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Literacy and numeracy support for homeless adults:

An exploration of third sector employment and skills provision

Katy Jones, July 2018

Summary

Whilst homeless people are increasingly expected to move into work, many face a number of barriers to labour market participation. A small but growing evidence base suggests that one key barrier is poor literacy and numeracy, or 'basic' skills. This briefing note summarises research focused on the literacy and numeracy support offered by third sector organisations, as part of their efforts to help homeless adults move into (or closer to) work. It presents key findings from 27 qualitative interviews conducted with staff working in the Greater Manchester homelessness sector. The research uncovers the extent and nature of literacy and numeracy provision offered in these organisations, along with a range of factors shaping it. It shows that organisations have demonstrated a propensity to develop literacy and numeracy support. However, it concludes that while government policy and related funding does not recognise and support such provision, it is likely to remain piecemeal and highly contingent on the contribution of volunteers and short term funding opportunities.

About the researcher

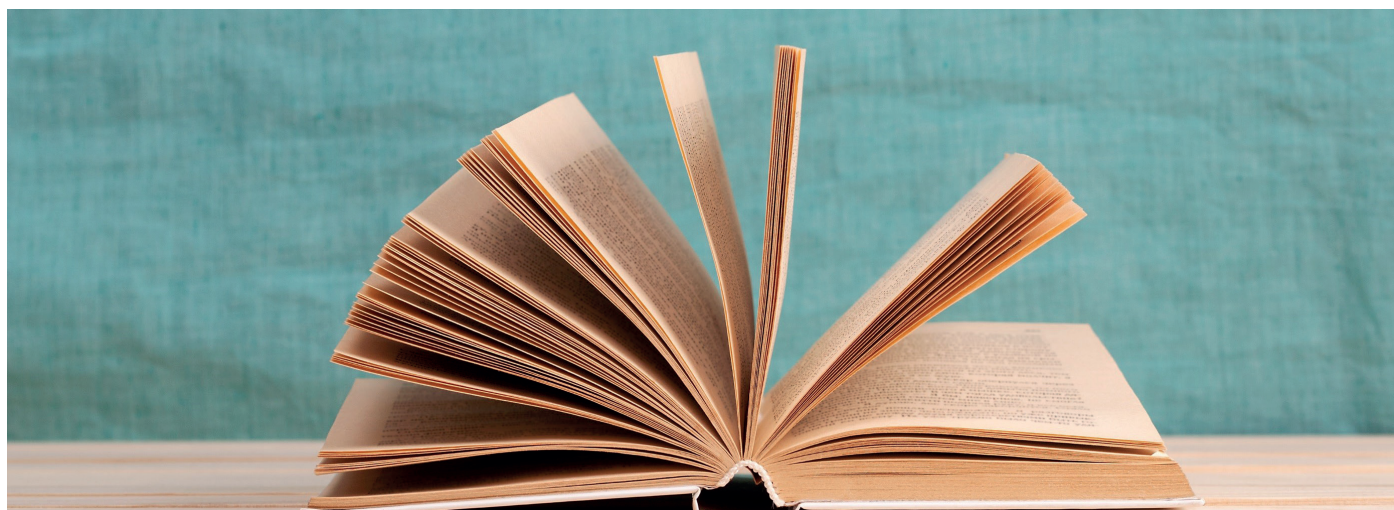
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Background: Homelessness, work and skills

Moving into work has been presented by successive governments as an important part of the route out of homelessness. However, homeless people can struggle to both enter and sustain work in the paid labour market. A combination of factors can make finding and keeping a job a significant challenge, reinforcing the position of homeless people outside or on the edge of mainstream employment. These can include housing instability and a lack of access to affordable accommodation, a lack of recent work experience and employer references, low or no qualifications, mental and physical health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, and criminal records.

In addition to these barriers, a small but growing evidence base suggests that many homeless people have poor literacy and numeracy skills (Luby and Welch, 2006; Olisa et al., 2010; Dumoulin and Jones, 2014). In a recent attempt to assess homeless people's basic skill levels, Dumoulin and Jones (2014) found that in a sample of 139 single homeless adults, 51 per cent and 55 per cent had poor literacy and numeracy skills respectively (i.e. below level 1). This is likely to put many homeless people at a serious disadvantage in the labour market and other wider aspects of their lives.

The available evidence suggests that homeless people are often excluded from opportunities and support offered by adult colleges and other private training providers (Barton et al., 2006; Luby and Welch, 2006; Reisenberger et al., 2010; Olisa et al., 2010; Dumoulin and Jones, 2014). If moving into work continues to be presented as a 'solution' to homelessness and basic skills are so important to labour market success – homeless people's exclusion from mainstream support to improve these skills should be of great concern to both policymakers and practitioners.

A role for the third sector?

Exclusion from formal adult education and a preference to engage with non-governmental, charitable organisations can mean that the support homeless people are able to access depends on what these local services are able to offer. This has not gone unrecognised by policymakers. New Labour's Skills for Life Strategy, for example, identified homeless people as a group in need of improving their basic skills, and as a result homelessness organisations were sites of Skills for Life provision (Barton et al., 2007). More recently, additional government funding was provided, through STRIVE (Skills, Training, Innovation and Employment) pre-employment pilots, which took place in London in two national homelessness charities, jointly funded by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills and the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG / BIS, 2014). STRIVE was a small scale 'pre-employment' programme, providing an opportunity for homeless people to build their confidence and develop their basic IT, maths and English skills. Commenting at the pilot's inception, the then Skills and enterprise Minister, Matthew Hancock, said:

'It is wrong that until now excellent education projects led by [Homelessness charities] have been denied government funding – today we are putting that right. There is no doubt that charities like St Mungo's Broadway and Crisis are the best placed to reach those in need of help, but we are backing them in this vital task.' (Varvarides, 2014)

However, despite policy rhetoric around the value of engaging homeless adults in education, the amount of statutory funding for learning and skills flowing into homelessness agencies has been minimal. According to a recent survey of homelessness organisations in England, only three per cent of accommodation projects had received any 'employment and education' funding, for day centres this was seven per cent (Homeless Link, 2016). Beyond the STRIVE pilots, it is unclear what the current government's commitment to this agenda involves. Three years after the pilot's inception, no further statements have been forthcoming. In addition, following broader policy shifts towards 'localism', policy decisions relating to adult education are increasingly taken at a local level. Whether local decision makers will share the then Minister's sentiments on adult education in homelessness services is yet to be seen.

Despite this, according to recent sector surveys, many homelessness organisations offer a range of Employment, Training and Education (ETE), including literacy and numeracy support as part of this (Homeless Link, 2016). However, little is known about what this looks like in practice, nor the factors shaping it.

Homelessness and Skills in Greater Manchester

This study took place in Greater Manchester, a metropolitan county in the North West of England, consisting of ten metropolitan boroughs (Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan). As is the case nationally, take-up of adult skills training in Greater Manchester has been declining, in large part attributed to substantial funding cuts (Lupton, 2017). Regarding homelessness, research has consistently demonstrated a large proportion of adults experiencing homelessness and 'severe and multiple disadvantage' in Manchester and other Greater Manchester authorities (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2015). Recent increases in rough sleeping have been well documented (Fitzgerald and Ottewell, 2015), and the newly elected Mayor of Greater Manchester (Andy Burnham) has pledged a range of measures to tackle the issue.

Optimism about the potential for Greater Manchester's devolution settlement (commonly known as 'Devo-Manc') to shape public policy around areas including adult skills, social care, and housing makes the metropolitan county a timely focus of research concerned with the provision of both adult skills and homelessness services. Since the research was conducted, the homelessness sector in Manchester has begun to organise at a local level to campaign and influence policy. For example, the Manchester Homelessness Charter asserts that 'everyone who is homeless should have a right to... equality of

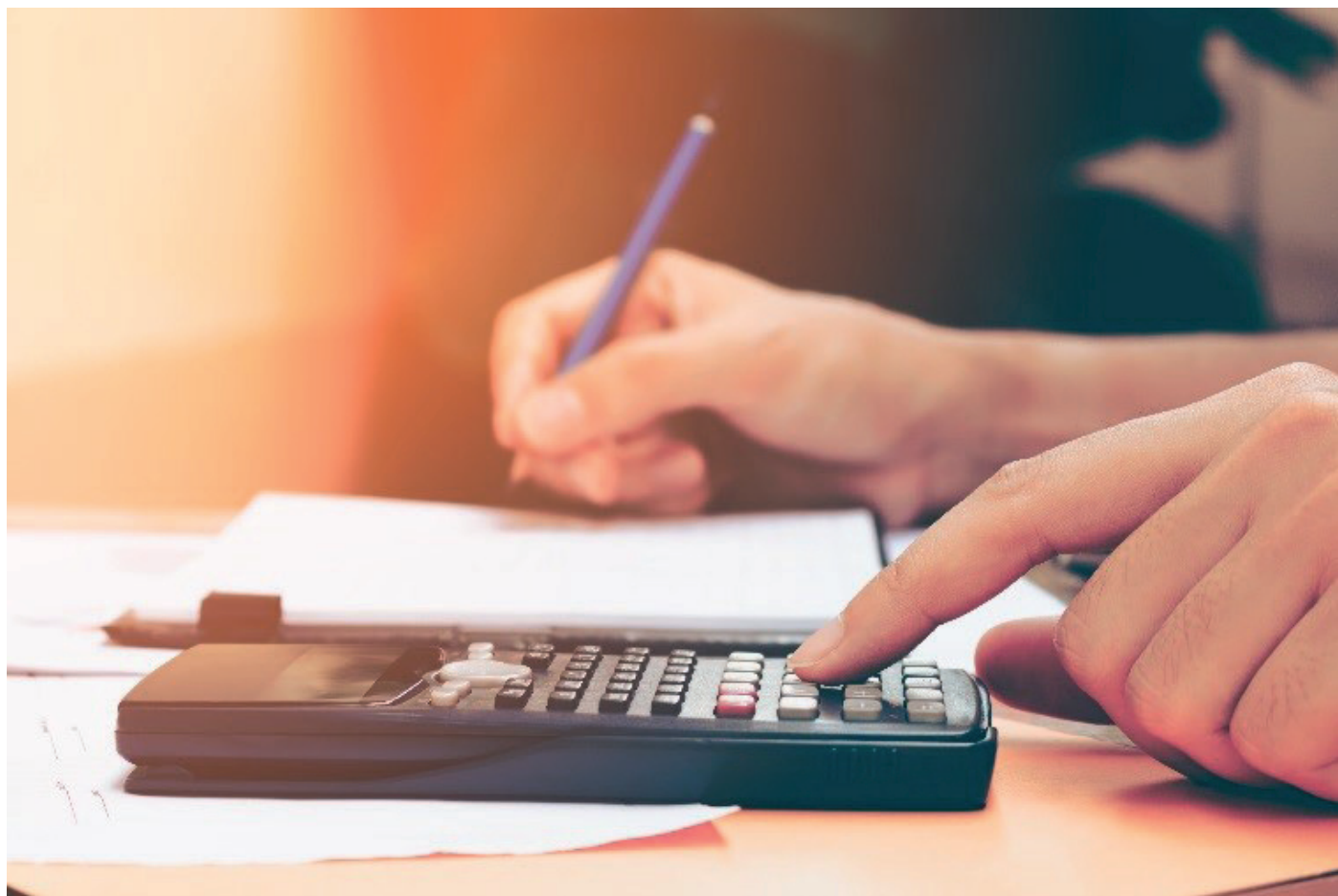
opportunity to employment, training, volunteering, leisure and creative activities'¹. It is hoped that this research will be of use to these and other groups seeking to improve employment and skills opportunities for homeless adults in Manchester and further afield.

This research

This research set out to explore literacy and numeracy provision in the homelessness sector. It was underpinned by several research questions, namely:

- 1** What is the extent and nature of literacy and numeracy education within the employment-related support offered by organisations supporting homeless adults?
- 2** What factors shape the literacy and numeracy education offered?
- 3** How can literacy and numeracy learning be better supported in homelessness organisations?

To answer these questions, 27 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners drawn from across the Greater Manchester homelessness sector. The sample was drawn from 12 different organisations of varying types and sizes, and included staff working at a range of levels (operational, managerial and strategic). Interviews took place in 2015.



¹ See <https://charter.streetsupport.net/read-the-charter/> accessed 10/11/2017

Key findings

'We aren't doing a huge amount about that, having basic skills courses... a lot of the support work that will be done will be by people who will work with people to actually do forms'

Whilst less common, interviewees also described a range of support provided within their organisations to help homeless people to develop and improve their literacy and numeracy skills. This included:

- Reading groups
- Creative writing activities
- One-to-one support
- Literacy and numeracy courses
- Embedded learning ('learning on the job')

In a small number of instances this support formed a regular part of the service offer, however in most instances learning opportunities were short-term and ad hoc.

Where support was available, a range of flexible and tailored learning options were offered, with a mix of one-to-one support and small class sizes allowing for support to be tailored to individual learners and allow for the development of communication and social interaction skills. Recognising the multiple and complex needs of those they are supporting, alongside expectations placed on them to attend appointments with a range of agencies, interviewees described offering flexible activities whereby service users can dip in and out of provision. Efforts had also been made to understand individual motivations for learning and link opportunities for learning to service users' own goals and interests. Furthermore, provision appeared to be rooted in the ways in which service users used (or wanted to use) literacy and numeracy in their day-to-day life, rather than based on pre-determined standardised provision.

Factors shaping literacy and numeracy support

Seven key factors appeared to impact on the extent and nature of literacy and numeracy support offered within the organisations sampled. These were:

- 1 Service user need;
- 2 The roles and capacity of staff working in homelessness organisations;
- 3 Organisational purpose and structures;
- 4 National policies relating to adult education, austerity and welfare reform;
- 5 Support from other adult education providers;
- 6 Non-governmental finance;
- 7 The time and expertise of volunteers.

Each of these is outlined in more detail below.

Employment support in the Greater Manchester homelessness sector

Interviews revealed a range of different ways organisations were supporting homeless people to move into (or closer to) work. As part of this, all interviewees said that their organisations supported service users with literacy in some way. A smaller but still significant number reported supporting their service users with numeracy.

Figure 1 - Employment support in the Greater Manchester homelessness sector



The extent and nature of literacy and numeracy support

Most of the literacy and numeracy support available appeared to be designed to temporarily compensate for, rather than address in any sustained way, any skills weaknesses experienced by service users. Interviewees most commonly described how they help those struggling to meet the literacy or numeracy demands of everyday life (including, but not restricted to, looking for work). This typically involved doing things 'for' service users rather than helping people to cope with such everyday tasks independently. Providing assistance to read and understand official forms relating to welfare benefits and services was a common activity.



Service user need

For all interviewees, whilst not the only factor, literacy and numeracy skills were considered important for labour market success.

'You can't get far without being able to write...if you're only on sort of Entry 1 or whatever it is you're not going to do well in a job, and you're gonna really struggle to get one. If you improve it it's not going to guarantee that you're gonna get a job but it's certainly going to make it more likely'.

In addition, most interviewees believed that a significant minority of their service users had very poor literacy and/or numeracy skills. One interviewee explained that whilst some service users who struggled with literacy and numeracy would accept help, others would be unwilling to recognise what staff members believed were significant 'skills needs'.

'We probably have three categories of people if you looked at literacy and numeracy across the board. We have a group who don't really have any issues with literacy and numeracy, we have a group who struggle terribly and need, and will accept, help. But then we have a little pot in the middle who probably wouldn't accept that they have an issue full stop'.

Particularly regarding literacy, interviewees were also conscious of the efforts of some service users to 'hide' issues they had with reading and writing.

Interviewees recognised several barriers to homeless people's participation in opportunities to improve these skills, ranging from individual motivations and confidence to identify and address literacy and numeracy weaknesses, to exclusion from formal education provision. In large part as a result of this, interviewees felt that their organisations were important spaces for either the direct facilitation or brokerage of opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills.

'I think if I took some of the [service users], and sent them to college once a week, they wouldn't go. But by coming here, it's the same environment – it's safe, secure'.

The organisations in which they worked were felt to offer a place in which their service users felt comfortable and accepted. Importantly, being supported to learn and develop their skills within a 'familiar', 'comfortable', 'trusted', and 'safe' environment was a key reason why they felt such support should be offered in these specialist settings. They described provision which was flexible and responsive, reflecting an appreciation of the multiple and complex needs faced by many of the homeless people they were supporting, alongside fluctuations in motivation and self-confidence, and recognising the range of barriers to learning participation that could be faced at an individual level.

'People tell us that they don't feel judged here... they feel valued and respected and all the rest of it and that's what we want to do. Because some people don't feel that anywhere else'

Staff roles and capacity

Interviewees had a range of job roles, working at different levels of their organisations – from project and support workers to service managers, chief executives and board members. Frontline staff explained that their role was guided by the diverse needs and aspirations of their service users, to respond to whatever service users needed help with, whether that was housing, issues with drugs and alcohol, benefits, mental and physical health, or moving into work. As part of this, staff described helping people with literacy and numeracy where there was a need and they were able to do so:

'You just do everything you can to help someone - so if we've got chance to [support people with literacy] and we've got time to do it then we will'

However, on the whole, staff felt that they did not possess the technical capacity to deliver or facilitate literacy and/or numeracy education.

'I don't have the knowledge base to teach, so people aren't getting what they need'



Organisational purpose and structures

Literacy and numeracy support was also impacted upon by the structures and functions of different organisations. In day centres, for example, staff tended to work with a relatively large number of service users. Here, service user needs tended to be much more varied, ranging from people in immediate 'crisis' to those with more settled accommodation, or engaged in active job search. Due to higher 'footfall', more 'potential' learners were in contact with the service, however attendance at learning activities could be more sporadic. In residential projects, a smaller number of staff were working with a relatively small number of service users – this allowed for more opportunities to pick up on needs, develop trusting relationships, and support people informally with literacy and numeracy needs. Structured courses were sometimes more possible in these settings, as service users spent more time on the organisation's premises. In social enterprises, reflecting a need to ensure the successful operation of the 'business', opportunities to develop skills through formal training were largely based around the needs of the enterprise, for example, the 'PAT testing' of second hand electrical goods to be sold in charity shops, and workplace health and safety certification. However, whilst here there were perhaps more opportunities to pick up on skills weaknesses and provide opportunities for development 'on the job', there was less time for structured courses.

National policies: austerity and welfare reform

Interviewees explained that the wider welfare system impacted on the services offered by homelessness organisations as they respond to the needs of their service users, many of whom were struggling to adapt to a stricter and less generous welfare regime, and who do not tend to benefit from mainstream employment support through the Job Centre or private sector Work Programme providers. Staff felt that providing employment-related support was important in the absence of appropriate support from statutory employment services.

Welfare reform also shaped the content of the activities offered by the organisations sampled. Whilst a range of educational activities had taken place in the past, a number of interviewees explained how increasing amounts of staff time were taken up by helping service users to learn about and understand benefit changes, and advocating on their behalf to challenge decisions made by the Department for Work and Pensions.

'There's an element of crisis work that has become a priority at times... the number of people in situations where they've been going for week after week without money... that kind of work has taken a priority over the last year or so'

In addition, some interviewees described needing to plan course provision around the conditions service users were expected to meet in order to access benefits. For example, provision was planned to allow for missed sessions and lateness in recognition of service users' need to prioritise attending appointments at the Job Centre. This, it was felt, was not as well catered for in more formal adult education settings such as local adult colleges.

'We definitely operate on the understanding that that's gonna happen and we have all sorts of things in place to make sure that doesn't derail things'

Alongside welfare reform, austerity appeared to be having a considerable impact on provision in these community settings. Many of the organisations had experienced significant funding reductions over the preceding few years. In response to this, a number of organisations had needed to diversify their funding streams to keep their service running. In some instances, new sources of funding had been used to support learning activities – a small minority of organisations sampled were successful in accessing funds designed to improve community health and well-being to provide learning opportunities for service users:

'It amounts to maybe two or three hundred thousand quid over the last few years from health sources, that we've been able to use in relation to things around structured activities ... like our [gardening] project, activities that will stimulate engagement... It's called health money, but it can be used for learning engagement'.

Adult education and skills policy

Most of the organisations represented were not direct recipients of any sort of statutory employment or education and skills funding. As the major funder of adult education activities, the absence of government funding perhaps explains why support in such settings occupies such a marginal position. One interviewee explained how accessing funding which recognised the challenges working with their 'client group' was particularly difficult within the current funding climate:

'If we go to a hostel and two people show up, and the funding that we've used for that is based on a guided learning hour calculation... we've, you know, we can't... it's not sustainable for us. So we need to find funding that recognises how much it costs to do that well and that's a real struggle at the moment'.

Whilst a lack of funding was felt to reduce the extent of literacy and numeracy support their organisations were able to provide, more positively this also meant that they were not subject to the strict requirements that government funding is often accompanied by. Given the tendency for state skills and adult education funding to result in more rigid, standardised forms of adult literacy and numeracy provision (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006; Barton et al., 2007, Duckworth, 2013), the absence of such funding in these settings may also explain the nature of what provision does exist. Without the need to satisfy government standards and outcomes measures, these organisations had greater freedom to develop support in a way which is guided by the aims and interests of learners rather than pre-determined frameworks which can have little relevance to them.



Non-governmental finance

In the absence of funding from central government, interviewees described drawing on traditional third sector funding sources (for example large grant-making trusts and one-off grants from local authorities) to fund learning activities. These income sources were typically time-limited and were subject to a high level of competition from other organisations and causes. Several organisations also operated, either solely or partially, as social enterprises. Whether or not programmes and support were in place were considered highly contingent on whether income was obtained from these other sources.

Volunteers

Across the sector, there was a heavy reliance on volunteers. In many instances, it was the time donated by volunteers that was integral to the ongoing provision of learning activities and support. Several interviewees described being able to draw on the skills and experience of trustees, or from church congregations supporting the work of the charities as and when literacy or numeracy needs emerged, others described volunteers who were retired teachers.

'[T]here is this teacher, or ex-teacher, and he suggested [developing literacy and numeracy support] to us and we were like yeah, wonderful'.

However, although the time and skills of volunteers was highly valued, a dependence on volunteers to support the ongoing provision of learning opportunities could make service provision inconsistent.

'Providing that one-to-one support requires a real kind of commitment from people which is difficult to guarantee... the last thing we want is those people having yet another bad experience of education.'

In addition, interviewees described a number of practical challenges in training and managing volunteers.

Other adult education providers

Recognising the limits of their own capabilities in supporting those with literacy and numeracy needs, interviewees described their attempts to identify and bring in resources from the wider community. A number had hosted external adult education providers within their settings. However, such activities were not underway at the time of interview in any of the organisations included within the sample, and in recent years, interviewees described a notable reduction in engagement and outreach work undertaken by local colleges and other external learning providers:

'We used to have the [adult education provider] in. They used to regularly do stuff at [the organisation]. I'm going back several years...particularly literacy classes ... but all that funding's gone'.

More generally, interviewees also felt that opportunities for learning within the wider community were becoming increasingly limited. Where respondents were supporting service users to identify learning opportunities outside of their organisation, several talked about restrictions on the courses available in their local areas. Most concerning was a lack of opportunities for 'older' learners.

'If you're under 25, you've got a lot more options...[but] if I've got somebody who's 27, who would benefit so much, they don't get a look in'.

Improving literacy and numeracy learning for homeless adults: practitioner perspectives

All interviewees were asked about the ways in which literacy and numeracy support for homeless adults could be improved, and what could help them to achieve this. Most said they would welcome the development of more literacy and numeracy support for their service users within their settings. They believed that many of their service users who might benefit from support to improve their literacy and numeracy would be reluctant and struggle to engage with formal adult education provision. This was the case for a number of reasons including, service users' reluctance to access support in an unfamiliar setting, difficulties in committing to rigid learning programmes, and a lack of provision which was developed in line with adults' motivations and interests. In contrast, their settings were described as places in which service users felt comfortable and were able to develop trusted relationships with empathetic staff. It was felt that homelessness organisations offered important spaces in which to both facilitate and broker skills support. Reflecting on how literacy and numeracy support could be improved, interviewees felt there was a need to:

- Develop a range of opportunities and activities, recognising the significant diversity amongst their service users in terms of levels of literacy and numeracy need, learning styles, motivations and capabilities.
- Create more opportunities within the existing activities for service users to engage in literacy and numeracy practices and develop their skills. For example, writing newsletters, embedding numeracy in social enterprise workplaces
- Provide one-to-one support for those with the weakest literacy and numeracy skills
- Develop support that was regular, ongoing and long-term, with service users able to 'dip in and out' of learning depending on their wider support needs.
- Explore different incentives for learning - Some felt that there was a need to reward those engaging and achieving in learning and skills activities, for example with gifts or days out. For others, the provision of opportunities for accreditation was important, although interviewees had mixed opinions on this.
- Provide opportunities for service users to take accredited courses with qualified tutors.
- Others ascribed less importance to accreditation, placing greater emphasis on the practical uses of improved literacy and numeracy skills, alongside improving the confidence and well-being of those who had struggled in this area.

Interviewees explained that improving literacy and numeracy support in their contexts was in large part dependent on accessing adequate funding. However, they were largely pessimistic about the prospect of obtaining additional government funding to support literacy and numeracy learning within their settings. Most of the organisations included in the sample had experienced drastic funding reductions in recent years, and were not hopeful about additional funds becoming available – whether adult education funding or otherwise.

One 'strategic level' respondent felt that they could do more to try to improve their awareness of available funding opportunities in the adult education field. Given that the provision of learning and skills activities are not usually the primary focus of organisations supporting homeless adults, adult education funding is understandably not something with which many in the sample were familiar with. It was felt that those working in homelessness organisations could do more to identify relevant learning and skills funding themselves, but also that the adult education sector should do more to promote the availability of suitable funds. If funding were to be available, interviewees stressed the importance of realistic funding arrangements which recognise the challenges of supporting those with multiple and complex needs to improve their skills.

In the absence of additional funds, a handful of respondents felt that organisations working across the homelessness sector could work together better in order to ensure that all those experiencing homelessness who also struggle with literacy and numeracy are supported as much as possible. For example, where literacy and numeracy support is being provided in one particular organisation, ensuring this is promoted to service users in other organisations would be an important way of opening up opportunities to all homeless people, and ensuring that there is enough demand to enable the continuation of existing activities. Whilst there was a concern that such co-operation may be hampered by the competitive commissioning environment within which many organisations were operating, one interviewee suggested that exploring possibilities for jointly representing outcomes for service users might offer one solution to this issue.

Other suggestions for improving the literacy and numeracy support available to homeless people involved the development of volunteer and 'peer learner' roles. One respondent emphasised how valuable it would be to have 'lots of well trained volunteers on hand'. Another felt that they might be able to recruit volunteers from local education institutions:

'If it was something structured... if we had say like university students that were like doing a teaching degree and they want to come in and teach maths once a week then yeah absolutely'.

Several interviewees suggested that more could be done to involve homeless service users themselves in volunteering and paid roles relating to the provision of literacy and numeracy support.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This research has demonstrated the varied educational activities currently underway in third sector homelessness organisations. This is an important source of support for homeless adults. However, the sector's role in addressing the educational and wider social inequalities experienced by many homeless adults is potentially much greater. Recognising the various factors at play in whether or not adults are able to participate in learning, a number of actions can be taken within existing structures to enhance the literacy and numeracy support provided in third sector organisations seeking to support homeless people to move into (or closer to) work (see below for some suggestions). However, without recognition by policymakers and significant financial investment, the extent to which such organisations are able to offer high quality literacy and numeracy support and redress wider educational and economic inequalities is currently, and will remain, limited. The continued lack of investment in opportunities for homeless adults to develop their literacy and numeracy and other skills risks a missed opportunity for homeless learners.

Specific recommendations for the government, the adult education sector and the homelessness sector are as follows:

For the government

- Government must ensure that opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills are adequately funded across the homelessness sector. It should reflect and act on the fact that despite sporadic policy announcements about the importance of ensuring homeless adults are given opportunities to develop these skills, there is a dearth of government funding in this area. Following completion of STRIVE pilots, the government should lay out further plans for funding support elsewhere in England.
- Given increasing moves towards devolved skills funding, local government must recognise its responsibilities in this area, and outline how homeless people will be supported to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.
- Available funding must recognise the challenges involved in supporting homeless people to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, and build on existing provision which has been developed in response to service user needs, capabilities and motivations.

For the adult education sector

- Those administering skills funding at the local level should ensure that existing opportunities for community learning funding are effectively promoted to those working with homeless adults, and where necessary provide support with the application process.
- Formal adult education institutions should identify and (where possible) remove barriers to learning participation in their own organisations for those with multiple and complex needs
- Formal adult education institutions should ensure that relevant outreach opportunities are communicated clearly to the homelessness sector.
- Local colleges, universities and other learning institutions should explore ways in which they could support literacy and numeracy provision in homelessness and other community settings, for example through volunteer brokerage opportunities, thereby increasing the supply of trained volunteer skills tutors available in homelessness settings
- Staff working in homelessness organisations should be able to access free (or subsidised) training in adult literacy and numeracy education
- Develop courses specifically for those working with homeless or other 'marginalised groups' to support basic skills training

For the homelessness sector

- Explore the ways in which existing activities can be used more effectively to develop learning opportunities for their service users e.g. social enterprise activities, service user involvement in newsletters and other aspects of the organisation.
- Explore opportunities for collaboration between different homelessness organisations. For example, where organisations are unable to fund their own skills tutors, explore the possibility of co-funding models, or promote literacy and numeracy activities to others.
- Explore the potential for developing 'peer support' opportunities for those homeless people who do not struggle with literacy and numeracy, including those who have overcome poor literacy and numeracy as an adult – for example, fund or identify opportunities for service users to train as 'literacy (or numeracy) champions'.
- Explore opportunities for the development of an online 'community of practice' for anyone engaged in (or wanting to engage in) literacy and numeracy support and wider employment and skills opportunities for homeless adults.

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