

Local learning

**Place-based insight on what works to drive
up essential skills participation**

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Learning and Work Institute

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1. Executive summary

Participation in essential skills learning has been shown to result in a range of positive personal and social outcomes for adult learners, including improved self-esteem and well-being and more confidence to complete everyday tasks. The economic case for basic skills is equally strong with a social return of £17 for Entry Level and £22 for every £1 invested in Level 1 provision, in the case of younger learners (19-24 years old). However, nine million adults in England have low literacy or numeracy. Despite this, participation levels have fallen significantly in England: adult participation in English, maths, and ESOL learning has declined by 63, 62 and 17 per cent, respectively, from 2012 to 2020.

Building on the case for action set out in the recent [Getting the Basics Right](#) paper, this report adopts a place-based approach to explore what effective practices to drive up essential skills participation look like at a local level in England. The research focused specifically on the factors and approaches driving or hindering essential skills participation in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority and West of England Combined Authority.

This research found that some of the key drivers for demand in essential skills across the three areas included: refugees and asylum seekers settling into the local area, thereby increasing demand for ESOL provision; providers' having strong relationships with the community and voluntary sector which increased their visibility in their local communities; high levels of need driven by deprivation and low levels of qualifications; and funding for non-accredited learning enabling increased flexibility in provision.

The stakeholders we engaged all felt that English and maths provision had been more challenging to engage learners when compared to ESOL, with a high level of consistency in barriers identified across the three areas. Factors preventing individuals with low essential skills from accessing provision included lack of confidence, stigma attached to low essential skills and a lack of awareness of the benefits of improving them. Other barriers included poor access to transport or childcare provision, irregular shift patterns, and a lack of ICT skills or equipment; difficulties in engaging employers to identify their employees' needs and deliver provision; challenges around outreach and referrals; a lack of coordinated messaging around essential skills; and a lack of flexibility within the funding system to respond to learners' wider needs and interests.

The place-based findings emerging from this research align with and strengthen the conclusions of the existing evidence base on what works to drive up adult essential skills. Insight from all three areas points to the effectiveness of using engagement strategies that are tailored to adult learners' interests and needs. These range from adapting courses' names to offering taster courses and conducting community outreach in partnership with local organisations.

Local areas were in agreement that additional strategies were required to keep adult essential skills learners engaged following a successful enrolment. These focused on how provision can respond to adult learners' wider sets of needs, including limited availability due to childcare responsibilities or work, and be tailored to include content that is relevant to learners' lives. Some of the key successful practices highlighted in this research include flexible timetabling, differentiated support facilitated by small class sizes, tailoring content to learners' parenting or working needs and fostering a suitable learning environment for adult learners in an accessible setting.

This research highlights several policy areas where urgent action is needed:

1. Improving essential skills should be a national and local priority, with a sustained effort to engage adults and employers and ambition to increase participation and achievement to at least 2010 levels.

In line with the existing evidence base, this research highlights individuals' difficulties in identifying essential skills needs and the stigma attached to low essential skills as two structural difficulties to improving participation. To address this challenge:

- **National and local government must make adult essential skills a priority across policy areas.**
- **National and local action is needed to encourage people to be open about their skills and come forward to improve them, addressing social stigma.**
- **National and local government plus adult education providers need to invest in sustainable partner engagement and increased integration of provision.**

2. A flexible approach to English, maths and ESOL provision can help increase participation.

This research identified that essential skills provision is most effective when it responds to the motivations and interests of adult learners through flexibility in outreach, location, content and size. This finding highlights several policy implications including that:

- **We need a broad focus on the economic and social outcomes of learning, as well as qualifications, and on the role played by flexible provision in achieving them.**
- **It is key to build an enhanced evidence base on how non-formal essential skills learning can support progression into further, formal learning.**
- **Greater investment in employer engagement is required to expand essential skills provision available for individuals in work.**

2. Introduction

Essential skills – including literacy, numeracy, ESOL and digital skills – are key to support adults' life chances and this importance is only increasing. Despite this, participation levels have fallen significantly in England: adult participation in English, maths, and ESOL learning has declined by 63, 62 and 17 per cent, respectively, from 2012 to 2020.

This trend must be urgently reversed, and a clear strategy is needed to improve adult essential skills across England. It is against this background that the Skills for Life Alliance – convened by Learning and Work Institute (L&W) and Hoxby – aims to explore what affects participation in essential skills learning and how adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills can be driven up the agenda.

As part of this work, L&W has set out a call for action on adult essential skills in a recent paper, [Getting the Basics Right](#). The paper highlights the importance of urgently reversing declining participation in adult essential skills learning and the necessity to bring a wide range of stakeholders together – government, employers, training providers, civil society – to do so.

This report builds on that case for action and explores:

- Key drivers and barriers to participation in essential skills learning
- What works in driving up essential skills participation through innovative interventions
- How this learning can inform national and local essential skills policy and practice.

This research adopted a place-based approach and focused on three Mayoral Combined Authority areas: West of England, South Yorkshire and Liverpool City Region. A local focus was selected as an acknowledgement of the impact of contextual factors on essential skills delivery and provision.

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, workshops and quantitative analysis. This report presents findings from the local area case studies and sets out key lessons learned and policy implications.

3. Local area engagement

The localised focus of this research stems from an acknowledgement of the role contextual factors play in determining levels and types of demand for essential skills learning and capacity to meet this at a local level. This is illustrated in our previous briefing paper¹, which found substantial differences in the extent to which essential skills participation has decreased between 2011 and 2019 across London and Mayoral Combined Authorities.

This report builds on this insight by exploring the factors and approaches driving or hindering essential skills participation in three local areas in England where essential skills participation has decreased the most: Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority and West of England Combined Authority.

The sections below explore each area's respective essential skills provision context and the activities delivered as part of this partnership.

3.1 Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA)

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) has had a devolved Adult Education Budget (AEB) since August 2019. As part of the flexibilities enabled by the budget's devolution, LCRCA launched a series of Test and Learn pilots in 2020/21 and 2021/22 to create new ESOL, English and maths provision that was more responsive to learners' needs. Using innovative approaches to course design and delivery, the pilots aimed to improve participation, retention and progression from adult essential skills learning by making learning directly relevant to learners' interests, needs and context.

Three Test and Learn pilot areas were identified to explore different strategies deployed to incentivise participation and the extent to which they had successfully met this aim. These included:

- **Wirral Lifelong Learning Service:** the 'Everyday English' pilot focused on delivering small courses aimed at supporting Pre-Entry and Entry Level learners improve their reading and literacy.
- **Warrington and Vale College:** partnering with a B&M branch, the College's pilot delivered a range of tailored ESOL courses in the workplace.
- **St Helens College:** the 'Family Learning GCSE' pilot aimed to support parents in improving their GCSE English and maths to enable them to support their children.

¹ Learning and Work Institute (2021) [Getting the basics rights](#)

Research activities



Development of the pilots' Theory of Change (ToC)

- L&W conducted a range of scoping discussions with pilot areas and a rapid review of their operational and strategic documentation.
- Building on this evidence synthesis, a draft ToC was developed by L&W and stress-tested in an interactive workshop with pilot areas (the final ToC can be found in Appendix 1).



Mixed-methods fieldwork

- A total of eight semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with providers' staff members across the three pilot areas.
- L&W conducted a quantitative analysis of Management Information System (MIS) data comparing participation rates and learners' demographic characteristics across providers' pilot and mainstream provision.

3.2 South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA)

Following the decision in 2020 to devolve South Yorkshire's AEB, SYMCA began managing its budget from 2021/22. Against this background, the MCA is developing an overarching Skills Strategy, aiming to improve educational attainment across the region, including in essential skills. As part of this study, L&W partnered with SYMCA to support the development of the strategy by informing its approach to Skills for Life.

Research activities



- L&W co-facilitated two online workshops with SYMCA exploring 'What works to support essential skills participation'.
- The first workshop, in February 2022, aimed to develop a localised understanding of essential skills provision and its main drivers and barriers in South Yorkshire.
- The second workshop, in March 2022, aimed to explore effective strategies for engaging adults in essential skills learning.

3.3 West of England Combined Authority (WECA)

WECA became responsible for commissioning the AEB from August 2019. To ensure that access to adult education provision was improved and to strengthen its links to the economic needs of the region, it published an Adult Education Strategy in 2021/22. The strategy aims to embed essential skills targets across different types of adult education provision for priority residents (unemployed, economically inactive or low-skilled/paid) to drive up essential skills participation. It was from this context that the partnership with L&W emerged, aimed at consolidating an understanding of local essential skills demand and participation and facilitate a discussion about effective strategies in driving it up.

Research activities



- L&W co-facilitated an online workshop with WECA exploring 'What works to support essential skills participation'.
- The workshop took place in February 2022 and brought together representatives from the West of England Combined Authority and local adult learning providers and FE colleges.
- The aim of the workshop was to develop a localised understanding of essential skills provision and its main drivers and barriers in the West of England, and to explore effective strategies for engaging adults in essential skills learning.

4. Case studies

This section of the report summarises the main drivers and barriers to essential skills participation encountered by providers in Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire, and the West of England. It also explores engagement strategies employed by providers across these three areas, including case studies of the three Test and Learn projects.

4.1 Drivers and barriers to essential skills participation

4.1.1 Drivers

Key drivers of essential skills participation across the local areas we engaged included:

- A high demand for ESOL provision, particularly in Liverpool City Region and South Yorkshire. In Liverpool City Region, this has partly been driven by refugees and asylum seekers settling into the area and a well-coordinated community response.
- Strong relationships with the community and voluntary sector. These give providers a level of visibility in their local communities and allow them to tap into adults' existing support networks to promote essential skills provision.
- High levels of need for essential skills provision, driven by pockets of relative deprivation and low levels of qualifications within each local area.
- For Wirral Lifelong and Family Learning Service, grant funding for non-accredited learning, which has allowed them to develop a flexible essential skills provision and respond to learner's specific needs.

4.1.2 Barriers

The three local areas we engaged all felt that English and maths provision had been more challenging to engage learners when compared to ESOL. There was a high level of consistency in barriers identified across the three areas. These include:

- **Adults who have low essential skills don't always seek support.** Providers identified a number of reasons for this, including a lack of confidence to engage with learning, stigma attached to having low essential skills and a lack of awareness of the benefits improving essential skills could bring or the provision they can access. Providers felt that there was a particular level of stigma attached to accessing basic English and maths provision, and less so for ESOL:

"There is a massive appetite for ESOL provision... we've got people on waiting lists, I'm needing to take on another tutor... I don't know if that's something to do with that there's no stigma for them, they just need English language, of course they do, that's the situation they're in, there's no stigma there." (Provider, South Yorkshire)

- **High levels of deprivation can create multiple barriers to learning.** These include poor access to transport or childcare provision, irregular shift patterns, and a lack of ICT skills or equipment. Providers recognised that poverty can be a particular barrier to adult learners accessing provision, and that this has been exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic. It is important to consider how provision can be adapted to the needs of these learners, for example, through offering wrap-around support and being as flexible as possible around attendance.

“We are experiencing even more poverty... learners are actually coming to class hungry. We have breakfast clubs in schools because children are hungry, but if the children are hungry the parents are probably hungrier, because they feed the kids first.” (Provider, South Yorkshire)

- **Employers can be difficult to engage.** This was attributed to a lack of awareness of the essential skills provision available and the benefits for them as a business. Employees who lack essential skills may also be reluctant to identify these needs and seek out support. Both employers and employees often prioritise vocational training over essential skills, since they see this as more directly relevant to their job role.

“My experience in the workplace is that people don’t realise this is available to them. There’s also a confidence issue ... they will not want to identify themselves in a workplace as having a need, they’ll think that they’ll be dismissed for any progression in the workplace, or they may well think it will make their colleagues think less of them.” (Provider, South Yorkshire)

- **Challenges around outreach and referrals.** These include a decline in referrals and limited opportunities for face-to-face outreach during the Covid-19 pandemic, low numbers of referrals from community and voluntary organisations, instability within the voluntary and community sector, and a lack of co-ordinated working between providers and referral partners.

“We would work with any referral pathway and third sector organisation that approaches us, it’s just because of the lack of stability within that voluntary sector field...it’s quite unpredictable...it quite often relies on that fairly constant staff input as a reminder of what’s available.” (Provider, West of England)

- **A lack of coordinated messaging around essential skills.** Some providers felt that messaging around the importance of essential skills from stakeholders such as DWP, Housing Associations and local councils could be stronger. Others identified a need for more coordinated marketing and communications activity to promote essential skills provision at a local and national level, including information about adults’ entitlement to free courses.

“I think nationally there’s no push from DWP, housing associations, children’s centres, schools to a certain extent, the council. I think all those big stakeholders,

there's no real push towards improving your basic reading and writing.” (Provider, Liverpool City Region)

- **A mismatch between the current funding system and learners’ needs.** Providers believed that the current funding system prioritises qualifications over developing learner’s skills and confidence. This has resulted in a lack of flexibility to respond to learners’ wider needs and interests. Additionally, the real terms decrease in funding rates², which makes smaller class sizes less financially viable for providers, has resulted in gaps in provision, in some cases limiting learners’ ability to progress onto higher-level courses.

“A lot of our learners aren’t necessarily looking for a qualification, they’re looking to be able to better their skills, knowledge, and understanding... but for many of us, as a provider, we promote a qualification because that’s what we are funded to be able to deliver.” (Provider, South Yorkshire)

4.2 Strategies for promoting engagement

Despite wide-ranging challenges around engaging adults with essential skills learning, providers had developed a number of successful engagement strategies. These include:

- **Making learning relevant and appealing to adult learners.** Providers emphasised the importance of ensuring that essential skills learning is delivered in way that is appealing to adults and doesn’t make them feel as if they are going back to school. Strategies used by providers in the West of England included offering engaging taster sessions; incorporating fun activities such as arts and crafts; offering refreshments; and tailoring messaging around learners’ motivations and interests, for example, helping children with their homework. One provider explained how they adapted the names of their courses to be “engaging and non-threatening”:

“We will call courses anything we want to that we think will get people through the door. So we would certainly not put on an ‘improve your maths accuracy so it’s better than when you were at school.’ We will say ‘Do you want to keep up with the kids? Do you want to help your kids with your homework?’” (Provider, West of England)

Providers in South Yorkshire also noted how they adapted course content to make it relevant to learner’s interests – for example, by contextualising essential skills learning within vocational course content.

- **Reaching out to learners in their communities.** A number of providers offered community-based provision as a way of engaging with learners in settings where they are already comfortable and making learning relevant to their daily lives. This includes

² Primary analysis conducted by L&W in [Getting the basics right](#) (p. 26) found that, in real terms, funding per learner has fallen nine per cent from 2013-14 to 2019-20.

family learning provision in schools and early years settings, and also non-accredited provision delivered in community venues such as libraries and community centres. Some providers in the West of England had also used outreach workers to promote essential skills provision in their local communities and door-to-door, helping them to reach adults who don't belong to any community groups:

- **Developing collaborative referral networks.** While providers identified joined-up working as an area for improvement, some offered examples of where this was already successfully taking place. In Rotherham, South Yorkshire, training providers and third sector organisations have received funding through the Community Renewal Fund to develop a consortium approach to referrals. Another provider in South Yorkshire described how they had worked with other AEB providers in the area to set up a collaborative network of routine meetings. This has enabled them to identify opportunities for joint working and establish clear referral and progression pathways for learners. They have also identified opportunities for joined-up delivery, for example, by supporting vocational training providers to deliver essential skills provision as part of their courses. Such relationships are mutually beneficial, since they allow essential skills providers to access learners while also helping vocational providers to ensure that learners have the skills they need for employment.
- **A supportive enrolment and onboarding process.** Providers recognised that adults who are furthest away from learning may require a significant amount of support to build their confidence to engage. Strategies for building trusting and supportive relationships with learners included visiting them in their community settings and offering one-to-one drop-in sessions with tutors and careers advisors. Others mentioned how they had provided practical support for learners to engage; for example, a provider in South Yorkshire had offered a learner support fund to provide digital equipment for learners and support sessions to help them access lesson content on their mobile phones during the Coronavirus pandemic. However, providers also acknowledged that this process can be time and resource intensive, and that the funding they receive doesn't cover outreach and engagement activity:

"Sometimes we'll just get one person and it might take six to eight weeks. So, if the tutor goes once a week or twice a week, just pop in half an hour, an hour, to have a chat to them, and slowly build that rapport up and then eventually get them into class. Or they'll do a class at their centre or somewhere near that if we can. So, yes, it's a slow process to recruit them, it's just one-to-ones. We don't get, 'Here are twelve learners from DWP.'" (Provider, Liverpool City Region)

4.3 Liverpool City Region Test and Learn Case Studies

As noted in Section 3 of this report, L&W has engaged with three providers delivering essential skills pilot interventions as part of a wider 'Test and Learn' programme in Liverpool City Region. The aim of these pilots is to encourage essential skills participation by making learning directly relevant to adult's interests, needs, and contexts.

The following section of this report details how each pilot project is delivered and identifies key learning around how provision is adapted to respond to individual needs and improve engagement.

4.3.1 Wirral Lifelong and Family Learning Service ‘Everyday English’ Pilot

Provider background: Wirral Lifelong and Family Learning Service focuses on offering essential skills and Entry Level courses for adults with low or no qualifications. Courses are delivered from the provider’s main centre in Birkenhead, as well as in ‘satellite hubs’ and community venues across the borough (e.g. libraries, foodbanks and schools). Learners accessing this provision often have ‘spikey’ profiles of maths and English achievement and face multiple barriers to learning, including a lack of confidence, anxiety, and negative experiences of formal education.

Pilot aims: The pilot is targeted at Pre-entry and Entry Level learners who wish to improve their reading and literacy skills. Through supporting learners to develop basic literacy skills, the pilot also aims to improve their confidence and abilities to take an active role in their lives, workplaces, and communities. The pilot is designed to be a ‘first step’ into learning, with learners eventually progressing into further community learning or mainstream provision:

“Hopefully give them a really successful first step into the world learning, that is beneficial to them, in so many ways, and means that they can have different opportunities in their life. And also, probably be a happier person, and a healthier person, and maybe contribute to their communities in a different way, as well.”

Pilot activities: Activities are focused on developing basic reading and literacy skills, and where appropriate applying these to maths, ICT and employability-related tasks (for example, budgeting or completing a job search online). The intervention is designed to be more flexible and individualised than mainstream provision. Learners are encouraged to discuss their personal learning goals with a tutor prior to starting their course. Class sizes are small (around three to four learners) to allow for differentiation and one-to-one support. Timetabling is flexible to fit in with learners’ work and family commitments – learners can book into sessions depending on their availability, and tutors can meet with learners outside of scheduled class times to offer further one-to-one support. There is no set timescale for the intervention; instead, progression is based on whether learners have acquired the skills and confidence to move on to further learning. This differs from the providers’ standard offer, where courses are delivered in ten-week blocks.

Engagement and retention: The intervention was designed with low numbers of learners in mind to allow for more tailored and individualised provision. However, interviewees recognised that recruitment has at times been difficult. This was attributed to existing challenges with referral pathways: a decline in referrals from larger organisations such as Jobcentre Plus during the pandemic has led to increased reliance on referrals from smaller community organisations, such as churches, who tend to recruit in far smaller numbers.

While participation in the pilot has been relatively low (100 learners over the course of the project), learner retention has been high, with 96 per cent of learners remaining engaged³. Interviewees also noted a high level of commitment and engagement from learners:

"There's a responsibility being taken by the learners to let us know what's happening with them if they can't come in, why they can't come in, when they're coming back. And I think it shows a bit of a commitment there, to learning..."

The pilot has also been successful at engaging a diverse range of learners⁴, including groups who generally tend to be less likely to engage in learning⁵. These include learners aged over 45⁶, those who are unemployed and economically inactive⁷, and those with no existing qualifications⁸. These findings indicate that the pilot programme has been successful in reaching and retaining students from its target cohort. When compared to one of the providers' existing non-accredited interventions, the pilot has also been more successful at engaging men and those from black ethnic backgrounds.

Key learning/success factors

Key success factors identified by interviewees included:

- **Offering differentiated and individualised support.** This was viewed as vital for maintaining learner engagement, making learners feel supported and valued, and preparing those furthest away from learning for mainstream provision:

"We always try to explain to them, as it's like having a brick wall, and the bottom bricks are all missing. Or there's gaps in those bricks, and we need to fill in the gaps, so you can build the wall a little bit higher. And that's what differentiation is about...it's identifying what those gaps are, and filling the gaps."

- **Small class sizes.** This allows learning to be tailored to individual needs and can be less intimidating for learners who are anxious about re-entering education:

"It's not like we're trying to encourage an adult that has no literacy skills to go and sit in a classroom with twelve other adults. So, there is no aspect of it that would feel like going back to school in a way."

³ Source: Programme MI data

⁴ Source: Programme MI data

⁵ Learning and Work Institute (2021) Adult Participation in Learning Survey

⁶ Out of the 100 learners targeted in the pilot scheme, 47 were aged 45 and over (47%). In the existing scheme, out of 327 learners targeted, 98 were aged 45 and over (30%), Source: Programme MI data

⁷ Out of the 100 learners targeted in the pilot scheme, 80 were unemployed or economically inactive (80%). In the existing scheme, out of 327 learners targeted, 197 were unemployed or economically inactive (60%). Source: Programme MI data

⁸ Out of the 100 learners targeted in the pilot scheme, 40 had no qualifications (40%). In the existing scheme, out of 327 learners targeted, 61 had no qualifications (19%). Source: Programme MI data

- **Flexible timetabling.** This enables adult learners to maintain engagement alongside their work and family commitments.
- **Creating a relaxed and informal environment.** Creating a relaxed and nurturing environment, focused on meeting learners' wider needs and building their confidence, was viewed as important for engaging adults furthest away from education:

"So, once you create that relaxed environment that is not intimidating, it's comfortable, you can enjoy it as an adult, that allows learning to begin."

4.3.2 St Helens College Family Learning GCSE

Provider background: St Helens is a merged FE college operating across four sites in St Helens and Knowsley. Their essential skills provision consists largely of Functional Skills and GCSE courses, catering from Entry Level up to Level 2, alongside a growing ESOL provision. The college operates in a borough with high levels of deprivation and low adult literacy rates.

Pilot aims: The pilot aims to respond to the issue of low adult literacy rates in the borough by supporting parents of GCSE-aged students to help their children, and in doing so develop their own maths and literacy skills. It is hoped that learners will develop the skills and confidence to progress onto further accredited learning, such as a full GCSE or functional skills course.

Pilot activities: The pilot involves working with parents to develop the literacy and numeracy skills required to support their children's GCSE achievement. This includes a simplified breakdown of course content as well as revision and exam techniques. Learners are encouraged to bring their children who are studying GCSE courses so that they can be supported as a family unit. Sessions take place in the evening to fit in around parents' working hours and are delivered in small groups to encourage a relaxed and social atmosphere.

Engagement and retention: The pilot is advertised directly through social media, hand-delivered adult learning guides, and messages to parents of internal 16-19-year-old GCSE students. The college also promotes the course through its existing community referral networks. These recruitment strategies were successful last year when parents were concerned about supporting their children at home during the Coronavirus lockdowns. However, engagement was initially lower this year. In response, the college has adapted their messaging around the course to focus on how parents can support their children to prepare for exams after two years of centre-assessed grades. This approach has been successful, and they now have 35 enrolments for an introductory online session.

Programme data shows that when compared to one of the college's existing adult GCSE English courses, the family learning pilot has attracted more learners aged 50 and over⁹.

⁹ Out of 45 total learners on the family learning pilot, 12 were aged 50 or over and 33 were aged under 50, while 4 were male and 41 were female. Source: Programme MI data

This suggests that family learning programmes based in secondary and further education settings could be a useful way of engaging with older adults, who we know from wider research are typically less likely to take up learning¹⁰. However, the programme has been less successful at engaging men, who account for less than 10 per cent of participants. It would be interesting to explore whether this is typical of family learning provision and, if so, how such provision could more successfully engage with fathers.

Key learning/success factors

Key success factors identified by interviewees included:

- **Tailoring messaging and course content around adult's needs and interests.** St Helens recognised that parents in the borough want to support their children's learning, but often lack the skills and confidence to do so. Tailoring messaging and course content around these needs provides an initial hook to engage adults in learning:

"I think if we went in directly with developing your own skills, I think that would scare some of them off because of their own confidence, but linking it to their own children and how they could support their children because most parents do want to do that, that was the hook, really, being able to get them engaged and then we can go down that path."

- **Incorporating learner feedback.** Course content is designed to be flexible, with learners having a say in the topics they would like to cover and how long is spent on these. Feedback from last year's cohort has also been used to inform curriculum planning for this year, helping to ensure that the course content and format meets the specific needs of their learners.
- **Creating a relaxed and social learning environment.** This was identified as key to making learners feel comfortable and building their confidence to engage with learning, as well as for responding to learners' wider needs (e.g. isolation during the Coronavirus pandemic). The pilot has encouraged the college to review their wider pedagogy and consider how they can incorporate more sociable ways of delivery.

"I think the sociability. I think the non-traditional, if it is in a classroom, but the relaxed environment. It still starts at one time and finishes at another, and they're still learning, and there's still a whiteboard at the front, but the staff we picked to deliver it, would be able to deliver it in a way that made people feel comfortable to be there."

¹⁰ Learning and Work Institute (2021) Adult Participation in Learning Survey

4.3.3 Warrington and Vale College ESOL in the workplace

Background: Warrington and Vale College (WVC) offers a range of accredited and non-accredited essential skills courses across their two college sites and in the community. ESOL is a growing area of their provision, and the college is keen to expand its community-based delivery in this area.

Pilot aims: WVC and its employer and trade union partners have identified a considerable need for ESOL provision within the warehousing, manufacturing and logistics sector in Liverpool City Region. The nature of employee's shift patterns creates barriers to them accessing standard ESOL provision, while employers often lack the resource and expertise to deliver this effectively on site. Low levels of spoken English within the workforce in this sector can lead to communication barriers between employees and their managers and also result in health and safety risks. The pilot has been designed to address these challenges by offering specialist ESOL provision on site, working closely with an employer partner (B&M Bargains) to ensure that course content is tailored to the company's needs.

Pilot activities: The pilot consists of a short-term, eight-week intervention, with a focus on developing learners' understanding of core workplace vocabulary and health and safety requirements. Classes are delivered on site at the B&M warehouse, by an experienced ESOL tutor working for WVC college. Sessions take place every Friday, with one session in the morning and one in the afternoon to ensure that as many employees as possible have the opportunity to participate. While course content is tailored to meet the needs of the employer, this is also embedded within a broader English curriculum so that learners develop the skills to communicate in other social settings. Sessions incorporate paired and group work to give learners the opportunity to speak with one another in English, something they may not do on the shop floor if other colleagues speak their first language. This also helps learners to develop supportive relationships with their colleagues, which extend outside of the classroom.

Engagement and retention: Retention on the course has been high (94 per cent)¹¹, with interviewees attributing this to the fact that attendance is voluntary and learners are paid to attend out of their shift allowance. Managers at B&M have also been involved in encouraging engagement and retention, writing to staff every week to remind them about the classes and following up with learners whose attendance has dropped. Involving the employer in this process was identified as important, since they have the best knowledge of their staff and their ESOL requirements.

The majority of learners engaging with this intervention are men¹². This is likely a reflection of the sector, although broader data also indicates that women who do not speak English

¹¹ 36 learners in the pilot scheme were retained, at a retention rate of approximately 94%. Source: Programme MI data.

¹² 32 out of 36 participants. Source: Programme MI data.

proficiently are generally less likely to be employed when compared to their male counterparts¹³. This finding has implications for how workplace ESOL provision can best support women with ESOL needs, and if so, which sectors should be targeted. On the other hand, wider evidence suggests that men are less likely than women to participate in formal ESOL provision¹⁴. From this perspective, workplace-based ESOL provision, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sectors, may be helpful for increasing engagement.

Key learning/success factors

Key success factors identified by interviewees included:

- **Incentivising participation.** Interviewees believed that making the course optional and paying employees to attend resulted in higher levels of motivation than they would have seen if the course were compulsory:

“So [the employer] incentivised them, but they’ve also spoken to them as individuals. That’s led us having students in front of us who are really motivated to learn, which, if it was the other way round and it was mandated, and it was at the end of a shift or something like that, I don’t think it’d have as much worth.”

- **Making provision accessible.** Delivering ESOL provision in the workplace makes it more accessible for employees who would struggle to access mainstream provision alongside their work and family commitments:

“[P]rovision being accessible to them is the most important thing I feel because they’re all adults, they’ve got families, they’ve got jobs. To bring the provision to them rather than them having to come to a college that is the first most important thing about this.”

- **Contextualising learning in an employment setting.** Interviewees identified the importance of responding to employers’ specific needs as a way of incentivising them to engage:

“[E]ach employment setting is different, with its own challenges and its own staff issues, if you want to call them issues, and we need to be reactive to that in designing a delivery of a course that’s bespoke.”

- **Addressing learner’s wider needs.** While contextualising learning in a workplace setting has clear benefits, employees will often have broader motivations for learning

¹³ [People who cannot speak English well are more likely to be in poor health - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/people-in-the-uk/population-and-demography/ethnicity-and-nationality/ethnicity-and-nationality-in-the-uk)

¹⁴ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) equality impact assessment

English, for example, a desire to develop the skills to socialise and integrate into their communities. Responding to these motivations can improve engagement and retention.

“Obviously like I've been doing contextualising everything, if whoever is going to deliver the course can make sure that that's done ... and also actually give them the English because at the end of the day they're there to learn the English, the language.”

- **Using qualified and experienced ESOL teachers.** Qualified ESOL tutors offer different expertise to in-house HR training providers, which can better meet the needs of workers where English is not their first language. ESOL tutors may also be better equipped to differentiate provision to learners' needs and help them to develop broader English language skills.

There are parallels between these key learnings and existing evidence on what works for workplace essential skills provision¹⁵, which has found that:

- It is important to understand employer motivations for engaging in workplace learning programmes and to communicate how essential skills programmes can meet these needs.
- Providers need to work out a delivery model that suits employers and employees, considering employers' business needs and employees' work/life balance.

¹⁵ Learning and Work Institute (2019) *What works to improve adult essential skills?*

5. Key learning

This section of the report presents lessons learned from this research about drivers of participation in essential skills learning at a local level in England. It also explores how this learning corroborates the existing evidence on strategies to promote essential skills learning outlined in our recent briefing paper¹⁶, and considers how place-based learning can incorporate these strategies to facilitate engagement.

Key learning 1: Tailoring adult essential skills provision to adults' motivations and interests can incentivise participation

Providers across all three regions identified that essential skills provision is most effective when it responds to the motivations and interests of adult learners, rather than focusing narrowly on qualifications. The strategies they identified for ensuring this align with recommendations from our previous evidence review, including:

- Using specific motivations that are relevant to each learner group as hooks.
- Providing short 'taster' courses that reflect learners' interests.
- Ensuring that course content is relevant to the lives of learners, for example, by linking materials to real life or workplace situations so that they do not seem abstract.
- Naming courses in a way that is non-threatening and engaging – previous research indicates that the names of courses, such as 'numeracy' or 'basic maths' may be off-putting for learners who lack confidence, had negative experiences at school, or believe there is a stigma around essential skills learning.

The pilot projects delivered by St Helens and WVC offer positive examples of how messaging and course content can be tailored to learners' motivations, such as a desire to support their children's learning or to learn English and integrate into their local communities. These cases also demonstrate how a clear understanding of local context (e.g. low adult literacy rates, high levels of ESOL need in the workforce) is essential to appropriately tailor provision.

Key learning 2: It is important to respond to adult learners' broader needs

Providers recognised that adults who lack essential skills often face multiple barriers to learning, including practical barriers resulting from high levels of deprivation, as well as low confidence or anxiety about learning. They emphasised the importance of working to reduce these barriers through building positive relationships with learners, fostering a learning environment which is welcoming for adults (rather than feeling like 'going back to

¹⁶ *Ibid*

school'), and reducing practical barriers – for example, through flexible timetabling to fit around learners' work and family commitments, or financial support to access IT equipment. The Liverpool City Region pilot projects demonstrate how some of these strategies can be used in practice. This learning aligns with the findings from our previous evidence review, which highlighted the importance of responding to learners' individual needs by:

- Being flexible and adapting to the changing life circumstances and priorities of learners.
- Providing practical and social support for learners to remove barriers to engagement with learning, including one to one support from a trusted person.
- Addressing common barriers faced by those learning essential skills, for example, issues related to a lack of confidence or the perceived stigma of being an essential skills learner.

The Liverpool City Region pilot studies also offer some indication that these approaches can help to engage adults who we know from wider research are less likely to take part in learning, including older adults and those with no or low-level qualifications, although relatively low learner numbers mean that these findings should be treated with caution.

Key learning 3: Effective partnership working can drive participation and ensure that learners' needs are met

Providers from all areas discussed the importance of working in partnership with other training providers and community organisations to facilitate referrals. They recognised the unique position of voluntary and community sector organisations in building relationships with harder-to-reach adults, who may not approach learning providers directly owing to a lack of confidence. Additionally, providers from South Yorkshire noted how partnerships between training providers can result in referrals and ensure that learners' learning and progression needs are met. These findings are in line with existing research, which highlights the key role of partnership working in engaging with harder-to-reach groups, particularly through relationships with community and voluntary sector organisations who are already well-networked and strongly embedded in their communities. However, providers also highlighted challenges around this, including a lack of funding and resource for engagement/relationship building and low numbers of referrals from community organisations. South Yorkshire providers' suggestions around developing consortium-based approaches may offer a practical solution to these issues, although this approach also requires time and resource to maintain.

Key learning 4: Reaching out to learners in their communities can encourage engagement and embed learning into their lives

Providers identified the importance of taking essential skills learning out to adults in their communities, rather than expecting them to seek out provision. Delivering in settings that

are accessible and familiar to learners also reduces barriers to engagement and helps to embed learning into their lives. These findings are consistent with previous research, which shows that a diverse range of settings can better meet the needs of different learner groups; for example, community provision may be more effective than mainstream provision for vulnerable and harder-to-reach groups, while learning environments outside the classroom may be more appealing for learners who have had negative experiences at school.

Key learning 5: Engaging with employers to offer essential skills provision can make learning more accessible and reduce barriers to engagement

WVC's pilot project demonstrates how offering ESOL provision within a workplace setting and which is tailored to employers' specific needs can incentivise engagement for both learners and employers. In this case, the provider worked with an employer to identify a specific area of need, and to build a course which responded to these needs by tailoring course content to be specific to the workplace. The provider and employer worked together to ensure that learning was accessible by paying learners to attend as part of their shift allowance, and offered the course on a voluntary basis to ensure that learners were motivated to attend. These strategies align with recommendations from our previous research, including¹⁷:

- It is important to understand employer motivations for engaging in workplace learning programmes and to communicate how essential skills programmes can meet these needs.
- Providers need to work out a delivery model that suits employers and employees, considering employers' business needs and employees' work/life balance.
- Voluntary participation essential skills learning is more likely to lead to full engagement than involuntary attendance, for example, as a result of a mandatory requirement from Jobcentre Plus.

With providers across all three local areas identifying a growing demand for ESOL provision, it is likely that similar approaches can be deployed to address this need, while also providing a hook to engage with local employers. However, it is worth considering whether short-term workplace interventions are always best placed to equip learners with the wider skills that they need. In the case of WVC, the ESOL tutor was experienced in offering provision in other settings, and so was able to embed work-related content into a broader English language curriculum. If a similar model is adopted in other contexts, it will

¹⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2019) *What works to improve adult essential skills?*; Learning and Work Institute (2020) *Better essential skills: better business. A guide for learning providers.*

be important to ensure that learners have opportunities to develop their broader English skills, or are signposted to further provision where they can do so.

6. Conclusion and policy implications

This report builds on the case for action in adult essential skills set out in the [Getting the Basics Right](#) paper. It adopts a place-based approach to explore what effective practices to drive up essential skills participation look like at a local level in England. The research focused specifically on the factors and approaches driving or hindering essential skills participation in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority and West of England Combined Authority.

We found that the learning emerging from local approaches is in line with the existing evidence base on what works to incentivise participation in essential skills learning. Insight from all three areas points to the effectiveness of using engagement strategies that are tailored to adult learners' interests and needs. These range from adapting courses' names to offering taster courses and conducting community outreach in partnership with local organisations.

Local areas were in agreement that additional strategies were required to keep adult essential skills learners engaged following a successful enrolment. These focused on how provision can respond to adult learners' wider sets of needs, including limited availability due to childcare responsibilities or work, and be tailored to include content that is relevant to learners' lives. Some of the key successful practices highlighted in this research include flexible timetabling, differentiated support facilitated by small class sizes, tailoring content to learners' parenting or working needs and fostering a suitable learning environment for adult learners in an accessible setting.

The place-based findings emerging from this research align with and strengthen the conclusions of our evidence review¹⁸ on what works to improve adult essential skills. Both stress the need to build the design and delivery of adult essential skills provision on a robust understanding of learners' motivations, practical needs and factors that may prevent them from identifying gaps in their essential skills or accessing provision when necessary.

Against a background of high levels of adult essential skills need – with 9 million working-age people having low literacy or numeracy in England – and a significant fall in adult essential skills participation in the last ten years, this research highlights several policy areas where urgent action is needed.

- 1. Improving essential skills should be a national and local priority, with a sustained effort to engage adults and employers and ambition to increase participation and achievement to at least 2010 levels.**

¹⁸ Learning and Work Institute (2019) [Evidence review: what works to improve adult essential skills?](#)

In line with the existing evidence base, this research highlights individuals' difficulties in identifying essential skills needs and the stigma attached to low essential skills as two structural difficulties to improving participation. This is particularly the case for literacy and numeracy, which have also seen the starkest decrease in participation from 2012 to 2020 – by 63 and 62 per cent, respectively. To address this challenge:

- **National and local government must make adult essential skills a priority across policy areas.** Providers highlighted that a lack of prioritisation of essential skills learning affected demand, both due to its impact on referral pathways and on the wider investment in this provision. Prioritising the identification of essential skills needs across other public services – such as Jobcentre Plus and housing provision – can play a vital role in supporting individuals furthest away from provision.
- **National and local action is needed to encourage people to be open about their skills and come forward to improve them, addressing social stigma.** Existing evidence highlights the role social stigma plays in preventing individuals from identifying and accessing essential skills provision when they need it. Due to the systemic nature of this stigma, concerted national and local measures are required. For example, the existing Skills for Life campaign should deploy specific initiatives aimed at addressing misconceptions surrounding low essential skills, in addition to highlighting the benefits of accessing this provision. Local and Mayoral Combined Authority initiatives can also be key in complementing this effort and ensuring it reaches local audiences and those furthest away from provision.
- **National and local government plus adult education providers need to invest in sustainable partner engagement and increased integration of provision.** Community outreach is key to the successful identification of adult essential skills needs and effective engagement of potential learners. This requires continuous partnership engagement which has been difficult to do sustainably while the adult education budget was being cut. Partnership working is also key to increasing the integration of provision, which can support learners in accessing suitable learning and progressing into higher level learning. With adult skills funding now increasing again, these partnerships need to be a priority and necessary resources and capacity-building should be made available to strengthen them.

2. A flexible approach to English, maths and ESOL provision can help increase participation.

This research identified that essential skills provision is most effective when it responds to the motivations and interests of adult learners through flexibility in outreach, location, content and size. This finding highlights several policy implications for the design and delivery of essential skills learning:

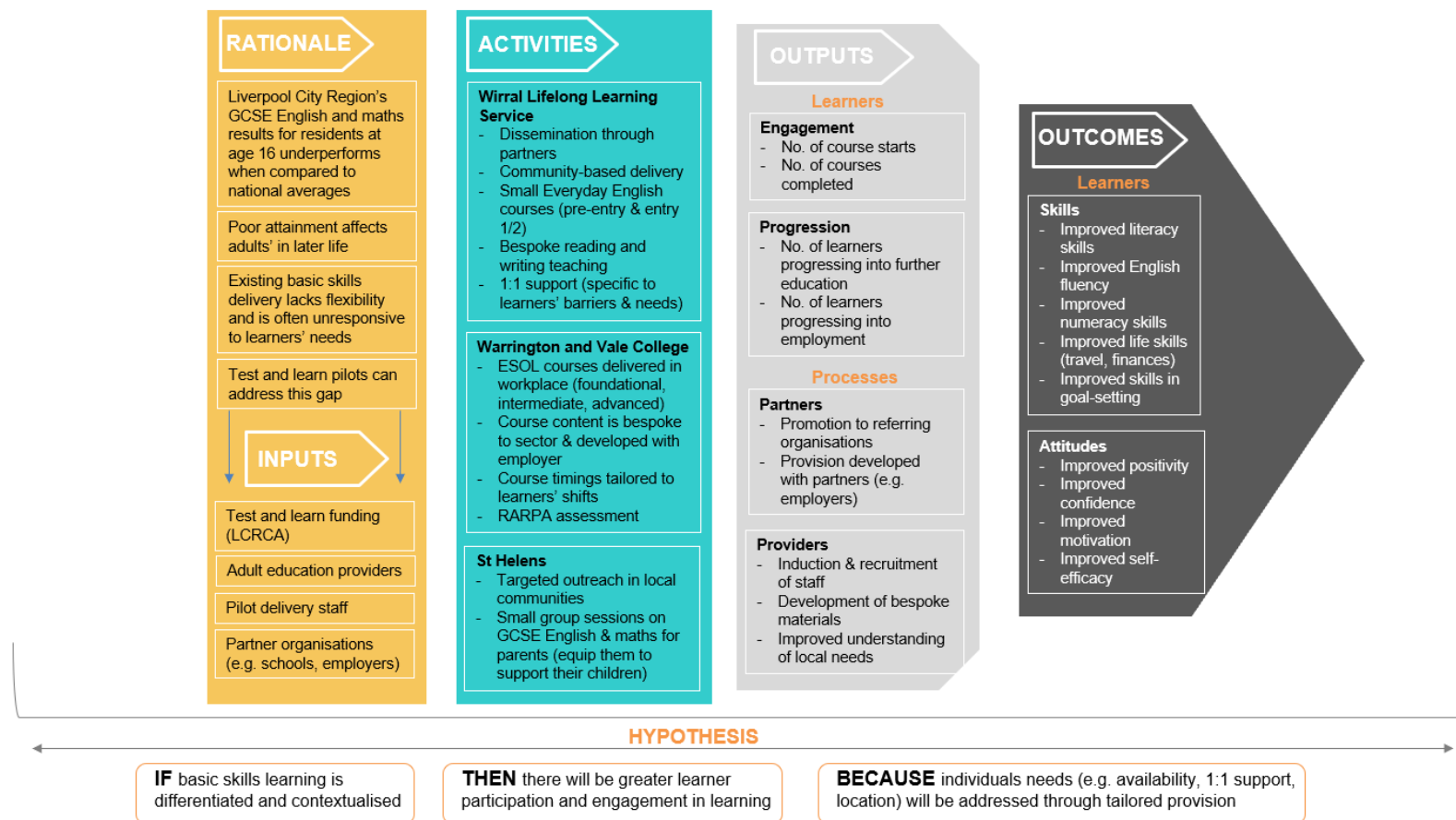
- **We need a broad focus on the economic and social outcomes of learning, as well as qualifications, and of the role played by flexible provision in achieving them.** Moving away from a narrow focus on qualifications, this research points to the positive effect delivering contextualised learning in accessible settings can have on essential skills participation and progression into formal learning. This learning can, in turn, result in a range of employment, economic and social benefits for

learners, including access to better quality work and improved self-esteem and wellbeing¹⁹. Further support is therefore needed to support adult education providers in developing an improved understanding of how to use existing flexibilities within funding arrangements, including through enhanced guidance from commissioners/ESFA.

- **It is key to build an enhanced evidence base on how non-formal essential skills learning can support progression into further, formal learning.** Given the encouraging examples from this project and the wider literature, further research should take place to understand the benefits and impacts of less formal forms of essential skills learning, to help understand 'what works' in engaging adults. This could include piloting of different approaches and testing a range of outcomes measures to evidence impact.
- **Greater investment in employer engagement is required to expand essential skills provision available for individuals in work.** Creating essential skills provision in the workplace involves sustained and resource-intensive engagement with employers on behalf of training providers. Resources for employer engagement activities can enable providers to expand this type of provision and reach potential learners in the workplace. Another welcome approach would involve a greater use of existing levers available to central and local government and aimed at incentivising employers to identify employees' essential skills needs and support their access to provision. For example, this can include the public sector leading by example (e.g. by supporting existing employees access essential skills provision); local and national government encouraging employers to engage in essential skills through existing relationships; and considering building essential skills into public procurement.

¹⁹ Learning and Work Institute (2021) [Getting the basics right](#)

7. Appendix – LCRCA Test and Learn Pilots' ToC



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