

# Improving Literacy and Numeracy of Offenders in the Community

Findings of an Adult Learning Inspectorate  
review and Government response

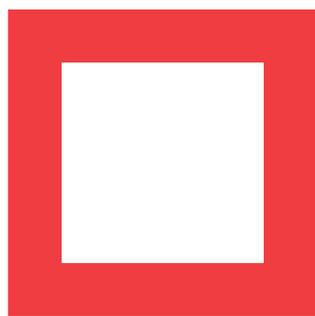
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# Improving Literacy and Numeracy of Offenders in the Community

## **SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION**

This report sets out the action the Government is taking in order to improve literacy numeracy and language of offenders in the community. Providing more and better education to help offenders is a key part of the Government's effort to rehabilitate offenders and reduce re-offending. In recent years we have significantly improved the educational achievements of offenders in prison. We now need to take further action to tackle the learning needs of offenders under supervision in the community.

The importance of this work is clear. In any one year the National Probation Service (NPS) supervises approximately 200,000 offenders aged 18 and over. They include offenders serving community sentences and those released from prison on licence, some of whom will have been able to gain qualifications in literacy, language and numeracy skills while in prison. Offenders on supervision in the community face a range of challenges including a lack of stable accommodation, health problems, lack of family support, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems, unemployment and a poor employment history. Around half of offenders screened by the National Probation Service have very poor basic skills, significantly higher than the estimated 20 per cent of the general population with a similar learning need. Many offenders have also had a negative experience of education, and may have truanted or been excluded. They may have little or no enthusiasm or motivation to return to a school or other learning environment. This may be particularly true of young adult

offenders whose negative experiences of school may be more recent and vivid than adult offenders.

We are committed to addressing the issues outlined in the ALI report on Basic Skills for Offenders in the Community. We firmly believe that offenders according to need should have access to education and training in the community. This will enable them to gain the skills and qualifications they require to provide alternatives to crime, obtain and keep appropriate employment, and play a positive role within the community.

This action plan draws on a review commissioned in November 2003 by the Home Office from the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). The review found that some NPS areas had been successful in achieving basic skills qualifications, but overall the service was patchy and there were still significant barriers to greater success. This document is published in parallel with the detailed ALI report. The action plan summarises the ALI's recommendations, and sets out the Government response.

The ALI review rightly draws attention to the need for a range of organisations involved in this area, to work more effectively in partnership. The Government recognises the need to do better, and has already put in place new arrangements to support improvements in the learning and skills of offenders in the community. The Offenders' Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), in partnership with the National Probation Service (NPS) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), is now responsible for the learning and skills of offenders under supervision of the NPS. These organisations are working in partnership to improve the quantity and quality of education for offenders. An additional £9.4m in 2004-05 and 2005-06 is being allocated to local Learning and Skills Councils for this purpose. New targets, of 32,000 starts and 8,000 qualifications in England and Wales, are shared between the DfES, LSC and NPS.

Transferring policy responsibility for learning provision for offenders under supervision of the NPS to the DfES and the LSC enables the NPS to focus on the screening, assessment and referral of offenders, while placing learning in the hands of the LSC and its providers who are best placed to deliver learning programmes. Extending the OLSU's remit to include education and training policy for offenders on probation, as well as those in custody, will support a closer alignment of policies to support offenders – in custody and community – with developments in mainstream education and training.

The partnership will be pulled together at the national level by the Education, Training and Employment sub-Group of the Home Office Reducing Reconvictions Board. This will review progress in delivering the new service, and contribute to developing policies for education and training for offenders in the community. Once the arrangements for the new integrated learning and skills Service for prisoners are in place by December 2004, we will build the links with delivery to offenders in the community. The ultimate aim is to have an end-to-end learning and skills service that meets the needs of all offenders by 2006.

One of the main objectives of the new partnership is to improve continuity of prisoners' learning when they leave custody. The new National Offender Management Service (NOMS) will sharpen the focus on this vital area as we move towards a new sentencing framework comprising both a custodial and a community element. One of the main aims of NOMS is to ensure that the focus is firmly on managing offenders throughout their entire sentence. The Prison Service and the NPS will need to work much more closely together on a range of interventions to support offender rehabilitation. The ALI report pointed out that NOMS has "great potential for marshalling all the services needed by each offender, including learning and job placement".

As part of the introduction of the generic Community Sentence we will want to develop a specified activity condition to support involvement in basic skills work. In conjunction with this focus on compliance and enforcement we believe there is value in developing incentives to support achievement by offenders. These might be similar to the pilots run with Jobcentre Plus. This approach will balance a regime of enforcement where necessary combined with incentives to support and encourage achievement by individuals.

The National Probation Directorate is therefore looking to develop a range of pathfinder pilots which will focus primarily on the issues of raising quality as well as enhancing delivery. The quality aspects of this work would include:

- Training – Working with the new Skills for Life quality initiative trainers to improve the induction, training and development of basic skills tutors as well as running regional training events for poor performing areas;
- Accommodation issues – looking to increase local accommodation, in order to enhance delivery by using dedicated resources either on site or within close proximity, to increase the availability of IT equipment and to increase the availability of e-learning;
- Enforcement/incentives – To explore the provision for providing a range of incentives, to increase the provision for on line testing, provide mentoring opportunities, provide IT training and widen the work on embedding basic skills within other interventions (such as Drug Treatment and Testing Orders, Offending Behaviour Programmes and Enhanced Community Punishment etc). To also look at a range of enforcement issues that will complement those contained within the new Criminal Justice Act.

In terms of uplifting delivery the NPD would target poor performing areas and regions by undertaking regular visits, closely tracking achievements against profile as well as running regional seminars with local partners and providers to identify quality and delivery issues to resolve. Additional work would also focus on developing and improving on local delivery systems in order to ensure that they are working to full capacity.

In this changing context, the Government warmly welcomes the ALI report as an important contribution to the work of improving the learning and skills of offenders. We are committed

to addressing its recommendations in full. Action is already in hand to address many of the issues identified by the Inspectorate. The following pages set out the detail of the ALI findings, and the action already taken, or which is planned, to respond to them.

#### **ALI RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE**

**1. *The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has great potential for marshalling all the services needed by each offender, including learning and job placement. In order to fulfil that potential, its relationships with other interested bodies should be clarified and simplified, including confirmation of lines of commitment for expenditure.***

The introduction of NOMS will underpin 'end to end' offender management, ensuring that the focus is firmly on managing offenders throughout their entire sentence. The Prison Service and the NPS will work much more closely together on a range of interventions to support offender rehabilitation. The Offenders Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU), which is responsible for the planning and funding of education and training for offenders, has a dual accountability to DfES and to the Prison and National Probation Services. This is to be formally set out in a new framework agreement and memorandum of understanding. We anticipate that the OLSU's accountability will in future be into the NOMS centre.

**Action** – OLSU and NOMS, working with LSC and other partners

**2. *It should be considered whether delegation of funding through local LSCs should be delayed to enable comprehensive consideration to be given to the operating system for the NOMS.***

Joint partnership arrangements between the OLSU, the LSC and the NPS are now in place, together with the resulting funding and planning arrangements. We have issued further funding clarification guidance, together with agreed funding and agreed local and national targets. As the new NOMS system is developed, we shall keep closely under review the most effective links between the new service and education provision.

**Action** – OLSU and NOMS

**3. *The NOMS should develop a strategic forum, bringing together all those agencies that can assist offender rehabilitation, including LSC Jobcentre Plus, Ufi and the Basic Skills Agency (BSA).***

We welcome this recommendation. We have established the Education, Training and Employment sub Group to bring together the most important players at a national level to review progress, to take steps to improve performance as necessary, and to contribute to the development of policy. Membership will include the Home Office, NOMS, DfES, LSC, Jobcentre Plus, as well as the Prison Service and the Youth Justice Board. Day to day responsibility for decisions affecting delivery will remain with the LSC and the NPS.

We already have in place important building blocks for a closer delivery partnership, most importantly through the new NPS and LSC partnership. The new Employment Pathfinder (Phase 2) from April will raise the profile of employment and enhance engagement with Jobcentre Plus. The National Probation Directorate is also running pilot projects with Learndirect to test offender engagement. We expect NOMS, particularly through the new regional offender managers, to build on the existing structures which have been established through Regional Resettlement Strategies, fostering even greater engagement with partners.

**Action** – OLSU, with NPD, LSC and HMPS, and subsequently NOMS

***4. Set clear directions for the development of offenders' literacy, numeracy and language skills across England and Wales, linking improved literacy, numeracy and language skills with better prospects of employment and reduced re-offending.***

A draft policy framework document was issued to local NPS areas and LSCs in March 2004, A revised document has been prepared and circulated to all partners for comment with a view to issuing a final version of the document in August 2004. The document explains why education and training is a key part of the Government's action plan to improve offender resettlement and so reduce the high level and cost to society of re-offending. It explains how with better skills, offenders have a greater chance of getting a job, and the likelihood of re-offending is reduced enabling offenders to gain the skills and qualifications they need to hold down a job and play a positive role in society.

An Operational Guidance document was issued to local NPS areas and LSCs in March 2004. We are reviewing all joint local Partnership Plans to identify best practice with an early focus on areas where plans fall short. We shall introduce a 'traffic light' review of performance to ensure targets are met. The Employment pathfinder is designed to establish good practice between basic skills and employment work and will contribute to developing an integrated education, training and employment strategy for the NPS. The NPS and the Prison Service are committed to developing joint targets for 2005/06 and are working on a co-ordinated approach on engagement of employers.

**Action** – The Education, Training and Employment sub board.

***5. Each Probation Service area should be given a specific plan and targets for literacy, numeracy and language programmes which reflect the offender profile.***

The e-OASys system is designed to assist the making of comprehensive assessments of offenders' needs, to inform sentence and supervision planning. By the end of 2004, OASys will give us a sample profile of educational and employment needs across the offender population. However, the Prison Service have no current plans to undertake an OASys assessment for offenders sentenced to less than 12 months. In the shorter term, local targets are currently allocated based on workload profiles and each local NPS area has been asked to develop a plan in partnership with its local LSC, detailing how local partnerships will

deliver the targets. LSC Executive Directors are jointly responsible for the implementation of the partnership plans with their NPS counterparts. LSC and the NPS will agree future changes to target profiles. The Education, Training and Employment sub Group will monitor progress and quality. Phased implementation of local targets will allow areas to build capacity in order to meet the new increased target profile.

**Action** – The Education, Training and Employment sub board.

**Outcome** – By December 2004, OASys sample profile of offender educational and employment needs.

***6. Targets should measure milestones of achievement in addition to achievement of qualifications and should relate to employment and reduced re-offending.***

ALL considered that targets had until now been set without sufficient evidence of achievability, and failed to recognise milestones in learners' achievement, such as regular attendance at sessions or good timekeeping. They considered there was an emphasis on formal qualifications as an outcome, rather than finding a job and avoiding re-offending.

The current targets do in fact also measure the numbers of offenders starting courses. Nevertheless, the Government accepts that we should strive to be more sophisticated in performance management and ensure targets help to focus effort on the right areas of activity and outcomes. The Education, Training and Employment sub Group is developing a framework for measuring and assessing other factors, as well as looking at partnership, involving wider partners, including the Jobcentre Plus.

The measurement of 'distance travelled' by learners will be addressed by the production of an individual learning plan (ILP) for offenders as part of the normal quality arrangements in place in support of LSC-funded provision (although this may not apply universally before 2005/06). This is dependent upon the ILP capturing all the relevant information about the qualifications and ability of learners at the start and the end of their learning programme.

**Action** – The Education, Training and Employment sub board.

***7. Literacy, numeracy and language programmes should not be delivered in isolation. They should complement other strands of the Probation Service's work with offenders.***

ALL drew attention to the need to do better in 'embedding' of basic skills training. Too often, in NPS areas, literacy, numeracy and language training was conducted in isolation from offending behaviour or vocational training programmes. The Government accepts this recommendation. Action will include:

- Guidance for probation staff, including the embedding of 'Skills for life' in other probation interventions, and ensuring that the Skills for Life National Quality Initiative Professional Development Programme is available to all providers to support the teaching and learning infrastructure by September 2004. Will consult with ABSSU on existing practice across other sectors where a range of incentives have been introduced;
- DfES (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit) and the NPD are developing a strategy, which is scheduled to be in place by early 2005, for building basic skills into other interventions;
- Prison Service and the NPD have also developed a joint action plan which will be circulated to areas by the end of June to address the issues outlined in the recent evaluation of literacy and general offending behaviour programmes. DfES will support the use of ICT for on-line testing, beginning with a pilot for on-line delivery;
- Guidance for probation staff will say the new Skills for Life Quality Initiative 04/05 is available to all Probation staff to support the teaching and learning infrastructure;
- The DfES [Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit] in partnership with NPD and OLSU are supporting the development of a strategy for embedding literacy, numeracy and language skills in other interventions;
- Use will be made of The Move On project which aims to develop models to enable more individuals to take the on-line National Literacy and Numeracy Tests, by the promotion of the new certificates, training recruiters in all sectors, and providing materials to provide them with the skills to run the test. The Move On project also aims to develop new models of delivery together with the resources to support this.

**Action** – DfES, ABSSU and NPD, with the Education, Training and Employment sub board to oversee progress

**Outcome** – Skills for Life National Quality Initiative Professional Development Programme available to all providers to support the teaching and learning infrastructure by September 2004.

***8a. More sophisticated tools should be introduced for assessing learning needs and reliable means should be developed for transferring assessment outcomes from custody. Develop more comprehensive initial assessment techniques, specifically designed for those who have complex and multiple learning needs***

ALI suggested that the current 'Fast Track' was not an appropriate tool for screening the complex learning needs of offenders, because it can produce incomplete results, leading to inconsistencies in the evaluations made in referrals from NPS staff. *New Skills for Life* ESOL screening and assessment materials are now available and new generic screening and assessment will be published by December 2004, covering the full range of levels from Entry 1 – Level 2.

We will review the use of existing screening and assessment processes and tools for offenders on probation once the new materials become available. However, we do not anticipate any significant revisions to the screening tools especially as current proposals are to incorporate screening tools into OASys. The critical issue is making sure that those who have needs identified go on to a more detailed first assessment. We are content to see if we need to promote a single/consistent approach to initial assessment and we would be looking to ABSSU to work closely with NPS/D on this

**Action** – NPD, ABSSU and Education, Training and Employment sub board to oversee progress.

***8b. Reliable means should be developed for transferring assessment outcomes from custody [in order to] share systematically between Prison and Probation findings of initial assessment and information about any previous education and training.***

ALI found that transfer of information between custody and community was unreliable. This meant that education and training records of prisoners released on licence were often not routinely passed on to probation officers or training providers. Many offenders repeated tests or worked towards qualifications they had already completed.

The Government accepts that continuity of planning and provision between different custodial settings and between custody and community needs to be significantly improved. This is of course one of the fundamental purposes of the Carter reforms, most notably the creation of the National Offender Management Service, with regional offender managers. More immediately, we are running a pilot exploring the better transmission of education data in HMP Liverpool and Merseyside Probation Service. This will be rolled out across the region and the findings disseminated across the PS and NPS estate.

In addition to the review of processes mentioned above, this issue will also be addressed through the work with LSCs to develop a new delivery model for education and training in prisons. We are establishing a number of development areas, on a regional basis, later in 2004 to test new ways of planning, funding and organising the service beyond the existing prison education contracts. An important part of the new approach will be to ensure more effective delivery of a better integrated, more continuous service, overcoming the existing problems which arise when offenders move from prison to prison or into the community.

***9. The acquisition of employability and basic skills should form an integral part of a detailed offender supervision plan. The links between sentence plans, individual learning plans and supervision plans should be explicit.***

The ALI report drew attention to what they described as weak strategic direction in terms of clearly linking the acquisition of employability and basic skills to reducing re-offending. The Government very much accepts the need to link education and training for offenders with skills for employability. The draft policy framework document on the new arrangements,

published in March 2004, made these links explicit. We are developing a training strategy for probation staff, particularly at the front line, to increase awareness of the importance and relevance of basic skills training. This will be supported by a Skills for Life communications strategy. Prison Service and the NPS will support joint initiatives to facilitate continuity of learning between prison and the community, including the expansion of the e-OASys system to record basic skills data.

The NPD has also developed a communications plan in order to raise the awareness of NPS staff. Further guidance to sentencers will also be issued as part of the roll out of the new generic community sentence. This roll out has a large training programme attached to it and will provide additional guidance to sentencers.

**Action** – NPD with DfES (OLSU), Prison Service and LSC, working with ABSSU and BSA with target date of 31 December 2004.

***10. The NPD should select appropriate learning materials and teaching programmes and encourage the use of a wider variety of appropriate teaching methods, including e-learning.***

We accept, as ALI pointed out, that too narrow a range of teaching methods and learning materials may be used, failing to engage inexperienced learners and those with low levels of literacy and numeracy. We agree that we can improve the extent to which education is relevant to offenders' experiences or linked to the compulsory elements of their programmes, and we can exploit better the opportunities afforded by IT and multimedia to enhance the learning experience.

A number of steps have already been taken to make progress in this area. These include:

- a newsletter to staff to introduce 'Skills for Life' and promote all products;
- training in the use of products and materials through the Skills for Life Quality Initiative has since January been made available to all NPS staff;
- providing awareness training for frontline staff, including an understanding of how the 'Move On' approach can be used to support learners who are able to achieve a level 2 qualification within a relatively short period of time.

We are also already promoting access to 'Skills for Life' and the Teaching and Learning Infrastructure for probation staff and trainers through Skills for Life Probation Task Forces. In May and June 2004 we ran regional workshops to promote relevant products

The pilot studies on the use of ICT for delivering on-line testing and monitoring, mentioned above, will include the availability of capital funding so that probation areas can improve equipment.

We also plan to develop a range of pathfinder pilots as mentioned earlier, which will focus on quality, delivery and looking at enforcement and incentives for offender attendance at basic skills programmes.

**Action** – NPD/S , with support from OLSU and ABSSU, working with LSC and BSA

*11. Local LSCs should respond to specifically address the needs of offenders in their communities and should work with the NPD to develop a list of preferred providers who are expert in offering literacy, numeracy and language skills. Improve coordination between LSC, NPD and providers.*

We accept that in the past coordination has variable. However, there have been significant recent improvements. Most notably, the new partnership arrangements based on NPS and local LSCs which began in April 2004, supported by the new resources made available to local LSCs in 2004-05 and 2005-06. Local partnership plans will co-ordinate actions between local LSCs and NPS areas.

The new arrangements have been launched with the support of a series of regional workshops, which helped clarify the role of the LSC. We have also published operational guidance to local LSCs. The LSC nationally issued additional guidance on contracting to local LSC and NPS areas in April 2004.

Looking ahead, LSC and NPD will work together to ensure that providers are aware of, and understand, the need to develop provision that meets the needs of offender learners.

**Action** – LSC and NPS and Education, Training and Employment sub board monitor.

*12. A standard approach to quality assessment and improvement should be adopted, including regular self-assessment, use of the Common Inspection Framework and inspection by the ALI.*

We accept that quality assessment and improvement needs to be more rigorous and consistent. LSC-funded provision will meet this standard after the transitional year 04/05. Partnership plans for the transitional year produced jointly by the local LSCs and the Probation Service areas enable us to work towards the required standards for LSC provision. All provision for offenders in the community will be subject to these quality standards by April 05. We shall also take steps to ensure that the range of other partners, in particular the Prison Service and the Youth Justice Board, are fully involved.

In addition, OLSU has set up a OLSU Quality Improvement Steering Group to provide a strategic, decision-making forum for key partners involved in the quality assurance and quality improvement of learning and skills for offenders. The working group on quality for offenders supervised in the community will have its own work-plan and milestones which will contribute to the OLSU quality improvement delivery plan

**Action** – LSC and OLSU

*13. Much of the current provision is inflexible and not designed to meet offenders' specific needs. Most FE colleges run provision with a set structure of courses and timetables. Offenders are required to fit in with these established patterns which often do not meet their needs. Also their support needs (practical and pastoral) are often not sufficiently considered.*

We accept the concerns outlined in the ALI report and we have set up a OLSU Quality Improvement Steering Group to provide a strategic, decision-making forum for key partners involved in the quality assurance and quality improvement of learning and skills for offenders. The working group on quality for offenders supervised in the community will have its own work-plan and milestones which will contribute to the OLSU quality improvement delivery plan. The Team Leader for Offenders in the Community will lead the working group on quality for offenders in the community; s/he will work closely with education providers in the three Development Regions to address the weaknesses described in the ALI thematic review, piloting flexible and innovative delivery relevant to the goals, needs and interests of offenders supervised in the community. We also plan to set up a database of promising practice and will launch a new project to support the listening and speaking skills of offenders. We are participating in a Home Office study on effective interventions and plan to pilot a Learning Difficulties/Disabilities Pathfinder project for offenders. We are currently working in partnership with LSC, ABSSU and NPD to deliver three *Skills for Life* conferences for probation managers, with inputs on key strategic issues as well as practical workshops on delivery issues such as national tests, partnership working and professional development opportunities.

**Action** – Education, Training and Employment Sub Board

*14. Attendance at basic skills sessions is seldom adequately monitored and controlled.*

We plan to set up a pathfinder project to test the effectiveness of incentives and compulsory attendance with offenders.

**Action** – NPD to run pilot from October 2004 to March 2005.

*15. Learning is often disrupted or sporadic. This makes it difficult for offenders to establish rhythm and discipline.*

The new arrangements will bring improved accommodation and facilities as we move offender education into the mainstream.

*16. Training in basic skills to be an integral part of a programme that aims to achieve employability and reduce re-offending.*

We plan to look at training requirements and undertake the training of probation officers and other frontline staff. We will “sell” basic skills training to offenders and work to improve the turnaround of screening and referral.

*17. The NPD should address the specific problems found in Wales, including those relating to Welsh speakers.*

Framework arrangements are now in place for delivery of learning provision for offenders in Wales. They include the establishment of a transitional period, lasting until August 2005, which will enable ELWa to build capacity, resources and expertise in time for them to take the lead for learning provision in August 2005. Partnership plans for each NPS area have also been completed which will detail the milestones to be achieved for 2004/05.

Funding and targets for Wales have also been agreed and a memorandum of understanding between the NPS areas and ELWa is to be drawn up.

**Action** – OLSU to set up a management group for basic skills for offenders in Wales, involving the range of partners, including ELWa.

This document is available on the Offenders Learning and Skills Unit website [www.dfes.gov.uk/offenderlearning](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/offenderlearning)

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