

# Older people and essential skills

Alex Stevenson, Lynne Mason and Hazel Klenk

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## Foreword by Learning and Work Institute

At Learning and Work Institute, we've long known that good essential skills lead to a range of positive economic, personal and social outcomes. Everyone benefits from good literacy, numeracy and digital skills, which underpin employment opportunities, wellbeing and self-esteem and the confidence to complete everyday tasks. In the context of an ageing population, longer working lives and increasing digitisation in society, it has never been more important to ensure that older people are not excluded from support with essential skills.

We therefore welcomed the opportunity to work in partnership with Age UK on this new research, which offers a unique perspective on the essential skills needs of older people aged 50+ and including those post-retirement. We find that an estimated 27% of older people have low literacy skills, equating to 6 million people. The same figure is true for low numeracy skills.

As well as the day-to-day challenges faced by older adults with low essential skills, the evidence shows there is an economic cost too, risking disadvantage later in life. Someone who left school at 18 with 'very poor' literacy skills will have earned around £33,000 less by state pension age.<sup>1</sup>

This research highlights the ways in which older people's experiences of low essential skills often intersect with other age-related challenges they may face, such as managing health conditions and experiences of bereavement.

The research also shows how bespoke support can help engage older people in learning to improve their essential skills. This means, for example, employers offering older workers support with training, adult learning providers offering inclusive and appealing provision, GPs prescribing literacy support to help people understand health information, and JobCentre Plus supporting signposting to provision which supports with budgeting, form filling or digital skills.

Change is needed now. Everyone – employers, adult learning providers and civil society – has a role in supporting older people with the essential skills needed to thrive later in life.

**Stephen Evans, Chief Executive, Learning and Work Institute**

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<sup>1</sup> Kerr, M (2021) [Paying the price: The cost of very poor adult literacy](#), Pro Bono Economics. (The research defines people with 'very poor' literacy skills as those who have only limited vocabulary and cannot read lengthy texts on unfamiliar topics)

## Foreword by Age UK

Having long heard from the Age UK network about high numbers of older people coming for assistance with understanding official letters, filling out forms, and low levels of digital literacy, among other things, we had long suspected that there may be a hidden issue with low levels of essential skills among the older population. However, we were surprised to find that this issue had never been examined in any meaningful way.

The consequences of having low essential skills can be extremely damaging. For example, we know that about a third of eligible households do not receive the Pension Credit they're entitled to, a key benefit that helps boost the incomes of many low-income pensioner households, and that having low literacy skills can make it even harder to fill out the near-250 questions required to make an application.

Understanding this and ensuring that appropriate help and support is in place becomes an important factor in enabling people to be aware of and apply for their benefit entitlement.

This effect is replicated across many aspects of life – having low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can have a significant impact on older people's ability to take part in society.

Low skills can come about for several reasons. Some people may have always had poor skills, often dating back to a poor experience at school or undiagnosed learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Others may have developed a health condition that has restricted their ability to see the words on a screen, or perhaps are in the early stages of dementia and are finding these things difficult.

We're very pleased that this research sheds more light on the issues that older people face, and hopefully is just the start of helping people overcome the barriers that they experience in their daily lives.

**Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK**

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## Executive summary

Essential skills – including literacy, numeracy and digital skills – are key to supporting adults' life chances. Good essential skills lead to a range of positive personal and social outcomes, including improved self-esteem and wellbeing and more confidence to complete everyday tasks. In contrast, there is a wealth of evidence to show that poor essential skills can have a significant effect on people's lives. For example, poor literacy skills in older adults can impact their mental and physical wellbeing, family life, political, civic and community engagement, and even life expectancy. These are skills as fundamental as understanding the dosage instructions on an aspirin packet or filling out forms to access welfare support. Old age is also associated with low numeracy skills which, in turn, can negatively affect health and financial capabilities. Additionally, poor digital skills and confidence can impact older people's ability to access official information and services online such as claiming benefits.

Around 9 million working-age adults in the UK have low literacy or numeracy skills. For older adults (aged 50 and over<sup>2</sup>), an estimated 6 million have difficulties with maths, and the same number have difficulties with literacy.<sup>3</sup> The evidence shows there is an economic cost to low essential skills, risking disadvantage later in life. Someone who left school at 18 with 'very poor' literacy skills will have earned around £33,000 less by state pension age.<sup>4</sup> However, there is a shortage of information about older adults, and in particular on adults post-retirement age, as most evidence and datasets tend to focus on younger and working age adults.<sup>5</sup>

This research aims to fill this evidence gap, exploring older adults' (aged 50 and over) experiences of essential skills. It considers the implications of skills gaps for older people's daily lives, their experiences of improving their skills and what support is needed to help them improve their skills and ultimately thrive in later life. This report also makes recommendations for policy and practice.

### Key findings

The following findings draw on interviews and focus groups conducted with older people and essential skills providers.

- **Older people with low essential skills have unique and complex needs and circumstances, however there are some shared experiences.** Experiences of worsening or new health conditions, bereavement, undiagnosed learning

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<sup>2</sup> This includes adults over state pension age

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> Kerr, M (2021) [Paying the price: The cost of very poor adult literacy](#). Pro Bono Economics (The research defines people with 'very poor' literacy skills as those who have only limited vocabulary and cannot read lengthy texts on unfamiliar topics)

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2013), Survey of Adult Skills. This figure excludes Scotland and Wales. See Appendix A for a discussion and further data on Scotland and Wales.

difficulties or disabilities (LDD) and leaving school with few to no qualifications are common.

- **Low essential skills can negatively impact on older people's ability to:**
  - Access essential services such as welfare support and healthcare provision
  - Secure and progress in employment
  - Manage their health and enjoy good wellbeing, including engaging in social interactions
  - Feel confident in themselves
- **These impacts can be exacerbated when coupled with experiences common to older people such as worsening health or a disability, an (undiagnosed) LDD, bereavement as well as with age**, indicating that particular groups of older people are more likely to need support.
- **Older people with low essential skills find specific tasks challenging including understanding written information, filling out official forms, booking medical appointments online and completing job applications online.**
- **In the context of longer working lives, some older people experience career transition. However, low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can limit opportunities.** Having targeted support available to help older people reskill and stay in employment is crucial.
- **Literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs can overlap.** For example, older people with low essential skills can struggle to enter written information using a smartphone or set up accounts online.
- **Digital skills challenges are prevalent among older people, and they feel increasingly excluded as technology becomes more integral to our daily lives.**
- **The shame and stigma attached to having a skills gap can lead older people to hide the challenges they face.** This is particularly prevalent in relation to maths skills.
- **Negative experiences at school and leaving school with few to no qualifications is common among older people with low essential skills and can have a lasting negative impact on skills level and self-confidence throughout their lives.**



- **When older people do ask for help, they commonly rely on family and friends.** But not everyone has access to trustworthy informal support networks, making the role of organisations like Age UK and adult learning providers that support older people crucial.
- **Older people see the benefits of developing and maintaining skills later in life but can face a range of barriers to learning.** Key practical barriers include cost, accessibility and availability of suitable provision. Attitudinal barriers including fear and shame of learning as an adult are also common.
- **Older people find out about learning provision and wider support in a range of ways including leaflets and word of mouth.**
- **In-person support at enrolment, tutor support during a course, the opportunity to socialise, learning at a slow pace and having access to flexible provision** are all beneficial aspects of learning opportunities for older people.

### Recommendations for practice

- **The Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that appropriate support is provided to help older people with low essential skills apply for benefits,** including Pension Credit and Attendance Allowance. Many people find official letters difficult to interpret and the application forms to be complex. Having low essential skills can be an additional, and sometimes significant barrier. This could be achieved in part through ensuring that local agencies, including local authorities and local Age UKs, are adequately resourced to support people in their communities.
- **JobCentre Plus (JCP) are uniquely placed to support older people to develop their essential skills and feel more confident with important everyday tasks such as reading official letters and applying for jobs. The new national jobs and careers service, that joins up health, skills and work support, should ensure older people's skills needs are met.** This research found that older people are supported by JCP to take up essential skills provision. JCP should continue to promote and refer people to learning opportunities. For example, an older person who struggles with reading official documents could be signposted to a literacy course. JCP coaches should be supported to identify essential skills needs, as previous research found that in non-provider organisations, staff expertise and confidence in conducting basic skills checks may be patchy.<sup>6</sup>
- **Employers should be able to use the flexibilities of the new [Skills and Growth Levy](#) to support the literacy and numeracy needs of their workforce.** This

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<sup>6</sup> L&W (2020) The potential for an online basic skills checker

research shows that many older people below state pension age are still in work and are motivated to improve their skills levels for employment-related reasons. The benefits of improving their skills should be clearly communicated to employers to help incentivise them to use the levy to invest in their workers' skills development.

- **In the context of longer working lives, having targeted support available to help older people with low essential skills reskill and stay in employment is crucial.** Some older people want or need to change careers. However, low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can limit their opportunities. Evidence<sup>7</sup> shows that peer support, CV writing and online job application support, digital skills provision and a strong emphasis on identifying transferable skills from their previous work history can boost older people's confidence and enable them to seek work in a wider range of sectors.
- **Age UK should continue to help older people overcome challenges they face with everyday activities to ensure they can access essential services, manage their health and wellbeing and feel more confident in themselves.** Low essential skills can negatively impact on older people's lives in a range of ways. They can affect people's ability to access essential services such as welfare support and healthcare provision, secure and progress in employment, manage their health and wellbeing and feel confident in themselves. Older people can feel locked out of opportunities that require a combination of literacy and digital skills such as completing job applications online, booking medical appointments online and accessing welfare support online. Organisations such as Age UK play a crucial role in supporting older people to overcome these challenges. Informal, slow-paced and ad-hoc learning opportunities in welcoming, trusted and comfortable settings such as Age UK are highly valued by older people (particularly retired people).
- **GP surgeries should continue to support older people with low essential skills to better manage their health and wellbeing, including through social prescribing to learning.** Older people's physical and mental wellbeing can be impacted by poor essential skills. Worsening health and conditions that develop with age can exacerbate these challenges. Given the important role 'warm' service contacts like GPs play in supporting older people, they are well-placed to signpost older people to relevant skills provision and support them to overcome barriers to managing their health and wellbeing. Previous research shows that referrals to adult education via social prescribing can help in

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<sup>7</sup> Centre for Ageing Better, L&W (2024) [Evaluation of Elevate pilot. Final report](#). The project was aimed at supporting older individuals at risk of and/or experiencing redundancy in the West Midlands.

providing a comprehensive service and reduce the dependence on primary care and highlights examples of effective practice.<sup>8</sup>

- **In order to effectively engage with older people with low essential skills, providers and other organisations that support older people should consider the following marketing approaches:**
  - **Information about essential skills learning opportunities should be available in a range of formats and locations, be accessible, visible and provide clear information** to learners, community-based partners, employers, referral organisations (e.g. JCP, Age UK centres and medical centres) and relevant local authorities teams (including libraries and schools). This could be achieved in part through ensuring that local agencies are adequately resourced to provide this information.
  - **Course and group names should be relatable and relevant**, tapping into older people's motivations of learning for social reasons, to meet a specific skills gap or wanting to progress at work.
  - **Providers should consider using learner champions and taster days** as approaches to boost engagement and remove attitudinal barriers to learning (for example, fear and stigma).
  - **Providers should continue to develop and where possible extend their collaborative working with community-based partners** (in particular organisations who support older people such as Age UK), local authorities, public services (including referral organisations such as JCP) and employers to support outreach delivery and referrals into learning.
- **Providers should aim to address barriers to learning for older people.** This includes providing free courses, covering indirect costs of learning, providing resources and equipment, ensuring learning opportunities are in accessible locations and settings and providing provision that fits around working hours for employed older people.
- **To support learners into meaningful learning opportunities, comprehensive and supportive initial assessment and induction processes that identify learning and wider support needs should be conducted.** Older people often have complex needs and circumstances. For example, older people in this research commonly reported having a health condition, experiencing bereavement, having little to no previous education or negative experiences at school which had impacted on their confidence, and feeling shame or anxiety

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<sup>8</sup> L&W (2022) [Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London](#)

about their low essential skills. They also have a range of motivations for improving their skills from social to employment-related reasons. In person options should always be available as well as online options to ensure accessibility. To support staff to meet these needs, providers should ensure that continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities focused on learners aged 50+ are available and accessible to all staff.

- **Providers and other organisations supporting older people should offer flexible learning options to meet older people's individual needs.** Options should include online and in person, formal (i.e., accredited) and informal (i.e., non-accredited) courses, opportunities to repeat content or courses as well as more ad hoc learning in a relaxed social setting. Learning providers should use the full flexibilities within the ASF and Multiply funding to provide non-accredited learning options.
- **Providers and organisations supporting older people should consider embedding essential skills in other learning content or courses** as this can be an effective way for older adults to acquire skills. For example, a sewing course that embeds numeracy.

### Recommendations for policy

- **Public services should be inclusive and accessible to older people who lack essential skills. Older people should be involved in the design of services so that their needs are met.** Older people feel locked out of digital skills-based tasks (that can require literacy and numeracy competencies too) such as filling out forms and applications online or accessing GP appointments. This has significant implications for their ability to access and engage with public services given the drive to 'digital by default' in public services provision over recent years.
- **Adult Skills Fund (ASF) funding rules should recognise skills maintenance (rather than only skills development or progression) as an outcome for older people.** Many older people value learning as a way of maintaining their existing skills. However, current ASF (previously Adult Education Budget) funding focuses on skills development and progression. Additionally, ASF community-based provision is often funded short-term making it challenging to put on slower-paced or repeat courses.
- **Specialist support staff should be available to providers to help diagnose learning difficulties and disabilities (LDDs) and to support learners throughout their learner journey.** Some providers reported that undiagnosed LDDs are common among learners aged 50+ but that there is currently a lack of specialist support available.

- **National government, devolved areas and local authorities should consider supporting provider marketing and outreach by running awareness-raising campaigns to promote learning later in life.** The importance and value of learning later in life should be recognised as part of national and local level skills strategies.

# Introduction

## Research aims and approach

The main aims of the research are to:

- Explore the prevalence and impact of low essential skills among people aged 50+.
- Understand the challenges and benefits of skills improvement for adults aged 50+.
- Understand and promote the role of different providers in improving older people's skills and experiences.
- Identify recommendations for policy and practice to support more older people to improve their skills.

To achieve these aims, L&W explored:

- The circumstances and needs of older people
- Older people's experiences of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills
- The impact of low essential skills on older people's daily lives
- Older people's experiences of improving their essential skills
- How to support more older people to improve their essential skills

Qualitative fieldwork took place in spring and summer 2024 and included:

- A rapid review of existing evidence to explore the prevalence and impact of poor essential skills among older adults
- Interviews with 20 current or recent essential skills learners
- Two focus groups with older adults not currently engaged in essential skills learning
- A provider workshop with three local authority essential skills providers

Findings from analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing<sup>9</sup> (ELSA) survey are also included in this report.<sup>10</sup> The findings explore the prevalence of difficulties with essential skills among people aged 50 and over in England.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> Age UK undertook analysis of data drawn from waves 9 and 10 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, in which participants were given literacy and numeracy tests. The literacy test consisted of four questions, and participants were defined as having problems with literacy if they answered any of the four incorrectly. The numeracy test consisted of six questions, and participants were defined as having problems with numeracy if they answered fewer than four of them correctly.

## Evidence review

A rapid review was undertaken to explore the literature relating to essential skills in adults aged 50+. Essential skills are deemed to be those skills needed for work and everyday life, and include literacy, numeracy, and digital skills.

Around 9 million working-age adults in the UK have low literacy or numeracy skills. For older adults (aged 50 and over<sup>11</sup>), an estimated 6 million have difficulties with maths, and the same number have difficulties with literacy.<sup>12</sup> In the UK, nearly 1 in 5 (18 per cent) of 55 to 64-year-olds have the lowest level<sup>13</sup> of essential skills<sup>14</sup> and, generally, those aged 55 to 64 are more likely to have no qualifications than other age groups.<sup>15</sup>

Research also shows there is an economic cost to low essential skills, risking disadvantage later in life. Someone who left school at 18 with 'very poor' literacy skills will have earned around £33,000 less by state pension age.<sup>16</sup>

The key findings from the review are presented below.

### Evidence review: Key findings

- There is a lack of focus on older people and essential skills in current policy and practice including the provision of careers guidance to retrain and upskill older adults.
- An estimated 27% of people aged 50+ in England have difficulties with numeracy, equivalent to 6 million people. The same number of older people have difficulties with literacy.

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<sup>11</sup> This includes adults over state pension age

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> "Very low level" of skills refers to individuals who scored below level 1 in the PIAAC tests.

<sup>14</sup> Vignoles, A., & Cherry, G. (2020). [What is the economic value of literacy and numeracy?](#) IZA World of Labor.

<sup>15</sup> Office for National Statistics, [Labour Force Survey](#)

<sup>16</sup> Kerr, M (2021) [Paying the price: The cost of very poor adult literacy](#), Pro Bono Economics. (The research defines people with 'very poor' literacy skills as those who have only limited vocabulary and cannot read lengthy texts on unfamiliar topics)



- There is an economic cost to low essential skills, risking disadvantage later in life. Someone who left school at 18 with 'very poor' literacy skills will have earned around £33,000 less by state pension age.
- More data regarding older adults and the essential skills they possess is required to increase the limited evidence currently available.
- Poor literacy skills in older adults can impact their mental and physical wellbeing, family life, political, civic and community engagement, and even life expectancy.
- Older age is associated with low numeracy skills which, in turn, can negatively affect health and financial capabilities.
- The design of digital technologies would benefit from input by older people to ensure that a diverse range of needs are being met.

The full evidence review is included in Appendix 1.

# Findings

## Introduction

This chapter draws on data from learner interviews, non-learner focus groups and the provider workshop as well as data from the ELSA survey.

It explores:

- Older people's current circumstances and needs in everyday life
- Older people's experiences of essential skills
- The impact of low essential skills on older people's lives
- Older people's barriers to and motivations for improving their skills
- Older people's experiences of engaging in learning and improving their essential skills
- How to support more older people to improve their essential skills

### **Key findings – older people's circumstances, needs and experiences of essential skills**

- Older people with low essential skills have unique and complex needs and circumstances however there are some shared experiences. Experiences of worsening or new health conditions, bereavement, undiagnosed learning difficulties or disabilities, caring responsibilities and leaving school with few to no qualifications are common.
- Older people with low essential skills find specific tasks challenging including understanding written information and filling out official forms.
- Literacy and digital skills can overlap. For example, older people with low essential skills can struggle to enter written information using a smartphone or set up accounts online.
- Digital skills challenges are prevalent and more widely acknowledged among older people, which might be due to the lack of stigma attached to discussing digital skills challenges compared to challenges with maths, reading and writing.

## Key findings – how low essential skills impact older people's lives

- Low essential skills can negatively impact on older people's ability to:
  - Access essential services such as welfare support and healthcare provision
  - Secure and progress in employment
  - Manage their health and enjoy good wellbeing, including engaging in social interactions
  - Feel confident in themselves
- These impacts can be exacerbated when coupled with experiences common to older people such as worsening health, a disability, an (undiagnosed) LDD, bereavement and ageing indicating that certain groups might be more likely to need support.
- Older people with low essential skills can feel particularly locked out of opportunities that require a combination of literacy and digital skills such as completing job applications online, booking medical appointments online and accessing welfare support online. Older people can feel increasingly excluded as technology becomes more integral to our daily lives.
- In the context of longer working lives, some older people experience career transition. However, low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can limit opportunities. Having targeted support available to help older people reskill and stay in employment is crucial. Evidence<sup>17</sup> shows that peer support, CV writing and online job application support, digital skills provision and a strong emphasis on transferable skills can boost older people's confidence and enabled them to seek work in a wider range of sectors.
- In some cases, the shame and stigma attached to having a skills gap leads older people to hide the challenges they face. This is particularly prevalent in relation to maths skills.

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<sup>17</sup> Centre for Ageing Better, L&W (2024) [Evaluation of Elevate pilot: Final report](#). The project was aimed at supporting older individuals at risk of and/or experiencing redundancy in the West Midlands.

- Negative experiences at school and leaving school with few to no qualifications is common among older people with low essential skills and can have a lasting negative impact on skills level and self-confidence throughout their lives.
- When older people do ask for help, they often rely on family and friends.

### **Key findings – older people's experiences of improving their essential skills**

- Overall, participants agreed that learning as an adult and maintaining or improving skills is important, and some felt it becomes more important with age.
- Older people face a range of barriers to learning and improving their skills. Key practical barriers include cost, accessibility and availability of suitable provision. Attitudinal barriers including fear and shame of learning as an adult are also common.
- Key motivations for older people to improve their skills level include meeting a skills gap, improving confidence, progressing into or within a job and making social connections.
- Older people found out about provision in a range of ways including leaflets in their local community and word of mouth.
- In-person enrolment is preferable for older people, but online options should also be available to widen accessibility.
- Support from tutors and other support staff is highly valued by older people.
- An important part of learning for older people is the opportunity to socialise.
- Informal, slow-paced and ad-hoc learning opportunities in welcoming, trusted and comfortable settings are highly valued by older people (particularly retired people).
- Older people commonly engage in self-led learning – using the internet to acquire new information and develop skills.
- Flexible provision is important for older people, especially people with caring responsibilities, workers and learners who want to repeat courses.

- Support for older learners with LDDs is important. Providers report that undiagnosed LDDs are common among learners aged 50+ but providing specialist support is a key challenge.
- Learners experienced a range of outcomes as a result of engaging in provision including improved skills levels, improved confidence, employment-related and health outcomes.

## Older people's circumstances and needs in everyday life

This section explores older people's current circumstances and needs as well as previous experiences of employment and education, and attitudes towards learning later in life.

### Participant background information

#### Age

Just over half of the current or recent learners interviewed were under state pension age and just under half were over state pension age.

#### Gender

Just over half of the current or recent learners interviewed were female and just under half were male. The majority of the focus group participants were female.

#### Hobbies

As well as regularly attending their local community centre or Age UK group or engaging in learning opportunities, retired participants reported engaging in a range of hobbies including gardening, knitting, reading, and socialising.

Some learners we spoke to were still employed or looking for work.

#### Caring responsibilities

Many participants reported having caring responsibilities for parents, children and grandchildren. There are also some examples of participants who care for a disabled relative.

#### Experiences of employment

Most participants had past employment experience. Sectors participants (had) worked in included: education, health and social care, retail, transport and construction.

All focus group participants were either retired or in voluntary positions. Whereas learners had mixed employment statuses: some were in work or looking for work, others were retired.

How participants' literacy, numeracy and digital skills impact on their experiences of employment is discussed below in the 'impact of poor essential skills section'.

### **Disabilities, health and wellbeing**

Some participants reported health conditions that had either worsened or developed with age. These included conditions affecting their sight, mobility issues, diabetes and poor mental health. Older people with health conditions that affect their mobility and older people with mental health conditions reported feeling lonely and isolated which impacts on their wellbeing. Two participants were disabled.

The impacts having low essential skills, coupled with a disability or health condition is explored further in the next section 'impact of poor essential skills.'

### **Learning difficulties or disabilities**

A couple of participants reported having dyslexia, while some said they thought they might have a learning difficulty or disability (LDD) but did not have a formal diagnosis.

Providers reported that undiagnosed LDDs are common among the learners aged 50 and over that they support. Carrying out literacy, numeracy and digital-based tasks and accessing the right support can be particularly challenging for older people who have low essential skills and an (undiagnosed) LDD.

### **Bereavement**

Participants commonly reported experiencing bereavement which is a difficult time for older people with low essential skills. Navigating the support on offer and undertaking all the necessary domestic admin tasks during this time can be especially difficult for those who struggle with literacy and numeracy issues. The impacts of having low essential skills, coupled with experiences of bereavement is explored further in the section 'impact of poor essential skills.'

One participant describes a lack of confidence since their partner died:

My confidence has been eroded since I lost my wife. Emotions and behaviours have been changed. You have to learn to live on your own.  
*(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

Another shared how challenging life can be after the death of a loved one:

Loneliness means you struggle to survive. *(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

### **Attitudes towards learning and improving skills**

Overall, participants (both learners and non-learners) reported a positive attitude towards learning and improving their skills and recognised the benefits. Some emphasised that learning becomes more important with age for maintaining cognitive ability, socialising and staying up to date with modern trends:

Learning is hugely important at our age, for mental and social reasons and important for keeping up with modern trends. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

Living longer we need things to do and learn and feel busy and keep mentally stimulated. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

However, a small number of focus group participants explained that they find it difficult to learn new things which puts them off developing their skills.

### **Previous experiences at school**

Many participants reported leaving school with few to no qualifications and having negative experiences at school:

I was terrified when asked to stand up and do my tables. I used to stutter and had to go back to the beginning. *(Learner, aged 52)*

Providers echoed this, reporting that older learners they work with tend to have little to no prior education.

Some participants highlighted how negative experiences at school had impacted their skills level and confidence levels throughout life:

I missed quite a lot of school. It was not brilliant. I left school with basic GCSEs so I have always had that gap...the foundations have always been shaky with my maths, and it can always trip you up at certain points unexpectedly. *(Learner, aged 51)*

Analysis of the ELSA survey data confirms this finding, showing that older people who left full time education before they turned 16 are more likely to find literacy and numeracy difficult than those who left at 16 or over. Over half (52 per cent) of adults over 50 who left school before they turned 16 had challenges with numeracy, compared to just under a quarter (24 per cent) of those who left at 16 or older. The results for literacy difficulties are 44 per cent and 23 per cent respectively.

### **Older people's experiences of essential skills**

This section explores older people's experiences of essential skills. It is divided into literacy, numeracy and digital skills. However, it is important to note that often a combination of these skills is used when conducting certain tasks – for example, online banking requires both numeracy and digital skills and claiming benefits can require people to read and write information on a digital platform.

#### **Literacy skills**

Overall, participants reported that they felt comfortable with their reading and writing abilities but faced challenges with specific literacy-based tasks. Many participants

explained that they found understanding and filling in official forms challenging. Some explained that they require help to understand what the questions are asking them and how to fill in information accurately. Older people who found these tasks most challenging also reported having dyslexia. Examples given are applying for benefits and grants.

In some cases, literacy and digital skills challenges overlap. For example, entering written information into a smartphone. Recent research shows that older people who claim Pension Credit are more likely than average for their age group to face challenges setting up an account online or filling out official forms online.<sup>18</sup> The impacts of these challenges are explored further in the 'impact of poor essential skills section.'

Older people for whom English is not their first language can face additional challenges with literacy skills. Providers noted that their needs are likely to take longer to address and they recognise the challenges involved when older people with an English for Speakers for Other Languages ESOL need want to enter essential skills education, especially when a lot of those people have never been in education. One provider noted that certain groups can be more likely to face these challenges such as older Asian women.

## **Numeracy skills**

Similar to the findings with literacy skills, most participants who reported numeracy skills gaps said they faced challenges with specific tasks rather than reporting they had low level maths skills overall. Participants tended to struggle with more complicated tasks with understanding interest rates, working with big numbers, doing fractions, converting measurements from imperial to metric, and converting foreign currency into pounds sterling. While many participants were reasonably comfortable with more basic tasks, some struggled with understanding bills, budgeting and shopping. The impacts of these skills gaps is discussed in the 'impact of poor essential skills' section.

## **Numeracy and gender**

One female participant explained how her attitude towards numeracy skills had been shaped by gender-based social norms. When she was at school, girls were not encouraged to improve their numeracy skills. However, she recognises that this has changed now, which has influenced her attitudes towards developing her own skills:

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<sup>18</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2024) [Digital skills, channel preferences and access needs](#)



I think in my generation it was acceptable for women to say, 'Oh I hate maths I'm rubbish at maths'. Whereas I don't think it is now, you know, you would not accept 'oh I am rubbish at maths' from your daughter now. It was accepted that girls were good at English and boys were good at maths and science whereas that is not acceptable now.

*(Learner, aged 51)*

Analysis from the ELSA data mirrors this finding, with just under a third (32 per cent) of female respondents experiencing challenges with numeracy, compared to just a fifth (20 per cent) of men.

### **Digital skills**

Participants most commonly reported experiencing challenges with digital skills. Providers echoed this finding, explaining that for the older people they work with digital skills gaps are more prevalent than other essential skills needs.

Although not explicitly reported, it may be that older people are more likely to discuss challenges they face with digital skills given the relative lack of stigma attached to this compared to reporting low literacy and numeracy skills. Commonly, stigma about low literacy and numeracy skills stems from negative experiences at school and can have a lasting legacy. As discussed in more detail in the 'impact of poor essential skills' section, some participants reported feeling so embarrassed about their numeracy and literacy skills gaps that they choose to hide their struggles from other people. In contrast, nobody made this link with digital skills suggesting it is more socially acceptable to discuss a digital skills need.

Many participants explained that these challenges have increased as technology becomes more integral to our daily lives. People face challenges claiming benefits, applying for jobs, consulting bus timetables and booking medical appointments. This can have a negative impact on older people's financial circumstances, social opportunities, health and wellbeing in later life – as discussed further in the 'impact of low essential skills section'.

Many reported that as they were not taught these skills at school or work, they do not have the skills to engage with digital services. For others, it is an accessibility challenge – many participants reported that they do not have or cannot easily access, the necessary IT resources (e.g. a computer or printer).

Participants also noted that digital activities are challenging because technology is constantly changing and therefore new skills are always needed. One participant said this made them feel pressured to develop their skills so that they keep up with changes in society:

[I] feel pressure now with technology as you'll be left behind [if you don't know how to use it]. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

Interestingly, participants tended to favour using a smartphone over a computer reporting that they found phones more user friendly.

I prefer to do emails and searching on my phone...I find it easier...I do not like the computer in case I hit the wrong key *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

This was particularly true for some older people with health conditions: one participant with arthritis in their hands struggled to use a mouse and keyboard but did not experience pain when using their phone.

However, some participants explained how they use digital skills on a daily basis and how useful technology can be for a range of reasons. For instance, some participants said that WhatsApp is very useful for keeping in touch with friends and family. Others reported using YouTube to help do DIY or find new recipes. One focus group participant explained they use the internet to support them with their numeracy challenges:

[The] Internet [and] Google is great for solving maths problems *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

### **Impact of poor essential skills**

This section explores the impact of low essential skills on older people's lives and how they cope when they do face challenges. Age UK conducted a survey with older people across England who either faced challenges with numbers or reading themselves or knew someone who did. The survey found that most people said these difficulties have a major or moderate impact on their life.<sup>19</sup> Our research found that low essential skills can negatively impact on older people's ability to:

- Access essential services such as banking, welfare support and healthcare provision
- Secure and progress in employment

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<sup>19</sup> Findings from Age UK's Your Voice Engagement Panel, March 2024. The survey of around 500 people aged 50+ living in England is not nationally representative and uses an inclusive approach to data collection with an aim of ensuring that more seldom heard groups of older people are able to participate.

- Manage their health, for example by understanding instructions on a medicine packet, and enjoy good wellbeing
- Feel confident in themselves

These impacts can be exacerbated when coupled with experiences common to older people such as worsening health, an (undiagnosed) LDD and bereavement. Challenges can also increase with age.

### **Challenges increasing with age**

Conducting essential skills-based tasks can become more difficult as people age, suggesting that people over retirement age are more likely to need support with tasks such as form filling and budgeting.

ELSA survey data shows that those aged 66 and over are more likely to experience literacy challenges (31 per cent) than adults aged 50-65 (23 per cent). For numeracy, those aged 66 and over more likely to experience challenges (33 per cent) than adults aged 50-65 (26 per cent).

For some, an existing low essential skills level can worsen with age. Some participants explained that their skills had declined over time due to limited use:

I recognised some maths skills had been forgotten due to lack of use.  
*(Learner, aged 69)*

For others, health related issues that come with age can pose new challenges to engaging with literacy-based activities. For example, poor eyesight impacting on people's ability to read prescriptions. Conditions affecting mobility can make accessing digital equipment and platforms challenging too.

### **Impact on accessing essential services**

Having low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can have an impact on accessing essential services. This can be heightened for older people when coupled with poor health, a disability, and LDD (such as dyslexia) or experiences of bereavement. Struggling to understand bills or official letters about tax or benefits, fill out official paperwork or access online services can mean many older people with low skills are missing out on vital additional support such as Pension Credit.

Many participants explained that their low literacy levels make tasks such as understanding and filling in official forms challenging. This can impact on older people's ability to apply for benefits and access essential support.

I am not very good at filling out government forms...sometimes I need help to understand what they are really asking. (*Focus group participant, Essex*)

Research conducted by Age UK with Information and Advice Managers from across the Age UK network<sup>20</sup> found that form filling (e.g. benefit applications) is the most common challenge faced by service users who have low literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>21</sup> An Age UK survey of older people found that dealing with official letters (e.g. about tax or benefits) was the most challenging situation for people with low numeracy and literacy skills. In one case, an older person's difficulty with reading information correctly on a government form resulted in their benefits being stopped.<sup>22</sup>

In some cases, literacy and digital skills challenges overlap which makes accessing information and support particularly difficult given the digitalisation of public services. For example, some participants reported struggling to enter written information into a smartphone on their online banking app and booking medical appointments online. In some cases, participants worried that their challenges could worsen in the future, as they get older, and they become less able to carry out tasks.

Online banking and contacting the doctor can be a challenge especially with respect to getting passwords right...what if I were 80 and there was no one around to help. (*Learner, aged 69*)

Some participants noted how challenges with numeracy impacted on their financial capabilities including money management. For example, understanding information on bills and knowing how much money they owe. This echoes findings from the Age UK research which shows older people who faced challenges with numbers were likely to find online banking and budgeting and money management difficult as a result.<sup>23</sup>

These impacts can be exacerbated by worsening health. For example, one participant who had a stroke faced increasing challenges with form filling and online banking. They now relied on their partner to carry out these essential tasks. However, for older

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<sup>20</sup> Age UK is a national charity that works with a network of partners, including Age Scotland, Age Cymru, Age NI and approximately 120 local Age UKs across England, to help everyone make the most of later life, whatever their circumstances.

<sup>21</sup> Age UK survey of 63 Information and Advice Managers from across the Age UK network, conducted March 2024

<sup>22</sup> Findings from Age UK's Your Voice Engagement Panel, March 2024. The survey of around 500 people aged 50+ living in England is not nationally representative and uses an inclusive approach to data collection with an aim of ensuring that more seldom heard groups of older people are able to participate.

<sup>23</sup> Age UK survey of 63 Information and Advice Managers from across the Age UK network, conducted March 2024

people without family and friends to rely on, formal support with these critical life tasks is essential.

As discussed, the death of a partner is a common and difficult experience for older people. For older people with low essential skills, experiencing bereavement can have significant impacts on their ability to conduct essential domestic admin tasks such as applying for welfare support or managing money. Some participants explained that it was the first time they had carried out certain tasks which, when bereft, feels particularly overwhelming. For some, this experience motivated them to gain those skills themselves while others turned to family members or friends for support:

My sister...she's very good at being patient with me and she does a lot of my finances for me. Because I always used to rely on my husband - he was very good at doing things like that for me. (*Learner, aged 71*)

This shows that older people with low essential skills and poor health, older disabled people and older people experiencing bereavement can face disproportionate challenges to engaging in essential services that can benefit them.

## **Impact on employment opportunities**

### **Impact on securing work**

Low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can impact on older people's ability to secure employment opportunities, especially when coupled with health conditions that develop later in life. In the context of longer working lives, this finding has implications for how employment support is tailored to meet the needs of older people with low essential skills. Having the right support available to help older people reskill and stay in employment is crucial. Our recent evaluation for Centre for Ageing Better's Redundancy Support project<sup>24</sup> found that peer support, CV writing and online job application support, digital skills provision and a strong emphasis on transferable skills boosted older people's confidence and enabled them to seek work in a wider range of sectors.

A couple of participants had struggled to secure sustainable work throughout their lives, which they attributed to their skills gap and leaving school with no qualifications.

Many participants reported recent and current challenges securing work due to their digital skills gaps. The most commonly reported challenge was not knowing how to apply for jobs online:

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<sup>24</sup> Centre for Ageing Better, L&W (2024) [Evaluation of Elevate pilot: Final report](#). The project was aimed at supporting older individuals at risk of and/or experiencing redundancy in the West Midlands.

Applying for jobs is more difficult now it has to be online. To ask for the job you've got to go online. Every job application is online. (*Learner, aged 64*)

Numeracy skills gaps can also affect older people's ability to secure employment. One participant was not offered a job because they were unable to complete a maths test without a calculator.

Worsening health conditions, coupled with low essential skills can further impact on older people's chances of securing employment. For example, some participants who worked in manual roles had developed health conditions affecting their mobility later in life. They wanted to find a new job that suited their health needs but faced challenges because of their lack of literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

### **Impact on progressing in work**

Some participants shared how they had faced challenges at work due to their skills gap, and sometimes a lack of support.

I struggled at work with IT because there was no guidance... I used to sweat. (*Focus group participant, Leeds*)

Others reported that they feel that their skills gap, and associated lack of confidence, held them back from progressing at work:

Well I think it was not having maths, that stopped me getting on, I did not have confidence in myself. (*Learner, aged 75*)

### **Impact on health and wellbeing**

Low essential skills among older people can impact on their ability to manage their health and enjoy good wellbeing, especially when coupled with worsening health conditions or a disability.

One participant attributed their loneliness and poor wellbeing to their low literacy, language and digital skills. In this case, English was not their first language, and they faced considerable challenges engaging in public services (such as booking a medical appointment online) and social interactions (meeting new people).

Some participants reported how low literacy skills, together with worsening health, impacted on their ability to manage their health. For example, people with low literacy levels and poor eyesight found reading medicine bottles and prescriptions challenging.

Other participants explained that a lack of digital skills made them feel excluded from social interactions. For example, one participant explained that they feel disconnected from their children and grandchildren because the majority of communication is via text, which they find difficult to engage with:

I struggle with text messages when [younger family members] use acronyms. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

According to the ELSA survey, disabled older people are more likely to face challenges with literacy and numeracy than older people who are not disabled (35 per cent and 24 percent respectively).<sup>25</sup>

### **Impact on confidence and self-esteem**

Some participants talked about how a lack of essential skills impacted on their confidence and self-esteem. For many, this has been a lifelong legacy stemming from negative experiences at school.

Many explained that limited maths skills made them feel foolish or anxious. Interestingly, this was not mentioned in association with literacy skills:

I have Maths anxiety. When you get your bills, they are too detailed, and you can't read them *(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

If I had to use fractions that was something I did not have knowledge of.... I would feel silly because it was not something that I knew *(Learner, aged 51)*

### **Hiding a skills gap**

Some participants even reported hiding their skills (in particular numeracy) gaps due to being too embarrassed to admit they face challenges. This is consistent with stigma being a commonly reported barrier to adult essential skills learning and has implications for how support services work with older people with low essential skills.

Interestingly, covering up a skills gap was only mentioned in association with literacy and numeracy skills gaps, not digital skills gaps. Most commonly, participants hide their skills gaps from employers and colleagues, while others hide their challenges from friends and family. For example, one participant who felt out of their depth with numeracy-related tasks at work, felt too ashamed to admit they were struggling:

I was embarrassed to tell my manager that I struggled with numbers. I would lose sleep over it...I did not share my concerns with others. I did not want them laughing at me *(Learner, aged 52)*

A lack of digital skills can make people fearful for engaging with everyday domestic admin activities. For example, one focus group participant explained they were nervous about using online banking for the first time because of their digital skills gap.

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting the potential for reverse causality here as the data analysis is cross-sectional. For example, it might be more likely that a person with poor literacy and numeracy becomes disabled later in life.

Others said that they avoid certain digital-based activities because of their skills gap. For example, half of focus group participants do not do online banking. For some, not wanting to engage with online activities has arisen due to a fear of being scammed rather than reasons associated with a lack of skills:

I don't actually order anything online I'm terrified...I will get scammed.  
*(Learner, aged 64)*

### **Coping mechanisms**

Older people have different ways of dealing with the challenges they face with tasks that require literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

The most common approach participants reported to accomplishing everyday essential skills tasks is relying on support from friends and family:

My son provides help when I have IT challenges. *(Learner, aged 69)*

I ask is my cousin or one of my sons for help with formal paperwork  
*(Learner, aged 71)*

Some participants also gave examples of resourceful approaches they used to overcome their skills gap. Some said they take their time over challenging tasks and break information down into chunks. Another said that to help their children with schoolwork, they used to buy the teacher's textbook so that they had the correct answers.

### **Older people's experience of improving their essential skills**

This section explores older people's experiences of current and recent essential skills learning. This includes engagement in any form of learning that aimed to improve their literacy, numeracy or digital skills including courses, more informal groups and self-led learning. It is important to note that while focus group participants were not recent or current essential skills learners, it transpired that many were currently engaged in other informal learning opportunities that had directly benefited their essential skills level. Therefore these findings are included in this chapter too.

Current and recent learners were or had been involved in a range of essential skills learning opportunities ranging from Entry level to Level 2 and GCSE. The majority reported engagement in a number of courses. For example, one participant had recently completed Level 2 Functional skills in maths, English and IT. Some had also been engaged in shorter, non-accredited courses such as digital courses introducing them to email. Finally, some had also engaged in learning in other subject areas such as photography and craft.



## **Barriers to learning**

Participants (in particular focus group participants) reported barriers faced to engaging in essential skills provision. These included:

### **Cost**

Direct and associated costs of learning and improving their skills were a key concern for many participants. Some focus group participants said they would only engage in learning if it was free, while some learners had only been able to learn because indirect costs such as transport had been covered by the provider.

### **Accessibility**

Focus group participants reported accessibility as a significant barrier, especially for people with a health condition that affects mobility and people who rely on public transport.

First things I have to ask ...is can I get there? *(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

Participants explained that their nearest adult education centre was too far away for many of them to get to and that the bus connection was poor.

### **Availability of provision**

Some focus group participants explained that they had attempted to engage in essential skills provision, but the relevant course was not available in their local area, so they were unable to engage:

I always wanted a formal qualification...I started a course, but teachers kept dropping out and the course was abandoned. Then I went to [to a different town], but the course did not happen *(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

I wanted to learn but could not get the right course. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

Some focus group participants reported that opportunities are particularly limited for older people:

We would go to the library if there were some...young people get more provision than older people *(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

Providers noted that employed older people face barriers to accessing learning as courses are not always available outside of working hours.

### **Fear of learning as an older person**

A few focus group participants explained that they were afraid of learning, often associated with negative experiences at school:

Sometimes I do not feel confident...at my age I would love to do more academic learning but am afraid of learning, frightened of failing (*Focus group participant, Essex*)

### **Accredited learning**

Participants had mixed views of qualifications and accredited courses. Some were motivated to learn to get a qualification (as discussed in the next section), while some reported that older, retired people do not need qualifications:

Qualifications equip us for careers. Why do we, older people, need to do qualifications? (*Focus group participant, Essex*)

Participants who wanted to get a qualification tended to be younger and in or looking for work.

### **Motivations to improve essential skills**

This section explores the key motivations that participants reported for engaging in learning. It was common for individual participants to report a number of motivations. Key motivations include:

#### **Meeting a skills need**

Some participants were motivated to learn to meet a skills need.

Those on digital courses, attributed their motivation to improve their skills to their desire to stay engaged in an increasingly digitalised world:

You have to do everything online nowadays or the majority of things online. I need to know these things so that was the reason that I joined [a course]. (*Learner, aged 71*)

The reason that I wanted to learn was that the world is changing. So, I needed to at least understand some of the things I've got to do. (*Learner, aged 72*)

For two participants, gaining a qualification in a subject they missed out on at school was a driving factor in taking up learning.

#### **Confidence building**

Some participants wanted to develop their skills to feel more confident and build their self-worth.

I wanted to get the groundings in English...to feel more confident. (*Learner, aged 51*)

## Employability

Learners in their 50s and early 60s were often motivated to improve their essential skills for employment reasons – either to secure a new job or support them in an existing role.

I know now if I do want to go back into the work scenario, which I would like to, maths would be advantageous. (*Learner, aged 58*)

## Social motivations

Some participants were driven to improve their skills for social reasons, especially retired people, people who had experienced bereavement and people who felt lonely or isolated due to health conditions or not having an existing social circle.

Some wanted to support their children or grandchildren to improve their skills, others were keen to learn how to use a smartphone or email to communicate with social circles and some wanted to meet new people. For example, one participant who did not have English as their first language explained that their main motivation to learn was to meet new people:

I'm just waiting at home and feeling alone...so I just joined something to learn a little bit and have some company (*Learner, aged 62*)

## Experiences of engagement

This section explores the ways in which learners found out about their learning opportunity and their experiences of enrolling on a course.

### Finding provision

Learners found out about essential skills courses through a variety of routes. Focus group participants also reported that they found out about their local community centre or Age UK group via the same routes. This included posters in their local supermarkets and libraries, leaflets through their door, word of mouth and referrals from Job Centre Plus (JCP), their doctor and community learning providers.

I spoke to my job coach, and she referred me, and I spoke to a lady on the phone at the job centre, and they said, 'Have you tried these adult courses?' And that's how I ended up doing adult courses for PCs, computers, and things. (*Learner, aged 56*)

I got the information (about the English course) when I was doing the wellbeing courses. At the end of the session they gave me a little pamphlet and asked would you like to carry on and do something. (*Learner, aged 71*)

For one participant, social prescription to their Age UK centre was a lifeline:

I was referred to Age UK by my doctor - I had not been out of house for 3 years due to depression (*Focus group participant, Leeds*)

It is worth noting that before seeing a poster in their library, some older people had not been fully aware of what libraries could offer them in terms of improving their skills. Similarly, focus group participants felt the range of informal learning opportunities at their local community centre is not well advertised.

For focus group participants, their local community centre or Age UK centre plays a key role in providing them with information about relevant groups, courses or other learning opportunities provided by them or other organisations in the local area.

### **Experiences of enrolling on essential skills courses**

Recent and current learners talked about their experiences of enrolling on courses. Providers also explained their approaches to enrolment.

#### **Online versus in person**

Many learners reported enrolling online whereby their provider sent out pre-course emails requesting information about learners' expectations of the course and existing skills relating to the subject. Some participants highlighted challenges with this process, indicating that such approaches might not be suitable for (older) essential skills learners:

You would be sent a paper to fill in, but you couldn't actually fill it in online. It had to be printed and filled in manually, and then scanned and sent back. And it was like, how odd is this? (*Learner, aged 61*)

Other participants enrolled in person which they found straightforward. Providers agreed, reporting that in person engagement and enrolment was most successful for this cohort. They reported that personalised, in person communication is key to help reduce anxieties older people commonly have about returning to learning. They felt that online only options were not suitable.

#### **Paperwork**

One participant highlighted that the amount of information needed at enrolment can be overwhelming and might discourage some people from learning:

For each course you are asked a large number of questions in the enrolment process this could put people off. (*Learner, aged 69*)

They went on to suggest that the process could be streamlined by removing some of the paperwork for repeat learners:

[Providers should] remove the need to complete the same form at every enrolment. (*Learner, aged 69*)

## Experiences of learning

This section explores participants experiences of learning – aspects of the learning opportunity that they found useful, as well as challenges.

### Tutor support

Learners were very positive overall regarding their learning experience. In particular they appreciated the support they received from their teachers:

[My] teacher has been very supportive, stretching and challenging.  
[They] encourage the sharing of learning in a positive way. (*Learner, aged 52*)

They also acknowledged the support from other learners and referral organisations such as JCP:

I've been so lucky, I've been fully supported by the job centre, they've been absolutely fantastic. (*Learner, aged 56*)

### The opportunity to socialise

For many older learners - particularly those who have recently experienced bereavement or feel isolated - one of the most positive aspects of learning was the chance to socialise with others, from all different backgrounds:

[I really] enjoy the friendship on the course, fellow students encourage each other to do further learning. (*Learner, aged 50*)

For focus group participants engaged in groups at their local community or Age UK centre, the opportunity to socialise was the most important aspect of their experience:

Being out of the house, being in a social group...we can share our expertise with one another. (*Focus group participant, Essex*)

You get a social life at Age UK. I am loving it. A lovely bunch here. (*Focus group participant, Leeds*)

### Non-formal and non-accredited learning opportunities

Although focus group participants were not engaged in essential skills provision, they were regularly attending a group at a local community or Age UK centre. Participants described these centres as welcoming and comfortable, offering a variety of provision and support for this cohort including lunch clubs, digital skills support, art classes and trips out. Many of the focus group participants highlighted the importance this setting and group of people play in improving their skills. Learners who had engaged in non-accredited community-based courses reported similar experiences. In some cases, learners had progressed into Functional Skills courses from their engagement in

shorter, non-accredited, community-based courses, demonstrating the benefit this type of learning can have on progression.

Focus group participants said they particularly enjoy the informal, slow-paced and ad-hoc nature in which they pick up knowledge through sharing expertise with each other:

We are not learning on a grand scale. It's everyday little things. These small things all add up. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

One participant noted the importance of the centre given that other services for older people are closing:

Age UK is an important space... We would go to the library if there were some... *(Focus group participant, Leeds)*

Providers have also found providing non-formal community-based learning opportunities successful with older learners. Having opportunities available in local, familiar and trusted settings removes practical and attitudinal barriers.

It is also important to note that participants commonly reported engaging in self-led learning. This tended to be using internet search engines and videos to find out information about a specific skills related task.

### **Slow-paced, repeated provision**

Some learners – especially those aged 70+ - reported that the pace and intensity of the course they engaged with was overwhelming. They found it challenging to process and retain all the information in a short space of time.

It's just the course itself really, you know, it's a lot to take in. A lot of new terms, and yes, again, it's the memory really, I think, not just me, but a lot of us really. They seem to cover a lot in a short time, really. So much to remember. *(Learner, aged 79)*

Providers also reported that older learners tend to favour repeating courses as it suits their learning needs and style. However, meeting the needs of repeat learners is a key challenge for providers due to limitations in the current Adult Skills Fund (formerly Adult Education Budget) funding rules.

### **Flexible provision**

Learners appreciated provision that flexed around their lives. For example, learners with caring responsibilities appreciated daytime classes, while those in work needed provision outside of their working hours. Providers acknowledged the challenges of engaging learners who are in work as class times often clash with working patterns.

## Course costs

Overall, participants highlighted the importance of access to free learning opportunities<sup>26</sup> in enabling them to take up learning. This includes both direct course costs and associated costs such as transport and learning materials.

I could not afford £800 for a course because they are so terribly expensive so when I saw functional skills as free to adults, helping with maths, I thought you know I will go down that route. *(Learner, aged 71)*

For many digital skills learners, having access to a laptop was fundamental to them being able to access and complete the course.

For the IT course they actually loaned me a laptop, which was amazing because my own laptop was very slow. They loaned me a brand-new laptop which I picked up from the library. I didn't think I could have done the course without it. *(Learner, aged 71)*

One learner accessed a bus pass which enabled them to travel to the course for free.

## Support for learners with an LDD

Participants who reported having an LDD said that reasonable adjustments were made to support them on the course:

I have just passed the exam I got 26 out of 30. I get a little longer to do my exams because I am dyslexic...I have my coping strategies I have my coloured pens, my ruler and my alphabet. *(Learner, aged 59)*

Providers reported that undiagnosed LDDs are common among learners aged 50+. They noted that these learners' progression is often slower, as provision does not always meet their needs. Providers reported that it is key that tutors engage in relevant

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<sup>26</sup> Within the Adult Skills Fund, the English and maths entitlement fully funds English and maths learning up to Level 2, including Functional Skills and GCSE qualifications, for learners aged 19+ who meet the residency eligibility criteria and who have not previously attained a GCSE in English or maths at grade 4, or an equivalent or higher level qualification. Learners are also funded if they have previously achieved GCSE or equivalent qualification in English or maths and are assessed as having a skill level lower than GCSE grade 4. Education and Skills Funding Agency (2024) [Adult skills fund: funding and performance management rules 2024 to 2025](#)

The government also provides fully funded qualifications at Entry Level and Level 1 (Essential Digital skills qualifications (EDSQs) and new Digital Functional Skills qualifications (Digital FSQs)) for adults with low digital skills. Department for Education (2022) [Fully-funded qualifications for adults with low digital skills](#)

training opportunities to understand how to effectively support learners with LDDs. Providers also utilise the learner support budget to provide learners with necessary equipment and resources. However, some providers reported that a key challenge is not having access to specialist support staff to diagnose LDDs or provide support during a course.

## **Outcomes of learning**

This section explores the outcomes learners have experienced as a result of taking part in learning. Learners reported a range of positive outcomes including gaining new skills and qualifications, improved confidence and self-worth, health outcomes, and improved attitudes towards learning. In some cases, improved confidence resulted in learners feeling ready to move into work or volunteering roles.

### **Gaining new skills and qualifications**

Older people who attended essential skills courses came away with positive skills outcomes, including gaining new learning and qualifications:

I cannot tell you how much I am learning about the English Language.  
*(Learner, aged 71)*

IT skills improved. More to go. *(Learner, aged 64)*

Wider learning opportunities also supported participants to improve their essential skills. For instance, one older person refreshed their numeracy skills through a book-making course, in which they needed to convert measurements from metric into imperial. By using the books they had made, they employed their literacy skills through journaling.

One focus group participant explained how they had developed their digital skills themselves:

I have learnt how to take a picture on my phone and send it...I need the instructions written down step by step. *(Focus group participant, Essex)*

Another participant explained how they had improved their financial capabilities as a result of completing a maths course:

I did spend time afterwards because I got inspired, I went and looked at my savings and all sorts of things I did with various investments.  
*(Learner, aged 61)*

### **Improved confidence**

Many learners attribute increased levels of confidence to their engaging in formal and non-formal learning opportunities (i.e. an English or maths course as well as an Age UK wellbeing session). For many, this was the first time that they had felt confident with their essential skills – especially for those who had negative experiences at school.



Some felt more confident in themselves and described a feeling of increased self-worth:

My life would probably still be the same if I hadn't done the course except that I feel better about myself (*Learner, aged 75*)

One participant described how engaging in a Level 1 English course has given them a new lease of life:

I cannot tell you how much they [the lessons] help me...those weeks have been like me learning to walk again... It's got me fired up; you know? (*Learner, aged 71*)

Others described feeling more confident conducting a certain task that they now had the knowledge for. One participant described how they now felt confident enough to support others with tasks they found difficult, for example helping their partner to use the computer. Another said that the digital course they engaged with had helped them overcome fear they had held about using certain software:

[The] little things I thought were totally out of my depth appear quite easy really like PowerPoint, and I couldn't believe that things like that scared me in the past. (*Learner, aged 58*)

Those seeking employment also spoke of their increased self-confidence making them feel more ready to enter the workplace or a volunteering role. For example, one learner had started volunteering as an adult reading coach. The coaching group they attended was interviewed on TV regarding their role in supporting older people who had never learnt to read, or who struggled to read.

### **Improved health and wellbeing**

Some learners attributed a positive impact on their health and wellbeing to engaging in learning. Commonly, participants described how being part of a group made them feel less isolated or lonely.

Others attributed improved mental health to their engagement in a course. One learner, who was socially prescribed to a digital skills course, reported feeling more able to manage their mental health condition than prior to the course. Another explained that they had overcome anxiety as a result of their learning experience:

I used to suffer from anxiety. But these courses have brought me out of myself. (*Learner, aged 50*)

### **Enjoying learning later in life**

Some learners – particularly those who had had a negative experience at school – explained how reengaging in learning later in life had been enjoyable:

I realised I enjoyed learning. (*Learner, aged 51*)

Some participants described how they now felt motivated to engage in further learning:

I enjoyed doing all three subjects. Maths the most unexpectedly because it was something that I couldn't do and [the course] gave me that confidence to go on and do other courses (*Learner, aged 52*)

## **Supporting more older people to improve their essential skills**

### **Recruitment strategies**

#### **Marketing materials**

As discussed in the previous chapter, learners found out about learning opportunities in a range of ways including word of mouth and leaflets through their door. Participants and providers agreed that having marketing materials in a range of formats and locations helps to maximise reach. Suggestions included leaflets through the letterbox and leaflets or posters displayed in GP surgeries, chemists, libraries, supermarkets, community centres, social clubs, cafes, bingo, Women's Institute, and Job Centre Plus.

I think a bit more advertising, because it was in [a supermarket] where I saw that sign and it's just pure chance I saw it. Perhaps put something in doctors' surgeries, where people gather, so that they could see these things. (*Learner, aged 79*)

It is important that marketing materials provide clear information in accessible and attractive ways. For example, participants suggested images to break up text would encourage them to engage. One participant suggested the wording needs to be reassuring and inclusive, to help overcome any concerns potential learners have:

I think when classes are advertised, they really need to stress that no previous experience is needed and all help will be given, because it does put me off when I see things and I think, Oh, no, I can't. I don't know anything about it. (*Learner, aged 71*)

#### **Relatable course names**

Participants and providers highlighted the importance of using relatable course names that tap into older people's motivations. Examples given include: 'Numbers and natter' to hook those looking to make social connections, 'Understanding your pension' to attract people looking to meet a specific skills gap, and basing names on popular TV shows e.g. MathsMaster,

It was also suggested that putting on courses for specific groups of people would attract older learners. For example, a course for bereaved women.

## **Learning champions**

Many of the learners interviewed now advocate for learning in later life due to their positive experiences. Learning champions can be an effective approach to engaging more learners.

## **Taster sessions**

Some participants suggested that taster sessions - enabling older people to experience a course before signing up - would encourage them to engage in learning.

## **Working in partnership**

Providers highlighted the importance of working in partnership to maximise engagement and widen reach. One provider found that forming partnerships with trusted local organisations boosted engagement in the courses.

## **Raising awareness of adult learning**

Providers reported that they advertise and promote learning opportunities. However, they felt that to prompt a significant shift in engagement, learning opportunities for older people need to be advertised by local and national government. They also felt that recognition of the importance and value of adult learning and raising awareness of importance of improving your skills later in life needs to be done at the national level.

## **Learning format**

### **Flexible options**

Learning opportunities in a range of formats is important to meet older people's needs. For example, older people have mixed views on whether online or face-to-face learning is preferential. Some feel comfortable taking exams online and enjoy learning online at home or prefer it because it makes learning more accessible. For example, one participant with mobility issues was only able to engage on their course because it was remote. Others prefer face-to-face learning to increase their opportunities for socialising:

Offering more face-to-face lessons or one-off sessions at the beginning of the course, or so many weeks in, so that you could get together as a group. (*Learner, aged 60*)

Many participants agreed that informal learning opportunities should be available as well as more formal opportunities to meet different needs.

Participants and providers suggested longer, slower-paced learning opportunities with repeated content are more effective than short, more intensive courses. However, as noted, current funding limitations present a key barrier to supporting repeat learners.

## **Embedded learning**

Providers highlighted the value of embedding literacy, numeracy and digital in other learning content. For example, one provider used the 'Multiply' offer to embed numeracy in community courses such as a sewing course. This can have a positive impact of supporting learners to progress onto more formal essential skills courses too. This provider found that the more older people engaged with the community courses, the more likely they were to pursue maths courses.

Similarly, participants (including focus group participants) who had completed courses in other subject areas such as photography and cooking reported that they acquired literacy and numeracy skills, demonstrating that essential skills can be embedded into a range of subject areas.

## **Bridging courses**

Providers suggested that offering bridging courses can support learners to progress between levels as often there is a considerable step up.

## **Location**

Learning opportunities in accessible community venues would attract this cohort. Participants reported that their preferred places to improve their skills would be in welcoming, comfortable and trusted settings within their local community such as Age UK centres, the library, their GP surgery or a local cafe. Participants said this is crucial for older people who might feel anxious about going to a more formal educational setting.

The nicer the environment the more people that will learn. You could learn in a coffee shop with comfortable seats, a bit more like settees, a bit more relaxing, not stressful (*Learner, aged 52*)

Learning opportunities also need to be accessible to older people, especially for those who rely on public transport or have health conditions that affect mobility.

## **Cost of learning**

Cost of learning is an important consideration for this cohort<sup>27</sup>. Many participants said they would only consider a course if it was free and felt free courses would be an effective way of engaging more people like them. This includes both direct course costs and indirect costs such as course materials and transport.

Access to equipment and resources can support engagement. As discussed in the previous section, having access to equipment and resources was fundamental to their

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<sup>27</sup> Adult Skills Fund funded English, Maths and Digital Skills courses up to and including level 2 are usually fully funded for adults aged 19 and over. Level 3 courses are free and fully funded for eligible adults (this includes adults without two full A-Levels or equivalent qualifications and adults who earn below the National Living Wage annually or are unemployed, regardless of their prior qualifications).

ability to engage in learning. Providers agreed that providing relevant equipment and resources to learners who need it to complete the course is essential.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations for practice

- **The Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that appropriate support is provided to help older people with low essential skills apply for benefits**, including Pension Credit and Attendance Allowance. Many people find official letters difficult to interpret and the application forms to be complex. Having low essential skills can be an additional, and sometimes significant, barrier. This could be achieved in part through ensuring that local agencies, including local authorities and local Age UKs, are adequately resourced to support people in their communities.
- **JobCentre Plus (JCP) are uniquely placed to support older people to develop their essential skills and feel more confident with important everyday tasks such as reading official letters and applying for jobs. The new national jobs and careers service, that joins up health, skills and work support, should ensure older people's skills needs are met.** This research found that older people are supported by JCP to take up essential skills provision. JCP should continue to promote learning opportunities as part of their provision. For example, an older person who wants to apply for Pension Credit but struggles with reading official documents could be signposted to a literacy course. JCP coaches should be supported to identify essential skills needs, as previous research found that in non-provider organisations, staff expertise and confidence in conducting basic skills checks may be patchy.<sup>28</sup>
- **Employers should be able to use the flexibilities of the new [Skills and Growth Levy](#) to support the literacy and numeracy needs of their workforce.** This research shows that many older people below state pension age are still in work and are motivated to improve their skills levels for employment-related reasons. The benefits of improving their skills should be clearly communicated to employers to help incentivise them to use the levy to invest in their workers' skills development.
- **In the context of longer working lives, having targeted support available to help older people reskill and stay in employment is crucial.** Some older people want or need to change careers. However, low literacy, numeracy and digital skills can limit their opportunities. Evidence<sup>29</sup> shows that peer support, CV writing and online job application support, digital skills provision and a strong emphasis on identifying transferable skills from their previous work history can

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<sup>28</sup> L&W (2020) The potential for an online basic skills checker

<sup>29</sup> Centre for Ageing Better, L&W (2024) [Evaluation of Elevate pilot: Final report](#). The project was aimed at supporting older individuals at risk of and/or experiencing redundancy in the West Midlands.

boost older people's confidence and enable them to seek work in a wider range of sectors.

- **Age UK should continue to help older people overcome challenges they face with everyday activities to ensure they can access essential services, manage their health and wellbeing and feel more confident in themselves.** Low essential skills can negatively impact on older people's lives in a range of ways. They can affect people's ability to access essential services such as welfare support and healthcare provision, secure and progress in employment, manage their health and wellbeing and feel confident in themselves. Older people can feel locked out of opportunities that require a combination of literacy and digital skills such as completing job applications online, booking medical appointments online and accessing welfare support online. Organisations such as Age UK play a crucial role in supporting older people to overcome these challenges. Informal, slow-paced and ad-hoc learning opportunities in welcoming, trusted and comfortable settings such as Age UK are highly valued by older people (particularly retired people).
- **GP surgeries should continue to support older people with low essential skills to better manage their health and wellbeing.** Older people's physical and mental and wellbeing can be impacted by poor essential skills. Worsening health and conditions that develop with age can exacerbate these challenges. Given the important role 'warm' service contacts like GPs play in supporting older people, they are well-placed to signpost older people to relevant skills provision and support them to overcome barriers to managing their health and wellbeing.
- **In order to effectively engage with older people with low essential skills, providers and other organisations that support older people should consider the following marketing approaches:**
  - **Information about essential skills learning opportunities should be available in a range of formats and locations, be accessible, visible and provide clear information** to learners, community-based partners, employers, referral organisations (e.g. JCP, Age UK centres and medical centres) and relevant local authorities teams (including libraries and schools). This could be achieved in part through ensuring that local agencies are adequately resourced to provide this information.
  - **Course and group names should be relatable and relevant**, tapping into older people's motivations of learning for social reasons, to meet a specific skills gap or wanting to progress at work.

- **Providers should consider using learner champions and taster days** as approaches to boost engagement and remove attitudinal barriers to learning (for example, fear and stigma).
- **Providers should continue to develop and where possible extend their collaborative working with community-based partners** (in particular organisations who support older people such as Age UK), local authorities, public services (including referral organisations such as JCP) and employers to support outreach delivery and referrals into learning.
- **Providers should aim to address barriers to learning for older people.** This includes providing free courses, covering indirect costs of learning and providing resources and equipment, and ensuring learning opportunities are in accessible locations and settings and for older people in work there should be provision that flexes around working hours.
- **To support learners into meaningful learning opportunities, comprehensive and supportive initial assessment and induction processes that identify learning and wider support needs should be conducted.** Older people often have complex needs and circumstances. For example, older people in this research commonly reported having a health condition, experiencing bereavement, having little to no previous education or negative experiences at school which had impacted on their confidence, and feeling shame or anxiety about their low essential skills. They also have a range of motivations for improving their skills from social to employment-related reasons. In person options should always be available as well as online options to ensure accessibility. To support staff to meet these needs, providers should ensure that continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities focused on learners aged 50+ are available and accessible to all staff.
- **Providers and other organisations supporting older people should offer flexible learning options to meet older people's individual needs.** Options should include online and in person, formal (i.e., accredited) and informal (i.e., non-accredited) courses, opportunities to repeat content or courses as well as more ad hoc learning in a relaxed social setting. Learning providers should use the full flexibilities within the ASF and Multiply funding to provide non-accredited learning options.
- **Providers and organisations supporting older people should consider embedding essential skills in other learning content or courses** as this can be an effective way for older adults to acquire skills. For example, a sewing course that embeds numeracy.



## Recommendations for policy

- **Public services should be inclusive and accessible to older people who lack essential skills. Older people should be involved in the design of services so that their needs are met.** Older people feel locked out of digital skills-based tasks (that can require literacy and numeracy competencies too) such as filling out forms and applications online or accessing GP appointments. This has significant implications for their ability to access and engage with public services given the drive to 'digital by default' in public services provision over recent years.
- **Adult Skills Fund (ASF) funding rules should recognise skills maintenance (rather than only skills development or progression) as an outcome for older people.** Many older people value learning as a way of maintaining their existing skills. However, current ASF (previously Adult Education Budget) funding focuses on skills development and progression. Additionally, ASF community-based provision is often funded short-term making it challenging to put on slower-paced or repeat courses.
- **Specialist support staff should be available to providers to help diagnose learning difficulties and disabilities (LDDs) and to support learners throughout their learner journey.** Some providers reported that undiagnosed LDDs are common among learners aged 50+, but that there is currently a lack of specialist support available.
- **National government, devolved areas and local authorities should consider supporting provider marketing and outreach by running awareness-raising campaigns to promote learning later in life.** The importance and value of learning later in life should be recognised as part of national and local level skills strategies.

# Appendix A

## Evidence review

This chapter summarises key findings from a rapid desktop review of existing evidence relating to essential skills and people aged 50+.

### Background

In the UK, nearly 1 in 5 (18 per cent) of 55 to 64-year-olds have the lowest level of essential skills<sup>30</sup>. The UK Government defines essential skills as those skills needed for work and everyday life<sup>31</sup>. These skills comprise literacy, numeracy, and digital skills which, in turn, may impact on broader skills and capabilities such as finance and health.

While essential skills are considered important for people of all ages, it has been found that older adults, especially those with lower levels of prior education, face barriers if employers discriminate against them or overlook their skills and knowledge, especially in low skilled sectors<sup>32</sup>. The findings from the Labour Force Survey<sup>33</sup> show the percentage of people with no qualifications based on their age and economic status. Generally, those aged 55 to 64 are more likely to have no qualifications (see also Appendix B).

Unfortunately, in the UK, the EU and OECD, there is an absence of data encompassing people aged over 64. There is also an insufficient focus on policy and practice and the provision of careers guidance; this includes the retraining and upskilling of older workers. To address these issues regarding older adults and essential skills, this report explores the prevalence and impact of poor essential skills on older adults, aged 55 and over, in the UK.

### Literacy skills

Figure 1 provides an overview of the percentage of adults (across all ages) with low literacy skills throughout the UK. Wales has the lowest percentage (12 per cent) of adults with low literacy skills, whereas Scotland has the highest percentage of adults with low literacy skills (26.7 per cent), which is nearly twice that of Wales. England and

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<sup>30</sup> Vignoles, A., & Cherry, G. (2020). [What is the economic value of literacy and numeracy?](#) IZA World of Labor.

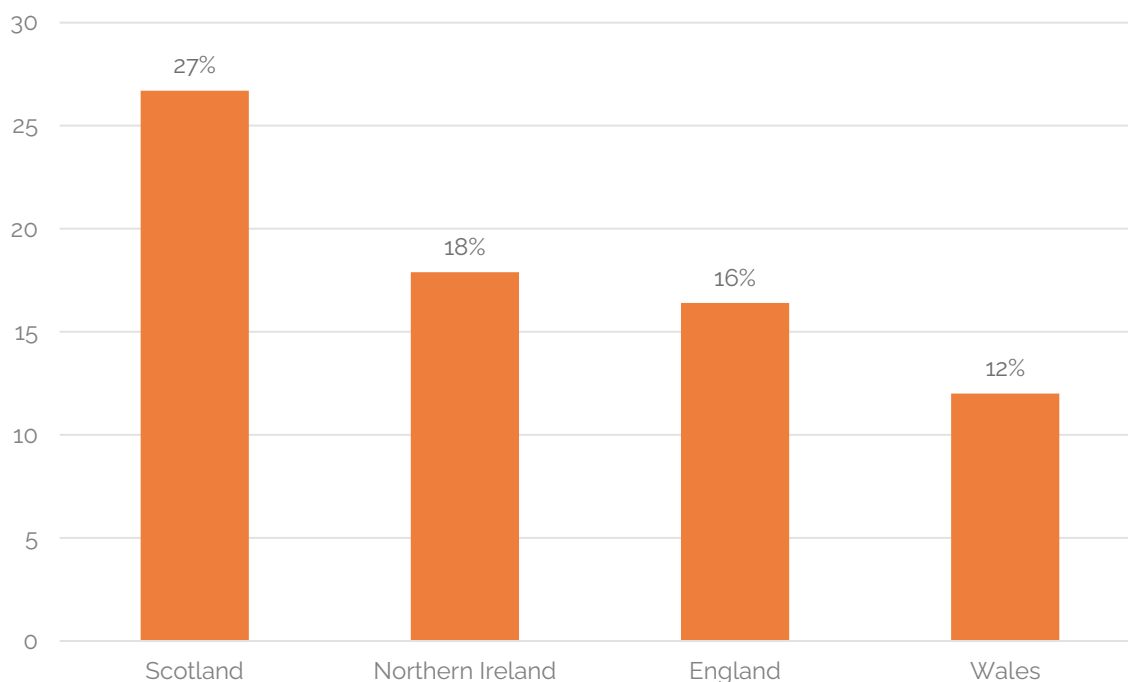
<sup>31</sup> [Department for Education: Skills for Careers](#)

<sup>32</sup> Boselli, R., Grosso, C., Negoita, G., Schuller, T., & Watts, J. (2023). [Midlife in a Changing and Post-Pandemic World. Implications for Career Education and Older Adult Learning Using On-Line and in Person Solutions](#). European Review of Applied Sociology, 16(26), 34–43.

<sup>33</sup> Office for National Statistics, [Labour Force Survey](#)

Northern Ireland both have approximately the same percentage (around 17 per cent) of adults with low literacy skills<sup>34,35</sup>.

**Figure 1. The percentage of adults, across all ages, with low literacy skills within each of the four UK jurisdictions.**



In 2019 a survey of 2,000 UK adults was commissioned by the National Literacy Trust to explore the views of older adults regarding their reading skills. Figure 2 summarises the findings which show that for older adults aged 66 and over, almost all (97 per cent) agreed that people with good reading skills have more opportunities to do well in life, and just under three quarters (72 per cent) agreed that better jobs were available to those with good reading skills. Furthermore, 43 per cent of people aged 66 and over agreed that becoming a better reader requires a lot of effort with 5 per cent saying that sometimes having to read something makes them feel anxious, and 6 per cent saying that if they do not understand something they read they tend to give up. Lastly, 3 per cent of respondents said that they often avoid tasks that involve reading.

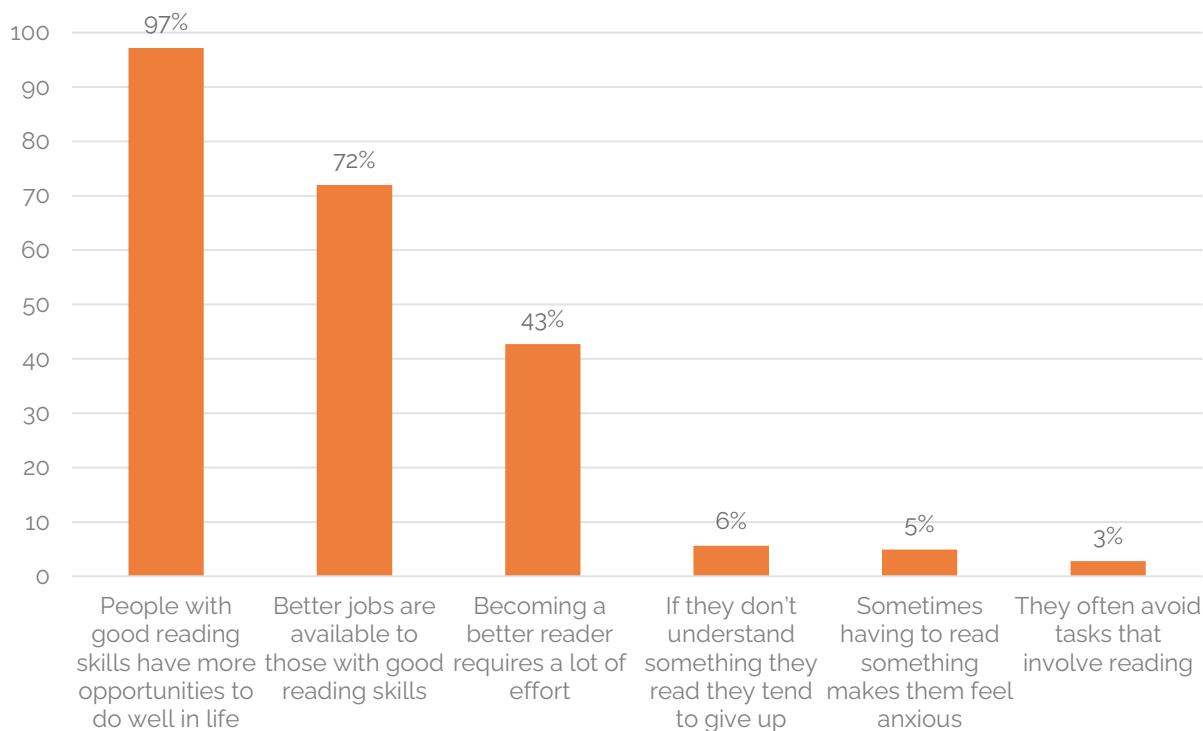
It is also known that the impact of literacy goes beyond economic considerations and is related to mental and physical wellbeing, family life, political, civic and community engagement, and even life expectancy. Furthermore, findings from a qualitative study

<sup>34</sup> OECD, Adult Skills, (2012) [Survey of Adults Skills](#), PIACC

<sup>35</sup> Teravainen-Goff, A., Flynn, M., Riad, L., Cole, A., & Clark, C. (2022). [Seldom-heard voices: Adult literacy in the UK context](#).

regarding 'ageing readers' showed that reading for pleasure enabled older adults to cope with and celebrate their lives and stories.<sup>36</sup>

**Figure 2. The percentage of older adults aged 66 and over who responded with 'agree' to questions regarding their views on reading skills.**



### Numeracy skills

Globally, older age is associated with low numeracy, even after accounting for education<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, findings from the OECD show that older adults (aged 45 to 65) perform worse on numeracy assessments compared to those aged 16 to 45 years<sup>38</sup>. Consequently, it is important for people, as they get older, to be aware that lower numeracy skills can negatively affect their health-related, financial, and other decision-making capabilities. Results from a study into the impact of numeracy and technology skills on health-related tasks found that numeracy and internet experience had a significant impact on older adults' ability to perform health-related tasks<sup>39</sup>. To promote health-related decision making and prevent financial exploitation, the research

<sup>36</sup> Rothbauer, P., & Dalmer, N. (2018). [Reading as a lifeline among aging readers: Findings from a qualitative interview study with older adults](#). *Library and Information Science Research*, 40(3–4), 165–172.

<sup>37</sup> Bruine de Bruin, W., Ulqinaku, A., Llopis, J., & Ravà, M. S. (2023). [Beyond High-Income Countries: Low Numeracy Is Associated with Older Adult Age around the World](#). *MDM Policy and Practice*, 8(1).

<sup>38</sup> OECD (2020) [How's Life? 2020: Measuring Well-Being](#)

<sup>39</sup> Taha, J., Sharit, J., & Czaja, S. J. (2014). [The impact of numeracy ability and technology skills on older adults' performance of health management tasks using a patient portal](#). *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 33(4), 416–436.

literature suggests that the effect of developing numeracy skills in older adults is promising if the interventions are tailored to the specific needs of older adults<sup>40</sup>. The findings also show that older adults may adopt creative ways of dealing with everyday numeracy problems based on their own needs. This approach provides a change of perspective from a skills deficit view to a resourcefulness view. Therefore, when designing numeracy skills interventions for older adults, their existing and self-created numeracy skills and knowledge should be used, recognised, and appreciated.<sup>41</sup>

## Digital skills

As technology advances, older adults are falling further behind with their digital competencies. In England, 10 per cent of 16 to 65-year-olds report no prior experience with computers or lack the basic skills required. Accessibility barriers, harmful misinformation such as fake news, and increasingly sophisticated scams are just some of the issues that older adults face online.<sup>42,43</sup> Yet, digital technologies also have the potential to improve older adults' well-being (e.g., social inclusion and civic participation). However, it appears that there may be a discrepancy between the digital technologies that are developed and what older adults want and need. To avoid ageism and to help older adults overcome the barriers to digital technologies, it is recommended that designers and researchers endeavour to ensure that older adults are involved in the research and design processes of digital technologies.<sup>44</sup> Another strategy to support older adults' engagement in digital skills includes the involvement of family members. It has been found that older adults are more likely to use digital technologies if their children and grandchildren, are convinced of the benefits as they are typically skilled at working with technology<sup>45</sup>.

Older adults may also face physical challenges such as visual impairments, hearing loss or arthritis that makes using technology difficult or impossible, and this is something that designers of digital technology should incorporate into their products. For instance, many of these ageing impairments can be mitigated with technology, for

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<sup>40</sup> Fastame, M. C., & Melis, S. (2020). [Numeracy skills, cognitive reserve, and psychological well-being: What relationship in late adult lifespan?](#) *Behavioral Sciences*, 10(11).

<sup>41</sup> Zeuner, C., Pabst, A., & Benz-Gydat, M. (2020). [Numeracy practices and vulnerability in old age: interdependencies and reciprocal effects.](#) *ZDM - Mathematics Education*, 52(3), 501–513.

<sup>42</sup> IEEE [Digital Literacy for Senior Citizens: Building ICT Competencies](#)

<sup>43</sup> Jentoft, E. E. (2023). [Technology and older adults in British loneliness policy and political discourse.](#) *Frontiers in Digital Health*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Mannheim, I., Schwartz, E., Xi, W., Buttigieg, S. C., McDonnell-Naughton, M., Wouters, E. J. M., & van Zaal, Y. (2019). [Inclusion of older adults in the research and design of digital technology.](#) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(19).

<sup>45</sup> Luijckx, K., Peek, S., & Wouters, E. (2015). ['Grandma, you should do it—its cool' older adults and the role of family members in their acceptance of technology.](#) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12(12), 15470–15485.

example, voice assistant devices can help those with dexterity issues or vision impairments.

A further impact on those older adults not engaging in digital technologies is the potential loneliness they may experience. However, digital literacy interventions for older adults have emerged to enable those individuals to improve their digital literacy skills although, unfortunately, there has been little evaluation of these interventions effectiveness in improving older adults' digital skills and their resilience to influences such as fake news<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Moore, R. C., & Hancock, J. T. (2022). [A digital media literacy intervention for older adults improves resilience to fake news](#). *Scientific Reports*, 12(1).

## Appendix B

This analysis explores the percentage people Highest qualification level by age and economic status. Figures A1-A4 below show the percentage of people in the UK aged 16 or above who have no qualifications over a period of five years. For each year from 2019 to 2023 the period from October to December (OD) is considered, with a label 'OD19' representing October 2019 to December 2019, for example.

Figure A1: Overall UK population with no qualifications.

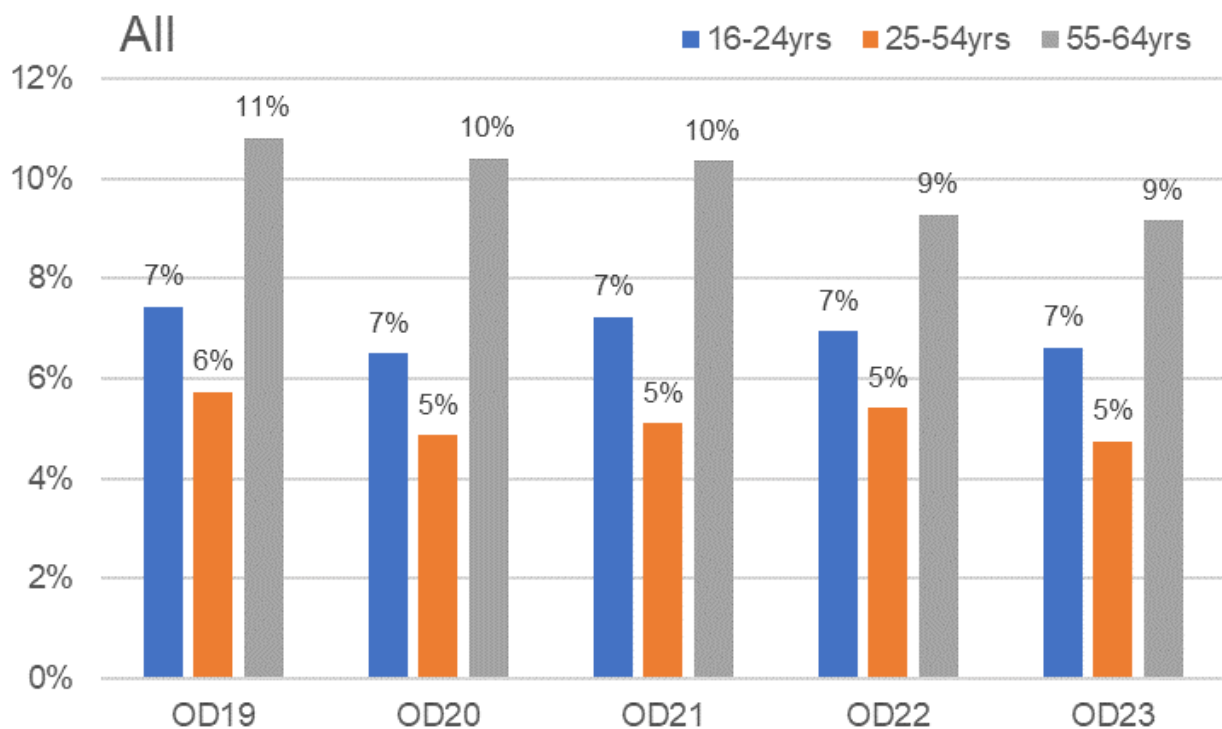


Figure A2: Percentage in employment with no qualifications.

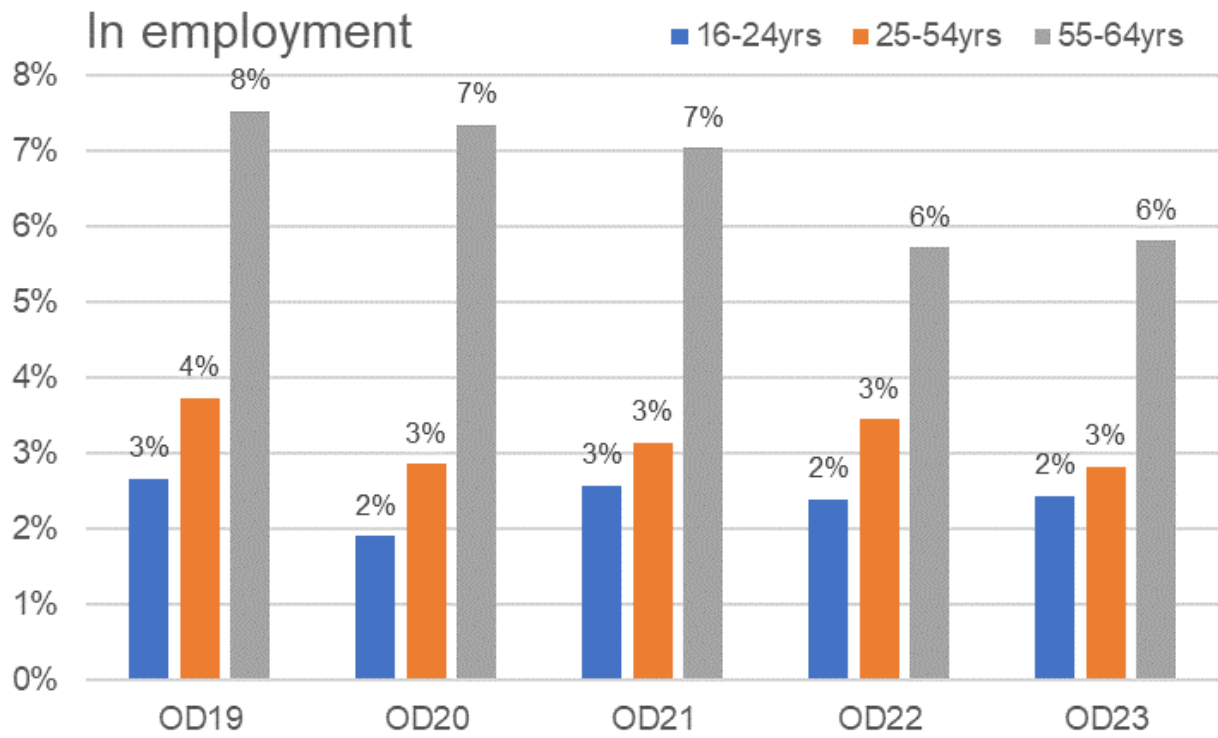




Figure A3: Percentage unemployed with no qualifications

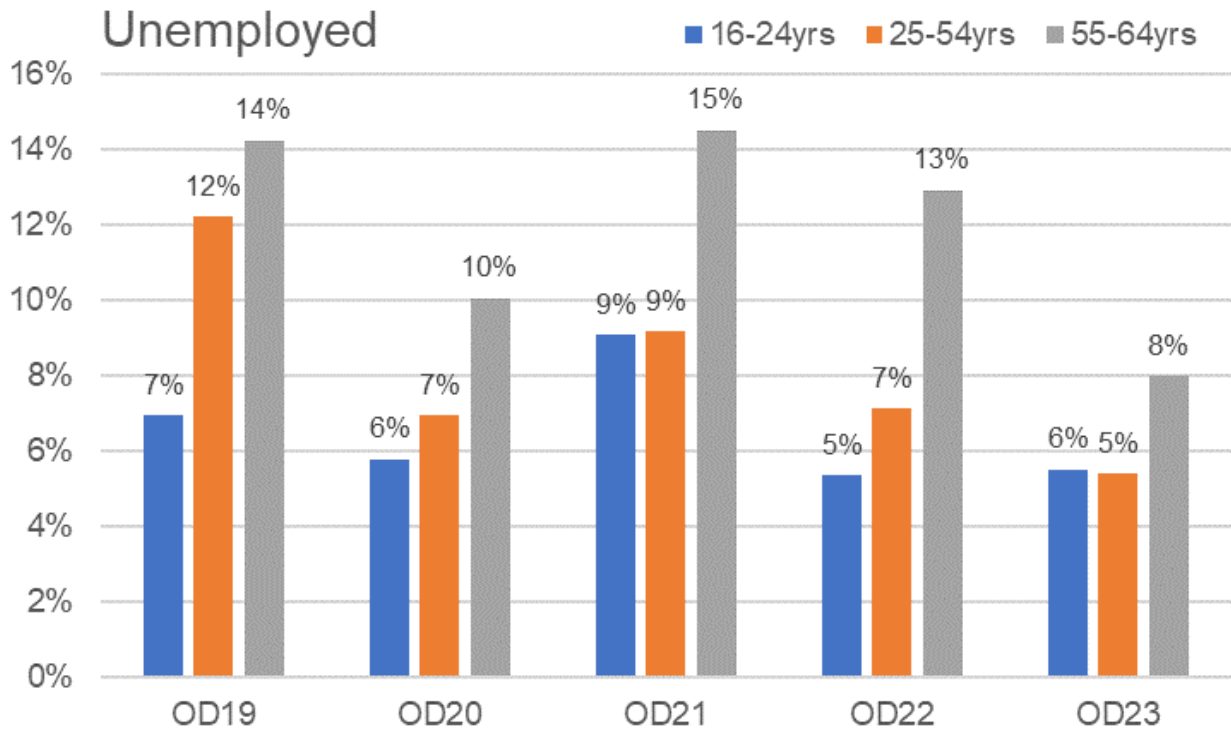


Figure A4: Percentage economically inactive with no qualification

