Informal Adult Learning – **Shaping the Way Ahead**

January 2008

Contents

John Denham
Secretary of State for Innovation,
Universities and Skills

All forms of good adult learning are valuable. Whether vocational, or simply for personal enlightenment and fulfilment, adult learning contributes immeasurably to the well-being and health of our society.

Our country enjoys a rich and diverse history of adult education. Much of today's learning has its roots in sources as varied as Victorian philanthropy, the trades union movement, faith groups, local councils and the technical institutes established by manufacturers.

One of the most profound changes has been the expansion of the state's role in funding the education that leads to skills and qualifications for the working age population. Through my Department, Government is increasing spending on

adult learning by some £600 million over the next three years, to £4.8 billion. Between 1997/98 and 2006/07, FE funding increased by 52% in real terms and spending on higher education rose by 23% in real terms. This investment is essential if we are to remain competitive and prosperous and if we are to ensure that every citizen has the chance to enjoy rewarding work and family security.

We continue to value informal adult learning within this significant investment. As this document sets out, informal learning is supported by DIUS and many other Government departments.

Today's adult learning is no less diverse and no less rich than in the past, but it has changed. Some is classroom taught

at a fixed time – a successful approach that would have been recognised a hundred years ago. But adult learning may as easily be stimulated by a television programme prompting a museum visit, an internet search and the bringing together of a group of like minded learners.

Far more adult learning is being designed and developed by learners themselves. More people want to choose what, where, when and how they want to learn. New technologies make new ways of learning accessible, but the most radical possibilities are only just beginning to be understood. Major voluntary organisations are now significant education providers.

The emphasis the Government has rightly given to adult vocational

educational has led some to suggest that informal adult education is not valued. Nothing could be further from the truth. This consultation document starts a discussion that will lead to a new vision for informal adult learning for the 21st century. To do so, it will be important to understand all the changes that are currently taking place, all the ways that Government and other organisations support adult learners and, most importantly, what learners from all parts of our society actually want.

I hope that everyone with an interest in the future of informal adult learning will help us shape that vision and identify the most appropriate support that Government can give.

John Denham

We want to ensure that we have the best possible arrangements for securing vibrant and fulfilling informal adult learning for the 21st century. This consultation paper is designed to stimulate debate and shape future Government policy:

Chapter 1 – gives a taste of the rich mix of informal adult learning: during the consultation we will commission a mapping of informal adult learning activity in order to identify gaps in what is available and/or accessible to different learner groups

Chapter 2 – sets out some of the exciting informal adult learning opportunities funded through a range of Government departments

Chapter 3 – describes our current adult education service in England: during the consultation we will open up the debate about its role for the future

Chapter 4 – reviews the issues about ensuring equality of access to learning

Chapter 5 - looks at the role of technology in informal adult learning: the consultation will ask what more can be done to ensure that learners can access cutting edge developments in technology and broadcasting

Chapter 6 – discussion points

Traditional consultations use questionnaires to take the pulse of existing attitudes. Used alone, they are not a good way of engaging people in complex reflection on challenging topics because the organisations and individuals who respond are often

those who are already closely involved in the policy area. We are determined to bring this debate to a much wider audience and especially keen to ensure that the consultation reaches out to learners, potential learners and the special interest groups and networks they belong to. For this reason we think that structured discussion in specific groups would be a better way of reaching the wide range of stakeholders and networks that need to be engaged in this debate. In addition, we will set up a Citizens' Jury to consider evidence from stakeholders and debate the issues they raise.

We invite all of you who have an interest in informal adult learning, in whatever capacity or setting, to take part in this consultation so that we can pave the way towards a new offer for the 21st century and continue the tradition of improving adult lives through both formal and informal learning.

The consultation period runs from 15 January to 15 May 2008. You can respond to this consultation by visiting www.adultlearningconsultation.org.uk or respond in writing (as per the questions on pages 31 to 33) to Informal Adult Learning Consultation, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 4th Floor, Kingsgate House, 66 – 74 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6SW.

For additional copies of the consultation please visit www.adultlearningconsultation.org.uk or call DIUS Publications (0845 60 222 60) quoting reference IAL2008. The results will be made public later this year on the DIUS website: www.dius.gov.uk

We value learning in all its forms.

Learning can make a profound difference to adult lives in many ways:

- through the formal development of skills that enable people to get better jobs;
- through learning that helps develop families, communities and community cohesion; and
- by meeting the basic human need for creativity and stimulation.

This consultation is primarily but not exclusively about the last of these – structured and unstructured adult learning for enjoyment, personal fulfilment and intellectual, creative and physical stimulation.

While there is currently no formal definition of informal adult learning shared across Government departments, broadly we are talking about structured or unstructured part time, non-vocational learning which does not lead to qualifications - or at least where qualifications are incidental to the learning. This kind of learning activity can take place anywhere - in a local college, community centre, pub or on the North Yorkshire moors. It embraces all kinds of activity ranging from family learning, sports and recreation to the arts, humanities and foreign languages.

Dr Veronica McGivney proposes three useful categories of informal learning in *Informal Learning in the Community: a trigger for change and development* (NIACE, 2001)

- non course-based learning activities (which might include discussion, talks or presentations, information, advice and guidance) provided or facilitated in response to expressed interests and needs by people from a range of sectors and organisations
- planned and structured learning such as short courses organised in response to identified interests and needs but delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings
- learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment and which arises from the activities and interests of individuals and groups, but which may not be recognised as learning.

As this consultation document sets out, there is today an extraordinary range of informal adult learning taking place, much of it supported by Government, but a very significant amount of it self-funded, self-organised or funded through other funding streams such as European Funding.

This country enjoys a long and vibrant history of adult education.

In the 19th century informal adult education was usually delivered through family, community, social and religious organisations. Movements for the vote, trades unions, 'mutual improvement societies', cooperative societies, women's suffrage groups, independent lending libraries and non-conformist religious groups all offered opportunities for adults to improve their chances in life. Thanks to these developments and progressive Government reforms such

as the Penny Post in 1840, 737 million letters were sent in England alone – testimony to literacy learning, changing demands and new technologies for communication. In 1850 the Public Libraries Act set up a network of public libraries built on the ideal of equal access to shared resources. Millions engaged in informal learning, and by the 1860s over 70% of men were literate – with women fast catching up.

The rise of local government saw the emergence of classes in dressmaking, boot repair, cookery and physical education as people sought to stretch their tight budgets. The National Trust and the Ramblers' Association were formed to offer people living in confined city streets access to country air. Women's Institutes developed learning activities to enrich the lives of country women and to give them a voice.

Formal education also flourished, as Birkbeck College, the Mechanics' Institutes, settlements such as Swarthmore in Leeds and institutions like the Working Men's College gave people the chance to read and write their way

out of poverty. Technical colleges gave people a first or second chance to gain qualifications through night school classes. In 1907 the Workers' Education Association (WEA) set up its University Tutorial Classes, taught by R.H. Tawney, to offer working people from Rochdale and North Staffordshire the chance to study. Trades unions, political parties and other associations set up learning opportunities through study groups, correspondence courses and residential colleges like Ruskin College in Oxford.

In 1917 the Government made a commitment to support formal and informal adult learning as a key part of rebuilding society after the First World War. And then came the beginning of public service broadcasting. The BBC was set up in October 1922 with John Reith as General Manager. His vision for radio in Britain was that it should be "an independent broadcaster able to educate, inform and entertain", as true today as it was then but now extended into a much broader range of media. The interwar period saw adult education grow and flourish in local authorities and voluntary organisations.

During the Second World War, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs developed programmes to help inform the forces, and after the war the WEA, universities and local government adult education classes offered a rich mix of provision from language classes, keep fit and ballroom dancing, to painting and drawing, DIY and Egyptology. Post-war,

radio and television provided a new impetus for adult learning, creating mass audiences for astronomy and natural history, with the BBC's People's War programmes capturing thousands of individual memories of life in war-time, creating a collective archive far greater than the sum of its parts.

Since the early 1970s, there has been a major focus on programmes to engage people who benefited least from formal education. University settlements and voluntary centres started a campaign to teach adults literacy and numeracy skills, and with the support of broadcasters persuaded Government to fund national initiatives. Migration from East Africa and South Asia led to the development of programmes such as English for Speakers of Other Languages.

Access to Higher Education courses fuelled a major expansion of mature student HE participation in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the early 1990s there has also been a significant expansion of provision for adults in colleges. Organisations such as the Open University have played a significant part in making high quality education accessible to a far broader range of people in society. New

social movements have brought new initiatives: the women's movement stimulated both informal and formal learning, and trades unions have been at the forefront of peer advice and support through the work of learning representatives. More recently, the green movement has generated a mass of informal learning programmes to promote greater understanding of the need for sustainability. New technology has brought a huge increase in internet and broadband access, podcasting and multi-channel TV.

We have seen a developing passion for self-directed learning. Today there are an estimated 50,000 book groups in the UK, 3.5 million National Trust members, more than one million RSPB members and 640 active University of the Third Age (U3A) groups with 190,000 older learners. Two million people drop in on Open University TV programmes every year. These developments reflect a sea change in the way that people learn and seek knowledge and information.

And what about the future? DIUS funding for adult learning will increase by some £600 million over the next three years. Between 1997/98 and 2006/07, FE funding increased by 52% in real terms and spending on higher education rose by 23% in real terms. But as a Government we have also had to set priorities for that increased spending.

In response to the Leitch report, we are giving priority to the development of skills and qualifications for those of working age. This is essential both to ensure our future economic competitiveness as a nation and to enable millions of individuals to enjoy the work, prosperity and family security that other citizens take for granted. These essential priorities do limit the resources available for informal adult education funded through DIUS. They have and will shape provision in both further and higher education. But this is not the whole picture. Other parts of Government and other public funding

streams provide very significant support for informal adult learning, as the examples in Chapters 2 and 3 of this document demonstrate.

Outside this publicly-funded provision there has also been a great expansion in informal adult learning activity. This ranges from sports coaching and dance tuition, through to self-help groups and cultural activity organised by charities and the voluntary sector. A remarkable thing about this recent development is how much is being driven by learners themselves. Just as waves of philanthropists, educators and trades union activists have developed and shaped informal adult learning in the past, we are now seeing the creation of a broad and innovative adult learning landscape for the 21st century, a landscape in which learners are driving the learning agenda.
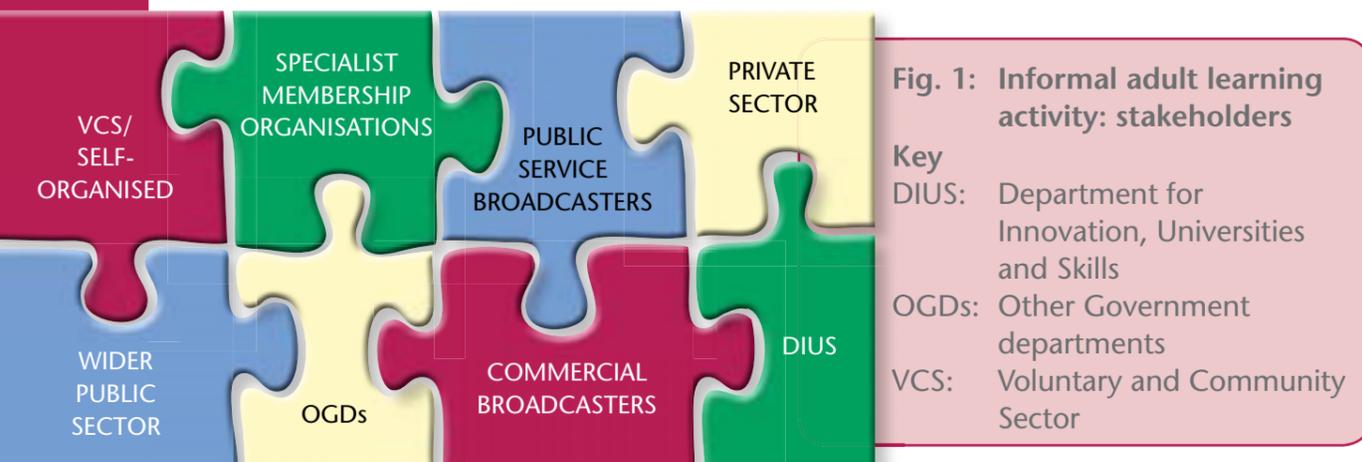
As we freely acknowledge, prioritising adult education resources for those who require skills and qualifications for work, and for those who have not previously had the opportunity to enjoy a good level of education, has rightly stimulated a debate about the future of informal adult learning. We welcome that debate; we value the important role that informal adult education has played and will play in our society; we believe that there is much that is good and positive on which to build for the future, and it is for this reason that we have published this consultation document.

1. A rich tapestry

In this chapter we give just a flavour of the variety of informal adult learning activities offered across the public, voluntary, self-directed and private sectors. Chapters 2 and 3 amplify this in terms of the Government contribution.

Figure 1 illustrates the interlocking nature and very wide range of public, private, voluntary and self-directed stakeholders in the informal adult learning arena.

Founded in 1982, there are now 640 active U3A groups stretching from Shetland to Jersey and the West of Ireland to the Wash, with 190,000 older people currently learning hundreds of subjects.

Most major voluntary organisations offer the chance to develop specialist interests through study, with a plethora of museum and gallery programmes to stimulate active engagement with their collections.

English Heritage's five-year strategic plan commits to learning programmes at over 400 historic sites, wider engagement with the public and more partnership working and an educational volunteering programme at selected sites across the country.

Annual Science lectures at the Royal Institution are full and the Royal Society for the Arts issues podcasts of its lectures. UfI, broadband and satellite based programmes offer opportunities for self-study backed by on-line communities of similar-minded people with whom to share the excitements of the learning experience.

There's an enormous thirst for knowledge and information. Google, the number one search engine in the UK, has 7.7 million UK users. In the first half of 2007, Youtube had 6.5 million users and Wikipedia had 6.4 UK million users. Since 2000, the learndirect national learning advice line has recorded more than 46.6 million web advice sessions. And across the world, 431 million people have access to the Discovery Channel in 33 different languages.

We are now seeing powerful interconnections between different learning experiences where programmes such as *'Who do you think you are?'* stimulate people to attend events, use web pages which give them the tools they need to research their own family trees, use archives and form local study groups. Their findings in turn add richness to existing archive collections.
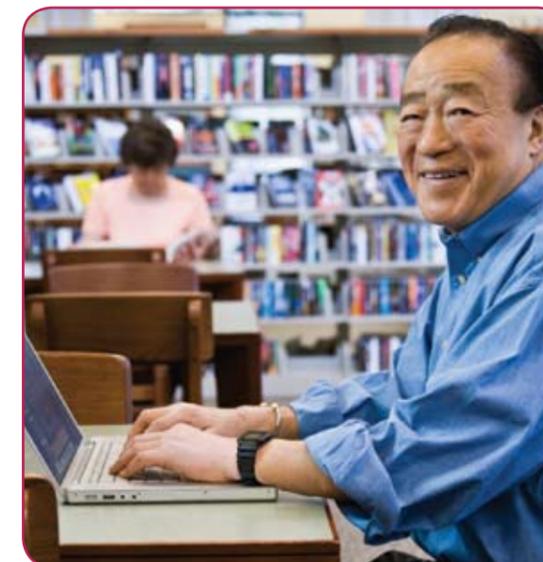
And there's a strong thread of volunteering running through all this activity. Currently around 11 million unpaid volunteers work in 150,000 registered charities and 300,000 unregistered not-for-profit groups in the UK. In fact, the contribution of volunteers is estimated to be equivalent to more than one million people working full time. Many organisations in the voluntary sector have developed specialised mentoring schemes. For example, the *Time Together* project has been successful in working with refugees and asylum seekers, the St Giles Trust has developed an effective peer mentoring scheme for offenders and the DfES Link Up scheme drew hard to reach learners into basic skills learning by recruiting people from local communities to train as learning supporters.

DIUS is currently funding a project *Volunteers Count* to identify potential roles for volunteers in engaging and

Fig. 1: Informal adult learning activity: stakeholders

Key

DIUS: Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

OGDs: Other Government departments

VCS: Voluntary and Community Sector

The greatest area of expansion in informal adult learning has been in self-directed and self-funded activities. In the last few years, the extraordinary reading group phenomenon has swept the country as more and more people become members of a group or set up their own group. Some groups have emerged around libraries and bookshops, with well over 5,000 reading groups linked to libraries for people of all ages and abilities.

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is a good example of self-organised learning.

The National Trust is one of the largest membership organisations in the UK, with 3.5 million members. It offers a wide range of learning opportunities for adults, including visiting houses to learn more about their history or getting involved in a community projects to learn new skills. It even offers teams of informed and trained volunteers who will talk to community groups and associations about the work of the National Trust and some of the inspirational historic properties and countryside sites they manage.

supporting learners who do not have English as their first language. The project will produce a draft framework for innovative approaches to volunteer training and support, as well as a report with recommendations for extending and developing the initiative into wider adult learning contexts.

All these examples illustrate the sheer diversity of opportunities now available, as well as great changes in the way that people learn and access information. We propose now to commission a proper mapping of what is offered by the public,
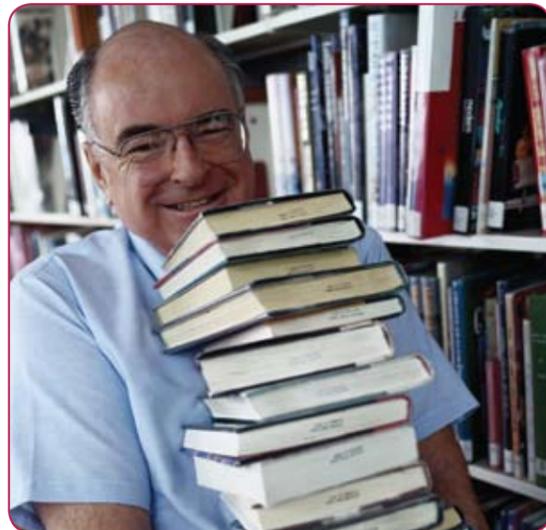
private and voluntary sectors, as well as self-directed learning in its many forms. We will also develop a definition of informal adult learning that can be used across Government and stakeholders. The results will be published to inform further debate and provide evidence for a policy paper later this year. The diverse funding streams and disparate nature of self-

directed learning have made it difficult to quantify precisely, so we will include quantification as a strand of work in the mapping activity we plan to commission.

The past couple of decades have seen a great deal of innovation in the provision of new ways of learning and in the consultation we want to identify the conditions that make it easier for people to develop new approaches to their way of learning.

DISCUSSION POINTS FROM THIS CHAPTER

In the consultation, the points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. How can we understand more about the factors that are driving this diversity of activity?
b. What are the conditions that make it easier for learners to learn? How can we support people to be more instrumental in their own learning?
c. How can we support and develop models of self-organised adult education, learning from (for example) the U3A model?
d. How can we improve the connectivity between different kinds of learning episodes, for example by helping people move from watching a TV programme to using the web, to joining a group and then to pro-actively teaching or sharing information with others?
e. How can we further develop the culture of volunteering to support informal adult learning?
f. What are the conditions most likely to foster innovative approaches to adult learning?

Adult informal learning is both pervasive and low profile. A lot of activity is happening without Government support, but a rich mix of informal adult learning activities is also supported through different Government funding streams, including the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Learning and Skills Council and a range of Government departments, European Social Funding and many local government initiatives. The range of work shows that informal adult learning continues to be very important for the implementation of Government policy. Through this consultation DIUS aims to strengthen dialogue across Government and its partners as to the future shape of - and priorities for - informal adult learning in England.

This chapter gives just a flavour of the relevant policy commitments, initiatives and actual learning activity funded by our Government departments.

CABINET OFFICE – OFFICE OF THE THIRD SECTOR

The Office of the Third Sector supports a wide range of third sector organisations and leads across Government on volunteering and mentoring, funding a wide range of high profile national initiatives, just a few of which are:

• TimeBank, a national organisation set up to promote volunteering
• Community Service Volunteers (CSV), one of the largest volunteering

organisations in the UK and involved in both formal and informal adult learning
• The Community Channel, available on Freeview, Virgin and Sky - the only national television channel devoted to community issues.

DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP co-ordinates and leads *Opportunity Age*, the Government's strategy for an ageing society. The strategy aims to end the perception of older people as dependent, ensure that longer life is healthy and fulfilling and that older people are full participants in society. *Opportunity Age* aims to:

• achieve higher employment rates overall and greater flexibility for over 50s in continuing careers, managing any health conditions and combining work with family and other commitment
• enable older people to play a full and active role in society
• allow people to keep independence and control over their lives as they grow older.

The indicators of progress on the *Opportunity Age* strategy include older people's participation in learning, self-directed study and evening classes.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DoH funds a wide range of learning activities, just one of which is the Prescriptions for Learning project, which bases a learning adviser in a GP surgery so that healthcare staff can refer patients to the learning adviser. Participants are supported to access and achieve in learning while accruing health benefits such as increased self-esteem and confidence, improved social networks and increased activity.

Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) are charged, along with local sports partnerships, with producing a physical activity strategy. Local informal adult learning provision can play a key part in delivering this strategy, with programmes ranging from keep fit to health awareness. The national mental health strategy has also identified adult learning and skills, along with employment and volunteering, as being important in promoting social inclusion for adults experiencing mental health problems.

THE DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Among all departments, DCMS probably funds the widest range of informal adult learning activity, with considerable scope for synergy and co-operation at local level:

- Nationally, DCMS works though a number of non-departmental public bodies, notably the Arts Council England, Sport England and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. These bodies already work closely at local level through Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements
- 95% of funding for public libraries comes through local government and local authorities are developing their libraries into learning centres and integrating their adult learning services with libraries
- DCMS has established sports partnerships across England. Tasked with developing a sports strategy as well as working with the PCT and others to produce a physical activity plan, there is considerable scope for co-operation and collaboration with informal adult learning providers
- The Lottery funds enormous amounts of informal adult learning through the billions of pounds that have been allocated through the Big Lottery Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Arts Lottery.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

CLG's framework of local government, Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements provide a powerful engine for improving co-operation at a local level to meet shared and related objectives. It promotes active citizenship and published a National Framework for Active Learning for Active Citizenship (ALAC) in 2006. It has helped facilitate community development through the curriculum of the Academy for Sustainable Communities and capacity building programmes developed for local authority officers and councillors, with taster packs and course outlines produced by the Federation for Community Development Learning.

CLG set up the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) which oversees the Government's comprehensive neighbourhood renewal strategy and establishes programmes to identify local needs and tackle deprivation in the 88 poorest and most deprived communities, linking closely with DIUS-funded family learning and neighbourhood learning activities.

DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

DCSF funds a significant amount of informal adult activity through several programmes, including:

- 8,000 Extended Schools services which already offer community use of school facilities for adult learning, due to widen to all schools by 2010
- 1,600 Sure Start Children's Centres (one-stop hubs for children under the age of five and their families); local authorities have responsibility for planning their location and development and will be well placed to make links with the adult learning offer.

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENTERPRISE AND REGULATORY REFORM

BERR supports the delivery of the learning and skills agenda through the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), whose primary focus is on sustainable economic development.

DISCUSSION POINTS FROM THIS CHAPTER

In the consultation, the points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. Whether, and if so how, Government support for informal adult learning can be improved?

b. Whether you agree that, given the diversity of demand, need and type of provision that is made, it would be inappropriate to aim for a common funding system across Government, or a centralised strategy?

c. How can we ensure there is proper recognition and understanding of the wide variety of ways in which Government is supporting informal adult learning?

d. How can we make better use of Government resources, for example better use of premises?

e. Are there areas where Government should be actively removing barriers or creating new flexibilities in order to improve the use of resources?

DIUS funds informal adult learning through a safeguarded budget of £210m each year through to 2010/11, the comprehensive spending review period. Although this provision is delivered mainly through local authorities, many FE colleges also offer adult education classes. In addition to these sums, local authorities can access £10m for major capital works every two years and around £7.5m per year for carrying out other repairs and providing disability access.

We also help to core-fund the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), which has the remit to encourage more and different adults to engage in learning of all kinds.

The mainstream adult education service supports learning for enjoyment, personal development, cultural enrichment and intellectual or creative stimulation, but also family learning and community-based learning designed to develop the skills for social and

community action. These programmes carry no requirement for learners to achieve accreditation or progress to other learning.

Since the publication of the first Skills White Paper in 2003, we have seen a series of reforms to the adult education service, including:

• the development of descriptors for adult learning and mapping of adult learning provision against a consistent framework

• the introduction of new LSC-led partnerships to plan and co-ordinate provision at the local level, with the remit to develop strong links with local strategic partnerships and local area agreements and secure a wide membership to include learners, local community groups and stakeholders with related budgets in health, sports and recreation etc

• the setting up of a national Task Group to steer the reforms and secure a co-ordinated approach to maximise the effective use of public funding

• the introduction of the principle that those who have benefited least from the education system and are in most financial need should have greatest access to public funding for informal learning, with learners who can afford to do so contributing some or all of the cost of their learning.

Most recently, these LSC-led partnerships have mapped publicly-funded informal adult provision in their areas to identify

gaps and eliminate duplications. The mapping exercise has already captured a lot of informal adult learning activity not funded by the LSC and will provide a useful starting point for the cross sector mapping we intend to commission during the consultation. During the next few months partnerships will submit plans for addressing local needs strategically and efficiently for the future.

Generally, partnerships are moving in the right direction. Many of them have come a long way since May 2007 and have adapted to new planning and funding arrangements within a very short space of time. And many have made a good job of recruiting a wide variety of partners to work together on funding and planning an appropriate and comprehensive informal adult learning offer for their area, using events, meetings, advisory groups, satisfaction surveys, community-based research and forums to gather the views of local adults. This case study illustrates good practice:

Case study
Northamptonshire County Council, as a member of its' local Personal and Community Development Learning partnership, analysed participation data and found that they had few learners aged 25 to 40. They employed a new member of staff with a private sector marketing background to research this group and devise/market an offer targeted at this group. Responses showed that these learners wanted classes to fit in with their busy working lives. The service responded by marketing a programme of one day or half day courses, in the best of their venues and with the option of booking a place quickly, on line and up until a day or so before the course. This presented quite a challenge for the existing administrative systems, but was effective at bringing in new, younger learners. Fees were set at a higher level than the mainstream provision elsewhere in the adult learning service. The higher fee income targets set by the LSC were met out of the fees from this new group, rather than from an increase in the fees of existing and longstanding learners, who were unlikely to tolerate the kind of increase necessary to meet the target.

However, looking across the country as a whole, the speed of progress has proved to be very variable and some partnerships are little more than a continuation of the previous planning and funding arrangements. Given that reforms to the service did not take practical effect until the current financial year, it is arguably still too early to decide whether they can help secure an adult service for the 21st century.

But the future of the adult education service is obviously an important part of this consultation.

There is evidence that, with the increasing focus on formal skills, providers and practitioners became

concerned about the future of informal adult learning and offered fewer non-accredited, non-vocational courses. Informal adult learning has not been an easy area to track, report on, quantify or assess. DIUS and LSC are currently working towards more effective and comprehensive monitoring processes designed to capture the range and benefits of LSC and non LSC-funded informal provision.

There is no doubt that the numbers supported by the funding levels inherited by DIUS have been both lower and higher at different points in the past. In some areas, the change in subsidy arrangements seems to have resulted in loss of provision, yet in other areas provision has been maintained or has increased despite those changes.

The service presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, some services do still teach learners in utilitarian buildings using classroom based, traditional teaching methods. On the other, there are examples of purpose built accommodation with modern teaching and tutorial rooms, learning centres, disability access and specialist facilities for music, drama, art, dance, health and complementary therapies.

In some areas strong links have been forged between museums, libraries and galleries and flexible informal education. In others the emphasis may still be on the publication of a prospectus of traditional courses.

Our overall vision must be of an inclusive adult education service in which people from all backgrounds can participate. By no means will all of this activity be supported through an adult education service, and we need to ensure that local partnerships are able to have a broad view of the provision in their area and to provide support in the most appropriate ways.

Much of the debate about adult education tends to centre on levels of subsidy and the protection of existing provision. But this can crowd out an innovative discussion about different ways of using funding. Course subsidy is one route; but we should also consider direct support to organisers of informal adult education. We should also explore whether funding should be made available to some individuals or groups – perhaps using the virtual but powerful

funding system DIUS is developing for Skills Accounts – to enable them to design and purchase their own informal education.

Higher education is not normally included in the local overview of informal adult education. But higher education institutions make an important contribution to informal adult learning in their localities and, through institutions like the Open University, across the country. Some formal, accredited courses will be affected by the reprioritisation of higher education towards those who have never had the chance to go to university. But informal higher education takes many forms, such as through university organised summer schools, and we want its future to be an important part of this consultation.

In the consultation, the points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. Is the adult education service basically a 1970s model, now overtaken by the developments summarised in Chapter 1? Or is it a successful service that has the potential, with the reforms currently in train, to develop and thrive in the 21st century?

b. How are local authorities now organising their adult education services? What are their visions for the future and what are their experiences of different models of delivery today?

c. Have we taken partnership working as far as we can? The scale of the support from other Government departments is important for each partnership to grasp and take advantage of.

d. In terms of using the DIUS safeguarded budget, would it be better in future to focus spend on infrastructure and on the organisation of an effective service, rather than through direct subsidies to providers for putting on courses?

e. Do we need the service to become more learner-led? Would a way of doing that be to explore the possible use of real or virtual vouchers, taking advantage of new technologies? These might build on the Skills Accounts mechanism being phased in, starting in 2010.

4. Ensuring equality of access to learning

Everyone has the right to pursue their basic human needs for creativity, physical activity and intellectual stimulation. Learning is a key tool in securing equality of opportunity, but at the moment that key turns most easily for people with the confidence, money, motivation and opportunity to join in.

The barriers to joining in may affect a wide range of people, including:

- Older people lacking money or mobility or both;
- Those with learning difficulties or disabilities who need the chance to develop their learning and also skills for independent living;
- Poorer people who face barriers that may be financial or to do with their prior experience of learning;
- Ethnic minority groups, who may face language or other barriers to learning.

It is important to emphasise that all these people want and deserve equal access to the same kinds of provision that are benefiting others in society. This is not primarily about specialised provision, though some tailoring may be needed in some circumstances. It is about no one losing out, including through the risks of the digital divide.

Developing an informal adult learning offer that attracts the people who have benefited least from such learning in the past is one of the key reasons for our consultation. We want informal adult learning to engage and inspire adults

who believe that learning is not for them, as well as those who are keenest. We want every community to have easy access to local information and a volunteer community learning champion who can encourage and support people.

We also want to see learning programmes do better at signposting progression opportunities for those people who need and want to go further with their learning. Adult learning journeys can be untidy and many are not straightforward or predictable even by people themselves. Even though informal adult learning does not assume that learners want to progress, informal activities can often motivate adults to undertake further learning.

The DIUS safeguarded pot of £210m noted in the previous chapter is an important resource which, used well, can help address many of the issues of

equality of access. We also spend some £300 million annually on English for Speakers of Other Languages, within a total of some £1.5 billion annually on all types of basic skills.

DIUS also separately funds Unionlearn, where trained Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are supporting their peers to participate in both formal and informal adult learning. Last year the Union Learning Fund enabled ULRs to support more than 17,000 employees to learn foreign languages, British Sign Language, local history and much more. During the 2007 Learning at Work Day, 2,000 ULRs in the London and SE regions engaged more than 10,000 new learners in informal learning sessions.

Other Government activity with a role in informal adult learning, especially in terms of reaching out to the most disadvantaged groups, includes the Treasury's initiative to develop financial literacy and financial education, and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' policies to support an effective rural development, including access to learning opportunities for adults.

As one of the EU's Structural Funds, the European Social Fund (ESF) aims to reduce differences in prosperity across the EU and enhance economic and social cohesion, focusing on those most in need of help and contributing to our own policies to reduce inequality and build a fairer society. Over the past seven years ESF has helped over four million

people in England and contributed to a wide range of informal adult learning projects and programmes. The new ESF programme will invest £4 billion in 2007-2013, of which £2 billion will come from the ESF and £2 billion will be national funding. In May each year, the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) holds events that include the presentation of a number of national and regional ESF awards marking the lifelong learning achievements of individuals, groups and projects.

And it is not just central Government that is acting to support equality of access. Many of the activities summarised in
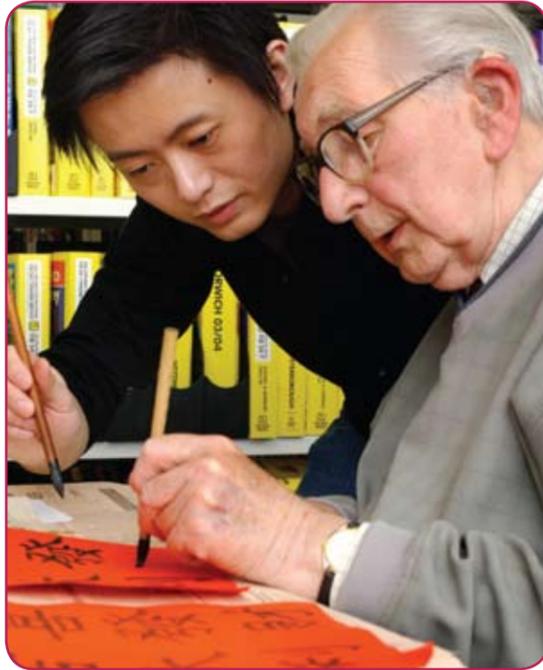
Chapters 1 and 2 are relevant. For example, the work of libraries is key to literacy. To mark the 2008 National Year of Reading, over 70% of public library services across England are offering a Six Book Challenge™ in association with the Costa Book Awards for readers at Entry Level 3/Level 1. A pilot run by Hull Libraries found that 91% of participants said they read more confidently as a result. In Gosport, Hampshire, the re-design of the public library as a 'discovery centre' attracted 1,000 learndirect learners in the first six months - in a facility where none had taken part before.

Organisations such as English Heritage are also supporting equality through their basic skills courses. English Heritage will extend these courses to

two new sites each year, as well as engaging a minimum of 15,000 learners per year in the Festival of History and continuing the roll-out of its educational volunteering at selected sites across the country.

Much of this experience suggests strongly that the routes to informal education for disadvantaged groups are not markedly different to those for other parts of society. The challenge may simply be to identify and tackle potential obstacles and to design appropriate and attractive learning opportunities.

When it comes to technology, the nation continues to face the threat of a digital divide, creating new classes of haves and have-nots. Age, income, geography and literacy levels have a real impact on access. In 2007 two English regions, Yorkshire and Humber and the North East, still had 48% of households with no internet access at all, compared to only 31% of households in the London and South East regions. Technology is a key area where we have to combat the problem of people being excluded from the tools and skills needed to succeed in the modern world.

That is why Government is investing in new technologies to support activity in the home, the community, schools, colleges and universities, working to bridge the digital divide by making technologies accessible and helping people develop the skills needed to use them effectively. The use of technology

for learning can also contribute to other Government ambitions because learning from home and work reduces the environmental impact of learners who no longer need to travel in order to learn.

DIUS has funded UK Online centres, established to help improve the access and use of IT, providing people with access to the internet and e-learning in some 6,000 UK Online centres. Around half of these are in public libraries, a third are in local community centres and voluntary organisations and some 10% are based in colleges. They are sited locally in order to reach their communities, particularly the most disadvantaged and hard to reach groups and individuals. They deliver a wide range of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and e-services including 'First Time Online' internet taster sessions, basic skills assessments, e-skills passports and access to a range of e-government services.

We want the technology and broadcasting stakeholder forum, and other stakeholder groups, to consider these equity issues in the course of our consultation. They should work with broadcasters, private businesses, Becta, NESTA, UfI/learndirect, UK Online, LSC and other Government departments to consider the role of technology in delivering a broad, stimulating and accessible menu of informal adult learning opportunities.

5. The contribution of new technology and broadcasting

Learning has always been good at exploiting technology – witness *linguaphone*, BBC language learning through cassettes and vinyl or the growth of distance and television based learning since the 1960s.

More than ever, new technologies are opening up the world of knowledge and offering new, flexible and exciting ways to learn. Ever-expanding learning opportunities are possible through the availability of hand-held devices, wide access to broadband and wireless connections, the growth in open source materials and free interactive multimedia learning programmes such as ALISON and Kickstart TV. It is already transforming every aspect of our lives at tremendous speed.

61% of all households now have an internet connection, an increase of 7% since 2006. An astonishing one in two learners over 60 is studying ICT. People are pursuing personal interests through the internet. Online peer-to-peer support communities across the globe are learning together to manage health conditions, study family histories or work on environmental projects. This in turn is creating renewed interest in more traditional sources of information such as archives for genealogy. Television is an important source: last year many viewers turned over from mainstream programmes to see live streaming of Springwatch on BBC2.

Informal adult learning is of course already engaging with technology. Adults are already using technology to find out about courses, develop new skills and acquire qualifications for work or leisure. The learndirect national learning advice line has taken more than 9 million calls since it was established in February 1998 and the website has recorded over 46.6 million eligible advice web sessions since May 2000. Both services provide callers with information about local informal adult learning opportunities.

Over the last six years, £22 million has been invested to bring the benefits of technology to adults in adult and community learning settings, supporting innovation projects and the establishment of learning platforms in over 50% of local authorities. 1,700 people have been trained as e-guides -

champions who work with more than 10,000 other tutors. Becta helped this work through aclearn.net, which supports the delivery workforce.

As stated earlier, Government is investing in new technologies to support activity in the home, the community, schools, colleges and universities, and working to bridge the digital divide by making technologies accessible and helping people develop the skills needed to use them effectively.

What of the future? Although it is easy to refer simply to the impact of the internet, the full potential of current developments in ICT is only beginning to be understood. The internet is certainly a powerful source of information and it will become even more user friendly as more people are able to use their domestic televisions to access the internet (although this raises sharp questions about the digital divide described in the last chapter).

But the internet and digital broadcasting have not yet fully exploited the potential to make educational materials from around the world more easily available to learners. We are only just starting to use the internet to put learners and potential teachers – often the same people as in the U3A model – in touch with each other. Technology will soon enable far more people, including those who are house-bound, to take part in group study 'face to face' from home through webcams on the sitting room television. We could also imagine home-based book clubs using IT and television to read books and hold virtual discussions with their authors.

We know that learners like the 'blended learning' approach combining face-to-face contact, study groups, on-line and other ways of learning, especially when they have a say in determining the 'learning package'. The ability to meet new like-minded people increases our social interaction and allows individuals and groups to take charge of their own learning, as in the 'meetup.com' website which helps groups of people with shared interests meet up wherever they are based.

Chip technologies will increasingly enable information in galleries, museums and architecturally interesting buildings to be available through mobile phones, which will in turn provide routes to post-visit discussion groups, further educational material, and/or informal and formal learning. The internet will develop further and faster. 'Web 2.0' technology will enable even greater use of information in new ways. It will also enable more users, teachers and learners to drive technological innovation in the ways that they want. ICT undoubtedly has the potential to make closer and closer links between the different episodes and kinds of learning that so many people are now choosing to combine.

Technology also allows the role of public investment to change: not so much slotting people into courses or predetermined programmes, as people agreeing their own programmes and

using technology to find their own 'teachers'. So in the 'meetup' example, the group may feel the need of a more specialist/expert teaching input. Such specialists could be identified through the site or related sites. This could be further encouraged through the introduction of real or virtual vouchers.

So what might be the impact of technology on informal adult learning and what can it make possible? We can see learning being turned on its head by technological change, presenting us with exciting opportunities for adult informal learners: more learners, more connected, more empowered. And surely the most exciting prospect is the ability of technology to bring learning to those who have not previously engaged, as well as new experiences for those that have.

Recent experience suggests that providers and technology companies
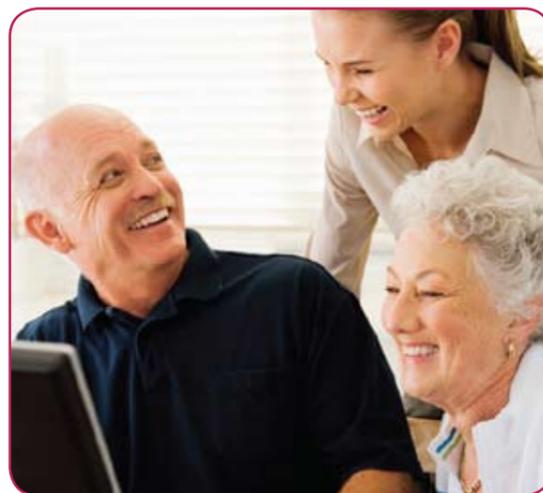
will work together to deliver the innovative products needed to exploit the informal educational potential of these developments. No doubt there will be uses of technology that we cannot imagine today. We would not suggest that Government needs to show everyone how to use technology. But it is important we understand the developments taking place and how we can support the most important of them. We also need to be vigilant in identifying those people who might miss out without some form of public intervention.

To make informal adult education fit for the 21st century, we also need to encourage access to learning at home and in the community through new technologies. We will look to Becta, UfI/learndirect, UK Online, private companies, libraries, schools, colleges and community based ICT facilities to help support adults with e-learning skills, computer skills and selection of hardware and software and, as appropriate, to support the technology skills of those teaching in informal adult learning. We expect Becta to take account of this focus in the work they are currently leading to update *Harnessing Technology*, the Government's e-strategy for learning and children's services. We will work with DCSF and the existing Home Access Task Group set up by Schools Minister, Jim Knight MP, to optimise the opportunities offered to the most disadvantaged families.

As part of the consultation we will set up opportunities for structured discussion in specific interest groups, including a forum for technology and broadcasting. This will enable the debate to be taken forward with networks and interest groups in preparation for a policy paper. It will bring together learners, representatives from adult learning providers, experts in the application of technology to learning, broadcasters and the technology industry. We want to find out how ICT could support new ways of learning and identify any potential obstacles to making existing learning resources more freely available.

a. What are the barriers to making the most of technology for learners? How can these be overcome?

b. What do we know about the learning opportunities that will become available utilising new technology over the next 10 to 15 years? What is the best way of identifying these opportunities?

c. What opportunities, if any, are there to make learning a more central consideration in the future of broadband and the digital switchover? And in the development of mobile phone applications?

d. How can we make greater use of interactive television?

e. How can the connectivity between broadcast, physical and virtual resources and informal learning be further enhanced?

f. How can we bring new Information and Communications Technology together with more established teaching and learning models so that there are integrated opportunities to learn?

The mass movement described in this paper has come about through the independent actions of millions of people - and few, if any, of them would even recognise that they are part of such a movement. They are all following a common human impulse to satisfy their curiosity and thirst for knowledge.

What implications does this have for the type of public policy we should be developing for informal adult learning for the period 2009 - 2020? Does the laissez-faire nature of these recent developments mean Government should leave well alone? Or, as we believe, does Government have a key role in helping to maximise and sustain the benefits of the arrangements as they are working today?

The launch of this consultation marks the start of a wide-ranging debate that will lead to a policy paper later this year on informal adult learning for the 21st century. The consultation needs to provide the information and evidence that will help develop a sound strategic vision that can support and inform the public, private, voluntary and self-directed learning sectors.

The specific points we want to explore and debate through this consultation are listed below.

1. Understanding and improving on current provision

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. How can we understand more about the factors that are driving this diversity of activity?

b. What are the conditions that make it easier for learners to learn? How can we support people to be more instrumental in their own learning?

c. How can we support and develop models of self-organised adult education, learning from (for example) the U3A model?

d. How can we improve the connectivity between different kinds of learning episodes, for example by helping people move from watching a TV programme to using the web, to joining a group and then to pro-actively teaching or sharing information with others?

e. How can we further develop the culture of volunteering to support informal adult learning?

f. What are the conditions most likely to foster innovative approaches to adult learning?

2. The Government contribution

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. Whether, and if so how, Government support for informal adult learning can be improved?
b. Whether you agree that, given the diversity of demand, need and type of provision that is made, it would be inappropriate to aim for a common funding system across Government, or a centralised strategy?
c. How can we ensure there is proper recognition and understanding of the wide variety of ways in which Government is supporting informal adult learning?
d. How can we make better use of Government resources, for example better use of premises?
e. Are there areas where Government should be actively removing barriers or creating new flexibilities in order to improve the use of resources?

3. DIUS-funded informal adult education

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. Is the adult education service basically a 1970s model, now overtaken by the developments summarised in Chapter 1? Or is it a successful service that has the potential, with the reforms currently in train, to develop and thrive in the 21st century?
b. How are Local Authorities now organising their adult education services? What are their visions for the future and what are their experiences of different models of delivery today?
c. Have we taken partnership working as far as we can? The scale of the support from other Government departments is important for each partnership to grasp and take advantage of.
d. In terms of using the DIUS safeguarded budget, would it be better in future to focus spend on infrastructure and on the organisation of an effective service, rather than through direct subsidies to providers for putting on courses?
e. Do we need the service to become more learner-led? Would a way of doing that be to explore the possible use of real or virtual vouchers, taking advantage of new technologies? These might build on the Skills Accounts mechanism being phased in, starting in 2010.

4. Equality of access

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. How can we do better in ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of learning? Or from the same opportunities that others enjoy?
b. How well do we understand the barriers to learning as they exist at present, and how they affect particular parts of society? To what extent are the barriers financial? What action would address each of the barriers?
c. What further actions could Government most usefully take to ensure more equal access to informal learning?
d. What further actions could others most usefully take?
e. What more can Government do to overcome the 'digital divide' where the people who could most benefit from new ways of participating in adult learning are the least equipped to take advantage of them?

5. Broadcasting and technology

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

a. What are the barriers to making the most of technology for learners? How can these be overcome?
b. What do we know about the learning opportunities that will become available utilising new technology over the next ten to 15 years? What is the best way of identifying these opportunities?
c. What opportunities, if any, are there to make learning a more central consideration in the future of broadband and the digital switchover? And in the development of mobile phone applications?
d. How can we make greater use of interactive television?
e. How can the connectivity between broadcast, physical and virtual resources and informal learning be further enhanced?
f. How can we bring new Information and Communications Technology together with more established teaching and learning models so that there are integrated opportunities to learn?

A WIDE RANGING DISCUSSION

These discussion points are intended to prompt debate. They are not intended to limit or constrain what needs to be a challenging and innovative consultation. So if you feel that there are other equally important issues which should be addressed, please feel free to do so.

The consultation period runs from 15 January to 15 May 2008. You can respond to this consultation by visiting www.adultlearningconsultation.org.uk or respond in writing (as per the questions on pages 31 to 33) to Informal Adult Learning Consultation, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 4th Floor, Kingsgate House, 66–74 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6SW.

For additional copies of the consultation please visit www.adultlearningconsultation.org.uk or call DIUS Publications (0845 60 222 60) quoting reference IAL2008. The results will be made public later this year on the DIUS website: www.dius.gov.uk

Inside back cover