

Adult Education and Social Mobility

Summary Report of the National Stakeholder Policy Roundtable

4th December 2017

1. Background

1.1 The event provided an opportunity for adult education policymakers, providers and other stakeholders to bring their collective knowledge and expertise to bear on **the question of how the role of adult education can be strengthened in policy and practice to promote social mobility**. It was convened by Learning & Work Institute for the Department for Education (DfE), and was attended by members of L&W's stakeholder networks and forums: The Local Education Authority Forum for the Education of Adults (LEAFA), the National Advisory Group on Peer Volunteering and Learning (NAG), the National Older Learners Group (NOLG), the National Family Learning Forum (NFLF) and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Forum for adult learning and skills.

1.2 **The event's starting point was the proposition that lifelong learning must be at the centre of a national vision for social mobility and economic prosperity**. Many of the entrenched factors that inhibit social mobility and life chances, such as low pay, poor health and disability, are strongly linked to educational inequality. Coupled with this, the UK's relatively poor productivity reflects an over-reliance on low-wage, low-skill jobs. For adults, families and communities trapped in a cycle of disadvantage, education has a vital contribution to make towards re-igniting social mobility in its broadest sense.

1.3 The roundtable took place the day after the unexpected resignation of all four board members of the Social Mobility Commission. The Commission's out-going Chair, Alan Milburn, singled out the Secretary of State for Education for her "deep commitment" to the issue. **Participants recognised that an opportunity exists to shift lifelong learning from the margins to the mainstream of policy responses to the social mobility challenge**. This note summarises the issues and ideas raised through both the plenary session and workshops, so that they can inform stakeholders on-going engagement with this agenda.

2. What are the issues?

2.1 **The term social mobility can be problematic for adult education**. It has been associated with efforts to move individuals "up and out" of their communities, whereas adult education traditionally seeks to support change through empowering and enriching communities. Participants considered what social mobility means, and how adult education can engage with an agenda framed in terms of social mobility. It was noted that:

- Setting out her definition of social mobility, the Education Secretary said, "Everyone should have the chance to be the best version of themselves that they

can be.” Meanwhile, the Social Mobility Commission and others conflate social mobility with addressing poverty, inequality and unfairness in access to opportunities. While rather vague, these positions are potentially helpful as they draw attention to the structural factors underpinning weak social mobility, and the challenge of poverty at its heart.

- Discussions of social mobility is often limited to concern with work and employment. However, it is vital that they also encompass how social and cultural factors inhibit the ability of disadvantaged groups to access and benefit from opportunities for improving their lives and circumstances. Social and family networks can exercise a powerful influence over people’s mindsets and perceptions of the opportunities and choices available to them.
- The Social Mobility Commission’s focus on the geographical dimension of social mobility highlights the need for place-based approaches to addressing inequality and disadvantage.

2.2 Structural problems in the UK labour market mean that there are currently too few jobs for people to move into which offer good opportunities for career progression. Increasing the supply of education and skills will not alone create the conditions in which social mobility can thrive. Demand for skills from industry and employers also needs to be raised, with better skills utilisation and the creation of higher skilled, better paid roles.

2.3 Many jobs in some growing sectors (e.g. social care) are characterised by low status and pay and limited progression opportunities. Although the roles performed are vital to society, they are undervalued in the labour market. Adults working in these sectors are likely to experience significant barriers to social mobility, as they become “stuck” in low paid jobs with few, if any, prospects of advancement.

2.4 Greater flexibility is needed in the opportunities for adults in work to access learning. From employers, this requires willingness to allow people time off to train, better understanding of the value and benefits of training their staff, and the business development capacity to use the new skills that their employees acquire in order to grow their business.

2.5 Currently, some employers do not want their staff to be socially mobile. They are resistant to training because they do not know how to use higher skill levels within their own organisation, and consequently fear that staff will move to competitors if they acquire new skills. However, evidence on the quality of jobs indicates that employers who invest in skills development outperform comparable low wage, low skill organisations.

2.6 Disability and health related barriers to employment are not being addressed from the employer perspective. The challenge is not just how to enable adults with disabilities and health conditions to gain skills for work, but also how to work with employers to design good job roles that are accessible to them.

2.7 Technology is having a major impact on the nature of work and job roles. It is changing rather than eliminating jobs. Low-skilled workers are most vulnerable to being displaced by automation and falling into long-term unemployment, but they are also the least likely to have opportunities to participate in learning.

2.8 Digital exclusion presents a huge barrier to social mobility for some adults, as some level of digital skills are an almost universal requirement for participation and progression in the labour market.

2.9 Social mobility overlaps with actual mobility. Transport (availability and cost) is a major factor limiting the ability of some individuals and communities to access opportunities for participation and progression in education and employment.

2.10 Data on adult participation in learning suggests that the system may currently be entrenching rather than addressing inequalities which emerge during initial education. Social class is a major determinant of adults' propensity to take part in learning, and employers are most likely to offer work-related learning opportunities to those who have higher levels of existing skills.

3. How can adult education help?

3.1 Community learning provides entry points, first steps and progression pathways which are essential for enabling progression to further learning and employment, for adults both in and outside the workplace. It helps people to develop the confidence, self-belief and "soft skills" to move forward in their work and wider lives. "Pre-pre-employment" provision is an important aspect of these

3.2 Family learning delivers unique value for money, by improving outcomes for both adults and children. Participants highlighted a range of examples of how this happens.

- FL can give parents the confidence to support their children's learning and wider cultural engagement, and nurture in them a love of learning and a sense of aspiration and ambition. Some FL courses include specific activities to encourage parents to access free cultural spaces with their children which they previously considered were "not for them".
- FL helps parents to gain the skills, knowledge and understanding to create a positive home learning environment, through which children's learning can be better supported.
- FL practitioners are generally in a better position than teachers to engage with the most excluded parents, who may themselves have had very negative experiences of school. Parent Champions can also play a critical role – these are parents who themselves have had experience of participating in FL, and are able to work more effectively than professionals to engage and motivate other parents.

- Analysis of local data for Norfolk has shown that the attainment gap opens up significantly at KS2. The FL service has been working with schools to target provision at parents of this group.

It was also noted that Family Learning has not been included as a core element in the Opportunity Area pilots. This was felt to be a missed opportunity.

3.3 By equipping adults with the skills to learn, adult education supports them to make the most of future opportunities. It is thus about more than curriculum content, and any good learning experiences can have a positive impact on an individual's confidence, motivation and capacity to progress, both in the workplace and beyond.

3.4 The provision of diverse opportunities for adults to gain and develop digital skills is a critical dimension of the way in which adult education supports re-skilling and up-skilling for successful participation in work and society. Learning may be formal or informal, discretely delivered or embedded into other learning activities, depending on context and circumstances.

3.5 Adult and family learning can help to shift culture and aspirations within disadvantaged families and communities, so that individuals develop a sense of belief and entitlement in their right to access learning and wider opportunities. It can lift people's perspectives beyond the narrow and restrictive horizons of what they already know, which is a fundamental pre-requisite for social mobility. Historically, adult learning has played an important role in fostering a culture that values learning within communities.

3.6 Union Learning Reps and other trusted intermediaries in the workplace and in the community (e.g. Community Learning Champions, Family Learning Champions, Workplace Learning Advocates) can play a powerful role in helping to shift both cultures and individual self-perceptions, by promoting learning and raising people's aspirations, particularly among those who have low levels of skills and qualifications. On-going mentoring or other less formal support for people once they move into work can be critical for helping them to stay on track and succeed in their new role.

3.7 Local partnerships involving providers and employers can develop entry and progression pathways in key sectors, to improve recruitment and create opportunities for employees in low paid roles to progress. E.g. Cambridgeshire Health and Care Sector Work Academy.

3.8 Supporting health and wellbeing through workplace culture and practices will be critical for addressing the UK's productivity challenges. A positive culture of learning is a key element of a healthy and productive workplace. Evidence from initiatives such as the Ford EDAP scheme confirm that the opportunity to take part in any learning – not just that related to doing the job – has a positive experience on employers' wellbeing and productivity.

3.9 The mid-life review approach provides a space where adults can reflect holistically on skills and employment alongside issues such their health, care

and financial needs. Evidence from initiatives that have piloted and implemented the model to date suggests that there is significant demand for such interventions.

4. What are the barriers in the current system?

4.1 Policy, funding and organisational silos continue to work against cross-agency and multi-agency working. But more co-ordinated approaches are essential for achieving the kinds of holistic interventions and robust progression pathways that will support progression in work and wider life for individuals and communities.

4.2 The value and benefits of adult education in all its diversity are still not sufficiently well understood outside the sector, and the sector must do more to make a convincing case in key areas. For instance:

- For FL providers, making relationships with schools remains a major challenge. It involves building relationships with individual head teachers, making it very evident how FL can support the school's agenda and what it can do for them, securing dedicated space for learning, etc. This happens in a very piecemeal way.
- Employers need to understand better the kinds of learning that are legitimate in the workplace, and the gains to be made from giving employees opportunities to pursue not only job-specific training but also wider learning interests.

4.3 Austerity is impacting negatively in a range of ways. For instance:

- Real terms cuts to funding for community and family learning undermine the capacity of the sector to make its full potential contribution to supporting social mobility among the most disadvantaged groups. For example, access to resources to support digital skills development remains limited in many community learning settings.
- Cuts in local authority funding are reducing the capacity of services such as Children's Centres and Citizens' Advice Bureaux to reach the most disadvantaged adults in their localities. These services can act as key intermediaries in supporting people to engage with community and family learning.

4.4 The exclusion of many voluntary sector providers through the reformed Adult Education Budget procurement process has undermined a critical plank of education for social mobility. Voluntary and community sector providers have historically demonstrated particular expertise in supporting engagement and progression for disadvantaged individuals and groups.

4.5 Careers guidance for adults is not adequate to support people to progress their careers. Even those with good levels of skills and qualifications do not necessarily have good job search and career management skills. Better co-ordination, and a focus on the career guidance needs of all adults, not just those who are unemployed, is needed.

4.6 The benefits system actively discourages people from taking up opportunities to address skills needs. The “work first” approach promotes a focus on the short-term goal of moving people off benefits, and neglects the opportunity to support claimants to identify and pursue education and training that would equip them to progress their lives and careers.

4.7 The balance and focus of funding does not provide for the right mix and kinds of learning opportunities that will support social mobility. For example:

- Discussions about the devolution of the Adult Education Budget have tended to focus on higher level skills and apprenticeships, which raises concerns that less funding could be available for the kind of learning which promotes engagement and first steps, and is critical for enabling social mobility for excluded communities.
- Family learning budgets are no longer ring-fenced, putting this work at risk.
- There is not enough digital skills provision at Level 2 and above to support the re-skilling and up-skilling required in the changing labour market.

4.8 There is a risk that new vocational training opportunities will continue to exclude lower skilled workers. As employers adapt to the new funding and training regime for apprenticeships it is likely that there will be greater investment in existing staff / older workers, but this must not be allowed to perpetuate the tendency for those with good skills levels to benefit most from development opportunities.

4.9 The entitlement to request unpaid study leave does not help the lowest paid. They are less likely to have the confidence to ask their employers in the first place, and are least able to afford the loss of income. An entitlement to request paid study leave, perhaps targeted at low-paid employees in certain sectors, would help to address this.

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