

West Midlands Learning and Skills Council
Proposed Regional Numeracy Strategy 2006-2010

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Introduction

1. Within the West Midlands 76% of the regional population aged 16 plus do not have numeracy skills at level 2 standard. High numeracy needs are particularly evident within the urban areas of Birmingham and Black Country with pockets of need in the urban-rural locations of Warwickshire, Staffordshire, Hereford, Worcester and Shropshire. Detailed figures on regional and sub-regional levels of need are held on the national survey page of the DfES 'readwriteplus' website.
2. Nationally and regionally there is growing recognition of the significance role numeracy skills play in accessing and sustaining employment.
3. To address regional numeracy needs, in the West Midlands we have identified numeracy as a priority and will implement a West Midlands Regional Strategy for Numeracy to:
 - create a demand for numeracy,
 - increase engagement and achievement across all skills for life client groups
 - result in numeracy learning and achievement that more closely reflect regional needs.
4. Section Two provides more detail on the case for a Regional Numeracy Strategy.
5. The City Strategies partnership between Learning and Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus and Local Authorities will be key in driving forward Numeracy within the 55 most deprived wards in the West Midlands.
6. This strategy applies to all priority groups of offenders, unemployed, employed including public sector employees and disadvantaged client groups.

Section One: National Context

7. 'We know from research and from national surveys that huge numbers of adults have problems with maths, with a powerful impact on people's life chances and success at work.' (National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy - Maths4Life Pathfinder Report 2006)
8. There is an increasing focus nationally on the need, within all regions, to develop numeracy to Level 2 standards among adults.
9. Numeracy is a complex area. There is evidence of high need, but low participation in numeracy learning, underpinned by an apparent social acceptability of low numeracy skills levels.
10. Nationally more than 50% of the adult population do not have the numeracy skills at Level 1 standard (which is the equivalent of D-G at GCSE standard). There is more than double the need to address numeracy skills at Level 2 compared with literacy. It now is recognised as a high priority subject that has, in some cases, been 'squeezed' by the demands e.g. for ESOL.
11. While the need for competent literacy skills are popularly recognised as an essential skill in order to enable individuals to function effectively in adult life, this does not apply to numeracy. As the NRDC Research Report 'Does Numeracy Matter' (2005) identified, there remains an assumption among adults that numeracy skills are not as important as being able to read and write competently.
12. This same research pointed to the powerful effects that low numeracy skills could have upon economic, social and psychological areas of everyday life. Low numeracy skills levels had a greater impact on the lives of women. For men the combination of poor literacy and numeracy has a negative affect, as opposed to the impact of numeracy alone.
13. The Leitch Review on the UK's long-term skills needs has identified the need to do more to strengthen levels of basic skills. It proposes stretching targets to 95% of adults achieving the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy (from their 2005 levels of 85% for literacy and 79% for numeracy) by 2020. Whilst this improvement in literacy skills is generally seen as achievable, the extra stretch in the numeracy upskilling is seen as much more of a challenge. Meeting this challenge will require a dramatic acceleration in rates of attainment at all levels as well as a step change in the quality and capacity of delivery mechanisms.

14. The current emphasis on meeting the needs of employers has significance when looking at the picture of numeracy. Numeracy is a particular issue for initial and continuing employability. The Skills for Life Strategy Unit have identified the skills for life needs, including numeracy, that are required across job roles in different sectors. This information can be obtained from the DfES Skills for Life Strategy Unit 'readwriteplus' website.
15. Numeracy skills that are not used, at work or in other contexts, will decline and the level of individual numeracy skills will decrease. With literacy there exists a more daily exposure to written communication skills which help to ensure that literacy skills are maintained. There is less daily exposure to the full range of numeracy skills which results in adults losing those skills, particularly if they do not hold them at level 2 standard.
16. Adults with numeracy needs are not always aware of these needs. Those adults with an awareness of their needs are not always motivated to attend learning to address these as they view these skills as less important than literacy skills. There is a clear 'motivation to improve' issue with numeracy. The NRDC Numeracy Pathfinder Report, 2005, identified that student motivations are varied and complex, with few students attending classes because they feel they lack skills in everyday lives. Adults who want to learn numeracy want to do this for a specific purpose such as getting a job, helping their children with homework or new numeracy demands within their job.
17. Numeracy is an integral part of the national Skills for Life strategy, which continues to be structured around the four pillars of raising demand; capacity of providers to respond to changing needs; quality of the learning experience; and opportunity to gain nationally-recognised qualifications. The emphasis, within the strategy, has shifted from a focus on discrete Skills for Life activity to activities that use Skills for Life to support changes in employability, employee effectiveness, public sector recruitment and service delivery, reduced reoffending etc.
18. This numeracy strategy will be carried forward within any current LSC annual statement of priorities. For 2007/8 these include:
 - increasing the support for Skills for Life and for full Level 2 qualification achievement
 - countering disadvantage i.e. not simply responding to demands
 - asylum seekers 19+ no longer automatically eligible for publicly-funded FE provision
 - stronger focus on the needs of employers

Section Two: The Regional Numeracy Challenge – Levels of Ability, Learning Participation and Achievement

19. Within the West Midlands only 24% of the regional population aged 16+ has numeracy skills at level 2 of the national numeracy curriculum standards. This percentage of ability at numeracy level 2 is lower than the national average by only one percentage point, and highlights the significant improvement still need to be made.

20. The level of numeracy skills is varied across the region with the urban areas of Birmingham and Black Country demonstrating the lowest levels of skills. Detailed in the chart below are the numeracy abilities by local area across the West Midlands:

Levels of numeracy ability, at different levels, across the sub-regional areas:

Level	Region	Bham & Solihull	Black Country	Staffs	Coventry & Warks	Hereford & Worcester	Shrops
Entry Level or below	47% (cf. 17% literacy)	62%	56%	48%	45%	39%	35%
Level 1	29% (cf. 42% literacy)	27%	33%	30%	31%	41%	37%
Level 2 or above	24% (cf. 41% literacy)	11%	11%	22%	25%	20%	28%

21. Whilst basic skills in general, and numeracy in particular, is a predominantly urban issue because of the lower overall skills levels and the much higher population, it has been possible to highlight specific rural wards where there are small pockets of high concentration of need in numeracy (Places such as Cannock South; Leek North; Bilbrook; Great Wyrley; Churnet; Norton Canes; Hurley and Wood End; Areley Kings; Tardebigge; Gatacre; Monkmoor).

22. City Strategies will provide a focus for numeracy within the 55 most deprived wards within the West Midlands covering Sandwell, , Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley, Birmingham, Solihull, Coventry and Telford Local Authority areas.

23. The lack of sector-related numeracy skills identified, across the West Midlands, in the National Employer Skills Survey (2005) shows the variation across sectors. The table below details employer perception of numeracy needs in their sector as identified within this Survey.

	% employers reporting numeracy skills needs where skills shortage vacancies exist
Personal services	40%
Sales	38%
Administrative	35%
Professional	31%
Skilled trades	25%
Elementary	23%
Associate professional	18%
Managers	17%
Operatives	16%
<i>WM average</i>	27%
<i>National Average</i>	23%

24. There were 86,084 enrolments on numeracy courses in 05-06. Of these there were 21% aiming for Entry Level certification; 51% aiming for Level 1 certification and 28% aiming for Level 2 certification. To summarise, 72% of all numeracy enrolments were aimed at lifting skills up to Level 1

25. The enrolments in numeracy represented a reasonable proportion of all Skills for Life enrolments. Numeracy enrolments represent:

- 33% of all Skills for Life enrolments
- 32% of all Skills for Life retained learners
- 31% of all Skills for Life achievements

26. Almost half of all numeracy enrolments were for under 19 key skills focusing on Application of Number Level 1 or for 19+ provision that were not aiming for national certification.

Category of enrolment	As % of all numeracy enrolments
u/19 Key Skills Level 1 Number	17.2%
19+ Adult Numeracy Level 1 (nc)*	14.9%
19+ Adult Numeracy Entry Level (nc)	13.8%
	(~46%)
19+ Key Skills Level 1 Number	5.3%
19+ Key Skills Level 2 Number	4.3%
19+ Adult Numeracy Level 1 (c)*	4.3%
u/19 numeracy Level 1 (c)	4.3%
u/19 GCSE Maths (A-C)	4.1%
19+ Adult Numeracy Level 2 (c)	3.3%
u/19 Numeracy Entry Level (c)	3.3%
	(~75%)

- nc = not counting towards target; c = counting towards target

27. 64.3% of all numeracy enrolments were on provision that counted towards the target with 35.7% on provision that did not count towards the target.

	Counts towards target?	Proportion of all Sfl numeracy enrolments
Numeracy – Entry level to Level 2	No	35.7%
Numeracy – Entry level to level 2	Yes	18.9%
Key Skills (number)	Yes	37.3%
GCSE Maths	Yes	8.1%

28. The take up of provision shows a reasonable spread across the three levels of numeracy. In the West Midlands region, numeracy enrolments have been maintained at a good proportion of the total as overall numbers have grown. Within numeracy, however, there is a need to increase the number of enrolments for adults which *count towards* the national target.

Section Three: The Regional Numeracy Action Plan

29. Numeracy developments will need their own focus if the desired progress is to be made, but this will need to be seen as integral within:

- The wider priorities of the Skills for Life strategy with a focus on unemployed people; offenders; low skilled employees; public sector workers and people in disadvantaged communities
- The LSC 'Framework for Future Success' which includes improved planning processes; securing provision aligned to levels of need; securing the most appropriate mix and balance of provision; high quality provision delivered by well qualified staff; securing national targets, including Level 2 targets as well as Skills for Life targets; working through mainstream programmes etc.

30. The action plan that follows is structured within the context of wider Skills for Life priorities and LSC framework.

31. Progress against this action plan will be monitored by the Regional Skills for Life Manager and Skills Director every three months. Reports on progress will be produced as required.