

Hillingdon's Adult and Community Learning Service



A review by the Residents, Education & Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee (2020/21)

Members of the Committee: Councillors Wayne Bridges (Chairman), John Morgan (Vice Chairman), Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead), Allan Kauffman, Devi Radia, Colleen Sullivan, Alan Chapman, Stuart Mathers, Paula Rodrigues & Mr Tony Little



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Chairman's Foreword

On behalf of the former Residents, Education and Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee, I am pleased to present this report detailing the Committee's review into Hillingdon's Adult and Community Learning Service.

Following presentation of the Ofsted review of the service carried out in December 2019, and the following self-assessment report by the service itself, it became clear that the service was performing well. The review therefore focused on how to make further improvements to promote resident awareness and broaden participation, together with ensuring that the service remained agile to learner needs in a post-Covid world.

Information gathering focused on understanding the current service offering to residents, how the service had adapted to ensure service continuity throughout the pandemic, and what further challenges were to be overcome to turn a 'good' service into an 'outstanding' one.

Through all information gathering, the Committee was mindful of the need to find cost-effective, workable solutions, and the recommendations in this report are endorsed as prudent, effective actions to maintain and grow learner participation and achievement.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those officers and volunteers who have given up their time to help the Committee in reviewing this topic, and commend them for their continued hard work to support residents in their personal and professional development.

Councillor Wayne Bridges

Chairman of the former Residents, Education and Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee, and current Chairman of the Environment, Housing and Regeneration Select Committee.



Summary of recommendations to Cabinet

Through the witness testimony and evidence received during the detailed review by the Committee, Members have agreed the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- 1** That Cabinet recognises the good work and improvisation of the HACL service during the recent COVID pandemic and notes the new ways of working identified and underway.
- 2** That the service be rebranded to 'Hillingdon ACE' (Adult & Community Education), supported by a communications campaign to support a 'soft relaunch' of the service to stimulate demand and uptake of courses.
- 3** That the service continues with the new ways of working identified as a result of the pandemic, including increased use of technology, support for blended learning, instigation of new courses, and increased interdepartmental and partnership working via new processes.
- 4** That officers continue lobbying the GLA to increase their grant funding allocation, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Families, Education and Wellbeing, and also investigate other funding or lobbying options.
- 5** That Council continues to review and develop oversight and scrutiny, and includes an annual report to the Families, Education and Wellbeing Select Committee & Cabinet Member (inclusive of feedback from learners and tutors).

Background to the review

At its meeting of 03 November 2020, the Residents, Education and Environmental Services Committee (now retired) considered the topic of Hillingdon's Adult and Community Learning Service (HACL) as its next major review.

Members were provided with an overview of the service, and understood that the service provided the following:

- Courses for Adults with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD)
- Community based courses that engage residents facing particular disadvantages (Engagement - delete engagement)
- Emotional Health and Wellbeing
- English, Maths and ESOL
- Digital Skills, IT and Business
- Vocational Learning
- Courses for Personal Development

The service's main learning centre was confirmed to be located at Brookfield in Uxbridge, with Harlington acting as the centre in the south. Two additional centres were located in South Ruislip and Ruislip Manor, both of which are shared with the Library Service. Courses were run in centres and online, or as a blend of the two, and many are run in the community as outreach provision.

It was noted that the service was externally funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the GLA following the delegation of funds to the Mayor of London in August 2019. Historically, approximately 3000 learners have taken courses a year, resulting in approximately 5000 enrolments, the vast majority of whom are Hillingdon residents.

The Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning, advised that whilst grant funding remained stable, the additional funding generated by the Strategic Investment Pot funding bid would end when the two-year project completed in March 2021. Any reduction in fee income because of declining learner numbers (for example, due to the Covid-19 pandemic), could also impact on the financial viability of certain courses.

While courses aimed to be as accessible as possible to residents, the Covid-19 pandemic and periodic lockdowns had meant that some residents had been unable to attend classes in person. The move to virtual learning, using remote meeting technology, had also proved difficult for some learners, through a combination of lack of IT skills or lack of availability of the requisite IT equipment at home.

Members were keen that any review focused on understanding how the service was helping support resident participation, how the service was helping residents to prepare to enter or re-enter employment, and how the service was helping residents to manage stress and mental health within

its cohorts (particularly as residents were learning to cope with the pressures of the pandemic). In addition, Members requested that the review addressed how the service was set up to cope with demand for its current, and potential new, courses, and how the service was addressing the areas for further improvement raised by Ofsted following their inspection in December 2019.

It was expected that a greater understanding of these areas of the service could highlight potential improvements, including how to further support learners in a post-pandemic world, whether there were any efficiencies to be gained by increased interdepartmental or partnership working, how to further promote the service to residents across the Borough, and whether there was any scope for increased funding.

The Committee considered that a strong understanding of these issues was a source of great importance for the residents of Hillingdon, and therefore, approved the topic as its next major review.

Evidence & Witness Testimony

The Committee's first information gathering session was held on 23 February 2021 and was themed around broadening an understanding of the service through feedback from officers and service users. The session was attended by Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning), Thoria King (Curriculum Manager for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities team), Ginette Powis (Sessional tutor for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities) and Ebony Gonzalez (Learner who completed ESOL and Maths courses during the lockdown period).

The second information gathering session was held on 17 March 2021 and focused on the planned service offer for 2021-22, including the available funding and how it was to be used in comparison with other West London providers. The session was attended by Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning), Cristi Gonzalez (Ealing Adult Learning Manager), and Eamon Scanlon (Head of Adult Learning and Skills Service, LB Hammersmith and Fulham).

The final information gathering session was held on 20 April 2021 and was themed around current and future challenges and opportunities, and was attended by Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning).

The sections below summarise the information presented to the Committee by way of witness testimony and supporting written data.

The benefit of Adult Education to residents & Hillingdon's mission statement:

Firstly, the Committee wished to understand the current service offering and resultant benefits to residents. To aid this, the Committee was provided with the 'LGA Handbook for Councillors', (**Appendix E**), which suggested that adult education services had outcomes in six main categories:

1. Employment, skills and qualifications
2. Health and wellbeing
3. Integrations and inclusion
4. Culture and creativity
5. Attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics
6. Life transitions.

The handbook went on to list several clear positive impacts on learners because of adult education, including gaining and retaining employment, increased earnings, and aspirations, improved mental

health, healthier lifestyle choices, boosted social connections and cohesion, greater community involvement and democratic participation, and reduced crime and antisocial behaviour.

Hillingdon's Adult and Community Learning's mission statement was therefore aligned to these six categories, and promised that:

'Every learner receives an outstanding learning experience that supports them towards a clearly identified and ambitious goal and encourages their economic, social and emotional wellbeing'.

Performance of the service

The Committee was advised that each year, the service produced its own self-assessment report (**Appendix B**). Each report contained an overview of the service, including learner profiles and achievements, recent Ofsted inspections, and now, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the most recent report, the service gave itself a score of **'2 – Good'**, which was in line with the grade given by Ofsted following their most recent inspection in December 2019.

Ofsted's Review

Ofsted inspects all publicly funded education providers on a 3-year cycle, inspecting against criteria laid out in its Education Inspection Framework. HACL was last inspected in December 2019 and as due for inspection again in the 2022-23 academic year.

During its review in December 2019, Ofsted's focus was on the impact of the education provided to learners, with judgements made against four key areas:

- Quality of Education through the 'Intent', 'Implementation' and 'Impact' of the curriculum offer
- Behaviour and Attitudes
- Personal Development
- Leadership and Management.

Within the Leadership and Management section of their guide to reviews, Ofsted states that inspectors evaluate the extent to which,

'those responsible for governance understand their role and carry this out effectively. They ensure that the provider has a clear vision and strategy and that resources are managed well. They hold leaders to account for the quality of education or training', (Ofsted Inspectors Handbook, 2019).

Following the most recent review in December 2019, a 'good' verdict was achieved (**Appendix C**). However, inspectors highlighted a number of areas requiring improvement, set out below, alongside the work currently underway to address these:

Ofsted recommendation	Officer response
Targeted professional development is required to ensure that feedback from tutors consistently helps learners improve the standard of their writing including their spelling, punctuation and grammar.”	The service had addressed this through additional training for staff.
Existing measures to robustly and effectively capture the impact of the curriculum on learners’ lives should be strengthened. Improved progression data will help managers to better understand the learner journey and plan for learner progression over longer periods of time.	To address this, the service’s data systems were to be reviewed and updated to improve data capture.
Senior leaders should put in place arrangements that provide the support and challenge managers need to improve further the quality of education provided.	To address this, officers, together with the Cabinet Member for Families, Education and Wellbeing, were working to provide additional support. Officers had also reviewed the feasibility of creating a regular ‘advisory board’ meeting with the relevant stakeholders to share best practice and canvas opinions regarding direction of travel for the service.

On the last recommendation, the Committee noted that due to the new Select Committee structure in place as of May 2021, Councillors would not attend any such meetings, and to demonstrate that Hillingdon was providing support and challenge as highlighted by Ofsted, it was suggested that the Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning, bring an annual report to the new Families, Education and Wellbeing Select Committee as a regular part of its work programme.

Learner Profiles

The Committee was provided with additional detail regarding the profile of residents engaging with the service, and their achievements. In 2019-20, the HACL learner profile was:

Residency	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Hillingdon resident	4610 (91.2%)	4798 (92.8%)	3566 (90.9%)
London resident	318 (6.3%)	256 (5.0%)	301 (7.7%)
Out of London resident	123 (2.4%)	116 (2.2%)	58 (1.5%)
Total	5051	5170	3925

Two thirds of learners were from the south of the Borough, likely due to the fact that the area had a proportionately higher number of lower skilled or unemployed residents, who were attempting to

upskill with the aim of furthering their job prospects or career development. Learners in the north tended to be an older group that chose take up more courses focusing on personal or social development, particularly during retirement. In addition, this older group had often been less comfortable using online meeting tools, and so learner numbers had fallen during the pandemic.

The Committee was advised that the majority of residents engaging with the service were women, often with low confidence or with little formal education.

Achievement Rates in a pandemic:

The Committee was advised that achievement rates across the service in 2019-20 had been good for learners who had adapted to online learning and there had been no significant difference in achievements between learners living in the north and south of the Borough. However, lower enrolment and retention rates had impacted on results in some curriculum areas leading to varied and nuanced rates within and between curriculum areas and provision types. Further detail is set out in the table below:

Service Headline Data	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	5051	5170	3925
Retention	93%	92.6%	84.7%
Pass Rate (results of those who stay until the end of the course)	95.5%	96.6%	92.9%
Achievement Rate (results of those who left before the end of the course)	88.9%	89.5%	78.6%
Underpinning data			
Qualification courses and non-regulated ASB	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	2423	2236	1992
Retention	93.4%	93.6%	79.2%
Pass Rate	95.0%	95.9%	92.0%
Achievement Rate	88.7%	89.8%	73.0%
Community Learning: Personal Development courses	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20

Enrolments	1816	1351	1012
Retention	94.6%	92.2%	93.0%
Pass Rate	93.6%	96.9%	95.9%
Achievement Rate	88.5%	89.9%	89.2%
Community Learning: Targeted Outreach	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	722	1512	921
Retention	93.2%	92.1%	86.9%
Pass Rate	93.6%	96.9%	93.4%
Achievement Rate	88.5%	89.4%	81.2%

Pass rates within Hillingdon for the last year were confirmed to be approximately 90%, despite the impact of the pandemic.

The Committee considered the strengths of the service identified by officers which included effective leadership and management, team working, and financial and resource management, as well as the quality of the education provided. The team's ability to respond to emerging issues had been seen in the swift efforts to address the impact of Covid-19 on the way in which the service was delivered, and which had resulted in the positive numbers of learners achieving their qualifications in June 2020.

It was noted that comparisons to statistical neighbours were difficult to determine due to differences in population sizes, learner demographics, and grant funding levels.

Enrolment numbers for the 20-21 academic year were confirmed as 3860, which equated to 1758 learners. More recent retention, pass and achievement data was not yet available, as the service was awaiting outstanding qualification results to be confirmed from the awarding bodies, or the signing-off of portfolio work.

Bidding for additional course offerings & certification

The Committee learnt that the service regularly bid for additional projects to develop the course offer and provide support to residents. In 2019-20 these included the Strategic Investment Pot (education and careers advice and intensive support for learners to overcome barriers to learning); the Talk English project (for residents with low levels of English to begin speaking and listening in English); and work to develop and upskill childminders, in partnership with local authority colleagues.

The service also has a manager whose role includes overseeing vocational and employment partnerships, with the aim of furthering partnership working including film and television-based courses covering make up, costume design and creation, etc, and another whose role includes targeting outreach programmes at the most deprived and disadvantaged of Hillingdon's residents.

The Committee learnt that the service regularly bid for additional projects to develop the course offer and provide support to residents that was not possible within the grant funding rules. In 2019-20 these included the Talk English project (for residents with low levels of English to begin speaking and listening in English); work to develop and upskill childminders, in partnership with local authority colleagues and the Strategic Investment Pot. The latter funding was for a 2-year project which enabled HACL to provide the most disadvantaged residents with education and careers advice, intensive support for residents to overcome additional barriers to learning, staff training and bespoke courses for community partners, and targeted work-skills development for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. Although the funding for this project has ended, most of the support developed for residents has been sustained by the service.

The Committee were informed that a wide range of English, maths and vocational qualifications were available to Hillingdon's adult residents. As of September 2020, the Government had funded new courses on developing digital skills, for which certifications were given upon completion. Whilst awaiting publication of the new qualifications, courses until this point had focused on introducing learners to digital learning, while adults with learning difficulties or disabilities (ALDD) had been provided with a low-level 'how it works' courses in an effort to promote comfort with online learning. Once introductory courses were completed, learners could move into the higher-level certified courses. In January 2021, new funding was released, which allowed for more digital skills courses across all learner groups.

Mental Health & Wellbeing of learners

The Committee was particularly keen to understand how the service was promoting and supporting good mental health within its learner cohorts and were advised that the service had been building mental health provision for several years, called 'emotional health and wellbeing'. When courses had moved online as a result of Covid-19, mental health provision was also moved online. For some learners, this was not suitable, however optional online wellbeing questionnaires had seen increased submissions vs. in-person questionnaires, possibly due to the increased confidentiality that the online medium afforded. Enrolments into the mental health provision had decreased, though this was expected to rise once people were allowed back into centres. The 'In Your Shoes' provision, a course designed to help parents support their children's mental health, had seen a significant rise in numbers. Recent team restructuring had resulted in a dedicated officer whose role was to help support health and social care within the service.

Hillingdon's support for mental health was provided free of charge to all learners, with general service fees used to support those learners who did not pay for courses. The Committee was advised that interdepartmental working had increased, for example via referrals to the social care teams, and external organisations such as MIND and Hillingdon Carers were regularly engaged.

Officers were proactive, with targeted outreach involving GP's, neighbourhood care teams, public health etc. Ealing and Hammersmith and Fulham highlighted additional engagement with partners such as MENCAP, housing associations, Hoxex, and the Education and Training Foundation, among others, reflecting the position in Hillingdon.

The Committee recognised that further work could be done to promote the services available among Hillingdon residents, many of whom were unaware of the availability of the service. Such promotional work could result in increased uptake of the service among all demographics.

Funding

The majority of funding for the Council's Adult Education service was via the Department for Education's (DfE's) adult education budget, apportioned by the ESFA. However, funding had reduced markedly in recent years, with national funding reduced by 47% between 2009/10 and 2018/19. In March 2021, with the externally funded Strategic Investment Pot completed and a reduction in learner numbers due to ongoing Covid-19, fee income had reduced.

The Committee noted that Government funding levels were allocated to different boroughs based on historical figures and had not been reviewed in many years. It was highlighted that the GLA could potentially review funding in the future, but that this would require successful lobbying by officers. Hillingdon was recognised as having the third lowest funding in West London. LBH funding compared to that of Hammersmith and Fulham can be found in the table below:

Hillingdon vs. Hammersmith and Fulham LA Adult Education services comparative data.

Data type	LB Hillingdon Adult Education service		LB Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education service	
		Notes		Notes
Annual grant funding level	£1.489m		£2.8m	
No of learners	2,917	93% Hillingdon residents	6,480	87% H&F residents
No of enrolments	5,170		9,320	

Officers provided the figures below which summarised the service's income in 2018-19, (the last full year of education and funding prior to the interruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic). 'Learners' are the total individuals engaging with the service, with some learners signing up to multiple courses ('enrolments').

Academic year 2018-19	Data	Notes
No of learners	2917	
No of course enrolments	5,170	(93% Hillingdon residents)
Funding total (only ESFA in 18/19)	1,489,375	AEB devolved to GLA in Aug 2019.
	761,079	
of which qualifications	728,296	

of which non-qualifications		GLA funding this academic year is £1,524,877, plus ESFA funding 20-21 of £60,217
Adult Learning Loans allocation	127,461	
Additional funding:		
Flexible Learning Fund	61,976	Year 2 of 2
Talk English project	42,250	Year 1 of 2 (total sum shown)
Strategic Investment Pot (SIP)	470,000	
Local Authority income:		
Fee concession subsidy	70,000	20-21: £60k
Early Years funding	20,000	

The Committee noted that in November 2020, the GLA granted an additional £100k for courses focusing on employment due to increased threat of redundancy due to the pandemic. However, the funding had come with the caveat that qualifications were required, and so the service was trying to balance this requirement with the needs of residents. In the academic year 2020/21, the service used approximately £40k of this £100k, with the remaining £60k rolling over to the academic year 2021/22.

In April 2021, a further £15k was granted by the GLA to take into account a new funding initiative that gave some free funding for a selection of L3 courses, if the learner reached the correct criteria to benefit from this pot of funding.

£25k had recently been granted for new equipment, with £77k approved for the remainder of equipment, with the aim of increasing lending stock of chromebooks and laptops, among other resources. This enabled the service to introduce a new 'learn and loan' scheme, which allowed learners to borrow the devices to support their learning. At times, procuring sufficient equipment from suppliers had been difficult, due to overall marketplace demand during the pandemic.

Similar to neighbours such as Ealing or Hammersmith & Fulham, core funding was received via grants from the GLA or ESFA. Where appropriate, fees were charged in line with funding rules, with lower fees or concessions provided for learners receiving benefits, or from certain socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, in Hillingdon, residents were subsidised by £60k annually, to ensure tuition fees remain low.

Grant funding levels varied between West London councils but were recognised as being too low to meet demand for qualifications in Hillingdon. In addition, the removal of the £60k Council subsidy in the current economic climate could require an increase in fees and charges.

Strategic Investment Pot (2019-21)

The Committee were informed that in 2018, the City of London Corporation had launched the Strategic Investment Pot (SIP) project, utilising newly devolved rates to fund London's councils to identify and meet local skills needs in their area. Hillingdon was awarded £470k against the Skills Agenda for the Adult and Community Learning service's bid (HACL) to deliver against the following five identified strands. One of the challenges facing the service was to identify ways in which to ensure this legacy work continued:

1. Increasing the reach and scale of ESOL to get residents into work.
2. Providing opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) to engage with work.
3. Developing an information, advice and guidance hub that provides residents with support and work experience.
4. Enabling tutors and partner organisations to support residents with English, mathematics and digital skills. We wanted to reach out to more community-based 3rd sector partners to support their survival and to access some of these target residents.
5. Targeting support to remove barriers to progression for particular groups, for example we wanted to target new home-base childcare micro-businesses and help them to overcome the barriers of the first two years, when enterprises are most at risk of failure.

The Committee was advised that the Strategic Investment Pot funding was unlikely to be repeated. To utilize the funding efficiently, a decision had been made at an early stage to manage the project in-house, to ensure the skills and expertise developed was retained rather than lost through engaging with external contractors. Officers advised that, despite this funding stream ending, the service was well placed to continue to sustain many of the benefits for residents, including offering free careers and education advice.

GLA Good Work for All (2021-23)

Led by the 'Good Things Foundation', the Committee were made aware of a new bidding opportunity designed to help Londoners recover following the pandemic. Focused on Digital, Health and Social Care, Green Economy and Creative Industries, it asked bidders to offer 'training, education and employability support that helped Londoners gain relevant skills, retrain and move into good work in sectors key to London's recovery'. In March 2021, the service had submitted a bid for £200k over two academic years, and though this had since been confirmed as unsuccessful, new courses have been launched to help residents gain qualifications to work in local creative industries.

Details of the programme planning for the 2021-22 academic year are attached as **Appendix D**. The AEB funding for these programmes included learning support and splits into two sections: qualification and non-qualification courses.

Funding for courses that lead to qualifications

The Committee were briefed on funding courses leading to qualifications. It was noted that the priorities for this funding were driven by improving the economic prospects for learners by increasing qualifications, to strengthen skills and CVs and lead into work/improved prospects. The ethos underpinning the funding rules was that learners should progress from beginners in their subjects (often English or maths) to qualified status in their chosen field (usually vocational) and preferably into employment or a new career.

These qualification courses attracted fixed amounts of funding for each enrolment. Some qualifications were fully funded for all, so learners made no financial contributions, e.g. English, maths and digital skills up to and including level 2 (GCSE). Where this was the case, the full amount of funding was drawn from the Council's grant.

Other qualifications were fully funded for the unemployed and those on a low wage (less than London living wage). Learners not in these categories are co-funded, which meant the service could utilise its grant to pay up to 50% of course fees. 25% of the balance had historically been paid by the Council in concessions, with the learner contributing the rest. Each course had four Fee Bands attached, and fees were paid according to means, (for example, Band 1 was the fee for learners not in receipt of any benefits, whereas Band 3 was for the unemployed or low waged i.e. below London Living Wage). By recruiting enough 'learners', the Council 'earned' its grant allocation for qualifications of £823k.

Although the service could deliver any qualifications it wishes, only those specifically listed on the Learning Aims Register and in line with government priorities attracted funding, which influenced choices when designing the qualification programme offer.

Funding for courses that do not lead to qualifications

The Committee noted that this was funded differently from qualifications funding and termed "community learning". The priority for this £705k funding was to engage those furthest away from seeking learning opportunities and encourage them to improve their social and mental wellbeing, as well as support, for example, their children's own learning and development.

The 'Community Learning' funding was broken into two distinct types of provision:

- a. **Community Development** courses relied on partnership work, most often with the 3rd sector but also with schools, children's centres and libraries, and were targeted at the most disadvantaged residents and those in deprived areas, many of whom were least likely to have the time or financial resources to attend classes or who may have had poor educational experiences as a child resulting in personal barriers to learning.

This provision was delivered in partner premises across the Borough. It was offered free, funded from the Community Learning funding stream, and was usually made up of shorter (e.g. 10 hour) courses that build up in duration and difficulty over time.

Target groups included:

- those with mental health issues;
- carers;
- parents who need to improve their own English and maths to support their children's education;
- families who would benefit from multi-generational learning to encourage cooperative interactions and strengthen relationships;
- those with long-term health issues, such as stroke, dementia, diabetes, obesity;
- those most isolated from the wider community, such as older members of minority ethnic groups who are most likely to stay within their own communities;
- asylum seekers who often need basic English skills to support their settlement;
- specific vulnerable groups, through work with partner organisations e.g. Hillingdon Women's Centre re domestic abuse; Hestia re modern slavery;
- those who are the lowest skilled/lowest paid who would not otherwise recognise or engage in learning as a means to enhancing their life chances.

The purpose of this provision was to help learners progress into the wider community, such as volunteering and/or progressing into formal qualifications through more demanding, stepping-stone courses. Along the way, most began to build their social and emotional capital and see their own potential, increasing their self-esteem and allowing them to imagine a better future for themselves and their families.

b. Personal Development courses. Traditionally seen as 'leisure courses', learners reported that their learning these new skills reduced isolation (especially for older learners), improved wellbeing and 'keeps the brain cells ticking over' for working and post-retirement learners. These learners used their disposable income to pay tuition fees and while they did not often progress into qualifications, they did go into volunteering, self-directed clubs and new social networks. Learners could spend years trying out new courses with the service, whether learning a language, developing arts and crafts skills or keeping fit through yoga classes. Courses were run day and evening, usually in the north of the Borough where demand was greatest.

Other funding

Members were informed that from April 2021, residents who were attempting their first full Level 3 qualification would be fully funded through the government's Lifetime Skills Guarantee; if they already had a full level 3 qualification (2 'A' Levels or equivalent), they were able to take out a student loan or pay their fees independently.

A long-standing partnership with the Council's Early Years team allocated £20k p.a. to the service to provide initial training and CPD opportunities to the Borough's childminders, which had raised standards of childcare in the Borough. The service's online Childminder's Forum had encouraged online learning, networking and peer support opportunities for these micro-businesses.

A pilot project working with Adult Social Care whilst utilising the Designated Schools Grant had funded the service to provide bespoke courses for eight young people with learning difficulties and disabilities who had Education, Health and Care plans or through the Council's Education Support Allowance. Adult Social Care officers have since confirmed continued funding for those already on the pilot, though there is no confirmation to date that this funding will be approved for any more residents with LLD.

Response to the Pandemic

The Committee was particularly invested in understanding how the service had adapted its course delivery and learner support as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning), Thoria King (Curriculum Manager for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities team), Ginette Powis (Sessional tutor for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities) advised the Committee that this had been a uniquely challenging period for the service, especially for residents with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) most of whom struggle to learn online.

In March 2020, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, delivery of the courses had been forced to change to online or stop. Although some classroom and homework activities were already carried out online within the courses delivered in person at the services learning centres using the service's virtual learning environment (Moodle), when the lockdowns came delivery of face-to-face courses had to be postponed and the centres were closed. Those learners in higher level qualification courses who could manage online learning were able to continue their classes with additional support in place. However, whilst some residents did not wish to learn online, others were unable to do so, for example most adults with learning difficulties and disabilities have remained unable to adapt to online learning sufficiently to continue their classes, which resulted in a 25% achievement rate for these classes. (Courses resumed in centres once the Government's lockdown rules were relaxed.)

It was noted that in May 2020, during the first lockdown, service staff were offered training to upskill digital teaching skills. Learning more about the tools available in Moodle and using the Google G-Suite tools provided the tutors with more confidence and alleviated some of the fears they had toward using technology in teaching and learning. This contributed to the high pass rates for learners doing qualifications. Additionally, many of the general tools were not suitable for Adults with Developmental Difficulties (ALDD) and especially learners with profound cognitive disabilities so the delivery tools therefore needed to be rigorously adapted in order to be fully effective but many adults with LDD were reluctant or unable to engage in online learning despite significant additional support.

In June 2020, the service tested out its newfound skills for adults with LDD in a 5-week online pilot project involving some of its high-needs learners. Each session was taught by a pair of teachers who delivered a topic they wanted to experiment with. As the pilot progressed, whatever was learned from previous sessions was shared forward, and in this way each session improved week on week. Since September 2020, teachers of those with LDD had placed all learning activities for their sessions on Moodle and used this in their classrooms so that the learners became more

familiar with the platform. Teachers had also moved Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) online. These ILPs were posted onto Moodle pages to encourage learners to visit when out of class. Learner work completed in class each week was also posted to encourage learners to want to go online and admire their work, which helped those learners who missed classes to catch up. Then, with increasing instances of shielding and Covid-isolation, the service had encouraged learners and teachers to continue to attend remotely when necessary, providing they were well enough to do so, though this had proved challenging for learners who depended on their parent/carers, and without whom they were unable to connect.

Members heard that since some learners had been reluctant to transfer to online learning, leading to an adverse impact on their achievement rates. Other courses that relied on in-person learning, or which were held in community centres, had been paused and then resumed once lockdowns had ended. It was advised that a 'Loan and Learn scheme' had been introduced for learners that did not have devices, which had been positively received, but they still required an internet connection which was not always possible. As a result, the service had identified an area for improvement in their self-assessment report that, 'Sustainable models are needed for areas of provision and activities that didn't transition well during the pandemic, including ALDD courses, outreach, IT, volunteering and enrichment activities'.

It was welcomed by Members that the service had provided many hours of telephone support to assist learners, and their parent/carers where appropriate, to join online, which was challenging when there was no face to face physical assistance.

As many learners with LDD were in residential care or supported living, they sometimes relied on the staff to support them 1:1. This is not always possible due to staffing numbers which could result in a lack of attendance. In addition, the environment in such locations was not always appropriate and conducive to learning. e.g. in residential homes, several learners may be in the same room which makes it noisy. While this situation was out of Council control, attempts had been made to support carers to connect, and staff had demonstrated the functions of Google Meet and other meeting tools, to enable them to encourage the learner to participate as fully as possible.

The service had an established optional wellbeing and health self-assessment for learners to self-assess and disclose any mental health issues they may be facing. This assessment was refined and adapted to become an online form. Completion of this online assessment had proven popular, likely due to the additional privacy afforded to learners. Once received, the team was well placed to provide support and target interventions, where necessary, but health and financial issues meant many of this cohort were unable to join online courses.

The Committee were informed that changes to the service as a result of the pandemic would include continued provision of 'blended learning' with a number of courses remaining online, alongside an increased focus on courses linked to health and wellbeing. Members recognized that adults need a wide variety of learning models and providing face-to-face learning to allow for social interaction and engagement between learners, as well as for those learners who were unable to use remote learning technology was important. It has been noted that social interaction formed a core influence over the mental health of learners. Internal working practices between departments

had also been strengthened to better support new working practices, and by extension, learners.

Partnership working between Hillingdon and other authorities has included regular online meetings to discuss how to overcome challenges or share best practice. Joint training sessions and the sharing of resource materials was also carried out, while authorities often submitted joint bids for funding, where appropriate. Each authority engaging with Hillingdon also drafted their own annual self-assessment of their service, which was then peer reviewed by the other councils.

Work placements and volunteering opportunities for adults with learning difficulties aged over 25 were recognised as needing to increase, and to this end the service was developing pre-employment workshops to help these learners make the transition into employment. Some learners were particularly strong with regard to digital skills and were being trained to be 'digital champions' to help support their peers.

Feedback from learners & witness testimony

An important area of the Committee's interest was the user experience and feedback from the learners themselves. In general, officers advised that feedback received throughout the last 18 months had shown that learners were reporting good progress in their own personal development, behaviours and attitudes to learning. Learners had advised of feeling increased confidence, skills, and self-sufficiency. Attendance had remained high, with learners committing to their courses while managing their additional responsibilities. An annual survey of learners carried out by HACL, as well as a separate survey conducted by Ofsted, was detailed within the self-assessment report. Results showed that learners felt overwhelmingly positive regarding the service offering.

The Committee's witness session on 17 March 2021 was attended by Ebony Gonzalez, a learner who completed ESOL and Mathematics courses during the lockdown period. A full learner profile for Ebony is attached as **Appendix A**.

Feedback from Ebony had been very positive. The service had provided help and support for both learning and mental health, as well as other matters, through what had been a difficult personal time. Ebony advised that communication from service staff had been excellent and confirmed that the courses provided much needed social interaction with officers and other learners, especially during the periodic covid lockdowns.

The service had provided equipment which allowed Ebony to log in and attend courses via laptop, which was felt to be much easier than through a mobile phone. The course had helped Ebony to increase her self-confidence and allowed her to present a positive role model for her children.

More general feedback from some older residents had been that they were less comfortable with online tools, and had therefore been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, through an inability to attend classes in person and a reluctance to join them online.

In addition, the Committee viewed video testimony from learners, who outlined their positive experiences with the service.

Improvements made since 2020:

The Committee were made aware that the service had made several improvements since 2020, including specific improvements relating to service delivery and learner support as a result of the pandemic. These included:

- A refreshed course offer for adults with learning difficulties, including pre-employment workshops and a pilot programme for high needs learners;
- Targeted course delivery for learners with emotional health and wellbeing issues;
- Newly created systems to support online learning, including online learning walks and shared folders;
- Support for learners moving to online learning;
- Creation of a new online initial assessment process to ensure learners join the most appropriate courses;
- New processes to progress learners to next qualification levels upon completion of their current courses; and
- New webpages to support online enrolment and the access of information and support.
- Following Brexit, there was the potential for EU learners to be unable to complete settlement forms. To address this, forms had been simplified and support was available to help residents complete the paperwork successfully.
- General encouragement for parents/carers to gain and improve digital skills. Encourage learners to enroll on a digital skills course to improve their ability to join in online. Encourage parents and carers to do the same.

Challenges and Opportunities

Throughout the review, the Committee acknowledged that all evidence from Ofsted's review, the service's own self-assessment, and feedback from learners, showed that the service was performing well. However, the service remained ambitious to make further improvements, with the aim of achieving a rating of 'outstanding' moving forward. To this end, a number of risks and challenges to overcome, and opportunities for further improvements, were identified:

1. Funding

As set out earlier in the report, the Committee recognised that historic grant funding levels had led to an imbalance between different local authorities, and while the service continued to lobby for increased grant funding to extend the offer to a greater number of residents, additional support through consultation with the Cabinet Member for Families, Education and Wellbeing could help achieve this.

2. Ofsted and the Quality of Education provided by Hillingdon's Adult and Community Learning Service

The required further improvements identified by Ofsted were being addressed, as set out earlier in

this report, though work remained to fully address them.

3. Development of a clearly identifiable service ‘brand’ and widely highlighting the service offering

The Committee considered that some residents were perhaps not aware of the services provided. In addition, the Committee heard that learner enrolments post Covid-19 had reduced somewhat. Of those residents aware of the service, most referred to the service as ‘Brookfield’ or ‘Harlington’ and that the actual service name ‘Hillingdon Adult and Community Learning’ was felt to be too long a title to slip off the tongue.

The Committee expressed a view that a possible rebranding of the service to ‘Hillingdon ACE’ or something similar, together with a concerted communication campaign highlighting the rebranding and promoting the service widely amongst residents, Council staff and Members, could result in increased engagement with residents and improved learner numbers. It was felt that a positive communications campaign could highlight the varied service offering and as part of the rebrand the online Adult Education and Careers Hub could also be further updated and developed.

4. Increased interdepartmental and community working

The service currently works with other council departments to benefit residents, such as the qualifications and professional development it delivers to local childminders funded by the Early Years team. A long history of working with local 3rd sector organisations has led to community partnerships that include Carers Trust, MIND, Hillingdon Dementia Action Alliance, Austin Sewing Group, Hillingdon Women’s Group and Care for Calais, each of which targets residents facing additional challenges and barriers to learning. The service has a robust volunteering offer for residents (currently 40+ engaged), who are trained as ESOL or Digital or Community [Interpreting] Champions in order to support and encourage learners on courses.

Members noted that voluntary sector partnerships remained strong but strengthening partnerships with other Council services and micro-employers could increase the impact of the service’s offer for residents. Additional interdepartmental working with other areas of the Council, as well as external partners such as the NHS, and increasing engagement with local volunteers, could allow the service to provide further support to residents engaging with the service.

5. Accommodation for adult and community learning courses

The service has two main sites in the borough: Brookfield in the north and Harlington in the south, with smaller centres based in two library sites in Ruislip and a range of classes delivered in community venues across the borough.

Spread of classes within the borough					
North			South		
Residents	Enrolments	% of total	Residents	Enrolments	% of total
1,651	3,045	57%	1,250	2,303	43%

Notwithstanding the move to more online courses, the Committee considered that the Uxbridge (Brookfield site) was well-established in resident minds in relation to adult learning, as was Harlington. However, it was recognised that the new Harlington School build taking place could somewhat limit the learning accommodation available to adults in the south of the Borough, and officers indicated that they would explore new teaching locations that would meet the needs of residents, including suitability of public transport links.

The Committee's Findings

General conclusions

From the information presented to the Committee throughout the review, the Committee concluded that the service was one of great value to those residents that use it, not only through upskilling and providing a platform for employment and career development, but also as an avenue for social interaction and the promotion of mental health.

Through the 2019 Ofsted review, the service's own self-assessment and feedback as part of this review, the Committee also concluded that the service was performing well, and the Committee was particularly impressed with the timely and effective measures put in place to support service continuity throughout the pandemic.

However, the Committee acknowledged the challenges ahead and also the potential for further improvements to ensure the continued service and financial sustainability of the service and, therefore, agreed the following recommendations to Cabinet set out below.

The Committee's recommendations to Cabinet

The Committee was appreciative of the uniquely challenging circumstances presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and wished to place on record their admiration for the manner by which the service has adapted and improvised to ensure its continued support to its service users. To this end, the Committee recommends:

- 1 That Cabinet recognises the good work and improvisation of the HACL service during the recent COVID pandemic and notes the new ways of working identified and underway.**

The importance of reaching as wide a demographic of learners as possible was recognised as key to growing the service user base. Following the new ways of working identified as a result of the pandemic, and the service's continued commitment to maintaining these new practices to include blended learning moving forward, the Committee believed that a strong communication campaign would be extremely beneficial.

To provide structure and aim, and to help identify the key messaging for the campaign, it was suggested that the service be rebranded as part of a 'soft relaunch' of the service. The campaign could include use of social media platforms and YouTube to deliver short, punchy messaging to residents highlighting the courses available (inclusive of the provision for adults with learning difficulties and support for guardians and carers to help support their dependants/learners), the new ways of engaging with the service (including online meeting tools and available equipment),

how the service helps to support physical and mental health and wellbeing of its learners through social interaction, and engagement with health partners, To this end, the Committee recommends:

2

That the service be rebranded to ‘Hillingdon ACE’ (Adult Community Education), supported by a communications campaign to support a ‘soft relaunch’ of the service to stimulate demand and uptake of courses.

Further to recommendation 1, the Committee recognised the importance of increased co-operation with partners, including health services, as well as greater interdepartmental working as part of a continued review of service delivery to ensure it is meeting the needs of learners. The Committee, therefore, recommends:

3

That the service continues with the new ways of working identified as a result of the pandemic, including use of technology, blended learning, new courses, increased interdepartmental and partnership working via new processes.

The historic way councils are allocated funds from the GLA was recognised by the Committee as having resulted in significant inequality of available funding for use in delivering adult education services, with Hillingdon receiving the third lowest allocation of funds within West London. Members viewed this as a potential threat to the continued delivery of high-quality services to Hillingdon residents, and that additional funding routes and sources must be sought wherever possible. To this end, the Committee recommends:

4

That officers continue lobbying the GLA to increase their grant funding allocation, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Families, Education and Wellbeing, and also investigate other funding or lobbying options.

While the most recent Ofsted review into the service resulted in a ‘good’ determination, the Committee wished for the Council to continue its ambitions and further improve the service to ‘outstanding’ status. As part of their review, Ofsted made a number recommendations for improvement to be made, including evidencing that oversight and challenge of the service is regularly taking place. To assist in meeting these recommendations, in particular to ensure that greater scrutiny is being carried out, the Committee recommends:

5

That Council continues to review and develop oversight and scrutiny, and includes an annual report to the Families, Education and Wellbeing Select Committee & Cabinet Member (inclusive of feedback from learners and tutors).

About the review – witnesses and activity

The following Terms of Reference were agreed by the Committee from the outset of the review:

1. To understand Hillingdon's current adult education service offering, including feedback from learners and from recent Ofsted inspections;
2. To review existing best practice and identify further innovative ways of working, as identified through research and examination of other local government and volunteer service providers;
3. To examine how the service is currently funded, any risk of reduced funding, and how to ensure service continuity or expansion through the identification of additional funding opportunities;
4. To identify budget considerations and determine the service's value for money proposition;
5. To examine departmental, partnership, and multi-agency working to identify any gaps and opportunities to draw together the different strands of activities, ensuring the service is agile and responsive and is meeting the needs of its learners; and
6. To make practical, prudent recommendations to Cabinet, (and other bodies if applicable), from the Committee's findings to support residents engaging with the service.

The Committee received evidence from the following sources and witnesses:

<p>Witness Session 1 – 23 Feb 2021</p>	<p>Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning)</p> <p>Thoria King (Curriculum Manager for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities team)</p> <p>Ginette Powis (Sessional tutor for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities)</p> <p>Ebony Gonzalez (Learner who has completed ESOL and Maths courses during the lockdown period)</p>
<p>Witness Session 2 –</p>	<p>Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning)</p>

17 March 2021	Cristi Gonzalez (Ealing Adult Learning Manager) Eamon Scanlon (Head of Adult Learning and Skills Service, LB Hammersmith and Fulham)
Witness Session 3 - 20 April 2021	Debbie Scarborough (Service Manager, Adult and Community Learning)

References

[HOLEX \(2019\), *Adult Community Education – Supporting Place and People: Characteristics of Success*](#)

[The Further Education Trust for Leadership](#)

[UK Parliament, Education Committee, House of Commons \(2019\), *A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution*](#)

Appendices

Appendix A – Learner Profile, Ebony Gonzales

Appendix B – HACL Self-Assessment report 2019-20

Appendix C – Ofsted HACL Report December 2019

Appendix D - Curriculum plan for academic year 2021-22

Appendix E - Learning for Life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving local communities – A handbook for Councillors

Appendix A – Learner Profile for Ebony Gonzalez

Born in the Dominican Republic, Ebony had spent her childhood travelling the world with her working mother, a model. Although she had learned five languages, her formal education had been frequently interrupted. When she settled in the UK in October 2015, with her husband and two children, she knew she wanted to acquire formal qualifications to fulfil her dreams of using her languages to build a career, either in teaching or interpreting.

At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, Ebony was studying English and mathematics with the service. By then, her 9-year-old and 15-year-old daughters had a 3-year-old sister, but sadly her husband was suffering from Parkinsons and was increasingly depressed. During the lockdown, Ebony struggled to balance her children's welfare with her role as her husband's carer, though she tried hard to continue her studying. Her courses had transferred online and, with the family's laptop so often used by the children for their schoolwork, she found it difficult to attend regularly and keep up with homework. She managed to pass her English exams, but failed her mathematics qualification.

When her husband died in the summer 2020, Ebony returned to college to pick up her studies again. Following a conversation with the staff there, she decided to concentrate on just one of her subjects while she helped her children manage their grief, and with the help of a laptop borrowed from the service, she is now studying English at Entry Level 3. She has also struggled with her own grief and has felt isolated and exhausted much of the time. Despite this, she values her time at college and is determined to show her children that studying and working hard is the way to a better life.



HILLINGDON
LONDON

Hillingdon Adult and Community Learning

SELF ASSESSMENT REPORT

2019-20

Date submitted: December 2020

1. Overview of the service

Hillingdon Adult and Community Learning (HACL) service works towards the following mission: that 'every learner receives an outstanding learning experience that supports them towards a clearly identified and ambitious goal and encourages their economic, social and emotional wellbeing'. Although the service attracts adults from all walks of life into a wide range of provision, it particularly targets low-skilled, low-paid residents, those facing disadvantages and those living in deprived areas of the borough.

The learner profile in 2019-20 was:

Residency	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Hillingdon resident	4610 (91.2%)	4798 (92.8%)	3566 (90.9%)
London resident	318 (6.3%)	256 (5.0%)	301 (7.7%)
Out of London resident	123 (2.4%)	116 (2.2%)	58 (1.5%)
Total	5051	5170	3925

The service had a successful Ofsted inspection in December 2019 resulting in a Good judgement (Grade 2). Inspectors were impressed with the provision overall, stating that,

'Learners look forward to attending their classes. Whatever type of course to attend they learn much that helps them in their daily lives, their wellbeing or in their search for a job or further training. Many greatly develop their self confidence and esteem. Learners say that the centres are great places to learn and they would recommend them to their friends. Learners feel safe and are safe wherever they study. They benefit from learning in an environment where there is mutual respect whatever background they come from.' (Ofsted Inspection Report, 2020).

HACL officers work very effectively as a team. They are committed to the service's aims and to supporting residents to achieve their goals. Staff work hard to put learners first and their significant effort to adapt to online learning so swiftly and effectively during the Covid-19 lockdown was the critical factor in so many learners achieving their qualifications in July. All 62 staff members surveyed by Ofsted said they were proud to work for the service and thought it was well led and managed.

Inspectors also highlighted areas where the service could improve: inconsistent correction of learners spelling, punctuation and grammar; improved capture of progression data; and increased support and challenge by senior managers to further improve the quality of education provided. These are reflected later in this report and work is underway to address them.

The service regularly bids for additional projects to develop the course offer and provide support to residents. In 19-20 these included the Strategic Investment Pot (education and careers advice and support for learners to overcoming barriers to learning), the Talk English project (for residents with low levels of English to begin speaking and listening in English) and work to develop and upskill childminders, in partnership with local authority colleagues.

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown interrupted the provision. Learners on 85% of qualification-based courses benefited from their swift and efficient transfer to online delivery, utilising the groundwork that was already in place by using existing online platforms to enhance their learning.

Other classes also transferred online, including many language and arts classes but not all of these could continue and some learners were reluctant to transfer to online learning which was clearly seen in the poor achievement rate in IT. Learners on floristry qualifications could not access flowers so their courses were paused and resumed in September 2020. Classes scheduled to run in community venues in summer term had to be cancelled but some new online outreach courses were introduced such as e-safety for parents and a digital skills course for carers.

Adults with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) were unable to adapt to online learning sufficiently to continue their classes. When the centres were closed in March, these courses were also closed, leading to a 25% achievement rate for LDD courses. Tutors for these courses kept in contact with learners and completed training and preparation work for safe re-opening and introduction of blended delivery in September 2020.

Service Headline Data	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	5051	5170	3925
Retention	93%	92.6%	84.7%
Pass Rate (results of those who stay until the end of the course)	95.5%	96.6%	92.9%
Achievement Rate (results of those who left before the end of the course)	88.9%	89.5%	78.6%
Underpinning data			
Qualification courses and non-regulated ASB	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	2423	2236	1992
Retention	93.4%	93.6%	79.2%
Pass Rate	95.0%	95.9%	92.0%
Achievement Rate	88.7%	89.8%	73.0%
Community Learning: Personal Development courses	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	1816	1351	1012
Retention	94.6%	92.2%	93.0%
Pass Rate	93.6%	96.9%	95.9%
Achievement Rate	88.5%	89.9%	89.2%

Community Learning: Targeted Outreach	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Enrolments	722	1512	921
Retention	93.2%	92.1%	86.9%
Pass Rate	93.6%	96.9%	93.4%
Achievement Rate	88.5%	89.4%	81.2%

Achievement rates across the service were good in 19-20, although they present a mixed picture. Results were good for most learners who adapted to online learning and continued with qualifications at a range of levels, particularly for those on vocational courses. There was no significant difference in achievements between learners living in the north and south of the borough, however lower retention rates had an impact on results in other areas leading to varied and nuanced rates within and between curriculum areas and provision types.

2. Overall Effectiveness

2.1 Key Strengths

- Leadership and management is good. Leaders, managers and staff use their expertise well to ensure that residents can access and engage in learning and achieve their goals, despite the challenges in 2019-20 leading to curtailed provision for some learner groups. Committed, highly-skilled staff; a culture of flexibility and 'going the extra mile'; and a determination from learners who continued their learning led to sustained, high quality education for learners.
- Good financial and resource management enables the service to provide a high quality service to residents. The service made highly effective use of externally-funded projects to provide additional services to residents and to overcome barriers to learning. As a result 47 tutors were trained to deliver courses and provide support effectively online; learners benefitted from the development of new systems that provided online initial assessment; and residents accessed individualised, online education and careers advice supported including 1-1 telephone placements in classes, ensuring they could make informed decisions whilst staying safe. Funding targets were met at 97%, significantly above the London average of 88%.
- The quality of education is good. Teaching staff work hard to meet the needs of learners, building their skills and knowledge and adapting their sessions to new delivery modes and assessment methods to ensure the best possible chance of success. The long-term development of online learning expertise within the service enabled the very effective transition needed during lockdown. Learners benefitted from a focus on digital skills through bespoke courses and electronic portfolios. Tutors and managers with experience in running online sessions put in rapid online support to their peers.

- Support for learners is very good. Learners benefit from targeted support based on accurately identified needs at enrolment and support is put in place where needed during courses. Good use is made of skilled learning support assistants and volunteers to support learners and well-established pastoral mechanisms provide individualised support for learners struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. These existing systems were adapted during lockdown and worked well together to support achievement contributing to a pass rate of 92.85%.
- A range of good progression routes underpin the overall programme. The focus on building the basic skills of low-skilled learners and encouraging them to progress into vocational training and employment also encourages them to try new things. For example, increasing numbers have trained as volunteers, who report benefits in their own self-esteem as they support their peers.

2.2 Improvements made in year and their impact on learners

Learners benefited from an effective programme of improvements in-year, including:

- The refreshed course offer for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) was embedded and pre-employment workshops were begun to help learners raise their expectations and consider new horizons. A pilot programme for high needs learners was embedded into the wider LDD provision, maximising integration for learners whilst ensuring the specific support they needed was in place.
- Well-adapted course delivery targeted at learners with emotional health and wellbeing issues and some family learning courses allowed them to continue learning online during lockdown. Learners reported that this continuity significantly helped them maintain their wellbeing during the uncertainties of the lockdown period.
- New systems were created and others adapted to support online learning, such as online learning walks and shared folders where electronic evidence could be uploaded, marked and returned to learners supported managers well to maintain high quality provision. The introduction of online individual learning plans, shared between learners and tutors, effectively supported ongoing communication between the two.
- Support for learners in moving to online learning was strong and a system was put in place to immediately contact learners who were struggling. 414 tutor referrals enabled learners who were struggling to receive support to access online learning. Across the service 57% of learners said that their digital skills improved while on their course and this figure was higher for courses which ran during summer term 2020.
- A new online initial assessment process was devised and successfully introduced in July 2020, with learners completing assessment and receiving IAG online for most subjects and by telephone for ESOL learners. Consistent initial assessment and start of course advice throughout the year ensured that learners joined the right course. 94% of learners stated that they received good information before joining the course which helped them to make decisions.
- Learners completing qualification courses benefitted from new initiatives that supported them to progress into the next level of qualification as they finished their courses. This ensured that learners' next steps were confirmed swiftly and efficiently, negating the

need for them to return to the centres in the summer to enrol and beginning to address Ofsted progression concerns (see below).

- New webpages were designed and the learner portal was updated ready for summer enrolments. Residents could more easily access information about the course offer online, could ask questions and receive 1-1 support and enrol electronically, maximising the efficiency of enrolment procedures and minimising the need to visit centres.

2.3 Areas for improvement in 2020-21

- Targeted professional development is required to ensure that feedback from tutors consistently helps learners improve the standard of their writing including their spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Existing measures to robustly and effectively capture the impact of the curriculum on learners' lives should be strengthened. Improved progression data will help managers to better understand the learner journey and plan for learner progression over longer periods of time.
- Senior leaders should put in place arrangements that provide the support and challenge managers need to improve further the quality of education provided.
- Sustainable new models are needed for areas of provision and activities that didn't transition well during the pandemic, including ALDD courses, outreach, IT, volunteering and enrichment activities.

Personal development, behaviours and attitudes, including learners' feedback

Learners have reported good progress in their own personal development, behaviours and attitudes to learning during 2019-20. Despite the upheaval of the Covid-19 lockdown, and partly because of it, learners felt proud of their achievements. In addition to increased confidence, learners on low level qualification courses developed the skills to participate successfully in online sessions by learning how to behave in online meetings and became more autonomous learners, for example by using online self-study resources that were tracked by tutors.

Attendance remained high, and learners demonstrated their commitment to learning whilst managing multiple personal responsibilities during lockdown, such as childcare while schools were closed. However, as mentioned above some learners were either unable or reluctant to continue and retention and achievement rates fell as a result. Despite the challenges, many learners appreciated that continuing learning online gave them a sense of some normality and personal progress. The following comment from a learner is typical of what learners told staff during summer term 2020.

'Staying at home while learning online was the best thing and it was a great experience....If I will be given the opportunity to do more courses I will love to do so. It was my motivation during the lockdown and it kept me busy. Now the course is about to finish and I will miss the online learning.' (Learner feedback, June 2020)

Learners actively participate in, and benefit from, a range of events and initiatives throughout the year. They have a strong voice in influencing both curriculum design and the quality of education through individual feedback and through course representatives and the learner council. In Parliament Week, 2019, 505 learners elected 15 learners onto the Learner Council

which engages in a range of organised activities throughout the year from feedback about fire and lockdown drills, to carrying out Secret Shopper exercises and improving advice and guidance mechanisms provided by the service. Groups of learners took part in events including debates, diversity celebrations and visits to Parliament.

What learners say about their experiences in HACL

There was an extremely high response rate to the annual learner survey, with 1215 learners taking part.

- 98% (1190 learners) said they felt safe and respected in their class
- 96% (1163 learners) said their teacher gave helpful feedback
- 94% learners said that the information they received before joining the course was good and helped them make decisions.
- 96% learners agreed that they have made progress and developed their knowledge and skills
- 60% learners said they set an individual social skills goal and they achieved it and 59% learners said they set wellbeing and work skills goals and achieved them.

Questions about the online learning experience were added to the survey in the summer term. Most of the learners said that they benefited from online learning and improved their digital skills.

346 learners took part in a separate survey conducted by Ofsted. Of those,

- 98% recommend us to friends.
- Nearly all say they're getting the help they need, with comments such as:
'Good teachers who explain things well'
'Well organised, helpful pace of work'
'Helpful and patient teachers'
'Respectful'
'Increased confidence'.

Additional comments included:

- 'I look forward to going to class'
- 'I have learned so much that I use at home and at work, and using technology helps every day'.

Appendix 1 - Summary of Provision for Academic Year 2019-20

97% of our funding allocation was achieved in 19-20 against a London average of 77%.

Provision type	ENROLMENTS			RETENTION RATE			PASS RATE			Overall Qualification Aims Rate (QAR)		
	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Qualifications	2406	2203	1992	93.3	93.7	79.4	95.1	96.1	90.7	88.7	90.1	72.0
Personal Development	1816	1351	1012	92.6	92.1	93.0	97.2	97.6	95.9	90.0	89.9	89.2
Targeted Outreach	722	1512	921	94.6	92.2	86.9	93.6	96.9	93.4	88.5	89.4	81.2
Overall Totals	5051	5170	3925	93.0	92.6	84.67	95.5	96.6	92.85	88.9	89.5	78.62

Curriculum Area	ENROLMENTS			RETENTION RATE			PASS RATE			Overall QAR		
	17-18	18-19	19-20	17-18	18-19	19-20	17-18	18-19	19-20	17-18	18-19	19-20
Childcare	231	480	498	92.6	91.0	92.4	97.2	98.9	97.9	90.0	90.0	90.5
Counselling	49	54	34	87.8	83.3	79.4	100.0	97.8	100.0	87.8	81.5	79.4
H&SC	27	55	87	92.6	100.0	91.9	92.0	90.9	93.4	85.2	90.9	85.8
Total for curriculum area	307	589	619	91.9	91.2	91.6	97.2	98.0	97.4	89.3	89.3	89.2
Floristry	331	228	243	97.6	96.5	90.9	98.8	98.2	99.1	96.4	94.7	90.1
Horticulture	66	59	150	93.9	100.0	98.7	83.9	98.3	99.3	78.8	98.3	98.0
Total for curriculum area	397	287	393	97.0	97.2	93.9	96.4	98.2	99.2	93.5	95.5	93.1
Art	526	467	260	93.2	93.1	92.3	97.6	96.8	96.2	90.9	90.1	88.8
Languages	688	503	351	91.6	89.7	92.6	97.3	96.0	93.5	89.1	86.1	86.6
Leisure	192	240	47	94.3	93.3	91.5	94.5	97.8	95.3	89.1	91.3	87.2
Total for curriculum area	1406	1210	658	92.5	91.7	92.4	97.0	96.7	94.7	89.8	88.7	87.5
Total for IT curriculum area	228	82	95	96.9	91.5	86.3	94.6	98.7	79.3	91.7	90.2	68.4
English	372	335	457	90.1	93.7	87.3	91.9	91.1	87.0	82.8	85.4	75.9
ESOL	624	621	469	94.1	93.6	86.0	95.1	96.0	87.7	89.4	89.9	75.4
Maths	374	268	311	88.8	93.3	91.5	95.8	97.6	91.5	85.0	91.0	83.7
Total for curriculum area	1370	1224	1237	91.5	93.5	87.9	94.4	95.0	88.4	86.4	88.9	77.7
Total for ALDD curriculum area	470	444	290	96.2	94.6	29.0	98.7	99.5	88.1	94.9	94.1	25.5
Family English, Maths and Language	100	301	52	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	90.4	100.0	100.0	90.4
Multi-generational family learning (WFL)	498	539	385	91.4	87.0	82.9	90.5	97.2	95.0	82.7	84.6	78.7
Total for curriculum area	598	846	437	92.8	91.7	84.9	92.3	98.3	94.3	85.6	90.2	80.1
Total for Emotional Health and Wellbeing area	275	374	196	90.5	91.7	79.6	92.8	93.3	91.7	84.0	85.6	73.0

Short inspection of Hillingdon London Borough Council

Inspection dates:

4–5 December 2019

Outcome

Hillingdon London Borough Council continues to be a good provider.

Information about this provider

At the time of the inspection, there were 1458 learners on roll. Most learners study on courses at level 1 and below with around two hundred and seventy studying at level 2. Around fifty study at level 3. A small proportion of these learners use an advanced learner loan to fund their learning.

Courses are provided to build learners' vocational skills, primarily in childcare and supporting teaching and learning in schools. English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), English, mathematics, arts and crafts form a large part of the curriculum on offer. The service also delivers provision aimed at building the independent living skills of adults with a learning difficulty or disability and provision for learners with mental health concerns. Courses are taught at three main sites, plus several outreach locations across the borough. The previous short inspection in February 2016 confirmed that the service continued to provide a good quality of education.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Learners look forward to attending their classes. Whatever type of course they attend, they learn much that helps them in their daily lives, their well-being or in their search for a job or further training. Many greatly develop their self-confidence and esteem. Learners say that the centres are great places to learn and they would recommend them to their friends.

Learners feel safe and are safe wherever they study. They benefit from learning in an environment where there is mutual respect whatever background you come from.

Experienced and skilled tutors make topics easy to follow because they explain things clearly. Tutors are patient and work through topics at a pace that suits learners. They are easy to approach when learners need guidance or assistance.

Learners develop their enthusiasm for learning whatever subject they follow, including subjects in which they may have had negative experiences while at school.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

In line with local priorities, leaders and managers ensure that learners from the borough's most disadvantaged communities take part in the courses they offer. Working with a wide range of partners, they ensure that the curriculum meets effectively the needs of many different communities in the area. Leaders and managers introduce new courses that respond well to newly identified needs, such as the emotional health and wellbeing of residents.

Tutors teach their subjects in a logical order. They teach fundamental concepts first and check that learners understand these before moving on. For example, those on childcare courses are taught about basic child development before learning about the more specific needs of children, such as those with learning difficulties and disabilities. In ESOL, tutors help learners' recap on prior learning to ensure they have learned the language skills they need before moving on to the next stage.

Most learners receive effective advice and guidance that helps them plan their next steps. Learners seeking employment receive good guidance from external agencies, such as the national careers service, to help them get jobs. A few learners following the arts curriculum are not made aware of other courses that are available elsewhere.

Learners attend regularly and produce good-quality work. Those taking qualifications are successful and achieve well. A high proportion of learners on courses without qualifications achieve their personal goals. They gain pride and a sense of achievement in their work. Learners, such as those who are retired, gain a sense of purpose from attending classes. Those with mental health conditions build their resilience very well. They make friends, become more active in their community and learn to cope better with everyday life.

A few tutors do not provide helpful feedback on learners' written work. As a result, at times learners do not know what they need to do to improve. Too often, tutors do not correct spelling and grammar mistakes that learners make. This hinders learners improving their writing.

Managers have good expertise in adult learning. They have a good track record in making improvements and in ensuring that the quality of education that learners receive is good. However, senior leaders and the relatively new governing body do not provide enough support and challenge to managers to help them develop further the quality and impact of the curriculum. They are not sufficiently informed about the impact that the curriculum has on learners once they complete their courses.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Learners know how to report any concerns they have about their own or others' safety. Staff report any safeguarding concerns appropriately. These concerns are dealt with effectively. Managers and staff closely monitor and support learners where there are safeguarding concerns.

Managers provide effective oversight of safeguarding practices in the service through their 'staying safe' board. They have in place a suitable range of policies and procedures aimed at safeguarding learners. They meet their obligations under the 'Prevent' duty.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Managers should ensure that feedback from tutors helps learners improve the standard of their writing, including their spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Managers should establish measures that more effectively capture the impact of the curriculum on learners.
- Senior leaders should put in place arrangements that provide the support and challenge managers need to improve further the quality of education provided.

Provider details

Unique reference number	53129
Address	Adult and Community Learning – Hillingdon London Borough Council Park Road Uxbridge UB8 1NP
Contact number	01895 676 690
Website	www.archive.hillingdon.gov.uk/adultlearning
Principal	Debbie Scarborough
Provider type	Local authority
Date of previous inspection	18 February 2016

Information about this inspection

The inspection was the second short inspection carried out since Hillingdon London Borough Council was judged to be good in February 2016.

The inspection team was assisted by the service manager, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including observing learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

Jon Bowman, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Kanwaljit Dhillon	Ofsted Inspector
Saher Nijabat	Her Majesty's Inspector
Christina Christou	Ofsted Inspector

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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Curriculum plan for academic year 2021-22

Provision type	Delivery plan	Funding stream
Courses for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities	Offer all learners 1 digital skills course + any two other choices (except repeats from previous a/y). Mostly centre-based delivery.	Qualification
Community Engagement through targeted outreach	<p>Family English, Maths and Language (FEML): ESOL and English and Maths to help your Children Learn; partnership approach</p> <p>Multigenerational learning: range of subjects based on target group. Gardening together; Discovering Nature; Healthy Eating and Cooking; E-safety for Families...</p> <p>Targeted outreach in the community for disadvantaged adults; free. Short intro courses themed around supporting partner organisations; Health, e.g. obesity, diabetes, dementia, stroke Digital, e.g. carers, lone parents, asylum seekers Reducing isolation, e.g. older people, esp from ethnic minorities who may be reluctant to engage with the wider community EHW (see below)</p>	<p>Non-qualification</p> <p><i>Outreach, small amount of online delivery</i></p>
Emotional health and wellbeing	<p>Core programme of support courses, including: Boost your confidence and self esteem Managing anxiety and understanding depression Healthy mind, healthy body</p> <p>Progression into self-care courses, including: Knitting to improve your mental health; therapeutic art; de-stress with yoga; mindfulness and meditation; tapping into positive health and wellbeing; 5 steps to wellbeing for men (men only course).</p> <p>Seasonal courses, including Coping with Christmas; Dig for Recovery</p> <p>Stepping-stone into mainstream courses, including Improve your confidence to try new things (qualification)</p>	<p>Non-qualification</p> <p><i>Mix of centre, outreach and some online</i></p>
English, maths, ESOL Community Interpreting	<p>Introductory speaking and listening ESOL Pre-Entry ESOL courses Build your English/Maths with Digital Skills between levels</p> <p>Stepping-stones units</p>	<p>Non-qualification</p> <p>Qualification</p>

	<p>Entry Level 1 ESOL Entry Levels 2 and 3 ESOL, English and Maths Level 1 ESOL, English, Maths Level 2 English and Maths GCSE English and Maths Community Interpreting L1, 2 and 3</p>	<p><i>Mix of centre, outreach and online</i></p>
Digital Skills, IT and Business	<p>Short introductory courses, e.g. Build your Basic Digital Skills Essential Digital Skills Qualifications at Entry Level and Level 1. Progression into... Data Analysis at L2 Introduction to Cyber Security at L2 Understanding Coding at L2 Bookkeeping at L1 and L2 Accounting at L2</p> <p>Digital Marketing Start your own Business Online Learning Essentials Online Job Search</p>	<p>Qualification</p> <p><i>Mix of centre, outreach and online</i></p> <p>Non-qualification</p>
<p>Vocational learning:</p> <p>Childcare</p> <p>Childcare/H&SC (these courses can be used as CPD for professionals in the sector)</p> <p>Health and Social Care, incl Counselling</p> <p>Floristry</p>	<p>Employability workshops and short courses <i>All qualifications supported by attached English/ maths/digital skills quals as appropriate or through an embedded approach</i></p> <p>E3 Caring for Children L1 Caring for Children or L1 Preparing to work in schools L2 and L3 Early Year's Educator L2 and L3 Supporting Teaching and Learning L2 and 3 Children's and Young Peoples Workforce L2 Intro to Neuroscience in Early Years</p> <p>L2 Understanding Autism L2 Understanding Behaviour that Challenges L1 Award in Mentoring L1 Award in Safeguarding L2 Supporting individuals with Learning Disabilities Childminding quals and ongoing CPD in partnership with LA Early Years team L2 Supporting individuals with learning disabilities</p> <p>L1 Award in Introduction to Health, Social Care and Children's and Young People's Settings L2 Understanding Working in the Health Sector L2 Diploma in Care; L2 and L3 Counselling qualifications L3 in Understanding Mental Health Plans to develop an Access to HE Diploma in Allied Health Professions during 21-22 a/y L1 Mental Health Awareness</p> <p>E3 Award in Creative Craft (Floristry)</p>	<p>Qualification</p> <p><i>Mix of centre or online; some subjects in centre, e.g. floristry in Brookfield and South Ruislip; horticulture at RAGC.</i></p>

<p>Horticulture</p>	<p>L1 Award in Creative Craft (Floristry) with E3 Employability Skills embedded L2 Certificate in Floristry (Year 1) L2 Diploma in Floristry (Year 2) L3 qualifications to be decided (research ongoing)</p> <p>E3 Award in Occupational Studies (Horticulture) L1 Award in Occupational Studies (Horticulture) L2 Certificate in Practical Horticulture Skills and/or L2 RHS Certificate in the Principles of: Plant Growth Garden Planning Practical Horticulture (3-year course)</p> <p>Get Started with Floristry (3x 1-term courses) Flower Arranging History of Flower Arranging Contemporary Flower Arranging Get Ready for Winter/Spring/Summer Workshops both subjects</p>	<p>Non-qualification</p>
<p>Personal development</p>	<p>French, Spanish and British Sign Language Arts and Crafts, e.g. calligraphy, yoga, creative writing, textiles, painting and drawing, sketching on location Return to Learn intro courses Photography Drama Flower arranging Online cookery (healthy eating) Links with Hillingdon Heritage and Archives teams</p>	<p>Non-qualification</p> <p><i>Mixed delivery: some online, most in centres</i></p>

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Learning for Life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving local communities - A handbook for councillors



The handful of case studies featured in this councillors' handbook demonstrate the excellent work of ACE services, but there are hundreds more great examples out there.

Employment and skills

27 Oct 2020

Jump to section



Foreword

Council run or commissioned adult and community education (ACE) plays a vital role in supporting residents on their journey to learn skills to enter, return or progress in work. Alongside the economic benefits, it reduces loneliness and makes people happier, healthier, more confident, capable and resilient – making places smarter and more inclusive.

Put simply, ACE transforms people's lives. As the COVID-19 crisis continues to grip our communities, it is a more important lifeline than ever before. It is the cornerstone of adult learning. Without it, many of the 600,000 adults – including some of our hardest to reach, vulnerable or isolated residents – that access it every year would not progress into further learning and work or be able to cope with what life throws at them.

Delivering a range of informal and formal learning from entry-level courses to professional qualifications, as well as interview support and confidence-boosting programmes in a range of community settings, ACE gives residents a first, second, third or even fourth chance to access learning. It works with the grain of other place-based services including employment, regeneration, education, health and culture, and adds value to each, as well as connecting with agencies like Jobcentre Plus and local colleges.

The handful of case studies featured in this councillors' handbook demonstrate the excellent work of ACE services, but there are hundreds more great examples out there. We know that because 92 per cent of ACE providers are rated good or outstanding, the best performing in the further education sector. We should be extremely proud of that.

But there are challenges and opportunities ahead for ACE services.

Over the last decade, as national funding for adult learning halved, councils innovated to source new funding or faced a reduction in provision or a wind down of the service altogether. Just prior to the pandemic, national investment in retraining was boosted to enable people to adapt to a rapidly changing economy which is more likely to displace the least qualified. Today, as unemployment soars, we need all hands to the pump to direct that skills investment to where it is most needed and that must include local ACE services.

Soon, two White Papers – one on further education (FE) and the other on devolution – should provide an opportunity to develop a more coherent, place-based approach to adult skills that connects the entire provider base together across a local area. The LGA's Work Local model provides a framework for how that could happen.

So, it is a significant time for the future of ACE. That's why this handbook is so timely and a must-have for all councillors. You have a real leadership role in understanding, supporting, scrutinising and advocating for it, so you can make your service the best it can be. We provide some top tips on how you can do that which we hope you will find useful.

Cllr Sir Richard Leese CBE, Chair, LGA City Regions Board

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chairman, LGA People and Places Board

Introduction

This handbook for councillors focuses on the direct and indirect impact of adult community education (ACE). It aims to help councillors effectively plan, promote and scrutinise their local ACE service so that it is relevant, robust, efficient, responsive and ambitious.

It builds on a report by HOLEX, the lead professional body for adult community education and learning, which recommended that more should be done to explain and promote the vital role of councillors in ACE services and the value they add to this sector.

Councillors have a critical role to play in planning and promoting ACE; in support, oversight and challenge; and in ensuring that provision is joined up and responds to the needs of local communities. Their input, scrutiny and leadership are essential in realising the rich potential of adult community education.

This handbook will set out the importance of ACE in place shaping: how it brings economic and social benefits to local communities, enhancing the lives of residents and contributing to the culture and cohesion of the places in which they live and work. It will encourage planners and policy-makers to work in a way that acknowledges and makes use of the special role played by adult education in connecting and adding value to other council services.

We hope that this handbook will help councillors take an active role in planning, promoting and scrutinising ACE in their local areas, and that it will help councillors and officers to design services that improve the lives of residents and support the development of thriving, inclusive communities.

As we will see through the examples of good practice included here, the places in which ACE services deliver the most for their communities are the places where councillors recognise and champion their intrinsic value.

The role of ACE in shaping people and places

“Adult education is not just about what goes on in the classroom. It is about having the ability to support residents to develop wider outcomes for their own personal lives which, in turn, support and have an impact on their local communities, local businesses, and therefore the local economy.”

**Pat Carrington MBE, Assistant Director for Employment and Skills,
Peterborough City Council, and Principal, City College Peterborough**

ACE matters. As well as having clear and direct benefits in terms of economic prosperity, employment and productivity, adult learning is linked to the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle, grow confidence and self-esteem and provide meaning and purpose in life. Associated outcomes of participation include the development of collaborative and creative thinking skills such as problem solving, innovation, curiosity and adaptability; enhanced physical and mental health; greater interest in politics and community engagement; and greater diversity in the workforce.

Despite the wide range of positive economic, social and cultural outcomes, ACE remains poorly understood, which means that its potential benefits often go largely unrealised. This is in part due to its complex nature, wide cross-sectoral reach and contribution to an array of different local services, portfolios and policy priorities, not to mention the variety of different ACE delivery models. As a result, adult education can be difficult to describe simply, which can make effective championing, advocacy and scrutiny challenging.

While there is a great deal of evidence on the broad benefits of adult learning, little has been written about how it is delivered in local communities, where it sits among the other services provided by councils, or how it supports and strengthens those services.

This handbook focuses on how effective leadership, planning and delivery of ACE has a demonstrable impact on six distinct but related outcomes:

- **employment, skills and qualifications:** getting people onto the skills ladder and helping them gain, retain and progress at work
- **health and wellbeing:** supporting people with physical and mental health issues, thus reducing health costs such as GP visits
- **integration and inclusion:** reducing isolation, promoting interaction and integration and bringing communities together
- **culture and creativity:** supporting individuals and communities in becoming creative and cultural producers
- **attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics:** helping people to acquire the characteristics needed to participate fully in work and life
- **life transitions:** helping people to navigate challenges such as redundancy, retirement and parenthood.

Chapter 1: Why ACE matters

A safe, empowering, local space

Adult community education (ACE) services educate, train and retrain more than 600,000 adults each year, including many from the most deprived wards in England. They have a combined annual income in excess of £350 million.

In 2017, the 222 community learning providers in England included 139 councils, as well as 72 not-for-profit organisations and 11 'specialist designated institutions' (independently constituted charities regulated by their own trust deeds).

Most council adult education services were founded early in the 20th century, though some can trace their history back further. Today they continue to provide a safe, empowering local space in which adults can build their confidence and capacity, learn new skills, and take steps towards further education and new employment opportunities.

A large proportion of ACE learners are considered 'hard to reach'. This includes the long-term unemployed, vulnerable families, people with substance issues and young people who are not in education, employment or training. For example, 75 per cent of Leeds City Council's adult learners come from the 20 per cent most deprived lower-layer super output areas on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

This first-step engagement, giving adults and young people a second, third or fourth chance to access learning, is a crucial part of what ACE services do. More than any other provider, ACE services reach people and communities experiencing multiple disadvantage, whose support needs often demand the coordinated intervention and engagement of different council services.

From the learner's perspective, ACE's reach into other local services, and its close connection with employers and other education providers, enables them to connect with employers, further learning opportunities and their community – and ultimately to maximise their own potential.

In brief: ACE within the further education sector

Further education (FE) is a diverse sector of the education system, comprising many different types of provider offering a wide range of vocational, academic and recreational courses.

FE providers are institutions or organisations (other than schools and universities) that receive government funding to provide education and training to people over the age of 16. There are five different types of FE provider:

colleges, councils, independent training providers, the voluntary sector and employers.

- **General further education colleges** offer a wide range of programmes including vocational courses, apprenticeships, academic courses and higher education, from Entry Level to Level 4 and above. Most FE college students are aged 16 to 19, but they also provide courses for adult students and for 14/15-year-olds. While general FE colleges are the largest and most common provider in the sector, there are others including sixth-form colleges, land-based colleges, specialist designated colleges and art, design and performing arts colleges and Institutes for Adult Learning.
- **Councils** provide a wide variety of ACE and work-based learning. Some councils provide educational services directly to their communities, while others contract out to service providers. These services provide accessible learning to people from all backgrounds and abilities, usually on a part-time basis. Courses can be unaccredited or qualification-bearing.
- **Independent training providers (ITPs)** receive government funding to provide off-the-job training. While all work closely with employers, some are small and focus on a single area of vocational training (such as hairdressing or construction), while others are large and provide a range of vocational training opportunities across the country.
- **Voluntary sector providers** are non-profit organisations such as charities, foundations and community groups, usually directly providing adult community education, but also delivering other kinds of specialist courses to specific groups of learners.
- **Employer providers** deliver their own in-house training rather than contracting out to an external provider such as a college, an ITP or a council.

These organisations have a specific and important role in delivering skills in their communities. It is critical that they work together in partnership across a local area for the good of local learners and employers. This is why knowledge and expertise of local areas is critical to both the commissioning and oversight of skills provision.

Despite the complex issues facing many of their learners, ACE providers are the best-performing part of the FE sector, with **92 per cent of services rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted inspectors** (compared to 81 per cent for colleges and 75 per cent for independent training providers).

As well as being the best-performing part of the further education sector, ACE can claim to be the most resilient. During the coronavirus crisis of 2020, many ACE providers quickly switched their provision to online delivery, enabling residents to access learning under lockdown conditions.

The ACE offer

Most ACE providers offer courses at Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) or below, including ‘non-accredited’ courses that do not lead to a formal qualification. While in recent years provision has tended to focus increasingly on maths, English and digital, other offers include:

- ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) to help refugees or people recruited from overseas, such as health and care workers, to improve their English
- family learning courses to enable parents to better support their children in literacy and numeracy
- employability and preparing for work
- programmes to help learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities develop independence, social skills and employment skills
- training in mentoring and counselling for learners recovering from drug and alcohol misuse
- courses in music, ceramics and other cultural and creative arts.

ACE services work in close partnership with other agencies and council services. Councils have an important role both as providers of learning and as partners with other stakeholders such as local businesses, job centres, the voluntary and community sector, and other education and training providers.

ACE adds real value to these partnerships. For example, ACE services are often based at centres in the heart of disadvantaged communities. Not only do they bring together people of different backgrounds in a friendly, supportive local space, they also provide a place in which different services can address the multiple needs of learners at a neighbourhood level. This provides ACE with an opportunity to add value to other services, such as those relating to health and wellbeing.

The cross-cutting nature of ACE services and their capacity to add value to other services means they have an especially important role to play in councils' place-shaping ambitions and in responding to entrenched, complex issues such as poverty or long-term unemployment.

Chapter 2: What do ACE services achieve?

The six core ACE outcomes

Much has been written about the wider benefits of adult education and their relevance to different social and economic agendas. While a strong case can also be made for ACE's long-term, indirect impact on issues such as social mobility and reduced costs to other services such as public health, this section focuses on the direct outcomes of adult community education.

These outcomes can be organised into six distinct but overlapping categories, each of which will be explored here in more detail:

- employment, skills and qualifications
- health and wellbeing
- integration and inclusion
- culture and creativity
- attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics
- life transitions.

Outcome 1: Employment, skills and qualifications

Adult community education is critical in creating new opportunities for people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – to prepare for, enter and progress in the workplace.

Many of the adults who engage with council ACE services are unemployed, often on a long-term basis, and may face multiple disadvantages related to poverty and poor mental or physical health. They often have low literacy and numeracy skills and limited basic digital skills. ACE offers these adults a crucial first step back into learning and onto the skills ladder. It offers cross-service, integrated solutions for learners facing multiple disadvantage, and puts learners on course to further education and employment.

Adult learning is not only of benefit in terms of helping people to gain and retain employment, it also helps them to increase their earnings, raise their aspirations and gain more satisfaction from their work. It supports employers in raising productivity,

increasing profitability and reducing staff turnover, and helps boost the country's employment rates and tax revenue.

Skills and employment challenges differ from one local area to the next – some, for example, may have high unemployment as a result of the decline of traditional industry, while others may need adults to acquire industry-specific skills to match local demand. Responding to these challenges requires a coordinated local effort, which ACE can help to address or overcome.

Demographic change has huge implications for education and skills. In common with other developed countries, the UK has an ageing population. Some 80 per cent of the workforce of 2030 is already part of the working population. Figures pre-COVID show that a third of all workers are now aged over 50, and the number of people over 70 in work has doubled since 2009 to half a million. Longer working lives and fewer young people entering the workforce increases the need for adults to be retrained, upskilled and supported into local jobs. They need opportunities to engage and routes for progression, particularly given the changing nature of work and the growth in automation and artificial intelligence.

The Industrial Strategy Council predicted that seven million additional workers would be under-skilled for their job requirements by 2020 – about 20 per cent of the labour market. The UK's departure from the EU is likely to mean a reduction in the number of EU national workers, increasing our reliance on home-grown talent, including adults who are already in the workforce or unable to access it.

While unemployment as a national average remains relatively low (or was so before the impact of COVID-19), there are large numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training. If this is not effectively addressed at an early stage, there is a risk this group becomes more marginalised resulting in pockets of acute, long-term unemployment which demand targeted, coherent cross-service support. In addition, there will be more demand for adult skills training as the cohort get older.

According to the **Social Mobility Commission**, adults with the lowest qualifications are the least likely to access adult training – despite being the group that would benefit most. Further, men in routine and manual occupations are the least likely to engage in learning, creating what the commission describes as 'vicious cycles' of low-paid, low-skilled insecure work.

Experience: Unlocking new opportunities

Islington Council supports more than 1,500 residents every year through a wide variety of courses, including in ESOL and digital skills. Olga, for example, who is originally from Romania, used what she learned on an ESOL course to progress to further learning and improve her career prospects.

Olga said: “I am now studying in Morley College in my first term of professional sewing and tailoring. The course is in English and I am happy that I can now understand and learn something new. I work part-time doing alterations in a dry-cleaners shop and as a cleaner, but now I would like to find a job in the fashion industry.”

Another issue that ACE can address is low levels of literacy and numeracy, with England tending to fare poorly in international comparisons such as the OECD’s survey of adult skills. Some nine million adults lack functional literacy and numeracy skills (the level expected of nine-year-olds). Around **11.9 million adults are thought to lack digital skills**. This represents a significant barrier to further learning and better job prospects, and is a major issue for employers in hiring staff with the right skills.

Outcome 2: Health and wellbeing

ACE has clear and well-evidenced benefits for the health and wellbeing of people and communities. The challenges in this area include increased incidence of long-term complex health conditions associated with an ageing population, lifestyle factors such as alcoholism and substance abuse, entrenched health inequalities and the growing prevalence of mental health problems in society.

It addresses these issues in several ways. ACE is associated with healthier lifestyle choices and better understanding and management of health conditions. It has been linked to increased life expectancy and prolonged independent living among elderly people, and there is a clear correlation between level of education and diseases such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes, which represent a huge cost to the health service.

Studies also demonstrate a link between participation in adult learning and improved mental health and wellbeing. It fosters a sense of identity, an ability to cope and a sense of purpose in life, as well as greater levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction. It reduces social isolation and increases confidence and self-efficacy among learners. There is evidence too that participation in learning prevents early ageing and slows the onset of dementia.

Many ACE providers created new online provision to help with isolation and mental wellbeing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included online courses based around health and wellbeing, mindfulness, crafts, relaxation, chair-based exercises and family learning.

Experience: Supporting mental health

'Working in mind' is an employability initiative developed by Redbridge Institute of Adult Education. It targets priority Jobcentre Plus clients – unemployed adults with mental ill health and older people with poor literacy skills.

Working with partners such as Redbridge Concern for Mental Health and other local mental health charities, the initiative combines traditional employability support, dyslexia screening, wellbeing coaches and access to social prescription provision, such as mindfulness training. Around 50 per cent of the participants progress into work, while others go on to further learning.

Experience: 'This course turned my life around'

Lincolnshire County Council supported 7,511 adults onto 1,235 learning programmes during 2018/19. It targeted specific groups including people with learning difficulties and disabilities, people with no or low qualifications, the unemployed, and residents from the most deprived neighbourhoods – which accounted for 20 per cent of learners.

Ninety-two per cent of learners said their course helped to develop their self-confidence. One learner, Victoria, suffered with low self-esteem, back problems and other illnesses before taking part in a 'Get into catering' course. By the end of the course, Victoria had secured employment in a café in Lincoln. She said: "This course has turned my life around. I am so happy with my new job and the fact that I am now off benefits."

Many learners face digital barriers to accessing the help and support they need. In response, a growing number of ACE services are introducing an NHS-funded digital health module, embedded in their main delivery programmes, which helps people get

online, set up an email account and make doctor's appointments online. As well as digitally empowering learners, it has the added benefit of taking pressure off local doctor's surgeries.

Outcome 3: Integration and inclusion

Council ACE services have a crucial role to play in boosting social capital and promoting community cohesion and interaction. Adult learning is associated with higher levels of interpersonal and social trust, as well as increased community involvement and civic participation, particularly at a local level. It can also lead to greater understanding of diversity.

ACE services support the integration of new community members, both through ESOL courses and community-based courses that bring different groups together and facilitate the sharing of experiences. They provide a space in which stereotypes can be challenged, conversations begun, and tensions reduced.

The broad range of wider individual benefits to adult learning include increases in confidence and self-esteem, higher aspirations, a sense of purpose, engagement in the community, an active body and mind, and improved 'soft skills' such as collaboration, teamwork and communication. ACE has a special role to play in supporting integration and community engagement, and thus in making places safer and more cohesive.

Experience: 'I can talk to anyone now'

Hussein came to the UK as a refugee from Sudan in 2014. He had no formal schooling, little money and no grasp of English. Hussein lived in a shared house with other refugees from various countries. Their lack of English meant there was no communication between them, leaving them all quite isolated.

To improve his English, Hussein took free English classes, walking an hour and a half each way to attend class. Four months later, he started studying at Manchester's adult education service. The skills he acquired there enabled him to gain employment as a warehouse operative. Hussein said: "I was feeling sad because I couldn't understand when people were talking to me. Now I can talk to and understand anyone and I work with a lot of people from different countries."

Adult learning has been found to have a positive impact in the following five areas linked to integration and inclusion:

- 1) **Social capital:** adult learning is associated with higher levels of interpersonal and social connection. It has been shown to promote civic engagement and activity. ACE community venues are among the few surviving public spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together with a common goal in mind.
- 2) **Social cohesion and integration:** ACE has in general, and in literacy and numeracy provision in particular, a significant positive impact on communities. It can lead to higher levels of respect, tolerance and trust. Literacy and numeracy programmes and ESOL courses are key to ACE service efforts to promote social cohesion and integration. It forms a key part of councils' efforts to integrate refugees.
- 3) **Community involvement:** adult learning fosters civic participation, through local involvement, and can help overcome loneliness and social isolation. The Government has linked feeling lonely to increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, depression, cognitive decline and Alzheimer's. It is estimated that between five and 18 per cent of UK adults feel lonely often or always.

According to a survey by the Workers' Educational Association, 82 per cent of people on adult education courses make new friends, while **97 per cent say it helps to keep their minds active**. Participation also boosts 'civic capability', the ability to make sense of and shape one's own culture and community. Adult learners report increased civic participation, community involvement and wider social networks.

- 4) **Democratic participation:** adult learning, through civic education programmes, positively improves people's political understanding, feelings of empowerment and level of political participation. It encourages active citizens who are empowered to find solutions to the problems their communities face and engaged in informed dialogue.
- 5) **Crime and anti-social behaviour:** adult learning can reduce crime and anti-social behaviour by raising aspiration, improving the self-confidence of learners and offering them routes into further learning and work.

The prison population in England and Wales has increased by around 90 per cent since 1990 to about 84,000 prisoners. Recidivism rates are high and represent a significant economic cost: a one per cent reduction in recidivism rates would lead to an estimated annual saving of £130 million. Education is one of the pillars of effective rehabilitation. Almost half of prisoners have a reading level at or below that expected of an 11-year-old. ACE can give people the chance to escape cycles of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Outcome 4: Culture and creativity

Creative and cultural courses bring together people from different backgrounds around a common interest and can help to enhance community cohesion. Creative learning can be empowering and is often the catalyst for improved confidence and greater community involvement. It can lead to new employment opportunities and further self-organised learning.

While this form of provision has been much reduced in recent years, it can be vital in allowing learners with limited access to the creative arts to express themselves and contribute to their own local cultures. As well as contributing to employment, civic, and health and wellbeing outcomes, cultural and creative courses give people an enhanced sense of purpose and help them become creative producers as well as consumers.

Cultural and creative production can be a source of pride, celebration and empowerment, not only for the learners but also for the communities in which they live. Learners can host exhibitions of their work or volunteer their services for local fundraising or community activities such as arts festivals. Creative learners may set up self-organised learning groups to continue the activity, reducing isolation and providing social support networks; or establish small businesses to sell their work.

For example, the Quaggy Printmakers, a group of learners from Lewisham, were encouraged by their tutors to make the step into self-employment and sell their work. The 20-strong group of screen printers and etchers now sells its work through a website, with social media used to publicise events and exhibitions. A precondition of membership is to have taken a course with the Lewisham service.

Experience: Careers, community, culture

The strategic plan for Westminster Council's adult education service clusters its curriculum into three key areas: careers, community and culture. This approach reflects the needs, starting points, ambitions and potential of learners.

Head of service, Arinola Edeh, said: "It is easy to think we should focus on the economic benefits. People forget about the social, mental health and wellbeing benefits that are also important parts of education. Adult education is about employability, but it is also about bringing communities together and enabling local residents of different ages, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic backgrounds to have a better understanding of each other.

“Our strategic plan clusters what we do in terms of these three key areas. Alongside the ‘careers’ element, we do a lot of work bringing communities together, reducing isolation and supporting vulnerable people, which we capture in the ‘community’ element. The ‘culture’ strand is all about celebration and bringing people together at the cultural level. So we have a careers, community and culture focus, which enables us to transform lives.”

Every year, Westminster supports over 8000 learners to achieve their goals in these three areas.

Outcome 5: Attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics

ACE fosters positive attitudes and aptitudes such as resilience, cooperation, communication and critical thinking, which are key to success – not only in the workplace but also at home, in the community and in wider civic life. Often, gaining these attitudes and aptitudes can make all the difference for learners seeking to enter the workforce, manage transition or be more active in the community.

This includes the competences required to live an independent life and be more self-reliant; skills such as communication, team working and problem-solving (which are essential in finding a job and getting on at work); and the confidence and capacity parents need to better support their children and become more involved in school and community life.

Participation in adult education improves people’s social relationships, making them less isolated and more tolerant and trusting, while boosting levels of community engagement. ACE services also promote changes in attitudes to learning, which is crucial in a society in which few adults will have a job for life and most will have to upskill throughout their working lives and/or retrain for a new job role or multiple roles, which will for many become a reality as a result of economic impact of COVID-19.

Experience: Overcoming anxiety

When Laura started her Health and Care Sector Work Academy course, funded by Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, she lacked confidence and found it a struggle to interact with new people. Laura had become a mum at a very early age, so missed out on further education and work.

It took her an hour to get out of the car for her first class but she found the courage and, over the next few weeks, her anxieties receded. Through the course, Laura gained confidence in her skills and abilities, and grew to understand the values and attitudes required to work in the health and care sector.

After achieving her Level 1 'Preparing to Work in Adult Social Care' qualification, Laura received mentoring in CV writing, job applications and attending interviews. She secured a job at a care home and is now completing a Level 3 qualification. Had it not been for the course, she said, "I would still be struggling with my anxiety and depression and still be unemployed." Laura was City College Peterborough's 'Adult Learner of the Year' in 2019.

Outcome 6: Life transitions

This final type of outcome, though sometimes overlooked, is in supporting life transitions, particularly redundancy, parenthood, a return to work and retirement. The skills required in negotiating these life transitions can be enhanced parenting skills, independent living skills and increased capacity to support a child's learning.

Many adults reaching points of transition in their lives will have been out of learning for some time, and some may not have engaged in formal education since school. As noted already, ACE services provide an accessible, safe environment where learners can step back into education and find the space in which to reflect on and shape the next phase of their lives. They also offer the flexibility and adaptability required to respond to changing local need. For example, helping a community to cope with mass redundancies, or ensuring continuity of learning during the COVID-19 lockdown.

It is at such key moments in people's lives that adult education can be most effective and beneficial. As a recent study shows, transitions such as returning to work, becoming a parent, raising a family, living independently or retirement 'often lead to a reappraisal of the decisions and actions that shape an adult's life course', and engagement in learning 'can become more of a priority, especially when seen to play a pivotal role in helping people achieve their ambitions and aspirations'.

Case studies

This section of the handbook sets out a series of short case studies that demonstrate how different ACE services are working to achieve the six outcomes.

London Borough of Redbridge: A culture of excellence

Rochdale Borough Council: Connecting local services

Manchester City Council: A co-owned, city-wide plan

London Borough of Lewisham: Valuing culture and creativity

Peterborough City Council: Promoting adult education

Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES)

Chapter 3: How ACE services work

Structure

Although all ACE providers are influenced by government policy and the national funding structure, there is no common model or recipe for success. While national policy sets the tone and imposes common constraints on funding, each council area will adopt its own structure, governance and scrutiny arrangements based around local circumstances.

The chief role of councillors is to lead the direction of adult education policy, linking their ambitions for ACE to local challenges and priorities; to provide scrutiny and challenge; and to signpost residents towards the service. Portfolio holders provide leadership in terms of championing adult education across and beyond the council, advocacy at a community and regional level, involvement in service planning, and fostering or strengthening partnerships and connections.

The ACE's head of service is generally responsible for service strategy and its alignment with the council's core objectives, as well as creating and maintaining partnerships, ensuring the service's work is understood and visible, and making sure the service has a seat at the right tables.

A survey of local ACE providers by HOLEX found that there was no common structure among ACE services. Services differ in their model of delivery – whether direct, indirect or a blend of both; in where they sit within council structures and wider partnership arrangements; and in how they shape and adapt their provision to respond to local need.

In general, the organisational structure in which an ACE service sits does not make much difference to the quality of the service. However, making the right connections with other services seems to be easier for officers when they are based in a

directorates with a strong focus on place and/or on education or enterprise.

There is a variety of approaches to governance, with some ACE services convening advisory boards of governors (comprising a combination of councillors, employers and representatives of key community groups); and others held accountable by the council's scrutiny committee. Some councils do both.

However, it is possible to identify some common elements in the way in which ACE services work and to recognise some critical success factors. Although provision has reduced somewhat over the past decade, the best services remain agile and responsive, with exceptional reach into communities (particularly the least advantaged communities); they have strong partnerships within their council and more widely; and they have adopted meaningful governance and scrutiny arrangements through which councillors can add real value to the service.

Delivery models

There are two main models of ACE delivery – direct and indirect (through sub-contracting), although in practice many local areas offer a combination of both.

- **Direct delivery:** providers offer adult education services themselves rather than contracting them out. In some cases, courses are provided through a large college-type facility; in others through smaller, community-based centres where other council services may be co-located. Many councils combine a large institutional hub with smaller community centres, often based in areas of acute need where learners may be reluctant or unable to travel.

For example, Hertfordshire's adult education service has set up learning hubs in some of the county's most deprived areas, with a specific focus on wards where there is currently little or no support service. Each hub is set up with a local organisation from the voluntary sector, with the aim of creating a welcoming environment for people from disadvantaged groups.

- **Sub-contracted delivery:** other councils sub-contract the delivery of ACE courses out to private and/or voluntary and community sector partners. Councils providing courses that are either wholly or largely provided on an indirect basis typically have a smaller team responsible for planning and managing provision. These councils rely on the specialist knowledge and reach of different community services in engaging learners in provision planned to match local need.

Unsurprisingly, ACE services often work in very complex local structures, which may include multiple levels of planning and commissioning and different players interested in shaping service plans. For example, mayoral combined authorities are now

responsible for the adult education budget which funds ACE provision.

According to HOLEX's analysis of ACE service inspection reports, good or outstanding services tend to have strong governance with clear accountabilities, and councillors with excellent knowledge of the service and how it supports local need.

Leadership

Councils are place shapers and conveners. They must address the needs of their communities in an integrated and coherent way, making smart and efficient use of the resources they have. While working within the national-level constraints, councils must plan ACE provision that is sensitive to local need and informed by relevant labour market and other intelligence. To be effective, a council's ACE service must find a way to make national policy support local need.

While job titles vary, every ACE provider will have a head of service or principal who is responsible for assessing local need and developing a working plan which addresses these needs through clear goals that support the council's vision and reflect the national policy framework.

Dr Sue Pember, Director of Policy for HOLEX, says: "It has to build on what the area and the residents need, be integrated into the council's other services, and it must reflect what the government wants. And it must be well monitored, so that if something goes awry, it can be dealt with quickly."

Councils have access to a wide range of data on issues such as pupil performance, public health and the location of areas of greatest need. It can be disaggregated in terms of age group, socio-economic group, equality of access or employment status. It is important that

ACE services use this data to plan provision, ensuring close integration with the council's wider plans and priorities. ACE services are themselves a source of useful data on learner performance and progression, which should be used to identify gaps, challenge practice and improve.

In addition to interpreting data and planning in the context of local and national policy frameworks, the head of service has an important role as a leader or facilitator of partnerships. There is an important role too for councillors in supporting this, both through strengthening existing partnerships and fostering new ones.

One form of partnership particularly relevant to councils that contract out some or all of their ACE provision is the delivery partnership. ACE services often work with community organisations that specialise in a form of provision or that have a special

reach into a particular community, often one considered marginalised or hard to reach. These subcontracting arrangements are generally robustly managed, and learners know they are students of their respective ACE service.

The relatively small scale of ACE service operations means they can move swiftly and with agility, adapting provision to the specific needs of their communities. This makes them an ideal partner – able to work in a smart, collaborative way with organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver a wide range of programmes tailored to local need.

ACE services work in close partnership with organisations in sectors where adult education has an important contribution to make, for example health. They are more likely than other providers (such as colleges or private training providers) to partner with, for example, the NHS in working collaboratively on issues such as obesity, suicide prevention, loneliness or social prescribing.

Since the COVID-19 crisis, providers are strengthening their relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus to provide an enhanced service for the newly unemployed and people facing redundancy. This covers everything from DWP referrals to online advice and guidance, supporting job applications and skills needs analysis.

The link between councils and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) mean that ACE services are also well positioned to contribute to the regional skills and employment agenda.

Experience: Families learning together

Lewisham Adult Learning has forged a long-term partnership with the Horniman Museum. Family learning and ESOL learners have taken part in projects organised with the museum: for example, ESOL family learning students have helped the museum to review labels and interpretation for its exhibits. The museum offers learners the chance to volunteer through Lewisham's 'Volunteering: a stepping stone into work' programme. Parents on the family learning course have given presentations at community events and have supported the museum in developing new activities for families.

The national funding framework

All services work to the council adult education governance regulatory framework set by the then government in 'New challenges, new chances' in 2011, and the way in which that is expressed in the funding guidance from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

'New challenges, new chances affirmed the focus of ACE services on 'people who are disadvantaged and who are furthest from learning and therefore less likely to participate', highlighting their role in widening participation and supporting progression into work and further learning, and in developing stronger communities with 'more self-sufficient, connected and pro-active citizens'.

In brief: 'New challenges, new chances'

The purpose of government-supported community learning, according to 'New challenges, new chances', is to:

- maximise access to community learning for adults, bringing new opportunities and improving lives, whatever people's circumstances
- promote social renewal by bringing local communities together to experience the joy of learning and the pride that comes with achievement
- maximise the impact of community learning on the social and economic wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.

The objectives of community learning are to:

- focus public funding on people who are disadvantaged and least likely to participate, including people in rural areas and those on low incomes with low skills
- collect fee income from people who can afford to pay and use this where possible to extend provision to those who cannot
- widen participation and transform people's destinies by supporting progression relevant to personal circumstances
- develop stronger communities with more self-sufficient, connected and pro-active citizens
- commission, deliver and support learning in ways that contribute directly to these objectives.

The ESFA, an agency of the Department for Education (DfE), provides funding for adult skills and community learning. Its **funding guidance** is based on the purposes and objectives set out in 'New challenges, new chances', which it characterises as to develop the skills, confidence, motivation and resilience of adults in order to progress into learning or employment, improve their health and wellbeing, and develop stronger communities.

Council ACE services are funded through the DfE's adult education budget. Since August 2019, this budget has been apportioned between the ESFA, which distributes the funding to councils, and the six mayoral combined authorities (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West Midlands and West of England) along with the Greater London Authority, to which it is devolved by the DfE. AEB devolution will soon also cover the West Yorkshire, North of Tyne and Sheffield City Region.

The mayoral authorities received £630 million in adult education funding in the first wave of skills devolution in 2019. The move was welcomed as a serious attempt to give adult education funding more local discretion and flexibility. This has required more local conversations to agree the right balance of provision. There is a view that it could change the relative stability in funding and policy direction that has been a major part of ACE's success over the past decade.

Overall funding for adult learning nationally has reduced by 47 per cent between 2009/10 and 2018/19, which has affected all ACE, and other adult learning providers. According to the 2019 Learning and Work Institute analysis, this has coincided with adult learner numbers falling by 3.8 million in the last decade.

On top of these funding cuts to adult learning, councils have experienced a 40 per cent reduction in government funding since 2010. Despite this, they continue to run successful programmes of adult education provision, with ACE learner numbers declining at a slower rate than in FE colleges – and even increasing for Level 4 (higher technical qualifications, such as higher apprenticeships) and ESOL courses. Learner satisfaction with ACE services remains higher than for any other part of the FE sector.

In spending their allocation, councils and combined authorities are expected to maintain a clear line of sight between government policy and regional and local adult education service plans and cannot go over budget. ACE services have managed to do this with great success, despite a steady reduction in funding.

Experience: Setting up a community learning trust

Following a recommendation made in 'New challenges, new chances' (2011), New Directions College, the learning and employment service for Reading, set up a community learning trust (Reading Community Learning Network) to support joint curriculum planning and delivery with strategic partners from the public, community and voluntary sectors, to ensure the service's community learning offer meets local priorities.

The network consists of 38 members including Reading libraries, children's centres, voluntary sector agencies and the probation service, each providing targeted or specialist provision. Such partnerships are critical for a service that aims to reach some of Reading's most disadvantaged communities.

Two-thirds of the council's learners come from the most deprived areas. The service aims to reach out to people where they live, engage them in learning and give them routes to further learning and employment. It works with other council teams to add value to their activities.

Reading has found that partnership is key not only in engaging the hardest-to-reach adults, but also in generating new income for the service, enabling it to better meet the needs of learners and ensuring the available resource goes a long way. The service, for example, recently obtained £170,000 from the LEP to develop its catering and hospitality facilities, in response to development of the area's hotel and leisure sector.

The service generates added value through its use of volunteers, free venues and course fees. Around £250,000 is collected annually and used to offset the costs of working with Reading's most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

Many councils, finding that demand for ACE services surpasses ESFA funding, have attempted to increase the available funding by adopting a 'Pound Plus' model of income generation. This means that they look to add to their existing budget through, for example, course fees, financial sponsorship, low or no-cost learning spaces, donations of equipment, and other funding sources and grants. This is a highly effective approach that allows ACE services to do more within a shrinking public funding context.

Experience: Making money go further

Southampton City Council's adult education service has used a 'Pound Plus' model to increase service income and drive up participation within a constrained public funding environment.

Although the majority of the service's provision is sub-contracted out (84 per cent in 2018-19), there are clear expectations concerning Pound Plus set out in the original specification issued to all potential sub-contractors, along with guidance in the annual provider guide.

Sub-contractors are expected to demonstrate Pound Plus improvements including:

- increase in fee income
- increase in commercial sponsorship and support via contributions in kind
- increased use of volunteers
- increased income from external bids
- rationalisation, enhancing and re-focusing of the curriculum offer
- improved efficiency
- greater social impact of learning on the wider community.

Sub-contractors are expected to use the money saved or created by these policies for the benefit of learners, particularly priority groups and those who might otherwise not be able to engage in learning activity.

Governance and scrutiny

It is important that ACE services are rooted in the needs of their communities, which means that local people should be democratically involved in the governance of these services through councillors and other stakeholders. This is the key role of councillors in respect of their council's ACE service.

Councillors are the equivalent of a further education college board of governors and are responsible, ultimately, for ensuring the service on offer to residents is of high quality and relevant to their needs. Councillors also have a wider role as leaders of their local places and in helping to set the direction of local services.

Different councils take different approaches to governance. More than half (53 per cent) of the services that responded to the HOLEX survey said they were governed and held accountable through the council's scrutiny committee, while 38 per cent had

an advisory board. Despite this mixed approach, it is clear that all councils attach importance to ensuring that their ACE services are democratically accountable to the people they serve.

Councils' scrutiny and challenge committees play a fundamental role in ensuring ACE funding is well spent, monitoring services and ensuring that learner outcomes are improving. They help councillors understand what the service is for, how service plans are developed and how success is evaluated. They give councillors from different backgrounds the opportunity to make connections and see the wider relevance of ACE. These committees can also bring in other local partners and providers to be scrutinised.

ACE service governance or advisory boards usually comprise a number of councillors, the head of service, and representatives of the private, public and voluntary sectors. Having a breadth of membership adds expertise to the board and creates new opportunities for partnership. These boards do not merely assure the quality of learning in the service – they ensure that the service is meeting local need and engaging in self-evaluation (as well as evaluating sub-contracted providers).

The 2018 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection report on Redbridge Institute of Adult Education, for example, found that:

'Governance is very strong. Governors are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the organisation... They strongly promote the organisation's vision to target the most disadvantaged learners and increase participation from the most deprived neighbourhoods. Governors and senior leaders work effectively together to achieve the positive standing of Redbridge Institute in the community. They are rightly proud of the positive contribution it makes to the local area.'

In some high-performing services – Reading, Redbridge and Peterborough, for example – new governors undergo a process of induction, learning about the service and the people it supports. They are encouraged to attend classes and meet learners, thus deepening their understanding of adult education and adult learners. Some heads of service arrange 'learning walks' for councillors to find out more about their service. All services interviewed for this handbook highlighted the importance of bringing governors/councillors and learners together.

The high level of scrutiny in council ACE services helps ensure service plans are in line with local need and the wider plans of councils, and that the available resource is sensibly and smartly allocated. Effective scrutiny is one of the core considerations brought to bear by Ofsted in their service inspections.

Place shaping

‘Place’ is an important concept for councils. While national and local strategies and interventions to support communities with significant, complex needs are important in their own right, without sufficient join-up they risk being stand-alone and less effective than they might be. Place-based interventions, bringing together different council services and other core partners, can be a hugely effective way of coordinating policy and provision.

The strong physical presence of ACE services in the communities they serve is an important factor in this – often, service buildings become a “community resource that is about high-quality learning but can also be a point of connection, information-sharing and collaboration among different services” as described in the Redbridge Institute case study.

As leaders of place, councils are not only democratically mandated but are best placed to convene and take a lead, in collaboration with national government, employers, LEPs and other key partners. ACE services, sitting within their council and with unparalleled reach into other services, are uniquely well positioned to contribute to this agenda.

The role of councillors in ACE

Leadership plays an important part in the success of the best ACE services. Lead members with responsibility for ACE policy provide the political vision and accountability for the service, while the head of service will manage its day-to-day activities. Together, they must play the part of local leaders of learning. That means they must keep the learner at the forefront of their minds and strive to offer a service that is accessible, appropriate, inclusive and effective.

The lead member with responsibility for ACE should be:

- working with all stakeholders to set the strategy, plan and scrutinise delivery of the service
- the voice of residents and learners
- ensuring the plan is underpinned by the objectives of the council
- exploring the potential to join-up with other services (section 106 and regeneration, public health etc) and partners (local businesses, representative bodies including local chambers, colleges and jobcentre plus and wider regional connections).

They should be adept in determining, through local data and intelligence, the needs of their learners, and be able to make the most of limited resources to meet those needs.

Increasingly, they should be opportunistic and entrepreneurial, looking at all available funding sources and ensuring that learners are adequately supported.

Councillors who have scrutiny responsibility for the ACE function should:

- hold the executive to account and provide a scrutiny role, and where relevant seek independent advice
- scrutinise the finances and effectiveness of ACE to deliver outcomes
- be the voice of residents and learners
- provide suggestions on how to improve service delivery.

As well as assuring the democratic accountability of the service and ensuring that the offer meets local need, councillors are also key advocates – spreading the word about their service and helping to ensure greater buy-in and support across and outside of the council.

As essential ‘conduits’ between the council and local communities, the councillor’s role in fostering public engagement – whether engaging people as service users or service supporters – is vital. Councillors can arm themselves with information and signpost people to services, making connections that the individual may not have acknowledged, such as seeing how it could help someone experiencing isolation. There is still a general lack of appreciation of what ACE can achieve. Councils need to consider how to build that knowledge and awareness in their own communities.

In many of the most successful services, there is strong, informed understanding of what ACE does and long-term support for the local service. In others, services face more of a challenge to raise the profile of the service.

As well as holding heads of service to account, councillors have a key role in supporting them and enabling them to do their job better. They can help them to see the big picture, where the ACE service fits within it and where it can add value and facilitate the development of new partnerships and pursue new funding sources. The conversations councillors have, and the connections they make, can be crucial in expanding the scope and ambition of their ACE service.

Summary: The leadership role of councillors

- Councillors are responsible in different ways for ensuring that their local ACE service is of high quality and relevant to the needs of residents. This can be done through the portfolio holder with responsibility for ACE and

through scrutiny members who hold the service to account.

- Councillors provide challenge and advice, evaluating service progress and guiding its development, through scrutiny committees and advisory boards. Often, they have high-level expertise gained in the private, public or voluntary sectors.
- Councillors are responsible for ensuring money is spent properly and in line with local priorities and national funding guidelines.
- Councillors are key advocates for the service, promoting its work within the council and across the whole community.
- Councillors are forgers of new partnerships, using their perspective across council services to help assure effective join-up and support place-based planning.
- Councillors promote wider understanding of ACE and its outcomes, drawing on their knowledge of the service and their learners, to spread the word and get other councillors on board.

Through good governance and effective scrutiny, smart, place-based planning, sound financial management and strong partnerships, ACE leaders can create a culture of excellence and inclusivity across the service and a climate of innovation and creativity, in which staff feel confident in meeting the needs of their communities within their limited resources.

The best-led, most effective services have in common 'a strong sense of belonging and respect among staff, learners, stakeholders and the community, including employers', as well as an acknowledgement of the broad set of outcomes that ACE can achieve.

Chapter 4: Key issues for councillors

The national context

This is a moment of opportunity for adult community education in England. There is renewed interest in adult education, as reflected in the various commissions or reviews of lifelong learning which took place during 2019, and the Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into adult skills and lifelong learning.

The Government has committed £3 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament to a new National Skills Fund for adults. This will be in addition to the existing £1.5 billion per year adult education budget. It has also indicated that it will replace European Social Fund money and ensure that £500 million of its successor, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, is used to give disadvantaged people the skills they need to succeed in life.

This reflects a growing appreciation at both national and local level of the value and broad benefits of adult education, particularly its threefold capacity to boost productivity and economic growth, improve people's health and wellbeing and build strong, thriving communities.

It also represents an important opportunity for council ACE services to draw on new sources of funding and expand or revise their provision. The challenge for ACE is that while some high-performing services are adept at working in an entrepreneurial way and turning their expertise into bids for funding, others will face a steep learning curve if they are not to fall behind. This will be one of the main challenges for ACE services in the near future.

The case for adult education

As we have seen, ACE matters to people and places. It reaches into the least-advantaged, most-marginalised communities, supports those who are furthest from work into education, training and employment, and has a broad range of positive effects on citizens and communities.

The case for adult education is getting stronger. Technological developments are changing the world of work and the skills required to thrive in it, the population is getting older, and inequalities remain in educational opportunity, health and wellbeing, civic participation and access to cultural experience. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis means adult learning will need to expand to help adults retrain for work.

Addressing these issues demands a coherent, joined-up educational offer, at every level (including adult education), with links to other services and to further learning and employment, and – perhaps above all – a strong commitment to places and to the people who live in them.

Only councils have the democratic mandate and local insight to lead efforts to foster local economic growth and give people the support, skills and competences they need to get on at work and in life. They have a unique ability to bring together local partners, and the flexibility and agility to target specific problems in a concerted, coherent and creative way.

ACE can connect with other council services and other agencies to transform people's lives, in a way other education providers cannot. It is only through councils' democratic local leadership and strategic social and economic priorities and duties that this can happen.

Focusing on place is key to bringing partners together and offering a coherent local response to the challenges and issues faced by different communities. This handbook has demonstrated the significant contribution made by ACE services to place making. Their presence at the heart of communities and their reach into other services give them a special role in placed-based policy, connecting and adding value to other services.

Top tips for councillors

The handbook has attempted to set out what makes a good ACE service and has explored some of the key factors associated with success. It has shown how the best services draw on local data to identify service gaps and plan provision that meets the needs of residents and businesses, and the important role played by scrutiny and challenge, governance, partnership and leadership in delivering an effective, high-quality service.

In considering the characteristics of successful leadership, the handbook has also explored the qualities councillors need to effectively contribute to the planning, scrutiny and promotion of a service, highlighting the importance of councillors in:

- understanding the service that they support and scrutinise
- providing challenge and advice
- supporting the development of service strategies and plans
- ensuring resources are used effectively
- advocating for the service
- fostering partnership working
- considering the service's role place making.

The following 'top tips for councillors' summarise what they can do to fulfil this critical role as effectively as possible. There is also a responsibility on officers to ensure that ACE in the local context is understood by portfolio holders, scrutiny committee members and all councillors.

Top tips for councillors

- Understand adult community education – you can only scrutinise your service if you understand what it is trying to do, the local context and the limitations in terms of service delivery.
- Get to know your service and the learners it supports – there is no better way of doing this than meeting learners. Ask your head of service to organise a ‘learning walk’ through one of their centres.
- Try to understand the needs of your community – know the data and ask whether your service could do more, or work in a different way. A clear understanding of local need will help you hold the service to account and will make you a better advocate.
- Champion the role of ACE, both within the council and outside of it. Make it your job to have conversations about ACE with local education providers, senior officers, the elected mayor, the LEP chair and local MPs.
- Be vocal about your service’s achievements – if people aren’t aware of what your service does, it will be left out of, or arrive late, to area planning.
- Make use of all the data available – councils hold detailed data on public health, pupil performance, local need and so on, which can be accessed and aggregated in terms of factors such as age, locality or employment status.
- Be aware that sometimes the need will exceed the resources available to your service. A common-sense approach to providing the offer within the available funding is essential.
- Familiarise yourself with the main national policy guidance for ACE. This is the context for the work – and the basis of your service’s funding.
- Speak to other councillors about the ACE service, what it can provide and its potential to change lives: they will be the most effective link into local communities.
- Can you bring in new partners or strengthen existing ones? ACE services are only as strong and as valuable as the partnerships they foster and the connections they make.

- Celebrate your service and your learners and promote learner achievement within the wider community.
- Share your enthusiasm for the service and your passion for service improvement and raising learner aspiration – enthusiasm can be infectious!

Looking to the future

Adult community education has enjoyed relative stability, compared to other parts of the FE sector. However, the introduction of the adult education budget and the ongoing process of devolution are changing the game and asking new questions both of ACE services and the local leaders responsible for them. The new environment in which ACE services operate requires them to be outward-looking, responsive to local need and place focused.

Councillors have a special role in this process in terms of scrutiny, advocacy and building partnerships. They are best placed to maximise the reach and quality of the local ACE service, and to fully realise its potential in relation to other council services and in the context of local communities.

COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19, the LGA had called for funding for adult learning to be restored to 2010 levels, increased over time and fully devolved through the adult education budget. This was seen as critical, given people's extended working and non-working lives and a rapidly changing labour market.

ACE providers and services demonstrated agility and flexibility in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout the lockdown, centres were busy adapting their activities and ensuring that learners were supported. Online learning was introduced, while many centres remained open for vulnerable learners. ACE providers are keen to continue to provide blended learning where appropriate, while recognising that the needs of learners can be complex, and a virtual learning environment will not suit everyone.

As we move towards COVID-19 recovery, it is anticipated that **adult training will need to increase rapidly to help the unemployed retrain for new occupations or even sectors and increase digital skills, therefore funding will need to match that demand.** Learning providers are asking for clarity of funding and flexible processes to enable them to support those already seeking support.

Further Education White Paper

DfE is reviewing the work of post-16 education and training and is intending to produce a new white paper on further and adult education in autumn 2020. The white paper will also respond to the Augar Review 2019 and may include a COVID-19 recovery plan detailing the importance of skills and retaining.

Councils and their Adult Community Education services should be centre stage to any recovery plan and should feature in the implementation plan in two ways. Firstly, by working with local Jobcentre Plus centres, schools and colleges to coordinate the response for 16-24 year olds and secondly, through the ACE services, provide a training and employability offer to get adults back into work.

It is important that the role played by councils is reinforced and that the Government is encouraged to strengthen councils' role in determining and supporting local residents to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

Devolution White Paper

It is clear from this handbook that the case should be made to strengthen ACE services for the benefit of local communities. And while councils have a direct role in ACE, they have limited direct influence on the wider skills and employment system, which remains highly centralised. Many councils want that to change, so that they can have more influence over skills and employment issues for their area.

The Government has prioritised the need to 'level up' prosperity across the country, and we expect more detail in the White Paper on devolution, which is likely to be published around the same time as the FE White Paper. The advent of both White Papers is a unique opportunity to **Re-think Local**.

The LGA has already set out its vision and framework for devolution in this area in LGA's **Work Local' model**. It recommends that councils and combined authorities should have the powers and funding to design, commission, and have oversight of a devolved and integrated employment and skills service that brings together information, advice and guidance, skills, apprenticeships, employment support and wider support for individuals and employers. This approach makes sense given every council area has its own unique challenges and opportunities and its own economic and social needs which cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach.

This should be used as blueprint for a skills and employment devolution that works for all people and places. The Government should back and fund the trialling of it. This could for a medium sized combined authority, lead to additional fiscal benefits for a local area of £280 million per year, with a benefit to the economy of £420 million. This

would be associated with an additional 8,500 people leaving benefits, an additional 3,600 people achieving Level 2 skills, and an additional 2,100 people achieving Level 3.

Closing thoughts

We asked our interviewees – heads of service and senior councillors – what they thought were the key points for councillors to consider in thinking about the future of their ACE service. Here are some of their responses:

- ‘The obvious one is about funding and how they can support [the service] by leveraging funding from different areas of the council for maximum benefit.’
- ‘Their lobbying power is important and making sure they have a voice in key decision making.’
- ‘It’s that understanding of where the need is greatest within your area in order to ensure that the funding we do have is used to maximum effect.’
- ‘I think this role in bringing partners together and collaborating, especially in more difficult challenges, is really key.’
- ‘We have to get our residents the basic skills they need – English, maths, digital skills – if we are to address a whole range of social injustices.’
- ‘Adult learning contributes to civic pride, and it is important to celebrate what our local residents are doing, through learning, to contribute to their local communities. What I see our learners are juggling with, and what they achieve, and the ambitions they have for their children and their future, it is all about civic pride and wanting to make that contribution, to do well. That is a key point for councillors to understand.’
- ‘It’s about lobbying, being advocates for the service, and bringing those key players together.’
- ‘Know your outcomes, know what you are there for, which outcomes you need to achieve and how to design your curriculum to achieve those.’
- ‘Get the support and the advocacy partners in place, so the council understands the purpose of adult learning and can see its utility.’

- ‘You have to be really brilliant at partnerships. Brilliant partnerships can transform a service.’
- ‘What councillors need to be thinking about, first and foremost, is what is important to local people. Put the politics to one side and think about the priorities for that area, the challenges. That is the brief they should be expecting from officers, that is what they should be looking at.’

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