



SKILLS FOR LIFE: A NEW STRATEGY FOR ENGLISH, MATHS, ESOL AND DIGITAL

Learning from the past to
improve the future

NEXT STAGE 2021-2031

ABOUT FETL

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 AUTHORS

This reflection and action plan has been written by a collective of practitioners and sector leaders who were either part of the original Skills for Life team and/or are contributing to the agenda now. They are proud of their contribution in helping adults to improve their life chances and were motivated to reflect on what worked in the past, in the hope the next generation of activists can take the agenda on.

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FOREWORD

Lord David Blunkett

Twenty years ago, I was honoured to be the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. It was an exhilarating period and I was able to initiate new radical policies based on what children, young people and adults needed to thrive in life and work. In 1998 we introduced the Learning Age Policy Paper which included a new focus on adult education.

Coinciding with our vision for lifelong learning, we received a worrying report about the country's levels of adult literacy and in response we asked Sir Claus Moser (later Lord Moser) to evaluate the size of the challenge. Having received his report, we responded with the Skills for Life strategy with stretching targets. We put in place the legal entitlements to free English and maths tuition and supported teachers by developing a new curriculum with rigorous standards and through continuous professional development. It was a cross-departments, all-embracing government agenda.

It turned out to be extremely successful. The final evaluation in 2011 was very complimentary with acknowledgement that, over the 10-year period, more than 14 million adults were supported to improve their skills. Its legacy lives on with much of the original infrastructure still in place but, although the need is great (we sadly still have nine million adults with poor literacy skills), participation numbers even before Covid-19 were decreasing. Therefore, it feels right to look again at what works and what needs to happen now, and I am pleased that those who

care about this work have come together to evaluate what was successful and, having reviewed the last 20 years, conclude with a plan for the future.

I am pleased that the Government's new white paper 'Skills for Jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth' offers a commitment to continuing to support English, maths, digital and ESOL. However, as participation is decreasing, we need to galvanise the whole of the FE sector and departments across government to again unite and prioritise this agenda. Back in 2000, I used the term "crusade" and I feel that is where we need to be again.

Let's look at the best of the past to shape the future and give all adults with poor basic skills a second chance to rebuild their futures.

Douglas Blunkett

FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

Low levels of literacy and numeracy in the adult population in England constitute a long-standing issue which has, over several decades of policy intervention, proven stubbornly difficult to reverse. While the recent white paper on further education reaffirmed the government's commitment to improving adult literacy and numeracy, and this is very welcome, the challenge remains immense, with an estimated nine million adults of working age reportedly struggling with low basic skills. The cost of this is enormous, whether you measure it in terms of thwarted life chances or loss to the economy.

This is not to say there have been no successes or improvements in this time. The national Skills for Life strategy, which engaged 14 million people in adult literacy and numeracy and supported the achievement of 8 million qualifications between 2001 and 2011, is probably the most prominent example in recent years. The improvements it produced, with more than five million adults gaining skills at Level 2, demonstrated just how successful this kind of intervention can be, and, in particular, the value of targeted investment in adult skills and the importance of wide, multi-level partnership in ensuring effective delivery. The failure of the programme to engage learners below Level 2, and the impact of the government's decision to redirect investment from wider FE provision to skills more narrowly conceived, also provide lessons as to the need for policy to be both holistic and cogent.

The fact that adult participation has dropped further since the programme finished reflects both the chronic short-termism of government policy and the failure of ministers to learn from or build on the successes of the past. Further education, perhaps more than any other part of the education system, suffers acutely from this shortness in policy memory. Little wonder, then, that every few years we find ourselves rolling up our sleeves and gathering around the drawing board to reinvent the wheel.

That is why I particularly value this publication, and why the Further Education Trust for Leadership has been pleased to fund it. Rather than proposing a revolution in our approach to skills, I would much prefer we took a careful, measured approach to improving the system, building thoughtfully on what worked before and reflecting intelligently on how fresh interventions can articulate with what is already in place. This is what this report attempts to do. There is an important lesson in this for politicians and civil servants. In reforming further education and skills, we must ensure policy does not repeat the mistakes of the past and reflect on the challenges we face now in a way that learns these lessons and coheres with the wider policy architecture of the present.

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

FOREWORD

Robert Halfon

This paper is both timely and helpful at a moment when boosting adult skills is more vital than ever.

As we face the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution, an ageing population and the ongoing impact of the pandemic, improving adult English and maths skills will be so important in opening the door to improved job prospects and increased productivity and economic growth.

The benefits of lifelong learning reach well beyond this however. Adult education is also vital for health and wellbeing, and for social justice and communities.

But despite the need for a skills boost, set out in this paper, participation in adult education is at its lowest level in 23 years and funding fell by 45% between 2008–9 and 2018–19. The ideas and good practice documented here on what works will be incredibly helpful when thinking about what needs to happen next if we are to reverse this decline.

As Chair of the cross-party Education Committee in Parliament, I am determined that we too play our part. Last year we put forward a four-pillar approach to establishing a long-term strategy to revolutionise the adult education system. This included a community learning centre in every town, individual learning accounts and a greater focus on part-time and employer-led learning.

It is incredibly important that we all work together to remove the barriers to participation and I am pleased to see that the sector has welcomed the recent White Paper, *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth*, which sets out the Government's commitment to the entitlement for adult English, maths and ESOL.

Improving adult skills is vital to supporting the levelling up agenda and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the teachers and support staff who have worked tirelessly throughout last year to find creative and innovative ways to carry on teaching English, maths and ESOL.

It is now time to act, to ensure an ambitious, long-term strategy for adult skills and education, tackle social injustice and give everyone the chance to climb the educational ladder of opportunity, whatever their age.

Robert Halfon, Chair of the Education Select Committee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Skills for Life 2021-31

Twenty years ago, after the UK received a damning report on the nation's literacy skills, the new Labour government identified the need for a far-reaching response and strategy that was innovative, flexible, and embraced and enhanced every aspect of literacy, language and numeracy delivery.

The resulting Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills was successful, met its targets early and went on to ensure that between 2001 and 2011 some 14 million people participated in adult literacy and numeracy activities – with over eight million qualifications being achieved. This produced a 13% improvement in literacy in the adult population, with over five million more adults gaining skills at Level 2.

However, although the strategy was successful and many of the delivery features were embedded in the further education system and delivery landscape in 2008, in recent years participation in adult English and maths courses has dropped – despite the need being even greater.

This paper reviews what worked through the prism of those who delivered the original strategy, reviews the independent evaluation, explains today's issues, highlights the risks to future prosperity and wellbeing, and proposes how adult English and Maths participation might be improved.

The paper explores how collectively, by pooling our effort, working with what is already in place we can enhance the

infrastructure and embrace the new technological world to produce a strategy fit to take us from 2021 through to 2031. It concludes with proposals and recommendations for us all - Government and its agencies, the Mayoral Combined Authorities, the Greater London Authority, colleges and other providers, teachers and practitioners.

Personal Reflection

"20 years ago I joined DfEE to lead the Skills for Life unit. It was a job I was passionate about. The unit was full of gifted civil servants and experts from the adult education sector. It was successful in keeping the Skills for Life agenda in the public and political eye and supported millions of adults in improving their basic skills. Its legacy is still evident and embedded in the system, but participation is now decreasing. That's why we have regrouped, bringing those same people together again with today's sector leaders to produce an action plan for the next 20 years. The interest shown in the consultation and the motivation of the 30 plus people who have contributed freely of their time to create this new strategy, demonstrates the time is right to reflect on past success and refocus on finding new ways of supporting adults to improve their English, maths digital and ESOL skills."

Sue Pember, Former Director of the Skills for Life Unit, and now Policy Director HOLEX

INTRODUCTION

Skills for Life, the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills was far reaching and, through a network of trained providers and intermediaries, covered most communities in England. Between 2001 and 2011, around 14 million people participated in adult literacy and numeracy activities, with over eight million qualifications being achieved.

As part of the long-term evaluation of the strategy's success, in 2002 the Department for Education and Skills commissioned a baseline survey of adult basic skills to produce a national profile of adult literacy, language, numeracy, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills, and to assess the impact of these skills on people's lives.

After a period of sustained investment in adult literacy, language and numeracy teaching and family learning programmes in England, in 2010 the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) commissioned a follow-up survey to assess the change in literacy, language and numeracy levels over time amongst working-age adults.

The BIS report showed that, for literacy, the investment had proved successful in helping significant numbers of adults over the threshold of a Level 2 qualification. However, it had been less effective in improving the skills of adults with the lowest levels of proficiency (those at the Entry Level). In the case of numeracy, more progress was seen at Entry Level compared to smaller numbers of people attaining Level 2 qualifications.

The legacy of the strategy can still be seen today with on average 400,000 participants each year, over 50,000 of them taking external examinations; and in the funding mechanism, standards and inspection embedded in the further education (FE) system. However annual participation has halved since 2016, and this decrease has prompted this coming together of those who worked in the sector to determine how we can collectively improve participation and achievement.

This paper explains the issues, highlights the risks to future prosperity and wellbeing, and proposes how adult English and Maths participation and expertise might be improved. Throughout the document we include several 'learner journeys' which emphasise the importance of the policy, along with reflections on what works from leaders, teachers and tutors.

Learner Journey: Andrea Ats, Redbridge Institute of Adult Education

Andrea came to the UK from Hungary with her young family in 2011 without much spoken English, and soon found that basic tasks like shopping were a struggle. She spent the next few years getting to grips with her spoken English.

By 2017, Andrea felt ready to move to the next phase of her learning and was invited to join a family maths course in her child's school. Despite being very apprehensive, she soon found that not only did she brush up her own maths, but she discovered fun maths techniques that she could use to help her child at home.

With renewed confidence, Andrea proudly achieved a maths Functional Skills qualification. She quickly progressed to Level 1 and in the following year enrolled in a GCSE maths class at Redbridge Institute of Adult Education. Despite wanting to give up on numerous occasions, due to health and personal issues, Andrea achieved a grade 8 in her GCSE.

Andrea's maths tutor Naeem noticed that she was adept at helping her peers with their classwork and encouraged Andrea to become a volunteer in the institute's maths homework club. At the same time, Andrea started to realise that she had a chance of achieving her ambition to become a teacher.

In 2019, with her confidence increasing, Andrea joined the GCSE English class and continued to volunteer helping maths learners with their homework. In 2019 she was elected Student Governor by her peers. Andrea has now enrolled on a teacher training course and is on the path to achieve her ambition of becoming a teacher.

BACKGROUND TO THE 2001 STRATEGY

Until the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1996 revealed the low levels of literacy and numeracy in the UK in comparison with other OECD countries, adult basic skills education was not seen as a priority.

Before 2001, teaching basic skills to adults was marginalised and under-resourced and classes in many regions were mainly delivered by a volunteer workforce. In response to the 1996 survey which highlighted the basic skills issue, Lord Claus Moser was asked to review the situation.

The 1999 Moser Report estimated that there were seven million people with skills below Level 1 in the UK (Level 1 is similar to having a GCSE at grades D-G or 1-3). It set out evidence that people with poor literacy, language or numeracy skills were less productive at work, earned lower wages and were more likely to suffer from ill health and social exclusion.

Tackling the skills problem was made a national priority, and in 2001 the Moser Report triggered the launch of the Skills for Life Strategy for England, a Labour government flagship initiative to raise the literacy and numeracy skills of the adult population.

'Skills for Life' introduced a learning infrastructure including national standards for literacy, language and numeracy, a core curriculum framework, materials and tests, new qualifications and professional standards for basic skills teachers, as well as national targets for the number of adults the strategy aimed to reach and the number of formal qualifications to be gained.

To support this work, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) set up a Basic Skills Unit made up of civil servants and external experts who knew how to make the further education system work to:

- improve the standards in, and quality of, teaching and learning
- ensure that provision is effectively planned and funded
- manage the transition of responsibility for the delivery of work to partner organisations and the ongoing risks that this could pose to delivery
- ensure that provision is accessible to those from priority groups
- engage employers and continue the development of high-quality workplace learning
- promote the take-up of literacy and numeracy qualifications and learning, and
- improve the analysis of performance to highlight the fundamental role in the long term.

Skills for Life grew out of the recognition that improving adult basic skills brings multiple benefits to employers, individuals, families and wider society. Improved literacy, language and numeracy skills are of crucial importance in raising Britain's standing in international measures of educational achievement and in promoting social participation and social mobility, as well as being a vital means of enhancing the UK's global economic competitiveness.

A number of priority groups were identified, including:

- unemployed people and those on benefits
- prisoners and those supervised in the community
- low-skilled employees
- public sector employees, and
- other groups at risk of social exclusion.

Regional pathfinder projects were set up to pilot new approaches to improving basic skills. Initiatives such as 'Move On' also set out to encourage adults to engage in skills development programmes. Considerable investment was made in adult skills development, and public service agreement (PSA) targets were set to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of 2.25 million adults by 2010, with an interim target of 1.5 million adults by 2007.

Personal Reflection

"The Skills for Life Survey from 2011 calculated that 6.9% of the adult population of the City of Bristol was at Entry 1 or Entry 2, amounting to over 20,000 adults with very serious reading difficulties, so there is much to do. We really rely on this type of data to help identify the need and get our message out, but it would be good to have an update of the survey."

Ginny Williams-Ellis, Chief Executive, Read Easy UK

POLITICAL POLICY LONGEVITY AND ENDORSEMENT

The major driver in English basic skills policy since 2001 has been the need to reduce the cost to the country of low levels of literacy and numeracy in terms of lower incomes, reduced productivity, poorer health and expenditure on benefits and welfare services. This driver has been repeatedly understood by successive governments and has allowed for continuity of delivery and continuous improvement of the offer. The following section sets out the strategy and evaluation timeline.

Following on from the publication of the Skills for Life strategy in 2003, the publication of 'The Skills for Life Survey: A national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills' emphasised the need for the government to continue its drive to improve skills. Although the number of adults with literacy skills below Level 1 had fallen since the introduction of Skills for Life, the survey revealed that 5.2 million adults still had literacy skills below this level compared to the Moser estimate of seven million in 1999. The number of adults with numeracy skills below Entry Level 3 had fallen only slightly to 6.8 million.

Further policy initiatives were introduced, such as the Skills White Paper and the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper, both published in 2005. The Skills White Paper included Skills for Life as a main objective. The policy on 14-19 education stressed the importance of Functional Skills in English and maths and established the place of ICT as an essential skill for young people.

Personal Reflection

“When the Skills for Life strategy was introduced, I was the manager of a North East local authority training centre in Newcastle. The strategy was a godsend as I had long personally advocated a stronger link between vocational learning and the improvement of numeracy and literacy, and this gave me the structure to do just that with my adult learners.”

Paul Turner, Policy Specialist, NCFE

The next important policy development was the Leitch Review of Skills in 2006. Lord Sandy Leitch proposed that by 2020, 95% of adults should be able to achieve the basic skills of functional literacy, language and numeracy.

In response, the Labour government refreshed Skills for Life in 2008 and introduced a new target to match that suggested by Lord Leitch. In the 2009 report ‘Skills for Life: Changing Lives’, John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, wrote that over 5.7 million learners had taken training courses and 2.8 million had achieved nationally recognised qualifications, exceeding the original 2010 PSA target to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of 2.25 million adults more than two years early.

Following the 2010 General Election, the Coalition government published its skills strategy for England, ‘Skills for Sustainable Growth’, setting out its commitment to continue funding provision in full for those without basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Despite the success of Skills for Life in achieving the PSA targets (by 2010, 3.25 million adults in England had achieved a nationally recognised qualification), questions remained about its impact on overall levels of literacy and numeracy and on the sustainability of the skills gains. For example, the UK Commission

for Employment and Skills signalled the danger that, although the skills profile of the UK was improving, other countries were improving at a faster rate.

One concern for government was therefore to ensure a good match between the basic skills offer (the functional literacy and numeracy skills that individuals and employers need) and the basic skills that have been demonstrated to bring the highest economic, social and personal returns.

‘Skills for Sustainable Growth’ signalled a move away from a centrally-determined target system where qualifications were used as a proxy for skills gain (the PSA targets set under Skills for Life were abolished), towards a demand-led system that gives providers the flexibility to respond to local needs and focuses on improving the effectiveness of provision.

In 2011, the government published ‘New Challenges, New Chances’, its reform plan for FE and skills. It contained the pledge that as well as continuing to financially support basic English and maths learning, this would be “expanded to include and fund those who need GCSE English and/or maths at Level 2”.

Sir Vince Cable, then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, wrote in the foreword: “As this country strives to strengthen economic growth and create the jobs that will come with it, businesses of all sizes are crying out for people with the right skills to design, produce and sell a quality product efficiently. The future of thousands of communities all over the land depends on whether or not those skills will be available. So too do the futures of millions of people, especially young people.”

In January 2021, the further education White Paper ‘Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth’ was published, with a commitment that the Government will continue to support participation in English, maths, and digital training to meet employers’ needs and support people to progress in employment or further study.

It states: "Under our legal entitlements, any adult who does not already have an intermediate (Level 2) qualification in English and/or maths can be fully funded to study these qualifications. Our qualifications reforms mean we now have GCSEs and Functional Skills as the qualifications of choice." It also puts language on the same footing as English and maths, stating: "Everyone who lives in England should have the opportunity to learn to speak English so that they can participate in our labour market and civil society. Our commitment to boost English language provision for existing migrants will be a key part of the future adult skills system to help people to achieve and progress through employer-recognised, high-quality qualifications."

These statements are welcomed. They support and underpin the concern expressed in this paper that more needs to be done.

Learner Journey: Helen Russell, WEA Learner, South West

Helen was nervous about getting back into education, but the WEA helped her to gain the writing and maths skills she needed to feel confident. Now studying with the Open University, Helen is an inspiration to everyone looking to learn something new.

"I first took a 'Return to Learn' course with the WEA after having lost my confidence in my writing and maths. I had not studied in 11 years, so was a bit nervous, to say the least, but the WEA made me feel welcome and safe. I was anxious about stepping back into a classroom, but I really wanted to progress and improve my career.

"After taking the first steps to improve my maths and English skills, I felt more confident about getting back into further education. I've tried to stay positive and balance my work with my home life, which isn't always easy, but the WEA has always been there to support me and help me keep on track on my learning journey.

"I've been surrounded by fantastic people and I'm proud to say that I'm now enrolled to start a degree in Health and Social Care at the Open University. I would never have thought that it would be possible to get back into education the way I have, but now I'm always happy to help motivate others to make the right decisions towards their own goals."

THE CURRENT POSITION

UK literacy levels have improved over the last 100 years. However, even with a new initiative almost every decade, the position in 2021 is that literacy and numeracy levels in the UK compare poorly internationally, and there is considerable variation in proficiency across nations and regions within the UK.

In the UK in 2021, an estimated nine million adults of working age have low basic skills, with more than a quarter of adults aged 16-65 having low literacy or numeracy skills or both. This is well below the adult average for literacy and numeracy compared to other OECD countries. The UK also has an underlying issue with those aged 16 to 29 having on average worse literacy and numeracy than those aged 30 to 45.

This indicates that we are seeing the beginning of a trend in which a growing number of countries have better levels literacy and numeracy than the UK across the population. Literacy and numeracy achievement are also subject to regional variation, with London and the South East achieving the highest scores in GCSE maths and English. The UK has one of the strongest associations between socio-economic background and literacy/numeracy levels among OECD countries.

Good literacy and numeracy skills bring a range of benefits to the individual, employers and society. These include personal wage and employment returns, improvements in business efficiency and productivity, economic growth and improved wellbeing across society. Having poor basic skills creates problems for individuals. For example, those with poor skills may struggle with

basic quantitative reasoning or have difficulty with simple written information. They may not be able to estimate how much petrol is left in the petrol tank from a sight of the gauge, fill in online forms, or fully understand instructions on a bottle of aspirin – and they will not be able to help their children to read. Individuals have said that a feeling of inadequacy has often held them back and has an impact on their wellbeing.

As well as having a devastating impact on the individual, it also creates difficulties for employers as it can lead to expensive errors and affect productivity levels. Poor language skills damage citizenship and create isolation and a fragmented society, leading to a loss of equality and social exclusion. It fosters an environment in which many people feel they have been 'left behind' and that this country doesn't value them and is not willing to invest in them.

Learner Journey: Karen Woods, Manchester

The Festival of Learning is an annual celebration of adult learning. Its awards highlight the range of motivations that adults have for improving their skills and the transformational impact it can have on their lives. Karen Woods won the Learning for Work Individual Award in 2013.

Karen had a chaotic upbringing and didn't do well at school. She was working as a cleaning supervisor at Manchester City Council when she enrolled on 'Train to Gain' – a workplace learning initiative which included literacy and numeracy. As Karen worked towards Level 2 qualifications, her literacy tutor, Christine, was struck by her drive and potential.

During this time, Karen revealed that she had always wanted to write a novel. She was encouraged to do so by Christine and completed 'Broken Youth' within weeks. Karen has now published seven novels. Although she began learning to gain new skills for the workplace, it unlocked her wider potential. *"I never thought I would say this but learning has changed my life – education has now sent me on the right path to achieve my dreams."*

Apart from Karen's impressive achievements, this learner testimony highlights two key things. The first is the importance of workplace initiatives in engaging adults in basic skills learning. The second is how people's individual learning trajectories differ and evolve. For Karen, the starting point was the workplace but learning led her somewhere entirely new. For others, the journey could well be the other way round. Creative approaches to engaging adults in learning can support a range of outcomes, including developing the confidence that helps people find work.

WHAT WORKED AND WHY?

To ensure implementation of the Skills for Life strategy, many initiatives and systems were developed to underpin its successful delivery. The implementation strategy brought many agencies and partners together to work for a common goal. When reviewing what worked, we could have picked many different strands of activity but we have honed in on what we think were key to success.

- Endorsement from the top.
- A whole-government approach to delivery.
- Clear and measured targets, goals and objectives.
- Mainstreaming within the FE sector.
- Working together with delivery partners, stakeholders, teachers, learners and employers to improve the learner experience.
- Ensuring quality by setting clear standards and development of a basic curriculum, a national test and inspection.
- Emphasis on building capacity and supporting teachers.
- Use of the mainstream media and relentless communication.
- Working with initiatives that had the same goals.
- Underpinned by robust programme management and accountability.

The following section looks at each of these elements in turn, reviewing how they operated in practice through the prism of those who delivered and/or steered the policy.

Endorsement from the top

Skills for Life was developed on clear evidence of what was needed, built on knowledge of what works, and was launched and signed off by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair. This action alone gave the initiative status and media coverage and made sure other government departments took their roles seriously.

The rationale behind the strategy was that basic skills were important in the face of the changing nature of the workplace and the increasing complexity of traditional jobs. It aimed to make Britain a more equal society and 'close the gap' by addressing issues including area and neighbourhood deprivation and educational attainment.

There was continued political interest, and the progress highlighted by the evaluation three years on was welcomed by Tony Blair in 2004. Since the launch of Skills for Life, he said, "we have made great strides in ensuring adults are able to gain the skills they need to be productive at work, active in their communities, and fulfilled in their home and family lives... We now have to build on the solid foundations in place and strive to increase the number of adult achievers."

A whole-government approach to delivery

The strategy and implementation plan were made up of several different strands of work that required a whole-government approach to delivery. It brought together several government departments covering education; culture, media and sport; work and pensions; justice; business, innovation and skills; and communities and local government, steered by a cross-government ministerial steering committee. It was the cumulative impact of this work that brought about its success.

The strategy was written to galvanise everyone behind it and seen by the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett,

as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to help adults gain the skills for life. In line with what teachers and learners said they wanted, it was embedded in other programmes such as apprenticeships and the Level 2 entitlement for vocational skills.

Personal Reflection

"Skills for Life was a movement: it galvanised further education into a more systematic and standardised approach to adult education and to family learning with fewer qualifications, improved assessment tools, teacher training and a national test. It had a national identity through the media campaign, with a simple message ('Get On') and phone number that engaged those outside of the education system to take action including individuals, employer champions, big business, as well as the public sector system itself."

Lisa Capper, Principal and Director of Education & Skills at Nacro

Clear and measured targets, goals and objectives

The Skills for Life strategy set out how government would reach its PSA target to improve the basic skill levels of 2.25 million adults between 2001 and 2010, with a milestone of 1.5 million in 2007. This target was part of the wider objective to tackle the adult skills gaps by increasing the number of adults with the skills required for employability and progression to higher levels of training.

The strategy met its targets early, going on to ensure that between 2001 and 2011 there were 14 million adult literacy and numeracy participants with over eight million qualifications achieved. This produced a 13% improvement in literacy – with over five million more adults with skills at Level 2 (BIS Skills for Life Survey 2011).

The target and sub-targets brought everyone together – they could see and measure the impact. Whether they were a teacher, delivery partner or agency chief executive, they could measure their contribution to adults moving one step up the basic skills ladder.

Personal Reflection

“As consultants, we often talk about making an impact that matters. Participating in the ‘Skills for Life’ agenda to help people achieve their potential was one of those moments. It demonstrated how the public, private and third sectors can work together to deliver improved life chances that assist levelling up.

I left school with few qualifications and took a non-traditional route to university and postgraduate studies. The power of education should not be underestimated. Skills for Life helped provide related opportunities for others. One of the most gratifying things in my career was a conversation with an adult basic skills learner who said he had missed out on a lot with his children, but was now enjoying helping his grandchildren to read and to do homework.”

Ken Sargison, Private Sector Consultant and former Partner at Deloitte

Mainstreaming within the FE sector

Personal Reflection

“The need for support in literacy and numeracy was undeniable and in the millions. Mobilising the sector to find the individuals and employers, persuade them to learn and then be able to deliver what was needed was a challenge. It worked as we never accepted ‘no’ as an answer, challenged every rule and process that was going to get in our way –

whether it be DfE(S) rules, Learning and Skills Council rules or even local college processes and procedures.”

Mark Dawe, Skills for Life Deputy Director now Chief Executive of The Skills Network

It was recognised that the issue was so large that there was no quick fix. The programme had to be quickly embedded into the mainstream funding and delivery process to ensure it wasn't seen as just an add-on – mainstreaming it to make the system work for literacy and numeracy provision. The most important partner to the success of the project was the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

Personal Reflection

“The energy, commitment and resources behind Skills for Life in the early years almost feel like a dream and a time of relative plenty. If only we could have that now. Progress was made in a number of ways, but I think the enduring legacy is the significant shift in thinking across the FE sector about the importance of literacy and numeracy for adults – for life, well-being, citizenship and for work.

“There is still work to be done though. I wince sometimes at the sense I get in certain circles that achieving a degree is somehow more important than a literacy or numeracy qualification. The people who believe that can never have met the adult learners who have used their learning to transform their lives, as well the impact it always has on those around them – family, friends, colleagues.”

David Hughes, LSC Director now Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

A key element of the Skills for Life strategy was for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), through its Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, to work with a wide range of government departments and agencies. This joined-up approach was central to tackling such an endemic and far-reaching issue, affecting as it did, around one in five of the adult population.

The DfES saw the LSC as core to its policy, planning and funding strategy. The LSC could provide both a national framework and local implementation capacity through its 47 local employer-led councils. These local councils developed local strategies, working together with local authorities, colleges, adult education providers, the voluntary sector and others.

For example, local LSCs used workplace basic skills advisors to broker relationships between employers and providers, resulting in over 2,500 learner achievements between 2001 and 2004. At national level, the LSC worked with the DfES strategy unit to develop and implement a successful communications strategy, while the local LSCs collated and disseminated local success stories. The LSC was also accountable for the collection of regular and comprehensive data, reporting on progress towards Skills for Life targets.

In collaboration with the national and regional LSCs and the Association of Colleges, a number of sector-wide projects were conducted to support the 'balance and mix' of learning provision. Improvements in ILR (Individual Learner Record) coding and learner achievements resulted in a direct increase in provider funding. This allowed further investment in identifying and targeting priority groups that led to increases in qualification delivery and success rates.

Mark Dawe, Chief Executive of The Skills Network, recalls: "In some ways this was simple, but simple isn't always easy. Firstly, it was essential to be clear about what programmes were being funded and, more importantly, to persuade the LSC that these courses should receive a special weighting (eventually there was agreement for a 1.4 weighting). The next challenge was ensuring

providers were aware of the funding and the opportunity to recruit learners, and to respond quickly. As well as the normal communication channels to colleges and providers we, offered every college a day of consultancy to explain the programmes, funding, methods of delivery, the curriculum and assessment procedures and teacher training.

"Another challenge was finding the consultants with the capacity and capability to quickly ramp up and provide the required support across the country to over 300 organisations. The one thing we did insist on was every college had to make available the principal and senior management team members involved in curriculum and funding if they wanted access to this free consultancy service – a logistical nightmare, but it worked."

Working together with delivery partners, stakeholders, teachers, learners and employers to improve the learner experience

The strategy was developed with delivery partners including the Basic Skills Agency, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Campaign for Learning, awarding bodies and those who would be involved directly in delivery, through large group dynamic events that brought together future learners, providers, teachers and intermediary services such as libraries and probation staff.

This effort was recognised in 2008 by John Denham, then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, when he wrote that everyone involved in Skills for Life "from partners, teachers, college staff and union learning representatives, to community workers, volunteers and classroom assistants", should be proud of what had been collectively achieved since 2001."

Personal Reflection

In Redbridge, our well-respected English and maths offer grew out of a real commitment to tackle inequality using the Skills for Life initiative to develop the excellent basic skills teaching and learning which are so essential for learner success. This would not have been possible without the Skills for Life drive to professionalise the workforce, provision of teacher training and ongoing development.

"The flexibility to deliver courses in community settings has made a big difference to the provision of basic skills in Redbridge – such as close partnership working with schools to create hubs for our programme. Our community provision is used for learners to 'learn to learn' and build confidence before they progress to accredited courses. Embedding basic skills in vocational programmes, another Skills for Life initiative, has given learners the English skills needed to be successful in their quest to improve their life chances."

Maria Sotiriou, Assistant Principal for Adult Skills, Redbridge Institute of Adult Education

The strategy was far reaching and worked well with delivery partners such as Learndirect, Unionlearn and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) to secure reach into all communities. Chris Butcher, Public Policy Manager at the WEA, says a key element was the way literacy and numeracy teaching was embedded in broader subjects. "This has informed practice across the sector and is certainly a central part of the WEA's approach to education and learning. We recognise that adult students are more likely to embrace the idea of tackling the challenges of language and numbers if they are set in the context of a goal that motivates them, such as pursuing a personal interest or taking a step towards better work."

Placing learning in community-based facilities can make it more accessible for adults who have issues around stepping back into

formal education settings. "Peer support and shared experience is an important motivator in adult learning, and doubly so in disadvantaged areas where other infrastructure may be absent. By delivering courses in venues where the whole community can feel included, empowered and safe, greater progress can be made in enabling students to take control of their own learning and relate it more readily to the world around them."

• Working with employers

From the start, through the then Department of Trade and Industry and the sector bodies, public and private sector employers were seen as key to success. Working with them was seen as a major contributing factor in boosting demand for Skills for Learning provision and improving economic gains.

Two notable approaches were to develop referral skills from public sector front line workers and private sector 'employer brokerage'. The aim was to embed learner referrals from public or voluntary sector service user interaction and, in the case of employers, identifying employees and putting in place referral mechanisms.

The outcome of the approach to front line workers proved to be a positive experience for staff, volunteers and clients. Leaders within organisations saw the linkages, motivational and reputational benefits. However, there was consideration of what this would mean in terms of additional work for front line staff. One incentive for many was the ability to gain a qualification that demonstrated their referral skills. Referrers appreciated the intrinsic value of helping and the element of job enrichment. Critical to the success of the approach was the provision of guides and tool kits that took away the burden of additional work and facilitated a referral mechanism to a network of delivery providers.

Working with employers had a similar outcome, as many employers did not want to take staff away from core employment activities. Providing guides and methodologies and working with

HR departments allowed for priority group identification and referral mechanisms to be put in place. This was more successful in larger employers, some of which were identified as having significant current and future labour demands. Working with them resulted in direct funding for qualification delivery. Whilst this was seen as a complex activity by the employers, the LSC worked with them to facilitate funded learning delivery that raised skill levels.

Many private employers responded well to private sector involvement in the 'brokering of solutions' with them and navigating the complexities of the education environment. In future, government should consider further direct approaches to working with employers. Employers' concerns about too much or no communication can be resolved through the 'single point of contact' account management approaches that boosted Skills for Life take-up.

Chris James, Skills Angle Learning, says: "Skills for Life specifically set in the context of employment was successful in helping learners understand the direct application of literacy and numeracy to their job. Equally, embedding delivery within the work-shift made it accessible. The facility to learn in bite-sized chunks made assimilation more likely and progress more obvious and relevant.

"For many sectors whose work was in part considered entry level, a collective cross-sector approach to Skills for Life was instrumental in developing common approaches and sharing best practice. Real progress at work and an employer appreciation of impact was crucial. Whilst impact was not uniform, or always recognised, it did have a measurable impact on GVA and an immeasurable impact on the careers and life chances of all who took part."

Colleges were key to reaching those in work, as Nikki Davis, Vice Principal at Leeds College of Building, explains: "Twenty years ago key skills enabled college students to build their evidence around trade areas, making the qualification more engaging and relevant. Students could progress through different levels and the contextualisation helped to support skills really needed in the vocational subject.

"Along came Functional Skills with generic exam themes, followed by the reformed Functional Skills which demonstrated more clearly to students the knowledge gaps they had, and these seemed easier to fill than the skills of GCSE which some had failed to grasp year after year. Reformed Functional Skills were less theoretical, so the link with everyday life was more obvious and students' engagement improved.

"From a college perspective, stability is required. English and maths are vital skills that need development, supporting each other in subject content. Allow providers and practitioners the time to develop their practice, resources and skills in delivering these qualifications, so that students can benefit from that experience. Ensuring that all students, at any point in their lifelong learning, can access high-quality, properly and equally funded provision is an important part of the future of skills for life."

Ensuring quality by setting clear standards and development of a basic curriculum, a national test and inspection

Personal Reflection

"I became leader of the Sfl standards team after 12 years teaching ESOL and 11 years in various adult education advisory roles. Developing the Sfl implementation programme was similar to completing a very challenging jigsaw ... every piece had to be present, relevant and able to fit usefully with its neighbours. So in updating the strategy, let's consider:

- *what we've learnt from the past 16 years*
- *the new issues, developments and opportunities we need to address.*

It'll be challenging, but welcome and very worthwhile!"

Liz Lawson, Skills for Life Team leader

• Standards

Karen Adriaanse, former Ofsted HMI, recalls: "After the birth of the Skills for Life Strategy, wherever you went as an Adult Learning Inspectorate inspector, you saw the large light-blue Skills for Life folders and the CD-ROMs with the curricula for literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

"This gave the tutors the direction they needed. Bit by bit, every worksheet or lesson plan was mapped to national standards. Learners were developing the skills that they really did need for life. Similarly, managers up and down the country had a structure for quality assuring their provision. This meant greater consistency in the quality of the provision nationally – and this was borne out on inspection.

"The difference was that many of the tutors had benefited from training in how to use the curricula and the learners were benefiting from better quality learning resources and activities. Skills for Life raised the quality of inspection too, and that helped raise the importance of basic skills across the breadth of FE and skills. There is no doubt that the Skills for Life strategy opened the doors to learning for thousands of people who had spent years hiding their low level of skills."

• Curriculum

An important part of the implementation was supporting teachers to provide a tailored learning experience for their learners. Initial and diagnostic assessment for basic skills learners was important as many learners had a spiky profile (knew some things but had great gaps of knowledge). To embed rigour into the learning process, national standards were developed for literacy, numeracy and ESOL, with underpinning curricula for each element and level.

• ESOL

While the original focus was on English and maths, the Moser report recommended that there should be a parallel review of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). Dr Philida

Schellekens, Head of English and ESOL at the Education and Training Foundation, remembers intense meetings with the DfES, with "the very welcome outcome that ESOL provision would be fully funded". This enabled thousands of learners to access ESOL provision up to and beyond Level 2. Training was put in place to support teachers with the new curriculum and resources. The inevitable compromise was that the national standards for basic literacy should encompass ESOL standards up to Level 2.

While much good work goes on in the sector, ESOL has struggled in recent years. Demand remains high but a major reduction in funding has led to dramatic falls in student numbers. Students beyond Entry 3 are routinely referred to Functional Skills English provision, at too early a stage to make the most of provision designed for first language speakers.

• Assessment

The role of the awarding bodies was fundamental to the success of Skills for Life, as they provided the robust evidence that learners' skills were improving. David Phillips, Managing Director of City & Guilds and ILM, reflects: "Skills for Life was fundamental in professionalising the way literacy and numeracy are delivered to adults today. It was critical in improving teaching, learning and assessment. Whereas before there has been a workforce made up of many volunteers, suddenly there were on staff teaching positions with salaries.

Personal Reflection

"As we enter 2021 with an economy and employment market impacted by Coronavirus, it is more important than ever that people have the skills they need to compete in the labour market. Twenty years on from the launch of Skills for Life, I would hope to see the Government protect qualifications that provide people in the UK with a better chance at a fulfilling career."

David Phillips, Managing Director of City & Guilds and ILM

• Digital

As the strategy progressed, more emphasis was placed on technology and, in recent years, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has invested substantially in supporting educators to develop their digital skills and use of educational technology ('EdTech'). This is essentially to improve the life chances of learners, because those with the confidence and skills to use technology and participate online will gain advantages in both life and work.

Yet research shows that one in ten adults in the UK has never used the internet and many more are missing out on the opportunities the digital world offers. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed how damaging this digital inequality can be at every level, but particularly in education.

In response, the ETF has launched:

- an EdTech offer that embeds use of digital technology in teaching so that learners build skills and confidence in using technology to study, live and work in a digital society, and
- an Essential Digital Skills CPD offer which enables educators to deliver free qualifications aligned to the new national standards for basic digital skills

Emphasis on building capacity and supporting teachers

Skills for Life ensured that teachers and managers had good underpinning resources. Although now dated and in need of revision, these can still be found on the ETF website and are well used.

New teacher training programmes were established and existing ones were enhanced with new modules on teaching literacy and numeracy. These were developed and embedded in all post-18 teacher training, including for those intending to teach a vocational skills subject. Guidance manuals were produced for

teachers and support staff and training offered to intermediaries such as JobCentre Plus staff to do initial assessment.

Personal Reflection

"Skills for Life was the starting point for my career. I had left school with Level 3 qualifications and was not eligible for any funded training. However, Skills for Life came with a serious amount of funding for professional development, and once I got started, I was hooked and took advantage of everything. I joined what is now City College Peterborough and we had so much fun promoting these new Skills for Life courses dressed as gremlins; and family literacy, language and numeracy dressed as characters from books. Very happy memories that were all underpinned by this great strategy."

Jaki Bradley, Principal, Thurrock Adult Education Service

Dr Philida Schellekens, Head of English and ESOL and Julie Baxter, Head of Maths at the ETF, reflect: "We well remember the excitement in the sector when the government announced that adult literacy and numeracy would become a key priority. There can be no doubt that the Skills for Life strategy has had a major impact on teacher development. The Excellence Gateway website was established, we had annual literacy and numeracy conferences and teacher training went on locally as well.

"The strategy coincided with more central access to general teacher training. And although the sector has seen a sequence of teacher training organisations, all of them had a consistent focus on English and maths. These organisations culminated in the ETF, which became responsible for professional development and standards in FE and skills in 2015.

"English, maths and ESOL has grown into a substantial part of the ETF's training provision. We deliver discrete subject training and have a growing focus on the management of basic skills provision and embedded learning, for example on T-levels. The ETF has also

supported the sector to respond to the massive increase in young people who resit GCSEs.”

Personal Reflection

“As a new tutor in 2000, the Skills for Life resources were fantastic. They provided all a tutor needed to plan, deliver and assess their learners. The practice versions of the national tests were based on the national standards for adult literacy and numeracy and gave tutors (and learners) the practice required to achieve the qualification. The added bonus was that learners could do the tests online or on paper. The Skills for Life maths qualifications prepared learners much more than Functional Skills to deal with maths they encounter every day.”

Dipa Ganguli OBE, Principal of Sutton Adult Education College

• A learner focus

Adult learners need plenty of encouragement, support and people to inspire them at a local level. Eleanor Churchward, Service Manager at Sheffield City Council, says: “Many years ago there were a lot of community advocates ensuring that each learner’s wrap-around needs were met. This has become increasingly more scarce, difficult to fund, and relies on much good will of staff, and most importantly the VCF [voluntary, community and faith] sector. We in Sheffield work very closely with the VCF and champion this type of work but it is becoming more difficult. Learners tell us that this support is vital for their motivation and ability to continue on their own journey.”

She also highlights the challenge of digital inequality. “We are now faced with an unprecedented difficulty in engaging or maintaining engagement of adult learners using online platforms. Digital literacy is a major barrier and the lack of SMART technology places learners in digital poverty. Changes to the workplace around digital platforms creates an even bigger

divide for those that are already the most vulnerable – needing digital, maths and English to be in with a chance on the starting block.”

• Inspection and Ofsted

As the Skills for Life strategy grew, so did its influence on the inspection of literacy and numeracy.

- The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and then Ofsted had a national lead for literacy, language and numeracy.
- Every inspection team had to have a specialist literacy or numeracy inspector.
- Where there was literacy or numeracy provision, it had to be inspected.
- Providers knew that their provision would be inspected, and the Skills for Life strategy gave them the tools for improving it.
- The strategy’s national standards provided a framework for inspection too: inspectors were trained in using them to help improve the consistency of judgement.
- Meetings between the Skills for Life team and ALI/Ofsted were used to share inspection findings and identify further developments and support for providers.
- They often used a ‘double-pronged tactic’ when approaching ministers about policy and funding.
- Soon, literacy and numeracy were inspected across all subject areas and apprenticeships.
- Many of the ALI/Ofsted good practice examples for literacy, numeracy and ESOL demonstrated how learners had benefited directly from their providers’ use of the Skills for Life resources and training.

Personal Reflection

“On inspection, learners would often take pride in talking about the difference their course had made. One learner looked at his shiny new adult literacy certificate and then at me, saying, ‘I didn’t ever think that I could achieve that’. He said it had made his day – mine too.”

Karen Adriaanse, former Ofsted HMI

Use of the mainstream media and relentless communication

The 2001-10 national ‘Get On’ media campaign and helpline were central to stimulating demand for Skills for Life programmes, leaning heavily on a tradition of successfully recruiting adults via broadcasting media pioneered by the BBC from the early 1970s. Adults were encouraged to overcome their fears of learning and “get rid of their Gremlins”.

Whether you loved them or hated them, the Gremlins had reach – by 2005 the DfES reported that just over one million people had achieved basic English or maths qualifications as a direct result of the marketing drive. The campaign included controversial television adverts, restricted for screening after 7.30pm after viewers complained that the creatures were frightening children; but the Gremlins nudged many reluctant adults into participating (see the ‘references’ section for weblinks to two of these adverts).

The ‘Move On Up’ programme, which enabled adults to brush up their basic skills and take the national literacy and numeracy tests, also helped to raise participation. The programme had a strong branding, including a distinctive logo. Its legacy continues: ‘move on’ and ‘practice adult literacy and numeracy tests’ are still two of the most frequent search terms and the subject of many enquiries on the Skills for Life Network website.

Barbara Zealley, Director of the Skills for Life Network, comments: “The more widespread use of smartphones, laptops and wearable

technology over the past decade allows for a wider reach than TV, a helpline and merchandise alone can achieve. The evolution of social media and digital marketing brings new opportunities to connect with people, amplify key messages and evaluate the success of campaigns, in ways that we couldn’t have imagined back in 2010.”

Working with initiatives that have the same goals

The strategy segmented learner types and looked for innovative ways to engage each type. There was a collection of initiatives such as Union Learn, Workbased Literacy, Move On, Read Write Plus and Our Future: It’s In Our Hands, developed and targeted to meet the needs of different learner types.

Early on, it was decided not to reinvent any wheels but to build on what other initiatives and agencies were doing. Enabling learners to undertake vocational qualifications with their literacy, language and numeracy support running parallel, improved their achievements and opened up many more opportunities.

• Investors in People

Ruth Spellman, former Chief Executive of the WEA and the Chartered Management Institute, says: “By the 1990s, Investors in People (IIP) was already riding high as a proven way to recognise and spread best practice in people development. One of its strengths was that it helped to identify the skill needs of employees through an objective assessment process and, in many cases, this was a voyage of discovery for employers.

“IIP helped employers to prioritise the training and development needs of their whole workforce in a way which had never been achieved before, to access advice and support and to be referred to other agencies to find solutions. Our model of delivery was through partnerships with the LSCs and other organisations able to influence employers and workers.

“Through the reach of IIP, organisations were introduced to the Skills for Life campaign and became ambassadors for it. Schools with IIP realised they could train their support staff through Skills for Life funding, small employers could invest in entry level skills to address shortages, and national organisations became passionate advocates. At its peak in 2005/06, more than 30,000 businesses had achieved IIP.”

• **Prison and probation**

Skills for Life:

- Exposed the issue of literacy and numeracy levels of prisoners and those in youth custody, and in particular the link between the skills deficit and re-offending.
- Exposed how prison education was working as a whole through this national focus – heads of learning were appointed and there was better organisation of prisoners into education, but more needed to be referred in for basic skills.
- Enabled focus on how literacy and numeracy skills provision needed to be delivered to get impact and results in these settings (embedded, linked to employment opportunities and progression, and linked to life opportunities such as family literacy in prisons).
- Demonstrated the need for an individual ‘passport’ so that the now streamlined national assessments were not repeated by other agencies due to lost records.
- Reinforced that basic skills lead to jobs/employment, which in turn helps resettlement and reduces re-offending.

• **Family learning**

‘Family learning’ is any activity where there are learning outcomes for both the children/young people and parents/carers involved. This might be ‘synchronous’ learning between parents/carers and children/young people. Or it may be ‘asynchronous’ learning where, for example, parents/carers learn strategies from

tutors about techniques their children are taught in school, in order to better support learning in the home environment. It directly supports the efforts of adult education providers.

Family learning is arguably more important than any purely child-focused support/intervention that schools/academies/nurseries might offer, and offers great potential for improved home-school communication and better outcomes for children and young people. This is because, as the DfE has acknowledged, a parent’s approach is important. However, for some parents, developing their confidence to support their child can be challenging, particularly if they struggle with their own numeracy, language and literacy skills.

Personal Reflection

“Over 15 years I’ve worked locally, nationally and internationally in delivering and enabling family learning. I’ve researched and campaigned for family learning classes to be available for all families wishing to access it – irrespective of postcode. My studies through Harvard University in family engagement confirm the impact of this approach.”

Susannah Chambers, Family Learning Consultant and Founder of Families Learning

• **Financial literacy**

Andrea Cowton, Head of Curriculum at Lancashire Adult Learning, reflects: “In the early days of teaching adult community-based Skills for Life, contextualised English and maths courses were the norm as we sought to raise the profile of basic skills and draw in hard-to-reach learners. This included courses that developed some money management skills, such as ‘cooking on a budget’.

“The Adult Financial Capability framework, updated in 2006, provided a much more structured framework and recognised

that in order to improve a learner's financial skills, there was an absolute need to develop their English and maths too. The premise was to equip people with the skills to question, challenge and seek advice to understand their financial requirements. From a teacher point of view, the framework took away the fear of teaching financial learning without being experts in this field. It was practical, mapped to the core curricula, used clear language and enabled teachers to develop ideas for delivery in a maths or English context.

"Today, with the loss of many jobs and debt at high levels, maybe there is a real need to bring this back and ensure that it is again fully embedded into adult maths and English delivery for those that need this. Though there is a plethora of good online educational resources, if it is to be of real benefit to the many with low skills, the English and maths skills must be developed alongside."

Underpinned by robust programme management and accountability

The steering committee for Skills for Life was made up of ministers from all the key departments responsible for elements of the strategy. Although individual skills ministers moved on from their roles quite regularly, they often moved to another department that had a role in the implementation of Skills for Life – and so these ministers took on the portfolio in their new department.

From 2001 to 2005, this group became experts in the agenda and really championed the policy. The work was spearheaded by an experienced sector leader who led the DfEE/DfES Basic Skills Unit, made up of talented civil servants and external specialists in curriculum and FE finance. The unit also had a regional dimension and placed key colleagues in each of the partner government departments. There was robust programme management with a clear focus on implementing and meeting the target.

Ken Sargison recalls: "One of the most critical delivery points was the Skills for Life Strategy Unit to commission implementation projects that brought together the public, private and third sector organisations. These organisations worked in concert to bring the best of their talents to the distinct approach that the strategy required to be delivered. At times this presented challenges, but the benefits of this approach were tangible. This way of working was innovative and was unusual for the civil service, which at the time preferred a more centralist delivery mechanism.

"The original budget for the strategy was created from new funding coming into DfEE for the Learning Age Strategy 2001 and diversion of funds that were not seen as a priority. As participation increased, funding was further enhanced in 2004 and 2007. The bulk of the budget was spent on participation, but funds were kept back to underpin implementation – including teaching materials and teacher training, media campaigns, research and evaluation."

Technology was harnessed and the new 'learndirect' (launched by Ufi) established online courses. Sue Densley, Head of Skills for Life at Ufi 2002-06, says: "In 2003 Ufi/learndirect started to build a network of over 500 learning centres across England to deliver the new online assessments for adult literacy and numeracy as part of the Skills for Life strategy. We also put in place regional co-ordinators who, along with national staff, raised awareness of the Skills for Life agenda.

"The online version of the assessments really appealed to those learners who were 'tech savvy' and had been engaging with online learning materials. Because the strategy broadened the scope of the previous agenda regarding basic skills, learning centres were able to offer courses and the new tests to learners who hadn't previously considered themselves as having literacy or numeracy skills needs – encouraging them to upskill. Other learners really responded to the opportunity to gain a qualification. The assessments were particularly popular with ESOL learners.

To promote the Skills for Life agenda Ufi/learnDirect formed a partnership with the 'Move On' campaign.

"The strategy gave millions of adults the opportunity to upskill and achieve a qualification. Offering courses from Entry Level through to Level 2 provided progression routes for individuals and undoubtedly built confidence and created opportunities to go on to further learning."

LEGACY

The Skills for Life strategy created a lasting delivery framework. Many of its processes and systems were embedded into mainstream practice in 2007 and still continue today. It left a lasting legacy and infrastructure including:

- A legal entitlement to free education for those without a Level 2 qualification in English and/or maths.
- Teaching materials and resources (although these now require updating).
- National standards and qualifications framework from Pre-Entry level to Level 2 and an alternative route to GCSE.
- Recognition that English and maths teachers need to be trained and qualified.
- Funding mainstreamed into the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funding methodology.
- A solid research foundation on the economic impact of investing in adult English and maths.
- Established family learning as an effective means of improving children's reading and adult literacy.
- The importance of co-activity, such as learning for literacy skills as part of a vocational course.

Annual participation in English and maths courses peaked in 2009 then settled at around 800,000. However, in 2016/17, participation decreased 6% to 755,300 (down from 803,800 in 2015/16). In 2017/18 there was a further 12.1% decrease to 664,200. That downward trend has continued: in 2018/19, 573,500 people participated and in 2019/20 this had fallen to 479,300.

This reduction in participation is causing alarm as the need is still there. Adults need to be supported by a government infrastructure which can help improve their prospects and that of the economy. This decrease in participation is a worrying trend which must be addressed through a renewed government focus on adult literacy and numeracy.

Anne Milton, former Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, wrote in FE News in June 2020: “Adult education is little understood except by those involved with it. But amongst those who provide it, and those who receive, you will find a committed and dedicated workforce and incredibly motivated students of all ages who see it as a lifeline to a better job and career. A small budget – and a budget that’s down 40% since 2010, but through adult education there is an opportunity waiting to blossom for adults – and for employers... Government needs to put money behind warm words on adult education and levelling up – it needs to truly believe people are worth it. And for Government the economic, social and health benefits will be worth every penny they spend.”

Personal Reflection

“Many of the initiatives introduced by Skills for Life, especially the workplace delivery and community referral networks, are now in decline but could and should be reinvigorated to boost participation today. The main legacy for me is the professional development opportunities – funded conferences, research, teacher training courses and resources. These supported me in delivering Skills for Life, but also equipped me with the skills, knowledge and understanding to critique the elements I felt were less effective. I still draw on much of this professional development in my current role.”

Alex Stevenson, Skills for Life tutor now Head of English, Maths and ESOL at the Learning and Work Institute

NEW CHALLENGES FOR 2021 AND BEYOND

Young people’s skills levels

Too many young people are leaving school with low levels of literacy, and a disturbing feature in England is that young adults perform no better than older ones. Although adults aged 55 to 65 compare reasonably well with their counterparts in other countries, younger people are lagging badly behind. Other things being equal (including migration), this means that over time the basic skills of the English labour force could fall further behind that of other countries.

In many countries, rising educational attainment has driven up basic skills. But in England, whilst young people are more likely than their parents’ generation to continue into further and higher education, too many still have weak basic skills.

To help mitigate this issue, government introduced the requirement for students to resit their GCSE English and maths. Since 2015 the FE and skills sector has seen major changes in the delivery of English and maths. Students who have not yet achieved a GCSE grade 4 at school are required to resit the exam. This has resulted in a massive expansion of the provision for 16-19 year olds, and the recruitment and training of many new English and maths teachers.

For example, quite a few FE colleges have over 1,000 candidates for the GCSE resits in both English and maths. In 2016 there was a major overhaul of the GCSE standards and exams, followed by the same for Functional Skills. The effort that has gone into managing these changes has been phenomenal. At the same

time, there is more work to train and upskill teachers of English and maths, and to produce appropriate and up-to-date resources.

Personal Reflection

"The loss of focus has led to the need getting even greater than 20 years ago – both the 'stock' of adults needing support and the 'flow' of young people every year without a Level 2 in literacy and numeracy is relentless and somewhat depressing. What is needed now is exactly what was needed 20 years ago, but this time don't let it wither on the vine."

Mark Dawe, Chief Executive of The Skills Network.

There is a new concern that compared to other OECD countries the UK has an issue with poor basic skills among graduates. In terms of adaptability, labour productivity growth is below the OECD average, which partly reflects depressed investment throughout 2010-16. Student skills are below the OECD average, with low basic skills at every education level being more prevalent. Improving basic skills, the OECD says, will increase the UK's productivity.

Another serious issue concerns the provision of ESOL. Although there is much good practice and a large proportion of the Adult Education Budget (AEB) is spent on ESOL, there is no national strategy for England. Scotland and Wales both have national strategies.

Imbalance of funding

There is an imbalance in funding and investment: those that did well at school benefit from investment, while those that didn't do well don't really get a second chance. Of the £20 billion available for post-19 education and skills training in this country, only 7% goes on those without a Level 3 qualification. This breeds resentment and a feeling of being left behind.

Although funding is an issue, the situation is more complex than just money. Austerity measures reduced the AEB by 40% and removed the entitlement to a free vocational Level 2 qualification in 2013. English and maths were not a target of cuts, with the policy intent being to keep their budgets at the 2011 level and retain the entitlements for both. However, the entitlements were expanded to cover essential digital skills while the overall envelope of funding was not, which puts greater burden on the funding available.

The funding guides and rules from the ESFA and the Mayoral Combined Authorities continue to confirm that they will fully fund the entitlements, and the Mayor of London has increased the funding rate for basic skills. The European Social Fund is being replaced by the UK Prosperity Fund but will be managed differently, and there is some funding for ESOL from other sources such as the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

Reduction in participation

Decreasing participation over the last five years is not entirely due to lack of funding but it is also to do with the combined impact of several policy changes – including the emphasis on Functional Skills, poor subject funding levels, removal of the vocational Level 2 (which was often the hook that encouraged adults to return to learning), the unintended consequences of the performance system plus the lack of emphasis and promotion from government and the new combined authorities.

These issues are not insurmountable, but they do need to be coordinated and led by government and its agencies.

Personal Reflection

“Problem recognised, problem proved (Moser); political action; a plan (Skills for Life); leadership selected; clarity of purpose well communicated; widespread supply side buy-in; clear focus/limited goals. It worked. Political short-termism, it wasn’t sustained at the funding level it needed to be. An even bigger problem remains. Adversarial political system to blame. Let’s do it again and then keep doing it.”

Martin Dunford OBE, Chief Executive of Skills Training, UK Chair of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers

ACTION PLAN AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What can be done to turn the tide and increase adult participation and achievement? Building on the success of Skills for Life and drawing on existing best practice, the Government, providers and intermediaries should revitalise their approach and embrace the following:

1. Collective leadership

Government, funding agencies, intermediaries, colleges, Adult Community Education and other providers, together with teachers, should commit to raise participation in adult English, ESOL and maths in a way which enthuses and grabs attention, just like it did 20 years ago.

2. New strategy

Following through on its commitment to funding the basic skills entitlements in the 2021 White Paper ‘Skills for Jobs’, DfE should create a new Skills for Life strategy for English, maths, digital and ESOL provision. This should sit alongside Skills for Jobs and be recognised as vital element in improving productivity, creating a dynamic economy and ensuring individual life chances.

3. Underpinning delivery plan

The DfE, with its delivery partners, should co-develop and co-own a new delivery plan that ensures adult basic skills is prioritised in the new skills development plans.

4. Whole-government approach to delivery

As part of the implementation plan, DfE should take the lead and bring together the main government departments who either commission adult skills, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, or would benefit from the nation's skills being improved, such as the Department of Health.

5. Regional and national infrastructure should fund and promote basic skills

As spending is being devolved, so is the responsibility for ensuring that adults are aware of their entitlements. Government and the Mayoral Combined Authorities should work together to manage national and local campaigns, including national advertising, so that they build and feed off each other with consistent messaging.

6. Enhanced workplace and unemployment offer

Before Covid -19 many of the adults needing to improve their skills are typically in the workplace. The workplace should become a learning environment with more providers delivering in employers' premises. The impact of Covid-19 has been greater on those with poor skills, and the national recovery plan should prioritise learning basic skills as part of a recovery training offer including basic skills of English, maths, digital and ESOL in the workplace.

7. Rebalancing the post-18 funding envelope

In response to the post-18 funding review, Government should rebalance the post-18 spend so that adults who were failed by the schools system have a second chance to acquire the basic skills they need for life. DfE should resource and renew its efforts to persuade the Treasury of the importance of sustained investment in preparing people for life and work.

8. Establish a realistic funding level

ESFA should take immediate action to rebase the funding levels for English, maths and ESOL. The present rates have remained

static for over 10 years and do not reflect the complex needs of learners and apprentices, or the expected quality requirements.

9. Revise and clarify the 'stepping stone' concept of funding

To ensure that colleges, ACE and other providers can continue to meet local basic skills needs, they need to maintain the flexibilities of entry points. The current approved qualifications in the funding system for 'legal entitlement' should be revised to either include non-regulated learning or recognition that the 'stepping stones' qualifications for English and maths enable learners to pick up learning as needed.

10. A quality offer

Colleges, ACE and other providers, if funded properly, are capable of doing the right thing. All provision, including the newly development online offer, should include:

- pre-course assessment
- diagnostic assessment
- individual learning plans
- delivery through different/appropriate sets of learning options, including the use of digital
- good relevant learning resources
- good practice embedded in vocational learning settings
- regular feedback and assessment leading to recognised qualifications including GCSE
- clear progression routes, and
- underpinned by trained qualified teachers and support staff.

11. Supporting the front line

Although colleges and providers in general are delivering good or outstanding provision, many say that the learning materials

for adult basic skills are dated and need to be revised. The Skills for Life and other resources are still available on the ETF website and are well used. The new delivery plan should make provision for updating or developing new materials for teachers and learners.

12. Clear signposting to courses

Prospective learners are often unclear where to go to find a programme that meets their needs. There should be a central point of contact via the National Careers Service website and providers should be supported to give point of entry advice and guidance. The new skills development plans should provide clear pathways for adults wishing to pursue courses in English, maths, ESOL and digital.

13. Use of the media

To stimulate increased participation, the new strategy should include a media campaign using television and other media outlets. The Skills for Life television adverts were controversial at the time, but they did the trick and nudged many reluctant adults into learning. There is a desperate need for something similar that lets prospective learners know they are entitled to free provision.

14. Universal roll-out of family learning

Enhance funding for family learning and start a universal roll-out which would better prepare families for any future disruption to the flow of learning.

15. Review the role of GCSEs

Going forward we need to stop the flow of young people reaching adulthood with poor basic skills. We therefore need proper, open review of the role of GCSEs in English and maths. We need to find better ways to help every young person build strong literacy, numeracy, digital and wider citizenship skills through their statutory education – enabling them to enter adulthood confidently and able to carry on learning throughout life.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and managers are working hard to do their best for adult learners, but the infrastructure that supports them is disintegrating. If further investment and changes are not made, participation and achievement will continue to decrease, productivity will continue to be lower than that of our competitors, and the social consequences and dependencies on the state will continue to rise. It is time for Government and the Mayoral Combined Authorities to take the reins and invest in those adults who need education the most.

Learner journey: Sally Eldridge, Thurrock Adult Community College

My experience of school wasn't great and I struggled with being bullied and couldn't wait to leave. I went into retail work and hairdressing, but after some hard life experiences my confidence was at an all-time low.

I decided that I needed to improve my English, maths and IT skills to improve my job prospects. It took courage to go into Thurrock Adult Community College (TACC) to enquire. I had an assessment and enrolled on Entry 3 literacy and numeracy classes, progressing to Levels 1 and 2.

Once I started you couldn't stop me. My tutors and peers helped immensely and my confidence improved. One tutor said that I would make a great tutor. She encouraged me to become a sessional tutor at TACC and I completed a qualification in education and training. My tutor was now my manager and mentor.

In 2013 I became a learning support assistant in a secondary school. I enjoyed working with the students but I had always wanted to work at TACC again, so when I saw a job advert for a learning support coordinator there I applied. I was amazed when I got the job.

I am now a team leader for the learning support team, supporting all learners to achieve. The college has been the driving force to my success, believing in me when I did not believe in myself. It helped me to gain confidence and grow at my own pace. Even now as a member of staff, the college as a whole gives me the reassurance that I can achieve. I wanted to join the college again to help learners to achieve their potential, as the college has done for me.

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