

# PLAYING THE ACE

A plan to unleash the potential of adult community education and bolster economic growth

November 2022





# Contents

About the Centre for Social Justice	2
Acknowledgements	3
Foreword	4
Executive summary	6
Summary of recommendations	8
<b>1 Lifelong learning for all – the golden thread of adult education</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2 Creating a route out of poverty through work</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>3 Reaping the full benefits of Adult Community Education</b>	<b>55</b>

# About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five 'pathways to poverty', first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policy-makers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2022 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.



# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the individuals and organisations who took the time to help inform our report.

In particular, we would like to thank Horex for making this report possible, the amazing Adult Community Education centres who showed us around their colleges, and the inspiring adult students who we spoke to in our research for this report.

This report is for every individual involved in adult education, from the teachers to the students. They are often unrecognised yet adult community education providers are doing vital work, supporting some of the most disadvantaged adults and giving them a crucial second chance.

Every single learner we met with had taken the brave step of re-entering education, many had battled obstacles in starting their lifelong learning journey. Every learner that we met with told us that Adult Community Education had transformed their lives. They are proof that it is never too late to learn.

# Foreword

Adult education has never been more needed. The UK is facing a severe skills gap which is hampering our economic recovery and future development. The need to train and retrain for new careers will become ever more urgent as automation takes hold and displaces existing jobs.

Yet there is a dearth of opportunities for adults to re-enter education, with lifelong learning in England having suffered from a decade of neglect. The number of learners on courses at Level 3 and below halved from 2.8 million adults in 2010 to 1.5 million in 2020. In a period when investment in adult education should have been an imperative, budgets were slashed and provision cut.

We need to radically reform our adult education offer if we want to set the country on the path to sustainable growth because adult learning could provide the key to tackling our current economic and social challenges. As we grapple with issues such as skills shortages and health challenges, lifelong learning has an essential role to play.

Adult Community Education should be recognised as the foundation stone of any lifelong learning strategy. I have seen first-hand the difference that adult community learning can make. I began my working life as a tutor at the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), teaching people returning to education who were determined to turn their life around. Adult community learning gives working-class people the chance to access an education and to realise opportunities that they may have never had before.

Adult Community Education providers are unique in their ability to engage adults who are often dismissed as the "hardest to reach". Many of the adults I worked with were re-entering education after a lengthy absence and, often, the first step back into the classroom was the most difficult one.

We must do more to ensure that every adult has the opportunity to re-engage in lifelong learning. As this report finds, many adults want to retrain but simply do not know of the options that are available to them. Across the nation there is an army of Adult Community Education providers who are being underused.

If the full power of community learning was unleashed, Adult Community Education could provide a robust safety net for those most in need.

Lifelong learning is an issue of social justice. Increasing opportunities for adult education not only contributes to our growth and upskilling agenda, it also improves health, happiness and social cohesion. This report outlines a plan to integrate Adult Community Education into the government's agenda to deliver growth and to make high-quality lifelong learning opportunities accessible to all.

As we hurtle towards an age of automation, significant reform of our adult education system is needed. Retraining is becoming increasingly important, so I welcome the recommendation for an all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy.

Education should be the vehicle for a secure and sustained productive working life. We need a plan to develop a pipeline of homegrown talent across all sectors of the economy to address the needs of the labour market. Adults without GCSE qualifications face being barred from the workforce or being stuck in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. That makes no sense and this report makes the case for supporting adults currently outside the labour market into jobs where there are skills shortages and for increasing employer investment in those skills.

We must also abandon the false divide between community learning and qualifications. Adult education has many benefits which extend beyond improved prosperity and economic growth. A recent survey on the impact of adult learning found that 84% of learners reported improvements to their overall wellbeing, with no less than 92% making fewer visits to their GP.

So adult learning can help to create a happier and healthier nation and this, in itself, will assist in building a more resilient country.

Recent government proposals to limit the focus of adult learning to purely work-related qualifications fail to understand the breadth and depth of adult education and would put many adult learners at risk. Much more positively, the proposals outlined in this paper demonstrate the increased need for community learning.

To realise the nation's potential, we need a radical reform of adult education which builds from a strong foundation of Adult Community Education. This report provides the blueprint for such a system.

**Lord (Mike) Watson of Invergowrie,  
Shadow Education Minister in the House of Lords from 2015–2022**

# Executive summary

The Prime Minister is facing an in-tray stacked high with urgent challenges. Perhaps the most pressing issue is how to achieve economic growth and set our country on a path for sustainable finances.

Over the last decade, our nation's economy has suffered from stuttering growth rates. Between 2000–2020, economic growth in the UK averaged around 1.8 per cent, almost a percentage point lower than the growth rate of the previous two decades. Low economic growth has meant that public services have been financed largely by an increasing tax burden.

Even the growth our economy has achieved has failed to improve the lot of ordinary working families. A focus on consumption, rather than investment in capital and skills, has left our productivity rate stagnant and generated almost no growth in average earnings. Poor growth in personal income has left families exposed to rising costs and facing the brutal realities of the cost-of-living crisis.

Learning and skills underpin our country's growth trajectory. Without a stronger foundation of education for all and opportunities to retrain and develop the world-class skills needed for a competitive market, our economy will continue to be hostage to low growth rates.

Part of the reason for poor economic growth has been our inability to cultivate the skills needed by employers. While lots of attention has been given to the increased number of pupils going to university, hidden from sight, a long tail of low skills has been growing.

There is a huge deficit of basic skills. In 2018, nearly 1 in 5 young people left formal education without basic qualifications. Adults who wish to resit and retrain for GCSE and equivalent qualifications face a dearth of second chances.

By 2030, 7 million people (20 per cent of the current labour market) could be under-skilled for their job and up to two in three workers will be under-skilled in basic skills to some degree. The most widespread under-skilling is expected to be in basic digital skills, with around 5 million workers projected to be under-skilled.

While talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. There are massive gulfs between different parts of the country: higher skill levels among London's workforce explains about two thirds of the productivity gap between the capital and the rest of the country. Britain faces a particularly persistent problem with low level skills: 1 in 5 of the lowest skilled cities in Europe come from Britain.

Work remains the best route out of poverty and yet many thousands of adults in the UK do not have the right skills to enter employment. The impact of low skills on an individual's life chances are scarring.

Adults with lower-level qualifications face an unforgiving jobs market. New Centre for Social Justice analysis for this report reveals that in 2022 adults without qualifications are 4.4 times as likely to be inactive and 1.6 times as likely to be unemployed as adults with a degree or degree apprenticeship. CSJ analysis of the Labour Force Survey found that 48 per cent of adults with no qualifications (1.2 million adults in total) were economically inactive in April–June 2022. This compares with only 11 per cent of adults who held a degree or a degree apprenticeship.

Even when people with low level qualifications secure a job, their low-qualification status significantly depresses their earning potential and constrains their ability to get a promotion.

They also experience much worse health outcomes, are less engaged in civic activities, and have worse wellbeing. These adults are often overlooked and forgotten about, deemed “furthest to reach”. Failing to give these adults a second chance through lifelong learning is an issue of social justice.

This cohort of adults are an untapped resource who, with better education, could help boost the productivity of businesses in the UK. Research from the OECD has revealed that the UK could improve overall productivity by 5 per cent if it reduced the skills mismatch to mirror best practice of comparator nations. Improving basic skills could lead to a 12 per cent increase in wages.

Any plan for economic recovery must create a pipeline of talent, building from the foundation of Adult Community Education (ACE). Across England there is an army of Adult Community Education providers ready to be mobilised to retrain and reskill adults and set the country on a trajectory for stronger economic growth.

This report sets out a blueprint for improved lifelong learning which fosters every individual’s talent and potential and engages adults on the very fringes of our labour market.

Chapter 1 outlines the state of adult education in England. It focuses on the role of Adult Community Education providers, who often provide the first step back into learning for adults the furthest removed from education and work. It examines the reasons for the recent decline in participation in lifelong learning and provides recommendations to boost the take up of Adult Community Education.

Chapter 2 investigates the relationship between Adult Community Education and work. It looks at how we can create a route out of poverty through work with a focus on addressing skills shortages and encouraging investment in lifelong learning for adults in the labour market.

Chapter 3 demystifies the false divide between adult education which is focused on work outcomes and community learning. It explains how community education is intertwined with work-related learning. It makes the case for community learning as a necessary focus for any lifelong learning programme which aims to engage with adults the furthest removed from the labour market.

A talented workforce is the best engine to drive economic growth. If we want to create a more resilient economy, we must examine our adult education system and focus on building a strong foundation of Adult Community Education.

# Summary of recommendations

## **Recommendation 1: The Government should introduce a Minister for Adult Education and Lifelong Learning.**

- Given the importance of adult education to the strength of our economy and future skills generation, there is a strong need for an explicit focus on adult education at the Ministerial level.
- This minister should sit within the Department for Education but also play a key role in coordinating collaboration across Governmental departments, at both a local and national level, with a stake in adult education.

## **Recommendation 2: The Government should launch an all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy.**

- The Government should launch an all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy which builds from the foundations of Adult Community Education. Specific attention should be given to adults without formal qualifications.
- This strategy should aim to provide every adult who needs to retrain with a pathway to develop the skills they need, regardless of their starting point.
- New and existing skills programmes should be threaded together with a focus on creating a connected lifelong learning system.
- This strategy should pull together the expertise of Adult Community Education providers, Further Education, Higher Education, and stakeholders with devolved powers around skills.
- Where the Adult Education budget is devolved, Mayoral Combined Authorities should lead their strategy with a focus on place-based skills development.

## **Recommendation 3: Following the articulation of the Government strategy for an all-phase, all-stage lifelong learning offer, Adult Community Education providers should be offered a 5-year funding settlement to allow them to deliver against these aims.**

- To allow Adult Community Education to plan and innovate, to meet the skills demands of the economy, providers should be offered a 5-year funding settlement.

- This funding should come with requisite accountability and focus on whether providers meet long-term aims for service provision.
- Funding should be simplified but should be comprehensive enough to allow Adult Community Education providers to deliver a range of educational, employment and community learning opportunities.
- Funding should be visible and transparent and should come with less bureaucracy, freeing up providers to spend less time applying for bids and more time delivering education.

**Recommendation 4: The Government should launch a national information campaign to raise awareness around the value of Adult Community Education and directing adults to their local adult learning institution or centre.**

- The Government should embark on a national campaign to raise awareness around the value of Adult Community Education and outline the details of what is available locally.
- National campaigns promoting available Adult Community Education provision have a strong record of success and previous awareness raising campaigns have seen increased levels of engagement in adult education.
- This campaign should focus on reaching adults who are unlikely to otherwise participate in education.
- To ensure that such a campaign is targeted towards adults who would most benefit, the government should look to design any national marketing materials building on insights from adults who have participated in Adult Community Education.

**Recommendation 5: As part of a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy, the Government should commit to promoting the legal entitlement to basic skills for adults in numeracy, literacy and language, and digital skills.**

- The Government should build upon Multiply and offer a suite of interventions and short courses, delivered through Adult Community Education providers, to secure universal basic skills for all adults.
- These courses should focus on literacy and essential digital skills and should be advertised nationally to ensure they reach adults who would most benefit from them.

**Recommendation 6: The Government should consult around barriers to progression between different education providers.**

- As part of a comprehensive all-phase, all-stage lifelong learning plan, the Government should look at how different parts of the adult education system link together and how providers can outline a pathway of learning, progressing adults from one level to the other, from the start of their course, where appropriate.
- The review should look at barriers to progression for individuals and also challenges that prevent adult education providers from working together.

- It should examine whether learners can access courses which provide foundation knowledge to progress onto higher level courses within their locality.
- Greater focus should be given to the role of outreach from higher-level education providers, such as universities. For example, university Access and Participation plans should have a specific focus on outreach to disadvantaged adults.

**Recommendation 7: The new lifelong learning strategy should identify key sectors with skills shortages and offer fully funded learning pathways from Entry Level to Level 3 for unemployed adults or adults earning less than the National Minimum wage.**

- As part of the Free Courses for jobs scheme, the Government should target support for Level 1 and Level 2 courses for applicants who do not have pre-requisite skills.
- Adult Community Education providers should be signposted to and given funding to deliver foundation courses that give adults with lower qualifications the necessary knowledge to progress on to a free Level 3 course.
- These courses should be offered to individuals for free and should align with the eligibility criteria for the Free Courses for Jobs scheme.

**Recommendation 8: New short courses, like Bootcamps, should be piloted with a focus on content at Level 2 standard.**

- A new wave of Bootcamps should be piloted to deliver intensive, short courses at Level 2 or above in industries where these skills are needed.
- The pilot should target adults with low or no formal qualifications, adults who are unemployed or adults who risk losing their job as the economy modernises. The Government may want to focus this new wave on vocational retraining for specific growth industries.

**Recommendation 9: Introduce a “learning and skills tax rebate” for employers who invest in low-skilled workers.**

- A tax rebate, with a focus on low-skilled workers, would help to raise the profile of skills in this country while keeping people in work.
- This relief should be targeted at low-skilled workers as they are less likely to participate in adult education and they are disproportionately at risk of losing their jobs as the economy modernises.

- The Government could align the eligibility criteria with existing schemes, targeting adults without Level 2 qualifications or with an income less than the National Living Wage.
- We already offer employers research and development (R&D) tax credits. The mechanism that exists for employers to claim R&D tax credits could be refined to bolt on training credits, which means this reform need not be overly complicated from an administrative point of view.

**Recommendation 10: The Government should pilot employment interventions which target adults who are economically inactive but would like to transition into work.**

- The Government should roll out pilot education interventions which target the 1.7 million economically inactive people who want to work.
- The pilots should look at the role of Adult Community Education in reskilling adults furthest from the labour market.

**Recommendation 11: Alongside plans for devolution, the Government should adopt a local first approach. Local leaders should be given the power, funding, and accountability to join up skills, careers and employment at a local level to create a locally responsive skills system.**

- The local first approach should be intertwined with a new national all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy. Central government should take responsibility for making lifelong learning accessible for all and devolve powers to the local level to allow leaders to flexibly draw down on funds to match provision to their labour market needs.
- All local approaches should build from the foundation of Adult Community Education. Devolved employment and skills agreements should ensure that universal basic skills are prioritised across the country.

**Recommendation 12: The Government should introduce Universal Support to accompany Universal Credit.**

- Universal Support Key Workers would support the most vulnerable adults who face complex barriers in their personal life and would guide adults who need Adult Community Education through their learning and into a sustainable job.

**Recommendation 13: The Government should reinstate the wider objectives for Adult Community Education and should review how to make funding for community learning sustainable.**

- A consultation document published in 2022 outlined the Government’s plan to limit the scope of community education funding.<sup>1</sup> The changes have been criticised for limiting the remit of community learning. Programmes such as social prescribing activities, health and wellbeing, family learning and first steps English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) would have to be dropped.
- The Government should remove the change in scope from the consultation and reinstate its commitment to a broader slate of community learning outcomes.
- As part of their lifelong learning plan, the new government minister should seek to integrate Adult Community Education into policy responses across different departments.
- A review should be conducted into how community education is funded to ensure that Adult Community Education is valued and can be utilised to unlock personal, social and employability benefits.

**Recommendation 14: The Government should review how it assesses the benefits of Adult Community Education to better capture outcomes related to community learning and assess longer-term progression.**

- The Government should review the outcome measures for Adult Community Education.
- This review should try to capture the broader outcomes for learners and collect data in a way that allows it to be shared with other relevant partners in a locality, such as social prescribing key workers.
- Longitudinal data on the outcomes of learners should be captured to evidence the long time frames under which Adult Community Education providers support adult learners and to better reflect the timeframe of success for adult education provision.

**Recommendation 15: Adult Community Education should be embedded in the national approach to social prescribing.**

- The Government should provide greater clarity over who should fund Adult Community Education provision which is health centred as part of a national approach to social prescribing.
- National guidance for link workers should explain the benefits of Adult Community Education and local directories of available provision should be made accessible for social prescribers in every locality across the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, 2022. “Implementing a new FE Funding and Accountability System” [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/implementing-a-new-fe-funding-and-accountability-system>]

**Recommendation 16:** The Government should review the current offer of family learning and seek to provide family learning opportunities delivered by Adult Community Education providers across the country’s growing network of Family Hubs.

- Family learning should become a core part of the Department for Education’s plans to tackle the attainment gap and improve literacy and numeracy.
- Parents should be referred to family learning programmes to enable them to better support their children’s learning.
- These courses should be provided in accessible locations for parents to maximise participation. This could involve pilots of co-location where a broad Adult Community Education offer, including family learning and a roster of other courses, is hosted at Family Hubs.

**Recommendation 17:** To better reach families in need of support, the Money and Pensions Service should steer financial education providers to invest in and scale up programmes that adopt a ‘whole-family approach’, reaching parents through existing local infrastructure such Adult Community Education and Family Hubs.

- The Money and Pensions service should seek to boost the number of adults receiving financial education.
- Whole-family approaches to money management should be scaled up, using existing Adult Community Education provision.
- A new adult financial education initiative could build upon existing basic skills programmes, such as Multiply, and integrate financial literacy as part of ongoing learning opportunities.

**Recommendation 18:** The Government should simplify funding for ESOL under a single strategy for building healthy communities.

- A new funding allocation should be developed which allows providers to both plan for long-term provision to help ESOL learners integrate into society and also respond to refugee crises as they emerge.

**Recommendation 19:** Adult Community Education providers should be set up in every town that needs one.

- As part of the lifelong learning strategy, the Government should evaluate the spread of Adult Community Education and identify cold spots of provision.
- Through either additional capital investment or greater use of co-location, the Government should look to develop a network of Adult Community Education providers based in locations that are most accessible to learners.



## chapter one

# Lifelong learning for all – the golden thread of adult education

Lifelong learning will play an essential role in the regeneration of our economy. In the face of skills mismatches and low economic growth, the country must look to regenerate and reskill. With a labour market increasingly dependent on older workers, an economy stifled by labour shortages, and a workforce that needs to transform itself at an unprecedented rate, Britain depends upon a strengthened adult education offer.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills has forecast that by 2030 the UK workforce will be older and more female, the global labour market will be even more competitive, and technology will define every work environment.<sup>2</sup> The pace of change demands a greater focus on lifelong learning as two-thirds of the workforce for 2030 have already left compulsory education.<sup>3</sup>

In evidence to the Government, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills stated that this new labour market will necessitate a greater focus on upskilling and that the Government will need to develop a strategy to support low-skilled workers to adapt.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, our adult education offer has languished in recent years. A seminal study from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) concluded that cuts to public investment in basic adult education and training have exacerbated educational inequalities in the UK.<sup>5</sup> Each year, a large proportion of school children open their GCSE results to find that they have not received the results they hoped for. Many leave without reaching Level 2. Once they're on the other side of the school gates, this cohort finds it incredibly difficult to resit their examinations later in life and gain qualifications.

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2 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014. "The future of work: jobs and skills in 2030" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobs-and-skills-in-2030>]

3 Education Select Committee Written Evidence, 2019. "Written evidence submitted by the Northern Powerhouse Partnership" [Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/2296/pdf>]

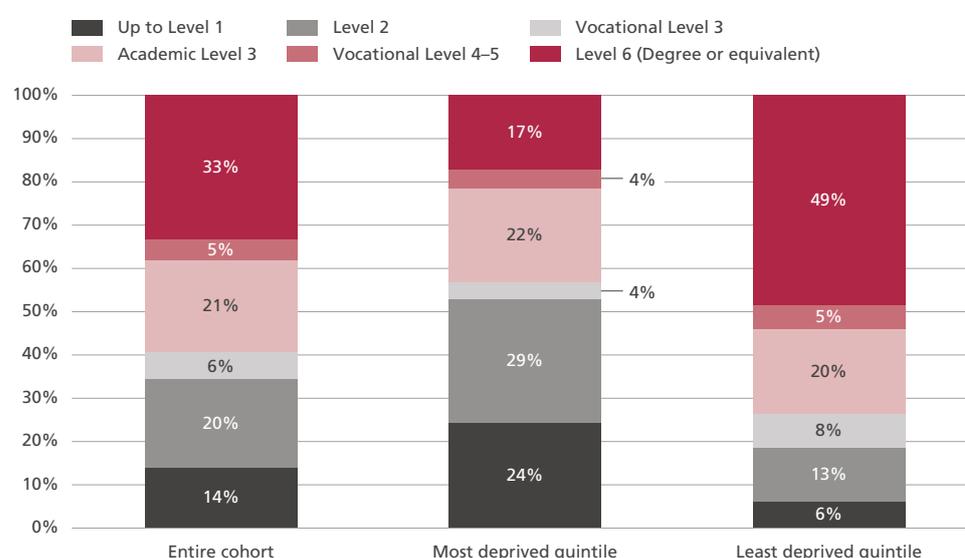
4 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014. "The future of work: jobs and skills in 2030" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobs-and-skills-in-2030>]

5 Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022. "Education inequalities" [Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>]

The former Children’s Commissioner found that in 2018 nearly 100,000 children in England (18 per cent of all school leavers) left school at 18 without achieving five GCSEs grade A\*–C or equivalent.<sup>6</sup> This rate is now rising after falling between 2005–2015. The Children’s Commissioner’s research found that this rise was largely down to a sharp increase in free-school meal eligible pupils failing to get the grades.<sup>7</sup>

IFS research has laid bare the difficulties adults face when they attempt to gain qualifications outside of compulsory schooling. By age 26, 14 per cent of all adults were educated only up to Level 1. In the most deprived quintile of adults, 24 per cent of adults were educated up to Level 1 whereas in the least deprived quintile only 6 per cent of adults hit this threshold.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1: Adults from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have low qualifications: highest level of qualification at age 26 by deprivation quintile



Source: Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2020. “Post-18 Education: Who is Taking Different Routes and How Much do they Earn?”

The opportunities to return to learning in adulthood are few and far between. Our current system of lifelong learning neglects the role played by Adult Community Education.

The cohort of adults with low and no qualifications remain locked out of the labour market and unable to reach their full potential. This chapter will make the case for a strengthened lifelong learning offer which recognises Adult Community Education as the foundation for adult education.

6 Children’s Commissioner, 2019. “Almost one in five children left education at 18 last year without basic qualifications” [Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2019/09/20/almost-one-in-five-children-left-education-at-18-last-year-without-basic-qualifications>]

7 Ibid.

8 Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022. “Education inequalities” [Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>]

## 1.1 What is Adult Community Education?

Adult Community Education exists to: “[...] develop the skills, confidence, motivation, and resilience of adults of different ages and backgrounds in order to: progress towards formal learning or employment and/or improve their health and well-being, including mental health and/or develop stronger communities.”<sup>9</sup>

To achieve these aims, the sector offers a broad range of courses often at Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) or below including “non-accredited courses”. The courses on offer through Adult Community Education include:

- Maths, English and digital skills
- ESOL (English for speakers of other languages)
- Family learning courses
- Employability courses (providing skills to prepare adults for work)
- Programmes to support learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to develop independence, social skills and employability skills
- Training in mentoring and counselling for learners recovering from addiction
- Creative courses in subjects like music, ceramics, and creative arts

Over half a million learners are educated, trained, and retrained by Adult Community Education centres each year.<sup>10</sup> In 2018/19, adult community education provided over 800,000 courses and delivered lessons across a network of 10,000 delivery centres.<sup>11</sup> Community learning has the greatest footprint of any further education provision in England, with the largest geographical reach.

Adult Community Education should be recognised as the first rung of any lifetime learning entitlement. In undertaking research for this report, adults studying at community learning centres told us how invaluable this provision is. One learner told us that adult community learning had offered her “light in the darkness” and given her the ability to see a future for herself when previously her prospects had seemed bleak.<sup>12</sup>

According to Ofsted, Adult Community Education centres are the best-performing form of further education provision: 92 per cent of all providers are rated “Good” or “Outstanding”.<sup>13</sup>

Community learning centres have a stellar track record in reaching individuals the furthest removed from the labour market and putting them on track for success. More than any other form of adult learning, Adult Community Education centres reach individuals and whole communities who are the most disadvantaged.

9 Education Select Committee, 2020. “A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution” [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

10 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. “Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?” [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Sue-Pember-Holex-report.pdf>]

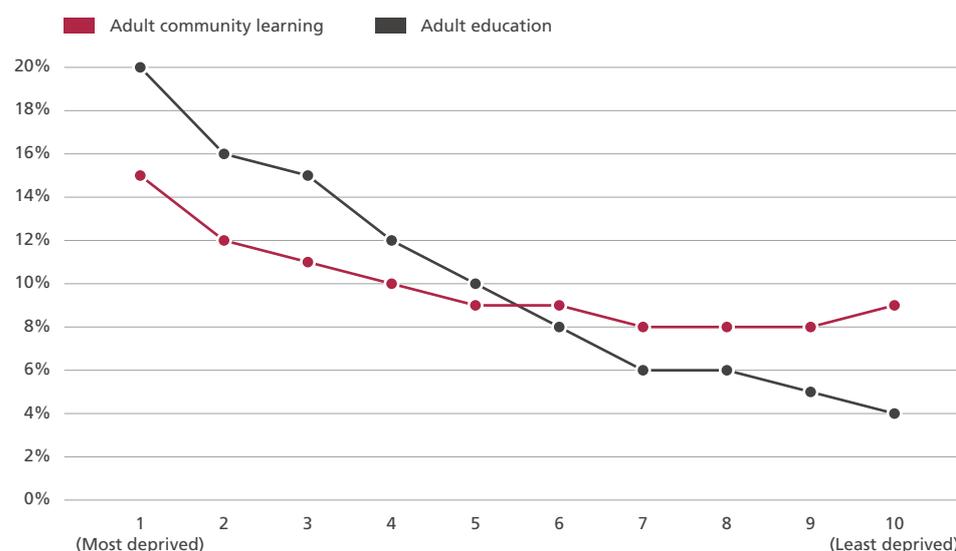
11 Ibid.

12 CSJ fieldwork visits to Adult Community Education centres.

13 CSJ analysis of Ofsted figures.

Many adults who participate in Adult Community Education are unemployed, often on a long-term basis.<sup>14</sup> At community learning centres, 36 per cent of all adults receiving adult education and 27 per cent of all adults receiving community learning were from the 20 per cent most disadvantaged households.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2: Adult Community Education providers have proven success in engaging adults in the most disadvantaged areas: adult community education and adult education delivery 2018/19 by deprivation decile



Source: Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?"

These learners are trapped in a cycle of low basic skills and subsequently confront multiple disadvantages in their personal lives. For many, adult community learning is the first stepping stone towards reengaging with education and improving their life prospects.<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 Our lifelong learning strategy is a complex web of ad hoc initiatives

The Centenary Commission on Adult Education came together in 2019 to reflect on what needed to change in adult education to create the conditions for a learning society for all. It argued that since the 1919 Report on adult education, education had become an even more important component of labour market policies, health and wellbeing strategies and plans for rehabilitation of ex-offenders.<sup>17</sup>

14 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving local communities – A handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

15 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Sue-Pember-Holex-report.pdf>]

16 Ibid.

17 The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019. "A Permanent National Necessity: Adult education and lifelong learning for 21st Century Britain" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-2.pdf>]

Adult Community Education provides benefits spanning education, work and welfare, business and skills, health, communities, and local government<sup>18</sup> with funding pots coming from a range of different sources.<sup>19</sup> This spaghetti junction of incentives, strategies and accountability makes it difficult to coordinate a clear strategy for adult learning.

Lifelong learning is not given particular attention within ministerial briefs, despite its increasing importance. At present, adult education is one item on a long list of priorities for a minister within the Department for Education.<sup>20</sup>

Adult Community Education receives comparatively very little policy attention, despite its fundamental role in reskilling adults the furthest from the labour market. At present, there are four ministers with a portfolio on the school system but only one minister with lifelong learning in their portfolio. Lifelong learning sits as one of many portfolio issues alongside higher and further education.<sup>21</sup>

In their inquiry into adult education in 2019, the Education Select Committee raised alarm that the Minister responsible for adult education could not set out a specific strategy or ambition for Adult Community Education. The vision of the Government was seen to clash with what stakeholders involved in Adult Community Education said about the role and purpose of Adult Community Education.<sup>22</sup>

### **Recommendation 1: The Government should introduce a Minister for Adult Education and Lifelong Learning.**

- Given the importance of adult education to the strength of our economy and future skills generation, there is a strong need for an explicit focus on adult education at the Ministerial level.
- This minister should sit within the Department for Education but also play a key role in coordinating collaboration across Governmental departments, at both a local and national level, with a stake in adult education.

Adult Community Education is often the first step back into learning, especially for adults who are furthest removed from the education system. However, most recent policy developments have focused on boosting the access to and provision of higher-level qualifications while adults who left school with low or no qualifications face a paucity of second chances.<sup>23</sup>

18 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving local communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

19 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. "The Long Game" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/the-long-game-how-to-reboot-skills-training-for-disadvantaged-adults>]

20 The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019. "A Permanent National Necessity: Adult education and lifelong learning for 21st Century Britain" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-2.pdf>]

21 Schools Week, 2022. "Meet the ministers: Who's who in Liz Truss's first DfE lineup" [Available at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/meet-the-ministers-whos-who-in-liz-truss-first-dfe-lineup>]

22 Education Select Committee, 2019, "A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution" [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

23 Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022. "Education inequalities" [Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>]

While the Government has invested significant sums in national skills initiatives, these schemes have been introduced on an ad-hoc basis and we currently lack a plan to thread together Government schemes into a single lifelong learning strategy.

In 2020, the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, delivered a speech on the Government's skills strategy.<sup>24</sup> He announced that a new Lifelong Loan Entitlement would be introduced to allow individuals to fund four years of post-18 education to retrain for high-level technical courses. Consultation on the Government's Lifelong Loan Entitlement was focused exclusively on courses at levels 4 to 6, with no proposal for funding courses at Level 2.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the Government has invested £1.6 billion through the National Skills Fund to help adults improve their job prospects and meet future skills needs for the economy. This funding includes £550 million to expand Skills Bootcamps at Level 3 standard or above and investment in free Level 3 qualifications for adults if it is their first Level 3 or they are low-income (regardless of their prior qualification level).<sup>26</sup>

While further development of higher-level skills is important, large swathes of the adult population cannot access Level 3 provision. An alarming proportion of adults do not progress beyond, or even to, basic qualifications. Nationally, more than 1 in 20 of all adults hold no formal qualifications,<sup>27</sup> and in some areas, the rate exceeds more than 1 in 10 adults.<sup>28</sup>

Other devolved nations have started to explore a connected adult learning journey which builds from entry-level skills, yet England's adult education provision comprises a mixture of new initiatives that present cliff edges for learners. Experts have warned that the ad hoc nature of adult learning provision in England leads to deadweight loss and poor value for money.<sup>29</sup>

### **Recommendation 2: The Government should launch an all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy.**

- The Government should launch an all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy which builds from the foundations of Adult Community Education. Specific attention should be given to adults without formal qualifications.
- This strategy should aim to provide every adult who needs to retrain with a pathway to develop the skills they need, regardless of their starting point.
- New and existing skills programmes should be threaded together with a focus on creating a connected lifelong learning system.

24 Prime Minister's Office – 10 Downing Street, 2020. "PM's Skills Speech: 29 September 2020" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-skills-speech-29-september-2020>]

25 Department for Education, 2022. "Lifelong loan entitlement" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/lifelong-loan-entitlement>]

26 Department for Education, 2022. "National Skills Fund" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-skills-fund>]

27 Legatum Institute, 2021. "The levelling up agenda is held back by an "adult skills crisis" and "lack of access to business loans" in Red Wall areas – not infrastructure" [Available at: <https://li.com/commentaries/levelling-up-held-back-by-adultskills-crisis-and-lack-of-business-loans-in-red-wall-areas-2>]

28 Ibid.

29 FE Week, 2022. "DfE – look at Scotland's plans for an adult learning strategy" [Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/dfe-look-at-scotlands-plans-for-an-adult-learning-strategy>]

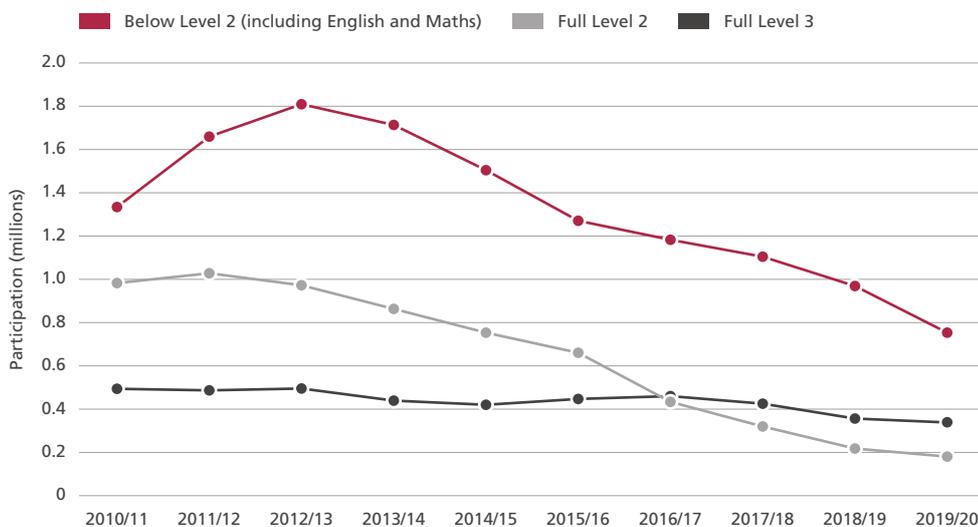
- This strategy should pull together the expertise of Adult Community Education providers, Further Education, Higher Education, and stakeholders with devolved powers around skills.
- Where the Adult Education budget is devolved, Mayoral Combined Authorities should lead their strategy with a focus on place-based skills development.

### 1.3 Participation in Adult Community Education is falling

The benefits of Adult Community Education are multi-faceted, yet participation has been in steep decline in recent years. Over the last decade, the number of adults engaging in education has been falling and this decline is mostly attributed to a collapse in the number of adults taking lower-level qualifications through Adult Community Education.<sup>30</sup>

The Learning and Work Institute's survey of Adult Participation in Learning estimates that engagement in Adult Community Education maths, English and ESOL courses has fallen by 60 per cent over the last decade.<sup>31</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) figures show that the number of adults on all Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 courses has halved over the same period.<sup>32</sup>

Figure 3: Lower level qualification participation has collapsed: participation in adult education over time by qualification level



Source: Department for Education, 2022. "Academic Year 2021/22: Further education and skills"

The fall in numbers has been particularly sharp for learners on Entry and Level 1 courses. The number of adults taking these courses peaked in 2012 at around 1.8 million but by 2020 this figure had fallen to fewer than 700,000 learners.<sup>33</sup>

30 IFS, 2022. "Adult education: the past, present and future" [Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/adult-education-past-present-and-future>]

31 Learning and Work Institute, 2021. "Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2021" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-2021>]

32 IFS, 2022. "Adult education: the past, present and future" [Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/adult-education-past-present-and-future>]

33 Ibid.

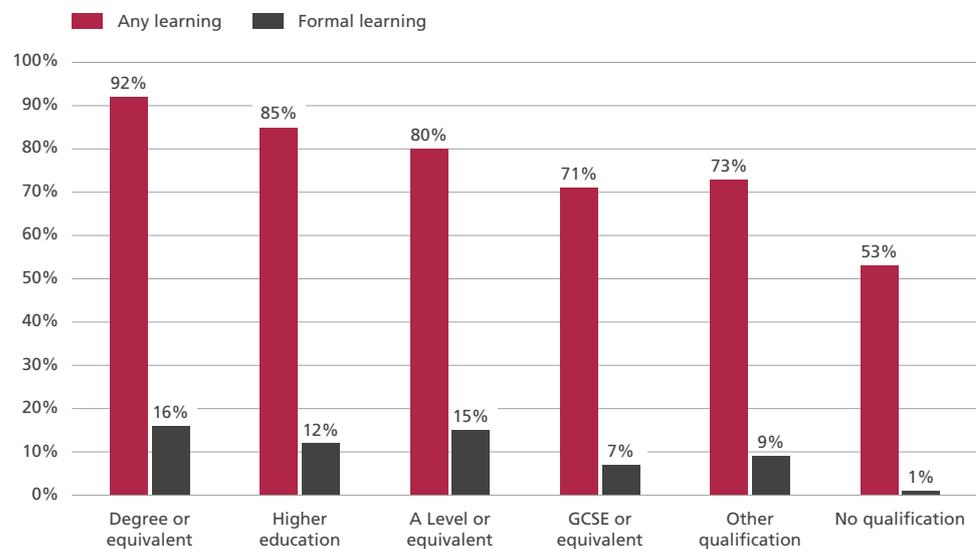
Level 2 learners have also fallen over the same period, having peaked at 1.1 million in 2010 falling to a low of 520,000 learners in 2019. This fall largely occurred between 2011 and 2015. During this period, funding for Level 2 courses beyond English and maths was restricted and workplace support for this group of learners was removed in 2016.<sup>34</sup>

Our vanishing Adult Community Education offer is stoking up massive challenges for the nation, however, the reduced offer is a particular concern for adults from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite having the most to gain from continued education, disadvantaged adults are twice as likely as their more affluent peers to not take part in adult education.<sup>35</sup> In a recent survey on adult participation in learning, it was revealed that 37 per cent of adults from socioeconomic groups D and E – low-income and working-class adults – have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education.<sup>36</sup> In comparison, only 18 per cent of adults from socioeconomic groups A and B – upper-middle and middle-class adults – have similarly not engaged in adult learning.<sup>37</sup>

Adults who left school with no formal qualifications are less likely to seek out routes to these qualifications in later life, despite the recognised benefits of these qualifications in the labour market and the fact that this cohort has the most to gain by engaging in lifelong learning.

Figure 4: A cumulative learning gap has opened up: participation in learning in the last 12 months, by highest educational attainment



Source: Department for Education, 2018. "Adult Education Survey 2016"

34 Ibid.

35 Learning and Work Institute, 2021. "Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2021" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-2021>]

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

The 2016 Adult Education Survey found that only 53 per cent of adults who left school with no formal qualifications had engaged in any form of education in the last year, whereas the rate for those with GCSEs was 71 per cent and 92 per cent for adults with degree-level qualifications.<sup>38</sup> Adults with degrees are twice as likely to engage in learning that leads to nationally recognised qualifications as individuals who left school with no GCSEs or equivalent qualifications.<sup>39</sup>

The UK, therefore, suffers from a cumulative education gap: people who go on to degree level are much more likely to engage in lifelong learning than people who have no formal qualifications. Over time, this creates a gulf between the most and least educated and results in a skills mismatch in the wider economy.

As noted in this report, this cohort of low-income and poorly qualified adults are likely to face the brunt of future economic shocks. Adults with low levels of formal qualifications are more likely to be unemployed and are disproportionately represented in sectors of the economy which are vulnerable to the threats posed by automation. Workers who are at high risk of being displaced by automation (overwhelmingly workers in lower-skilled jobs) have a participation rate in lifelong learning which is 21 per cent lower than those in low-risk jobs.<sup>40</sup>

## Factors behind falling participation figures

### Pressures from the pandemic

In part, the recent fall in numbers can be attributed to factors to do with the Covid-19 pandemic. Adult Community Education providers are, by design, flexible and adaptive. Building on the principle of taking the learning opportunities to the learner, providers reinvented their provision over lockdown to offer continuity and support to their learners.

Innovative new service design led to the creation of online lessons and blended learning opportunities.<sup>41</sup> Yet, despite the creation of a new, more accessible learning offer, as Covid-19 gripped the country many adults began to disengage with Adult Community Education.

In a recent report, Toynbee Hall found that the pandemic created new barriers to accessing adult education for the most disadvantaged learners. While some learners embraced the digital world, many people felt totally alienated by it.<sup>42</sup>

The shift online may have reduced the cost of transportation to an Adult Community Education provider, yet online provision was not necessarily cheaper for all learners. Over this period, increased reliance on digital access led to a hike in utilities and internet

38 Department for Education, 2018. "Adult Education Survey 2016" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-education-survey-2016>]

39 Ibid.

40 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. "The Long Game" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/the-long-game-how-to-reboot-skills-training-for-disadvantaged-adults>]

41 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

42 Toynbee Hall, 2022. "More than just education" [Available at: <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TH-GLA-Adult-Education-Report-Feb22-Digital.pdf>]

bills which particularly hit learners on low incomes. The digital divide, well documented as a barrier to continued school education throughout the pandemic, similarly acted as a barrier for adults in a household without access to a computer.<sup>43</sup>

Alongside difficulties accessing digital education, lockdowns themselves created new barriers for learners. Adults with children and elderly relatives in their household found it more difficult to engage in learning with the increased caring responsibilities imposed over this period. Many learners depend upon access to childcare and social networks to support them when they are taking Adult Community Education courses, but during lockdowns, informal support evaporated as the country moved towards a world of bubbles and social distancing.<sup>44</sup>

The strong restrictions imposed on households over this period led to worsening mental health and heightened stress levels. Despite the proven mental health benefits that come with Adult Community Education, many adults found the mounting stress over this period hampered their motivation to engage with online learning.<sup>45</sup>

While provision has now largely moved back to in-person, with some courses retaining the flexibility for blended learning where it suits their learners, throughout our research providers have warned that lower engagement levels are continuing to blight the sector.

Adult Community Education providers detailed how the cost of living pressures are crowding out engagement with Adult Community Education. Despite the fact that taking part in Adult Community Education can lead to fiscal and mental health benefits, both of which could help families weather the cost-of-living crisis, providers told us that moments of crisis can lead to adult education being seen as a luxury good and can further suppress engagement.<sup>46</sup>

### **A shrinking Adult Education Budget**

While pandemic restrictions and increased stress factors in the home environment may have led to a recent dip in student numbers, the decline in participation predates 2020.

In recent years, the supply of Adult Community Education has been constrained by funding rules. Nationally, funding rules have suppressed student numbers and limited the supply of options available via Adult Community Education.<sup>47</sup>

The complex and constrained Community Learning Budget has led to a shrinking of the Adult Community Education offer. In 2016, the Community Learning Budget became part of the Adult Education Budget (AEB). The overall budget was capped at 18 per cent of the total £1.34 billion funding for the AEB. Experts have stated that this cap was set at an “arbitrary level for 10 years” and current funding does not reflect the real cost of providing Adult Community Education courses.

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43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 CSJ Interviews with Adult Community Education Providers

47 Education Select Committee, 2020, “A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution”  
[Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

Over time, reduced funding and a lack of investment have curtailed the offer of Adult Community Education provision and diminished the level of support available for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.<sup>48</sup>

Alongside this, providers must navigate a bewildering funding landscape to be able to secure enough money to put on courses in the first place. Funding for Adult Community Education is not just drawn down from a single pot, instead providers must bid for money from a stream of at least 10 different funding streams, all with their own set of rules and expected outcomes.<sup>49</sup>

The situation is made even more bewildering now that in nine areas of the country skills funding, including community learning, is delegated to Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority. Most learning institutions and centres will also still draw down national funding for apprenticeships, Bootcamps, free Level 3 and 16–18 study programme funding.

The Education Select Committee has noted that the significant decline in adults taking a Level 2 qualification may suggest that this cost barrier has proved insurmountable for some adults wishing to further develop their skills starting from Level 2.<sup>50</sup>

In recent years, the funding for entry-level adult education has been slashed, limiting the opportunities available for adults to reengage in learning. Prior to 2012–13, the Department for Education provided funding for any adult who wanted to take their first full Level 2 qualification. However, austerity measures led to a cut in funding for the Adult Education Budget.

The entitlement to funding for a first full Level 2 was only kept for the 19–23 age group. Adults over the age of 24 must half co-fund their Level 3 and take out a loan to do so. The Augar Review estimated that the cost to individuals was £500 per course on average.<sup>51</sup>

Even when courses are provided for free, the issue of living costs persists. Universal Credit is not available for prospective students who wish to study more than 16 hours and they are not entitled to a loan.

In their 2019 inquiry, the Education Select Committee argued that Adult Community Education providers needed a long-term funding settlement which simplifies funding streams and makes application for funding less bureaucratic for providers.<sup>52</sup>

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48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Augar, 2019. "Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/805127/Review\\_of\\_post\\_18\\_education\\_and\\_funding.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf)]

52 Education Select Committee, 2019, "A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution" [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

**Recommendation 3: Following the articulation of the Government strategy for an all-phase, all-stage lifelong learning offer, Adult Community Education providers should be offered a 5-year funding settlement to allow them to deliver against these aims.**

- To allow Adult Community Education to plan and innovate, to meet the skills demands of the economy, providers should be offered a 5-year funding settlement.
- This funding should come with requisite accountability and focus on whether providers meet long-term aims for service provision.
- Funding should be simplified but should be comprehensive enough to allow Adult Community Education providers to deliver a range of educational, employment and community learning opportunities.
- Funding should be visible and transparent and should come with less bureaucracy, freeing up providers to spend less time applying for bids and more time delivering education.

### **A lack of awareness**

Alongside a decreasing supply, there is also a remarkable lack of demand for Adult Community Education from the population it seeks to serve. This lack of demand is rooted in poor levels of public awareness.

In undertaking research for this report, we found that one of the greatest difficulties that adult community education providers face is that they are largely unknown. Very few people recognise the term “Adult Community Education” and even fewer know of the vast range of benefits that come from Adult Community Education courses.

A recent survey found that 50 per cent of adults did not know that they could access free courses to improve their English and maths skills.<sup>53</sup> Adults with lower-level qualifications, who left school with no GCSEs/O Levels, were the least likely to know of this provision, with only a third of adults in this cohort being aware that free courses in maths and English are available.<sup>54</sup>

The evidence shows that as people move further away from the education system, they become less aware of basic skills courses on offer at Adult Community Education providers. Just 27 per cent of adults who have not engaged in learning since leaving full-time education knew about the free courses available in maths and English. In comparison, 39 per cent of respondents who took part in learning more than three years ago, 53 per cent of recent learners, and 58 per cent of current learners knew about these courses.<sup>55</sup>

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53 Learning and Work Institute, 2021. “Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2021” [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-2021>]

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

The primary referral pathway into Adult Community Education provision often comes through friends and family and word of mouth. There is little formalised advertising or awareness raising about the local ACE offer as many ACE providers are unable to promote their work due to both a lack of resources and also a conflict of interest in the instances where the Adult Community Education provider is the local authority.<sup>56</sup>

Many Adult Community Education providers cultivate strong relationships with local service providers to create a referral pathway from Job Centres to local GPs,<sup>57</sup> however, these partnerships are patchy across the country and depend very much on strong pre-existing relationships. In some cases, there have been concerns that Job Coaches actively discourage potential learners from taking on these courses as doing so may result in lower welfare payments.<sup>58</sup>

Across England there is an army of Adult Community Education providers ready to be mobilised to support the country to level up, yet far too few people know of their existence or the benefits that come from participating in an Adult Community Education course.

National campaigns promoting available Adult Community Education centres have a strong record of success and previous awareness-raising campaigns have seen increased levels of engagement in adult education.<sup>59</sup>

**Recommendation 4: The Government should launch a national information campaign to raise awareness around the value of Adult Community Education and directing adults to their local adult learning institution or centre.**

- The Government should embark on a national campaign to raise awareness around the value of Adult Community Education and outline the details of what is available locally.
- National campaigns promoting available Adult Community Education provision have a strong record of success and previous awareness raising campaigns have seen increased levels of engagement in adult education.
- This campaign should focus on reaching adults who are unlikely to otherwise participate in education.
- To ensure that such a campaign is targeted towards adults who would most benefit, the government should look to design any national marketing materials building on insights from adults who have participated in Adult Community Education.

56 CSJ Fieldwork and Interviews with Adult Community Education providers.

57 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

58 Toynbee Hall, 2022. "More than just education" [Available at: <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TH-GLA-Adult-Education-Report-Feb22-Digital.pdf>]

59 The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019. "A Permanent National Necessity: Adult education and lifelong learning for 21st Century Britain" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-2.pdf>]

## 1.4 Adults in England have some of the lowest levels of basic skills

Any cohesive lifelong learning strategy needs to build from a foundation of universal basic skills. This is a particular challenge in England where nine million working-aged adults lack functional literacy or numeracy.<sup>60</sup> This population would struggle to do basic maths such as estimating the amount of petrol left in a tank from the sight of a gauge and would find it difficult to process written information such as reading the back of a paracetamol packet.<sup>61</sup>

Investment in basic skills is crucial for England's economic recovery. Lower-level basic skills have started to stifle economic growth and England's international competitiveness. Adults in England approaching retirement have similar levels of basic skills compared to their international counterparts, but younger adults are lagging badly behind.<sup>62</sup>

Despite being a major global economy, the UK consistently sits in the bottom half of the OECD numeracy skills ranking.<sup>63</sup> Around half of all adults only have the numeracy levels expected by the end of primary. 4 in 5 adults have maths skills below the equivalent of GCSE grade 4, equivalent to only being qualified to Level 1 in mathematics.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, in England 1 in 6 of all working-age adults, in total 7.1 million people, have "very poor literacy skills".<sup>65</sup> World Literacy Foundation has found that progress in closing the literacy learning gap has remained stagnant. Over the past eight years, very little progress has been made in reducing the proportion of adults who are not functionally literate.<sup>66</sup>

In part, the decline in basic skills proficiency can be attributed to a tilt in our education system to prize higher-level skills, with insufficient regard for securing the foundations. England is an international outlier: younger people are more likely to go on to university than their parents, but they exhibit worse basic skills than the previous generation. In evidence to the Education Select Committee, Andreas Schleicher (Director of Education and Skills at OECD) remarked:

"Even a university degree in the UK does not provide insurance against poor skills. You have literacy and numeracy skills among British university graduates roughly on par with what we see in Finnish or Japanese high school graduates."<sup>67</sup>

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60 Learning and Work Institute, 2021. "Getting the basics right: The case for action on adult basic skills" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/getting-the-basics-right-the-case-for-action-on-adult-basic-skills>]

61 OECD, 2016. "Building skills for all: A review of England" [Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf>]

62 Ibid.

63 Financial Times, 2021. "Low adult numeracy is holding the UK back" [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/52b91b92-1780-4c84-ae11-4017a315ada7>]

64 Ibid.

65 National Literacy Trust. "Adult Literacy" [Available at: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy>]

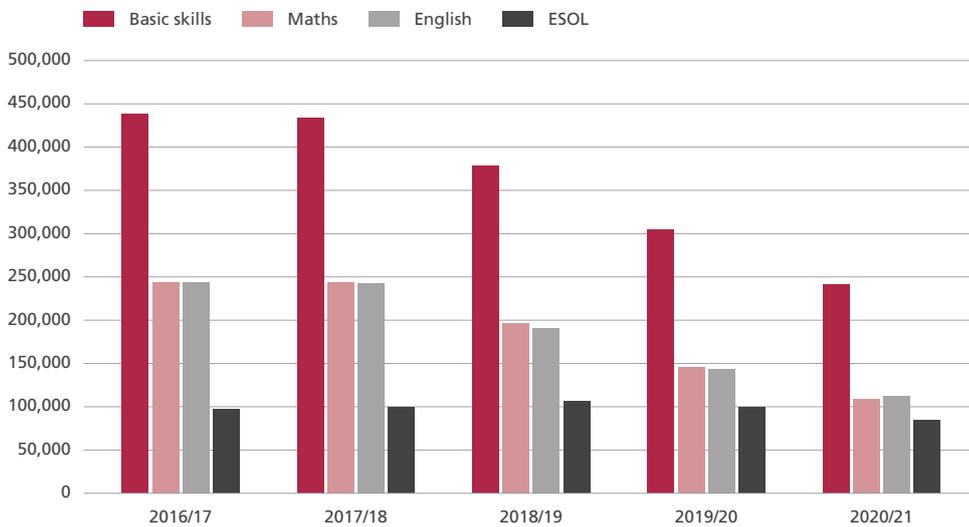
66 World Literacy Foundation, 2018. "The economic and social costs of illiteracy: A White Paper by the World Literacy Foundation" [Available at: <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheEconomicSocialCostofIlliteracy-2.pdf>]

67 Education Select Committee, 2022. "Oral Evidence session: The future of post-16 qualifications HC 902" [Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/13293/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session>]

GCSE maths and English are both benchmark subjects which unlock job opportunities. Adults without these vital qualifications often find themselves barred from the jobs market. An analysis of apprenticeship opportunities found that almost 80 per cent of employer adverts mentioned English or maths as qualifications needed to apply for an apprenticeship, despite the fact that this is not a government imposed prerequisite.<sup>68</sup>

In our research, we heard from many learners who had previously felt ashamed that they had not obtained their maths and English GCSEs at school. Many did not originally start their adult education journey with a focus on qualifications, instead, they came to ACE to embark upon a community learning course. Following a positive experience in the classroom, these learners progressed onto courses for maths and English GCSEs.

Figure 5: Adult participation in essential skills has been falling over time: adult further education achievement in essential skills (basic skills, maths, English and ESOL)



Department for Education, 2022. "Academic Year 2021/22: Further education and skills"

Some were inspired to resit their exams to better support their family whereas for others the motivation was to get better job opportunities. Several told us that they had concerns that it was too late to pick up these essential skills but when they started on their course they realised that was not the case.<sup>69</sup>

**Case study: Michelle, Northern College**

Northern College GCSE student Michelle is a shining example of how it is never too late to get the qualifications you need to achieve your goals.

Michelle's dream is to build on her foster care experience to become a Social Worker to help others. To do so she needed to improve her English qualifications.

68 FE Week, 2021. "Employers keep asking for unnecessary maths and English grades from apprentices" [Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/employers-keep-asking-for-unnecessary-maths-and-english-grades-from-apprentices>]

69 CSJ interviews with Adult Community Education learners.

GCSE student Michelle studied Maths in the evening and English in the day, whilst working as a Foster Carer to two children aged four and five. Despite being a busy foster carer, she successfully passed her GCSE English at grade 7 and GCSE Maths at grade 4. Michelle will now progress onto a Northern College Access to Higher Education course in Humanities and Social Science. This would lead to a degree course with the aim of training as a Social Worker.

Michelle credits some of the difference in the learning experience to school was the fact that students were there for a reason and had a goal in mind, whereas she felt that when she was at school too many students were only there because they had to be.

Michelle says “People should never write themselves off – it’s never too late to get the qualifications to achieve your goals.”

Boosting our nations’ basic skills would reap immense financial dividends. If our entire adult population reached functional levels of literacy, it is estimated that our economy would benefit to the tune of £80 billion. This breaks down into £24.8 billion less spent on welfare and an additional £55.2 billion gained through higher personal income, productivity and business earnings.<sup>70</sup>

Economists estimate that 16 million workers in the UK have low numeracy skills and are earning on average £1,600 less per year than if they had mastered numeracy as a basic skill.<sup>71</sup> If the entire population mastered numeracy, this would add up to a further £25 billion in pay packets across the country.<sup>72</sup>

Improving basic skills for adults would further underpin the Government’s commitment to level up the country as areas which have been traditionally left behind would be the most likely to benefit from skills improvement initiatives.

The potential benefits of improved basic skills would be felt most acutely in the regions where the average income is lower.<sup>73</sup> Research from National Numeracy has found that areas including the North East, West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber would gain the most from improving the level of proficiency in adult basic skills.<sup>74</sup>

The Adult Education Budget fully funds or at least half co-funds skills provision for the most disadvantaged adults. Adults without the equivalent of a pass in English and/or maths and eligible learners without essential digital skills can seek full funding for courses in these basic skills at Adult Community Education providers.<sup>75</sup>

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70 Ibid.

71 National Numeracy Trust, 2021. “New research: ‘Numeracy crisis’ could be costing the UK up to £25 billion a year” [Available at: <https://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/news/counting-on-the-recovery>]

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 World Literacy Foundation, 2018. “The economic and social costs of illiteracy: A White Paper by the World Literacy Foundation” [Available at: <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheEconomicSocialCostofIlliteracy-2.pdf>]

75 Education Select Committee, 2019, “A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution” [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

Alongside this, the Government has recently launched Multiply, an initiative to help adults to improve their numeracy skills through a range of courses from beginner level through to GCSEs. This provision has been designed to be as flexible as possible, offering both classroom-based and online courses, designed at a pace to best suit each individual learner.<sup>76</sup>

**Recommendation 5: As part of a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy, the Government should commit to promoting the legal entitlement to basic skills for adults in numeracy, literacy and language, and digital skills.**

- The Government should build upon Multiply and offer a suite of interventions and short courses, delivered through Adult Community Education providers, to secure universal basic skills for all adults.
- These courses should focus on literacy and essential digital skills and should be advertised nationally to ensure they reach adults who would most benefit from them.

## 1.5 Courses need to provide opportunities for learners to progress to higher levels

The Augar Review found that for people who have left the compulsory education system, progress through different stages of education becomes much more difficult. If students have not completed their Level 1 or Level 2 qualifications by age 18/19, their progress through higher levels of education is largely non-existent.<sup>77</sup>

A study of KS4 leavers in 2010/11 found that around 31.1 per cent of leavers obtained only a Level 1 or below and 12.6 per cent obtained a Level 2 qualification by 2012. These proportions remained relatively constant throughout the five years that followed, settling at 24.4 per cent and 11.4 per cent respectively.<sup>78</sup>

The low uptake of Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications between the ages of 19 and 25 may be in part explained due to a lack of awareness. When adults do take these courses, they are keen to progress on to higher level qualifications. Government research has found that the impact of education below Level 2 on increasing appetite for learning and subsequent actual uptake of learning opportunities is pronounced.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Skills for Life, 2022. "Multiply" [Available at: <https://skillsforlife.campaign.gov.uk/courses/multiply>]

<sup>77</sup> Augar, 2019. "Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/805127/Review\\_of\\_post\\_18\\_education\\_and\\_funding.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf)]

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013. "Evaluation of the impact of learning Below Level 2" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/253585/bis-13-1261-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-learning-below-level-2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253585/bis-13-1261-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-learning-below-level-2.pdf)]

Adult Community Education is often the first step back to education for many. It holds the key to future retraining opportunities, especially for adults who are least likely to engage in retraining through work. 4 in 5 adults who took part in adult learning at below Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) agreed that their below Level 2 learning experience had made them more enthusiastic about learning.<sup>80</sup>

As a result, many adult learners who take part in ACE go on to achieve higher level qualifications. According to a study of 4,000 learners, over a quarter of all adult learners who took a course below Level 2 went on to further learning since their original course. Of these, more than half had taken a course at a higher level.<sup>81</sup>

Of those adults not in education at the time of the survey:

- 30 per cent said that they definitely intend to learn in the future;
- 17 per cent said that they thought they will probably go on to do a further course; and
- 20 per cent said that they would like to go on to do a further course.

### Case study: Abbie, Norfolk County Council

Abbie has been on a phenomenal journey with Norfolk County Council's Adult Learning service. Initially she joined a Functional Skills course, and then progressed on to gain Maths GCSE and Access to HE qualifications, that opened the door to her dream of attending University.

Abbie joined Norfolk Adult Education Service in 2018 when she attended a GCSE information session. Not having a Maths GCSE was starting to hold her back. As her current level of learning was not at the required standard it was recommended that she start with Functional Skills Maths first to help prepare for the GCSE course.

Abbie overcame personal doubt to build her confidence and thrive in her studies, she said, "It's given me so much confidence because I had such bad anxiety. I attempted to go to a lesson once and I couldn't do it, it was too overwhelming. I spoke to my tutor, and we worked out a plan, and it's actually made me realise that I am more capable than I thought. When I first started, I wouldn't answer questions but now I don't feel that way at all, I just speak freely".

Abbie has been on an amazing learning journey and since passing her Access to HE course has progressed onto a Degree in Social Work at the University of East Anglia. When asked what she would say to someone thinking about studying with Adult Learning, Abbie said, "Do it! Everyone has been so supportive. Put the work in and the results will show."

While there is strong appetite from learners to engage in further education once they have been enrolled on an Adult Community Education course, a lack of clear information about progression pathways inhibits some learners from progressing onto further education.

Currently, adults must try to piece together a fragmented jigsaw puzzle of mismatched provision. Many learners have noted that they have had to identify a pathway for themselves and it's difficult to progress from one course to another.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Toynbee Hall, 2022. "More than just education" [Available at: <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TH-GLA-Adult-Education-Report-Feb22-Digital.pdf>]

This is a particular concern for people starting off on basic skills provision who hope to use this as the steppingstone to other courses. For people seeking a learning pathway which will help them to progress in their career, not knowing whether they will be able to enrol on later courses inhibits their willingness to engage in the first step of adult education, refining their basic skills.<sup>83</sup>

Other devolved nations have started to explore a connected adult learning journey yet England's adult education provision comprises a mixture of new initiatives that present cliff-edges for learners.<sup>84</sup> Experts have warned that the ad hoc nature of adult learning provision in England leads to deadweight loss and poor value for money.<sup>85</sup>

The impact of a disconnected system was recently noted in the Government's evaluation of its Level 3 free courses for jobs offer. Over half of all providers offering a free Level 3 course said that some of their applicants did not hold the requisite Level 1 or Level 2 course needed to take up the free Level 3 course on offer.

The evaluation pointed to the need to create a pipeline of talent, starting from foundation level courses. The report called for the Government to target support in making Level 1 and Level 2 courses available for learners.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, the Adult Centenary Commission recently found that adults on Level 2 and below courses are often not embedded into university and higher education outreach plans. The Civic University Commission detailed how universities have increasingly focused on widening participation for young, disadvantaged students.<sup>87</sup> While this is a welcome increased focus, little attention has been paid to adults seeking to enter university as a mature student in universities' access and participation plans.<sup>88</sup>

### **Recommendation 6: The Government should consult around barriers to progression between different education providers.**

- As part of a comprehensive all-phase, all-stage lifelong learning plan, the Government should look at how different parts of the adult education system link together and how providers can outline a pathway of learning, progressing adults from one level to the other, from the start of their course, where appropriate.
- The review should look at barriers to progression for individuals and also challenges that prevent adult education providers from working together.
- It should examine whether learners can access courses which provide foundation knowledge to progress onto higher level courses within their locality.
- Greater focus should be given to the role of outreach from higher-level education providers, such as universities. For example, university Access and Participation plans should have a specific focus on outreach to disadvantaged adults.

83 Ibid.

84 FE Week, 2022. "DfE – look at Scotland's plans for an adult learning strategy"

85 Ibid.

86 Department for Education, 2022. "Evaluation of the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer"

87 UPP Foundation, 2018. "Civic University Commission Progress Report"

88 Ibid.



## chapter two

# Creating a route out of poverty through work

While in the UK a growing number of people have been going on to tertiary education, hidden from sight, a “long tail of low skills” has been growing.<sup>89</sup> Work remains the best route out of poverty and yet many thousands of adults in the UK do not have the right skills to secure a well-paid job.

Without access to the second chance that Adult Community Education provides, adults with lower-level qualifications face an unforgiving jobs market. New Centre for Social Justice analysis for this report reveals that in 2022 adults without qualifications are 4.4 times as likely to be inactive and 1.6 times as likely to be unemployed as adults with a degree or degree apprenticeship.

CSJ analysis of the Labour Force Survey found that 48 per cent of adults with no qualifications (1.2 million adults in total) were economically inactive in April–June 2022. This compares with only 11 per cent of adults who held a degree or a degree apprenticeship.

Even when people with low-level qualifications secure a job, their low-qualification status significantly depresses their earning potential and constrains their ability to get a promotion. Between 2006 and 2016 just 17 per cent of low-paid workers moved permanently out of low pay.<sup>90</sup>

This cohort of adults is an untapped resource who, with better education, could help boost the productivity of businesses in the UK. Currently, the UK’s labour market is exceptionally tight and chronic imbalances have led to labour shortages.<sup>91</sup> From April to June 2022, job vacancies reached a record high of 1.3 million.<sup>92</sup> Businesses are keen to recruit and fill jobs, but many employers have said that they are struggling to find people with the right skills<sup>93</sup> and the Bank of England has warned that they are having to take more drastic measures to tackle inflation as a consequence of an overheated, tight labour market.<sup>94</sup>

89 Onward, 2022. “Course Correction” [Available at: <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Course-Correction-Onward-060422.pdf>]

90 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. “Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?” [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Sue-Pember-Holex-report.pdf>]

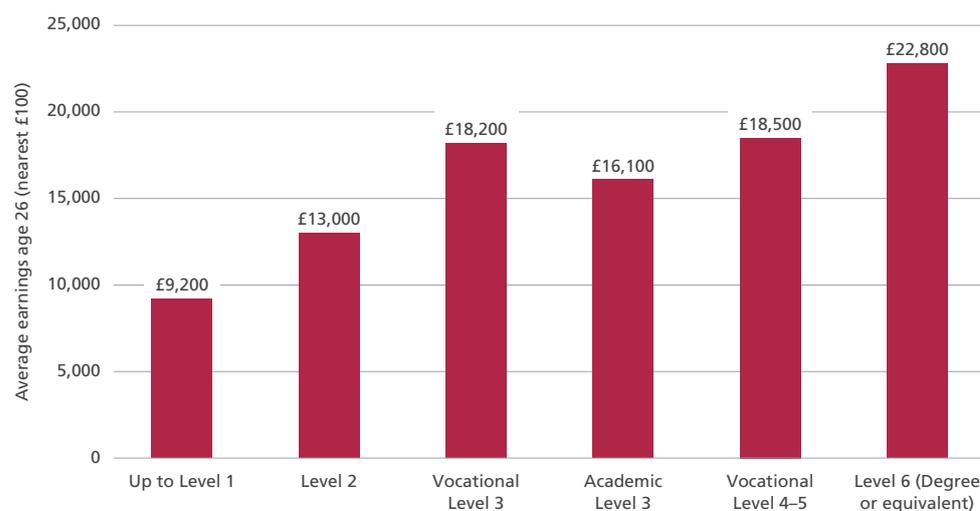
91 Financial Times, 2022. “UK unfilled vacancies hit record as workers leave labour market” [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/60a79b3e-5d94-400c-84c5-a8b812619e2f>]

92 ONS, 2022. “Vacancies and jobs in the UK: July 2022” [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/jobsandvacanciesintheuk/july2022>]

93 Financial Times, 2022. “UK unfilled vacancies hit record as workers leave labour market” [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/60a79b3e-5d94-400c-84c5-a8b812619e2f>]

94 Financial Times, 2022. “Bank of England’s task of taming inflation just got harder” [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/b80274ed-032d-4b87-8ca0-d8053dfd007b>]

Figure 6: Adults with low qualifications earn less: average earnings by highest level of qualification at age 26



Source: Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2020. "Post-18 Education: Who is Taking Different Routes and How Much do they Earn?"

While these issues are of paramount importance as the country braces itself for an expected recession, very few of these challenges are new. Even prior to the pandemic, experts detailed the risks of a skills mismatch: in 2019, the Industrial Strategy Council concluded that the UK's supply of skills could struggle to keep up with increased demand over the next decade.<sup>95</sup>

By 2030, 7 million people (20 per cent of the current labour market) could be under-skilled for their job and up to two in three workers will be under-skilled in basic skills to some degree. The most widespread under-skilling is expected to be in basic digital skills, with around 5 million workers projected to be under-skilled.<sup>96</sup> This skills mismatch is forecast to frustrate economic growth and harm the livelihoods of millions of people.

Economies with greater shares of under-skilled workers are associated with lower market efficiency and reduced productivity. An OECD study has found that the UK could improve overall productivity by 5 per cent if it reduced the skills mismatch to mirror best practices of comparator nations.<sup>97</sup>

The long tail of low skills is constraining economic growth and stifling the potential of adults on the very frays of our labour market. Adult Community Education providers have a strong track record of reaching adults branded "hardest to reach" and supporting them into employment.

95 Industrial Strategy Council, 2019. "20 per cent of workers could be under-skilled by 2030, new analysis finds" [Available at: <https://industrialstrategy.org/20-cent-workers-could-be-under-skilled-2030-new-analysis-finds>]

96 Ibid.

97 Onward, 2022. "Course Correction" [Available at: <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Course-Correction-Onward-060422.pdf>]

A study by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills found that learners who study below Level 2 are more likely to find work. 31 per cent of learners who were previously employed and looking for work transferred into employment after learning.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, the employment rate of those studying below Level 2 increased after engaging in adult education, rising from 47 per cent to 54 per cent. Similarly, the self-employment rate increased from 2 per cent to 3 per cent.<sup>99</sup>

Increased employment for this cohort of learners translates into broader returns to public finances. Research shows that learning below Level 2 could contribute a total return of around £160 million per year to the public purse. For every £1 invested there is a £17 return to Entry Level study and a £22 return for study at Level 1 for learners aged 19–24.<sup>100</sup>

Any plan for economic recovery must create a pipeline of talent, building from the foundation of Adult Community Education.

## 2.1 Skills mismatches are stifling economic growth

In the recent Levelling Up White Paper, the Government outlined its vision for a high-wage, high-skill economy which ensures local employers have access to the skills they need, and that people can access high-quality jobs and progress in work.<sup>101</sup> To meet this goal, the Government must meet urgent skill shortages threatening key sectors of our economy and also prepare the labour market for jobs of the future.

### Addressing skills shortages

Many of the UK's essential industries are facing growing skills shortages and are struggling to find people in the UK willing to take up a job in their sector.<sup>102</sup> Low basic skills are disproportionately concentrated in four sectors of our economy: wholesale and retail trade, human health and social work, manufacturing, and transportation and storage.<sup>103</sup>

Sectors like food production, health and social care, and construction are the backbone of our economy. Our country depends upon these powerhouse industries to function, as was exposed during the Coronavirus crisis when key workers came to the fore to keep our country working. Yet, despite the immense social value of these industries, only a quarter of the UK's working-age population would be interested in being employed in these sectors.<sup>104</sup>

98 Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013. "Evaluation of the Impact of Learning Below Level 2" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/253585/bis-13-1261-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-learning-below-level-2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253585/bis-13-1261-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-learning-below-level-2.pdf)]

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. "Levelling Up the United Kingdom: White Paper" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1052708/Levelling\\_up\\_the\\_UK\\_white\\_paper.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052708/Levelling_up_the_UK_white_paper.pdf)]

102 City and Guilds, 2022. "Great Jobs" [Available at: <https://www.cityandguilds.com/-/media/cityandguilds-site/documents/news/2022/great-jobs-research-feb-2022-pdf.ashx?la=en&hash=1B061C214E9A297D49E0BB4F4F1B43ED2CF0FFA3>]

103 Onward, 2022. "Course Correction" [Available at: <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Course-Correction-Onward-060422.pdf>]

104 City and Guilds, 2022. "Great Jobs" [Available at: <https://www.cityandguilds.com/-/media/cityandguilds-site/documents/news/2022/great-jobs-research-feb-2022-pdf.ashx?la=en&hash=1B061C214E9A297D49E0BB4F4F1B43ED2CF0FFA3>]

Research by City & Guilds found that construction could be the worst impacted with just one in six (17 per cent) of adults stating that they would consider a job in the sector. 22 per cent of adults said they would consider working in food production, animal care, agriculture, and transport and around 25 per cent said they would work in health or social care.<sup>105</sup>

The lack of desire to move into these key sectors was not because they were seen in a poor light. In fact, many survey respondents had immense respect for people employed in these industries. 59 per cent of people said they respected the healthcare sector even more since the pandemic. The number one reason why people wouldn't consider a job in health and social care was because they believed that they did not have the right skills, experience, or qualifications for a job in the sector.<sup>106</sup>

Adult Community Education provision can provide an access point for adults wishing to retrain in essential industries. Throughout our research, we heard from many adults taking vocation-specific Level 2 qualifications with the intention of progressing to further study or using their new qualifications to secure a job.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the massive untapped potential of adults with lower-level skills, for whom Adult Community Education is the necessary first step back into training, recently there has been a lack of focus on reskilling for this cohort.

The Government recently announced a range of initiatives as part of its National Skills Strategy and Skills Bill, yet discussion of the role of Adult Community Education and education below Level 3 was largely absent.

The initiatives funded by the National Skills Fund, Skills Bootcamps and Free Courses for Jobs are focused at Level 3 standard and above and recent evaluations have shown that there is a gaping hole in lower level provision that acts as a bridge for learners reengaging in education.<sup>108</sup>

As part of a wider plan to expand vocational lifelong learning, the Government introduced Skills Bootcamps which provide intensive short-term courses to improve skills at Level 3 or above. Part of the appeal of these courses is that they are so brief, so learners do not have to forgo earnings or put their life on hold as much as they currently do when taking a longer adult education course.<sup>109</sup>

Learners who have taken part in Bootcamps have been largely positive about their experience. In the first evaluation, participants said they were confident that Bootcamps would develop their skills and lead to further success.<sup>110</sup>

However, despite the promise of Bootcamps, a government analysis has shown that one in five participants dropped out before completing the course. Government figures also

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105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

107 Centre for Social Justice interviews with Adult Community Education learners.

108 Department for Education, 2022. "Evaluation of the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1092893/Evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_Level\\_3\\_Free\\_Courses\\_for\\_Jobs\\_offer.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1092893/Evaluation_of_the_Level_3_Free_Courses_for_Jobs_offer.pdf)]

109 Financial Times, 2022. "Do boot camps deliver the best vocational training?" [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/96e8099a-0154-4f31-beb1-d66ffa9837d6>]

110 Department for Education, 2021. "Skills Bootcamps process evaluation" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1027163/Bootcamps\\_wave\\_1\\_final\\_evaluation\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1027163/Bootcamps_wave_1_final_evaluation_report.pdf)]

show that only 3 per cent of participants had prior qualifications below Level 2. Nearly half of all participants were qualified to Level 6 (university degree or equivalent) or above.<sup>111</sup>

The evaluation of the Government's Free Courses for Jobs found that over half of all providers said that some of their applicants did not have suitable Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications to participate in the free course that they were offered at Level 3. 71 per cent of providers surveyed said some learners did not have sufficient English skills and 69 per cent said some applicants were not at the right standard for maths or lacked other pre-requisite skills.<sup>112</sup>

The evaluation found that while some course providers signposted learners to available courses or put on tailored support, others reported that they did not have the capacity to do so. The report recommended making Level 1 or Level 2 courses available for learners.<sup>113</sup>

### Case study: Sam, Academy Transformation Trust Further Education College

Sam was an adult student who worked as a hairdresser, then in an office, followed by working in a hospital as a health care worker. However, Sam wanted to become a nurse. Sam already had qualifications in English and maths as an adult learner and thought these would be enough for her to be accepted for to the nursing course. Unfortunately, this was not the case and she needed to study Functional Skills English and Maths and achieve a Level 2 qualification to be accepted on her nursing course.

Completing two Level 2 courses at once is challenge enough, but doing these whilst working full-time shifts is no small feat. Through sheer determination, Sam managed to fit her college work around her family life and work.

Sam had a clear goal as to why she needed to do these courses and put in the hours to make sure she passed her exams (which she did first time).

Sam got accepted onto the nursing training course and is now working in a hospital as a trainee nurse as well as studying nursing.

### Recommendation 7: The new lifelong learning strategy should identify key sectors with skills shortages and offer fully funded learning pathways from Entry Level to Level 3 for unemployed adults or adults earning less than the National Minimum wage.

- As part of the Free Courses for jobs scheme, the Government should target support for Level 1 and Level 2 courses for applicants who do not have pre-requisite skills.
- Adult Community Education providers should be signposted to and given funding to deliver foundation courses that give adults with lower qualifications the necessary knowledge to progress on to a free Level 3 course.
- These courses should be offered to individuals for free and should align with the eligibility criteria for the Free Courses for Jobs scheme.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Department for Education, 2022. "Evaluation of the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1092893/Evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_Level\\_3\\_Free\\_Courses\\_for\\_Jobs\\_offer.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1092893/Evaluation_of_the_Level_3_Free_Courses_for_Jobs_offer.pdf)]

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

## Creating retraining opportunities for the jobs of tomorrow

The rise of automation and future labour market changes have made it imperative that the UK develop a lifetime learning strategy which offers all adults the chance to retrain, especially those currently in lower-skilled jobs. Research commissioned by the Department for Education found that an estimated 10–35 per cent of jobs are at risk of replacement in the next 20 years.<sup>114</sup> It is expected that automation will wipe out around 7.4 per cent of jobs and lower-skilled workers are the cohort most vulnerable to losing their jobs.<sup>115</sup>

As automation charges forward, employers are increasingly demanding higher-order skills and better soft skills. Low-skilled and low-paid workers are the most vulnerable to becoming economically marginalised and losing their jobs altogether.<sup>116</sup> PWC forecast that automation will disproportionately displace jobs typically taken up by men with low levels of education. They found that individuals with only GCSE level education or lower (Level 2 or below), the estimated risk of automation displacing jobs reaches up to 46 per cent in the UK but falls to 12 per cent for those with an undergraduate degree.<sup>117</sup>

Low-skilled/low-paid workers would benefit the most from retraining and reskilling opportunities, yet they are the least likely group of adults to participate in any form of lifelong learning. The Social Mobility Commission recently found that disadvantaged adults are least likely to access training. Their findings showed that graduates were over three times more likely to participate in training than those with no qualifications.<sup>118</sup>

Further research from the Learning and Work Institute found that lower income and lower-skilled households are less likely to participate or engage in training opportunities. Individuals who have been out of work for a long time were also much less likely to pursue training opportunities.<sup>119</sup>

Recent events have proven how precarious job security can be in the modern age. Over the lockdown, the increase in redundancy rates was faster than during the 2008/2009 economic downturn.<sup>120</sup> This wave of redundancies forced many adults who had been in secure jobs to reconsider their careers.

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114 Department for Education, 2018. "Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups: Report of qualitative findings" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/735453/Barriers\\_to\\_learning\\_-\\_Qualitative\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/735453/Barriers_to_learning_-_Qualitative_report.pdf)]

115 ONS, 2019. "The probability of automation in England: 2011 and 2017" [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/theprobabilityofautomationinengland/2011and2017>]

116 CSJ, 2019. "The Future of Work: A vision for the National Retraining Scheme" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/a-vision-for-the-national-retraining-scheme>]

117 PWC, 2018. "Will robots steal our jobs? The potential impact of automation on the UK and other major economies" [Available at: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/ukey/pwcukey-section-4-automation-march-2017-v2.pdf>]

118 Social Mobility Commission, 2019. "The adult skills gap: is falling investment in UK stalling social mobility?" [Available at: <https://feweeek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Social-Mobility-Commission-adult-skills-report.pdf>]

119 Learning and Work Institute, 2017. "Adult Participation in Learning Survey" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-2017>]

120 ONS, 2021. "Coronavirus and redundancies in the labour market: September to November 2020" [Available at: <https://backup.ons.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/02/Coronavirus-and-redundancies-in-the-UK-labour-market-September-to-November-2020-2.pdf>]

### Case study: Rita, York Learning

When Rita was made redundant as the store she was working at closed, her first thought was 'Now what?'

She knew nothing about computers and relied on her daughter's support, but soon realised that everywhere she looked for a job asked for good digital skills. Rita applied to York Learning's ICDL course and went along to her pre-course induction. She found that, right from the start, the tutors were interested in finding out about her and her own learning needs, and the induction felt personalised. She liked the flexibility of the sessions and the way the course worked around her work – even though she's still studying Rita has now been able to apply for and start a job in a new sector – transport – at a senior level.

"I was able to do all the online application aspects for the job that I wouldn't have been able to do before". Rita feels confident about her course and her work, and now feels like she knows what she's doing on computers and with digital. She completed her Introduction to Work Skills course and progressed onto her ICDL Level 2 qualification, which she has now completed. She says "It really helps you to get confident and get the qualifications you need for work and life"

### Recommendation 8: New short courses, like Bootcamps, should be piloted with a focus on content at Level 2 standard.

- A new wave of Bootcamps should be piloted to deliver intensive, short courses at Level 2 or above in industries where these skills are needed.
- The pilot should target adults with low or no formal qualifications, adults who are unemployed or adults who risk losing their job as the economy modernises. The Government may want to focus this new wave on vocational retraining for specific growth industries.

## 2.2 Employer-led training has languished in recent years

As well as supporting learners to cultivate new skills, Adult Community Education can also help adults to progress and secure a promotion in their given career.

A study by the Department for Business and Skills showed that participation in Adult Community Education can significantly improve the quality of work outcomes for adults already in work.<sup>121</sup>

According to a survey of adults in employment, following an Entry Level or Level 1 course:

- 52 per cent reported better job satisfaction;
- 46 per cent reported better job security;
- 31 per cent reported better promotion prospects; and
- A further 16 per cent had been promoted.

<sup>121</sup> Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013. "Evaluation of the impact of learning Below Level 2" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/253585/bis-13-1261-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-learning-below-level-2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253585/bis-13-1261-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-learning-below-level-2.pdf)]

### Case study: Rocio, Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES)

Rocio started her WAES journey as a learner in 2019. Since then, she has achieved her Level 3 teaching assistant qualification, completed a work placement, and now works full-time as a Learning Support Assistant at WAES.

She had started to work at a nursery but realised she needed some qualifications to progress, so decided instead to apply for a course with WAES, where her mother had had a good experience as an ESOL learner. She was interested in becoming a teaching assistant to learners of any age, so applied for the Level 2 certificate, after completing the necessary maths and English qualifications.

In class, she drew upon the experience of her tutors, including how they managed the group and set expectations for learners, approaches she looked forward to putting into practice herself.

Having completed this, Rocio initially applied for a part-time position as a Learning Support Assistant. However, based on how well she was doing in her placement as a support volunteer, she was encouraged to update her CV and application to include greater detail about all this additional experience, and to apply for the full-time position, for which she was successful in her interview.

Since starting as a Learning Support Assistant at WAES she has run workshops for students on the Entry Level 3 Skills in Maths, helping them clarify concepts. She has also been working one-to-one with a group of young adult apprentices at Westminster City Council who are on Education Health and Care Plans, to ensure that they are able to pass the apprenticeship and gain the necessary experience for their next steps.

Her advice to other learners is to "Take the course seriously and enjoy the path you have chosen, because at the end the reward will come".

Adults who participate in courses at Adult Community Education centres have been shown to increase their earnings. A government study found that one-quarter of working adults who engaged in learning below Level 2 received an increase in earnings after completing their course. The same study also found that learning below Level 2 led to a 12 per cent decrease in the proportion of people accessing benefits.<sup>122</sup>

These benefits have been evidenced to be long-term: further research from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills found that achieving a Level 2 qualification in maths and English led to a wage return of 8.5 per cent over three to five years and learners who study the same subject at entry level saw a 5 per cent increase in wages over the same period.<sup>123</sup>

122 Learning and Work Institute, 2021. "Getting the basics right: The case for action on adult basic skills" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/getting-the-basics-right-the-case-for-action-on-adult-basic-skills>]

123 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016. "Returns to Maths and English Learning (at Level 2 and below) in Further Education" [Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/26378/1/bis-16-180-maths-english-learning.pdf>]

### Case study: Monika, Redbridge Institute

As a young adult, coming from a low-income family, Monika had limited opportunities to study and had no choice but to start her working life early. Monika was in full-time employment when she started her part-time bookkeeping course.

After successfully completing Level 2 bookkeeping and Sage courses last year, Monika has been made a junior partner in the company she works for.

In addition, she has been offered a job as a bookkeeper at local businesses. She accepted this opportunity and has started a bookkeeping business on a part time basis, allowing her to earn additional income.

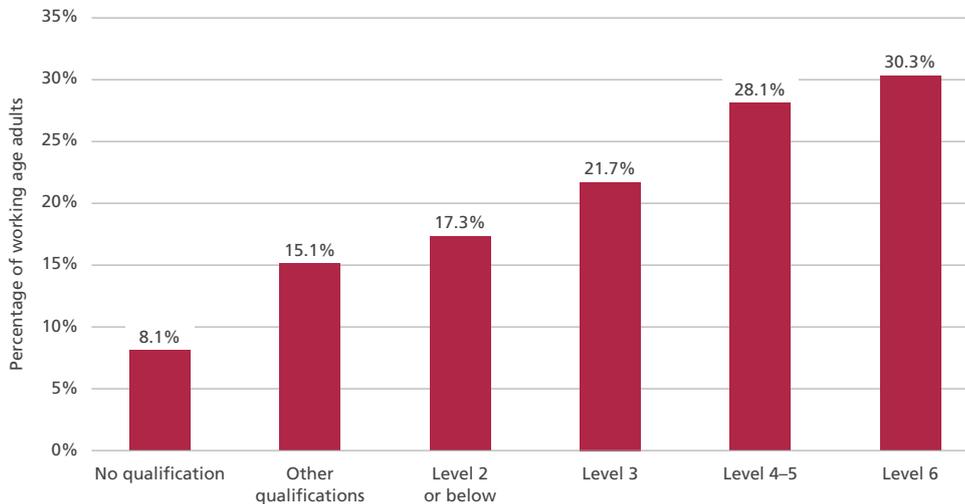
She believes that studying bookkeeping (especially at Level 3) at the Redbridge Institute has given her the necessary knowledge and business confidence to progress greatly in her career.

She says “The courses offered at the Institute gave me a second chance at education and impacted my life in so many ways.”

Having had a successful year to top it off Monika won the IAB (International Association of Bookkeepers) Student of the Year 2022 award.

Employers stand to gain from increased productivity and stronger skills when their staff engage in lifetime learning. This is particularly the case when the labour market is tight and external recruitment becomes more difficult.<sup>124</sup>

Figure 7: Adults with lower level qualifications are less likely to receive employer provided training: percentage of working-age adults receiving employer-provided training in the last three months by highest qualification level



Source: Social Mobility Commission, 2019. “The Adult Skills Gap: Is Falling Investment in UK Adults Stalling Social Mobility?”

124 Department for Work and Pensions, 2010. “Training and progression in the labour market” [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/214451/rrep680.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214451/rrep680.pdf)]

Yet, despite the benefits, employer-led training has languished over the last fifteen years, falling from 4.2 million in 2004 to 3.8 million in 2019. Employer's real-term expenditure on training per employee has also fallen by 17 per cent between 2011 and 2017.<sup>125</sup>

Employers want to offer more training, but prohibitive costs are the number one reason why companies in the UK have stopped investing in adult education.<sup>126</sup> This factor is likely to become even more prominent in the climate of high inflation. As we face an imminent recession, it is likely that companies will look to cut costs by reducing overheads and further decreasing their investment in training.

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**Recommendation 9: Introduce a “learning and skills tax rebate” for employers who invest in low-skilled workers.**

- A tax rebate, with a focus on low-skilled workers, would help to raise the profile of skills in this country while keeping people in work.
- This relief should be targeted at low-skilled workers as they are less likely to participate in adult education and they are disproportionately at risk of losing their jobs as the economy modernises.
- The Government could align the eligibility criteria with existing schemes, targeting adults without Level 2 qualifications or with an income less than the National Living Wage.
- We already offer employers research and development (R&D) tax credits. The mechanism that exists for employers to claim R&D tax credits could be refined to bolt on training credits, which means this reform need not be overly complicated from an administrative point of view.

### 2.3 A growing tide of economic inactivity has caused problems for our broader economy

One of the most urgent priorities for the Government is how to get more people into work and expand the labour supply. An overly tight labour market has been cited as one of the domestic factors driving the highest rates of inflation for a generation.<sup>127</sup>

According to the Bank of England, one of the main reasons for the tight labour market is that there has been a fall in the number of people in the labour market.<sup>128</sup> Most other countries have seen employment levels return quickly to pre-pandemic levels, whereas in Britain the number of people who are economically inactive has grown nearly every quarter since the end of 2019.<sup>129</sup>

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125 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. “The Long Game” [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CSJ-The-Long-Game.pdf>]

126 Ibid.

127 Bank of England, 2022. “Monetary Policy Report – August 2022” [Available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/monetary-policy-report/2022/august/monetary-policy-report-august-2022.pdf>]

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid.

As a consequence, the stock of vacancies remains roughly equal to the number of people who are unemployed.<sup>130</sup> Experts have warned that tackling participation in work is crucial for any Government wishing to address the perils of inflation and to get Britain working.<sup>131</sup>

Around 1.7 million people who are inactive say that they want a job.<sup>132</sup> To get these people into employment, we must address the reasons behind their economic inactivity.

Two key factors appear to have been driving the recent increase in economic inactivity: a large cohort of people have left the labour market due to a rise in long-term sickness and many adults aged over 50 decided to retire early following disruption to the labour market caused by economic shutdowns.<sup>133</sup>

### Economic inactivity due to health

The greatest driver of economic inactivity is long-term health issues. Chronic illness is the main reason given for economic inactivity for two thirds of working age adults who are absent from the labour market.<sup>134</sup>

The number of people with long-term illnesses has been rising over time, in part due to the ageing population<sup>135</sup> and a greater proportion of young people exiting the labour market due to poor mental health.<sup>136</sup>

However, the pandemic accelerated this trend. Adults with long-term illnesses had treatment delayed as a result of the pandemic and some patients have become parked on waiting lists for operations delayed by several years.<sup>137</sup> According to the most recent NHS figures, 7 million people are still waiting for hospital treatment as of July 2022.<sup>138</sup>

The pandemic itself also created new health problems. Many people exited the labour market so that they could shield from the virus. It is difficult to judge how many of these adults have returned.<sup>139</sup> Many adults may have also left the labour market as a direct result of contracting Covid-19. As of June 2022, two million people reported that they had long Covid. 1 in 5 people with long-Covid have reported that the disease impacts their ability to do day-to-day activities such as sustain a job.<sup>140</sup>

130 Ibid.

131 Telegraph, 2022. "Britain really isn't working – and the collapsing NHS is to blame" [Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2022/08/07/britain-really-isnt-working-collapsing-nhs-blame>]

132 ONS, 2022. "Labour market statistics time series" [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/labourmarketstatisticstimeseriesoctober2022>]

133 Bank of England, 2022. "Monetary Policy Report – August 2022" [Available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/monetary-policy-report/2022/august/monetary-policy-report-august-2022.pdf>]

134 Financial Times, 2022. "Chronic illness makes UK workforce the sickest in developed world" [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/c333a6d8-0a56-488c-aeb8-eeb1c05a34d2>]

135 Sky News, 2022. "NHS waiting times: Care delayed for more than three years for dozens of people due to backlog" [Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/nhs-waiting-times-care-delayed-for-more-than-three-years-for-dozens-of-people-due-to-backlog-12589442>]

136 Resolution Foundation, 2022. "Not working"

137 Sky News, 2022. "NHS waiting times: Care delayed for more than three years for dozens of people due to backlog" [Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/nhs-waiting-times-care-delayed-for-more-than-three-years-for-dozens-of-people-due-to-backlog-12589442>]

138 BMA, 2022. "NHS backlog data analysis" [Available at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/nhs-backlog-data-analysis>]

139 Bank of England, 2022. "Monetary Policy Report – August 2022" [Available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/monetary-policy-report/2022/august/monetary-policy-report-august-2022.pdf>]

140 Ibid.

To get this cohort of people back into the labour market, greater focus will need to be given to providing treatment and addressing the NHS backlog. However, a large proportion of this group do still want to work, despite their long-term illness. Over half a million people who were economically inactive due to illness say that they would like a job.<sup>141</sup> 1.4 million people on Universal Credit, 25% of all people on Universal Credit in July 2022, are searching for work.<sup>142</sup>

Adult Community Education can support adults who could work to improve their health and return to the labour market. In particular, Adult Community Education can help to improve people's confidence and self-esteem when they have been out of the labour market for a long duration.<sup>143</sup>

There is also strong evidence that Adult Community Education can improve the health and wellbeing of adults with mild to moderate mental health conditions including anxiety and depression.<sup>144</sup>

### **Case study: Charlotte, Kirklees Adult Education Service**

Charlotte has a debilitating illness after suffering collapse and being left in a coma unable to move for several weeks some years ago. Her illness was Guillain Barre Syndrome, and she contracted Sepsis. It paralysed her and required her to be placed in an induced coma, and ventilated. She was in intensive care for 5 weeks, on heavy duty medication to fight the infections, and had to be weaned off the ventilation, and then had to learn to walk/talk/swallow again. Charlotte hasn't fully recovered, she has been left with mobility issues, numbness, shortness of breath and in constant pain.

Charlotte signed up to her first adult learning course to develop her confidence and to get out of the house. Not only did Charlotte go on to help children in school to improve their reading as a trained volunteer, she also became an active member of the PTA to help the school as a whole. Her confidence developed to such a point that she became PTA chair. She also hosted an online national support group for people with Sepsis, working with the NHS.

After volunteering for some time and taking a more active part in school life and supporting her children at primary school, Charlotte realised she wanted to continue learning and her own progression journey. Her children are now secondary aged, so she has more time to explore her own career path. Charlotte returned to community learning and studied Mental Health First Aid and It is All About Me! These courses were about developing confidence and believing in yourself to achieve your goals in life.

Charlotte progressed to college and has just completed a Level 3 award in Education & Training. Her journey continues as she is hoping to become a teacher one day and be a role model for her children.

141 ONS, 2022. "Economic inactivity by reason (seasonally adjusted)" [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/economicinactivity/datasets/economicinactivitybyreasonseasonallyadjustedinac01sa>]

142 Department for Work and Pensions, 2022. "Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 14 July 2022" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-july-2022/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-july-2022>]

143 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012. "The relationship between Adult Learning and Wellbeing: Evidence from the 1958 National Development Study" [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/34669/12-1241-relationship-adult-learning-and-wellbeing-evidence-1958.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/34669/12-1241-relationship-adult-learning-and-wellbeing-evidence-1958.pdf)]

144 Department for Education, 2018. "Community learning mental health research project" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-learning-mental-health-research-project>]

## Older-age workers leaving the jobs market

Alongside an increase in long-term sick adults becoming economically inactive, an increasing number of older age workers have also exited the labour market post-pandemic. The pandemic led to the biggest annual employment fall for older workers since the 1980s<sup>145</sup> and 87,000 older workers have since decided to quit the jobs market altogether.<sup>146</sup>

Over 3 in 5 older workers who left during this period said that they left work sooner than expected. People in their 50s were more likely to say this (77 per cent) than people aged 60 and over (57 per cent).<sup>147</sup> 58 per cent of workers in their 50s who lost their job during the pandemic would consider returning to work.<sup>148</sup>

For the full functioning of our economy, it is vital that some of these older workers are encouraged to reengage with work. Increasingly, the labour market is tilting towards the older generation. Government research has forecast that by the mid-2030s half of all adults in the UK will be over 50 years of age.<sup>149</sup> This shift has a profound effect on the composition of our workforce. In the next three years, there will be around 1 million more workers aged over 50 and 300,000 fewer workers under 30.<sup>150</sup>

There is a strong evidence base for the effectiveness of training programmes which support older workers back into the labour market. Recent research from the Resolution Foundation found that older learners see some of the greatest returns to training. Older non-graduate men have one of the highest rates of return to work when they receive training compared to other groups of learners.<sup>151</sup>

Training programmes offered through Adult Community Education centres may provide a bridge back to the labour market for older workers looking to repurpose their wealth of expertise in a different sector. Adult Community Education providers already engage extensively with older learners. Over half of all learners paid for by community learning and 34 per cent of learners paid for by the Adult Education Budget are over the age of 45.<sup>152</sup>

145 FE News, 2021. "Providing retraining opportunities for older workers is essential, as Covid-19 crisis causes biggest annual employment fall for older workers since the 1980s" [Available at: <https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/covid-has-created-a-u-shaped-crisis-as-majority-of-young-adults-and-pensioners-stopped-working>]

146 ONS, 2022. "Movements out of work for those aged over 50 years since the start of the coronavirus pandemic" [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/movementsoutofworkforthoseagedover50yearsincethestartofthecoronaviruspandemic/2022-03-14>]

147 ONS, 2022. "Reasons for workers aged over 50 years leaving employment since the start of the coronavirus pandemic" [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/reasonsforworkersagedover50yearsleavingemploymentsincethestartofthecoronaviruspandemic/2022-03-14>]

148 Ibid.

149 DWP, 2017. "Fuller Working Lives: Evidence Base 2018. A Partnership Approach" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fuller-working-lives-a-partnership-approach>]

150 Centre for Ageing Better, 2019. "Lifelong learning: unlocking the potential of older workers" [Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/blogs/lifelong-learning-unlocking-potential-older-workers>]

151 Resolution Foundation, 2020. "Can training help workers change their stripes?" [Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/can-training-help-workers-change-their-stripes>]

152 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Sue-Pember-Holex-report.pdf>]

### Case study: Kimberly, Workers' Educational Association

When Kimberly's contract at a financial services firm ended at the start of lockdown in March 2020, Kimberly attended a Workers' Educational Association (WEA) "Introduction to Support Work in Schools" course that was delivered in partnership with the Essex Jobcentres under their Skills Work Academy Programme.

Kimberly said: "I've always excelled in communication skills and a career in teaching seemed like a great fit. My Jobcentre work coach recommended a course that would allow me to enter a school environment without going down the traditional university pathway."

"The course was online, which suited me fine. I was learning with likeminded people, who all wanted the same outcome. The diversity of the students was definitely a big positive. One of the biggest helps was in redeveloping my CV. Mine had become more like a novel! I received loads of practical advice from my tutor on what to detail, the order, the format and then targeted hints when I prepared for a job application."

"It was exactly what I needed to change career and I am excited about what the future holds. I now have a part-time position as a teaching assistant. This is truly the start of a new chapter."

### Recommendation 10: The Government should pilot employment interventions which target adults who are economically inactive but would like to transition into work.

- The Government should roll out pilot education interventions which target the 1.7 million economically inactive people who want to work.
- The pilots should look at the role of Adult Community Education in reskilling adults furthest from the labour market.

## 3.4 Skills initiatives need to be localised for maximum impact

Beneath national figures, each locality faces a unique labour market with its own skills challenges. Some areas have high levels of unemployment and few vacancies while for others the reverse is true.<sup>153</sup>

At a national level, falling unemployment and record-level vacancies have created an exceptionally tight labour market which is threatening economic growth. This analysis reflects the labour market in 42 per cent of localities where there are more vacancies than there are unemployed people. However, the national story does not hold up consistently across the country. In 30 per cent of areas there are twice as many unemployed adults as there are vacancies.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Local Government Association, 2022. "Work Local: Unlocking talent to level up" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-unlocking-talent-level>]

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

A recent analysis by the Local Government Association portrayed the sheer diversity of labour market states. While each area's profile was different, a few common themes emerged from their study:<sup>155</sup>

- Coastal and ex-industrial towns also have low participation rates, but they have fewer vacancies. These areas are largely concentrated in the North of England.
- Localities in the North West and Midlands are experiencing higher vacancies but they have lower levels of economic inactivity. These areas are facing a particularly tight labour market.
- Areas that are close to the national average levels of participation and vacancies are evenly spread across England. In these areas the national picture largely accords with the national analysis.
- In less urban areas in the South, levels of participation and vacancy rates are high.
- Many parts of London have high participation rates and low vacancies, in contrast to the national picture.

Skills profiles and needs also vary significantly across the country. At a national level, the country is facing a yawning skills gap which is costing the economy billions each year.<sup>156</sup>

However, even areas where skills demand matches supply can cause both economic and social problems when these areas are stuck in a state of low skills equilibria. While skills and employment are matched, these areas exhibit lower levels of productivity, low employment, and low wages.<sup>157</sup>

Even though companies operating in low skills equilibria can still be profitable, beneath the surface low skills equilibria depress growth and innovation and stifles the local economy.<sup>158</sup> Around half of the UK's labour productivity slow down since the financial crash can be accounted for by the shift in the economy away from high productivity sectors towards low productivity industries like hospitality.<sup>159</sup>

Low skills equilibria are difficult for local economies to escape from. Individuals in low-skilled jobs face poorly paid and insecure work. Skilled individuals move away from these areas because they lack opportunities for career development. Consequently, low skills equilibrium areas get trapped in a vicious cycle which disincentivises investment in skills and depresses productivity.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Industrial Strategy Council, 2019. "UK Skills Mismatch in 2030" [Available at: <https://industrialstrategycouncil.org/sites/default/files/UK%20Skills%20Mismatch%202030%20-%20Research%20Paper.pdf>]

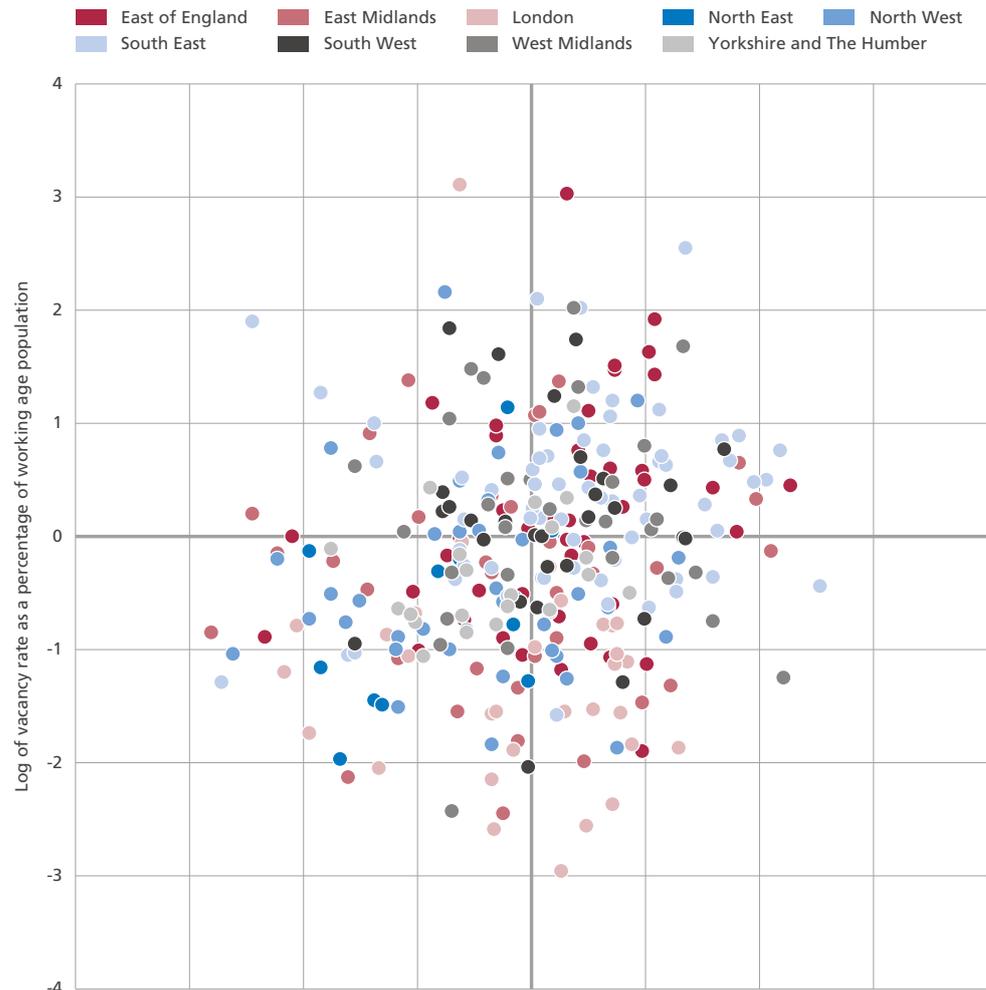
<sup>157</sup> Government Office for Science, 2017. "Future of skills and lifelong learning" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning>]

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Thompson et al, 2016. "Boosting Britain's low-wage sectors: A strategy for Productivity, Innovation and Growth" [Available at: <https://www.ippr.org/publications/boosting-britains-low-wage-sectors-a-strategy-for-productivity-innovation-and-growth>]

<sup>160</sup> Government Office for Science, 2017. "Future of skills and lifelong learning" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning>]

Figure 8: Each local labour market is unique and distinct: local areas' economic activity rate by vacancy rate



Source: Local Government Association, 2022. "Work Local: Unlocking talent to level up"

A recent report from the Government Office for Science found that low skills equilibrium areas are disproportionately found in the North West and parts of the East of England.<sup>161</sup> These areas will likely only move out of low skills equilibria through a targeted regional strategy for skills which addresses both skills development and job creation in tandem.

Recent initiatives have sought to give local stakeholders a greater say in their skills strategies. As part of the 2022 Skills Bill, the Government introduced Local Skills Improvement Plans to bring together key stakeholders from education, employment, and local government to devise a strategy for skills at a local level.

While this is a welcome development, Local Skills Improvement Plans in their current form do not require Adult Community Education providers or local authorities to be involved.<sup>162</sup> As such, these forums currently lack the insights and expertise of education providers with the greatest reach of disadvantaged, low-skilled adults.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Hansard, 2021. "Skills and Post-16 Education Bill: Lords Committee 2nd Day" [Available at: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-02-21/debates/DOC73A53-9DB4-49DE-9E31-81B081284F42/SkillsAndPost-16EducationBill\(Lords\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-02-21/debates/DOC73A53-9DB4-49DE-9E31-81B081284F42/SkillsAndPost-16EducationBill(Lords))]

Even with increased focus on devolution, central government retains responsibility for a large range of employability schemes. In 2022, the Government has invested £20 billion on 49 skills and work initiatives.<sup>163</sup> These initiatives are managed by multiple Whitehall departments and their delivery boundaries do not always align. Often, these schemes are short-term and ad-hoc.

Despite the best intentions of local government to knit together existing interventions, the failure to join up and target provision undermines these schemes from achieving their aims.

**Recommendation 11: Alongside plans for devolution, the Government should adopt a local first approach. Local leaders should be given the power, funding, and accountability to join up skills, careers and employment at a local level to create a locally responsive skills system.**

- The local first approach should be intertwined with a new national all-age, all-stage lifelong learning strategy. Central government should take responsibility for making lifelong learning accessible for all and devolve powers to the local level to allow leaders to flexibly draw down on funds to match provision to their labour market needs.
- All local approaches should build from the foundation of Adult Community Education. Devolved employment and skills agreements should ensure that universal basic skills are prioritised across the country.

## 2.4 Some adults need wrap-around holistic support to get into secure jobs

Unemployment can be scarring, not just for the economy but for families and their livelihoods. A secure job doesn't just provide a salary, it also gives people a sense of purpose and dignity.

Adults participating in courses at Adult Community Education centres consistently told us that being on an Adult Community Education course gave them a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Strong relationships with tutors and classmates improved their wellbeing and cemented their determination to succeed. Many of these learners wanted to build upon their enthusiasm and newfound skills to secure a job yet some adults find this transition into employment is beset with challenges.<sup>164</sup>

Universal Credit has been an immense success and demonstrated the benefits of a flexible and dynamic welfare system which incentivises people into work. However, Universal Credit was always envisioned to be more than a welfare payment. In the original conception of Universal Credit, Universal Support was pitched as a holistic support service to sit alongside benefit payments and to tackle the root causes behind unemployment.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Local Government Association, 2022. "Work Local: Unlocking talent to level up" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-unlocking-talent-level>]

<sup>164</sup> CSJ Fieldwork and interviews with Adult Community Education learners.

<sup>165</sup> iNews, 2020. "Iain Duncan Smith on Universal Credit: There's work to do to create a truly compassionate benefits system" [Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/iain-duncan-smith-universal-credit-compassionate-benefits-system-780513>]

A significant minority of people out of work enter Universal Credit in a state of crisis, some on a long-term basis.<sup>166</sup> Many people are held back from employment by complex barriers in their personal lives, be it troubles at home, with substance abuse, trauma, or poor health. Survey evidence and interviews consistently show that individuals claiming Universal Credit are more likely to experience these challenges and become reliant on state support.<sup>167</sup>

These individuals find it hard to navigate the Universal Credit system and sustain a job. While the Government has outlined a range of unemployment support initiatives, programmes with an exclusive focus on job training and search assistance have been proven to be ineffective and unable to support the hardest to reach.<sup>168</sup>

Adult Community Education providers have evidenced success in supporting adults experiencing multiple disadvantages and empowering them to succeed in their educational journey. Many Adult Community Education providers are part of the local authority and use their role to provide an integrated, cross-service support package to enable learners to thrive while they are on their course.<sup>169</sup>

### Case study: Luke, Fircroft College

Luke was homeless and in recovery when he came to Fircroft College of Adult Education a few years ago. Now, he has just completed his Masters' Degree at the University of Birmingham.

Luke was kicked out of school at a young age which had a huge impact on his development. Things began to further deteriorate for Luke when he then developed an addiction and became homeless.

Luke says: "Addiction made me miss a lot in my life, but I always had a sincere desire to study. In many other institutions, I may have experienced some stigma because of my past, however, at Fircroft I always felt supported and safe".

Luke went on to the Access to Higher Education Diploma (Social Science and Humanities) course which is a 9-month foundation course that provides students with a great pathway for getting into university.

Luke went on to study at the University of Birmingham and in 2020 achieved a First Class degree in Political Science and Social Policy and has now just completed his Masters' Degree and is working at the University a Project Manager on their Better Than Well project which supports students who are in recovery.

Despite the brilliant work done by Adult Community Education providers and other services throughout education, some of the most vulnerable adult learners who complete their courses struggle to transition into employment. They find that when they move into a job, the support they receive falls off a cliff-edge, making it difficult to sustain employment.

166 Centre for Social Justice, 2021. "Universal Credit Update: pandemic, uplift and Universal Support" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/universal-credit-update-pandemic-uplift-and-universal-support>]

167 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. "Unfinished Business: Next steps for welfare reform in post-Covid Britain" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/unfinished-business-next-steps-for-welfare-reform-in-post-covid-britain>]

168 Ibid.

169 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

The concept of Universal Support was first outlined by Lord Freud during the Coalition Government.<sup>170</sup> It was trialled in 2014 and the results were promising. Key workers supported Universal Credit claimants suffering multiple personal disadvantages. The trial evidenced the impact of holistic support that saw claimants as humans tackling immense challenges in their personal lives.<sup>171</sup>

The Centre for Social Justice has been calling for the introduction of Universal Support for years. In our 2020 paper, *Unfinished Business*, we made the case for rolling out Universal Support to create a more dynamic and flexible welfare system following the pandemic.<sup>172</sup>

By partnering people on Universal Credit with a key worker who could triage them to necessary support to improve their health, economic and social wellbeing, the Universal Support trial showed the benefit of a simple holistic programme which tackles the root causes behind unemployment and empowers people to progress in work. The pilot showed that for every £1 spent on Universal Support, £1.50–£2.00 was saved across other parts of local government.<sup>173</sup>

### **Recommendation 12: The Government should introduce Universal Support to accompany Universal Credit.**

- Universal Support Key Workers would support the most vulnerable adults who face complex barriers in their personal life and would guide adults who need Adult Community Education through their learning and into a sustainable job.

170 Gov.UK, 2015. "Universal Credit and Universal Support" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universal-credit-and-universal-support>]

171 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

172 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. "Unfinished Business: Next steps for welfare reform in post-Covid Britain" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/unfinished-business-next-steps-for-welfare-reform-in-post-covid-britain>]

173 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]



## chapter three

# Reaping the full benefits of Adult Community Education

Adult Community Education provides the catalyst for people furthest removed from the labour market to gain meaningful employment and improve their standard of living. However, the benefits of Adult Community Education provision are not simply economic. Adult Community Education providers offer courses which are not solely focused on employability as part of their community learning offer.

The 1919 report on adult education enshrined the role and purpose of adult education in England. It proposed an adult education system that addressed not just the economic needs of the country – the need to reskill after WW1 – but also a system that helped to repair the social fabric of society, building social cohesion, and creating healthy and strong communities. In this spirit, the adult community education offer was forged.<sup>174</sup>

Community learning covers a wide range of different programmes including those focused on mental and physical health, community building, family learning, and broader skill development initiatives which increase independence, foster civic engagement, and improve wellbeing.<sup>175</sup>

Adult Community Education has a vital role to play in rebuilding communities and addressing the immense social challenges that face the Government after the disruption caused by the pandemic and resultant lockdowns.

We are only just beginning to understand the true social cost of lockdowns, but early evidence suggests the damage to society has been greater than anyone anticipated. The NHS is facing a backlog of 7 million people waiting for hospital treatment<sup>176</sup> and the strain on mental health care has left 8 million adults with mental health needs without help.<sup>177</sup>

174 The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019. "A Permanent National Necessity: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-2.pdf>]

175 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

176 BMA, 2022. "NHS backlog data analysis" [Available at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/nhs-backlog-data-analysis>]

177 Mind, 2022. "Mind responds to UK Government NHS elective recovery plan" [Available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/mind-responds-to-uk-government-nhs-elective-recovery-plan>]

While the pandemic initially gave rise to a revival in community spirit and localism,<sup>178</sup> emerging evidence suggests that people are increasingly feeling lonely. Before the Covid-19 crisis, around 1 in 5 people reported being often or always lonely but after lockdowns, 41 per cent of adults report feeling lonelier. The loneliest people state that they feel the least able to cope with the effects of the pandemic.<sup>179</sup>

The Levelling Up White Paper states that “communities are bound together by good relationships and a strong sense of belonging. Local leaders are able to build on these foundations to deliver improvements for their local community”. Where pride in community is depleted, a vicious cycle has emerged which has culminated in a depletion of skills, business, and culture.<sup>180</sup>

While Adult Community Education alone cannot provide a single panacea for all of society’s ills, this form of education can provide the first rung of support for the most disadvantaged adults to tackle deep and engrained social issues.

Adult Community Education has proven successful in addressing health, wellbeing, and community needs. It has been associated with longer life expectancy and prolonged independent living for older people and also has a positive effect on acute health issues such as depression, anxiety, heart disease, stroke and diabetes.<sup>181</sup>

Non-accredited community learning courses can improve life satisfaction and increase learners’ confidence and self-esteem. They reduce isolation and bring communities together. Adult Community Education has a key role to play in creating social cohesion and building inclusive societies.<sup>182</sup> 82 per cent of people on adult education courses make new friends.<sup>183</sup>

Across the nation, there is an army of Adult Community Education providers whose community provision is currently underutilised and not integrated into broader government initiatives. If the full power of community learning was unleashed, Adult Community Education could provide a robust safety net for those most in need.

### 3.1 Community Learning has been continuously undervalued

The wider benefits of Adult Community Education have often been seen in contrast with the benefits of education provision which targets employability and economic prosperity. The Centenary Commission noted that it has always been a challenge to balance these two kinds of provision and over the last 20 years the balance has been

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178 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021. “New Government survey results underline community spirit generated during the pandemic” [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-survey-results-underline-community-spirit-generated-during-pandemic>]

179 British Red Cross, 2020. “Tackling Loneliness among those left behind” [Available at: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-and-social-care/life-after-lockdown-detailed-policy-recommendations.pdf>]

180 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. “Levelling Up the United Kingdom: White Paper” [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>]

181 Local Government Association, 2020. “Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors” [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

182 Ibid.

183 Tes, 2018. “Use learning to combat loneliness” [Available at: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/use-learning-combat-loneliness>]

skewed in favour of lifelong learning which focuses solely on employability. They argued that this skewed approach has had damaging consequences for personal, social and community development.<sup>184</sup>

The practicalities of this tension often play out in the funding mechanisms for Adult Community Education and performance measures for providers. Although Adult Community Education providers get their funding from many different pots, the two main sources of funding come from Community Learning and Regulated and Non-Regulated Qualifications Funding. These two streams are accounted for separately. The majority of enrolments for community learning are for personal and community development learning courses.<sup>185</sup>

While some Adult Community Education provision is free of charge to learners, this largely takes the form of education which leads directly to qualifications. Providers try to make the most of their community learning funding to target community learning activities towards cohorts of disadvantaged adults who would otherwise be unable to attend through using the flexibility of non-formula funded community learning allocations, however, the extent to which this happens is variable. In some cases, community learning provision can only be run if a learner contributes a fee to the cost of running the classes.<sup>186</sup>

Adult Community Education providers struggle to demonstrate their value and impact when applying for funding. While commissioners rightly ask for evidence on the quality of education and resultant outcomes, the benefits of Adult Community Education are too broad to fall into a single impact measure, such as progression to employment.

Some local areas have begun to review the outcomes by which they measure Adult Community Education providers, to better capture and articulate the wider range of benefits of this kind of provision. Under the Skills for Londoners scheme, Greater London Authority has developed a new strategy to assess outcomes related to economic growth, social inclusion and cohesion, a culture of lifelong learning and efficient use of public funds.<sup>187</sup>

However, at the national level, there has been an increased focus on funding for strictly qualification-centred courses and recent Government consultation documents suggest that the Department for Education is further cementing this approach.<sup>188</sup>

A consultation document published in 2022 outlined the Government's plan to limit the scope of community education funding. The plans would revise non-qualification funding and limit the provision to focus on achieving employment outcomes, achieving progression to further learning and helping those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.<sup>189</sup>

184 The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019. "A Permanent National Necessity: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-2.pdf>]

185 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/3252>]

186 Learning and Work Institute, 2022. "Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/social-prescribing-adult-learning>]

187 Greater London Authority, 2017. "London Adult Community Learning Review Report" [Available at: [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london\\_adult\\_community\\_learning\\_review\\_report.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_adult_community_learning_review_report.pdf)]

188 Department for Education, 2022. "Implementing a new Further Education Funding and Accountability System" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/implementing-a-new-fe-funding-and-accountability-system>]

189 Ibid.

The changes have been criticised for limiting the remit of community learning. Programmes such as social prescribing activities, health and wellbeing, family learning and first steps ESOL would have to be dropped.<sup>190</sup>

Experts have warned that these reforms will dampen student participation figures and have knock-on effects for the sector as a whole. It is likely that these restrictions will lead to a reduction in participation both in community learning activities and in courses that lead to qualifications.<sup>191</sup>

### 3.2 The benefits of community learning are wrapped up with the benefits to employment

This shift in approach risks losing out on a range of intrinsic personal and social benefits that come with community learning. However, such an approach also risks undermining the Government's main policy objectives to get people into work and address labour market skills shortages.

In reality, the employability benefits and broader community benefits of Adult Community Education provision cannot be so easily untangled. Often, they mutually reinforce one another but the relationship is difficult to evidence for short-term commissioning applications.

Adult Community Education's broader community learning programmes can often help individuals facing severe and multiple disadvantages re-enter and progress in the workplace, even if they are not acquiring a new qualification. Also, many learners who start out on a community learning course progress onto skill-specific courses afterwards.

#### Community learning's indirect impact on the labour market

The indirect relationship between community learning programmes and labour market outcomes can be seen in the returns to community learning courses delivering health outcomes. A 2018 study from the Department for Education evidenced that Adult Community Education can significantly boost mental health.<sup>192</sup> This evaluation found that Adult Community Education providers reach a greater proportion of unemployed and economically inactive people compared to the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies service. The report noted that the fact community learning courses were offered for free was typically a factor in learners' decisions to take part.<sup>193</sup>

The findings suggested that the process of learning something new, whether this was specifically a course designed around mental health or general community learning, can lead to improvements in mental health. Many learners stated that they had more confidence and were motivated to continue learning after participating in a community learning course.<sup>194</sup>

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190 FE Week, 2022. "DfE's latest consultation puts Adult Community Education at risk" [Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/dfes-latest-consultation-puts-adult-community-education-at-risk>]

191 Ibid.

192 Department for Education, 2018. "Community learning mental health research project" [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-learning-mental-health-research-project>]

193 Ibid.

194 Ibid.

### Case study: Andrea, Lancashire Adult Education

Having left school with no qualifications and spending much of her adulthood trapped in a cycle of drug addiction, the future had looked bleak for Andrea.

But in 2019, when she tragically lost her husband in a car accident, she decided, aged 51, it was time to make a change.

Andrea began attending adult community courses with Lancashire Adult Learning (LAL), gaining the knowledge, skills, and certificates she needed to fulfil a role as a volunteer within the Chorley community.

In three years, she achieved qualifications in Money Management, Basic Life Support, Emergency Paediatric First Aid, Basic Awareness of Food Safety, Essential Digital Skills, Mentorship, and more.

Moreover, in 2020 she also became the Founder and Director of WatchUSgrow, a charitable organisation and outreach hub based in Chorley. Such has been the success of WatchUSgrow, Andrea has recently received approval to open her own Recovery House in the town, offering support services for adults as they recover from addiction.

On a whirlwind three years, Andrea said: "I have achieved goals I never thought possible as a recovered addict. It's been an amazing personal journey from my recovery through to being able to support others."

"LAL's courses have helped me personally as well as helping to develop my role as Founder and Director at WatchUSgrow."

"The courses make a huge difference in building confidence, resilience, and in supporting the mental health of myself and those I support."

While improved mental health and wellbeing are health outcomes, the benefits of improved mental health are evident in labour market participation. England's labour market is suffering from record levels of labour shortages, high vacancy rates and a skills mismatch which is costing the economy billions each year.<sup>195</sup> The tight labour market has been attributed to a greater number of people no longer being in work and the greatest driver for people leaving the labour market is long-term sickness.<sup>196</sup>

Studies have suggested that worsening mental health has been a key factor behind the exodus of people from the labour market.<sup>197</sup> While some of this cohort will be awaiting treatment that can only be addressed through the NHS, a significant proportion of people who have left the labour market, around 1.7 million people,<sup>198</sup> would be able to work and would like to do so.

195 Financial Times, 2022. "UK unfilled vacancies hit record as workers leave labour market" [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/60a79b3e-5d94-400c-84c5-a8b812619e2f>]

196 Financial Times, 2022. "Chronic illness makes UK workforce the sickest in the developed world" [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/c333a6d8-0a56-488c-aeb8-eeb1c05a34d2>]

197 Resolution Foundation, 2022. "Not Working" [Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/not-working>]

198 ONS, 2022. "Labour market statistics time series" [Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/labourmarketstatisticstimeseriesoctober2022>]

Economic inactivity due to long-term health problems has increased for young people between 2006 and 2021 (with the numbers more than doubling for both young men and women). In total 160,000 young people are economically inactive due to mental health conditions. Evidence has shown that having a common mental health disorder increases a young person's chances of moving into worklessness.<sup>199</sup>

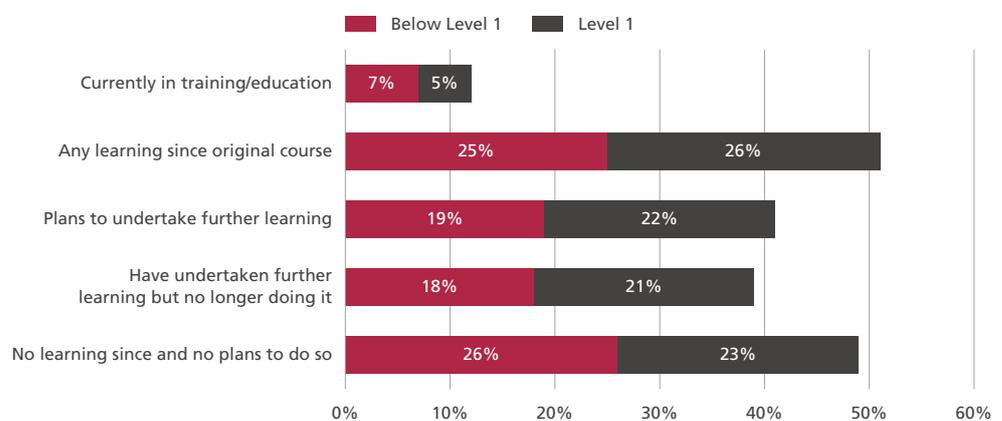
As evidenced, community learning can effectively support people from disadvantaged backgrounds, facing unemployment and economic inactivity, to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Thus, a community learning approach focused on the broader social and personal outcomes, not just jobs focused, could have a significant impact on economic recovery as such an approach would help unlock untapped potential in our labour market.

### Community learning is often the first step for adults reengaging in education

Community learning courses also tend to be a starting point for adults reengaging in education but often they lead to learners progressing on to skill-specific courses which are tied to qualifications and job outcomes.

According to a study from the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, around half of all learners on a community learning course progress onto further learning. Over three quarters say that their positive experience in community education encouraged them to take up further learning, with those from disadvantaged areas or in receipt of benefits more likely to report that community education increased their motivation.<sup>200</sup>

Figure 9: More than three quarters of learners undertake or plan to undertake further learning: further learning intentions for adults on below Level 2 courses



Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013. "Evaluation of the impact of learning Below Level 2"

Learners who embark on courses at Adult Community Education providers have often not stepped back into a classroom for many years. Their course is often the first foray back into education and marks the first step on their educational journey.<sup>201</sup> For many, the prospect

199 Resolution Foundation, 2022. "Not Working" [Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/not-working>]

200 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016. "Returns to Maths and English Learning (at Level 2 and below) in Further Education" [Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/26378/1/bis-16-180-maths-english-learning.pdf>]

201 Education Select Committee, 2020. "A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution" [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

of taking a skill-specific course when they first arrive is daunting and overwhelming.<sup>202</sup> They embark on their learning journey with the primary motivation of building resilience and overcoming a barrier in their personal life.<sup>203</sup>

Sometimes, learners come to Adult Community Education with negative perceptions of what education will be like, having had a bad experience of compulsory education in school. Courses centred around community learning can help to build trust and give learners a glimpse of how Adult Community Education differs from their negative preconceptions.<sup>204</sup>

### Case study: Craig, Wolverhampton Adult Education Service

Craig left school with one GCSE and little ambition for a meaningful career; he describes his early relationship with education as 'difficult.' He worked in retail for 20 years, enjoying his work but feeling that he needed a new challenge.

Prompted by his partner starting university, he decided, aged 39, to enroll at Wolverhampton Adult Education Service on the Access to Higher Education Social Sciences pathway. Craig describes this experience of studying as a major turning point both in his own life and in that of his children.

He describes his course as well-delivered, challenging and 'amazingly liberating,' saying that his beliefs were challenged, his entire skillset was developed, and his outlook and future were changed. He says that he received amazing support from the staff at Wolverhampton Adult Education Service, with everyone encouraging him to work hard, to be the best he could and to never doubt himself. He completed the course and did better than he would ever have imagined.

Using his newly developed skills, he progressed to the University of Wolverhampton and achieved a 1st class degree in Social Care. He followed this up with a Post Graduate Certificate in Education in the post-compulsory sector and credits this achievement directly to the inspirational staff at Wolverhampton Adult Education Service.

Wanting to give something back, his story turned full circle and he is now a qualified teacher, teaching the very programme that he studied in 2016.

Angus states "I cannot praise Wolverhampton Adult Education Service enough for empowering me to develop the tools to achieve my potential."

Throughout this report, we have engaged with several focus groups of adult learners who all told us that they started their course unable to imagine the progress that they would make through Adult Community Education. One learner told us that prior to starting her Adult Community Education course, she had not left the house for three years. Adult Community Education often starts with the goal of improving self-esteem and unlocking a person's potential to learn.<sup>205</sup>

202 FE Week, 2022. "DfE's latest consultation puts Adult Community Education at risk" [Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/dfes-latest-consultation-puts-adult-community-education-at-risk>]

203 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/3252>]

204 CSJ focus groups with learners in Adult Community Education.

205 Ibid.

Once learners have established a relationship of trust with their tutors and have started to understand how adult learning differs from their past experiences, they are much more likely to transition onto further courses and focus on qualifications for employment.<sup>206</sup>

**Recommendation 13: The Government should reinstate the wider objectives for Adult Community Education and should review how to make funding for community learning sustainable.**

- A consultation document published in 2022 outlined the Government’s plan to limit the scope of community education funding.<sup>207</sup> The changes have been criticised for limiting the remit of community learning. Programmes such as social prescribing activities, health and wellbeing, family learning and first steps English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) would have to be dropped.
- The Government should remove the change in scope from the consultation and reinstate its commitment to a broader slate of community learning outcomes.
- As part of their lifelong learning plan, the new government minister should seek to integrate Adult Community Education into policy responses across different departments.
- A review should be conducted into how community education is funded to ensure that Adult Community Education is valued and can be utilised to unlock personal, social and employability benefits.

The recognition that community education reinforces a person’s employability needs to be further embedded in commissioning practices and funding allocations for adult community education.

While there are specific challenges to the delivery of different kinds of community education, as detailed throughout this chapter, this tension is perhaps the biggest problem undermining the provision of community education in its fullest sense. Addressing this systemic undervaluation is key to unlocking the full potential of Adult Community Education.

**Recommendation 14: The Government should review how it assesses the benefits of Adult Community Education to better capture outcomes related to community learning and assess longer-term progression.**

- The Government should review the outcome measures for Adult Community Education.
- This review should try to capture the broader outcomes for learners and collect data in a way that allows it to be shared with other relevant partners in a locality, such as social prescribing key workers.
- Longitudinal data on the outcomes of learners should be captured to evidence the long time frames under which Adult Community Education providers support adult learners and to better reflect the timeframe of success for adult education provision.

206 FE Week, 2022. “DfE’s latest consultation puts Adult Community Education at risk” [Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/dfes-latest-consultation-puts-adult-community-education-at-risk>]

207 Department for Education, 2022. “Implementing a new FE Funding and Accountability System” [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/implementing-a-new-fe-funding-and-accountability-system>]

All further recommendations in this section will examine the specific challenges facing different forms of community learning and how Adult Community Education can be fully utilised to support the Government's broader policy goals. However, secure, and sustainable commissioning for community education programmes underwrites all further recommendations in this chapter.

### 3.3 Adult Community Education is not yet integrated into Social Prescribing

In England, there has been a recent national policy shift towards using non-clinical settings to address people's health and wellbeing problems. The 2019 NHS long-term plan ushered in a new era in health and social care provision which incorporated social prescribing as part of the NHS's comprehensive model of personal care. Social prescribing has thus become a fundamental tool in preventing health and wellbeing deteriorations and supporting the NHS to tackle some of the major health challenges facing the nation.<sup>208</sup>

The shift towards social prescribing recognises that social, economic, and environmental factors can be determinants of poor health and wellbeing.<sup>209</sup> Social prescribing schemes refer people facing health and wellbeing difficulties onto a range of local, non-clinical services. Identified beneficiaries of social prescribing schemes include people with multiple long-term conditions who rely on primary or secondary health care, people with complex needs, people who are socially isolated and people suffering with mental health difficulties.<sup>210</sup>

Social prescribers and Adult Community Education providers see the benefit of working in tandem to reduce dependence on primary care through greater rollout of adult education.<sup>211</sup> Over 100 local authority education services are currently involved in social prescribing.<sup>212</sup>

While there is significant potential for collaboration between local health and education services, the extent to which social prescribers refer to Adult Community Education provision is patchy and varied.<sup>213</sup>

Research on collaboration between social prescribing and education has identified three major barriers to these settings working together effectively, there are:

- Inconsistent relationships;
- A lack of understanding of the benefits of collaboration; and
- A funding gap that undermines commissioning.

208 Matt Hancock, 2018. "Social prescribing speech" [Available at: <https://www.matt-hancock.com/news/social-prescribing-speech>]

209 Kings Fund, 2020. "What is social prescribing?" [Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/social-prescribing>]

210 Ibid.

211 Learning and Work Institute, 2022. "Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/social-prescribing-adult-learning>]

212 CSJ Survey of Adult Community Education Providers

213 Ibid.

### Inconsistent relationships

While pockets of social prescribing activity have been prevalent in England since the 1990s, the shift at a national level is still quite recent and many social prescribing services are relatively young.<sup>214</sup> In areas where prescribers are nascent or less well developed, there are particular challenges that lead to an under-utilisation of Adult Community Education.

Reviews have found that Adult Community Education is not well understood by social prescribers and links are not being made between local Adult Community Education provision and health services.<sup>215</sup> Adult Community Education providers often do not understand how social prescribers make decisions and whether they are part of local social prescribers' directories. Social prescribers similarly lack an understanding of the Adult Community Education offer in their locality: link workers have noted that it can be hard to understand what providers operate in their area, how they each work and what the fee and eligibility rules are.<sup>216</sup>

Relationship building across services takes time, however, social prescribing link workers face pressure to have more contact time with patients and Adult Community Education providers have no specific capacity to build relationships with other organisations.<sup>217</sup> These factors often hamper the relationship between adult education and health at a local level.<sup>218</sup>

In areas where social prescribing is a relatively new initiative, stakeholders often do not have an established network to share information between providers and promote their services.<sup>219</sup> This was a common theme in feedback from Adult Community Education providers engaged with throughout this research. While many providers have some form of link with social prescribing services, the nature of this connection varied significantly and was often underpinned by relationships with individuals rather than a systemic approach which integrated Adult Community Education with health.

The fragility of this relationship often means that when key people move on, Adult Community Education providers have to reset their relationships and start again from ground zero in promoting the health benefits of their work.<sup>220</sup>

### A lack of understanding of the benefits of collaboration

Even when social prescribers know about the education provision in their local area, many social prescribers do not fully understand the full range of benefits that Adult Community Education can deliver. Similarly, the general public have a low level of awareness of community learning courses.<sup>221</sup>

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214 Kings Fund, 2020. "What is social prescribing?" [Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/social-prescribing>]

215 Health Education England, 2016. "Social prescribing at a glance: North West England" [Available at: <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Social%20Prescribing%20at%20a%20glance.pdf>]

216 Learning and Work Institute, 2022. "Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/social-prescribing-adult-learning>]

217 Ibid.

218 Ibid.

219 Ibid.

220 CSJ interviews with Adult Community Education providers.

221 Learning and Work Institute, 2022. "Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/social-prescribing-adult-learning>]

Most of the national conversation about Adult Community Education, where it exists, is focused on jobs and skills outcomes. As a consequence, many people do not consider adult education as something that could help address their health needs and few who could see health benefits from engaging in adult education enrol on courses.<sup>222</sup>

Social prescribers often do not fully understand the benefits of a referral to adult education as, when it comes to monitoring outcomes, social prescribers and adult education providers use different tools. This hampers data sharing and prohibits a meaningful joint conversation about measuring the health impact of adult community education services.<sup>223</sup>

Also, research has found that adult education services are deprioritised relative to other services addressing social needs. When patients present with urgent issues, such as poor housing or finances, social prescribers tend to focus solely on addressing a patient's basic needs. Often, it is hard to get beyond these urgent basic needs to address longer-term social solutions, which can improve a person's broader wellbeing, such as adult education.<sup>224</sup>

### A funding gap that undermines commissioning

Funding structures, as already outlined, can create significant barriers to community learning delivery. Adult Community Education that is centred on achieving twin objectives, providing learning opportunities and also health benefits, can reap a double dividend in terms of social rewards. However, this strength is also a significant challenge for the sector. These benefits cross over different governmental work streams and create tension for funding this kind of provision.<sup>225</sup>

Adult Community Education linked to health benefits is often subject to a funding gap: health funders suggest this form of learning activity should be funded by education whereas education argues for this work to be funded by the health sector.<sup>226</sup>

In many instances, Adult Community Education courses targeting better health outcomes are provided for a learner fee. Patients often assume that learning is free because social prescribing does not incur a personal cost. Where learners incur a cost for learning for health benefits this can act as a deterrent to learners.<sup>227</sup>

#### **Recommendation 15: Adult Community Education should be embedded in the national approach to social prescribing.**

- The Government should provide greater clarity over who should fund Adult Community Education provision which is health centred as part of a national approach to social prescribing.
- National guidance for link workers should explain the benefits of Adult Community Education and local directories of available provision should be made accessible for social prescribers in every locality across the country.

222 Ibid.

223 Ibid.

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 Health Education England, 2016. "Social prescribing at a glance: North West England" [Available at: <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Social%20Prescribing%20at%20a%20glance.pdf>]

227 Learning and Work Institute, 2022. "Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/social-prescribing-adult-learning>]

### 3.4 Greater family learning is key to addressing the attainment gap

Many people enrolled on literacy and numeracy courses at adult education providers tend to be parents, motivated to reengage in learning in part through a desire to improve their skills and pass on their new-found confidence to their children.<sup>228</sup>

However, alongside courses teaching these foundational skills to adults, Adult Community Education providers also offer a range of courses specifically focused on family learning. These courses teach parents how they can support children to learn at home and familiarise parents with learning methods in schools.<sup>229</sup> These courses can help improve children's development and also lead to greater family wellbeing. Evidence suggests that parents from lower-income backgrounds are likely to need and benefit more from accessing non-home learning centres.<sup>230</sup>

Parental engagement in learning has enormous potential to improve academic outcomes from children and can help boost attainment. Evidence has shown that family learning could increase the overall level of a child's development by as much as 15 per cent for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>231</sup> Experts have argued that the differences in the family environment are potentially more significant than differences between schools but most policy attention has been focused on the latter rather than on addressing family learning.<sup>232</sup>

Family learning also provides a route to further formal learning for many parents. An evaluation of the Family Learning Impact Fund, targeted at families from disadvantaged backgrounds, found that 85 per cent of learners on family learning courses went on to attend a further course after participating in family learning.<sup>233</sup> In addition, family learning courses have been shown to improve health, wellbeing and social cohesion.<sup>234</sup>

In the absence of a cohesive, national family learning strategy, the number of parents enrolled on family learning courses has dwindled in recent years. Family English, maths and language enrolments dropped by 53 per cent between 2012 and 2019 and wider family learning (which helps parents and carers to support childhood development) fell by 36 per cent over the same period.<sup>235</sup>

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228 Campaign for Learning, 2022. "Parents, Children and Adult Learning: Family Learning Policy in the 2020s" [Available at: <https://campaign-for-learning.org.uk/Web/CFL/What-we-do/Policy-Folder/Policy-Reports-Folder/Parents-Children-Adult-Learning-Family-Learning-Policy.aspx>]

229 Local Government Association, 2020. "Learning for Life: the role of Adult Community Education in developing thriving communities – a handbook for councillors" [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

230 Campaign for Learning, 2022. "Parents, Children and Adult Learning: Family Learning Policy in the 2020s" [Available at: <https://campaign-for-learning.org.uk/Web/CFL/What-we-do/Policy-Folder/Policy-Reports-Folder/Parents-Children-Adult-Learning-Family-Learning-Policy.aspx>]

231 NIACE, 2013. "Family Learning Works: The Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Family-Learning-Works-The-Inquiry-into-Family-Learning-in-England-and-Wales-Summary.pdf>]

232 Campaign for Learning, 2022. "Parents, Children and Adult Learning: Family Learning Policy in the 2020s" [Available at: <https://campaign-for-learning.org.uk/Web/CFL/What-we-do/Policy-Folder/Policy-Reports-Folder/Parents-Children-Adult-Learning-Family-Learning-Policy.aspx>]

233 NIACE, 2013. "Family Learning Works: The Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales" [Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Family-Learning-Works-The-Inquiry-into-Family-Learning-in-England-and-Wales-Summary.pdf>]

234 Ibid.

235 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. "The Long Game" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CSJ-The-Long-Game.pdf>]

**Recommendation 16: The Government should review the current offer of family learning and seek to provide family learning opportunities delivered by Adult Community Education providers across the country's growing network of Family Hubs.**

- Family learning should become a core part of the Department for Education's plans to tackle the attainment gap and improve literacy and numeracy.
- Parents should be referred to family learning programmes to enable them to better support their children's learning.
- These courses should be provided in accessible locations for parents to maximise participation. This could involve pilots of co-location where a broad Adult Community Education offer, including family learning and a roster of other courses, is hosted at Family Hubs.

### 3.5 Adults in England want greater financial literacy skills

Nearly half of UK adults want urgent help managing their own money yet there is very little infrastructure in place to develop universal financial literacy in adulthood.<sup>236</sup> Adult Community Education providers sometimes offer financial literacy programmes to help adults with money management, but this does not make up a significant amount of overall enrolments.<sup>237</sup>

Providers who offer financial literacy programmes say the biggest barrier to delivery is "getting people through the door" particularly those who are furthest from the labour market. Shame around debt and reluctance to talk about money can prevent adults from seeking help to develop their financial literacy.<sup>238</sup>

The reach of financial literacy programmes are limited to people who seek out support and very little active outreach takes place to integrate learners facing problem debt onto these courses. Adult Community Education providers have noted that when people do sign up for these courses, their primary motivator tends to be getting help to sign up for benefits.

Integrating financial education opportunities into key touchpoints with services that people likely engage with, like the benefits system, would help to deliver financial education to adults who need it most. Financial education can often be a gateway for learners who go on to other skills development courses. Financial education can therefore help to break cycles of disadvantage and put learners on the course towards greater self-sufficiency.

236 Centre for Social Justice & Lowell, 2021. "Press Release: Half of Brits want urgent help managing their cash, new poll finds" [Available at: <https://www.lowellbusiness.co.uk/hubfs/Press%20release%20Half%20of%20Brits%20want%20urgent%20help%20managing%20their%20cash%20new%20poll%20finds.pdf?hsLang=en>]

237 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/3252>]

238 Centre for Social Justice, 2022. "On the money" [Available at: [https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CSJ-The\\_financial\\_education\\_initiative.pdf](https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CSJ-The_financial_education_initiative.pdf)]

**Recommendation 17: To better reach families in need of support, the Money and Pensions Service should steer financial education providers to invest in and scale up programmes that adopt a ‘whole-family approach’, reaching parents through existing local infrastructure such as Adult Community Education and Family Hubs.**

- The Money and Pensions service should seek to boost the number of adults receiving financial education.
- Whole-family approaches to money management should be scaled up, using existing Adult Community Education provision.
- A new adult financial education initiative could build upon existing basic skills programmes, such as Multiply, and integrate financial literacy as part of ongoing learning opportunities.

### 3.6 ESOL provision is disjointed and holds back new migrants from settling into the UK

Adult Community Education centres are based at the heart of disadvantaged communities. They work at neighbourhood level and bring together people of all different backgrounds. Through bringing people together to work towards a common aim, Adult Community Education providers foster a sense of community and belonging and create thriving local communities.

Adult Community Education helps to build stronger communities, especially through providing foundation level skills in literacy and numeracy. Empowering every adult through basic skills leads to higher levels of respect, tolerance, and trust and in turn can lead to greater social cohesion.<sup>239</sup>

Good English skills are particularly important for new migrants and settled communities in the UK. The Government’s recent “Integrated Communities Action Plan” found that English language skills were of fundamental importance. Speaking and understanding English means that you are less socially isolated, breaks down barriers to work, increases your chances of friendships with people from other backgrounds and allows you to feel more confident accessing local services.<sup>240</sup>

Despite the myriad of benefits of ESOL provision to both individuals and broader society, the provision of ESOL courses has been tightly constrained by reduced funding in recent years. Funding for ESOL comes from a range of sources including the Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government but most of the funding comes from the Department for Education (four fifths of ESOL providers offer provision via the Adult Education Budget).<sup>241</sup>

239 Local Government Association, 2020. “Learning for Life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving local communities – A handbook for councillors” [Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>]

240 HM Government, 2019. “Integrated Communities Action Plan” [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-communities-action-plan>]

241 Education Select Committee, 2020. “A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution” [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

### Case study: Sabri, Oldham Adult Education Service

Sabri joined an E1 non-vocational class in September 2020. He worked really hard and always studied at home. His tutor was so impressed with his progress she progressed him onto a E1 vocational Speaking & Listening course.

He said “I can't speak anything in English before ESOL class. I wasn't buying coffee or going anywhere – just sat in our flat, but I can handle a lot of things right now. For example, I can call my GP, I can speak on the phone about a job or I can contact a real estate to let a house. I feel more self-confident and this is incredible for me.”

“Now I have got a job, testing, troubleshooting and updating PCs. I really feel that I am breaking down my barrier with English language. I have sorted out many things, I applied to stay in Britain by myself for myself and my partner, now we have leave to remain. I am now a British citizen. We have a new flat. I help my partner in daily life, speak to doctors and the hospital for him. I keep in touch with many people I have met along the way on my journey in this country. I know, as I learn English my life will be more comfortable, easier and pleasurable. Since I started to work, I have made a few friends. My social life and work life have both improved together my English skills. Also, my partner's life has improved with my life which is making my life worth living!”

The Adult Education Budget ESOL funding has been free falling over the last decade, there has been a 56 per cent cut in real terms funding between 2009/10 and 2016/17. Research from the House of Commons Library has concluded that participation in ESOL has mirrored the trends in funding cuts: participation has fallen from 179,000 in 2009/10 to 114,00 in 2016/17.<sup>242</sup>

Underfunding of ESOL provision has had knock on consequences for new migrants trying to integrate into their local communities and has limited their ability to play a full role as UK residents.<sup>243</sup> 64 per cent of providers stated that their current level of funding was insufficient to meet demands for ESOL provision.<sup>244</sup>

The Education Select Committee recently heard evidence that as demand has consistently outstripped supply of ESOL provision, long waiting lists have emerged.<sup>245</sup> Without a grasp of spoken English, highly-skilled and motivated learners have become trapped in low-income jobs and have become vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>246</sup>

242 House of Commons Library, 2018. “Adult ESOL in England” [Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7905/CBP-7905.pdf>]

243 Education Select Committee, 2020. “Written evidence submitted by LTE Group” [Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19606/pdf>]

244 Department for Education, 2019. “English for speakers of other languages: Access and progression” [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/811750/English\\_for\\_speakers\\_of\\_other\\_languages.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/811750/English_for_speakers_of_other_languages.pdf)]

245 Education Select Committee, 2020. “A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution” [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

246 Education Select Committee, 2020. “Written evidence submitted by LTE Group” [Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19606/pdf>]

In undertaking research for this report, Adult Community Education Providers stated that they struggled to access ESOL funding as bid allocations were often announced on an ad-hoc basis with short timelines for applications and timelines that produced cliff-edges for learners. The inconsistency of ESOL funding is largely due to the fact that there is no single ESOL strategy and the approach to funding ESOL provision is not joined-up.

**Recommendation 18: The Government should simplify funding for ESOL under a single strategy for building healthy communities.**

A new funding allocation should be developed which allows providers to both plan for long-term provision to help ESOL learners integrate into society and also respond to refugee crises as they emerge.

### 3.7 Adult Community Education cold spots

Adult Community Education is uniquely placed to reach adults who are socially isolated and to thread together local communities. These providers have a strong track record on reaching disadvantaged individuals who are traditionally hard to engage and helping them to develop a sense of identity and belonging.<sup>247</sup>

Despite the enormous value of Adult Community Education in growing communities and promoting social cohesion, there has been a decline in coverage of Adult Community Education provision. While in the past, Adult Community Education was based in every town and collocated in schools and college sites, experts have warned that the infrastructure to deliver Adult Community Education is not as strong as it used to be.<sup>248</sup>

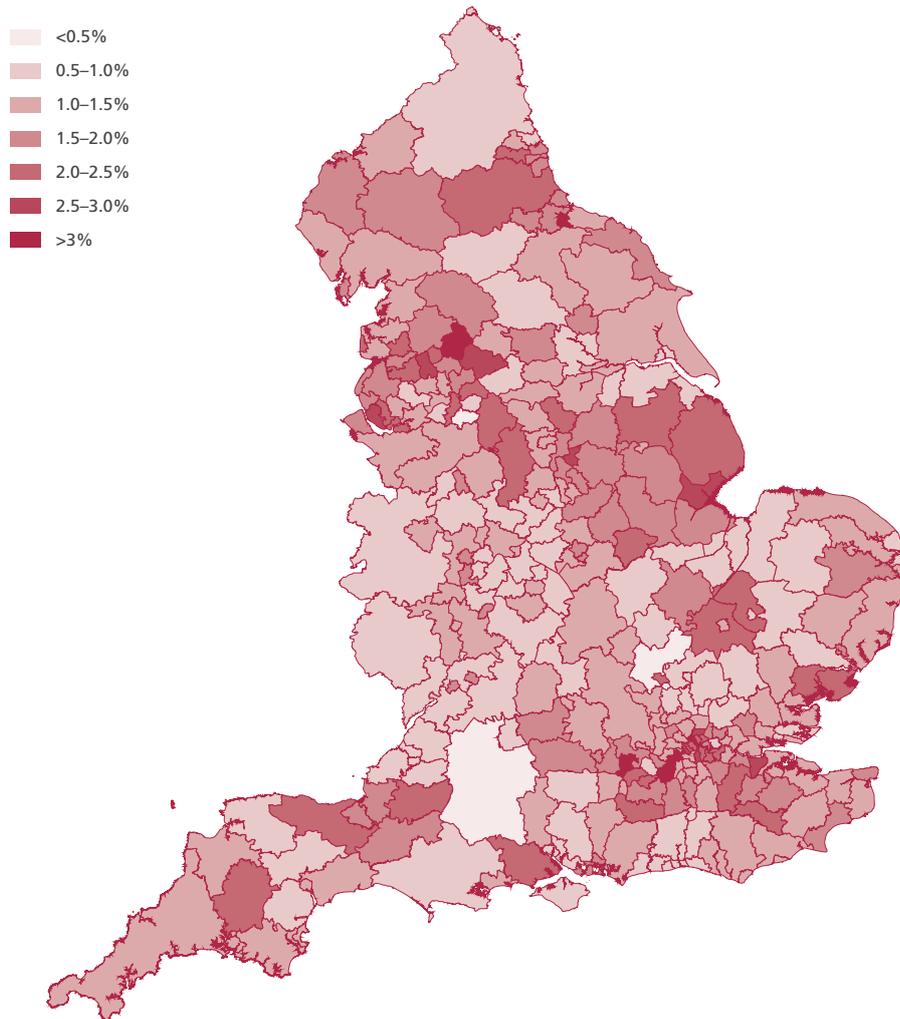
In some areas, the number of adults in Adult Community Education is low and there are some parts of the country which do not have access to any form of Adult Community Education.<sup>249</sup>

247 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. "The Long Game" [Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CSJ-The-Long-Game.pdf>]

248 Education Select Committee, 2020. "A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution" [Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>]

249 Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?" [Available at: <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/3252>]

Figure 10: Number of learners as a percentage of the population



Source: FETL, 2021. "Levelling up Adult Community Education: What does the data tell us?"

**Recommendation 19: Adult Community Education providers should be set up in every town that needs one.**

- As part of the lifelong learning strategy, the Government should evaluate the spread of Adult Community Education and identify cold spots of provision.
- Through either additional capital investment or greater use of co-location, the Government should look to develop a network of Adult Community Education providers based in locations that are most accessible to learners.

Playing the Ace

A plan to unleash the potential of adult community education and bolster economic growth

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