

Use of aspirational floor targets to drive change in levels of adult basic skills

One part of the 'toolkit', being used to bring about a progressive closing of the gaps between the most flourishing neighbourhoods and the least flourishing ones, is the use of targets. There are two kinds of target being used:

- Stretching but achievable outcomes agreed as part of Public Service Agreements. Commitment to achieving more, on the one hand, is balanced by increased resourcing or increased flexibilities, on the other. The national Public Service Agreements around adult basic skills are that between 2001 and 2007, one and a half million separate individuals will substantially improve their literacy/numeracy. This national target has been disaggregated into a local contribution in Birmingham and Solihull, of almost 40,000 extra people measurably improving their basic skills (in terms of 'moving up a level') in the 2001-2007 period.

The Public Service Agreement relating to school outcomes resulted in Birmingham school system committing itself to 50% of pupils gaining 5 higher level subjects in the national examinations at 16 years old in 2003 and the incrementally increase this by agreed amounts each year to 2007.

- 'Floor targets'. These are minimum levels below which no area or organisation will remain by an agree date. For schools the national floor targets include an expectation, for example, that there will be no secondary schools where fewer than 20% of pupils aged 16 securing 5 higher level subject successes, by 2004; rising to 25% by 2006.

There were, in 2002, no plans to establish national floor targets for adult basic skills. Following from the Adult Basic Skills Review, organisations across Birmingham and Solihull saw value in agreeing some aspirational floor targets for localities across the area. Using the levels of skills in each ward at the moment, and the overall planned levels of skill for the whole area for 2005 and 2010, it was possible to set aspirational minimum levels for 2005 (levels below which no local ward area will remain by that time).

These floor/minimum levels were set for literacy (at Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1, Level 2) and numeracy (at Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1, Level 2). These are attached as profiles of the levels of ability across the different localities in Birmingham and Solihull, with aspirational targets shown as bold lines.

The argument against ward-based floor targets are twofold. Firstly, monitoring progress against the targets requires, ideally, a re-measuring of overall skills levels for the ward's population each year. Secondly, those wards with furthest distance to travel to reach the floor target are often wards characterised by high levels of population

turnover. This mobility of population is, however, usually an exchange between similar wards and, whilst made up of different individuals, the ward population characteristics have a degree of stability.

Rather than constant monitoring of skills levels, a better approach could be to convert the distances to be travelled (within each ward, in order to reach/surpass the floor target) into numbers of adults needing to move up a level over the period to 2005 and to annually monitor the numbers 'succeeding' in this way within the target wards.

Potential floor targets for literacy (at 4 levels) and numeracy (at 4 levels) are shown, for Birmingham wards and for Solihull wards separately, in the Adult Basic Skills Review for Birmingham and Solihull.