

## Provision of, and learner engagement with, adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in rural England. A comparative case study

### Synopsis

This research examines the issues surrounding the delivery of the **Skills for Life** agenda to adult learners in six rural counties of England. Although the research is situated in the rural the findings and policy recommendations offer much to those concerned with the planning and delivery of the **Skills for Life** agenda in the urban and semi-urban context. We argue that providing adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in rural communities and then engaging learners with that provision is a major challenge for providers and policy makers alike.

### The research found that:

- ❑ Learners prefer provision that is locally available. Transport, access and childcare are major barriers to learning in rural areas, along with the issue of attracting a viable number of learners.
- ❑ There is a lack of suitably qualified tutors, particularly in numeracy and ESOL. Tutors need to have greater training opportunities and to be adequately compensated for the cost of their time and travel to rural areas. In all areas providers feel they are in competition with each other for the same learners; partnership working is crucial if this is to be avoided.
- ❑ Learners are often aware of their lack of basic skills, they think they can not learn or have other priorities and therefore develop coping strategies and are unlikely to seek help until such time as

they see a need. This often occurs after a change in their circumstances, personal or professional. This has implications for those involved in encouraging new learners to attend provision.

- ❑ Learners' reasons for attending a course often change over time from helping their children to gaining qualifications or from gaining confidence to aiming for a new or better job. Family learning is popular but the client group is predominantly mothers. In some areas there is a lack of progression routes from family learning.
- ❑ Despite the fact that in rural counties the resident ethnic minority population is small and diverse there is a growing need for an increase in dedicated ESOL provision.
- ❑ Whilst further research needs to be conducted to establish how best to access the workplace, the use of embedded learning is one strategy which has shown some success.

### Background and rationale of research

This study builds on the growing national and international interest in the problems faced by rural communities and the delivery of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in times of rapid change. We argue that for effective delivery the needs and motivations of the adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL learner, in the context of their rural setting, need to be fully understood before they can be met.

In particular we argue that without changes to the funding of the delivery of the **Skills for Life** agenda in rural areas it will be almost impossible for rural Learning and Skills Councils to meet government targets. In this report we have focused on rural as the defining characteristic of 'hard to reach'. Clearly there are many other potentially disadvantaged groups in society for which this report and its findings may aid policy development.

### Main elements of research

The study areas consisted of six rural counties in England: Cumbria, Cornwall, Devon, Herefordshire, Lincolnshire and Northumberland and were selected to give a geographical spread throughout England. The project was comparative in nature and used a combination of standard qualitative and quantitative data gathering techniques including telephone interviews, postal questionnaires, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, classroom visits and the attendance at key meetings.

Postal questionnaires were sent to 38 policy makers and 415 individual coordinators and tutors delivering provision across the six study areas. We received 18 completed policy questionnaires and 85 from practitioners with a further 69 returned unfilled or void. This gave a response rate of 47 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. Due to the large amount of provision in each study area it was necessary to identify a sample of providers. Using data from the 2001 census three district councils were selected for each area; the district with the lowest population density, the highest population density and the median. In Herefordshire, which consists of only one district, the whole county was sampled. In addition, a random sample of 66 classes were visited and 48 tutors and 214 learners were interviewed; 84 literacy learners, 61 numeracy, 68 ESOL, plus one classed as other.

The research was undertaken by Chris Atkin, Anthea Rose and Rosie Shier based in the Centre for Comparative Education Research, School of Education at the University of Nottingham.

### Further Reading

- Atkin, C., and Merchant, P. (2004) **The impact of adult literacy and numeracy levels on small businesses in rural Lincolnshire: a case study in the pilot report on small businesses and adult literacy in Lincolnshire.** London: NRDC.
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- DfEE (1999) **Improving literacy and numeracy: A fresh start. The report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser.** London: DfEE.
- DETR (2000) Rural White Paper: Our Countryside: The Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England. Norwich: HMSO.
- Gray, F. (2002) **Landscapes in Learning – Lifelong Learning in rural communities.** Leicester: NIACE.

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**The full report is available from March 2005 in PDF and text-only formats from NRDC's website at**

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