Overcoming Barriers to Adult Basic Skills in Sussex

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The policy context

The UK Government has committed to developing the literacy, numeracy and ESOL skills of 750,000 adults in England by 2004, through an investment of £1.5bn between 2000 and 2004. As part of the strategy, the Sussex Learning and Skills Council has made a commitment to improve the basic skills of 19,561 adults in the region during this period.

The research

The research objectives were to uncover the barriers to adult basic skills learning, consider the extent to which these barriers can be overcome and highlight elements of good practice that may further the participation of adults in basic skills learning.

The research methodology

The study draws on desk-based research, and a series of interviews and focus groups conducted with basic skills stakeholders, basic skills learners and non-learners, between October 2003 and March 2004.

Thirty interviews and eight focus groups were conducted as part of the research. Over 20 interviews were conducted with stakeholders responsible for planning, supporting and delivering adult basic skills at the 'strategic' and 'implementation' levels, while eight focus groups and eight interviews were conducted with adult learner and potential learners.

Areas in which the research was clustered

It was desirable to obtain a geographic spread that reflected the potential demand for basic skills courses, elements of demographic, geographic and economic interest, and the support of local education providers. The research was, therefore, clustered around four broad sub-regions: Hastings, Eastbourne and Newhaven, Brighton and Hove, and Chichester District/West Sussex Rural.

Employment sectors

A second dimension to the research design related specifically to barriers affecting employees and to issues surrounding workplace learning. The project identified four employment sectors in the region in which employees were engaged in basic skills learning: the refuse sector, railways, health care and social care. In three of the sectors it was possible to conduct focus groups with employees.

Understanding basic skills

Defining basic skills

The Moser report defines basic skills as:

> '… *the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general.*' (DfEE, 1999)

The definition recognises the functional importance of working within society and that these skills are not dichotomous (*ie* skills that are held or not held) but rather, they relate to a spectrum of abilities in a broad range of context.

Measuring basic skills

Difficulties with literacy and numeracy skills do not merely affect a small minority of the population. The International Adult Literacy Survey, concluded that at least half of those surveyed in the UK had literacy skills below what the OECD describes as '*a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society*'. This evidence supported the findings of the National Child Development Study, and has since been reconfirmed by the Skills for Life Survey. In terms of the Government's agenda to improve basic skills, the surveys suggest that there are even greater needs with regards to numeracy, where around three-quarters of the adult population have been assessed as having below intermediate-level skills (*ie* below Level 2).

Motivations for learning

Why do people learn?

The research identified four sets of reasons for engagement in basic skills learning: career development, family, personal, and social development related reasons.

It was often the case that those learning for work or family based reasons were motivated by a 'life event', such as redundancy, a desire for promotion, divorce, or the death of a spouse. Among

parents, the desire to help their children with reading and writing proved a key motivator.

Opportunities and information

There are three main routes by which people were informed about learning opportunities: published advertising/promotion, formal intermediaries and informal intermediaries. One method was through advertising and publicity. However, word of mouth, encompassing promotion through intermediaries/brokers, and through more informal channels such as friends and family, appeared to be a more significant and persuasive method of engagement.

Dispositional barriers to learning

Recognition and relevance

Survey evidence suggests that there is a tendency for people to over-estimate their numeracy and literacy abilities, while many adults may not find any relevance in improving their basic skills. Problems of relevance may be a particular barrier against the take-up of intermediate (Level 2) numeracy, for those who have a good background in literacy.

Issues of stigma

Stigma may be a greater issue for literacy than numeracy; whilst people are often fairly comfortable with admitting that they are 'hopeless at maths' the situation is quite different when it comes to admitting difficulty with literacy. This is possibly because a higher proportion of the population has numeracy difficulties, and so admission does not place the adult in a minority. Indeed, in environments in which people were not expected to have basic skills (*eg* people employed in routine occupations or where there were a high number of non-native English speakers) stigma, although apparent, was slightly less of an issue.

Negative school experiences

Negative school experiences were key factors behind non-participation. Many interviewees who did not hold qualifications left school feeling that it had failed them, and they had failed within it. They did not think that college would be any different.

Negative perceptions

The interviews highlighted a range of other 'perceptions' based barriers to engagement:

- lack of confidence — fear about making the first step/fear of application process

- lack of support and understanding — fear that the course will be too difficult/that the learner will be left behind

- age concerns — being 'too old'/not wanting to be surrounded by youngsters

- belief that education 'wouldn't offer anything'.

Practical and resource related barriers

Time

People working in unskilled and/or semi-skilled occupations, who are the most likely to have basic skills needs, often work long hours, motivated by the need to secure a sufficient level of income. Added to this, a lack of autonomy, shift-working and working anti-social hours, all make it difficult for them to take on a regular learning activity. Among women who are not engaged in employment, time taken up with childcare commitments was often suggested as a barrier to participation.

Health and welfare

Health emerged from our fieldwork as a major barrier for learners and potential learners. A number of the interviewees were coping with mental health conditions, and some had physical disabilities and chronic illnesses that affected their mobility, energy and confidence levels.

Childcare

Childcare-needs present a significant barrier for people in accessing learning opportunities, encompassing:

- willingness to use childcare/issues of trust

- availability

- accessibility

- cost.

Among non-participants, the willingness to use childcare in the first place was the primary barrier. The other practical issues surrounding childcare were more commonly raised by those with some experience of seeking and using childcare facilities, including some learners.

Transport and travel

Further practical issues relate to transport and travel. However, these issues are more complex than whether transport is or is not available at a particular time and place. They also encompass:

- availability (access and frequency)
- reliability
- cost
- willingness to travel
- safety and other issues.

Transport difficulties exist in both rural and urban regions and often reflect individual demographic factors, such as age, disabilities and health problems. Among many non-learners, the willingness to travel was often a greater barrier to participation than their ability to travel.

Location and timing

Location and time barriers relate to where learning opportunities are offered, when learning takes place and the flexibility of delivery. Location is a barrier which frequently interacts with some of the other barriers described above. The general message that has come through from the research conducted is that there are no 'ideal' times and places to hold courses, as different demographic and economic groups prefer to take up learning at different times and in different places.

Information

The research suggests that potential learners are aware of where they may find support but without having made steps to find information. Often, individuals lack knowledge about the specific opportunities available to them and where to look for these, *eg* the types of courses available, when they are available and where. Consequently, their perceptions about what is on offer - and the reasons why what is on offer would not suit them - may often be based upon inaccurate perceptions and limited information.

Costs

Although basic skills courses are free to learners, those who have not been involved in any learning may not be aware of this. Indeed, some of the non-learners we spoke with believed that costs would be a barrier. The issue is partly one of a lack of information. However, cost can be an issue with regard to other barriers, such as childcare, or transport.

Provider-related barriers

In the course of the research, several respondents mentioned structural, or provider-level barriers, affecting the ability of providers to deliver their services.

Cost of development time

Although providers get core funding to deliver basic skills, this is not always the case for development work, and this may restrict the opportunity for providers to engage effectively with other institutions.

Strategic level development

At a strategic level, development time covers the time spent by providers working with other agencies in the region, or developing capacity internally. These activities may include the time or resources spent developing partnership arrangements with other providers, engaging with local agencies, developing internal policy, conducting local needs analysis and project development.

Intermediate level development

Providers may need to build close relationships with other intermediaries, such as community and voluntary groups or employing organisations. In the case of providing workplace learning, it may also include the process of building a relationship with the employing organisation, as well as course development-related activities.

Lead time

A problem that was raised, in particular among the 'non-provider' intermediaries, was the issue of 'lead-time'. Lead-time relates to the time period that is taken up between identifying learners' needs and finding an effective solution. Issues around lead time can relate to project development, co-ordinating actions with other intermediaries (*eg* workplace provisions) and developing direct links with potential learners (*ie* offering assessment or provisions at the right time, before the potential learner has lost interest).

Class sizes

The issue of minimum class sizes was also raised throughout the research and was a particularly common theme among those responsible for prompting workplace learning. In order for a learning offering to be cost effective for providers, there is a

minimum number of learners needed per class, which was reported as being around eight.

There are both logistical and dispositional issues to consider. The logistical issue is that it may be difficult to get eight people together at the same time. This is particularly apparent in the case of providing workplace training for small establishments, or in situations where people are working on differing and changing shifts. At a dispositional level, some learners or potential learners have very low levels of self-esteem and may require a substantial amount of confidence building, before they feel able to progress onto larger group-based basic skills learning.

Co-ordinating learner provisions

Several interviewees raised the suggestion that there is a need for greater co-ordination between the various agents responsible for identifying basic skills needs, or delivering basic skills provision. Among potential learners, the need to standardise the process of assessments was seen to be an issue, while - at a provision level - there is a need to ensure that resources are not consumed competing for the same market.

Resource and capacity

Some interviewees reported that qualified staff capacity and the scope for expansion are key issues. These concerns existed throughout the sector but were seen as particular issues with smaller private learning providers.

Other resource barriers, such as finding suitable classrooms, venues and computers during peak teaching times, can also restrict further expansion.

Funding

Among larger educational institutions, it is possible to secure core funding for basic skills work and find additional support for specific initiatives. These organisations have the resources to support the generation of new bids and the system works to their advantage. However, there are some situations in which the funding can promote less than efficient outcomes:

- Short-term funding can mean providers and intermediaries have to operate in an unstable 'short-term' environment.

- Engaging hard-to-reach learners is usually more resource intensive than engaging the more traditional ones.

- Inflexible funding requirements may lead to some provisions being fund driven, rather than learner driven.

Barriers to workplace learning

Many of the barriers that relate specifically to individual disposition will still exist in the workplace, but they are complemented by some additional ones.

Employers' recognition

The extent to which employers understand the concept of basic skills, or their workplace relevance, can often be a barrier. Several interviewees who had responsibility for promoting workplace basic skills commented that a lack of awareness among employers was a major barrier to promoting the basic skills agenda.

The lack of recognition and willingness to take action was seen as particularly strong among private companies, non-unionised companies, companies without a 'culture of learning' and small and medium sized enterprises.

Poor employment relations

In many workplaces, a poor history of labour relations and a lack of a learning culture will also act as barriers to successful engagement and delivery. Three related barriers were identified by our respondents:

- The belief that training employees will encourage them to leave for better jobs.
- The belief that basic skills is just a way of weeding out people for redundancy.
- A general lack of communication or mistrust between employers and employees.

Operational management

Resistance to promoting skills and development may exist at an operational level, even if support exists among senior management. The reasons were twofold. Firstly, operational (line) managers will often have a conflicting set of operational targets and objectives. Secondly, operational managers may themselves have basic skills needs and feel threatened or undermined by other staff pursuing such development.

Organising staff release

Issues of staff release are common to most organisations but were seen as being a particular problem among small and medium sized enterprises, and within occupations that were considered operationally critical. Staff shortages, and the inability to find staff to cover for those engaged in learning, were also seen as major

barriers to staff release. From the employer/employee representative perspective, there may be great reluctance among employees to engage in workplace learning outside work time, particularly if the provisions are closely aligned to employer needs, or if the employees have already undertaken a long work shift.

Logistics

The logistical requirements of workplace learning are likely to be considerably greater than those associated with providing learning in traditional further education settings. There may be specific problems concerning the teaching locations and timing.

Finding a suitable location

Many workplaces offer a less-than-ideal environment in which to hold teaching sessions. The problem of finding suitable space may be particularly acute in small enterprises or open plan offices. In other cases, rural settings or workplaces on industrial sites may be too far away from off-site facilities for teaching outside the workplace to be practical.

Coping with shifts

A second logistical issue that needs to be addressed in workplace learning is that of timing. As has been noted, people with very low-level basic skills needs may be engaged in employment activities that are characterised by long hours, variable shifts and/or working unsociable hours. In some sectors, such as the social care sector, low pay may also force employees to seek second jobs, making it difficult for providers to offer courses at the end of shifts.

Resources for learning representatives

Union learning representatives are potentially one of the best routes into identifying people who could benefit from basic skills learning but for unions to operate to their full potential, they require sufficient support from employers and other agencies, in terms of training, resources and time to perform their duties.

Workplace brokerage issues

The issue of brokering relationships between employment organisations and training providers was also seen as a process that faced a series of difficulties and constraints.

Gaining appropriate access

Intermediaries involved in developing workplace learning may find that negotiating access to the relevant managers within organisations can be difficult. This was seen as particularly being the case in companies that work at both a national and regional level.

Need for brokering skills

Brokering was seen as a marketing activity, which required a different skills set than that which may be held by people employed in the teaching profession.

Ensuring wider communication

It was suggested that there is a need for brokers, employee organisations and employers to share information, when developing programmes for workplace basic skills teaching.

Addressing the barriers

We conclude by summarising the proposals that have been made concerning how the barriers to basic skills learning can be addressed.

Intermediaries and outreach

Although still recognising the importance of 'traditionally' delivered provisions, many providers also highlighted the benefits of providing services outside those learning settings, or working in partnership with other organisations who have closer contact with potential learners. Providers in Sussex have been successful in developing relationships with community and voluntary groups (*eg* sports clubs and religious organisations), and in promoting workplace and family learning (*eg* through links with employment organisations, school and childcare groups). Interviewees report a number of advantages:

- There is an improved scope for the identification and recruitment of 'hard-to-reach' adults.
- The learners may feel more comfortable with more familiar, or less classroom like, settings.
- There may be a reduced need for additional resources (*eg* for the learner to travel).

Re-branding basic skills

The term 'basic skills' was considered to be a barrier to its promotion due to its negative connotations, association with

'simplicity' and stigma. In many cases, providers or intermediaries preferred to use alternative phrases to promote literacy and numeracy, such as 'essential skills', 'life skills', or 'survivor skills'.

Embedded basic skills

One of the most popular approaches to attracting new learners is to embed basic skills into other leisure or work-related courses. The idea behind this approach is often to deliver basic skills through stealth and to make it a part of a wider learning process. Embedded courses have a number of advantages:

- reduced stigma, as courses are 'sold' on other activities, such as computing, health and safety *etc.*
- allows for assessment through stealth
- widens interest, especially among hard-to-reach groups
- offers the opportunity to provide 'practical' outcomes, *eg* the development of other skills or knowledge
- encourages engagement with employers, as it can be made work specific.

The most common suggestion, which is also supported by the focus group and interview evidence among non-learners, is that offering people courses on Information Technology (*eg* using computers, email, the Internet and text messaging), can be a major hook into encouraging people to take up learning.

Flexible provisions

Flexibility in delivery was seen as crucial to attract hard-to-reach learners, particularly those who are working long hours or involved in shift work. Two forms of flexibility were roll-on/roll-off provisions (including open learning centres) and mixed group classes.

Roll-on/roll-off provisions

Roll-on/roll-off provisions enable learners to start whenever they are ready and progress at their own pace. They do not have to wait for courses to start or finish. This overcomes the barrier of lost motivation when potential learners are not able to start immediate learning when they present themselves and provides flexibility for their progression.

Mixed group learning

Mixed group learning, involving people with different specific basic skills profiles learning together, was also seen as a method of

increasing flexibility. Students engaged in mixed group learning were usually very positive about its benefits, and cited the ability to help each other out as being a key motivator.

Workshops and short courses

Short courses were seen as a way of enticing employers, employees and other potential students in learning, as they required minimal commitment and were less disruptive.

In many cases, the courses may not relate to basic skills at all. Instead, the intention is to bring learning to the forefront of people's attention, and to influence the negative perceptions that people who have been disengaged from learning have about educational institutions.

Learner support arrangements

As we have already noted, the costs (or perceived costs) associated with learning can be a barrier to participation. Even though basic skills courses are offered with full fee remission, the cost of transport, childcare, and books and equipment associated with participation may discourage some individuals from participation. It may, therefore, be necessary to ensure that basic skills students are a priority for learner support funding, and to ensure that potential learners are adequately informed of the financial support available.

The role of key motivators

A point that came across very strongly in many of the interviews was that the promotion of basic skills required more than simply the right structures to be in place. There are other factors that are less tangible but as important. Often, the biggest contributors to the success of some provisions were the enthusiasm and commitment of key individuals. Interviewees commented on the pivotal role of individual tutors, union representatives, learning co-ordinators and managers in developing provisions and encouraging participation.

Focusing on the individual

There were numerous examples of where the provider offered very individualised support to students, in order to tackle some of the dispositional barriers that these people may have faced. The level of individual support provided to learners, has often been the decisive factor in the take up of learning.

Promoting and marketing basic skills

The methods by which basic skills are promoted and marketed were seen as being of key importance in breaking down barriers. Issues that were raised in the interviews include:

- A need to promote greater basic skills awareness among the general public and intermediary organisations.

- The need to promote basic skills using methods and media accessible to non-learners.

- The need to take a proactive approach to recruitment, *eg* through working through intermediaries (community groups and workplace learning) and targeting key points in people's lives.

1. Background and Overview of Research

1.1 The policy context

In 1999, *A Fresh Start Improving Literacy and Numeracy* (the Moser report) highlighted the extent of the 'basic skills' challenge in England.

> *'It is staggering that over the years millions of children have been leaving school hardly able to read and write, and that today millions of adults have the same problems. Of course, one can argue about definitions, but the stark facts are all too clear. Roughly 20 per cent of adults – that is perhaps as many as seven million people – have more or less severe problems with basic skills, in particular with what is generally called 'functional literacy' and 'functional numeracy.'* (DfEE, 1999)

The report proposed a government strategy to address this problem, which prioritised the widening of participation among those who were seen as having the greatest need:

- unemployed people and benefit claimants
- prisoners and those supervised in the community
- public sector employees
- low-skilled people in employment
- other groups at risk of exclusion.

In numeric terms, the government aimed to increase the literacy, numeracy and ESOL skills of 750,000 adults in England by 2004, through an investment of £1.5bn between 2000 and 2004. The newly formed Local Learning and Skills Councils (with the assistance of the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit) were given the task of planning, funding, supporting and delivering these provisions.

1.2 Sussex Learning and Skills Council

The Sussex Learning and Skills Council's (LSC's) Local Strategy Plan (2002 to 2005) outlines the organisation's commitment to improve the basic skills of 19,561 adults in the region by 2004. The plan recognises the need for Sussex LSC to develop the region's

ability to deliver basic skills provisions through a number of actions:

- developing imaginative provision of opportunities for adults to improve their basic skills, often through other types of training programmes

- building the capacity of the provider network to deliver support to (basic skills) learners

- developing a regional strategy for the development and delivery of numeracy and literacy skills, working closely with key regional partners

- capturing and applying local best practice across the region

The plan has led to the creation of the Sussex Skills for Life Development Centre. The centre will have a strong outreach role, with 11 specialist workers, *eg* workplace, curriculum, quality. They will also work pan-Sussex, to build partnerships and promote innovation.

1.3 The research objectives

The research objective was to uncover the barriers to adult basic skills learning, consider the extent to which these barriers can be overcome, and highlight elements of good practice that may achieve these aims.

1.3.1 Barriers to adult basic skills learning

When considering the barriers to participating in adult basic skills learning, it was necessary to explore several key themes:

- motivations for participating on basic skills provisions

- social and cultural barriers to learning

- resource related barriers (*eg* lack of childcare provision, transport costs and availability, childcare support)

- time and place barriers (*ie* barriers related to the time and place in which courses are available)

- information constraints, including any potential deficiency in the availability of information, advice and guidance.

In addition, we were interested in whether different barriers affected the ability of different groups of adults, or adults in different localities, to take up basic skills courses.

1.3.2 Overcoming barriers and the nature of provision

The second element of the research examined the ways in which the nature of provision may affect people's ability and inclination

to engage with basic skills learning. We considered the key features of provisions that have proved to be successful in engaging adults, what had worked, why, and for whom. In addition to building an understanding of the barriers to adult participation in basic skills, the research also aimed to highlight elements of good practice and how current basic skills provisions could be developed further.

1.4 The research methodology

The results in this report are based on the conclusions drawn from desk-based research and a series of interviews and focus groups conducted with basic skills stakeholders, basic skills learners and non-learners, between October 2003 and March 2004.

1.4.1 Interviews with strategic and intermediate level respondents

Twenty-two interviews were conducted with stakeholders responsible for planning, supporting and delivering adult basic skills at the 'strategic' and 'implementation' levels. The purposes of these interviews were twofold. First, they aimed to build a picture of the barriers to basic skills learning in Sussex faced by adults, and other 'intermediate clients' such as employers, (on the demand-side). The interviews also aimed to discover the issues facing providers (on the supply-side). The second aim was to find basic skills providers and employment organisations who could facilitate the identification of adult basic skills learners and non-learners to participate in focus groups.

Strategic level interviews

- Strategic planning and support (including the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, Sussex LSC, Local Government representatives, SEEDA and the Basic Skills Agency).

Implementation level interviews

- Intermediaries supporting workplace basic skills regionally (Workplace Basic Skills Network and South East Regional TUC).

- Intermediaries supporting basic skills in the community (Jobcentre Plus and the Probation Service).

- Intermediaries supporting specific workplace initiatives (Union Learning Representatives and employers).

- Regional basic skills providers.

1.4.2 Interviews and focus groups with learners and non-learners

Working through intermediaries

This research is also based on the findings from eight focus groups with learners and non-learners, and eight interviews with non-learners. The learner based focus groups were carried out through the identification of basic skills learners currently supported through college and community based provisions in Sussex, while non-learners and some workplace learners were identified through employment organisations.

Sussex LSC Household Survey

A problem with identifying research participants through intermediaries is that they are likely to have a certain degree of homogeneity, reflecting the methods by which they were selected. For example, participants identified through employment organisations are all employees.

In consequence of this, interviewee participants were also identified through a recent Sussex LSC Household Survey. Participants from the earlier survey, who had suggested that they were prepared to take part in further research, were contacted and asked if they were prepared to take part in a 'sift survey'. The 'sift survey' captured information about their learning experiences, qualification levels and economic activities. As it is not possible to identify (with complete certainty) non-learners with basic skills levels below Level 2 without conducting an assessment, the sampling concentrated on respondents with educational or employment backgrounds that are highly correlated with below Level 2 literacy or numeracy attainment. Respondents who either had no qualifications, or qualifications up to level 1, and who did not match the demographic or economic profile of the focus group participants, were selected for further interviewing.

1.4.3 Areas in which the research was clustered

It was desirable to obtain a geographic spread that reflected the potential demand for basic skills courses, elements of demographic, geographic and economic interest, and the support of local education providers. The research was, therefore, clustered around four broad sub-regions. It should be stressed, however, that many of the stakeholders had remits that covered the whole of Sussex, and they were asked about their overall views of the region.

In Sussex, a large proportion of the areas recording high levels of deprivation (which have been shown to be associated with basic skills needs — see DfES, 2003) are on the coastal strip and, in particular, within East Sussex and Brighton and Hove (most notably East Brighton and Moulscoombe). Additionally, in order

to improve the probability of finding a heterogeneous group of respondents, facing potentially different economic, social and geographic constraints, we also included a rural area (Chichester District). The areas in which the research was concentrated and the characteristics of these areas are reported below.

Hastings

Hastings has five of the most deprived wards in England, while a lack of employment opportunity, geographic isolation and high unemployment were all seen as issues that may contribute to disaffection among younger adults with basic skills needs.

Eastbourne and Newhaven

Both Eastbourne and Newhaven contain pockets of very high deprivation. In terms of educational deprivation, two wards in Newhaven fall within the top ten per cent of the most deprived wards in England. Eastbourne also contains one of the highest concentrations of older and retired people in Sussex (18 per cent compared to a national average of 13.6 per cent), a demographic/economic group that contains a higher proportion of people with basic skills needs than the adult population in general.

Brighton and Hove

Brighton and Hove is the main conurbation in Sussex. In education terms, it has a relatively polarised population: a large number of graduates coupled with a large proportion of people with no or few qualifications. There are few 'high-level' jobs in the area and, consequently, competition for intermediate and low-skilled jobs is fierce. People with the lowest levels of qualification attainment are, therefore, often forced into 'marginal' jobs that may be characterised by long, unsociable hours and/or shift-working.

Chichester District/West Sussex Rural

Although Chichester District is a relatively wealthy area of Sussex, it also contains small pockets of deprivation and has issues related to rurality and isolation. Chichester District has a person per hectare ratio of 1.4, which compares to an average in England and Wales of 3.4 and is also the lowest within Sussex.

1.4.4 Employment sectors

A second dimension to the research design related specifically to workplace learning. The project identified four employment sectors in the region in which employees were engaged in basic skills learning: the refuse sector, railways, health care and social care. In three of the sectors it was possible to conduct focus groups with employees.

2. Understanding Basic Skills

In this section, we consider the definitions of basic skills, literacy and numeracy, and the prevalence of basic skills needs.

2.1 Defining basic skills

A difficulty experienced when assessing the scale of the basic skills needs is that different surveys use different typologies and different methods of measurement. As we have seen in the previous section, the Moser report suggested that one-in-five adults, as many as seven million, in England have poor levels of basic skills. The report adopted the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) definition:

> '… the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general.' (DfEE, 1999)

Another internationally recognised definition of literacy, and method of measurement, was adopted in the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS):

> 'The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community — to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.' (OECD, 2000)

Although the IALS definition just covers literacy and quantitative literacy, both definitions have common themes. First, they recognise the functional importance of working within society, and secondly, they recognise that these skills are not dichotomous (*ie* skills that are held or not held) but rather, they relate to a spectrum of abilities in a broad range of context. The IAL Survey, for example, distinguishes between:

- **Prose literacy —** the knowledge and skills required to understand and use information from texts, such as newspapers, brochures and instruction manuals.

- **Document literacy —** the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information in various formats, including application forms, timetables, maps, tables and charts.

- **Quantitative literacy —** the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations to numbers embedded in printed materials; for example, balancing a cheque book, calculating interest or figuring out a restaurant tip.

2.2 Measuring basic skills

As we have said, different surveys have used different definitions and different measures. Table 2.1 reports the findings of three national assessments of basic skills needs (Skills for Life Survey, 2003; the National Child Development Survey [NCDS], 1995, and the IAL Survey, 1996), against the Basic Skills Agency Standards.

It should be noted from Table 2.1 that difficulties with literacy and numeracy skills do not merely affect a small minority of the population. The Carey *et al.,* (1997) report on the IAL survey in the UK, concluded that at least half of those surveyed had skills below level 3 (equivalent to the National Qualification Framework Level 2). Level 3 is defined by OECD as, '*a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society*'. This evidence supported the findings of the National Child Development Study survey, tracking individuals born in 1970, and has since been reconfirmed by the Skills for Life Survey.

In terms of the Government's agenda to improve basic skills up to Level 2, there are even greater needs with regards to numeracy. Level 2 in numeracy was only reached by between less than a fifth (19 per cent) and just over a quarter (27 per cent) of the population, depending on the survey in question. Around half the population were assessed as being at Entry Level or below. Finally, the Skills for Life Survey found that 82 per cent of adults did not achieve Level 2 in either, or both, the literacy and numeracy assessments.

2.3 Breaking the stereotype

To some degree, the level of basic skills, particularly literacy skills, are closely aligned with people's individual, social and economic characteristics. Survey research, for example, suggests that those with the lowest levels of literacy attainment are more likely to be

Table 2.1: Basic skills reported in the SfL, IALS and the NCDS

Literacy						Numeracy					
SfL		**IALS**		**NCDS**		**SfL**		**IALS**		**NCDS**	
Below entry				Very low	6	Below entry		Level 1	23	Very low	23
Entry level	16	Level 1	22	Low	13	Entry level	47	Level 2	28	Low	25
Level 1	40	Level 2	30	Average	38	Level 1	28	Level 3	30	Average	24
Level 2	44	Level 3+	48	Good	43	Level 2	25	Level 4+	19	Good	27

Source: adapted from STF Research Paper 20 (reported in John Lord Associates, 2001) and DfES (2003)

older, economically inactive or unemployed, working in unskilled or routine employment, or living in an area of high social deprivation; they are less likely to have formal qualifications. However, the same survey evidence also suggests that the overall potential for improvement in these skills is more widespread. Several of our strategic and implementation level respondents were keen to highlight that the 'basic skills problem' is not a minority issue and, when considering the potential scope for the population to improve their basic skills, generalisations can be misleading.

> *'We need to realise that this is not a minority problem … These are not a small group of poor people with Dyslexia … it is not somebody else … '* (Strategic level interviewee)

A large number of people with basic skills needs do not conform to a fixed stereotype and may successfully have circumvented their difficulties over many years. As one interviewee explained:

> *'Surprisingly, all sorts of people have basic skills needs, some people who you would consider obvious and who would say to you that they're not very good with computers. But sometimes you have the odd one who has managed to get through the net for 25 years.'* (Intermediary level interviewee)

Similarly, qualifications were not necessarily seen by some interviewees as being a guarantee of a person's literacy or numeracy abilities.

> *'There are people at very high qualification levels, level 4 and 5 … people who go through the net of getting quite high qualifications without having the literacy, people who know how to use a spell-checker, or who get other people to type-up or check over their work … people are quite clever at getting away with it. There are people in good jobs, but who make frequent mistakes.'* (Intermediary)

> *'It's not just the people without qualifications who have difficulties, there is a large proportion of highly qualified people, graduate even, who I'd say have literacy issues … '* (Intermediary)

The problems associated with recognition are explored in more depth in Sections 4.1 and 7.1.

3. Motivations for Learning

'People have to make a journey between identifying that there is something they need to do and them actually doing something about it. … Among men that journey can often be longer than it is for women. A life event will often force people to evaluate their skills … it may be a work change, a divorce or a partner dying … at some point they recognise that they have do to something about it. … It is our job to cut down the journey time between the realisation and the actual.'
(Provider level interviewee)

This chapter looks at the reasons why people want to engage in learning, what got them interested in learning, and what they hoped to get out of it.

3.1 Why do people learn?

This research with learners and non-learners identified four sets of reasons for engagement in basic skills learning:

- career-related reasons

- family-based reasons, *eg* to help their children learn

- personal, and

- social development.

This chapter looks at each of these in turn.

3.2 Career-related reasons

Reasons for learning were often found to be closely associated with the respondent's current economic activity, or what they hoped their future career might be. Hence, people in employment, or those who had particular career-related aspirations often cited motivations which were specifically concerned with these. They included the desire for promotion or career progression, the ability to move into a new career, or improved chances generally in the labour market. Career-related motivations were, therefore, expressed by three distinct groups:

- those currently in work

- those who had been employed in the past but were not employed at present
- those who had never worked.

3.2.1 Those currently in work

People currently in work had a variety of reasons for engaging with basic skills learning, including wanting to do their current job more effectively, to increase their chances of promotion, and to increase their options for changing their job role:

> 'Because I got the (English and Maths) qualifications I went on to an assessment for a promotion and it helped me in the assessment. … I probably wouldn't have got where I am if it wasn't for doing those Maths and English courses.' (Learner)

> 'When you get older this job can start to take its toll physically … it's hard to go all the way to retirement age and so you would want to move up the skills ladder and do something less physical perhaps for the last 15 years.' (Learner)

For some, basic skills could provide a first step towards bringing about a career change. However, our fieldwork mainly found evidence of this amongst people who had, for some reason, already stopped the work they had done in the past, and were hence not currently employed. This is discussed in the section below. Others felt that having a good grounding in basic skills gave them more options in the future in terms of job protection; for example, retaining their job with their current employer when other circumstances changed.

3.2.2 Employed in the past

We found examples of people who had been employed in the past but had to stop working, for example, due to redundancy, or because of health problems. This had provided them with both a 'trigger' event, and an opportunity in terms of time, to look into basic skills learning, with the aim of improving their future prospects generally, or to find new sorts of work which would suit them better. In some cases, people felt they would be unable to work in the foreseeable future, due to health conditions, but they now had an opportunity to learn for learning's sake. There were also examples of people who had retired and wanted to get involved for similar reasons.

> 'The company I used to work for shut down so I spent over a year moping about not doing a lot really. … I was a powder coater for a company just over the road actually, for 14 years. I worked up to the position of supervisor, then that folded up and of course my eyesight started getting worse and I was registered blind. During that time I applied for a good half dozen jobs but they didn't really want to know. So I thought it's [college] a bit of a last option but she [social worker] said, "well why don't you give it a go, get in FE, get some bits behind you and make a fresh start," and I'm really glad I have. I hope in the

future to run my own business from home, I've actually already started to sort bits out for it … I might even think about going on to a business studies course or something, depending on how I do, depending on how I progress from that.' (Learner)

'I was working full-time and I had a lot of pain in my legs and I went to the doctors and found out I needed quite a big operation, and I also found out I would end up in a wheelchair if I continued to work, so I didn't have a choice, and I went from a good income and a regular kind of life to having my life turned upside down. I didn't want to sit at home and do nothing and I know this college has a good reputation so I just came along to the lady at reception and said, "look, I know nothing, do you offer any courses for people that don't know anything?" And she said you've come to the right place. They got me a tutor from New Beginnings and it transpired that what they offered were all the things I wanted, literacy, numeracy and IT. So I thought I could have a crack at this.' (Learner)

3.2.3 Never worked

Some of our research participants had never worked, but had done various courses and activities since leaving school. Amongst these were people with disabilities and learning difficulties. Some had ambitions to enter particular careers, and doing basic skills was helping them to work towards this. In some cases, colleges had suggested that they needed to get a good foundation in literacy and numeracy before progressing on to higher level vocational courses.

'When I left school, I came to [name] college to do my taster, and I thought yeah, I'll come and do it. I did a two year course, I can't remember what it was, and then out of the blue I said I wanted to be an actor, and I did a GNVQ and a BTEC first diploma in performing arts, and then I wanted to go onto the next one, to the national diploma, the two year one. But they won't have me, 'cos my literacy holds me down a bit. … So what they said was, "why don't you go to New Beginnings," and this is my second time I've done it … I know what I want to do, it's just that it holds me down a bit, the writing side.' (Learner)

Others had less clear career ambitions, but felt that having improved their literacy and numeracy would help them when they did decide to look for work.

'Well I'll brush up on the English, the maths and the computer and study skills, it's all good things to have, and if you go and look for work, if you've brushed up on those skills its great … Then when I go out to work I've got all the skills back again. I've been in college for a while, so the next step will probably be work.' (Learner)

'I've only ever been in education, school, college and that was it, I've never known anything other than education. But I think I will work next. It's just trying to find what job.' (Learner)

'If I go back to work I can show a potential employer that I went back to college and got this. They like people to show initiative, they like qualifications. It doesn't matter what it is but it shows you can commit to something and see it through.' (Learner)

3.3 Family-based reasons

One of the strongest motivators to get involved in basic skills came from other family members. This was particularly true for the people we spoke to who had children, who wanted to be able to help them with their school work, get more involved in their education and their lives and to set them a good example. Partners also provided encouragement.

> 'I've got a two and a half year old who wants daddy to read him stories at bedtimes … My wife keeps going on at me to do something.' (Learner)

> 'When my daughter comes home from school and asks me something in metric I'll be able to help her and not have her think I don't know anything.' (Learner)

> 'Because I couldn't help my children with their homework, I felt I needed to do something about it. I wish I had the opportunities that youngsters have today.' (Workplace learner)

> 'Well, it shows it [learning] is important in life to him … me doing this has shown him that you can still learn at a later age. It is always going to be there available to you to learn. … He is very happy that I am learning.' (Learner)

However, other life events related to the family could also provide a trigger for people to want to get involved in basic skills learning. For example, in our focus groups. Some people spoke of having taken the plunge into learning following the death of a spouse.

> 'I lost my husband three years ago and everything was done by him, and suddenly I had to get on with things on my own so I think numeracy is very important. I started doing the course last September.' (Learner)

> 'I was sitting at home not doing anything and I thought, I'm not spending the next 30 years sleeping and being a vegetable at home, I had lost my husband so had nobody to say yay or nay to, although he wouldn't have stopped me anyway, but I wanted to do it for myself, not for anybody else, just for me.' (Learner)

3.4 Personal and social development

People cited a host of personal reasons for wanting to get involved in learning, and these are discussed, in turn, below.

3.4.1 Gaining independence

For some, learning was undertaken out of a desire to become more capable, more independent. Focus group and interview participants spoke about how they wanted to be able to 'pull their own weight' and raise their self-esteem. As discussed above, sometimes this was necessitated through a change in circumstances, however, this was not always the case, as there

were occasions where it seemed to have come from a growing realisation of the benefits that basic skills learning could provide.

> 'My wife will deal with the letters or forms that come in on a day-to-day basis but I believe that it is not fair on her because she has the day-to-day running of the house and the kids, so to speak. And she shouldn't have to sit there and deal with something that I should be able to do. ... She wasn't pushing me to do anything but sometimes I think, well I'd like to put my own words in there.' (Learner)

> 'I wanted to do numeracy in particular. Many years ago I asked my husband about fractions and in my school I remember that when it came to fractions I just lost confidence at that time, why can't I do it? So I wanted help with that. … I live on my own now, so I have nobody to help me with that, and maths is very important for shopping and cooking.' (Learner)

3.4.2 Recognition

A barrier to engaging with basic skills learning, which emerged strongly from the scoping interviews with policy makers and providers, was the issue of people recognising that they might benefit from basic skills learning. We found evidence that word of mouth, for example, coming into contact with other learners, was a powerful way for people to move towards recognising that they might have a basic skills need, and promoted a desire to enrol on a course.

> 'Well, I want to do that English Literature course because I'm interested in writing I suppose. I mean, when I left school at 15 you didn't really have the opportunities that young people have today, and when my own children went to university I suddenly felt very thick, it made me start doing things. I know I'm not too old to learn.' (Learner)

> 'I didn't really think about it (before having to stop work for health reasons) because there was no need. The work I was doing, I mean, my level of literacy and numeracy were adequate for the work I was doing, but now I don't have that job, I thought why not try college? I had tried years before when I was forced to come here … a partner pushed me into it, I did about a week of it because I had no motivation, whereas, this time I'm still here and enjoying it.' (Learner)

3.4.3 Qualifications

Several of the learners we spoke to mentioned qualifications as having been a strong motivation for them to get involved in basic skills learning.

> 'My goal is to get qualifications. … That's my goals … you get a certificate, but I think you can go up to GCSE, maybe 'A' level, which I want to do, qualifications are really important to me, because my kids have all got certificates on their wall, and I want to have my own wall.' (Learner)

Although not a primary reason for taking up a basic skills course, getting qualifications can still be an important secondary motivation among some:

'The fact that the course leads to a qualification is very important … . It shows you have done something and is recognition of the work you have put into it. It is something to be proud of and show your friends and family. It is good to put on a CV and to show employers.' (Learner)

'I was at special school myself and I have learning difficulties, so I wanted to get something to show for my life, I didn't want to be a failure.' (Learner)

However, there were also concerns that if a course was too focused around gaining qualifications it could be off-putting for some, due to low confidence in their own abilities.

'Well, we can work with what you need to learn basically and that is the advantage we have found. I mean, we work with national tests but basically it spoils it if we are driven by accreditation, as it has to work around you.' (Provider)

Negative experiences at school, and a failure to gain qualifications were undoubtedly a contributing factor here. However, another interviewee mentioned that staff could find assessments problematic, and also that using qualifications to entice people onto courses may not always be the most effective method:

'It is not a problem of learners not wanting to do [an assessment] but staff are not comfortable with doing it … to assess work is difficult. If you offer a person the opportunity to take a test you may not be selling it.' (Intermediary)

However, a counter argument was also expressed, that qualifications could be crucial in raising self-confidence and esteem, and in turn, motivation to learn in the future.

'Basic skills is not the end point − it's very employment focused but it's also good for them personally since it does raise their self-esteem, and for a lot of people who have never done an exam before or got a certificate for anything, they are just over the moon when they get one.' (Intermediary)

It seems that on balance, it is important to offer learners the opportunity to gain qualifications, due to the positive impact that such achievements can have. However, care must be taken not to dissuade people from engaging with learning through too strong an emphasis on the need to gain qualifications, which might scare people off.

3.4.4 Stepping stone for further learning

Some of the learners we spoke with were already planning to progress on to further courses, sometimes with a strong vocational

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flavour. For these, the basic skills courses they were currently doing were seen as opening doors to future learning opportunities and in some cases careers as a result.

> *'Last year I came here for Performing Arts and I loved it … but I failed four points on the assessment … so they recommended me to do New Beginnings, improve my English so I could re-apply to do the next Performing Arts course next year.'* (Learner)

> *'My goal is to get qualifications … then I want to go on to work with children and also I want to do aromatherapy. So they're like my goals.'* (Do you get qualifications from this course?) *'You get kind of a qualification, you get a certificate, but I think you can go up to GCSE, maybe 'A' level, which I want to do, qualifications are really important to me.'* (Learner)

Whilst there were examples of people who had longer-term learning aspirations prior to beginning their basic skills courses, there were also those who were developing them as a direct result of the literacy and numeracy learning that they were doing. This was strongly associated with their confidence being raised, and along with it, their aspirations.

> *'I can't leave just yet! I just feel that I don't see myself actually leaving … maybe working up level by level and maybe going to GCSE. Yes, so work my way from this to GCSE, you know. I never really thought about where I'd go from here to be honest with you. I just see myself sitting here constantly doing maths. Coming in and doing my work.'* (Learner)

3.4.5 Stimulating activity

Whilst for some people, qualifications and progression to further learning were seen as the main motivators for learning, for others, it was learning for learning's sake that was important. This was especially the case for older learners, who wanted to do something constructive and stimulating with their time, which in turn made them feel more worthwhile.

> *'The older participants feel it is important for them to "keep the brain ticking over". '* (Provider)

> *'I think that education is good for your own self-worth, I mean I did my courses not because I was going to change my job but to make me feel better about myself.'* (Learner)

Indeed, it was this aspect – finding new and interesting activities – which one of the non-learners we spoke to cited as being a potential motivation for them:

> *'When I'm not focusing very often … we've got the discovery channel … so I try to focus on that. … I suppose that's what I'm trying to do is get my mind working … perhaps if I took up a [literacy] course that would help me too.'* (Non-learner)

3.4.6 Confidence

The issue of confidence emerged very strongly from all stages of fieldwork undertaken for this project. Confidence emerged as a significant barrier to learning (discussed later in this report), but also as a motivator for some to have got involved — learning as a way to boost confidence and self-esteem. Some of the focus group participants and interviewees said specifically that they had hoped to gain confidence from basic skills learning:

> 'Confidence. It doesn't matter if I don't get a certificate at the end of it, because I know that I've worked hard, and I've done something with my life. It doesn't matter about anything else, I've tried and I've done it.' (Learner)

> 'My self-confidence, it was literally zero but when I came here my confidence gradually grew. I had no self-confidence in maths but that is gradually stronger, that was my low subject.' (Learner)

However, for others, increased confidence had emerged as an additional benefit to learning that they had not expected.

> 'Initially I thought I was just coming here to learn but it's amazing how you learn, not just about the subject that you're doing but also you gain a lot more confidence and also respect for the other people here, your classmates, I've found it very rewarding actually, very rewarding … I mean, a good few months ago you wouldn't have seen me sitting here talking so open as I am now. I just lost my confidence, because I thought that people look at you because of your disability and that. But when you come into a course like this, it brings a whole world of different problems to get there, but you all have the same goals, so I've really enjoyed it.' (Learner)

Some spoke of how they were able to do practical things now, as a result of their basic skills learning, that they had been too scared or embarrassed to attempt previously, and it was clear that their confidence had been greatly boosted by their new abilities:

> 'I've learnt something new, like I learnt percentages and when you go to a sale and all that stuff, 20 per cent off, I can do that now and it's quite cool. When I used to see it said 20 per cent off in the sale I'd walk away. I didn't know what it meant, I couldn't do it, I just couldn't do it, I felt embarrassed but now I know what it means, so I'll go and buy it now rather than missing out … And learning to measure as well, I mean metres, I didn't know what a metre was. I always worry about learning to drive because you have to stop a certain distance and I'm like right, how much is that? But now I know what a metre is. '(Learner)

Others envisaged that their current courses would help to generally build their confidence to make the next steps.

> 'This place has given me the ideal opportunity to brush up my reading and writing so from here on in if I decide to go to college this place has given me the kick start that I needed...it helps in terms of making that first step … now if I go in there (college) and you put anything in front of me I will be able to read it, I will be able to understand it, and

hopefully I'll be able to write something on my application form that someone else will understand.' (Learner)

3.4.7 Social reasons

Another aspect of confidence was related to social interaction. For some, one of the primary motivations for getting involved in learning was to mix with people, and thereby get used to being in the company of others, and to interact socially. This was particularly true of those we spoke with who had suffered from mental health problems. Several people talked of how they wanted to learn in order to overcome and deal with depression or anxiety, which had meant that they had been socially isolated in the past.

'I didn't mix with anybody. I've been in my house a year now and I don't know anybody. So my stepping stone was to come to college and [name] being the nearest college to me, that's why I came here.' (Learner)

'It's for everything, learning, getting out of the house, learning to be with other people.' (Learner)

'I think it's a confidence thing, I'm still quiet in class but I guess as you go on … me and [name] are the loners in the group, we encourage each other.' (Learner)

For others, it was a more general opportunity to engage socially:

'I was just going to sleep at home, my brain wasn't being used so that's why I did college, it gets me out, gets me with people, gets my brain going and I have really enjoyed it.' (Learner)

'I've had my ups and downs but I've kept coming as I like college, I enjoy the company.' (Learner)

3.5 Employer motivations

This section examines the ways in which employers can be motivated to become involved in providing basic skills for their workforce.

3.5.1 To improve recruitment, retention and progression

One of the ways in which employers could be motivated to engage with providing basic skills learning opportunities for their workforce would be to enable them to improve their recruitment, retention and progression rates. By gaining a reputation as an employer which takes development of its staff seriously, and by demonstrating an ongoing commitment to this, the numbers of people willing to apply for jobs can be increased. Likewise, providing the workforce with basic skills training firstly enables

them to carry out their work more effectively, but in addition, can result in a more committed and loyal workforce, thereby, improving retention rates. It can also widen opportunity and equality of access amongst minority staff groups. Finally, in developing the workforce, employers have access to a 'home-grown' suitable pool of staff from which to appoint future team leaders and managers.

Grampian Country Foods in Uckfield are a good example of how provision of learning opportunities for staff can improve recruitment, retention and progression opportunities in a relatively short space of time. Providing their staff with learning opportunities has raised their numbers of applicants, improved retention rates, and also provided minority staff groups with progression opportunities. Although due to the high proportion of refugees and asylum seekers in their catchment area, they have focused on ESOL provision, the model of the provision of free learning opportunities to employees, during work time shows the nature of the benefits which can be reaped from an employers' wholehearted learning commitment.

3.5.2 Health and Safety

Health and safety obligations could provide an important motivation for employers who wish to engage with basic skills provision for their workforce. Indeed, this was mentioned in the scoping interviews as a potentially effective way to develop the commitment of employers in basic skills provision. In working environments with potential health and safety hazards, it is in the interest of employers to ensure that staff are able to read to a standard that allows them to act appropriately according to health and safety instructions, signs and directions.

> *'Some employers are hard to get to but the main clinch is Health and Safety. … Organisations feel very uncomfortable about having staff that are not equipped to deal with health and safety issues because they have difficulty reading instructions.'* (Strategic)

3.5.3 Re-skilling

A further motivation for employers to become actively involved in providing basic skills training for their staff is to provide them with additional skills, which makes them more flexible and adaptable employees. When business needs and, hence, job requirements change, rather then having to make loyal employees redundant, it can be preferable to retain them in alternative roles. Here, the business benefits of having a workforce competent in basic skills come into their own, through having a potentially responsive and flexible workforce who can adapt to role changes as required. For example, if an employer has a policy of re-deployment before redundancy:

'Where you're looking at office workers that's not really a problem . You can move from one office to another but where do you redeploy someone without any skills, who can't read or write? At least if they learn something here and pick up some IT skills they could do some low grade IT work.' (Learning representative)

3.6 Opportunities and information

Where motivation to learn exists, it is often accompanied by some awareness of the learning opportunities that are available. For many, there is undoubtedly a need to know what might actually be available before they are able to become interested in it. Hence, the extent to which people were exposed to relevant information about how, where and when they might be able to learn and what they might hope to gain from engaging with such opportunities was also a key consideration in terms of motivation.

We found three main routes by which people were informed about learning opportunities. The first of these was through advertising and publicity. However, word of mouth – encompassing indirect marketing by intermediaries, and through more informal channels such as friends and family – appeared to be a more significant and persuasive method of engaging people with basic skills learning. Each are discussed in turn below.

3.6.1 Advertising and the media

A few of the learners we spoke to during our fieldwork mentioned adverts on TV as having been an important awareness-raiser for them (this is also examined in Section 8.9). One person in particular had enrolled on a college course as a direct result of a learndirect advert on daytime television:

'I saw it on TV, an advert on TV, learning direct, it's always advertised in the intervals of 'Trisha' or 'Good Morning', and that's how I got the number, and I plucked up the courage to 'phone up, which took a long time … it took about three months, to pluck up the confidence to 'phone the number.' (Learner)

Television had not been a significant motivator in most cases, but several learners mentioned the 'Gremlins' campaign as having had some relevance to them:

'They have those adverts on the television with the gremlins and I think that is true, there are gremlins that stop you doing it.' (Learner)

One learner told us that she had found out about the course she was currently taking through an advert in the local paper.

'I think I saw something in the paper about different courses at the college so I came here to find out. I was already thinking I would like to do something.' (Learner)

3.6.2 Formal intermediaries

Word of mouth was a key route to stimulating interest in learning, both through formal support structures and informal social networks. This section looks at the first of these. Support workers, tutors, union learning representatives (ULRs), and other intermediaries can play a key role in making people aware of learning opportunities – how they might benefit from them – and rousing enthusiasm as a result. For example, support workers are likely to have built some level of trust with their clients, making them a potentially effective conduit for engaging learner interest.

> *'I found out through my social services lady as I was registered blind earlier this year. … She suggested it to me, I came here, had the interview and I thought, I've got nothing to lose really, I thought I'd give it a go.'* (Learner)

However, particularly in the field of workplace learning, there were suggestions that intermediaries in the workplace, *eg* ULRs, learning advisers, could be made even more effective. Many ULR positions and those of other workplace learning intermediaries are part-time, and therefore the role can be under-resourced, leading to what one respondent described as '*a bit of a bottle neck*' in terms of throughput of employees into learning opportunities. Given more time, resources and training, ULRs could raise their profile and increase their ability to operate effectively to engage non-learners in the workplace setting.

> *'We have a learning adviser at work now. He is possibly someone we could go and see, but then many people don't know about him and he probably only promotes [work-based] courses such as basic computing, that sort of thing.'* (Non-learner)

3.6.3 Informal intermediaries

Informal intermediaries or social networks, *ie* word of mouth through the encouragement of friends and family, were a very effective way of introducing the concept of basic skills learning to those who had not previously been involved. This route appears to be particularly effective in terms of persuading people to 'take the plunge' despite any reservations they might have, of suggesting the benefits that learning could bring, and the difference it could make to their lives as a result.

> *'We've had people join up because they've spoken to others who have been on the courses here … there's been a snowballing effect really that's come from word-of-mouth.'* (Provider)

Again, lack of confidence was an issue for many, so a show of moral support from friends and family could provide the necessary impetus to take the first steps towards starting a course or visiting a college.

'Coming into college on your own for the first time is very difficult and so if you have a friend to do the course with it is a great help. You need lots of support.' (Learner)

'I found out about [the learndirect centre] from my friend … she said this is just the thing for you, why don't you look into it? … so we went down together.' (Learner)

4. Dispositional Barriers to Learning

This chapter is the first of four which examine barriers to learning. Chapters 4 and 5 look at the barriers faced by individuals, Chapter 6 considers provider concerns (supply-side barriers) and Chapter 7 turns to barriers in the workplace setting.

The issues that have emerged as being barriers for individuals confirm the findings of other work, and fall into four broad categories:

- dispositional (motivation, fear of formal education)
- structural (availability)
- resource (travel and childcare)
- information.

Dispositional factors (motivation, negative perceptions of learning, fear of formal education resulting from negative school experiences) were seen by the majority of respondents as being the greatest barrier to participation. This was despite the fact that many non-learners were more keen to focus on other issues. The unwillingness of many non-learners to talk about dispositional factors was observed by one intermediary:

> 'There is the example [people] who came absolutely adamant that they wouldn't do any learning and their case managers sat down with them and just talk about why – it might be the third time they've met before they do the actual assessment, they need to establish the relationship and a feeling of trust before you can help someone to learn who deep down is very frightened. You and I might sit down together and you might be a very frightened person who has had a terrible time at school and we start talking and happen to click and you might like me and we talk through things and it might just awaken that hope.'
> (Intermediary).

This is confirmed by other research. Patricia Cross (1981), for example, found that non-learners are more likely to report structural or resource reasons for not participating in basic skills learning, rather than report dispositional reasons. As Cross notes, this is possibly because it is seen as more socially acceptable to report structural and resource reasons for non-participation than dispositional ones. It might be anticipated, therefore, that for many non-learners, the removal of all other structural or resource

barriers would still be insufficient in encouraging participation in learning.

Multiple barriers

It is important to note at the outset, that although these barriers are described in turn, one of the key messages of this study is that they are seldom experienced in isolation. Many basic skills learners and potential learners face multiple barriers, hence the barriers described in this and the following chapter (on practical and resource related barriers). Barriers often coincide to present complex situations which can sometimes only be met by focusing interventions at an individual level, tailored to the particular needs of the person and their unique circumstances.

An additional point is that where multiples are experienced, they can interact with one another to produce a total effect which is greater than the sum of each barrier. For example, a health condition can result in low confidence and a lack of travel options, with each of these barriers potentially worsening the others, if not addressed correctly. The concept of multiple barriers, and its key importance, should be borne in mind throughout the remainder of this report.

4.1 Recognition and relevance

The key dispositional barrier, preventing people from engaging in basic skills education, is recognition of the needs and benefits from such learning. As has been highlighted in Chapter Two, basic skills is a majority, rather than a minority issue. Also, the fact that such a large proportion of the population have intermediate rather than entry level needs creates a problem of recognition. Often, non-learners would suggest that basic skills courses were for those who had very low level skills, *ie* people who were '*illiterate*'.

> '*I wouldn't need to do those kinds of courses... I'm not illiterate.*' (Non-learner)

> '*Lack of awareness − a lot of people with level 1 and level 2 needs are getting by − they don't realise that the skills are holding them back.*' (Provider)

> '*We found level 1 and level 2 skills are a lot harder to target. Entry level people recognise that these skills are holding them back. So, as long as you can break down the barriers preventing them from coming forward, you can do something about helping them. … For level 2 you have to put it across as getting a qualification. For level 1 to 2 we might say, have you thought about doing a GCSE.*' (Provider)

> '*Many people don't consider that they have any basic skills needs … this is particularly the case where they have spiky profiles; their reading*

may be fine but they may have some other difficulty, eg in writing.'
(Intermediary)

Whilst the concept of lifelong learning is embraced by some sections of the population, for others learning after school is not something that is considered practicable, or necessary.

'I think … between when you leave school and when you retire, education isn't seen as something that is part of your life … It doesn't cover the middle bit … It's something you did in the past … In the middle bit of your life you don't think of education. You're working or you've got children to look after … Certainly nobody came looking for me.' (Non-learner)

'There really isn't a need for basic skills around here … we've all got to be literate and able to deal with numeracy in order to do our jobs.' (Non-learner)

At a higher level (particularly in numeracy) some people may not be able to find any relevance in achieving a qualification. One respondent, for example, who had qualifications in English but not mathematics, reported that any lack of higher level numeracy skills did not affect her ability to carry out her work or deal with the numeracy demands of her day-to-day living. Consequently, although she felt that there were no barriers holding her back from taking up a course in numeracy (indeed she had been involved in several education courses for leisure purposes since leaving school) she was not interested in taking her numeracy any further.

'I never got any qualifications in Maths and that may have been an issue initially... I can do everything I need to do that is arithmetic related though and even if there are the odd things I'd struggle with, such as dealing with weights and measures, this is not something that is causing much of a problem with my life, and I'm not interested in doing anything about it now.' (Non-learner)

Added to the issue of recognition and relevance, is that of complacency. The Skills for Life survey (DfES, 2003) highlights that there is a tendency for people to over-estimate their numeracy and literacy abilities. The survey shows that 41 per cent of respondents who attained entry level or below in literacy suggested that they were 'very good' at reading. Generally, female respondents and older respondents were the most likely to overstate their abilities. Nearly half of all female respondents (48 per cent) who were at Entry level 3 or below in literacy reported that they are were 'very good' at reading. However, it should be noted that many respondents have a 'spiky profile', in which they may be more competent at some aspects of literacy, *eg* reading, than other aspects of literacy; a low level of grammar and punctuation may, thus, account more for their low literacy levels than their ability to read.

A third of respondents with entry level numeracy skills reported being very good at Maths, with men slightly more likely than

women to overstate their Maths ability (35 per cent of men compared to 32 per cent of women). When focusing on those who achieved level 1 literacy or numeracy but were below level 2, we find that overwhelming majority of respondents report being either fairly good or very good.

At least one respondent commented that complacency was one of the main barriers to participation. It was seen as being particularly relevant in the case of numeracy where:

> *'The majority of the population is in the same boat … so there isn't a stigma. The barrier to Maths is that, because there is no stigma at all, people become complacent. The question is how do you overcome a barrier to learning when most people don't think they have a problem? The major psychological problems are stigma and complacency.'*
> (Policy maker)

4.2 Issues of stigma

> *'It's difficult for guys here to admit that they've got problems with basic skills. They've managed to get around the problem for years.'*
> (Learning representative)

A barrier that was consistently referred to in our interviews was stigma. Closely related to low confidence, admitting to having a basic skills need is something that few people would find easy. Those we interviewed as part of the scoping phase suggested this is particularly true among men, and it may also be true of some minority ethnic groups, where there are deeper cultural barriers to acknowledgement. Several of those we interviewed during the scoping phase highlighted the fact that stigma is usually greater for literacy than numeracy; whilst people are often fairly comfortable with admitting that they 'can't add up' or are 'hopeless at maths' the situation is quite different when it comes to admitting difficulty with reading, writing, or comprehension. In one interview, for example, a union learning representative gave an account of an employee who felt such a high degree of stigma that he had not even broached the issue of literacy with members of his family:

> *'There was one person that took-up a course so that he could help his child with his homework. When his son used to ask him for help, rather than admit that he couldn't read, he would just say, "it's your homework, you have to sort it out." I think a lot of people are embarrassed or are at an age that they think they don't need to bother improving themselves. I think the hard thing is making that initial step.'* (Learning representative)

However, given the right environment – where people realise that they are not the only ones in that situation, that there are others in the same boat – stigma can be overcome.

'There wasn't any real stigma in coming forward because lots of people have basic skills problems there. … You're not in an environment in which your peers will stigmatise you for it.' (Learner)

The fact that ESOL provision does not carry the same stigma as literacy (and to a lessor extent, numeracy) was also drawn to our attention:

'The ESOL course, we never have a problem with, because it's not like the basic skills courses … you're not saying, "you're a bit thick and need basic skills" … ESOL is just saying you just don't read or speak English at the level that is going to give good opportunities in the labour market. So that one is not a problem to fill.' (Intermediary)

4.3   Negative school experiences

Both the literature and the interviews often cited 'negative school experience' as a key factor in non-participation. This holds true in both the workplace and community/FE settings. Providers of workplace learning and community learning suggested that their learners have a high level of fear around college and how they might be treated there. Many of those who could perhaps stand to benefit most from basic skills learning are those who had bad school experiences. Typically, they left school feeling that it had failed them, and they had failed within it. They do not think that college would be any different, and hence, would rather use coping strategies than admit to having a problem which could be addressed through learning at college.

'If you're here you can go and make a cup of tea if you want to make a cup of tea and if you want to go to the toilet you can go to the toilet … If you went to a college you'd have to put your hand up and ask … it would be just like being back at school again.' (Learner, work-based)

A good number of those interviewed as part of our scoping phase felt that negative school experiences were the main barrier to participation in college-based provisions, and the subsequent fieldwork with learners and non-learners confirmed this. Prior to re-entering learning, people said that they were scared they might be made to look stupid in class, that they may be subject to discipline and formality, as they were at school, or that they simply would not be able to cope with the work.

'If you have had a bad experience at school, coming back into a classroom situation can be quite daunting, it can put you off for life.' (Learner)

'I left school 15 plus years ago and I have never been in this sort of an environment and it is like another world to me. I think I have been frightened and not been able to do things but I have surprised myself — learnt something today, I learnt something yesterday, I learn something every day and I walk away and think, well I didn't know that this morning but I know that now. I was just apprehensive I think.' (Learner)

4.4 Negative perceptions

One of the biggest barriers to basic skills learning appears to be the perception of non-learners regarding what entering learning might mean for them. Many perceptions appear to be based on negative school experiences (see Section 4.3).

4.4.1 Lack of confidence

Many of the policy makers and providers we spoke to highlighted low confidence amongst learners and potential learners as one of the biggest barriers to participating in learning. This was confirmed by the focus groups and interviews with learners who talked about the difficulties they had faced in confronting their fears of getting involved in learning; they talked about plucking up the necessary courage to take the first steps:

> *'You need writing … my biggest downfall is writing and it took me a while to pick up courage to come down here … '* (Learner)

In fact, low confidence could result in extremely high levels of fear, which was a barrier in itself. People experiencing this often needed support not just when they started college, but before they went there. For example, some of our participants said that they were frightened by the prospect of having an interview, and had required help with that process:

> *'It took about three months to pluck up the confidence to 'phone the number. Then I had this scary time coming in for the interview, seeing [the tutor], then I had the first day and I was absolutely petrified coming in, I nearly didn't but I knew it was the way forward. But I really wanted to learn, help my children, that kind of stuff … '* (Learner)

> *'I found that when I had my interview, [the tutor], she was very helpful, she actually came to my home for my interview, and did like an assessment with me, and found out what my grades were and how good I was … 'cos I was too scared to come to college.'* (Learner)

4.4.2 Lack of support and understanding

One fear that emerged from a focus group with non-learners, as well as some interviews with non-learners, was that college courses would be too difficult, that the pace of learning would be too fast and they would be left behind:

> *'In a college you can't just put your hand up … everyone else will just think, "oh, it's him again being dim".'* (Workplace learner)

> *'At a college they say this is this and we have to do this week and if you don't understand they won't go back, you're just left behind.'* (Non-learner)

In fact, this perception applied to the application process in addition to the learning itself, with people saying that they felt they would not be able to cope with filling out forms they thought they would be given when they tried to apply, or find out about what was on offer. Ironically, one person said he felt he would need a better grounding in basic skills before he was able to join a course to learn more:

'I thought about doing a course before but I need to get some of the basics first. It seems pointless to me to go to a college and you get some paperwork when signing up … and you're saying what's that, what does that mean?' (Non-learner)

The reality of the learning for some of our focus group participants was, in fact, very different from their original perceptions. However, they still expressed reservations saying that this might not be the norm; they were lucky to be on a course that allowed them to work at their own pace and provided enough support:

'Here, if you don't understand something you can ask … and if half an hour later you've forgotten it you can ask your tutor or whoever's there, again. It doesn't matter how many times you ask for things to be explained. … but in some other places it would be like … I've told you once, don't ask again.' (Workplace learner)

This demonstrates how deep rooted the mistrust of education can be, following negative experiences in earlier life. Akin to this, it should also be noted that even in situations in which non-learners recognise that tutors are prepared to work at a suitable pace, there may be issues of self-esteem (*eg* related to a fear of falling behind in class) that prevent them from wanting to take part. A basic skills non-learner who had had previous experience of college, for example, suggested that although she knew that tutors were very accommodating and were prepared to allow her to work at her own pace she still felt very uncomfortable with the idea of actually getting involved.

One tutor who taught a numeracy course commented on the need to overcome negative prior experiences by supporting learners and going at their own pace:

'I think that one of the barriers to learning is people who have been put off by schools, who have not had good experiences and that is a lot of people, even ones you assume have done well by the system and I think that it is crucial that learning is led by them rather than by the curriculum. It is a luxury to be able to explore things like this really but it is terribly important.' (Tutor)

4.4.3 Age concerns

'I'm a bit old in the tooth to start taking up new courses … or to start sitting exams and things like that.' (Non-learner)

Age-related concerns were twofold. Firstly, as the quote above illustrates, some non-learners felt that they were simply 'too old' to start learning. Perhaps by this they meant that they felt they were too out of practice to start again, or that they were too old to reap any benefits from it.

> *'If I was younger I would certainly think about retraining but it's too late now, I'm too old.'* (Non-learner)

Secondly, there were concerns about the age profile of the other learners they would come into contact with, were they to get involved. For many non-learners, further education and basic skills education are regarded as being synonymous with post-school education, and college campuses full of young people. It can, therefore, be seen as an activity that would involve entering a learning environment dominated by young people. Several non-learners expressed an apprehension to returning to education based upon this belief.

> *'I think that going into a class with lots of youngsters is what puts me off.'* (Non-learner)

> *'I wouldn't go to a college … You'd stand out a bit as everyone else would have come from school.'* (Non-learner)

Some non-learners expressed a fear regarding how younger learners might react to them, particularly if they felt they would take longer to acquire or develop their skills than their younger counterparts:

> *'I honestly think that I'm too scared to go back into education. The whole education thing itself scares me. I wouldn't want to go to evening classes or something and have some snotty little kids aged about 18 looking down at me. I don't want to be the oldest there, it would be uncomfortable.'* (Non-learner)

Another aspect of age acting as a barrier is based on the opinion that younger students will have a lower level of motivation, commitment and discipline than adult learners. Indeed, non-learners held the belief that some younger people were being coerced into attending college in order to receive social security benefits. The young people would, therefore, be unmotivated and disruptive.

> *'My sister went on a college course some time back and it was pointless … She was in a class full of young kids who were just there because they'd been sent by the social, they didn't want to be there so just played around … you just can't learn anything when it's like that.'* (Non-learner)

These negative perceptions held about further education institutions by some basic skills non-learners (or basic skills learners who have not studied within a 'college environment') are at odds with the actual experiences of most of the basic skills learners we spoke to. However, unless these perceptions are

addressed, they are likely to remain a barrier to college participation among many non-learners.

> *'I must admit, I would prefer to study at home rather than at a college. It would be easier and you wouldn't have to mix with all the youngsters.'* (Non-learner)

In addition to these perceptual barriers, older people may face other health, infirmity, and confidence-related barriers, including perceptions of safety, which compound their concerns about being 'too old' to learn.

4.4.4 Unsuitable timing

One of the negative perceptions that we came across was the belief that learning would be in the form of evening classes, and these were not felt to be suitable. It should be noted, however, that this belief might partly be related to the learner fixing their perceptions about the timing of courses to fit in with their own potential availability or 'free time'. The association that is made between college provisions and 'evening classes' was more apparent among those who were in employment during the day. There were still, however, a number of non-learners, who were not in employment but raised objections to taking up basic skills learning on the basis of the fact that they had other commitments during the evening.

4.4.5 'It's not for me'

Some of the learners told us that before they had re-engaged with learning they strongly believed that college was simply not suitable for them. This view is undoubtedly a result of a combination of negative perceptions, including those discussed above, *eg* lack of confidence, age, lack of ability *etc.* Providers backed up this view:

> *'Further education colleges are seen as 'academic'. There is a belief that there is a minimum standard that they won't reach.'* (Intermediary)

One interviewee argued that education was something that you obtained through life rather than 'schooling'.

> *'Everything I've learnt, I've learnt through life not through school.'* (Non-learner)

For others, learning was simply not something that they had ever thought of doing. It just 'wasn't for them':

> *'I haven't thought about taking up any learning.'* (Non-learner)

> *'No, I never think about it, it just doesn't interest me, I'm happy doing what I'm doing.'* (Non-learner)

'I've just never thought about doing more education. It's just never crossed my mind. I've worked here for a long time and I suppose I haven't had to think about it.' (Non-learner)

'I've never really considered taking up a course. I thought very briefly of doing a catering course as I was working in a kitchen … but then I had my first child … that was in 1977, and I've been involved with bringing up my children since.' (Non-learner)

The issue of relevance is particularly acute among older non-learners. In these instances, the non-learner may not be able to identify any employment or family related benefits of furthering their literacy or numeracy abilities.

'I'm 60 years old … If you told me I'd be doing some IT course last year I'd tell you to go away … but at the same time, at my age, why would I want to study mathematics?' (Non-learner)

4.5 Safety concerns

A further dispositional barrier which was mentioned by some of our key informants and participants was concerned with safety. Points were made about courses needing to be timed so that people would feel safe travelling to and from the venue. For example, some people were not willing to travel after dark or in the evenings.

'There is a high elderly population in Eastbourne and they don't necessarily want to be out late at night. The best time to set courses, therefore, would be in the afternoons … between three and five, for example.' (Provider)

'I think it's difficult to go to courses in the evenings … especially in the winter months when it gets dark earlier … there's been quite a few people attacked around here recently, so it isn't safe.' (Non-learner)

5. Practical and Resource Related Barriers

This chapter turns to look at the practical and resource-related barriers which can prevent people from engaging with basic skills learning. It considers in turn:

- time
- health and welfare
- childcare
- transport and travel
- location and timing
- information
- cost.

5.1 Time

Lack of time is frequently mentioned as a barrier to general learning. However, there is strong reason to believe that among those who have basic skills needs it may be more of an issue. Kodz *et al.*, (2003) highlight that people working in unskilled and/or semi-skilled occupations often work some of the longest hours in the UK, largely through a necessity to earn a 'living wage'. This barrier is often compounded by a lack of autonomy, shift-working and working anti-social hours.

> *'Most people are married so if you're talking about evening courses … they'd rather be at home with their family.'* (Non-learner)

> *'I couldn't do a course in the mornings because that's when you're getting the kids ready for school … and the evenings are the only time you get with them really … so that's not the sort of time I could give up for studying … late evening is also a no … as I'd be putting them to bed.'* (Non-learner)

Along with work and family commitments, the ability to maintain a social life is also of clear importance to many basic skills learners and non-learners alike. However, acknowledging the importance of maintaining a social life may be lower in the hierarchy of 'socially acceptable' reasons not to study and, if referred to at all, would often be dismissed as a lesser reason for not studying or mentioned somewhat apologetically.

'I'd been thinking about it for a couple of years but I didn't get around to doing anything about it … it just didn't really fit into my hectic lifestyle … what with getting here at six and leaving at 2 [pm] and evening classes are a bit late … also there's the social life … I know that social life doesn't come into it … and if it's getting up early, I'm one of these people who like to have a good eight hours kip.'
(Workplace Learner)

'I don't really have time to take on any courses. In the evening I've got to be at home for my son and in the daytime I'm working.'
(Non-learner)

In terms of the areas covered by this research, we found some evidence to suggest that lack of time could be a particularly strong barrier for people employed in Brighton and Hove. A large student and graduate population exists alongside a low number of 'graduate' level jobs, and hence, students and graduates compete for work in low-skilled customer-facing occupations. This can force those with fewer or no qualifications in the labour market, including those with basic skills needs, down into lower level occupations, often involving shift work, longer hours, or juggling several jobs. All of this means that there can be less time and less flexibility to take up learning opportunities.

'I mean, trying to juggle shift work with the family is hard. When you're not at work you want to spend time with your family, not take part in courses.' (Non-learner)

'A lot of people with basic skills needs who are working may be working long hours on low pay, or may have more than one part-time job in order to make ends meet.' (Intermediary)

5.2 Health and welfare

Health issues emerged from our fieldwork as a major barrier for learners and potential learners. Some of the providers with whom we spoke during the first phase of this research explained that many of their basic skills learners had health conditions, including mental health conditions, which could make it difficult to access learning and attend courses. Indeed, our fieldwork backed this up and provided us with some insight into the ways in which their access to learning opportunities — and their lives more generally, were affected. A number of the focus group members and interviewees were coping with mental health conditions, and some had physical disabilities and chronic illnesses which affected their mobility, energy and confidence levels. These learners could require a lot of support, both to get them into learning, and to support them effectively in the learning environment.

'Not being able to get out is difficult, I have days when I can't leave the house and that is restricting for me.' (Learner).

'My health has stopped me doing a lot of things, I suffer from depression so actually getting out is quite difficult for me, but I have

the motivation to come here every Thursday, I like talking to people.' (Learner).

'It's difficult for me because of my ME. I can think in the morning but I get tired very easily … some days are better than others.' (Learner)

'I suffer from panic attacks, find it very difficult to be around other people. Sometimes I do have to get out of that environment, leave the classes.' (Learner)

Some of the groups targeted for basic skills provision are from the most disengaged sections of society. Whilst they may not have such severe health conditions, they too need support, alongside their learning, for welfare and emotional issues. For example, one of the colleges we spoke with said they had introduced an adviser who students were able to speak to for help with welfare issues, benefits, housing *etc.* This measure had also improved retention rates on their basic skills courses. Another provider explained the need to factor in welfare support for basic skills students:

'We do a lot of work with employers … teaching basic skills at all levels … with some of the learners (who are at a pre-entry level) there may also be huge emotional issues to deal with … the students get incredibly attached … 50 per cent of it is basic skills and the other 50 per cent is counselling.' (Provider).

These examples serve to illustrate how engaging some of those who are in most need of basic skills learning is not as simple as providing learning opportunities. Basic skills learners often present a host of personal, social, and welfare issues, alongside their learning needs (some of which existed before they accessed learning and some of which can come to the fore as a result of accessing learning). All of these need to be dealt with, and they can present significant barriers to learning, and retention/ progression in the absence of adequate support mechanisms.

5.3 Childcare

Childcare needs present a significant barrier for people in accessing learning opportunities, encompassing:

- willingness to use childcare
- availability
- accessibility
- cost.

The Government's Interdepartmental Childcare Review (2002) highlighted access, affordability, and information about where to find childcare and how to judge its quality, as being key barriers which are holding back parents, particularly women and lone parents, from taking up learning and employment opportunities. In addition, a research study conducted in 2002 (Woodland *et al.*)

found that households with a student parent were more likely than other households to have experienced an unmet demand for childcare over the previous 12 months. Indeed, some student parents reported having had to miss lessons due to a lack of suitable childcare, *eg* arrangements that had fallen through. This seemed to be particularly the case when parents used childcare from a variety of sources rather than from a single source. This finding points to a need for consistent, available and reliable childcare, if parents are to make the most of learning opportunities. According to Woodland *et al.*'s research, lone parents were significantly more likely than couples to have experienced unmet needs for childcare.

In our research, many of the non-learners who had dependent children reported that their family commitments were preventing them from taking up further learning. Willingness and trust issues were highlighted by some of our respondents as being their key concern:

> *'I don't think that childcare would be appropriate for my circumstances … I wouldn't leave [my child] with anyone else … It isn't the cost, it's the case that I have to be there. It's not the facilities either.'* (Non-learner)

> *'My children are too important. I wouldn't leave them with anyone who isn't family.'* (Non-learner)

Related to the issue of willingness and trust of childcare provision, is that of information — as highlighted by the Interdepartmental Childcare Review (2002). With insufficient information to assess the quality and suitability of childcare, many parents may continue to be unwilling to entrust their children with others, whether this provision is formal, or informal. In addition, for parents and carers of children with disabilities and/or other specific needs, childcare issues are of particular concern, as the quote below illustrates:

> *'My child has autism and takes up a lot of my time … you can't just call up a child minder.'* (Non-learner).

Much research exists to show that it is very hard to access affordable childcare for children with physical or learning disabilities, even though they are more likely than other children to be in poor and low income families, and have higher living costs (TUC, 2003). Hence, the TUC's Childcare Review calls for funding investment to ensure that parents have good quality, affordable childcare that meets the specific needs of their children, and allows them access to employment and training opportunities.

In our research, it emerged that willingness to use childcare in the first place was the primary barrier, which must be overcome before issues of availability, accessibility and costs are even considered. Hence, issues around trusting childcare to others —

an attitudinal constraint, tended to be mentioned by non-learners. The other, more practical issues were more commonly raised by those with some experience of seeking and using childcare facilities, including some learners.

> *'The childcare in the college is not free and this is a difficulty.'*
> (Learner)

Childcare responsibilities were also mentioned by some strategic and provider level respondents as representing a potential barrier to learning. However, few respondents raised any *specific* concerns regarding the availability of childcare or financial support for childcare. This may, in part, reflect a difference in the knowledge held by strategic and provider level respondents, when compared to the knowledge and perceptions held by non-learners.

Other literature and research has revealed that while some people engaged in further education may be aware of the financial support afforded to people with childcare needs, not all potential recipients will know of this. Dewson *et al.,* (2003) report that a large proportion of students with financial needs for childcare are unlikely to be aware of the support that is available.

Casebourne and Saunders (2003) present a number of additional key childcare issues. They discuss the general shortage of childcare places, but also highlight the inequality of access, which is heavily dependent on where you live, and your income. Added to this is the fact that British parents pay the highest childcare bills in Europe, with many unable to work or train as a result. In fact, a CIPD survey of parents showed that parents on lower incomes are likely to stop working to care full-time for their children. It stands to reason that these parents, together with others on low incomes who have not been in work, will perceive and experience a lack of affordable, accessible and flexible childcare to be a significant barrier to learning.

A study carried out in Brighton and Hove (Fyvie-Gauld, 2000) found the lack of childcare was keenly felt by residents across the city. Parents in East Brighton expressed a need for childcare support, in fact many of them 'felt quite overwhelmed' by their responsibilities. In addition to traditional childcare they also wanted provision of pre and after school clubs and holiday clubs. The current provision of affordable childcare was also highlighted as an issue in Brunswick, while Kemp Town residents identified childcare as an issue for families on low incomes, particularly single parent families.

5.4 Transport and travel

A further practical issue which can act as a significant barrier to learner engagement, is one of transport and travel. However, it is

more complex than whether transport is or is not available at a particular time and place. It encompasses:

- availability (access and frequency)
- reliability
- cost
- willingness to travel
- safety and other issues.

We found in our fieldwork that many of the learners we spoke to had circumvented the issue of transport and travel by opting to study at the college which was closest to them, or by doing their learning in the workplace. However, there were also those who did not live near any of the providers, who had no option but to travel if they were going to access learning.

5.4.1 Availability

The availability of transport is clearly specific to different parts of Sussex. For example, most of the respondents from the Brighton and Hove area suggested that public transport links were good. However, elsewhere in the county the picture was more mixed. In contrast to this, the issue of public transport was raised on a number of occasions in Hastings.

> *'Hastings has two main bus routes and you've got to be on those bus routes … if you're not it's very difficult to get anywhere. (The college) is a bit out the way … once you've got off the bus you have to walk about 15 minutes from the bus stop. I can't do that these days.'* (Non-learner)

> *'I looked at taking a course at [name] school but you have to travel over two very steep hills to get there and I'm unable to do that because of my illness. They were offering courses in English that I saw advertised in the local supermarket.'* (Non-learner)

Throughout Sussex, availability of public transport has to be considered alongside individuals' other circumstances for a true picture of the ways in which it is operating as a barrier to be seen. For example, those who have cars do not need to rely on public transport; however, parking may be an issue. For those without cars, especially those living away from the major towns, the availability of either suitable public transport or the provision of local learning opportunities, was key:

> *'I believe you can do various courses at the [Community Centre} and in [Name] college, but it would have to be local as I don't drive.'* (Non-learner)

5.4.2 Reliability

Reliability of transport was also raised as an issue. Whilst transport routes were well established and well served, some felt

that it was difficult to rely on them. For example, a learner in West Sussex noted the unreliability of the train service as causing them some difficulty in getting into class:

'I live in Goring, so the train is a real difficulty because sometimes it's late or there are replacement trains … ' (Learner)

5.4.3 Cost

The cost of transport was raised by some as a barrier to their accessing transport.

'Also, travel to and from college can be expensive.' (Learner)

Here too, we found examples of how barriers can interact to provide a complex and individual set of problems which must be overcome. For example, a woman with a health condition, and who had initially found it difficult to get to and from college as a result, explained that:

'I have a medical condition which prevents me from walking into college, so for a while I had to pay for taxis there and back, and that was like, £4.50 there and £4.50 back, so I was paying like, over £10 a day for cabs, and I actually got myself into debt because of that.' (Learner)

Fortunately, with the help of a telephone advice line supplied by the college, this learner was able to find a solution to her travel difficulties, which made it possible for her to continue to attend college:

'But now I've found a very good service, which is called dial-a-ride, they pick you up from your door and bring you to college, and they take you home at your time, so if you want to leave at half one, they pick you up at half one, if you want to leave at 4 o'clock they pick you up at 4 o'clock. And its only £2 return.' (Learner)

5.4.4 Willingness to travel

Individuals' willingness to travel varied. Respondents who did not have a driving licence, who worked long shifts or who had a disability were more likely to have suggested that having to travel any distance to a place of learning would act as a barrier to study. Willingness to travel was, in part, dependent upon other circumstances, and age was also a factor. There was also some evidence that willingness to travel could operate differently in the rural and urban settings (discussed later in this section).

It is important to note the role that multiple barriers (particularly those around attitudes and perceptions) can play. One of our scoping phase interviewees felt that transport/travel issues were sometimes cited as the main barrier when, in fact, other motivational factors, particularly fear, were the root cause:

'It's very hard to overcome any negative experiences at school and to realise that not all learning has to be like that. They just don't want to do it because of their bad experience, and they are not willing to change their mind and these [travel etc.] reasons often mask an emotional reason, people will move mountains to go and do something they really want to do and if we offered the travel money to come in from five miles away they'd come like a shot, but if they are making difficulties about the travelling, "oh, I keep missing the bus", then you know that there's something else underlying it and its just an excuse to hide the fear.'
(Intermediary)

McGivney (2000), highlights the reluctance of non-learners to travel and the importance of location: *'even a mile down the road may be out of reach, not just because of a lack of transport … but psychologically and culturally.'*

5.4.5 Safety and other issues

People's perceptions of safety on public transport has been highlighted as a barrier to travelling. This may be particularly relevant to certain sections of the population, *eg* the elderly, or at certain times of the day, *eg* after dark. For older people, there can be additional concerns about buses moving too quickly after boarding, for ethnic minorities, racial harassment from other passengers and language barriers can present problems. For disabled people and their carers, transport can be a major difficulty, both in terms of physical access and the attitudes of others. As a result of these issues, some form of inexpensive community transport was raised as being highly desirable in the Brighton and Hove area (Fyvie-Gauld, 2000).

5.4.6 Rural and urban differences

Considering the rural and urban settings separately, it seems that transport issues can have differing emphases. For example, in areas of rurality, transport issues are more likely to be centred around cost, reliability or availability. Safety concerns can also be an issue for some groups of the population, *eg* the elderly, as noted above and may also affect the willingness of these groups to use public transport. In rural areas, unlit roads and unmanned railway stations were a potential source of concern. In urban areas, previous research (*eg* Papworth, 2002) suggests that parking may be more of an issue than lack of transport. Some respondents suggested that, even in urban areas that have very good public transport services, having to travel any distance to get to a basic skills course could act as a deterrent to many potential learners.

5.5 Location and timing

Location and time barriers relate to where learning opportunities are offered, when learning takes place, and the flexibility of delivery. Location is a barrier which frequently interacts with

some of the other barriers described above. For example, work or childcare needs can impact upon when someone is able to take up a course, and where they would prefer to do so, while people who have very negative attitudes to school may not be prepared to enter a college in the first instance, but an inconvenient location could provide a more concrete reason for them to resist learning opportunities. Indeed, steps had been taken by some providers to overcome this barrier by providing courses away from the college.

> *'Tutors will always go to a workplace or community building. We never use a formal college campus. Colleges would be fearsome and covered with young people – which isn't comfortable for some adult learners.'* (Provider)

The general message that has come through from the research conducted is that there are no 'ideal' times and places to hold courses, as different demographic and economic groups prefer to take up learning at different times and in different places. Lone parents, for example, may be attracted to courses held in schools between 1pm and 3pm, as they are able to collect their children after the course and this reduces the need for childcare. However, this would not suit an employee working nine to five. Similarly, a course on offer in the evening for people employed on 'standard' working hours may not appeal to older, retired individuals who have concerns about leaving their homes at night.

> *'I could do something between ending work at half one and three o'clock.'* (Non-learner)

> *'Sometimes, the timing of classes makes it difficult, this seemed especially the case for those with children to pick up from school or for those trying to fit classes around work.'* (Provider)

5.6 Information

Assuming that people have overcome the barriers of recognition and stigma (discussed in the previous chapter) there is an issue about where that individual may look for help. The research suggests that potential learners are aware of where they may find support (*eg* the public library). However, without having made steps to find information, they lack knowledge about the specific opportunities available to them and where to look for these, *eg* the types of courses available, when they are available and where. Consequently, their perceptions about what is on offer, and the reasons why what is on offer would not suit them, may often be based upon the inaccurate and limited information they hold, rather than on concrete information and a genuine awareness of what they might be entitled to and able to do.

A lack of 'formal' information on basic skills course and access to formal intermediaries (*eg* IAG providers) may be negatively complemented among basic skills non-learners with a lack of direct access to private individuals with knowledge or experience

of the 'education system'. Consequently, any negative perceptions of education and educational establishments may be enhanced by the non-learner's association with friends, families and work colleagues, who hold similar reinforcing views. Taylor and Cameron (2002) suggest that those who are disengaged from learning may be hindered by their immediate relationships and circumstances, and may not have contact with the same network of 'private intermediaries' (mentors) as those engaged in learning.

Compounding the points noted by Taylor and Cameron, is the fact that the lack of access to individuals who have positive views about education is also likely to mean a similar lack of access to individuals who have knowledge about where to gain specific information about learning opportunities, and routes into suitable courses.

The most popular source of information in general, reported among non-learners, was the Internet. However, other sources of information may be restricted or unknown. Unsurprisingly, the knowledge of where to go among non-learners was, therefore, often incomplete or out of date.

> *'There are quite a few places around here … you've got Sussex Uni and Brighton Polytechnic … Brighton College … the college down by the Open Market … you've got quite a few … it's a bus journey really, depending on where you're living or what course you're doing.'*
> (Non-learner)

> *'The only place you can get information about the courses available here is by going to the public library. They've got plenty of newspapers put in there by the colleges and they tell you about all the courses and the prices. Otherwise there is no other place you can get it.'*
> (Non-learner)

A certain degree of proactivity in providing information may be needed to engage the latent demand that exists amongst some sections of the non-learner population:

> *'Quite often over the years I've come across courses that other people have done quite inadvertently and thought … oh, I never knew they did that … perhaps I could have done it.'* (Non-learner)

> *'Maths was always something I had had trouble with and I really wanted to get to grips with it, but before I heard about the courses here I didn't really know how to.'* (Learner)

5.7 Cost

Although basic skills courses are free to learners, those who have not been involved in any learning may not be aware of this. Indeed, some of the non-learners we spoke with believed that costs would be a barrier to taking up a basic skills course.

'If you go to college … the thing is that some people just can't afford it … ' (Non-learner)

Clearly, the issue here is one of a lack of awareness about basic skills provision, *ie* a lack of information. However, as the preceding sections in this chapter have shown, cost can clearly be an issue with regard to other barriers, such as childcare or transport.

6. Provider Related Barriers

Through the course of the research, several respondents mentioned structural or provider level barriers that may not have directly been observed by the learners (or potential learners) but did relate to the ability of providers to deliver their services. Some of these issues were raised by providers and relate to the problems they may face with delivery, while other barriers were raised by intermediaries who engage with these providers and relate to the problems that they face as clients. Although some of these supply-side barriers were tangential to our research, which was more learner focused, this section will report these issues as they may account for some of the 'structural' barriers that are observed by learners and/or potential learners. It should be stressed that the interviewees often felt that these issues were not specifically problems or barriers that exist solely in Sussex, nor did they believe that Sussex was worse off than the national picture.

The provider barriers that were highlighted cover six key areas:

- cost of development
- issues around lead-time
- issues of class size restrictions
- co-ordination and brokerage related issues
- resources and capacity
- funding issues.

In the remainder of this section, we continue to consider these themes in more detail.

6.1 Cost of development time

Although providers get core funding to deliver basic skills, this is not always the case for the development work[1].

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[1] Sussex LSC have awarded bursaries of £10,000 to 15 providers, to enable them to remove the barriers that they perceive for, *eg* training staff, producing bespoke courses. This will provide a tool for employers to look at basic skills needs in the workplace and local providers can help them with these and other training needs.

Some providers and intermediaries have reported that there may be greater need for development work to be carried out when they are trying to reach people who have very low levels of basic skills, who may also have the greatest degree of disadvantage and the greatest barriers to learning. Development time may exist at a strategic, intermediate and implementation level, and is often the result of working in partnership with other organisations.

'There's an issue of development time. Funding is geared towards delivery rather than working with employers.' (Intermediary)

'We have put resources into development … some (money) is available to use for development but still there is not enough … doing all the curriculum development, as well as working in partnerships which is very time consuming.' (Intermediary)

6.1.1 Strategic level development

At a strategic level, development time covers the time spent by providers working with other agencies in the region, or developing capacity internally. These activities may include the time or resources spent:

● developing partnership arrangements with other providers (*eg* to co-ordinate local delivery)

● attending, and contributing towards, strategic level meetings and engagement in local partnerships (*eg* working with Sussex Skills for Life Development Centre)

● developing policy within the provider institution, including time spent co-ordinating actions with other internal parties, *eg* business development units, vocational training units and student support services

● conducting local needs analysis, *eg* reviewing current student participation and local demand

● planning and developing proposals for further funding.

6.1.2 Intermediate level development

To attract new learners, providers may need to build close relationships with other intermediaries, such as community and voluntary groups or employing organisations. In the case of providing workplace learning, it may also involve a process of brokerage as well as course development. These activities could include:

● identifying the relevant people with whom to negotiate on issues of learning and basic skills

● raising awareness of basic skills issues, and promoting the personal and business benefits of basic skills training

- building a relationship with the employer and employee representatives
- conducting an audit of employer needs and the needs of employees
- developing a 'bespoke' solution to the needs of the employer and staff
- co-ordination of activities with employers and learning representatives
- implementing the solution.

To some degree it may be possible, however, to develop some economies of scale in terms of the design of courses. One provider, for example, noted that as they had initially spent time developing several different types of courses, and models of workplace delivery, it was much more a case of '*customising provisions*' to employer needs, rather than building completely new provisions from scratch.

6.2 Lead time

A problem that was raised, in particular among intermediaries, was the issue of 'lead-time'. Lead-time relates to the time period that is taken up between identifying learners' needs and finding an effective solution. Once again, issues around lead-time can relate to project development, co-ordinating actions with other intermediaries (*eg* workplace provisions) and developing direct links with potential learners (*ie* offering assessment or provisions at the right time, before the potential learner has lost interest).

6.2.1 Responding to the needs of other intermediaries

Lead-time associated with development work can sometimes affect ability of basic skills agents to work effectively with other employers or community organisations.

> '*An employer approached us directly and asked for help with giving their staff some Basic Skills training. The timing of this was awkward, however, as it came in the middle of [a strategic] re-contracting of responsibilities. Because of this it was about four months before anyone was able to go back to the employer, by which time the momentum had failed.*' (Intermediary)

> '*There's a problem [from some colleges] of capacity to deliver to the timescale we need. … they're isn't enough resources attached to co-ordination. The issue of responsiveness can put learners off.*' (Intermediary)

It may, however, reflect a broader need to clarify the channels of communication between brokers and the relevant representatives within the provider institutions.

'It seems that demand is there amongst employers, but supply can be problematic … colleges take a long time to get back to employers … perhaps referrals went to the Basic Skills Unit at the college, which is good at designing courses, but not at liasing with employers at a strategic level. [Brokers have] found that they still had to manage the relationship. Perhaps if the referral went to the Business Development Unit then they might be in a better position to respond to the employer.' (Strategic)

This theme is explored in more detail in Section 7.7.

6.2.2 Responding to the needs of learners

At a provider-individual client level, lead-time may relate to the time between identifying a potential learner and providing that individual with the opportunity to engage in learning. As one interviewer noted, '*People lose interest quickly if there is a wait*'. This was seen as being a particular problem with regards to assessment.

'The issues really faced [here] at the moment are probably around availability of the assessor for the assessment itself. There is too much of a wait, which is when you lose people.' (Intermediary)

'There are a number of others on the waiting list, waiting to see the outcome of the pilot. The thing with this is that the response has to be immediate, they want something right now − if it comes to us and we say, "well perhaps we'll have something for you in a few months," then that's no good.' (Intermediary)

In other situations, interviewees suggested that there may be issues of delivering provisions at a time as soon as individuals show an interest in taking up learning. This was particularly the case for workplace learning arrangements over the summer period:

'There's a capacity issue about having the tutors when we need them. The other issue is the summer break. We can't shut down the needs for July and August.' (Intermediary)

Similarly, if those who have engaged on courses find that there is too long a time period between gaining a skill and being offered the opportunity to test that skill, they may choose not to do so.

'You need to allow people to go through tests when they're ready … if you finish in April you want to take the test in April not wait until July.' (Intermediary)

6.3 Class sizes

The issue of minimum class sizes was also raised throughout the research, and was a particularly common theme among those responsible for prompting workplace learning. In order for a learning offering to be cost effective for providers, there is a

minimum number of learners needed per class, which was reported as being around eight. There are both logistical and dispositional issues to consider.

6.3.1 Recruiting a sufficient number of people per class is not always possible

The logistical issue is that it may be difficult to get eight people together at the same time. The logistical problems of recruiting a sufficient number of people for group teaching are particularly apparent in the case of providing workplace training for small establishments, or in situations where people are working on differing and changing shifts (even if it is possible to recruit eight people to a workplace course, other commitments may mean that fewer are able to attend on a regular basis.) These issues are examined in more detail in Section 7.5.

6.3.2 Learners may prefer smaller classes or one-to-one tuition

Some learners or potential learners have very low levels of self-esteem (see Section 3.4.6), and, therefore, may require a substantial amount of preparatory work and confidence building before they feel able to progress onto larger group based basic skills learning. In the focus groups, some people have suggested that they feel more comfortable if taught on a one-to-one basis, or in very small groups.

> *'With the one-to-ones that you have in there you don't mind sitting there and telling [the tutor] what your problems are … you're not under any pressure to rush through what you're being taught. You can say, "right this is today's lesson," and you can go through it a couple of times within your time limit.'* (Learner)

In some cases, the use of one-to-one tuition was seen by the learner as a stepping-stone to progressing onto group based learning.

> *'This place has given me the ideal opportunity to brush up my reading and writing so from here on in if I decide to go to college this place has given me the kick start that I needed … it helps in terms of making that first step … now if I go in there [college] and you put anything in front of me I will be able to read it, I will be able to understand it and hopefully, I'll be able to write something on my application form that someone else will understand.'* (Learner, Work-based)

6.4 Co-ordinating learner provisions

Several interviewees raised the suggestion that there is a need for greater co-ordination between the various agents responsible for identifying basic skills needs, or delivering basic skills provision. Two key messages emerged from the interviews.

6.4.1 An absence of co-ordination may alienate the learner

An example of how a lack of co-ordination may have negative consequences relates to the issue of assessments. One respondent highlighted how a lack of co-ordinations, and standardisation/ recognition, means that some individuals who have basic skills needs could undergo a basic skills assessment by several intermediaries.

> 'For a long time we've all known that an individual in Brighton can get an independent assessment done three or four times a year by different agencies — the probation service may have done one, at the same time Jobcentre Plus may be encouraging them to have an independent assessment. [They may] then refer them onto [name] college where there are some bits of the college that won't let anyone through their doors until they have conducted an assessment of their basic skills. It becomes ridiculous, especially for someone with an actual basic skills need, they are just going to switch off or wonder why they keep having to do this, especially if the results come out different.' (Intermediary)

6.4.2 Lack of co-ordination may confuse the intermediate level clients, or lead to other inefficiencies

A lack of co-ordination between providers may create a situation in which several organisations attempt to target the same market. As one interviewee noted:

> 'There is a need for joined up thinking so that there aren't a whole set of projects vying for the same market … . Employers may find it complicated to get lots of different things sent to them by different projects that are running at the same time.' (Intermediary)

In some cases, providers and intermediaries found that the introduction of one set of provisions was closely associated with a decline in the demand for other provisions that were aimed at the same market.

> 'We found that the ESOL Pathfinder work that was being carried out in the area led to a fall in community class numbers.' (Provider)

There have been successful attempts to address these issues. In Hastings, for example, several organisations were working independently to provide projects for the local NHS Trust. The Trust felt that there was a need for these provisions to be co-ordinated and now the sixth-form college and adult education providers pool their resources to deliver workplace learning to them.

6.5 Resource and capacity

Several interviewees suggested that they had a strong understanding of the barriers faced by their potential learners and they

could, theoretically, increase the numbers of learners they engage. The main problem, however, is that they have insufficient resources to do so.

6.5.1 Staffing issues

Some interviewees reported that qualified staff capacity and the scope for expansion are key issues.

> *'We could set up a lot of initiatives like a Basic Skills pathfinder but if you don't have the tutors where would you go?'* (Provider)

> *'There is a huge need for basic skills courses in Sussex but not necessarily a large number of tutors.'* (Intermediary)

These concerns were seen as particular issues with smaller private learning providers, who were unable to match the wages and salaries of their competitors.

> *'A classic example is that our best local small provider … the amount we pay them and the volume of business that we send them has only allowed them to pay for a basic skills tutor between £12 and £14k per year. The college down the road pays £20k and they get a golden hello. It means that for our providers the ability to keep their tutors is slim and the ability to take on new ones is nearly non-existent.'* (Intermediary)

> *'Capacity associated with taking provisions to the workplace is always going to be a killer as a lot of people won't want to deliver at 9pm. A lot of providers don't necessarily find it easy to deliver in the workplace.'* (Intermediary)

The current shortage of basic skills tutors could become more acute. A couple of our interviewees suggested that the new FENTO standards introduced in September 2003 (teaching basic skills will require a level 4 qualification, supporting learners will require level 2 to 3 depending on the setting) could also impact on the supply of available tutors.

6.5.2 Other resource issues

Other resource barriers, such as finding suitable classrooms, venues and computers during peak teaching times, can also restrict further expansion.

> *'We've reached saturation point (within the college campuses) and most of the rooms are fully booked.'* (Provider)

A couple of interviewees remarked that it was difficult to find funds to purchase items that may be used in basic skills education, such as computer equipment. This issue can be more of an issue among those responsible for supporting workplace learning:

'There is a huge problem with us trying to get IT equipment. We have the Union Learning Fund but if you have a local institution that doesn't fit into the national picture you don't get funded.' (Intermediary)

It should be noted, however, that the research did highlight other instances in which the funding of computers to teach basic skills in the workplace had been successfully secured.

6.6 Funding

Any discussion of provider level barriers, and their impact on the structural barriers faced by learners, cannot overlook the issue of funding. Funding for basic skills provisions comes from a number of sources in Sussex, including the European Social Fund (ESF), Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), and Sussex Learning and Skills Council. Each source may have a different set of criteria, to which the provider has to comply, and different durations of support. Among larger organisations, it is possible to secure core funding for basic skills work and find additional support for specific initiatives. These organisations have the resources to support the generation of new bids and the system works in their advantage.

'Most money is pretty short term — basic skills in community is for six months, LSC-FE is the longest at three years. There is a constant cycle of putting in bids. Provision is planned with the money that they are sure of, with other projects running as and when the funding can be found … . It generally works well.' (Intermediary)

There are, however, some situations in which the funding that is available works less well, or can promote less than efficient outcomes.

6.6.1 Some funding arrangements may conflict with the need to promote greater stability

Short-term funding and fixed contracts can create an unstable environment from which providers and intermediaries can operate. There may also be conflict between the desire to promote the 'professionalism' of basic skills teaching, through the new FENTO standards, and the continued recruitment of basic skills tutors on fixed or casual contracts.

'Difficulty comes with the fact that they can't be sure of getting funding in years to come so they are not able to create full-time or more permanent posts — all staff are sessional.' (Intermediary)

'You work on the assumption that you will get the funding again for the next period but that's not enough to give people posts. All teachers are hourly paid.' (Intermediary)

Secondly, funding difficulties and insecure employment prospects within the sector, can serve to de-motivate the staff responsible for developing basic skills.

'Very frustrating, and makes it impossible to plan when you worry that you will have lost key staff in the meantime. Same in all the regions — every area in same position, no area knows what the funding position will be because if one knew they would all know via the grapevine.' (Intermediary)

Finally, short-term funding, and the prevalence of short fixed-term contracts within the education sector in general, can encourage staff turnover. Staff turnover (due to contract terminations or staff leaving as a result of job insecurity) can mean that the relationships that they have developed with other intermediaries, and the skills they have acquired in their job, are lost. This may have an impact on the effectiveness of partnership working, for example, in the case of business development there is a requirement for key individuals to build long term trust with other employers.

In another case, a union learning representative gave an account of how he had previously relied upon a personal college contact for course information but since that contact had changed jobs was less able to obtain that information.

'Another one was [name] … he was a brilliant contact. He could advise you about what courses were on offer and from where but he's moved on … it's all so transient.' (Learning rep)

6.6.2 Engaging 'hard-to-reach' learners is resource intensive

A further issue (partly explored in Section 8.8) is that engaging hard-to-reach learners is usually more resource intensive than engaging the more traditional ones. If employers and unions demand flexibly delivered workplace learning, this is likely to require greater funding to pay for tutors working unsocial hours or their need to travel to multiple locations.

'… the railways project, they are looking for teachers to teach at all hours of the night and you have to pay them all sorts for that — if you want to take learning to the people you have to have teachers who are able to do that, and are able to teach, for example at Barnham station at 3am because that's when the shift changes over — you are demanding a huge amount of flexibility from teachers.' (Intermediary)

6.6.3 Understanding the funding environment

Finally, not every organisation will have the skills to bid for relevant funding, or have knowledge about where relevant funding exists. Identifying and successfully bidding for funding is itself a skill, and some organisations will have a greater capacity to do this than others.

It is difficult to judge the ability of other organisations to navigate their way through the various funding streams, but interviewees

expressed a range of opinions from it being '*relatively straight forward*' to '*the system of funding is like a minefield*'. Also, respondents could, at times, give conflicting accounts as to what funding was available. Several, for example, highlighted that Sussex LSC did not fund development time or equipment purchases, while a couple of accounts were offered that suggested that money was available. It is unclear whether these variances relate to organisations requiring more information of what is available, whether the organisation concerned was not eligible for that particular element of support, or whether the amount of support on offer insufficiently covered their needs.

6.6.4 Meeting funding requirements

In other instances, it was felt that meeting funding requirements were an issue. One respondent, for example, felt that inflexible funding requirements sometimes meant that provisions were fund driven rather learner driven.

> '*Inflexible funding can be an issue … it can lead to people to shape products to fit their funding rather than learner needs.*' (Strategic)

Another respondent suggested that the requirement by funders for providers to obtain personal information about the learner can act as a barrier to take-up. This was particularly the case when working with vulnerable groups, *eg* asylum seekers and homeless people.

> '*… a recent audit said that they need national insurance numbers for their ESOL learners … but people run a mile if you ask too many questions of them, particularly people on the fringes and they are the very people you want to draw in. Particular problem with those who are asylum seekers and are going through the process − asylum seekers are eligible but you might, for example get someone who says, "my friend is going along, can I go too?" and you don't want to give them the third degree, especially if they are willing to come along and do something about their language problems … There is a similar problem with the homeless … the homeless are homeless for a number of reasons and often don't want to reveal too much about themselves … they'll run a mile if you ask too many questions − they're trying to pull themselves up the ladder but shouldn't have to reveal what they don't want to.*' (Intermediary)

7. **Barriers to Workplace Learning**

We reported earlier that workplace basic skills teaching provides opportunities for people with basic skills needs who would be unlikely to engage in more 'traditional' basic skills education. The scope to identify and recruit new learners, offer learning that is of situational relevance, teach in a place of familiarity, schedule learning around work commitments and reduce the need for additional travel are just some of the many factors that work to its advantage. However, just as there are provider based structural barriers that affect the ability of providers to offer services that meet the demands of the learner, there also exist a series of workplace barriers that need to be negotiated in order for this form of learning to work effectively.

Many of the barriers that relate specifically to individual disposition (recognition, doubts about relevance, stigma *etc.*) will still exist in the workplace, but they are complemented by some additional ones:

- a failure among employers to recognise the need for (or benefits of) basic skills improvements in their workforce

- employer/employee mistrust surrounding the motivations for promoting basic skills improvements

- complex logistics surrounding the delivery of basic skills in the workplace

- a lack of commitment at an operational level to basic skills development

- difficulties related to staff release and paid time off for learning

- a need for training, time and resources among learning representatives

- a lack of suitable resources for learning in the workplace.

We now turn to the barriers faced by those engaged in workplace learning.

7.1 Employers' recognition

The extent to which employers understand the concept of basic skills, or the need for them in their workplace, can often be a barrier to provision. Several of the interviewees who had responsibility for promoting workplace basic skills commented that a lack of awareness among employers was a major barrier to promoting the basic skills agenda.

7.1.1 A problem of misconceptions

Once again, the problems of employers failing to recognise the potential for basic skills development in their workforce mirror the 'individual level' misconceptions identified in Chapter 3. In a similar way, as employees may erroneously associate the terms 'basic skills', 'literacy' and 'numeracy' simply to cover an elementary ability to read, communicate in written form or apply basic arithmetic, so too will employers. Furthermore, as people who have 'basic skills' needs are often stereotyped (as people who have no qualifications or have learning disabilities *etc.*) employers can take the view that their 'better educated' workforce have no such needs.

> *'Education of managers is critical in changing their attitudes to basic skills.'* (Intermediary)

Perhaps as a consequence of the failure among some employers to understand the issues, one interviewee highlighted a response that was received when employers were approached about workplace basic skills provisions as being, '*we don't have any basic skills problems here*'. In other instances, where employers are not convinced about the business benefits of upskilling their workforce, there may also be a reluctance to train.

> *'… the employer doesn't believe that upgrading basic skills would progress people in their jobs so they are reluctant to give people time off … they'd much rather they did it in their own time.'* (Strategic)

7.1.2 Differences by type of establishments

A lack of recognition, and willingness to take action, on basic skills issues was seen as being particularly strong among private companies, non-unionised companies, companies without a 'culture of learning' and small and medium sized enterprises. Although the research has covered a number of examples in which 'difficult to reach' organisations have engaged in basic skills support, these examples were often related to the provision of ESOL, a need which may be easier for the employer to 'identify'.

The difficulties of gaining entry into non-unionised workplaces, private companies and small and medium sized enterprises has

meant that at least one interviewee conceded that a lot of their efforts have concentrated on those organisations that are the most supportive to staff development issues.

> 'We've essentially got through to the ones that have been most receptive to the agenda … public sector organisations, large organisations, unionised organisations … There will be a limit to how many of these types of organisations we can target and the private SMEs are going to be a different prospect entirely.' (Strategic)

7.2 Poor employment relations

The ability to promote basic skills in the workplace cannot be viewed in isolation of the general issues of labour relations within these organisations. In many workplaces, a poor history of labour relations, and a lack of a learning culture, will also act as barriers to successful engagement and delivery. Three related barriers were identified by our respondents.

7.2.1 The belief that training employees will encourage them to leave for better jobs

The fear that offering employees training will encourage them to leave for better employment is not solely restricted to the issue of teaching basic skills. However, interviewees noted that many unskilled jobs, which employed people with no qualifications and very low levels of basic skills, were often low paid and involved poor working conditions. Consequently, these types of employers suffer from problems associated with high labour turnover and difficulties in recruitment. This was seen as particularly being the case within Sussex over recent years, given its tight labour market conditions, and the relatively low levels of unemployment. Within this context, some interviewees felt that employers held the view that, if their staff are offered the opportunity to acquire new skills they would seek alternative employment once these skills have been secured.

7.2.2 The belief that basic skills is just a way of weeding out people for redundancy

Employees are more likely to use coping strategies than admit to their employer that they have any fundamental problems with literacy or numeracy, due to fear of negative consequences, *ie* that they will be sacked or first in line for redundancy. This may especially be the case where the employee in question is expected to have these skills as part of their job:

> 'There is a huge issue of job security. People whose job it is to take money and who can't add or subtract will fear losing their jobs.' (Intermediary)

The irony is that both employers and employees associate basic skills with different aspects of labour turnover; this was succinctly summarised by one union learning representative:

'… the employees think that basic skills is just a trick to find people for redundancy … the employers on the other hand see [basic skills] as something that, once done, would encourage them to leave.' (Intermediary)

Together, mutual mistrust concerning the reasons for basic skills development, and a lack of awareness about its development were seen as major barriers to promoting such learning within some organisations.

7.2.3 Lack of communication between employers and employees

A third factor, partly linked with issues of mistrust, relates to the hierarchical nature of some organisations. In a few instances, interviewees reported that there was a general lack of communication between management and employees, and this lack of communication meant that management were not always best placed to identify the needs of their staff. As one interviewee, involved in organising workplace learning, noted:

'It is highly unlikely that (the employees) talk to managers about anything … let alone development opportunities.' (Intermediary)

In these situations, identifying the development needs of the employees requires improvements in communication and trust between management and employees, or the intervention of other intermediaries, such as employee/union learning representatives.

7.3 Operational management

Several interviewees argued that resistance to promoting skills and development often exists at an operational level, even if support exists for basic skills development at the senior management level.

'In terms of barriers, middle managers seem to be the real problem – the top people … CEOs and directors like to be seen to promote these things.' (Intermediary)

'Managers aren't always particularly understanding. Middle managers stop them [taking up basic skills courses], not senior ones.' (Intermediary)

The reasons for a lack of commitment among some operational managers were seen to be twofold. Firstly, operational (line) managers will often have different sets of objectives and perspectives associated with the resource implications of workplace learning. Secondly, operational managers may themselves have

basic skills needs and feel threatened or undermined by other staff pursuing such development.

7.3.1 Conflicting operational targets

Several respondents responsible for promoting workplace learning reported a tension between productivity targets and learning, and faced with this, productivity will often be prioritised over learning, as one respondent commented:

> *'senior management may see the value in promoting staff development, while the people on the ground, on the other hand have different targets, and a different set of criteria, to meet.'* (Intermediary)

In addition, operational managers may not necessarily view training and development as a motivator, nor see its relevance in promoting productivity or improving workforce retention.

> *'Operational managers are the greatest barriers due to release time and a fear that they wouldn't be able to retain people once trained. They don't see it as being a motivator. This isn't unique to basic skills though.'* (Intermediary)

Another interviewee, responsible for organising workplace learning commented that:

> *'Some management have the idea that you should just do your hours, (learning) is not considered to be a motivator.'* (Intermediary)

7.3.2 Basic skills needs among managers and supervisors

In some instances, interviewees felt that lack of support related to operational managers/supervisors requiring basic skills support themselves. In these instances, the manager or supervisor may feel threatened by the personal development of other employees, or if they do not see the relevance of developing higher levels of basic skills in their own lives, may not recognise the importance of promoting similar development among others.

> *'There's quite a few unsupportive line managers, who may feel that they too are under threat or have their own learning issues.'* (Intermediary)

> *'Barriers may also differ depending on whom you talk to. People who are over promoted in occupations, a potential issue in the South East due to low unemployment, won't want to admit it to their colleagues or employer. They certainly won't want their employer to know.'* (Intermediary)

The motives held by line managers who are reluctant to promote basic skills are never going to be known with certainty and the views of some respondents need to be seen within this context. However, as the Skills for Life Survey has shown, there are

considerable basic skills needs among people holding lower managerial responsibilities, and the implications that these needs may have on the willingness of people to promote basic skills in the workplace should not be overlooked.

7.4 Organising staff release

There can be disagreement between the employer and employees (or employee representatives) concerning whether basic skills teaching should take place during work time or around work time. The issue of staff release can be seen as an obstacle among employers and a necessity among employees.

7.4.1 Employers' perspective

From the employers' perspective, releasing staff for learning during work time may raise concerns over costs of covering that employee's shift, the loss of labour for which they have paid, or the impact on production. In some instances, for example, where an employee works in part of a small team, taking an employee away from that team can have an effect on output that goes beyond the productivity of a single individual. In addition, in circumstances in which a person works from multiple locations, the loss of an individual for training purposes could involve having to cover for that person, not only for the duration of the tuition, but also for the time required to travel to and from the place of teaching; in some cases this may mean that the employer will need to find cover for the entire shift.

> *'There are some practical issues. People are on shift work and work in gangs — taking people out means that you lose them for a day or half a day.'* (Intermediary)

> *'Quite often there is an issue of releasing people. People don't turn up on the day and managers have a, "we can't cope without them attitude".'* (Intermediary)

Staff release was seen as being of particular issue among small and medium sized enterprises, who are concerned with the cost of losing employees, and within occupations that were considered operationally critical.

> *'SMEs may not be able to lose people … and with them there may also be an issue about who pays the bill … with larger companies it may be the case of them saying, "oh my god, how many hours is that".'* (Strategic)

> *'We're a lot more expendable, so getting time off to study would be less of a problem for us. If you wanted to get time off and you were [another occupation] there would be a much bigger problem. You can't really run anything without them.'* (Non-learner)

Within many workplaces around Sussex, staff shortages, and the inability to find staff to cover for those engaged in learning, were also seen as the major barrier to staff release.

'A particular issue in the South East is that you can't employ people to fill in at short notice.' (Strategic)

'In [one organisation] because of staff shortages, even if staff have agreed release they still can't necessarily get the time off.' (Intermediary)

'A big issue is that there are not currently the number of people in post to deliver the service needed as it is, and so there is not the capacity to release people for training.' (Intermediary)

The problems associated with staff shortages are not always reflected in an unwillingness of managers to allow people to have time off. In some instances, employees may choose not to take the time that they have agreed with their managers because of the difficulties in finding cover, or peer pressure associated with forcing others to cover for them.

'I know that when other people have to cover for those who are off this can put peer pressure on them not to attend.' (Intermediary)

It was, therefore, suggested that there was a need to take into account these problems in the delivery of workplace provisions. At times this meant the need to place people in waiting lists to access learning.

'It's a case of setting modest targets so that it doesn't cause congestion problems.' (Intermediary)

7.4.2 Employee perspectives

From the employee/employee representative perspective, there may be great reluctance to engage in workplace learning outside work time. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, if the provisions are closely aligned to employer needs, *eg* basic skills embedded within the tasks that the workers perform as part of their jobs, their direct job-related relevance may appeal to the employers. However, employees may view this as work-related training, and question why such development should occur during their own time.

'When it comes to workplace learning … employers won't, or are reluctant to, give up work time … . Employees then say, "why should I give up my own time if it is directly relevant to my work?"' (Provider)

Secondly, some respondents may believe that the problems associated with staff cover are not insurmountable and are usually dealt with in other emergencies.

'They seem to manage to cover for people immediately when there's sickness, why should it be so impossible to do so when a person is taking some time out for training and they've had weeks or months of notice?' (Intermediary)

Thirdly, it has been suggested that employees will often feel unwilling to take on learning after a long work shift. People with very low levels of basic skills, who are engaged in physically demanding employment, may not find it easy to switch from a day's work to the mentally demanding task of improving their basic skills. As one learning representative noted:

'A lot people get up at 5am and start their shift at 6 … they don't finish work until 2pm … no-one can then expect them to sit in a classroom for an hour or so and do some very difficult brain work after all that. The work we do here takes it out of you physically and going on a course takes it out on you mentally.' (Intermediary)

The ability to study during work time was seen as an incentive to participate in learning, and could act as a motivator, especially among those who had traditionally seen education as being tangential to their lives.

'… paid time off work would encourage people to go back to learning, as money is very important to people and if you are going to lose money by going back into education then you are not going to do it.' (Intermediary)

7.5 Logistics

The logistics that need to be considered when providing workplace learning are likely to be considerably greater than that associated with providing learning in traditional classroom settings. There may be specific problems concerning the locations used for teaching, and the timing of such teaching.

7.5.1 Finding suitable locations

In terms of location, many workplaces offer less than ideal environments to hold teaching sessions. The problem of finding suitable space may be particularly acute among small enterprises or open plan offices. While in other cases, rural settings or workplaces on industrial sites may be too far away from off-site facilities for teaching outside work to be practical.

'Employers may not have space for learning centres; rural areas and industrial estates can be a bit out of the way.' (Intermediary)

In some instances, this may lead to the tutor being forced to offer teaching in spaces that are ill equipped for such purposes (for example, in spare bedrooms at nursing homes, or in unheated storage rooms *etc.*). The use of inadequate locations for teaching,

was seen as giving the 'wrong impression' about the value that was being placed on the employee's development.

In other circumstances, it may be more than the quality of the teaching room that is the problem. Interviewees reported that it was important to find a room that was seen as being separate from their immediate locality of work. If the teaching is taking place in a room that is not sufficiently detached from the work environment, the employee may find themselves 'filling-in' by taking on work-related tasks during their teaching session.

> *'We do a lot of work with restaurants and we've found that delivery in the restaurants isn't that good an idea … it's not the right environment and people get pulled away.'* (Provider)

Finally, in one case, the interviewee reported a conflict between the need for ease of access, which would suggest that the most suitable location for a learning centre is on the employer's premises, and the need for confidentiality, which would make a location *near* the employer's premises more suitable. In that example, a desire for discretion among some learners has meant that provisions are offered in multiple locations.

7.5.2 Coping with shifts

A second logistical issue that needs to be addressed in workplace learning is that of timing. As has been noted, people with very low level basic skills may be engaged in employment activities that are characterised by long hours, variable shifts and/or working unsociable hours. In some sectors, such as the social care sector, low pay may also force employees to seek second jobs, making it difficult for providers to offer courses at the end of shifts.

> *'With the college courses we do 'earlies' and 'lates' [shifts] so it's impossible. I was thinking of doing a computing course at Sussex Downs College but would have had to have missed every other week … you couldn't go to college, you couldn't even go to night school.'* (Non-learner)

In workplaces that involve shift-work, it may be impossible to find a time that all employees can attend. Indeed, as employees may be working on flexible and rotating shifts, it is not guaranteed that the same employee can attend the same courses each week.

Regularly changing shifts may impact upon retention as well as participation.

> *'We have a good retention rate but attendance is another thing … for example, in the workplace you have people varying their shifts … but retention isn't a problem … it takes you so long to make the decision to come, once you've made that decision you tend to stay.'* (Provider)

7.6 Resources for learning representatives

Union learning representatives are potentially one of the best routes into identifying people who could benefit from basic skills learning, but for unions to operate to their full potential, they require sufficient support from employers and other agencies, in terms of training, resources and time to perform their duties. In at least one organisation in Sussex, the basic skills programmes delivered in that workplace, had benefited from the employment of a dedicated learning co-ordinator.

If insufficient resources are allocated to learning reps, they may be unable to take advantage of the new learning opportunities or promote earning effectively in their workplace.

'Issue of TU branches not realising that this is a new opportunity. Learning reps tend to be people who have not had union officer experience. If the information is not coming through the branches it can be a bottleneck.' (Intermediary)

7.7 Workplace brokerage issues

The issue of brokering relationships between employment organisations and training providers was also seen as a process that faced a series of difficulties and constraints.

7.7.1 Gaining appropriate access

Intermediaries involved in developing workplace learning may find that negotiating access to the managers within organisations who have responsibility for promoting workplace training can be difficult. This was seen as particularly being the case in companies that work at both a national and regional level:

'A real problem is that some companies work on a local basis even though they're a national company. It can be difficult to find the person responsible. We've been waiting to get moving on [a major employer] for three years, for instance.' (Intermediary)

7.7.2 Need for brokering skills

One respondent raised the issue of the skills required to carry out brokering work. Brokering was seen as marketing activity, which required a different skills set than that which may be held by people employed in the teaching profession.

'Brokerage is a difficult thing to do … tutors don't necessarily make good brokers. You're essentially selling something to employers.' (Intermediary)

7.7.3 Ensuring wider communication

Another concern that had been reported was that difficulties in communication can be created when workplace training brokers approach employers but fail to communicate this to the union learning representative, or employee representatives, that are in operation within the organisation. Although this was not seen as an issue that has come up specifically within Sussex, it was suggested that encouraging brokers to conform to a protocol would help relations between employee organisations and other agents.

8. Addressing the Barriers

In the preceding sections of the report we have highlighted a series of disposition-related, practical, resource and structural barriers to participation in basic skills learning. We now conclude by summarising the proposals that have been made concerning how the barriers to basic skills learning can be addressed. As in the case of the earlier sections, the focus here is on measures that can be implemented to tackle the barriers faced by potential learners at a personal or structural level. There may also be issues that need to be addressed at a more strategic level (for example, related to building of strategic level partnership or the future role of the Pan-Sussex Skills for Life Development Centre). However, as these strategic level issues were not the primary focus of the research, they are not considered in this section.

Our focus here is primarily on issues related to implementation. Some of these proposals relate to activities that are currently being promoted in Sussex, while other suggestions relate to common observations that have been made regarding how the current basic skills arrangements can be improved:

- development of outreach provisions (*eg* community-based initiative, family learning and workplace learning)

- re-branding basic skills

- use of embedded courses

- use of flexible provisions (roll-on/roll-off and mixed group learning)

- workshops and short courses

- targeted learner support provisions

- improved promotion of basic skills and basic skills awareness.

The remainder of this section considers the issues surrounding each of these interventions in more depth.

8.1 Intermediaries and outreach

Although still recognising the importance of 'traditionally' delivered provisions (*eg* those delivered on a college campus setting), many providers within Sussex also highlighted the

benefits of providing services outside those learning settings, or working in partnership with other organisations who have closer contact with potential learners. In particular, providers in Sussex have already been successful in developing relationships with government institutions, including community and voluntary groups (*eg* sports clubs and religious organisations), and in promoting workplace and family learning (*eg* through links with employment organisations, school and childcare groups). Providers who have worked with intermediaries, or who have developed outreach provisions, report a number of advantages.

8.1.1 Improved identification and recruitment of non-learners

A key advantage held by intermediary organisations is that they may often be better placed to identify and recruit new (and potentially hard-to-reach) learners, as they are more likely to actually come into contact with these people and be aware of their specific needs. Working with intermediary groups can, therefore, allow providers to communicate more effectively with a large audience than can be achieved through other forms of promotion. One provider compared the benefits that going directly to an intermediary, in this case an employer, had over conducting general public advertising.

> *'You could advertise to your heart's content and still not get anyone … On the other hand, if I were to go to [a local employer] I could probably pick up five hundred learners in an afternoon.'* (Provider)

The roles of family and social support intermediaries were also seen as an important.

> *'Families with learning needs won't come because of a leaflet. Families are recruited constantly through contacts such as Playlink.'* (Intermediary). (Playlink is a charity that was designed to promote language development, concentration, social skills and independent activity, and also to strengthen family life and prevent breakdown.)

> *'I have some help, I have a support worker, she suggested that I go to the glassworks, [the provider] runs a group at the glassworks, and I said I don't want to do it there, I'd rather come to college and do it with other people. [It was about] facing my fears.'* (Learner)

8.1.2 Learners may feel more comfortable

The second benefit of working through (non-FE) intermediaries is that the potential learner may feel more comfortable. There may, for example, be a better degree of trust between these intermediaries and potential learners.

> *'People are intimidated by members of an institution but community workers are more trusted.'* (Provider)

Familiarity is also important. Learning (in community groups or the workplace *etc.*) takes place with other people who the learners know, and in surroundings with which they are familiar. A couple of people who did not feel able to take up college-based learning, due to a lack of confidence, suggested that participating in workplace learning would be different.

> *'If you go to a college you're going to be in a room full of strangers, so if you have some sort of learning difficulty you're going to feel uncomfortable aren't you? … . You'll sit there and you'll feel a bit dubious about putting your hand up and saying I don't understand this … but when you're with people you know you can ask and they'll talk you through it … those are some of the advantages.'*
> (Workplace Learner)

> *'A lot of the people who do the Maths and English courses here wouldn't do it outside … in a college … it's full of strangers. Here they're with people they know. There is a comfort zone.'*
> (Workplace Learner)

An additional benefit of teaching groups of learners who are familiar with one another from a non-learning context is that they may feel more comfortable with seeking personal support from their friends or colleagues. As one workplace learner commented:

> *'You can take letters in here and people will help you to read them, but if you go to a normal college they probably won't even give you the time of day because they don't know you.'* (Workplace Learner)

8.1.3 It can help reduce the need for additional resources

The third factor is that community or workplace learning can reduce the need for learners to take on additional travel, or find additional childcare provisions. Examples found in the research include '*Keeping up with the Children*' type courses which were held at schools before school closing time, thus reducing the need for parents to make additional journeys or find out of school childcare support. On interviewee, for example, who was working as a teaching assistant recalled how her employer offered her basic literacy and numeracy courses as part of her induction. As the course took place during school time, and transport was provided by the employer, she did not have childcare and transport issues that had previously prevented her from undertaking such learning.

> *'I went on a combined literacy and numeracy course when I started working as a teaching assistant … it was a basic general course for teaching assistants … because it was held during school time my child was at school and so that wasn't a problem, plus the school provided transport for us to get there as it was held in Burgess Hill.'*
> (Ex-learner)

There may also be benefits from the provider's perspective, as the delivery of provisions outside the workplace may reduce the need

for additional room capacity within the institutions of further education institutions themselves.

8.2 Re-branding basic skills

The term 'basic skills' was considered to be a barrier to its promotion due to its negative connotations, association with 'simplicity' and stigma. In many cases, providers or intermediaries preferred to use alternative phrases to promote literacy and numeracy (the most popular of which was 'Skills for Life').

> *'The term basic skills itself doesn't always help. It conveys the wrong impression. It sounds like it is just about learning to read or learning how to count. It suggests that these skills are … well … basic. We call it skills for life or life skills here.'* (Intermediary)

Although the use of alternative phrasing may help to convey a more appropriate and relevant perception of these courses, the ability to change opinions through labelling will take time. In one focus group, for example, where the intermediary had earlier suggested that the term basic skills was not used to promote literacy and numeracy, the term 'basic skills' was in common usage among those that the courses was trying to attract. This problem may exist because there is a lack of consistency in the use of more suitable phrasing, so despite all intentions, the term 'basic skills' is still relied heavily upon. As one intermediary noted:

> *'I think 'life skills' is better or (for assessment purposes) 'skills audit' … the basic skill term is terrible. I've tried numerous ways of encouraging staff to use any other term they like. But the bottom line is that the customer gets a letter from us saying you are going to attend a basic skills course.'* (Intermediary)

The problems concerning the negative associations that exist with the term 'basic skills' also exists with the terms 'literacy' and 'numeracy', which (as we have seen in Chapter 2) often gets mistaken as relating simply to the ability to read and write, or perform arithmetic. None of the non-learners who had been interviewed in the focus groups, for example, associated basic skills learning with something that offered intermediate (level 2) skills. Any re-branding of the 'basic skills', especially at level 2, should perhaps convey the fact that it is an intermediate and not elementary level skill or qualification.

8.3 Embedded basic skills

One of the most popular approaches to attracting new learners is to embed basic skills into other leisure or work-related courses, so that these skills are developed in the context of another course or activity. In some instances, the idea behind this approach is to deliver basic skills through stealth, and to make it a part of a wider learning process. There may, however, be some practical difficulties

in delivering such courses, and there may be difficulties in securing funding, which will limit the scope for innovation.

> *'Embedded basic skills courses can be tricky to run — when it comes to trying to deliver, for example, a yoga course with basic skills embedded in it … you need to find both a yoga teacher and a basic skills teacher, and co-ordinate the organising for them both to be present.'* (Strategic)

Despite these limitations, embedded courses have a number of advantages:

● reduces stigma

● assessment through stealth

● widens interest, especially among hard-to-reach groups

● offers the opportunity for other 'practical' outcomes

● encourages engagement with employers.

It was beyond the scope of the project to compare the effectiveness of different models of embedded basic skills provisions, and it may be the case that different models of embedded basic skills courses will have different advantages or practical constraints. However, some of the general advantages that were noted by respondents are explored below.

8.3.1 Reducing stigma

Embedded courses may not suffer from the same problems of stigma or negative connotations, which could put people off participating in stand-alone basics courses.

> *'I think the lead programmes manager and myself would get rid of all the basic skills training and have all of it fully embedded in one or other of our vocational or motivational training programmes.'*
> (Intermediary)

In a workplace setting, embedding basic skills in other courses, such as those that cover computer skills, is regarded as a way that employees could take up learning without declaring themselves as having basic skills needs.

8.3.2 Assessment through stealth

Reducing stigma is also important in the assessment process. Embedding basic skills into other courses may enable providers to assess the needs of potential learners, without having to ask them to take a 'basic skills' test. One interviewee felt that a difficulty with approaching people, and then trying to encourage them to take a 'basic skills' assessment, was that it was questioning the intelligence. Instead, by embedding basic skills in a wider skills audit, it was possible to assess issues of literacy and numeracy in the wider context of job skills:

'(Our) leaflet comes in useful because it's all about skills to do a job as opposed to basic skills — we find that very helpful because we can talk about doing the job, and you might come across an area where it's clear that they have a need and that's where it shows … . It's a real art of camouflage.' (Intermediary)

8.3.3 Widening interest

Embedding basic skills into other courses may attract hard-to-reach groups (such as young people and men) into learning, who would not have been interested in taking up a stand-alone basic skills course.

'If we build in basic skills training with something else then motivation is greater. One example is the training at the football ground. Because you are linking it to something young people are interested in, basic skills is part of that training. If you can get rid of the term basic skills and have it through a medium that is interesting then you will get people interested.' (Intermediary)

'We're working through the LEA to find out what the barriers are for men and have set up a project 'On four wheels' aimed at car enthusiasts.' (Intermediary)

'… course about to start about how your 'phone works, and how to use text messaging, with embedded BS training, as means of getting young people, particularly young men, engaging them with what they do all day. We are considering making it a multi-generational thing where the young people show older people how it works. The format and participants to be decided — not happened yet — but it will probably be a short course/workshop to be held in a local cafe in Bognor Regis.' (Intermediary)

One provider who was interviewed, however, stressed that the benefits of using embedded course to widen participation should not be over-stated. In some instance, the interviewee argued, courses that are designed to attract new learners though innovation, end up attracting the same types of people that the more traditional stand-alone courses would have attracted anyway.

8.3.4 Offering practical outcomes

For many non-learners, the benefits of improving basic skills may be too abstract a goal to encourage participation (EBSN, 2002). An advantage of embedding basic skills into other courses is that the courses lead to practical outcomes, with which the learner can more readily identify. Practical outcomes were seen as being particularly important among non-learners. The majority of the non-learners, who had suggested that they would be interested in some form of non-basic skills learning, were interested in courses that had a practical purpose. The general view held by many non-learners (who were not economically inactive due to ill-heath or retired) was that they had busy schedules (looking after the family

or working etc), and so they could not see the relevance of taking up courses for a purely leisure related purpose.

Some practical outcomes attempt to contextualise a basic skill so that it seems relevant to the learner, while in other instances practical outcomes are seen as an additional hook into learning.

An example of a course that contextualised numeracy was one covering financial literacy.

> 'We are currently piloting basic skills embedded in financial literacy. It differs from numeracy as financial literacy covers things such as everyday budgeting, insurance, managing your bank, whereas, numeracy might be something like measuring for DIY. There is clearly an overlap, as there is a lot of budgeting in numeracy too … but you don't get many people in for numeracy itself, as people feel they can cope quite well without the skills.' (Intermediary)

In another instance, courses encouraged people to attend through offering other outcomes in addition to gaining basic skills. A course targeting homeless people, for example, integrated basic skills into cookery.

> 'A popular class is embedded cookery classes for the homeless as they also get a meal at the end of it … it is going to be running out of another centre, and they'll each receive a health and hygiene certificate.' (Intermediary)

Other courses that were seen as having practical outcomes among non-learners, who were not interested in taking up literacy or numeracy courses, include foreign languages and courses related to performing their jobs (eg dealing with public and law).

Information technology

The most common suggestion, which is also supported by the focus group and interview evidence among non-learners, is that offering people courses on Information Technology (eg using computers, email, the Internet and text messaging), can be used as a major hook into encouraging people to take up learning.

> 'ICT is a big hook so they put laptops in, and got the tutors to sit down and open the computer and put something interesting on it and get talking to someone who says, "that looks good, I'll have a go at that," and he talks to his mate etc.' (Intermediary)

> 'IT is a good hook for [basic skills] … they can just say that they're doing an IT course and there is less of a stigma attached to that … there is also scope to use interactive material and multi-media, which can make the whole process of learning a lot more stimulating.' (Provider)

People with low levels of basic skills often reported an interest in improving their computer skills, or learning about computers in general, even if they did not report an interest in taking up specific numeracy or literacy-based courses.

8.3.5 Encouraging employers

In order to encourage employers to take up basic skills courses it is often necessary to demonstrate the work-related benefits. Consequently, courses tend to focus on work skills, or health and safety.

> *'Two of the popular types of courses with employers are those that deal with IT or 'health and safety' … other courses include bite sized courses on report writing and employability skills.'* (Strategic)

> *'Health and safety is a good way of encouraging employers to take up courses.'* (Intermediary)

> *'We have people working with SMEs who have embedded level 1 basic skills into a book-keeping course.'* (Strategic)

8.4 Flexible provisions

Flexibility in delivery was seen as crucial in attracting hard-to-reach learners, particularly those who are working long hours or involved in shift work. Two forms of flexibility were roll-on/roll-off provisions (including open learning centres) and mixed group classes.

8.4.1 Roll-on/roll-off provision

Roll-on/roll-off provisions enable learners to start whenever they are ready and progress at their own pace. They do not have to wait for courses to start or finish. This overcomes the barrier of the loss of motivation, when potential learners are not able to start learning as they present themselves, and provides flexibility for their progression.

> *'For me, I was living in Europe for a while and before I came back to Chichester I found out about the courses they did and the timing fitted in perfectly, so I came back from Spain on the Sunday and started the course on the Monday. I was offered to go back abroad but I've turned it down. For me the timing was perfect as I don't have anything on now until June, July.'* (Learner)

In other situations, an open learning centre may offer a place of self-study for more confident learners, provide equipment and material to assist learning, and also allow learners to book one-to-one support with tutors at times that are convenient for them.

> *'We've some roll-on/roll-off courses with the NHS. Apart from the time flexibility that this allows … it also enables people to just pick up the bits they want to refresh or develop … the bits in their spiky profile like comprehension … they've funded learning centres … open as many hours as they can do, where learners can book tutor time. In a 24 hour workplace you have to be prepared for one-on-one learning or groups of three … or for people to go there in drips and drabs.'* (Intermediary)

8.4.2 Mixed group learning

A consequence of roll-on/roll-off provision is that provision needs to be flexible enough to provide learning to mixed groups, that is to say people with different starting points and different specific basic skills profiles. Students engaged in mixed group learning were usually very positive about its benefits.

> *'we are different levels of learning but it is framed at … how can I say it? It is not intimidating for us. When I was at school I was just left at the back of the room and nobody wanted to know.'* (Learner)

> *'The tutors in [this course] know how to find the best in people and what makes them tick, so how you get something explained may be different to how I get something explained.'* (Learner)

> *'In literacy we are all the same level, there is a lower level in a different classroom but with numeracy it is something where we all do different work. We help each other.'* (Learner)

8.5 Workshops and short courses

Short courses were seen as a way of enticing employers, employees and other potential students in learning, as they required minimal commitment and were less disruptive. They were often seen as a way of introducing learners to what they might gain from learning, and to start to build their confidence and raise their aspirations. For employers, short courses are a low-risk way for them to get involved, and provide evidence to persuade them to get more involved.

> *'When I left school, I came to Chichester college to do my taster, and I thought yeah, I'll come and do it. I did a two year course.'* (Learner)

In many cases, the courses may not relate to basic skills at all. Instead, the intention is to bring learning to the forefront of people's attention, and to influence the negative perceptions that people who have been disengaged from learning have about educational institutions.

> *'The college is currently working on an SRB5 project and found a number of people in two wards who didn't want to be involved in skills for life … the idea was to find things that they would be interested in … activities such as funding a Christmas dinner or producing CDs … the idea is to provide a friendly face, so when they do feel that they want to engage in learning they know who we are.'* (Intermediary)

> *'The feedback we get from the projects is that once you've given people a taste for learning they want more and more.'* (Provider)

However, the ability of short courses to improve basic skills are not be overstated. In some instances, courses have been too short to deliver success.

'The short programme was such a flop at four weeks. At the start, because it was so short, it was easy to sell attendance to it. Its ability to actually deliver anything to the people willing to attend was a different matter, and it meant that it didn't produce the results we needed. Take up is therefore poor. Where doubt is identified it's usually for customers who need much more than just four weeks training, so the course didn't work very well. It was extended to eight weeks recently and we'll see how that goes.' (Intermediary)

There may be a difference between those who are brushing up on skills and those learning basic skills for the first time. Among those who are learning new skills from a low level of prior attainment it may be unrealistic to expect fast progression on courses of short duration. As another interviewee noted.

'You can't just stick a course on for 12 weeks and expect everyone to be competent … it took us years to learn what's being taught.' (Provider)

8.6 Learner support arrangements

As we have already noted, the costs (or perceived costs) associated with learning can be a barrier to participation. Even though basic skills courses are offered with full fee remission, the cost of transport, childcare and books and equipment associated with participation may discourage some individuals from participation, especially if they are on a low income. Dewson *et al.*, (2003) has highlighted that mature students are more likely to be concerned with planning for the costs of learning than students entering education from school. Furthermore, receiving support to cover the costs of learning is seen by further education institutions as an effective way of promoting participation and improving retention. It may, therefore, be necessary to ensure that basic skills students are eligible for learner support funding, and to ensure that potential learners are adequately informed of the financial support that they could receive.

Under the Learner Support Arrangements Funding Guidance for 2004/5, **'Those taking programmes where the primary learning goal is adult basic education or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)'** and **'Students aged 19+ without a level 2 qualification'** have been identified as being priority targets for learner support funding. The other key target groups (identified by the Funding Guidance) and which are also likely to be associated with having a large proportion of adults with high levels of basic skills needs were:

- students who are economically/socially disadvantaged, disabled, medically ill and/or have learning difficulties who need support with transport, childcare or other associated learning costs

- unemployed people receiving job seekers allowance (JSA)

- lone parents

- students on low incomes or from low-income families, identified by appropriate means-testing

- those who have been in care, on probation, or are young parents, or otherwise considered to be at risk.

It may be appropriate to extend the provision of learner support beyond covering the cost of childcare or travel reimbursements. In some instances, further education institutions may opt to provide on-site crèche facilities, or subsidies arrangements with local transport companies. In rural areas, such as in the Chichester district, 'dial-a-ride' services were able to offer a cheaper alternative to travellers than taxis, and were considered considerably more convenient than the bus service.

8.7 The role of key motivators

A point that came across very strongly in many of the interviews was that the promotion of basic skills required more than simply the right structures to be in place. There are other factors that are less tangible but as important. The biggest contributors to the success of some provisions were often seen as the enthusiasm and commitment of key individuals.

A couple of intermediaries, for example, suggested that the success of their courses came down to individual tutors, their skills and approachability:

> *'I think that it's really down to the individual … that makes the difference, you can have the same provider in different areas but they could both be very different, it's down to the individual.'*
> (Intermediary)

> *'We've had people in the past who have come here and sat with the desk as their barrier. But then you get some really good tutors who know how to communicate with their students … (for example) it may be a stereotype, but they come in with a copy of 'The Sun' under their arm.'*
> (Intermediary)

In other cases, people commenting on the success of their workplace provisions would stress the importance of individual personalities, such as tutors, union reps, learning co-ordinators and employers.

8.8 Focusing on the individual

There were numerous examples of providers offering very individualised support to students, in order to tackle some of the dispositional barriers that these people may have faced. The individual support provided to learners, had often been the decisive factor in the take up of learning.

'And I found that when I came for my interview here, [the basic skills co-ordinator] … was very helpful … she actually came to my home for my interview, and did like an assessment with me, and found out what my grades were and how good I was … 'cos I was too scared to come to college.' (Learner)

'I applied [at another institution] but I didn't like the look of it … When I went there I met this lady in a small poky room, and we just had a chat, and she said, "this is what you're gonna do," not, "lets have a look at what grades you've got, lets put you on to this, lets have a look," it was like, "this is what you're gonna do, this is all we can offer you." … Whereas, I came here, I met many people from all different departments, and they'd say OK I'm here, but you don't need me, so I met someone else and they'd say Ok this is what grades you've got, you could do this course, that course, and they basically sat down and, were more helpful. They listened to what you wanted to do and basically were more polite. They were much more reassuring, they seemed to have your interests at heart.' (Learner)

'To me the college has always been the same … it opens itself up to you, it treats each individual as a person, it doesn't matter if you can't see, you can't talk, you can't walk, if you've got emotional problems, it doesn't matter. They treat you as a person.' (Learner)

'My neighbour did basic English up at [name] college and I was interested in it, I thought I might go with her and I had to 'phone up and I just felt they weren't interested in having me come along, I didn't feel welcome, no. Here you come in and everyone says hello, do you know what I mean? It's like a home from home.' (Learner)

It is interesting to contrast some of the above comments with the negative perception that many non-learners, who have not experienced learning since leaving school, generally held about education institutions.

8.9 Promoting and marketing basic skills

The methods by which basic skills are promoted and marketed were seen as being of key importance to breaking down barriers. Issues that were raised in the interviews include:

- a need for greater basic skills awareness among the general public and intermediary organisations
- the need to promote basic skills using methods and media accessible to non-learners
- the need to take a proactive approach to recruitment.

These themes are explored below.

8.9.1 Building awareness

As has been argued, many potential learners have limited information regarding basic skills issues. This has resulted in a large degree of stereotyping, and an over-estimation of the general

ability of members of the public. There is a need, therefore, to highlight the wide scope of skills that come under the heading 'basic skills', the range of ability levels that are covered by basic skills, and the benefits that learning, or 'brushing-up' on a skill, may bring. Among some potential learners, particularly those with entry level needs who have had negative experiences of education, there is also a need to build trust and awareness between them and the local providers.

There is also a need to promote awareness among employers as to the nature of basic skills and its relevance to their organisation. Evidence supporting the role of basic skills in promoting productivity, improving health and safety, motivating staff and increasing attendance were all seen as useful in encouraging employers to take up the agenda.

The nature of awareness building, and methods used, are likely to depend upon whether the subject is a potential learner or an employer/other intermediary, as their motivations will differ. Further, the awareness and concerns of potential learners with Entry Level needs are not likely to be the same as those held by potential learners with intermediate (level 2) needs. Michael and Hogard (1996) have argued that effective marketing needs to be targeted towards specific market segments. To do this, providers must first identify clear market segments before developing an appropriate marketing mix (programme, promotion method and delivery strategy) for those segments.

8.9.2 The role of prospectuses, posters and leaflets

An interesting finding in comparing comments made in the expert interviews and comments made by adult non-learners, relates to the capacity of adults with basic skills needs to assimilate written information about basic skills courses. Although a minority of potential learners may have difficulty assimilating written information, it should be noted that the majority of individuals with basic skills needs (below level 2) may be very capable of reading and assimilating the relevant information. Also, many non-learners with entry level needs may have access to support from friends or members of the family.

In a several cases, non-learners who suggested that they may benefit from basic skills education, were aware of published material (including adverts placed in newspapers and on shop billboards promoting basic skills courses). The problem was not one of being able to digest the material, but rather that the material did not actually inspire them to act. This may be because in some instances, prospectuses are targeted towards potential 'A' level or NVQ level students. People looking at basic skills courses have different aims, different needs and a different set of study motivations, which need to be reflected in how the courses are promoted.

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8.9.3 Using the Internet

Individuals with limited skills or experience in accessing information from electronic sources (*eg* the Internet) often cited an ability to turn to friends or members of the family for support in accessing information.

> *'I'd probably ask my husband to help me find [a course] on the Internet … we've got a computer, I don't know how to use it but he's very good on it himself … I don't know if that's the best place to look really … I don't know if they advertise on there but that's where I'd look.'*
> (Non-learner)

In the light of the growing availability of Internet access, it seems maybe useful to make 'friendly' (as well as user-friendly) course information and promotional material easily accessible from their websites.

8.9.4 Media campaigns

National media campaigns have had considerable success in promoting basic skills. The majority of basic skills non-learners were aware of campaigns such as learndirect and the 'Get On' (Gremlins) campaign. The campaign appeared to be well received among many of the basic skills learners and non-learners.

> *'I think that one of the best adverts has been the Gremlins one.'*
> (Non-learner)

> *'[The Gremlins campaign] seems to work, as the adverts themselves seem to bring some of the truths closer to home … '* (Learner)

> *'You're in a place and you're talking to a lot of people and they seem educated and sometimes you don't want to open your mouth because you'll say something that you think is stupid … you're not on a par … and when you see something like that [the Gremlins campaign] you think, oh there is something I can do about it … '* (Non-learner)

> *'I think [the Gremlins campaign] is quite good … it's amusing and if they think they're too old it makes them think that it's not too late.'*
> (Non-learner)

8.9.5 The need to be proactive

In many cases, it is not the comprehension of published material that is a barrier to engagement in learning but it is the fact that published material may not be sufficient if the potential learner also has to overcome other circumstantial and/or motivational issues. Some people may, therefore, have a certain degree of informational awareness without actually getting around to act upon that information. As one non-learner commented:

> *'The best place to look is the Internet I think, my wife looks up loads of courses on the Internet, for home study that sort of thing, but she never*

does them. I think she thinks she hasn't really got the time, what with the kids and that.' (Non-learner)

In another instance, a non-learner had seen the 'Get On' campaign and had decided to send off for the promotional video. Although the learner received the video, she did not receive any follow up call about local provisions, the momentum for taking up a course was lost.

'I have some difficulty with English. I can read and write but sometimes I don't know where to put an exclamation mark or things like that … I saw the advert for it [Gremlins] on television and thought this might suit me. I sent off for the tape and it showed you how people doing these courses have gone on to do other things. I was interested but I didn't get round to taking it any further though. I don't know if they 'phoned me up … perhaps they did … perhaps I wasn't in.' (Non-learner)

'… people who run courses should come into the workplace, like a roadshow … show people what's on offer that would encourage people. Some sort of open day in the workplace. People just don't know what's on offer and may be encouraged to take part.' (Non-learner)

The need for personal encouragement was expressed by a couple of non-learners.

'I don't think that people are aware of half of what a college does … perhaps they need to make people more aware … they need to let more people now somehow … I just think they've got to go out there and grab people.' (Non-learner)

'You hear it on the radio or television but that is too remote … you don't know what you're getting … you need someone to actually come and tell you want's on offer.' (Non-learner)

'Nobody's knocked on my door and asked if I would like to do a course.' (Non-learner)

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