

Basic skills and capabilities

Basic skills include literacy, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), numeracy and digital as well as other capabilities like health, financial and citizenship. They help people find work and be active citizens and adapt to economic and social change, including that caused or accelerated by the pandemic.

Why does this matter for local government?

- Good basic skills can improve **people's employment and career prospects**, limiting unemployment with all its potential negative impacts on health, wellbeing and communities.
- Low basic skills can limit engagement with national and local **public services**. This risks some groups being excluded from support, which can widen inequalities and have knock on consequences for them, their families and communities.
- An [evaluation of a recent pilot found](#) that a **community learning programme** focused on these core capabilities led to savings for a range of public services, primarily by increasing engagement in preventative services (such as registering with a GP or dentist) thus reducing demand for emergency services (such as A&E).
- Good basic skills and capabilities increase the likelihood of people engaging in their communities and being **active citizens**.
- Local government is also in many cases a [provider of basic skills learning](#), including through adult education services.

What is the challenge?

- There are **9 million adults** in England who have low literacy or numeracy, and around **11.5 million** have low digital skills. This is measured by an [OECD survey](#) testing skills such as whether people can understand the dosage instructions on an aspirin packet or use a website. In addition, [850,000 migrants told the 2001 census](#) that they don't speak English well or at all.
- Levels of basic skills and capabilities vary by demographic group, with **large inequalities**. England and the US are the only countries taking part in an [OECD study](#) where young people were more likely to have low basic skills than older people. On average, those with lower qualifications are more likely to have low basic skills; however, a significant minority of graduates also had low basic skills.
- [The importance of basic skills and capabilities is increasing](#) as our economy and society changes. Good basic skills are increasingly central to:
 - a. **work and career prospects:** global economic changes including **advances in technology** are raising the bar for getting into work, reducing job opportunities for those with low basic skills as well as opportunities for progression. Those with good literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to be in work and more likely to earn more, as well as to have higher financial capability
 - b. **health and wellbeing:** basic skills and capabilities help people to understand health information, such as dosing instructions for medicine, but also increase their likelihood of engaging in healthy behaviours (though the nature of causation is not clear)
 - c. **access to public services:** public services are increasingly digital by default, so literacy, language and digital skills are crucial for accessing support

- d. **community and citizenship:** those with good basic skills and higher levels of learning are more likely to be active in their communities.

What does the evidence say works?

What works will vary between groups, and we need to further build the evidence base, for example, on how best to engage people in basic skills learning. However, there is also some clear evidence, with a Learning and Work Institute [what works review](#) identifying the following themes.

The [Citizens' Curriculum programme](#) focused on co-designing a community learning programme with local people for core capabilities like literacy, numeracy, digital, citizenship. A Rochdale Council pilot saw increased participation in learning and £3.68 saved for local public services for every £1 invested, through increased engagement in preventative services leading to reduced need for emergency or reactive services.

1. Engagement.

Approaches to engagement need to reflect people's previous experiences of learning and whether they have found coping mechanisms for low basic skills. These can affect whether people feel they need to improve their basic skills and also whether they take action if they do.

The **language** used to describe provision matters: for example, 'maths in your home' or 'managing money better' may be more engaging than 'numeracy course'. In addition, the routes to engagement are key. Use of **trusted intermediaries** like council services, community groups and housing associations, can be effective in engaging and referring 'harder to reach' groups.

2. Contextualisation.

Provision is likely to be more attractive and engaging and make a difference if it **relates to their work or life**. This could include school-based learning to help parents to develop the skills they need to support their child's education, or work-based provision that helps people address basic skills gaps to support progression.

Relating learning to work or life also increases the likelihood of people **using their newly developed skills on an ongoing basis**, which helps to maintain and develop skill levels after provision has finished.

There are a number of ways to do this, including: **tailoring** standalone provision, eg English for construction courses focused on the literacy needed for people to work on construction sites; **embedding** basic skills learning in other learning, such as functional skills in apprenticeships.

3. Provision.

One of the biggest challenges people cite to engaging in any form of learning is lack of time and being able to fit learning around work and home life. This means designing **how and where provision is delivered** is very important.

In terms of where, [delivering learning in communities or workplaces can be most effective](#) and potentially make it more accessible. Learning also needs to be at times that work for the target group. There is also increasing use of online learning, though in general **blended learning** (combining some online learning with in person learning) is regarded as preferable. In addition, our what works review highlighted evidence that **behavioural interventions**, such as text messages to encourage attendance, can help retain people on provision.

SIX STEPS TO IMPROVING BASIC SKILLS AND CAPABILITIES

1. What is the objective?

Defining the intended objective helps to then understand the challenge and identify an effective response. Preferably the objective should be measurable and aligned with key local or regional strategies, including responding to redundancies or new job creation.

This could be to increase basic skills levels for a particular community. Or it could be a focus on particular skills or capability (eg digital), supporting basic skills for a particular group of adults such as parents, unemployed people or migrants, or to improve basic skills as a contribution to other priorities, such as community engagement or increasing apprenticeships.

2. Do we understand the challenge?

Who has low basic skills? This could be a demographic group or a particular geography within the council. Has coronavirus increased the impetus for some groups to retrain or upskill?

Is high quality basic skills learning available? This will help understand the provision already available and whether it matches the needs and motivations of local people.

What is holding back engagement and take up? This could be lack of suitable provision including online, low awareness, lack of referral routes, issues with transport, childcare etc.

Answers to these questions can be informed by: previous research; speaking to local people, particularly those in the target groups; and engaging with providers of basic skills learning. It may also be worth ensuring the portfolio holder is aware and engaging with them.

3. What works?

A range of evidence demonstrates some core factors that make basic skills provision a success. Evaluations from the UK and other countries should be considered, alongside engagement with those delivering basic skills learning and other stakeholders. The following framework may help:

Engagement. People have to both **want to learn** and be **able to access learning**. The right message (tailored to people's interests and motivations) and medium (eg via trusted intermediaries like community groups) are important. As is tackling potential barriers to learning like fitting learning around work and home life.

Contextualisation. Learning works best when it is **tailored to people's motivations** (whether for life or work), whether as standalone provision or integrated with other learning. So it is important to understand the motivations of the identified target group, the purpose of the provision, and how contextualising learning can help with both engagement into learning and retention in learning.

Provision. Learning needs to fit with work and life. That means considering **where** learning is delivered, including in communities and workplaces, **when** to deliver so learning fits with work and home life, and **how**, including blended and online learning. In addition, **behavioural interventions**, like text messages, can help with retention in learning and completion of learning.

4. What support and services are already available?

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Mapping the main local programmes and providers can help in identifying any **gaps or shortfalls**, as well as opportunities for **new ideas** and **joining up support**.

Basic skills learning is funded through the adult education budget and built into employment and skills provision, including: council **adult and community learning provision**; **DWP and Jobcentre Plus** employment support; integrated into **other learning, such as apprenticeships**; and standalone programmes delivered by **colleges, training providers** and **community learning providers**. Basic skills provision is also commissioned or delivered through **housing associations, charitable trusts and foundations, community groups, employers** and others, and funded through European Social Fund and its successor the **UK Shared Prosperity Fund**.

5. What are the options for intervention to improve outcomes?

A **full range of options** focused on the challenge should be identified, and their potential costs, benefits and potential unintended consequences analysed. This can be informed by engagement with key stakeholders identified in step 4, in particular local colleges and learning providers including councils' own adult learning services.

The options could include: developing a **new engagement campaign** including building referral routes with trusted intermediaries and promotion by the local authority; **expanding existing provision** or increasing its focus on the target group; further **embedding basic skills** in other learning, skills and employment provision; **introducing or testing a new type of engagement or provision** such as one that has worked elsewhere or for another group; or looking at how existing provision could **work more effectively together** (for example, referrals and data sharing).

Options for **implementation** could include: commissioning of new support by the council; influencing what others are commissioning; co-commissioning; influencing national policy; or ensuring structures for more effective coordination of support.

6. How will we know if it's working?

- **Defining success.** Success will mean engaging sufficient people in learning and achieving benchmarked completion rates. But it is important to consider the potential outcomes of learning, such as health or accessing public services, too. And the intervention must be value for money: achieving results additional to what would have happened without support, and at a unit cost comparable to other similarly successful provision.
- **Effective design and evaluation.** The new provision or support should be designed from the start so that its impact and effectiveness can be assessed. Evaluation is also important to identify impact and learn lessons. This can include quantitative evaluation, such as cost-benefit analysis, and qualitative research with staff and learners.
- **Key performance indicators.** These could include numbers of people engaged, whether they complete learning, and achievement of other outcomes (such as work, health or community engagement). Taken together, they should provide measures that start from engaging people, through to provision and completion of learning, and the impact of that learning.
- **Taking a systems view.** Provision may have unintended consequences, particularly given the importance of embedding and contextualising basic skills learning. It is important to watch out for these and consider, for example, the impact on participation and completion of other forms of learning, including apprenticeships.