

Work, Society and Lifelong Literacy

Report of the inquiry into adult literacy in England

Executive summary • September 2011

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*“Being unable to read or write... took away my ability to choose how I interacted with the outside world.
Can’t read; can’t vote; don’t have choices.”*

(Linda Worden, learner and Commissioner)

1 The Inquiry

There are an estimated 5.2 million adults in England who do not have the literacy skills to enable them to function effectively in modern society.¹ Ten years after the introduction of the Skills for Life strategy the

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) launched an independent inquiry into the state of adult literacy in England, under the chairmanship of Lord Boswell of Aynho.

¹ DfES (2003) *The Skills for Life Survey, 2003*.

2 The Purpose of the Inquiry

The Skills for Life Strategy has achieved a lot in many different areas of literacy development, but we wanted to discover how to respond to the current challenges faced by adults with underdeveloped literacy skills as well as seek ways of preventing the need for adult literacy initiatives and

campaigns in future. Our focus was on adults and young people over the age of 16 years and not on children and schools, although we necessarily had to consider them.

3 The Method

We conducted a literature review, held expert seminars and focus groups and invited stakeholders to contribute papers, asking key questions about the successes on which to build as well as areas for development. The full evidence, including all papers, contributions and analysis can be found on the NIACE website: <http://www.niace.org.uk/literacy-inquiry>

Our findings, analysis, conclusions and detailed recommendations, are set out in the full report available at <http://shop.niace.uk/literacy-enquiry> (free download).

4 Findings

Drawing on diverse sources of evidence we learned that providers and practitioners were very clear about what works – or not – for different learners. They identified current challenges and highlighted the need for both initial teacher training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Areas for staff development included ICTs and e-learning, where concerns were expressed about the lack of skill and equipment. Both the literature search and the consultations revealed the importance of addressing intergenerational cycles of poor literacy skills through family literacy and learning programmes. The evidence suggested that partnerships are often underdeveloped, and many contributors felt that it was important to join up policies and practices in the interest of learners and effective, efficient delivery. Many respondents revealed that currently some groups of people are not often found in literacy provision.

They include people at the lower levels of achievement, who have the longest learning journeys to make, as well as offenders and ex-offenders, people with learning or mental health difficulties, older people and some employees especially in SMEs. Contributors emphasised the necessity to respond to diversity and complexity with differentiated approaches and not focus on skills for employment at the cost of learning literacy for personal, social and democratic purposes. Great concern was expressed about provision being led by qualifications rather than learners, and respondents suggested that differentiated ways of recognising and measuring success should be available. Using the media, volunteers and intermediaries was felt to be important in raising awareness and encouraging individuals to take up learning opportunities.

5 Conclusions

Our analysis of the evidence concluded that challenges remain in addressing current adult literacy learning requirements in England as well as minimising future difficulties.

The evidence suggests that those adults with some of the lower levels of achievement, in the most challenging situations, and with the biggest barriers to overcome, have benefited least in the past.

One high priority is training and equipping the teaching and learning workforce, including volunteers, especially in using ICTs.

We cannot rely entirely on investment in schools to remove literacy challenges: family and community approaches must be supported, advocated and extended.

A major concern is our inability to join up policies, practices and partnerships across departmental and organisational silos.

It is vital to foster a positive attitude to lifelong learning, so that individuals and organisations are able to tap into learning at any life stage or life context.

We conclude that we must review and change systems and processes as well as stimulate participation. We must continue to research and discover what works best and for whom, and report the evidence of the impact literacy learning makes on individuals, families, their workplaces and society.

6 Recommendations

In the light of the evidence gathered, our analysis and conclusions, we recommend the following adult literacy priority development areas:

1. The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) must work with the Department of Work and Pensions, local authorities, further education colleges and providers, higher education and professional bodies to raise standards of teaching and learning.

They must:

- increase the number of qualified adult literacy teachers by offering varied and different modes of training;
- offer priority training in those sectors where least teacher development has taken place, particularly amongst Work-based Learning Providers and in the Voluntary and Community Sector;
- provide Continuing Professional Development opportunities for all teachers, including part-time staff, particularly in the use of digital learning and resources, blended approaches, and making the curriculum and accreditation work responsively for learners;

- train volunteers to act as assistants, buddies and mentors, Community Learning Champions and Union Learning Representatives to enhance the learning experience;
- train teachers to manage a range of people in civil society roles who support learners;
- support, through partnership work, development of different approaches to embedding and integrating literacy in education and training programmes and practice.

2. The Department for Education (DfE), working with BIS and local authorities, must help to break down cycles of intergenerational difficulties with literacy through family literacy and learning programmes.

They must:

- work in partnership with primary schools and children's centres to train staff, raise awareness, provide information, and demonstrate the impact of adult literacy difficulties on children, to encourage and support commitment to family literacy;

- support and oversee provision of CPD for existing teaching and learning staff to improve the quality of provision and learning experiences;
- challenge every primary school to organise a family literacy learning programme;
- support family literacy teachers, IAG services and intermediaries to provide signposting to local lifelong learning opportunities and to encourage progression from family literacy programmes;
- recognise the important contribution of Family Learning – including Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy – to the development of adult literacy and numeracy skills, through the introduction of a separate, specific funding stream.

3. BIS and DfE, working with employers, trades unions and civil society organisations, should explore environments, opportunities and pedagogies which reach and respond to those who are currently under-represented in provision.

They should:

- establish a Challenge Fund to develop innovative, intensive approaches to learning, for different learner cohorts, such as those who are in work, people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), offenders, older people and Travellers, using for example, cross-sectoral promotion and delivery; blended learning; effective use of volunteers; mixed methods;

- ensure that some funds should be drawn from existing budgets, together with funds from DWP and other stakeholder government departments as well as contributions from business, commerce and the 3rd sector;
- monitor and evaluate the impact of such approaches, including cost efficiencies and distribute the outcomes widely;
- work with key organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses, trade unions and Unionlearn to support actively the development of workplaces as learning organisations, recognising the potential contributions of all staff and supporting them to develop literacy skills to contribute effectively, in a framework of lifelong learning;
- promote policies and practices that encourage providers of public, private and voluntary services (such as health, finance, welfare, housing, energy) working with trade unions and Unionlearn to make information and customer services accessible and responsive, using Plain English and such quality assurance models as the Crystal Mark.

4. BIS should lead on optimising effective organisational processes and structures, which help to join up policies and provision and ensure adequate resourcing.

They should:

- support the joining up of policies from BIS, Department of Work and Pensions, DfE and Departments of Culture Media and Sport and

Communities and Local Government, as well as local delivery networks, to improve reach, effectiveness and efficiency and reduce unnecessary duplication;

- encourage the development of initiatives, such as Quick Reads, which bring together the public, private and voluntary sectors to use their particular experiences and expertise to support awareness raising, engagement of new learners, resourcing and delivery of learning opportunities;
- work with the Federation of Awarding Bodies to ensure every award and accreditation programme has literacy as an essential, integrated component;
- identify and implement ways of including a literacy imperative in procurement processes in national and local government delivery programmes;
- incentivise providers through the funding mechanisms to deliver and maintain literacy outcomes.

5. BIS should support the development of a range of measures to identify and record success including:

- initiating labour force surveys or longitudinal studies (cohort studies) to measure population impacts of literacy learning;

- updating the Skills for Life initial assessment, to develop a standardised suite of tools and processes to be used pre and post learning activities, in order to identify the distance travelled;
- developing processes which ensure that initial assessment results travel with the learner;
- developing participation measures for particular groups, especially those at entry levels, offenders, ex-offenders, those who are NEET, older people;
- actively promoting the use of unitisation of awards to create portfolios of recognition of achievement which travel with the learner.

6. BIS must work with the media to raise awareness, demand and motivation to:

- support initiatives which bring together private, public and voluntary agencies to use their particular expertise – Quick Reads and Adult Learners' Week are excellent examples;
- build upon research about learning champions, national celebrity champions, Union Learning Representatives, libraries and museums staff and intermediaries to recruit, educate and train local Community Learning Champions and mentors/buddies from business and commerce;
- mobilise awareness-raising programmes and processes for 'front-line' services, e.g. in health, housing, welfare, libraries, information

and advice-giving organisations, and voluntary and community organisations with interests in specific groups of people and causes;

- work with radio and TV to develop story-lines as well as campaigns to raise awareness and encourage participation in learning;
- use procurement with leading media organisations to include promotional activities related to literacy and learning.

7. BIS should work with research and development organisations to carry out more research, such as:

- how we can reach, motivate and teach different groups of learners such as older people, NEETs, offenders, Travellers and gypsies;

- identifying the economic benefits of increasing reading and writing – to the individual, the family and the workplace;
- exploring what strategies, processes and practices create effective ways of joining up policies and practices, in the interest of reaching and teaching learners of adult literacy;
- holding regular (at least quinquennial) reviews of the impact of funding on the delivery of adult literacy learning provision, including outcomes and enhanced ability and performance.

The chair of the Commissioners concludes that addressing adult literacy is not only vital for economic success, personal and collective fulfilment but is a moral imperative.

7 Acknowledgements

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A full list of contributors is available at
<http://www.niace.org.uk/literacy-inquiry>

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NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties and disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

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