

National Literacy Trust response to the DIUS informal adult learning consultation.

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) is an independent charity that changes lives through literacy. The National Literacy Trust links home, school and the wider community to inspire learners and create opportunities for everyone. We support those who work with learners through our innovative programmes, information and research. We bring together key organisations to lead literacy promotion in the UK.

We focus on:

- **Empowering learners** - programmes such as Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), promote a love of reading among children and young people in areas of disadvantage.
- **Supporting professionals** - our campaigns and initiatives aim to influence practice and enable professionals to work more effectively to improve literacy skills and the enjoyment of reading.
- **Influencing policy and practice** - we emphasise a partnership approach, in which whole communities work together to improve individuals' enjoyment of reading and literacy skills. However, we also recognise that this needs to operate within a systems approach; looking at the system as a whole, seeing how the pieces interrelate and working out the most effective way to move forward.

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) welcomes the consultation set out by John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, into informal adult learning. The consultation document marks an interesting step by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to map the current provision of informal adult learning and to assess its future direction. Literacy plays a central role in all adult learning, informal or otherwise, and the future of adult learning is fundamentally intertwined with literacy and basic skills. This response focuses on three key areas for literacy that the NLT considers important for the future of informal adult learning:

1. Literacy and culture – Literacy is a fundamental precursor to participation in culture, and in turn cultural participation raises literacy. Keeping a database of activities and provision in a local area, while maintaining a low level of direct intervention in adult participation will enable cultural participation to grow.
2. Facilitating access – The internet and other forms of media have presented exciting new opportunities for a systematic and comprehensive mapping of adult learning provision. However, the challenges of a digital divide must be taken into account when using new technology.
3. Family literacy – This is a key area for the improvement of literacy skills within both formal and informal channels. The sharing of best practice, as well as the use of resources and locations, will create growth and may lead to improved basic skills.

1. Literacy and culture

Among the many forms of informal learning, active participation in culture is one of the most prominent. Cultural participation encompasses a diverse range of activities; from theatre productions through to museum visits, the opportunities for learning are vast. Literacy plays a vital role in the development and uptake of cultural activities and government statistics suggest that participation in cultural activities is far higher among those with high literacy levels than those without.¹

There are multiple reasons for this close association between literacy and cultural participation. Successful participation in cultural activities is defined by the ability to communicate effectively and, in turn, participation especially those that appeal to an individual's interest will benefit their literacy skills. This virtuous circle of improvement highlights the importance of informal learning to improving basic skills. However, with regard to voluntary cultural participation the NLT believes that it is essential informal learning is kept free from many of the rigours and burdensome targets of formal education.

As the current generation of school children move out of the education system and into employment, they will take with them a history of cultural participation delivered through the school-based cultural offer. The offer should enable young people to establish where their interests lie, allowing them to make informed choices about informal lifelong learning. Enjoyment of an activity is the primary motivator in this area of informal learning and therefore regulation would not be effective and may even become counter-productive.

2. Facilitating access

Given that too much government involvement in informal learning can be counter-productive, the facilitation of learning should be the primary concern of government departments. This falls into two main categories; mapping and provision for those with learning or physical difficulties. Both of these categories require the use of technology and should take into account the potential difficulties that technology can present people.

Mapping provision and signposting people towards local activity is vital for both central and local government. If informal learning is to be centred on choice and personal interest, then it is important that individuals are aware of the options available to them. New technology, and in particular the internet, provide excellent opportunities for promoting and raising awareness of local activities. However, due to concerns about a digital divide meaning not everybody can access online information, more traditional dissemination channels, for instance local libraries, will also need to be involved.

Technology also provides new opportunities to reach learners with disabilities. Coloured screens and other innovations have enfranchised many with dyslexia and other conditions who may previously have been excluded from both formal and informal learning. There are also screen readers for blind users, which further extend the reach of computer-based provision. However, there are still a large proportion of people who cannot access computers and in this context television and to a lesser extent radio become important.

¹ DCMS *Taking Part*

Television and radio have a wider reach than computers and modern technological advances, they are also an important provider of informal learning through documentaries and other information-based programmes. There is often a significant overlap between collections in museums and galleries and the content of television documentaries. Advances in interactive television should be utilised so that national and, more importantly, local opportunities for further exploration are properly signposted. For instance, if books on a certain subject are available in a local library or artefacts in a local museum then viewers/listeners are told this.

3. Family literacy

Informal learning should also be seen in a wider context than the pursuit of individual interest. There are tangible benefits to the educational standards and literacy levels of groups of people through informal channels. The proliferation of reading groups mentioned in the original consultation document provides a good example of group-based informal learning, as well as illustrating the potential for literacy as a social activity. It is in this context that the rise in prominence of family literacy becomes relevant.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families' Children's Plan sets out plans to increase family literacy schemes across the country as they have significant positive outcomes on the literacy rates of children.² Increasingly the benefits for adults are also being realised and schemes use family literacy to encourage disengaged adults to participate in learning. Family literacy necessitates a different form of government involvement than individual interest learning. More encouragement, funding and direct involvement – especially at a local level – is necessary as directed learning is less likely to happen organically. It is also vital that best practice is shared and highlighted to maximise the impact of these initiatives. For example the storybook mums/dads programme which has been adopted in a number of settings, including prisons and the army, has proved successful in recent years.³ The NLT is currently working on a national strategy for the provision of family literacy that will create a strategic and coordinated approach, using a coordinator at local authority level to share and disseminate knowledge of local practice.

As well as an effective tool for disseminating best practice, national and local government could be effective by providing both physical spaces for family literacy courses to take place and money for any teachers or resources required. These resources would have to be targeted towards hard to reach families who are often disengaged and therefore out of the reach of formal education. Free courses that aim to spark interest rather than directly assess learners would be more effective in drawing in hard to reach learners. As the impetus for these courses is to create an initial engagement, informal learning courses should be linked to opportunities for more formal education, although it is vital that the non-target-based approach is not lost.

² http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/childrensplan/downloads/The_Childrens_Plan.pdf

³ <http://www.storybookdads.co.uk/>