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# **LEVELLING UP ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?**

**Recommendations for Government,  
Local Government and Adult  
Community Education Providers**

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**DR SUSAN PEMBER, CBE**

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# ABOUT FETL

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**The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:**

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Sue started her career as a teacher and is one of the few people in the FE sector who has had senior leadership roles in colleges, local authorities and government. Sue is now the Policy Director for HOLEX, the professional body for adult education services, centres and institutions. Her work concentrates on ensuring the voice of adult learners is heard and she is a keen advocate of lifelong learning.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Our thanks also go to the ACE providers who responded to the survey, and to the HOLEX Board for acting as the steering group for this project.

## Dedicated

To every teacher, manager, support worker and leader who provided adult education and learning opportunities throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and to every student who in difficult circumstances showed fortitude and resilience and carried on learning.

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## FOREWORD

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### **Dame Ruth Silver**

Adult community education has long been a neglected and rather poorly understood part of the further education sector. Yet, while national-level politicians and civil servants, and most local councillors and officials, know little about it, it plays a critical role, usually below the policy radar, in engaging adults from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in making the first crucial steps into education, training and employment. And while recent policy interventions, notably the new report from the Education Select Committee on lifelong learning, have acknowledged this, they also bemoan the paucity of evidence on adult education, its outcomes, reach and impact.

Filling this gap, and setting out clearly and persuasively what adult community education does and how it benefits people and communities, is critically important in ensuring providers can make a full contribution to the government's 'levelling up' agenda, and that this contribution is properly understood. That is why the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) commissioned ACE membership body HOLEX to undertake this report. We very much welcome its publication and hope it will support not only government in realising the potential of adult education but also providers in making sense of the levelling-up agenda.

The challenges in this policy area are immense, and are immensely complicated by the double tsunami of Brexit and Covid-19, both of which could end up greatly exacerbating existing inequalities. Understanding what adult education can

contribute to this agenda, particularly in getting the hard-to-reach back into education and learning, is crucial. We need to ensure ACE services have the reach and resources to make a difference, and that policy making and planning at national, local and regional levels recognise its distinct role and are sufficiently joined up, inclusive and holistic in their thinking to match provision against both individual and community need, closing gaps where they are identified. The data included in this report should be used to support this.

The pandemic represents an appalling tragedy, the ramifications of which we will struggle with for years to come, but it has also highlighted a need to change and, I very much hope, given us the impetus to remake society in a fairer, less unequal and more inclusive way. Adult education has a critical role in this. If the government is serious about 'levelling up', reducing inequality and creating a more balanced economy, it must not only invest more in education at every level, but do so in a more thoughtful, integrated and comprehensive way. This is important in ensuring there are no rungs missing in the ladder of opportunity, particularly near the bottom, where policymakers often fear to tread – and about which, to be frank, they tend to know little.

This report presents key data, collated in an intelligent, systematic manner, that should be useful to researchers, policy-makers and advocates of adult education in making this ambitious vision a reality. It also offers a set of recommendations that warrant serious, concerted reflection. It is just the sort of thinking that we, as a society and as a sector, need.

*Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2020, with its many challenges, was an interesting year for adult education. There has never been a year where there have been so many commissions, studies and reviews on lifelong learning. The year ended with the Education Select Committee report *[A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution](#)*, summarised in *[MPs call for adult skills revolution to foster new culture of lifelong learning](#)*.

Much has been written about skills and the ways that adult education can support the post Covid-19 recovery. This topic sparked the imagination of many in the media, causing quite a stir when retraining was being suggested for those whose job might not exist in the future while, for others, the thought of government financial support is seen as a lifeline to a new future. However, several of these reviews, including the recent Education Select Committee report, commented that their work was hampered by a lack of data and analysis on community education.

This evaluation and assessment of available data on adult education, commissioned by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), was provoked by the observation that even though the role of adult education has been recognised as an important element of the government’s post Covid-19 recovery plan and levelling up agenda, there is very little analysis of government-funded adult community education.

This report starts to fill this data vacuum by reviewing what has been articulated in recently published reviews and, with the agreement of the Office for National Statistics and the

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Department of Education, provides a detailed examination of the unpublished Individualised Learner Record base data collected by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. Through this analysis, the report sets out the priority themes for adult education and describes the adult community education landscape in England, including student demographics, highlights delivery shortfalls and geographical hotspots and establishes the level of investment required to ensure the levelling up agenda improves the lives of adults with low and intermediate skills.

The project has also provided a tool for ACE services/centres and colleges to benchmark themselves and support their own local levelling-up agendas and suggests how adult community education could support the acceleration of the post-Covid-19 recovery plan. The report concludes with a set of policy recommendations for government, Mayoral Combined Authorities and ACE providers.

### Key findings

Through this work we have been able to:

- pinpoint the 10,000 places from which adult education is delivered,
- determine where in England there is little adult education offered,
- report on where there is a delivery imbalance,
- demonstrate that the public pound does go to learners from the most deprived areas of England,
- detail the initial impact of Covid-19 on adult education learners
- identify the need for a new annual injection of £5.2 billion to fund a basic and intermediate skills levelling-up plan.

1. Develop in consultation with the sector a government-wide Levelling-Up Lifelong Learning Plan that highlights how learning new skills as an adult supports the economy, improves productivity, facilitates integration and improves personal wellbeing. This strategy should become the framework for devolution of skills and education budgets and support for the post Covid-19 recovery.
2. Underpin this plan with new government-wide strategies for basic skills including ESOL, health and wellbeing, digital and skills retraining.
3. Ensure there is an adult education and skills component as an integral part of all new employment initiatives.
4. Establish a branded adult education centre in every town. Planning rules should promote multi-use community centres which can be used as outreach posts for adult education.
5. As well as these main centres, create a network of adult education centres which are co-located with other services, for example, adult education with libraries and the arts, social housing and learning centres, early years settings for family learning and schools and colleges for evening adult education classes.
6. Give access to capital funding from the new DfE capital fund to adult education providers and use new initiatives such as Levelling Up Communities (LUC).
7. DfE should protect the future delivery infrastructure by providing assurance that adult community education

providers' base allocation for 2021/22 will be at 2019/20 levels.

8. Ensure adult learners have access to any new digital infrastructure for communities and education.
9. Rapidly establish a support programme for industries seriously impacted by Covid-19 such as hospitality and the arts. Allow furloughed and redundant workers to up their skills levels by taking subject-related master classes to improve their digital skills, and, where necessary, prioritise retraining.
10. ACE providers, via their Local Authority, should become the funding vehicle for the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).
11. DfE, via the Education & Training Foundation (ETF), should support the ACE sector by providing development funding for leadership training and CPD for all those who work in the sector.
12. DfE should support levelling up by rebalancing spend by prioritising basic and Level 2 adult education, injecting £5.2 billion into the system and providing a 10-year budget that breaks the cycle of low skills, which in turn will pay for itself through a boost in productivity.
13. Facilitate adult education growth by moving funding from those providers who find recruiting adults problematic to those who are can.
14. Further work should be done by DfE on adult education data, which should be analysed and made public by DfE at least annually.
15. Develop new official measures to understand and track the economic and social contribution of adult community education and report on these annually alongside the Longitudinal Education Outcome data.
16. Collect and manage comprehensive and comparable data from government departments about what funding goes where, and what outcomes are delivered.

## ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The focus of this project has been adult community education (ACE). Adult community education services, centres and institutes educate, train and retrain 500,000+ adult learners annually and deliver quality provision. They are the best-performing part of the FE sector as judged by Ofsted, with 92% being Good or Outstanding and they top the league table for customer and employer satisfaction. During the Covid-19 lockdown, participation numbers were reduced but, by moving online, much of the planned learning continued.

The Education Select Committee report [\*A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution\*](#) described adult community learning providers as the 'jewel in the crown' of the nation's adult education landscape.

### **Definition: Adult community education (ACE)**

ACE providers are, in the main, local authority adult community education services, Institutes for Adult Learning (IAL) and independent third-sector providers who deliver adult education. They are categorised for Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and Ofsted purposes as Adult Community Learning providers and are grant-funded mainly from the adult community line of the Adult Education Budget (AEB). However, since the term ACL was adopted in 2012 as the funding stream descriptor for the previous safeguarded learning category, the term underplays what these providers do and the multiple funding streams they use to fund their skills and retraining offer to learners. Use of the term ACL as a descriptor for this group of providers has also made the collection of data difficult as the practice has been to

interpret data only from the ACL single-funding stream and not the whole offer. This in turn has led to a misunderstanding of the role of these providers in their local community by policy makers.

The term adult community education in this report is used to convey the wider reach of these providers and brings adult education in line with further education and higher education. It is also the term most used by learners and prospective learners and has international currency.

## Delivery centres

These providers deliver through a network of centres in every city and town in England, have the largest geographical reach of all providers of post-19 education and their main goal is to work with those often furthest away from employment and society to help ensure they are able to progress in life and work. There are over 200 organisations receiving adult community learning (ACL) funding as part of their adult education budget allocation, working in over 10,000 delivery points/ centres. These delivery points can be anything from just one room in a community centre up to large multi-floored college buildings in the centre of a town or city. It is this dispersal of delivery that gives ACE its ability to go where the learners are but, also leads to making it somewhat invisible.

In the light of Covid-19, these providers have adapted their offer to embrace a virtual environment and provide a blended approach to learning.

## Mission

ACE providers share a joint mission to provide education, skills and learning that give adults a second chance and supports their employment prospects and wellbeing. This in turn improves productivity and creates the circumstances for economic success. ACE providers have the expertise to support those most disadvantaged, they are cost effective and entrepreneurial, using their state funding grant to lever in alternative forms of

income. They take a multi-agency approach, their flexibility and reach into their local areas has enabled ACE providers to work effectively on local priorities. This includes working with statutory services within their local authorities to support some of the most vulnerable individuals and families to provide routes into employment and prevent a deterioration of their circumstances – for example, working with health professionals on social prescribing which has proven beneficial impact on health and wellbeing and consequent reduction in demand for public services like the NHS.

## Working ethos

ACE providers are innovative and adaptive and have responded well to successive government directions and policy nudges. They provide a unique local service, and many have national reputations as leaders in their field. They have been at the forefront of working with partners on difficult issues, such as securing employment for the long-term unemployed, supporting community cohesion, troubled families, refugees, improving mental health and family learning through education. They build on other services such as libraries and children's centres to reach adults who can benefit from upgrading their skills. ACE providers believe everyone should be given a chance to benefit from learning new skills through education which in turn will enrich their everyday lives, their engagement in the democratic process, and their future careers.

## Policy direction

Their work is directed by government as set out in their funding agreements and, increasingly, by Mayoral Combined Authorities. Annex 1 describes in detail what is expected of them when delivering adult community learning. Most ACE providers, in addition to receiving funding for adult community learning, also support their local residents by drawing down adult education budget formula and non-formula funding, further education loans and student support funding to both support learning

and for enrichment provision. Full cost fees are charged to those who can afford to pay. They welcome government's new lifetime entitlement and free Level 3 for high-economic value programmes and are proactive in reaching out to the newly unemployed by supporting the Kickstart scheme, Traineeships and Digital Bootcamps.

They use their AEB funding to ensure the most disadvantaged can gain essential basic maths and English qualifications, and digital skills, as well as pre-vocational qualifications to aid their progression into further learning and sustainable employment. Learners with low skills are able to improve their job prospects and/or move up a skills level.

## LEVELLING UP – CHALLENGE AND ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION

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### Government agenda

Government has prioritised the levelling-up agenda and allocated funding in the March 2020 budget to several large-scale infrastructure projects which, when implemented, could support a transfer of wealth. The concept is that levelling up will spread prosperity, shift influence and funding to the regions and level up the inequalities of individuals that exist in the system. This is an important agenda for government because, without it, they will not be able to demonstrate they have listened to what they call the 'borrowed vote', and they need to demonstrate they have helped to improve the lives of those voters. This agenda has taken a knock back because of Covid-19 which has made the levelling-up programme even more difficult and the gaps even wider. However, Covid-19 has brought communities together and ACE services have become a pivotal resource for local authorities in responding to the support needed by individuals and communities. As a result of this coming-together, the Prime Minister has sought to capture and learn from communities and, in the summer of 2020, commissioned Danny Kruger MP to undertake a review which would offer recommendations to government on supporting the levelling up agenda by building on the good community practice generated and often led by local authorities.

### The skills challenge

The UK is one of the most spatially unequal societies among developed nations. Communities have been 'left behind', especially in the industrial heartlands of the North and Midlands,

but also in coastal and rural communities across the country. Adult community education providers continually report their areas require more support, but the funding is not there to meet it and, although there have been numerous skills projects, these rarely match need and are often centrally driven and not locally designed. Although jobless figures were low before Covid-19, this hid the issue of poor individual skills levels. Since the 2008 crash, capital released into the economy through quantitative easing did not seek new growth opportunities in the Midlands and the North, instead it flowed into assets (mainly housing) in the South-east and, on the face of it, the economy recovered.

Jobs have been created across the country, and we have had ten years of GDP growth until this year. Wage growth has improved recently, but median incomes before Covid-19 were still lower than in 2008, and the income of the poorest fifth of the population was no higher in 2019 than in 2005. During this time, DWP's mantra has been about getting a person a job (any job); however, training would have been a better option.

When Covid-19 hit, it was the young unqualified with no experience and the low-skilled adults who were first to be made unemployed. Therefore, one of the pillars of the levelling-up agenda must be to improve the nation's skills base. Some work has been done on qualification levels by region, and Local Enterprise Partnerships have been commissioned to write skills plans, but little has been done on adult community education. Other than in the Greater London Authority, little has been done on reviewing the reach of adult community education or the local offer, how big the attainment gap is at the moment and what level of resource would be needed to make a step change in the population's skills level.

The levelling-up initiative is an important agenda for government seeking to demonstrate they have listened to the 'borrowed vote', and they need to validate their active role in improving the lives of those voters. However, implementation of this agenda has been set back because of Covid-19 making the levelling-up

programme even more difficult and the gaps even wider. This increased challenge should not be underestimated. The Learning and Work Institute *Adult participation in learning* survey of November 2020, for instance, found that 'just one in five (20%) of adults who left school at the first opportunity took part in lockdown learning, compared to three in five (57%) of adults who stayed in education until 21'. And the Work Foundation report *Learning to level up* of November 2020 suggests that 'over 7.5 million mid-career workers have not received any training since leaving full-time education'.

The 2019 Social Mobility Commission report *The adult skills gap: is falling investment in UK adults stalling social mobility?* is summarised in *Low-skilled adults are missing out on training: the skills gap*:

- disadvantaged adults with the lowest qualifications are the least likely to access adult training despite being the group who would benefit most
- overall investment in adult skills from employers, government and individuals was around £44 billion in 2013 to 2014 – government funds just 7% of this training
- government funding for the Adult Skills Budget fell by £830 million (in cash terms) between 2010 to 2011, and from £2.84 billion to £2.01 billion, equivalent to a 34% fall (real terms) between 2015 to 2016
- graduates are three times more likely to receive training than those with no qualifications, while professionals and managers are about twice as likely to receive training as lower-skilled workers

## THE INFORMATION AND DATA VACUUM

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Community education providers make data returns to DfE via ESFA on every learner. Each learner has a unique number and can be matched to postcode and tax return data. There are well established methods of data collection through the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and a relatively new matching methodology and longitudinal data reporting via the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) analysis. However, although this data is collected and available, it has not been analysed in any depth for adult community education and has not been used to underpin policy since 2011. This void in analysis has been raised and used to explain why community education has not been included in recent reviews – for example, the May 2019 Department for Education report [\*Post-18 review of education and funding\*](#) acknowledges there is 'little to say about other community learning and training providers. This is partly because there is remarkably little information available about them: even obtaining provider numbers is difficult.'

This view was reinforced in [\*The long game: How to reboot skills training for disadvantaged adults\*](#), a 2020 report by the Centre for Social Justice which highlighted that, although much data on ACE learners was collected, there was little analysis of the data and even less interpretation. The Centre for Social Justice said

*Currently, we cannot access the kind of information that would enable us to better understand where in the country there is unmet need. For instance, the DfE does not publish data on the number of community learning centres in the country, and only breaks down different community*

*learning courses by region. And, while it publishes general information on all courses delivered in each local authority district, it does not clarify which of these courses are community learning courses, specifically. Another dataset only illustrates where community learning providers base themselves, and not the centres in which learning is delivered. In this context, it is hard to reliably ascertain the areas of the country where community learning takes place, and the prevalence in each case.*

*In addition, open source data on the personal characteristics of community learners only captures a limited range of variables: age, gender, learning difficulties/ disabilities and ethnicity. We cannot cross-reference information about learners with the kind of proxies (for instance, the Index of Multiple Deprivation) that would tell us more about the relationship between geographical deprivation and uptake. In these circumstances, it is hard to identify potential unmet need at a more granular level.*

*The lack of a strong strategic vision for community learning may, at least in part, be fuelling our lack of attention to the need for this type of provision. (pp. 35, 36)*

Similar statements about a data vacuum have been repeated in the 2020 Education Select Committee report [\*A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution\*](#) which proposed

*The Department for Education must work with the adult education sector to develop a better understanding of what data exists on community learning and where any gaps might be. This should include mapping and regularly publishing data on how many community learning centres exist nationally and where they are located.*

This project was established to attempt to fill the gaps and drill down using data from the ILR and other data returns such as a review of workforce. The project was to place a 'spirit level' across need and supply to see what the challenges of levelling

up really are, in the hope that the recommendations will influence government, combined authorities, local government and adult community education providers and improve the offer for adults who need to upskill or reskill.

## **Filling the vacuum**

To fill this recognised void, the project collated and interpreted data from several sources. The first exercise was to establish need and skills gaps through OECD comparisons and recent work from Centre for Social Justice, Industrial Strategy Council, Campaign for Learning and other recently completed lifelong learning reviews. Annex 2 sets out the links to these reviews and the rich wealth of evidence and analysis within them. With the permission of Office for National Statistics and Department for Education, relevant Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data was investigated to provide information and comparisons on the present geographical reach of the existing adult community education offer; the type of offer at local, regional and national levels; and participation by demographic factors of ethnicity, gender, age and skills level, with the data being matched to other data sources and gaps identified. The project also considered staffing and workforce issues and used a recently completed DfE study on workforce to determine key sector issues. By reviewing these data sources, the work was able to identify gaps and solutions and offer up a set of policy recommendations centred on the levelling up agenda. A secondary purpose was to help individual services/ centres and colleges to benchmark themselves and support their own local levelling up agendas.

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT WHY WE NEED TO PROVIDE ADULT EDUCATION?

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- 17 million without a Level 2
- 9 million with poor basic skills
- 11.9 million (22%) do not have the essential digital skills they need for life
- 17.3 million (53%) do not have the essential digital skills they need for work
- An additional 7 million workers (20% of the current labour market) could be under-skilled for their job
- A further 0.9 million people could be over-skilled for their current role
- 66% of the workforce facing some level of under-skilling

In the light of this information, numerous recent studies on lifelong learning have highlighted the nation's skills deficit. Annex 2 provides links to the main reviews of 2019 and 2020. Although these reviews looked at skills through different lenses, there are common themes around why adult learning and education should be part of the future levelling-up agenda. The main themes and arguments about expanding adult basic and intermediate skills described in the following sections.

### **Impact of Covid-19 on the labour market**

Covid-19 is having a negative impact on our labour market. The extension of local/ regional lockdowns and the impact of tiered restrictions are creating job losses in some areas at an unprecedented rate. Job vacancies are dropping and some

industries (like hospitality and the arts) are being decimated. Government interventions have been welcomed by employers, but many are not able to support existing programmes – for example, apprenticeship numbers have plummeted even though government has put in place several financial incentives for employers to recruit apprentices.

Although the immediate challenge will be to protect jobs and support unemployed individuals back into work through welfare policies, there is an argument that this time should be used to support the unemployed and furloughed staff to retrain. For many low-skilled workers, this could break the 'revolving door' cycle of being unemployed, in a low-skilled job and then back to being unemployed and on benefits. Government has introduced new schemes including an expansion of traineeships, Kickstart, apprenticeship incentives, digital bootcamps and the new free Level 3 entitlement to high-value courses. Although welcomed, these schemes are disjointed and there are overlaps which confuse people about what is available for them.

## Poor basic skills

As a country, we have a long-running problem with adult literacy, with over six million working-age adults in England not being qualified to Level 2 (GCSE level). This issue impacts on their lives and the ambitions of their children. Some 6 million adults aged 19–64 (19% of the people of working age) in England do not have the equivalent of a Level 2 qualification.

Adults with and without qualifications at Level 2 and above, may have outdated numeracy, literacy, and the now all-important digital, skills. There is a lack of support for disadvantaged individuals, with almost half of adults from the lowest socioeconomic groups not having not received any training at all since they left full-time education. There appears to be little aspiration or confidence, with only 12% of adults with no qualifications saying they are very likely to receive job-related learning/ training in the next two to three years.

## Rising automation

History shows us that sometimes the balance between the skills level of the workforce and the skills needed for available jobs is not aligned. It seems we are now in one of those times. The 2017 report from the Institute for Public Policy Research *Managing automation: Employment, inequality and ethics in the digital age* explains in detail the types of occupation which will lose out in the future and what will happen if we cannot rebalance employment opportunities. Between 10% and 35% of all UK jobs could be replaced or altered over the next 10 to 20 years.

There is some room for skills growth in existing roles (a quarter of workers in the UK are under-qualified for their jobs, and 11.3 million adults do not have the full set of basic digital skills) and, prior to the current pandemic, hundreds of thousands of vacancies were hard to fill because employers could not find people with the right skills set.

But this is not just about today's jobs. The jobs market is evolving quickly, which calls into question the relevance of certain skills. Although predictions about the magnitude of change vary, it is clear that many people will need to adapt. Disadvantaged individuals are more precariously poised than most: while 1.5 million people are employed in jobs that are at high risk of automation, 98.8% of these individuals are qualified to Level 3 or below. For people whose skills are likely to be wiped out by a fast-changing labour market, adult learning offers a way back.

## Wellbeing

Adult education is recognised as an activity that improves wellbeing. It has been shown that adult learning fosters a sense of identity, an ability to cope, a sense of purpose, especially in older adults, a general increase in satisfaction in life, and positive changes in mental wellbeing. Continued education throughout life contributes to a 'cognitive footprint' which may delay the onset of dementia. The pandemic has demonstrated that many adults turn to learning a new craft skill as a way of dealing with loneliness and anxiety in a lockdown.

## Longer working lives

People are living longer. The state pension age is set to increase to 67 by the late 2020s. Many older adults will need to continue working to earn income until they reach state pension age as well as save for their retirement. The fact of the matter is the occupation people trained for in their twenties may not last until they are 70 years old. Whether it be because the role requires physical strength and worker's health will not keep up with the demands of the job, or the industry will not be there in 20 years' time, the idea of retraining and taking mid-life career breaks to change direction must become commonplace and acceptable practice. Covid-19 has put many older workers out of a job and they are the age group who have the greatest difficulty in finding new employment.

## Developing our own after Brexit

Brexit and the anticipated labour shortage are making us rethink our approach to low-skilled and often low-paid work. To ensure our jobs are filled, we will need to retrain many of existing employees and think about how we can make roles attractive to British residents. We need to retrain our resident workforce to match the job roles and skills needs of the future.

## Progressing from benefit to sustainable jobs

DWP interventions are based on getting a job. Between 2006 and 2016, just 17% of low-paid workers moved permanently out of low pay; the main reason for this is lack of retraining. There is much rhetoric about the need for lifelong learning and getting workers out of the cycle of periods of unemployment and state support into a job that is not reliant on the state. As yet, this has not turned into sustained training programmes or a commitment to new funds and resources. Having low qualifications makes unemployment more likely, depresses earning potential and undermines the home-learning environment. By improving their qualifications later in life, adults can start to redress these challenges. Even brushing up on basic skills pays dividends.

## Atypical working

*Good work: The Taylor review of modern working practices* (July 2017) described the rise of atypical working. Temporary workers, agency workers and those on zero hours contracts are less likely to receive employer-funded training although they need access to retraining to remain employable. Approximately 15% of the workforce is self-employed (4.85 million). The self-employed also tend to be older rather than younger (see John Cridland's *Smoothing the transition: Independent review of the state pension age* (GOV.UK, March 2017). To remain successfully self-employed, they need to be able to retrain too.

## Lack of a clear narrative

Although the majority of the reviews and commissions listed in Annex 2 called for a lifelong learning or skills plan for the country, setting out how the issues listed above would be tackled, that has yet to take place. This has led to a variety of ad hoc projects, planning blight and no framework for providers or regional authorities to work to.

### *Recommendation 1*

Develop in consultation with the sector a government-wide levelling-up lifelong learning plan that highlights how learning new skills as an adult supports the economy, improves productivity, facilitates integration and improves personal wellbeing. This strategy should become the framework for devolution of skills and education budgets and support the post Covid-19 recovery.

### *Recommendation 2*

Underpin this plan with new government-wide strategies for basic skills, including ESOL, health and wellbeing, digital and skills retraining.

### *Recommendation 3*

Ensure there is an adult education and skills component as an integral part of all new employment initiatives.

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT OVERALL PARTICIPATION IN ENGLAND?

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DfE collects student data via the provider-administered Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and is described as ILR administrative data. DfE publishes a high volume of FE statistics using provisional in-year ILR data. This enables DfE and providers to have an early picture of FE performance and allows providers to assess the impact of government-funded provision and hold the 'system' to account. However, it should be noted that the ILR is an administrative data collection system designed primarily for operational use in order to fund training providers for learners in FE and on apprenticeship programmes. Therefore, there are important limitations such as in-year data returns being subject to later revisions; different proportions being observed during the year (for instance for learner characteristics such as ethnicity); some in-year returns being more robust/ reliable than others due to completeness of information at the time of the return, particularly for returns early in the year: provider reporting behaviour changing from one year to the next (e.g. their timeliness in making returns).

DfE produce a summary document and give access to underpinning reports. In recent years, they have made advances in how the data is presented and how providers, Mayoral Combined Authorities and policy colleagues can integrate the data. However, there is no standard benchmarking data for providers, and it is still difficult to produce useful and timely provider reports.

The current reports look at the last three years and, by reviewing older reports, a timeline showing the decrease in participation

over the past 10 years. In line with funding cuts, over one million learners have been lost and participation has dropped to 1.7 million over the last 10 years.

- Further education and skills participation 1,745,800, down 15.6% from 2018/19.
- Adult education budget participation 1,042,000, down 20.0% from 2018/19.
- Education and training participation 875,100, down 19.3% from 2018/19.
- Community learning participation 358,500, down 26.9% from 2018/19.
- During the period since the start of lockdown (23 March to 31 July 2020) enrolment starts on adult education and training were 208,790, a 50.4% drop compared to the same period in 2018/19 (420,910).

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION?

The primary data source used within this section of the report is the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) which records publicly funded learning in England. The data covers learning undertaken during the academic years between 2016/17 and 2018/19. In addition, the report includes part-year data for 2019/20 covering learning up to April 2020. The data was supplied by the Department for Education using the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service. The full report can be found at [Levelling Up ACE | Hoxex](#).

Although adult community education providers get their funding from several sources, the two main government funding streams are both from the DfE/ESFA Adult Education Budget, these two streams are *Community Learning* and *Regulated and Non-Regulated Qualifications Funding*. Providers report separately on these two streams and use different methodologies to describe learner activity; so, for completeness, this review looks at both sets of activity.

The Community Learning section covers all learners and learning aims which are recorded under the community learning funding model. This includes all provider types that deliver this provision.

The Adult Education Budget section focuses on learners and learning aims funded via the Adult Education Budget excluding Community Learning funding. This section focuses on delivery by local authority providers and only includes learners who pass the funding qualifying period.

This section covers:

- Overall student numbers,
- Who delivers adult community education?
- numbers participating,
- locations,
- deprivation information,
- learner profile age, sex, ethnicity,
- subjects and levels.

Note: The main source of data for this section is the Individualised Learner Record 2016/17–2018/19 (R14).

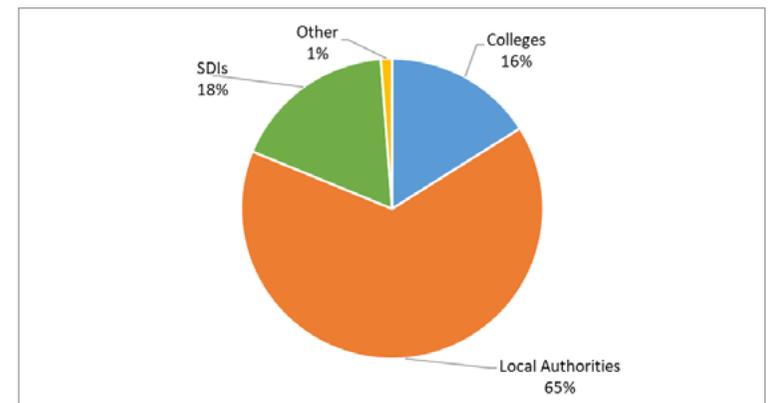
## Overall student numbers in ACE providers

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Community Learning	358,110	330,080	319,640
Adult Education Budget (excluding community learning)	116,950	119,700	116,670
FE Loans	3,830	3,220	2,860
Apprenticeships	15,480	13,530	11,910
16–19-year olds	5,280	5,070	4,570

## Number of providers delivering in the community

There were 259 providers delivering provision funded by the adult community learning programme of the Adult Skills Budget between in 2018/19, of which 131 were local authorities. In addition, 128 of the local authority providers delivered other AEB programmes in 2018/19.

### Provider type: Percentage adult community learning by type of provider (2018/19)

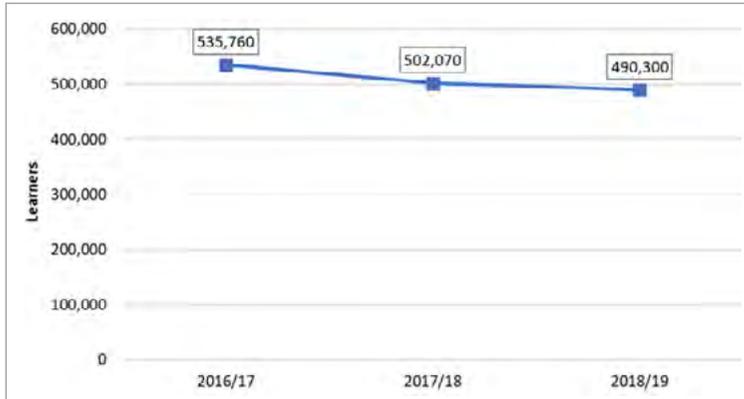


## Total number of learners participating in community education

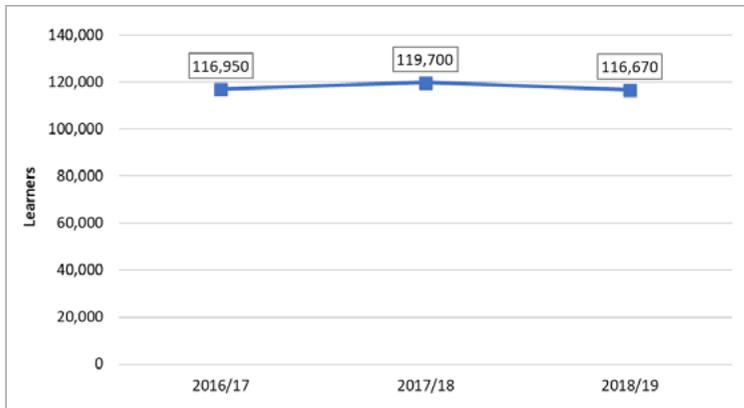
As there is not an overall published report on learning in adult community education settings, we have used the Individualised Learner Record and reviewed the numbers in four main funding streams: adult community learning, adult education main budget – regulated and non-regulated, FE loans, and apprenticeships and 16–19-year olds.

## Adult Education Budget

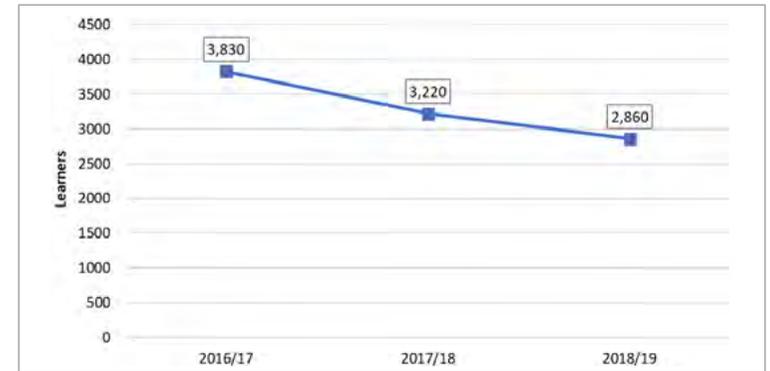
Number of learners funded by Adult Community Learning Programme



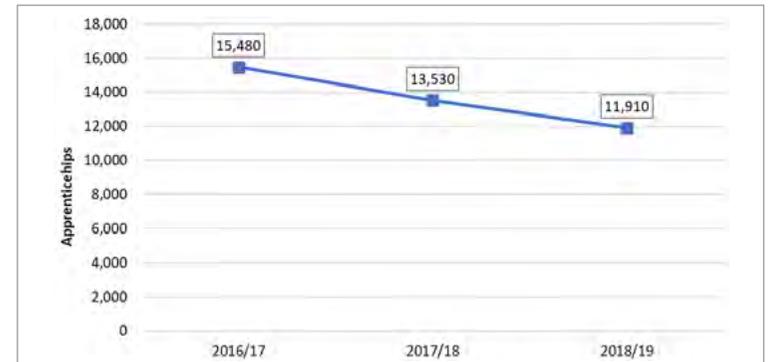
Number of learners funded by Adult Education Budget by year



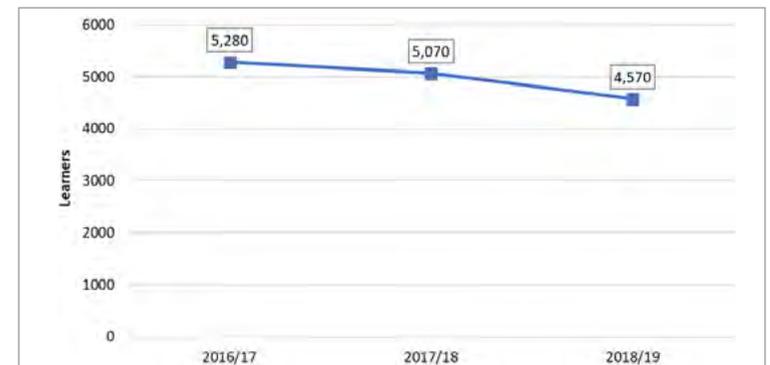
Total number of learners with an Advanced Learner Loan by year



Total number of apprenticeships by year

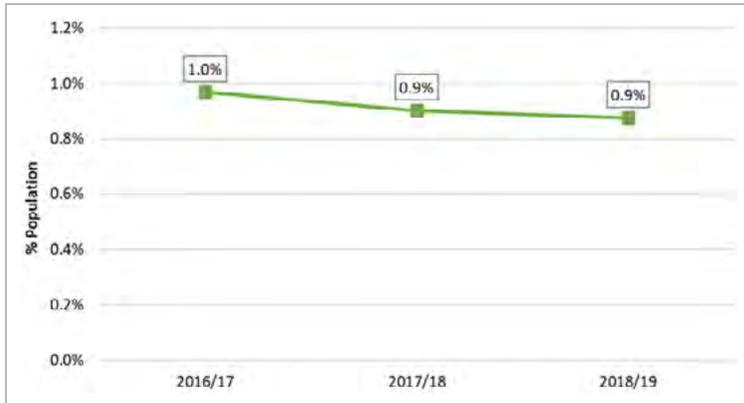


Total number of 16–19-year old funded learners by year

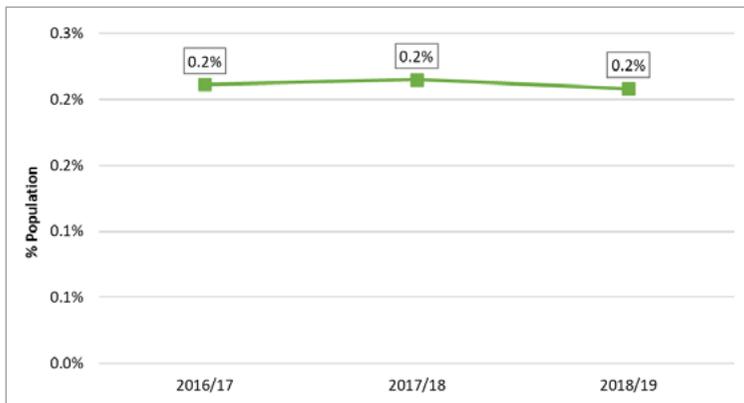


## Population uptake

Percentage of population participating in community learning

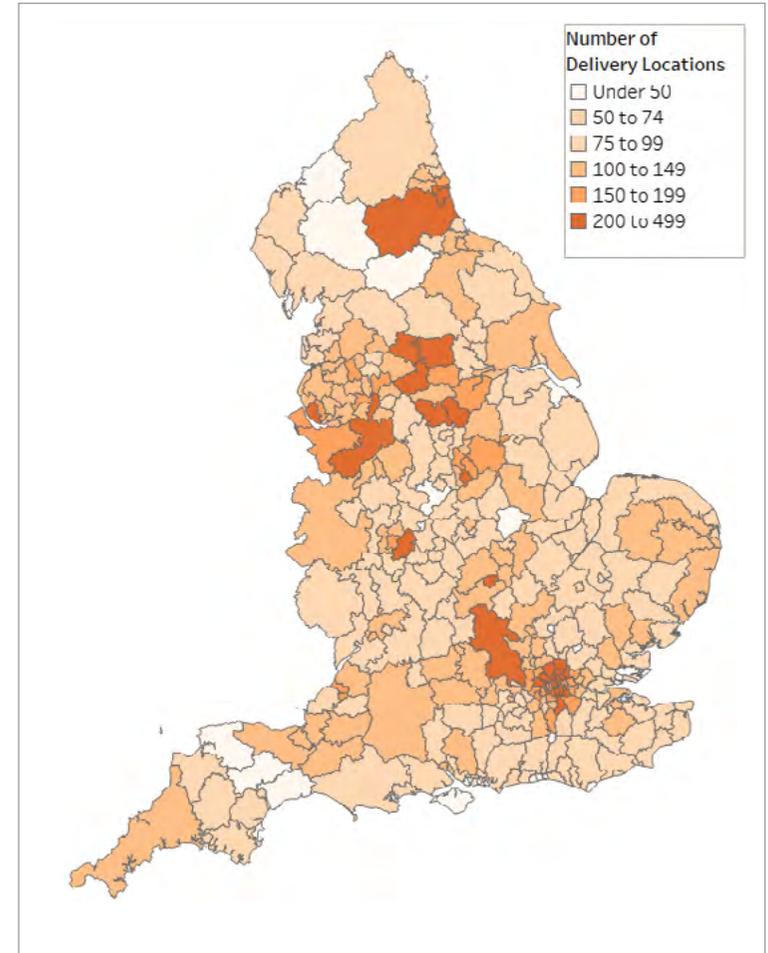


Percentage of population participating in AEB programmes in community education settings

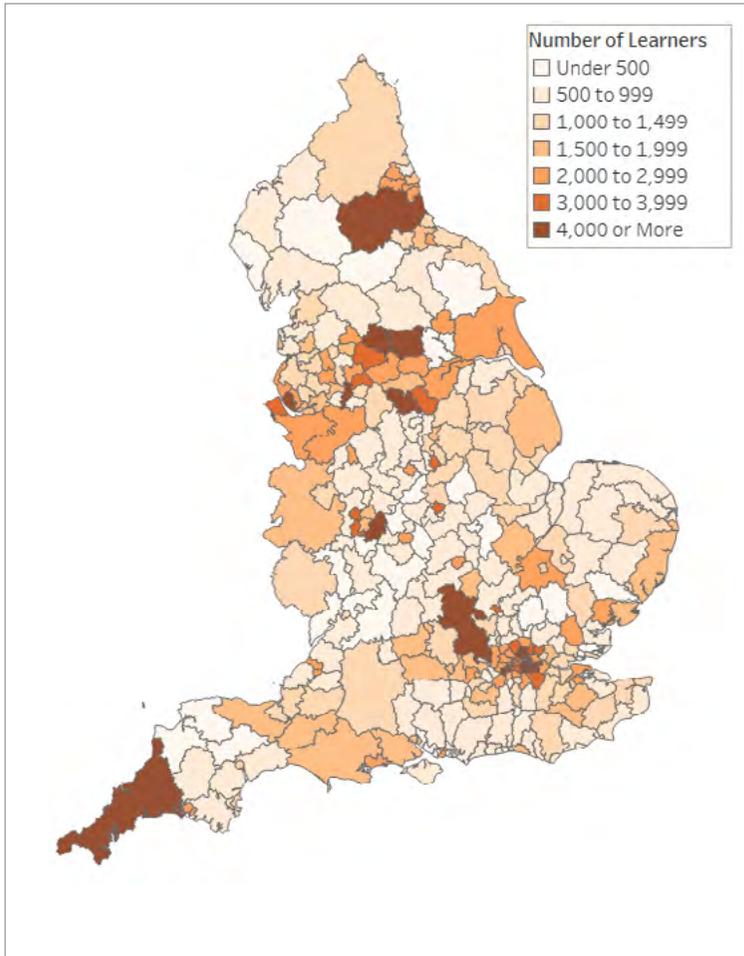


## Delivery locations

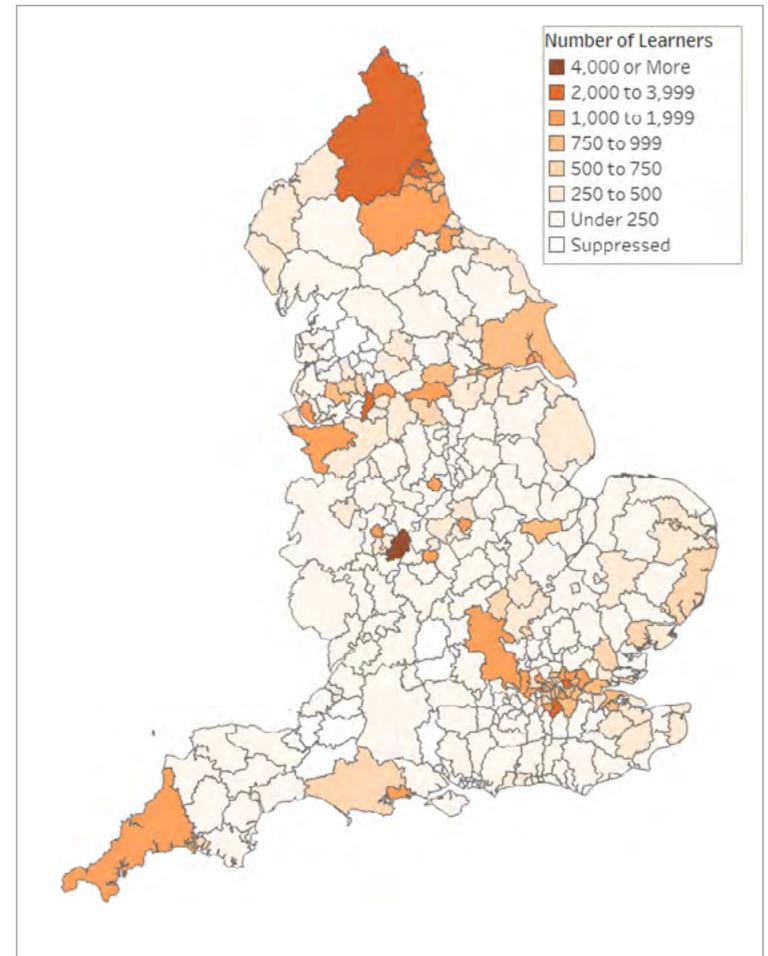
Number of community learning delivery locations by local authority district (2018/19)



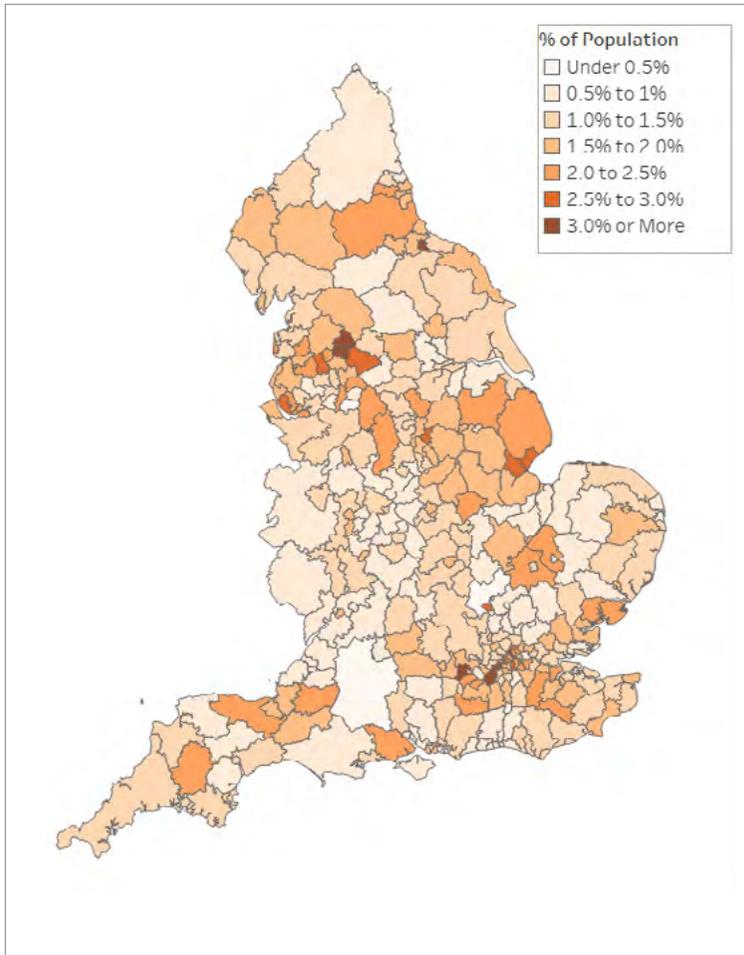
**ACL – Number of learners by local authority districts (2018/19)**



**AEB – Number of learners by local authority district (2018/19)**

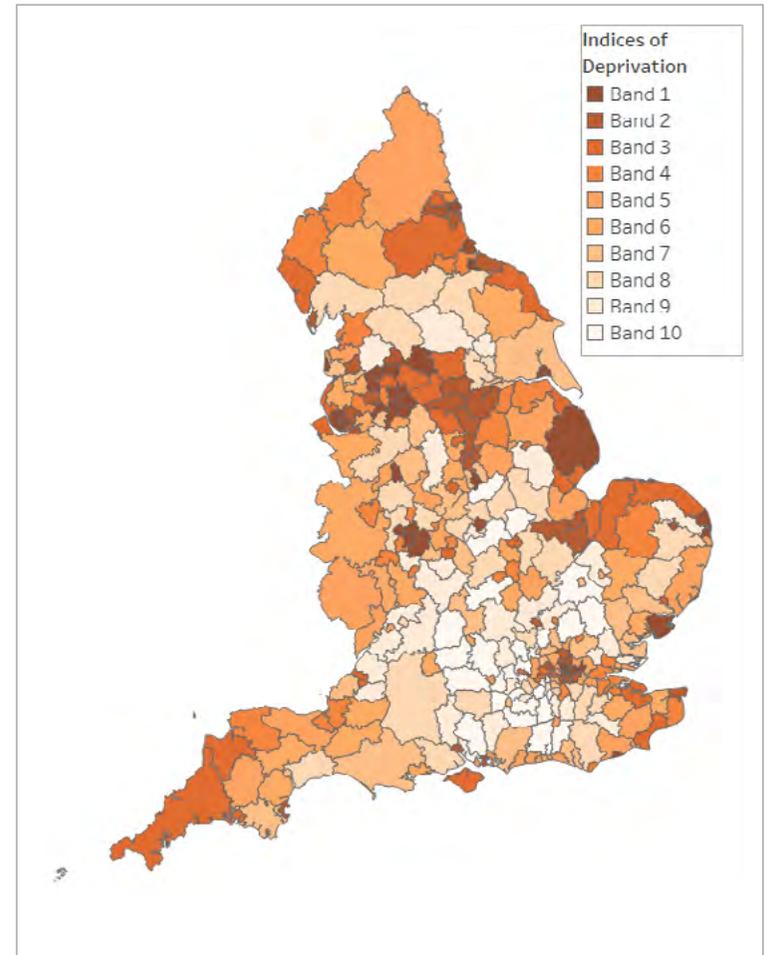


## Number of learners as percentage of population

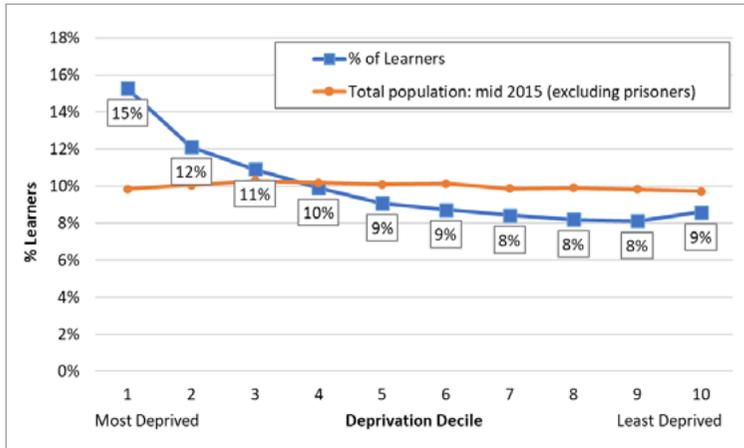


## Deprivation map

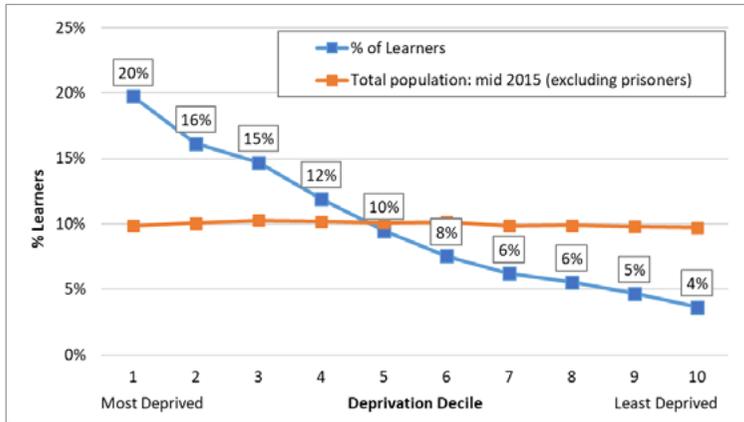
For information and comparison: Indices of Deprivation



### Community learning delivery: Percentage of learners by deprivation decile (2018/19)



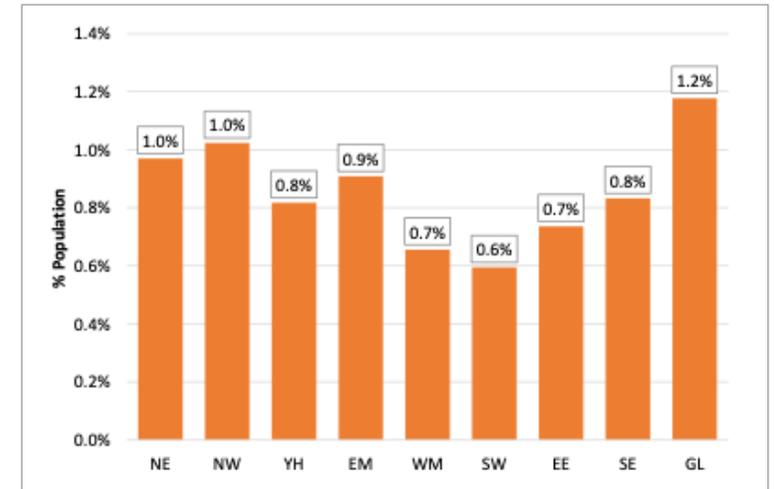
### Adult education delivery: percentage of learners by deprivation decile (2018/19)



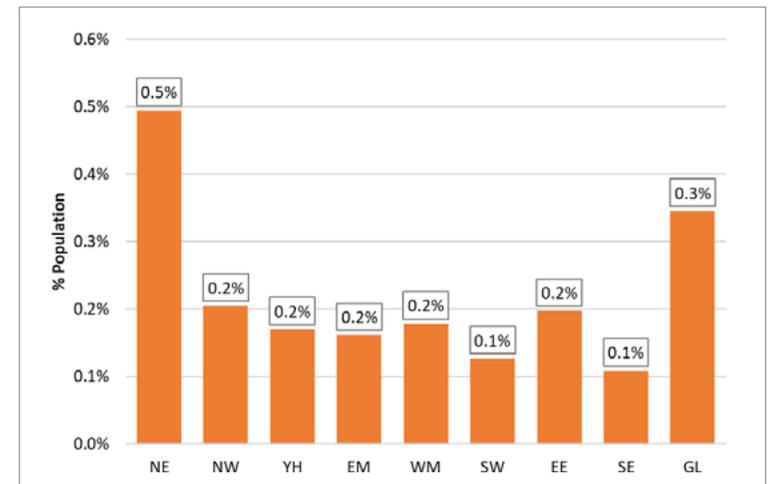
Source: Individualised Learner Record 2018/19 (R14) and Indices of Deprivation 2019

### Learner home region percentage of population

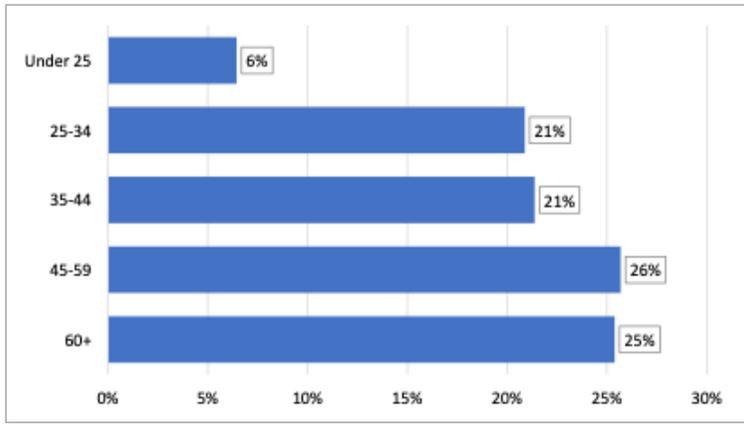
#### Community learning by region (2018/19)



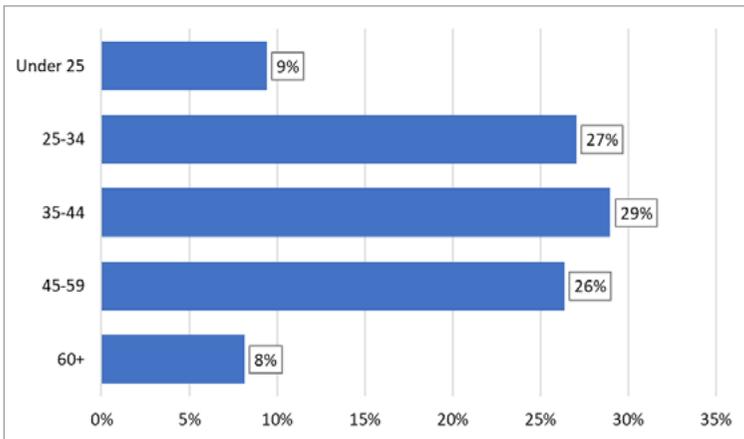
#### AEB: percentage of population by region



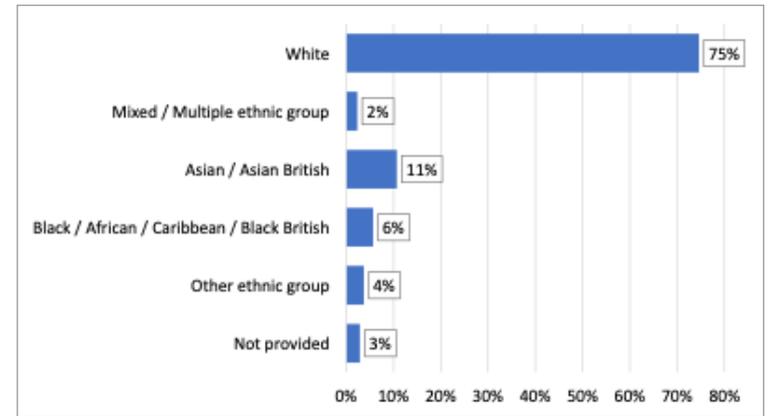
ACL: percentage of learners by age band (2018/19)



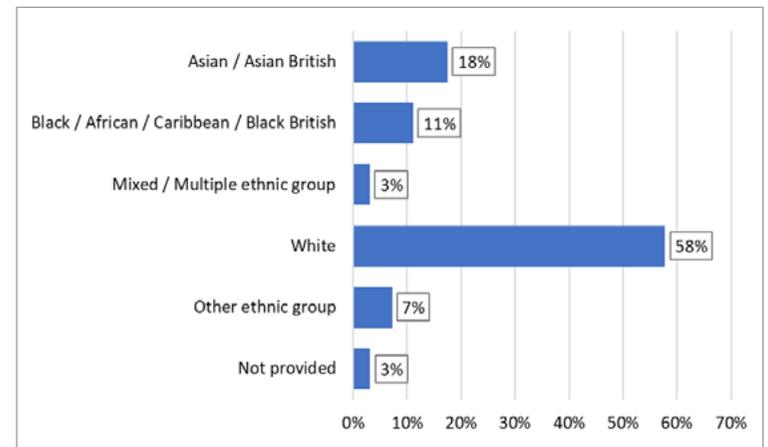
AEB: percentage of learners by age band (2018/19)



ACL: percentage of learners by ethnicity – broad groups (2018/19)

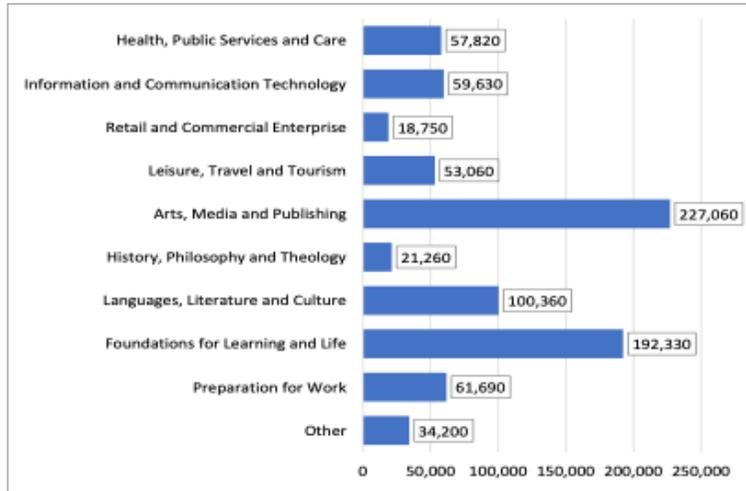


AEB: percentage of learners by ethnicity – broad groups (2018/19)

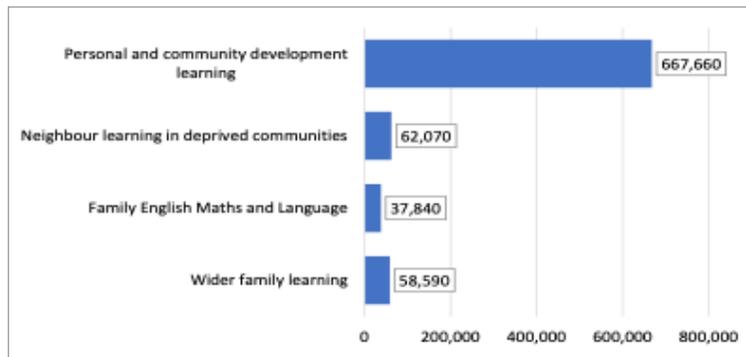


## Number of enrolments by subject (2018/19)

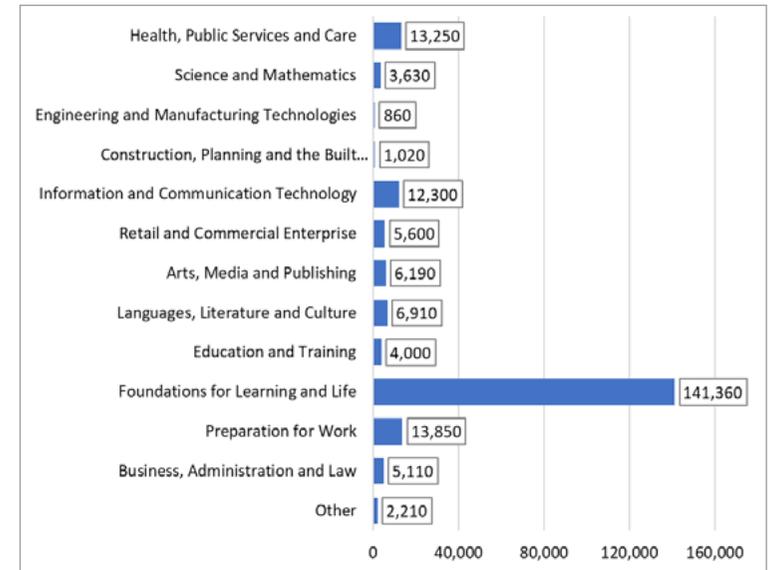
### ACL: number of enrolments by subject (2018/19)



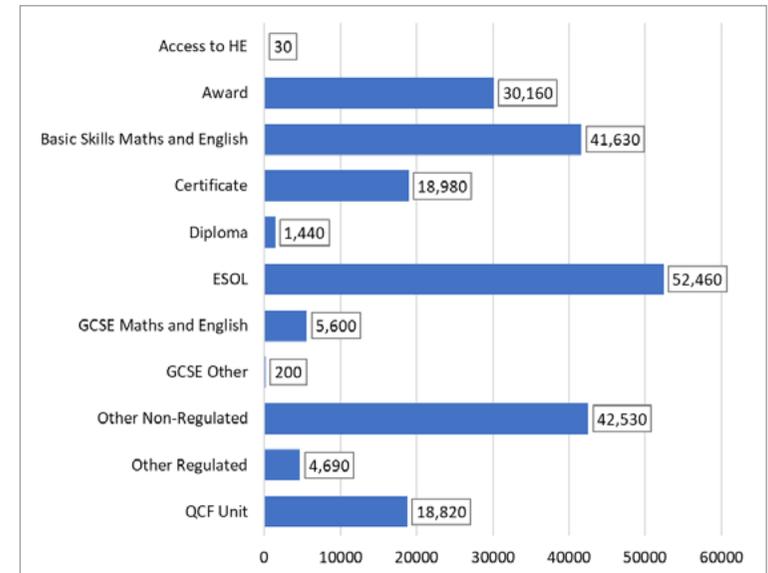
## Number of enrolments by community learning type (2018/19)



## AEB: number of enrolments by subject (2018/19)

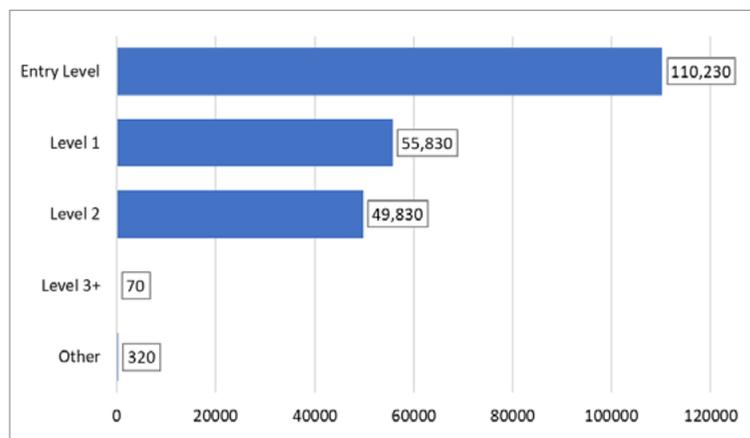


## AEB: number of enrolments by qualification type (2018/19)



Note: Access to HE is also covered in FE Loans

## AEB: Number of enrolments by level (2018/19)



Note: Level 3 and above covered by FE Loans

## What does the data tell us in summary about ACE?

- Delivered from 10,000 locations
- 500,000+ learners
- 800,000+ enrolments
- Funding goes to those from the most deprived areas
- 75% of students under the age of 60
- 73% female
- 25% on an ACL course are from a diverse background
- 52% on an AEB course are from a diverse background

The data and graphs demonstrate that ACE providers are delivering to government policy as set out in their funding agreements (Annex 1). However, although the reach is wide (for example, ACE is delivered from over 10,000 different locations), because of funding constraints the numbers participating in some areas are low and there are some areas of the country not

covered. This exercise of drilling down on the data has made the issue visible and demonstrates the need to ensure all learners have access to an adult education service. The Education Select Committee report recommends a centre in every town, the data demonstrates that this ambition is achievable as there is an offer of adult education but, it is often invisible and not in the main centre. To meet this ambition, capital funding should be made available to community education providers.

### **Recommendation 4**

Establish a branded adult education centre in every town. Planning rules should promote multi-use community centres which can be used as outreach posts for adult education.

### **Recommendation 5**

As well as these main centres, create a network of adult education centres which are co-located with other services, for example, adult education with libraries and the arts, social housing and learning centres, early years settings for family learning and schools and colleges for evening adult education classes.

### **Recommendation 6**

Give access to capital funding from the new DfE capital fund to adult education providers and use new initiatives such as the dormant assets fund and the Levelling Up Communities (LUC) Fund for perpetual investment in long-term, transformational, community-led local projects in left-behind areas.

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ADULT EDUCATION?

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Recent research from Learning and Work Institute shows that during the first lockdown two in five adults (42%) – an estimated 22 million people across the UK – embraced this opportunity to engage in some form of learning or training, with most of this taking place completely (60%) or partially (30%) online.

While many lockdown learners said they were learning for work-related reasons, others were learning for their own personal development, or to pursue an interest or hobby. Around one in ten said the reduced time and work pressures of lockdown meant that they were now able to commit to learning, when this had previously not been possible.

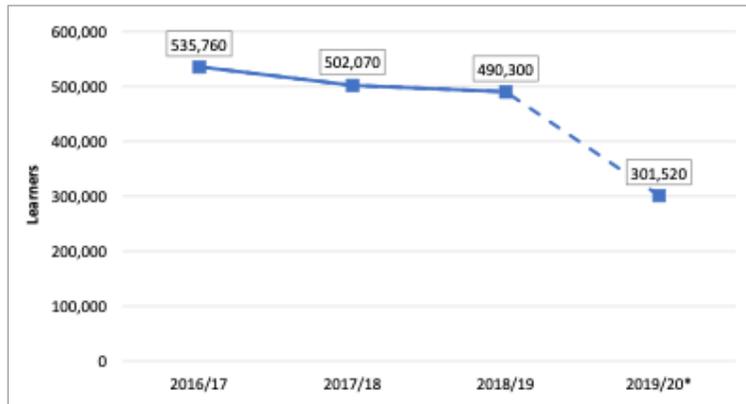
However, this type of informal learning did not translate into more adults completing courses that led to qualifications or acquiring new skills that would help them retrain or move into a new job. One in five found that previously planned learning had to be postponed or cancelled. Others struggled to balance their learning with work pressures, childcare or home schooling, or access to technology.

The package of support offered by government such as a traineeships, the Kickstart programme, or the New Lifetime Entitlement, has yet to demonstrate any uptake or support of the newly unemployed into work. The furlough scheme is being extended and it is difficult for economists to predict what will happen to those furloughed workers in the spring. Many workforce analysts are expecting to see the jobless figure rise to over 2 million and, coupled with the impact of Brexit, this

presents an uncertain future which could have an impact on the adult education provider base.

Early data from the Individualised Learner Record shows a sharp reduction in participation.

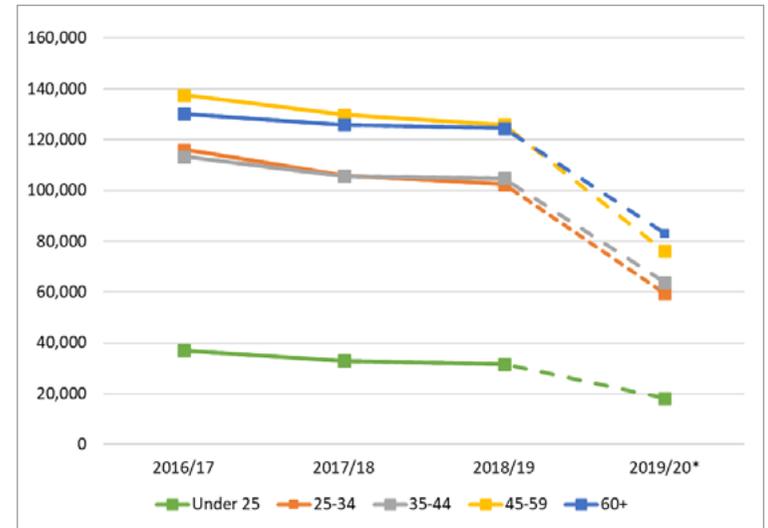
### Covid-19 effect on ACL participation



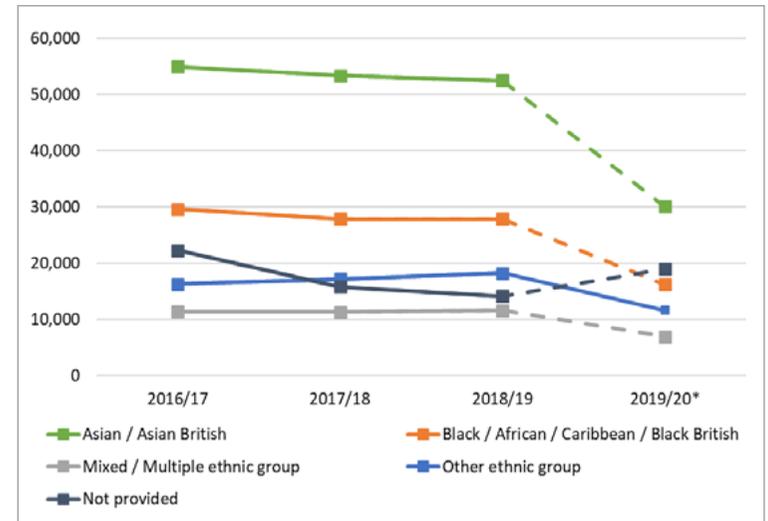
### Covid-19 effect on AEB participation



### Covid-19 effect on participation by age group



### Covid-19 effect on participation by ethnicity



Providers are commenting that although they moved much of their provision online, this does not work well for all learners. There are many low-skilled adult learners without digital devices

and/or basic digital skills and this has become a barrier to many. Providers have worked hard to keep these learners engaged but worries about safety and putting their children first have led to a marked drop in learners aged over 25 compared to those aged 19–25. Learners from Asian backgrounds were the most likely group to fail to present for learning.

The information also shows that subjects such as catering, hospitality and other social value courses have seen a large drop in participation. It is important that the infrastructure to provide this activity is not lost in the future.

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN?

- Just one in five (20%) of adults who left school at the first opportunity took part in lockdown learning, compared to three in five (57%) adults who stayed in education until 21
- Adults in lower socio-economic groups (29%) were half as likely to take part in lockdown learning as adults in higher socioeconomic groups (57%)
- Just one in three (34%) of adults who were out of work took part in lockdown learning, compared to over half (52%) of those who were in employment.

### **Recommendation 7**

DfE should protect the future delivery infrastructure by providing assurance that adult community education providers' base allocation for 2021/22 will be at 2019/20 levels.

### **Recommendation 8**

Ensure adult learners have access to any new digital infrastructure for communities and education.

### **Recommendation 9**

Rapidly establish a support programme for industries seriously impacted by Covid-19 such as hospitality and the arts. Allow furloughed and redundant workers to up their skills levels by taking subject related master classes to improve their digital skills, and where necessary prioritise retraining.

### **Recommendation 10**

ACE providers, via their local authority, should become the funding vehicle for the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT THE ACE WORKFORCE?

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The main data source for this is a recent staff survey which was commissioned by DfE in 2019. They commissioned IFF Research to deliver the Education and Training Professionals (ETP) Survey 2019. All independent training providers (ITPs), adult and community learning (ACL) providers and sixth form colleges (SFCs) receiving funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) in England were in scope for the research. The study addresses the evidence gap on workforce data available to DfE and the wider sector on teaching staff and leaders in ITPs, ACL providers and SFCs in England. It also provides insights into the experience, qualifications and expectations of teachers and leaders in these parts of the FE sector and explores recruitment and retention issues. Annex 3 is a useful summary.

The survey analysis indicates there are 15,500 teachers in ACE providers, but this analysis has its limitations as the survey did not cover delivery partners or the staff of subcontractors. This is a difficult number to calculate as most of these teachers work part-time and many work for multiple employers – early studies suggest 20,000 employed staff. Only 18% of contracts are full time; this might seem low compared to other sectors but it allows a flexible and agile workforce. It is also interesting to note that ACL has one of the highest staff satisfaction ratings where 53% of staff are on sessional flexible contracts. This reflects the nature of their provision, which is often delivered as evening classes or in short part-time courses.

ACE providers were the most likely to offer some type of vocational or other non-academic course. They were also the

most likely to provide other types of course such as community learning (92%) and Adult Education Budget (AEB) provision (90%), as might be expected given their remit. 56% of ACE providers offered vocational provision and 22% other accredited academic qualifications. 97% of the teaching staff in ACE providers hold a teaching qualification. The most common highest teaching qualification amongst ACE teachers/ tutors was at Level 7 (38%). Staff in this sector were the most likely to have a teaching certificate and be qualified to degree level in the subject they were teaching. A significant number were aged over 50 and ACE providers employed more women than men. 16% of teachers were from diverse backgrounds, reflecting their learners' backgrounds, a higher percentage than for the rest of FE.

- 15,000+ teachers
- Mainly part-time
- 97% held a teaching certificate
- Mature workforce
- 16% of teachers are non-white
- Mainly female leadership
- Lower than average salaries

### **Recommendation 11**

DfE, via the Education & Training Foundation (ETF), should support the ACE sector by providing development funding for leadership training and CPD for all those who work in the sector.

## WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US ABOUT VALUE FOR MONEY?

The Centre for Social Justice report *The long game* details the value for money aspects of low-level skill qualifications.

Level 2 and 3 qualifications boost wages and are good public investments.

### **Benefits to individuals**

Although specific combinations of different subjects yield different returns, the three-to five-year average wage return for adults is:

- 10% for ages 19–24 who study a full Level 2 qualification
- 8% for ages 25+ who study a full-time Level 2 qualification
- 10% average wage return for ages 19–24 who achieve a full Level 3 qualification
- 10% average wage return for ages 25+ who achieve a full Level 3 qualification
- Level 2 and 3 qualifications also serve as gateways to higher learning and training

### **Benefits to the taxpayer**

The taxpayer, too, benefits from public investment in Level 2 and 3 qualifications:

- For every pound of government spending on full Level 2 qualifications, the net present value is £21, and the total value of this type of learning to the economy is £28 billion.

- For full Level 3 qualifications that are grant-funded (advanced learner loans were introduced in 2013/14 for individuals over 24 wishing to study any Level 3 qualification), the net present value is £16 (£21 if these courses are funded through loans).

## National strategy

However, despite the strong returns associated with Level 2 and 3 qualifications for both individuals and the public, millions of adults still lack these basic building blocks of learning, and government has continued to reduce funding. The argument for resourcing an enhanced programme is compelling and should be seen as a 'spend to save' initiative.

## Underpinning financial strategy

'Spending on adult education is nearly two-thirds lower in real terms than in 2003–04 and about 50% lower than in 2009–10. This fall was mainly driven by the removal of public funding from some courses and a resultant drop in learner numbers, which fell from 4.4 million in 2004–05 to 1.5 million by 2018–19.' Institute for Fiscal Studies [2020 annual report on education spending in England](#) (November 2020).

# FUNDING ADULT EDUCATION

Lifelong learning in the UK compares poorly internationally, is heavily skewed towards wealthier socio-economic groups, and is disproportionately consumed by younger people.

## Decreasing budget

The levels of government investment in adult skills in England seem to be decreasing over time. Broadly, since 2013/14, some of the grant component of the Adult Skills Budget has been replaced by loans – an example of shifting resources from the state to the private sector – while the overall budget allocations are similar, the composition of the budget has moved away from government and towards individuals and employers. The adult further education budget comprises the Adult Skills Budget (the majority of the adult further education allocations) and also smaller funding areas, such as the offender learning and skills service and community learning.

The Adult Skills Budget fell by 34% in real terms (29% in cash terms) between 2010/11 and 2015/16. From 2015/16, the Adult Skills Budget excluding apprenticeships was combined with community learning and discretionary learner support to create the Adult Education Budget.

## Low level of government investment

Government investment in training is also at comparatively low levels internationally. Comparing expenditure on training across countries is complicated due to differences in definitions and practices. However, work by OECD and the Social Mobility

Commission suggests that the UK tends to have internationally low levels of investment in skills. As a proportion of GDP, public expenditure on training in Great Britain was among the lowest of the G7 countries between 2004 and 2011, with only Japan at comparably low levels.

Adult participation funding was reduced by 40% as part of the austerity measures in 2011 and has not grown since. The result of this cut has been a drop of over 2 million participating and, as such, England falls below other OECD countries at a time when we need more people to be learning new skills and participating in adult education to ensure their own wellbeing.

## PROPOSED UNDERPINNING FINANCIAL STRATEGY

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- Unbalanced investment
- Less than 1% of the post-18 education and skills budget is spent on adult community learning even though, as shown in the section on skills need, there are 17 million adults without a Level 2 qualification and 1 in 5 of our adults struggle with maths and literacy
- 83.75% of total spend is in the prescribed higher education sector compared to 16.25% for adult further education and apprenticeships
- The current post-18 education system short-changes adults who require basic skills, training and retraining at Level 2 to maintain their employability and participate in wider adult education to improve their quality of life

To meet the skills needs of people and the country, a new injection of resource should be made by government that is intensive and substantial enough to turn the tide on low skills. If, post Brexit and Covid-19, we wish as a country to compete with the world, we need a skilled workforce to do it. Increasing funding now will save the state money in the long term. The Treasury should break the cycle of poor skills and resource with a major 10-year initiative to improve adult basic and intermediate skills. Using the current funding rates and data on existing provision and need, we estimate that a further £5.2 billion should be made available to fund everyone who needs to gain basic skills to Level 3. The summary resource plan is below and the full technical plan can be found at [Levelling Up ACE | Hoxex](#).

## Resource plan: 2021–2030

Resource Plan 2021–2030: Levelling-Up: Adult Basic Skills to First Level 3	
First Full Level 2	£19.5 billion
First Full Level 3	£20.0 billion
First Full Level 1	£1.0 billion
Level 2 Basic numeracy	£13.0 billion
Level 2 Basic literacy	£7.4 billion
Level 2 Basic digital	£2.4 billion
Level 1 ESOL	£1.7 billion
Total cost	£65.0 billion
Total annual cost	£6.5 billion
Less AEB annual budget	£1.3 billion
Total net annual cost	£5.2 billion

### **Recommendation 12**

DfE should support levelling up by rebalancing spend by prioritising basic and Level 2 adult education, injecting £5.2b into the system and providing a 10-year budget that breaks the cycle of low skills, which in turn will pay for itself through a boost in productivity.

### **Recommendation 13**

Facilitate adult education growth by moving funding from those providers who find recruiting adults problematic to those who are can.

## GOING FORWARD

This data evaluation and review of adult community education has opened up a wealth of information which could and should help to inform what education is offered and where it is offered. Through this exercise we have been able to analyse the existing data sets owned by government agencies; the next stage should be for the same analysis to be done for individual providers. This would allow providers to benchmark their work and enable policy makers in local authorities, Mayoral Combined Authorities and government to determine future priorities.

This exercise was commissioned to help fill the data vacuum highlighted in several recent reviews including the 2020 Education Select Committee report [A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution](#). Going forward, as this data is already collected by DfE, further work should be done and the data analysed and made public by DfE at least annually. DfE should also consider doing further work to complement the Longitudinal Education Outcome (LEO) dataset on the economic social contribution of adult education and take the lead on collecting data from across government on the resource going into adult education.

### **Recommendation 14**

Further work should be done by DfE on adult education data which should be analysed and made public by DfE at least annually.

### **Recommendation 15**

Develop new official measures to understand and track the economic and social contribution of adult community education

and report on these annually alongside the Longitudinal Education Outcome data.

### **Recommendation 16**

Collect and manage comprehensive and comparable data from government departments about what funding goes where, and what outcomes are delivered.

## ANNEX 1: ROLE OF ACE PROVIDERS

ACE providers channel several funding streams to resource their plan. These include the full range of programmes funded by the DFE Adult Education Budget, Regulatory and Non regulatory, Adult Community Learning, FE Loans, Traineeship and DWP Kickstart and Restart, Apprenticeships Levy and Non Levy, ESF and the future prosperity funds, and other community funding from MHCLG and Home Office.

Their role was set out in government policy in 2011 and those criteria are still part of their funding contract.

Extract from *[New challenges, new chances: next steps in implementing the further education reform programme](#)* (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011):

### **Community learning**

Funding will continue to support a universal community learning offer, with a wide range of learning opportunities available to all adults in England.

Purpose of government-supported community learning:

- Maximise access to community learning for adults, bringing new opportunities and improving lives, whatever people's circumstances.
- Promote social renewal by bringing local communities together to experience the joy of learning and the pride that comes with achievement.
- Maximise the impact of community learning on the social and economic wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.

## Objectives

- Focus public funding on people who are disadvantaged and least likely to participate, including in rural areas and people on low incomes with low skills.
- Collect fee income from people who can afford to pay and use where possible to extend provision to those who cannot.
- Widen participation and transform people's destinies by supporting progression relevant to personal circumstances, e.g.
  - improved confidence and willingness to engage in learning;
  - acquisition of skills preparing people for training, employment or self-employment;
  - improved digital, financial literacy and/or communication skills;
  - parents/ carers better equipped to support and encourage their children's learning;
  - improved/ maintained health and/or social well-being.
- Develop stronger communities, with more self-sufficient, connected and pro-active citizens, leading to:
  - improved/ increased volunteering, civic engagement and social integration;
  - reduced costs on welfare, health and anti-social behaviour;
  - increased online learning and self-organised learning;
  - the lives of our most troubled families being turned around.
- Commission, deliver and support learning in ways that contribute directly to these objectives, including:
  - bringing together people from backgrounds, cultures and income groups;
  - including people who can/ cannot afford to pay;
  - using effective local partnerships to bring together key providers and relevant local agencies and services;
  - devolving planning and accountability to neighbourhood/ parish level, with local people involved in decisions about the learning offer;
  - involving volunteers and voluntary and community sector groups, shifting long term, 'blocked' classes into learning clubs, growing self-organised learning groups;
  - encouraging employers to support informal learning in the workplace;
  - supporting the wide use of online information and learning resources;
  - minimising overheads, bureaucracy and administration.

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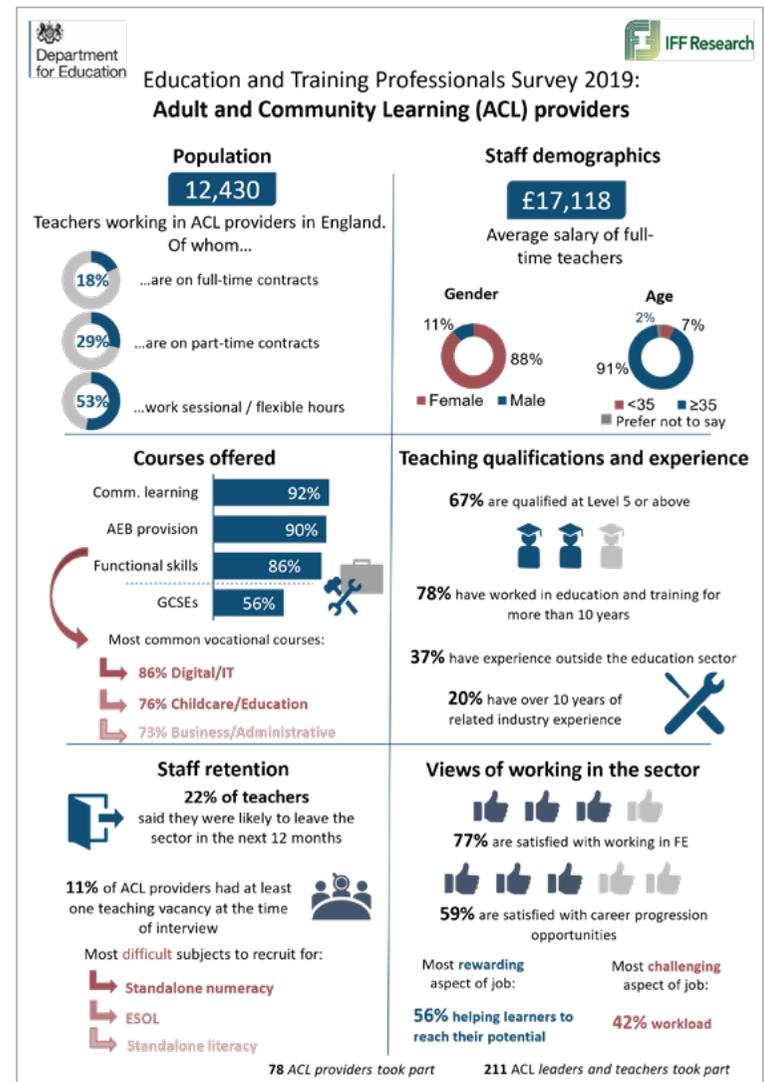
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# ANNEX 3: ACE WORKFORCE OVERVIEW



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