

ADULT LITERACY IN THE UK: A BASIC PRIMER

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An Introduction to Adult Literacy Trust

Adult Literacy Trust (ALT) believes that literacy is a right, not a privilege, and wants every adult to have the chance to gain this critical skill. ALT recognises how invaluable literacy is in improving life chances, employability, health and wellbeing.

We provide one-to-one support for disadvantaged adults to improve their reading skills and confidence, as a complement to overstretched formal adult education provision. Utilising specially trained volunteer Reading Coaches, we work closely with formal learning providers to identify adults who could benefit from enhanced support outside of the classroom, to strengthen outcomes from participation in adult community education.

Introduction to this Guide

This short guide provides an introduction to the field of adult literacy. It aims to help anyone with an interest in ALT's mission of breaking the cycle of exclusion and poor literacy to gain a more detailed understanding of the sector and the role ALT plays.

The guide covers:

- A brief overview and background to adult literacy in the UK
- The scale and the nature of the challenge, and why some adults have poor literacy
- The personal, social and economic benefits of good literacy
- How adults learn literacy, including the provision available and how it is funded
- Current challenges in the sector
- The unique role of ALT in the sector

A note on the data

In the UK, adult learning and skills policy is the responsibility of the Westminster government for England, as well as the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which means there is very limited and variable data for the UK as whole. In this report, much of the data and available evidence used is drawn primarily from sources in England only. However, the issues and effective practice highlighted will be relevant across the UK.

Overview of adult literacy in the UK

A lack of reading skills can be a main contributor to a life of hardship, and a key contributor to intergenerational cycles of poverty. Those with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed, and workers with poor literacy earn significantly less than those with basic literacy. Adults with low literacy are far less likely to access health, housing and other social services to which they are entitled.

Improving an adult's reading skills and confidence can have profound and lasting benefits. It helps improve their ability to find and retain decent-paying jobs, better navigate everyday tasks such as shopping or accessing public transport, manage their personal finances, participate in their children's learning, and help make more informed decisions that can ensure healthier lives. Increased literacy also improves social connectedness, skills, wellbeing and mental health.

Yet in the UK, it is estimated that at least 7 million adults (1 in 6) have low literacy¹, lacking basic reading skills beyond primary school level or below. England ranks only 15th out of 31 OECD countries for literacy skills, with 17% of working age adults estimated to have very poor literacy skills.²

Terminology in the sector

'Basic skills' historically refer to literacy, language and numeracy – the skills we all need for life, work or study. The term increasingly includes digital skills, as these become ever more necessary in all aspects of life.

The term **'literacy'** comprises reading, writing, speaking and listening. It is sometimes defined as the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts. Literacy encompasses a range of skills, from the decoding of written words and sentences to the comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation of complex texts. A low level of literacy is distinct from **'illiteracy'**, which is relatively rare.

Another commonly used term is **'functional literacy'**, meaning a person's reading and writing skills are sufficient to cope in their everyday life, for instance to read signs, pamphlets, or to write a simple message for someone at work or at home.

Theoretical concepts of adult literacy range from a view of adult literacy as a discrete set of 'functional' skills needed for specific tasks (such as for work), to a 'socially situated' perspective, which emphasises how people interact with texts and how literacy is embedded in people's everyday lives. While this is the subject of lively academic debate, in practice adult literacy teaching and learning draws on aspects of both concepts.

Adult literacy is distinct from other essential skills such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), although there is some degree of crossover. ESOL provision is aimed at people settled in the UK who speak English as a second or additional language. Adult literacy provision primarily supports people whose main language is English with reading, writing and spoken communication skills. ALT's focus is primarily on helping these adults to become better, more confident readers.

¹ OECD (2013) England & Northern Ireland (UK) - Country Note -Survey of Adult Skills first results

² Kerr, M. E. (2021) *Paying the Price. The Cost of Very Poor Adult Literacy*. Pro Bono Economics.

Why do adults have poor literacy skills?

There are many reasons why adults might need help with reading and writing. These include:

- **Interrupted education:** A disrupted school education, for example through ill health, mental health challenges, caring responsibilities or poor personal experience of school.
- **Learning disabilities:** Late or missed diagnosis of a learning difficulty or disability affecting reading and writing skills, such as dyslexia.
- **Cognitive impairments:** Certain medical conditions, such as traumatic brain injuries or cognitive disorders, can affect a person's ability to read and write.
- **Parental influence:** Adults with parents who themselves had low literacy skills, and did not receive support for their literacy development at home or have regular access to books and reading materials, may be at a particular disadvantage.

How does low literacy affect people's lives?

Improving skills and confidence in reading and writing has many positive benefits, and is closely linked to higher earnings, better health and improved well-being. There is no doubt that it changes lives for adults as well as for their children, as poor literacy is often passed down from one generation to the next.

Indeed, the lack of reading skills can have a major impact on a person's life chances. Those with low literacy skills are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than those who can read beyond the most basic of levels³. Research shows that the median hourly wage of workers scoring higher on literacy scales – those who can make complex inferences and evaluate truth claims or arguments in written texts, for instance – can be more than 60% higher than for workers scoring at the lowest levels – those who can, at best, read relatively short texts or understand only basic written vocabulary⁴.

Today, literacy is more important than ever. We rely on the written word through communication technologies and devices that hadn't been imagined even a decade ago. The way we live and work has changed profoundly – and so has the set of skills we need to participate fully in and benefit from our hyper-connected society and increasingly knowledge-based economy. As a result, people with low basic skills proficiency, including both literacy and digital skills, face a much greater risk of economic disadvantage.

Individuals with low skills are therefore increasingly likely to be left behind. As the demand for skills continues to shift towards more sophisticated tasks, as jobs increasingly involve analysing and communicating information, and as technology pervades all aspects of life, those individuals with poor literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to find themselves at risk. Low levels of literacy limits adults' access to many basic services, to better-paying and more rewarding jobs, and to the possibility of participating in the further education and training that can be crucial for developing and maintaining skills over a working life.

But the impact of poor literacy goes far beyond earnings and employment. Individuals with lower proficiency in literacy are also much more likely to believe that they have little influence on political processes, and not to participate in associative or volunteer activities. They also under-utilise the National Health Service out of fear, or because they are unable to follow written instructions, and as a result are much more likely to report poor health.

³ For an explanation of reading level classifications, see the Qualifications section in the Annex to this paper

⁴ Skilled for Life: Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills, OECD 2013

Coping Strategies

It's often the case that people with low literacy are referred to as 'struggling' or having 'difficulties'. It's important to recognise that adults with low literacy are people who have a range of other skills and talents. In many cases they will be coping on a day-to-day basis – for example, working and/or engaged in family and community life – although they may use strategies to avoid literacy-related tasks.

Adults with low literacy skills may not be able to easily or confidently complete reading tasks such as identifying key information from a short text in a familiar context (e.g. a letter sent home from school). More complex reading tasks, requiring comprehension of longer, more formal and/or less familiar texts – such as a legal or medical letter – will likely be beyond the skills of many adults with low literacy, without help.

They may also not realise that help is available, or need some support to help them understand how improving their literacy skills could help them at work or in other aspects of their lives.

The impact of family background on literacy

In the UK, family background has a major impact on literacy skills. Too often we see that the children of parents with low levels of education have significantly lower proficiency than those whose parents have higher levels of education, even after taking other factors into account. As a result, progress has been highly uneven; improvements between younger and older generations are barely apparent. Young people in the UK are entering a much more demanding labour market, yet they are not much better prepared than those who are retiring. In fact, recent OECD research among developed countries suggests that the UK is among the three highest-performing countries in literacy when comparing 55-65-year-olds, but among the bottom three countries when comparing literacy proficiency among 16-24-year-olds.

In fact, the long-term effect of parents' low literacy can be profoundly seen on their children; if a parent cannot read or reads poorly, the child starts school at a disadvantage. Then, once the child is in school, the parent is often unable to help with homework. Low literacy becomes intergenerational: the strongest indicator of a child's success in school is his/her parents' level of education.

Why Adult Literacy Matters: Key Facts and Figures

There is a wide range of evidence of the benefits and impact of good adult literacy, including a range of economic and social benefits. Although more research is needed into effective practice in adult literacy interventions, there is already a compelling case for investment in and action on adult literacy.

Increased productivity

A survey of more than 4,000 workplaces in England⁵ reported that the most commonly cited benefits of public-funded adult literacy and numeracy training are:

- A reduction in the number of errors made by the workforce (cited by 63%)
- An increase in the organisation's capacity to meet statutory and industry requirements (58%)
- Being able to introduce more efficient or new processes (52%)
- Being able to produce higher quality products (51%)

Increased employment prospects

- Government research demonstrated a 7 percentage point increase in the employment rate of the learner population before and after learning at Level 2 and below.⁶
- A study into the impact of English and mathematics learning indicated employment returns of up to 3 percentage points over a three-to-five-year period for learners aged 19+ achieving Level 2 qualifications in English/and or mathematics.⁷
- The same study also demonstrated a 12 percentage point fall (from before and after learning) in the proportion of people learning below Level 2 who accessed Jobseeker's Allowance.

Increased quality of employment

For people in employment, Government research⁸ has shown that there are a range of work-related benefits, including:

- 52% of workers reported better job satisfaction
- 46% reported better job security
- 31% reported better promotion prospects
- 16% had been promoted.

Longitudinal Government research⁹ with adult literacy and numeracy learners on the Skills for Life programme found that:

- 69% of literacy learners who moved into work following their course believed that the course had helped them to find work.
- 82% of literacy learners who were in employment said that their course had increased their confidence at work.
- 75% of literacy learners believed that their course had helped them with their ability to do their job.

⁵ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Impact of Poor Basic Literacy and Numeracy on Employers*

⁶ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) *Evaluation of the Impact of Learning Below Level 2*. Adult literacy sits at or below Level 2 in the national qualifications levels.

⁷ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Returns to Maths and English Learning (at Level 2 and below) in Further Education*.

⁸ Department for Business and Skills (2013) *Evaluation of the Impact of Learning Below Level 2*.

⁹ Department for Education (2018) *Quantitative programme of research for adult English and maths: Longitudinal survey of adult learners final research report*.

Increased earnings potential

- Research into the benefits of English and mathematics learning has indicated wage returns of up to 8.5 percentage points over a three-to-five-year period for adults (aged 19+) achieving a Level 2 qualification in English and/or maths and returns of up to 5 percentage points for those achieving Entry Level qualifications.¹⁰
- The average worker in the UK with very poor literacy skills earns approximately £1,500 less per year than they would if they had a basic level of literacy.¹¹

Progression to Further Learning

Good literacy skills underpin the ability to participate in and benefit from other learning and training opportunities. Policy is often focussed on engaging adults in upskilling and retraining in skills shortage areas at Level 3 and above; however, 18% of adults aged 19 – 64 don't hold a Level 2 qualification. Investment in adult literacy learning at and below Level 2 can help put people on a progression pathway to higher level skills needed by employers.

Longitudinal research¹² with learners on Skills for Life funded programmes found that:

- 50% of literacy learners attended a subsequent course during the year after completing their Skills for Life-funded course, with many of these learners progressing onto higher level courses.
- 35% of literacy learners said that they would not have attended their subsequent course without having completed a Skills for Life course first.

Personal and Social Benefits

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills¹³ indicates that adults with poor literacy skills have:

- Lower levels of trust in others and lower levels of political efficacy¹⁴
- Lower levels of participation in volunteering activities
- Poorer health

Lower health outcomes may be connected to literacy levels given the importance of literacy skills to understand health information, follow medical instructions and advice, and access support to self-manage health conditions.

- Research shows that 43 per cent of adults aged 18-65 do not have adequate literacy skills to routinely understand health information.¹⁵

¹⁰ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Returns to Maths and English Learning (at Level 2 and below) in Further Education*.

¹¹ Kerr, M. E. (2021) *Paying the Price. The Cost of Very Poor Adult Literacy*. Pro Bono Economics.

¹² Department for Education (2018) *Quantitative programme of research for adult English and maths: Longitudinal survey of adult learners final research report*.

¹³ OECD (2016) *Skills matter: Further results from the survey of adult skills*.

¹⁴ Trust is measured as the extent to which respondents agree when asked "Do you agree that only few people can be trusted?". Political efficacy is measured as the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statement: "People like me don't have a say about what the government does."

¹⁵ CHL Foundation (2014) *What do we know about the format in which people with low levels of health literacy prefer to receive information? A review of the literature*.

Learner Case Studies

The following case studies of adult literacy learners are provided by the Festival of Learning, England's biggest celebration of lifelong learning¹⁶. They demonstrate the difference that improving literacy skills can make.

Learner Case Study – Stuart Ferris ([Video](#))

At school Stuart was told to sit at the back of the classroom because he couldn't read or write. Aged 50, he began attending the dyslexia study skills class run by Oldham Lifelong Learning Service. Stuart's return to learning has opened up new and better job opportunities, and had a profound impact on his life.

"All my life, I hadn't been able to write. I became a skilled joiner, managing without writing skills, and then a school caretaker. I was doing the work of a site manager but needed literacy skills to apply for the site manager job.

I joined a dyslexia study skills class where I learnt in an interactive way. I looked forward to going every week. My tutor was exceptional and I met other learners in similar situations to me. I joined a functional skills English class and was motivated to gain Entry Level 2 qualifications. During this time I was made redundant from the school caretaker job that I loved and felt very low.

Attending English classes kept me going – I had something to look forward to. I'm still motivated to do even better at entry level 3 and beyond, and I now have a new job as a caretaker in a community centre. I'd hoped to achieve qualifications and take on more responsibility at work and in the voluntary sector. This I have done, but I have changed my attitude to life as well. I'm more positive and rather than let life happen to me, I make things happen. I'm no longer letting life pass me by."

Stuart Ferris won the Festival of Learning's Return to Learning award in 2019.

Learner Case Study – Tyrese Williams ([Video](#))

Tyrese found school extremely challenging and left without any GCSEs. Everything changed with her referral to First Steps to Learning course at Buckinghamshire Adult Learning, a course aimed at developing English, maths and digital skills for young parents.

"I was told at the Jobcentre that I would have a better chance at getting a job if I had maths and English qualifications. My kids really motivated me: I wanted to become the best version of myself for them and prove that even though I decided to settle down and have a family, I can still be successful.

Returning to learning has made a massive difference to my life. I suffer with depression and anxiety, but studying online with other people helped me relax and feel comfortable. The courses have made me realise I'm actually quite smart, so that has helped with my self-esteem. I find it much easier now to talk to people and socialise, and when I'm stuck on something I know I can ask for help.

Passing my Level 1 and 2 Functional Skills English and Maths has made my family very proud of me. I feel more confident about getting a job and know I'll be able to help the kids out with their homework when they're older. By achieving the qualifications I've worked hard for, I hope to show what amazing things mums can do whilst raising kids."

Tyrese Williams won the Festival of Learning's Return to Learning award in 2023.

¹⁶ <https://www.festivaloflearning.org.uk/>

What motivates adults to improve their literacy skills?

Society expects that people leaving school will have obtained a qualification in English and that they will be able to read and write confidently. For adults who didn't achieve a good qualification in English or who nevertheless don't feel confident in reading and writing, there is a considerable social stigma. This often prevents adults coming forward for help.

In comparison with other essential skills, this is a point of distinction with adult literacy – people readily admit to being 'bad at maths', or not speaking English fluently as a migrant new to the UK. These are both important issues too, but are often more visible than adult literacy and carry much less stigma.

Many adults are motivated to address their literacy needs by changes in life circumstances or moments of transition. These can include:

- Starting a family, or the desire to support a child's learning when they start or progress in school.
- Work, including wanting to find a job, change jobs or needing to become more confident in specific tasks at work.
- Returning to education, for example needing to get a literacy qualification in order to be accepted onto a course.
- A change in personal circumstances, for example taking on household management and administration when someone else previously dealt with this on their behalf.

The evidence suggests that making literacy learning relevant to adults' practical needs and their motivations is important in making literacy provision attractive to adults¹⁷. Other factors include having convenient, local locations (such as schools, libraries, community centres) to make learning opportunities readily accessible and minimise barriers to learning such as travel times and costs.

Adults returning to learn: Barriers and enablers

Research by Learning and Work Institute into adult participation in learning¹⁸ identifies a number of common barriers to participation in learning. These include:

- **lack of time** – work or family commitments
- **lack of confidence** – negative experiences of learning at school, literacy difficulties
- **fear of the unknown** – concern about meeting others or trying something new
- **reluctance** – to admit a lack of skills or knowledge
- **accessibility** – travel, care responsibilities, physical or mental health conditions
- **cost** – real costs such as travel, or perceived costs such as course fees (although literacy classes are free)
- **awareness** – knowing where to go and who to talk to
- **resilience** – giving up easily because of a lack of self-belief

To be successful in engaging adults in literacy learning, all these potential barriers need to be acknowledged and addressed.

¹⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2019) *Evidence Review: What Works to Improve Adult Basic Skills?*

<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/evidence-review-what-works-to-improve-adult-basic-skills/>

¹⁸ <https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/lifelong-learning/adult-participation-in-learning-survey/>

What's available to help adults improve their literacy?

Adults can access literacy learning in different ways. Publicly funded, classroom-based courses are delivered by different kinds of adult education providers, including:

- Local authority adult education services
- Further Education Colleges
- Institutes of Adult Learning, such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA)
- Offender Learning and Skills Service providers delivering education and training provision in prisons¹⁹.

Providers may organise courses in community venues and sometimes workplaces in order to make them more convenient to adult learners. This also helps the learning environment feel less like returning to school.

In addition, there is an active voluntary sector working to support adults with literacy needs. These organisations are often focused on contexts where there are high proportions of adults with literacy needs, including prisons and the homelessness sector. For example:

- The Shannon Trust uses a volunteer-led model to support reading in prisons
- Read Easy provides community-based tutoring to support adults to read
- The Reading Agency promotes the benefits of reading among both children and adults, working with partners including public libraries, colleges and prisons
- Adult Literacy Trust provides one-to-one support for disadvantaged adults to improve their reading skills and confidence, as a complement to overstretched formal adult education provision.

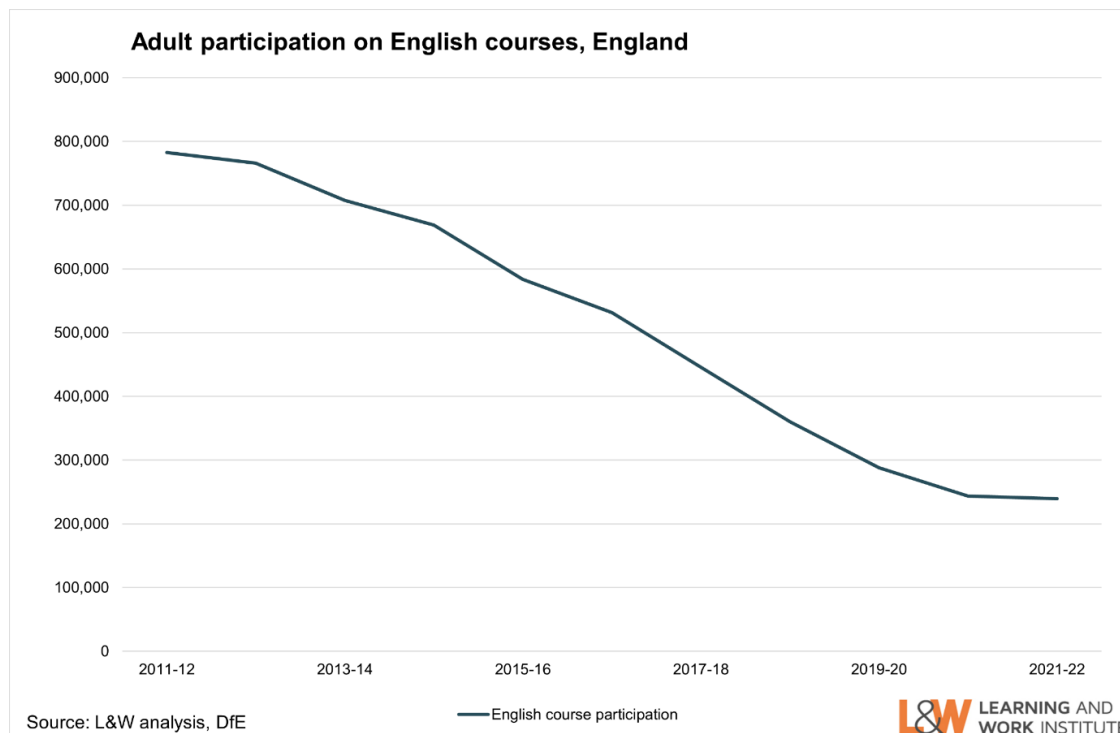
Some adult literacy providers offer online courses as well as classroom-based provision. These are often best suited to adults with higher levels of literacy skills, as low literacy and digital skills can make accessing learning online difficult.

There are some online resources designed for adult literacy learners. For example, the Citizen Literacy app is designed to be used by learners supported by tutors.

¹⁹ Offender Learning is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, and funded separately to other adult skills provision.

Participation in adult literacy provision

In adult literacy (English) provision, participation in England has fallen from approx. 360,000 in 2018/19 to 239,000 in 2021/22, a decrease of 34% since the pre-pandemic period. This is in the context of a much longer decline in participation over the past decade.



Funding

There is a statutory entitlement to fully funded adult literacy learning up to Level 2. This means that in almost all cases, all adults can access literacy learning free of charge. The statutory entitlement is funded through the Adult Education Budget, which funds adult further education and skills training in England.

The 2021 Spending Review allocated an extra £900 million in funding for adult education and apprenticeships by 2024/25, compared with 2019/20, representing an increase of 22%. However, this only reverses a fraction of past cuts: total adult skills spending in 2024/25 will still be more than 20% below 2009/10 levels. Spending on classroom-based adult education in particular has fallen especially sharply, and will still be 40% below 2009/10 levels even with the additional funding²⁰. It is this funding for classroom-based adult education which supports adult literacy provision. Recent high levels of inflation are further reducing the real terms value of this funding.

²⁰ Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2022*

Effective Practice in Adult Literacy Provision

Helping adults to improve their literacy is fundamentally different to teaching school children how to read and write. Adults have busy lives, which constrains the time available for learning. General life experience can help them learn – but may also influence their perceptions of their own ability and of learning in general.

Understanding ‘what works’

There is a shortage of robust and reliable research on many areas of practice in adult literacy, particularly in terms of the kinds of research privileged in public policy.

Increasingly, policy-making and Government investment decisions are influenced by evidence about ‘what works’. Often, this means the availability of evidence from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and/or other robust quantitative impact evaluation, seen as the ‘gold standard’ for evidence about whether or not any given intervention is effective (and therefore should be funded).

Although there are questions and limitations on the extent to which research through RCTs can benefit the adult literacy sector, very little of this type of research has taken place outside of the USA. In contrast to other areas of social policy, including schools, there is no formal What Works Centre²¹ for Further Education, adult learning and skills (including adult literacy) to act as a central hub for research, evidence and data.²²

An evidence review conducted by Learning and Work Institute²³ summarises effective practice in adult basic skills (including literacy, numeracy and ESOL), drawing on the best available evidence. It highlights a number of features of effective provision:

- Adult basic skills programmes can have a positive impact on a range of outcomes, including self-confidence, employability skills, social integration and productivity improvements for businesses.
- Behavioural interventions that provide learners with encouragement, social support and the opportunity to reflect on why they value learning have been found to improve persistence and achievement.
- Evidence on the effects of financial incentives on basic skills learning is mixed, as is the evidence on effective duration of learning. Longer courses tend to be delivered more efficiently than shorter ones due to the fixed start-up costs.
- Engaging adults in basic skills programmes is one of the most challenging aspects of delivering effective provision. Effective marketing techniques (using motivations that are specific to different learner groups), referral networks and supportive enrolment processes all play an important role.
- Partnership working between education providers and agencies, such as housing associations and JobCentre Plus, and working with various client groups in the community, can help address barriers to engagement with basic skills learning.
- Provision must be flexible, responding and adapting to the changing life circumstances and priorities of learners over time, for example as a learner moves into employment.
- Practical and social support can be effective in supporting adults to persist with learning, as can one-to-one support from a named and trusted advisor.
- Embedded or contextualised learning that is relevant to learners’ lives enables more tailored and successful learning.

Despite this starting point, there remain many areas to explore and evidence more robustly, particularly in relation to teaching and learning interventions.

²¹ The What Works Network aims to improve the way government and other public sector organisations create, share and use high-quality evidence in decision-making to improve the design and delivery of public services. The Education Endowment Foundation is the What Works Centre for educational achievement in schools.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

²² Learning and Work Institute (2020) *Understanding Evidence Use in Adult Learning and Skills*.

²³ Learning and Work Institute (2019) *Evidence Review: What Works to Improve Adult Basic Skills?*

Current challenges in Adult Literacy Provision

Against the background of stark reductions in funding and falling participation in adult literacy learning (see above), ALT's engagement with the adult literacy sector suggests that a number of challenges are of key concern. These issues hold back practitioners and providers from delivering the kinds of effective adult literacy provision they would ideally like to offer.

In particular, sector stakeholders have highlighted:

- A lack of focus on adult literacy as part of the wider adult policy skills landscape – including the absence of awareness raising to promote adult literacy learning to the general public and amongst key stakeholders.
- A shortage of trained, skilled adult literacy specialist teachers – and a lack of a workforce development pipeline to address this issue.
- Inadequate and restrictive funding mechanisms, resulting in adverse impacts such as:
 - Larger class sizes needed for minimum financial viability of provision, meaning that tutors are less able to offer personalised, tailored support to individual learners
 - Reductions in community-based and employer provision due to financial viability constraints of smaller class sizes typical of these locations, and the additional costs of off-site delivery
 - Focus on qualifications delivery and achievement at the expense of non-accredited learning opportunities which can help engage adults and overcome attitudinal barriers to learning
- Insufficient specialist support and funding for additional learning needs, such as dyslexia, to allow these need to be diagnosed and extra support provided.

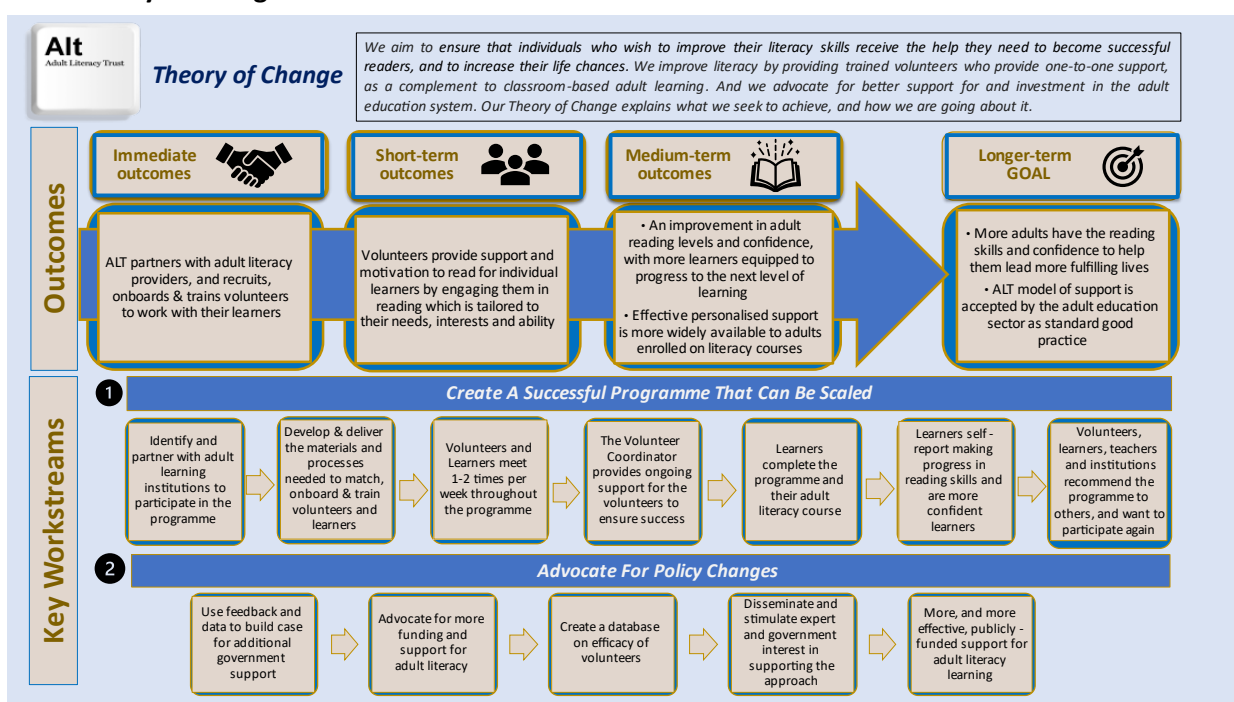
The Role of Adult Literacy Trust

ALT's model of support provides learners enrolled on formal adult literacy courses with additional, personalised support in basic reading skills, delivered through ALT's network of trained volunteers.

The model has been developed in response to challenges such as capacity issues in the sector (see previous sections) and with the aim of helping learners overcome barriers to learning and the stigma of low literacy skills through personalised support.

The ALT model is unique in its approach, particularly in its emphasis on partnership with the formal adult literacy sector and the development of a volunteer role which is complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the role of professional adult literacy teachers.

ALT's theory of change



ALT's Reading Coaches are developing constructive relationships with learners, focusing on individual needs. They work with adults outside of the classroom to help to check learners' understanding, and to build their confidence in reading. Volunteers also lead small groups of learners in informal group sessions, working collectively to focus on developing the ability to navigate everyday literacy challenges, to boost confidence, as well as foster an overall appreciation for reading.

The organisation recruits, DBS checks, and trains local volunteers to provide structured one-to-one reading support. They work with staff at its teaching partners to carefully match reading pairs based on learning style, background and individual needs. Each group of learners and volunteers works together over a minimum period of six months, and ideally over a full academic year.

Evaluation

To learn as much as possible from its initial deployment, ALT commissioned an independent evaluation²⁴ to measure the outcomes and impact for participating adult learners, volunteers and partner institutions. Lessons learned are informing the roll-out of future cohorts. The Assessment Report offered clear proof-of-concept for ALT's model of personalised reading support for adults and found that all participants in the programme – learners, volunteers, teaching staff – uniformly report their overall experience as strongly positive:

- Learners highly valued the personalised support they received from volunteers, reporting gains in reading skills and confidence
- Volunteers greatly welcomed the opportunity to support individuals in this way, and
- Teaching staff highly valued the additional, personalised support for reading & the enrichment of learner experience provided by volunteers.

Key outcomes for **adult learners** included:

- Improved literacy confidence and skills, equipping learners to progress in their education
- Enhanced skills to strengthen employability and job retention
- Improvements in wellbeing and better health outcomes, and
- Greater engagement in community activities and support for their children's education.

Alongside their support to learners, **volunteers** also benefitted from:

- Gaining practical skills including communication and coaching
- Improving wellbeing and engagement in the community
- Building transferable skills and experience that improves their employability.

ALT Learner Profile: Peter



We are delighted that Peter, one of our learners, has achieved one of his main goals: to secure a new job. Having spent the majority of his career as a professional bricklayer, due to a recent injury Peter can no longer engage in heavy physical labour. He's been facing the already daunting challenge of navigating the job market, made significantly more difficult by his struggles with reading.

Recognising Peter's strong focus on securing employment, our volunteer Lydia suggested using sample job postings and the necessary paperwork for job applications as the primary practice material during their reading sessions. This has clearly paid off, helping Peter build the confidence needed to apply for jobs through his local Jobcentre Plus. And just last month, he secured his first employment contract, in high-end retail security.



"Lydia always required me to take the lead in our sessions," Peter reflected on his time with ALT. *"While at the beginning, I admit I found this sort of frustrating, I think it's what got me to develop the reading skills and confidence I needed to land a job I'm truly excited about."*

²⁴ Braddell, A. (2023) *Adult Literacy Trust Pilot Evaluation Report*.

ANNEXES

A brief history of adult literacy in the UK²⁵

Low levels of adult literacy in the UK are a long-standing issue. Contrary to popular opinion, there was never a 'golden era' (50s, 60s, etc.) where everyone left school confident in their ability to read and write. For many years adult literacy classes were unregulated, and learners were often taught by unqualified volunteers. Classes were not inspected in line with a quality framework, and there were few qualifications available at lower levels; little or no research was undertaken about the scale of the issue and how successfully learners were supported. It was largely a hidden issue.

A significant development was the publication in 1999 of the **Moser Report**, which kick-started the **Skills for Life Strategy**. Although this strategy ended in 2010, it developed much of the infrastructure which still underpins adult literacy teaching and learning today, such as the National Standards for Adult Literacy, which are the basis of the adult literacy curriculum and qualifications.

The table below summarises some key developments in adult literacy in the UK in recent decades. This summary focuses on the UK, although international practice, including the work of UNESCO, has been influential in the development of the sector in the UK.

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| 1970s | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Right to Read campaign, launched in 1973 by a coalition of voluntary sector organisations and supported by the BBC, raises awareness of adult literacy as an issue in social and educational policy.• Around 5,000 people receive support from local authorities with reading and writing. |
| 1980s | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expansion of local authority provision, supported with leadership, training and development funding by a national agency, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, later the Basic Skills Agency. |
| 1990s | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey and other studies provide statistical evidence of the challenge, and an international league table of OECD countries. The UK's performance on a range of literacy measures is mid-ranking.• Increasing involvement of Further Education colleges in adult literacy provision.• In 1999, the Moser report finds that adult literacy provision is fragmented and inconsistent, and teachers poorly equipped and qualified to teach. |

²⁵ For further detail on the period to 2010, see Hughes, N. and Schwab, I. (Eds.) (2010) *Teaching Adult Literacy. Principles and Practice*. Open University Press.

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| <p>2000s</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a result of the Moser Report, the Skills for Life Strategy commits £1.5bn to improve literacy and numeracy skills, with funding routed to local authority and Further Education colleges. • Supporting infrastructure includes new professional qualifications for teachers, new learner qualifications, a national core curriculum for adult literacy, teaching and learning materials, and a national media campaign to raise awareness amongst the general public. • By 2010, 14 million people engaged in Skills for Life adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, with 8 million qualifications achieved. • The report of the 2006 Leitch Review of skills - <i>Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills</i> - led to a government objective to help 95% of the adult population of working age achieve functional literacy (Level 1) by 2020. |
| <p>2010s</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for Life ends. A new policy document, Skills for Sustainable Growth, maintains the statutory entitlement to fully funded adult literacy courses, removed the Leitch targets, and placed a new emphasis on English, rather than literacy. • Policy focuses on equipping young adults with the English and maths skills needed for work, with reforms to qualifications and funding for English and maths in 16 – 18 Further Education provision. New Functional Skills English qualifications aim to support learners with the English skills needed for life and for work. • The OECD’s 2013 Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) shows that the UK ranks 15th out of 31 OECD countries for adult literacy. • Funding for adult education falls by more than 50% and participation in adult literacy learning declines over the decade. |
| <p>2020s</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid-19 lockdowns result in increased online delivery of adult literacy provision. Some learners benefit from the added flexibility, but providers report that learners with low literacy skills struggle to access online learning. • Participation in adult literacy continues to decline, even relative to pre-pandemic levels. |

Qualifications

Public funding of adult literacy provision is closely linked to the delivery and achievement of qualifications at defined levels. Learners typically study literacy programmes at levels ranging from Entry Level (subdivided into Entry 1, Entry 2 and Entry 3) through to Level 1 and Level 2. The adult literacy national standards and core curriculum include a range of reading and writing skills, and spoken communication skills.

Although comparisons with school literacy levels are not particularly helpful in the context of adult learners, Entry Level 3 is approximately the level expected on leaving primary school. Level 2 is roughly equivalent to a good GCSE pass.

The main qualifications available are:

- **Functional Skills English.** These adult literacy qualifications are available from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 and focus on the reading and writing skills needed for work and everyday life. Functional Skills English qualifications have been available for more than a decade, with the content periodically updated, meaning that they are well-known and recognised by employers.
- **GCSE English.** Adults with a specific need to obtain a GCSE, such as an occupational requirement, can also study GCSE English under the statutory entitlement to fully funded adult literacy provision.

Many adult literacy providers cite the value of non-accredited, non-formal learning. This can be used to offer short, introductory courses in the community, or bespoke provision for an employer, without the need for extensive preparations for external examinations and assessments. Often, non-accredited learning is attractive to adult learners who may be deterred by the thought of a return to exams and tests.

Non-accredited learning has been discouraged in favour of the delivery of qualifications in recent years. However, some Mayoral Combined Authorities, who now have devolved responsibility for Adult Education provision, have started to introduce funding flexibility so that more adults can benefit from non-formal learning opportunities.

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