

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills in adult learning in the community

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the provision for literacy, numeracy and digital skills for adults – a significant part of the offer in the adult learning in the community (ALC) sector. For many learners it is a ‘second chance’ to develop these foundational skills, or to improve their job prospects, support their children or build the confidence to participate fully in society.

The report draws on visits by inspectors in late 2024 and early 2025 to eight of the 13 adult learning in the community partnerships, and to Adult Learning Wales. We carried out an online survey for ALC tutors. We analysed data from the official data set, and data returned to us in a request to individual partnerships. We drew on evidence from our inspections and annual link visits of ALC partnerships.

Engaging learners

Learners face numerous barriers that inhibit them from re-engaging with education. These appear to have increased over recent years. The biggest single barrier is learners’ confidence. Learners may feel reluctant to admit they need help or feel anxious about the thought of attending a formal learning setting. Other barriers include access to digital devices, financial constraints, mental health issues, undiagnosed or unsupported learning difficulties; or where English or Welsh is not their first language. Learners also report that difficulty in finding information about courses can be a barrier. Partnerships have improved their websites to allow learners to search for courses more effectively but, on the whole, partnerships’ websites are still complex to navigate or use language or formatting that may not be accessible to learners, or potential learners. We include a recommendation for partnerships to ensure that they have straightforward and accessible ways for potential learners to find out about their provision.

Partnerships have a good understanding of these barriers and have attempted to reduce many of the obstacles. However, partnerships have challenges in engaging learners, and restrictions and lack of clarity about how they spend their funding on engagement or family learning provision reduce their ability to recruit hard-to-reach learners. Providers also report significant challenges in funding their community venues. We include recommendations for Medr / the Welsh Government to develop clear and flexible guidance for providers about the range and type of provision they can fund through the community learning grant (particularly about engagement provision – for those needing first steps towards formal learning); and to improve the availability and consistency of family learning programmes.

Teaching and professional learning

We found that teaching was effective in most of our observations for this thematic review, consistent with our findings from inspections. Tutors personalise their approaches to meet the needs of

individual learners, taking into account learners' preferences and individual strengths and weaknesses. Most tutors give highly effective one-to-one support and use this to tailor their delivery and give feedback that helps learners know how to improve.

In the few examples where teaching was less effective, there were two general areas for improvement. The first is where tutors did not build effectively on the learner's prior knowledge and experience and did not have a wide enough understanding of the range of methods that can be used to perform, for example mathematical operations. The second is where tutors were over-reliant on workbooks as their main resource for teaching. In these cases, tutors did not include enough variety in their teaching and learners became bored, demotivated or disengaged. We include recommendations for the Welsh Government, Medr, partnerships and tutors to improve the professional learning for tutors in the sector to support their subject-specific teaching skills.

Provision and progress

Providers use a wide range of accredited and non-accredited courses to deliver adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills and we give examples of the range of courses offered. Published performance data indicates that around 84% of learners in all ALC provision successfully completed their courses and qualifications in 2022-2023. However, at both partnership level and system level, information collected about learners' enrolment and retention on programmes is not used effectively enough to evaluate how learners progress through their courses and develop their skills over time. The current data collection and analysis model is of limited value in drawing insights about the patterns and effectiveness of provision. As a result, there are important gaps in understanding of the impact of provision on learners' long-term outcomes. We recommend that a clearer focus is placed on how effectively provision supports learners to progress. We recommend that Medr helps develop methodologies to measure learners' progression into, within and beyond literacy, numeracy and digital skills provision. We recommend that partnerships ensure that they plan pathways for learners and evaluate, using a wide range of information, how effectively learners move through them.

We have been critical of ALC partnerships in inspection reports where poor partnership working or planning has meant that progression routes for learners have not been clear, and learners have not been given enough good-quality information to help them think about their next steps. We include recommendations to improve partnership working to engage new learners and plan for clearer progression routes.

The UK Government's Multiply initiative significantly influenced numeracy provision in partnerships across Wales from mid-2023 to March 2025. With a notably large funding allocation (£100m across Wales), partnerships were able to develop new collaborations with community groups, engage new learners whom they previously had not reached, and were creative in developing non-accredited, numeracy-focused courses. These demonstrated that there was a demand for this kind of provision. However, partnerships frequently expressed frustration at the 'feast and famine' nature of the Multiply funding and, having only recently set up provision with the Multiply funding, were in the process of transitioning away from it.

Digital learning plays an important role, both as a distinct area of provision and as an integrated teaching tool. Digital skills courses are often less intimidating for learners and serve as accessible entry points into literacy or numeracy education. Tutors also integrate digital tools into core literacy and numeracy lessons, which enhances learners' engagement and the sessions' relevance. The challenges include learners' differing digital abilities, time constraints, and the need for reliable technology. Tutors commonly use tools like the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) online

assessment for literacy and numeracy, but these can pose difficulties for those with low digital confidence.

Most learners expressed a clear preference for in-person learning over online remote learning approaches, and we found that most partnerships had an appropriate balance of in-person to online remote learning, with typically about 5 – 15% of provision offered online.

Bilingual and Welsh-medium provision

Overall, we found very little provision was carried out through the medium of Welsh, and generally low demand from learners or potential learners. In naturally bilingual areas like Gwynedd and Ynys Môn, delivery was often bilingual, but assessments were usually in English. Learners tended to prioritise skill acquisition over the language of delivery, with many preferring to improve English literacy rather than Welsh. There was greater interest in learning numeracy through Welsh due to familiarity with mathematical terminology. Welsh-speaking learners taking digital skills courses, especially courses designed to support typically older learners in using their devices, expressed in general, a stronger demand for Welsh-medium delivery.

Successful Welsh-medium delivery often results from collaborations with community groups such as the Mentrau Iaith. Family learning programmes also supported engagement with Welsh-language provision, particularly through schemes funded by Multiply. We include a recommendation that partnerships identify opportunities to work in collaboration with existing local organisations to offer Welsh-medium or bilingual provision.

Our recommendations

Medr and the Welsh Government should:

1. Review the way in which data are used to measure outcomes for learners in ALC, with a new focus on how effectively provision supports learners to progress
2. Develop methodologies for measuring learners' progression and retention into, within and beyond ALC provision
3. Improve opportunities for partnerships to compare and benchmark their provision offer, learners' progression and outcomes with other partnerships
4. Develop clear guidance for ALC partnerships about the expectations for their provision, with a suitable and flexible local balance of provision for:
 - engagement, for those needing the first steps towards formal learning
 - literacy, numeracy and digital skills
 - skills to prepare adults for employment and job seeking
 - well-being and personal development
 - provision offered bilingually or through the medium of Welsh
5. Improve the availability and consistency of family learning programmes, as a means of engaging learners and potential learners in adult learning in the community provision of literacy, numeracy and digital skills
6. Ensure that partnerships have robust partnership agreements between their constituent providers, setting out clearly arrangements for leadership and accountability, funding, provision, progression and quality assurance
7. Promote professional learning – both accredited and non-accredited – which supports tutors to develop subject specific teaching skills

Partnerships should:

1. Ensure that learners or potential learners have accessible, straightforward ways of finding out about the full partnership's provision, which take account of the barriers that adults have in engaging in learning
2. Ensure that provision planning allows learners clear pathways to progress to further levels in their learning of literacy, numeracy and digital skills
3. Sharpen self-evaluation to focus more clearly on how learners progress into, through and beyond literacy, numeracy and digital provision
4. Use a wide range of information to evaluate how learners progress, including outcomes and enrolment data, but also information from individual learning plans, initial and iterative assessment information and learners' own aspirations
5. Maximise opportunities to work in partnership with community organisations, schools and statutory agencies to engage new learners in provision to support literacy, numeracy and digital skills
6. Identify opportunities to work in partnership to offer Welsh-medium or bilingual provision
7. Ensure that professional learning for tutors has appropriate focus on developing subject specific teaching skills so that tutors have a wide range of teaching tools to meet learners' needs

Tutors should:

1. Ensure that their teaching practice is informed from professional learning in the subject specific pedagogy for teaching literacy, numeracy and digital skills to adults