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Learning for Life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving local communities - A handbook for councillors



The handful of case studies featured in this councillors' handbook demonstrate the excellent work of ACE services, but there are hundreds more great examples out there.

Employment and skills

27 Oct 2020

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Foreword

Council run or commissioned adult and community education (ACE) plays a vital role in supporting residents on their journey to learn skills to enter, return or progress in work. Alongside the economic benefits, it reduces loneliness and makes people happier, healthier, more confident, capable and resilient – making places smarter and more inclusive.

Put simply, ACE transforms people's lives. As the COVID-19 crisis continues to grip our communities, it is a more important lifeline than ever before. It is the cornerstone of adult learning. Without it, many of the 600,000 adults – including some of our hardest to reach, vulnerable or isolated residents – that access it every year would not progress into further learning and work or be able to cope with what life throws at them.

Delivering a range of informal and formal learning from entry-level courses to professional qualifications, as well as interview support and confidence-boosting programmes in a range of community settings, ACE gives residents a first, second, third or even fourth chance to access learning. It works with the grain of other place-based services including employment, regeneration, education, health and culture, and adds value to each, as well as connecting with agencies like Jobcentre Plus and local colleges.

The handful of case studies featured in this councillors' handbook demonstrate the excellent work of ACE services, but there are hundreds more great examples out there. We know that because 92 per cent of ACE providers are rated good or outstanding, the best performing in the further education sector. We should be extremely proud of that.

But there are challenges and opportunities ahead for ACE services.

Over the last decade, as national funding for adult learning halved, councils innovated to source new funding or faced a reduction in provision or a wind down of the service altogether. Just prior to the pandemic, national investment in retraining was boosted to enable people to adapt to a rapidly changing economy which is more likely to displace the least qualified. Today, as unemployment soars, we need all hands to the pump to direct that skills investment to where it is most needed and that must include local ACE services.

Soon, two White Papers – one on further education (FE) and the other on devolution – should provide an opportunity to develop a more coherent, place-based approach to adult skills that connects the entire provider base together across a local area. The LGA's Work Local model provides a framework for how that could happen.

So, it is a significant time for the future of ACE. That's why this handbook is so timely and a must-have for all councillors. You have a real leadership role in understanding, supporting, scrutinising and advocating for it, so you can make your service the best it can be. We provide some top tips on how you can do that which we hope you will find useful.

Cllr Sir Richard Leese CBE, Chair, LGA City Regions Board

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chairman, LGA People and Places Board

Introduction

This handbook for councillors focuses on the direct and indirect impact of adult community education (ACE). It aims to help councillors effectively plan, promote and scrutinise their local ACE service so that it is relevant, robust, efficient, responsive and ambitious.

It builds on a report by HOLEX, the lead professional body for adult community education and learning, which recommended that more should be done to explain and promote the vital role of councillors in ACE services and the value they add to this sector.

Councillors have a critical role to play in planning and promoting ACE; in support, oversight and challenge; and in ensuring that provision is joined up and responds to the needs of local communities. Their input, scrutiny and leadership are essential in realising the rich potential of adult community education.

This handbook will set out the importance of ACE in place shaping: how it brings economic and social benefits to local communities, enhancing the lives of residents and contributing to the culture and cohesion of the places in which they live and work. It will encourage planners and policy-makers to work in a way that acknowledges and makes use of the special role played by adult education in connecting and adding value to other council services.

We hope that this handbook will help councillors take an active role in planning, promoting and scrutinising ACE in their local areas, and that it will help councillors and officers to design services that improve the lives of residents and support the development of thriving, inclusive communities.

As we will see through the examples of good practice included here, the places in which ACE services deliver the most for their communities are the places where councillors recognise and champion their intrinsic value.

The role of ACE in shaping people and places

“Adult education is not just about what goes on in the classroom. It is about having the ability to support residents to develop wider outcomes for their own personal lives which, in turn, support and have an impact on their local communities, local businesses, and therefore the local economy.”

**Pat Carrington MBE, Assistant Director for Employment and Skills,
Peterborough City Council, and Principal, City College Peterborough**

ACE matters. As well as having clear and direct benefits in terms of economic prosperity, employment and productivity, adult learning is linked to the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle, grow confidence and self-esteem and provide meaning and purpose in life. Associated outcomes of participation include the development of collaborative and creative thinking skills such as problem solving, innovation, curiosity and adaptability; enhanced physical and mental health; greater interest in politics and community engagement; and greater diversity in the workforce.

Despite the wide range of positive economic, social and cultural outcomes, ACE remains poorly understood, which means that its potential benefits often go largely unrealised. This is in part due to its complex nature, wide cross-sectoral reach and contribution to an array of different local services, portfolios and policy priorities, not to mention the variety of different ACE delivery models. As a result, adult education can be difficult to describe simply, which can make effective championing, advocacy and scrutiny challenging.

While there is a great deal of evidence on the broad benefits of adult learning, little has been written about how it is delivered in local communities, where it sits among the other services provided by councils, or how it supports and strengthens those services.

This handbook focuses on how effective leadership, planning and delivery of ACE has a demonstrable impact on six distinct but related outcomes:

- **employment, skills and qualifications:** getting people onto the skills ladder and helping them gain, retain and progress at work
- **health and wellbeing:** supporting people with physical and mental health issues, thus reducing health costs such as GP visits
- **integration and inclusion:** reducing isolation, promoting interaction and integration and bringing communities together
- **culture and creativity:** supporting individuals and communities in becoming creative and cultural producers
- **attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics:** helping people to acquire the characteristics needed to participate fully in work and life
- **life transitions:** helping people to navigate challenges such as redundancy, retirement and parenthood.

Chapter 1: Why ACE matters

A safe, empowering, local space

Adult community education (ACE) services educate, train and retrain more than 600,000 adults each year, including many from the most deprived wards in England. They have a combined annual income in excess of £350 million.

In 2017, the 222 community learning providers in England included 139 councils, as well as 72 not-for-profit organisations and 11 'specialist designated institutions' (independently constituted charities regulated by their own trust deeds).

Most council adult education services were founded early in the 20th century, though some can trace their history back further. Today they continue to provide a safe, empowering local space in which adults can build their confidence and capacity, learn new skills, and take steps towards further education and new employment opportunities.

A large proportion of ACE learners are considered 'hard to reach'. This includes the long-term unemployed, vulnerable families, people with substance issues and young people who are not in education, employment or training. For example, 75 per cent of Leeds City Council's adult learners come from the 20 per cent most deprived lower-layer super output areas on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

This first-step engagement, giving adults and young people a second, third or fourth chance to access learning, is a crucial part of what ACE services do. More than any other provider, ACE services reach people and communities experiencing multiple disadvantage, whose support needs often demand the coordinated intervention and engagement of different council services.

From the learner's perspective, ACE's reach into other local services, and its close connection with employers and other education providers, enables them to connect with employers, further learning opportunities and their community – and ultimately to maximise their own potential.

In brief: ACE within the further education sector

Further education (FE) is a diverse sector of the education system, comprising many different types of provider offering a wide range of vocational, academic and recreational courses.

FE providers are institutions or organisations (other than schools and universities) that receive government funding to provide education and training to people over the age of 16. There are five different types of FE provider:

colleges, councils, independent training providers, the voluntary sector and employers.

- **General further education colleges** offer a wide range of programmes including vocational courses, apprenticeships, academic courses and higher education, from Entry Level to Level 4 and above. Most FE college students are aged 16 to 19, but they also provide courses for adult students and for 14/15-year-olds. While general FE colleges are the largest and most common provider in the sector, there are others including sixth-form colleges, land-based colleges, specialist designated colleges and art, design and performing arts colleges and Institutes for Adult Learning.
- **Councils** provide a wide variety of ACE and work-based learning. Some councils provide educational services directly to their communities, while others contract out to service providers. These services provide accessible learning to people from all backgrounds and abilities, usually on a part-time basis. Courses can be unaccredited or qualification-bearing.
- **Independent training providers (ITPs)** receive government funding to provide off-the-job training. While all work closely with employers, some are small and focus on a single area of vocational training (such as hairdressing or construction), while others are large and provide a range of vocational training opportunities across the country.
- **Voluntary sector providers** are non-profit organisations such as charities, foundations and community groups, usually directly providing adult community education, but also delivering other kinds of specialist courses to specific groups of learners.
- **Employer providers** deliver their own in-house training rather than contracting out to an external provider such as a college, an ITP or a council.

These organisations have a specific and important role in delivering skills in their communities. It is critical that they work together in partnership across a local area for the good of local learners and employers. This is why knowledge and expertise of local areas is critical to both the commissioning and oversight of skills provision.

Despite the complex issues facing many of their learners, ACE providers are the best-performing part of the FE sector, with **92 per cent of services rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted inspectors** (compared to 81 per cent for colleges and 75 per cent for independent training providers).

As well as being the best-performing part of the further education sector, ACE can claim to be the most resilient. During the coronavirus crisis of 2020, many ACE providers quickly switched their provision to online delivery, enabling residents to access learning under lockdown conditions.

The ACE offer

Most ACE providers offer courses at Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) or below, including 'non-accredited' courses that do not lead to a formal qualification. While in recent years provision has tended to focus increasingly on maths, English and digital, other offers include:

- ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) to help refugees or people recruited from overseas, such as health and care workers, to improve their English
- family learning courses to enable parents to better support their children in literacy and numeracy
- employability and preparing for work
- programmes to help learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities develop independence, social skills and employment skills
- training in mentoring and counselling for learners recovering from drug and alcohol misuse
- courses in music, ceramics and other cultural and creative arts.

ACE services work in close partnership with other agencies and council services. Councils have an important role both as providers of learning and as partners with other stakeholders such as local businesses, job centres, the voluntary and community sector, and other education and training providers.

ACE adds real value to these partnerships. For example, ACE services are often based at centres in the heart of disadvantaged communities. Not only do they bring together people of different backgrounds in a friendly, supportive local space, they also provide a place in which different services can address the multiple needs of learners at a neighbourhood level. This provides ACE with an opportunity to add value to other services, such as those relating to health and wellbeing.

The cross-cutting nature of ACE services and their capacity to add value to other services means they have an especially important role to play in councils' place-shaping ambitions and in responding to entrenched, complex issues such as poverty or long-term unemployment.

Chapter 2: What do ACE services achieve?

The six core ACE outcomes

Much has been written about the wider benefits of adult education and their relevance to different social and economic agendas. While a strong case can also be made for ACE's long-term, indirect impact on issues such as social mobility and reduced costs to other services such as public health, this section focuses on the direct outcomes of adult community education.

These outcomes can be organised into six distinct but overlapping categories, each of which will be explored here in more detail:

- employment, skills and qualifications
- health and wellbeing
- integration and inclusion
- culture and creativity
- attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics
- life transitions.

Outcome 1: Employment, skills and qualifications

Adult community education is critical in creating new opportunities for people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – to prepare for, enter and progress in the workplace.

Many of the adults who engage with council ACE services are unemployed, often on a long-term basis, and may face multiple disadvantages related to poverty and poor mental or physical health. They often have low literacy and numeracy skills and limited basic digital skills. ACE offers these adults a crucial first step back into learning and onto the skills ladder. It offers cross-service, integrated solutions for learners facing multiple disadvantage, and puts learners on course to further education and employment.

Adult learning is not only of benefit in terms of helping people to gain and retain employment, it also helps them to increase their earnings, raise their aspirations and gain more satisfaction from their work. It supports employers in raising productivity,

increasing profitability and reducing staff turnover, and helps boost the country's employment rates and tax revenue.

Skills and employment challenges differ from one local area to the next – some, for example, may have high unemployment as a result of the decline of traditional industry, while others may need adults to acquire industry-specific skills to match local demand. Responding to these challenges requires a coordinated local effort, which ACE can help to address or overcome.

Demographic change has huge implications for education and skills. In common with other developed countries, the UK has an ageing population. Some 80 per cent of the workforce of 2030 is already part of the working population. Figures pre-COVID show that a third of all workers are now aged over 50, and the number of people over 70 in work has doubled since 2009 to half a million. Longer working lives and fewer young people entering the workforce increases the need for adults to be retrained, upskilled and supported into local jobs. They need opportunities to engage and routes for progression, particularly given the changing nature of work and the growth in automation and artificial intelligence.

The Industrial Strategy Council predicted that seven million additional workers would be under-skilled for their job requirements by 2020 – about 20 per cent of the labour market. The UK's departure from the EU is likely to mean a reduction in the number of EU national workers, increasing our reliance on home-grown talent, including adults who are already in the workforce or unable to access it.

While unemployment as a national average remains relatively low (or was so before the impact of COVID-19), there are large numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training. If this is not effectively addressed at an early stage, there is a risk this group becomes more marginalised resulting in pockets of acute, long-term unemployment which demand targeted, coherent cross-service support. In addition, there will be more demand for adult skills training as the cohort get older.

According to the **Social Mobility Commission**, adults with the lowest qualifications are the least likely to access adult training – despite being the group that would benefit most. Further, men in routine and manual occupations are the least likely to engage in learning, creating what the commission describes as 'vicious cycles' of low-paid, low-skilled insecure work.

Experience: Unlocking new opportunities

Islington Council supports more than 1,500 residents every year through a wide variety of courses, including in ESOL and digital skills. Olga, for example, who is originally from Romania, used what she learned on an ESOL course to progress to further learning and improve her career prospects.

Olga said: “I am now studying in Morley College in my first term of professional sewing and tailoring. The course is in English and I am happy that I can now understand and learn something new. I work part-time doing alterations in a dry-cleaners shop and as a cleaner, but now I would like to find a job in the fashion industry.”

Another issue that ACE can address is low levels of literacy and numeracy, with England tending to fare poorly in international comparisons such as the OECD’s survey of adult skills. Some nine million adults lack functional literacy and numeracy skills (the level expected of nine-year-olds). Around **11.9 million adults are thought to lack digital skills**. This represents a significant barrier to further learning and better job prospects, and is a major issue for employers in hiring staff with the right skills.

Outcome 2: Health and wellbeing

ACE has clear and well-evidenced benefits for the health and wellbeing of people and communities. The challenges in this area include increased incidence of long-term complex health conditions associated with an ageing population, lifestyle factors such as alcoholism and substance abuse, entrenched health inequalities and the growing prevalence of mental health problems in society.

It addresses these issues in several ways. ACE is associated with healthier lifestyle choices and better understanding and management of health conditions. It has been linked to increased life expectancy and prolonged independent living among elderly people, and there is a clear correlation between level of education and diseases such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes, which represent a huge cost to the health service.

Studies also demonstrate a link between participation in adult learning and improved mental health and wellbeing. It fosters a sense of identity, an ability to cope and a sense of purpose in life, as well as greater levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction. It reduces social isolation and increases confidence and self-efficacy among learners. There is evidence too that participation in learning prevents early ageing and slows the onset of dementia.

Many ACE providers created new online provision to help with isolation and mental wellbeing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included online courses based around health and wellbeing, mindfulness, crafts, relaxation, chair-based exercises and family learning.

Experience: Supporting mental health

'Working in mind' is an employability initiative developed by Redbridge Institute of Adult Education. It targets priority Jobcentre Plus clients – unemployed adults with mental ill health and older people with poor literacy skills.

Working with partners such as Redbridge Concern for Mental Health and other local mental health charities, the initiative combines traditional employability support, dyslexia screening, wellbeing coaches and access to social prescription provision, such as mindfulness training. Around 50 per cent of the participants progress into work, while others go on to further learning.

Experience: 'This course turned my life around'

Lincolnshire County Council supported 7,511 adults onto 1,235 learning programmes during 2018/19. It targeted specific groups including people with learning difficulties and disabilities, people with no or low qualifications, the unemployed, and residents from the most deprived neighbourhoods – which accounted for 20 per cent of learners.

Ninety-two per cent of learners said their course helped to develop their self-confidence. One learner, Victoria, suffered with low self-esteem, back problems and other illnesses before taking part in a 'Get into catering' course. By the end of the course, Victoria had secured employment in a café in Lincoln. She said: "This course has turned my life around. I am so happy with my new job and the fact that I am now off benefits."

Many learners face digital barriers to accessing the help and support they need. In response, a growing number of ACE services are introducing an NHS-funded digital health module, embedded in their main delivery programmes, which helps people get

online, set up an email account and make doctor's appointments online. As well as digitally empowering learners, it has the added benefit of taking pressure off local doctor's surgeries.

Outcome 3: Integration and inclusion

Council ACE services have a crucial role to play in boosting social capital and promoting community cohesion and interaction. Adult learning is associated with higher levels of interpersonal and social trust, as well as increased community involvement and civic participation, particularly at a local level. It can also lead to greater understanding of diversity.

ACE services support the integration of new community members, both through ESOL courses and community-based courses that bring different groups together and facilitate the sharing of experiences. They provide a space in which stereotypes can be challenged, conversations begun, and tensions reduced.

The broad range of wider individual benefits to adult learning include increases in confidence and self-esteem, higher aspirations, a sense of purpose, engagement in the community, an active body and mind, and improved 'soft skills' such as collaboration, teamwork and communication. ACE has a special role to play in supporting integration and community engagement, and thus in making places safer and more cohesive.

Experience: 'I can talk to anyone now'

Hussein came to the UK as a refugee from Sudan in 2014. He had no formal schooling, little money and no grasp of English. Hussein lived in a shared house with other refugees from various countries. Their lack of English meant there was no communication between them, leaving them all quite isolated.

To improve his English, Hussein took free English classes, walking an hour and a half each way to attend class. Four months later, he started studying at Manchester's adult education service. The skills he acquired there enabled him to gain employment as a warehouse operative. Hussein said: "I was feeling sad because I couldn't understand when people were talking to me. Now I can talk to and understand anyone and I work with a lot of people from different countries."

Adult learning has been found to have a positive impact in the following five areas linked to integration and inclusion:

- 1) **Social capital:** adult learning is associated with higher levels of interpersonal and social connection. It has been shown to promote civic engagement and activity. ACE community venues are among the few surviving public spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together with a common goal in mind.
- 2) **Social cohesion and integration:** ACE has in general, and in literacy and numeracy provision in particular, a significant positive impact on communities. It can lead to higher levels of respect, tolerance and trust. Literacy and numeracy programmes and ESOL courses are key to ACE service efforts to promote social cohesion and integration. It forms a key part of councils' efforts to integrate refugees.
- 3) **Community involvement:** adult learning fosters civic participation, through local involvement, and can help overcome loneliness and social isolation. The Government has linked feeling lonely to increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, depression, cognitive decline and Alzheimer's. It is estimated that between five and 18 per cent of UK adults feel lonely often or always.

According to a survey by the Workers' Educational Association, 82 per cent of people on adult education courses make new friends, while **97 per cent say it helps to keep their minds active**. Participation also boosts 'civic capability', the ability to make sense of and shape one's own culture and community. Adult learners report increased civic participation, community involvement and wider social networks.

- 4) **Democratic participation:** adult learning, through civic education programmes, positively improves people's political understanding, feelings of empowerment and level of political participation. It encourages active citizens who are empowered to find solutions to the problems their communities face and engaged in informed dialogue.
- 5) **Crime and anti-social behaviour:** adult learning can reduce crime and anti-social behaviour by raising aspiration, improving the self-confidence of learners and offering them routes into further learning and work.

The prison population in England and Wales has increased by around 90 per cent since 1990 to about 84,000 prisoners. Recidivism rates are high and represent a significant economic cost: a one per cent reduction in recidivism rates would lead to an estimated annual saving of £130 million. Education is one of the pillars of effective rehabilitation. Almost half of prisoners have a reading level at or below that expected of an 11-year-old. ACE can give people the chance to escape cycles of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Outcome 4: Culture and creativity

Creative and cultural courses bring together people from different backgrounds around a common interest and can help to enhance community cohesion. Creative learning can be empowering and is often the catalyst for improved confidence and greater community involvement. It can lead to new employment opportunities and further self-organised learning.

While this form of provision has been much reduced in recent years, it can be vital in allowing learners with limited access to the creative arts to express themselves and contribute to their own local cultures. As well as contributing to employment, civic, and health and wellbeing outcomes, cultural and creative courses give people an enhanced sense of purpose and help them become creative producers as well as consumers.

Cultural and creative production can be a source of pride, celebration and empowerment, not only for the learners but also for the communities in which they live. Learners can host exhibitions of their work or volunteer their services for local fundraising or community activities such as arts festivals. Creative learners may set up self-organised learning groups to continue the activity, reducing isolation and providing social support networks; or establish small businesses to sell their work.

For example, the Quaggy Printmakers, a group of learners from Lewisham, were encouraged by their tutors to make the step into self-employment and sell their work. The 20-strong group of screen printers and etchers now sells its work through a website, with social media used to publicise events and exhibitions. A precondition of membership is to have taken a course with the Lewisham service.

Experience: Careers, community, culture

The strategic plan for Westminster Council's adult education service clusters its curriculum into three key areas: careers, community and culture. This approach reflects the needs, starting points, ambitions and potential of learners.

Head of service, Arinola Edeh, said: "It is easy to think we should focus on the economic benefits. People forget about the social, mental health and wellbeing benefits that are also important parts of education. Adult education is about employability, but it is also about bringing communities together and enabling local residents of different ages, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic backgrounds to have a better understanding of each other.

“Our strategic plan clusters what we do in terms of these three key areas. Alongside the ‘careers’ element, we do a lot of work bringing communities together, reducing isolation and supporting vulnerable people, which we capture in the ‘community’ element. The ‘culture’ strand is all about celebration and bringing people together at the cultural level. So we have a careers, community and culture focus, which enables us to transform lives.”

Every year, Westminster supports over 8000 learners to achieve their goals in these three areas.

Outcome 5: Attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics

ACE fosters positive attitudes and aptitudes such as resilience, cooperation, communication and critical thinking, which are key to success – not only in the workplace but also at home, in the community and in wider civic life. Often, gaining these attitudes and aptitudes can make all the difference for learners seeking to enter the workforce, manage transition or be more active in the community.

This includes the competences required to live an independent life and be more self-reliant; skills such as communication, team working and problem-solving (which are essential in finding a job and getting on at work); and the confidence and capacity parents need to better support their children and become more involved in school and community life.

Participation in adult education improves people’s social relationships, making them less isolated and more tolerant and trusting, while boosting levels of community engagement. ACE services also promote changes in attitudes to learning, which is crucial in a society in which few adults will have a job for life and most will have to upskill throughout their working lives and/or retrain for a new job role or multiple roles, which will for many become a reality as a result of economic impact of COVID-19.

Experience: Overcoming anxiety

When Laura started her Health and Care Sector Work Academy course, funded by Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, she lacked confidence and found it a struggle to interact with new people. Laura had become a mum at a very early age, so missed out on further education and work.

It took her an hour to get out of the car for her first class but she found the courage and, over the next few weeks, her anxieties receded. Through the course, Laura gained confidence in her skills and abilities, and grew to understand the values and attitudes required to work in the health and care sector.

After achieving her Level 1 'Preparing to Work in Adult Social Care' qualification, Laura received mentoring in CV writing, job applications and attending interviews. She secured a job at a care home and is now completing a Level 3 qualification. Had it not been for the course, she said, "I would still be struggling with my anxiety and depression and still be unemployed." Laura was City College Peterborough's 'Adult Learner of the Year' in 2019.

Outcome 6: Life transitions

This final type of outcome, though sometimes overlooked, is in supporting life transitions, particularly redundancy, parenthood, a return to work and retirement. The skills required in negotiating these life transitions can be enhanced parenting skills, independent living skills and increased capacity to support a child's learning.

Many adults reaching points of transition in their lives will have been out of learning for some time, and some may not have engaged in formal education since school. As noted already, ACE services provide an accessible, safe environment where learners can step back into education and find the space in which to reflect on and shape the next phase of their lives. They also offer the flexibility and adaptability required to respond to changing local need. For example, helping a community to cope with mass redundancies, or ensuring continuity of learning during the COVID-19 lockdown.

It is at such key moments in people's lives that adult education can be most effective and beneficial. As a recent study shows, transitions such as returning to work, becoming a parent, raising a family, living independently or retirement 'often lead to a reappraisal of the decisions and actions that shape an adult's life course', and engagement in learning 'can become more of a priority, especially when seen to play a pivotal role in helping people achieve their ambitions and aspirations'.

Case studies

This section of the handbook sets out a series of short case studies that demonstrate how different ACE services are working to achieve the six outcomes.

London Borough of Redbridge: A culture of excellence

Rochdale Borough Council: Connecting local services

Manchester City Council: A co-owned, city-wide plan

London Borough of Lewisham: Valuing culture and creativity

Peterborough City Council: Promoting adult education

Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES)

Chapter 3: How ACE services work

Structure

Although all ACE providers are influenced by government policy and the national funding structure, there is no common model or recipe for success. While national policy sets the tone and imposes common constraints on funding, each council area will adopt its own structure, governance and scrutiny arrangements based around local circumstances.

The chief role of councillors is to lead the direction of adult education policy, linking their ambitions for ACE to local challenges and priorities; to provide scrutiny and challenge; and to signpost residents towards the service. Portfolio holders provide leadership in terms of championing adult education across and beyond the council, advocacy at a community and regional level, involvement in service planning, and fostering or strengthening partnerships and connections.

The ACE's head of service is generally responsible for service strategy and its alignment with the council's core objectives, as well as creating and maintaining partnerships, ensuring the service's work is understood and visible, and making sure the service has a seat at the right tables.

A survey of local ACE providers by HOLEX found that there was no common structure among ACE services. Services differ in their model of delivery – whether direct, indirect or a blend of both; in where they sit within council structures and wider partnership arrangements; and in how they shape and adapt their provision to respond to local need.

In general, the organisational structure in which an ACE service sits does not make much difference to the quality of the service. However, making the right connections with other services seems to be easier for officers when they are based in a

directorates with a strong focus on place and/or on education or enterprise.

There is a variety of approaches to governance, with some ACE services convening advisory boards of governors (comprising a combination of councillors, employers and representatives of key community groups); and others held accountable by the council's scrutiny committee. Some councils do both.

However, it is possible to identify some common elements in the way in which ACE services work and to recognise some critical success factors. Although provision has reduced somewhat over the past decade, the best services remain agile and responsive, with exceptional reach into communities (particularly the least advantaged communities); they have strong partnerships within their council and more widely; and they have adopted meaningful governance and scrutiny arrangements through which councillors can add real value to the service.

Delivery models

There are two main models of ACE delivery – direct and indirect (through sub-contracting), although in practice many local areas offer a combination of both.

- **Direct delivery:** providers offer adult education services themselves rather than contracting them out. In some cases, courses are provided through a large college-type facility; in others through smaller, community-based centres where other council services may be co-located. Many councils combine a large institutional hub with smaller community centres, often based in areas of acute need where learners may be reluctant or unable to travel.

For example, Hertfordshire's adult education service has set up learning hubs in some of the county's most deprived areas, with a specific focus on wards where there is currently little or no support service. Each hub is set up with a local organisation from the voluntary sector, with the aim of creating a welcoming environment for people from disadvantaged groups.

- **Sub-contracted delivery:** other councils sub-contract the delivery of ACE courses out to private and/or voluntary and community sector partners. Councils providing courses that are either wholly or largely provided on an indirect basis typically have a smaller team responsible for planning and managing provision. These councils rely on the specialist knowledge and reach of different community services in engaging learners in provision planned to match local need.

Unsurprisingly, ACE services often work in very complex local structures, which may include multiple levels of planning and commissioning and different players interested in shaping service plans. For example, mayoral combined authorities are now

responsible for the adult education budget which funds ACE provision.

According to HOLEX's analysis of ACE service inspection reports, good or outstanding services tend to have strong governance with clear accountabilities, and councillors with excellent knowledge of the service and how it supports local need.

Leadership

Councils are place shapers and conveners. They must address the needs of their communities in an integrated and coherent way, making smart and efficient use of the resources they have. While working within the national-level constraints, councils must plan ACE provision that is sensitive to local need and informed by relevant labour market and other intelligence. To be effective, a council's ACE service must find a way to make national policy support local need.

While job titles vary, every ACE provider will have a head of service or principal who is responsible for assessing local need and developing a working plan which addresses these needs through clear goals that support the council's vision and reflect the national policy framework.

Dr Sue Pember, Director of Policy for HOLEX, says: "It has to build on what the area and the residents need, be integrated into the council's other services, and it must reflect what the government wants. And it must be well monitored, so that if something goes awry, it can be dealt with quickly."

Councils have access to a wide range of data on issues such as pupil performance, public health and the location of areas of greatest need. It can be disaggregated in terms of age group, socio-economic group, equality of access or employment status. It is important that

ACE services use this data to plan provision, ensuring close integration with the council's wider plans and priorities. ACE services are themselves a source of useful data on learner performance and progression, which should be used to identify gaps, challenge practice and improve.

In addition to interpreting data and planning in the context of local and national policy frameworks, the head of service has an important role as a leader or facilitator of partnerships. There is an important role too for councillors in supporting this, both through strengthening existing partnerships and fostering new ones.

One form of partnership particularly relevant to councils that contract out some or all of their ACE provision is the delivery partnership. ACE services often work with community organisations that specialise in a form of provision or that have a special

reach into a particular community, often one considered marginalised or hard to reach. These subcontracting arrangements are generally robustly managed, and learners know they are students of their respective ACE service.

The relatively small scale of ACE service operations means they can move swiftly and with agility, adapting provision to the specific needs of their communities. This makes them an ideal partner – able to work in a smart, collaborative way with organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver a wide range of programmes tailored to local need.

ACE services work in close partnership with organisations in sectors where adult education has an important contribution to make, for example health. They are more likely than other providers (such as colleges or private training providers) to partner with, for example, the NHS in working collaboratively on issues such as obesity, suicide prevention, loneliness or social prescribing.

Since the COVID-19 crisis, providers are strengthening their relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus to provide an enhanced service for the newly unemployed and people facing redundancy. This covers everything from DWP referrals to online advice and guidance, supporting job applications and skills needs analysis.

The link between councils and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) mean that ACE services are also well positioned to contribute to the regional skills and employment agenda.

Experience: Families learning together

Lewisham Adult Learning has forged a long-term partnership with the Horniman Museum. Family learning and ESOL learners have taken part in projects organised with the museum: for example, ESOL family learning students have helped the museum to review labels and interpretation for its exhibits. The museum offers learners the chance to volunteer through Lewisham's 'Volunteering: a stepping stone into work' programme. Parents on the family learning course have given presentations at community events and have supported the museum in developing new activities for families.

The national funding framework

All services work to the council adult education governance regulatory framework set by the then government in 'New challenges, new chances' in 2011, and the way in which that is expressed in the funding guidance from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

'New challenges, new chances affirmed the focus of ACE services on 'people who are disadvantaged and who are furthest from learning and therefore less likely to participate', highlighting their role in widening participation and supporting progression into work and further learning, and in developing stronger communities with 'more self-sufficient, connected and pro-active citizens'.

In brief: 'New challenges, new chances'

The purpose of government-supported community learning, according to 'New challenges, new chances', is to:

- maximise access to community learning for adults, bringing new opportunities and improving lives, whatever people's circumstances
- promote social renewal by bringing local communities together to experience the joy of learning and the pride that comes with achievement
- maximise the impact of community learning on the social and economic wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.

The objectives of community learning are to:

- focus public funding on people who are disadvantaged and least likely to participate, including people in rural areas and those on low incomes with low skills
- collect fee income from people who can afford to pay and use this where possible to extend provision to those who cannot
- widen participation and transform people's destinies by supporting progression relevant to personal circumstances
- develop stronger communities with more self-sufficient, connected and pro-active citizens
- commission, deliver and support learning in ways that contribute directly to these objectives.

The ESFA, an agency of the Department for Education (DfE), provides funding for adult skills and community learning. Its **funding guidance** is based on the purposes and objectives set out in 'New challenges, new chances', which it characterises as to develop the skills, confidence, motivation and resilience of adults in order to progress into learning or employment, improve their health and wellbeing, and develop stronger communities.

Council ACE services are funded through the DfE's adult education budget. Since August 2019, this budget has been apportioned between the ESFA, which distributes the funding to councils, and the six mayoral combined authorities (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West Midlands and West of England) along with the Greater London Authority, to which it is devolved by the DfE. AEB devolution will soon also cover the West Yorkshire, North of Tyne and Sheffield City Region.

The mayoral authorities received £630 million in adult education funding in the first wave of skills devolution in 2019. The move was welcomed as a serious attempt to give adult education funding more local discretion and flexibility. This has required more local conversations to agree the right balance of provision. There is a view that it could change the relative stability in funding and policy direction that has been a major part of ACE's success over the past decade.

Overall funding for adult learning nationally has reduced by 47 per cent between 2009/10 and 2018/19, which has affected all ACE, and other adult learning providers. According to the 2019 Learning and Work Institute analysis, this has coincided with adult learner numbers falling by 3.8 million in the last decade.

On top of these funding cuts to adult learning, councils have experienced a 40 per cent reduction in government funding since 2010. Despite this, they continue to run successful programmes of adult education provision, with ACE learner numbers declining at a slower rate than in FE colleges – and even increasing for Level 4 (higher technical qualifications, such as higher apprenticeships) and ESOL courses. Learner satisfaction with ACE services remains higher than for any other part of the FE sector.

In spending their allocation, councils and combined authorities are expected to maintain a clear line of sight between government policy and regional and local adult education service plans and cannot go over budget. ACE services have managed to do this with great success, despite a steady reduction in funding.

Experience: Setting up a community learning trust

Following a recommendation made in 'New challenges, new chances' (2011), New Directions College, the learning and employment service for Reading, set up a community learning trust (Reading Community Learning Network) to support joint curriculum planning and delivery with strategic partners from the public, community and voluntary sectors, to ensure the service's community learning offer meets local priorities.

The network consists of 38 members including Reading libraries, children's centres, voluntary sector agencies and the probation service, each providing targeted or specialist provision. Such partnerships are critical for a service that aims to reach some of Reading's most disadvantaged communities.

Two-thirds of the council's learners come from the most deprived areas. The service aims to reach out to people where they live, engage them in learning and give them routes to further learning and employment. It works with other council teams to add value to their activities.

Reading has found that partnership is key not only in engaging the hardest-to-reach adults, but also in generating new income for the service, enabling it to better meet the needs of learners and ensuring the available resource goes a long way. The service, for example, recently obtained £170,000 from the LEP to develop its catering and hospitality facilities, in response to development of the area's hotel and leisure sector.

The service generates added value through its use of volunteers, free venues and course fees. Around £250,000 is collected annually and used to offset the costs of working with Reading's most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

Many councils, finding that demand for ACE services surpasses ESFA funding, have attempted to increase the available funding by adopting a 'Pound Plus' model of income generation. This means that they look to add to their existing budget through, for example, course fees, financial sponsorship, low or no-cost learning spaces, donations of equipment, and other funding sources and grants. This is a highly effective approach that allows ACE services to do more within a shrinking public funding context.

Experience: Making money go further

Southampton City Council's adult education service has used a 'Pound Plus' model to increase service income and drive up participation within a constrained public funding environment.

Although the majority of the service's provision is sub-contracted out (84 per cent in 2018-19), there are clear expectations concerning Pound Plus set out in the original specification issued to all potential sub-contractors, along with guidance in the annual provider guide.

Sub-contractors are expected to demonstrate Pound Plus improvements including:

- increase in fee income
- increase in commercial sponsorship and support via contributions in kind
- increased use of volunteers
- increased income from external bids
- rationalisation, enhancing and re-focusing of the curriculum offer
- improved efficiency
- greater social impact of learning on the wider community.

Sub-contractors are expected to use the money saved or created by these policies for the benefit of learners, particularly priority groups and those who might otherwise not be able to engage in learning activity.

Governance and scrutiny

It is important that ACE services are rooted in the needs of their communities, which means that local people should be democratically involved in the governance of these services through councillors and other stakeholders. This is the key role of councillors in respect of their council's ACE service.

Councillors are the equivalent of a further education college board of governors and are responsible, ultimately, for ensuring the service on offer to residents is of high quality and relevant to their needs. Councillors also have a wider role as leaders of their local places and in helping to set the direction of local services.

Different councils take different approaches to governance. More than half (53 per cent) of the services that responded to the HOLEX survey said they were governed and held accountable through the council's scrutiny committee, while 38 per cent had

an advisory board. Despite this mixed approach, it is clear that all councils attach importance to ensuring that their ACE services are democratically accountable to the people they serve.

Councils' scrutiny and challenge committees play a fundamental role in ensuring ACE funding is well spent, monitoring services and ensuring that learner outcomes are improving. They help councillors understand what the service is for, how service plans are developed and how success is evaluated. They give councillors from different backgrounds the opportunity to make connections and see the wider relevance of ACE. These committees can also bring in other local partners and providers to be scrutinised.

ACE service governance or advisory boards usually comprise a number of councillors, the head of service, and representatives of the private, public and voluntary sectors. Having a breadth of membership adds expertise to the board and creates new opportunities for partnership. These boards do not merely assure the quality of learning in the service – they ensure that the service is meeting local need and engaging in self-evaluation (as well as evaluating sub-contracted providers).

The 2018 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection report on Redbridge Institute of Adult Education, for example, found that:

'Governance is very strong. Governors are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the organisation... They strongly promote the organisation's vision to target the most disadvantaged learners and increase participation from the most deprived neighbourhoods. Governors and senior leaders work effectively together to achieve the positive standing of Redbridge Institute in the community. They are rightly proud of the positive contribution it makes to the local area.'

In some high-performing services – Reading, Redbridge and Peterborough, for example – new governors undergo a process of induction, learning about the service and the people it supports. They are encouraged to attend classes and meet learners, thus deepening their understanding of adult education and adult learners. Some heads of service arrange 'learning walks' for councillors to find out more about their service. All services interviewed for this handbook highlighted the importance of bringing governors/councillors and learners together.

The high level of scrutiny in council ACE services helps ensure service plans are in line with local need and the wider plans of councils, and that the available resource is sensibly and smartly allocated. Effective scrutiny is one of the core considerations brought to bear by Ofsted in their service inspections.

Place shaping

‘Place’ is an important concept for councils. While national and local strategies and interventions to support communities with significant, complex needs are important in their own right, without sufficient join-up they risk being stand-alone and less effective than they might be. Place-based interventions, bringing together different council services and other core partners, can be a hugely effective way of coordinating policy and provision.

The strong physical presence of ACE services in the communities they serve is an important factor in this – often, service buildings become a “community resource that is about high-quality learning but can also be a point of connection, information-sharing and collaboration among different services” as described in the Redbridge Institute case study.

As leaders of place, councils are not only democratically mandated but are best placed to convene and take a lead, in collaboration with national government, employers, LEPs and other key partners. ACE services, sitting within their council and with unparalleled reach into other services, are uniquely well positioned to contribute to this agenda.

The role of councillors in ACE

Leadership plays an important part in the success of the best ACE services. Lead members with responsibility for ACE policy provide the political vision and accountability for the service, while the head of service will manage its day-to-day activities. Together, they must play the part of local leaders of learning. That means they must keep the learner at the forefront of their minds and strive to offer a service that is accessible, appropriate, inclusive and effective.

The lead member with responsibility for ACE should be:

- working with all stakeholders to set the strategy, plan and scrutinise delivery of the service
- the voice of residents and learners
- ensuring the plan is underpinned by the objectives of the council
- exploring the potential to join-up with other services (section 106 and regeneration, public health etc) and partners (local businesses, representative bodies including local chambers, colleges and jobcentre plus and wider regional connections).

They should be adept in determining, through local data and intelligence, the needs of their learners, and be able to make the most of limited resources to meet those needs.

Increasingly, they should be opportunistic and entrepreneurial, looking at all available funding sources and ensuring that learners are adequately supported.

Councillors who have scrutiny responsibility for the ACE function should:

- hold the executive to account and provide a scrutiny role, and where relevant seek independent advice
- scrutinise the finances and effectiveness of ACE to deliver outcomes
- be the voice of residents and learners
- provide suggestions on how to improve service delivery.

As well as assuring the democratic accountability of the service and ensuring that the offer meets local need, councillors are also key advocates – spreading the word about their service and helping to ensure greater buy-in and support across and outside of the council.

As essential ‘conduits’ between the council and local communities, the councillor’s role in fostering public engagement – whether engaging people as service users or service supporters – is vital. Councillors can arm themselves with information and signpost people to services, making connections that the individual may not have acknowledged, such as seeing how it could help someone experiencing isolation. There is still a general lack of appreciation of what ACE can achieve. Councils need to consider how to build that knowledge and awareness in their own communities.

In many of the most successful services, there is strong, informed understanding of what ACE does and long-term support for the local service. In others, services face more of a challenge to raise the profile of the service.

As well as holding heads of service to account, councillors have a key role in supporting them and enabling them to do their job better. They can help them to see the big picture, where the ACE service fits within it and where it can add value and facilitate the development of new partnerships and pursue new funding sources. The conversations councillors have, and the connections they make, can be crucial in expanding the scope and ambition of their ACE service.

Summary: The leadership role of councillors

- Councillors are responsible in different ways for ensuring that their local ACE service is of high quality and relevant to the needs of residents. This can be done through the portfolio holder with responsibility for ACE and

through scrutiny members who hold the service to account.

- Councillors provide challenge and advice, evaluating service progress and guiding its development, through scrutiny committees and advisory boards. Often, they have high-level expertise gained in the private, public or voluntary sectors.
- Councillors are responsible for ensuring money is spent properly and in line with local priorities and national funding guidelines.
- Councillors are key advocates for the service, promoting its work within the council and across the whole community.
- Councillors are forgers of new partnerships, using their perspective across council services to help assure effective join-up and support place-based planning.
- Councillors promote wider understanding of ACE and its outcomes, drawing on their knowledge of the service and their learners, to spread the word and get other councillors on board.

Through good governance and effective scrutiny, smart, place-based planning, sound financial management and strong partnerships, ACE leaders can create a culture of excellence and inclusivity across the service and a climate of innovation and creativity, in which staff feel confident in meeting the needs of their communities within their limited resources.

The best-led, most effective services have in common 'a strong sense of belonging and respect among staff, learners, stakeholders and the community, including employers', as well as an acknowledgement of the broad set of outcomes that ACE can achieve.

Chapter 4: Key issues for councillors

The national context

This is a moment of opportunity for adult community education in England. There is renewed interest in adult education, as reflected in the various commissions or reviews of lifelong learning which took place during 2019, and the Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into adult skills and lifelong learning.

The Government has committed £3 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament to a new National Skills Fund for adults. This will be in addition to the existing £1.5 billion per year adult education budget. It has also indicated that it will replace European Social Fund money and ensure that £500 million of its successor, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, is used to give disadvantaged people the skills they need to succeed in life.

This reflects a growing appreciation at both national and local level of the value and broad benefits of adult education, particularly its threefold capacity to boost productivity and economic growth, improve people's health and wellbeing and build strong, thriving communities.

It also represents an important opportunity for council ACE services to draw on new sources of funding and expand or revise their provision. The challenge for ACE is that while some high-performing services are adept at working in an entrepreneurial way and turning their expertise into bids for funding, others will face a steep learning curve if they are not to fall behind. This will be one of the main challenges for ACE services in the near future.

The case for adult education

As we have seen, ACE matters to people and places. It reaches into the least-advantaged, most-marginalised communities, supports those who are furthest from work into education, training and employment, and has a broad range of positive effects on citizens and communities.

The case for adult education is getting stronger. Technological developments are changing the world of work and the skills required to thrive in it, the population is getting older, and inequalities remain in educational opportunity, health and wellbeing, civic participation and access to cultural experience. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis means adult learning will need to expand to help adults retrain for work.

Addressing these issues demands a coherent, joined-up educational offer, at every level (including adult education), with links to other services and to further learning and employment, and – perhaps above all – a strong commitment to places and to the people who live in them.

Only councils have the democratic mandate and local insight to lead efforts to foster local economic growth and give people the support, skills and competences they need to get on at work and in life. They have a unique ability to bring together local partners, and the flexibility and agility to target specific problems in a concerted, coherent and creative way.

ACE can connect with other council services and other agencies to transform people's lives, in a way other education providers cannot. It is only through councils' democratic local leadership and strategic social and economic priorities and duties that this can happen.

Focusing on place is key to bringing partners together and offering a coherent local response to the challenges and issues faced by different communities. This handbook has demonstrated the significant contribution made by ACE services to place making. Their presence at the heart of communities and their reach into other services give them a special role in placed-based policy, connecting and adding value to other services.

Top tips for councillors

The handbook has attempted to set out what makes a good ACE service and has explored some of the key factors associated with success. It has shown how the best services draw on local data to identify service gaps and plan provision that meets the needs of residents and businesses, and the important role played by scrutiny and challenge, governance, partnership and leadership in delivering an effective, high-quality service.

In considering the characteristics of successful leadership, the handbook has also explored the qualities councillors need to effectively contribute to the planning, scrutiny and promotion of a service, highlighting the importance of councillors in:

- understanding the service that they support and scrutinise
- providing challenge and advice
- supporting the development of service strategies and plans
- ensuring resources are used effectively
- advocating for the service
- fostering partnership working
- considering the service's role place making.

The following 'top tips for councillors' summarise what they can do to fulfil this critical role as effectively as possible. There is also a responsibility on officers to ensure that ACE in the local context is understood by portfolio holders, scrutiny committee members and all councillors.

Top tips for councillors

- Understand adult community education – you can only scrutinise your service if you understand what it is trying to do, the local context and the limitations in terms of service delivery.
- Get to know your service and the learners it supports – there is no better way of doing this than meeting learners. Ask your head of service to organise a ‘learning walk’ through one of their centres.
- Try to understand the needs of your community – know the data and ask whether your service could do more, or work in a different way. A clear understanding of local need will help you hold the service to account and will make you a better advocate.
- Champion the role of ACE, both within the council and outside of it. Make it your job to have conversations about ACE with local education providers, senior officers, the elected mayor, the LEP chair and local MPs.
- Be vocal about your service’s achievements – if people aren’t aware of what your service does, it will be left out of, or arrive late, to area planning.
- Make use of all the data available – councils hold detailed data on public health, pupil performance, local need and so on, which can be accessed and aggregated in terms of factors such as age, locality or employment status.
- Be aware that sometimes the need will exceed the resources available to your service. A common-sense approach to providing the offer within the available funding is essential.
- Familiarise yourself with the main national policy guidance for ACE. This is the context for the work – and the basis of your service’s funding.
- Speak to other councillors about the ACE service, what it can provide and its potential to change lives: they will be the most effective link into local communities.
- Can you bring in new partners or strengthen existing ones? ACE services are only as strong and as valuable as the partnerships they foster and the connections they make.

- Celebrate your service and your learners and promote learner achievement within the wider community.
- Share your enthusiasm for the service and your passion for service improvement and raising learner aspiration – enthusiasm can be infectious!

Looking to the future

Adult community education has enjoyed relative stability, compared to other parts of the FE sector. However, the introduction of the adult education budget and the ongoing process of devolution are changing the game and asking new questions both of ACE services and the local leaders responsible for them. The new environment in which ACE services operate requires them to be outward-looking, responsive to local need and place focused.

Councillors have a special role in this process in terms of scrutiny, advocacy and building partnerships. They are best placed to maximise the reach and quality of the local ACE service, and to fully realise its potential in relation to other council services and in the context of local communities.

COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19, the LGA had called for funding for adult learning to be restored to 2010 levels, increased over time and fully devolved through the adult education budget. This was seen as critical, given people's extended working and non-working lives and a rapidly changing labour market.

ACE providers and services demonstrated agility and flexibility in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout the lockdown, centres were busy adapting their activities and ensuring that learners were supported. Online learning was introduced, while many centres remained open for vulnerable learners. ACE providers are keen to continue to provide blended learning where appropriate, while recognising that the needs of learners can be complex, and a virtual learning environment will not suit everyone.

As we move towards COVID-19 recovery, it is anticipated that **adult training will need to increase rapidly to help the unemployed retrain for new occupations or even sectors and increase digital skills, therefore funding will need to match that demand.** Learning providers are asking for clarity of funding and flexible processes to enable them to support those already seeking support.

Further Education White Paper

DfE is reviewing the work of post-16 education and training and is intending to produce a new white paper on further and adult education in autumn 2020. The white paper will also respond to the Augar Review 2019 and may include a COVID-19 recovery plan detailing the importance of skills and retaining.

Councils and their Adult Community Education services should be centre stage to any recovery plan and should feature in the implementation plan in two ways. Firstly, by working with local Jobcentre Plus centres, schools and colleges to coordinate the response for 16-24 year olds and secondly, through the ACE services, provide a training and employability offer to get adults back into work.

It is important that the role played by councils is reinforced and that the Government is encouraged to strengthen councils' role in determining and supporting local residents to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

Devolution White Paper

It is clear from this handbook that the case should be made to strengthen ACE services for the benefit of local communities. And while councils have a direct role in ACE, they have limited direct influence on the wider skills and employment system, which remains highly centralised. Many councils want that to change, so that they can have more influence over skills and employment issues for their area.

The Government has prioritised the need to 'level up' prosperity across the country, and we expect more detail in the White Paper on devolution, which is likely to be published around the same time as the FE White Paper. The advent of both White Papers is a unique opportunity to **Re-think Local**.

The LGA has already set out its vision and framework for devolution in this area in LGA's **Work Local' model**. It recommends that councils and combined authorities should have the powers and funding to design, commission, and have oversight of a devolved and integrated employment and skills service that brings together information, advice and guidance, skills, apprenticeships, employment support and wider support for individuals and employers. This approach makes sense given every council area has its own unique challenges and opportunities and its own economic and social needs which cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach.

This should be used as blueprint for a skills and employment devolution that works for all people and places. The Government should back and fund the trialling of it. This could for a medium sized combined authority, lead to additional fiscal benefits for a local area of £280 million per year, with a benefit to the economy of £420 million. This

would be associated with an additional 8,500 people leaving benefits, an additional 3,600 people achieving Level 2 skills, and an additional 2,100 people achieving Level 3.

Closing thoughts

We asked our interviewees – heads of service and senior councillors – what they thought were the key points for councillors to consider in thinking about the future of their ACE service. Here are some of their responses:

- ‘The obvious one is about funding and how they can support [the service] by leveraging funding from different areas of the council for maximum benefit.’
- ‘Their lobbying power is important and making sure they have a voice in key decision making.’
- ‘It’s that understanding of where the need is greatest within your area in order to ensure that the funding we do have is used to maximum effect.’
- ‘I think this role in bringing partners together and collaborating, especially in more difficult challenges, is really key.’
- ‘We have to get our residents the basic skills they need – English, maths, digital skills – if we are to address a whole range of social injustices.’
- ‘Adult learning contributes to civic pride, and it is important to celebrate what our local residents are doing, through learning, to contribute to their local communities. What I see our learners are juggling with, and what they achieve, and the ambitions they have for their children and their future, it is all about civic pride and wanting to make that contribution, to do well. That is a key point for councillors to understand.’
- ‘It’s about lobbying, being advocates for the service, and bringing those key players together.’
- ‘Know your outcomes, know what you are there for, which outcomes you need to achieve and how to design your curriculum to achieve those.’
- ‘Get the support and the advocacy partners in place, so the council understands the purpose of adult learning and can see its utility.’

- ‘You have to be really brilliant at partnerships. Brilliant partnerships can transform a service.’
- ‘What councillors need to be thinking about, first and foremost, is what is important to local people. Put the politics to one side and think about the priorities for that area, the challenges. That is the brief they should be expecting from officers, that is what they should be looking at.’

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