

# Skills for Life: Improving adult literacy and numeracy

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



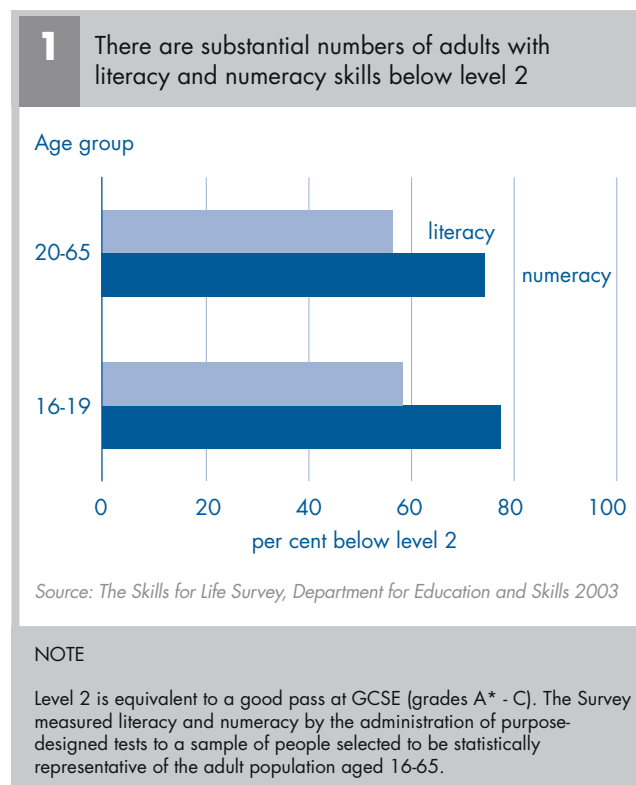


**1** Twenty-six million people of working age have levels of literacy or numeracy below those expected of school leavers.<sup>1</sup> People with the lowest levels – those expected of a 9 to 11 year old or below – can experience practical difficulties in their everyday lives. They may be unable to read and understand signs, notices and labels, or check whether they have received the correct change when shopping. Low levels of literacy and numeracy can affect people’s ability to interact with other people, bring up their children and hold down a job. Many are unemployed, on benefits or work in low-skilled employment. Some are offenders in prison or being supervised in the community.

**2** People who did not learn to read, write and carry out simple arithmetic in childhood may be reluctant to start or persevere with learning. There are substantial barriers to literacy and numeracy learning as an adult:

- People may be embarrassed about their low level of skills.
- They may not realise how poor their skills are because they have spent years developing coping strategies to reduce the impact on their daily lives.
- Poor experiences of learning in school, for example involving exclusion from school or coping with unidentified difficulties such as dyslexia, may have sapped their confidence and given them a negative view of education.
- Practical barriers to participating in learning include the need for childcare, the cost of transport, or the difficulty of getting time away from work to attend a course.

**3** The UK has relatively high numbers of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy compared with other countries, and there are substantial numbers of adults in England with literacy and numeracy skills below a good pass at GCSE (**Figure 1**). The low skills are spread equally across all age groups in the working age population, with no significant variation between men and women

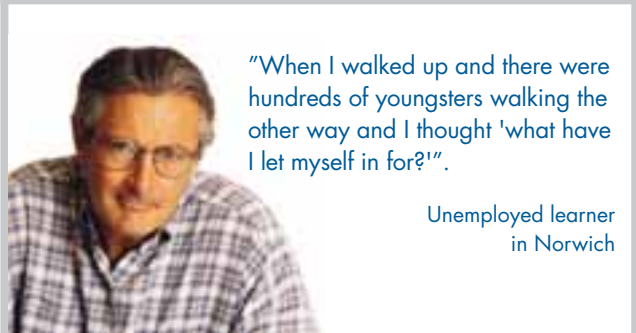
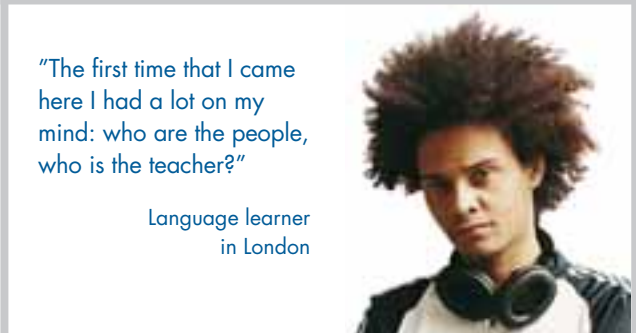
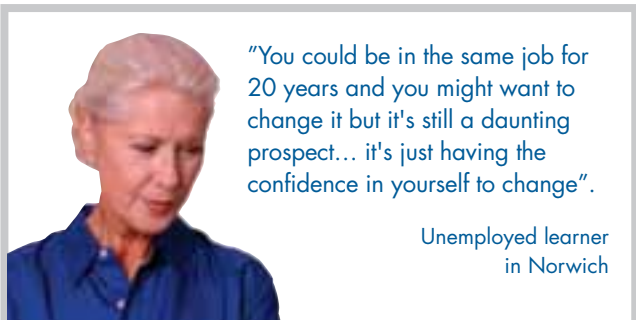


<sup>1</sup> The equivalent of grades A\* to C at GCSE, which is level 2 in the national qualification framework (Figure 8 on page 18 and Appendix 1).

or between ethnic groups where there are no language barriers. Those migrants who enter the country without English language skills may also have low levels of literacy in their own language, or low levels of numeracy. Some may have lived and worked within their own community, perhaps for a decade or more, without substantially improving their English language skills.

4 The labour market demand for people with good literacy and numeracy skills is increasing, and a working population with low literacy and numeracy skills is therefore increasingly likely to reduce the UK's economic competitiveness.

5 In March 2001 the Department for Education and Skills launched the Skills for Life Strategy, which began a long-term programme of improvement to break the cycle of poor literacy and numeracy skills in England. At least £3.7 billion will be spent on implementing the programme by 2006. Language skills (English for Speakers of Other



Languages) are included in the programme to address the needs of migrants entering the country with poor or no English. This report covers literacy, language and numeracy. The Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly have also introduced measures to address levels of literacy and numeracy.<sup>2</sup>

6 The Department is working with other departments, agencies, colleges, charities, voluntary organisations and private sector companies to increase the number and quality of learning opportunities for people to improve their literacy and numeracy. The learning provision is funded by the Department via the Learning and Skills Council which funds education and training for people aged over 16, or by Jobcentre Plus as part of entry to job-related training for people receiving working age benefits. Potential learners can access learning opportunities across a range of providers and locations including colleges, private sector providers, learndirect centres, and community learning centres (Figure 2). For many learners there will be a choice of the type of learning that they can take up, when and where they can do so. Figure 3 opposite sets out some of the paths that a learner may take.

7 In addition, the Department has encouraged departments and other public sector employers to help their own relevant staff to recognise they need to improve their skills and to find ways of learning that will be effective for them.

2 Adult literacy and numeracy in Scotland, July 2001 and the Basic Skills Strategy for Wales, February 2002.

**3** Examples of the different paths potential learners may take to improve their literacy, language or numeracy

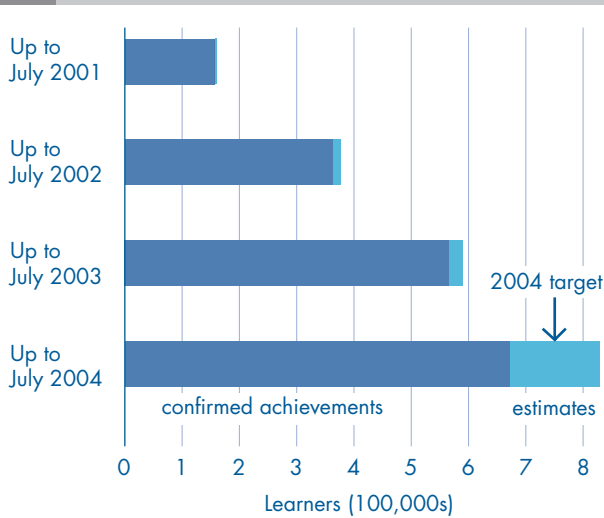
	<b>How do learners get into learning?</b>	<b>Where are needs assessed?</b>	<b>Where does the learning happen?</b>	
 Low-skilled employee	Employer, union learning representative and learning provider stimulate interest  Adverts and/or speaking to friends	— Learning provider working with employer  — College or learndirect centre	— Usually in the workplace  — At home, college and/or learndirect	 
 Teenager over school age	Applies to college for vocational or other course	— College as part of course induction	— If needed, alongside a college course applied for	
 Unemployed and seeking work	Applies for Jobseeker's Allowance and is automatically screened by Jobcentre Plus adviser	— Jobcentre Plus contractor providing learning	— Jobcentre Plus contractor's premises or at the Jobcentre	
 Not working and not seeking work	Applies for personal interest course (for example shiatsu massage)	— Learning provider, after discussing embedded <sup>1</sup> learning with applicant	— If needed, as part of embedded learning in personal interest course	
 Migrant	Immigration adviser and/or speaking to other migrants	— College or other learning provider	— English for Speakers of Other Languages in college or other provider	
 Offender committed to prison	As part of a programme to reduce re-offending	— On admission to prison	— In prison or later in college/other learning provider	

Source: National Audit Office

**NOTE**

<sup>1</sup> Embedded learning is where literacy or numeracy is taught as part of a vocational programme or wider programme, for example as part of a course on plumbing or a personal interest or skill.

**4** The latest estimates suggest that the 2004 target has been achieved



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Learning and Skills Council data and estimates

**NOTE**

The reasons for the need to estimate achievement are set out in Figure 15 on page 28.

**8** Our report explains the background to the Skills for Life Strategy and how it is being implemented (Part 1) and examines:

- the costs of the programme and its achievements to date (Part 2);
- the growth in participation (Part 3); and
- how delivery will be sustained (Part 4).

We make recommendations to support the delivery of the Strategy until 2010 and beyond.

## Findings

**9** The Department has set about implementing the Skills for Life Strategy in a pragmatic way. It concentrated first of all on raising the standards of learning, increasing the quantity of provision and encouraging people to take up the learning. Since many of the people taking up learning had difficulties with education in the past, the Department wanted to secure sufficient good quality learning early on, so that once attracted to learn, a learner's experience as an adult would be a good one. Some of the improvements will take time to have their full impact.

## What has worked well

**10** The Skills for Life Strategy is starting to have an impact on people's levels of literacy, language and numeracy, and is increasing participation in learning.

According to the latest estimates, the Department has achieved its initial target of improving the literacy or numeracy of 750,000 people by 2004 (Figure 4).

**11** The Public Service Agreement target for 2010 and its milestones – 750,000 people by 2004, 1.5 million by 2007, and 2.25 million by 2010 – appear small in comparison with the 26 million people with literacy and numeracy below a good GCSE. However, there are enormous cultural and cost barriers to raising the skills of a large proportion of the population above this level except, possibly, over the longer term. The Department is placing emphasis on building participation of all adults with skills below the target level and estimates that by July 2004 over two million people had taken part in literacy and numeracy learning.

**12** Evidence is building up on the impacts of improving literacy and numeracy as an adult. There has been a lack of research on beneficial impacts from gaining literacy, language and numeracy later in life both nationally and internationally. The Department has commissioned research to track the experience of learners. In 2005 the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy intends to investigate the value placed by the labour market on adult literacy, numeracy and language skills. Evidence from individual learners suggests beneficial impacts – for example through increased confidence in dealing with banks, their doctor, social situations and personal relationships. Many learners say they feel better equipped to get a job or move on to a further course of study.

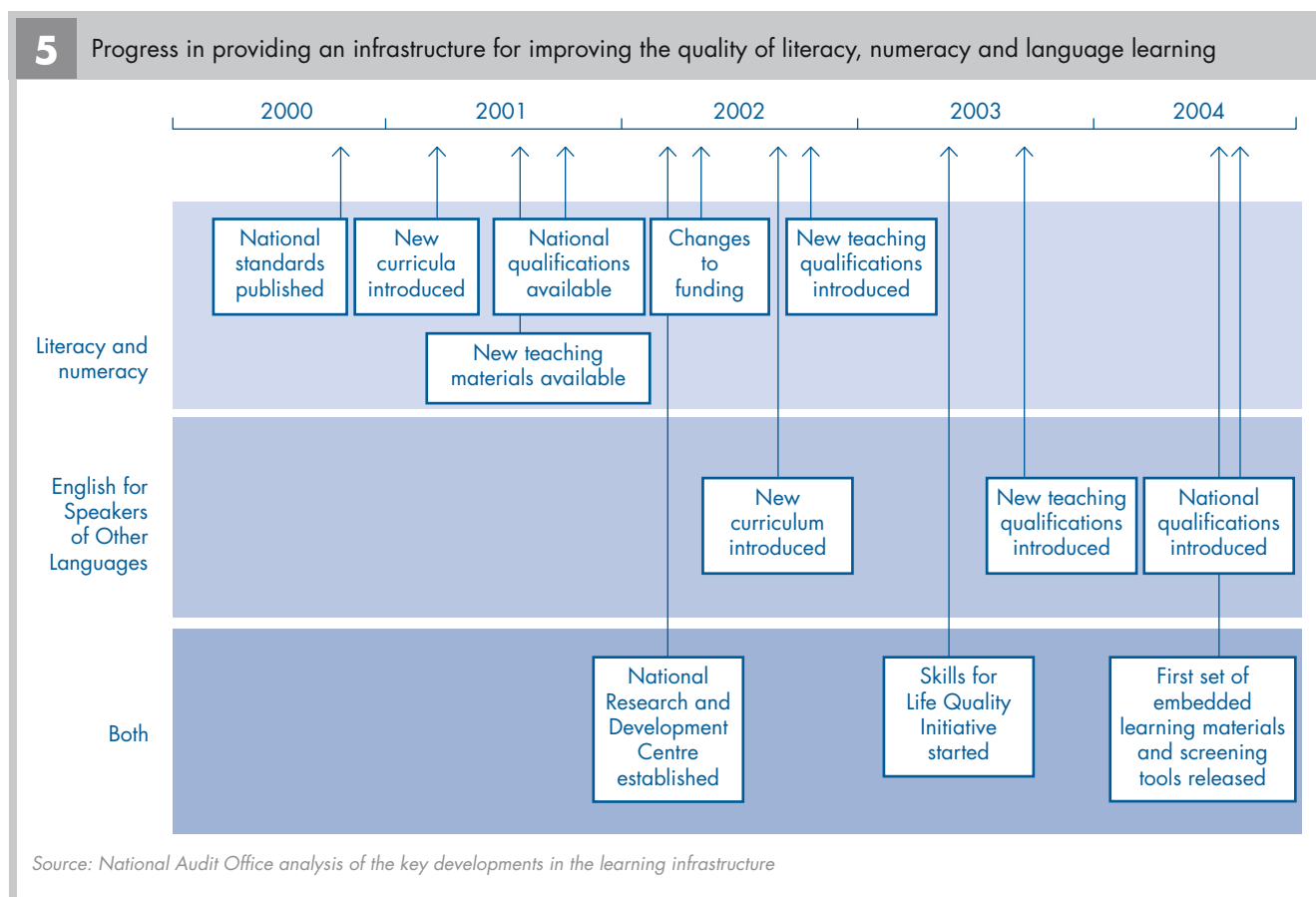
**13** The Department has led the development of lasting improvements in the quality of literacy, numeracy and language learning. All the elements that support good learning – such as skill standards, curricula, good quality teaching and recognisable qualifications – were either non-existent or underdeveloped before 2001. Different colleges and examining boards offered a wide range of courses and qualifications which were not recognised by employers. Teachers were not always supported by good quality teaching materials and there was no clear path for improving the teaching of literacy, language and numeracy and for training and developing teachers.

**14** The Department has introduced standards, curricula and new teaching materials to raise the quality of learning. It has brought in national tests and associated qualifications so that people know when they have achieved the standards. The developments on language learning followed literacy and numeracy, drawing on some of the work undertaken for literacy. The infrastructure shown in **Figure 5** will underpin the continued implementation of the Skills for Life Strategy.

**15** Literacy and numeracy learning will increasingly need to attract people who are ‘difficult to reach’. Encouraging some of these people to learn will require creative provision through practices such as ‘embedding’, where literacy or numeracy is taught as part of a vocational programme or through family literacy which helps parents support their children in school. Learners we met liked this style of learning because they see it as more relevant to their daily lives. The Department has

commissioned a project to provide embedded learning materials over three years to 2006. Some providers are making good progress in developing embedded courses that both appeal to learners and meet their learning needs.

**16** **The Department and the Learning and Skills Council have given incentives to providers to deliver more opportunities for people to learn literacy, language and numeracy.** The Learning and Skills Council’s funding for literacy, language and numeracy is 40 per cent higher than for other comparable programmes. In response, colleges are offering more options for people to improve their literacy and numeracy, including some flexible provision such as learning in the evening and at weekends. learndirect<sup>3</sup> also provides opportunities for people to improve literacy and numeracy either at learndirect centres or online. The places are free to learners with low skills.



3 learndirect provides flexible e-learning solutions enabling learning to take place at work, home or in one of over 2,000 learndirect centres.

**17 The Department has raised awareness by advertising and by working with other departments to reach their clients.** The Department has run national campaigns on radio and television designed to help people recognise when they have low skills and to tell them where they can go for help. The campaigns were reinforced by advertising from local Learning and Skills Councils and a campaign by learndirect.

**18** The Department, the Prison Service and the Probation Service have co-operated to improve the assessment of offenders' levels of literacy, language or numeracy. An estimated 92,000 offenders have gained qualifications in literacy or numeracy. From April 2004, the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus have introduced arrangements to screen all people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance within six months of making their claim for benefit, followed by more detailed assessment where appropriate. People with literacy and numeracy skills below level 1<sup>4</sup> are offered courses funded by Jobcentre Plus which are designed in part to improve their literacy and numeracy in a work environment. Jobcentre Plus is also introducing less formal screening of other working age benefit claimants where they attend work-focused interviews as part of the regular review of their entitlement to benefit. If these customers are identified as having potential literacy and numeracy needs below level 1, Jobcentre Plus advisers offer them more detailed assessment of their skills by a Jobcentre Plus' contractor. The contractor may then offer the client Jobcentre Plus funded courses, or direct them to further education colleges or to learndirect.

### Where more progress is needed

**19** The Department is continuing to direct its efforts into increasing participation, reducing the barriers to learning and raising the quality, accessibility and flexibility of the provision. The following areas are those which seem to us to present the greatest challenges for the Department, the Learning and Skills Council and their partners.

**20 More people with the lowest skill levels and those who are least likely to perceive they have poor skills need to be persuaded that improving their skills is worthwhile.** More than half of the qualifications counting towards the July 2004 target were gained by 16 to 18 year olds. Many people who have recently experienced formal education perceive relatively few barriers to learning – although equally many young people are in danger of being lost to the education system. Most qualifications were also achieved by people who were happy to study at a further education college. Participation by older adults is increasing, but only slowly. Larger numbers of older adults with low skills need to be encouraged into learning to make substantial inroads into the low literacy and numeracy skills of the working age population. Local Learning and Skills Councils have had varying success in raising participation, but in all areas only a small percentage of the potential numbers are participating in learning so far and new learners need to be encouraged to take up opportunities over the next few years.

**21 There continue to be high barriers to some people taking up opportunities to learn, or to them continuing with learning once started.** Many people lead complicated lives with commitments to family, employers and often both. They are understandably reluctant to take on extra hours to improve skills they do not think need improving, or where the benefits of improvement are unclear. Some people may not have held a job for any length of time or may have chaotic, unstructured lives involving substance abuse, periods of homelessness or mental illness. Local Learning and Skills Councils have historically had poor information on the extent of low skills in local populations.

**22** Refugees and asylum seekers face cultural barriers, may be traumatised from past experiences, face uncertainty about their immigration status and may be dispersed around the country. The local picture on migrants' literacy and numeracy needs can change rapidly as people with different countries of origin come into the UK.

4 Level 1 is the level equivalent to a GCSE grade D-G and equates to that expected of an 11 year old.



**23** For all potential learners barriers can include: recognising that they can improve their skills; being able to find out what learning opportunities exist; having courses in places they can get to; or simply being unable to organise their lives to include regular time in which to learn new skills. The gremlins promotion campaigns have sought to address many of these barriers and the latest campaign focuses on people in the workplace and the benefits of gaining qualifications. Local campaigns complement the national ones and can be tailored to local circumstances.

**24 Assessment of peoples' skill needs varies widely among these and other groups.** Offenders are routinely assessed in prison or during probation and offered relevant courses. As explained in paragraph 18, Jobcentre Plus undertakes a formal assessment of the literacy and numeracy skills of customers receiving Jobseeker's Allowance. In around half of its offices, Jobcentre Plus advisers also informally screen customers claiming working age benefits when carrying out work-focused interviews to review their entitlement to benefits. This will be extended to all offices by 2006.

**25** The Department for Education and Skills has sought to enlist employers, unions, and many public sector agencies that may come into contact with potential learners in identifying those who have low literacy and numeracy skills, encouraging them to have their skills assessed and supporting them into learning. There remains a risk that the needs of people such as those who do not receive benefits, or who do not receive benefits on their own behalf and are not themselves employed, would only be assessed if they identify a need to improve their skills and ask a learning provider for an assessment.

**26 Some learners need more incentives and choice to encourage them to persevere with learning opportunities.** The Department has sought to engage potential learners who only need short courses to improve their skills and gain a qualification by promoting short, specific courses that best meet their needs. Offenders are on probation for an average of six months. Thereafter they need to take up learning from another provider and the risk that they will drop out of learning increases.

**27** Jobcentre Plus' primary objective is to help people into work, though it funds literacy and numeracy learning as one element of training aimed at getting people into employment. Attendance on the courses is for the most part voluntary. Jobcentre Plus' customers who obtain employment cease to attend any training course provided by Jobcentre Plus' contractors even where the job is short-term, and few people seek to continue the learning elsewhere. The drop-out rate for customers on Jobcentre Plus courses has been high and few have achieved qualifications.<sup>5</sup> In April 2004, the Department for Work and Pensions introduced financial incentives for taking up training and achieving a qualification, which are intended to increase participation rates and reduce the number of people who drop out before finding work.

**28 Low-skilled employees are one of the hardest groups to reach, and more small and medium sized employers need to be persuaded of the benefits of raising the skills of their employees.** Many employees who have low literacy and numeracy skills are not aware of it, and if they are, they may not see the benefits of improving their skills. Similarly many employers, particularly those running small or medium sized enterprises<sup>6</sup>, are not readily convinced of the business benefits of improving employees' literacy and numeracy. Consequently they may be reluctant to invest cost and staff time in training. Barriers include work time lost from releasing employees for courses, fitting courses around working patterns, and the time and effort required for a learning provider to develop flexible and effective programmes that meet both the employer's and employees' needs. To promote the benefits of learning to employers and to address the perceived barriers, the Department has sponsored a number of initiatives such as employer training pilots and union learning representatives. Progress at local level is slow – even those providers and local Learning and Skills Councils that are engaging most effectively with employers of low-skilled employees find they have to expend considerable effort and resources to develop a successful offer of opportunities to improve skills.

<sup>5</sup> Jobcentre Plus considers that this is primarily due to customers finding employment and leaving the unemployment register.

<sup>6</sup> Small to medium sized enterprises, with 200 staff or fewer, are around 80 per cent of employers in England.

**29 Voluntary and community organisations are essential partners because they are often best placed to encourage into learning those people who are very hard to reach, but there are barriers to these organisations becoming effectively involved.** The Department and the Learning and Skills Council have taken steps to involve voluntary and community organisations in engaging reluctant learners and organising appropriate and personalised learning for them. However most organisations have much wider roles than learning provision and can find it difficult to cope with the Council's conditions for obtaining funding, which are designed for organisations mainly focused on providing learning. In May 2004 the Learning and Skills Council published a strategy for working with the voluntary and community sector, which included plans for making voluntary and community organisations' access to funding more straightforward.

**30 More teachers with up-to-date training in teaching literacy, numeracy and language are needed to provide high quality learning.** There are widespread shortages of teachers with up-to-date skills to match the success so far in raising demand for learning. In September 2002 the Department introduced new qualifications at level 4<sup>7</sup> for literacy or numeracy teaching, and a programme of continuing professional education for existing teachers. It has made clear to providers that it expects them to encourage teachers to improve their skills and that by 2010 all teachers will be qualified. Not all providers are fully responding to the call for improvement so that, for example, existing teachers, especially those on temporary and part-time contracts, may not be persuaded of the benefits of improving their teaching skills or feel supported to do so.

**31 The quality of learning needs to be raised to a consistently high level in all areas of the country.**

A review of the quality and standards of literacy, language and numeracy provision by the Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted, reporting in September 2003, found examples of good practice but also widespread weaknesses. The report established a baseline against which the improvements in quality can be assessed. As yet there is little evidence from individual inspections of improvements in the quality of learning delivered. The continuing weaknesses may partly be explained by the lead time required before improvements, for example in training of teachers, feed through to the learning they deliver. However, some low performance is likely to be due to providers not energetically taking up the fruits of the new learning infrastructure (Figure 5 on page 7).

**32 More providers need to engage in creative development of flexible learning that people want because it meets both their practical requirements and personal needs.** More innovative approaches such as embedded learning present particular challenges, for example because of the need to ensure that the literacy or numeracy elements within an embedded programme are given sufficient attention and that the programmes use teachers trained in teaching literacy or numeracy. Some providers are already developing learning that is both creative and effective, and there is increasing support available for others to do so, drawing on resources such as the work of the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy which, among other things, tests new ideas and approaches to learning.

7 The qualifications are set at the level of difficulty of a degree, but are not equivalent to a degree because they do not cover the breadth of material covered within a degree course.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

**33** We support the comprehensive and pragmatic approach that the Department for Education and Skills is taking to improving adult literacy, language and numeracy. The low levels of skills are a big problem that can only be addressed through action over the long term, and the Department and its partners' work will take time to have a major impact on the level of literacy and numeracy in the working age population. The Department and its partners should work together to implement our recommendations. There are, in addition, complementary recommendations set out in our recent report on the barriers to employment of older people.<sup>8</sup>

**1** **Local Learning and Skills Councils should use the information from the Skills for Life survey and detailed information collected in their local area to build a clear picture of local needs for literacy, language and numeracy learning. They should help a range of learning providers to develop their capacity to meet the assessed local needs.**

Local Learning and Skills Councils have the primary responsibility for assessing local needs for further education and planning the provision to meet it. The picture on need for language learning can change particularly rapidly. Local Learning and Skills Councils have been hampered by poor local information both on low levels of literacy, language and numeracy and how far local learning provision matches the needs. Some have made good progress – for example, the Learning and Skills Council West Yorkshire has worked with local providers to map local provision in Bradford and has removed duplication, so freeing resources to provide learning where there was little or no provision.

**2** **Local Learning and Skills Councils should use the enthusiasm, commitment and local knowledge of existing and recent learners to attract other people into learning.**

The people who best know the benefits of improving their literacy, language and numeracy are the learners themselves. For many learning unexpectedly turns out to be a life-changing experience and their enthusiasm is infectious. Some of the best provision builds on this experience to create learning that meets new learners' personal needs – for example some learndirect centres employ learners from deprived areas to support new learners in its centres. The Department ran a successful project, called Link Up, to recruit volunteers who undertook a qualification to become adult learner supporters. This scheme is now being devolved to a local level and needs to be maintained and built upon. The Department and its partners are using examples of successful learners to promote the benefits. They should extend this approach to local mentoring and outreach work to help people to see the benefits of improving their skills.

<sup>8</sup> National Audit Office Report. Welfare to work: tackling the barriers to the employment of older people (HC 1026 2003-04).

## RECOMMENDATIONS *continued*

**3** The Department and the Learning and Skills Council should establish and disseminate examples of embedded and personalised learning that are successfully raising literacy and numeracy levels and encouraging learners to take up further learning opportunities. They should draw on examples of good practice involving work with voluntary and community organisations in encouraging very reluctant learners to get involved.

By embedding learning in vocational training or personal interest subjects, reluctant learners can be helped in a non-threatening way to address their literacy and numeracy skills. Some providers are working creatively to develop flexible and attractive programmes by assisting with embedding literacy, language and numeracy into vocational courses such as plumbing. Some voluntary organisations are helping hard to reach learners by embedding skills in courses such as needlework for Bangladeshi women run in local community centres. The Department has commissioned a national embedded materials project to provide support for teachers. These are all potentially very rewarding approaches that need to be evaluated and good practice shared throughout the country.



**4** Local Learning and Skills Councils should continue to work with local employers to overcome the barriers that employers perceive to providing their employees with improved skills, and with providers to help develop choice in flexible learning to meet the needs of employers and employees.

Many employers, particularly smaller employers, consider that they do not have sufficient capacity or resources to be able to free employees to improve literacy and numeracy during working hours. The Department has been trialling different ways of engaging employers. Local Learning and Skills Councils are encouraging employers to draw on flexible learning opportunities – for example through learndirect, colleges providing courses on business premises and literacy and numeracy embedded in vocational learning. Financial incentives may also be needed to help some small employers to release their staff for learning and are being piloted in the employer training pilots. Successfully engaged businesses should also be encouraged and supported to persuade other employers of the practical benefits of improving the literacy and numeracy of their staff.

**5** The Department for Education and Skills should develop ways of following up learners, encouraging them to persevere with improving their skills and to take up further opportunities.

The Department already funds helplines that can direct potential learners to appropriate learning provision. As part of its evaluation of the helplines, the Department follows up a group of callers to find out the action they take and their views of the helpline. With the consent of the person calling, telephone helplines make follow-up calls to encourage progress and provide links to local mentors and other support. The Department should consider extending this follow up to the majority of callers. While this type of support increases costs, it has been demonstrated to be cost-effective for other services such as the NHS Smoking Helpline.



**6 The Department for Education and Skills, Learning and Skills Council and the Department for Work and Pensions should work together to ensure that customers on Jobcentre Plus funded courses are encouraged to continue their learning if they take up employment**

At present people have to give up learning funded by Jobcentre Plus once they get a job and the barriers they face in continuing to learn when in employment can be very high. Jobcentre Plus should work with local Learning and Skills Councils to encourage customers to access and complete their learning in a way that suits them, whether as part of their new job or in their leisure time. Local Learning and Skills Councils should also consider what encouragement local employers need to help them see the benefits of their staff continuing to improve their skills.

**7 The Department for Education and Skills should look at ways of ensuring that programmes for literacy, language and numeracy assess progress at frequent intervals.**

Our society tends to see non-completion of learning in a negative light – as ‘dropping out’. And there are barriers to picking learning up at a later date because the learner often has to start all over again. People’s circumstances change and learning needs to be devised that fits better with their lives, and with their employer’s business if they work. When tutors assess skills as they are gained, learners build a sense of achievement from their ‘credits’ and are more easily able to pick up learning where they left off. The Department has been working to introduce flexible and innovative assessment, but this is not always operated effectively or recorded.

**8 Local Learning and Skills Councils should work with providers to make sure that there are sufficient appropriately trained teachers in their areas and that existing teachers are supported to develop their skills.**

Most areas have shortages of teachers able to provide the high quality teaching to meet local demand. Most also have high numbers of existing teaching staff who need to develop their professional skills further. Local Learning and Skills Councils should explore the specific reasons for shortages of teachers in their areas. Where there are few or no local programmes for teacher training, they should work with Higher Education Institutions to develop them. Professional development programmes such as those under the Skills for Life Quality Initiative, funded by the national Learning and Skills Council, are available for existing staff, and local Learning and Skills Councils need to ensure providers make full use of the opportunities they provide. Where teachers are not being retained, local Learning and Skills Councils should work with providers to find out why and get them to tackle the problems that emerge – whether related to pay, contract terms, or other reasons.

**9 The Learning and Skills Council should assist local Learning and Skills Councils in sharing approaches and experience of what works (and what has not worked) in increasing participation in learning and achievement of the national target.**

All the local areas need to increase participation of the large numbers of people identified with low levels of skills. There are regional differences such as varying levels of low-skilled employment and the varying proportion of urban and rural communities, but the local Learning and Skills Councils we visited all agreed they could benefit from sharing ideas and learning from each other’s experience. The Learning and Skills Council could increase its active support, for example by increased use of its intranet to share experience and by facilitating events to explore innovative approaches.