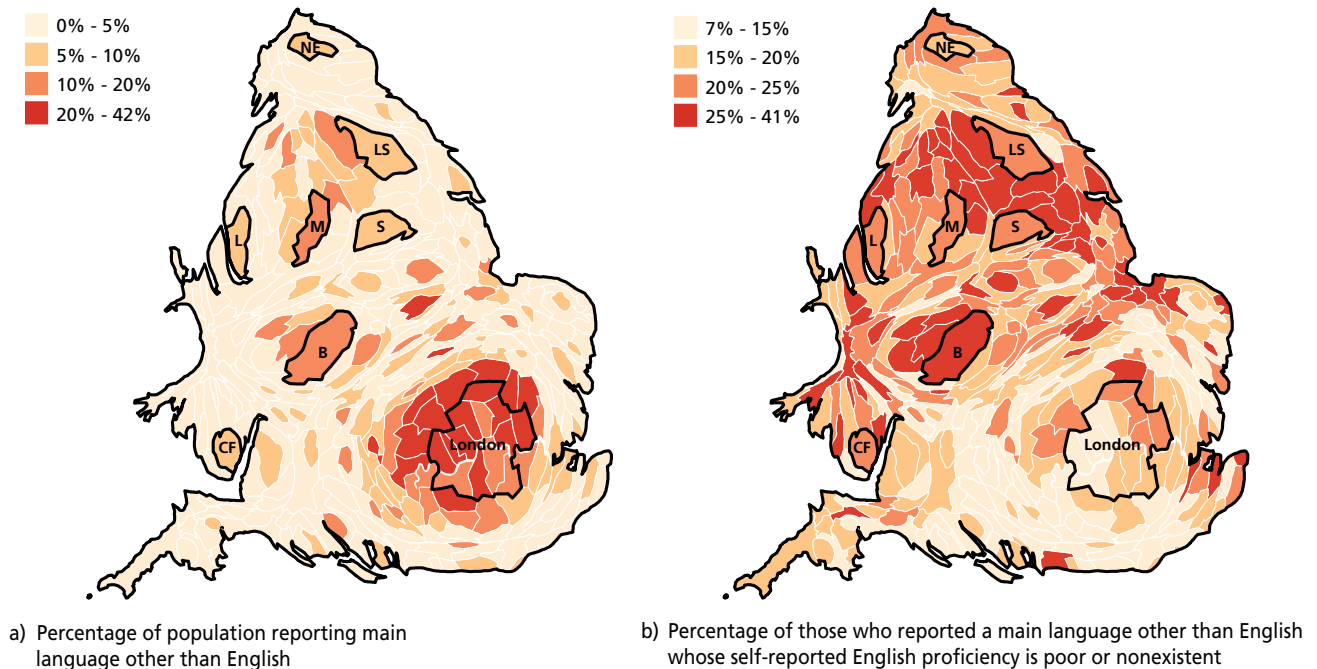


# Who can and cannot speak English?

## Summary

- The 2011 Census was the first to ask about English proficiency, which is of major interest to local authorities and service providers when planning provisions for interpreters and English as an additional language (EAL).
- Less than 2% (or 863,150 people) of the population in England and Wales reported not being able to speak English well or at all. Of those who reported a language other than English to be their 'main language', 79% said they spoke English very well or well.
- Proficiency in English is not necessarily lower in areas with a high concentration of speakers of other languages, such as London.
- The local authorities in which the highest percentage of non-English main language speakers reported not being able to speak English well or at all include Bolsover in Derbyshire and Boston in Lincolnshire.
- The percentage of those who reported a non-English main language was highest among 25 to 34 year olds (16%) and lowest amongst those aged 75 and over (3%).
- Among those who reported a non-English main language, the oldest (aged 75 and over) had the lowest rate of English proficiency, with just 48% speaking English very well or well.
- By comparison, 85% of those aged 25 to 34 whose main language is not English speak English very well or well.

**Figure 1: Geographical distribution of non-English language speakers and English proficiency by local authority district, 2011**



Notes: These maps are population cartograms where each local authority district is shown approximately proportional in size to its resident population<sup>1</sup>. The highlighted areas are intended to act as reference points: Inner London and other principal cities: Manchester (M), Liverpool (L), Sheffield (S), Newcastle upon Tyne (NE), Birmingham (B), Leeds (LS), and Cardiff (CF). For a more detailed key of each local authority district click [here](#).

[Click here for data in Excel](#)

- The percentage of people who reported a main language other than English was two times greater for those who arrived in the UK during or after 2001 (66%) compared with those who arrived before this date (33%).
- Nonetheless, recent arrivals are more likely to say they can speak English well than those who arrived during earlier periods (80% compared with 75%). This suggests that time spent in the country is not always a clear determinant of English language proficiency.
- The clearest example is people born in China. Among those who arrived during or after 2001, 89% speak a main language other than English yet 81% can speak English well. For those who arrived before 2001, 64% speak a main language other than English, but only 68% can speak English well.

## English language in households

The 2011 Census shows that in 91% of households, all members report English as their main language. Of the remaining 9%, 42% contained at least one adult who reported English as a main language, 9% had 0 adults but at least one child aged 3 to 15 years with English as a main language, and 48% contained no members of any age with English as a main language.

## The geographical distribution of English proficiency

A useful way to think about the policy implications of English proficiency is to look at the distribution of

## How the Census deals with English proficiency

The 2011 Census provides information on English (English or Welsh in Wales) proficiency. It also asks whether anyone in a *household*, defined as being either one person living alone, or a group of people at the same address who share facilities and common areas, speaks English as their main language. Households reporting that some but not all members have English as a first language have more than one member.

Those who reported on the Census that they spoke a main language other than English (other than English or Welsh in Wales) were asked how well they could speak English. They could select from four boxes: 'very well', 'well', 'not well', and 'not at all'. English proficiency in the 2011 Census is self-reported and self-assessed and therefore individuals may have different notions of proficiency, based on their personal communicative needs.

those reporting little or no English proficiency across electoral wards and local authorities. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of a non-English main language and the proficiency among those who speak another main language by local authority district. The local authority in which people reported a non-English main language most frequently (42%) was Newham, London. Of those who reported a non-English main language, only 21% in Newham said they could not speak English well. The

**Table 1: English language within households by region, 2011**

Region	Number of households	All persons in the household report English as a main language	At least one but not all persons aged 16 and over report English as a main language	No people aged 16 and over but at least one person aged 3–15 in a household report English as a main language	No persons in household have English as a main language
London	3,266,173	74.1%	10.4%	2.6%	12.9%
West Midlands	2,294,909	91.9%	3.7%	0.7%	3.7%
East Midlands	1,895,604	93.3%	2.6%	0.5%	3.6%
Yorkshire and The Humber	2,224,059	93.4%	2.9%	0.5%	3.2%
South East	3,555,463	93.2%	3.2%	0.6%	3.1%
East	2,423,035	93.6%	2.9%	0.5%	3.1%
North West	3,009,549	94.2%	2.4%	0.5%	2.9%
South West	2,264,641	95.9%	1.8%	0.3%	2.0%
Wales	1,302,676	96.7%	1.4%	0.2%	1.7%
<b>England and Wales</b>	<b>23,366,044</b>	<b>91.2%</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>4.3%</b>

Note: Main language refers to English or Welsh in Wales.

local authority with the highest percentage of residents whose main language was not English and who reported that they could not speak English well (39%) is Bolsover, Derbyshire.

Within Bolsover, the ward with the highest proportion of residents who reported that they do not speak English as their main language and could not speak English well is Shirebrook East. In Shirebrook East, 4.8% of the population had a main language other than English (entirely Polish) and of these people, 80% reported little or no proficiency in English.

In Staniland North ward in Boston, Lincolnshire 39% reported that their main language was not English (almost exclusively Polish, Lithuanian, or Latvian). Of those, 44% declared that they spoke little or no English. In Boston Central ward, 43% of the population reported that their main language was not English (mainly Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, or Portuguese), and, of those, 42% reported poor or no proficiency in English.

In Coldhurst ward in Oldham, 43% of the population had a main language other than English, almost entirely Bengali/Sylheti. Of this group, 39% reported poor English proficiency. In Manningham ward in Bradford, 42% spoke a variety of non-English main languages including Panjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Pashto. In this group, 38% reported difficulty with English. In Latimer ward, Leicester, 63% of the population reported a main language other than English, almost exclusively Gujarati. Of those, 37% reported poor English proficiency.

In many areas, as Figure 1b makes clear, English proficiency was high despite the fact that a large proportion of the population reported a language other than English as their main language. The most obvious example of this is London.

## Who is most proficient in English? Age, country of birth and year of arrival

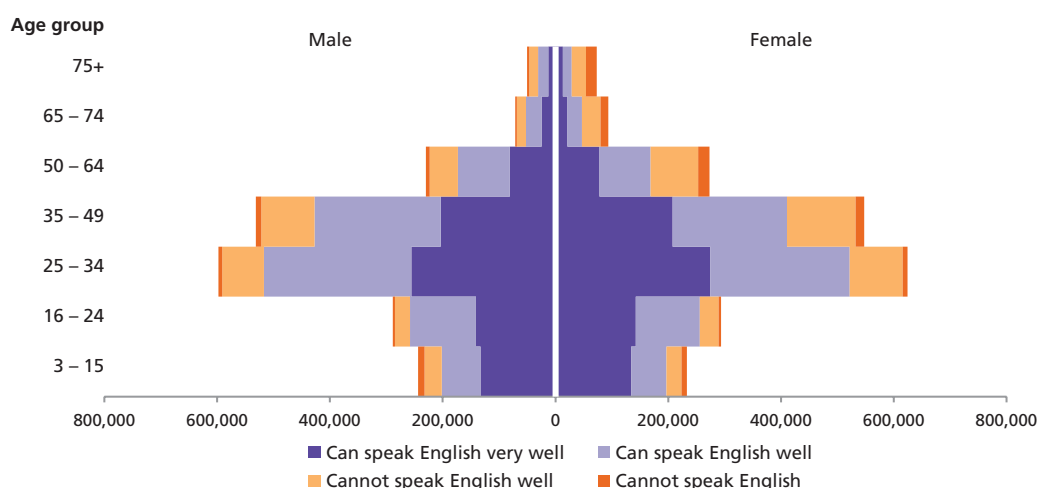
Of those under 25 for whom English is not a main language, 86% can speak English very well or well, and there is no significant difference between males and females. The percentage of those in the working age groups, 25 to 64, who can speak English very well or well, is slightly higher for men (87%) and slightly lower for women (84%). However, only 45% of women and 68% of men aged 65 and over whose main language is not English reported they speak English very well or well.

Of those born outside the UK, the highest rates of people reporting a main language other than English were found among those born in Poland (92%), China (83%), Portugal (79%), other recent EU entrants (77%), Bangladesh (78%), and Pakistan (67%). The percentage of persons declaring English as a main language was lower for more recent arrivals (during or after 2001) (33%), and higher for those who arrived in the UK before 2001 (66%).

As Figure 3 shows, among those who arrived before 2001, the country of origin with the highest proportion of people who cannot speak English well or at all, though 36% reported English as their main language. Among those who arrived during or after 2001, the percentage of people who cannot speak English was 19% and yet the percentage of those who spoke English as the their main language was 11%.

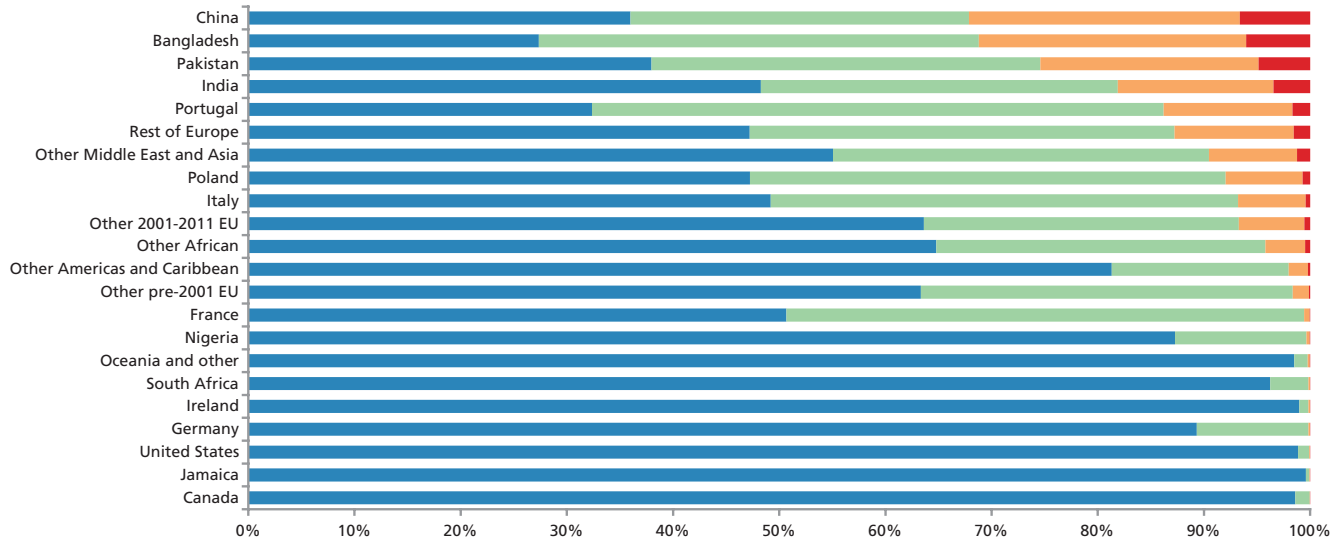
Of the people born in Bangladesh, irrespective of their arrival date, 6% reported that they are unable to speak English, giving the highest overall rate of lack of any proficiency in English of any country of birth. Among those born in Pakistan the figure is 4%, and for those born in China and Poland the figure is 3% each.

**Figure 2: Age and gender breakdown of the portion of the population of England and Wales reporting a non-English main language in 2011**

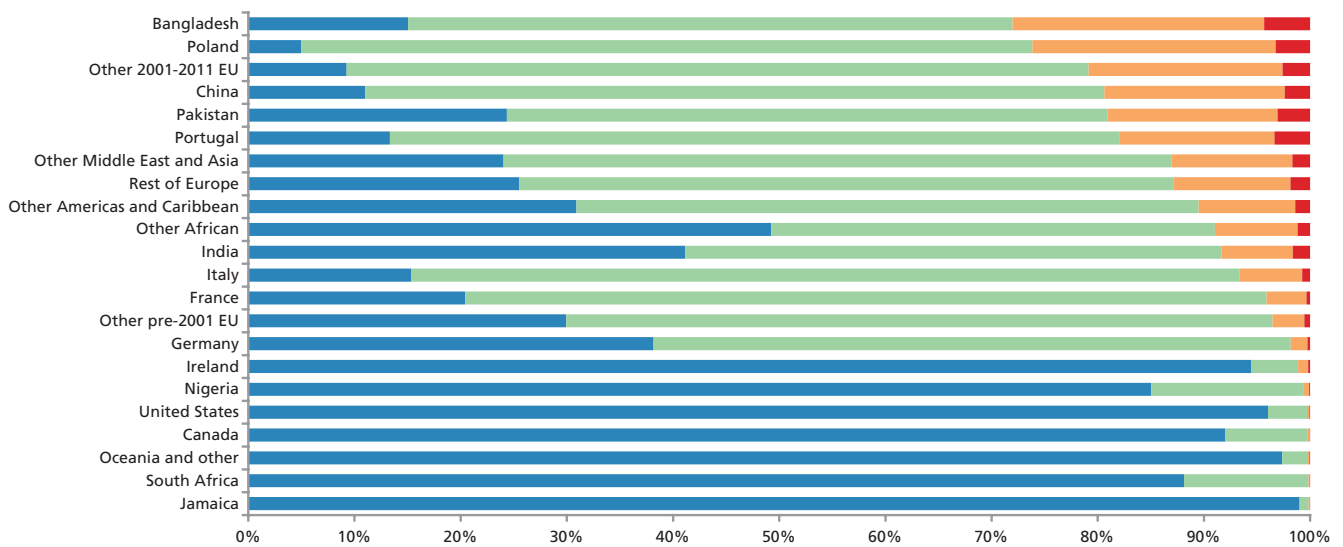


[Click here for data in Excel](#)

**Figure 3: English proficiency by country of birth, 2011**



**a) Arrived before 2001**



**b) Arrived during or after 2001**

■ Main Language English ■ Speaks English well ■ Does not speak English well ■ Cannot speak English

[Click here for data in Excel](#)

<sup>1</sup> Dorling, D., & Thomas, B. (2011) *Bankrupt Britain: An Atlas of Social Change*, Bristol: Policy Press.  
Source: 2011 Census (Crown Copyright).

This briefing is one in a series, *The Dynamics of Diversity: evidence from the 2011 Census*.

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