just stop. No one knows what I do; it all comes down to me. *(L1)*

Findings suggest that a challenge of the network model is that success rests strongly on the leadership skills of the SLN lead. If this person does not have the requisite skills, or leaves, the health of the network can find itself at risk.

Pine School Case Study: An experienced and skilful network lead

Pine School is a large secondary school in a suburban area of a major city and is part of a Multi-Academy Trust. It is also a SCITT provider and a Teaching Hub. The majority of the pupils are white but there is increasing diversity and a growing number of pupils who speak English as an Additional Language. It is a lead SLN school and was a co-lead hub school previously.

The lead for the SLN has been a Head of MFL and worked across the Trust. They are currently involved in running both the SCITT and Teaching Hub and were the lead for the MFL hub model work. This experience has given them skills in designing and delivering CPD, supporting school improvement and networking. As a member of staff at the school says:

> [they're] used to that system leadership approach…[they] understand school improvement and [they] understand how things work in that respect from a systems leadership point of view. *(L14)*

The network has a reach of 134 schools across the region. The SLN lead has been able to build on experience as a co-lead hub school to strengthen MFL provision both in Pine School and the schools they work with. In the period September 2024 to February 2026 (1.5 academic years), 222 language teachers attended face-to-face and online CPD. The network has its own evaluation mechanisms, according to which 38 of these schools have made substantial changes to their languages provision as a result of working with the network.

Staff from network schools spoke about how the network has shaped their practice and how the lead's ability to build relationships and deliver high-quality training has been integral to this process. Network schools which have been involved in 1 of 2 NPPs also identified coaching skills as an important part of what has developed their practice:

> Meeting with [the network lead] as well, [they] ask very, very good questions, and it's made me really reflect on my practice, reflect on the department and reflect on the priorities. *(N7)*

The sustainability of the network approach

There was a strong desire among the lead schools to continue to be part of or to lead their SLN, with 2 in 3 (66%) respondents saying they would like to continue. The rest tended to be unsure rather than expressly not wanting to continue. The most common reasons given by respondents for wanting to continue were because it was good to be part of a wider language network, good to share resources and experiences, and because they wanted to continue working with the NCLE. Very few respondents said that they wanted to continue because they had enough time to plan and coordinate SLN activities or to take part in SLN activities. Thus, collaboration was key and the desire to continue leading a network was despite a lack of time among respondents.

Just under three-quarters (70%) of network school respondents reported that they intended to continue being part of the SLN, while a one-quarter (28%) were unsure, and only 2 respondents said they did not intend to continue (from a total of 117), though in interviews many said that they would question being involved if it was no longer free to take part. Among those network schools intending to continue, Table 6 shows the primary motivator was because they believed it was good to be part of the wider language network (92%). Indeed, the responses suggested a desire to continue participation despite a lack of time to do so. These drivers reflect those of the lead schools to continue to lead their SLN, indicating a strong desire from schools to be part of a network or community and to share insights and resources.

Table 6: Reasons for intending to continue with SLN

Reasons	Percentage
It is good to be part of the wider Language Network	91.5
It is good to share resources and experiences	76.8
I want to continue working with NCLE	52.4
I feel confident in participating in the SLN	39.1
The SLN is set up now	31.7
The school is now part of a larger, supra-network	12.2
I have enough time to take part in SLN activities	8.5
I have enough time to plan and co-ordinate SLN activities	6.1
Other	1.2
Total (N, those intending to continue)	82

Source: Network schools, IES staff survey, 2026

Almost all interviewees said they wanted to continue to be part of their network. As indicated by the survey, they are committed to collaborating:

> It feels really purposeful to be with other teachers and not feel like you're just in your little spot doing your own thing, to feel part of the bigger picture. *(N10)*

Several network school staff said that professional development, collaboration and peer support have improved teaching and leadership in their schools. In addition, their comments suggest that good quality CPD and the relationships facilitated by the network have improved their job satisfaction. In 1 network, the ability to spread the word about job opportunities has improved teacher recruitment: before the network, a job advert had attracted very limited applicants whilst a recent job advert resulted in 6 applications in a few days, all from people who had heard about it through the network. This potential impact on teaching and learning, leadership, and pupil and staff recruitment and retention is therefore promising.

However, despite the positive picture painted by participants in well-run networks, the variation in quality and reach raises questions about how effectively the model is working at a national level in its current form. The fact that involvement in the network is often limited to the Head of Department (often due to capacity issues) undermines its potential impact. The degree to which the quality of the offer is dependent on the skills of 1 SLN lead is another risk factor. If either of these people are not extremely good at time management and facilitating shared learning, ideas and experiences that could improve teaching and learning do not make their way into the classroom.

The success of the network also depends on MFL being a school priority. Lead schools often prioritise MFL and consequently have strong practice and MFL leadership. However, this is not always the case for network schools, which can be a barrier to engagement. As this SLN lead explained:

> It's quite a challenge. Schools have their own issues and understandably, there are competing priorities, and some schools are in a really tough window expecting Ofsted and things aren't right in certain areas, and languages is the least of their worries, and we're trying to do this work. *(L9)*

Time is money. The work of networks requires the time of both those running it and those who participate. It also requires longevity: the time for relationships to be established and people to get used to the way things work. As 1 participant said:

> ...giving people time to invest in building relationships does allow a model to be sustainable. *(L16)*

Interviewees said that although they would like to remain involved in running or participating in a network, such involvement was dependent on funding: 'it's literally as simple as that.' (L14). This sentiment was repeated by multiple lead and network school staff. Effectiveness is therefore dependent on sustained funding.

National Priority Projects

Setting up the projects

Almost all staff in lead schools involved with NPPs to some capacity (N=24) agreed that both choosing their project topic, and the project planning process had been straightforward. SLN leads explained that they reviewed a list of priority areas, selected one which aligned with local priorities, wrote a proposal and submitted it to NCLE. Many commented positively on the significant freedom they had in the design and execution of the projects:

> I really appreciate the autonomy that we had to do the projects in the way that we thought best. *(L8)*

Once the proposal was approved, the SLN lead met with MFL leads from local schools to decide which schools would be suitable partner(s). SLN leads pointed out that this 'selection' process was important as partner schools needed to have capacity and be at a stage in their development to enable them to commit fully to participation.

As might be expected, there was significant variation in the nature and scope of NPPs. Some were small scale (e.g. with a focus on teaching resources) whilst others aimed for wider impact by focusing on more systemic issues such as leadership development. In places, a project with more of an 'intervention' approach revealed action needed at a system level. For example, staff involved in improving primary expertise through input from secondary language specialists realised that for it to be more than 'a kind of parachute exercise' *(L10)*, input was needed at the stage of initial teacher training. Participants talked about the importance of focusing on something which is in their control to influence, for example to look at a single aspect of transition rather than the 'wicked problem' *(L11)* of transition more widely. However, designing a project which is both at a manageable scale and likely to produce transferrable insights can be challenging.

Experiences of the projects

Views of participants directly involved in projects

Of the surveyed staff at lead schools who were involved with NPPs (N=24), most agreed that they felt confident in working on or leading the NPP. However, only one-half agreed that they had enough time for the NPP – both to take part in the NPP activities or to plan and coordinate the NPP. This reflects findings across the survey about the paucity of time to dedicate to language programme activities (see also the section on Challenges to NPP implementation). Despite these challenges, almost all felt the findings of the NPP they had been involved in had been useful, and that they had been able to utilise these findings in their school. Additionally, two-thirds felt the NPP model was very or extremely effective for addressing the national priority that was the focus of their project.

Similarly, staff in network schools were positive about the effectiveness of NPPs. Among the small group of staff involved in their SLN's NPP (N=20), almost all felt they had been at least fairly effective for addressing the priority. Two-thirds felt findings of the NPP had been useful to their school or that they had been able to utilise the results of the project.

In interviews, participants directly involved in projects often spoke about them with passion and expressed how useful they found them. Almost all cited collaboration as key to a project's success; it was the primary mechanism through which change had been brought about and impact achieved. Where projects had not worked as well as intended, problems with collaboration were often cited as the reason. This SLN lead commented on the power of active involvement:

> You can be part of a network and just go to a meeting, you're not necessarily working together [whereas in a project] you are collaborating and you're involved in something which is not just information being given to you. *(L9)*

Co-design in the process of fleshing out and implementing the project plan was key; the agency it gave both to those leading the project in partner schools and other staff involved in delivery was an important part of motivation and learning. One project lead in a partner school really appreciated how 'it's been done very much in partnership' (N7). Another talked about how the MFL department had gone from 'begrudgingly compliant' to 'fully invested' (L13) because of the agency they had in how they delivered the project in their classrooms.

Collaboration has taken the form of discussion, coaching, lesson observation and feedback. These have been powerful ways for teachers to learn and develop, as articulated by this participant:

> The way I was delivering it was a difficulty in the first place. But that didn't last long because of the support I've had, in terms of people coming in and observing, and X has been in and Y from Z school has also been in. And when you are willing to have a light shone on your own practice, it's really easy to take feedback onboard. So, with everyone else's support, that was overcome in no time at all. *(N6)*

This project was led by an experienced SLN lead. The success of projects was often attributed to the quality of the network lead; they have a critical role to play in NPPs as well as SLNs.

Lead schools often spoke about the value of meeting regularly with their assigned NCLE project advisor. These advisors acted as a sounding board, offered expertise and support, and helped hold the SLN lead to account. SLN leads made comments like: 'Really, really helpful and very supportive' *(L8)* and 'good sounding board but also...[provided] practical

help' *(L17)*. For some projects, such as those focusing HHCL, the expertise of the NCLE advisor has been matched with the project, which has been particularly appreciated.

Benefits of the NPPs

Professional development

The interview and case study participants talked about the way in which involvement in the NPPs had developed them as professionals and so improved their teaching or leadership. This happened through providing space to think, prompting a change in approach to teaching and learning, coaching conversations, and non-judgemental feedback:

> I've been teaching languages for 24 years, and the idea of the skills underpinning it has been quite a revelation. *(N6)*

> It's been really useful for me to look at a lot of the research that's been carried out into motivation and engagement and learning, and then to be able to apply that in our setting. *(N7)*

> One of the things that we spoke about, which is part of the framework, was about engaging the team, which to be very honest with you, I never spent that much time thinking about, because I was just thinking that people in the team, everyone is going to just do what they have to do, but it doesn't work like that, really. *(N8)*

> To be able to say to my SLT, 'I'm part of this, and it's rubber stamping what I'm doing and everything's going really well,' I think has further enabled them to take the hands-off approach, that just gives me the freedom to do what I need to do here. *(N6)*

These benefits have affected the individual members of staff, their departments and pupils. There were also suggestions that such professional development has helped staff retention by providing opportunities to learn, increasing job satisfaction and improving leadership.

Sycamore School Case Study: delivering lessons through a language lens

Sycamore school is a selective grammar school for boys that also admits girls for 6th form. It is on the outskirts of a large city and offered the International Baccalaureate. All students learn at least 2 languages: 1 European (French/Spanish/German/Latin) and 1 Asian (Mandarin/Japanese). Their NPP focused on developing effective pedagogies for teaching literacy and using trans-languaging to better teach multilingual learners. This focus was inspired by their school's diversity; the network lead reported over 60 languages spoken by pupils and teachers:

> How can we ignore the repertoire?...You realise what an amazing repertoire there is. What could pupils do if their languages were really allowed in? *(L6).*

They aim to do this across the curriculum, considering how activities can be oriented to include heritage languages, and try to be guided by students.

To do this, teachers have been supported to embed consideration of heritage languages and apply language teaching insights within their own subjects. For example, a computer science teacher, influenced by understanding the pedagogical approach used in language lessons, realised the value of getting students to repeat information back to them. A geography teacher from Kerela felt empowered by recognition of the educational value of their heritage to deliver a lesson about the state and Keralan culture and language.

Links between practitioners

The substantial collaboration has also created links between people who would not have otherwise worked together, for example primary and secondary school staff and teachers in different curriculum areas.

Participants from cross-phase projects were firm in their belief that the work was improving pupils' experience of transition and meeting an important need. A primary teacher involved in one such NPP explained how primary provision can lay the foundation for secondary language study:

> We put the edge of the jigsaw in place for when the children move on to secondary school. *(N6)*

A secondary network lead commented on how their project has been a vehicle for much needed cross-phase dialogue:

> We knew [support for primary] was needed, but the primary schools have never been asked before. We need to improve transition. *(L1)*

Elm School Case Study: The benefits of collaboration with primary schools

Elm school is a new secondary school in a suburban area of a major city and around one-third of its students speak another language at home. It is part of a Multi-Academy Trust and well-known for its high-quality German language teaching (it only offers German). Its NPP focuses on the KS2-KS3 transition and delivers, with the support of the Goethe-Institut, top quality German lessons to a feeder primary school. The project appears successful on several levels. First, staff at the primary school report that pupils make impressive progress in German and pupils were hugely positive about the sessions. Second, the NPP models effective language teaching to primary staff, which they find beneficial given their lack of subject specialism in languages. The primary headteacher commented:

> …probably the best thing about this at the beginning, was that it actually gave us an opportunity to really think about modern foreign languages.. I had never given thought to what do I want to teach? How do I want it taught? What's the intent? What's the implementation going to look like in the school? *(N3)*

Third, the secondary language teachers who taught the sessions said they were having their ‘eyes opened’ to what younger pupils could achieve in a way that was changing their teaching of Y7:

> It clearly is a really interesting one for secondary school teachers to go in and see where primary school students are at and can get to. And the answer is, they can get further than you think.... it prompts you to really think about how aspirational you could be with year 7s. *(L10)*

The relationship between the 2 schools was also proving ripe for further collaboration, with Y6 able mathematicians having recently been linked up with secondary maths students. The primary Headteacher feels this is only the beginning:

> I think this thing will just grow legs and go in so many different curriculum areas that will just benefit us hugely. And it's a gift. It's a real gift…It's like day and night where we were before...It's really impressive how our language [skills] just shot up. *(N3).*

Impact on pupils

In some cases, staff felt confident that the project has had a clear impact on pupil engagement and progress:

> I've seen the levels of engagement, and I know from their senior leadership team that that wasn't the case earlier on….I think we've got some anecdotal evidence that that is having a good impact. (L9).

However, in many cases participants talked about needing more time for impact to become apparent.

Challenges to NPP implementation

Staff in network schools tended to have limited awareness of NPPs and little or no involvement in NPP activities. Approximately one-third (34%) were aware of NPPs in general, and one-quarter (27%) were aware of their lead school's NPP, and far fewer (17%) were involved in their SLN's NPP activities. These survey results suggest a relatively low penetration of NPP activity among network schools which is unsurprising given the early stages of NPP maturity.

Interviews with network school staff reinforced this lack of awareness in the work of the NPPs; unless network schools were directly involved in a project, they seemed to have little knowledge of them. Several interviewees had not heard of NPPs or were confused about what they were and their purpose. Even teachers in schools where a project was running were not necessarily aware of it unless they are directly involved in delivery: 1 interviewee said that the project lead in their school 'hasn't talked about it much' *(N10)*.

Several interviewees remarked on the lack of connection between the work of the SLNs and that of the NPPs. These 2 parts of the model seem to operate in different spheres and do not currently complement or reinforce each other in most cases. One SLN lead remarked that a better connection might help to make each 'more visible' *(L17)*. At the moment, NPP activity seems to be only 'visible' to the staff and pupils directly involved.

Funding issues also created challenges. As with the SLNs, the interruption to funding caused a hiatus in delivery which affected momentum and, in places, diluted impact. For example, in 1 transition project year 7 pupils did not receive the material that had been scheduled for their arrival in September until January: 'those projects have stalled. Well, they didn't need to stall.' *(L14)*. The fact that the funding cycle is out of sync with the academic year had also been challenging:

> If this wants to be a real success, the cycles need to be September to September or at least summer to the following September. It can't end in the middle of the year because it's not even at the end of the financial year either. It really is tricky to do. *(L17)*

Several participants also talked about the need to build in time and resource to reflect and evaluate. The lifespan of the projects was not sufficient to enable these important stages, as this SLN lead explained:

> It's really hard to carry something out and then evaluate it because of that pressured time, everything by the end of January. It was quite hard to fulfil everything in the time given. *(L17)*

Concern that impact is limited to participating schools unless time and resources are allocated to write up and disseminate findings was expressed in several interviews. Although some schools are thinking about ways to share the fruits of projects to increase their potential impact, this is not always obvious or easy because of the location-bound nature of projects and the availability of platforms. A jamboree (celebration event convened by NCLE to share learning about the NPPs) was intended to provide such a space but was not mentioned by many interviewees, suggesting limited impact. Some schools spoke about using their network and/or the NCLE website for dissemination, but these approaches have not yet been tried and will require time to prepare for.

As was evident from our staff survey, where respondents reported a lack of time to take part in NPP activities or to plan and coordinate the NPP (see section on the views of participants directly involved in projects), several interviewees spoke about time constraints. Project leads in partner schools have 2 funded hours a week to complete all project work, which is often insufficient. SLN leads are similarly time-poor, as this participant put it: ‘timewise, it's awful trying to work on a project’ *(L6)*. As a result, some schools have scaled back their ambitions but then felt this reduced the project’s impact.

All the lead school staff interviewed said they were keen to stay involved in NPP projects. However, this was a different picture from that which emerged from survey respondents (note that the numbers involved are small, N=38). Just over one-half of those from SLN lead schools said that they intended to continue to lead or participate in their NPP (mostly intending to continue with the same project rather than starting a different project), and most of the rest responded that they did not know about future intentions (rather than responding that they did not intend to continue).

Language resources

NCLE

SLN leads greatly appreciated the personalised one-to-one support and expertise available through NCLE. This was most clearly experienced in relation to their NPP, where leads met every few weeks with their allocated NCLE advisor to talk through progress and plans. These conversations sometimes involved the NCLE advisor sharing research findings directly relevant to the SLN lead’s project, which was experienced as extremely valuable. SLN leads who have been involved in setting up supra-networks also spoke

highly about the help they received from NCLE through this process. These examples suggest that a key strength of NCLE has been one-to-one relationships and communication with individual members of the team. These have been experienced as helpful, supportive and responsive. In these contexts, the subject expertise of the advisor has been fully appreciated.

However, the interface with groups of teachers in the context of CPD and through newsletters has been experienced by participants in this evaluation as less successful. Several participants said that CPD felt too long, academic and not practical enough, suggesting problems with both content and delivery. Furthermore, several felt that NCLE's expectations of teachers were unrealistic. These weaknesses were attributed to some NCLE staff being distanced from the realities of schools and classrooms. These 2 comments are typical:

> Our named link there, X, has been nothing short of superb in terms of the way that she's been able to communicate and support us with the actual facilitation of the project. I do think sometimes, though not her necessarily, but the whole organisation, there's a difference between those who are in schools and those who are out of school. *(L17)*

> They don't really understand the complexities and the intricacies of working in a school. *(L14)*

Participants who had been involved from the beginning perceived a difference over time which may suggest that the organisation is improving in response to feedback:

> They've definitely been on a journey, haven't they? I don't think the CPD that they provided initially was very well received. I think it's been better in this second phase. *(L14)*

It seems that there is potential for the NCLE to provide high-quality MFL CPD because of their expertise. However, both content and delivery need to continue to improve to maintain and develop levels of engagement with the MFL community.

Interviewees' thoughts about the NCLE newsletter (containing information about upcoming webinars and events and signposting people to resources on LEO) were also mixed. Some network leads found this newsletter useful, whilst for some in network schools it felt less relevant:

> Quite often the things that are in it are just either too far away or not relevant for our school, so it becomes a bit pointless. *(N11)*

This newsletter and the website were mentioned as having potential for disseminating information and findings from NPPs although the projects were not at a stage in their life cycle for this to have been tried yet.

Language Educators Online (LEO) platform

All respondents to the staff survey were asked questions about engagement with the LEO platform. Overall, 29% of respondents said that they had accessed one or more modules on the LEO platform, and this proportion was higher among staff at lead schools (39%) than among those at network schools (26%).

Among the small group of users[24], the majority (85%) felt the quality of modules accessed was good or very good with the rest feeling neutral. Staff at network schools were more likely than those at lead schools to report that the quality was very good. Similarly, most users (87%) felt these modules were useful, and many (79%) felt the LEO platform overall was fairly or very useful for improving language teaching. Again, those in network schools tended to be more positive about LEO than those in lead schools. This suggests relatively low take-up but that the content accessed is regarded positively.

Interviews helped shed light on this slightly mixed picture. Some of the SLN leads who have accessed resources on LEO also spoke very positively about their quality. There was particularly good feedback on the phonics resources which leaders have used and adapted for their own CPD. One participant, who had included the resources in CPD for Early Career Teachers, was particularly effusive, conveying excitement about finding so much high-quality material and how this would help them design more effective CPD:

> I couldn't believe how much was on there and it was all free. I was like, 'Oh, my God.' So that, I thought, was brilliant having all these free resources, because when you get [to the point of planning CPD] and you have to plan the entire year, you do get, I don't like to say the word, stagnant. *(N13)*

However, 3 significant barriers to engagement were mentioned repeatedly: the site is not user friendly; the materials can be too dense and long; and the site is unfinished. Some people also felt that it is secondary school focused and felt that many primary teachers need input and would welcome relevant resources and guidance.

Network leads often spoke about how slow it was to navigate the site and how difficult it can be to find what you are looking for. For time-poor teachers, this is off-putting. One participant had decided, after having an initial look that ‘it’s a summer holiday thing’ *(N12*). Another said ‘I would really, really like to have some sort of map of where everything is’ *(L15)* because she had failed to find material she knew was available there.

When participants had found relevant resources, they reported that lessons for pupils are too ‘full’ *(L17)* to realistically be taught in an hour and that modules for teachers are long and impenetrable. One participant described it as ‘overloaded’ *(N13)*. Another said:

[24] N=15 for lead schools and N=31 for network schools, N=46 in total

> The biggest problem that I think I've come across is the amount of time it takes to engage with the platform. So when you log into the platform, it says, 'This module will take you 10 hours to complete.' And I have probably more time than your typical head of department has, and I look at it, and I think, I haven't got 10 hours to spend doing this. *(L11)*

The unfinished nature of the website was another issue which was frequently mentioned. Participants expressed frustration that ‘a lot of the things you click on don’t have anything behind them’ *(N11)*. This makes it difficult for them to recommend the site to their network as well as being an off-putting experience for them:

> If I’m giving a recommendation, I need [the information] to be there. *(L6)*

> We're the salesmen for LEO in a way to our networks, and we've obviously sent people links and encouraged it and advocated for it. But if it's an unfinished product, then that's not ideal. *(L8)*

> You obviously want to signpost it as much as possible, but you're also aware that people are going to look once, it's going to say 'Content coming soon.' They're busy people, they're probably not going to go back any time. *(L11)*

Many SLN leads had expended time on LEO on behalf of their networks and then shared snippets or signposted to specific resources in their newsletters. However, they felt that this mediation should not be necessary. They would like the platform to be accessible and user-friendly for all teachers – a one-stop shop for high-quality MFL resources which is seen as saving time, inspiring teachers and improving teaching and learning. Participants saw enormous potential in LEO as a resource for the MFL community but did not feel that it is working as intended in its current form. The quotation below captures this sense of promise as well as what needs to happen to make this possible:

> When it's finished and when it's as well packaged as it can be, we can really push that and suggest to people and perhaps give examples of how you might use that LEO footage in a department meeting. I think that's the potential for it….[and in School-Centred Initial] Teacher training as well. *(L8)*

Summary

Teaching professionals are hugely committed to collaboration, which they see as one of the most important ways to improve teaching, learning and leadership. Where participants spoke about networks, projects and support working well, they are valued enormously, providing access to expertise, support and perspectives which go beyond a single school or Trust. As one SLN Lead put it: ‘I like being part of something different and part of something bigger’ *(L1*).

Declining take-up of MFL at GCSE and A Level make such collaboration vital. Teachers working in isolation or in small departments are ever more dependent on networks for sustenance. At the same time, high-quality networks and programmes have the potential to positively impact teacher recruitment and retention and improve subject status and quality of teaching and learning, which may contribute to better take-up. This virtuous circle is worth pursuing.

The SLN model is viewed by most school staff as a valuable resource, with many reporting benefits from collaboration. However, there is substantial variation, between the quality of the SLN offer, and between the degree of network schools' engagement. Network schools want relevant and high-quality training and resources and appreciate opportunities for networking (particularly in-person, though this can be logistically challenging). The skills and experience of the lead are key to both the quality of training and resources and facilitation of effective networking. Lack of time and funding affects both network schools' involvement and what lead schools can offer.

NPPs have further fostered collaboration within and between schools, and staff directly involved in projects tend to report significant value. However, their overall impact is unclear because there has not been sufficient time for evaluation and reach has been limited to the few who are directly involved. To justify the significant resource it takes to undertake an NPP, it will be important to improve evidence of impact and reach going forward. This could be supported by linking NPPs more closely to the work of SLNs.

Setting up the networks and NPPs created some challenges, particularly relating to the timing of funding announcements; staff stressed the importance of being able to plan in line with the rhythm of the school year and preferably over several years.

NCLE support of SLN leads has been hugely appreciated by lead schools. The quality of the content on LEO is also considered by staff as very good, but usability and accessibility need significant improvement. Once this set up phase is complete, use of the platform has potential to gather momentum.

4: German Expert Mentors (GEMs)

Staff views on programmes to support German

Very few SLN staff surveyed had direct involvement with the GEM scheme; one respondent was a GEM providing support, and 3 others were being supported by a GEM. Those in network schools (N=2) found the support received from GEMs effective and felt it had a positive impact on pupil engagement and performance in German lessons, and their own knowledge and understanding of German and the quality of their German teaching.

There was also very limited involvement among staff survey respondents[25] in wider German promotion schemes supported by the UK-German Connection (UKGC) programme aimed at staff, schools and students. This included funding opportunities such as the Flexible Funding Scheme (thematic partnership projects and visits, N=3) and Partnership Bursaries (helping schools to maintain existing links, N=3), staff development such as German Pupil Course Group Leaders Development Opportunity (N=3), student activities including the Networks programme (N=5) and regular communications (N=6). Several German teachers reported hosting a teacher from Germany (N=7), with mixed experiences. Most, though not all (8 out of 11), of those involved were satisfied or very satisfied with their experiences of the UKGC programme overall.

Few of the SLN lead or network school staff interviewed spoke about the GEM scheme or wider German promotion schemes. This might stem from a sample bias, as not many of the interviewees worked at schools where German was taught. However, those in schools where it was taught spoke highly about the support offered by the Goethe-Institut. German teaching was a focus of one NPP, which is detailed in the Elm school case study in Chapter 3.

Views of German Expert Mentors

Changes over time

GEMs did not report any major changes in how the initiative had been delivered this year (2025 to 2026 academic year) in comparison with previous academic years (thus were not impacted by the transition from language hubs to language networks). The programme's core purpose and delivery model remained consistent, with GEMs continuing to provide school-based support, professional expertise, and advice to German teachers.

The most widely reported change was that of GEMs' increased knowledge and expertise. They had gained more experience and confidence in their skills, which they felt made the support they provided more effective. Some GEMs reported delivering fewer direct

[25] In total, there were 47 German teachers in the responding staff sample, questions about German programmes were filtered to German teachers only.

interventions with schools this year. In some cases, this reflected a shift towards other areas of work, including research projects, advice on the National German A level Class, and support for groups of teachers. This suggests that GEM activity may be diversifying, with more experienced mentors taking on broader strategic, developmental or network-building roles alongside school deployments.

This year, Goethe-Institut recruited additional GEMs to help deliver the initiative. Increased capacity enabled the programme to reach more schools and provide support across a wider geographical area. The expansion of the GEM network was therefore viewed as an important development in addressing earlier concerns about regional disparities.

GEMs also reported that the nature of school requests had shifted. Schools were increasingly seeking support amid wider policy and structural pressures affecting the status of languages. These included declining numbers of pupils studying languages, concerns about the sustainability of German provision, worries among German teachers about whether their subject and roles will be maintained over time, and specific support around new GCSE exams:

> I would say that there are some new challenges in schools and that's to do with the policy decisions that have been made regarding the status of languages. There are various schools now where people have been made redundant due to lower uptake in key stage 4. And I think there's a general trend in student numbers going down. I think there's additional pressures there as well. I have just detected more structural problems to do with people being able to maintain the subject and I have had requests more coming from people who are worried about their jobs. *(GEM01)*

Over the last 3 years, the professional development, training opportunities, and collaborative relationships established between GEMs have strengthened the initiative's impact while also helping GEMs develop their professional expertise, research, and practical skills. They reported that being part of the initiative had a positive impact in their own classrooms, improving their teaching and broader linguistic knowledge:

> It's been really enriching, yes. It has allowed me to engage with people who have the same passion as me. It's enabled me to make a difference in some schools, giving people a forum to chat and to reflect, and it's also helped me improve my practice as well. *(GEM04)*

Impact of structural changes on take up of German

Key reason for decline in German

GEMs described cultural barriers to language learning as operating in 2 main ways. Firstly, some pupils and parents were reported to question the relevance of learning languages, particularly in the post-Brexit context. Some saw learning languages as less practical,

particularly for STEM-focused pupils who found it challenging to connect it to their future goals.

Secondly, interviewees highlighted the impact of attainment pressures within schools. MFL GCSE and A level can be perceived as carrying a greater risk in terms of achieving high results compared with some other subjects, which can discourage pupils from pursuing them. GEMs view this pressure as contributing to reduced uptake.

GEMs reported that some schools were reducing language provision or finding it difficult to justify continued investment in German GCSE and A level in the context of tight budgets and declining pupil numbers. This was seen as especially acute for German, where falling uptake can make provision appear increasingly difficult to sustain.

New GSCE exam

Nevertheless, recent changes to German GCSE examinations were widely seen as improving accessibility and were believed to potentially improve pupils' motivation and confidence, possibly leading to greater interest in continuing German at A level. This year's GCSE results do suggest some evidence of less harsh grading, though there is still some way to go.[26]

However, GEMs cautioned that exam reform alone may not address the deeper structural challenges facing German. Some interviewees felt that the new GCSE may be 'tinkering around the edges' rather than addressing wider issues in exam design, pupil motivation, and the broader culture of language learning in schools.

National German A level Class

In autumn 2026 the Goethe-Institut started roll-out of a National German A level Class. It operates as a collaboration between a partner school and the Institut. The partner school German teacher delivers 2 hours of in-person teaching, supplemented by 2 hours of live online lessons provided by the Goethe-Institut. In addition, asynchronous learning and independent tasks are supported by online tools prepared by the Goethe-Institut. The introduction of the National German A level Class was seen as addressing a clear need in schools where low pupil numbers make it difficult to sustain a full German A level class. GEMs suggested that an online A level class, combined with lower-level support from teachers in schools, makes provision more affordable and feasible for schools that might otherwise be unable to offer German beyond GCSE.

Interviewees also highlighted a further benefit; the programme gives German teachers additional leverage in discussions with senior leadership teams. Where schools are considering reducing or cutting A level German, the availability of a national online class could help teachers make the case for maintaining at least some form of provision.

[26] FFT Datalab (2026) Languages were less harshly graded at GCSE this year, but there is still some way to go.

Brexit

The UK's departure from the European Union has made it more difficult to recruit native German speakers to work as Language Assistants in schools. It has raised costs and introduced additional bureaucratic barriers, making recruitment less viable for schools, especially those with lower budgets (see also Chapter 5).

Brexit has also made pupil trips to Germany and EU study/work opportunities more costly and difficult, undermining student motivation to learn languages. Re-entry to Erasmus could help reverse this by making language learning feel more worthwhile again:

> Erasmus being back will be quite helpful. Student numbers are going down, and the recent change in the status of languages in schools has actually meant that I think fewer students will study it. I'm actually more interested now in this kind of youth exchange arm of this because I think it's very good for students because they meet people from a country where the language is spoken, and they tend to be kind of young, you know, just people can relate to them. *(GEM02)*

Other challenges

GEMs described teachers as already time-constrained by a demanding workload, meaning that additional activities such as arranging GEM support, attending training opportunities, or engaging with programme resources can lose priority to the immediate demands of everyday teaching.

Secondly, relationships with schools were identified as a challenge. Interviewees noted that schools sometimes only reached out to GEMs at a late stage, when German provision was already under immediate threat, leaving little room for interventions. Managing expectations was also described as important: some schools were seen as expecting GEMs to deliver more than was feasible or to resolve wider structural problems within the schools. GEMs understood their role as supporting, coaching and helping schools identify the best solutions, rather than directly fixing all challenges facing German provision.

Thirdly, interviewees highlighted the impact of fragmentation across the school system. Pupils who study German at primary school may have no guarantee that they can continue at secondary school or higher levels. In some regions, the absence of German provision in nearby schools creates discontinuity, limiting progression and undermining efforts to sustain pupil interest over time.

Finally, they expressed concerns that further shifts in education policy (such as the removal of the EBacc performance measure) and funding priorities towards STEM subjects could place additional pressure on language provision.

Impact of GEMs in schools

When GEMs reflected on their impact in the schools where they were deployed, they felt positive about the support they provided. Impact varied, from practical, hands-on support in developing or improving the German curriculum to advocating for continued German provision.

Core support

Overall, teachers and schools were described as wanting hands-on, practical support, including concrete examples, lesson planning guidance and approaches that could be applied directly in the classroom, rather than theoretical advice alone. They also often looked for opportunities for professional development, especially when they had limited access to wider networks of German teachers.

GEMs' external expertise and the prestige associated with the initiative were viewed as useful in influencing SLT and strengthening the perceived value of German and language learning more broadly. GEMs helped develop resources that were relevant, accessible and appropriate for pupils at different stages and levels, supporting teachers to strengthen German provision in practical and tailored ways.

Some GEMs reported that the teachers who reached out for support were often the only German teachers in their school. Consequently, they lacked colleagues with whom they could test ideas, reflect on challenges or talk through possible approaches. The coaching element of the GEM role was therefore seen as highly valuable, offering isolated teachers a trusted space for discussion, encouragement and practical advice:

> I also really enjoyed being able to work with schools and connecting them with opportunities to keep their German A level going. More generally, actually being able to encourage people to keep going with the great work they do, because very often people feel quite isolated […] the challenges they face are quite big and being able to help them overcome those is a really, really positive thing. *(GEM01)*

> [school with one teacher]. He wanted a kind of sounding board. He wanted that coaching model. You know, I went and observed him teach Year 11 lessons. We talked about different topics, had a real clear idea about what he wanted to get from it. You know, 'How do I design my Key Stage 3 curriculum? How do I increase numbers doing GCSE? How do I make sure that there's an A level class going forward?' You know, really concrete things. *(GEM08)*

Pupils' motivation engagement and uptake

Many teachers and schools struggle to sustain pupils' motivation to learn languages and face declining numbers, especially in German language classes. GEM deployments were seen as effective in improving this situation.

German language clubs set up with GEMs' help were particularly successful in helping schools provide some level of German language provision and in motivating students to take up languages. GEMs also helped teachers to effectively communicate the value of learning languages and how they can help in future careers. GEMs' prestige and renown helped teachers advocate for further support and backing from SLT, which effectively translated into greater language uptake and more secure language-learning provision in many schools:

> In terms of growth, the one where I did the primary thing, we know that there was a primary club set up for year 3 and that it was rolled out this summer to year 6. *(GEM01)*

The interviews conducted in 2025 revealed increasing interest from primary schools in the GEM initiative. This trend has continued: GEMs interviewed this year reported increased interest in resources and strategies to increase German learning at primary level. They believe this will positively affect the popularity of German at secondary level.

Impact beyond classrooms

Many GEMs reported that their deployments had an impact beyond German-language classrooms. These included: the wider school environment, the dissemination of best-practice advice and skills for other language teachers, and increased recognition of the value of languages amongst SLT:

> You've got schools who have asked for GEM support, they're able to say, 'Well, it's not just some other random German teacher that's come up with this idea. This is actually a GEM, and these GEMs are backed by the DfE, and they're backed by the Bundesregierung, and they're backed by Goethe'. *(GEM02)*

Support given to German teachers often appeared to filter more widely into MFL departments, particularly when GEM interventions led to conversations with other heads of department or when interventions were delivered to whole teams rather than individual German teachers:

> That was quite nice when she said, 'They're using your techniques, they listen to how you are doing this and this, and they're doing it in Spanish now and in French.' *(GEM06)*

Examples of wider impact also included activities that helped pupils engage more broadly with languages. For example, Year 9 pupils visiting primary schools to have a go at teaching languages which helped build their confidence and raised younger pupils' interest in language learning.

Other impact

GEMs reported that, particularly this year, as the new GCSE exams are being rolled out, many teachers sought support to adequately prepare pupils for the new exam structure and achieve high grades.

Outside of classroom work, GEMs noted that teachers looked to GEMs for professional development and opportunities to strengthen their subject knowledge and pedagogical confidence. This was particularly important where teachers were working in isolation, were newer to teaching German, or had limited access to specialist German networks within their own schools or local areas.

Awareness of wider MFL programmes

GEMs were largely unaware of the different initiatives to support MFL. None that were interviewed were part of an NPP or had much interaction with SLNs. They were however aware of German-specific campaigns and promotional materials, including GIMAGINE, and thought these were useful tools for raising Germany's profile and generating additional interest among pupils and schools. GEMs felt that the GIMAGINE Awards were particularly effective at motivating pupils.

GEMs also reported that campaign materials and NCLE resources were being noticed, used and picked up by teachers. These materials were especially valuable when they provided cultural input alongside language-learning resources. Some teachers found this additional content useful during periods such as the end of the summer term:

> I know that it's widely used for the primary schools, but also for the year 7. Lots of the promotional materials are used as an extra cultural input, so definitely in my school and in the schools I've been to, and a lot of them are also used for the project work, so once people have maybe finished with the content, a lot of them are used, especially in summer, when you have the last half term, when you have a little bit more time, exams are done, year 11s have gone. So yes, definitely been sent out, definitely being used, at least in the schools that I've been working with. *(GEM06)*

However, interviewees also identified limitations in reach and evidence of impact. Geographical coverage was seen as uneven, with fewer events or campaigns reaching regions such as the North West. As a result, GEMs felt that the potential impact of campaigns and materials may be more limited in areas with less visible programme activity or fewer opportunities for pupils and schools to engage directly.

Overall, campaigns and promotional materials were viewed as helpful in creating visibility, enthusiasm, and ‘buzz’ around German. At the same time, GEMs found it difficult to assess whether this translated into longer-term outcomes, such as sustained motivation, increased uptake or continued progression in German, especially in more geographically isolated areas:

> Yes, so I think it kind of created a bit of a buzz for us. But I do think that it's probably been more impactful in certain areas of the country than others. For us, our biggest problem is lack of access to things. We're so isolated up here that, you know, we can't really get to things. It would be nice if things could come to us occasionally. *(GEM07)*

Sustainability of the GEM programme

Overall, GEMs strongly supported the programme continuing. They felt that the programme is making a difference and expressed a clear desire to remain involved.

There were certain areas for improvement. GEMs felt that they were working with a limited pool of schools and that there were geographical ‘blind spots’ that could benefit from further GEM support. Addressing this was seen as an important step to achieve sustained national impact:

> I think my recommendation is, how do we keep the momentum going? There are still places that don't know we exist, so how do we ensure that they do so that we can work? *(GEM05)*

GEMs also saw potential for their role to evolve in response to wider system changes. The curriculum review of Key Stages 2, 3 and 5 was identified as an area where GEMs could play a valuable role, particularly in helping primary schools and language departments adapt their curriculums. Interviewees also suggested that GEMs could take on a more active role in supporting collaboration between the Goethe-Institut and SLNs.

GEMs emphasised the importance of continuing and expanding work with primary schools. A bottom-up approach was seen as important for building early interest in German, strengthening pupils’ first experiences of language learning and sustaining a pipeline of pupils who may choose to continue German at later levels. Interviewees also suggested expanding the National German A level Class to include GCSE provision, enabling the programme to reach more learners and strengthen progression.

GEMs emphasised the need for sustained national commitment to language learning that extends beyond changes in government and policy priorities, as those often undermine the sustainability of programmes like the GEM initiative. They argued that embedding a long-term culture of language learning, supported by consistent national backing, would improve its sustainability.

Summary

Overall, the GEM initiative has provided valuable and practical support for German teachers and schools at a time when language provision faces significant structural pressures. GEMs were seen to strengthen teachers' confidence, support curriculum development, encourage pupil engagement and help German teachers advocate and make the case for sustaining German provision. However, declining uptake, uneven geographical distribution of the initiative, workload pressures and wider policy uncertainty continue to limit what the GEM initiative can achieve on its own. Sustaining and expanding the initiative, alongside broader national commitment to language learning, will therefore be important if progress is to translate into longer-term improvements.

5: Language Assistants

The British Council Language Assistants Programme has ELAs, UK university graduates or undergraduates who support teaching in classrooms in 14 countries to promote the English Language and UK culture. It also has MLAs, graduates and undergraduates from the same 14 countries who come to work in UK schools and colleges and universities annually.

Schools' experience of Language Assistants

Our fieldwork with schools explored engagement with Language Assistants, who were either part of the British Council Language Assistants Programme or recruited via other means.

The survey of schools involved with SLNs found few schools employ Language Assistants but there are considerable perceived benefits where this does happen. 1 in 5 (21%) respondents to the staff survey with lead and network schools indicated that their school had employed a Language Assistant in the 2025 to 2026 academic year. This is lower than the 48% found in the previous staff survey.[27] In the 2026 survey, a higher proportion of staff at lead schools rather than network schools said that their school had employed a Language Assistant (33% compared with 17%).

In the recent staff survey, only a small group (19%) recruited their Language Assistant through the British Council (this is smaller than 33% found in the previous staff survey). All of this group agreed that they would recommend this approach to other teachers and schools and felt the quality of support offered by the British Council was good. However, not all were planning to have a British Council Language Assistant in the following 2026 to 2027 academic year, indicating further possible reductions in take-up of the programme. Other methods of recruiting Language Assistants, outside of the programme, included (in order of frequency of mention) using contacts such as links with Anglo European School and Study Abroad UK, retaining Language Assistants for several years and advertising via the school's website, education sector publications (e.g. Times Educational Supplement), language or country specific organisations or websites, or a recruitment agency.

Most (97%) of those with a Language Assistant in their school agreed they brought benefits (corresponding with 98% in the previous survey who felt there were benefits). Table 7 shows the most commonly reported benefit in the 2026 survey was on students' enthusiasm and motivation for language learning whereas this was enabling more targeted support in language classes in the previous survey. Influencing students' ability in reading and writing and refreshing language teachers' skills were the least frequently cited benefits in both 2024 and 2026. However, despite the latter not being a stated aim of the programme it was still seen as a benefit by 2 in 3 staff in 2026 (67%).

[27] Here language teachers in hub and partner schools were referring to the 2023 to 2024 academic year.

Table 7: Benefits to having a Language Assistant (percentage agree)

Survey year	2024	2026
Students' enthusiasm and motivation for language learning	91.1	96.8
Students' general language skills and knowledge	94.6	93.5
Students' cultural awareness of LA's home country	92.6	93.5
Extending students' knowledge of vocabulary and general understanding of the target language	92.9	90.0
Students' ability in listening and speaking	94.6	90.0
Enabling more targeted support in language classes (e.g. one-to-one or small group support)	98.1	90.0
Students' exam grades	88.7	92.9
Students' ability in reading and writing	72.2	69.0
Refreshing the language teachers' language skills and knowledge	75.0	66.7
Total (N, those with a Language Assistant, max)	56	31

Source: All schools, IES staff survey, 2024 and 2026

These views were reflected in the case studies and staff interviews: the minority of schools which employed one or more Language Assistants spoke extremely positively about the value they add to teaching and learning. Language Assistants often work with small groups to develop speaking and listening skills (reflecting common activities reported in the survey of MLAs, see Table 15): 'The children absolutely love going out with the French LAs. They think it's a treat.' (N9). They also educate pupils about their country and culture which has wider benefits in terms of tolerance and aspirations. One teacher commented on how working with a Language Assistant 'showed [pupils] that there's a world beyond this tiny island' (N11). Others talked about the power of having someone young who the pupils can relate to:

> Brilliant for sixth form; they got a lot out of it. Good for everything cultural or current…It was nice to have cultural elements, which made it more real, especially for younger pupils. A real-life French person! *(L2)*

One school which employs a Language Assistant every year has also recruited some as trainee teachers:

> We would be at a loss without them...I can't praise them highly enough... they're a really valued resource amongst students and certainly amongst our departments. *(L17).*

Schools like this which consistently employ Language Assistants seem to have embedded costs into their budget:

> Our CEO is really supportive of it. She knows that if she wants the language results to improve, then it needs investment, and it needs support, so having that specialist provision really helps. *(N9).*

A minority of schools have had bad experiences with Language Assistants which has put them off. However, these were attributed to the personal situations of individual Language Assistants, rather than the programme itself.

Given these mostly positive experiences, it is not surprising that almost all (97%) of staff in schools who employed Language Assistants in the 2025 to 2026 academic year agreed that they would recommend having a Language Assistant to other teachers and schools (this was also the case in the 2024 survey). However, there were some challenges reported. Approximately 2 in 3 respondents said they struggled with budgeting for placements (this appeared to be more of a challenge in the 2026 survey than the 2024 survey[28]), and 2 in 5 struggled with the organisation and hiring of placements.

Many of the schools involved in interviews and case studies fieldwork did not have Language Assistants due to funding constraints: ‘we just have not got the money to be able to afford them' (L11). Some staff from these schools spoke positively about past experiences but said they were no longer able to afford them: 'It's a real shame from my point of view. I'd love to have them’ (L8).

Some schools which see the value but struggle to fund a Language Assistant have found ways around the problem. For example, by employing local native speakers on 6-month contracts, or by justifying use of Pupil Premium funding because there is lower MFL take up amongst FSM students. The British Council model was viewed by some as expensive, unreliable or too much hassle because of the bureaucratic processes involved.

Who are the Language Assistants

Responses were received from 492 Language Assistants on the British Council programme in 2026 and 897 in 2025, with a roughly even split between ELAs and MLAs. The majority of MLAs working in UK schools spoke French or Spanish as their first language (Table 8), which closely matched the languages they taught.[29] The proportion of German speakers has fallen over time as has the proportion of Mandarin speakers. ELAs were most commonly placed in Spain, followed by France and Germany (Table 9), and the vast majority (89% in 2026 and 86% in 2025) were teaching English.

[28] Up from 1 in 5 in the 2024 survey. However, comparisons are indicative only, as the number of respondents involved particularly in the 2026 survey are small (N=20), and the schools sampled differed.
[29] In 2026: 44% were teaching via French, 36% via Spanish, 13% teaching via German, and 3% via English.

Table 8: MLAs' first language (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2026
French	38.2	43.8
Spanish	38.0	36.5
German	16.5	14.9
Italian	1.2	0.8
English	0.2	0.0
Mandarin Chinese	5.0	2.4
Other	0.9	1.6
Total (N)	424	249

Source: MLAs, IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Table 9: Main ELA destinations (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2026
France	22.5	23.0
Spain	50.0	41.0
Germany	15.3	16.0
Italy	3.0	7.0
Austria	4.4	5.7
Total (N)	472	244

Source: ELAs, IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Application process

Motivations and preferences

The majority of Language Assistants interviewed heard about the programme through their university courses. Others heard about the programme through friends who had previously participated or had found the programme online after searching for ways to work abroad. One ELA said they had wanted to take part in the programme since they were 11. Another became aware of the possibility of working as a language assistant after having an MLA at their primary school.

ELAs studying languages chose the programme over other placement opportunities, such as working abroad for a year. They felt that the Language Assistants Programme would be more straightforward and enable them to develop their language skills, which was also a key motivation for MLAs. MLAs tended to have stronger career motivations than ELAs,

linking participation in the programme with furthering their careers and giving them a chance to practice or improve their teaching skills and to test whether they would enjoy a teaching career. This is likely to reflect that MLAs were further in their educational journey and careers than ELAs. As noted in Chapter 1, MLAs surveyed were most commonly postgraduate students and many were studying for teacher training.

Both ELAs and MLAs felt the programme was a good opportunity to live and work in another country. Two ELAs had taken part in the programme at least once before. They wanted to participate again because they had enjoyed their experience, and because they wanted to continue living abroad. Some ELAs and MLAs said they wanted a break from studying and the programme allowed them to travel and remain productive:

> I wanted a break from study, but it was the best of both worlds because I was still learning, working and teaching. *(MLA working in England)*

As part of the application process, Language Assistants chose which country they wanted to be placed in. All interviewees reported getting their country of choice (2025 interviewees indicated how they valued the effort put into placing them in areas closely matching their requests), although in 2026 not all received the region they wanted. One ELA reported initially planning to go to Hong Kong, but the programme there was cancelled. The majority of Language Assistants wanted to go to the country of the language they were learning, or could speak, so often felt there was only one option for them.

Challenges to becoming a Language Assistant

For both ELAs and MLAs the greatest challenges experienced and reported in the 2025 and 2026 surveys related to post-Brexit changes in rights to work and the general cost of the administrative processes (as shown in Table 10). The proportions affected are consistent across the surveys.

Experiences varied between ELAs and MLAs to some extent. Obtaining visa sponsorship or the visa application process was significantly more challenging for ELAs, and this pattern remained consistent across the 2024, 2025 and 2026 surveys. Whereas the cost of living in the host country was significantly more challenging for MLAs than ELAs, across all survey periods. However, challenges around cost of living for MLAs appear to have increased from the 2024 survey.

Interviews with Language Assistants illustrate how some found the programme application process long and quite stressful, requiring multiple documents and concerns about whether these would be accepted (due to conflicting information around which documents were required). The interviewees also explained their concerns about the delays in obtaining visas (often caused by late confirmation of placement schools) which created further challenges around finding accommodation and worries that visas would not arrive before placements were due to start. Three ELAs also found the cost of the visa to be

high. A small number of ELAs said that they had joined Facebook group chats with other language assistants, which was helpful and offered them support.

In 2025 and 2026 relatively low proportions of Language Assistants reported engagement with host schools, travel restrictions, or guidance from the British Council as issues. However, travel restrictions for the chosen destinations were more commonly mentioned by MLAs coming to the UK and this appeared to worsen over time. Conversely, lack of guidance from the British Council was more of a challenge for ELAs in 2025 and 2026. Interestingly lack of engagement with the host school was more of an issue for ELAs than for MLAs in 2025 but the difference had largely disappeared by the 2026 survey.

The interviews highlighted that communication and contact from host schools before arrival varied. When contact was provided this was reassuring and helpful, with schools sending information ahead of the start of placement. However, it was common for Language Assistants to experience very limited contact from their placement school which prompted at least one interviewee to contact the British Council who were able to give some support and prompt the school.

Table 10: Challenges experienced in becoming a Language Assistant (percentage agree)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
Post-Brexit changes in right to work	67.1	64.5	65.9	64.0	67.5	65.8
General cost of administrative processes involved with becoming a Language Assistant	63.5**	60.3**	62.0	67.2	63.4	65.3
Obtaining visa sponsorship/visa application process	62.6***	35.7***	49.4	63.6***	30.3***	46.5
Income received for work as a Language Assistant	49.0**	49.3**	49.1	49.0*	45.9*	47.4
Lengthy/complicated application process	42.6	43.8	43.2	39.7	40.5	40.1
Cost of living in country of interest	33.3***	74.1***	52.6	39.4***	71.6***	55.6
Lack of guidance from the British Council	22.4***	6.0***	14.7	20.2***	6.0***	13.1
Lack of engagement with your host school	20.2***	11.1***	15.9	15.8	13.1	14.4
Impact of travel restrictions for your chosen destination	13.9**	17.8**	15.8	11.5***	23.5***	17.4
Total (N, max)	469	419	887	242	248	490

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

About the placement

Duration and location

Approximately one-half of all Language Assistants surveyed reported that the duration of their placement was 9 months (as shown in Table 11). MLAs were more likely than ELAs to have a placement of 6 months or less, but the likelihood of shorter placements among

ELAs increased between the 2025 and 2026 surveys. Conversely ELAs were more likely than MLAs to have placement for the full academic year, but this fell over time.

The placement setting varied significantly between the ELAs and MLAs. The majority of MLAs were placed in secondary schools (92% in 2026 and 86% in 2025). Secondary schools were also the most common setting among ELAs, but these tended to be placed in a wider variety of settings (as shown in Table 12). This is corroborated by the interviews. All MLAs interviewees were placed in secondary schools (which had been their choice) with some working in grammar schools, or schools that had a boarding option. Whereas ELAs interviewees worked in primary and secondary schools, and one ELA reported working at a technical college as well as school.

Table 11: Duration of placement (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA*** **	**MLA*** **	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
6 months or less	7.4	18.6	12.8	12.1	16.1	14.1
9 months	47.4	50.0	48.6	46.7	50.8	48.8
Full academic year	24.7	15.7	20.4	18.8	12.4	15.6
Other	20.5	15.7	18.2	22.5	20.7	21.6
Total (N)	458	420	878	240	242	482

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Table 12: Placement setting (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	ELA***	MLA***	All	ELA***	MLA***	All
Primary school	34.5	2.1	18.9	34.3	0.8	17.5
Secondary school	55.3	86.4	70.3	53.1	92.1	72.7
College	7.3	8.8	8.0	8.8	6.2	7.5
University	2.9	2.6	2.8	3.8	0.8	2.3
Total (N)	462	419	871	239	241	480

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Generally, Language Assistants worked at just one institution during their placement period: 76% in 2025 and 77% in 2026. However, in the 2026 survey ELAs were more likely than MLAs to balance multiple placements (35% of ELAs compared with 11% of MLAs). There was less of a difference noticed in the 2025 survey (27% of ELAs compared with 20% of MLAs). Working across schools/placements was more common for those working at primary schools. Interviewees indicated that working across 2 or more schools could provide enjoyable variety and interesting contrasts in experiences as they often differed in size, level of deprivation and pupil needs. However, for some, this made it harder to settle into the school environment and bond with the pupils.

Working patterns and additional work

The surveys found that Language Assistants most commonly worked between 12 and 20 hours per week on their placement (89% for both ELAs and MLAs in 2025, and 87% for both groups in 2026). Most of the rest worked for less than 12 hours per week (8% for both groups in 2025, 10% of ELAs and 12% of MLAs in 2026), with few working more than 20 hours per week (2% of both groups in 2025 compared with 3% of ELAs and 1% of MLAs in 2026). Interviewees working around 12 hours a week often said they had Fridays as a day off which they found gave them a good work-life balance, although some felt they could have worked more hours to gain more experience or to settle in better in the school. Interview data suggests more hours could also have helped with managing finances.

A small proportion of Language Assistants reported taking up other employment during their placements (17% in 2025 and 2026). Additional employment was significantly more common among ELAs than MLAs across all 3 surveys (23% of ELAs and 10% of MLAs in 2025, and 24% of ELAs and 9% of MLAs in 2026). The interviews in 2025 indicated that this additional work was mostly tutoring work gained through contacts at their school. Additional analysis of the 2026 survey found taking on other employment was more

common among ELAs placed in Spain. Differences in take up of wider paid work may be due to differences in visa arrangements (whether visas permitted or prohibited additional work[30]). Nearly all (99% in 2026 and 94% in 2025) of those taking up other employment said that the main reason was to earn more money, although around one-quarter also reported doing so to gain a wider experience of the country and 1 in 7 to meet people (the proportions were consistent across the 2026 and 2025 surveys). Very few of the follow-up interview sample were working another job alongside their placement, although a small number took up volunteering roles. Those who worked either did freelance or were already living in their placement country before becoming a Language Assistant.

Language Assistants provided an approximation for the total money spent in additional costs whilst on placement in pounds sterling (e.g. for accommodation, travel, and living expenses). On average, the mean spend was £3,775 in the 2025 survey rising slightly to £3,924 in the 2026 survey.[31] Average spend was higher among ELAs than MLAs and the difference widened between 2025 and 2026 (as shown in Table 13). The greater spend for ELAs aligns with the finding that more ELAs than MLAs took on additional employment. It also suggests that ELAs not only have to balance multiple placements but to do this alongside additional employment.

Around one-half of language assistants said that the amount spent was more than they had expected. In both surveys MLAs were more likely than ELAs to report spending was higher than anticipated (as shown in Table 14), and this aligns with a greater proportion of MLAs finding cost of living in the host country a challenge. This contrasts with approximately one-third who reported costs were as they had expected. These findings suggest that more information around costs would be helpful, particularly for MLAs.

[30] Visa permissions for ELAs vary country to country. MLAs in the UK have Temporary Work - Government Authorised Exchange Visas for which the British Council acts as a sponsor
[31] The figures quotes have not been adjusted for inflation

Table 13: Additional spending during placement period in GBP (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	ELA***	MLA***	All	ELA***	MLA***	All
1-749	15.7	16.5	16.1	14.8	21.5	18.4
750-1,499	15.4	31.3	23.5	12.2	31.8	22.6
1,500-2,999	17.0	13.7	15.3	12.7	8.9	10.7
3,000-7,499	36.4	19.6	27.9	38.1	19.2	28.0
7,500 and above	15.4	18.9	17.2	22.2	18.7	20.3
Total (N)	376	387	763	189	214	403
Average (£)	3,869	3,683	3,775	4,455	3,456	3,924

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Table 14: Expectations around additional spending during placement period (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	ELA***	MLA***	All	ELA	MLA	All
More than expected	49.2	60.1	54.4	49.1	55.9	52.6
What I expected	41.5	32.6	37.2	42.1	32.6	37.3
Less than expected	9.3	7.3	8.3	8.8	11.4	10.1
Total (N)	443	411	854	228	236	464

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Activities

Table 15 shows activities delivered on placement, where the most common was teaching or support for speaking. The spread of activities was similar in the 2025 and 2026 surveys, however involvement in whole class teaching fell between 2025 and 2026 (particularly among MLAs). In both surveys, there was variation in Language Assistants activities with ELAs significantly more likely to deliver whole class teaching input, support with general understanding of the target language, provide teaching or support for reading, writing and listening, and deliver wider cultural activities. Conversely MLAs were much more likely to deliver preparation for speaking assignments (which fits with the approach to language

learning in English schools noted in Chapter 2), provide one-to-one tuition or small group tuition, and mark work or tests. In the 2026 survey MLAs were also more likely to deliver extra-curricular activities, in the 2025 survey this was more common among ELAs.

Interviewees explained their common activities included speaking practice with smaller groups of pupils, supporting the language teacher in the classroom, and giving presentations on different topics. Some reported they were given time to observe lessons before they started working with pupils which they found helpful. Fewer were asked to mark pupils' work. Language Assistants working across multiple schools often found their responsibilities were different in each school.

Differences were noticed in interviewee accounts. MLAs were often involved with supporting GCSE and A level speaking exam preparation, either in small groups or one-to-one (reflecting that the majority were in secondary settings) which constrained working creatively with pupils, although some also worked with younger year groups and played games. Whereas ELAs were less involved in supporting exams, and reported working with younger groups of pupils, also playing games with them (reflecting their greater likelihood to be in primary settings). ELAs were also able to give presentations to the class on elements of British culture or events such as Halloween or Pancake Day, which they and the pupils enjoyed. However, a small number of ELAs were asked to teach and manage behaviours of half-size or full-size classes or were asked to support teaching in non-language classes, which they often found difficult:

> I would say I particularly enjoy teaching the sixth formers because they are able to hold a conversation and it's just a little more interesting. But I was also quite happy that I was allowed to sort of teach the year 7s and spark a little more interest in German maybe by just being there and doing fun stuff and playing games and so on. *(MLA working in England)*

> When I was observing they would sort of like just introduce me, get the children to ask me questions, some teachers had different approaches on how they wanted to do that. And I think it's part of their curriculum or their scheme of work or whatever to talk about Halloween. So then I was doing a whole bunch of classes on Halloween, and then after that I was just doing presentations again, and then they used me also to work with small groups on their own. So, I think month by month they had sort of a different use for me. *(ELA working in Germany)*

Overall, ELAs appeared to have greater freedom and diversity within their role (less structure) which could lead to being stretched and building better confidence and skills but could also lead to feeling underutilised. Whereas MLAs appeared to be given more structure and guidance, meaning some MLAs felt they would have liked the opportunity to do more with the pupils.

Table 15: Activities delivered as part of the placement (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
Speaking – teaching or support	89.6	91.1	90.3	92.4	90.3	91.4
Small group tuition	75.7***	89.7***	82.4	74.3***	84.9***	79.6
Support with general understanding of target language	85.0***	68.0***	76.8	84.4***	68.1***	76.2
Preparation for speaking assessments	57.1***	90.4***	73.0	57.8***	90.8***	74.3
One to one tuition	40.7***	85.8***	62.3	40.9***	87.4***	64.2
Whole class teaching input	94.2***	43.0***	69.7	91.1***	32.8***	61.9
Reading – teaching or support	69.5***	48.8***	59.6	70.5***	49.6***	60.0
Writing – teaching or support	60.0***	48.8***	54.6	67.5***	49.6***	58.5
Listening – teaching or support	65.0***	48.3***	57.0	68.8***	46.6***	57.7
Extra-curricular activities	51.3***	42.3***	47.0	39.2*	48.7*	44.0
Marking work or tests	26.8***	55.0***	40.3	24.1***	49.6***	36.8
Preparation for written exams	25.7***	37.0***	31.1	28.7	36.6	32.6
Wider cultural experiences	14.8***	8.7***	11.9	18.6***	8.0***	13.3
Other	1.1	0.7	0.9	3.0	1.3	2.1
Total (N)	452	416	868	237	238	475

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2026

The placement experience

Table 16 shows that survey respondents found the experience of being a Language Assistant positive, with 9 in 10 rating their experience as good or very good. The proportion rating it as very good increased over time between 2025 and 2026[32], particularly among MLAs. Overall, MLAs tended to be more positive than ELAs (but the difference was only statistically significant in 2025).

[32] The 2026 results also represented a slight rise on the 2024 ratings, where 63% of MLAs and 55% of ELAS rated their experience as very good.

Table 16: Experience of being a Language Assistant (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA*** **	**MLA*** **	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
Very good	47.8	60.5	53.9	56.8	66.0	61.4
Good	38.7	31.6	35.3	32.6	26.9	29.7
Neither good nor poor	7.1	4.1	5.7	5.1	3.4	4.2
Poor	5.5	3.1	4.4	4.2	3.8	4.0
Very poor	0.9	0.7	0.8	1.3	0.0	0.6
Total (N)	452	415	867	236	238	474

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Aspects contributing to a positive experience

For all Language Assistants the positives came from enjoying the work and learning about the country of their placement and the wider culture (reported by 9 in 10 Language Assistants in 2025 and 2026, see Table 17). Fewer Language Assistants associated having a positive experience with staying in the country or getting a job (suggesting few do these things). ELAs were significantly more likely than MLAs to say their language skills had improved (which ties in with ELA motivations reported in the interviews) and that their placement provider was supportive (both in 2026 only) which made their experience positive. Conversely MLAs were significantly more likely than ELAs to feel they gained skills that would help them with their future plans (in 2025), that their learning would be useful in their degree course (in 2025 and 2026) and that it led to a job (in 2025). These suggest stronger perceived career outcomes of programme participation among MLAs which correspond with stronger career motivations reported in the interviews and their place in their educational and career journey.

Table 17: Elements contributing to a positive placement experience (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant Category	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
I enjoyed working as a language assistant	87.1	89.8	88.5	91.9	90.9	91.4
I learned about the country and wider culture	84.6	87.7	86.1	91.4	86.3	88.8
My language skills improved	85.6	81.7	83.7	87.1*	78.5*	82.6
I gained skills that will help me with my future plans	74.6***	86.6***	80.5	79.0	83.1	81.1
My placement provider was supportive	64.8	62.8	63.8	67.6*	58.0*	62.7
I made some useful contacts	43.4***	57.3***	50.3	47.1	50.7	49.0
My learning will be useful in my degree course	33.2***	49.5***	41.2	30.0***	47.5***	38.9
I stayed in the country	20.8	25.1	23.0	17.6	24.7	21.2
I got a job	10.3***	18.3***	14.3	12.4	17.8	15.2
Other	1.8	1.3	1.6	2.4	0.00	1.2
Total (N)	389	382	771	210	219	429

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Importance of support

Overall, Language Assistants in the 2025 and 2026 surveys were positive about the support provided to them. MLAs were generally more positive than ELAs which continues the pattern found in the 2024 survey.

Support from the British Council

Table 18 shows that in 2025 and 2026, 7 in 10 Language Assistants felt the quality of support received from the British Council was positive. MLAs rated the support more highly than ELAs (this was also reflected in the interviews), with approximately one-third rating it as very good. In 2026 MLAs were twice as likely as ELAs to rate the quality of support from the British Council as very good.

Table 18: Rating of support from the British Council (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA*** **	**MLA*** **	**All**	**ELA*** **	**MLA*** **	**All**
Very good	20.5	35.0	27.5	15.4	34.3	24.9
Good	41.4	43.8	42.6	48.9	43.0	46.0
Neither good nor poor	25.3	17.6	21.6	24.7	17.4	21.0
Poor	10.6	3.4	7.1	10.1	5.2	7.7
Very poor	2.3	0.0	1.2	0.9	0.0	0.4
Total (N, max)	435	408	843	227	230	457

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Language Assistants who rated British Council support positively in the survey highlighted 4 key themes: clear and proactive communication (although some noted that contact became less frequent during placements); comprehensive resources and guidance; responsive, approachable staff; and sustained practical support, including onboarding and visa assistance. Feedback from the interviews also highlighted how Language Assistants appreciated the help given to them by the British Council during the application process and to prepare for placement, especially the guidance provided through their website:

> The communication from the British Council throughout the whole application process was great. The support with gaining specific certifications and the visa process has been great. Other resources such as Buddy Maps and support with other needs whilst being in the placement destination has been helpful. *(92: ELA)*

> All the preparation work was good, it was well organised. Although they couldn't directly offer visa help, there were clear instructions provided on things we needed for the visa such as the work contract. When I couldn't find the work contract on the partner platform, the British Council team responded very quickly to me and sent over the contract. *(41: ELA)*

> Every exchange with the British Council was concise and enjoyable. I appreciated that. *(80: MLA)*

> I would say the British Council gave us lots of support. They gave us opportunity to meet in meetings and also to watch videos, several videos about safeguarding and also about the role of being an assistant. So yeah, I think we were really well prepared. *(MLA working in England)*

Support from placement mentors and schools

Feedback from interviews with Language Assistants highlights how help and support from the placement school was the most significant factor influencing their enjoyment of the programme. Language Assistants in the survey were overwhelmingly positive about the quality of support provided by their host placement mentor (more so than the support from the British Council). Across the 2025 and 2026 surveys, 8 in 10 rated it as good or very good. Again, MLAs were more positive than ELAs (see Table 19). Language Assistants also tended to feel that integration into their host institution went well (8 in 10 reported this as good or very good, Table 20), and the pattern remained consistent from 2025 to 2026.

Table 19: Rating of support from the host mentor (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	ELA	MLA	All	ELA	MLA	All
Very good	46.0	56.1	50.9	48.0	53.9	51.0
Good	33.1	27.3	30.3	29.5	27.6	28.5
Neither good nor poor	9.9	7.6	8.8	10.6	9.1	9.8
Poor	8.3	6.6	7.5	9.3	7.3	8.3
Very poor	2.8	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.2	2.4
Total (N, max)	435	410	845	227	232	459

Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Table 20: Rating of integration into host placement (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA*** **	**MLA*** **	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
Very good	35.5	49.6	42.3	37.4	48.1	42.8
Good	37.3	34.0	35.7	42.7	33.8	38.0
Neither good nor poor	16.1	10.5	13.4	12.3	10.8	11.6
Poor	9.2	4.4	6.9	5.7	6.5	6.1
Very poor	1.8	1.5	1.7	1.8	1.3	1.5
Total (N, max)	434	409	843	227	231	458

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Language Assistants described what was good about the support provided by their mentor (and wider school) before and during placement. They found that the mentors were open and responsive, ensured regular catchups and provided practical personal help (e.g. with lifts, accommodation, DBS check, bank accounts). Mentors and schools also provided teaching support via training, advice and practical help (e.g. with lesson planning, tracking student progress). Mentors supported integration into the school, enabling Language Assistants to adapt to the school environment and feel part of the team. This was helped by wider staff being welcoming and friendly, but also with practical arrangements such as having a dedicated workspace and well organised timetable. Crucially, mentors ensured Language Assistants had a clear understanding of what was expected of them.

The interviews found that support was most effective when schools were well-prepared and organised. Schools who had previously had Language Assistants or had more than one at any time, tended to be better prepared. In these cases, schools were able to provide materials used or developed by previous Language Assistants and could put them in touch with current or former Language Assistants (for practical support, resources and materials). Indeed, Language Assistants in placements with more than one Language Assistant at the school found this very positive. They found it extremely helpful to have another person going through the same experience and able to provide peer support:

> My mentor was fabulous and very forthcoming, she supported me whenever I needed support yet also gave me a lot of freedom when it came to what to do with my students. My ideas were always appreciated, and I felt my opinion was valued. We worked well together as a team, and I knew I could ask for help anytime if I ever needed it. *(81: MLA)*

> My mentor was genuinely exceptional and made the experience far more meaningful than I could have expected. From the very beginning, they were welcoming, patient, and consistently attentive, always taking the time to explain things clearly and ensure I felt comfortable and included. Their kindness and encouragement created a supportive environment where learning felt natural. They were always approachable, happy to answer questions, and generous with their time, which made a real difference in building my confidence and understanding. Overall, their professionalism was matched by a genuine warmth that made the placement not only valuable in terms of learning. *(188: ELA)*

> I felt very welcomed by the teams and well-integrated. I went on the staff day-out at one of my placements, I played volleyball with the other teachers, I went to a pub quiz with the English department. Every teacher was happy to have me in their class and always tried to find something for me to do. I felt not only valued as a language assistant, but as a person and a friend. The students were also almost all respectful of me and enjoyed my input in lessons. They recognised me around the school as the Language Assistant. *(291: ELA)*

> The teachers are really kind. They explain my work duties in detail and patiently answer all my questions. They also offer help whenever I run into troubles in daily life. We prepare exams together and support students as a team. *(261: MLA)*

> …just slotted into that spot. The HR knew what to do, the teachers knew what to do, the students knew what to expect, to some extent at least. It was absolutely no questions asked. Every staff member that I met that asked me who I was, I said, I'm a language assistant, okay, we know. *(MLA working in England)*

Challenges faced

A small group (5% in both 2025 and 2026) rated their experience as a Language Assistant as poor or very poor (see Table 16). This appeared to be driven by feeling their placement provider was not supportive and not enjoying the work of a Language Assistant. This highlights how so much of the experience was dependent on the placement school.

Lack of support

Perceived lack of support from the British Council: A minority of Language Assistants in the survey rated support from the British Council as poor (8%, Table 18), and these tended to be ELAs. This was mirrored by some experiences described by ELAs in interview. Across the surveys and interviews, those with poor experiences felt the information from the British Council was limited or provided too late, that the British

Council was unapproachable and ignored requests for help (e.g. with challenging situations such as a mugging, with administrative issues such as delays with visas or payments, or if struggling during their placement), and did little to help them settle in. This left Language Assistants feeling unsure where to go for help and who to contact:

> It's true that I probably could have reached out at some point to voice my concerns, but I guess this was a problem kind of all the way through. I didn't quite know who was responsible for what, in terms of which organisation I should go with which problem. *(ELA working in France)*

Language Assistants suggested potential improvements to British Council support including better and earlier information in relation to key documentation such as visas and residence permits, more points of contact and for personal/tailored and potentially in-person support and help around socialising to counter feelings of isolation. They also called for more financial support and help dealing with tax (e.g. NI and HMRC) and housing (e.g. accommodation, understanding housing deposits):

> I would like more sufficient teacher training, more support in finding accommodation, more support in connecting with other assistants, updates on administrative obligations as and when needed and a clear separation of powers between the British Council and the French Education Board so assistants know who to go to for support. *(292: ELA)*

Poor support within the school: 1 in 10 Language Assistants had limited mentor support, and a similar proportion reported poor experiences with integrating into their placement school (Tables 19 and 20). Feedback suggested that for those who worked in multiple settings experiences could be mixed: some settings were good (prepared, welcoming and supportive) but some were less supportive leading to a poor(er) experience.

Across the surveys and interviews, this small group of Language Assistants described experiencing poor communication (before and during placement) or indeed conflicting information, and a lack of feedback about performance/progress all of which meant Language Assistants did not know what was expected from them. Not making the role or expectations clear meant some felt like substitute teachers rather than Language Assistants, especially when asked to teach lessons (take a whole class not just as cover or within the lesson) or support teaching outside of language lessons.

Difficulties also occurred when schools had little understanding of the programme and the Language Assistant’s role was disorganised (resulting in poor timetabling), when Language Assistants were not introduced to the wider teaching team or when relationships with mentors broke down or mentors were unable to provide sufficient time for support. This left Language Assistants feeling unwelcome, afraid to ask for help, isolated and different to other staff. Language Assistants described how some teachers were more supportive than others of having a Language Assistants in the classroom. Where teachers

were less supportive, Language Assistants were often unsure of what to do or how to interact with the class:

> I was never briefed on things like the school values, behaviour and discipline policy, expected standards of behaviour and academic achievement, etc. All of this was very different from any school I had attended or worked in before. *(367: ELA)*

> There was no integration. Almost none of the teachers ever tried to speak with us in a welcoming way since the first day we arrived. There is no link between us MLAs and any other staff. We struggled having information regarding the school, students' exams or anything like that as no information was shared with us, which leads to arriving to empty classes sometimes or not knowing where to go because the room had changed and no one let us know even if the teacher knew we had class with them. *(140: MLA)*

> I felt like it was a bit 50/50, like sometimes I felt like it was worthwhile and I was engaging with the kids and I was really helping them with their speaking practice. And then other times, [it depended] on the teacher, if they included you or not. But the ones who didn't include me, then I felt just like really awkward, like sitting in the back of the classroom or, you know, just not welcome. *(ELA working in Germany)*

Induction support that Language Assistants would have appreciated therefore included more information about school policies, greater clarity around their role and expectations (before starting the placement), more support with administrative issues and accommodation, and more help with integration and fitting in, including being able to contact previous or current Language Assistants (as was suggested for the British Council). A few Language Assistants also mentioned it would be good for schools to have more training on how to use Language Assistants effectively.

Challenges with living in a new country

The follow-up interviews identified 3 (related) challenges with the programme experience. These centred around living in a new country: securing affordable accommodation, struggling with finances, and settling in.

Securing affordable accommodation: Their experience with accommodation often depended on the support received from their placement school. Schools who were used to having Language Assistants frequently had arrangements in place, such as offering free or low-cost accommodation at a teacher's house, or offering places to stay at the school, if it had boarding facilities. Thus, some interviewees lived in accommodation with other Language Assistants at the school. When Language Assistants had trouble finding accommodation (which could be caused by late notification of placement), they often spent

the first weeks of their placement in hotels while they tried to find somewhere to live and were not sure who could or should help them. Visa issues could also complicate matters. Some ELAs described how they could only receive their visa once they had an address in their placement country. As the application process was lengthy, this often meant they had a sudden rush to find somewhere to live once they were told the location of their placement. Language Assistants who were placed in capital cities reported struggling to find somewhere they could afford.

Struggling with finances: Finances could also be challenging in terms of covering costs of rent, subsistence and maintaining a social life. Interviewees in 2025 explained how the hourly rate for the programme was sufficient but the number of hours they did/could work meant that overall they were living on low salaries which made it difficult to have a good life in their host country. One ELA reported that this was a 'financial deterrent' and thought they should be warned ahead of time of the need to have savings before starting the programme. Indeed, whilst most Language Assistants interviewed in 2026 had no issues with finances, they did report having money saved up or receiving financial support from their families and would have found their placement much more difficult without this. Interviewees in 2025 felt that availability of financial support would ensure fair(er) access to the programme rather than having to rely on savings and parents to maintain a decent standard of living. Some of those interviewed in 2026 noted that they received student loan payments as well as their Language Assistant stipend. Some Language Assistants reported that they were not paid for the first month of their placement or sometimes were not paid on time. This was a known issue at some placement schools, and was reported by Language Assistants in interviews in 2025.

Settling in: When it came to settling into their host country, a few Language Assistants reported feeling 'lonely', particularly when they were the only Language Assistant at their school or were in a rural school with few places to socialise. One MLA reported that the British Council emailed them a map of where other MLAs were placed in the country, but there were no other MLAs in their area. In contrast Language Assistants placed in schools with more than one Language Assistant often made friends and found it very useful to have someone else going through the same experience. Many reported that they would have liked to have had more information about/contact details for other Language Assistants and felt more could be done by the British Council to facilitate social events and networking during placements. Those who joined group chats with other Language Assistants found this very helpful.

Benefits and lasting impacts of the programme

Impact on Language Assistants

The most commonly reported personal benefits in 2025 and 2026 from participating in the programme were gaining skills working with young people and improving cultural, political and social awareness of the placement country. Table 21 shows that almost all Language Assistants reported these benefits. Benefits less frequently noted were gaining skills in

time management and organisation, and in teamwork, but these were still experienced by the majority of Language Assistants and appeared to increase between the 2 surveys.

There was some variation between ELAs and MLAs. MLAs were significantly more likely to rate personal benefits as strengthening their CV and career prospects and gaining valuable work experience (which again illustrates MLAs' greater focus on their careers). Whereas for ELAs key benefits were more immediate and skills based: gaining skills in working with young people, in communication and presentation, and in teaching. These all saw significant differences in the 2025 and 2026 surveys.

Interviews with Language Assistants found that the experience of the programme gave them insights into different teaching approaches. Those working across multiple schools noticed how some schools focused on following textbooks while others focused on activities, such as storytelling and songs, especially in primary schools. Language Assistants also reported differences in teaching in their placement country compared to their home country. MLAs felt that in their home country there was a greater focus on intercultural communication, and teaching started with grammar and moved onto building sentences whereas in the UK it was often the other way around. Both ELAs and MLAs noticed that in language lessons in Europe, teachers spoke in class the language that they taught more so than in the UK, such as when having conversations and giving instructions.

Table 21: Personal benefits to participating in a Language Assistant placement (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
Gaining skills working with young people	97.0*	91.4*	94.3	96.5	91.4	93.9
Improving cultural, political and societal awareness of placement country	94.6	91.5	93.1	93.0	91.5	92.2
Improving fluency or skills in another language	88.4	92.4	90.3	92.1	90.9	91.5
Gaining interpersonal skills	88.6	89.1	88.8	92.0	90.1	91.0
Providing valuable work experience	86.4*	90.7*	88.5	88.5	92.3	90.5
Strengthening your CV and career prospects	81.6***	95.6***	88.4	86.8	93.6	90.2
Gaining teaching skills	93.4**	86.0**	89.9	91.2	88.8	90.0
Developing professional confidence and independence	88.4	91.0	89.7	89.0	91.0	90.0
Gaining skills in communication and presentation	92.5*	85.6*	89.2	93.0	86.4	89.6
Gaining problem-solving skills	75.7	74.6	75.2	79.0	74.1	76.5
Gaining skills in time management and organisation	67.5	66.3	66.9	72.6	72.2	72.4
Gaining skills in teamwork	55.9*	62.0*	58.8	64.2	64.7	64.4
Total (N, max)	441	411	852	228	235	463

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Impact on students

Table 22 shows that Language Assistants felt they contributed to students' learning in a number of ways. This was most commonly positively influencing students' general language skills and knowledge (which aligns with school staff perceptions of Language Assistants' impact), and students' listening and speaking abilities. They were less likely to feel they had contributed to students' reading and writing abilities, but still over one-half felt they had made a difference in this respect. Overall, Language Assistants in 2026 appeared marginally more positive than those in the 2025 survey.

MLAs were significantly more likely than ELAs to feel they enabled more targeted support in language classes (e.g. one-to-one or small group support) and had an impact on students' exam grades. This reflects patterns of activity where MLAs were significantly more likely than ELAs to have reported delivering small group or one-to-one tuition, whereas whole class teaching was significantly more common among ELAs. Also, MLAs were more likely to report supporting preparation for assignments and marking work or tests (as shown in Table 15).

The follow-up interviews also explored engagement with and perceived impacts on pupils. Language Assistants felt pupils were generally happy to engage with them, and that pupils enjoyed having a native speaker in the classroom. However, some variation in engagement was noticed. A few MLAs felt engagement was better if pupils were studying the language for GSCE or A level. Although they noted that in schools where pupils were required to study a language to GCSE, students were not always motivated in lessons. One ELA was placed in a school where other lessons were taught in English, so pupils were used to hearing it spoken which supported engagement. However, some pupils perceived language learning to be difficult, or unnecessary, which limited how much they engaged in lessons, or with the Language Assistant:

> A lot of them said that it was useless, which I found quite funny, to be honest. But it's sort of from the environment that they grew up in. The only people that spoke English in these schools were the English teachers. That was it. No one else spoke English to a level to have a conversation. *(ELA working in Spain)*

Table 22: Impacts on students of the Language Assistant role (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
General language skills and knowledge	93.1***	97.3***	95.1	95.1	97.4	96.3
Listening and speaking ability	90.8	94.8	92.7	94.1	93.0	93.6
Extending vocabulary and general understanding	91.8	89.9	90.9	93.7	90.5	92.1
Enthusiasm and motivation for language learning	85.0	87.3	86.1	88.2	90.1	89.2
Cultural awareness of LA's home country	87.0	86.7	86.9	88.4	84.8	86.6
Enabling more targeted support	70.6***	91.2***	80.7	72.9***	93.0***	83.3
Refreshing language teachers' language skills and knowledge	80.7***	66.3***	73.8	83.8*	71.1*	77.3
Desire to continue with language study	65.0	68.3	66.6	67.0	68.8	68.0
Exam grades	44.8***	78.0***	61.7	50.3***	74.1***	63.2
Reading and writing ability	57.4	57.5	57.5	61.5	61.6	61.6
Other	17.5	33.3	25.6	35.7	21.4	26.2
Total (N, max)	435	406	841	225	232	455

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Future career plans

For many Language Assistants, the experience had a profound impact on their futures, as shown in Table 23. More than 4 in 5 Language Assistants agreed that after the programme they were more likely to continue learning languages, look for a job where they can use their language skills, and consider working abroad again the future.

The were significant differences the plans of ELAs and MLAs. ELAs are keen to work abroad (continuing patterns found in the 2024 survey), and this appears to have increased between the 2025 and 2026 cohort. They were significantly more likely than MLAs to consider working abroad again (this increased by 5 percent points from 2025), to consider moving abroad in the future (although this also increased for MLAs since the 2025 survey), and to consider an international facing role (up 3 percentage points). Whereas for MLAs the programme appears to have cemented career plans and they have returned home to

capitalise on the learning gained (again continuing patterns found in the 2024 survey). MLAs were significantly more likely than ELAs to look for a job where they can use their language skills, go into teaching as a career and go into further study (no real change over time between 2025 and 2026). These findings suggest potential difficulties for the future pipeline of language speakers and teachers, but with some improvements over time as the proportion of the MLA cohort who would consider working in the UK in the future increased by 7 percentage points between the 2025 and 2026 surveys.

The interviews with Language Assistants confirmed the interest in further study including master's degree or teacher training, and the greater career focus of MLAs. MLAs used the programme to confirm their choice of a teaching career and provide valuable teaching experience and some already had teaching jobs organised. Whereas for a few ELAs interviewed, the experience had confirmed for them that they did not want to be a teacher. Other future plans reported were focused on utilising language skills, such as being a translator, or working in another country:

> I guess I think I realised during the programme that teaching maybe wasn't for me, but I think that was more of a personal thing. I think I get quite nervous speaking in front of big groups of people. (*ELA working in France*)

Table 23: Impacts on future plans (percentage)

Survey year	2025	2025	2025	2026	2026	2026
Language Assistant category	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**	**ELA**	**MLA**	**All**
More likely to continue learning languages	89.8	90.2	90.0	93.2	90.9	92.0
Consider working abroad again in the future	87.1	81.2	84.3	91.7*	82.3*	86.9
More likely to look for a job where I can use my language skills	84.9***	91.0***	87.8	87.0	92.1	89.7
Consider moving abroad in the future	83.9***	67.2***	75.9	85.3***	72.6***	78.9
Consider working in an international facing role	81.3***	70.7***	76.2	84.3***	70.7***	77.4
Consider working in the UK again in the future	50.7***	57.6***	54.2	50.3***	65.0***	58.3
More likely to go onto further study	40.5***	57.7***	49.0	45.7**	59.0**	52.7
More likely to go into teaching as a career	46.5***	78.0***	61.5	46.8***	76.3***	62.0
More likely to apply to the Languages Teacher Training Scholarship	36.4*	43.1*	39.6	33.7	39.2	36.5
Total (N, max)	430	399	829	220	231	451

Note: The inclusion of asterisks indicates within-year differences between ELAs and MLAs responses which are statistically significant, denoted as ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Source: IES Language Assistants survey, 2025 and 2026

Overall reflections

Reflecting respondents' generally positive experience of being a Language Assistant, 9 out of 10 said that they would recommend the programme to others (86% in 2025 and 90% in 2026). Reasons given for recommending the programme to others (provided as open text rather than a pre-populated list) included the opportunity to: enhance their language skills; experience cultural immersion and living abroad; foster personal growth, adaptability and confidence; advance professional and teaching experience and opportunities; build social connections, professional networks and friendships; and do so whilst receiving institutional support and effective organisation.

The follow-up interviews confirm the largely positive experience of Language Assistants. Indeed, all Language Assistants interviewed said they would recommend the programme, although some who had difficulties with support from their school placements did so ‘with caveats’. Some Language Assistants enjoyed the experience so much so that they had decided to take part in the programme again.

Overall, even when Language Assistants had faced challenges and difficulties, they reflected that they had enjoyed their time and were glad to have taken part in the programme. Similar to survey respondents, interviewees emphasised the opportunity to immerse themselves in another culture, experience new cultures and meet new people, improve their language skills and have the opportunity to live abroad. Language Assistants also appreciated going out of their comfort zones and broadening their horizons, and felt their confidence had improved as a result of taking part in the programme. They felt living in another country had given them more resilience and made them realise they were more capable than they thought:

> One of the best years of my life, really. *(ELA working in Spain)*

> I would say to everyone be a language assistant at least once in your lifetime, it is lifechanging… you have to do things out of your comfort zone which is beneficial for everybody. *(MLA working in England)*

> Overall, it is an amazing programme, it gives assistants and students the opportunity to have cultural exchange that they wouldn't have had otherwise, I am grateful I have done it. It has taught be to be more fearless, and to walk into a room with assertion... physically and vocally. *(ELA working in France)*

> I know that in this year has been a bit hard, but as a person, it made me grow so much, so much, because I gained confidence, I gained culture, but knowledge in general, it's, yeah, I will forever be grateful for this experience, to be honest. *(MLA working in England)*

Summary

Staff and pupils greatly appreciate the work of Language Assistants and feel they add real value in terms of supporting language skill development, conveying culture, being relatable, and adding capacity. Nearly all participants interviewed said that they would like to have a Language Assistant, and staff surveyed recognised the benefits they bring.

Language Assistants participating in the British Council programme were also largely positive about their experience and would recommend it to others because of the opportunity it offers for personal and professional growth. Overall, findings across phases of the evaluation show Language Assistants consistently have positive experiences of the programme. It gives them an opportunity to work and live abroad, and it provides

experience to those interested in a teaching career. Language Assistants also felt they had positive impacts on the pupils they worked with and enjoyed interacting with them in lessons or part of smaller groups.

The programme works well when Language Assistants are placed in prepared, welcoming schools and receive clear, responsive support (from the British Council, their host schools and dedicated mentor). Outcomes appear strongest where mentors hold regular check-ins, explain expectations, offer practical help and integrate Language Assistants into the wider school whilst giving them appropriate freedom to shape activities.

Findings across the evaluation also reveal some persistent issues. Language Assistants do not always receive support and welcome from their host schools, and there have been recurrent issues with receiving payments, obtaining visas, and the affordability of living in another country. The cost of living in placement countries can lead to unexpected expenditure and reliance on savings and parental support (which has implications for inclusion). School staff reported that budget and organisational issues may prevent them from having a British Council Language Assistant in the future. This may limit the reach the programme has in the future, particularly in the UK.

However, an overwhelming majority of Language Assistants would recommend the programme to others. Some Language Assistants had previously participated in the programme or were planning to do so again in the future, showing that enthusiasm for the programme remains high.

6: Considerations for future planning across language programmes

System-level factors impact MFL teaching and learning and the success of programmes designed to support them. MFL is one of many competing priorities in schools. This evaluation found that the priority given to MFL within a school affects the level of engagement with the network model, the GEM and Language Assistant programmes. The level of competition for limited attention, time and resource can therefore be a significant barrier to schools' ability to engage with and benefit from these programmes. Harnessing links with other priorities such as literacy and employability may be one way of maintaining the status of MFL. However, sufficient investment in MFL as a subject is needed at a system-level for the potential of strong programmes to be realised.

Each of the programmes evaluated as part of this research is organised at a national level and delivered locally. Furthermore, each is associated with an expert body which provides specialist support and resource: the British Council for the Language Assistant programme, the Goethe-Institut for the GEMs, and the NCLE for the SLNs and NPPs. Broadly, this model seems to work well by providing a national framework and specialist expertise to support local implementation.

The evidence gathered for this evaluation suggests that the various language programmes currently in place have good potential to support MFL in schools. The GEM and Language Assistant programmes have been running for longer than the SLNs and NPPs. This longevity has helped to embed and refine the way these programmes work. This evaluation has identified improvements or conditions of success which are detailed below. However, it concludes that these 2 programmes are broadly sustainable in their current form.

The SLNs and NPPs were at the end of their first year when this evaluation was conducted. Whilst the evidence suggests that they have great potential, more adjustments will be required to enable them to work as intended.

Future planning for the Language Assistant programme

This evaluation found that the main barrier to the sustainability of the Language Assistants programme is that schools find the British Council scheme too expensive. The 2026 staff survey found lower engagement with the Language Assistant programme than in 2024 and indications of a move towards hiring such support locally rather than via the British Council programme – a finding which was supported by the interviews. However, even local recruitment costs money and so many schools have no Language Assistants at all.

If the British Council model were to become more accessible through improved funding, the main improvement which was suggested by the participants in this evaluation was

better support from the British Council before ELAs arrive in their host country. Additional issues to be considered include:

- how to ensure there is clearer ownership of queries relating to visas, tax, housing and local costs.
- how to achieve more consistency in support offered to Language Assistants by their host schools. Host schools often have different understandings of the roles and responsibilities of their Language Assistant. This sometimes results in the Language Assistant being asked to do too much or too little. Greater consistency is also needed in terms of induction processes for Language Assistants and guidance for their mentors.
- how to give Language Assistants more ability to contact others on the programme
- how to ensure payments are made consistently and on time to Language Assistants.

Future planning for the GEM programme

Those who interact with the GEM programme think it is working very well to support German teachers, the quality of teaching and learning, and pupil take-up of German. The Goethe-Institut was spoken of highly by all participants who had had contact with them. Recent expansion of the GEM network to reach more areas of the country has been welcomed as an effective way to extend access to the benefits of the programme.

To sustain the model, the GEM network will need to be maintained and grown to ensure even reach across the country.

Future planning for the SLNs and NPPs

Where SLNs and NPPs are working well, there is firm belief in the value and feasibility of the model and a desire to continue. However, even these participants identified conditions which need to be met for the model to be sustainable and ways in which it could be improved. Three factors are identified as critical to success. Firstly, improving consistency of quality and reach. Secondly, network leadership. Thirdly, the resources needed to support successful operation and delivery.

Consistency of quality and reach

This evaluation found that there is a lack of consistency across the country in terms of the quality and reach of the SLNs. This was reflected in the number of networks in each region (West Midlands has 3 but the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber have none), the number of schools in each network (ranging from 10 to 188, see Table 1), and the extent to which responding schools engaged with network resources, support and activities.

Furthermore, this lack of consistency, together with the lack of join-up between the SLNs and NPPs, mean that individual projects tend to have low penetration, with impact mostly confined to those directly involved. Whilst the broad (SLN) and deep (NPP) model has potential to promote collaboration at a variety of levels, improvements are needed to enable it to work as intended. The following should be considered:

- how to improve the ways in which network schools are encouraged to participate. Current network leads have relied on relationships developed through hub model work or other existing networks. However, moving forwards, new network leads will not have worked with the hub model and may not have access to other networks to draw on. Relationships are important to encourage participation but take knowledge, time and resource to develop.
- consistent ways to monitor and evaluate reach and levels of engagement. Currently, network leads and NCLE have limited ways of gauging the reach and effectiveness of networks unless individual network leads administer their own tracking and evaluation. Better data on the number and type of schools involved with SLNs and NPPs and a way of measuring level of engagement would facilitate better understanding of reach and potential impact. This would enable targeted support for networks with low take-up, and planned opportunities to share knowledge and resource.
- how to communicate the offer to network schools as clearly as possible so that they know what the network provides, how to easily access its constituent elements and how they can play an active role.
- ways to make CPD accessible at different times of day and in a mix of formats (online and in-person) to accommodate various needs. In one region, use of a supra-network has been found to improve accessibility of CPD for network schools.
- how to improve the pedagogy of webinar delivery. The current model heavily relies on delivering CPD and promoting collaboration through webinars. However, network leads have not received guidance about best practice in running webinars. High-quality sessions impact engagement with the network and should be supported.
- ways to improve penetration of NPPs. This includes supporting schools to pursue projects which reflect their needs and capacities and are most likely to have impact in the classroom. Insights from the evaluation of the first round of NPPs could be used to identify the types of projects which have most impact and are more feasible to carry out in the context of a busy school. Time for such evaluation and dissemination is therefore important, together with ensuring that funding and planning cycles align with the rhythms of the school year.
- how to improve the links between SLNs and NPPs so that the activities and insights from each are more visible to the other. This may involve using network events to disseminate findings from NPPs and to develop ideas and partnerships for future

projects. Stronger links, together with better monitoring of reach and engagement, would also help SLN leads to accurately and fairly identify which schools in their network have capacity to undertake an NPP and thereby to make best use of the resource available.

Network leadership

This evaluation found that success of a network and/or project is dependent on the network lead as well as the willingness of schools to participate. However, network leadership requires skills beyond those acquired in the course of being a teacher or Head of Department. A successful network lead needs to be able to design and deliver CPD, have networking skills, be able to work at scale, and understand school improvement. In an educational context, such skills are most often developed through Trust-wide or local authority roles, teaching hub roles or SCITT roles. They are skills which require experience, not just a CPD course. Thought should therefore be given to:

- how to ensure network leads are equipped with the necessary skills. This may involve opportunities to take on other roles and/or to support the current SLN lead.
- succession planning so that the departure of a network lead does not put a network at risk. Distributed or shared leadership of the SLN could help with this so that a ‘deputy’ lead is learning the ropes as well as sharing the workload.
- how to shift the emphasis of the model so that on-going links between network schools are promoted to make collaboration less dependent on one network lead.

Resources

Time and funding are key to schools’ engagement. Network leads need administrative time to run the network (communication, event organization), time to research content for CPD and the newsletter, time to plan CPD, time to deliver CPD and time to write newsletters. Staff in network schools need time to attend CPD, to read and digest newsletters, to follow up ideas from CPD and newsletters, to communicate with other staff, and to put ideas into action. Those involved in NPPs need time to plan, deliver and evaluate their projects which includes time to meet and collaborate with colleagues from other schools and within their own.

Insufficient time to carry out these activities was a recurrent theme throughout the data collected for this evaluation. The success of networks and projects is thus dependent on sufficient funding to secure such time.

Timing is also important: timely communication from the DfE about requirements or changes to the model, funding periods which are synced with the academic year, multi-year funding which facilitates effective planning, staff deployment and refinement over time. Sustained funding is particularly important to build trust and encourage schools to invest time and effort.

NCLE have an important role to play in providing expertise, support and guidance, a platform for dissemination and curating LEO to make it a one-stop-shop for high-quality resources and training. To fulfil this role, thought needs to be given to the interface with groups of teachers and leaders: how training is pitched and structured, what is asked of teachers, and how the offer aligns with the priorities and realities of school life. LEO needs to be fully populated, easy to navigate and well matched to teachers' needs.

The programmes evaluated here have been operating for varying lengths of time and all continue to run this academic year. Each has been involved in an iterative process of feedback and refinement, of which this report is a part. The intention is for its findings to inform improvements for the current year and beyond.

Appendix tables

Table 24: Staff views on pupils' intentions for language learning (percentage agree)

Survey year	2024	2024	2024	2026	2026	2026
School type	**Hub school**	**Non-Hub school**	**All schools**	**Lead school**	**Network school**	**All schools**
Majority of pupils are interested/ considering languages at GCSE	54.5	28.6	41.9	78.9	24.2	39.4
Pupils who speak HHCL consider studying these at GCSE	74.5	60.4	67.6	88.9	76.3	79.7
Majority of pupils are interested/ considering languages at A level	7.8	3.6	5.8	10.8	2.1	4.5
Total (N, max)	66	63	129	38	99	137

Source: IES staff survey, 2024 and 2026

Table 25: Staff views on pupils' attitudes to language learning (percentage agree)

Survey year	2024	2024	2024	2026	2026	2026
School type	**Hub school**	**Non-Hub school**	**All schools**	**Lead school**	**Network school**	**All schools**
Pupils are engaged and interested in languages	54.5	57.6	56.1	87.2	53.2	62.0
Pupils engage with learning about other cultures	86.4	80.3	83.3	97.4	86.5	89.3
Most pupils feel that they could achieve good GCSE grade in their language subject	50.8	45.5	48.1	76.9	27.5	41.1
Most pupils feel that they could achieve good A Level grade in their language subject	26.2	25.0	25.7	17.1	5.5	8.7
Most pupils believe they are good at languages	40.0	30.3	35.1	59.0	18.2	28.9
Total (N, max)	66	66	132	39	112	150

Source: IES staff survey, 2024 and 2026

Table 26: Staff views on pupils' perceptions of language learning (percentage agree)

Survey year	2024	2024	2024	2026	2026	2026
School type	**Hub school**	**Non-Hub school**	**All schools**	**Lead school**	**Network school**	**All schools**
Pupils understand how learning a language could be useful for future	62.7	44.6	53.8	71.8	45.9	52.7
Many pupils believe it is useful for an English speaker to learn foreign languages	34.8	31.7	33.3	51.3	26.9	33.3
Pupils studying German understand how it could be useful for their future career (German teachers only, 2024 N=80, 2026 N=33)	52.7	-	48.8	-	-	60.6
Pupils who speak HHCL understand how this could be useful for future	68.3	52.5	60.5	62.2	79.3	75.0
Pupils who speak HHCL understand how this could be useful outside of home	69.8	57.6	63.9	64.9	80.9	76.9
Total (N, max)	67	65	132	39	112	148

'-' indicates the base is below 30 so % have been suppressed.

Source: IES staff survey, 2024 and 2026

Table 27: Staff attitudes to KS2/3 and stepped language qualifications (percentage agree)

Survey year	2026	2026	2026
School type	**Lead school**	**Network school**	**All schools**
Understand what MFL teaching looks like at primary feeder schools (those in secondary schools)	57.6	50.0	52.0
Aware of the proposed stepped language qualifications from the Curriculum and Assessment review response	45.2	40.6	41.7
Proposed stepped language qualifications are something we would be interested and capable of offering for our students	-	58.9	54.2
Total (N, max)	33	96	127

‘-‘ indicates the base is below 30 so % have been suppressed.

Source: IES staff survey, 2026



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