Centre for Ageing Better

Over 50s and essential skills

Towards building the skills system we need

October 2026

About us

Centre for Ageing Better

The Centre for Ageing Better is an independent centre of excellence on ageing and demographic change.

We work with national and local government, industries, businesses, and community organisations to improve how people experience ageing. Our work focuses on creating better workplaces, homes and communities, while tackling ageism and addressing inequality in later life.

Learn more at ageing-better.org.uk.

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Executive summary

This evidence review shows that essential skills are central to independence, confidence and participation in society as you age. Too many people aged 50 and over are living with low literacy, numeracy, digital or English language skills. An estimated 6.5 million people over 50 have poor literacy skills and 5.5 million over 50 have poor numeracy (ELSA, 2025), making them the age demographic with the greatest essential skills gap (OECD, 2025). Since devolving adult education, funding for essential skills has eroded substantially - funding for English courses having declined by 40% and for maths by 37% in real terms since 2016-2017 (Stevenson, Vaid and Vempalli, 2026).

Despite the obvious need for skills support for over 50s, the adult skills system remains poorly designed when it comes to serving the age group. People aged over 50 are often hesitant to participate in adult learning, feeling that essential skills classes are not for them, even though they would benefit from improved essential skills at least as much as any other age group. These skills are needed not just for working life, but also for the transition to retirement, with life requiring essential skills in literacy, maths, and digital to make complex decisions about care and finances.

People aged 50 and over should not be expected to overcome skills gaps through individual motivation alone. A lifelong learning system should make essential skills development accessible, relevant and worthwhile throughout working life and into later life. Devolution presents an opportunity to help the skills system reflect local needs and improve access to appropriate training. The evidence in this report highlights the barriers people face, and the changes needed to build an adult skills system that works for people of all ages.

Policy recommendations

As we continue to review the skills landscape in the UK, we are calling on national and local government to:

1. **Make people aged 50+ a clear priority within adult essential skills policy and funding.** National and local strategies should recognise high levels of low literacy, numeracy, digital skills and English language skills among people aged 50+ and explicitly include them in the design, commissioning and monitoring of essential skills provision.
2. **Ensure essential skills provision is accessible, flexible and designed around later-life circumstances.** Providers should be supported to offer provision on different days and at different times, alongside appropriate online and face-to-face options. Courses should be affordable and accessible by public transport, with informal and community-based learning recognised alongside formal qualifications. Provision should allow for different learning speeds and provide supportive social learning environments.
3. **Build stronger routes into learning through trusted services and employment support.** Local delivery organisations help reach people aged 50+ who are not actively seeking training, are returning to work after time outside the labour market or have had negative experiences of education. Government and providers should work with trusted organisations, build their capacity and provide sustainable funding so this work can continue.
4. **Use devolution to make provision more responsive to local need, whilst protecting a consistent minimum offer.** Combined authorities should use local data to identify gaps in essential skills provision for people aged 50+ and commission services that reflect local circumstances. As devolution continues, national government should give combined authorities the funding, capacity and accountability needed to deliver an adequate level of provision.
5. **Embed lifelong learning within the policy response to longer working lives.** Essential skills should be recognised as part of the infrastructure needed to support people to remain in, return to and progress in work as working lives extend. Employers and employment and skills services should offer accessible, age-inclusive learning and training, including opportunities to develop and maintain essential skills later in working life. This should sit alongside recognition of the wider benefits of essential skills for independence and participation in later life.
6. **Ensure consistent data collection across essential skills provision.** Government should collect regular, consistent data on essential skills provision and outcomes, including for groups underserved in essential skills data, such as racially minoritised people aged 50+. As local areas grapple with skills in their community, accurate, precise and consistent data will be central to providing services that meet local need.

Introduction

As people live and work for longer, the ability to develop and maintain essential skills throughout adulthood is increasingly important. Despite the popularity of the phrase “lifelong learning”, older adults are still too often overlooked in the discussion about skills. This matters not only because essential skills can support people to remain in and progress in work, but because they are fundamental to independence, participation and quality of life. Understanding whether the current adult education system is meeting the needs of people aged 50 and over is a pressing policy question.

This review brings together the latest evidence on essential skills provision for this age group, considers the barriers and opportunities that shape participation, and places the evidence within the changing policy landscape for adult education in the UK. It highlights both what is known about how provision can better support older adults and where evidence and practice need to improve if essential skills provision is to work better for people in mid and later life. The lowest performing age group when it comes to digital skills, numeracy and literacy is 50 to state pension age (Lloyds Banking Group, 2026; Wheater et al, 2024). They are also the working-age group most likely to have no formal qualifications (ONS, 2026).

Addressing skills gaps across all ages could deliver significant benefits for individuals, employers and the wider economy. In 2021, the cost of the essential numeracy skills gap was estimated at £25 billion in unrealised productivity (Pro Bono Economics, 2021). The economic cost of low essential digital skills is estimated at £23.1 billion (Cebr, 2025). Low literacy has direct consequences for individuals, with one report suggesting that someone with very low literacy skills earns an estimated £33,000 less over their lifetime than someone with a basic level of literacy (Kerr, 2021).

On a personal level it cannot be overstated how improving literacy, numeracy, digital skills benefit quality of life. Learners often express how improving their essential skills improves their confidence not just in those skills but across all areas of life. Unlike other post-18 education, essential skills are about helping people to meet a minimum standard of quality of life that we all deserve.

What are essential skills?

For the purposes of this review, essential skills include digital, literacy, numeracy and English language skills up to the level needed to participate in society and work. Essential skills training refers to training in these areas up to Level 2, as well as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision. This definition includes informal learning, which has been identified as particularly valuable for older learners who may prefer more flexible, non-traditional learning environments (Stevenson, Mason and Klenk, 2024).

Method

This report is an evidence review of essential skills training available to over 50s. It summarises findings from evaluations, reports and government publications on the essential skills system and the experience of over 50s attending essential skills training published within the last ten years. Quantitative analysis is taken from two data sources; descriptive analysis of low literacy and low numeracy for the over 50 population was conducted using the most recent wave of the 'English longitudinal study of ageing' (ELSA) and enrolments of over 50s in essential skills courses is taken from the 'Education and learning and tailored learning provision in England dashboard' produced by the Department for Education.

Why are essential skills important for older people

Essential skills development and maintenance are particularly important for people aged 50+, because they are more likely than younger adults (25-49) to experience low literacy, numeracy and digital skills. According to the most recent English longitudinal study of ageing (ELSA) survey data, 6.5 million people aged 50+ have low numeracy skills and 5.5 million have poor literacy (2025)[1]. Having low essential skills can have detrimental effects on wellbeing, confidence and quality of life. For instance, low literacy is linked to lower levels of physical and mental health and is shown to have a negative impact on political and civic engagement, as well as family life, while low numeracy is associated with financial and health difficulty (Stevenson, Mason and Klenk, 2024).

What makes this challenge such an important one is that older people with low essential skills are trying to overcome a lifetime of learning challenges. For many their learning difficulties go all the way back to primary school and they have never had the opportunity to overcome it.

Low essential skills can become particularly consequential during moments of transition or crisis in later life, such as declining health, bereavement or retirement. During bereavement, for example, a person may have to make complex financial decisions while under significant pressure, which can be especially challenging for someone with low literacy or numeracy skills. Difficulties with literacy can also make it harder to complete benefit applications correctly, potentially contributing to older people receiving less support than they are entitled to. Some people may also find it difficult to budget appropriately when managing pension savings in retirement.

When several learning needs overlap, the impact on an older person's life can be greater than any one barrier on its own. For example, completing paperwork digitally can be challenging for someone with low literacy, but it becomes harder if they also lack digital skills. Similar challenges can affect

1 This analysis was conducted using Wave 11 of the ELSA survey and project using data from Ageing Better 'State of Ageing' report. Following the methodology used in the L&W 'Older people and essential skills' report released in 2024. A person was considered low literacy if they got any of the four literacy questions incorrect and a person was considered low numeracy if they got more than two questions incorrect.

people whose first language is not English and people with undiagnosed learning difficulties or disabilities (Stevenson, Mason and Klenk, 2024).

The importance of essential skills has a tangible effect on employment skills. They can provide a valuable role in helping people find and sustain employment, particularly as working lives continue to extend. An estimated 5.5 million over 50s with low numeracy or literacy are in work (ELSA, 2025). The potential benefits of improving the skills of older employees are often ignored by employers and older people themselves. According to the 2025 OECD skills survey, less than one third of 60-65 year olds received any training compared to over half of 25-44 year olds. Evidence suggests that older workers do benefit from training, particularly where it is flexible, slower-paced and linked to their existing experience (Picchio, 2021; Age Diversity Forum, 2023).

The rising state pension age strengthens the case for investment in essential skills throughout later life. While some people have the financial security to choose to retire before reaching state pension age, many others need or want to work for longer. Those with low savings are more likely to be living with essential skills challenges[2]. Access to essential skills training is therefore important not only for productivity, but for fairness, job security and quality of life in retirement.

2 From analysis conducted on Wave 11 of ELSA, the literacy test scores between those with less than £2000 savings and those with more. Results showed that 34% struggled with literacy compared to just 23% of those with more than £2000 savings. Findings were significant at the 99% confidence interval.

Barriers to accessing essential skills training

Understanding why adults aged 50 and over do not take part in essential skills training is critical to developing effective policy solutions. Some barriers reduce interest in training, including the belief that learning is no longer worthwhile later in life (Picchio, 2021). Many older adults have also had poor previous experiences of education, making them reluctant to return to a learning environment. Others may feel shame or stigma about low essential skills, making them less likely to disclose support needs or seek help (Stevenson, Mason and Klenk, 2024).

Older learners have also cited course costs and indirect costs, such as transport, as barriers to participation. Learners often say they would only attend classes if they were free. Accessibility is another concern; older people are more likely to have mobility issues, so learning locations that are far away or difficult to reach by public transport can become a major barrier. Learners also reported that the type of class they were looking for was not available locally, suggesting significant variation in essential skills provision across places.

Ageing Better's research has shown that there are also barriers within the design and delivery of provision itself. Most skills support is targeted towards younger people, meaning that people in their 50s and 60s can feel that services are not intended for them, even when these are theoretically designed to be for all ages. How skills provision is delivered and marketed is particularly important in determining whether older adults see it as relevant and accessible.

In 2024, Ageing Better developed a co-design toolkit for commissioners of employment support and skills programmes. The toolkit sets out how to centre people aged 50 and over in service design so programmes reflect their needs and experiences. It emphasises the value of involving older people throughout the design process, so they have a meaningful voice in shaping the kinds of skills programmes that would work for them. The relevance and perceived value of training is also important. Older learners are less likely to engage where provision does not reflect their existing experience, needs or goals, or where the pathway from training to improved employment opportunities is unclear. Our research highlights the importance of relevant training, clear progression pathways and recognising the transferable skills and wider life experience that older learners bring.

Confidence is also a barrier. Ageing Better's research on digital inclusion found some older people lacked confidence, feared making mistakes or damaging devices and sometimes lacked the patience or motivation to engage with some technology. The format of skills provision can also affect participation. One-off or standalone digital sessions may not work for everyone, with some older people requiring ongoing learning, support and opportunities to practise and maintain skills. Digital inclusion also depends on access and the design of services (Ageing Better, 2021).

These barriers are not experienced equally. Age intersects with income, educational attainment and other forms of disadvantage. Our State of Ageing 2025 report found that among people over 50, the proportion who feel able to adapt to new technology is substantially lower among those struggling financially and those without formal qualifications. Participation can also be constrained by circumstances that become more common as we age, including health conditions and caring responsibilities.

Good practice in essential skills provision

People aged 50 and over have a significant need to develop and maintain essential skills, yet few participate in learning. Provision therefore needs to be designed and delivered in ways that work for older learners. The evidence highlights three priorities:

- The need to make learning accessible locally, affordable and at suitable times, using formats that work for different circumstances.
- Provision needs to reach older people, recognising that many people may not actively seek out training themselves.
- The learning environment matters: provision should be flexible, supportive and appropriately paced, helping learners build skills and confidence while creating a positive social experience.

Availability

Access to suitable provision underpins participation. The Learning and Work Institute's 2024 review of ESOL provision in the West Midlands found that people over 50 represented 50% of those who could benefit from ESOL, but only 25% of learners (Bradstreet et al, 2024). It also found significant oversubscription and called for more funding to expand provision. Limited availability may particularly disadvantage older people who can already feel wary of learning environments.

Flexibility has also been cited repeatedly in evaluation of essential skills programmes, as critical for essential skill provision (Matthews et al, 2026; Bradstreet et al, 2024; Campbell et al, 2025). Learners have diverse schedules that require different types of learning provision. Day time, evening and weekend classes should be available for those who need it. Offering a choice between online and in person learning can also allow older people to choose the best learning style for them.

Reaching and engaging over 50s

Trusted organisations and services can play an important role in connecting people over 50 to more learning opportunities. Jobcentre Plus (JCP) is particularly important in connecting older people whose essential skills may be holding them back from employment with appropriate training. The OECD 2025 UK economy outlook stresses the importance of having strong partnerships between employment centres and skills training providers to help all those who need skill improvement for work find the training they need (Zakrzewska, 2025).

Trusted community organisations also provide access to learning. Local Age UK centres can be a hub to connect older people with skills training or embed skills development within existing Age UK programmes. Local centres are already trusted spaces for older people and are therefore valuable partners to bring older people into skills training.

Improving learning experience

The quality and design of the learning experience are important in helping over 50s engage with and benefit from essential skills training. Older learners have stressed that opportunities to talk with others and build a sense of community made essential skills training more worthwhile (Stevenson, Mason and Klenk, 2024). A 2023 evaluation of maths and literacy training in London found that approaches that were less like a school curriculum helped those who had negative previous experiences with education feel comfortable in the learning environment (Campbell et al. 2024). Additionally, research has shown that a slower pace of learning in training helps older learners learn more in training sessions (Picchio, 2021).

Skills in the workplace

This report does not focus primarily on skills development in the workplace, but employers still have an important role in supporting learning. Employer investment in training has declined by 26% since 2005 levels, and there is a strong case for employers to invest more in workforce development. It is the responsibility of government to fund essential skills provision because it is a universal entitlement.

Evidence and gaps

Who manages adult skills?

Adult education remains only partially devolved. Strategic authorities have funding agreements with the Department for Education and can control the Adult Skills Fund (ASF) budget for their area. In places without a devolved authority, the Department for Education remains responsible for funding individual contracts with providers and employers. Strategic authorities therefore have some flexibility to develop adult education strategies that reflect local needs, while still following overarching directives from the Department for Education. Going forward we can expect more devolved areas which should give more areas the opportunity to tailor local skills provision to their local needs. However, giving strategic authorities the ability to control their own budgets does not mean they have the funding necessary to meet the demand for improving essential skills. To truly capitalise on the benefit of devolution, adult skills budgets need to increase.

Alongside increased budgets, providing publicly available information about how each strategic authority is using the ASF would improve accountability of strategic authorities. Some areas already provide valuable information about how budgets are spent while others provide very little. For example, London has commissioned an Adult Skills Fund evaluation from the Institute of Employment Studies (2026). The assessment shows that in 2024/2025 essential skills provision accounted for 54% of all provision in London, up from 48% in 2023/2024. If each strategic authority provided this level of detail on their ASF spending, we could assess whether authorities are spending efficiently. Under the current level of information, we cannot say.

Evidence

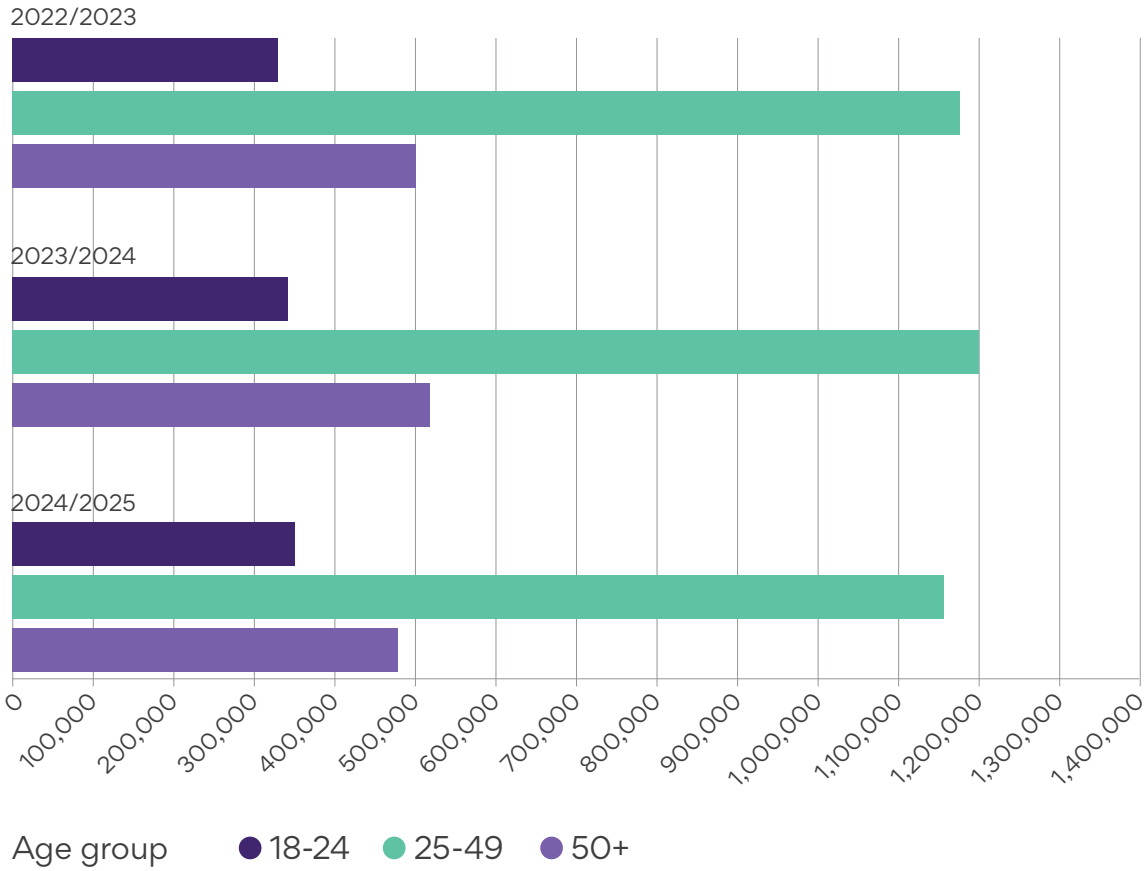
There are two broad types of essential skills courses. Formal courses end with an assessment and provide a certificate or qualification on completion. Informal courses can be more flexible and introduce essential skills learning by combining them into non-traditional skills learning environments like an arts class or other hobby courses. Learners aged 50 and over may prefer informal provision because it can be more flexible and less like school. The drawback is that less is known about the quality of this learning and whether it leads to significant skills development.

There is very little evidence on the experiences of different groups of adults aged 50 and over in essential skills learning. There is limited data on the participation and outcomes of 50+ racially minoritised learners, women, men, or LGBTQ+ people. The DfE adult education and training summary provides demographic breakdowns by ethnicity and sex, but these are not

available specifically for essential skills provision. As a result, it is difficult to assess whether significant inequalities exist within essential skills training. Qualitative evaluations are often better at exploring the experiences of specific groups. However, because age is rarely considered alongside characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, there is little evidence on how these factors interact to shape older adults' experiences of essential skills learning.

Figure 1: Essential skills provision by age group

Enrolments of Level 2 and below training by age group 2022-2025



Source: Tailored Learning Provision England DfE

All Data for 24/25 Education Year from the Education and Learning and Tailored Learning data provision dashboard

The above chart shows enrolments for Level 2 and below training in England by age group. The distribution of training has remained relatively stable across the three groups. For the youngest age group (18-24) there has been a small increase in enrolments across the last three years by 25,000 up to 385,000. Although 18-24 year olds make up the smallest group in absolute terms, they are the age group most likely to participate in essential skills training. The second largest group is people aged 50 and over, whose participation in low level skills provision fell slightly from 550,000 in 2022/23 to 525,000 in 2024/25. The decline is small but may indicate

fewer opportunities for the 50 and over age group relative to the year prior. The achievement rates for all three age categories are relatively high. In 2024/25, 80% of 18-24 and 86% of 25–49 year olds completed their training, compared to 90% of 50+ adults. The 50+ group having a higher achievement rate is likely because they prefer informal learning which do not have standard examinations.

Table 1: 50+ training enrolments up to Level 2 by region

Region	Adult education Level 2 and below enrolments	Essential skills tailored learning enrolments
England	524,660	26,100
North East	28,600	890
North West	65,660	4,950
Yorkshire and The Humber	38,560	1,670
East Midlands	52,650	2,950
West Midlands	44,800	2,610
East of England	37,850	1,910
London	148,440	5,620
South East	72,500	3,910
South West	35,600	2,190

All Data for 24/25 Education Year from the Education and Learning and Tailored Learning data provision dashboard

Table 1 shows the number of enrolments in Level 2 and below training for people aged 50 and over by region and the number of tailored learning enrolments where essential skills was the primary purpose of learning. In the 2024/25 year there were 524,660 ASF placements and 26,100 tailored learning placements. London had the most 50+ enrolments (148,440), followed by the South East (72,500). London also had the most tailored learning placements (5,620). On the other end of the spectrum the North East have by far the fewest enrolments (28,600).

Table 2: 50+ training enrolments up to Level 2 by devolved area

Devolved area	Adult skills fund Level 2 and below	Essential skills tailored learning
Outside of an English devolved area and unknown	222,410	12,340
York and North Yorkshire	6,150	270
West Yorkshire	12,000	740
West of England	4,280	280
West Midlands	26,070	1,620
Tees Valley	7,840	100
South Yorkshire	11,460	350
North East	20,780	800
Liverpool City Region	15,590	1,220
Greater Manchester	22,720	2,130
Greater London Authority	148,440	4,980
East Midlands	24,050	1,030
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	4,050	230

All Data for 24/25 Education Year from the Education and Learning and Tailored Learning data provision dashboard

Table 2 shows Level 2 and below enrolments for people aged 50 and over by English devolved area. There is greater variation in 50+ training delivery across devolved areas than across regions. The Greater London Authority accounts for 148,440 enrolments, roughly equivalent to the combined total across the other listed devolved areas. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has the fewest enrolments (4,050), which is unsurprising given its smaller population.

Evidence gaps

- There are limited programme evaluations for people 50+. We do not know enough about their experience participating in essential skills training.
- There is little data on the specific experience of those from racially minoritised backgrounds, LGBTQ+ people, women and men in essential skills learning and almost none on the specific experience among people aged 50+.
- There is a need to understand how the overlapping skills needs of older people interact to making learning an even greater challenge.
- There is weak evidence on essential skills outcomes in terms of improving broader quality of life for participants.
- There is limited evidence on the best way to connect older people with skills training. The current skills system relies on people seeking skills training themselves. Better strategies would help more people access the essential skills learning they need.
- There is limited evidence on delivery models for older learners, especially at devolved authority level. Some combined authorities identify the ageing workforce as a key challenge, while others focus mainly on younger people and give little attention to older learners.
- There is very limited analysis on the benefits of skills maintenance for older learners. The OECD has described skills maintenance as an important reason to train older workers, but little is known about the benefits of this kind of training.
- There is little known about essential skills need at the strategic authority level. This level of data will help strategic authorities set targets for essential skills education.
- Little known about how strategic authorities are organising their budgets and whether they are prioritising essential skills training or higher-level training.
- There is limited research on the quality of skills provision in rural areas, where older people are more likely to live. Participants have reported significant variation in the skills offer depending on where they live, but there is little evidence on how rurality affects access, delivery and outcomes.
- There should be further research examining the cumulative effect of poor quality or no skill provision over someone's lifetime. Trying to catch up on missed learning and skills training going back to secondary school is a very difficult and unique circumstance.

Funding and devolution

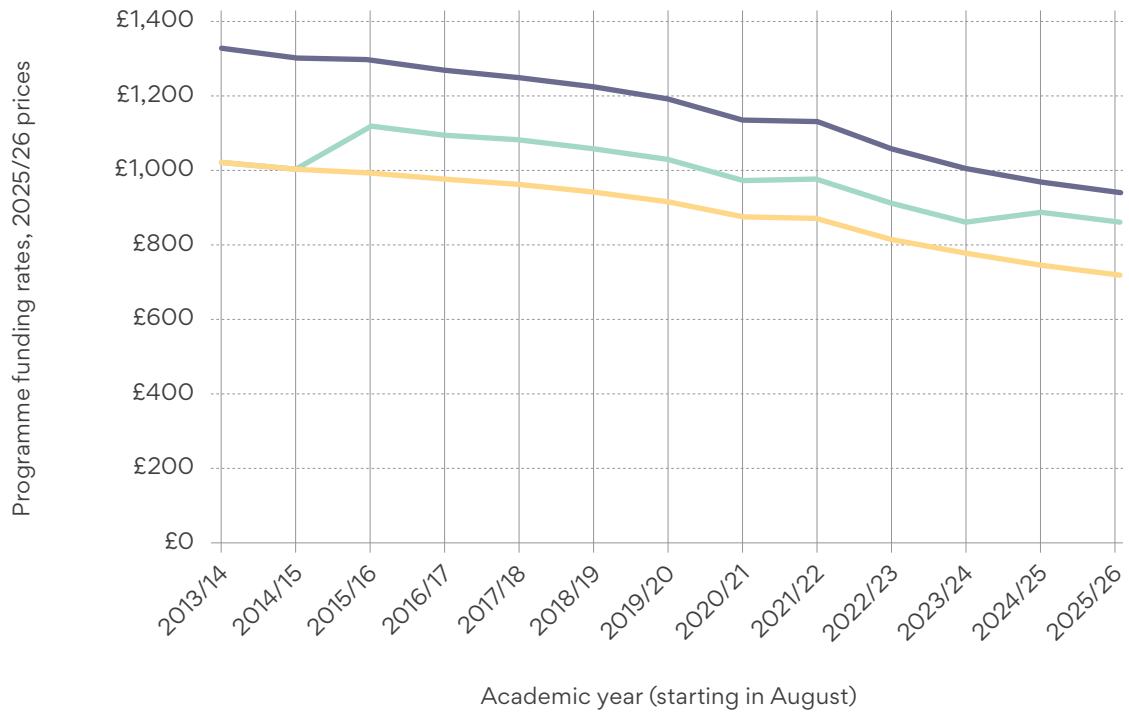
The availability and quality of essential skills provision are shaped not only by demand from learners, but also by the funding and governance arrangements that determine what can be offered and where. Over the past two decades, adult classroom-based learning in England has declined substantially, alongside significant changes in how adult education is funded and delivered. At the same time, increasing devolution has given combined authorities greater responsibility for shaping adult education around local needs.

Funding

Funding for classroom-based adult learning has declined significantly over the past two decades. This reflects a broader shift away from treating access to essential skills as a core entitlement. Historically, adults were entitled to free English and maths provision up to the level considered necessary to fully participate in work and society. Over time, however, this approach was scaled back as the economic returns were judged to be too low relative to the cost of provision. There were millions fewer places in essential skills, Level 1 and Level 2 provision in 2024/25 than in 2002/03 (OECD, 2023) and a 60% cut in funding for adult learning in the last two decades (Farquharson et al, 2026).

Figure 2 shows funding rates per class for essential skills learning in English, maths and GCSE-level maths and English. Since 2013/14, real-terms funding rates have declined across all three areas because nominal rates have remained flat while inflation has risen. This has made it more difficult for providers to maintain the quality of learning and may have contributed to challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers (Farquharson et al, 2026). Increasing per-class funding in line with inflation should be part of a new adult learning strategy.

Figure 2: Essential skills funding by education year



Source: IFS 2026 education spending review. Programme funding rates obtained from Department for Education adult skills fund guidance.

Devolution

Around the same time that funding rates for classroom-based learning were frozen, responsibility for adult education began to be devolved to combined authorities. Since devolving adult education, funding for essential skills has eroded substantially with funding for English courses having declined by 40% and maths 37% in real terms since 2016/17 (Stevenson, Vaid and Vempalli, 2026). As of today, almost 60% of adult skills education (formal and informal) is overseen by combined authorities. Devolution is widely seen as a positive development, giving local leaders greater flexibility to shape provision around local priorities and labour market needs.

However, there are concerns that the current model could lead to uneven access to learning opportunities depending on where someone lives. Combined authorities vary in power, governance arrangements and administrative capacity. These differences are likely to influence the availability and design of adult learning locally.

As devolution continues, there is a need to balance local flexibility with a consistent minimum level of access and quality. Combined authorities should have the freedom to respond to local circumstances, but national government also has a role in ensuring they have the resources, data and capacity needed to deliver high-quality adult learning. For people aged 50+, this means ensuring that essential skills opportunities are sufficient, accessible and relevant, rather than assuming they are equally available across places and age group.

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Let's make ageing better.

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The Centre for Ageing Better is pioneering ways to make ageing better a reality for everyone, including challenging ageism and building an Age-friendly Movement, creating Age-friendly Employment and Age-friendly Homes. It is a charitable foundation funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and part of the government's What Works Network.