Essential Skills for Living

Equipped for the Future: Building for Tomorrow

Executive Summary
A Framework and Consultation Paper on Adult Literacy
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Foreword
By the Minister for Employment and Learning

Improving the essential skills of literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland is one of the key challenges that my Department and the Executive faces. I believe, firmly, that improving levels of these essential skills holds the key to the future success of Northern Ireland, as a society, as an economy and as a culture.

Far too many in our society have low levels of literacy and numeracy skills, a stark fact brought to our attention through the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which estimated that over 20 per cent of adults in Northern Ireland perform at the lowest levels of literacy competence.

It has been said, often, that lifelong learning is the key to lifelong earning. I believe that to be true. It is, equally, my conviction that literacy and numeracy skills and, increasingly, the skills of information and communication technology, are the key that allows us to open the door of lifelong learning, which improves not only employability, but also social inclusion and personal development. There is no form of employment which does not require these skills.

For far too long, adult literacy education has been of low status within the education system. This Strategy document marks a radical new approach to literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. It has at its heart quality; quality in terms of curriculum, teaching and also in the esteem that such an important educational area rightly deserves.

The theme of the Strategy is the building of our capacity to deal with this issue. It sets out to:

• build a quality framework to underpin the provision of adult literacy and numeracy;

• build up the demand for such provision, from among those adults with low skill levels; and

• build up the number of tutors and increase provision.
Within the Executive, there is a shared vision of a Northern Ireland that can be competitive in a global economy, and one where all its citizens can participate fully in society. Through improving literacy and numeracy levels, we can go a long way to helping this vision become a reality.

I wish to thank the Basic Skills Committee, in particular, its Chairman, Richard Sterling and the Educational Guidance Service for Adult’s (EGSA’s) Basic Skills Unit, for the invaluable work they have done in this area, and for helping to raise the profile of adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. Their advice has played a key role in helping shape the Strategy.

The Strategy focuses on the needs of adults and, in particular, those who currently have low levels of literacy and numeracy. It should, however, be seen as a continuum with the policies of the Department of Education, as that Department strives to ensure that our children and young people develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

The Strategy sets out the direction to be taken. Many people have an interest in developing literacy and numeracy, not just those who work in the education sector but also those in the community and voluntary sectors, employers, trade unions and the general public. I want as many of these sectors as possible to be involved in implementing the Strategy. We have a huge challenge but, in partnership, we can work together in the interests of addressing this distinctive and important issue. I look forward, therefore, to receiving the views of all who wish to comment on my proposals.

I would like to assure you of my personal commitment to this challenge. I believe the time is now right to take a major step forward in our approach to Essential Skills in literacy and numeracy.

Carmel Hanna MLA
Minister for Employment and Learning
Executive Summary

Introduction

1. This paper sets out the framework and actions for a Strategy to improve the essential skills of literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. These skills are defined as “the ability to communicate by talking and listening; reading and writing; to use numeracy; and the ability to handle information”. In today’s society, information and communication technology (ICT), can also be regarded as an essential skill. While not addressing the development of ICT skills specifically in the Strategy, it is recognised that they will be the medium to draw many adults into learning and will be used frequently as a mode of delivery. Consequently, as adults increase their skills in literacy and numeracy they will also increase their ability to use ICT.

2. The Strategy plans the introduction of a regional curriculum, accreditation for adult learners and improved tutor qualifications. It sets targets for building capacity and engaging new adult learners, and suggests ways in which these might be achieved. It recommends the structures that need to be put in place to effect the changes, and indicates the resources which government is committed to providing to take the work forward.

3. Engaging adults to improve their essential skills means that the teaching must be relevant to the learners’ interests. As a consequence, a wide range of contexts will be used, for example, confidence-building courses as well as the wide range of leisure courses which are available. In addition, employers will be encouraged to develop the essential skills of their employees as part of their overall vocational training programme. This could be done, for example, while developing ICT skills.

4. The proposals outlined in this paper are for public consultation.

Context

5. Training in literacy and numeracy is provided currently through further education colleges, community groups, in the workplace and through the various programmes of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Provision is patchy, and suffers from a lack of consistency in terms of curriculum and a professional career structure for the tutors. The Executive is committed to lifelong learning and developing a knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, a social and economic imperative to improve the literacy and numeracy skills in a large proportion of the adult population. Improvement will not just happen; the Department needs to develop a structure to enable and encourage everyone to acquire these essential skills and help them to develop to their full potential.
Principles

6. The principles which underpin this Strategy are these:

• there will be visible and committed leadership;

• there will be a regional framework within which all provision for Essential Skills will sit;

• the provision for Essential Skills will be of consistently high quality;

• Essential Skills will be provided in a manner which makes them accessible to all; and

• tutors will be encouraged and supported to develop their skills within a professional framework.

Key Strands

7. The Strategy has five key strands:

• leadership;

• building a structured framework;

• building quality;

• building capacity;

• engaging learners.

8. These strands set out what the Department will do, and how it will be done. They are inter-dependent and not sequentially. The Strategy will deliver, by September 2002, a regional curriculum at entry level and an assessment regime at entry level by January 2003. The equivalent regime at levels 1 and 2 will be in place by September 2003.
Section 3 sets out, in detail, how these five strands can be achieved:

(a) Leadership

- The Strategy for improving Essential Skills will be driven by the Minister for Employment and Learning.

- The Minister will establish an Essential Skills Committee representative of all the major interests in the field and serviced by the Department.

- EGSA will be asked to mainstream and enhance support for Essential Skills across all its functions with a particular focus on advocacy and promotion.

- The proposed new curriculum and staff support body for the Further Education Sector will include in its remit the provision of curriculum and staff support for all providers of Essential Skills programmes.

- The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) will inspect the quality of Essential Skills irrespective of where it is provided.

- The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) will be the regulatory body for Essential Skills in Northern Ireland.

(b) Building a Structured Framework

- New standards and curricula for Essential Skills programmes will apply consistently across all provision, and will be sufficiently flexible to fit different contexts.

- The curriculum and qualifications for literacy and numeracy skills will be specific to Northern Ireland. They will be known as Essential Skills and will provide a continuum with existing Key Skills qualifications, and to provide identifiable benchmarks and progression routes for learners, higher education institutions and employers.

- There will be improved initial assessment of all learners.

- There will be regional assessment arrangements.
(c) Building Quality

• There will be improved professional training, along with an improved career structure for tutors.

• New and effective quality assurance procedures will be introduced.

• There will be improved staff and curriculum support for those involved in the delivery of Essential Skills.

• An ongoing research and evaluation programme for Essential Skills will be established.

(d) Building Capacity and Engaging Learners

• Provision will be expanded in the Further Education and community and voluntary sectors.

• Opportunities to improve Essential Skills will be maximised in all the Department’s programmes, such as New Deal, Focus for Work, learndirect and Jobskills.

• Opportunities to improve Essential Skills in the workplace will be expanded through greater involvement of employers and trade unions.

• Substantial support will be given to new initiatives which actively engage families in learning.

• In all initiatives, the potential to engage learners through relevant and flexible learning programmes through ICT will be explored.

• The Strategy will be underpinned by a comprehensive promotional campaign.
10. Through its current programmes, the Department invests heavily in adult literacy and numeracy. In the current year, this investment amounts to approximately £1.9 million. The Department has secured additional resources through Executive Programme Funds. In addition, through PEACE II funding, approximately £7 million is available until 2006/7 to expand literacy and numeracy programmes. However, if the new approach advocated in this Strategy is to be successful, then further significant investment will be required. The Department will seek to secure the necessary resources; it will be a matter for the Executive and the Assembly to determine the priority to be given to this area of expenditure in matching future resources to the many competing calls for funding.

11. This Strategy is not a “quick fix” to address the substantial problem of poor literacy and numeracy among adults; it is a new framework which will put in place an infrastructure that engages and supports the learner, provides professional development and resources for the tutor, and ensures the skills needed for a knowledge-based economy and an inclusive society.

12. The ultimate success of the Strategy will depend on the ability to engage learners from all walks of life. For this reason substantial resources will be devoted to a comprehensive national promotional campaign aimed at increasing awareness and driving up demand among adults for literacy and numeracy.
Introduction

1.1 This paper sets out a proposed strategic framework and the actions, for the future provision of Essential Skills in Northern Ireland, including key developments in the curriculum and the teaching base.

1.2 The Department for Employment and Learning invites comments to inform both the Strategy and the key actions proposed. Appendix 1 lists specific questions for comment. As well as replies to these questions, comments on any other relevant matter will be welcomed.

How to respond to this document

1.3 Adult literacy and numeracy affect the whole of society; they lie at the heart of developing Northern Ireland, both economically and socially. It is essential that there should be a widespread and informed discussion on the Strategy and the proposals for action put forward in this document.

1.4 EGSA’s Basic Skills Unit has been asked to manage the consultation process. Comments can be sent in writing or by E-mail to the address shown at the end of this section. If there are groups that would prefer to make an oral response, the Department will make arrangements to hear their views. Unless otherwise requested, it will be assumed that responses are not intended to be confidential.

Timescale for responses

1.5 The closing date for receiving comments is Friday 21st June 2002.

1.6 The consultation paper is being widely circulated to key interest groups. Additional copies and copies in large print, Braille and audiotape can be obtained by contacting the address, E-Mail address or telephone number below. The paper is also available on the Department’s website at www.delni.gov.uk

What Happens Next?

1.7 Following the consultation all the responses will be analysed by the Department and EGSA’s Basic Skills Unit. The Department will consider the responses and finalise its action plan in September 2002.

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Consultation Questions

While the Department welcomes comments on all aspects of the Framework and Consultation Paper, it particularly invites your views on the following issues:

**Building the Quality Framework**

1. Does the Department’s Strategy put in place the necessary foundations upon which to build a quality structured framework?

2. Are there any other actions that need to be taken to ensure that adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland will be characterised by quality in all aspects i.e. delivery, teaching, accreditation, and support structures?

**Building Capacity: Engaging Learners**

1. What are your views on the proposals for engaging new learners across FE, community and voluntary sector, and the workplace?

2. Have you any suggestions as to what other actions and provisions might be made available to ensure the Department engages the 25,000 learners targeted in the Strategy?

3. What are your views on how Essential Skills for Living can be promoted to reach and engage as wide an audience as possible?

**Targets**

1. Do you agree with the targets the Department has set?
### Summary of Targets

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<tr>
<th>Target</th>
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<tr>
<td>Essential Skills Committee will be in place.</td>
<td>September 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland will possess a regional curriculum for learners at all levels.</td>
<td>September 2003&lt;br&gt;(Entry level completed in September 2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland will have guidance material based on the regional curriculum at entry level to assist with the initial assessment of learners.</td>
<td>January 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland will possess an assessment and accreditation regime for Essential Skills at entry level.</td>
<td>January 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCEA will provide advice on assessment methodology for levels 1 and 2 to provide a continuum with Key Skills.</td>
<td>September 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCEA will provide advice on a recording and tracking system linked to the assessment regime.</td>
<td>September 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland will have a single set of quality indicators to evaluate Essential Skills.</td>
<td>September 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland will have professional qualifications in place for Essential Skills tutors.</td>
<td>June 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>The new central staff and curriculum support structure being proposed for the FE sector will support all Essential Skills providers.</td>
<td>June 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Department will require all providers to deliver Essential Skills in the context of the Quality Framework.</td>
<td>September 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>A research programme will begin to be developed.</td>
<td>September 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>The statutory and non-statutory FE sector will have engaged an additional 1,000 learners, an increase of almost 20% over current levels.</td>
<td>March 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify and support champions for Essential Skills within the voluntary and community sectors, and among employers and trade unions.</td>
<td>September 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish a fund to support family literacy programmes.</td>
<td>September 2002</td>
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<td>All training programmes under DEL’s control will have access to Essential Skills.</td>
<td>September 2002</td>
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<td>Increase the tutor base of new tutors by 50% and for volunteer tutors by 100%</td>
<td>March 2005</td>
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<td>A major promotional campaign will begin.</td>
<td>January 2003 (Major drive in September 2003)</td>
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