Skills for life, work and place

All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Further Education and Lifelong Learning

Report on adult education inquiry

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Foreword from Jonathan Brash

MP for Hartlepool, Chair, APPG on Further Education and Lifelong Learning

Freedom is one of the most contested ideas in politics. Yet we too often define it as freedom from something: freedom from control, freedom from regulation, freedom from the state. But there is another, equally important freedom and one that is denied to far too many people in our country: the freedom to do things. The freedom to learn. The freedom to earn. The freedom to adapt, progress and reach your potential.

That is the freedom this report is concerned with.

In my constituency, one in three adults is functionally illiterate. It is a statistic that is both shocking and deeply sad but, more importantly, it represents lives constrained and opportunities denied.

The consequences of educational failure do not end when someone leaves school. If people do not have the basic skills they need to navigate the modern world, their freedom to work, retrain, progress and participate fully in their community is severely diminished.

The challenge is not simply about literacy. Employers across Hartlepool and beyond repeatedly tell me that a supply-led education system does not always produce the workforce that local economies actually need. Industries change, technologies develop and jobs evolve. Yet too often, adults lack the opportunity to acquire the new skills they need, while employers struggle to provide training unless they have the resources to fund it themselves.

Adult education should therefore be understood not as a cost, but as an investment in freedom: freedom for people to change direction, to secure better employment, to keep pace with a changing economy and to fulfil their potential.

Too often, however, that investment has fallen victim to the harsh logic of Whitehall cost-benefit analysis. Decision-makers can become preoccupied with the cost of provision while overlooking its long-term value. The benefits of adult education rarely appear neatly on a single balance sheet. They emerge over years and across generations, through employment, higher earnings, improved confidence, better health, stronger families and more resilient communities.

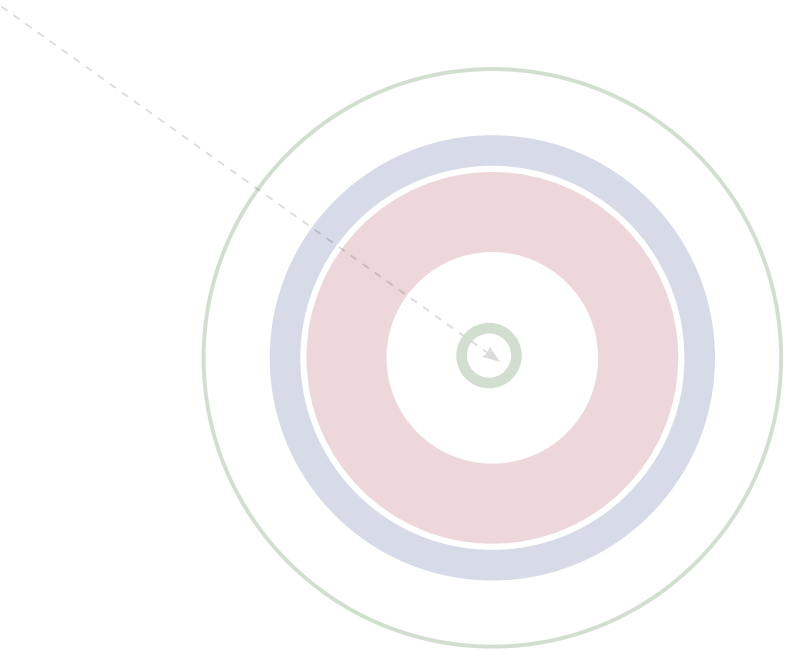
In Hartlepool, I have seen what happens when we take a different approach.

Hartlepool College of Further Education is an institution of which our town should be immensely proud. Under the leadership of Darren Hankey and Gary Riches, it has shown an inspiring commitment to learners, employers and the wider community. It demonstrates what further and adult education can achieve when it is ambitious, responsive and rooted in the place it serves.

The change of government during this inquiry has brought a welcome renewed focus on technical education and skills. Prime Minister Andy Burnham has begun to challenge the narrow academic focus that has dominated education policy for too long. That change in direction is important, but it must now be matched by action. If we genuinely believe in freedom, we must broaden our understanding of what freedom means. It is not enough to ask whether people are free from the state or free from regulation. We must also ask whether they are free to learn, to work, to retrain, to progress and to reach their potential.

A modern education system cannot stop at the age of 18. Learning must be available throughout adult life, because the freedom to improve your circumstances should not have an expiry date.

This report sets out how we can build that system, one that gives every adult, regardless of their age or starting point, a genuine opportunity to learn, to earn and to fulfil their potential.



Foreword from David Hughes CBE

CEO, Association of Colleges

As secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Further Education and Lifelong Learning, the Association of Colleges was delighted to support members with this important inquiry.

There is a strong and longstanding cross-party consensus that lifelong learning matters. Yet for too long, successive governments of all political colours have failed to back that commitment with the investment that is needed to unlock the potential and ambitions of adults across the country. In fact, the opposite has been true over the past two decades, with savage cuts to adult education which have resulted in millions of adults not having the opportunities they used to have to learn a new skill, return to education, retrain for a new career or gain the skills they need to find work and progress into better-paid jobs.

That is a human tragedy as well as an economic mistake. It has held too many people back from fulfilling their potential and left our country less well equipped to meet the challenges we face.

Those challenges are considerable. From stagnant economic growth and productivity to economic inactivity, skills shortages and the profound changes that artificial intelligence will bring to our lives and to work. The need for people to learn, retrain and develop throughout their lives has rarely been greater. A flourishing adult education system must be part of our response.

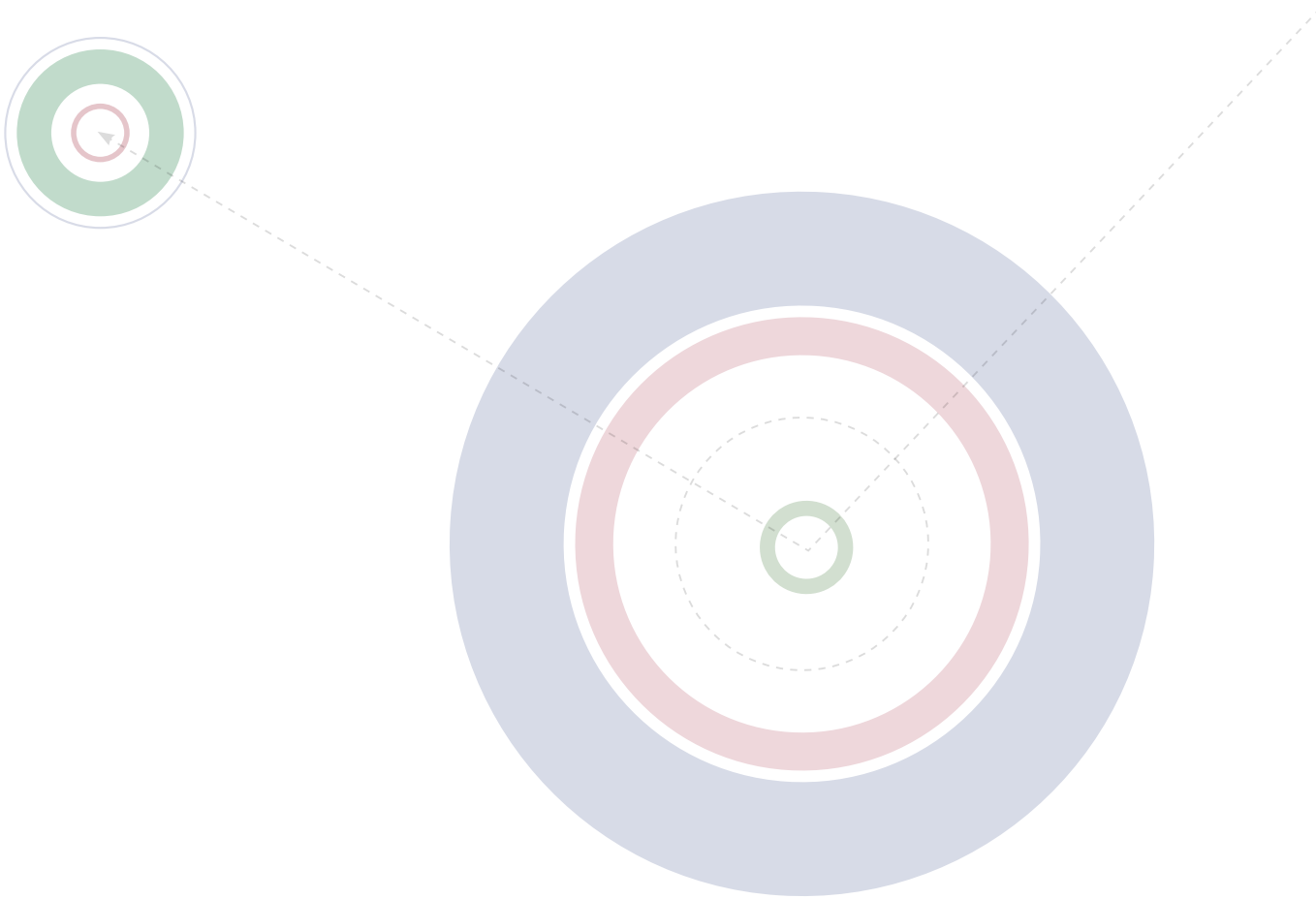
It was therefore hugely encouraging to see so many people from across adult education and beyond contribute to this inquiry. Five fascinating evidence sessions, alongside an excellent response to the call for evidence and discussions with colleges, provided a rich body of evidence from which the APPG has drawn its conclusions.

The recommendations in this report offer an opportunity to transform the capacity of adult education to change lives, strengthen communities and support a more productive economy. I strongly urge the government to give them the consideration they deserve.

This cannot be a report that sits on the shelf, and it's encouraging to see that the work on making the case for the recommendations has already begun. The need to reintroduce Union Learn, for example, came out powerfully throughout the inquiry, and it was fantastic to see the Chancellor commit to "rebirthing" the fund at the Labour party

conference last month. We know that it will be transformational in regalvanising thousands of workers to access education and training.

As the national voice for further education colleges, AoC will continue to work with the APPG, our members and partners across the sector to ensure that all of these findings are heard – and, crucially, also translated into action.



Executive summary

Our inquiry put adult education in the spotlight and examined its benefits for both the world of work and wider society alongside the policy and funding environment that surrounds it. With a focus on the English system, over a four-month period we gathered evidence from 150 contributors, including international experts. Across our inquiry we heard some clear and consistent messages about the role of adult education.

Global megatrends, particularly rapid technological change and the changing nature of work, will create new and evolving demand for adult learning and require sustained attention from policymakers.

Yet England currently lacks an overarching national vision for adult education, including provision for adult speakers of other languages, setting out clearly what the system is expected to achieve and the opportunities and entitlements adults should be able to access throughout their lives.

Devolution has created important opportunities to respond to this challenge, enabling adult education to be more closely aligned with regional priorities for economic growth, employment, health and stronger communities. There is significant potential to build on this approach, but contributors argued that devolution would be strengthened by a clear national strategy providing an overarching framework of priorities and entitlements, while allowing places the flexibility to respond to local needs.

The ability of the system to respond is also constrained by funding restrictions and a complex landscape of entitlements, which can limit the offer providers are able to make to learners and employers.

Underpinning this is a wider failure to fully recognise the societal value of adult education, including its contribution to improving public health, reducing isolation and strengthening communities, alongside its economic and employment benefits.

This report makes detailed recommendations based on **five shifts** needed for adult education to realise its full potential in delivering for life, work and place.

Recommendations

A system with purpose and stability

1. Develop a vision for adult learning in England, based on national commitment with local power
2. Build a coherent, long-term investment approach to adult learning

A learning guarantee for citizens

3. Introduce an England-wide minimum adult learning offer
4. Remove barriers so adults can afford and access the learning they need

A partnership approach

5. Audit employer incentives and barriers to engaging in adult learning and skills
6. Help adults get the skills they need by strengthening careers information, advice and guidance
7. Increase flexibility in adult qualifications and the Adult Skills Fund (ASF)
8. Target support for adults navigating skills transitions and artificial intelligence (AI) driven labour market change

A driver for inclusion, resilience and community wellbeing

9. Embed adult learning within local and national preventative health strategies
10. Strengthen English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) as a foundation for community cohesion and inclusion
11. Strengthen prison education to improve outcomes and reduce re-offending

A robust evidence base

12. Establish a framework to evidence the social and economic impact of adult learning

Key information

About the APPG on Further Education and Lifelong Learning

APPGs are informal, cross-party groups formed by MPs and members of the House of Lords who share a common interest in a particular policy area, region or country. Our APPG aims to promote and develop the interests of the further education, adult learning and skills sectors and to advise government ministers on matters of concern to those sectors.

What is adult learning?

Adult education can be summarised as the programmes or systems designed to educate or train adults at different stages of their lives. For individuals, learning helps them to upskill, reskill, access the job market, develop language proficiency, build self-confidence or even combat loneliness. For society, adult education is a powerful tool for economic growth, employability, personal growth, health, wellbeing and social cohesion.

Case studies

Colleges across the country are delivering high-quality, accessible and industry-relevant education and training to adults. You can read more about these programmes on the AoC's dedicated case study page.

Read college case studies here.

Glossary

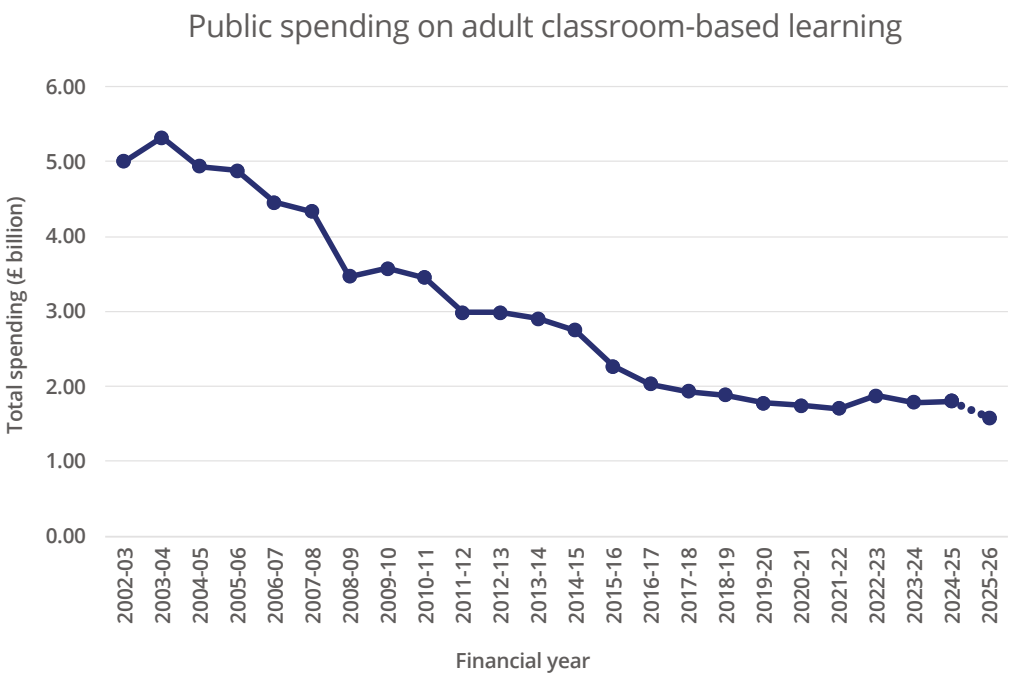
This report contains some technical language and terms specific to the further education (FE) sector.

For full definitions, please see AoC's comprehensive A-Z of FE.

Inquiry purpose

In England, adult learning can trace its origins to 19th century initiatives that created public access to learning opportunities[1]. Today, it makes a difference to more than a million[2] people's lives across England, yet under successive governments it has suffered decades of underinvestment and underappreciation. Public spending on classroom-based adult learning has fallen by around 70% in real terms since the early 2000s (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Public spending on classroom-based adult learning in England (projected for 2025–26):



Source: Institute of Fiscal Studies[3]

After a long period of declining investment in adult education, there is an urgent need to rebuild the opportunities available for people to learn and retrain throughout their lives. At the same time, the need for adult skills has arguably never been greater. Many of the major challenges facing the country depend on having an adaptable and skilled population, including the rising number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), the drive to reindustrialise, harnessing the opportunities of AI, delivering the transition to net zero and preparing people for a rapidly changing world of work.

That's why the APPG decided now was an important time to carry out this inquiry. We wanted to describe and champion the contribution that adult education makes to places, people's lives and the economy. We thought it was important to explore how the policy, funding and regulatory environment needs to change to cement adult education as a foundation stone of the country's future economic and societal prosperity. Our focus

[1] Learning the lessons - Learning and Work Institute 2025

[2] Department for Education, Academic year, 2024/25. Further education and skills statistics.

[3] Farquharson, C et al., 2026. *Annual report on education spending in England: 2025–26.* London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

is on England, whilst drawing on best practice and shared challenges with other nations.

Our inquiry builds on the collective legacy of previous inquiries, reports and commissions, keeping adult education firmly in the spotlight. Our findings and recommendations provide a fresh opportunity to review how adult education can deliver maximum benefit for our country.

Methodology

Over four months, we adopted a broad methodological approach to gather evidence, drawing on the expertise and experiences of a diverse range of contributors, including those directly undertaking adult education in further education colleges. This meant the inquiry had a rich evidence base, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence which we draw upon in this report.

150+

CONTRIBUTORS

from across England and other parts of the UK, alongside parliamentary colleagues who supported our evidence sessions.

5

PARLIAMENTARY EVIDENCE SESSIONS

each chaired by a different member of the APPG.

5

LEARNER FOCUS GROUPS

involving learners from a range of provision types.

85

CALL FOR EVIDENCE RESPONSES

from adult learning providers, local government, research organisations, trade unions and employers.

CHAPTER ONE

Growth and employment

Jonathan Brash
MP for Hartlepool

Introduction

Employers often tell me how difficult it is to recruit skilled workers. Meanwhile, nine million working-age people are economically inactive and 1.5 million are unemployed[4], with others trapped in low-paid, insecure employment. This coexistence of labour market shortages and untapped workforce potential represents not only a societal challenge, but a significant economic opportunity to drive good growth in Hartlepool, and right across the country.

Successive UK governments have described the importance of getting more adults into work and ensuring that businesses have the workforce they need to grow. Policy initiatives have frequently emphasised labour market participation, welfare-to-work reforms, and employer-led training. And yet the role of adult education in these ambitions has not been well understood nor have funding levels been matched to ambition. We need a fundamental reset, and a renaissance in adult education, if we are to meet the needs of people, employers and communities for good jobs and good growth.

This chapter sets out our findings on how adult education aligns with economic and labour market priorities and how it can be better aligned for the future. We gathered valuable insights into employer engagement, megatrends impacting the world of work, pathways into training, careers advice and the impact of devolution. By placing adult learning at the heart of the growth and productivity agenda, the government has an opportunity to unlock the potential of individuals, to strengthen the workforce and meet skills shortages, and ensure that economic transition is inclusive, sustainable, and widely shared.

Context

Adult education in England operates in a labour market defined by long-term structural change and immediate unemployment pressures. Labour market information (LMI)[5] shows that technological, demographic and environmental transitions will continue to reshape occupational demand, with growth in roles requiring critical thinking, interpersonal skills and digital capability. Meanwhile, employers face acute gaps in people skills, communication, teamwork and adaptability, which limits productivity[6].

This dual challenge means adult education must both prepare workers for longer-term economic transformation, and rapidly reskill those currently out of work, particularly in sectors with persistent vacancies such as health, logistics, green technologies and digital services.

International evidence shows a skills mismatch across the world. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[7]

[4] Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury, Department for Education, 2024. Get Britain Working White Paper.

[5] Bocock, L., Scott, M., Hillary, J., 2025. Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

[6] UK Parliament, 2021. Post note, number 659. Upskilling and retraining the adult workforce.

[7] OECD, 2023. SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook.

analysis found that across comparator economies, employers report rising misalignment between workforce capabilities and evolving job requirements, especially in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) where investment in training is comparatively low. In England, employer investment in training has fallen significantly over the past decade, contributing to widening skills gaps and lower participation in learning. However, countries with national upskilling strategies and higher employer co-investment demonstrate more resilient labour markets and smoother transitions into emerging occupations.

In England, devolved local skills improvement plans (LSIPs), local growth plans, and the DfE's long-running priority skills assessments[8] are central to shaping vocational pathways for adults. They consistently prioritise routes into health and social care, construction, engineering, digital, green industries, logistics, and business services, reflecting employer demand and national strategic priorities like net zero. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)[9] emphasises the rising importance of "essential employment skills" across all sectors, while high net migration trends[10] influence workforce supply and the urgency of domestic upskilling.

Adult education is a critical lever for regional economic resilience, inclusive labour market participation, and future proofing England's workforce.

What the inquiry told us

Key highlights

Our evidence paints a consistent picture: adult education has significant potential to further support economic development, but policy, funding and the regulatory system are all structurally misaligned with economic need. Fragmented funding, rigid qualification frameworks, workforce shortages, eligibility barriers and weak employer incentives were frequently cited as limiting providers' ability to respond to employer demand, particularly in high-value sectors. Concerns were also expressed about the continued decline of adult education infrastructure and expertise. At the same time, where provision is flexible and employer needs are aligned, adult education delivers strong economic outcomes, demonstrating the value of developing a more responsive and better resourced system for England.

AI, automation and wider labour market change are intensifying the need for flexible adult retraining, particularly for mid-career adults facing redundancy, declining health in manual roles or transitions into new types of work. In addition, essential skills gaps, including ESOL, literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills are creating bottlenecks that prevent adults progressing into technical training and priority sectors.

[8] Skills England, 2025. Assessment of priority skills to 2030.

[9] Bocock, L., Scott, M., Hillary, J., 2025. Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

[10] Office for National Statistics, 2026. Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2025.

Only 2% of respondents said that the adult education system meets skills needs to a great extent, while 89% said it does so only to a small or moderate extent.

Levels of employer engagement and staff capacity were cited as major barriers by 39% of those responding.

Almost two-thirds (63%) said that the current system does not effectively incentivise employers to co-invest in adult education.

While workforce transitions emerge in areas such as net zero, digitalisation, AI and the ageing workforce, only 2% of respondents said adult education is being utilised to address these transitions to a great extent. However, 27% said that adult education is being utilised to a moderate extent, and 56% to a small extent, signalling optimism for its potential.

Only 3% of respondents said that qualification delivery requirements, such as prescribed frameworks and funding eligibility, do not limit providers' ability to design provision around employer needs, while 69% said these requirements limit their ability to tailor provision to a great or moderate extent.

Findings from our call for evidence indicate widespread concern about the current system's ability to meet economic needs.

Findings in full

The evidence highlights recurrent themes in relation to the role of adult education in boosting economic growth and employment. We heard repeatedly about **barriers to growth**, the **gaps between economic need and adult skills provision, qualification constraints** and the importance of **targeted careers advice** for adults.

Barriers to growth

Employer engagement incentives

Almost two-fifths (39%) of respondents to our call for evidence rated employer engagement as a major barrier. They reported several challenges, including:

- lack of time and capacity for SMEs to engage
- weak co-investment incentives
- providers being held accountable for job outcomes they cannot control
- employers needing rapid upskilling for the workforce, not full qualifications.

One respondent noted that the system remains supply led, despite policy ambitions for employer-driven provision.

Another area for development is around employers as co-investors in adult education and training; only 1% said that the current system is effective in incentivising employers. Almost two-thirds (63%) said that the current system does not effectively incentivise employers to co-invest in adult education. In May 2026, the Federation of Small Businesses highlighted[11] current "thinner financial cushions and reduced ability to absorb higher overheads" and said that business costs as a result of geopolitical events are often more easily absorbed by larger firms, but severely limit an SME's capacity to engage and grow.

Furthermore, the DfE's Employer Skills Survey (2024)[12] showed a 9% decrease in training expenditure by employers between 2019 and 2024. This is a longer-term trend highlighted by Skills England in their annual skills report (2026)[13]. We heard clearly that the cycle of employer underinvestment in training needs to be broken.

Unique challenges for SMEs

Our inquiry highlights a unique set of challenges for SMEs, who often lack HR capacity, time and resources to engage with training.

> **"Poor economic performance... will mean less investment in training."**
> — Learning and Work Institute (L&W)

The inquiry heard that adult education has an important role to play in supporting business innovation and productivity, particularly among SMEs. While much policy discussion focuses on addressing skills shortages and vacancies, contributors argued that adult learning can also help businesses adopt new technologies, improve processes and move up the value chain.

Rather than responding solely to immediate recruitment needs, adult education can support workforce development that enables businesses to become more productive, innovative and resilient. Several contributors highlighted examples where colleges had worked directly with SMEs to identify skills needs and develop tailored learning programmes linked to business improvement and innovation.

They also argued that the discussion around employer engagement should move beyond vacancies and place greater emphasis on innovation and productivity. For example, the Innovate UK FE Innovation Fund (FEIF) pilot[14] (ended as of March 2025) was cited as it allowed colleges to support SME innovation, driving demand for skills, and moving SMEs up the value chain.

Inquiry contributors suggested that colleges can act as valuable intermediaries between innovation, workforce development and local

[11] McKenzie, T., 2026. Small Business Index, Quarter 1, 2026. Federation of Small Businesses.

[12] Department for Education, 2025. Employer skills survey: 2024.

[13] Department for Work and Pensions, Skills England, 2026. Skills England annual skills report 2026.

[14] Further Education Innovation Fund. 2026. Supporting business innovation through Further Education Colleges.

economic growth. However, many argued that current funding rules and short-term programmes (the FEIF, for example) make it difficult to deliver the highly flexible, employer-responsive provision that SMEs often require. Contributors called for a more adaptable funding system that supports colleges to work alongside employers to improve productivity and innovation, as well as addressing immediate labour market shortages. Strengthening the role of colleges as strategic partners could be a key route for increasing wider demand from employers for upskilling and retraining their staff and should be better embedded in national and devolved strategies, linking together growth and skills more explicitly.

Mega-trends will intensify skills disruption

AI and automation are reshaping labour markets in ways that will disproportionately affect mid-career adults, especially those in routine or mid skill roles. Evidence from providers and international experts shows growing concern that middle-aged workers will be displaced, with employers often reluctant to retrain staff they intend to let go.

As one contributor warned, entry-level roles that traditionally offered a first step into work are "disappearing", replaced by automated systems or higher skill technical posts. This creates a structural risk: adults in their 40s and 50s may face redundancy at the same moment the labour market demands new digital, technical and problem solving skills.

We heard evidence about adults facing particularly challenging transitions – such as leaving manual occupations as health deteriorates, or in response to wider changes in the labour market – and the challenges that adults can face in accessing education and training which would support them in their transitions into a new career.

> **"Transition to a sustainable, low-carbon and technologically advanced economy will require lifelong learning as the norm."**
> — Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC)

> **"Ageing workforce, technological change and shifts in job requirements mean individuals will need to update their skills more frequently."**
> — The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)

Without sustained investment in lifelong learning, modular retraining and employer incentives, AI driven disruption could widen inequalities, accelerate economic inactivity and leave a generation of workers stranded between declining job opportunities and insufficient access to reskilling pathways. Several contributors highlighted the growing pressures created by technological change, particularly AI, and the need for a system which is capable of supporting adults throughout their working lives.

Gaps between economic need and adult skills provision

High demand sectors

Respondents to our inquiry consistently identified gaps between economic need and the delivery of adult education. Only 2% of call for evidence respondents said that the adult education system meets skills needs to a great extent, while 89% said it does so only to a small or moderate extent. The largest gaps are recorded in industry sectors with the strongest economic demand and in public services. However, they are also the sectors and services that providers are least able to offer in their curriculum due to funding, staffing and infrastructure constraints. Key areas include:

- digital, data, AI, cyber and automation
- green and net zero skills
- engineering, construction and manufacturing
- health and social care
- leadership and management
- higher technical skills (Levels 3–5)

Capacity and expertise

Staff capacity and specialist expertise at adult education providers come across clearly as a major barrier identified by almost two-fifths (39%) of respondents to our call for evidence. Adult education providers highlighted severe shortages of industry experienced tutors in:

- digital, data and AI
- engineering and advanced manufacturing
- construction and green technologies
- health and social care
- English, maths and ESOL

Longstanding pay disparities with industry and with other parts of the education sector such as schools have made recruitment into key curriculum areas difficult for FE providers[15]. Our inquiry echoes these issues; providers highlighted the widening gap between adult education and industry. Examples included construction lecturers earning considerably more on site, as well as cybersecurity experts being paid substantially more in the private sector. They also warned that challenges in attracting and recruiting experienced staff creates a structural bottleneck where, even when funding is available, providers cannot deliver at scale to meet industry skills needs without the specialist workforce required.

Providers reported that demand for adult learning exceeds the physical capacity they have available. For FE colleges, in particular, this is compounded by a growing 16-18 cohort.

[15] NFER 2026. State of the Education Workforce 2026: Summary.

> **“This constrained capacity also interacts with the rising 16-18 population, with adult learners and young learners effectively competing for the same buildings, classrooms and specialist facilities.”** — Luminate Education Group

Where providers deliver to both 16 to 18-year-olds and adults, capital funding can pose a challenge if the new buildings funded for 16-18 provision cannot also be used for adult learners.

> **“The vast majority of capital investment has gone toward education provision for young people, with the ability for adult education to access provision in these facilities limited due to VAT rules.”** — Luminate Education Group

Unmet skills needs

Adult education providers reported that over and above challenges in recruit specialist staff, they are least able to provide skills training that requires:

- specialist facilities (workshops, labs, digital infrastructure)
- rapid, modular delivery
- integrated ESOL and vocational pathways
- mid-career reskilling
- Levels 3-5 technical progression routes

These are precisely the areas where economic demand is strongest.

> **“... the subjects of highest economic value are the least deliverable at scale within the current system.”** — Lambeth College

This is also noted by Skills England in their Annual Skills Report (2026)[16] where they highlight the importance of modular approaches to support reskilling, AI adoption and for growth in priority sectors.

We also heard about the significant opportunity to embed skills and training requirements within major infrastructure projects and procurement processes. By linking public investment to clear expectations around workforce development, the government could create a more coherent pipeline of opportunities for adults while supporting the sectors most critical to future growth.

[16] Department for Work and Pensions, Skills England, 2026. Skills England annual skills report 2026.

Qualifications and adult learning provision

Adult learners are not a homogenous group and our inquiry heard clearly from contributors that an effective adult education system should be able to pick everyone up by offering entry and exit points to meet different learner needs, with a clear line of sight through career pathways.

Essential skills as an economic bottleneck

Providers emphasised that essential skills gaps, particularly ESOL, literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills, are now a major constraint on economic participation. National evidence echoes the scale of underlying need. Around eight million adults have low literacy skills[17], and more than seven million lack the digital skills[18] required in the modern workplace.

Demand for ESOL is so high that several providers reported that they could "use their entire ASF allocation on ESOL alone". 2023 data from The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)[19] defined 18% of adults in England as having low literacy levels, with 21% of adults defined as having low numeracy proficiency, and yet participation in adult basic skills has declined sharply. These gaps in foundational skills prevent adults from progressing into technical roles, contributing to persistent labour shortages in priority sectors.

Providers recognised the important focus on higher level skills. However, they stressed that essential skills need to be accessible to avoid bottlenecks and ensure there are pathways to progression. The system should be flexible enough to allow individuals to access adult education at different ages and stages which meet individual needs.

Many of those responding to the call for evidence made the point that lots of adult learners taking essential skills courses (excluding ESOL) have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These learners rely on extensive wrap around support, from assisted learning to practical help with childcare, transport, and wellbeing. Yet the level of support required is no longer viable within the current funding model.

> **"There is a profound and persistent gap between long-term economic inactivity and genuine job readiness. This gap cannot be bridged by qualification achievement alone. Without adequate investment in holistic support, many adults will continue to be left behind – despite their willingness to learn, progress and contribute to the economy."**
> — WM College

Occupational standards

Employer involvement is now seen as structurally necessary to keep occupational standards current and relevant. The Learning and Work Institute (L&W) highlighted that rapid workplace change (automation, digitalisation, new hybrid roles) is making existing standards obsolete

[17] National Literacy Trust. No date. Adult literacy rates in the UK.

[18] UK Parliament, 2024. House of Commons Library, Research Briefing. Digital skills and careers.

[19] Department for Education, 2024. Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (PIAAC): National Report for England.

faster and employers must co design standards to ensure they reflect real tasks, tools, and competencies[20]. The University of Oxford Centre on Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) policy brief[21]published in 2026 argues that skills gaps will widen when standards are not grounded in current industry practice and proposes a new governance model where employers have structured, ongoing influence rather than episodic input.

Flexibility

Respondents called for the need for qualifications and funding to be more flexible in order to deliver positive outcomes for employers and learners. They also highlighted the importance of tailored learning and programmes outside of formal qualifications that meet individual and employer needs.

> **"What's needed is something closer to the principle of apprenticeship units – flexible, responsive, and outcomes-focused – but without the same level of prescription."** — East Durham College

One college leader highlighted the inflexibility of the ASF compared to the ringfenced budget for tailored learning; while the latter is more flexible and can be used to support wider ASF activity, the amount is minimal. They described a system where funding often comes from different government departments with different administrative and procurement processes which are often unhelpful and lead to duplication rather than supporting system coherence. EKC Group are working with partners to resolve this at a local level but some national recognition of the impact of adult education on the overall economy and people's wellbeing would aid this endeavour to no end.

> **"It also shows that there is not a consistent strategy across government on this key growth and productivity driver for the economy and key individual and community focused driver for employment, upskilling, health and wellbeing and community cohesion – all of which are crucial in this ever-volatile world."**
> — EKC Group

Only 3% of respondents to our call for evidence felt that qualification delivery requirements such as prescribed frameworks and funding eligibility did not limit ability to design provision tailored to employer needs. However, 69% said that it limits their ability to tailor provision to either a great or moderate extent.

[20] Price, D., Klenk, H., Egglestone, C., Evans, S., 2025. Development and use of occupational standards. Learning and Work Institute.

[21] Robson, J., Saunders, A., Xie, Y., Tattam, H., Xu, X., 2026. Reconceptualising the Role of Employers in England's Post-16 Education and Skills System.

> **Despite devolution in some areas, curriculum and funding rules remain tightly prescribed, restricting providers' ability to respond to local employer demand."** — Lambeth College

We also heard from representatives of the trade union movement about the impact of the decision to end funding for the Union Learning Fund, which had supported trade unions to provide education, training and lifelong learning opportunities in workplaces across the country. They highlighted the important role union learning had played in reaching workers who were often less likely to engage with traditional education provision or employer-led training and argued that government support for this approach should be reinstated.

Wider outcomes are often ignored

While the majority of evidence acknowledges the government's priorities to support the upskilling or reskilling of individuals to play an active role in economic growth, there was just as much concern that this is often to the detriment of the wider benefits of adult education. Focusing solely on economic benefits risks overlooking adults who are not currently able to work, including those facing poor health, trauma, anxiety or other barriers, for whom adult learning can support wellbeing, confidence and community connection. This is explored further in chapter 2.

> **... adult education does function to upskill and retrain adults to meet employment needs but beyond that, adult education serves to enrich society through the supportive progression and enhancement of communities and individuals alike."** — Education and Training Foundation

Targeted careers advice for adults

High quality careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) is essential for effective adult learning pathways, yet the evidence shows that current provision is inconsistent and often poorly aligned with adults' needs.

We heard throughout our inquiry that assessment processes can fail to recognise complex barriers such as caring responsibilities, mental health challenges, prior trauma or low confidence, resulting in guidance that does not reflect learners' starting points or long-term aspirations. Our evidence also highlights that ESOL learners often report variable experiences, with providers not always establishing learners' prior education, skills or ambitions. These learners often receive unclear information about how to access further learning or what level of language proficiency is required for their chosen career goals. This limits progression and can lead to inappropriate course placement or early withdrawal.

However, learners in our focus groups said they valued support with career planning, university applications, CV development and interview preparation.

> **“I had lessons with my teacher about interviews and how to introduce myself... and I was surprised because I could not say what kind of skills I have, but she helped me and now I am more confident.”**
> **— ESOL learner**

Another challenge highlighted several times in evidence is the perception of adult education as a short term fix rather than a genuine career pathway. Without clear, personalised guidance, adults may struggle to understand available opportunities or how learning can support long-term progression. Strengthening CEIAG practice through consistent application of recognised frameworks such as the Gatsby Benchmarks[22], personalised guidance, and better resourcing would help ensure that adult learners receive accurate, tailored advice that supports ambition and sustained engagement.

Finally, maintenance support is critical. Adults need reassurance that undertaking full time or intensive study will not jeopardise their benefits or welfare support. Clear CEIAG, combined with financial stability, is central to enabling adults to make informed choices and pursue meaningful, long-term career development.

The adult education opportunity

This chapter has explored the extent to which adult education supports economic growth and meets workforce needs. It highlights the opportunity of a properly resourced adult education system to address skills shortages, support economic transitions, and deliver a strong return on investment for the public purse: themes that we return to in chapter 3. The evidence describes the barriers adults face in accessing training and considers whether CEIAG is meeting the needs of adults navigating complex learning and employment decisions.

A clear picture has emerged: adult education can drive economic growth, but it is severely limited by the current system. Where providers have flexibility to shape provision around local need and work closely with employers, they deliver strong outcomes. But these successes sit within a wider system that is misaligned with the skills the economy requires.

Funding, policy and the regulatory environment underpinning adult education needs to avoid:

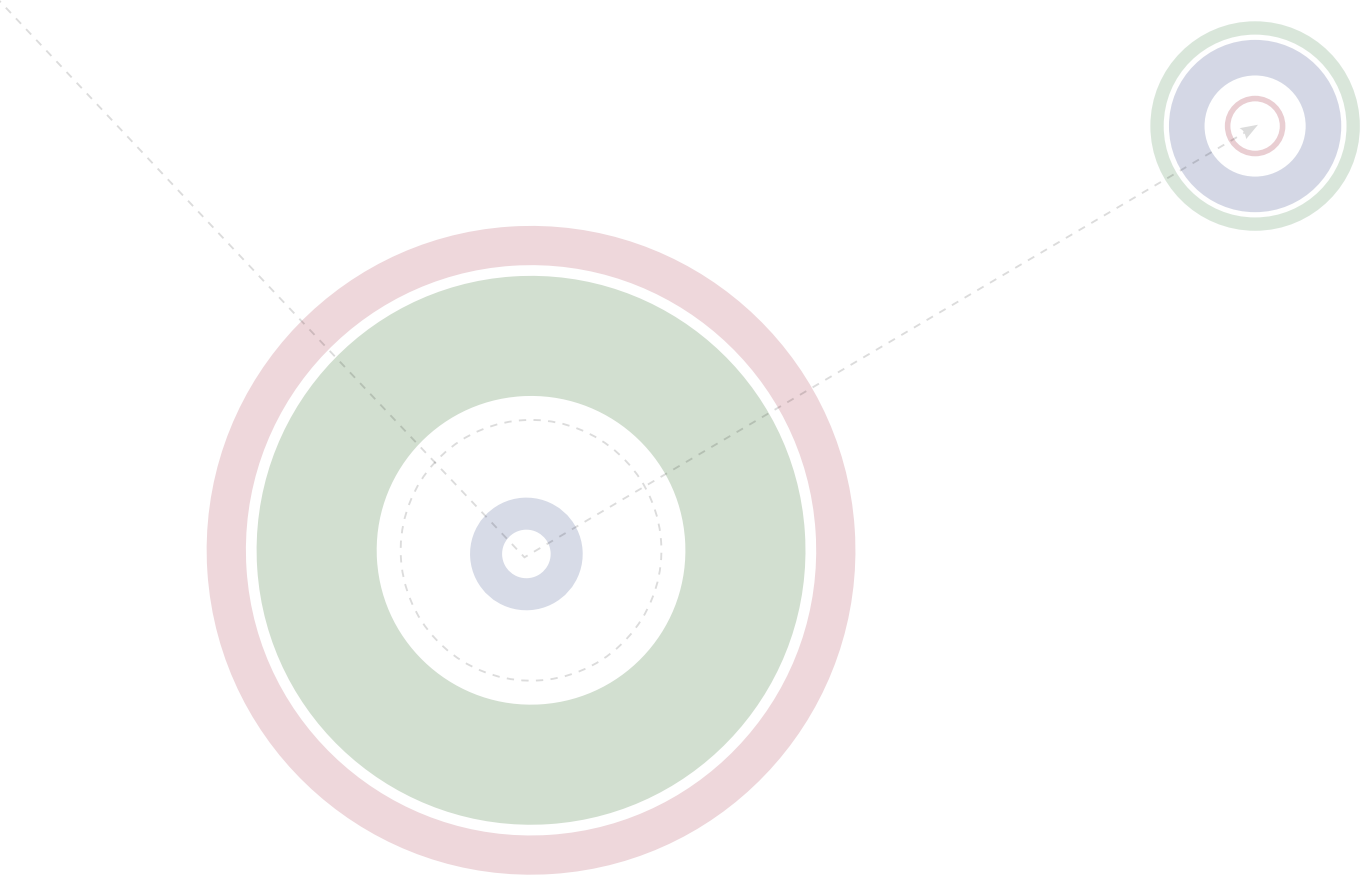
- → long form qualifications

[22] Gatsby Benchmarks.

- pathways targeted at young people but not adults
- short-term outputs
- rigid funding rules.

There is a mismatch between economic growth requiring speed, flexibility and progression, and what the system is structured to deliver. This is most visible in high value and priority sectors and in the essential skills that underpin adult learning progression. Employers report persistent shortages, while adults often struggle to access the training they need. Staffing pressures, qualification frameworks, and eligibility criteria continue to constrain provision, limiting the ability of colleges and training providers to respond quickly to market demands.

A more balanced skills system is needed; one that values employer insight but does not rely on employer demand alone to shape provision. A stronger focus on entry level learning would deliver the greatest return on investment, helping adults build the foundational skills and confidence required to progress into higher level training and sustainable employment.



CHAPTER TWO

Adults and society

Dr Sam Rushworth
MP for Bishop Auckland

Rachel Gilmour
MP for Tiverton and Minehead

Introduction

Adult education has a role that extends well beyond helping people gain qualifications or move into work. It can open up opportunities, build confidence and strengthen people's ability to participate in their communities, while also supporting health and wellbeing and preventing problems from becoming more acute. For adults facing unemployment, poor health, caring responsibilities, social isolation or other barriers, learning can provide a trusted route back into wider participation in society. These benefits are mutually reinforcing: improving skills and confidence can support progression into better work, while learning environments can also improve wellbeing, strengthen social connections and build more resilient communities.

Our constituencies, although in opposite ends of the country, face similar social and economic pressures, with growing numbers of people experiencing significant mental health challenges.

We also face some distinct issues. In Bishop Auckland, that's partly a result of the intergenerational scars from the closure of foundries, pits and wagon works. We also have a large veteran population, struggling to reapply their skills in civilian roles, as well as ageing populations engaged in manual work and whose bodies are wearing out before pension-age, fearing they lack the skills for alternative work. The area is part of the dispersal region for asylum-seekers, but without having a diaspora community or the social infrastructure and experience of hosting these groups, this has led to polarisation and community tensions. In such a context, ESOL is essential in giving people the ability to integrate.

In a large rural constituency such as Tiverton and Minehead, geography can itself become a barrier to social mobility. Limited public transport, long distances to education and training, and pockets of digital exclusion can make it harder for adults, particularly those on lower incomes, with caring responsibilities or already facing disadvantage, to access learning that could build confidence, improve their health and wellbeing and open up new employment opportunities.

In light of these challenges, this chapter examines the wider contribution adult education makes to a healthy, inclusive and connected society. It considers the barriers that prevent those who could benefit most from accessing learning, the support learners need both in and beyond the classroom, and the particular contribution of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and prison education. Across these areas, the inquiry finds a strong case for recognising adult education as a universal public good and as an important part of the UK's social and preventative infrastructure, while broadening policy and funding frameworks that currently place greatest weight on immediate qualifications and employment outcomes.

Adult learning is not only an economic intervention; it is a cornerstone of a more inclusive, healthier and more connected society.

Context

There are several reasons why adults struggle to access education. Annual National Participation Surveys published by the L&W Institute consistently indicate that around one in five adult learners have caring duties, which constrains access to training and intensifies social isolation. Data from the Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2024[23] highlighted that adults with lower prior attainment, poorer health, or unstable work are least likely to engage with learning, therefore contributing to persistent inequalities in progression, earnings, and civic participation. Analysis from the Office for National Statistics (ONS)[24] also found that adults who cannot speak English well are more likely to be in poor health, less able to navigate public services (like education), and more socially isolated.

In the UK, poor health is one of the largest barriers to work and education opportunities. The L&W Institute[25] found that over 2.8 million adults are economically inactive due to long-term sickness, with mental health conditions and musculoskeletal issues the most common causes. These health related barriers intersect with caring responsibilities.

And yet, we know that adult learning improves wellbeing, reduces anxiety, and strengthens resilience.

In DfE research[26] on community learning, for example, evidence showed significant reductions in depression and anxiety scores among participants. Evidence from the Bell Foundation[27] demonstrates that improved language skills supports community cohesion, parental engagement in children's learning, and access to healthcare.

Community cohesion pressures including rising local tensions, polarisation, and the impacts of economic insecurity further highlight the social role of adult learning. Workers' Educational Association (WEA) research[28] shows that community based learning strengthens solidarity, trust, and connection, particularly in areas facing social fragmentation.

Prison education contributes to cohesion and rehabilitation, but oversight is complex and funding pressures are intense, with responsibility and outcomes split between DfE, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). There has been a significant reduction in resourcing[29] available for prison education, and yet MOJ data[30] shows that participation in education programmes is associated with improved post release outcomes and reduced reoffending.

[23] Egglestone, C., Jones, E., Manetti, L., Nermond, O., 2024. Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2024. Learning and Work Institute.

[24] Office for National Statistics, 2015. People who cannot speak English well are more likely to be in poor health.

[25] Nermond, O., 2024. Persistent inequalities in lifelong learning: what can we learn from the Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2024? Learning and Work Institute.

[26] Department for Education, 2018. Community learning mental health research project Phase two evaluation report.

[27] The Bell Foundation, 2026. The Case for Increased Investment in ESOL.

[28] WEA, 2025. Impact Report 2025: Executive Summary.

[29] Prisoners' Education Trust, 2026. Prison education hours cut by 25%: what we know.

[30] Ministry of Justice, 2024. Prison Education and Accredited Programmes Statistics, April 2023 to March 2024.

What the inquiry told us

Key highlights

Inquiry evidence shows a strong consensus that adult education is a powerful driver of social mobility, inclusion and community cohesion. Adult learning provides spaces where adults can rebuild confidence, improve wellbeing and develop foundational skills, often before they can engage successfully in vocational learning or employment. This is most effective when delivered through trusted community settings and supported by strong pastoral and wraparound services. Yet the current system is not designed around the realities of adult learners' lives, and many take longer, more complex journeys before they are ready to progress. Funding systems overwhelmingly prioritise qualifications and immediate employment outcomes, without recognising wider social, health, family and community benefits that adult learning also delivers.

Contributors emphasised the importance of connecting adult education with wider employment, health and community support systems, to ensure learners receive the holistic support required to overcome entrenched barriers and achieve sustainable progression.

Only a very small proportion (6%) of respondents felt that the adult education system is highly effective in engaging adults furthest from the labour market, while almost one-quarter (23%) judged it to be not effective at all.

Most respondents felt that current funding mechanisms recognise, enable or encourage outcomes beyond qualifications only to a small extent (49%) or not at all (21%). Only 1% said they do so to a great extent.

Learner support funding was viewed as wholly insufficient. Only 1% of respondents described it as fully adequate, and almost one-quarter (24%) described it as not at all adequate in supporting learners facing additional barriers to participation.

Welfare support for retraining was similarly poorly rated; 0% said it is fully adequate and one-quarter (25%) it is not at all adequate in supporting people out of work to upskill or retrain.

Most respondents felt that adult education is recognised only to a small (53%) or moderate (30%) extent as a preventative intervention.

Most respondents said that national policymaking reflects the wider social value of adult learning to a small extent (52%) or not at all (23%).

Findings from our call for evidence reinforce the concerns in the oral evidence about a lack of support for adults facing disadvantage and social exclusion. It was felt that this group could benefit significantly from learning, whether or not it leads to employment.

We also heard clearly that ESOL provision is particularly central to integration, opportunity and progression, but contributors highlighted the need for faster access and more integrated ESOL and vocational pathways. They also called for prison education to be recognised as a core part of the adult education system, supporting rehabilitation, reintegration into society, employability, and reduced offending. Yet underinvestment, fragmented responsibilities and reduced contract values limit its ability to deliver long-term impact.

Findings in full

The evidence gathered through our inquiry highlighted recurrent themes in relation to the role of adult education in society. We heard repeatedly about **barriers to accessing adult learning, support in and beyond the classroom**, the **transformative role of ESOL, the preventative health and wellbeing impact** of adult education, and the **risks to prison education**. We also heard celebration of the role of adult education as a **universal public good**.

Barriers to access

Interconnected obstacles

Our inquiry heard about obstacles to accessing education that are multiple, cumulative and interconnected, making adult participation in learning difficult and progression slow. Contributors across the inquiry described a system that is struggling to reach those who could benefit most. Barriers cited include:

- financial pressures such as the costs of courses, transport, childcare, equipment and lost income. Many cited L&W's (2025) finding[31] that 24% of adults identify cost as a barrier to learning, compared with 8% in 2019
- poor mental health, disabilities, low confidence, lack of social capital and previous negative experiences of education that limit participation
- caring responsibilities
- digital exclusion
- a lack of awareness of available provision that further constrain engagement
- cultural or linguistic barriers.

[31] Revel, A., et al., 2025. The workforce learning slowdown? Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2025. Learning and Work Institute.

> **“... the barriers preventing disadvantaged adults from accessing and succeeding in adult education are rarely isolated. They tend to stack up, sitting between how the system is designed and the realities of everyday life, and in doing so disproportionately impact those who stand to benefit most.” — Activate Learning**

Our inquiry identified several groups who are least well served by current adult education provision and who would benefit most from its social, health and wellbeing outcomes. These include:

- adults with low literacy, numeracy or digital skills
- adults with mental or physical health conditions
- learners with SEND
- older adults
- people with caring responsibilities
- those living in poverty or insecure housing
- ESOL learners and migrant communities
- prisoners and ex-offenders
- rural learners
- adults experiencing multiple and complex disadvantages

Respondents highlighted the “Matthew effect”[32] in adult learning, with those who are already advantaged most likely to participate, while those facing the greatest barriers are least likely to access opportunities. Participants described examples where colleges, local authorities, health services and community organisations have successfully collaborated to support people experiencing poor health, economic inactivity or social isolation. However, respondents felt such examples remain the exception rather than the norm.

There was a particular concern about adults who are experiencing inequalities and are economically inactive, but who are not actively engaged with employment services, as well as adults whose educational needs are linked to health, housing or wider social challenges. These individuals are often beyond the reach of traditional skills programmes but may significantly benefit from community learning and tailored support. This concern was reflected in our call for evidence findings; only a very small proportion (6%) of respondents felt that the adult education system is highly effective in engaging adults furthest from the labour market, while almost one-quarter (23%) judged it to be not effective at all, emphasising challenges in supporting those experiencing disadvantage.

[32] Boeren, E. 2009. Adult education participation: The Matthew principle. *Filosofija Sociologija* 20(2):154-161.

Funding, flexibility and eligibility

Building on our findings in Chapter 1, we heard again in the context of social mobility and inclusion how complex eligibility rules and concerns about the impact of learning on benefits create additional obstacles to adult education participation. Respondents described welfare conditionality as a significant barrier, with some learners discouraged from undertaking training because of immediate job-search requirements. Providers argued that a "work first" approach constrains long-term progression into sustained employment, which undermines the wider role adult education can play in supporting health outcomes and social inclusion.

The inquiry heard concerns that current funding and accountability arrangements place significant emphasis on qualification achievement and immediate employment outcomes. While these measures are important, respondents argued that they do not adequately capture the wider contribution adult education makes to individuals, employers and communities. Providers described delivering learning that improves confidence, mental health, digital inclusion, community participation and readiness for work, often helping learners furthest from the labour market take their first steps towards employment. However, because these outcomes are not consistently recognised within funding and performance frameworks, providers can find it difficult to sustain provision that delivers substantial long-term social and economic value. Several respondents warned that this creates organisational vulnerability, particularly for providers serving disadvantaged communities, as programmes with proven benefits for health, wellbeing and progression may be deprioritised in favour of activity that generates more easily measurable outcomes.

This can be particularly challenging for community learning, family learning, foundation learning, ESOL and other engagement programmes, where the primary outcome may not be an immediate qualification or job outcome. The inquiry heard that these programmes often act as a gateway into further learning, employment or improved wellbeing, but their preventative value is not always reflected in funding decisions. As a result, providers can face pressure to reduce or reshape provision despite evidence that it delivers significant longer-term returns through improved health, increased labour market participation and reduced demand on public services.

Fragmented funding streams and insufficient flexibility in the use of funding are also major concerns. Providers are often funded to deliver specific qualifications rather than to respond holistically to learners' needs and progression goals. Greater flexibility would allow colleges to invest in the practical support, short-course training, professional licences, certifications and wraparound interventions that help individuals move into work, further study or improved wellbeing, even where these outcomes are not linked to a formal qualification.

Responses to our call for evidence clearly highlighted these funding challenges. Most respondents felt that current funding mechanisms recognise, enable or encourage outcomes beyond qualifications (such as health and wellbeing, community resilience) only to a small extent (49%) or not at all (21%). Only 1% said they do so to a great extent. They viewed learner support funding mechanisms (for example, advanced learner loans) as wholly insufficient; only 1% of respondents described them as fully adequate, while almost one-quarter (24%) said they're not at all adequate in supporting learners facing additional barriers to participation. In addition, no (0%) respondents saw the welfare system as fully adequate in supporting people out of work to upskill or retrain, and one-quarter (25%) perceived it as not at all adequate.

The task is to shift the system from one based on complex entitlements, to one which empowers providers to focus on long-term outcomes for people, and is far clearer for all stakeholders to navigate.

System coordination

Contributors to our inquiry told us that the wider social value of adult education remains poorly recognised in national policymaking, and call for evidence findings show that this value is reflected only to a small extent (52%) or not at all (23%). Providers described a system that continues to narrowly focus on qualifications and employment outcomes, even though adult learning demonstrably improves mental health, strengthens communities and reduces future demand on public services.

Respondents argued that adult education should be embedded within local health prevention strategies, working alongside health services, integrated care systems, social prescribing initiatives and employment support programmes to deliver a 'whole person' approach and improve access. While promising partnerships exist in pockets around the country, they remain inconsistent and dependent on examples of local leadership rather than national policy.

Support in and beyond the classroom

Despite concerns about the system, inquiry contributors provided extensive evidence of the transformative impact of adult learning offering a safe, supportive environment where they could rebuild confidence, develop new skills and begin to imagine different futures. Support from tutors, staff and peers was one of the strongest and most consistent themes across all learner focus groups, and many learners suggested that supportive relationships are key to maintaining motivation and persistence.

Adult education learners highly valued supportive tutors and staff. Participants consistently praised staff for being approachable, encouraging and responsive to both academic and personal challenges.

> **“So I think the communication, the way that they communicated with me and the support as well. There were no judgments. You should have seen how many times I got it wrong, and there was no judgment. It was like, ‘okay, let’s try it a different way if you’re just not grasping that, let’s do it a different way’, and then each other doing it and someone going ‘try this way, and that’, and us helping each other as well.” — Short course learner**

Peer support encourages persistence and progression. Adult learners described how they value encouragement from, and connection with, classmates which helps them remain engaged, overcome challenges and continue learning.

> **“We all kind of helped each other and buoyed each other up and supported each other. After the first week, I was thinking, oh, I’m rubbish at this, I’m going to leave. But, thanks to the people around me and the support from my tutor and the encouragement from her, I stayed and carried on the whole way.” — Employed, Level 1 learner**

Colleges and adult education settings provide valuable support beyond teaching, including a range of additional support services such as wellbeing support, mentoring, childcare support, housing advice and practical assistance.

> **“The support that’s given by the tutors and the college without it being ‘we are supporting’ and obvious, I think that’s really good. That’s so undervalued. It’s not just the education bit, it’s that reassurance as well and that you know you’re okay.”**
> **— Short course learner**

We also heard however that a lack of accessible and affordable childcare can prevent mothers from participating in adult education, reinforcing existing inequalities in access to skills and employment. Ensuring childcare support is available alongside adult learning can give more women the opportunity to retrain, build confidence and skills, and enter or progress in the labour market.

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

The inquiry heard about the benefits of ESOL for those both in and out of the labour market. Low English levels present a barrier to integration and opportunity, and contributors call for faster access to opportunities to learn English, as well as more integrated pathways to teach ESOL

alongside vocational qualifications. The benefits of ESOL can extend across generations, enabling parents to better support their children's English language development and engage with their education, with positive knock-on effects for children's progress at school. Importantly, we also heard that ESOL is not always well understood at a political level.

Inquiry contributors pointed to the different purposes of literacy as opposed to language learning and argued that language learning is not replaceable by digital solutions. Liverpool City Region was cited as a positive case study where the innovation element of the devolved ASF is being used to support the increased cost of team teaching (an ESOL teacher alongside a vocational teacher), providing a strong example of how English language skills can be aligned to vocational skills to broaden pathways into the workforce. A joint report from the AoC and Bell Foundation (2025)[33] noted the variance in approaches to ESOL provision across mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs) since the devolution of adults skills funding, arguing that further work needs to be undertaken to review lessons from the different approaches taken, and that a national strategy is required which could establish overarching principles and entitlements for ESOL provision, which elected mayors could in turn apply in their own local contexts.

In the focus groups, ESOL learners described using English to communicate with schools, healthcare services, employers and public services, noting that stronger language skills enables them to communicate more confidently and participate more fully in their communities. This, in turn, is fundamental to achieving career ambitions and progressing into further learning, supporting social inclusion.

> **"Now I am on the Level 1, and I am very happy because now I know how to speak with my child's schoolteacher or how to speak with the doctor, and to go somewhere else and how to speak with them."**
> **— ESOL Level 1 learner**

Insights from the call for evidence suggest that there should be a basic minimum entitlement to ESOL classes and budget ringfencing, with many of those responding calling for a national strategy for ESOL. Many respondents also highlighted the fact that a third of those who do not have English as a first language are British citizens. ESOL has also been disproportionately cut in prisons, and we turn to prison education later in this chapter.

There are many other countries that we can learn from regarding language learning for integration[34]. Finnish vocational education and training (VET), for example, combines practical skills, workplace learning, and Finnish/Swedish language development. Critically, there are no stipulations on residency status, meaning that vocational skills are truly

[33] The Bell Foundation and the Association of Colleges, 2025. Supporting ESOL in Devolved Authorities. The Bell Foundation.

[34] Finnish National Agency for Education, 2026. Information on Study Opportunities in VET and Residence in Finland.

open to all. All vocational qualifications include mandatory workplace training, which gives non-native Finnish/Swedish speakers valuable work experience and employer contacts.

Preventative health and wellbeing impact

Colleges and community education providers act as anchor institutions for wellbeing, offering trusted spaces where adults can rebuild confidence, reduce isolation and manage long-term conditions. Yet, we heard a clear message that the role of adult education in this space is not universally recognised or valued, and most call for evidence respondents felt that adult education is recognised only to a small (53%) or moderate (30%) extent as a preventative intervention.

Inquiry respondents highlighted that adult education frequently reaches people before or after they require more intensive interventions from health, social care or welfare systems. In this sense, adult learning fulfils the role of first responder. Community provision and tailored learning supports post-stroke recovery, improves mental health, reduces loneliness and helps learners manage long-term conditions. Health and wellbeing courses improve resilience and reduce sickness absence. ESOL programmes enhance health literacy, enabling learners to navigate healthcare systems and communicate effectively with clinicians.

Across all our evidence, we heard that adult education consistently acts as the first safe point of contact for people disconnected from work, health and civic life. Colleges and community providers are described as "anchor institutions for wellbeing", offering safe, trusted spaces where adults can rebuild confidence, reduce isolation and reconnect with others. For some learners who are not ready for work and, in some cases, not ready to leave their homes, adult learning can act as a first step towards improved wellbeing and social participation.

Learners in our focus groups told us about the wider benefits of learning. Being in college reduces social isolation and creates a sense of belonging, and many learners value opportunities to meet people, build friendships and develop supportive social networks.

> **"I felt lonely because I'm a single mum, but here it doesn't matter what nationality or religion, it doesn't matter. We are like really one family. It's so interesting, it's something unique"**
> **— ESOL Level 1 learner**

Others described adult learning as giving them a purpose, a chance to leave the house and meet other people. Learners described college as a safe, comfortable environment where everyone is treated as equally and respectfully.

[35] Department for Work and Pensions, 2024. Connect to Work.

Being in work improves health outcomes, and adult learning is often the gateway to employability. Programmes such as Connect to Work[35] and supported employment initiatives for learners with learning difficulties demonstrate the strong links between learning, confidence and progression.

Another example is from Manchester City Council's oral evidence about the work they are doing through the integration of employment advisors within certain Manchester NHS Foundation settings. They started with the muscular skeletal and mental health clinics due to the high percentage of adults losing their jobs or at risk of losing their jobs suffering from related conditions and accessing these health services. Advisors are embedded as part of clinical teams to ensure a 'whole person approach' and the pilot has been so successful that they are now looking at how they can adapt it to other health services in Manchester, such as cancer care.

However, whilst adult learning partnerships with health systems are growing, they are uneven, creating an inconsistent approach across the country. Integrated care boards (ICBs), WorkWell programmes[36], social prescribing initiatives and widening access pilots show the potential of more integrated approaches, but these remain limited and inconsistent across England.

Risks to prison education

The inquiry also heard strong concerns about prison education. Contributors argued that it should be recognised as a core part of the adult education system, supporting rehabilitation, employability and reintegration. However, prison education has suffered from underinvestment, fragmented responsibilities and reduced contract values, limiting its ability to deliver long-term impact.

Inquiry contributors called for prison education to be returned in full to the DfE to ensure stronger alignment with wider adult education policy and lifelong learning strategies, and for greater consideration of the role prisoner education can play in improving long-term outcomes for ex-offenders. They also highlighted the pressures on demand, and the short-sightedness of funding cuts which are deepening these issues.

Adult learning as a universal public good

Contributors to our inquiry pointed to recent policy focus on the one million younger adults who are NEET[37]. They also stressed the importance of lifelong learning and the potential displacement of the very real needs of older adults.

Contributors argued that the evidence base for adult learning is strong but insufficiently recognised by national policymakers, as evidenced by significant funding cuts since the early 2000s. Past research highlights the returns from adult learning, but contributors noted this has not translated into policy reform. Providers called for updated valuations,

[36] Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care, 2023. WorkWell.

[37] Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. Young people and work: interim report.

longitudinal data and clearer articulation of the social and health impacts of adult education. The international evidence session reinforces this, where we heard clearly that England is not alone in failing to value the wider returns from adult learning highly enough. In the main, benefits from adult education are linked to employment or to economic outcomes. The OECD's PIAAC testing of adult learners[38] is still not able to provide data on wider social outcomes that might better support adult education policy and funding decisions in countries around the world. Contributors to our inquiry told us that better data and tracking of adult education outcomes is needed as anecdotal evidence alone does not lead to increased funding.

> **"If you don't measure the return on investment, and I say it brutally like that, then it's sometimes really difficult to get the message across." — European Association for the Education of Adults**

The benefits generated by lifelong learning extend far beyond individual learners, strengthening the social, economic and democratic fabric of the country. When adults can access learning throughout their lives, communities become healthier with lower demand on public services, as well as more resilient and more cohesive, with many more people likely to be a part of a more adaptable workforce as a result.

> **"Lifelong learning is a huge economic, social and political opportunity for the UK... [people] want to build better futures for themselves and their families." — Mindful Education**

Learners in our focus groups described education as an investment in their families' futures, creating wider intergenerational benefits alongside personal development. Benefits include supporting their children's education using new skills, communicating more effectively with schools and acting as positive role models. Supporting their children reinforces learners' own development, providing opportunities to practise and strengthen skills.

> **"It makes you proud when you can help your children... I teach [my daughter] phonics and I read books with her... I can do most of, not all of them, but I can support my daughter. That's why for me I can feel proud for myself." — ESOL Level 1 learner**

As indicated by inquiry contributors, treating adult learning as a universal public good, rather than as a narrow labour market intervention, recognises its role in improving wellbeing, digital confidence, civic participation, integration, and environmental transition. It also

[38] OECD, no date. Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

establishes a shared national expectation that adults will need to return to learning at different points in their lives, creating a culture that supports progression, inclusion and opportunity at every stage and age. This framing aligns adult education with other universal entitlements such as healthcare and school education, embedding it as essential national infrastructure rather than a discretionary add-on.

The adult education opportunity

Our evidence demonstrates that adult education is a critical component of England's social and preventative infrastructure, improving mental health, reducing isolation, supporting recovery, strengthening communities and moving people closer to work. It reduces future costs for the NHS, DWP, local authorities and the criminal justice system, reaches groups who do not engage with statutory services, and provides trusted spaces to rebuild confidence and resilience.

Yet funding remains fragmented and overly focused on qualifications and job entry, preventative health outcomes, wellbeing and community resilience are undervalued, and those who could benefit most are the least likely to participate.

With the right support, these individuals could contribute meaningfully to society. A strong consensus emerged around the changes required, with respondents consistently calling for:

- increased and sustained long-term investment in adult education, with multi-year funding settlements
- greater flexibility to support modular, blended and community-based learning
- enhanced learner support for childcare, transport and digital access
- a minimum national entitlement for literacy, numeracy, digital skills and ESOL provision
- better integration and coordination between employment, education, health and social care services
- greater recognition of confidence-building, wellbeing and social outcomes
- improved progression pathways.

Achieving current policy ambitions for inclusive growth, opportunity and participation requires a more flexible, better-funded and joined-up adult education system. Improved longitudinal data, particularly from the ASF would allow clearer measurement of return on investment, including health and social care outcomes.

A new and broader shared outcomes framework across government departments and agencies, including DfE, DWP, Department for Health

and Social Care (DHSC) and ICBs, would capture health, wellbeing, confidence, digital inclusion and progression, and support the Treasury to recognise the benefits from adult learning across multiple departments, requiring joint investment models.

Adult education should be recognised not only as an economic intervention, but as a key component of the nation's social infrastructure, supporting healthier communities, greater resilience and improved life chances.

CHAPTER THREE

Systems and policy

Lord Johnson of Marylebone

Baroness Smith of Llanfaes

Introduction

As a former education minister and a former student leader, we know that England needs to take urgent action on adult education. There are reforms underway which should strengthen the system: the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), the transfer of skills responsibility to DWP, the new Growth and Skills Levy (GSL) and LSIPs. However, to truly succeed, we also need national vision, policy clarity and stability and sustained investment. In particular, without adequate funding we will struggle to achieve meaningful reform.

To understand how England might build a more coherent and resilient system, we have to look outward. Other parts of the UK and countries across the world face similar challenges: technological change, demographic pressures, labour-market disruption and regional inequalities. Responses vary and include strong social partnership models to employer co-investment, community based provision and systems where lifelong learning is embedded as a cultural norm. While no single model can be simply replicated, international experience shows that effective systems share common features: clear purpose, cross government coordination and stability that enables long-term planning.

This chapter assesses England's funding trends, policy reforms and governance arrangements, and draws practical lessons from international practice. It considers how participation can be incentivised, how delivery can be better aligned with labour-market needs, and how adult education can be integrated into wider social and economic objectives. Crucially, it asks what England must learn, and change, to create a stable, well funded and strategically aligned system capable of delivering lifelong learning at scale.

Context

Since the early 2000s, adult education policy in England has gradually shifted from broad community learning toward labour market alignment.

In 2001, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC)[39] gained national oversight of adult skills and training funding to improve coherence and responsiveness. By the mid-2000s, policy emphasised employer demand, exemplified by Train to Gain,[40] moving provision further from leisure based or civic adult learning. The 2008 financial crisis led to budget cuts, and by the mid-2010s, participation had fallen to its lowest level in modern records.[41] The closure of the LSC in 2010 and transfer of responsibilities to the DfE and its agencies centralised control, and narrowed policy focus to qualifications and employability.[42]

Since the late 2010s, policy has been shaped by two major forces: employment linked funding models and devolution deals.

[39] Learning and Skills Act 2000.

[40] National Audit Office, 2009. Train to Gain: Developing the skills of the workforce.

[41] Merritt, E. C., 2025. Lifelong learning: England's adult education sector and the government's plan for skills. House of Lords.

[42] Orr, K., 2020. A future for the further education sector in England. Journal of Education and Work, 33:7-8, 507-514.

Many courses became fully funded for adults on low incomes or those seeking a first full Level 3 qualification, while leisure oriented provision not eligible for public funding shifted to commercial fee-paying models[43]. Greater Manchester's devolution deal[44] saw responsibility for Adult Education Budget (AEB) (now the ASF) transferred to mayoral combined authorities, though the total budget remained fixed in cash terms, limiting local flexibility. The Skills for Jobs White Paper[45] and the Skills and Post 16 Education Act[46] further embedded employer designed qualifications, strengthened accountability for labour market outcomes, and lay the groundwork for the LLE[47].

Policy developments have continued this direction. There was a one-off 3% cash cut in the 2025/26 academic year[48], a £100m four-year expansion of construction Skills Bootcamps,[49] phased integrated settlements for local authority funding[50] and a new national target for two thirds of young adults to participate in higher level learning[51].

International trends show a move to employment centred adult learning, and analysis[52] highlights similar challenges seen across Europe with fragmented provision, uneven employer engagement, and persistent inequalities in participation. However, some European countries, like Sweden,[53] maintain higher adult learning participation through stable funding, universal entitlements and access to financial support for living costs.

These contrasts help frame England's reforms as part of a global shift toward skills productivity, but with distinctive pressures from austerity, decentralisation, and employer driven qualification design.

What the inquiry told us

Key highlights

Across our inquiry we heard strong agreement that the ambitions placed on adult education are not matched by the current policy and funding framework. While there are growing expectations on adult education to support economic growth, workforce transitions, social mobility, health, wellbeing, and community resilience, investment has failed to keep pace with these ambitions. Contributors argued that adult education is being asked to deliver increasingly wide-ranging outcomes without the stable funding, policy coherence or national direction needed to do so.

Funding concerns permeate our inquiry. As highlighted above, evidence suggests that the system has become increasingly fragmented, with multiple funding streams, complex eligibility rules and a lack of long-term strategic direction. Contributors argued that this creates confusion for learners, employers and providers alike. Successive policy reforms have added complexity without addressing underlying funding pressures.

[43] Merritt, E. C., 2025. Lifelong learning: England's adult education sector and the government's plan for skills. House of Lords.

[44] Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2026. Adult Skills Fund.

[45] Department for Education, 2021. Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth.

[46] Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022.

[47] Department for Education, 2026. Lifelong learning entitlement: what it is and how it will work.

[48] Department for Education, 2026. Adult education and skills funding allocations: update for 2025 to 2026.

[49] Department for Education and The Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, 2025. Major expansion of colleges to train next generation of workers.

[50] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025. Functional responsibilities for the Integrated Settlements: 2025 to 2026.

[51] Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions, and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025. Post-16 education and skills white paper.

[52] OECD, 2025. Trends in Adult Learning: New Data from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills. Paris, OECD Publishing.

[53] European Education and Culture Executive Agency (European Commission), 2021. Adult education and training in Europe: Building inclusive pathways to skills and qualifications. Publications Office of the European Union.

Adult education is expected to deliver across skills, employment, health and inclusion agendas, but contributors argued that fragmented departmental responsibility, short-term policy priorities and the absence of a clear national vision are preventing a coherent, long-term lifelong learning system. They called for a clearer national strategy, backed by local flexibility, stable investment and simpler funding arrangements, so that adult education is better aligned with wider social and economic priorities.

Over half (56%) of providers often or very often have to turn learners away due to inflexible funding rules or eligibility constraints.

Most respondents considered the current level of public investment in adult education to be either slightly adequate (17%) or not at all adequate (67%) relative to government ambitions.

83% of respondents identified funding as a major barrier in responding to skills shortages through adult education.

Confidence in policy coherence across government departments is generally low; over one-quarter reported they are slightly confident (26%) that adult education policy is aligned with wider priorities such as economic growth, health improvement and workforce transitions, and more than three in five (62%) said they are not at all confident.

Among providers operating in mayoral strategic authority (MSA) areas, views on public investment were mixed but largely cautious: only 2% felt that current investment is fully adequate relative to MSA policy ambitions, while 24% said it is only slightly adequate and 17% not at all adequate.

Findings from our call for evidence echo widespread concern about public investment and policy coherence.

Taken together, the findings suggest that many contributors believe adult education is expected to deliver increasingly wide-ranging outcomes without a sufficiently coherent policy framework or sustainable funding base.

Findings in full

Our evidence highlights recurrent themes in relation to adult education systems and policy. We heard repeatedly about **system, funding and policy barriers**, about the need for **a national vision for adult education** and about the **potential of reforms including the LLE.**

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System and policy barriers

Learner eligibility and participation

Our findings uncover evidence that providers frequently have to turn away learners due to eligibility rules set by the government and/or devolved authorities. Over half (56%) of providers to the call for evidence often or very often turn learners away due to inflexible funding rules or eligibility constraints. Inquiry contributors highlighted other reasons holding learners back from participating, including:

- childcare and travel costs
- digital exclusion
- mental health needs and trauma
- residency rules
- benefit conditionality
- lack of confidence or awareness.

Taken together, these eligibility and participation issues disproportionately affect those furthest from the labour market, one of the key groups that adult education is intended to engage, whilst denying employers a new talent pool to draw from.

Funding constraints

In identifying the extent to which different factors act as barriers in responding to skills shortages through adult education, adult skills funding was identified as the most significant; 83% of our call for evidence respondents rated it a major barrier. Funding was variously described as:

- insufficient to meet demand, particularly in high-cost technical subjects
- fragmented, with multiple overlapping funding pots and short-term spending cycles
- inflexible, tied to prescribed qualifications rather than skills needs
- unpredictable, making it difficult to invest in staff or facilities.
- Several providers said they have reached their ASF allocation limit and are turning potential learners away, despite seeing clear demand for training in industrial priority sectors such as manufacturing, construction and digital.

Across the adult learner focus groups carried out as part of the inquiry, we heard further evidence of significant and unmet demand for adult education. Participants frequently argued that adult learning opportunities should be maintained or expanded rather than reduced. Waiting lists, competitive enrolment processes and limited places on courses are common, which raise concerns about the availability of local courses and adult learning opportunities.

> **“The reason I’m having to interview for a place is because there’s a limited amount of places and a big list of people who want to do Level 2.” — Employed Level 1 learner**

Learners emphasised the importance of protecting and expanding provision to meet growing demand.

> **“I understand economic things are hard. They are trying to save costs. But reducing adult learning opportunities, I think, would be devastating. Because maybe someone before me would also want to have this opportunity... So please, I do understand it’s hard, but let them keep this going. It’s very important for us.” — GCSE English learner**

The inquiry evidence reveals concerns about potential learner drop-off after funded RQF Level 3 programmes, given that progression to Level 4 and above courses are reliant on advanced learner loans or the impending changes through the LLE, both of which rely heavily on individual financial commitment and are less visible to or understood by learners and employers. This creates the potential for significant drop-off in adult participation, often at the point that it is most needed for progression onto further study or into employment, echoing questions about how adult education should be funded.

Funding rule complexities and multi-year settlements

A clear message arising from the inquiry is that the future success of adult education depends on moving away from fragmented, short-term interventions towards a stable, coherent and sufficiently funded lifelong learning system.

Several contributors highlighted the contrast between the scale of the challenges facing the economy and the resources available to support workforce development, retraining and lifelong learning. Providers reported difficulties in planning strategically because funding is often delivered through short-term programmes with differing objectives and timescales. Short-term interventions can cause additional monitoring and compliance burdens, and the rigid qualification system prevents providers from responding quickly to changing needs.

Contributors consistently called for multi-year funding settlements that would allow providers to plan for the long-term, invest in staff and facilities, and build sustainable relationships with employers and communities. There was also strong support for simplifying funding streams and eligibility rules, enabling providers to respond more flexibly to local needs and changing labour market conditions. Many stressed that complexity excludes smaller providers.

> **“The current rulebook that we have that determines whether you’re funded or not is more than two hundred pages long.”**
> **— New City College**

A recurring theme is the need to rebuild participation among adults who have been lost from the system with contributors highlighting the long-term decline in participation. Overall, they advocated for a broader approach to lifelong learning that recognises progression, adaptability, confidence-building and lifelong participation in learning. We heard clearly that a simpler, more flexible, more stable system is needed; a system more clearly connected to wider national priorities and less attached to qualifications and narrowly defined employment outcomes.

Funding levels

Our evidence base was unequivocal in stating that adult education is critically important for economic growth, inclusion, health and community resilience, yet is severely underfunded after years of dramatic funding decline.

> **“The sector operates within a funding envelope that is around a third smaller in real terms than it was two decades ago.”**
> **—Luminate Education Group**

> **“Adult education funds... represents less than 1.6% of annual turnover. In 2013/14 it was 7.9%.” — Sparsholt College Hampshire**

Most respondents to the call for evidence considered the current level of public investment in adult education to be either slightly adequate (17%) or not at all adequate (67%) relative to the government’s ambitions.

Outside of England a similar picture is evident with funding declining or fragmented in most countries. One contributor described significant funding reductions in Wales, with a drop of 71% in funding allocations in the last decade. Of those giving evidence, only Austria bucked the trend with an increased budget for adult learning.

Contributors stressed that ambitions for growth, net zero, productivity and inclusion cannot be met without substantial reinvestment. Furthermore, funding should be sustainable, particularly for tailored learning, ESOL, and community learning which require stable investment to maintain reach and impact.

Funding fragmentation

As well as complexity, public funding for adult learning in England is fragmented and consists of programmes launched at different periods with changing names. The National Skills Fund promised in 2020 morphed into various programmes such as Free Courses for Jobs and Skills Bootcamps. The core adult budget changed over a decade from the Adult Skills Budget (ASB) to Adult Education Budget (AEB) and on to Adult Skills Fund (ASF) with government deciding in 2023 not to proceed with a Single Skills Fund (SSF). Devolution of adult skills responsibilities and budgets has the potential, in the long-term, to provide a mechanism for simplification but has been in progress since 2019 and also risks unhelpful boundaries which don't make sense to adult learners.

Some of these complexities are inevitable in public services but the complexity and the fragmentation make it hard to explain adult learning to those who might fund, support or enrol. If you don't understand a service, your instinct will probably be to defer a decision. Collectively more work needs to be done by everyone with an interest in developing adult learning to simplify, explain and improve the way that the funding and programmes work.

National vision, local implementation

Across all evidence sources, we heard the need for a coherent national lifelong learning strategy that aligns government departments invested in skills, simplifies funding and empowers local delivery.

The call for evidence revealed widespread concern that adult education lacks a clear home within the government. Respondents noted the increasing involvement of multiple departments, including DWP, DfE, Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (DBIST) and DHSC, but argue that policy leadership remains unclear. Similarly, several highlighted the absence of a long-term national vision.

This is echoed across the inquiry; contributors argued that adult education policy has become increasingly focused on short-term employment outcomes, while broader objectives such as personal development, social inclusion, health, citizenship and community cohesion have been deprioritised. They frequently called for a coherent long-term strategy that balances economic and social goals while providing greater certainty for learners, providers and employers.

> **"A sustainable lifelong learning system needs policy and funding frameworks that recognise learning as a continuum rather than a series of isolated interactions". — Libraries Connected**

> **“A long-term, joined-up strategy is needed to ensure adult education policy is aligned across government.” — Tameside College**

Contributors outside of England reinforced this. A senior policymaker from Ireland described a whole-government model that considers learners’ wider lives, including transport, childcare and social welfare support, rather than treating education as a standalone service.

> **“...we’re trying to work on a more systems approach across government... we are trying to make sure that the systems support the learners... There’s childcare available... through social welfare... we’re looking at them from their whole life perspective.” — SOLAS**

The evidence also reveals broad support for balancing national consistency with local flexibility. Contributors generally supported devolution where it enables provision to respond to local labour market needs, but stressed the importance of maintaining national entitlements and reducing postcode variations in access to learning. A contribution from Scotland highlighted the benefits of a national vision with local autonomy, giving broad parameters while allowing colleges to make their own decisions.

Reforms and the LLE

The inquiry heard mixed views about the potential impact of the LLE. Many respondents welcomed the principle of creating a more flexible lifelong learning system. However, they were concerned that the LLE is focused on learners seeking higher-level qualifications, and does nothing to support adults with low skills, low confidence or significant barriers to participation. Several contributors argued that those most in need of adult education are often starting well below Level 4 and may never reach the point where the LLE becomes relevant – and that regardless, closer focus needs to be given to the way the LLE would sit within a broader set of entitlements to adult education and training.

Inquiry contributors also questioned whether a loan-based approach would be effective for adult learners. A number instead pointed to the success of the former Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) scheme[54] in encouraging adults to take their first step back into learning. Whilst ILAs were not without challenges, one contributor described how effective they were in making adult learning feel accessible and achievable.

The evidence suggests that while respondents support greater flexibility and learner choice, many remain unconvinced that the LLE alone will reverse long-term declines in adult participation. Moreover, given its

[54] Learning and Skills Act 2000 (c. 21).

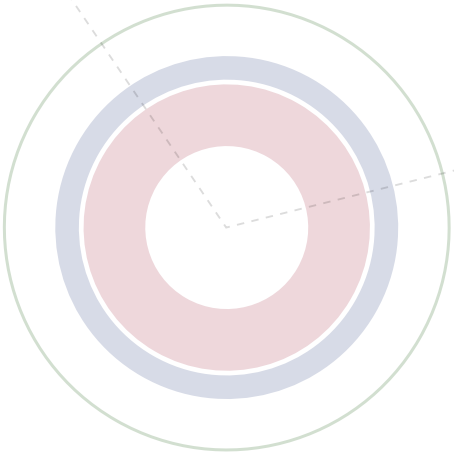
focus on higher-level provision, it will not address demand at lower levels, where this report demonstrates there is very acute need. The LLE is, in our view, a valuable and welcome intervention to support high-level re-training and up-skilling, but it should not be seen as a response to the broader challenges in access to adult education at lower levels, where demand is acute and learners typically suffering from greatest disadvantage.

The adult education opportunity

The evidence demonstrates that adult education is central to government ambitions for economic growth, productivity, workforce participation, social mobility and community resilience. However, contributors consistently argued that current funding levels, policy fragmentation and institutional complexity limit the system's ability to deliver these outcomes.

Contributors highlighted a lack of long-term strategic direction, complex funding arrangements and declining participation among adults who would benefit most from learning opportunities. Concerns were also raised about the risk that adult education becomes increasingly focused on short-term employment outcomes at the expense of broader lifelong learning objectives. They were clear that adult education should be viewed as a long-term investment in people, communities and economic resilience, rather than as a series of short-term interventions.

The inquiry found widespread support for a more coherent national strategy, backed by stable investment, simplified funding systems and a renewed commitment to lifelong learning. With the relocation of adult education policy to DWP, there is a clear opportunity to review the system now and to consider the balance between state and individual (including loan-based), funding of adult education.



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Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

Our inquiry gathered a tremendous breadth and depth of evidence about the power of adult education. We heard that it is not simply an economic or workforce intervention, but a public health, social mobility, and community resilience strategy, supporting individuals and communities to thrive amid complex societal challenges. Adult education delivers skills for life, work and place.

It is an untapped opportunity, lacking a national vision and suffering from complex restrictions and entitlements which undermine the ability of providers to support learners fully. It varies by geography, and there is insufficient clarity on the core entitlements adults should have regardless of postcode. It is also increasingly shaped by global megatrends such as AI.

With greater political recognition and understanding, and the right level of flexibility and support, adult education could realise its potential to deliver improved outcomes for national growth, community cohesion and societal health.

In England, the function of adult education as a universal public good has been overlooked by policymakers during decades of instability and underfunding. The traditional dual economic and social mandate of adult education has narrowed to a purpose linked largely to employment. And yet, despite this, the UK's economic inactivity rate is high at 21.8%.[55]

Our report argues that steps must be taken to enable adults, at all stages of life, to keep learning and to enter the labour market. Welfare and place-based barriers should be removed, alongside a rethink of the incentives and requirements for employers to invest more in training.

To deliver this, a cultural and policy shift is urgently needed. England must be emboldened to draw best practice from our partner nations, fund adult education more flexibly and track its long-term benefits better, even where this is complex. To help policymakers consider our evidence, we are proposing a series of recommendations and practical next steps.

[55] Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury, Department for Education, 2024. Get Britain Working White Paper.

Recommendations

These recommendations are for both national and local decision-makers. No recommendation can be delivered in isolation, and it is our firm belief that governments now, and in the future, will benefit from working in partnership with adult education stakeholders, including learners, through dialogue, co-design and testing of policy principles and practice.

A system with purpose and stability

1. Develop a vision for adult learning in England, based on national commitment with local power

A stronger, clearer national vision for adult learning can set the purpose, principles and public value of adult education across England, while empowering strategic authorities and local leaders to shape delivery around the needs of their communities. The vision would:

- position adult learning as essential to England's long-term social and economic health by articulating the public purpose of adult learning, the principles that should shape funding decisions, and the long-term outcomes England expects from its adult education system.
- provide a baseline offer that every adult in England can expect, regardless of postcode.
- become a framework for assessing plans and measuring impact.
- support mayors and MSAs to apply national good practice principles to local labour markets, communities and priorities.
- demonstrate adult learning's contribution to preventative health, community cohesion, green transition, productivity and inclusive growth.
- develop a clear articulation of the role adult learning plays in delivering priorities across many government departments, to ensure the opportunities it represents are utilised purposefully.

2. Build a coherent, long-term investment approach to adult learning

Every MSA should set out their investment plan to show how they will deliver the vision for adult learning. The investment plans would bring to life the vision and show how MSAs are using their full budgets to support learning including regeneration, employment support, health, housing, transport and economic development. Working on a multi-year funding model, it would aim to:

- provide purpose led funding where every funding stream has a clearly articulated role in supporting adult learners and the wider economy
- ensure stability and predictability so that providers and local leaders

have the multi year funding certainty needed to plan provision, invest in staff and respond to emerging skills needs

- see MSAs with single-settlements leading the way, by using their funding flexibilities to invest in adult education as a key driver of inclusive growth and a healthy, cohesive community
- remove complexity through simplified funding architecture with a clearer adult learning offer, fewer overlapping funding streams, and guidance that is easier for providers to navigate with competitive procurement processes used only where there are no other local options
- demonstrate transparency of outcomes with investment guided by robust, longitudinal data on learner progression, employment, wellbeing and community impact
- deliver local responsiveness with national guiding principles empowering mayors and MSAs to tailor investment to local labour markets and communities

A learning guarantee for citizens

3. Introduce an England wide minimum adult learning offer

Every adult should have a strengthened statutory entitlement to access education and training throughout their life. DWP should create an adult learning offer for those living in England, which sets out:

- the guarantee of a funded minimum offer from entry level to Level 3, ensuring that an adult's access to essential learning is not determined by their postcode, is portable and can be fulfilled
- delivery expectations defining the purpose, funding parameters and expected learner outcomes which MSAs would use as the basis for their investment plans and allow providers and local partners to plan provision coherently and align delivery with local and national priorities

4. Remove barriers so adults can afford and access the learning they need

It is not enough to fund the delivery costs to meet the new national guarantee, because learners also incur costs which need to be supported. The guarantee therefore would need a new national approach to ensure adults can participate in learning and training without being constrained by affordability or by conditionality rule within the welfare and benefits system. This could be achieved by:

- conducting a cross government review to clarify welfare rules for learners

- providing national guidance on how Universal Credit and other welfare benefits interact with learning and training, ensuring adults can undertake education without risking financial instability
- providing a simple, grant based national offer, locally administered, with straightforward eligibility, that helps adults afford the skills they need
- introducing a grant that would apply across both devolved and non devolved areas and extend affordability support to learners below Level 4, mirroring the welcome inclusion of maintenance funds in the forthcoming LLE

A partnership approach

5. Audit employer incentives and barriers to engaging in adult learning and skills

Employers are pivotal partners in enabling and galvanising demand for adult education and training, but face a number of barriers to doing so. Work should be undertaken to understand and address the barriers that employers face here, so that they can be confident in their role, and the opportunities this presents for their growth and their employees development. We recommend that:

- DBIST and Skills England should lead a cross government review of employer incentives including tax credits, levy flexibilities and others related to adult learning and training, assessing how effectively they support employer participation and where reforms could unlock greater engagement.
    - This DBIST-Skills England led review should include work to map employer barriers through an audit of the practical, financial and regulatory barriers that prevent employers from investing in adult learning, including administrative complexity, limited awareness of programmes, and misalignment between training offers and business needs.
- The government should establish a joint-working approach between DWP, DBIST, Skills England and other relevant agencies to ensure employer incentives, workforce programmes and skills policies are aligned and mutually reinforcing.
    - This joint working approach should work to ensure that employer facing incentives support both national skills priorities and local labour market needs, enabling MSAs and non devolved areas to work with employers and providers on shared training goals.

6. DWP to review opportunities to help adults get the skills they need by strengthening careers information, advice and guidance

Adult careers guidance should be clearer, more accessible and

better aligned with employer needs. DWP should sponsor a unified, adult focused approach which:

- provides a coherent, employer aligned adult careers guidance offer synchronised with the integration of the National Careers Service with Jobcentre Plus ensuring advice to citizens is structured, accessible and consistent across England.
- ensure adults can access impartial careers advice, regardless of postcode, through clearer national pathways, stronger provider involvement and devolved employment services that respond to individual needs.

7. Increase flexibility in adult qualifications and the ASF

A more flexible approach is needed to ensure adults are not left behind in a system misaligned to the skills needs of adults. DWP, working closely with DfE and the adult education sector, should:

- lead reforms that recognise the value of adult tailored learning and its social outcomes, not only qualification size or employment metrics
- develop greater flexibility in qualification design, funding and delivery to allow adults with historic or incomplete qualifications to have their skills recognised swiftly and meaningfully
- explore options to enable local anchor institutions to award qualifications at entry level, Levels 1 and 2, strengthening local responsiveness and widening access

8. Target support for adults navigating skills transitions and AI driven labour market change

A more purposeful national approach is needed to support adults who are most at risk of being displaced or left behind as AI reshapes job roles and skills requirements. Building on emerging work from Skills England and DBIST, the government should introduce targeted measures that help adults to retrain, update their skills rapidly and access clear guidance on how AI will affect their work by:

- establishing dedicated, well funded retraining pathways for mid-career adults with modular, rapid update training that enables workers to adapt quickly to changing roles and technologies.
- developing clear, accessible national guidance on AI related skills for adults, covering both skills development and role displacement, and ensuring alignment with employer needs.
- using Skills England's existing labour market analysis to identify adults and sectors most vulnerable to AI driven disruption and prioritise tailored support for these groups.

- promoting modular, stackable and short course provision that allows adults to update skills quickly and continuously, complementing the LLE and extending similar opportunities below Level 4.
- A driver for inclusion, resilience and community wellbeing

9. Embed adult learning within local and national preventative health strategies

Adult education should be formally recognised as a core contributor to preventative health, yet it is currently unevenly integrated into national and local public health approaches. To ensure proper integration:

- The DHSC should update its guidance to health and wellbeing boards to recommend that colleges and other adult learning providers are engaged as strategic partners, reflecting their deep reach into communities and their role in improving public health outcomes.
- National and local health strategies should ensure that colleges, community learning providers and other adult education institutions are consistently included in local preventative health interventions, recognising their impact on wellbeing, inclusion and community resilience.

10. Strengthen ESOL as a foundation for community cohesion and inclusion

Adult ESOL provision is central to community cohesion, enabling learners to participate fully in local life, access services, progress into work and build connections across diverse communities. A clearer national commitment is needed to ensure ESOL is consistently funded, locally coordinated and recognised as a core part of England's integration and wellbeing agenda, requiring:

- ESOL as an integral part of the new national vision for adult education, essential to community cohesion, integration and access to employment, with clear expectations for local coordination and provider involvement
- protected funding for local delivery, improving and stabilising ESOL funding so colleges and community providers can offer flexible, accessible provision that meets local needs and supports new learners to participate confidently in their communities.

11. Strengthen prison education to improve outcomes and reduce re-offending

The scale of cuts to the value of prison education contracts is striking and stands in tension with ambitions to improve outcomes for ex-offenders and reduce pressures on the criminal justice system. The inquiry recommends:

- moving oversight for prison education to DWP to help ensure it aligns with wider adult learning and employment approaches
- reviewing funding levels as a priority to improve employment outcomes for ex-offenders and reduce re-offending rates

A robust evidence base

12. Establish a framework to evidence the social and economic impact of adult learning

Throughout the inquiry, we heard time and again that the benefits of adult learning were not sufficiently visible. The wide range of impacts, across multiple policy priorities means that the evidence of benefits is widespread but not deeply recognised. A stronger evidence base is needed to demonstrate how adult learning contributes to wider social and economic outcomes across the UK. Current data captures mainly the qualification outputs, but does not adequately measure the positive contributions to employment, health, loneliness, families or civic participation, despite these benefits being well known by providers and adult learning stakeholders.

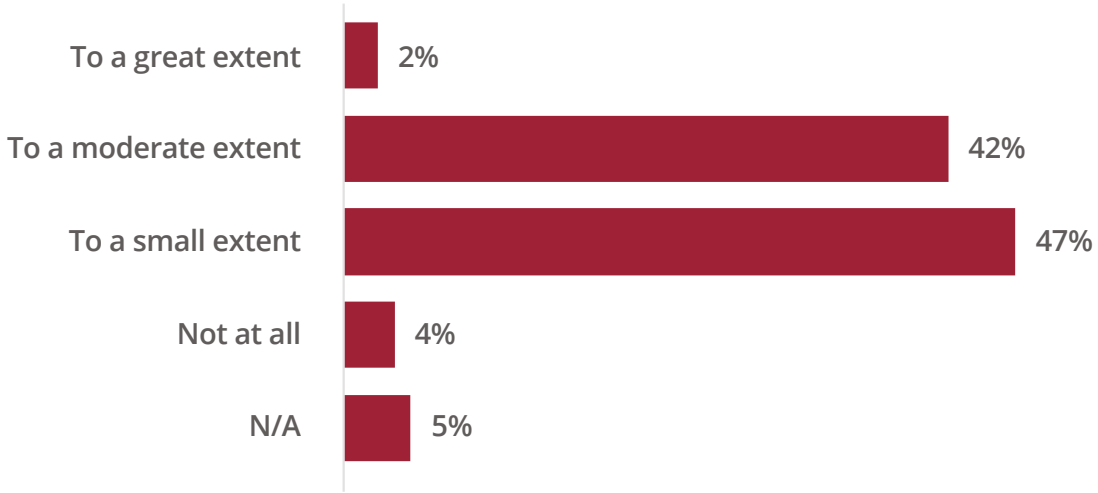
The AoC in collaboration with key sector bodies and government departments should:

- work with sector partners and government at all levels, and lead the creation of a nationally-developed, locally-relevant framework that evidences the full social, civic and economic impact of adult learning
- propose methods to establish and improve, long-term government data collection to measure how adult learning contributes to health savings, reduced loneliness, lower welfare dependency, increased civic

Appendix – call for evidence quantitative summary

Call for evidence respondents were asked how far the adult education system, in its current form, is able to adequately respond to and meet the skills needs of the economy. The findings point to a system seen as only partially responsive; only 2% said it meets the needs to a great extent, with a further 42% reporting a moderate extent (see Figure 1). Around half (51%) said it does so only to a small extent or not at all, suggesting that perceived capacity to respond to economic skills needs is limited rather than absent.

Figure 2: Extent to which the adult education system, in its current form, is able to adequately respond to and meet the skills needs of the economy



Base size: 85 respondents.

Respondents were then asked the extent to which different factors act as barriers in responding to skills shortages through adult education. Funding levels were revealed as the most significant constraint (see Figure 2), with an overwhelming majority reporting a major (83%) or moderate barrier (12%).

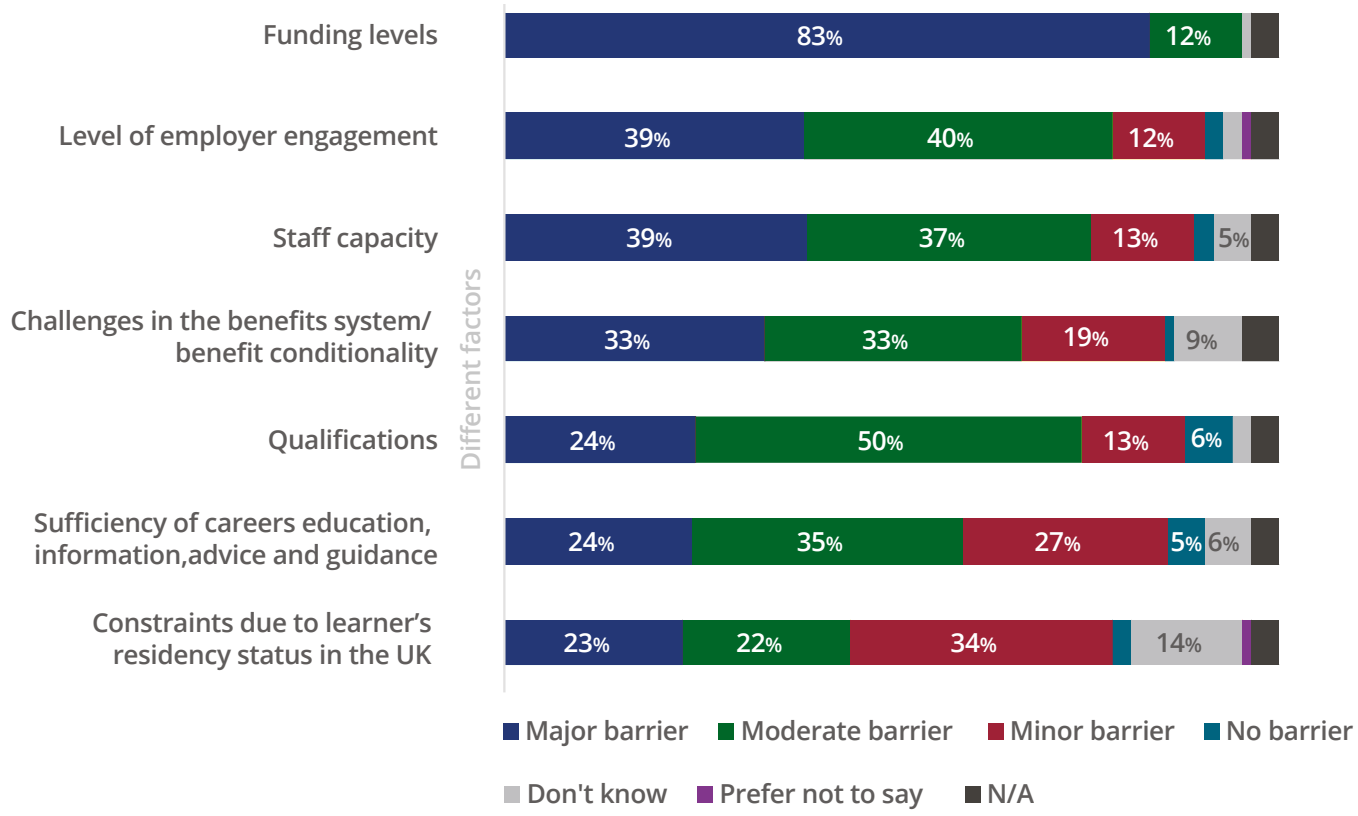
Other barriers were also widely recognised. Employer engagement was seen as a major or moderate barrier by 79% of respondents, with a further 12% describing it as a minor barrier and 2% saying it was not a barrier. Staff capacity followed a similar pattern, with 76% identifying it as a major or moderate barrier, 13% as a minor barrier and 2% as no barrier.

Challenges linked to the benefits system and benefit conditionality were less consistently rated as severe than other barriers, but were still identified by a substantial minority. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) described these issues as a major or moderate barrier, while 19% saw them as a minor barrier and just 1% said they were not a barrier.

Qualifications sat in the middle of the barrier profile; half of respondents (50%) identified them as a moderate barrier, while almost a quarter (24%) saw them as a major barrier, suggesting that qualifications are not viewed as the single strongest constraint but are nevertheless a substantial issue for many respondents. CEIAG was also a common concern, with 59% describing it as a major or moderate barrier, 27% as a minor barrier and 5% as no barrier.

Constraints linked to learners' residency status were more mixed, where 45% of respondents saw them as a major or moderate barrier, 34% as a minor barrier and 2% as no barrier.

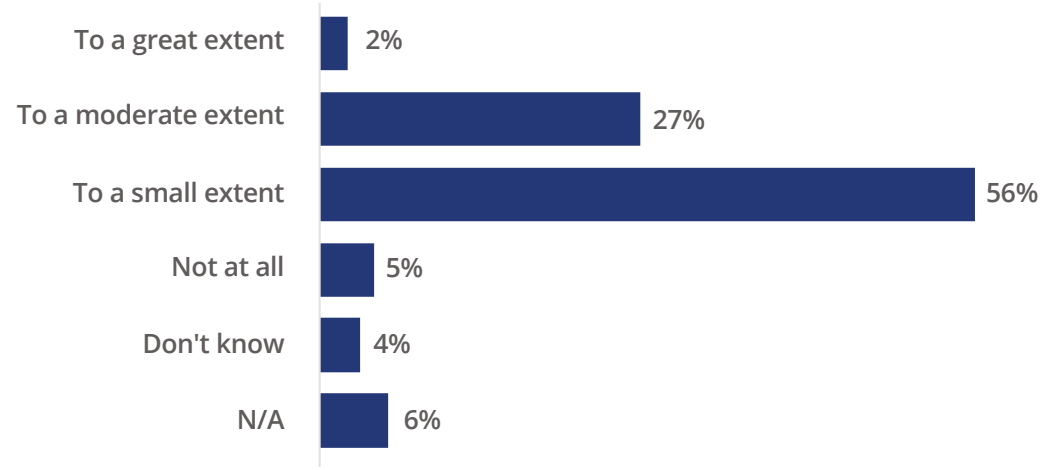
Figure 3:Extent to which different factors act as barriers in responding to skills shortages through adult education



Base size: 83 respondents.

Adult education is not widely seen as being used sufficiently to support major workforce transitions such as net zero, digitalisation, AI and an ageing workforce. Only 2% said it is being utilised to a great extent, while 27% said to a moderate extent. Most respondents instead feel it's used to a small extent (56%), and a further 5% said it is not being used sufficiently at all.

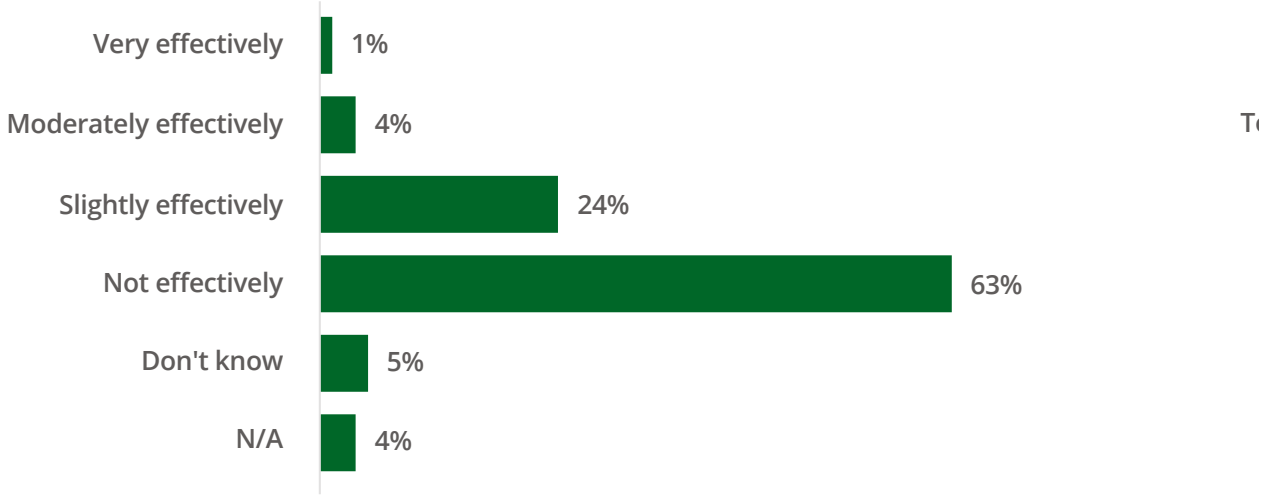
Figure 4: Extend to which adult education is being utilised sufficiently to address workforce transitions (for example net zero, digitalisation, AI, ageing workforce)



Base size: 84 respondents.

The current system is viewed as ineffectively incentivising employers to co-invest in adult skills (see Figure 4). Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) said it is not effective, while a further 24% described it as only slightly effective. Just 5% rated the system as moderately or very effective.

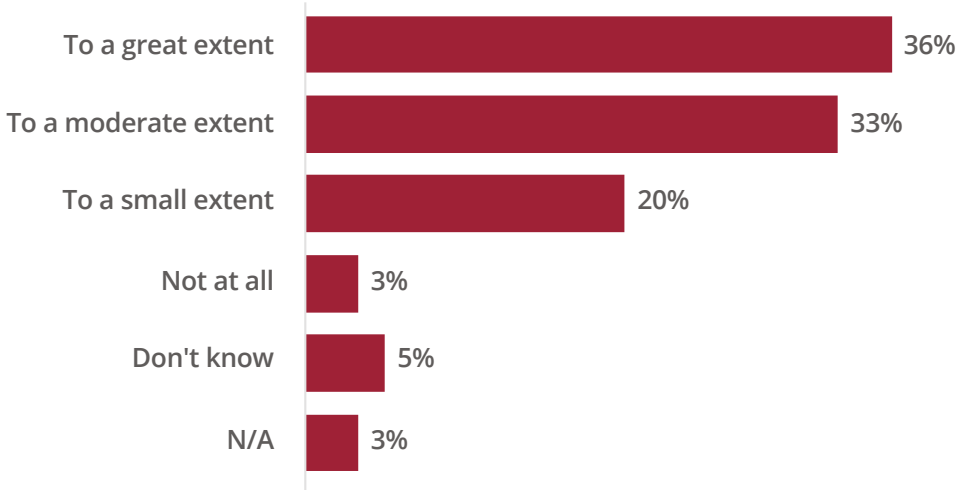
Figure 5: How effectively the current system incentivises employers to co-invest in adult skills



Base size: 84 respondents.

Qualification delivery requirements, including prescribed frameworks and funding eligibility rules, are widely viewed as limiting providers' ability to design provision around employer needs (see Figure 5). Almost seven in ten respondents (69%) reported that these requirements limit flexibility to a great or moderate extent, while 20% said they do so to a small extent. Only 3% said they do not limit tailored provision at all.

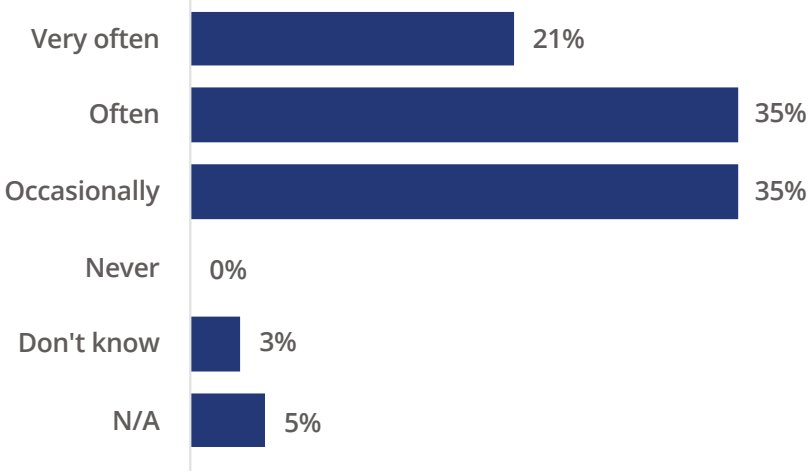
Figure 6: Extend to which qualification delivery requirements (e.g. prescribed frameworks, funding eligibility) limit ability to design provision tailored to employer needs



Base size: 61 respondents.

Funding and eligibility constraints also appear to have direct consequences for learner access (see Figure 6). More than half of providers (56%) said they often or very often have to turn potential adult learners away because of these constraints, while a further 35% said this happens occasionally. The issue is not confined to a small subset of providers, but rather most report at least some direct impact on prospective learners.

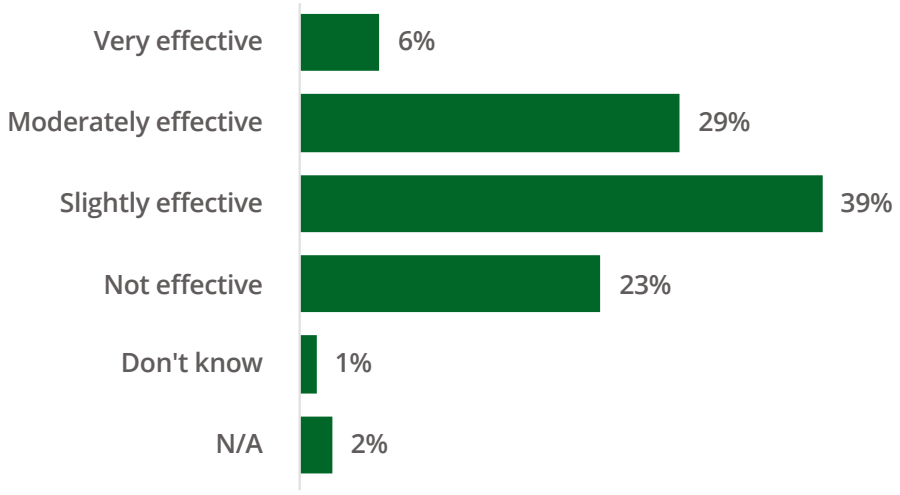
Figure 7: Frequency respondents are required to turn away potential adult learners due to funding or eligibility constraints



Base size: 62 respondents.

Respondents were asked how effectively the adult education system engages people who are furthest from the labour market. Views were mixed, where almost two-thirds described the system as very or moderately effective (35%), and a further 39% as slightly effective, and almost one-quarter (23%) said it is not effective (see Figure 7).

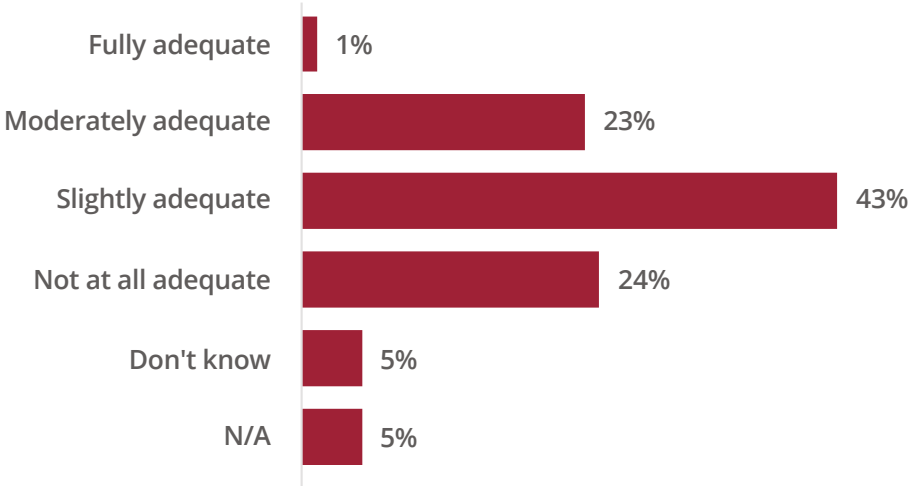
Figure 8: Extent to which the adult education system in its current form is able to adequately engage people who are furthest from the labour market



Base size: 84 respondents.

Learner support funding mechanisms, including advanced learner loans and learner support funds, are generally viewed as insufficient for learners facing additional barriers to participation (see Figure 8). Only 1% described these mechanisms as fully adequate, and 23% as moderately adequate. More than two-thirds rated them as only slightly adequate (43%) or not at all adequate (24%), pointing to a perceived support gap.

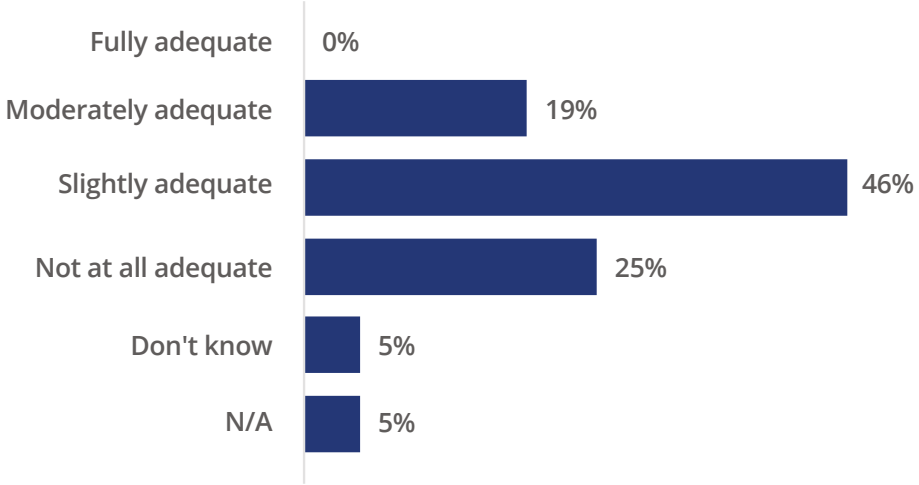
Figure 9: Extent to which student support funding mechanisms (for example, advanced learner loans, learner support funds etc.) adequately support learners facing additional barriers to participation



Base size: 84 respondents.

Views on how far the welfare system supports people out of work to upskill and retrain were similarly limited (see Figure 9). Although 65% described it as moderately or slightly adequate in supporting this demographic, no respondents said it is fully adequate, while one-quarter (25%) said it is not at all adequate.

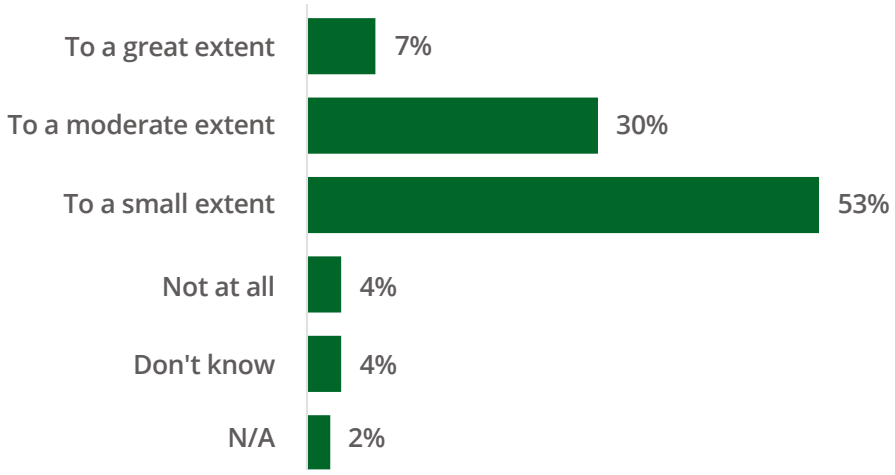
Figure 10: Extent to which the welfare system adequately supports people out of work to be able to upskill and retrain



Base size: 84 respondents.

Respondents were asked the extent to which adult education is≈recognised and utilised locally by stakeholders across education, community organisations, health, social services and local government as a preventative or early-intervention tool for health and wellbeing. Over four-fifths of respondents (83%) said it is recognised to a small or moderate extent, with only 7% saying to a great extent and 4% notxat all (see Figure 10).

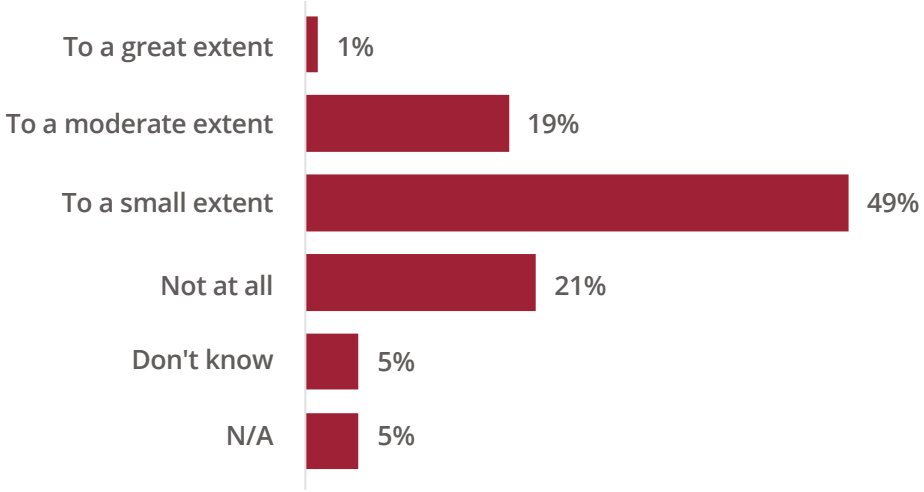
Figure 11: Extent to which adult education is recognised and utilised locally by stake-holders across education, community organisations, health, social services and local government as a preventative or early-intervention tool for health and wellbeing



Base size: 83 respondents.

Current funding mechanisms are not seen as strongly recognising, enabling or encouraging outcomes beyond qualifications, such as health and wellbeing or community resilience (see Figure 11). Seven in ten respondents said these outcomes are recognised only to a small extent (49%) or not at all (21%). A further 19% said they are recognised to a moderate extent, while just 1% feel they are to a great extent.

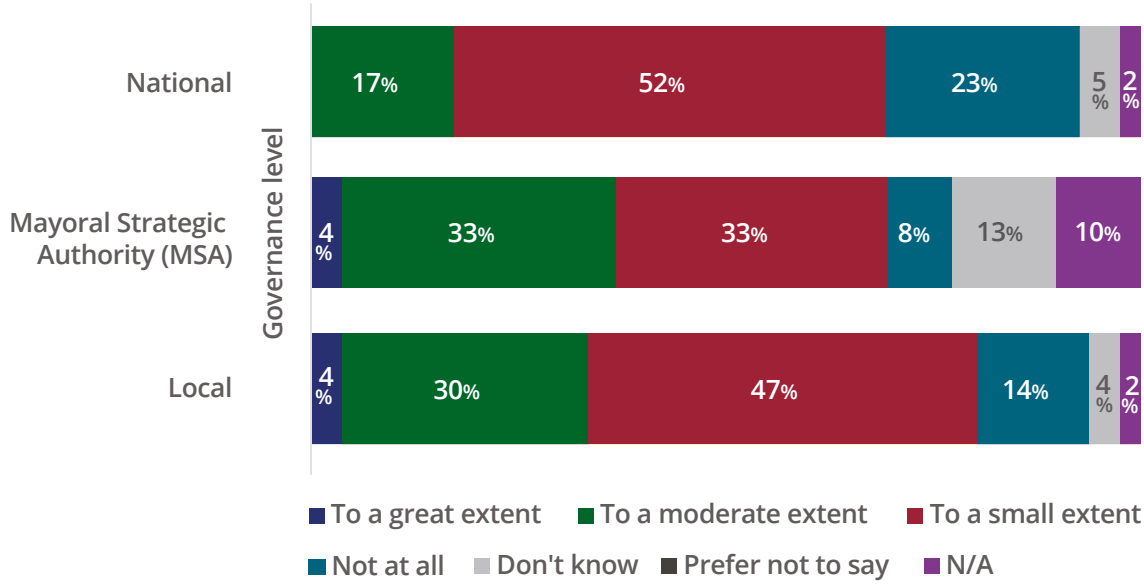
Figure 12: Extent to which current funding mechanisms recognise, enable or encourage outcomes beyond qualifications (e.g. health and wellbeing, community resilience)



Base size: 81 respondents.

Respondents were also asked how far the wider social value of adult education, such as savings for the health service or community resilience, is reflected in policymaking at national, Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) and local levels. Three-quarters of respondents (75%) said wider social value is reflected only to a small extent or not at all at national level, 17% said it is reflected to a moderate extent, and none said to a great extent (see Figure 12). Local policymaking was viewed somewhat more positively, with 61% selecting small extent or not at all, 30% moderate extent and 4% great extent. Regarding MSA-level policymaking, 37% said social value is reflected to a great or moderate extent, compared with 41% who said small extent or not at all.

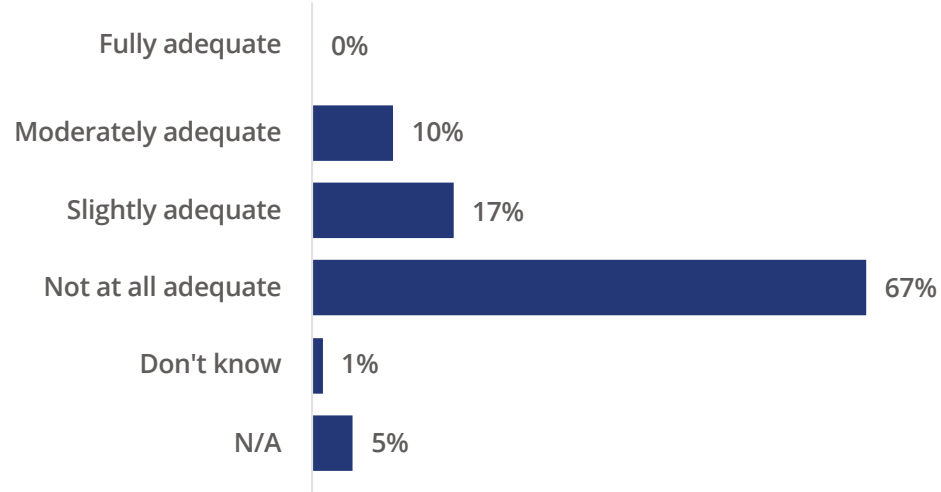
Figure 13: Extent to which the wider social value of adult education (e.g. savings for the health service, community resilience) is reflected in policymaking



Base size: 81 respondents.

Most respondents considered the current level of public investment in adult education inadequate relative to national policy ambitions. Over two-thirds (67%) rated investment as not at all adequate, and a further 17% as only slightly adequate. Only 10% said it is moderately adequate, while no respondents described it as fully adequate, indicating a perceived mismatch between national ambitions for adult education and the level of investment available to deliver them.

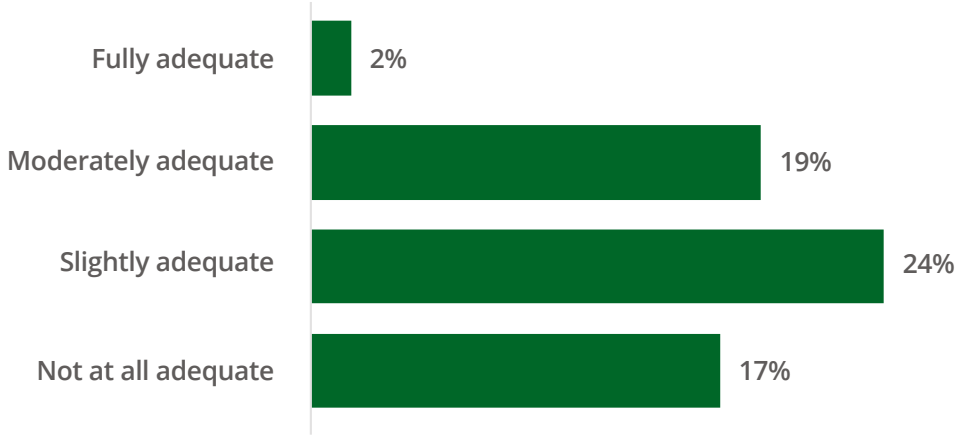
Figure 14: Adequacy of the current level of public investment in adult education relative to the government's national policy ambitions



Base size: 82 respondents.

Among providers operating in MSA areas, views on public investment were mixed. Around one-fifth (21%) said investment is fully or moderately adequate relative to MSA policy ambitions, while around two-fifths (41%) rated it as only slightly adequate or not at all adequate.

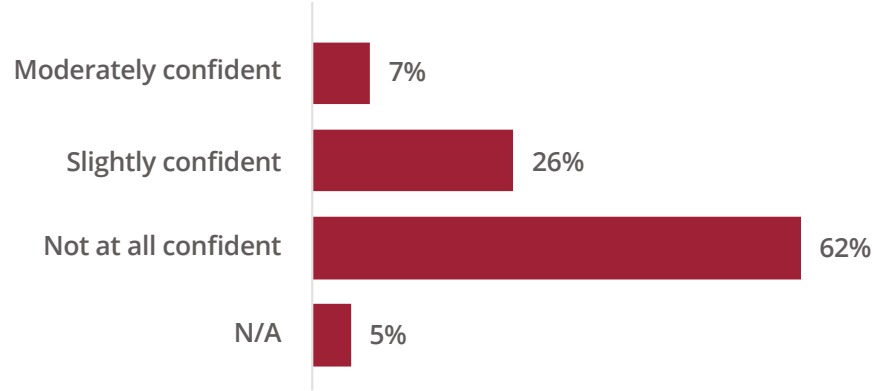
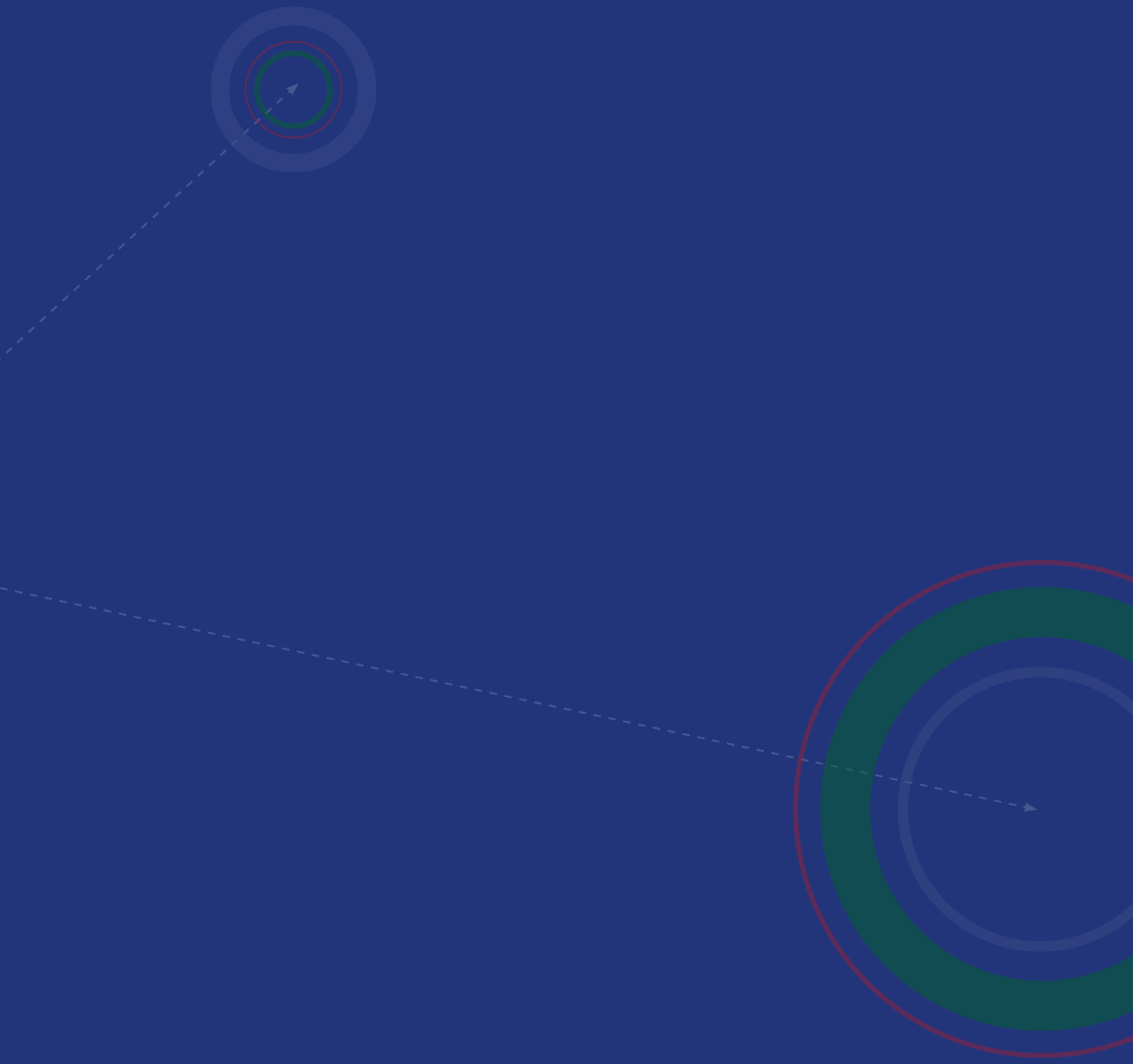
Figure 15: Adequacy of the current level of public investment in adult education relative to the MSA's policy ambitions, among providers in a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)



Base size: 36 respondents.

Confidence in the coherence of adult education policy across government departments, and sufficient alignment with wider government priorities (including economic growth, health, and net zero), is particularly low. More than three in five respondents (62%) were not at all confident, and a further 26% were only slightly confident. Just 7% were moderately confident, while no respondents were very confident.

Figure 16: Level of confidence that that adult education policy is coherent across government departments and sufficiently aligned with wider government priorities (e.g. economic growth, health, net zero)?



Base size: 82 respondents.