

Boosting Adult Literacy: Policy proposals from the adult literacy sector

Adult literacy is central to the Government’s ambition to break down barriers to opportunity and to deliver economic growth. Adults with good literacy skills have substantially better employment and earnings prospects, progress on to higher levels of qualifications and skills, experience better health outcomes and are more likely to be engaged in community and civic life¹. **Yet in England, around 1 in 6 adults has low literacy**², and England ranks only 15th out of 31 OECD countries for literacy skills. Significant numbers of adults experience difficulties with everyday reading tasks, which hold them back in life and at work; it’s estimated that around 20% of adults over 16 have a learning difficulty, disability or personal circumstances that require additional support and may have an effect on their reading skills and confidence.^{3 4}

In the decade from 2011/12, participation in adult literacy provision has fallen dramatically, from just under 800,000 to 239,000. Even accounting for Covid-19, participation in literacy learning has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels, with the fall in numbers most pronounced in disadvantaged areas. The statutory entitlement to fully funded adult literacy provision up to Level 2 remains; over the past decade, however, the Adult Education Budget, which funds this provision, has been reduced by close to 50%, from £2.8bn in 2012 to 1.5bn in 2020⁵.

Urgent action is needed to boost productivity, economic growth and a range of social outcomes. To do so, we need more adults participating in high quality literacy provision. Opportunities to learn should be more effectively promoted, and delivered in more innovative ways, by highly skilled teachers and others in the sector.

This Paper, developed by leading organisations in the adult literacy sector, aims to engage both the Department for Education and Skills England on the reforms needed to increase adult literacy levels. It lays out a number of specific, actionable ideas to help tackle the declines in participation in adult literacy learning, and offers potential solutions to eliminate challenges to literacy schemes that too often in practice have proved to be suboptimality designed, duplicative or hard to access. Finally, it encourages a more active role for the voluntary sector, and engagement of a wider group of stakeholders.

Our focus in this Paper is on adult literacy specifically. We recognise, however, that many of the measures suggested here apply equally or similarly to other essential skills, such as numeracy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and essential digital skills, and that for many adults a holistic approach to multiple, overlapping essential skills needs will be beneficial.

Supporting Organisations:



¹ OECD (2016) *Skills matter: Further results from the survey of adult skills*

² OECD (2013) [England & Northern Ireland \(UK\) - Country Note - Survey of Adult Skills first results](#)

³ ONS (2021) [Outcomes for Disabled People in the UK: 2021](#)

⁴ Research shows that over 1 in 10 UK adults – equating to about 5.9 million people – find reading ‘always’ or ‘usually’ difficult, rising to 22% of 16-24-year-olds: [Adult Reading Research Report | The Reading Agency](#)

⁵ House of Commons Education Committee (2020) [Formal meeting \(oral evidence session\): Adult skills and lifelong learning](#)

WE ENCOURAGE THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION TO:

1. Give adult literacy at least the same importance as numeracy in the drive to improve skills, for example by increasing provision delivered through the Adult Skills Fund⁶ (ASF), or by launching a follow-on literacy initiative building on the lessons from the previous Government's Multiply programme:

- Many of the most disadvantaged adults (e.g. unemployed, prisoners/ex-offenders, adults living in poverty, etc.) will have skills needs in both numeracy **and** literacy, along with other essential skills.
- Just as numeracy is a critical enabler, good literacy underpins a wide range of positive personal and social outcomes, such as health and wellbeing; it's essential in almost every aspect of our lives⁷. In addition to economic outcomes – such as better employment prospects, increased earnings and increased productivity – literacy is also a prerequisite for educational outcomes and progression, including addressing essential digital skills (EDS) needs and digital inclusion (e.g. using the internet)
- Additional investment, either through the ASF or a new programme, should be at least equivalent to Multiply (£560m over three years). This could be funded through an increase in the ASF ringfenced for literacy provision, or through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, as it is with the Multiply programme.
- The Government's proposed reform of the Apprenticeship Levy into the Growth and Skills Levy should enable opportunities for employers to fund adult literacy provision for their employees. Once established, Skills England should recognise the fundamental importance of good literacy skills in underpinning the delivery of wider skills priorities, as part of its national plan for skills, and permit the use of Levy funds to support adult literacy provision in the workplace. Within apprenticeships, Functional Skills English qualifications are important in supporting apprentices' literacy skills. These should be retained as an exit requirement, with sufficient investment to support high quality delivery.
- As the Adult Skills Fund is increasingly devolved to local areas, Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority will also need to prioritise literacy within their local skills strategies, and use local flexibilities to boost both investment and participation in adult literacy. Mayoral authorities should build a picture of local literacy and other essential skills needs, considering how this will impact on their wider skills priorities, and plan and develop progression pathways accordingly.

⁶ Formerly the Adult Education Budget

⁷ See the following report for findings related to the wellbeing-related benefits of a regular reading habit as well as health literacy: [State-of-the-Nations-Adult-Reading_2024-Focus-on-Health-and-Wellbeing.pdf \(readingagency.org.uk\)](#)

2. Promote existing literacy provision and the benefits of improving literacy skills more widely:

- Low uptake of provision is partly a result of limited awareness amongst individuals and referral organisations about what support is available to adults, where and how to get it, and the benefits of doing so.
- Government skills marketing campaigns, such as the recent DfE Skills for Life campaign, could give more prominence to adult literacy. More effective marketing of adult literacy courses – by providers and Government – could include behavioural messaging which resonates with adults’ motivations to learn and highlights the benefits, such as job prospects, earnings premiums or simply learning new things⁸.
- The Government has indicated it recognises the role of unions in promoting skills development. We encourage the Government to engage even more directly with employers and employers’ organisations to promote the value of increased literacy skills to their businesses, and encourage more employers to support employees to improve their literacy skills.

3. Encourage Further Education (FE) colleges and other adult learning providers to provide more adult literacy through fairer funding and better incentives:

- Despite the evidence of high levels of need, barriers to learning faced by adults, along with the stigma associated with poor literacy (more so than poor numeracy), mean that providers have to work hard to recruit and engage learners, who may not sign up for classes without being referred or supported to do so. This can mean that providers sometimes struggle to use their adult skills funding allocation to offer literacy provision, particularly without more viable funding rates needed to run different and engaging (but also more expensive) delivery models, such as community and workplace classes.
- Effective delivery of adult literacy can be more costly than other classroom-based further education services, due to the need for smaller classes and off-site, community-based delivery that are critical to help overcome these barriers to participation in learning.
- Providers should have increased flexibility to deliver more non-accredited literacy learning (as with numeracy under Multiply). This would make it easier to deliver short courses in workplace and community settings, and help address adults’ barriers to learning, including the many adults returning to education who are put off by negative experiences of exams-based learning at school.
- As part of increasing the overall investment in adult literacy provision through the ASF, providers could be better incentivised to prioritise adult literacy provision through funding measures such as:
 - uprating the £724 funding allocation for the Functional Skills English adult literacy qualification to account for inflation and increased provider costs. This rate is unchanged since 2013/14 and would have a true cost of approximately £965 today.
 - reviewing the programme weighting / funding band for adult literacy learning aims (e.g. from low to medium), to account for smaller class sizes and increased delivery costs.
- Given the importance of literacy to progression in learning, offer more literacy support through Additional Learning Support for learners studying on vocational courses and for those with learning difficulties and disabilities.
- Given that research consistently shows that supporting children’s education is a powerful motivating factor for adults to engage in skills development⁹, programme providers can be encouraged to leverage this motivation through a greater focus on family reading initiatives, community-based outreach and cross-sector partnerships, addressing the practical barriers to access and participation.

⁸ See for instance: [State-of-the-Nations-Adult-Reading-2024-Focus-on-Skills-Engagement-and-Career-Opportunities.pdf \(readingagency.org.uk\)](#)

⁹ See: Windisch (2015) [Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention](#)

4. Address the current and looming teacher shortage in adult literacy provision:

- Many existing specialist adult literacy teachers are nearing retirement, and there is no cohort moving in behind them. Previous courses and qualifications no longer run.
- We urge the Government to ensure the availability of professional adult literacy teacher training. In the short-term, in addition to the current Education and Training Foundation (ETF) English offer, this could be a standalone Level 5 module, such as has been developed by ETF for ESOL.
- For longer-term quality and sustainability, the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) with Literacy Specialism is the ideal qualification. The Government should increase the bursary amount for English (£15,000) to the same level as maths (£29,000), and remove the cap on the number of places available to rebuild a pipeline of teachers of adult literacy.
- A volunteer training pathway should be revived. There is a huge well of willing talent that could be tapped in a coordinated way, but a structure needs to be built to ensure volunteers have adequate skills, recognition, safeguarding awareness, and encouragement to be properly utilised, and opportunities to progress into adult literacy teacher training¹⁰. For example, this could mirror the ESOL capacity-building programme for '23/24, introduced by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to build capacity in ESOL teaching to support new arrivals from Ukraine.

5. Fund robust research to improve understanding of how best to deliver improved adult literacy:

- The programme should include Randomised Control Trials and other research to improve the evidence base on a range of literacy interventions¹¹. Investment in the research programme should be at least equivalent to Multiply, for which the RCT element is approx. £5m.
- Test the impact of innovative volunteer-led models of provision that complement the formal sector, as well as peer-led learning in adult literacy, in recognition of the barriers to learning faced by many adults, and the role of volunteers and peer educators in breaking down those barriers.
- Do so with a view to enhancing support for investment in pathways for areas such as volunteers (especially those with lived experience), released-from-prison peer educators, librarians and others to volunteer in community settings.
- Support research into clearer impact measurement from increased adult literacy provision, including enhanced skills to strengthen employability, job retention and better health outcomes, as well as research into the barriers that discourage adults from accessing learning.
- Strong evidence indicates that reading for pleasure/interest plays a critical role in building literacy skills and confidence, and is key to motivation and the development of reading behaviour, identity and proficiency. The government should recognise and resource reading for pleasure and for interest as part of accredited literacy provision, as it is within the school curriculum and Ofsted prison education guidance. This would mean providing investment and training to support its delivery, and the inclusion of more innovative person-centred and community-based models (including libraries) within funded provision.

¹⁰ Examples of good practice include: [Get Involved | Adult Literacy Trust \(alt.org.uk\)](#); [Volunteer - The Reading Agency](#); [Volunteer with us - ReadEasy](#); [Volunteer | National Literacy Trust | National Literacy Trust](#)

¹¹ See for instance: Learning & Work Institute (2023) *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/>

6. **Engage a wider group of stakeholders in commissioning, supporting and providing adult literacy provision, including a ‘whole government’ approach.** This could include:
- Strengthening referrals from JobCentre Plus, including through ‘in work conditionality’, to incentivise participation in adult literacy provision, alongside referrals for unemployed adults.
 - Working with Housing Associations to strengthen referral routes into adult literacy provision. Many social landlords are keen to support tenants to develop essential skills such as adult literacy, to help them secure sustained employment and manage their tenancies effectively.
 - Encouraging social prescribing, where GPs and health centres can refer to adult literacy provision, ensuring people are able to better self-manage their health. Literacy skills help to ensure that patients understand and follow medical advice accurately, and enable people to access information to manage their health conditions.
 - Engaging with stakeholders working on digital inclusion, digital skills and EdTech, to identify literacy issues impacting on digital skills and inclusion, and ways in which new digital technologies can support adult literacy learners.
 - Addressing the lack of ownership and dilution of effort around literacy that stems from it being an issue which cuts across a range of policy areas. This should include creating a national taskforce and/or cross-departmental working group, led by DfE, with clear, prominent leadership, senior ministerial accountability and a strong mandate to lead work on adult literacy.
 - As well as education, skills and employment, the proposed national taskforce should ensure that adult literacy is central to the agendas of policy and service providers in the health, housing, criminal justice and libraries sectors. Evidence from other countries, such as Ireland’s Adult Literacy for Life strategy¹², suggests a ‘whole government approach’ is required to achieve both impact and efficiency.
 - Alongside the national task force, establish a permanent sector-wide group of providers on adult literacy to be consulted more systematically on new policies as they are being planned/rolled-out.

¹² <https://www.adultliteracyforlife.ie/>