

Tackling Digital Exclusion and Literacy in the District – response from the Head of Service (HCC) Step2Skills (Adult Care Services) to the questions posed:

The following information is extracted from research commissioned by Step2Skills in the summer 2022 and carried out by the Learning and Work Institute (LW&I).

- ***what statistics / demographics are available which explain how this affects the District and Hertfordshire residents'?***

The OECD's adult skills survey showed that around one in four working-age adults in England had low literacy and/or numeracy. Research shows that levels of illiteracy and innumeracy have increased in England over the past two decades, which is showing an opposite trend to other OECD countries except the USA.

The results in Hertfordshire County Council are consistent with the overall national picture with around 169,517 (22.9%) people having low essential skills. Of these, 89% (150,502) are aged 25-64, with 26% (39,298) of these out of work. Some 11% (19,015) are 16-24, with 79% (14,944) of these being qualified to level 2 or below.

In Hertfordshire, Stevenage (25.6%) and Hertsmere (24.1%) have the highest proportion of people with low essential skills, while North Hertfordshire (22.4%) and St Albans (22.5%) have the lowest. East Herts is slightly above average with 23.2% (21,586 residents). Note that the LW&I's data refers to 'essential skills' as opposed to literacy and numeracy because more detailed information at local level is not available. However, it is a known fact in the sector that most people with low essential skills are likely to struggle with both literacy and numeracy, and often with digital skills too.

A further breakdown at ward level has been made available to us which shows that the highest proportion of people with low essential skills in East Herts are found in Much Hadham with 27.6% (483), Hertford Heath with 27.1% (551), Hunsdon 26% (465) as well as Hertford Sele with 26.3% and 921 individuals. The lowest proportion can be found in Ware Chadwell with 20.5% (414), Puckeridge with 21.9% (370) and Stanstead Abbots with 21.7% (443). It is also worth noting that the number of residents with low skills in the following wards is quite high: Hertford Castle with 22.1% (1255), Hertford Bengeo with 22.4% (1044).

From a different research, it has been estimated by the ONS and the Department for Education that 49% of the working age population have maths/numeracy skills below level 2. If extrapolated based on the last census, this means around 370,000 Herts residents aged 16-64 have low numeracy skills – which corresponds to around 46,000 in East Herts.

From Herts Insights and the last census, it is also worth noting that only 2.7% of East Herts district households have no one with English as a first language (which is lower than the Herts average with 4.3%).

- **Are there any particular social or cultural groups are affected by literacy issues e.g. gender, ethnicity?**
data is not available at district/ward level. However, it is known that :-
- literacy/numeracy problems tend to be a 'generational problem' i.e. if parents do not value literacy/numeracy and do not encourage children to value those skills, children are more likely to have lower education attainment at school and this will often translate into poor literacy/numeracy skills.

The DfE has been reporting for a number of years that boys' attainment, particularly White British, are lower than girls' attainment. Low SATs and GCSE attainment is often associated with low interest and/or poor attendance in education, but also in low levels of literacy. Those young people who have come through the education system with low levels of attainments are often now parents of a new generation of children.

- Low levels of essential skills (literacy/numeracy/digital) often correlate with high levels of deprivation. It is true that East Herts is really low on the Multiple Index of Deprivation. However, some wards should still be targeted for literacy/numeracy tuition, for example Hertford Sele.
- From Step2Skills' experience, unemployed women aged 20-40 with younger children and who live in more deprived areas are more likely to have low/no literacy/numeracy/digital skills.
- Over 50% of adults in UK prisons are considered functionally illiterate, having a major impact on rehabilitation and recidivism. Data published by the Ministry of Justice claims that 57% of adults in prison in the UK have a reading level below that of an average 11 year old. Therefore offenders, ex-offenders, people with drugs/alcohol addictions and the homeless or those at risk of homelessness should remain one of our key targets.
- It is estimated that 10% of the population is likely to show dyslexic tendencies – which means that around 9,400 working age residents in East Herts may have struggled and still struggle with literacy due to diagnosed or undiagnosed dyslexia.
- Literacy difficulties should not be confused with being unable to speak or read or write in English. However, it is true that people with limited English skills struggle in similar way to access information, secure jobs, etc. Dedicated provision for people whose English is not their first language (ESOL) is available in Herts. Those learners with good literacy skills in their own language are more likely to pick up English quicker than those with low level of education from their home country.
- People on low paid jobs, insecure jobs or unemployed are more likely to have lower literacy/numeracy skills
- Most adults with limited literacy skills do not engage easily with education, and certainly not with literacy or numeracy programmes. Embarrassment for not being able to read once an adult often compounds the problem of not being able to read the information made available to them.
- People with diagnosed learning difficulties are more likely to struggle with literacy than those without.

- ***Where can those struggling get help and how this can be provided?***

[Step2Skills](#) and our delivery partners have been promoting literacy, numeracy and digital skills programmes across Hertfordshire for more than a decade under the banner of Adult Community Learning. Though some programmes may not appear to be about literacy (e.g. crochet lessons, mindfulness), basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills are embedded in all Step2Skills adult community learning intervention funded by the DfE for Education. Some programmes are aimed specifically at parents/grandparents/carers to support their child in English/maths on Key Stage 1. All adult community learning programmes also aim to raise aspirations and re-connect adults gradually with learning and they support and encourage them to take on dedicated English/maths qualifications up to level 2 for their own personal and career aims.

Some Step2Skills provision is delivered by the Step2Skills in house delivery team. The team delivers where there is a demand, which includes online delivery. In East Herts, engagement with residents has been challenging but adult community learning numbers have doubled since academic year 2020/21 from 85 learners to 156 in 2021/22 and 150 in 2022/23. Delivery has taken place in various venues over the years including Bengoe, Hertford Castle, Hertford Sele, Bishops Stortford All Saints. Other Step2Skills-funded provision is delivery by trusted education partners across the county.

Colleges also offer provision but it tends to be GCSEs, which is often unattractive for adult learners unless they need a GCSE English/maths to apply for a higher level course or an apprenticeship.

- **How does the County Council explain and using what medium, “How to get help” if literacy is an issue.**

Communication to residents about the help available if they have a literacy issue and which medium is used is via social media, leaflets, website, posters etc. Step2Skills use newsletters, posters in local venues (community centres, libraries, GPs, district councils etc), social media, mailing lists, leaflets and sending direct information to partners and those that wish to promote adult learning to their client groups. We rely on partners to work with their local community and the residents they serve to encourage or support residents to make contact with us. We ensure our written materials are presented in plain language and learners are directed to make an enquiry on the website or contact the office. Partnership is key to reach those target groups as they do not engage easily with services and certainly not with learning. Those residents are more likely to engage if they are introduced gently to learning – this is often achieved with the support of local charities, but also through collaboration with district councils (particularly housing teams), job centres, housing associations, schools, children centres etc.

- **What roles do schools play (if any) in explaining how, where and what help can be provided?**

Schools and children centres, as well as key staff district council staff members, play a huge role in encouraging and supporting adults with barriers to learning in considering a return to adult education. Parents are more likely to engage with learning literacy/numeracy if someone they trust (e.g. their child’s teacher, a dedicated worker in a children centre) encourages them to take part in learning. They are more likely also to take part if the provision is delivered on the schools’ premises (or venues that are really close to schools) and within school time (so parents can learn whilst children are at school). However, with the current budget restrictions in the public sector, the commitment from schools and children centres to engage parents in their own education journey has dwindled over the past years.

In addition to the more traditional adult education provision highlighted above, it is also worth mentioning that Step2Skills also offers employment support interventions to people with more complex and multiple barriers to employment – many of whom have literacy difficulties. The employment support intervention is based on a coaching model, i.e. not group education but individualised and person-centred support. This type of intervention includes where necessary support with literacy in the form of help with writing CVs, applying for jobs, referring people to other skills provision in the county, support with the benefit system etc. This type of support has been offered for a number of years with funding from the European Social Investment fund, funding which you may know is coming to an end in December 2023 and has been *in part* replaced by UK Shared Prosperity Fund Allocations given to Herts District Councils. Most Herts Districts, but not East Herts, agreed in autumn 2022 to work in partnership with the LEP and HCC/Step2Skills to continue to provide some of that intensive coaching intervention (roughly equates to ¼ of what we used to be able to provide with ESIF). This means that unfortunately, unless Step2Skills find new sources of funding in the future, we are unlikely to be able to automatically accept referrals for intensive coaching support for East Herts residents.

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