

Impact of Skills for Life infrastructure on learners study

Final Report from the Qualitative Strand

Yvon Appleby, Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Pam Cole, Linda Pearce

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Contact: y.appleby@lancaster.ac.uk

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Section 1 - Summary overview

The research carried out by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) is concerned with the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on learners. *Skills for Life* represents the implementation of the first national UK adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL strategy: as such it is significant in the proposed scale of change and its aspiration towards impacting on the skills of the adult population.

1.1. Aims

The aim of this study is to understand how the *Skills for Life* infrastructure has impacted upon people attending adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in the UK. The research examines the impact of the infrastructure on the experience and achievement of learners and through this lens aims to examine how policy has been implemented.

1.2. The research

Overall, 562 people representing different stakeholders in the infrastructure participated in this research; 416 were learners and 146 were managers, co-ordinators and tutors¹. During 2004 –2006 we conducted 416 first interviews and 135 second interviews with adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL learners across six geographical sites. In the same sites we conducted 146 first interviews and 46 follow up interviews with managers and tutors. The six research sites of West Yorkshire, Birmingham and Solihull, Cheshire and Warrington, Wiltshire and Swindon, West London and Cumbria and Northumberland represent geographically diverse areas that also represented different Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas.

1.3. Connection with other reports

This paper is one of several reports from the NRDC Teachers and Learners Study that looks at the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on literacy, numeracy and language teaching and learning. The introduction of a national strategy in 2001 (DfES 2001a) was designed to improve adult literacy and numeracy skills through the implementation of an infrastructure that set targets, created a national curriculum and provided learning opportunities and qualifications for both learners and teachers.

^{1 1} We use the term manager, co-ordinator and tutor as generic terms for those involved in the implementation and delivery of the strategy across a wide range of settings

1.4. *Thematic findings*

- ***Overwhelmingly those who ‘fit’ the strategy view the changes it brings positively. The positive benefits are:***
 - An increased national public profile of literacy, numeracy and language.
 - The provision of new resources.
 - An increased access to learning opportunities.
 - An increased sense of professionalisation and quality of provision.
 - Many learners and some employers value national tests and certificates.
 - The national curriculum is valued by many teachers particularly those new to the profession.
 - There are clear routes for progression for teaching and learning.
 - There are new areas of entitlement for learning.

- ***Policy changes produce ‘travel’ in the strategy over time changing the focus of impact. The policy travel can be viewed as having both direct and indirect consequences.***

The direct consequences include:

- Greater emphasis on embedded provision.
- Strengthening vocational learning by increasing the age of basic skills entitlement.
- Greater emphasis on work-based learning and flexible methods of delivery.

The indirect consequences are experienced as:

- Moving from an initial period of diversity of provision, including funding for non-traditional learners, to one that is increasingly inflexible with the danger of potentially important and needful provision for learners dropping outside the strategy and seeking (e.g. homeless projects) resources elsewhere.
- A decrease in flexibility in curriculum and methods of delivery – particularly for ‘at risk’ and ‘hard to reach’ groups.
- Difficulties in funding the time taken for slower learners to achieve.
- Difficulties in adequately responding to demand for provision - for some, ESOL learners for example, there have been problems in obtaining provision in the first place and then being able to find appropriate post Level 2 progression.

- Some areas of provision are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain and seem unresponsive to ‘immediate need’ – for example ESOL provision for migrant workers who do not fall easily into categories that attract funding.
 - Juggling between different policy initiatives necessitates the need to reduce existing commitments to adapt to new policy emphasis and funding regimes, e.g. skills for employability for 14-19 year olds
- ***One strategy, one infrastructure: Different learners, different contexts.***

Whilst the strategy sets out to raise literacy, numeracy and language standards across the UK, differentiated individual learners and their learning contexts should be recognised and evoke specific responses.

- *Work-based learning* – This provides new access for some who benefit from learning. However, it can be limited to the employers’ rather than the expanded learners’ agenda. It can be affected by the irregular work patterns of employees (e.g. the army) and can be lost altogether through unemployment/redundancies. It is not easily accessible for those with low paid part time or casual work and for those with multiple jobs.

- *Homeless people* - This provision seems to have been particularly hard hit with recent funding changes that do not recognise turbulence in the lives of some people and the time taken to progress in learning. Several homeless schemes had left *Skills for Life* provision altogether, as they had ceased to ‘fit’ funding criteria and were seeking alternative sources of funding, for example through the Lottery Fund.

- *Different learners* – People want to learn discrete skills/knowledge and are able to learn quickly if they have recent experience and confidence in learning. Others with previous negative experiences and less confidence may take longer. Providers described ‘massaging’ figures to enable ‘slower’ learners to progress at their speed. Learners working below Level 2 described the importance of having time to practice new knowledge and information and for their confidence as learners to develop. This was in tension with externally paced progression.

- *ESOL provision* – Funding opportunities and the lack of availability of provision often limited progress, particularly in providing relevant and accessible post Level 2 progression routes. This is one area of provision where demand mainly outstripped supply.

1.5. Implications for policy

The major strengths of the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on learners are:

- Increase in basic skills profile nationally supported by new resources.
- The development of a professional, qualified workforce with quality procedures for delivery.
- The development of a unified curriculum offer linked to recognised tests and awards.
- The development of new entitlements for learning.

The major issues of the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on learners are:

- Supply and demand of provision is mediated by funding mechanisms – impacting on whom has access to provision: this process negatively affects ‘at risk’ groups.
- Distribution of resources, and access to provision, is unequal between urban and rural populations - rural provision costs more for less learners.
- Non-differentiated time allocation, and therefore resources, for learning creates tensions between individual progress and educational progression, particularly for learners needing more time.
- The loss of people who do not now ‘fit’ the education policy focus, particularly homeless people and those described as reluctant to learn, who are most likely to be negatively affected by diminishing community and lifelong learning budgets.

Section 2 - Introduction

2.1. Aims

The aim of this study of learners is to understand how the *Skills for Life* infrastructure has impacted upon people attending adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in the UK. The research examines the impact of the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure on the experience and achievement of learners. It has a particular emphasis on the effects of the strategy on the government's priority groups, such as unemployed people, benefit claimants, prisoners, workers in low skilled jobs and other groups at risk of social exclusion. In looking at aspects of the experiences of the learners the study aims to examine how policy has been implemented and adapted through the infrastructure to achieve this.

This qualitative study aims to look at the experiences of learners, asking people why they came and what they wanted to learn from the provision they attended. We asked them about the importance of qualifications to their motivation and what their longer term learning and life aspirations were. Although learners do not engage directly with the strategy or the infrastructure it nevertheless impacts upon them as stakeholders in two ways: firstly by the learning opportunities made available by the strategy and secondly through the direct experience of provision shaped by the infrastructure. They are therefore one of the most important stakeholders in assessing the impact of the infrastructure on learning.

2.2. The research

To understand the impact upon all the different stakeholders involved in the *Skills for Life* strategy, including managers, co-ordinators, tutors and learners, we used a staircase model of policy implementation (Saunders 2006). This model (See Appendix 1) enables us to understand the different roles and responsibilities, as well as the impact, on each different stakeholder group involved in the infrastructure at a time of far reaching change. Each group on the staircase is involved in implementing the policy, through the infrastructure, which shapes the provision the learners engage with. Those highest up the staircase engage more directly with policy, those in the middle are interpreting and implementing the strategy and those further down work within the infrastructure as it impacts upon their experiences of teaching and learning. The staircase represents an interrelated and dynamic relationship, and one that whilst being mainly invisible to the learner nevertheless shapes their experience of the infrastructure: the focus of our study.

Overall 562 people, representing different stakeholders in the infrastructure, participated in this research; 416 were learners and 146 were managers, co-ordinators and tutors. During 2004 –2006 we conducted 416 first interviews and 135 second interviews with adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL learners across six geographical sites. In the same sites we conducted 146 first interviews and 46 follow up interviews with managers and tutors. The six research sites of West Yorkshire, Birmingham and Solihull, Cheshire and Warrington, Wiltshire and Swindon, West London and Cumbria and Northumberland were chosen to represent geographically diverse areas that also represented different Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas which are parallel to the Teachers Study. The sites themselves show different microcosms of policy implementation, often relating to local issues and constraints such as organising and supporting provision in either rural or urban settings. Together the six sites provide an overall or macro level sense of the different ways that a national policy becomes adapted and embedded over time.

The first phase of the research conducted an initial sweep of the six sites to obtain baseline information from local co-ordinators and managers. A minimum of 20 managers and co-ordinators were interviewed in each site by a project researcher. These were selected to represent, where possible, a range of provision that included work-based, prison, college, voluntary and community and which also covered literacy, numeracy and ESOL (see Appendix 3 for details). The interviews, on average an hour in length, were transcribed and were used to generate initial findings (see Davies 2005), helping refocus the next stage of the research.

Approximately 20% of the managers and co-ordinators in each site were re-interviewed in the second phase, either by phone, email or face to face. Some chose to respond to questions via email. The first interviews asked individuals details of their teaching/managing background, their current roles and experience of the infrastructure and their views on the strengths and constraints brought about by the implementation of the infrastructure. The second interviews tracked changes in individual career trajectories, asked about changes in their experiences of provision and their views of the changes in impact of the infrastructure on learners.

Interviews were conducted with 416 learners (with a minimum of 50 per site) across all six sites. Learners were selected to represent, where possible, a cross section of provision that included work-based, prison, college, voluntary and community. They were also selected to cover literacy, numeracy and ESOL and to represent learners of different ages working at different levels from Entry level 1 to Level 2 (see Appendix 4,5,6 for details). Most interviews, on average of about 20 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. Where learners were unhappy with this comprehensive notes were taken. Interviews were carried out both individually and in small groups depending upon people's confidence and language skills. Many ESOL learners for example opted for a group

interview as they had more language support and felt less intimidated as did learners from a mental health group. Other learners such as those in prison had little choice other than to be interviewed on their own because of the constraints of their environment. The learners were asked why they had joined the class, what they felt they were getting from it, whether it was helping them in their life, whether it was affecting their confidence and what they wanted to do after the course finished.

Second interviews were carried out with approximately 20% of learners per site: an overall total of 135 across all six sites. These were conducted mainly by phone and where communication and confidence were an issue they were conducted face to face, for example with several groups of ESOL learners and those attending a mental health group. The second interviews asked learners what they were doing now, what they had got from the course they attended, if it had helped them, whether they felt they had made progress and whether they had achieved what they set out to. We also collected additional information about those learners not re-interviewed from tutors and other students.

As part of the refocusing of the research following the first round of interviews it was agreed that as tutors were the main interface between the strategy and the learners it was important that we had a larger representation of these in the following round. Early emerging findings (Davies 2005) suggested that 90% of learners were satisfied with their experience of learning. This was at variance with some of the difficulties in implementing the infrastructure being described in the first interviews by managers, co-ordinators and tutors. In various discussion forums it emerged that tutors were significant in making the infrastructure work, in spite of the difficulties, because of their commitment to their learners.

2.3. About this report

This is one of several reports from the NRDC Teachers and Learners Study that looks at the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on literacy, numeracy and language teaching and learning. The introduction of a national strategy in 2001 (DfES 2001a) was designed to improve adult literacy and numeracy skills through the implementation of an infrastructure that set targets, created a national curriculum and provided learning opportunities and qualifications for both learners and teachers. This was a significant and far reaching change to the adult basic education system that existed previously (see Hamilton and Hillier 2006).

The *Skills for Life* strategy is delivered within an infrastructure that links teaching and learning through standards, tests, screening, assessments, subject curricula, qualifications and learning materials (See Appendix 2 for a description of the learning infrastructure). To understand the relationship between teaching and learning in relation to the infrastructure the NRDC Teachers and Learners studies have been designed to compliment each other, bringing different types of information and findings from the perspectives of teachers and learners.

The studies although different in scale, and using different methods, each address the central question of the changes created by the new infrastructure. The studies focus in common on what changes, both intended and unintended, has occurred and what impact these changes have had on adult literacy, numeracy and language teaching and learning in the UK.

The report is divided into ten sections. The first two provide a summary and introduction. Section Three outlines what learners say about their experiences of learning in different learning environments, including work and home. It looks at the value of qualifications and of growth in confidence and changes in identity. Section Four focuses on learners' experiences of the different curriculum subject areas of literacy, numeracy and ESOL. This is followed in Section Five by looking at learning contexts and provision that include work-based, prison, college and community based learning. Section Six, the last section of the learners' experiences, looks at next steps people have taken. It follows learners as they 'move on', 'move around' or 'move out' of provision, considering personal and institutional factors that may influence this.

Section Seven reports on the perspective of managers, co-coordinators and tutors. It looks at their perceptions and experience of implementation particularly looking at funding and reaching 'hard to reach' learners. Section Eight follows this by looking at how managers, co-ordinators and tutors have worked with the infrastructure. Section Nine focuses on different contexts from their perspective as providers, this includes college, work-based, adult and community learning and prison. It also reports on experiences of embedded learning, accelerated provision and notions of progress and progression. Section Ten, the final section of the report, presents the findings and recommendations.

Section 3 - What learners said about their experiences of learning.

Some important general themes emerged from the learner interviews, across a variety of types of provision being delivered within a range of settings. People told us about why they came and what they hoped to get from attending classes. They told us about their previous experiences of learning and some of the things in their lives that affected their experiences of learning now. They told us what they liked or found difficult about learning literacy, numeracy or language as an adult and what they hoped to do in the future. In general these were:

- People joined for a variety of reasons including learning/developing skills for work and home
- Learners were positive about the learning environment including the quality of teaching, the tutors and physical surrounds
- Most learners were positive about taking the test and gaining a qualification
- Most learners valued social aspects of adult learning and increase in confidence, particularly as it was experienced as different to school
- Increase in skills and confidence created broader changes and a culture of learning in life – e.g. taking on new interests and finding out new information

3.1 Learning and developing skills for work and home

People described using things they learned in class at home and in work. Sometimes the skills were described as ‘generally useful’ for everyday activities so that learning had an added value to their life and activities. Other people described learning literacy, numeracy or language skills specifically for work and were pleased when they applied new skills to their everyday lives. Learning was viewed positively when it could be transferred from one aspect of their lives to another. A young college mixed programme student explained:

“I use maths a lot. At school I went and learned the stuff but never used it. But here it goes into my head because they explain it well and I actually use it outside, at shops and all that.”

A mature male learner with mental health issues describes the clear link for him between learning and employment:

“This is the second course I’ve been on and you know the reason for it all is to get back into employment. That’s really the reasons really... I do a lot of voluntary work with ‘Age Concern’ and I want to get into a care job and I want to get an NVQ but I’ve got to improve my spelling really, that’s the main reason.”

A male learner attending literacy provision in prison explained that his decision was not just based on what he wanted to learn now but involved consideration of what was most important for his future work:

"I prefer maths, because it helps for work. I do steel work. I used to work on a housing site in London, but I couldn't read the plan. I need to be able to read the plan."

3.2 Learning environment

For many people the environment they learned in was an important part of feeling comfortable, connected and being motivated to learn. For some this meant being able to work on their own whilst for others it was important to be able to work in a group. For most the learning environment was described as something that enabled them to learn at their own pace. For a young man in a work-based Army education literacy class the learning environment has been crucial:

"It's helped me because I don't normally like working with other people in the same classroom. I don't feel confident in myself when I work with other people in a classroom. So now this week, with these lads, they've helped me to work with other people. I normally have single lessons here, me, by myself. Because my English is a bit bad I didn't feel comfortable, I felt embarrassed but now I don't."

An older learner felt that learning at his own speed in a small class was significant to his learning. He, like many, felt this was a different learning environment to his previous experiences at school:

'I am learning and I think I have done in the last year better than I have ever done before, because I can learn at my own speed. Sometimes the going speed is too fast for me, whereas here I can take my time and it is much easier for me, I don't feel rushed. We all have a different learning speed and the class is small enough to accommodate that. I relax and take my time.'

The comparison to learning in a school environment was commented upon by many people. For example this young woman in a work-based Army education numeracy class observed:

"....actually I want to add that as compared to high school, with this syllabus I've found this week, even though it's compressed it's been taught in a way that's made us understand it better than if you were at school and it's just, it was actually the teaching style and how, you know, people understood the teaching method that we've actually learnt more I think than we might have learnt at school. So yeh, the teaching method and how it's been put across has been really, really helpful"

The importance of the learning environment to motivating learners in the workplace context of the Army has recently been discussed in case studies conducted by the Basic Skills Agency (2007).

3.3 Qualifications

Learners were mixed in their views about qualifications. Older learners who described learning for enjoyment and fulfilment on the whole did not want to take tests and gain qualifications. They felt they were 'past it', it was 'something for the young ones' and it wasn't relevant to their lives. A few did however value them as they had never gained qualifications before and they felt it was never too late to learn. A few said they were very proud of the evidence of what they were achieving. An example is of this older learner in work-based provision describing certificates as a real motivator:

'I've got 3 certificates... English Level 1 & 2 and maths, not maths – numeracy Level 1; we're doing our Level 2 today! I'd never had a certificate in me life!'

A retired dyslexic adult and community learner echoed this sense of elation in achieving a qualification and certificate for the first time:

"I have just done an exam here. Certificates, they are my show off point (laughs). I never got them when I was younger, so I get them now. Like everybody else, you get a bit nervous about exams. But you just go for it. My confidence has absolutely burst, it is oozing from everywhere."

Some learners with physical or mental health issues found regular attendance and taking the tests difficult but felt a sense of pride when they succeeded. For many others at work, hoping to gain employment, or wanting to progress within education, qualifications were important to achieving their goals. Qualifications provided a marker of progress both for individuals themselves, to see how far they had come, as well as providing an external measure of progression for others.

A number of higher-level female ESOL learners, working at Level 1 and Level 2, in community based learning were strongly motivated by qualifications. One woman explained:

"Yes, I want to continue 'Access to Diploma' course. I think that's at the end of this month in another centre and I will continue until I get a diploma and be certified for... Yes, I want to do a course for interpreter and translator."

A learner attending provision in a probation setting shows that attitudes to studying and qualifications can change over time and become more significant as goals in life change:

“I’ve been a plasterer for 23 years and decided that I’ve had enough of plastering so I decided to register for this, so I’m going back to college in December to do a basic fitness instructor course, so I need to get some qualifications.”

3.4 Social aspects of adult learning

As in other studies that have looked at the experiences of learners (Barton, Appleby, Hodge, Tusting and Ivacic 2006; Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, Tusting and Barton 2006) people described the importance of the social aspects of learning. It was often described as belonging to a group, meeting new people and learning new social and communication skills. A mature female student in work-based provision said:

“I think as a group, more like a group therapy really to get people talking about different things when you’re having a break and things like that. Also it brushes up your em, when you look at the supermarkets for the price of things you kind of know what you’re looking at, roughly what you’ve got in your purse and what you can spend and what you can’t spend.”

For a retired learner in college community based provision being able to meet younger people with confidence was important:

“Yes well as you get older you tend not to meet with younger people you tend to spend may be a little time with the very young ones, a fair amount of time with people your own age group but you’re not mixing with people in the sort of middle range and coming here and the other things I’ve taken on sometimes doing this course has brought me more in line with the sort of 25-45s and instead of sort of hanging back you join in the conversation or discussion, yes with a reasonable amount of confidence.”

Being able to mix with people from other cultures also provided other wider learning opportunities that were valued. A young male college based ESOL learner said:

“I’m happy with my class. There’s a lot of people from different country and different people and I have a lot of friends and lot of experience, their culture and language.”

3.5 Growth in confidence and identity changes

Many learners described a growth in confidence after attending literacy, numeracy or ESOL provision. The increase in confidence related specifically to what they were learning but often more widely in the literacy, numeracy and language practices they used at home, at work and in their everyday lives. Some described changing their identity from being someone that couldn’t do things to someone that could, and from being frightened of learning to being ‘a learner’.

A recently retired Italian woman in college provision explained:

“You see I’m now retired and I have got time on my hands as well. I thought to myself come on you’ve been here all these years relying on your husband for writing. I can read I know that in writing I make mistakes and I don’t know where to put all of the letters. I thought come here and I could write a few words without looking in dictionary or whatever. I think I’m chuffed with myself, you know what I mean.”

A woman on a work-based numeracy programme echoed this when she described how:

“It’s made me more confident of things and I can have the confidence to tackle things rather than going ‘oh god’, and I’ve got a daughter that has the same attitude as me and I don’t want her to have the same attitude as me, I’d like her to be a bit more confident about it.”

The importance of providing a model for learning for others, not just of skills, but also of confidence was seen as important for many learners. A learner attending Family Learning provision described it as:

“...being on any course makes you feel less like a mum, which I’ve been for nearly 11 years and you lose confidence as a mum. So going on courses makes you less of a mum and more of a real person, more of an adult in your own right as opposed to being like just a mum. You’re not in demand, it’s lovely. You can chat. You can be a woman as opposed to a mum. If you’re not in full time or even part time work, I think if you’re a stay at home mum you do lose confidence because you’re out of the general workplace. So just to come on a course, it’s not exactly work but it just gives you confidence.”

Section 4 - Curriculum subject areas

The learners attended literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes that were delivered as discrete curriculum areas, as embedded provision within vocational courses, or as part of family learning provision. The classes were offered in a range of settings and we follow descriptions of the classes by reporting on what learners told us about the provision contexts of work-based, prison and probation, college and community provision.

4.1 Literacy classes

People attended literacy classes for a variety of reasons. The most commonly mentioned ones were: to learn spelling, reading and writing not acquired at school; to gain skills and certificates for employment; to help grand/children with schoolwork and homework and to meet other people. People also talked of improved confidence and being able to do different things in their everyday lives.

Some people related their own negative experiences of learning at school as an important motivation for wanting to acquire the skills to help grand/children. One mother described the way that learning enabled her to see herself as a better mother:

“I was totally terrified of forms and things, like any bill that came through the post I wouldn't even look at them and basically I just wanted to change it and become a better mother and help me children through school, and sort of get them through school so they can achieve what I haven't. That's the main reason why I joined.”

Her increase in confidence since attending the literacy class meant that she used a dictionary to help her and her children find words they were unsure of, an activity completely new to her family. Some people attending literacy classes who had English as a second language wanted to be able to continue supporting their children as they progressed through school. One mother explained: *“I could help children when small but now they've left me behind.”* This learner also reflected that whilst she was born in England her parents had limited English language and were unable to help her when she was growing up – this was something that she was motivated not to repeat with her own children. Several others described how their children had supported them to attend literacy classes so they could improve to be able to communicate with their children whose first language was English. Often literacy and language skills travelled from the class to home and back again (see also Pahl and Rowsell 2005; Appleby and Hamilton 2006). This they described as being able to spell properly and read fluently as their children and other family members did.

Many learners said they wanted to attend literacy classes to learn things they had not learned, or fully understood at school. This was for a variety of reasons including being bored, being bullied, having undiagnosed

dyslexia, playing truant, dealing with difficult home circumstances or being expelled. For some this had been nearly forty years ago whilst for other it was a more recent negative experience. One learner described working for 38 years with his hands to cover his biggest fear of being found out that he could not read. He described his ambition as simply *“being able to read and spell”*. Many described their strategies for coping, which included using family members to manage household bills and paper work, writing cards, reading maps and writing cheques. Managing these tasks independently, and taking on new areas of responsibility at home and work, was described as an important aspiration by many.

Gaining skills and certificates for employment was frequently mentioned as a reason why people had come to a literacy class. For some this was to manage their existing work more confidently as many jobs were described as increasingly needing proficiency with literacy and IT skills. For others they came to the class to acquire the skills and confidence to either seek promotion or to seek new areas of work. Examples of this were: wanting to move into management, becoming a paid union official or moving from being a low-grade operative to becoming a higher-grade worker. In the Army context having a Level1 literacy qualification was a prerequisite for promotion. Many others spoke of ‘getting work’ or ‘finding a job’ in more general terms, as their skills and confidence improved.

Nearly all those who attended literacy classes mentioned the social aspect of learning and improved confidence. The social aspect was described as providing intellectual interest, structure in the day and contact with other people. Whether learners were young or old it was described repeatedly as *“getting out of the house”* and *“keeping my brain alive”* Confidence was directly related to improvements in reading, writing and spelling; something people had described being embarrassed about previously. Confidence also related to everyday tasks and practices including having the confidence to cook a family meal independently and being able to read road signs and directions whilst driving (see also Eldred 2002).

4.2 Numeracy classes

People described attending numeracy classes to improve their maths skills for work related reasons, to help their grand/children and simply to prove to themselves that they could do it. In the interviews many people recounted their own difficulties of learning maths whilst at school and wanted to support their children to prevent them experiencing the same difficulties. Others described needing to achieve a maths qualification for promotion or as an entrance requirement for a higher-level course. Whilst for a number the need to finally make sense of something that had perplexed them throughout life was predominant. For some all three reasons were important.

The reasons for attending maths classes were described by many interviewees as learning new skills and brushing up on existing ones to help grand/children. This was partly to be able to keep up with them and also to have the confidence to support their learning. Many people seemed to be aware of how easy it had been for them to get lost or get behind in their own maths class at school:

“I didn’t do very well in GCSEs and I didn’t follow any further education after school and now the kids are in school...well even the six year old is bringing homework and stuff what I’ll help him with so I thought I’d better refresh my memory.”

Although it was predominately older learners, parents or grandparents, who described wanting to support the maths learning of grand/children this was also mentioned by brothers, sisters and other extended family members. Many numeracy learners saw it as a useful family and community resource. For some largely older learners it was the opportunity to get to grips with something that they’d always found difficult or had a sense of failure about that was important.

People described how what they were learning in the maths class was benefiting their everyday life. Examples of this included being able to work out ‘three for two’ offers in the supermarket, being able to work out interest rates on a car loan and being able to calculate, rather than guessing, the amount of cleaning fluid per litre for a fish tank.

Many interviewees said they wanted to learn maths and achieve a qualification for their current job, or to be able to continue on to a higher-level course. Courses mentioned requiring a Level 2 qualification for entrance included classroom assistant, nursing and Access courses. Even when achieving a qualification was the main motivation for attending the class this did not prevent an awareness of other gains such as *“being able to add up in my head”* and *“confidence to do other things”*.

Other learners described needing the skills represented at a particular level of learning even if the certificate was unimportant. An example of this was a group of B&Q hygiene operatives who were studying at Level 1 to be able to calculate quickly and accurately enough to pass the ‘order picker test’. This test was timed and passing it meant the opportunity of a better job, which had more status and was a financial promotion. For these learners the certificate itself was of secondary importance behind that of the mathematical skill and practice of calculation at speed.

4.3 ESOL classes

People attending ESOL classes came from many language communities and backgrounds; some had been born in England, others were refugee or asylum seekers, whilst others were recent economic migrants from Europe. The vast majority of interviewees said they wanted to learn

English to be able to find work, some said it was to help their children and others said it was to help them integrate into their local community and to be able to help their own ethnic communities communicate. For many, particularly women their concern was to be able to access public services in the UK such as transport and health care. The balance between which reasons were more predominant depended on whether learners were indigenous to the UK, refugees or asylum seekers, immigrant spouses or workers (see also Roberts and Baynham et al 2004).

For those working in ESOL classes at higher levels many quoted specific jobs that they were working towards. These included several wanting to train to be nurses or electrical engineers with others mentioning carpentry and childcare work. There were still others with high level qualifications in their first language wanting to go on to appropriate Level 3, under graduate or post graduate qualifications in subjects ranging from accountancy & law through to business management and teaching.

For others working more slowly and at lower levels this was expressed more generally as “wanting to find work” “getting a job” and “getting a qualification”. Several women also mentioned that they wanted to become more independent from their family and a job they said would help them to do this. For many of the women interviewed at all levels being able to understand how to access public services in the UK was a priority. Being able to *“speak to head teacher or explain to them any problem with my child”*, *“go the GPs”* and *“travel for the underground”* or *“when I buy the bus travel card”* were recurring themes.

Many women said that although they would like the opportunity of finding employment later on they were learning now to support their children. Women with school age children described wanting to keep up with their children as they learned English at school and also to help them with their school work – something that became increasingly difficult as the children became older. A number of highly motivated women working at Level1/Level 2 who had school aged children were actively involved in their language communities as interpreters for contemporaries with lower level English abilities helping them to access health, community based and legal services.

Older ESOL learners described wanting to improve their language for social and community reasons; for example one older learner from Birmingham explained that although he came to England in 1968 it was only now that he was able to find the time to learn English grammatically. Another said that it helped him get out of the house and although he was born in England he wanted to learn ‘properly’ now and wished he had started a long time ago. Although not tied to employment older ESOL learners saw the value of learning, for themselves, their families and communities. One older male learner said:

“I am 62 years old and its not too late to learn, I could just sit and do nothing but I am learning...it helps there are no exams.”

Section 5 - Learning contexts

Literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes are held in a variety of places and contexts. The context shapes the type of class and delivery as well as who attends, what they want to learn and why they want to learn it. We look at the four examples of work-based learning, prison and probation settings, college provision and community-based provision, which although part of the same strategy, illustrate the significance of the different contexts to learners.

5.1 Work-based

People learning at work were doing so for a variety of reasons; some were specifically associated with work and others were not. Direct work associated reasons included promotion, taking on voluntary roles such as union learning rep and other union activities and keeping up with new levels of work skills, like IT. Vocational tutors suggested it sometimes to support other areas of study, for example Nursing Assistant NVQ Level 2. In other cases managers suggested taking literacy or numeracy courses where staff failed hygiene or health and safety courses because of poor reading skills. Reasons not as directly related to work included learning to help children, learning to overcome embarrassment and lack of confidence associated with earlier school failure.

Work-based learning included discrete literacy and numeracy classes as well as embedded learning. Whilst there are general and overlapping themes with the curriculum subject areas of literacy, numeracy and ESOL discussed above there are some significant differences created by the learning context. Whilst interviewees spoke of learning at work providing more flexible opportunities, which fitted in with their lives, it also meant that when they became unemployed or changed job they lost access to learning. Several work-based learners described how their promotion goals had changed and therefore their motivation to learn diminished. Where learning is directly related to work with potentially instrumental reasons it is also vulnerable to changes at work. The link between learning and economic growth for individuals was not always as straightforward as suggested in policy documents (see also Wolf 2002).

A number of work-based learners who had originally wanted to improve their IT skills found that this wasn't the main focus of provision and whilst they were happy with their progress in literacy and or numeracy they still wanted more input on IT skills.

Many learners, particularly ESOL learners, had more than one job and trying to fit in work and study was difficult. Several described not being able to participate with work-based study because they had to travel some distance between different jobs and found that classes at college which had a greater range of times were more manageable.

Interviewees reported union learning reps as an important factor in enrolling and being supported on work-based courses. However the union learning reps themselves reported finding it difficult to work between the needs of the managers and those of the learners. They experienced clashes between work and learning priorities particularly around funding and resourcing. Where these issues were resolved learners benefited from flexible learning opportunities, where they were not, learning was vulnerable to being made less of a priority or being cut altogether.

5.2 Prison and probation

Many of the learners interviewed in prison said their initial reason for attending classes was that it was a better option than working in prison and it alleviated boredom by getting out of the cell. Overwhelmingly most described experiences of school failure and of being embarrassed by not being able to read or write. Several mentioned that the 'time was right' and they wanted to use their time inside constructively both to enable them to get work on their release and to put something back by being able to contribute to society. This was by holding down a job and included retraining to work with troubled young people. It was also described by one prisoner as: *"not going back into a life of crime as there is more to life than fighting, football, taking drugs and getting pissed"*.

Many learners described being able to read and write more confidently after attending classes in prison. A description echoed by David Sherlock in the case study of HMPYOI Rochrester (ALI 2006). Learners described this in terms of enabling them to keep in contact with family members and being able to plan for a future, either working or going to college after release. Most felt that certificates were important showing what they had achieved – one learner sent his home for his mum to stick on the wall to show he was 'improving himself inside'. All described improving their confidence, both in the ability to learn and also to engage socially with others. For many the increase in confidence, changed aspirations and learning was part of a wider reflective process assessing long-term goals. The drawback to prison learning described by learners was moving on to other institutions, which often interrupted or terminated learning altogether.

Probation Service learners interviewed chose to attend class as part of their sentence. They felt that this was more productive than serving a sentence where they wouldn't achieve anything and they could use the opportunity to gain a qualification. These learners also described failing at school and getting by in jobs that didn't require any reading or writing. In a way similar to the learners in prison many were assessing their lives and futures. One 30 year old who described himself as a habitual offender said; *"at 30 you start to question your life, don't you"* He wanted to go on to college and felt for the first time with the support he received from the tutor this was a possibility. Another learner who had been a

plasterer for 20 years described wanting a better quality of life, not necessarily better money but that:

“My goal at the end of the day is to wake up in the morning and want to go to work instead of thinking ‘oh I’m there again I can’t do this again’.”

These probation learners were working at Level 1 and Level 2, were self-selecting and were highly motivated. Although enthusiastic about this opportunity, so positive they suggested it be made compulsory for all offenders, there are resource issues particularly around drug and alcohol addiction for other learners. In both cases, for the prison and probation learners, those who were at the ‘right time’ in their lives were able to engage successfully in learning using this and increased confidence to plan radical changes in their lives. Some probation interviewees explained that they had been involved in similar courses in the past but that for them it had not been the right time so they had not responded.

5.3 College-based provision

Over half of the people interviewed on college campus/satellite site were attending ESOL provision and their primary reason for being there was to either learn or improve their English language skills. They had a variety of reasons for wanting to do this ranging from wanting to have a better understanding of the requirements for living in the UK; *“I’m living in this country so it’s important to learn English”*, to being able to function socially with English speaking peers in the community; *“to understand better speaking with friends, neighbours...”*, as well as being able to access career and work opportunities; *“I want to buy a house in Scotland and set up my own gardening business”*. The majority of these learners were in the 20 - 29 and 30 - 39 year age groups.

The rest of the people interviewed in this context were reasonably evenly spread across literacy, numeracy and a mix of the two linked to vocational training. Literacy accounted for a slightly higher number of learners than mixed provision and numeracy for the smallest number. Almost all of the people in mixed provision linked to vocational training were young people in the 16 -19 year old age group. Here there was a strong emphasis on filling gaps in qualifications so that they could then move on to a career of their choice. As one young man said:

“I am doing this course next year as well and then construction and hopefully I’ll have a proper job when I am 21”.

People involved in non-vocational mixed provision were older learners spread across the 20-29, 40-49 and 50-59 age groups. The majority of these were older women with higher-level English as second language needs who would either like to get back into the workforce or improve their employment prospects. For some, becoming more linguistically independent now that their children had grown up was important.

People in literacy classes were more evenly spread across a broad spectrum of ages with the majority of people between 20 – 49 years old. Their reasons for being there encompassed the range already discussed in the subject specific section. Numeracy students in this context were concentrated in the older age ranges with approximately three quarters of those interviewed being over the age of 50. The reasons people gave for joining have been covered but the following quote from a woman in her 40s underlines the sense of stigma that many people feel in relation to their lack of confidence with numeracy;

“Well it’s the stigma that I never got it. I’m older now and my son’s doing his A levels and my daughter is going to approach GCSEs, and I thought I’m too old to do it. But now I’m really glad I’ve done it. It’s another thing in my life that I can put behind me and set off on something new.”

The sense of achievement expressed here was a common thread running through interviews with numeracy students. For many, particularly in the older age groups gaining a numeracy qualification was akin to climbing Everest; something people had been frightened of and never thought they could do. It was almost the ‘ultimate learning challenge’.

5.4 Community-based provision

For people learning in a community setting, one of the important features of attending this kind of provision was the fact that this was within their communities and near to their homes. This was cited repeatedly as a significant reason for being there, regardless of which subject area the person was studying. This feature has also been highlighted in the recent ALI report of 2006. One retired numeracy learner who was attending a programme at his great grandson’s school said:

“I meet my little, great grandson from school so I don’t want to be going travelling far away I need to be here to pick him up from school...It’s absolutely ideal!”

A mother with ESOL needs explained that the ‘centre was very convenient for her home’ and was therefore able to recruit learners like her who had tight family time schedules to meet. For these learners it wasn’t that they weren’t prepared to venture elsewhere for learning but initially they needed to build up confidence and re-establish their identities outside of family and home by attending provision in familiar territory. This also applied to a Family Learning programme within local primary schools as one mother explained:

“I think it’s easier for us three though because we’re so used to this school anyway. We’re not going on foreign territory as it were. We’re confident to be in the school so it’s easier for us to come to courses here. I’d probably be

nervous. I probably wouldn't go to any other course if it was outside the school, not yet."

The second noticeable characteristic of community based provision was that a number of older learners or learners with lower levels of confidence, learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia), disabilities or health issues (both mental and physical) found that they could more easily access this type of provision. One older learner said:

"Learning one to one is best. Especially for people who have learning difficulties it is better to be in a small class. It gives you confidence, it gives me confidence. I don't have learning difficulties, but I would encourage especially people with learning difficulties to come, but it is for everyone. At college there are many young people in class; it is easier to come here for older people like me."

These sentiments were reiterated again and again as learners talked about their experiences of this type of provision. It was clear that community based learning was reaching people who, for one or more of the reasons discussed would not be in provision otherwise.

The majority of learners we spoke to in this learning context were either attending ESOL or literacy provision with these two subjects accounting for approximately two thirds of the 178 learners interviewed. The other third was split between mixed provision and numeracy with very few learners engaged in stand-alone IT classes. There was a noticeable concentration of older learners (above the 14-19 age group) in community based provision with around two thirds of learners being over 30 and the remaining third being over 40 years old.

Section 6 - Next steps: Moving on, moving around and moving out

We carried out second interviews with a sample of learners across the six sites to see what their next steps were. We asked retrospectively about their experience of learning, whether this had made a difference to their lives and their plans for the future. In general, and in line with other studies such as the LSC Learner Satisfaction Study (2005) and the Wider Benefits of Learning study (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy and Bynner 2004) people reported:

- Positive experiences of learning particularly when tutors were able to respond to individual needs. Fitting in with every day lives in terms of the day, time and place of learning was important for participation. Many valued the social experience of learning, which provided structure and interest in their lives.
- Learners describe learning new literacy, numeracy and language knowledge as important as well as the more generic skills of 'learning how to learn'. Both sets of skills were seen as transferable to everyday life.
- Learners describe short term and goal focussed plans such as finding work or improving job prospects by studying subjects needed to accomplish this (e.g. Level 2 numeracy for promotion). Many also described lifelong and life-wide aspirations including career changes, broadening horizons through more general learning and doing things that promote happiness, well being and a sense of purpose.

Where learning fitted these broad objectives people were able to continue learning or to progress on to other courses and activities. If people felt their learning was relevant and beneficial in achieving their short or long term goals they continued with their participation.

People also described some of the things that made their continuing participation difficult for them. Some related to provision, particularly whether it would continue, and others were to do with people's lives and changes in their life circumstances. Difficulties were expressed as:

- The class/course did not fit in with learners' lives, for example in the place or time.
- Their own goal changed as they did not want to pursue promotion, their job changed or they became unemployed.
- They were unable to access courses and maintain progress, particularly in Level 2 and L3 ESOL provision.
- The employers learning requirement were sometimes at variance with the learners own goals, particularly in work-based learning.

- Learners felt coerced to attend or had sanctions imposed, for example through Job Centre Plus provision.

6.1 Institutional constraints

People expressed concern that courses would continue, describing issues around numbers and funding. For example the Level 1 numeracy course at a hospital was closed because of low numbers between the first and second interview. Two learners from an inner city college did not enrol on the course as they were told they would receive information through the post – this didn't arrive and they didn't know if it was an administration problem or if the course had been cancelled. Some learners in work-based learning were frustrated at the ongoing lack of opportunity to access computer training. Overwhelmingly though most people did not seem to be affected by institutional constraints, as by and large people seemed to accommodate institutional factors such as courses not being long enough (for what people wanted to learn), waiting lists for popular courses and lack of resources such as books or access to computers. Significant factors included:

- Higher level ESOL learners not being able to access appropriate follow on courses in their local area.
- Learners left or were unhappy if their progress didn't match institutional expectations, for example not achieving Level 2 needed for further study or being left in the same class the following term.
- Learners working at Level 1 and Level 2 progressed quickly being able to integrate new life goals and ambitions and take next steps, often into higher-level courses – confidence was an important aspect of this.

6.2 Personal factors

People's circumstances changed and what they wanted to learn, or the opportunity to learn changed with this. Generally people in the interviews had settled lives and did not experience extreme turbulence. Their motivation and ability to take up learning opportunities were affected by social factors such as health, caring responsibilities and work patterns as well as economic factors such as the cost of courses, cost and distance of travel and childcare. These things changed between the first and second interview. For example one person lost their job and was not able to participate in work-based learning, several became pregnant, others became ill and several others changed their minds about studying for a different or better job.

Between the first and second interviews several factors emerged as significant in people's lives affecting their learning opportunities:

- Being part of a moving population – particularly within prison and probation education, asylum seekers and refugees, migrant workers and those in certain kinds of employment.
- Experiencing health difficulties, particularly affecting older learners and those with physical or mental disabilities.
- Not being able to access work-based learning if jobs changed, if people became unemployed, or promotion aspirations changed.

6.3 What the learners did next

From the second interviews we were able to see more precisely what people were doing from the first to the second interview; whether they were carrying on with their original study, or a course of a similar level, whether they had moved on to a higher level of study or employment related to their experience of learning, or whether they had dropped out or left learning altogether. We identified three categories of moving on, moving around and moving out which captured these potential changes:

Moving On means moving on to other forms of learning. This could be a higher-level course like an Access course, a vocational course (nurse training) or literacy/numeracy and ESOL at a higher level, for example from Entry level 2 to Entry level 3 or from Entry level 3 to Level 1. This could also be moving on in terms of promotion in the work place or getting a job as a result of study. These relate strongly to both educational & socio-economic notions of progression as well as individual progress.

Moving Around means carrying on with the same course, or an equivalent level of learning, without taking qualifications. This could be people who are unable to attend regularly because of physical/mental health issues, people who come mainly for the social aspect of learning or those who want or need to learn at a slower pace or mainly for leisure. This relates strongly to individual progress, which may be at variance with educational notions of progression.

Moving Out means leaving learning altogether. This could be for a variety of reasons from being disappointed with the experience/outcome of learning or relating to changes in life circumstances including health and employment. For some moving out of provision is positive because

they have achieved what they wanted to learn. This relates strongly to educational issues of retention and achievement and also to the broader context of learning in relation to social and personal factors.

(Figure 1)

| Across all 6 sites – combined numbers of students moving on/around/out by subject area | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----|---------------|--------|------------|--------|
| | Moving On | | Moving Around | | Moving Out | |
| Literacy | 21 | 49% | 11 | 25.50% | 11 | 25.50% |
| Numeracy | 9 | 39% | 5 | 22% | 9 | 39% |
| Literacy/Numeracy | 5 | 33% | 4 | 27% | 6 | 40% |
| ESOL | 31 | 63% | 10 | 20% | 8 | 16% |

We found that across the six sites 74% of learners re-interviewed are either progressing in some way or continuing in learning. ESOL has the highest percentage of learners Moving On or Moving Around, which perhaps reflects the long term and on going nature of second language learning, or the importance of the social aspects of learning. We also found (see Figure 2 below) a difference between the more rural and more urban case study sites with less Moving Around in the rural sites. This may be due to the increased difficulty of attending and a lack of alternatives available for learners in geographically remote and rural areas.

(Figure 2)

| Largely rural | | | Largely Urban | | | |
|---|----|-----|--|-----|------------|-----|
| Wiltshire&Swindon Cumbria&Northumberland | | | Cheshire&Warrington West Yorkshire Birmingham &Solihull London West | | | |
| Moving On | 25 | 61% | 41 | 46% | Total = 66 | 51% |
| Moving Around | 5 | 12% | 25 | 28% | Total = 30 | 23% |
| Moving Out | 11 | 27% | 23 | 26% | Total = 34 | 26% |
| Totals | 41 | | 89 | | 130 | |

Having looked at the learners' experiences of Skills for Life we now consider the issues described by managers, co-ordinators and tutors. These experiences and concerns reflect other rungs on the staircase and illustrate the processes involved in policy implementation.

Section 7 - The managers, co-ordinators and tutors views of Skills for Life

Implementing and delivering *Skills for Life* was a key part of the professional role of all the managers, co-ordinators and tutor stakeholders we interviewed. With very few exceptions, they had been involved in adult basic skills work for a long time, bringing considerable prior knowledge and experience to their work on the strategy. They could be described as 'movers and shakers', people who combined a long-term commitment to work in the area of basic skills, with a vision of what they hoped to achieve, and the energy and the determination to initiate change. We found evidence of formal and informal networks as a result of managers, co-ordinators and tutors long-term involvement, some which predated *Skills for Life*. These networks brought together a range of providers to develop provision in one region, supporting the managers and co-ordinators we interviewed in being proactive about the strategy.

In contrast to the managers and co-ordinators, the expansion of basic skills provision through *Skills for Life* meant that many tutors were new to the field. A manager of a Professional Development and Resource Centre explained, the impact of the strategy on tutors was affected by whether tutors were new, or more experienced:

"A lot of people are involved with Skills for Life in [our area]. Many of these people are new to the field of basic skills. A lot of them have come in post-strategy. Therefore there has not been as much questioning of the strategy that you might assume. A lot of acceptance of it as the way it is. Therefore a key distinction you need to make is whether staff are pre-strategy staff or post-strategy staff. On the whole the staff are quite young...Many of the tutors therefore are not aware of the difference between pre- and post-strategy."

7.1 Perceptions of Skills for Life

Overwhelmingly, stakeholders expressed a critical but positive view of the strategy. For example a literacy teacher of a community mental health group described problems she had encountered but at the end of the interview responded generally and enthusiastically saying *"I think it's brilliant."* An ESOL teacher manager in a college talked about a range of problems she faced adding: *"but in spite of those things really Skills for Life has been good."* We found no instances where individuals were uncritical advocates, or conversely, were completely opposed to the strategy. Interviewees described how *Skills for Life* has allowed new projects and initiatives to develop, emphasising at the same time that these were building on provision that predated the strategy. It was felt however that the strategy had helped basic skills work gain more credibility.

Whilst people were generally positive about the changes created by the strategy there was concern about the future. The second round of interviews confirmed that sustainability was a very real concern for most people. For example a manager working in adult and community settings said:

“I think Skills for Life is great. It is a really good strategy, it is really well written, it is really inclusive and the fact that we have had money to provide training and to do various projects that have targeted different groups, I think that has been brilliant but there is an issue around sustainability now because a lot of projects have come to an end.”

The way that interviewees spoke about *Skills for Life* varied depending on where they were placed on our staircase model. Those near the top clearly felt some ownership, for example a regional director for ABSSU mentioned “*working with Number 10*”. This is in contrast to the next layer who saw their role within the strategy as getting other organisations to deliver the targets. Below them managers were concerned with targets in relation to their own organisation as they managed delivery of *Skills for Life* to the learners. It was they who tended to stress the complexities of putting the strategy into practice to meet the needs of individual learners. This particularly affected experienced staff who had worked in basic skills for many years, as they were being expected to make substantial changes to their practices. Whichever ‘stair’ people were on, any curtailing of provision for learners, in particular for non-traditional learners categorised as ‘hard to reach’ was viewed as a negative impact.

Most managers and co-ordinators spoke about the change of concept that the strategy had brought to adult literacy, numeracy and language learning. It had become ‘destigmatised’ compared to previous adult basic education. People reported that widening the definition of basic skills to include Level 2 learners changed the whole concept and changed what a *Skills for Life* learner might be. This was particularly noticeable for those dealing with Level 1 and Level 2 learners, as explained by a Move On regional adviser:

“I think it’s a kind of entitlement model that Skills for Life explores ... It’s not so much the deficit – it’s more positive, it’s about broadening it out. Skills for Life is inclusive and entitlement whereas basic skills was a deficit model.”

Whilst people spoke positively of the change of concept at the same time they recognised that changing the concept did not change the students and that for some at the Entry Levels it made little difference to their experience:

“Sadly we still have some students who were here before Skills for Life and they were here under the old system and they have continued with us under the new system and they are making very, very, slow progress. So it is not as if

Skills for Life has made this massive difference and they are suddenly out there achieving. From my point of view as a tutor I am trying to hurry them along which has also got problems I think, but whether they can use those skills outside of the class I don't know. If I am honest I think no."

7.2 Impact of Skills for Life

The managers, co-ordinators and tutors reported that the biggest impact of the strategy and its infrastructure was the way that it significantly raised basic skills in the national policy agenda. Increased funding, widening of the levels of entitlement and the introduction of targets produced an increased profile and expectation. In response to the heightened national profile *Skills for Life* also increased in significance within organisations, from colleges to workplaces, in a similar way. Considerable national advertising such as the Gremlins campaign had increased public awareness adding to increased demands. A family literacy organiser commented:

"I think there's been much more structure to promotion and advertising and trying to get to people, you know the TV ads, the gremlins, like it or not it seems to work! Then there's the coordination of TV campaign, radio and local press. I've really noticed that's far more coordinated. Our local LSC had a phone line, which was like talk to Janet about basic skills courses in the area."

For some experienced managers and co-ordinators, with a 'longer view', the Gremlins and other media campaigns built upon earlier campaigns to promote adult literacy. A college principal referred to *Skills for Life* as the culmination of the second significant drive on basic skills:

"The first one came back in the seventies with 'On the Move' and BBC promotion and I think it's really taken the Moser report and then the intervention of Government agencies - DfES and then the creation of the Strategy Unit to take that further... I think the successes (of Skills for Life) are the focus and the profile."

Another area of impact of the strategy mentioned by managers and co-ordinators was a greater national awareness that more people had literacy, numeracy and ESOL needs than had been previously realised. *Skills for Life*, and particularly its targets with attached funding, encouraged organisations to identify more people with skills needs. The extract below from a senior trainer's interview demonstrates the shift in responding to learners identified by the strategy:

"The emphasis from the Job Centres, they've got a big push that everybody goes through their 'Fast Track' screening and then, if they come below a certain level they're sent for a basic skills assessment. Since May when their focus went up we've done 162 basic skills assessments in [SW area] and out of those 131 were eligible to go on a course, which is quite frightening really. Some of these wouldn't have been picked up previously as people were only assessed if

they were still unemployed after 6 months. It's got so big now that our courses are oversubscribed!"

Skills for Life also encouraged and enabled organisations to recognise that many learners on vocational courses had literacy, numeracy and ESOL needs. Although not exclusive to the strategy the scale of response enabled by it was. *Skills for Life* led to an increased focus on the need to embed literacy, numeracy and ESOL within other courses, particularly vocational training. Embedding skills in this way increased the numbers of basic skills learners, for example a manager in a large college reported the college had 8,000 learners involved with *Skills for Life*; in a medium sized college the estimate was given of about 1,300 learners with 60 staff.

The policy makes a strong connection between skills for employability and economic growth in the UK. Not surprisingly therefore one of the strategy's initiatives was to encourage work with employers. This was not new as literacy, numeracy and ESOL work with employers pre-dated the strategy; however, it provided many new opportunities for this work. In our first round of interviews with managers and co-ordinators several talked about new initiatives with employers that they were developing. A manager for Army education commented:

"I think it has been successful in reaching more groups, I think particularly looking at those in employment which wasn't really an obvious group to begin with. I think it's great that people are talking about basic skills now."

7.3 The scale of Skills for Life

Most managers, co-ordinators and tutors commented upon the scale and scope of the strategy and its infrastructure. Those near the top of our staircase model often used actual figures, such as targets, both nationally and for their region or their organisation. Those further down the staircase often used phrases such as targets demanding 'increased numbers'. Reaction to the numbers seemed to be influenced by a person's position on the staircase. At the top of the staircase the targets were viewed as being based on the economic need of the country and responding to the need to 'upskill' the adult population. For example a senior regional development worker felt that the target numbers of learners were not actually enough for the future economic needs of his region. However, on the other hand, a trainer involved in the work of delivering the extra numbers held an opposing view. He questioned:

"Does England need another 5 million people with better literacy skills and could it use them if we had them?"

Some found the target numbers almost overwhelming and often confusing. A Regional LSC manager, with responsibility for achieving the targets in her area, exemplified the difficulty as she tried to remember

what the actual figures were. She questioned what the figures were saying:

“The 78,000 target for our region was fairly high, or was it 780,000, no its got to be 78,000”

Other managers and co-ordinators however found that the very size of *Skills for Life* was a positive advantage. An ESOL project manager reported:

“Skills for Life is big and everybody knows about it, a real impetus... I was in London at a conference yesterday and there were so many things happening that would have been unheard of before. Indeed the fact that you're here doing this research is part of that.”

The strategy also introduced new qualifications for learners to support the increased learning opportunities being created. Some managers, co-ordinators and tutors had issues about the content of the tests and what and how they were delivered but overall the response to them was positive. The fact that the tests were national with clearly defined levels seemed to outweigh any disadvantages. Many reported that after initial uncertainty learners viewed the tests and qualifications positively. A tutor in probation felt that the national recognition of the tests was particularly valuable for her learners who often needed something to give them credibility in the search for employment:

“The Skills for Life qualifications are national and for life. I'm always glad when they get a national qualification and I stress it is for life, and that when you see job adverts they ask for it and employers accept it. A lot of kids who leave school with grades A-C GCSE don't have anything as good as this. It is all exam done on the computer with no course work, so there is no chance of any cheating. For some people for whom education has never been important then this can be really good.”

Others pointed out that the national tests were valuable as evidence for others of what had been achieved and at what level. This was of value not only for learners and employers but also for providers when students moved into new provision, for whatever reason. A manager described this as removing the 'fuzziness' that had existed before.

The scale of the strategy also made managers, co-ordinators and tutors aware of increased possibilities to enable learners to progress. A manager of a Professional Development Unit explained:

“In the past a lot of learners came back time and time again for recreational and social reasons. It has forced us to look at learners. Made us work to attract learners who could really benefit from having their basic skills boosted...The national strategy has forced us to look at the type of learners we have. We are now able to provide sets of courses

which are more appropriate to the needs of those who require a lot of help. And provide a progression route through.”

However, she also pointed to the danger of moving to the opposite extreme where *“we just Hoover all these people up and push them on.”* The tension between pushing people out of basic skills provision and enabling them to move on through a clear progression route was an issue raised by many managers and co-ordinators.

The managers and co-ordinators came from a wide range of different organisations and services, confirming how diverse provision and learners following *Skills for Life* programmes were. In their various roles they were responding to a variety of reasons given by learners for wanting to improve their skills. A tutor described the *Skills for Life* learners she worked with:

“The adult learners I’ve worked with have had lots of reasons for coming – care assistants who wanted to be nurses, a town councillor who wanted to be able to write credible reports, a man whose wife made him enrol (lasted two weeks), a woman who came because her friend did, a stroke victim determined to relearn.”

Elsewhere, provision was targeted at very specific audiences. For example, the NHS in one area had an ambitious programme of *Skills for Life* provision that had three goals: to improve the skills of the existing workforce, to attract and ‘upskill’ the potential workforce, and to enable people to become ‘expert patients’.

7.4 The outer edges of Skills for Life: Reaching the ‘hard to reach’

Whereas ‘reluctant’ learners in prison represented a captive audience, most other ‘hard to reach’ learners were less easily attracted into provision. Traditional approaches to enrolling students tended to have little or no success in attracting hard to reach learners, as the following comment from a tutor explains:

“I lost count of the number of times I sat in libraries in the autumn of 2005 waiting for learners to turn up and enrol on various courses – yet on every training course I’d ever been there had been acknowledgement of the fact that courses had to be taken out to the learners. Most times no one came and no course ever resulted. Seemed so obvious that people with literacy difficulties were unlikely to have picked up leaflets (which were not attractive) in the library. Other tutors I knew were having the same experience.”

Instead, those who were engaging in *Skills for Life* provision came through various alternative routes. For example, one training organiser reported that learners in the young offenders unit where he worked came to programmes not only via Jobcentre Plus and the Connexions service,

but also as self-referrals via word-of-mouth through friends. A regional community provision manager explained how providers needed to go out to potential learners, rather than expect people to come to them: *“You actually have to go out and knock on the doors and try and engage groups of people that are really not confident about it”*. People described as ‘hard to reach’ learners tended not to be in ‘formal’ learning provision, as the above manager explained further:

“Organisations whose main work involved dealing with homelessness, or drug abuse or social housing issues reach learners unlikely to enter an educational institution, or even a regular community class.”

If ‘hard to reach’ learners did attend sessions in formal educational settings, this was sometimes seen as a chance for other professionals to work with them, disrupting provision of *Skills for Life*. The balance between learning and the immediate needs for surviving was often difficult to achieve in these settings. A tutor who taught a class in a local school explained:

“One group of young mothers I taught as part of a Sure Start project had such problems in their lives that they arrived angry or upset or unwell. We were frequently interrupted by professionals – school nurse, social workers, ed psych - wanting to see one of them and knowing that they would be available for a quick chat because they were in the building at that time.”

For many providers, attempts to work with hard to reach learners presented a funding risk, as these learners were less likely to attend regularly and to be able to meet national targets quickly, especially at Levels 1 and Level 2. For many involved in this work this produced a contradiction between policy targets and achieving adequate funding to achieve them. A county basic skills co-ordinator explains the consequences of this contradiction:

“This year we have put hard to reach learners on the back burner so we could reach our targets. By reaching our targets we get our money and we are then able to go back to the hard to help. Our main target is the number of qualifications at Levels 1 and 2.”

7.5 Funding Skills for Life

For those engaged directly with policy, near the top of our staircase model, the increased funding for *Skills for Life* was something of which they were proud. A LSC manager commented:

“I remember Ivan Lewis standing up and saying don’t ever call this thing the Cinderella service, it drives him mad when anybody still does, because there is plenty of funding in basic skills if the providers know how to utilise the funding model, but they don’t.”

All of the managers and co-ordinators were positive about the increased funding being made available to support the strategy. However, further down the staircase, and nearer to delivery, the words *“utilising the funding model”* in the quotation above was viewed less positively as people struggled to fit within what was sometimes felt to be prescriptive funding models. This applied particularly to those working outside of the mainstream and with ‘hard to reach’ learners. For smaller organisations applying for funding required additional time resources, which they didn’t always have.

A manager in a voluntary organisation described an example of this funding difficulty. He was pleased when he got extra funding but described the extra work in order to obtain it even when his local LSC had wanted his organisation to bid for a tender. The first time the tender came out he decided not to bid as *“...it didn’t fit what we’d written, so we said we’re not going to submit against that... you know round into square hole”*. However the LSC changed their criteria slightly and he did then bid. He was successful and was pleased by the large sums of money available from the LSC *“£600,000 which is massive”*. However, by his follow up interview he was less enthusiastic as he felt that the LSC was making increased demands, which his organisation could not always meet:

“The LSC demands high level of accountability but doesn’t respond itself. Funding is still an issue and what has been gained can be lost, as expectations get raised it becomes more difficult to respond.”

A similar point was made by a trade union development worker:

“I think by and large there’s a willingness from providers to be more flexible, but I think any provider will tell you there are funding issues around that, there are issues regarding funding that they might argue inhibit the ability to be as flexible as people want it.”

Even for those working in the mainstream the additional funding from *Skills for Life* did not address all their concerns. Some had concerns about the long-term commitment of funding for *Skills for Life* learners. One college principle said if she could ask a question about *Skills for Life* it would be to the LSC and funding bodies:

“It would be their long-term commitment to this work and to test out with them whether they actually have the knowledge about how much it actually costs to

take a learner with very few skills to that Level 2 qualification. Do they feel that the funding, even weighted as it is, will be sufficient to really take that hard core of learners through?"

By the second interview this principal's concerns about funding had increased. Her main concern was that overall funding within FE colleges was getting much tighter and that this indirectly affected *Skills for Life* as it left less room to manoeuvre when *Skills for Life* funding changed. She gave the example of staffing being so stretched that if anybody was off sick or on maternity leave it was difficult to provide cover. This was particularly detrimental as *Skills for Life* learners were usually part time, often in outreach centres and less able to be able to cope with being set work to complete independently.

With a tighter overall budget nationally in colleges there was less money to compensate for any individual problems within *Skills for Life* funding. An ESOL college tutor/manager found different fees being charged to ESOL learners depending on their country of origin. She explained that this is complex and when ESOL learners first arrive they often have poor English and sometimes misunderstand. If somebody does slip through the net then it can be very difficult to rectify at a later date if they do not have the money to continue with a course. She gave the example of a woman with a Portuguese passport who was thought to qualify for lower fees as she was an EU citizen, only later was it discovered that she was in fact from Mozambique. She did not qualify for free ESOL classes and the college were unable financially to support her learning.

This tutor/manager was also very concerned about a recent change in *Skills for Life* funding, in particular the loss of the three-hour allocation. She feared this would have a detrimental effect on new students. She explained the consequences:

"The loss of the 3hour funding to interview and assess new students will not be helpful. This was really useful as time to talk to potential learners and to assess them. Next year the shortest class will be 12 hours, which will be a more drawn out process for the learners especially if they do that and then have to go onto a waiting list. But if we do less than 9 hours we wouldn't get any money for the interview and assessment process. It means though that we will have to start teaching them to make up the 9 hours but that won't be easy because we don't know what level learners are at till we have assessed them. Normally when they start classes they go into the appropriate class now we will initially (first 9 hours) have to put them into a class with people who enrolled at the same time, which could be at any level. Ideally maybe we would enrol large numbers all at once at the college but not all new learners are confident to come to the college and we would do them at the outreach centres where they will go onto a course."

Managers and co-ordinators of training organisations also had concerns about funding, particularly uncertainties which were beyond their control. As smaller and less diverse providers than FE colleges they had little in

the way of a financial cushion, reporting the feeling they were walking a 'boom and bust' tightrope. A senior trainer in the SW area explained:

“The problem is we don't know whether funding is going to continue. Currently the LSC fund the Job Centre who then contract out. It's very difficult as we're a profit making company and we've got to earn the money to pay our wages. We can't take on commitments that aren't sustainable. What happens then? We can't get any guarantee of numbers. We get a projected number but if they don't materialise that's tough, and if 3 times that number materialise you've got to cope. We try to keep the ratio around 8-1 but what the job centre doesn't seem to realise is, that if the numbers suddenly double you can't just go and pick a basic skills tutor off the shelf in Tesco! You've got to advertise then interview. It needs to be sustainable because if those numbers aren't going to continue what are you going to do with that tutor?”

This was echoed by a trainer, working in Army provision, who described the uncertain situation he was facing:

“As I mentioned, the current anxiety over whether the sudden funding withdrawal through ETP [Employer Training Pilot] tends to dominate. My role therefore could very well disappear on a temporary or even permanent basis. There are various initiatives under way to attempt to recover the situation, both within the Army, for whom it represents a huge problem across their whole Basic Skills initiative, and by my employers.. Our current dire funding crisis has only highlighted the damage to an established and apparently quite successful programme that can be caused by not getting this right. Following as it does from the constant hassle and major delays in particular around ETP cash flows, it is should hardly be surprising that providers are reluctant to participate.”

Section 8 - Working with the infrastructure

Over the six sites managers, co-ordinators and tutors described their experiences of implementing and adapting the infrastructure within their regions. People did not talk about the infrastructure as such; rather they talked about the component parts such as targets, qualifications, tests, assessment, the curriculum and screening. The term was most likely to be used by those near the top of our staircase model and least likely to be used by those nearest learners and delivery.

8.1 Targets

For all those interviewed, the national targets represented an ever-present feature of *Skills for Life* provision. Most managers and co-ordinators were largely happy to have targets as they felt they helped to 'drive up' the quality as well as the quantity of provision. One manager described how they helped to reflect what the learner was actually learning:

"I've welcomed the targets, because you can get people who have been slushing about within basic skills for years. Now you have to make a decision as to whether you are actually doing any good for that learner, whether you're serving them best, and obviously in the back of your mind you've got the targets. Because all my tutors have targets the same as I've got targets. Therefore I think that with the Skills for Life strategy and the tests, it has focused us on where we should be moving to."

Others took an opposing view suggesting that *Skills for Life* targets could act as a blunt instrument that could hamper rather than enable progress. For example one manager felt:

"In terms of measurements we are looking at people who have achieved the test, but there are other people who have made progress and that gets fed back to me by the tutors and that is not being counted and really the Government are only interested in Level 1 and Level 2 rather than the entry levels because the funding goes that way. I just think that we need to think more creatively how we measure the impossible."

Another manager explained that simply collecting required data for funding was not useful in itself; it needed to be interrogated to gain a better understanding of how provision was reaching people who were the target of that provision:

"It's doing a bit of brainwork on [the data] to turn it into what are the puzzly questions, what's the knowledge that we have now, not "have you filled in your return properly". It's not about data, it's about what the data's telling us. Now we haven't had much of that brain work in the past, it's been about getting the figures in, getting them in the right boxes, because

of the strategy, code it properly, do this, get that, you don't get your funding if ... All that's helped to get proper data in place. Middle managers should feel they know everything they need to know. Whether they're acting on it is another thing."

There were examples of local targets being set and being used creatively to promote development, creating a useful internal focus and vision for basic skills work.

Many tutors were less happy with the targets. Whereas managers and co-ordinators felt they had some flexibility in adapting the targets and working with them, tutors described themselves as having to organise their work to meet the targets. Many tutors expressed the view that targets negatively distorted provision so that it did not always meet learners' needs. This was not simply that tutors felt some people did not want to take tests, but that the tests led to teaching being tied too closely to assessment, rather than linked to what learners felt they needed. Because funding was tied to achieving targets some tutors felt compromised by ensuring that sufficient learners 'achieved' and were 'counted' to enable provision to continue.

There was a strong view amongst managers, co-ordinators and tutors that the Level 2 target dominated provision, and that other levels did not 'count'. As a result, as one manager in the NE explained:

"...the weakest and those most in need fall through the net as providers can demonstrate better success rates when they concentrate on learners with higher abilities. If providers chose to work with learners with more complex needs (and subsequently the learners stay on for longer than 22 weeks), this jeopardises the targets and can be interpreted as a weakness of the provider."

8.2 Qualifications, accreditation and assessment

Positive comments about the national tests focused on how the tests were a means of motivating learners, how they enabled learners to gain a qualification without a long wait, and how they helped to move learners on. This was particularly welcomed in a prison context, with a shifting population and where timing was crucial in supporting individual learners sense of progress. A tutor working in prison explained:

"Prisoners can take tests and get their certificate, where in the past they had to wait for a test date and their certificate would arrive after they had moved on."

The possible benefits for learners did not mean that providers were always enthusiastic about tests. A regional core skills manager in the

Midlands described an early attempt to introduce the tests and the difficulties and resistance he came up against:

“The startling demonstration was when we did the literacy and numeracy Pathfinder, and we were offered the very first literacy and numeracy test, to pilot it. And we wanted to do it. There were 10,000 learners in [our area] and in theory they could all enter the test in 3 weeks time. So in my enthusiasm, I said to all the senior managers “how many people do you want to put in? It’s free, they’ll get a national qualification.” Oh, about 12. “Well, would you like to ask your tutors how many they want to put in?” About a week later we’d got 60. “Would you like to ask your learners?” because it’s only a week away now, and overnight we got 400. So there is something about, you need to shift the key intermediaries, either out the way, or along the system, because they are gate keeping for a multiplier of about 400. They’re not just affecting one or two, they’re affecting large numbers. So you’ve got to get that middle manager system sorted. And we’ve put a lot of energy into that. “

This senior manager, as with others in this position, saw the issue as a continuing problem to work on with the next tier of managers below them. They in turn would work with tutors who often had to be convinced that tests would not negatively affect the learning experiences of the learners.

8.3 Changing curriculum structures and organisation

The widespread use of screening met with some criticism. For example, a regional manager in the Midlands argued that intelligent targeted provision was sometimes more cost effective than screening. He felt by targeting a particular location used by people likely to have basic skills needs with a 2 hour screening session this would be more productive than actually trying to teach basic skills. Many managers and co-ordinators were resistant to a ‘scatter gun approach’ seeing the value in targeting specific areas and populations of learners. Many also expressed concern that the various aspects of provision were not necessarily joined up. One manager felt that:

“There seems to be very little substantial connection between screening, assessment, diagnosis, learning plans and what’s being taught and offering accreditation. That sort of journey round isn’t quite working yet in the way that the infrastructure imagines it would. So for us, that’s got to be part of the agenda.”

8.4 The 'professionalisation' of the workforce: staff training and development

The delivery of *Skills for Life* has involved considerable amounts of staff training, both for experienced and new tutors. Early on this required awareness/information training for existing providers and staff about the new strategy and infrastructure and how it differed from what was previously in place. It also involved a steep learning curve for stakeholders (especially those near the top of our staircase) who found themselves with new responsibilities, and whilst they had previous senior management experience this wasn't necessarily related to adult basic skills. For example a manager at Job Centre Plus working at regional level had had no previous experience in this area but had taken on this responsibility and was attending meetings at the regional Government Office and finding out what basic skills provision Job Centre Plus provided across the region.

Many experienced managers and co-ordinators became involved in training to support the implementation of the new infrastructure such as the national curricula (DfES 2001b, 2001c 2001d), the new qualifications and the new *Skills for Life* materials. This also included capacity building, both specific training to increase the number of *Skills for Life* teachers/trainers and also to increase the qualifications of many existing staff with the introduction of a Level 4 qualification in numeracy, ESOL and in literacy. However, for many staff who had been working in basic skills and regarded themselves as experienced professionals this was met with some scepticism at first. In our early interviews with managers and co-ordinators staff training was something that most would talk passionately about. Those near the top of the staircase would talk about how much it was needed, and their involvement in its provision. For example a senior manager at a regional development agency talked proudly about the specific funding that his organisation was providing:

“We contracted through our LSC a budget of £1,000,000, which was specifically to look at capacity building and infrastructure requirements in order for the LSC to meet its targets.”

Those at a slightly lower point on the staircase saw it differently, as being too little. A curriculum manager was disappointed as he felt there was insufficient to meet the need:

“There are things like curriculum training which have been slower. It started well but then it slowed right down and we have had new members of staff who haven’t had that. There’s no opportunity for them to get it at the moment because the money’s dried up for that. We haven’t had capacity building money this year that we had for the last 2 years so we’re not able to double staff sessions or do train the trainer sessions for the Level 2. It’s negative that because it’s not over or it shouldn’t be over, it’s just getting started really. If we’re to double the numbers from 2004-7 you can’t do that without the extra capacity and it’s longer term than they wanted it to be. They wanted to put capacity money in for 3 years and then say now you’ve done that.”

Another complaint, voiced by many, was the actual Level 4 qualifications themselves. A college manager explained the difficulties:

“The new level 4 qualifications that are being rolled out by universities haven’t had enough basic skills input them in. A lot of the new PGCE students are terrified of teaching new readers because they haven’t had those sort of strategies taught them. What they’ve had is generic literacy with the subject specification for numeracy or literacy. But the university says the subject specialism ‘is your bit’. But then people can’t go into classes straight away because they can’t teach it yet they have got the new qualifications. But I don’t see Level 4 subject knowledge in classes that I’m observing yet people are coming out of the university with a certificate. I also don’t think that the university are linking that to teaching in the context that people will be teaching in. It’s a bit of a shame really because the money was there and the ideas were there but then they didn’t have the staff to teach in the universities. They used linguistic experts to teach Level 4 literacy which is fine as far as it goes but it doesn’t help you to teach a beginner reader – there’s a link missing. They don’t have the basics of how to teach phonics and things.” (See Brooks, Burton, Cole and Szczerbinski 2007)

It was not just college managers who felt this way, a trainer in the army explained:

“I feel that the new Level 4 courses (in which I have been involved on the delivery side) do not sufficiently address the needs of new basic skills tutors. I hardly ever feel that, by the end of the course, a new basic skills tutor is really ready to go out and teach although some cope better than others.”

Many tutors at the beginning of the implementation of the strategy were negative and uncertain about the training, for example a part time tutor employed by an agency revealed how she did not fit the criteria for

training. Many felt it was a big commitment from them as part time tutors and some felt the courses were badly delivered and the content didn't match the teaching environments they were working in. However, in later interviews many of these complaints had disappeared. Indeed it was clear just how much training was taking place. A manager/tutor in an English department illustrates the scale of what was being undertaken:

“ Last academic year 5 of us got our Level 4 Fento. And we have some doing their PCET (post Compulsory Education and Training) and they [3] will be doing it next year. The maths workshop have their own programme so this is just the English workshop. And one of our other centres is running the Level 2 Fento for the support workers, quite a few of our support workers have gone through that programme.”

As the strategy has progressed there has been heightened awareness of the need for *Skills for Life* teaching to support learners on vocational courses. 'Embedding' has become an important aspect of delivery. This has raised many issues surrounding training and supporting vocational tutors across different subject areas and areas of professional expertise. Many tutors accepted embedding in principle but were critical of its implementation. A college manager voiced her concerns:

“ There are plans but I don't think it is happening yet to deliver the Level 3 Fento to the vocational tutors. I think there is still some resistance and I think it is quite difficult to break that because they don't see their roles as Skills for Life they are teaching bricklaying or whatever it is. So there's a course that we put on I don't know when.”

8.5 Quality and Inspection

Managers and co-ordinators frequently referred to the quality that *Skills for Life* had added to basic skills. A manager in community education when asked what was different about *Skills for Life* explained:

“ It's things that have put the structure in, and I do think it's helped us with the quality of what we expect from teachers as well. Having that structure, having the national curriculum, having somewhere to aim at, having the Level 4. I think that's reduced the sort of thing they talked about in Ofsted in 1998 or whatever which was all that learners sitting in the same workshop for years with random sheets of paper. I think there's much less of that going on.”

Only a few of our stakeholders specifically mentioned inspection but most were familiar with 'The Common Inspection Guidelines' (DfES 2002a) and of the Ofsted Reports and Adult Learning Inspectorate Reports (Ofsted 2003, 2005) which were monitoring quality of provision.

Some saw the inspection framework as a valuable tool for getting vocational providers to think about and meet the literacy, numeracy and language needs of some of their learners. A Move On regional adviser

felt the inspection reports gave her mandate to do this. Whilst a regional adviser for ABSSU, closer to policy, felt that the inspection reports helped to identify what was happening in *Skills for Life* provision itself and ways in which it should be improved. He identified areas that needed considerable improvement, for example Job Centre Plus, and gave example of others that were doing quite well such as FE Colleges.

A few managers and co-ordinators referred to specific inspection reports on their organisations. For one this was very positive, as it had led to the college creating a specific *Skills for Life* senior post to which she had been appointed. Another felt that the inspection report they received was good but the college was criticised, as some of its ESOL in outreach centres didn't have the same level of resourcing as provision in the main college campus. This manager voiced the frustration that many felt when their work, particularly in the community and with 'hard to reach' learners, was judged within a narrow frame of reference which didn't apply to the context they were delivering provision within:

"Well it was catch 22- so we have this wonderful comment about the responsibility and our ability to engage the community but at the same time we have this negative comment about the premises and facilities not being as good as those in the college in all of the centres."

Section 9 - Provision in different contexts

Different contexts for provision raised specific issues and drew attention to some of the problems facing a national strategy in addressing a diverse range of learners and their needs. FE colleges are the main *Skills for Life* providers delivering discrete literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes as well as embedded provision and foundation courses that include a mixture of literacy, numeracy and IT. Colleges also provide classes in the community, in prison and for the Probation service, in work places and support provision in voluntary organisations. Private providers and some community organisations also cover some of these learning contexts.

9.1 Colleges

Interviews with college staff showed that *Skills for Life* had dramatically raised the profile of the basic skills areas of work in colleges. Interviewees spoke of *Skills for Life* as including far more than just basic skills – as it now included higher levels (Level 2), extended into other courses (embedding) and sought to expand work outside of the college (work based learning.) Just as importantly they felt that *Skills for Life* had a much higher profile nationally and more funding than had been there before; this had raised its status and position within the college management structure. The Cross College *Skills for Life* co-ordinator in one college explained:

“If the LSC ring up the directorate and want information it comes to me. In terms of reporting I meet with the Vice Principal on a fortnightly basis. The agenda is set by me and I tell him which departments things aren’t happening in... when I said to one head of department that I have fortnightly meetings with the VP he said – well I don’t get to see him as often as that.”

As *Skills for Life* developed so the job titles of the people within the college changed. For instance a ‘Basic Skills Programme Manager’ had by the time of our follow up interview become a ‘*Skills for Life* Programme manager’. This was much more than a name change as *Skills for Life* had brought much wider responsibilities:

*“The job’s changed dramatically since I started in January 02. It wasn’t a department then and they decided for *Skills for Life* that it did need to be a specific department but since then it’s pulled in other areas as well. I’m responsible for the additional support that goes on in college, cross college basic skills, quite a lot of projects that have come on stream from ESF type money, so I’m like the mover and shaker for the development side of increasing basic skills wherever.”*

Most of the people we interviewed in these posts were ‘movers and shakers’ which is perhaps not surprising as funding was so clearly linked to targets. Whilst some tutors were less happy with targets many of the managers accepted them:

“I regard meeting those targets as payback time for all the money in the advertising and that, that’s going on at the moment. I feel sort of comfortable with that because that’s the reality of the world.”

Indeed many seemed proud of what they were achieving. One *Skills for Life* manager spoke of how the figures in her college had grown by 61% in 2003/04 from the previous year. In spite of this increase she was not concerned that the college would run out of new *Skills for Life* learners, as data at ward level showed cases of up to 35% need. She reflected that:

“Yet our penetration is no more than 3%. I’m not afraid of running out of people, even if the statistics are not absolutely accurate, on that scale there would still be a lot of people to go at.”

A college principal also felt that there were still many potential *Skills for Life* learners in the catchment area, but added the caveat that funding needed to account of the fact that the next tranche of basic skills *Skills for Life* learners was going to be more difficult to reach. Because of this it would take greater investment in outreach and delivery in small groups. She and others also felt that many of the youngsters coming out of school at 16 still did not have the skills needed and so there would be a need for *Skills for Life* in the future:

*“The nearest 11-16 school to us is only gaining 15% with 5 A-C passes. When you look then at the agenda of whether things are improving I’m very optimistic that at the college here we have some excellent staff but we still have that real log jam of young people coming through who in that definition of *Skills for Life* are illiterate and innumerate.”*

One of the biggest challenges initially identified by our college stakeholders was obtaining staff with the right skills. In our first interviews there were frequent concerns raised by college staff about capacity building, both gaining access to the training and often the quality of what was being taught. By the follow up interviews this appeared to be less of a priority issue. Some managers reported that new qualified staff often lacked classroom experience.

In our first stakeholder interviews many college staff were grappling with the difficulty of recruiting sufficient staff to meet the needs of the growing number of *Skills for Life* learners. By the second interviews many felt this had only partly been solved as one Head of School for *Skills for Life* explained:

“Literacy now probably has enough tutors but there is still a big shortage for numeracy and with ESOL it is like feeding buns to an elephant you couldn’t ever fill it up.”

In terms of recruiting staff many college managers commented on the fact that staff in schools were financially better rewarded than teachers in

FE, making it a less attractive area of teaching. One college principal said that often they only got one or two applicants for a teaching post, contrasting with their non-teaching posts. Many tutors complained that the pay and career progression routes within basic skills are not seen to be as attractive as in mainstream teaching routes.

Overall, despite some problems, by the follow up interviews college managers and co-ordinators were pleased by what *Skills for Life* had enabled them to do, both personally and professionally. For example when we returned to one interviewee, who worked in education for five years starting as a part time ESOL tutor, she had recently been promoted to 'Programme manager *Skills For Life*'. She said that she had seen a dramatic change "*before there wasn't the curriculum, and the professionalism wasn't regarded as being in the sector. It's a quality initiative.*" Many others working in college echoed this. It was often accompanied, however, by the warning that although the strategy was enabling progress to be made the problem was a persistent one: '*it's not a quick fix though it's here for ever*'. Other expressed concern that the funding might not last as long as it was needed, particularly in ESOL provision.

9.2 Adult and community learning (ACL)

The various examples of adult and community learning across this study indicate how important this aspect of *Skills for Life* provision is in reaching a diverse range of learners. It appeared however to be very vulnerable to changes in funding and changing funding priorities, particularly the perceived emphasis on the achievement of Level 2 qualifications. Several areas of provision with homeless men funded through *Skills for Life* had been cut within the life of this research. In both cases the manager or co-ordinator reported that their funding had been cut, either by the LSC or their college, as they were unable to meet learner progression targets. In both cases they were looking for other sources of funding to continue this work – in one case through a Big Lottery Fund grant and the other through a European funded project (see also Barton, Appleby, Hodge, Tusting and Ivanic 2006)

Funding was not always the main issue and several people identified a clash of culture between community education and literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision within *Skills for Life*. A co-ordinator identified the problematic nature of what she saw as a deficit model in *Skills for Life*, and how this conflicted with the wider ACL culture:

"Skills for Life is based on the view that adults need to learn because they lack something. That is fine if the adults agree with this and agree to take part. Adult education is more positive. Adult education is best described not in terms of meeting literacy needs but as providing opportunities to do something you want to learn."

She, like many others, advocated embedded *Skills for Life* provision as one solution to this dilemma. There is however an ongoing tension between the different pedagogic and political traditions between community education and basic skills/literacy education (e.g. Tett 2006) which predates the *Skills for Life* strategy.

9.3 Workplace and work-based learning

Workplace learning raises a number of specific issues and people spoke of both difficulties and factors that contributed to successful provision. Where workplace learning was most successful the company involved was committed to *Skills for Life* at the highest level of management, and managers at all levels were involved with the activity. In many companies a commitment to 'matched time' was agreed, that is, if employees committed half an hour to learning/training, they would have half an hour release from work to make up a full hour of learning.

Here we draw on an example from a provider in one region, who managed an extensive programme of workplace learning across the region to a wide variety of companies. The introduction of provision was preceded by a Training Needs Analysis carried out by the provider; seen as essential in order to provide relevant and targeted learning. In some cases the tutor would integrate themselves into the company, as another member of staff, so that people knew who they were. Union Learning Reps have been particularly important in facilitating this process. Provision was then offered at times to suit employees, and their shift patterns, which required a high degree of flexibility. It meant that basic skills tutors had to be found who were prepared to deliver at night before the night shift started (at 10pm for example), or first thing in the morning (such as 5am) before the morning shift. There were also periods when provision might be poorly attended, or might need to be suspended. This might be possible to predict, such as when a retailer was holding a sale, but might also be unpredictable. The following offers a good example:

"Their job at BT in Birmingham is to repair telegraph poles and to go down manholes and to look at the wiring. If it rains and there's a lot of wind about and terrible weather, then we know there will be nobody in the learning centre. So in order to get somebody through an achievement in the allotted time is sometimes a great challenge, because they're actually not going to be there, not because they don't want to be there, but because work takes over, and that's their priority."

In such instances, the provider still had to pay the tutors, even though only one learner might attend a session. These examples all involved large companies, and the manager of this provision admitted that working with small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) created a much greater challenge. She gave an example of where provision was made available to a group of SMEs in a retail centre, which had proved an effective way of beginning to address this issue.

9.4 Prison

In the prison context that we visited for this study, *Skills for Life* was seen as offering strengths and limitations. The opportunity for prisoners to achieve qualification outcomes more quickly and easily was seen as a strength that motivated learners and encouraged them to progress. However, increasingly *Skills for Life* was seen as dominating prison education provision, to the exclusion of other learning, with the National Qualification Framework (NQF) Level 2 the end point of learning offered to prisoners.

Prisons differed in the way learners experienced provision. The prison included in this study was a remand prison and had a very fluid population, whereas other categories of prison might have a more stable population, and a stronger emphasis on training. The general fluidity of the prison population, from one prison to another, and in and out of prison, meant that it was difficult to ensure that records followed individuals to other prisons or to services outside prison, meaning that time would be spent re-assessing individuals.

Despite these difficulties, there were numerous examples of creative projects to enhance *Skills for Life* provision and the learners' experience. These included a 'Storybook Dads' project, where prisoners could record stories that could be sent home for children to listen to and peer partner projects, where a prisoner with more advanced skills would undergo a certificated training programme and would work as a mentor to a less advanced peer.

9.5 Embedded learning

We found embedded provision in a range of contexts, but we also learned that the possibility of embedding provision was affected by wider factors. In the prison context that we visited, the education and training contract was divided between two further education colleges, with one responsible for *Skills for Life* work and the other for vocational training. This made it virtually impossible to embed *Skills for Life* into other programmes. In addition the risk with embedding is that basic skills *learning* disappears and it simply becomes an item to record on an outcomes sheet. Where embedded learning was working most successfully in this study, was where it was developed with a very clear focus and purpose, as a means of enabling learners to progress.

Three examples demonstrate this very clearly. In one region, a selection of first rung taster courses embedded with basic skills were introduced in the context of family learning, in areas considered to be areas of high social deprivation. These included beauty courses, floristry courses and craft courses, offered as short 10-week courses, with a view to moving learners on to something else. They had developed a particularly

successful progression route into classroom assistants training, leading eventually to a Foundation degree, offered by the local college in collaboration with a university. The manager commented on the success of this model:

“...we’re seeing some of our learners who started off in Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy [FLLN], have gone through the level 2 classroom assistants, and have then moved into the level 3. They wouldn’t even tackle that if they hadn’t done the one before, and they’re now doing the degree. It is so motivating to speak to those people. They’ve found the degree hard, but they’re doing it.”

9.6 Accelerated provision

There were a number of examples of intensive and accelerated provision that had proved very popular with learners from different backgrounds. One further education college ran three day intensive residentials for mature students each year, which provided the opportunities to learn, practise, and complete assessment over the course of the residential. A regional manager reported that young people attending college had complained that they were not offered similar opportunities:

“Why haven’t we been offered this before? You’ve been offering us an hour of maths every Friday and we’ve just not bothered turning up. If we knew we could have got our maths this way, we’d have come, because this is good.”

Elsewhere, the prison that we visited had trialled four-week intensive courses as part of a Pathfinder project and found that they were preferred by learners and were more effective. Learners in the army had also been given the opportunity to attend intensive courses and had welcomed this.

These examples are not to suggest that accelerated provision should replace other, longer term learning opportunities, but that there is a place for a variety of approaches to structuring provision.

9.7 Learner progress and learning progression

Skills for Life emphasises the progression of students towards achieving certificated outcomes in literacy, numeracy and language skills, and progress in relation to these outcomes is monitored and recorded closely. However, achieving such outcomes does not address the question of where *Skills for Life* takes the learner beyond this – what progress they feel they are able to make in their life. In this study we were made very aware through the comments and experiences of the managers, co-ordinators and tutors of the complex nature of learner progression within the *Skills for Life* framework and how this related to people’s progress outside of it.

We were given examples of individual success linked to, but going beyond, achieving basic skills qualifications. A training co-ordinator working with young offenders gave a number of examples of the positive outcomes his organisation has achieved. A young woman from Somalia completed her basic skills test, and the organisation helped her to apply for and get a job. The improvement in basic skills gave her the confidence to make applications. Following on from a basic skills course, they had helped another young man to get a job in a sports company doing low-skilled work, and he had progressed to assistant manager. Another young man from the Caribbean, who had achieved a basic skills qualification and been helped to get a job as a kitchen porter, was employee of the month 4 months later, and was training to be a manager.

All these examples required more than the achievement of basic skills, and involved active support from the organisation to help the young person to gain employment. Moreover, as the training organiser admitted, these were his 'success stories' and not all outcomes were like these. The issue of progression was particularly stark in relation to learners in prison, where tutors and managers were well aware that prisoners were much less likely to continue learning outside prison. Moreover, basic skills qualifications would not provide access to employment for ex-offenders without considerable additional back up and support.

In college contexts, there was evidence that the achievement of qualifications enabled progression through educational routes, particularly onto vocational courses. But there were also questions raised about the timescale of progress and progression. The 'hard to reach', the homeless, and those most reluctant to take up learning opportunities, often needed a considerable period of time before any evidence of progress or progression might be seen. Tutors and stakeholders raised questions about the 'right' length of time for learning and also about the 'right' time for learning in their attempts to offer flexible learning opportunities for individuals within the *Skills for Life* framework.

Section 10 - Pulling it all together

In this section we pull together the different stakeholder experiences using our staircase model. This enables a more complex reading of the wider context that shapes the experiences of learners: that is the *Skills for Life* strategy and the implementation of the infrastructure. The staircase model, incorporating the concept of 'theories of change' (Weiss 1995), enables us to consider the strategy in terms of progress and impact.

10.1 Progress

The strategy set out with ambitious targets based upon national concerns with low levels of adult literacy, numeracy and language skills (DfEE 1999) and emerging information of the scale of the 'problem' from the National Adult Learning Survey (DfES 2001e). Based upon this the *Skills for Life* strategy was designed and implemented to provide 750,000 adults with the opportunity to improve their literacy and numeracy skills between 2001 and 2010. Achieving the targets, figures much quoted by the managers and co-ordinators in our study, could be seen as a measure of success of the strategy. However, as many managers and co-ordinators told us the actual figures were not accurate, as they were based upon systems that distorted what was recorded. Indeed many of the early targets (almost 50%) achieved were for 16-18 years olds gaining GCSEs (Bathmaker 2005), who were outside of the priority groups outlined in the strategy documents. It is therefore difficult to objectively assess the progress and success of the strategy from the learners' perspective using these measures.

Listening to managers, co-ordinators and tutors there is an overall positive view of the strategy implemented through the infrastructure. The strategy itself is felt to represent progress in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL teaching and is overwhelmingly accepted as being better than what was in place before. In the early stages those nearest to policy seemed to have the clearest idea of the progress of the strategy and infrastructure that was being implemented. Those further down, often working at a regional level, saw the possibilities created by additional funding and of being involved in a new national focus on basic skills and on adult learning. There are those we identified at this level who were 'movers and shakers' as they were proactive, working with the strategy, adapting it in a constructive and creative way. They illustrated 'positive adaptability' to change. Others, whilst being generally positive about the potential for progress were more cautious, illustrating 'cautious adaptability' and some were sceptical to change, illustrating 'negative adaptability'. These two latter groups were not against change per se but were concerned that what was being implemented was in fact progress in the right direction and would benefit learners.

Many managers, co-ordinators and tutors talked generally of the initial benefits and progress they had been able to achieve supported by the strategy. People talked of increased opportunities for learning, of being able to offer flexible learning, of having better access to materials and a coherent system of delivery. Managers and co-ordinators valued what they saw as progress in terms of an increased awareness (both publicly and educationally) of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL learning and of the professionalisation and continuing development of tutors. They also talked about issues which they faced in their area of work which impeded progress such as: finding enough qualified tutors; convincing part-time tutors to take unsupported Level 4 training; achieving targets to obtain sufficient funding to run programmes, finding enough learners and ensuring provision they were responsible for received a good inspection grade. Although many people expressed one or more of these concerns, generally they were considered to be a necessary part of embedding a new system: a new system that on the whole was better than before.

Many managers and co-ordinators, whilst being generally positive, also expressed concern over the rapid rate of change towards achieving progress within the strategy and meeting its targets. This is also a concern raised by David Sherlock in the recent ALI report (2006) where he says: *“The evidence suggests that constant change hinders incremental improvement”*. Many in our study felt there were too many initiatives being introduced which were then changed, ‘from on high’, with little consideration of how this was implemented and the potential impact on learners. This suggests that whilst generally well regarded it was hard for some of those implementing the strategy to feel ownership of it, and not to feel powerless in the face of continual, and what sometimes was felt as overwhelming, change. This shows some of the tensions in the different positions on the staircase where the flow of decision-making was felt to be one that descended downwards rather than flowed in both directions.

Listening to the learners overwhelming positive views of learning, it is plausible to say that the strategy and infrastructure has brought some progress in relation to the scale and scope of learning opportunities being made available. Learners were positive about the teaching they received, the courses they attended and the benefits they and their families were experiencing. This ties in with the managers, co-ordinators and tutors perceptions above, that there was more and flexible provision being delivered by qualified and resourced teachers, which was valued by the learners. It also ties in with information from large learner satisfaction surveys (LSC 2005) which show that most of the 43,000 learners surveyed were positive about their experiences of learning. However, we have to ask why do students report being satisfied, and what does this tell us?

It should be remembered that many of these learners have been badly let down by their previous experience of the systems and practices of education. It is in the light of these relatively low levels of expectation

that we should interpret these positive responses. We should therefore be cautious about the precise nature of the added value created by the strategy and infrastructure of *Skills for Life*.

We found that for learners who experience *Skills for Life* positively those above them in the staircase mediate many of the negative aspects, the constraints and challenges, of change. Managers, co-ordinators and tutors were committed to making the strategy work for the learners at the point of learning delivery. They did this through a process of adapting and changing, where necessary, often making the infrastructure fit the learner rather than making the learners fit the infrastructure. This was a noticeable element of success and progress, which was more about the stakeholders' wider commitments to adult literacy, social justice and adult learning than simply the infrastructure itself.

10.2 Intended and unintended consequences

So far we have talked about the progress in terms of changes brought about by the strategy. Using our staircase analogy we can say that the changes instigated at the top of the staircase, at the policy level, have been felt through a process of implementation and adaptation on the other stairs, as creating progress for learners at the beginning of the staircase. However, the policy and strategy itself has changed, or progressed, over time. Whilst the staircase model allows us to understand the interrelationship between different stakeholders involved in policy implementation, it does not illustrate how the policy itself shifts. For our study this shift is significant, as it affects the target population the strategy covers and therefore who are considered to be learners.

Initially the policy and strategy were wide ranging providing foundation level adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes to improve the skills of large numbers of adults. Through 'upskilling' adults basic skills it had the twin aspiration of making the UK globally competitive within a knowledge based economy as well as reducing social exclusion. As policy has progressed it has travelled towards learning for employability (DfES 2002b, DfES 2003) and has directed resources and funding at vocational learning, particularly towards the 14-19 age group (DfES 2005). This trajectory is likely to continue with the recent Leitch report (2006) emphasising demand led sector skills delivery.

The intended consequence of this progress is to increase the level of skills attainment (from Level 2 through to Level 4 and 5) and to include more people in work-based learning. The unintended consequences of the policy shift toward employability, supported by changes in funding, are that people previously part of the government's priority groups now are outside of the policy focus (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006). This is best described as a 'pendulum effect'. Homeless people, unemployed people and those on benefits, low skilled workers and others at risk of

social exclusion, previously outside the policy focus, briefly had the policy spotlight shine on them before it moved away again. They remained in the same place with the same learning needs– the policy spotlight swung in a different direction. This means that at one time one group of people are illuminated as a target until the spotlight moves away to another target leaving them in the dark.

Using a metaphor of a ‘pendulum swing’ of policy has been helpful in conjunction with our staircase model in looking at the impact of policy progress. A pendulum movement shows how policy focus itself shifts over time whilst the infrastructure designed to deliver it remains intact. In this way we can see the whole staircase, as an interconnected set of rungs, set in motion by policy changes at the top. It still functions in much the same way, up and down, but gathers momentum in a sideways direction until it swings covering a different position at the bottom. This means there is a new policy reach at the bottom – those it covers are learners and those outside of it are not, falling outside of provision. Where the learners fit the policy they view it positively where they do not, as with several ‘hard to reach’ and homeless groups, they do not and become invisible. There are therefore significant absences within this study as some provision and some learners; particularly those in community provision, found themselves outside of *Skills for Life* as the strategy progressed and refocused its vision and resources.

When we consider that most learners we talked to were positive about their experiences of learning, we are aware that we are representing those who have benefited most from the strategy and infrastructure. It is more difficult to represent the learners who were not satisfied or who were lost altogether as they are not as easily present to give their views. What we found by tracking some of these people is that they were positive about their experiences when they were beneficiaries of the strategy but they were negative about their lack of opportunity, of cut backs and of discontinued classes when policy and funding priorities changed. This is in relation to policy changes, and who the policy is aimed at, rather than changes in the infrastructure itself as the strategy progresses.

10.3 Impact

The strategy impacted upon learners and their lives creating learning opportunities that were valued by them. Whilst there are some differences in why people attended literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes there are also similar issues for all learners around participation, progress and progression across the curriculum areas and learning contexts. There are general themes that describe the experience and impact of being an adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL learner in *Skills for Life* provision. These relate to adult learning pedagogy and are:

- People like to be respected and treated as adults.

- People like to work at the pace that suits their circumstances and prior experiences of learning.
- People use and translate what they learn in class to their everyday lives
- People enjoy and value the social aspect of learning

People described their learning as having 'wider benefits' (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brasett-Grundy and Bynner 2004) in other areas of their lives such as their family and community. Many of these benefits could be described in terms of the increase in social capital benefits of learning as well as development of literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Social capital is understood as the networks and norms that enable people to contribute to common goals and as Schuller (2004, p17) explains the link to learning lay in the relationships that exist between people and groups. It is often expressed as trust, behaviour and participation in civic activities. It is helpful in understanding the relationship of learning to enabling social inclusion.

Learners did describe being able to participate more widely in their communities, their families and at work as a result of learning. They described increased confidence and changing identities which were changing their current practices and reshaping their lifelong and life wide goals: they were improving their social capital. These echo findings from the evaluation of the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Scottish Executive 2006) showing the impact that adult literacy and numeracy learning had on peoples' lives, their patterns of social engagement and their self-confidence (Tett and Maclachlan 2006).

The impact of the strategy on learners was related to the context they were learning in, for example work-based, prison or community. The impact was affected by the time allocated to learn and whether the 'time was right' for the individual learner themselves. It was affected by the support available, such as learning reps, and how what was being learned was useful at work or at home. Sometimes these contexts could impact negatively on individuals, for example where there was a conflict of interest between employers' priorities and learners personal goals. Work patterns that changed, becoming unemployed, being part-time or having several jobs also impacted negatively on learners experiences of learning.

We found that for some groups of people the strategy had less impact, such as in rural areas where provision was scattered and transport scarce. Learners living in rural communities had limited and sometimes non-existent progression opportunities in their locality and for those who were working access to provision in the evenings was constrained by transport availability and time. For others such as ESOL learners the impact was mixed and it was questionable whether *Skills for Life* best met the needs of higher-level ESOL learners. Many of these learners are not basic skills learners but second language learners and need a

curriculum that allows for speedy progression and proficiency at a higher level than *Skills for Life* allows.

For those with mental health difficulties gaining Level 2 qualifications did not seem to get them any closer to employment; their primary learning goal. Many learners in 40 plus age group had been unable to access employment even though they had achieved their qualifications aims. Additionally disparity of learning hours available across different types of provision impacted on learner progress, particularly at lower levels in all subject areas but particularly noticeable with ESOL learners. These difficulties need to be read against findings that individuals on or below Entry Level 2 are associated with lack of qualifications, poor health and lack of prospects (Bynner and Parson 2006). It suggests that this impacts on some people, particularly those in the strategy's original target groups more than others; the very people who may need the learning opportunities the most. As we have discussed the impact of the strategy for many 'hard to reach learners' has been one of feast and famine as the policy pendulum at one time included them and then swung away excluding them. In many of the examples of where the impact has been negatively experienced by learners' managers, co-ordinators and tutors have sought to mediate, adapt and reinterpret the strategy and its infrastructure to create the best possible learning environments. Sometimes this has been possible and sometimes not.

Clearly, in policy terms, the past five years have been the 'right' time to be learning basic skills, with such a large investment in provision. However, this may not be the 'right' time in all learners lives to be taking advantage of provision, and from a policy perspective, this is a reminder that the 'problem' of adult basic skills will continue beyond this intensive period of policy interest in the issue. It is also a reminder that policy does not progress in a simple linear way, as it progresses it has both intended and unintended consequences affecting its impact on the learner.

Key Findings

The Learners' Study focuses on the impact on learners of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure. The infrastructure, created by a significant policy change in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision and entitlement, is the key mechanism for delivery of the national *Skills for Life* strategy. The life of the strategy, starting in 2001 and continuing, represents considerable change and adaptation with ongoing policy shifts affecting the strategy and implementation of the infrastructure. The relationship between policy, the strategy and the infrastructure is therefore both interrelated and dynamic. When we look at the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on learners this is framed by and is also affected by policy shifts and changes in the strategy.

We capture this relationship within a staircase model of policy implementation (Saunders 2006). Higher up the staircase people are engaging more directly with policy working, adapting and interpreting the strategy to fit changes in policy. They also engage with the creation of the infrastructure to implement the strategy, which in turn achieves the policy aims. In the middle of the staircase people are engaged less directly with policy and more with interpreting, co-ordinating and implementing the strategy through the infrastructure. Further down the staircase tutors engage with the infrastructure in a teaching context, shaping their professional identity and their delivery.

Learners do not engage directly with implementing the policy, the strategy or the infrastructure. They experience them however in two ways: firstly by the learning opportunities made available to them as they are identified, or not, as learners; secondly, if they are identified as learners, through their direct experience of provision, which is shaped by the infrastructure. The clearest example of this is how funding, determined at the policy level (e.g. 14-19 White Paper, DfES 2005) shapes the type and range of provision to be made available within the strategy, and which when implemented determines who is a learner. Whilst the overall infrastructure, which shapes delivery, has remained relatively constant over the five-year period the amount, type and range of delivery has changed as the strategy has adapted to new policy directives. This is a complex process and in our research we hear responses that relate to policy and strategy as well as the infrastructure.

- ***Overwhelmingly those who 'fit' the strategy view the changes it brings positively. The positive benefits are:***
 - An increased national public profile of literacy, numeracy and language.
 - The provision of new resources.
 - An increased access to learning opportunities.
 - An increased sense of professionalisation and quality of provision.

- Many learners and some employers value national tests and certificates.
- The national curriculum is valued by many teachers particularly those new to the profession.
- There are clear routes for progression for teaching and learning.
- There are new areas of entitlement for learning.

□ ***Policy changes produce ‘travel’ in the strategy over time changing the focus of impact. The policy travel can be viewed as having both direct and indirect consequences.***

The direct consequences include:

- Greater emphasis on embedded provision.
- Strengthening vocational learning by increasing the age of basic skills entitlement.
- Greater emphasis on work-based learning and flexible methods of delivery.

The indirect consequences are experienced as:

- Moving from an initial period of diversity of provision, including funding for non-traditional learners, to one that is increasingly inflexible with the danger of potentially important and needful provision for learners dropping outside the strategy and seeking (e.g. homeless projects) resources elsewhere.
- A decrease in flexibility in curriculum and methods of delivery – particularly for ‘at risk’ and ‘hard to reach’ groups.
- Difficulties in funding the time taken for slower learners to achieve.
- Difficulties in adequately responding to demand for provision - for some, ESOL learners for example, there have been problems in obtaining provision in the first place and then being able to find appropriate post Level 2 progression.
- Some areas of provision are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain and seem unresponsive to ‘immediate need’ – for example ESOL provision for migrant workers who do not fall easily into categories that attract funding.
- Juggling between different policy initiatives necessitates the need to reduce existing commitments to adapt to new policy emphasis and funding regimes, e.g. skills for employability for 14-19 year olds

□ ***One strategy, one infrastructure: Different learners, different contexts.***

Whilst the strategy sets out to raise literacy, numeracy and language standards across the UK, differentiated individual learners and their learning contexts should be recognised and evoke specific responses:

- *Work-based learning* – This provides new access for some who benefit from learning. However, it can be limited to the employers' rather than the expanded learners' agenda. It can be affected by the irregular work patterns of employees (e.g. the army) and can be lost altogether through unemployment/redundancies. It is not easily accessible for those with low paid part time or casual work and for those with multiple jobs.

- *Homeless people* - This provision seems to have been particularly hard hit with recent funding changes that do not recognise turbulence in the lives of some people and the time taken to progress in learning. Several homeless schemes had left *Skills for Life* provision altogether, as they had ceased to 'fit' funding criteria and were seeking alternative sources of funding, for example through the Lottery Fund.

- *Different learners* – People want to learn discrete skills/knowledge and are able to learn quickly if they have recent experience and confidence in learning. Others with previous negative experiences and less confidence may take longer. Providers described 'massaging' figures to enable 'slower' learners to progress at their speed. Learners working below Level 2 described the importance of having time to practice new knowledge and information and for their confidence as learners to develop. This was in tension with externally paced progression.

- *ESOL provision* –Funding opportunities and the lack of availability of provision often limited progress, particularly in providing relevant and accessible post Level 2 progression routes. This is one area of provision where demand mainly outstripped supply.

1.5. Implications for policy

The major strengths of the impact of the *Skills for Life* infrastructure on learners are:

- Increase in basic skills profile nationally supported by new resources.
- The development of a professional, qualified workforce with quality procedures for delivery.
- The development of a unified curriculum offer linked to recognised tests and awards.
- The development of new entitlements for learning.

The major issues of the impact of the Skills for Life infrastructure on learners are:

- Supply and demand of provision is mediated by funding mechanisms – impacting on whom has access to provision: this process negatively affects ‘at risk’ groups.
- Distribution of resources, and access to provision, is unequal between urban and rural populations - rural provision costs more for less learners.
- Non-differentiated time allocation, and therefore resources, for learning creates tensions between individual progress and educational progression, particularly for learners needing more time.
- The loss of people who do not now ‘fit’ the education policy focus, particularly homeless people and those described as reluctant to learn, who are most likely to be negatively affected by diminishing community and lifelong learning budgets.

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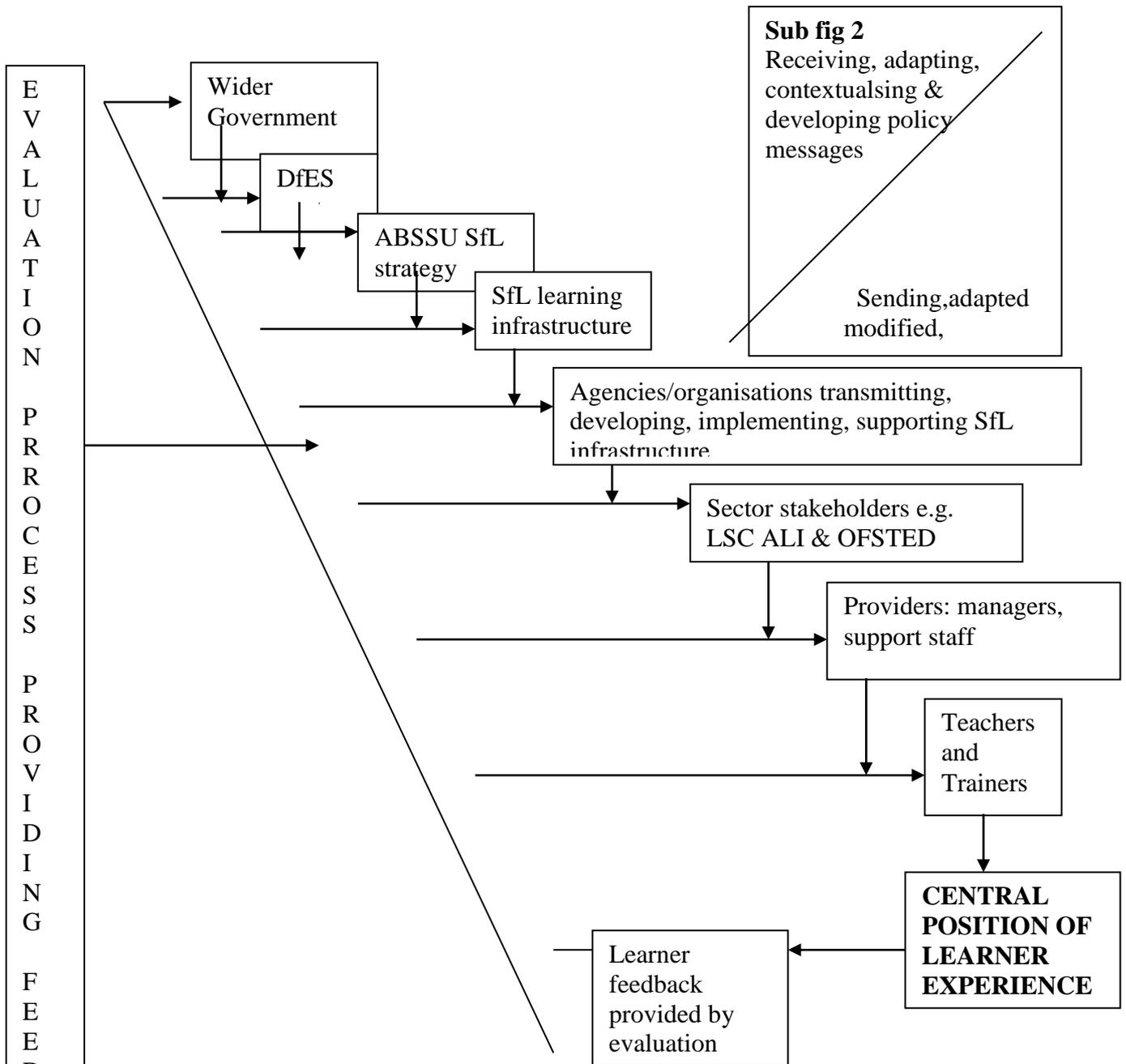
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Appendix 1

Implementation staircase: evolution of the Skills for Life infrastructure



Arrowed line denotes both the direction of the policy messages and the positioning of the evaluation to suggest the way each step of policy experience is part of a feedback loop to other steps. The evaluation will provide feedback from the learners' perspective to all other stakeholders in the SfL policy.

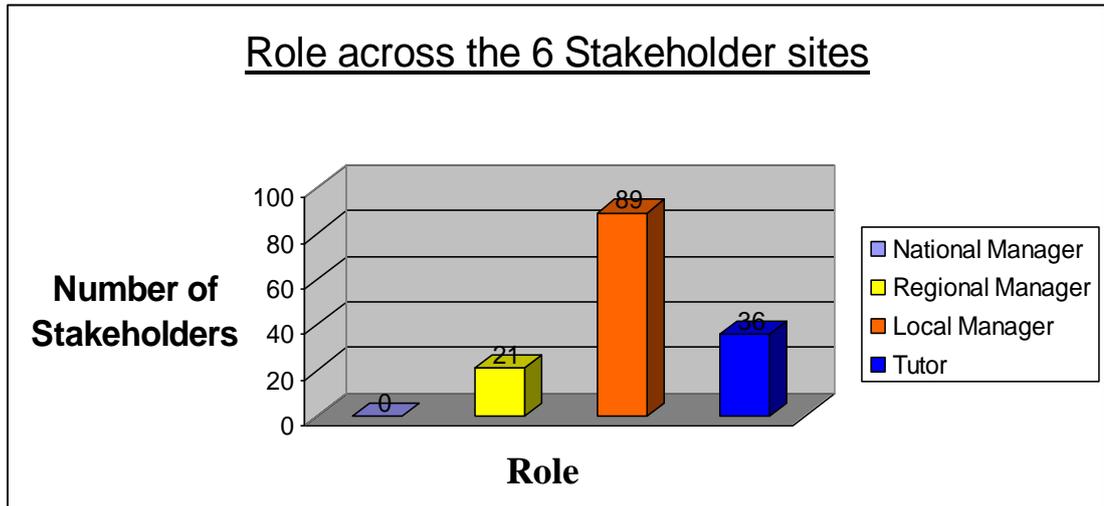
Appendix 2 Skills for Life Infrastructure

The skills for Life infrastructure is made up of several parts:

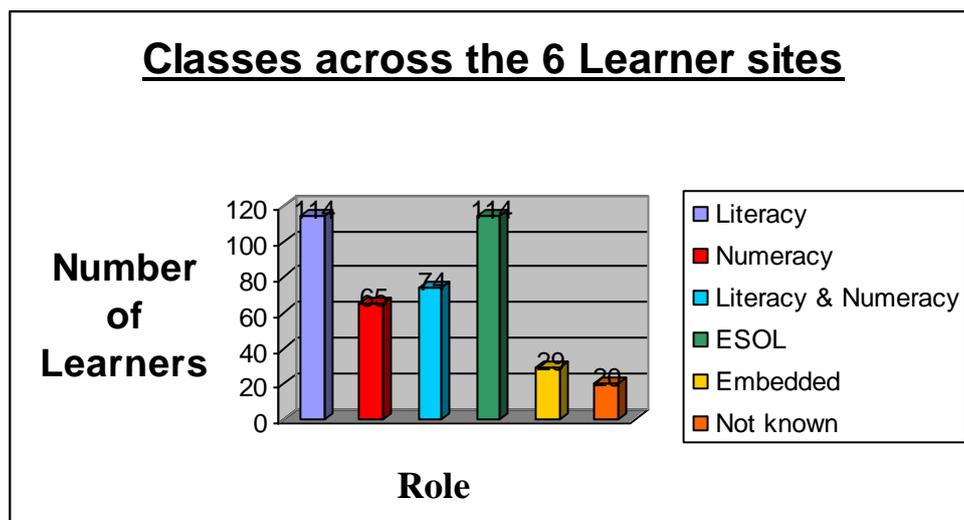
- Standards
- Tests
- Literacy Curriculum
- Numeracy Curriculum
- ESOL Curriculum
- Pre-Entry Curriculum
- Access for ALL
- Screening
- Initial Assessment
- Diagnostic Assessment
- Learning materials
- New Qualifications
- Non-accredited learning

(Accesses from Read, Write Plus website:
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/>)

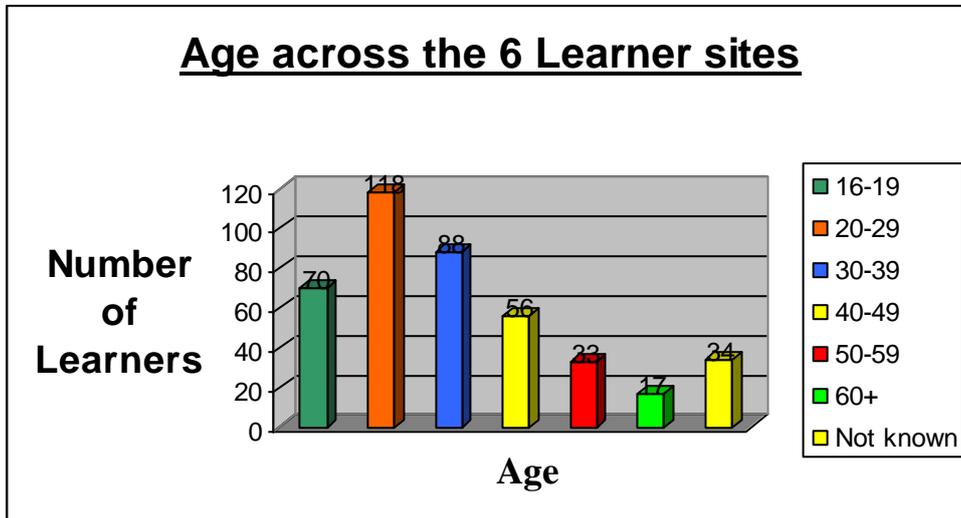
Appendix 3 Manager, co-coordinator and tutor roles across sites



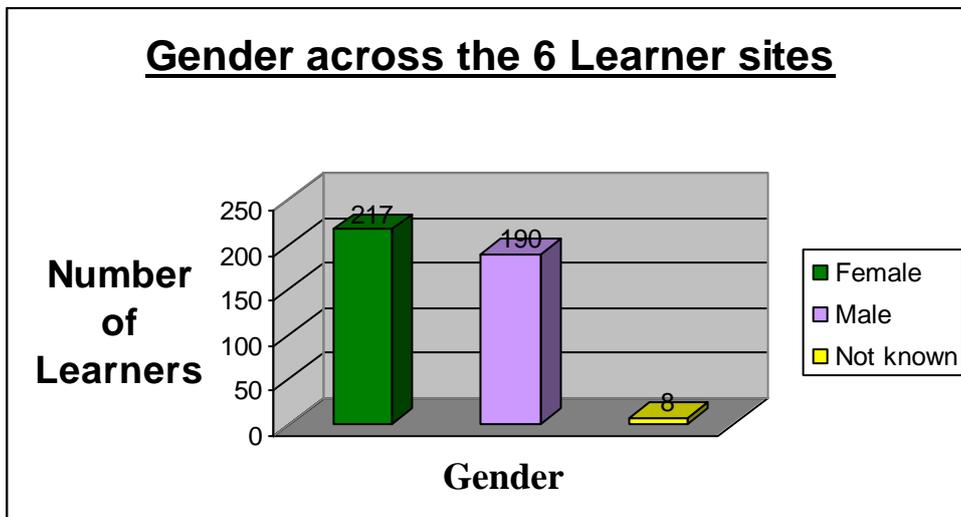
Appendix 4 Types of provision in sites



Appendix 5 Age of learners across sites



Appendix 6 Gender of learners across sites



Appendix 7 First language of learners across sites

