

people:skills:jobs:



Department for
**Employment
and Learning**
www.delni.gov.uk

Appraisal of
Essential Skills for
Living
A Report prepared by
Frontline Consultants
October 2006

Executive Summary

The Department for Employment and Learning commissioned Frontline Consultants to undertake a qualitative appraisal of the Essential Skills for Living Strategy – Northern Ireland’s strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy needs.

The Essential Skills for Living Strategy (referred to as Essential Skills from here on in) is critical to the continued growth of the Northern Ireland economy. The International Adult Literacy Survey (1996) showed that around 24% of the working age population of Northern Ireland (over 250,000 people based on current estimates of working age population) were operating at the lowest levels of literacy.

The evidence shows that poor literacy and numeracy have profound negative impacts on a society at a number of levels:

- *the individual*
- *the family*
- *the community*
- *the economy*

Therefore the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) launched the Essential Skills strategy and action plan in April 2002. The strategy sets out the vision:

“To provide opportunities for adults to update their essential skills to assist them in improving their overall quality of life, personal development and their employment opportunities and by so doing to promote greater economic development, social inclusion and cohesion”

The importance of essential skills within the overall skills framework has recently been underlined in DEL’s new Skills Strategy published in February 2006.

DEL set an ambitious target for learner engagement – that 18,500 learners would have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills by 2007. These qualifications are delivered by accredited tutors working in Further Education (FE) Colleges, private training providers and community organisations.

The research programme

The objectives of the appraisal of Essential Skills were to:

- gain feedback on the performance of the strategy and action plan, from key players: participants, training organisations, community groups and relevant DEL staff

- provide information on the experience of participants on Essential Skills training. This included a consideration of what attracted them to take part, any barriers they had overcome, their experiences of training and its value and how they had benefited or otherwise
- identify the barriers to participation in Essential Skills training. This involved discussion with participants and non-participants, and with other key players
- identify where Essential Skills training is operating well – examples of good practice
- identify areas where Essential Skills training could be improved
- use this information to inform: (1) the operation of Essential Skills training, and (2) further substantive research on Essential Skills to be carried out at a later date

Frontline's research programme included number of different techniques to gather and analyse data to meet these objectives:

- review of existing information and data about Essential Skills
- review of international research evidence on the impacts of improving adult literacy and numeracy
- benchmarking Northern Ireland's literacy and numeracy interventions against those of other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland
- interviews with key strategic and operational stakeholders
- interviews with tutors and training providers
- interviews and focus groups with past and current participants in Essential skills training
- interviews with people with literacy and numeracy difficulties who had not participated in Essential Skills training

The evidence base

The review of international research demonstrated that poor levels of literacy and numeracy have negative impacts. These impacts range across a number of areas of societal life:

- employment and social inclusion – adversely affecting the chances of getting a job and staying in a job; those who are employed tend to be in low wage, low quality jobs
- economic development – clear links to lower wages rates, and evidence that improving literacy and numeracy causes a measurable improvement in GDP per capita; in addition, direct costs to businesses of poor literacy and numeracy
- health – higher infant mortality, increased admission rates for chronic disease and increased complications in chronic disease
- crime – higher crime rates and re-offending rates
- future generations – adverse impacts on child development and educational attainment of children, leading to perpetuation of the problems listed above

The evidence also indicated that interventions to improve literacy and numeracy do improve these societal problems. The findings of long term

studies were used to identify early indicators, which could be used in Northern Ireland to predict improvements in the long term as a result of Essential Skills.

Research findings

Performance

Performance since the launch of the strategy has been good. The number of learners enrolling in the programme has increased year on year as follows:

2002-03	4,580
2003-04	7,077 (approx 50% increase on previous year)
2004-05	9,533 (approx 35% increase on previous year)

Of these enrolments, 10,072 (47%) had achieved qualifications by September 2005. If there is a continued increase in enrolments of 25% year on year (a conservative estimate compared with previous years), and continued rates of qualification achievement, Essential Skills is on track to exceed its targets by 2007.

The majority of participants are in the age group 16-25, but reasonable coverage is also being achieved in the harder-to-reach age groups, such as 36-65. The gender split is more or less even, and employment status is mixed; however, in the past year, the majority of participants have been unemployed or economically inactive. This represents a shift from earlier years where the majority were either full or part time employed.

Impacts on individuals

Interviews and focus groups with current and former participants revealed that Essential Skills made a positive impact on their lives. The common themes emerging from their feedback included:

- *increased confidence* – ES was a jumping off point for other training and self development, and their achievement on ES galvanised them to move forward; in addition, ES increased confidence to apply for jobs, leading to improved likelihood of positive employability outcomes; it also gave participants confidence to try new things, such as reading a book or joining a library, and improved self esteem, such as “*I feel great!*”
- *employability* – able to complete forms, letters and CVs confidently; actively sending out applications, now that they are able to do so; increased job security for those currently in employment, and more able to apply for new jobs and promotions
- *improved quality and security of employment* – securing a more highly paid job with better prospects and greater sustainability; as one client told us “*without Essential Skills, I would still be a cleaner*”.
- *educational engagement and progression* – a number had signed up for college courses or intended to do so soon, another for an OU degree and several are learning how to help others with Essential Skills, for example as classroom assistants; even the clients not currently able to progress their education indicated an intention to do in future

- *educational support* – helping their children and other young family members with homework, being able to read them bedtime stories, encouraging children in schoolwork and promoting a more positive attitude towards education; one participant told us of the thrill of hearing her child tell her “*Mummy, you’re well smart!*”
- *positive personality changes* – feeling more confident and sociable; feeling more positive about the future
- *greater engagement in society* – more willing to go out, less frightened of road signs, taking the bus, dealing with money in shops; these benefits were particularly concentrated in the participants with very low confidence and those from ethnic minorities
- *reduced stigma and fear* – now willing to ask for help if stuck with something; “*I no longer feel like I’m alone – there are others just like me*”; telling people they are going to ES classes – being unembarrassed about it and championing to friends, colleagues and family members

Experience of the programme

Feedback from participants about the quality, format and delivery of Essential Skills training was overwhelmingly positive. They stated that their tutors had been very good at assessing their individual needs and facilitating group and individual work which was relevant and appropriately paced.

Critically, the vast majority would and do recommend ES to others. This advocacy could play an important role in championing ES within communities.

Reasons for signing up

Participants reported that their principal reasons for signing up for Essential Skills had been:

- self-improvement – to get a job (or a better job), to participate in further education; to feel more able to help their children with homework and to be able to pursue hobbies
- confidence – to improve self esteem and “to prove I’m not useless”; to redress unsuccessful or unhappy experiences of school and education
- social inclusion – to feel more able to engage more fully in society, even simple things like shopping and taking the bus

Participants also reported the importance of key influencers in their decision to sign up for Essential Skills. Many were encouraged by family members – often their mother, wife or sister. Others were encouraged by friends and work colleagues.

They also highlighted the Gremlins campaign as an effective route to engaging the Essential Skills client group and encouraging them to sign up. They reported that the campaign resonated with them and made them feel that other people “just like me” had similar problems. This is particularly important in reducing the stigma of poor literacy or numeracy, as many participants reported feeling very embarrassed by their difficulties.

Longer term impacts

Given the immediate benefits experienced by participants, the literature suggests that these benefits to individuals could translate over time into the following impacts for the Northern Ireland economy:

- increased employment rates (leading to personal and national prosperity)
- increased productivity
- reduced benefits bill
- improved social inclusion and community cohesion
- improved population health outcomes and reduced health costs
- improved educational attainment in the child population, leading to a stronger knowledge base which can drive further economic growth
- reduced crime and re-offending rates

Barriers

Participants and non-participants reported a number of barriers to engaging in Essential Skills. These tended to be practical, such as:

- not being able to get time off work
- childcare responsibilities outside of working hours
- lack of transport

In addition, some reported embarrassment at needing help. For some of them, having to attend a class in their own community would be a barrier – they wanted to go elsewhere (though not too far away) for their training. For others, the idea of attending a college was intimidating and they tended to prefer community provision in a known environment. Importantly, these people reported that community provision was attractive because *“no one knows what you’re going into a community centre for – it could be for a keep fit class or a cup of coffee”*.

Conclusions

The overarching conclusion of the research is that Essential Skills has got off to a very strong start in Northern Ireland. It is on track to achieve, or possibly exceed, its targets and participants report positive experiences of the training. The benefits that participants have experienced from participating in the training are profoundly impactful to them, and as early indicators, these benefits correlate strongly with the evidence of longer term impact in the literature.

The research revealed a number of important themes which will be critical to the continued success of Essential Skills. Some of these are strategic whilst others are operational. They are described below.

Strategic themes

Joined up impacts

Our research revealed that the impacts achieved, and those projected to be achieved in the longer term, address the priorities of a number of key government departments:

- employability, lifelong learning and workforce development – Department for Employment and Learning
- productivity and economic development – Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- social inclusion and community cohesion – Department of Social Development
- health improvement – Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Given the importance of Essential Skills, especially to the economic development of Northern Ireland, it may be worth exploring the possibility of recognising the impacts of ES to all of these departments and priorities, and engaging these departments more fully in the Essential Skills agenda.

Employer engagement

There is a need to engage more employers in the Essential Skills agenda. Those who have engaged can demonstrate measurable business benefits (including cost benefits), but much of the business base remains distanced from Essential Skills. Much of the client group is already in the workforce, and therefore the most effective way to reach them is through their employers. This will require DEL to present a strong business case to employers.

Reach

Performance in the first 3 years of the ES strategy has been impressive, with over 21,000 learners reached during between 2002 and 2005. Tutor capacity and availability is increasing and demand is also increasing.

Together, these findings suggest that the work of Essential Skills is not yet completed. Even with such good reach in the first 3 years, there are still an estimated 150,000 people in the population with ES needs (not including those who have emerged from school education with ES deficiencies during this period). We therefore conclude that Essential Skills is still needed.

The research suggests that the hardest-to-reach groups, such as unemployed males and the most socially excluded groups of society, are being engaged by Essential Skills. However, they are a part of the mix of participants, rather than constituting the majority of participants. Over time, as the overall target population decreases, it is likely that the remaining target population will become harder to reach; with more complex barriers to participation, especially in terms of confidence levels. Therefore, as ES matures, it is likely that the emphasis of provision will need to shift more towards community and outreach provision, using innovative approaches to engage the most disengaged client groups.

Influencers

Influencers such as family and friends are important in encouraging people to sign up for Essential Skills. The Gremlins campaign has also been very influential.

Future promotion of Essential Skills should recognise the role of influencers, by targeting some of the promotion directly at them. They will then be armed with information with which to encourage others to sign up.

Operational themes

Flexibility of format

As the target groups for ES become harder to reach, there may be an increased need for greater flexibility in the delivery format. The research revealed good examples of flexible delivery, including the use of other subjects (eg ICT) as a encouragement to encourage participation. Other examples combined ICT with ES as a way to enable learners to move towards an ICT qualification even if they had ES difficulties. This approach was also used with other subjects such as travel and tourism and beauty therapy.

Sharing good practice

The research uncovered examples of good practice in delivery of Essential Skills. There will undoubtedly be others out there now, and more will emerge over time as provision matures. There is little dialogue between providers, so these pockets of good practice remain isolated or are discovered by one or two providers by accident.

It would be useful to develop a systematic approach to sharing knowledge and disseminating good practice among tutors and providers. This ensures that 'wheel reinvention' is minimised and the benefits of innovative approaches are maximised.

LSDA is developing the teaching and learning portal for ES, which will provide a virtual environment for sharing good practice. However, it may be useful to supplement this with a dissemination approach led by DEL.

Tutor development

In the early days of Essential Skills, the availability of accredited tutors was seen as a constraint. However, this has improved significantly in the past year and most providers no longer see capacity as a constraint to provision.

There is a need to support newer and less experienced tutors, in developing the confidence and flexibility to maximise the impact of their provision. Likewise, long-experienced tutors need access to development to refresh their skills and ideas, and to expose them to innovative good practice.

As Essential Skills matures, tutor development will be crucial to maintaining momentum and maximising impact.

Administration

The administration procedures involved in Essential Skills are important to ensure that enrolments and achievements are tracked and that funding flows

appropriately to providers. ES tutors and co-ordinators in colleges tend to find this administration burdensome and that it reduces the time they have available for teaching ES. Administration funding is included in the package provided to colleges, but this is not translated into dedicated administrative support in most colleges. Consequently, teaching staff must spend some of their time completing administration tasks. This does not play to their strengths or enable them to add maximum value.

Reducing stigma

The research provided evidence that the stigma associated with Essential Skills deficiencies is starting to be eroded. 'Graduates' of ES courses, and many of those still in training, reported a new willingness to talk to others about their training and the benefits it has brought them. If this trend continues, over time this will create a critical mass of people who will talk positively about ES with friends and colleagues. They will be powerful ambassadors for the programme; silence compounds the embarrassment factor, therefore talking about it gets ES out in the open and reduces the need to hide or be embarrassed.

Role of Jobs and Benefits Office (JBO) staff

The unemployed continues to be a priority target group for Essential Skills. This is reflected in the roll-out of ES screening to all benefits claimants attending for a work focussed interview.

There is not yet a critical mass of JBO advisers with the skills and confidence to screen and refer clients effectively. There also appears to be a knowledge gap, with many advisers being unaware of the full range of ES provision available.

To maximise the reach of ES into the unemployed group, JBO staff will be key partners. Training and development will be required to ensure that they can contribute fully to reaching the unemployed target group. Access to a user-friendly database of learning opportunities will also be important.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the research, the overarching recommendation is that Essential Skills continues to be a priority area for DEL and that increased funding (based on the 'joined-up' impacts of ES) is pursued to increase coverage and to compensate for the impending loss of PEACE II funding.

Other recommendations, to further develop Essential Skills in Northern Ireland, are listed below:

Employer engagement

Employers will be key partners in the continued success of Essential Skills; the workforce is an important target group and our research revealed that employer engagement could be improved. Further work will be required to identify the barriers to employers signing up and supporting employees, to identify good practice from elsewhere and to identify the key selling messages that would encourage employers to engage.

Promotional campaign

DEL should work with DfES and partners across the UK to ensure that Gremlins will be continued in the medium term. This should be supplemented by a Northern Ireland promotional campaign which:

- incorporates the key selling messages about self-improvement, family and social confidence
- targets adult female family members as key influencers
- targets businesses and people in employment to encourage workplace engagement
- enrolls champions and 'graduates' to promote ES
- uses real life experiences (eg case studies) to connect with the target groups

Tutor development and support

Tutor development should be a priority, to ensure that capacity and capability continues to meet demand and need. The programme of tutor development and support should include:

- tutor network, to supplement the LSDA portal and provide opportunities for knowledge sharing and dissemination of good practice
- a shadowing and placement programme for newly qualified tutors, to enable them to learn from more experienced tutors and accelerate the rate at which they achieve full confidence and flexibility
- a co-ordinated CPD programme that offers all tutors the opportunity to learn new and relevant skills and to experience new approaches to ES delivery
- ring-fence the administration funding provided to colleges, to ensure that is spent on providing dedicated administrative support

Increase community and outreach provision

To maximise penetration into the hardest-to-reach groups, there will need to be greater emphasis on community and outreach provision; over time, those most in need will become an increasing proportion of the target group. These are also the least likely to cross the threshold of a college. New and innovative approaches will be required to engage people in their communities.

Linked programmes

The use of combined learning programmes has proved useful in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the UK. DEL should consider further exploration of:

- tripartite awards – literacy, numeracy and ICT
- increased use of ICT as a combined to encourage participation
- combination of ES with other key subjects
- family learning projects – especially focussed on fathers, as a means to reach the unemployed male target group

Jobs and Benefits Office development

The ES team in DEL should work with colleagues in the Employment Service to develop and implement a programme of training for JBO advisers. This should be supplemented by the provision of an easy to use database which details all the different ES learning opportunities and locations available.

Susan's story

Susan is a housewife, and is currently in her second year of ES, studying Level 2 literacy. She recently turned 40 years old, and wanted to go back and finish her education. She wanted to do something for herself, and to be able to help her children should they need help with their homework. She had seen the Gremlins commercial on television, and called the helpline for more information.

In going to the class, Susan hopes to gain the qualifications she missed at school. She views this as her second chance. She also wants to improve her job prospects. She adds that in the past, it was not important to gain GCSEs, whereas now they are compulsory for most jobs.

She compares her experience of ES classes to her school days. During her childhood, she experienced large class sizes and a *“teacher who had no time for you.”* She had attended an all-girls school, and finds the current women-only classes ideal for her needs.

She believes she can talk more freely in a women-only group, and would not feel comfortable in a mixed group. She describes her tutor as *“fantastic”* and believes that if she had a teacher like her tutor in her school days, she would have performed better. She adds that *“the classes have boosted my confidence no end.”*

Last year, she gained a certificate for ES Level 1 literacy. She felt a great sense of achievement – *“I was beaming ear to ear”*. She has noticed a great change in her personality, and believes that were it not for her classes, she would rarely leave her house due to her lack of confidence and feelings of anxiety, both of which she has now overcome. She is now thinking about doing a college course, something she would never have dreamed of doing in the past.

*Susan has completed Literacy Level 1, and is currently working towards
Literacy Level 2*

Introduction

Essential Skills – that is literacy and numeracy – are critical to the success of any economy. There is a strong evidence base to show that Essential Skills deficiencies in the population have profound negative impacts on a society at a number of levels:

- *individuals* – increasing the risk of social exclusion, reducing life chances and affecting an individual's confidence to interact with society in a meaningful and full manner
- *families* – reducing life chances, educational attainment and economic opportunities for current and future generations; perpetuating the negative impacts for individuals across generations through the ties and influence of family norms
- *communities* – contributing to fragmentation and hampering cohesion, through the effects of social exclusion; those with deficiencies in essential skills have a reduced likelihood of getting involved in community life
- *the economy* – social exclusion and unemployment go hand in hand to reduce the economic prosperity of a nation; productivity is reduced at a company and national level.

Conversely, nations that have good levels of essential skills enjoy positive impacts, such as strong productivity, dynamic and included communities and maximum opportunities for all.

Northern Ireland's economy is currently growing and restructuring. In the last few years, the economy has enjoyed something of a renaissance. Mobile investment in new knowledge-based industries has been attracted to the province, especially in and around Belfast, and new and existing indigenous businesses have grown. Consequently, unemployment has decreased substantially and, since 1990, the Northern Ireland economy has been growing at a faster rate than that of any other region of the UK. The government in Northern Ireland wants to ensure that this growth is not constrained, and that all sections of the community can share in the opportunities and prosperity this growth brings.

The Essential Skills for Living Strategy (referred to as Essential Skills throughout this report) is critical to the continued growth of the Northern Ireland economy. The International Adult Literacy Survey (1996) showed that around 24% of the working age population of Northern Ireland (over 250,000 people based on current estimates of working age population) were operating at the lowest levels of literacy. Given the contribution that poor literacy and numeracy make to social exclusion in general and exclusion from the labour market in particular, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) launched the Essential Skills strategy and action plan in April 2002. The importance of essential skills within the overall skills framework has recently been underlined in DEL's new Skills Strategy published in February 2006¹

¹ "Success Through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland" Department for Employment and Learning, February 2006, page 4

The strategy sets out the vision:

“To provide opportunities for adults to update their essential skills to assist them in improving their overall quality of life, personal development and their employment opportunities and by so doing to promote greater economic development, social inclusion and cohesion”

There are two broad phases to the action plan:

- build the infrastructure to provide Essential Skills learning
- build capacity and engage learners

DEL set an ambitious target for learner engagement – that 18,500 learners would have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills by 2007. These qualifications are delivered by accredited tutors working in Further Education (FE) Colleges, private training providers and community organisations.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) commissioned Frontline Consultants to undertake a qualitative appraisal of the Essential Skills For Living strategy.

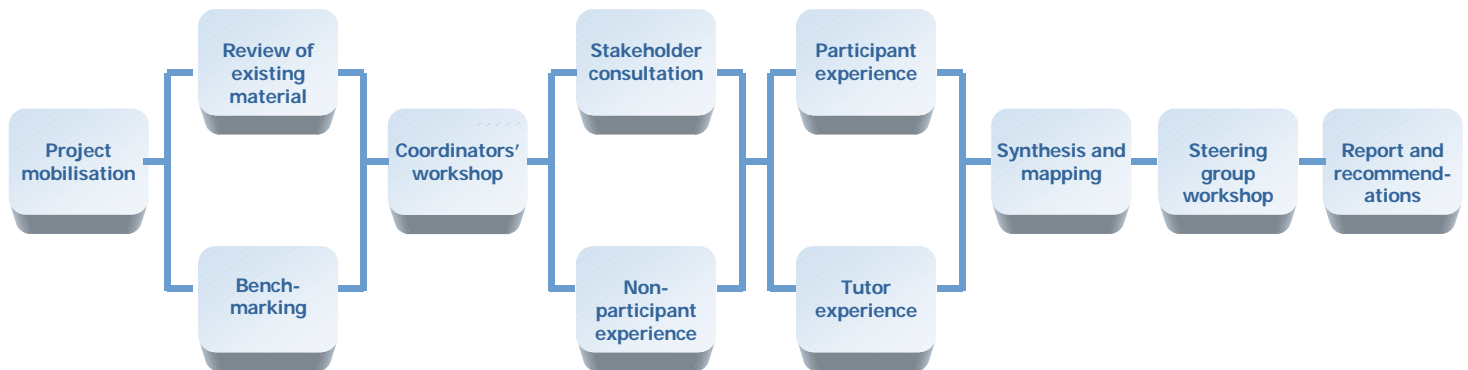
The objectives of the appraisal were to:

- gain feedback on the performance of the strategy and action plan, from key players: participants, training organisations, community groups and relevant DEL staff
- provide information on the experience of participants on Essential Skills training. This included a consideration of what attracted them to take part, any barriers they had overcome, their experiences of training and its value and how they had benefited or otherwise
- identify the barriers to participation in Essential Skills training. This involved discussion with participants and non-participants, and with other key players
- identify where Essential Skills training is operating well – examples of good practice
- identify areas where Essential Skills training could be improved
- use this information to inform: (1) the operation of Essential Skills training, and (2) further substantive research on Essential Skills to be carried out at a later date

This required a research programme that looked retrospectively, to assess progress to date, and looked forward to determine the most effective strategy for the future.

1 Method of working

The method of working for the project is outlined in the diagram below and described in further detail in the following sections.



1.1 Project mobilisation

We started the project with a mobilisation meeting with the steering group to agree:

- detailed objectives for the project
- who should be involved – key stakeholders and other contacts
- what success of the project will look like and how to evaluate it
- types of analysis and deliverables
- project process and timescales
- management and reporting arrangement for this project

1.2 Review of existing material

As the terms of reference required a qualitative appraisal, we did not undertake significant analysis of performance data. However, we did review existing policy documents and summarised performance information in order to contextualise the appraisal and provide a background understanding of current performance.

Alongside this, we undertook an extensive review of the research literature relating to adult literacy and numeracy worldwide. The purpose of this was to identify the potential longer term impacts of literacy and numeracy interventions, so that early indicators of these impacts may be included in our research with the client group. Therefore, if any of these early indicators were identified during our research with the client group, we would be able to project the longer term effects of these early impacts.

1.3 Benchmarking

In parallel with the review of existing material and the literature search, we reviewed policy and practice elsewhere in the UK. The purpose of this was twofold – to assess how they were performing relative to Northern Ireland and to identify experiences, good practice and lessons that could be applied in Northern Ireland.

1.4 Co-ordinators' workshop

Early on in the project we facilitated a workshop with the ES co-ordinators from the FE colleges. This half day session was designed to:

- help us build relationships with the co-ordinators, to enable us to work together effectively later in the project
- gather their views and experience of delivering ES
- test our proposals for engaging with the client group

1.5 Stakeholder consultation

There are numerous stakeholders with an interest in the Essential Skills for Living strategy either in terms of practical delivery or alignment with their broader objectives. We conducted interviews with 35 individuals and organisations to establish how stakeholders interact and operate together, and to determine how relationships and interactions may be contributing to the success or otherwise of the Essential Skills for Living strategy.

A mix of face-to-face and telephone based interviews was used.

The discussions with stakeholders were designed to elicit their views on how the infrastructure contributes to the effective delivery (or otherwise) of the strategy. Specifically we asked questions on:

- how do the relationships currently work?
- does the infrastructure support achievement of the strategy's objectives?
- what factors are acting as brakes to progress?
- what could accelerate success?
- the inclusive nature of the initiative – is it reaching target groups?
- what improvements could be made to ensure effective operation of the strategy and delivery in the future?
- what would make the initiative more efficient and effective?
- what is working particularly well?

1.6 Client group interviews

Our intention in speaking to the client group was to find out their experience of Essential Skills and the difference it had made to their lives. Our aim was to try and speak to people who were at different stages on the learning ladder:

- unconscious incompetence – don't really know or accept that they have a problem
- conscious incompetence – aware that they have a problem but are not yet doing something about it
- conscious competence – aware that they have a problem and are doing something about it
- unconscious competence – had a problem and have resolved it to the extent that they are no longer aware of 'trying' with their literacy and numeracy

Our conversations with past and current participants were designed to reach those in the latter two groups. In addition, we spoke non-participants (the second group) to identify their perceptions of Essential Skills and the barriers that prevent them addressing their skills need. Unfortunately, the first group are almost impossible to reach in a targeted way, as they are unknown to the agencies involved in delivering Essential Skills. Nevertheless, they constitute an important group and IALS and a recent omnibus survey revealed that those with the lowest levels of literacy are less likely to recognise they have a problem.

1.6.1 Non-participant interviews

To make a real improvement in the levels of literacy and numeracy in the adult population in Northern Ireland, it is important to understand the barriers that stop individuals from participating in Essential Skills. The reasons why individuals choose not to participate are many and varied. We worked with EGSA to identify people who had contacted the Gremlins helpline, but had then not taken up the offer of ES training. We interviewed 20 such individuals by telephone, to explore:

- why have they not participated?
- what were the barriers to participation?
- were there problems at home or work that impacted on a decision not to develop these skills?
- did they enquire but not see that enquiry through and what was the reason?
- have they had a previously bad experience of training and did this influence their decision not to apply?
- was the timing of training unsuitable?
- are they in an unsupportive environment where reactions from family and friends are negative towards learning?
- are there any physical factors eg low concentration or anxiety that prevented you from participation?
- what would make them more likely to participate in the future?

We sought other potential sources of non-participants, including Jobs and Benefits Offices. However, data protection legislation prevented us from speaking with people from these sources.

1.6.2 Current participant focus groups

We conducted 38 focus groups with current ES trainees, with a total of 266 individuals participating. The focus groups were sampled to ensure broad representation across a number of dimensions:

- location (both geography and the type of provider – college, community, workplace)
- type of participant (gender, age, employment status, offenders, themed groups eg disability, lone parent)
- type of course and level

Specifically we asked questions about:

- what has been their experience to date?
- what motivated them to participate?
- is it sufficiently flexible, accessible and appropriate?
- what is the perceived quality of delivery?
- what impact has it made on the individual, both in terms of skills improvement and the benefits accruing from improved literacy and numeracy?
- what worked well and what could be improved?
- is the range of activities on offer sufficient and relevant for their needs?
- how instrumental has the support been in developing their creativity, self confidence, self believe and motivation?
- do participants feel more confident in learning a new subject or improving a skill?
- has the programme enhanced workplace skills and improved confidence and employment prospects?

The findings of these focus groups were supplemented with 20 in-depth telephone interviews, which were used to create case studies of individuals' experiences.

1.6.3 Past participant interviews

Participants who have completed their course are potentially a rich source of information about the longer term impacts of ES training. It was important to understand whether their aspirations for the programme had been realised once they completed and left training. It was also important to understand whether other benefits had been realised.

We conducted telephone interviews with 20 former participants in Essential Skills training. The purpose of these interviews was to understand:

- the reasons why people had signed up for ES
- who had influenced them to sign up
- their experiences of the ES training programme
- the impact of ES on their lives

The training providers and colleges provided us with contact details for a large sample of past participants. From this we selected a representative sample of 20.

1.7 Tutor experience

Following on from our discussions with ES co-ordinators, we conducted interviews with tutors during our visits to training providers and colleges to conduct focus groups. From the tutor and training provider perspective it was important to understand how delivery is progressing and what could be improved. Specifically we explored:

- what works well?
- what doesn't work so well?
- suggestions for improvements
- perceptions of individuals' progress and the impact of the training on their abilities and lives
- resources purchased and in place; are these accessible to people?

1.8 Synthesis and mapping

We synthesised the findings from all the previous stages, to identify key themes and results emerging from each stage. We applied the impact indicators identified during the literature review to the findings of the participant focus groups and interviews, to establish the early and potential impact of provision. Finally, we synthesised the themes from individual stage to identify composite themes and action areas, which enabled us to develop our recommendations.

1.9 Steering group workshop

We presented our findings and recommendations to the steering group in a workshop, to test the recommendations and engage the group with the proposed way forward. Following this workshop, the report was finalised and presented to the steering group for approval.

2 Literature Review

We reviewed a wide range of literature relating to literacy and numeracy, from international and UK sources. The literature suggests that improving Essential Skills in the population will lead to substantial long term impacts at the levels of:

- national economy
- local community
- family
- individual

These impacts fall into five main categories:

- employment and social inclusion
- economic development
- health
- crime
- future generations

We summarise the key information relating to each category in the following sections.

2.1.1 Employment and social inclusion

Literacy and numeracy problems impact profoundly on employability and on ability to sustain a job. Among the unemployed, those with the poorest literacy skills have only a 50% chance of finding a job² and are four times as likely to experience long term unemployment than those with good literacy and numeracy skills³. In addition those with literacy problems who have been in work for 52 weeks still only have a 50% chance of finding another job or remaining in employment⁴. However, poor literacy is considered one of the easiest poverty indicators to tackle; unemployed people who retrain in literacy and numeracy skills find work much sooner than those who do not⁵.

The quality of employment is likely to be affected by literacy and numeracy difficulties, with evidence to suggest that people with low literacy and numeracy skills gravitate towards low skilled jobs which do not make demands on their literacy and numeracy abilities^{6 7}.

There is a somewhat circular argument in the literature about the impact of literacy and numeracy on social exclusion and unemployment. In essence, some of the literature states that social exclusion is the main determinant of

² Response to the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey; Movement for Canadian Literacy, May 2005

³ City University Report for Basic Skills Agency, 1999

⁴ *ibid* ref 1

⁵ Times Educational Supplement, 11 Feb 2000

⁶ The Value of Words: Literacy and Economic Security in Canada, Shalla and Schellenberg, 2005

⁷ A Fresh Start, report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser, 1999

unemployment, rather than poor reading abilities. However, this same literature also shows that poor reading skills increase the negative impact of social exclusion and limits the employment aspirations of individuals⁸. Therefore, the logical conclusion of this argument is that poor literacy and numeracy skills dramatically increase the risk of social exclusion **and** unemployment. Some of the evidence relating to literacy, numeracy and social exclusion is startling.

Compared to those with adequate literacy and numeracy skills, adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills are:

- more likely to live in a household where both partners are not employed
- less likely to own their own home
- less likely to be involved in public life
- more likely to be homeless⁹

⁸ Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education for the Basic Skills Agency, Parsons and Bynner, 2002

⁹ It Doesn't Get Any Better, Bynner and Parsons, 1997

2.1.2 Economic development

Literacy and numeracy problems have an impact at the economic level, both for individuals and for the wider economy. In addition to the negative impact on securing and sustaining employment, poor literacy and numeracy skills are linked to lower earnings than those of people with good literacy and numeracy skills¹⁰. Whilst both are important, numeracy is noted in the literature as having a more powerful effect on earnings than literacy. For example, in a study for the Basic Skills Agency in 1997, 58% of women with low numeracy and competent literacy earned below £150 per week. Where the competencies were reversed, only 30% fell into the below £150 earnings bracket¹¹. Whilst numeracy is a greater indicator of lower earnings than literacy, both impact on the type of jobs an individual gravitates towards, which can have a concomitant impact on earnings and prospects.

At a wider national economic level the impacts are also marked. According to the Moser report “numeracy has a profound effect on the productivity of the workforce and explains a significant proportion of the difference in economic performance between nations”¹². This finding is reinforced by work by Coulombe et al which links improvements in literacy to improvements in productivity and GDP per capita. Their findings show that a nation which achieves literacy scores 1% higher than the average achieves 1.5% above average productivity and 2.5% above average GDP per capita. This research also shows that investment in literacy is three times more important to a nation’s economic development than investment in physical capital¹³.

These findings also correlate with research that estimated the cost (in 1993) to employers of poor literacy and numeracy skills of around £86,000 per year for companies of 50 –100 employees and £500,000 for companies with more than 1,000 employees^{14 15}. The reasons for these costs are explored with business leaders in section 2.2.1.

Despite literacy and numeracy problems being recognised as inhibitors by many employers, our research indicates that engaging employers in the literacy and numeracy agenda proves difficult. In Australia a nationwide project is underway to explore employers’ attitudes to literacy and numeracy learning programmes¹⁶. Likewise, the Skills for Life Strategy in England makes explicit the need to engage employers effectively, and a toolkit has been developed to support this aim. Despite this being a common theme in national and regional strategies, we found no examples of successful large scale engagement of employers.

¹⁰ IALS

¹¹ Does Numeracy Matter?, Basic Skills Agency, 1997

¹² ibid ref 5

¹³ Literacy scores, human capital and growth across fourteen OECD countries, Coulombe, Tremblay and Marchand, Statistics Canada, 2004

¹⁴ Basic Skills Agency based on Gallup survey, 1993

¹⁵ op cit ref 1

¹⁶ Provision or development? Exploring employers' understandings of workplace literacy, numeracy and employability skills, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), ongoing - <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/projects/10361.html>

2.1.3 Health

Poor literacy skills in particular have an impact on the health of the individual and their family members. Much, although not all, of the research has been undertaken in the United States. As medical costs and health system performance information are more comprehensive in the US, this also allows us to see the some of the more far-reaching implications of the health problems caused by poor literacy.

In general, poor literacy prevents individuals from following written instructions correctly, whether these are dosage instructions for medication or post discharge care instructions. People with poor literacy are also less able to find information to help them self-treat for simple, self-limiting illnesses. Consequently, patients are more likely to seek medical help for these minor illnesses. In a study in Atlanta, patients with poor reading skills had more outpatient visits and were twice as likely to be admitted to hospital than those with adequate reading skills¹⁷. This has an inevitable impact on health care costs. In Arizona, it was found that Medicaid health care expenses were six times higher for patients with low reading skills than for those with adequate reading skills¹⁸.

Poor literacy skills have been linked to reduced uptake of preventative services¹⁹ and increased complications in chronic diseases. For example diabetics are at risk of developing retinopathy (which leads to blindness) if they do not control their blood sugar effectively.

Diabetics with poor literacy are almost twice as likely to develop the condition than those with adequate literacy²⁰, leading to greater reliance on health services and reduced ability to participate in society.

Essential Skills training is often the first experience of lifelong learning for many of society's most excluded individuals. It is also often the first step to undertaking further lifelong learning courses. There is evidence to show that participation in adult learning of any kind increases the probability of the individual giving up smoking and increases the amount of exercise the individual takes²¹. These are two of the most effective lifestyle changes to:

- improve long term health
- improve life expectancy
- increase working life years
- reduce access to and reliance on health services

2.1.4 Crime

¹⁷ Silent Barrier to Healthcare, *Annals of Internal Medicine* (13:791-8), 1998

¹⁸ *Journal of Family Practice* (46:168-175), 1998

¹⁹ *Family Medicine* (36: 595-8), 2004

²⁰ *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2002

²¹ *The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital*, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2000

There is a clear link between poor literacy and numeracy skills and crime. Research in the UK shows a statistically significant relationship between poor literacy and numeracy skills and the risk of offending²². In addition, people with poor literacy and numeracy skills are over-represented in prisons and young offenders institutions²³. Whilst there are many factors which impact on the likelihood of offending, including gender and socio-economic background, it is clear that literacy and numeracy skills are part of the mix, especially as they also impact on other causal factors such as social exclusion and unemployment.

Conversely, helping an individual to improve their literacy and numeracy skills equips them to gain employment, deal with health issues and participate more fully in society²⁴, thereby improving quality of life and reducing some of the other causal factors of crime.

2.1.5 Future generations

Improving an individual's literacy and numeracy skills doesn't only deliver benefits for the individual in question. There is evidence that it also improves the life chances of their children. At the most basic level – survival – infant mortality is lower when the parents have adequate literacy and numeracy²⁵.

Beyond survival, the development of the child's abilities and opportunities for social and economic inclusion are improved if their parents have adequate literacy and numeracy.

Parental positive attitudes to learning and adequacy of education are critically important factors in determining the cognitive development and educational success of their children²⁶ ²⁷. Parents' participation in literacy courses can affect children's preparedness for school and their ability to support the child's learning (through reading etc) has positive impacts the child's engagement with schooling²⁸. Evaluation of the US Early Head Start programme (a subset of the Head Start initiative) shows that children from deprived communities who have been involved in Early Head Start programmes are more engaged in literacy activities than those who have not. Importantly, their parents were found to be more proactively involved in their child's education, thereby leading to the benefits described above²⁹.

²² Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education for the Basic Skills Agency, Parsons, 2002

²³ The Basic Skills of Young Adults, for HM Prison Service, Ekynsmith and Bynner, 1994

²⁴ op cit ref 5

²⁵ The Lancet (v356), 2000

²⁶ Early Cognitive Development and Parental Education, Infant and Child Development, Roberts et al, 1999

²⁷ Obstacles and Opportunities On The Route To Adulthood; Evidence from Urban and Rural Britain, Bynner et al, 1999

²⁸ Fathers' Role in Children's Academic Achievement and Early Literacy, Gadsden and Ray, 2003

²⁹ Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, USA Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning Research and Evaluation

2.1.6 Summary

The evidence shows that literacy and numeracy have a profound impact on the factors that influence social cohesion and economic prosperity. Improving literacy and numeracy skills within the population will not by itself address some of the challenges faced by Northern Ireland's society; for example, employment cannot be increased without jobs being available, crime cannot be reduced by only tackling literacy and numeracy problems. However, taken in combination with economic growth and community development, improving essential skills deficiencies is an important part of any nation's future development.

3 Research Findings

3.1 Performance data

DEL continually tracks performance against its targets, through providers and ongoing in-house quantitative research. Performance since the launch of the strategy has been good. The number of learners enrolling in the programme has increased year on year as follows:

2002-04	4,580
2003-05	7,077 (approx 50% increase on previous year)
2004-06	9,533 (approx 35% increase on previous year)

Of these enrolments, 10,072 (47%) had achieved qualifications by September 2005. If there is a continued increase in enrolments of 25% year on year (a conservative estimate compared with previous years), and continued rates of qualification achievement, Essential Skills is on track to exceed its targets by 2007.

The majority of participants are in the age group 16-25, but reasonable coverage is also being achieved in the harder-to-reach age groups, such as 36-65. The gender split is more or less even, and employment status is mixed; however, in the past year, the majority of participants have been unemployed or economically inactive. This represents a shift from earlier years where the majority were either full or part time employed.

3.2 Stakeholder consultation

We interviewed a range of stakeholders with an involvement or interest in the Essential Skills strategy and implementation. They were drawn from a broad range of roles, some with operational delivery experience and others with a strategic viewpoint. Whilst the lines of questioning were similar for all stakeholders, it quickly became clear from their responses that stakeholders could be segmented according to their perspective on the Essential Skills programme:

- **strategists** – the stakeholders whose involvement in the programme was at the strategic, whole system level; such as business representative bodies, trades unions and government departments

- **technicians** – the stakeholders who were closely involved in hands-on delivery of the programme; such as training providers and tutors

There was a high degree of commonality of responses within each of these segments, but a high degree of difference between segments. We therefore present our findings from the stakeholder consultations according to segment.

3.2.1 Strategist findings

Our discussions with stakeholders with a strategic perspective on the Essential Skills strategy revealed a number of key themes relating to the strategy's effectiveness and future development. We explore these themes below.

Employer engagement

Providing support to the existing workforce is an important strand of the Essential Skills strategy, and has positive implications for employers in terms of productivity and minimising cost. Some pioneer employers are embracing the Essential Skills agenda, providing workplace learning opportunities for employees, and in some cases their families too. Those that are doing so are reporting measurable benefits in productivity, cost reduction and quality. Whilst it is predominantly larger employers that are involved in Essential Skills, some SMEs are also recognising the benefits. In a pilot project run by Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, and another run by Business in the Community, smaller employers are being provided with support and guidance to introduce Essential Skills into the workplace, whilst minimising the negative impact on operations.

Despite these positive experiences, it is proving difficult to engage the majority of employers in Essential Skills. Northern Ireland is a predominantly small business economy and SMEs face difficulties in releasing staff for training and development. However, even some of the larger employers are not yet engaged in the agenda. Feedback from our discussions revealed a range of reasons for this lack of employer engagement:

- lack of critical mass of employees needing ES support, therefore difficult to arrange workplace-based provision
- cost of down-time to release staff for attendance at ES courses
- perception that ES deficits have no impact on the business
- lack of flexibility of provision to fit with employer needs and timescales
- concern that staff will leave for better jobs once they have improved their skills

This lack of engagement is not universal, and we identified some interesting examples of ES in-work provision in both large employers and some SMEs. These included collective provision for a group of SMEs, use of champions in the business to encourage staff to sign up and provision of family learning by a large employer.

Organisations working with employers involved in ES also confirmed the findings of the literature review in terms of value to the business. They reported a range of costs incurred as a result of ES deficits, which have been reduced or mitigated as a result of improving their staff's skills, including:

- penalty charges for supplying poor quality products to major buyers, eg incorrect labelling of goods supplied to a supermarket
- design and production of diagrammatic instructions for machinery use and health and safety purposes, to ensure staff who cannot read can understand critical information
- risks associated with measurements and calculations requiring a high degree of precision, such as in engineering of precision equipment

They also reported staff progression, increased staff engagement in other training and development activities and improved succession planning as a result of addressing ES in the workplace.

Tutor accreditation and availability

The requirement for tutor accreditation was reported as causing some difficulties in the early days of the ES strategy, as there were few accredited tutors available. The need for accreditation was perhaps not fully acknowledged by providers and tutors themselves at the time, however it is now viewed as an extremely positive aspect of the ES programme; tutors, providers and other stakeholder agree that it has driven professionalisation of tutors and ensured high quality provision. In addition, the pipeline of tutors gaining their accreditation has increased, resolving the availability issue.

Flexibility of format

There is a widely reported need for flexibility in the format of ES provision. The need to fit timetables around employers' schedules is already mentioned above, but other suggestions included:

- combined provision – incorporating ES into other provision, such as IT; this makes it more palatable and attractive to some potential clients and offers employers and clients training in a relevant work-based subject as well as ES. Combined provision can help overcome the twin problems of clients' embarrassment at admitting a problem and employers' lack of interest in ES.
- taster sessions – providing short courses to allow clients to try out ES training before committing to a full course; this would help overcome clients' fear about what they might be signing up to.

The stakeholders we interviewed reported that college provision was improving in its flexibility, to meet demand from employers. However, there is still a perception that 'this is what we've got and when it's available' rather than colleges providing a truly demand-led offering.

Some providers do offer combined courses and find these good for engaging people who are reluctant to sign up for an ES course. More widespread use of these courses may be important in engaging more employers (especially those less convinced of the benefits of ES as a standalone course) and in reaching some of the hard to reach client groups, such as those who are embarrassed or who don't fully acknowledge the negative impact of their ES deficit on their life.

Capacity and capability issues within Employment Service

Employment Service staff, particularly personal advisers in Jobs and Benefits Offices, are pivotal to spotting and referring people with ES deficits. ES screening is currently undertaken for New Deal (ND) and Targeted Initiative (TI) clients, and will be trialled shortly in three new locations for all clients receiving a Work Focused Interview. This is an evolving picture, with increasing numbers of clients participating in Essential Skills.

Screening for ND clients is based on a UK-wide screening model, which leads into ES provision through gateway providers. There is a separate screening model for TI clients, who are then referred into 'mainstream' ES provision. Initial training was provided to staff in TI offices, however staff turnover now means that a number of staff are not as well-versed in screening clients. Likewise, the growing number of clients eligible to be screened for ES means that many more advisers in Jobs and Benefits Offices are now participating in screening activities. This will require further training of staff in Jobs and Benefits Offices, to ensure that all have a common level of skill and understanding of how to screen effectively.

We understand that staff also lack confidence in conducting a discussion about ES, given the sensitivities surrounding the subject and the potential to adversely affect the relationship between adviser and client. We also received reports that advisers lack knowledge of the full range provision available locally and further afield (for those who do not want to attend a course locally, where they may be recognised). Consequently, referral rates from the employment service are relatively low.

Role of EGSA and PEACE II funding

EGSA play three key roles in Essential Skills:

- administering PEACE II funding for ES provision which also promotes peace and reconciliation
- screening clients who attend for guidance, and referring to ES where appropriate
- following up with clients who contacted the Gremlins campaign

Provider bodies reported that the funding split between DEL and EGSA felt artificial and gave rise to confusion about who funds what and who to report progress to. There may be benefits in articulating this more clearly to providers, to ensure they understand the different streams of funding and maximise the use of both.

However, there is a more fundamental issue surrounding the PEACE II funding itself. The PEACE II funding appears to provide for greater flexibility and innovation in ES provision than the mainstream funding, and has led to the development of a range of provision based in community groups which are well connected into the hard to reach groups. Although PEACE II funding has been extended, it has a finite lifespan and will be reduced in scale for the extension period.

This poses a number of challenges to the ES strategy:

- if PEACE II funded projects are the hothouse for much of the innovation in provision, it is important to consider the extent to which innovation will continue to be required when PEACE II funding expires? If it is, how will this be encouraged within a more constrained resource package.
- the loss of PEACE II funding will reduce the capacity of the ES programme overall. Will ES have reached sufficient clients by then that reduced capacity is appropriate?

3.2.2 Technician findings

A number of themes emerged from our discussions with tutors and training providers from an operational perspective. These are discussed below.

ES qualifications

Tutors reported concerns that the focus on gaining an ES qualification presented a barrier to some clients, especially those who lack confidence. However, we identified a number of tutors using 'stealth' to deal with this, with clients not even realising they had completed an 'exam' until they received their results. This may be a useful tactic for engaging the least confident clients, and indeed a good tutor should be able to judge the best way to deal with the topic of qualifications with each individual. However, there are ethical considerations with an approach such as this, and these may require further exploration.

It must be noted that our interviews with clients suggest that the tutors concerns may be unfounded; clients reported the importance and value to them of having a qualification.

Flexibility of format

Some tutors and providers expressed a desire to offer greater flexibility of provision, such as:

- self-directed learning materials for the least confident (similar to those offered by NALA)
- one-to-one provision for the least confident
- longer lead-in periods to nurture and encourage the client before they finally sign up for an ES course (again for the least confident)

There are two principal issues with these proposals. Firstly, none of these options are recognised under the Education and Training Inspectorate's quality guidelines. Secondly they have substantial resource implications. Given the size of the client group for ES, it appears that it the best use of limited resources at this stage would be to try and attract high volumes of clients into ES provision. However, this volume provision needs to be of high quality and as tailored/targeted as possible to ensure that it:

- a) is an effective experience for the client
- b) fosters positive attitudes to further learning and education

Whilst reaching the hard to reach is very important, there are other ways to do this, such as through outreach and community based provision.

The development of self-directed learning materials may be a cost effective tool for helping the least confident get closer to stepping over the threshold of an ES course.

Administration

We received reports from providers (primarily from colleges) that the administration and paperwork that providers must complete for ES is cumbersome. This is linked to the high numbers of participants in colleges and the fact that, whilst colleges are provided with funding to support administration, many of them do not provide administrative support to the ES team; consequently the tutors and ES co-ordinators undertake much of the administration themselves. This is combined with them being required to complete a minimum number of teaching hours per week, leaving limited time for teaching preparation and administration.

Given the high volume of client throughput in colleges, this is an issue that needs to be addressed; it does not make best use of valuable tutor time to be completing administration tasks when they could be reaching more clients. However, the administration and collecting good monitoring information is important for the appropriate oversight of the programme in terms of

accountability and ensuring effectiveness. Therefore, when addressing the concerns about use of tutor time for administration tasks, any solution must still provide for administration to be undertaken.

Funding

The funding for ES is annualised, as is most public sector funding. Providers expressed a desire for longer term budgets to enable planning, however they do receive prior notification of their budgets, to enable them to plan in advance. Annualised budgets are a reality for all organisations working within or alongside the public sector and it is unlikely that this situation will change in the medium term.

Some providers told us they thought the mainstream ES funding was quite restrictive; in other words, the funding available per capita only just covers teaching time and materials, with little scope for developing new materials or innovative approaches to delivering the learning. The number of teaching hours required to deliver an ES qualification is fixed, with a lot needing to be delivered within a tight resource envelope. Tutors and providers suggested that this limited their ability to innovate and to market their services to employers.

Materials and resources

Tutors reported that they would welcome a range of customisable materials to be used with their classes. Tutors often develop their own materials, which reflect local people and issues. However, this again uses up time that could be spent with clients. Whilst tutors are not looking for a highly prescriptive and fixed set of materials, there may be scope to develop a backbone of materials which can be customised by tutors according to their needs.

Given the range of materials that have already been developed locally, tutors suggested that it may be beneficial to create a library of materials, which tutors could contribute to and borrow from. This would enable sharing of good practice and reduction of duplication.

Tutors would also welcome the opportunity to network at a regional and national level, so that they can share experiences and insights. This is common practice for professionals in developing fields, especially those where professionals work across dispersed locations. A network may be a cost-effective tool to enable continuous professional development and sharing of materials and ideas.

We understand that the Learning and Skills Development Agency are about to launch the ES version of their Teaching and Learning Portal. This acts as an online resource centre and virtual networking forum for professionals. It may be useful to supplement this with physical networking opportunities, to encourage knowledge sharing and peer support.

Data collection and performance management

Tutors and providers expressed concerns that the data collection requirements for ES are annualised, therefore not reflecting clients who take

more than one academic year to achieve their qualification. On further investigation it seems that this perception is incorrect, as the database system allows for clients to be carried over across academic years without appearing as early leavers or negative completers. Therefore it may be that tutors and providers require further training and information in reporting, to ensure they understand how to carry clients across academic years.

3.3 Non-participant interviews

We spoke to 20 individuals who had shown an interest in Essential Skills following the Gremlins campaign, but who had then not taken up the offer of an ES training intervention. Contact details were provided by EGSA, who had conducted follow-up research with individuals who had contacted the learndirect helpline in response to the Gremlins adverts. Interviewees were sampled equally from the following groups:

- 'not interested'
- 'still thinking about it'
- 'interested but not taken action yet'

The purpose of speaking with non-participants was to try and understand the reasons why they had responded to the Gremlins campaign but had not taken up the offer of a training course. In particular, we wanted to explore the barriers that might exist for people and the extent to which the campaign and/or advice had influenced their intention to seek help in future.

3.3.1 Reasons for initial enquiry

The people we interviewed cited a range of reasons for wanting to improve their literacy and/or numeracy. The majority expressed a desire to improve both their English and maths for a range of practical reasons, including:

- making progress at work
- helping their children with their homework
- enhanced practical skills around the home, eg DIY and cookery

A small number of clients were looking for 'something to do' and thought ES would be a good first step.

Two of the interviewees had been encouraged to phone the helpline by someone else; one by their line manager, to help them improve their work prospects, another by a friend.

3.3.2 Barriers to participation

The reasons why interviewees had not taken up training varied, but some interesting themes emerged:

- lack of employer support – employers not willing to provide leave for training during working hours
- family commitments – difficult to fit a course around childcare, work and running a home

- accessibility – reported difficulties with availability of public transport and locations of colleges
- support provided elsewhere – accessed ES support through other training courses such as New Deal, access courses; technically, this is not a barrier as the individuals have had access to training from a different source, however it is a key reason why interviewees did not follow up on the advice given by the helpline
- discomfort with the college environment – perceived as youth oriented, which can be intimidating for older adults

In addition, some of the people we spoke to had started a course but dropped out very quickly. The reasons for this were generally because they felt the level of the course was pitched wrongly for them. The individuals who had experienced this were not from one particular group or ability level. Indeed, one person reported a course being too basic, whilst another felt they were holding the rest of the class back. However, those who report feeling they are holding a class back may be revealing a more general confidence issue that needs addressing.

The comments above point to the need for highly individualised support for each client. However, our findings from the past and current participant consultations suggest that for the most part this is taking place, even within a mixed ability group setting.

Whilst these latter comments indicate some confidence issues, on the whole the barriers to participation appear to be of a more practical nature.

3.3.3 Continued interest in Essential Skills

Of the 20 people we spoke to, around half had signed up for ES training at a later date; some up to a year after their initial enquiry to the helpline. They indicated that the advice and information they received had ‘lived on’ in their minds and that when the time was right (ie the practical barriers they had faced had been eliminated) they had taken up the offer of training.

In addition, around half of those who had still not signed up for training indicated that they still wanted to do so in future. In fact, two asked to be re-referred to EGSA for further guidance and advice.

This suggests that the guidance and advice provided by the helpline, and indeed the initial impetus provided by the Gremlins campaign, has substantial longevity for the client group. This is not an issue that is fleetingly considered, but one that remains in the mind of the client and a substantial proportion of those we spoke to continued to aspire to improve their Essential Skills.

There may be opportunities arising from this longevity of influence, perhaps for further follow-up and encouragement through EGSA or to develop marketing campaigns aimed at previous enquirers, which nudge them closer to taking action.

3.3.4 Value of helpline advice

All interviewees rated the Gremlins campaign very positively, telling us that the situations in the adverts really resonated with them. They also cited the advice and guidance provided by the helpline as useful and valuable. However, it is clear that this does not always translate into immediate action. Interestingly, demand is sometimes being met by other provision, such as New Deal and college access courses. It may be useful to consider how to further engage enquirers in the period after they make their enquiry, to try and move them towards signing up for a course; this may involve follow-up calls, say from EGSA, or marketing campaigns directed to previous enquirers.

It is also important to note that the vast majority of interviewees told us they been directed towards college provision, with few reporting being signposted to other provision such as community or private training providers. This is likely to be because the vast majority of provision is based in colleges. However, given that some people reported discomfort with the college environment or difficulty in reaching a college location, it may be that greater signposting to alternative provision would increase sign up rates.

3.4 **Past participant interviews**

We conducted telephone interviews with 20 former participants in Essential Skills training, and focus groups with 9 more former participants. The purpose of these interviews was to understand:

- the reasons why people had signed up for ES
- who had influenced them to sign up
- their experiences of the ES training programme
- the impact of ES on their lives

The sample of past participants was selected to ensure broad representation across the following parameters:

- location (both geography and the type of provider – college, community, workplace)
- type of participant (gender, age, employment status, offenders, themed groups eg disability, lone parent)
- type of course and level

Around half had completed their course in June 2004 and half in June 2005. Almost all had completed more than one level or course during their time on ES.

3.4.1 Reasons for signing up

All the interviewees had signed up for ES as a route to self improvement, many initially signed up to improve confidence and to improve their sense of purpose (this is reflected in the case studies). However, some also reported a desire to either progress their career or embark on further/higher education. They all reported a desire to increase the scope of the opportunities available

to them, and saw improving their essential skills as being the critical first step. They all reported that signing up to ES was a real decision point for them; it was not just a decision to improve their essential skills, but a decision to take action to improve their lives, with ES being the first of a series of steps.

One client told us that ES was *“a ticket to a better life”*.

A number also told us they were motivated to improve their family life and their children’s educational attainment. Importantly, they wanted to address their difficulties with Essential Skills so that they could increase their ability to take a proactive role in their children’s education.

3.4.2 Influencers

Many of the people we interviewed had been influenced and encouraged to sign up for ES by family members, including their children and their parents. Women were generally influenced by their mothers and/or sisters. Men were most often influenced by their wives. The majority also told us that their self-motivation was key – others influenced and encouraged them, but they themselves were highly motivated to sign up (for the reasons outlined above). Overall, people reported that the influence of others and self were equally important in encouraging them to participate in ES.

The Gremlins campaign was also described as a powerful encouragement, as it was very relevant and highlighted situations that participants could relate to.

Other key influencers were staff in community centres, who promoted Essential Skills through other programmes and activities such as mothers and toddlers groups and craft/hobby related courses.

Children provided an important motivation for many of the people we spoke to. They wanted to improve their ability to help their children with homework and school projects. Many had themselves experienced difficulties at school and therefore wanted to ensure the experience was a positive and beneficial one for their children. They had seen the negative effects of having difficulties at school (in terms of employment and life prospects) and wanted to ensure their children did not face the same challenges.

3.4.3 Experience of ES

All interviewees told us that their ES course had been excellent. They stated that their tutors had been very good at assessing their individual needs and facilitating group and individual work which was relevant and appropriately paced.

Critically, the vast majority would and do recommend ES to others. This advocacy could play an important role in championing ES within communities.

3.4.4 Impacts

All the interviewees stated that their participation in ES had made positive impacts on their lives. They reported benefits in a number of areas, including:

- *increased confidence* – ES was a jumping off point for other training and self development, and their achievement on ES galvanised them to move forward; in addition, ES increased confidence to apply for jobs, leading to improved likelihood of positive employability outcomes
- *improved quality and security of employment* – securing a more highly paid job with better prospects and greater sustainability; as one client told us “*without Essential Skills, I would still be a cleaner*”. This also raises the possibility of ES contributing to a ‘skills escalator’, where entry level jobs are released for unemployed people as ES ‘graduates’ move up the escalator; ES may then provide a route for those people securing entry level jobs to also move up the escalator as their skills improve
- *improved employment prospects* – less fear of letter-writing, completing forms, etc, therefore more likely to apply for jobs in the first place; increased confidence to apply for jobs and promotions, both with existing and new employers; better able to articulate self in job and interviews
- *educational engagement and progression* – a number had signed up for college courses or intended to do so soon, another for an OU degree and several are learning how to help others with Essential Skills, for example as classroom assistants; even the clients not currently able to progress their education indicated an intention to do in future
- *educational support* – helping their children and other young family members with homework, being able to read them bedtime stories, encouraging children in schoolwork and promoting a more positive attitude towards education

These impacts correlate closely with the potential impacts detailed in the literature review, and indicate substantial long term benefit to the economy, the individual and the community.

3.4.5 Value of ES qualification

During our discussions with tutors they raised a concern that the ES qualification might act as a deterrent to some clients, especially the least confident.

We tested this during our interviews with past participants who, on the contrary, stated that the qualification was very important to them. They said it gave the course credibility and gave them a sense of achievement. A number also said they believed it was important to show to current and future employers. This may be something worth exploring further with employers, to ascertain their perception of the importance of the qualification.

However, it is important to note that some participants expressed concern about whether the qualification had credibility amongst the employer-base and FE/HE community. They wanted their efforts and achievements to be taken seriously and recognised, so that the qualification could give them the

'step up' they were hoping to achieve. They were unsure whether this was currently the case.

3.5 Current participant focus groups

We conducted 38 focus groups with current ES trainees, with a total of 266 individuals participating. These focus groups were conducted at the place of learning either during a class or immediately before or after.

The focus groups were sampled to ensure broad representation across a number of dimensions:

- location (both geography and the type of provider – college, community, workplace)
- type of participant (gender, age, employment status, offenders, themed groups eg disability, lone parent)
- type of course and level

The majority of the groups included more than one level of ES provision. A number covered a mix of literacy and numeracy, however the majority covered one or the other. Several of the groups were drawn from classes that included a 'mainstream' subject as well as ES (either as a means of engaging the client in ES or as a combination to enable clients to progress in their chosen mainstream subject). For example:

- literacy and ICT
- travel, tourism and ES
- beauty therapy and numeracy

Focus groups were questioned about a number of key areas related to Essential Skills. The prompts are appended. The main themes emerging from the focus groups are described below:

3.5.1 Reasons for signing up for ES

The principal reasons why participants signed up for Essential Skills were consistent across all groups and fell into the following categories:

Purposeful self improvement

Participants stated that they are doing ES to improve their life and work prospects, rather than simply as an 'interesting course'. The kinds of improvements they aspire to are:

- employability – getting a job
- career progression – getting a 'better' job, "I want to escape from a dead end job"
- move into further education and/or training
- get a qualification (to help the above)

Participants also reported a high degree of motivation to help their children or other family members with their education, for instance helping the kids with their homework. This was related to empowerment – not having to leave this to someone else (either the school, another family member or a private tutor) – and the recognition of the importance of their children getting a good education to improve their life chances.

Confidence

A large number of participants cited the desire to improve their confidence and self esteem. One participant told us she wanted to "prove I'm not useless". Many had not had positive experiences of school and therefore did not have the benefit of qualifications or positive attitudes to learning; they now saw this as limiting their confidence, which ultimately impacts on their ability to achieve the self-improvement aspirations described above.

Some participants told us they had previously hidden their difficulty with literacy and/or numeracy from people. This required enormous effort and the risk of being 'found out'. Taking an ES class was seen as a way to stop hiding from their problems and take control.

Social inclusion

Closely linked to confidence is the issue of social inclusion. A number of participants reported that they had not previously been fully involved in their community or active socially because of their difficulties with literacy and/or numeracy. Even going to the shops was a minefield, as they wouldn't know how much money to give the shop assistant and whether they had received the right change. Being able to interact confidently in a social or community setting was an important driver for a number of participants.

Others reported a desire to meet other people as one of their drivers for signing up. This was especially true of lone parents and ethnic minorities who were keen to meet likeminded people and lacked other opportunities to do so.

The participants in prison reported that participating in ES was seen as an additional privilege, which encouraged them to sign up. Those who continued to be involved as classroom assistants also received additional privileges in

terms of time to spend on classroom work and preparation, and extra flexibility in their routine. They perceived that helping with Essential Skills was seen by the prison staff as valuable and they received encouragement and support for doing so.

3.5.2 Influencers

We asked participants who had influenced them and encouraged them to sign up for Essential Skills training. Four key groups of influencers were identified:

- *Gremlins campaign* – this television campaign was cited in every focus group as being a powerful influencer. Participants liked the fact that the adverts were highly relevant to their own lives and really resonated with them. They felt that the adverts were not patronising and made them feel like they could do it.
- *family members* – female family members are especially influential in encouraging participants to sign up. Female participants were most commonly influenced by their mums and sisters. Male participants were most commonly influenced and encouraged by their wives.
- *friends and colleagues* – peer encouragement either at work or amongst friends down the pub has been a powerful influence for some participants. For example, we met a group of farmers who encouraged each other to sign up, so they could better manage their businesses (VAT returns, etc). The need for help with literacy and numeracy can carry a stigma or sense of embarrassment in the workplace. The use of champions in the workplace (such as union reps) was cited as helpful in bringing the subject out in the open and encouraging colleagues to sign up without fear of stigma.
- *self* – the majority of participants also cited their self-motivation as critical. The desire to achieve self-improvement, increased confidence and be able to help their children were all very influential in the decision to sign up to ES.

It is also important to note that local promotional campaigns were reported as useful in raising participants' awareness of courses in their local area.

3.5.3 Classes and materials

The majority of participants rated the style, teaching and materials used in classes very positively. The consistent themes emerging from the focus groups were:

- materials good and relevant
- small class sizes helpful – scope for one-to-one support and few distractions
- atmosphere described as safe, comfortable and relaxed
- sense of team work – all participants are in it together and encourage each other

Most participants reported a marked difference between ES and school. For instance: "At school they talk at you, here they take you step by step".

However, some of the young adults (age group 16-20) that we spoke to had a different and less positive perspective. Those who were doing ES as part of a mainstream course (to help them progress in their mainstream subject) resented having to miss part of their 'proper' course to do ES. Some also reported that it was "just like being back at school". These young people had not engaged well at school, therefore a different approach is critical to their success in ES and mainstream further education. It may be that the approach used by tutors with older adults is less effective with younger adults, whose negative experiences of school are still very fresh. There may be a need to explore further innovative approaches to engaging this group in ES.

3.5.4 Tutors

Allied to the discussion of classes and materials, we asked the focus groups about their perceptions and experience of their tutor(s). Aside from a small number of young adults, the majority provided very positive feedback about their tutors. In particular they reported that the tutor made the class fun and relevant and created a safe and comfortable learning environment. A number of participants liked the fact that their tutor wasn't like a teacher and that they were very approachable. The following quotes highlight these points:

"If I had a teacher like now in primary school, I would have done better"

"The tutor is dead on" – this was a very common comment

"I was very frightened before I started. The tutor support and encouragement from classmates is great. They have helped me reduce my fears"

Participants told us that the vital quality for tutors is the ability to build trust with their students. The trust relationship is critical to fostering the safe learning environment that has been such a positive feature of ES. Many participants consider their tutor as their friend and view this as an important distinction: the tutor is in a position of trust and authority, but is not a 'teacher' – at least not in the way most participants perceive a teacher to be.

3.5.5 Qualification

The ES qualification was viewed as very important by the majority of participants, especially since many of the people we spoke to had not gained any qualifications at school. All people in the focus groups were aware that they were studying towards a qualification and the majority were happy to do so. They saw the qualification as proof of achievement for themselves and potentially useful in getting a job, promotion or place in further/higher education/. However, some people did express concern that employers and universities may not recognise the value of the qualification.

3.5.6 Early impacts

The people in the focus groups are still completing their ES courses. In fact some of them had only recently started on the course. However, they were able to report early impacts which correlate with those experienced by past

participants and link closely with the potential long term impacts cited in the literature:

- *confidence* – to try new things, such as reading a book or joining a library; confidence to try for a new job; improved self esteem, such as *“I feel great!”*
- *helping children with homework* – ability to help kids to reach their educational potential; one participant told us of the thrill of hearing her child tell her *“Mummy, you’re well smart!”*
- *encouraging children and family to make the most of educational opportunities* – presenting a positive example to others and also recognising and promoting the value of education to family members
- *employability* – able to complete forms, letters and CVs confidently; actively sending out applications, now that they are able to do so; increased job security for those currently in employment, and more able to apply for new jobs and promotions
- *positive personality changes* – feeling more confident and sociable; feeling more positive about the future
- *greater engagement in society* – more willing to go out, less frightened of road signs, taking the bus, dealing with money in shops; these benefits were particularly concentrated in the participants with very low confidence and those from ethnic minorities
- *reduced stigma and fear* – now willing to ask for help if stuck with something; *“I no longer feel like I’m alone – there are others just like me”* ; telling people they are going to ES classes – being unembarrassed about it and championing to friends, colleagues and family members

These early impacts are clear indicators of some of the benefits cited in the literature such as:

- improved employability
- improved child development and educational attainment
- social inclusion

These benefits are illustrated by this quote from one of the participant we spoke to:

“As a result of completing entry level literacy, I’ve been able to read my first book. I didn’t think it would have been possible so soon. You can now find me curled up with a good book most evenings. My grandchildren now ask me about what I’m reading.”

3.5.7 Stigma reduction

The majority of participants now talk about ES and their training with friends, family and colleagues. This will ultimately lead to a reduction in the stigma associated with literacy and numeracy problems, and encourage greater sign-up to ES programmes. One person told us *“I’m not embarrassed to tell people now about ES. I feel there are a lot of people in the same boat”*.

However, a small number of participants did report that they remained embarrassed about needing an ES course. Some told people that they were attending an IT course instead.

3.5.8 Aspirations – what next?

About half of the participants we spoke to told us they hoped to undertake further education or training in the future. This included a substantial number for whom this had not been a reason to sign up for ES in the first place. This indicates that ES unlocks the desire and confidence to learn in some clients.

A substantial number also hope to get a new job as a result of improving their essential skills abilities. For many this is about trying to gain a new role that is perceived as higher value, because it is one or more of the following:

- higher paid
- more interesting
- more secure
- more likely to lead to other opportunities

3.5.9 Potential barriers

We asked the focus groups to tell us what might stop them from coming to their ES course. It was clear that the tutor was key to retaining participants, with their supportive attitude and empathy being essential. Participants told us they wouldn't have stayed in class if the tutor had not been approachable and supportive.

Small class sizes were also seen as important. Participants told us they would not come to class if there were too many people, as this detracted from the level of support they received from the tutor and would also provide too many distractions.

Practical barriers were also cited. Lone parents and young mums would not have been able to come to class if childcare facilities were not provided. Some participants also thought that the distance of the class from their home could stop them attending, especially if public transport was not available.

3.6 **ES Level 2 – specific findings**

As part of our research, we were asked to review our interviews with Level 2 participants, to determine the impacts of Level 2 achievement on

- coping with employment duties
- workplace promotion
- new jobs
- progression into FE and HE
- impact on children's education

The following summary findings are based on our one-to-one discussions with 5 past participants and the aggregate feedback from Level 2 participants in

focus groups. Therefore the sample size is too small to provide reliable evidence of impact, however, the findings do point to some key themes.

3.6.1 Coping with employment duties

The key impact acknowledged and highlighted by the majority of learners (albeit in this very small sample) was the improvement in confidence and self esteem as a direct result of participating in ES classes. In coping with employment duties, participants indicated that prior to starting ES they were scared that people would 'find out' about their lack of reading, writing and numeracy skills; they reported they were now less likely to hide behind colleagues. Some individuals also felt that they were now more efficient at work and didn't have to rely on computer spell-check software and getting colleagues to check their work.

One of the key messages was that they felt they were more secure in their position. Many were worried about losing their jobs to younger and 'more clever' people. They now felt that their skills were more up to date and they were in a more competitive and stronger position in their job

3.6.2 Workplace promotion

None of the individuals who were doing, or had completed, Level 2 in literacy and/or numeracy had applied for a promotion in their workplace. However, the majority felt that they were now in a stronger position because of the ES experience. Prior to ES, the majority would not have considered they had the appropriate skills to apply for promotion. Some told us that they believed there would not be a chance of getting it, so what was the point? ES had therefore improved not only their confidence in relation to promotion but also individuals' levels of self belief.

3.6.3 New jobs

None of the individuals interviewed indicated that they had secured a new job after completing ES Level 2. However, there were strong feelings about them being more employable having improved their skills. They also had the confidence to think about applying for jobs in a different sector or industry

Some of the individuals interviewed had been 'forced' to look for a new job due to health problems and being made redundant. Others were currently in employment and had started thinking about alternative careers. Examples included one individual who was currently a cleaner but who would like to get a PA or secretarial position, and a chef who wanted to get a job in IT.

3.6.4 Progression into FE and HE

Confidence was identified as key to progressing to FE and HE. The vast majority felt less scared about attending classes with people they didn't know, going into a College environment, and finding out about and signing up for courses in different subject matters. FE and HE was no longer something unobtainable; it was less scary, and they felt less stupid.

The majority of individuals were interested in doing more courses and one individual had signed for a horticulture course with the aim of doing a geography degree at university.

One of the issues relating to FE and HE was the link between ES Level 2 qualifications and GCSEs. Some thought that the ES Level 2 exam was harder than the equivalent GCSE exam, and were surprised at the lack of recognition by FE/HE and employers.

3.6.5 [Impact on their children's education](#)

From the Level 2 interviews conducted and the information extracted from different focus groups, we are not in a position to say that there has been a direct impact on children. However, individuals did mention that, having talked about their ES classes and their achievements with friends and family, they know that their children are proud of them and are being encouraged to think of their education. From this, we can conclude that their achievements will help encourage their children to stay in education and encourage a sense of educational achievement.

Individuals taking lower level ES classes talked more about the impact on their children. It is possible that this is because many of them were young parents with children attending primary school. Many had signed up for the ES class specifically to be able to help their kids with their schoolwork.

3.6.6 [Summary](#)

In summary, confidence is the key to progressing in education and employment for individuals taking ES classes. Although the sample size is too small to give proof of 'cutting edge impact', there are examples of real impacts and benefits to learners.

3.7 Tutor interviews

We interviewed 32 tutors who are involved in the delivery of Essential Skills across Northern Ireland. Where possible, we aligned our tutor interviews with the focus groups, thereby helping to reduce any bias from a particular area. In conducting the interviews, we used a structured pro forma (appended). Our discussions revealed a number of recurring themes:

- Impact and reach of ES
- Tutor experience and accreditation
- Resources and materials
- ES qualification and assessment
- Administration
- Flexibility of format

Each of these themes is now explored in more detail.

3.7.1 [Impact and reach of ES](#)

There was no doubt in tutors' minds that the provision of ES had already made a difference at an individual, community and national level, and many examples were provided.

At a national level, although the general consensus was that it was too early to accurately measure impact, tutors believed there were some positive signs in terms of:

- levels of achievement/accreditation increasing year-on-year
- a concurrent increase in course demand

However, they were uncertain as to whether ES was reaching the 'hard to reach' client groups. Tutors believed that there was a considerable volume of individuals, especially in rural areas, that national advertising had not engaged. When questioned about how this could be rectified, tutors made some initial suggestions:

- working with local community groups and organisations such as churches
- engaging with leaders in the community who can inform and encourage their friends/family/people in the community to engage
- recruit 'champions' - people who have been through Essential Skills and understand the barriers that are faced and how to overcome them; these champions could give talks to community groups and schools (ie catch them when they are young) to emphasise the significance of Essential Skills

On an individual level, participants were already exhibiting many behavioural changes, such as:

- increased confidence and self-esteem
- willingness and desire to continue in education (they noted a high proportion of returnees)
- increased level of peer support and encouragement (which speaks to increased confidence)

Importantly, tutors reported a significant change in the willingness of participants to tell others what they were doing. This should be considered a major attitudinal step change, the importance of which should not be underestimated. It points to a reduction in the stigma associated with Essential Skills, and this was confirmed by our discussions with participants. Whilst there is still a long way to go to eliminate the stigma and encourage open discussion about Essential Skills, this is a considerable achievement and a very positive sign. On probing further, tutors stated that they felt that the national 'Gremlins' campaign and television campaigns such as the Eastenders storyline and RAW had played a significant role in this attitudinal change.

Tutors also reported changes at a community level, primarily through EGSA PEACE II funded projects. Tutors who were involved in these projects believed that ES was helping to bring communities together, with a common

purpose and sense of achievement. They stated that helping individuals read, write and feel more comfortable with numbers in a group setting led to the breaking down of other barriers between people within a community. In addition, community-based tutors also noted a significant increase in the proportion of males attending mixed groups. Prior to the launch of ES, the majority of training projects were female dominated. The tutors reported that men were traditionally less willing to acknowledge learning needs (seen as weaknesses) and allowed their pride to get in the way of signing up. Older unemployed males are a key target group for ES, therefore the increase in male participation in community based ES projects represents a double achievement:

- reaching a hard to reach client group with the ES message
- engaging a hard to reach group in learning – with the resultant benefits in employability, health gain and confidence

In future, tutors suggested more targeted marketing and/or the use of male 'champions' to continue to encourage more male participation.

3.7.2 Tutor experience and accreditation

Our sample of tutors included a variety of experience levels, from those in their first term to those who have been working in ES for over 15 years. Therefore, we feel confident that the feedback is broadly representative.

As a result of the changing curriculum, many tutors had already made a shift from Key Skills to Essential Skills. For those that were new to this area of teaching, the majority had gained their ES qualification from Queen's University Belfast (QUB). Where individuals were exempt from having to gain an ES qualification (ie already teaching Maths/English at GCSE level or above or having extensive experience in teaching key skills), they still had to complete a two-day core curriculum training session before delivery of ES classes.

Although all individuals who had completed the ES accreditation at QUB described it as comprehensive, they pointed out that it was 'theory focused'. Tutors felt it would have been beneficial to have more opportunities to shadow current practitioners, to:

- help embed the theory
- build up teaching practice prior to starting formal teaching
- build understanding some of the softer/behavioural issues from the experienced tutor – many experienced tutors viewed this as vital in developing a relationship with the class

The relatively low numbers of qualified ES tutors, leading to limited availability, was viewed as having a negative impact on a number of levels. However tutors reported that this was definitely improving as more tutors became qualified.

The concerns raised by tutors included the following:

- community providers felt that tutor availability sometimes impacted the start date of their courses or resulted in courses not running. This ultimately caused difficulty in delivering the course over the appropriate number of weeks.
- those tutors who were available were often overloaded, which may have a negative impact on the quality of teaching.
- experienced tutors felt there was a danger that new tutors did not have the appropriate skills and attitudes to manage groups that often need to be handled sensitively. This is especially important as the majority of ES participants have overcome significant barriers, such as fear and admitting they have a problem, to enable them to sign up for the course. It is therefore imperative that the tutor understands how the participant is feeling, and feels able to manage a relationship with them, especially in the first few classes.

Tutors anticipated that these issues would become less of a concern over time as:

- more tutors become accredited
- ES becomes more embedded in the college curriculum, and the number of participants that are doing ES as part of a full time college course increases (therefore requiring less sensitivity of handling)

3.7.3 Resources and materials

Tutors were all in agreement that a plethora of material existed to support Essential Skills, from a range of sources including:

- college
- Skillbuilders
- BBC Skillwise
- NALA (occasionally)

However, tutors reported that for maximum effectiveness these materials need to be customised for use in their classes to reflect local people and issues. Tutors perceive this as using up valuable time, which could otherwise be spent teaching. Many tutors have also developed their own materials in their own time, and reported it was necessary to tailor teaching material to individual needs which was time consuming.

Given the range of materials that have already been developed locally and exist nationally, tutors stated that it would be beneficial to create a library of materials, which tutors could contribute to and borrow from. This would enable sharing of good practice and reduction of duplication. We understand that the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) are in the process of rolling out an ES version of their Teaching and Learning Portal – a peer-to-peer networking forum and resource library to address this particular need.

Tutors would also welcome the opportunity to network at a regional and national level, so that they can share experiences and insights. This is common practice for professionals in developing fields, especially those where professionals work across dispersed locations. Whilst the LSDA portal will be a very useful method for connecting tutors 'virtually' and enabling knowledge sharing on a continuous basis, it may be useful to consider a series of networking events to bring tutors together either regionally or nationally from time to time as a supplement to the portal. The combination of virtual and physical networking offers a cost-effective opportunity to enable continuous professional development and sharing of materials and ideas.

3.7.3 ES qualification and assessment

During our initial stakeholder consultation, tutors and training providers raised concerns that the focus on gaining an ES qualification presented a barrier to some clients. We probed this topic during our interviews with tutors, which revealed that this is mainly an issue for lower levels of ES (Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2); as a participant either progresses through or is assessed at a higher level on entry, gaining a qualification was often cited as the key motivating factor.

Tutors consider Entry Level 1 and 2 client groups as 'hard to reach' and as having the lowest confidence levels. Tutors, and participants, stated that gaining a qualification was not viewed as the first priority, ie they were more concerned with admitting they needed help and being able to work in a group to resolve this.

As a qualification is a key success factor for ES (ie DEL monitors such performance statistics and has a PSA target relating to ES achievement) we identified a number of tutors using different approaches (such as combining with ICT) to introduce the qualification, with clients not even realising they had completed an 'exam' until they received their results. This may be a useful tactic for engaging the least confident clients, and indeed most tutors felt that a good tutor should be able to judge the best way to deal with the subject of qualifications with each individual on a case by case basis.

Tutors reported that colleges and community groups are increasingly using award ceremonies to present certificates and celebrate success. This was noted as providing a sense of achievement as well as something to look forward to. In some cases, participants were also encouraged to bring along a family member or somebody who maybe had similar issues with ES, thereby increasing awareness of what was available and achievable.

Where projects were run in schools, parents were often awarded their certificate during their children's award ceremonies. Both participants and tutors cited this as encouraging to the younger generation and sending out the right messages.

As the importance of the qualification continues to increase, tutors (and participants) were keen to point out the lack of recognition at a national level. It was noted that both employers and universities did not recognise ES on application forms, tending to recognise the more traditional GCSE in Maths

and English, thereby excluding ES participants. In our discussions with tutors they highlighted the continued debate around the equivalence of ES to GCSE levels. The National Qualifications Framework defines a level 2 qualification as equivalent to 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C, however it seems that this was not well understood by the wider employer and education communities. In going forward it will be necessary to effectively communicate the equivalent value of ES qualifications to employers and universities.

There were mixed messages regarding current approaches to assessment and accreditation, especially in terms of quality and consistency. While some are satisfied, citing it as generally ok and as “only a guide”, many are dissatisfied. In general, ABSU was described as okay as a guide, but often provided an incorrect assessment of ability, often too high. Most tutors did speak favourably of Basic Skills Builders, describing this as a good diagnostic. Overall, the main complaint was that there were many mistakes in the assessment papers, which reflected negatively on them as tutors and the assessment centres.

Tutors also reported that they felt that a lot of marking was very subjective, leaving scope for inconsistencies. For example one tutor stated that participants from a previous training provider were all assessed too highly, which resulted in additional work to get them to the appropriate level. In going forward, a key objective will be to increase employers’ confidence that this is a robust qualification, therefore it will be important to maintain a high degree of consistency across assessment centres.

3.7.4 Administration

The majority of tutors in colleges reported that the administration associated with ES is cumbersome, and uses valuable time that could be used to develop more innovative teaching materials. A similar view was shared in prisons. We also noted that colleges are provided with funding to support administration, however this is not always translated into dedicated administrative support to the tutors; consequently tutors undertake much of the administration themselves. Given the high volume of client throughput in colleges and the relatively low numbers of qualified tutors, this is an issue that needs to be addressed. It does not make best use of valuable tutor time to be completing administration tasks when they could be reaching more clients.

Within community provision administration was rarely cited as an issue. It appears that this was less to do with lack of administration and more to do with utilisation levels of these tutors. For example, full time college tutors have a minimum number of teaching hours a week, whereas those involved in community provision tend to be part time.

3.7.5 Flexibility of format

Some tutors expressed a desire to offer greater flexibility of provision, such as:

- one-to-one tuition for the least confident
- longer lead-in periods to nurture and encourage the client before they finally sign up for an ES course (again for the least confident)
- self-directed learning materials for the least confident (similar to those offered by NALA)
- more flexible study length - not all students need 60 hours
- accreditation in smaller transferable units – some students may have to leave and rejoin classes at a later date

The Education and Training Inspectorate do not recommend the first three suggestions as good practice. In addition, the first two suggestions have substantial resource implications. These points are discussed in more length in section 4.2.1.

Tutors felt that the ability to offer more flexibility in length of study time, while a good idea for community based provision, would be more difficult to implement in a college based situation due to the funding constraints. Given this is mostly public sector funding, the funding for ES is annualised. However, colleges are given an indication of likely funding for future years, which may allow them to plan courses that straddle more than one academic year. College tutors also reported that that mainstream ES funding was quite restrictive, with a lot needing to be delivered within a tight resource envelope. Tutors suggested that this limited their ability to innovate and to market their services to employers.

A major concern of almost all tutors was their ability to teach all five ES levels concurrently. Although their training prepared them intellectually for this, the physical reality often leaves tutors feeling exhausted and lacking a sense of achievement. In many of our tutor discussions and focus groups we saw comprehensive ES coverage even in very small groups. For instance, one focus group had five people and covered four ES levels from Entry Level 1. Although tutors highlighted this as an issue, it was never highlighted by participants as being detrimental to their teaching.

All tutors felt it would be more beneficial to have a maximum of three levels at any one time and that the logical split would be to keep the entry levels together. This proposed split was based on the leap in understanding needed to achieve Levels 1 and 2. Although some tutors stated that having small, level-specific groups would be advantageous, the majority felt that this would reduce the amount of peer learning and mutual encouragement that is currently occurring. For example, where tutors had participants at higher capabilities or were returnees, these individuals were encouraged to share their experience and expertise, which ultimately helps embed what they have learned. In the prison service they have taken this a step further and have formal 'classroom assistants'. These individuals have all passed at least Level 1 and their role is to support new learners, especially in project work.

3.8 Benchmarking and good practice

As part of our research programme, we made contact with agencies in other parts of the UK to find out their experiences of delivering strategies and provision similar to Essential Skills. We also identified areas of good practice from these areas and from within Northern Ireland itself. Finally, we looked at some areas of good or interesting practice from the rest of the UK and elsewhere, which were highlighted to us during our research and interviews.

3.8.1 UK benchmarking

England

The Skills for Life strategy in England aims to improve literacy, language and numeracy skills of 2.25 million adults by 2010. It focuses on five key target groups, whose literacy and numeracy skills needs are deemed greatest:

- 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

The strategy is on track to meet its targets for 2005, and exceeded its targets in 2004, with 830,000 learning achievements. The team delivering the strategy credit this achievement to:

- high level political support, giving weight to the strategy
- above base rate funding

However, our conversations revealed that the strategy continues to struggle to reach key groups, in particular the transient population and employers. Indeed, the 2004/05 Skills for Life strategy places a strong emphasis on employer engagement, and an employer toolkit has been developed which contains resources and materials for use in the workplace.

We identified two examples of good practice from the Skills for Life Strategy:

- *Mobile Learning Skills Unit* – this is a mobile unit, equipped with IT and learning materials. It enables tutors to take the Skills for Life message to unusual locations (such as football pitches) and bring learning closer to the community, especially travelling communities. NB Some providers in Northern Ireland also have mobile provision.
- *E-Assessment* – this tool requires no IT skills except being able to use a mouse, but brings the assessment process to life in an interactive program. It also exposes people to IT in a non-threatening manner. The e-assessment tool can be used on mobile units.

During the latter stages of the project, the Adult Learning Inspectorate published a report on the Skills for Life programme, which was largely negative. It highlighted a failure to help those from the most disadvantaged groups, and was particularly critical of the quality of provision in prisons. It is important to note that the report recognised that the strategy was trying to make up for shortcomings in the school system, and that improving school-age literacy and numeracy was a key challenge.

Wales

The Basic Skills Agency for Wales oversees delivery of the Welsh Assembly's Basic Skills Strategy. In April 2005, the second phase of the strategy was launched. The details of 'Words Talk - Numbers Count' are still to be finalised, but the strategy identifies ten horizontal themes:

- raising awareness
- better identification of learning needs and tracking progress
- providing a better range of attractive learning
- improving the quality of provision
- developing the teacher workforce
- fit for purpose qualifications and assessment
- better help and support for learners
- Welsh language
- working together to maximise impact
- better evidence of what works

It also identifies priority groups which include:

- families
- adult learners with low literacy and numeracy levels
- low skilled people in the workforce
- jobseekers
- offenders and ex-offenders
- other groups at risk of exclusion
- speakers of other languages

During the course of this project, there were changes in key personnel in the Basic Skills Agency, which made it difficult for us to obtain accurate performance data.

We identified the following examples of good practice from the Welsh model:

- *tripartite award* – a qualification which covers literacy, numeracy and ICT has been piloted successfully with adult learners in Wales. It is currently being piloted in secondary schools.
- *literacy and social inclusion project* – initiative to use literacy training as a lever for greater social inclusion, working with parents, disaffected young people, young people out of school hours and 'at risk' adults.
- *Better Teaching Partnership* – a partnership between all the groups and agencies involved in adult literacy and numeracy provision, to share good practice.

Scotland

The Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is overseen by Communities Scotland, and delivered on the ground by Community Learning Strategy Partnerships in each local authority area. 100,000 learners have registered since 2001, and the aim is to have increased this to 150,000 by 2006-07. A curriculum framework for adult literacy and numeracy has recently been completed.

We identified the following examples of good practice in Scotland:

- *Challenge Dad pathfinder* – encouraging fathers to participate in literacy and numeracy learning for their own and their families' benefit.
- *voluntary sector engagement* – project to engage more voluntary organisations with promoting or delivering literacy and numeracy provision
- *learning disabilities curriculum* – development of a curriculum for people with learning disabilities to gain the skills to enable them to participate in community life
- *health related pilots* – building the capacity of the healthcare sector to identify and refer people with low literacy levels into relevant support

3.8.2 Northern Ireland good practice

Whilst the majority of providers are primarily focussed on building capacity and coverage within their provision, we identified the following examples of emerging good practice:

- *employer engagement pilots* – Londonderry Chamber of Commerce and Business in the Community are both running pilot projects to encourage employers to sign up to provide workplace-based Essential Skills training. These have had good results, with employers introducing champions and family learning as well as basic provision. They have reported improvements in productivity, skills, quality and attitudes of employees as a result, with concomitant impacts on costs, productivity and product quality. However, these pilots are relatively small scale, and even they report difficulties in getting employers bought-in.
- *classroom assistants* – the prison service and some training providers have encouraged ES completers to return to class to provide support to new learners. This has provided additional voluntary resource within the class to give more time to individuals; it has also provided confidence-building experience for the assistants in question, which is helpful when looking for work or promotion.
- *specialist ES library* – East Tyrone College has created a special subsection of the main library, with materials suitable for ES students. This encourages participants to visit the library, sure in the knowledge that they will be able to find something suitable for them. This breaks down confidence barriers to visiting a library for the first time.

3.8.3 Other examples of good or interesting practice

During our review of the literature and our discussions with stakeholders, we identified the following areas of good practice that may be worthy of further exploration:

- *fatherhood pilots* – in the USA the Head Start project includes a number of fatherhood initiatives, which encourage adult males (a traditionally difficult to reach group) to participate in literacy and numeracy training so that they can help their children with their education and development.
- *STEP literacy mentors* – again in the USA, Head Start is piloting the development of mentors and coaches to support teachers of literacy, to improve performance and thereby improve outcomes for the people they teach.
- *self-directed learning* – NALA in the Republic of Ireland produces video based learning materials for people who are unable (or lack confidence) to attend courses. This enables them to undertake training at their own pace within the home environment. This may be an interesting model to explore for bringing the least confident on before engaging them in the classroom environment.

4 Conclusions

The overarching conclusion arising from our research is that Essential Skills has got off to a very strong start in Northern Ireland. It is on track to achieve, or possibly exceed, its targets and participants report positive experiences of the training. The benefits that participants have experienced from participating in the training are profoundly impactful to them, and as early indicators, these benefits correlate strongly with the evidence of longer term impact in the literature.

The immediate benefits experienced by participants are detailed in Section 3, and the literature suggests that these benefits to individuals could translate over time into the following impacts for the Northern Ireland economy:

- increased employment rates (leading to personal and national prosperity)
- increased productivity
- reduced benefits bill
- improved social inclusion and community cohesion
- improved population health outcomes and reduced health costs
- improved educational attainment in the child population, leading to a stronger knowledge base which can drive further economic growth
- reduced crime and re-offending rates

Consequently, the benefit to Northern Ireland of continued investment in Essential Skills is clear. This is well expressed by Coulombe *et al's* research which shows that investment in literacy and numeracy is three times as valuable to a nation's economic development as investment in physical infrastructure. A nation which achieves only 1 percentage point above average literacy and numeracy can enjoy above average productivity and GDP.

The strategy launched in April 2002 with an action plan to build the infrastructure to deliver Essential Skills. This inevitably led to some early capacity issues, in terms of building a critical mass of accredited tutors. All the key players recognised these issues as 'growing pains' which have now been largely resolved. There is increased confidence among stakeholders that the Essential Skills community is now 'tooled up' and for the most part operating effectively. This is borne out by the reported experiences of past and current participants, whose feedback about the quality of training and the impact on their lives was overwhelmingly positive.

Following on from this overarching conclusion, we identified a number of themes that emerged during the research. These can be divided into strategic and operational conclusions:

4.1 Strategic themes

4.1.1 Joined-up impacts

Our research revealed that the impacts achieved, and those projected to be achieved in the longer term, address the priorities of a number of key government departments:

- employability, lifelong learning and workforce development – Department for Employment and Learning
- productivity and economic development – Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- social inclusion and community cohesion – Department of Social Development
- health improvement – Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Given the importance of Essential Skills, especially to the economic development of Northern Ireland, it may be worth exploring the possibility of an increased funding package which recognises the impacts of ES to all of these departments and priorities. As the impacts do span a range of departments, any increased funding package should be drawn from the various different funding strands to which ES contributes.

4.1.2 Employer engagement

Members of the workforce, especially low-skilled workers, constitute a priority group for the ES strategy. Getting employers to buy in to the strategy and to providing and promoting ES training will be critical to reaching this target group. At present, some participants report that their employers are not supportive of their ES training; for some this has been enough of a barrier to prevent them from starting or remaining in training.

The employer pilots that have taken place have been successful, albeit on a small scale. To achieve DEL's ambitions for Essential Skills, and to realise the full economic benefits of the strategy, employers need to be more fully engaged in ES. There are good examples (and stories of measurable business benefit) that can be used to promote ES to employers. Importantly, the business case is well-proven (see sections 3.2 and 3.3.1). However, the nature of the Northern Ireland economy (largely SME driven) presents additional challenges in engaging employers. A renewed focus on employer engagement, designed to make it easy for SMEs to buy in, will be required.

It is also worth noting that Essential Skills remains a key issue within DEL's new Skills Strategy (see above). The continued emphasis on Essential Skills is important, but the Skills Strategy also presages the establishment of local Workforce Development Forums (WDFs) across Northern Ireland. These WDFs will contain representatives of key stakeholders (eg employers, training providers, FE colleges etc) and it is envisaged that WDFs will be an important delivery mechanism for a Regional Skills Action Plan that will, amongst other things, seek to tailor local provision to local need within Northern Ireland. It will be vital that Essential Skills issues are amongst those addressed by the

WDFs so that a joined-up approach which includes both employers and training providers is adopted, and that Essential Skills remain a key priority.

4.1.3 Innovation

The Essential Skills strategy and action plan is still relatively young. During its first three years, there has been innovation and 'product development', particularly in reaching the hard-to-reach groups. The mainstream ES funding provided to colleges is reported as only being sufficient to fund the status quo; little funding is left for innovation in materials or approaches.

The PEACE II funding provides greater scope for flexibility in funding, and programmes funded through PEACE II have tended to be the ones leading innovation. PEACE II funding ceases soon, and there is a concern in the stakeholder community that there will be insufficient funding to support innovation in future.

There is a debate to be had about whether, by the time PEACE II funding runs out, the models for ES will be well developed and less innovation will be required. However, given that the strategy will only be 5 years old at that point (and the size of the target market still to be reached by ES), we would argue that this is unlikely that innovation will no longer be required. Although it may be required at a lower level by then.

4.1.4 Reach

Performance in the first 3 years of the ES strategy has been impressive, with over 21,000 learners reached during between 2002 and 2005. Tutor capacity and availability is increasing and demand is also increasing.

Together, these findings suggest that the work of Essential Skills is not yet completed. Even with such good reach in the first 3 years, there are still an estimated 150,000 people in the population with ES needs (not including those who have emerged from school education with ES deficiencies during this period). We therefore conclude that Essential Skills is still needed.

Our research suggests that the hardest-to-reach groups, such as unemployed males and the most socially excluded groups of society, are being engaged by Essential Skills. However, they are a part of the mix of participants, rather than constituting the majority of participants. Over time, as the overall target population decreases, it is likely that the remaining target population will become harder to reach; as the easier-to-reach progress, those remaining to be engaged are likely to have more complex barriers to participation, especially in terms of confidence levels. Therefore, as ES matures, it is likely that the emphasis of provision will need to shift more towards community and outreach provision, using innovative approaches to engage the most disengaged client groups.

4.1.5 Influencing the influencers

Promotional campaigns and the influence of others (especially family members and friends) have been powerful tools in encouraging participants to

sign up for Essential Skills. The Gremlins campaign has been well-received by participants, who felt the adverts really spoke to them and gave them a sense of the possible. It would be valuable to continue with the Gremlins campaign in future years, perhaps with follow up research in another eighteen months to ensure it is still well-received.

Our research showed that participants' personal motivations for signing up for Essential Skills tended to be:

- purposeful self-improvement – improving job prospects, stepping stone to further education, ability to act more independently
- family – helping children with their schoolwork and being able to influence their education, to improve long term life chances
- social confidence – feeling able to interact fully in society, such as using public transport and being confident using money (eg when shopping)

Therefore, these are the key selling messages that should be incorporated into any promotional campaign. The case studies shown in Section 6 also have the potential to be used as promotional tools. People respond well to real stories of 'people like me', and the case studies tell the true and affecting stories of people who have benefited from ES.

Any promotion campaign should also target key influencers, as well as potential participants themselves. The biggest group of influencers identified in our research was adult female family members – mums, sisters and wives. Their influence was very important in encouraging many participants to sign up for ES.

4.2 Operational themes

4.2.1 Flexibility of format

As the target groups for ES become harder to reach (see section 4.1.4), there may be an increased need for greater flexibility in the delivery format. We saw good examples of flexible delivery, including the use of other subjects (eg ICT) as an encouragement to encourage participation. We also saw courses which combined ICT with ES as a way to enable learners to move towards an ICT qualification even if they had ES difficulties. We also saw this approach with other subjects such as travel and tourism and beauty therapy.

In a community setting, we also saw tutors recruiting to ES from hobby and interest groups; clients were moved seamlessly from a non-threatening, 'fun' subjects into ES training. This made the prospect less scary and reduced the stigma associated with signing up for ES.

Where ES is being delivered in a more flexible format, this is usually down to the creativity of the tutor or the college/training provider. It will be important to foster this creativity and flexibility across the whole delivery community, if ES is to realise the ambition of helping those who are hardest to reach.

Some tutors reported that the least confident participants would benefit from one to one support. Our view is that, with such a large target group still to be reached, this would not be cost effective at this stage in the life of ES. It may, however, need to be considered further in future years. It may be worthwhile to consider the development of a self-directed learning option (such as the video-led NALA product) as a supplement to supported teaching in the meantime, to help the least confident to make progress towards signing up for a course.

4.2.2

Sharing good practice

Whilst most colleges and training providers are still focussing on maturing their provision and ramping up their capacity, we did find examples of good practice. There will undoubtedly be others out there now, and more will emerge over time as provision matures. There is little dialogue between providers, so these pockets of good practice remain isolated or are discovered by one or two providers by accident.

It would be useful to develop a systematic approach to sharing knowledge and disseminating good practice among tutors and providers. This ensures that 'wheel reinvention' is minimised and the benefits of innovative approaches are maximised.

LSDA is developing the teaching and learning portal for ES, which will provide a virtual environment for sharing good practice. However, it may be useful to supplement this with a dissemination approach led by DEL.

4.2.3 Tutor development

In the early days of Essential Skills, the availability of accredited tutors was seen as a constraint. However, this has improved significantly in the past year and most providers no longer see capacity as a constraint to provision.

The overwhelming majority of participants provided glowing reports about their tutors' approach, attitude and abilities. They are a valuable asset to the ES programme and their organisations.

Tutors' experience levels vary considerably, from those who have been teaching adult literacy and numeracy for twenty or more years, to those who are new to the discipline. Those who are newer tend to feel less confident to tailor and adapt their provision to individual needs. They also have fewer tried and tested approaches to engaging and supporting the least confident participants.

There is therefore a need to support newer and less experienced tutors, in developing the confidence and flexibility to maximise the impact of their provision. Likewise, long-experienced tutors need access to development to refresh their skills and ideas, and to expose them to innovative good practice.

As Essential Skills matures, tutor development will be crucial to maintaining momentum and maximising impact.

4.2.4 Administration

The administration procedures involved in Essential Skills are important to ensure that enrolments and achievements are tracked and that funding flows appropriately to providers. ES tutors and co-ordinators in colleges tend to find this administration burdensome and that it reduces the time they have available for teaching ES. Administration funding is included in the package provided to colleges, but this is not translated into dedicated administrative support in most colleges.

Consequently, teaching staff must spend some of their time completing administration tasks. This does not play to their strengths or enable them to add maximum value.

4.2.5 Reducing stigma

We saw evidence that the stigma associated with Essential Skills deficiencies is starting to be eroded. 'Graduates' of ES courses, and many of those still in training, reported a new willingness to talk to others about their training and the benefits it has brought them. If this trend continues, over time this will create a critical mass of people who will talk positively about ES with friends and colleagues. They will be powerful ambassadors for the programme; silence compounds the embarrassment factor, therefore talking about it gets ES out in the open and reduces the need to hide or be embarrassed.

This spontaneous ambassadorship could be harnessed and exploited further, by enrolling former participants to be champions of ES, either at work or in their local community. Other influential stakeholders, who could be enrolled to champion ES and encourage people to talk freely about it, include:

- trade union representatives in the workplace
- local community leaders
- religious leaders
- playgroup leaders

4.2.6 Engaging Jobs and Benefits Office (JBO) staff

The unemployed continues to be a priority target group for Essential Skills. This is reflected in the roll-out of ES screening to all benefits claimants attending for a work focussed interview.

Early provision of ES screening training for JBO staff tended to focus on Targeted Initiative (TI) personal advisers. Staff turnover means that some of these advisers have moved on and been replaced. Their replacements, and their colleagues who do not work in TI areas, have not yet benefited from training on ES screening. Therefore there is not yet a critical mass of JBO advisers with the skills and confidence to screen and refer clients effectively. There also appears to be a knowledge gap, with many advisers being unaware of the full range of ES provision available.

To maximise the reach of ES into the unemployed group, JBO staff will be key partners. Training and development will be required to ensure that they can contribute fully to reaching the unemployed target group. Access to a user-friendly database of learning opportunities will also be important.

5 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions in Section 5, our overarching recommendation is that Essential Skills continues to be a priority area for DEL and that increased funding (based on the 'joined-up' impacts of ES) is pursued to increase coverage and to compensate for the impending loss of PEACE II funding.

The following sections outline our other recommendations to further develop Essential Skills in Northern Ireland:

5.1 Employer engagement

Employers will be key partners in the continued success of Essential Skills; the workforce is an important target group and our research revealed that employer engagement could be improved. Further work will be required to identify the barriers to employers signing up and supporting employees, to identify good practice from elsewhere and to identify the key selling messages that would encourage employers to engage. The pilots undertaken by BITC and Londonderry Chamber of Commerce may provide useful intelligence to inform this research.

Based on this research, an employer engagement strategy may be required. The work with employers and any ensuing strategy should explore the potential to involve a range of key partners such as :

- Invest NI
- Enterprise NI (and its network of Local Enterprise Agencies)
- Trades unions
- Business in the Community
- Chambers of Commerce
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Institute of Directors
- Sector Skills Councils

Such a strategy would be likely to include a range of approaches, such as:

- sectoral initiatives
- collective approaches that make ES a viable option for SMEs
- championing and promotion of ES within the workplace
- development of the collateral to make the business case for ES in the workplace
- building capacity of business advisers to promote ES to their client organisations
- a co-ordinated plan for employer engagement, with clear roles and responsibilities

5.2 Promotional campaign

DEL should work with DfES and partners across the UK to ensure that Gremlins will be continued in the medium term. This should be supplemented by a Northern Ireland promotional campaign which:

- incorporates the key selling messages about self-improvement, family and social confidence
- targets adult female family members as key influencers
- targets businesses and people in employment to encourage workplace engagement
- enrolls champions and 'graduates' to promote ES
- uses real life experiences (eg case studies) to connect with the target groups

5.3 Tutor development and support

Tutor development should be a priority, to ensure that capacity and capability continues to meet demand and need. The programme of tutor development and support should include:

- tutor network, to supplement the LSDA portal and provide opportunities for knowledge sharing and dissemination of good practice
- a shadowing and placement programme for newly qualified tutors, to enable them to learn from more experienced tutors and accelerate the rate at which they achieve full confidence and flexibility
- a co-ordinated CPD programme that offers all tutors the opportunity to learn new and relevant skills and to experience new approaches to ES delivery
- ring-fence the administration funding provided to colleges, to ensure that is spent on providing dedicated administrative support

In addition, we highlighted some examples of using ES 'graduates' as classroom support to the tutor and participants in section 4.8. We recommend that expansion of this good practice is explored further.

5.4 Increase community and outreach provision

To maximise penetration into the hardest-to-reach groups, there will need to be greater emphasis on community and outreach provision; over time, those most in need will become an increasing proportion of the target group. These are also the least likely to cross the threshold of a college. New and innovative approaches will be required to engage people in their communities. Some of the examples of good practice highlighted in section 4.8 may be worth further exploration, such as provision aimed at fathers and the engagement of the health sector as partners. These ideas are described in more detail in section 4.8.

5.5 Linked programmes

The use of combined learning programmes has proved useful in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the UK. DEL should consider further exploration of:

- tripartite awards – literacy, numeracy and ICT
- increased use of ICT as a combined to encourage participation
- combination of ES with other key subjects
- family learning projects – especially focussed on fathers, as a means to reach the unemployed male target group

5.6 Jobs and Benefits Office development

The ES team in DEL should work with colleagues in the Employment Service to develop and implement a programme of training for JBO advisers. This should be supplemented by the provision of an easy to use database which details all the different ES learning opportunities and locations available.

6 Case Studies

The following presents a selection of case studies that have been developed through consultation with past and current participants during our one-to-one discussions and focus groups.

Tommy – completed Literacy Level 1 and 2 and Numeracy Level 1, currently providing support as a classroom assistant

Tommy is an Essential Skills classroom assistant at Magilligan Prison, having completed Levels 1 and 2 Literacy and Level 1 Numeracy. He liked English at school but didn't take it any further. He said the main reason for doing Essential Skills was to improve his self-confidence, although he stated that getting a qualification could prove valuable once he left prison.

Tommy described the tutors as brilliant, very motivational and encouraging, providing a good mix of support and doing their best with minimal resources. Since becoming a classroom assistant, Tommy believes he has embedded the skills he has learned. He stated that he was able to share his experience with others. In addition, he can now write interesting letters to his friends and family, and feels a sense of self-achievement.

Jackie and Bernie – currently studying Literacy Level 1 and Numeracy Level 2

Jackie and Bernie are currently attending Essential Skills Level 1 and Level 2 literacy and numeracy classes at their local women's aid group, which was set up to provide information, support and practical help to women and children who are or have been experiencing domestic violence. ES classes are one of the types of courses/training made available. In doing the classes, they hoped to prove to themselves that they had the ability, and to improve job prospects. By telling their children of their attendance in ES classes, they also hope to positively influence their childrens' attitudes to women.

Jackie had previously attended a Confidence Class at the women's aid group, and heard of the ES classes through her tutor. Bernie was introduced to ES classes by her volunteer worker from the centre. Both saw the Gremlins commercial and ES posters, which motivated them to sign up to classes. Prior to the advertisements, they did not realise services of this nature were available to adults.

Both left school at a young age, and view ES as a second chance – an opportunity to gain the qualifications that they missed at school and “to prove you have done something in your life”. Jackie describes her involvement in ES as another stage in her life – she got married, had children, and was looking for direction, which ES provided. Bernie hopes to improve her job prospects by furthering her literacy and numeracy as a basic level of both is now required for “a decent job”. Both hope that by doing the classes; they will be able to help their children with their homework.

Jackie and Bernie enjoy going to their classes, and say that they are able to “have a laugh”. Both are keen to note that ES classes are very different to school, which they feel let them down. Going to the classes give both a sense of pride. Julie was diagnosed with dyslexia last year by her ES tutor. Until then, she had no knowledge that she had a learning difficulty. The classes have also taught both more about their own personalities, and their capabilities, which they feel they were unable to test until now. They describe their tutor as “very good”, “very patient”, and supportive. Julie and Sarah have developed friendships from their classes and describe this as something that encourages them to keep coming back to classes. Their desire to learn is also a driver.

Since doing ES classes, both report a positive change in their personalities. They are now more confident and stronger people, “like a different person.”

Jennifer – completed Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy, currently studying Level 2 Literacy and Numeracy

Jennifer is currently studying Level 2 Literacy and Numeracy. She saw a leaflet advertising ES classes at a local centre, and called for information. She hopes to gain the qualifications she missed at school, and to assist her children with their homework. In gaining the qualifications, she hopes to improve her self esteem, and “feel as good as everyone else.”

She enjoys the relaxed and laid back approach of her classes. She had previously tried literacy classes at her local college, but did not feel she was getting adequate support, and “was made to feel stupid”. In her ES class, she can work at her own pace, and enjoys working in her group, where they can share similar experiences. She finds her tutor “very helpful” and “easygoing”.

Last year, she gained her first qualification in literacy and numeracy, gaining certificates in ES Level 1 for both. She believes that gaining the certificate now is more important to her than it would have been if she had gained it at school, because this time round, it was an active decision she had taken herself. She feels a great sense of achievement and pride. Jennifer is now keen to learn more, and wants to progress literacy and numeracy as much as possible.

Gregory – currently studying Literacy Entry Level 3

Gregory is 17 and an in mate at Hyde Bank Wood Young Offenders Centre. He is currently studying Entry Level 3 Literacy. Gregory’s prime motivation is to gain a qualification that he can show to potential employers upon leaving the centre. He said he might also use it to go to college. The qualification would not only give him a sense of achievement but would prove that he did something worthwhile during his time at the centre.

Gregory heard about the course when he arrived at Hyde Bank and felt that Essential Skills classes would offer him the opportunity to catch up with the work he missed at school. He described the tutor as brilliant, very kind hearted and a good listener – all of which was very important to him.

So far, Essential Skills has helped him write letters and fill out forms. He also believes that he is now able to structure sentences in a better way.

Stefane – currently studying Literacy Entry Level 3 (assessment not finalised)

Stefane has been doing literacy and IT classes for three months at The Strand Foyer*. She is doing the classes to improve her writing skills so she can apply for jobs and to learn more about computers; the field in which she hopes to work. She learned about the availability of classes at her residency interview**, and decided to sign up.

She describes her classes as “brilliant”, and much prefers the learning environment at The Foyer, in comparison to school, to which she confesses to “never paying much attention”. She is very complimentary of her tutor, who she believes plays an important role in encouraging her to return to classes. She values the fact that her tutor is always available***, and that she is able to approach him to discuss personal issues as well as those related to ES.

After three months of classes, Stefane has seen an improvement in her written English. She is now able to write letters properly, complete job application forms on her own, and feels more confident in her communication skills. She has recently started writing short stories and poetry, something she had always dreamed of doing, but didn’t know how until now.

*The Strand Foyer is an initiative involving partnerships between the voluntary, public and private sectors to maximise opportunities for young people in the Community. It is designed to meet the needs of young men and women aged between 16 – 25 years. The Foyer provides advice and support to assist young people overcome many of the barriers that prevent them from learning and entering the job market. The Foyer offers accommodation to young people for rent.

**New residents are interviewed before they are granted accommodation.

***There is only one tutor at The Strand Foyer who teaches all ES classes. He works most days, and has an open door policy.

Susan – completed Literacy Level 1, currently studying Literacy Level 2

Susan is a housewife, and is currently in her second year of ES, studying Level 2 literacy. She recently turned 40 years old, and wanted to go back and finish her education. She wanted to do something for herself, and to be able to help her children should they need help with their homework. She had seen the Gremlins commercial on television, and called the helpline for more information.

In going to the class, Susan hopes to gain the qualifications she missed at school. She views this as her second chance. She also wants to improve her job prospects. She adds that in the past, it was not important to gain GCSEs, whereas now they are compulsory for most jobs.

She compares her experience of ES classes to her school days. During her childhood, she experienced large class sizes and a “teacher who had no time for you.” She had attended an all-girls school, and finds the current women-only classes ideal for her needs.

She believes she can talk more freely in a women-only group, and would not feel comfortable in a mixed group. She is very complimentary of her class and tutor. She describes her tutor as “fantastic” and believes that if she had a teacher like her tutor in her school days, she would have performed better. She adds that “the classes have boosted my confidence to no end.”

Last year, she gained a certificate for ES Level 1 literacy. She felt a great sense of achievement – “I was beaming ear to ear”. She has noticed a great change in her personality, and believes that were it not for her classes, she would rarely leave her house due to her lack of confidence and feelings of anxiety, both of which she has now overcome. She is now thinking about doing a college course, something she would never have dreamed of doing in the past.

Sharon – completed Literacy Level 1, currently studying Literacy and Numeracy Level 2

Sharon is currently studying Level 2 literacy and numeracy. Sharon rarely writes in her present job, and thought the classes would present a good opportunity to refresh her memory and improve her level of written English. After some time in her job, she noted deterioration in her writing skills and got in touch with her local college to improve them. She had seen the Gremlins commercial on television, and brochure, before calling the college for further information.

In doing the classes, her main goal was to achieve a qualification in literacy, and to improve her confidence. Sharon believes her tutor plays an important role in helping her achieve these goals. She is very complimentary of her tutor and class, praising the friendliness and uplifting attitude of her tutor and said: “anyone who pulls out of the class would lose out”. She added that she would repeat the whole year again if she could, because she enjoyed it so much. The relationship between Sharon and her tutor played a strong role in encouraging her to return to ES classes every week. She also appreciated one-to-one interaction with her tutor, and believes that praise from the tutor is also very important in building confidence.

After only going to a few classes, Sharon noticed a positive change in her personality. Now, one year on, Sharon has gained a qualification in literacy and has seen a marked improvement in her writing skills. She is now capable of completing application forms and paperwork, which she was previously unable to do, and feels a greater sense of independence as well as increased confidence.

Paul – currently studying Literacy and Numeracy Entry Level 3

Paul has been at Springwell House for around 3 months. This was his second time in the programme, and he knew he was lucky to be allowed to return. Paul had previously gone to college but was unable to continue his classes due to lack of confidence.

Paul was always keen to make the most of the training on offer at Springwell House, and after completing an introductory course in IT and Word Processing; his tutor encouraged him to do Essential Skills. Initially, Paul was hesitant, but after asking some other people at the centre who had previously completed Essential Skills, he decided to sign up for classes. He was assessed as Entry Level 3 for both literacy and numeracy.

Paul believed that improving his literacy and numeracy would help him improve his job prospects when he got out of the centre, through giving him a confidence boost and more self esteem. He also felt it would help him become more integrated into society and with his family, enabling him to help his daughter with her schoolwork.

Paul had seen the Gremlins campaign, so knew what ES was and had also been encouraged by his friends and family. Ultimately, he believed that his tutor, Cathy, had the most influence on him. He described her as very flexible, “understands you and makes you feel relaxed”, saying that “she makes the class an enjoyment”.

At first he was extremely nervous, however Cathy made him feel at home. She was very encouraging and understood where he was coming from. To be told “you’re not stupid” made him feel great.

Although it was still early in the course, Paul had already seen improvements. He said that he was now more able to write and plan a letter, as well as write a postcard. The biggest change was that he was not embarrassed to say he was getting help.

At the moment, Paul is part of a group of 6 men and 2 women who are all at different levels. He was very complimentary of this approach, describing it as safe and was encouraged by the fact that there were others in the same boat. He said that they could support each other.

Paul described gaining a qualification as the most important aspect of the course. At the beginning, this wasn’t the case, but as the course progressed; he could start to see the need for qualifications. He believes that this will create a sense of achievement and ultimately help with employment opportunities.

Sandra – completed Literacy Level 1, currently studying Literacy Level 2

Sandra has been doing Essential Skills for two years, and is currently studying Level 2 literacy. She had never gained a qualification in English while at school, having missed two years, and suffered bad experiences with her teachers. She recently turned 40, and was unable to get a job, and so, decided it was time take action. With encouragement from her family, Sandra got in touch with LearnDirect, who informed her of ES classes.

Sandra has been a carer for many years, and seldom left the house. She described feelings of humiliation, and found it difficult to speak in front of people. In doing ES literacy, she hoped to achieve the qualification she missed at school, gain confidence, and improve her spelling and communication skills.

She is very happy with her class, and describes it as “ideal” and having an “individual” approach. She stresses the importance of a small class, and has previously been discouraged by large class sizes. She describes her tutor as “110% out of 100%”. She explains that her tutor is not a teacher. During her childhood, she was treated poorly by her teachers, who were unconcerned and uninterested. In comparison, her ES tutor offers a personable approach and has a friendly manner. Her family and fellow class members play an important role in encouraging her to attend ES classes.

As a result of her ES classes, Sandra has gained confidence, and is no longer scared at the prospect of meeting new people. She also completed a computing class last winter, and is due to start a first aid class at college in January.

Patrick – currently studying Literacy Entry Level 3

Patrick has always had trouble with his English, especially spelling. He described the Gremlins campaign as the trigger point and a key influencer in his decision to attend the course. In addition to improving English, Patrick wanted to meet other people, and described the social element as very important to him.

Patrick described his classes as excellent, and the tutor as inspirational as well as very approachable. He stated that that the assessment, although frightening was informative, helping him to understand his strengths and areas for development. He described the range of learning materials as just right, primarily because of the tutor and mode of delivery, but also the ability to learn at your own pace.

Patrick indicated that the qualification was one of the most important aspects of the course, as this would help them get a better job. Patrick stated that, although at an early stage in his course, it had already made a difference to his spelling and writing at work. He is now less reliant on spell-check, as well as more confident to ask colleagues if words were spelt correctly.

Marie – completed Numeracy Entry Level 3, currently studying Numeracy Level 1

Marie completed Entry Level 3 Numeracy last year, and is currently working towards Level 1 Numeracy. She had completed a range of other courses, but wanted to improve her numeracy skills to help her children with their schoolwork.

She had heard about the course through her children's primary school and was aware of the Gremlins campaign, which she described as a key decision making point. She said the campaign "sticks in your mind and gets you to get up and do something".

Marie described the classes as excellent. She said they were not intimidating and that they were enjoyable, as well as being of a size that enabled group work but still gave you individual time with the tutor when needed.

Marie indicated that the venue was very important, stating that she would have been less likely to go if it had been in a college. The proximity of classes to her childrens' school plays a key role in encouraging her to return to classes.

Marie described the tutor as the most important factor of all. She stated that he was encouraging, had lots of patience, and is easygoing as well as making sure you, and the rest of the class, understand things before moving on. He does not make you feel embarrassed about asking stupid questions. She said that he was "always there for you".

Marie feels that Essential Skills had made a considerable difference to her life. She has more confidence and is now able to help her children with their homework – even fractions; and is able to work out percentages – which is great for the sales.

June – completed Literacy and Numeracy Entry Level 3, currently studying Literacy Level 1

June has completed a year in both literacy and numeracy at her local college, and is currently doing Level 1 Literacy. Prior to Essential Skills classes, she was unable to read, write, or spell. She could not attend to daily tasks such as shopping on her own, needing the help of a friend or family member, and had never used an elevator before. She is 47 years old, and as her children were growing up she was unable to help them with their homework or write a sick note, and now that she has grandchildren, she does not wish to "make the same mistakes" with them.

A friend told her about the course, and she also saw the Gremlins commercial on television, both of which, influenced her decision to sign up to Essential Skills. She left school at 15, without qualifications. She wanted to improve her skills with the aim of working towards her GCSEs. Her main goals were shop on her own, and feel confident that she would get the right change, and be able to write. She wished to achieve something for herself.

She describes the literacy class as "brilliant" and something she "wouldn't miss for the world." She is enjoying her class, and finds her tutor very good, describing her as "fabulous" and "down to earth". The very first night of her class was the most difficult – she was terrified, in a room full of strangers. However, after ten minutes, she was relaxed, and has since moved from strength to strength. She has developed friends from the class, and believes that this encourages her to return to the classes every week. Her desire to learn is also a driver.

One year ago, June would have described herself as someone who did not like to be noticed, lacking in confidence and would prefer to stand in the background. Today, she describes herself as “a totally new person” and very confident. She has recently bought a new car on her own, which she would never have been able to do in the past, and is very proud of this. She can now go shopping on her own, and believes that her communication skills have greatly improved.

June received the EGSA Student of the Year award for her achievements in Essential Skills.

John – currently studying Literacy and Numeracy Entry Level 2 (still to be fully assessed)

John is currently attending literacy, numeracy and IT classes. He heard about the opportunity through his social worker, and was encouraged to take part. In attending the classes, he hopes to improve his job prospects and to prove that he is capable of “getting as good a job as any other person”. By improving his literacy, numeracy and computing skills, he hopes to attain a “higher level of job”.

John already feels a sense of confidence and motivation. He has noticed a marked change in his personality, from his communication and interaction with others. He is no longer nervous of speaking with people, and believes going to the classes has helped to overcome his fears.

James – completed Literacy Levels 1 and 2 and Numeracy Level 1, currently studying Numeracy Level 1

James has been studying Essential Skills (ES) for nearly 3 years. He is currently studying Level 2 numeracy, having previously completed Levels 1 and 2 literacy, and Level 1 numeracy.

James signed up for Essential Skills for numerous reasons, but primarily to get qualifications to improve his job prospects. He also wanted to prove to himself, and others, especially his sister, that he could do it.

James had previously completed other courses, and decided to sign up after seeing an advertisement in the local newspaper. He described the course as excellent, and his tutor as brilliant. The venue at the college also suited him well. James stated that sometimes work commitments got in the way, therefore to try and keep this to a minimum, he had signed an agreement with his current tutor not to miss any classes, unless ill.

James described the qualification as one of the most important aspects of attending the class, and something that continued to keep him motivated. He believed it was very important in helping to improve his job prospects.

James currently works for the Education Library Board, but his ambition is to go to college and become an engineer. So far, he described Essential Skills as having helped him to a great extent. He has become more organised, more confident, and feels he is closer to his dream job. Achieving Levels 1 and 2 literacy and Level 1 numeracy has enabled him to understand more about the value of money and made reading a lot easier – he has even joined a library.

Emmanuel – completed Literacy Level 2 and Numeracy Levels 1 and 2, currently providing support as a classroom assistant

Emmanuel, an inmate at Magilligan prison, has already completed Levels 1 and 2 Numeracy and Level 2 Literacy and is currently acting as a 'classroom assistant' supporting tutors in the prison to help current participants.

In doing Essential Skills, Emmanuel has greatly improved his confidence and feels a great sense of achievement, especially since he has been helping as a classroom assistant. He stated that he was surprised at his achievements, having had negative experiences at school, leaving without qualifications. He says Essential Skills has already helped him understand Maths and English better, especially in relation to writing letters.

In Magilligan, Essential Skills is treated like other jobs and those who choose to do the classes receive extra privileges. Emmanuel described this as one of the key motivating factors alongside the opportunity to improve employment or higher education prospects on the 'outside'.

Emmanuel described his tutors as brilliant, stating that they all had a great attitude, very helpful, and a great deal of patience. He said the materials were good, except the lack of internet access which made projects more difficult. Overall, the most important part was gaining the qualification which was the recognition for all his hard work.

Frontline Consultants

December 2005

Stakeholder list

Stakeholder Consultation

Strategic delivery and development partners

Ann Osborne	EGSA
Kevin Donaghy	EGSA
Kieran Brazier	DEL Employment Service
Kieran Goodman	DEL Employment Service
David Rogers	DEL Analytical Services
Tom Hunter	DEL Employment Service Policy Unit

Training providers

Anita Fitzsimmons	Paragon Services
Anne Ringland	Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC)
Carmel Boyce	Customised Training Services
Catherine Quigley	Customised Training Services
Cliff Kennedy	Oasis Caring in Action
Geraldine Compton	Waterside Women's Group
Geraldine McIvor	Cookstown Training
Hilary McAuley	Lisburn YMCA
Jacinta Hill	BWC Training Ltd
Jackie Greer	Cookstown Training
John Carson	Belfast Centre of Learning
John D'Arcy	Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC)
Julie McGonagle	CRAFT Training
Liam Devine	Clanrye Employment & Training Services
Louise Coyle	Cookstown & District Women's Group Limited
Marie Nealis	Craft Recruitment & Training
Martin McCaul	Southern Group Enterprises
Mary Hogg	Cookstown & District Women's Group Limited
Sharon Hanna	Altnaveigh House
Sharon McElhinney	Austins Training Group
Stevie Johnston	Workers' Educational Association (WEA)

Inspectors of Training and Education

Alistair Gilmore	Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)
Jayne Walkingshaw	Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)
Lorna Warren	Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

Care and Management of Offenders

Annie Owen	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)
Clinton Parker	Prison Service

Business and Union representatives

Kieran Harding	Business in the Community
Tom Gillen	Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Seamus McKenna	Anderson Spratt

Stakeholder interview prompts

Essential Skills for Living Stakeholder Interview – Areas for Exploration

Perceptions on how strategy is currently working (what is working well what is not working so well)

- Consider accelerators and brakes to progress

Perceptions on impacts Essential Skills is having (on individuals and wider society)

Suggestions for improving delivery of Essential Skills strategy

Known examples of good practice from NI or elsewhere that could be used as a benchmark

Infrastructural and management issues – do they support or hinder achievement of the strategy's objectives, how could they be improved?

Perceptions on the degree of fit and alignment between the different elements of Essential Skills (different levels, types of provision/provider, locations, etc)

Perceptions on the degree of engagement of stakeholders

Effectiveness of key relationships to deliver the strategy

Effectiveness of current delivery in reaching the target groups

Non participant interview prompts

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR LIVING

NON-PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEW PROMPTS

GREMLINS CONTACTS – CONTACTED THE HELPLINE AFTER THE GREMLINS CAMPAIGN

What made you call the helpline?

Did they give you any advice?

What was it like? Was it good, bad?

Did you do anything about reading, English and maths as a result of the advice you received?

What did you do? – eg signing up for a course?

If **yes**

What changed your mind? What made you do it now and not before?

What did you think of it?

How is it going?

Has it made to your life?

Can you do anything now that you couldn't do before?

How do you feel since doing it?

If **no**

What stopped you?

Probe for examples eg

- Didn't feel need it
- Nervous etc
- Times unsuitable
- Location, transport, childcare etc

Would you like to do something about reading, English and maths in the future?

If yes, would you like someone from EGSA to give you a call and talk about what you can do in more detail? I.e. courses?

**Current and past participants
interview/focus group prompts**

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR LIVING

PARTICIPANTS – PAST AND PRESENT INTERVIEW PROMPTS

How long did you do/have you been doing this class for? Do any other classes?
Have you done more than one level? (exploring progression)

How did you first hear about the course?
Did anybody influence your decision? If yes, who?
Have you seen the Gremlins campaign?

Why did you sign up for English or Maths?

What were you hoping to achieve?

Did you gain a certificate?
Was it important to you? Why yes or no?

What do/did you think of the **classes**? What was good? What was bad?
What would have made it **better**?
Probe for examples eg

- e.g. venue and time of course?
- e.g. learning materials?
- e.g. tutor style (helpful, friendly, approachable etc)

What keeps you coming back to the class? What encourages you?

What discourages you, or what would put you off coming to the classes?

What are your views on: the tutor, the learning material? (supplementary question if not talked about above)

Do you think this class has made any difference to you, in your life?

Probe for examples eg

- at work
- in the community e.g. reading signs, counting change
- at home e.g. helping children with home work, domestic tasks such as cookery or DIY.
- personally e.g.. greater self confidence and self esteem
- in relationships - e.g. communicating with others

Is there anything you can do better now due to your classes? Or something new e.g. writing letters, using the computer, communication skills?

How does that make you feel?

What are you planning to do after the classes? Any more classes?

What are you doing now for PAST PARTICIPANTS?*

Have you talked about your classes to any friends or family?

What do they think? Interested? Have you recommended or would you recommend anyone?

What are your main aspiration post ES?

If ES support/training, wasn't there ie no courses, how would you have developed the skills you have learned ie where else would you have gone or what else would you have done? How would that have affected you? (probe)

Tutor interview prompts

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR LIVING

TUTOR INTERVIEWS PROMPTS

What could be done to improve the practical delivery of Essential Skills?

From a tutor perspective, what difference has the Essential Skills made to:

- individuals
- communities
- Northern Ireland

How relevant is the current Essential Skills curriculum and what changes or improvements could be made?

Do you think your training as an Essential Skills tutor has equipped you for your role?

- What improvements could be made?

How adequate is the current assessment tool?

In your experience, do you think one to one or group learning is more effective? Explain.

Should groups be level specific or mixed?

How adequate are your available learning resources?

What could be done to improve the quality of learning materials?

What efficiencies could be made to improve the administration and accreditation procedures?

What could be done to ensure greater quality and consistency in programme delivery?

people:skills:jobs:



Department for
**Employment
and Learning**
www.delni.gov.uk



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

THE DEPARTMENT:

Our aim is to promote learning and skills,
to prepare people for work and to support
the economy.

This document is available in other
formats upon request.

Further information:
telephone: 028 9025 7777
web: www.delni.gov.uk