Do I want to improve my reading, writing or maths?

Findings from a study of adults born in 1958 and 1970

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Foreword

We have supported studies based on the two major cohort groups, NCDS and BCS70, for over ten years. These studies have increased our knowledge of how many adults have literacy and numeracy needs and given us detailed evidence on some of the characteristics of these men and women. The studies have highlighted an enduring association between poor literacy and numeracy and a range of social and economic disadvantage.

This study is based on new data gathered from both groups of men and women in 2000, when they were 42 and 30. It gives us new information on whether people think their skills have got better or worse and whether they have been on any courses to improve their literacy or numeracy. It also investigates if people want to study in the future, what motivates them and how they would prefer to learn.

The findings emphasise some steep challenges in raising standards of literacy and numeracy among adults. They show we need to give major attention to motivating people and we need to think beyond conventional programmes, if we are to make a serious difference.

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Summary

THIS study is based on evidence from 22,680 men and women aged 42 and 30 who took part in the latest round of data collection for the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70).

Reporting problems

- Across the whole of each cohort 10% of those aged 42 and 9% of those aged 30 reported difficulties with reading, writing or maths.
- Of those assessed in earlier studies as having very poor literacy just 7% (42 years) and 11% (30 years) now reported reading difficulties and 19% (42 years) and 14% (30 years) reported difficulties writing a letter to a friend.
- Of those assessed in earlier studies as having very poor numeracy just 5% (42 years) and 4% (30 years) reported problems calculating change.

Have I got better in the last ten years?

- 63% of 30 year olds assessed earlier with poor literacy and 42% of 42 year olds felt their ability to read and understand paperwork had improved.
- 3% of 30 and 42 year olds assessed with poor or very poor literacy felt their skills had got worse.

What is most difficult?

- Among those reporting reading difficulties, more than 1 in 2 ‘could not’ or ‘had difficulties’ reading and understanding forms at work, or reading aloud from a children’s story book.
- Among those reporting writing difficulties, three quarters had spelling difficulties.
- Among those reporting maths or number difficulties 43% women and 36% men (42 years) and 61% women, 44% men (30 years) had problems with the 4 rules of number.
Attended a course?

- Only 1% of either cohort reported attending a literacy course and 1% (42 years), 2% (30 years) reported attending a numeracy course.

- Of those reporting difficulties with reading 10% of men and 7% of women (30 years) had been on a course to improve reading, compared with 7% of men and 5% of women (42 years).

- Of those reporting difficulties with writing 5% of men (42 and 30 years), 7% of women (30 years) and 4% (42 years) had been on a course to improve their writing.

- Of those reporting difficulties with maths only 3% (42 year olds) and 3% of men, 4% of women (30 years) had been on a course.

- Of those assessed with very poor literacy 2% (30 years) and 4% (42 years) had been on a course.

- Of those assessed with very poor numeracy 1% (42 years) and 2% (30 years) had attended a course.

Wanting to improve?

- Overall 8% (30 years) and 7% (42 years) wanted to improve their reading, 9% and 13% their writing, 29% and 28% their maths.

- Of those reporting difficulties more men than women wanted to improve their reading: 47% to 26% (42 years), 51% to 41% (30 years); the same held true for writing: 49% to 36% (42 years) 42% to 40 % (30 years).

- Of those reporting difficulties more women than men wanted to improve their maths: 47% to 41% (42 years), 40% to 34% (30 years).

- Of those assessed with very poor literacy 15% of 30 year olds wanted to improve their reading, 12% their writing; 19% of 42 year olds wanted to improve their reading and 20% their writing.
Why improve?

- The most common reasons, across all groups, were: own satisfaction, to help children, to get a job or a better job

How do I prefer to learn?

- Among those who reported difficulties, people preferred: evening college courses, using books at home or PC packages and day college courses

Who wants to improve their skills?

- Among the groups with self reported or previously assessed literacy needs those who did express interest in improving were more likely to have: had a disrupted education, left school at the minimum age with few if any qualifications, gone into low skilled manual work, experienced symptoms of depression
- Those with numeracy needs and a desire to improve were only more likely to show signs and symptoms of depression

The findings show that there is much to do to motivate those with ‘latent’ and ‘invisible’ needs and that there need to be extended and improved opportunities for people to improve their skills.

*People preferred: evening college courses, using books at home or PC packages and day college courses*
URING the latter part of 1999 and 2000, 22,680 men and women from the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) age 42 and 30 respectively provided comprehensive information on many aspects of living in Britain at the start of the 21st century. This updated the detailed profiles we have from the time of their birth. An intrinsic part of these surveys has been to identify adults with a poor grasp of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. Apart from the self-reported measures that have been included in previous sweeps, a representative 10% sample of each study had their literacy and numeracy skills assessed: BCS70 cohort members when they were age 21 (1991), and NCDS cohort members when age 37 (1995).

These studies have established that up to 1 in 5 adults had difficulties with the basic skills, that is, they could not read, write or perform basic math calculations at the level expected of an 11 year old. A key priority of the Government's strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills is to reduce the number of adults in England with skills difficulties to the level of our main international competitors – 1 in 10 – or even better (Skills for Life, DfES 2001). Fundamental to raising adult literacy and numeracy levels is, first, for people to recognise they have poor skills and then to perceive these poor skills as a problem. Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2001) identified three types of adults with poor skills. Those with:

- 'expressed need' – people who are actually dissatisfied with their low skills
- 'latent need' – people who recognise that their skills are low but still say they are satisfied with them
- 'invisible need' – people who appear to rate their skills as stronger than they actually are.

The challenge is to move adults identified with a latent or invisible need to the expressed need group. Only when a need has been expressed is there any real chance of involving a person in adult literacy and numeracy provision.

1. See Ekinsmyth and Bynner, (1994) and Bynner and Parsons, (1997) for full details of questions included in the functional literacy and numeracy assessments. The distribution of BCS70 and NCDS cohort members by their performance in the assessments is given in the Appendix.
2. There are also strategies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
In previous rounds of cohort data collection, the percentage of adults in BCS70 or NCDS reporting difficulties with either reading, basic number-work, writing and/or spelling has ranged from 11% to 15%. A tightening of the question format in 2000 has removed spelling difficulties from this figure, and led to a slight reduction in the overall percentage reporting difficulties with at least one of the three basic skills: 10% of NCDS, 9% of BCS70. More men than women reported difficulties with reading, writing or numbers in both cohorts: 11% to 8% in BCS70, 12% to 8% in NCDS.

Among adults who had their basic skills assessed, remarkably few of those with a poor grasp of literacy or numeracy acknowledged their difficulties when they took the functional literacy or numeracy tests. Of the 23% of NCDS and 18% of BCS70 assessed with very poor numeracy skills, just 9% NCDS and 10% BCS70 acknowledged a difficulty with numbers. Among the 6% assessed with the poorest literacy skills in both cohorts, just 15% of 21 year olds in BCS70 and 11% of 37 year olds in NCDS acknowledged difficulties with reading. Problems in writing and/or spelling were more likely to be acknowledged by those with very poor literacy skills – 28% BCS70, 32% NCDS (Ekinsmyth and Bynner, 1994; Bynner and Parsons, 1997). Even among the adults with a very poor grasp of the basic skills, expressed need was low.

To help expand our knowledge and reach out to a far greater number of adults with poor basic skills, more questions than ever before were put to the men and women who took part in the 2000 survey. In this first look at the new data, we examine:

- just who did report difficulties?
- what are the specific tasks they find the most challenging?
- do they feel their skills have declined or improved over the past decade?
- have they tackled their problems?
- do they want to, and if so, how and where?

3. See appendix for full details of questions used in all surveys.
4. This included the great majority of cohort members in both the 10% sub-sample surveys who had their literacy and numeracy assessed. Details are given in the Appendix.
Previous research has clearly shown the strong impact that poor skills have on a person's ability to enjoy and participate fully in all aspects of adult life. What we need to know is what distinguishes the men and women with poor skills who want to improve their reading, writing or number-work – those who express their need – from the majority of those with limited literacy or numeracy who see no need or have no desire for improvement – those with latent or invisible need.
Do I think I have difficulties with literacy or numeracy?

1. **Overall**

Among the 22,680 adults taking part in the 2000 survey, the overall level self-reporting difficulties with reading, writing or numbers was remarkably consistent with earlier reports (see Appendix).

‘Can you read and understand what is written in a magazine or newspaper?’

- 3% of both NCDS and BCS70 reported they would have difficulties reading. There were no differences between men and women.

‘If you need to, can you write a letter to a friend to thank them for a gift or invite them to visit?’

- 6% of NCDS and 4% BCS70 reported they would find writing a thank-you letter to a friend difficult. More men than women in both cohorts reported writing difficulties: 8% to 4% NCDS, 6% to 3% BCS70.

‘When you buy things in shops with a five or ten pound note, can you usually tell if you are given the right change?’ or ‘If you need to, can you usually work out what dates go with which day on a calendar?’

- 5% of both men and women in NCDS and BCS70 reported they would have difficulties working out change and/or difficulties working out days/dates on a calendar.

2. **Previously assessed with basic skills needs**

Among the adults previously assessed with a poor grasp of basic skills, the level of acknowledged difficulties with reading and writing or numbers was once again low. Few adults with poor skills expressed their need – between just 4% and 19%.
Self-reported reading and writing difficulties by adults assessed with a poor literacy

- Among those assessed with very poor literacy skills, 11% of 30 year olds in BCS70 and 7% of 42 year olds in NCDS reported they had difficulties reading and understanding text written in magazines or newspapers, with 14% BCS70 and 19% NCDS reporting they would have difficulties writing a thank-you letter to a friend.

- Reading difficulties were reported by 4% of those assessed at an earlier date with poor literacy in both cohorts; difficulties writing by 5% in BCS70 and 11% in NCDS.

Self-reported difficulties with calculating change and/or working out days and dates on a calendar by adults assessed with very poor numeracy

- 4% of 30 year olds in BCS70 and 5% of 42 year olds in NCDS reported they could not tell when they buy things from a shop if they had the right change from either a £5 or £10 note.

- 5% of BCS70 and 6% in NCDS reported they would have difficulties working out the correct days or dates on a calendar.

- 7% of BCS70 and 9% in NCDS reported they would have a difficulty with calculating the right change and/or working out days or dates with the use of a calendar.

Do those assessed with poor skills think they have a problem?
Have I got better in the last few years?

- 59% of all the 30 year olds assessed with very poor literacy in BCS70 actually felt their ability to read and understand paperwork had improved over the past decade (65% poor literacy). Figures were lower among 42 year olds in the older NCDS cohort: 32% very poor literacy, 46% poor literacy.

- Taken together, 63% of those with very/poor literacy in BCS70 and 42% NCDS felt their ability to read and understand paperwork had improved, with just 3% BCS70 and NCDS thinking it had got worse.

That so many more of the younger adults report an improved ability to read and understand paperwork requires comment. It must be noted that ‘improvement’ here is an individual’s own view, and we have no way of measuring its accuracy. We can only hypothesise that 30 year olds are more likely than 42 year olds to report their skills had improved over the previous decade as certain challenges are more likely to be encountered for the first time during a person’s twenties than their thirties: job application forms, setting up bank accounts, managing household business, etc. If these tasks were mastered, then perhaps a person would be more inclined to report skills improvement than someone who has been using these skills for a while longer.

Do those assessed with poor literacy think their skills have got better in the last 10 years?

![Graph showing percentage reporting skill improvement between BCS70 and NCDS for very poor and poor literacy groups.](image)
What do I find the most difficult?

THE men and women who self-reported problems with reading, writing or basic number-work were asked more about the specific nature of the difficulties they experienced.

Among the 3% of all men and women in both cohorts who reported they had difficulties reading and understanding what is written in a magazine or newspaper:

• more than half of the men and women in both cohorts reported they ‘could not’ or ‘had difficulties’ with reading and understanding paperwork or forms in their job. Women were more likely to report they ‘could not’, men that they ‘had difficulties’

• roughly half of men and women in both cohorts also reported they ‘could not’ or ‘had difficulties’ reading to a child from a children’s storybook. More men reported that they ‘could not’ do it

• 30 year old men in BCS70 were more likely than the women to report they had difficulties with all three of the specific reading tasks they were asked about: 43% to 36%. Differences were negligible in NCDS: 42% men, 40% women.

Do you have problems reading and understanding paperwork or forms in your job?
Among the 6% of all NCDS and 4% of all BCS70 who reported difficulties with writing a thank-you letter to a friend:

- spelling difficulties were experienced by roughly three-quarters of both cohorts, although by more men than women (80% to 69% BCS70, 75% to 70% NCDS), with 6% in BCS70 and 8% of men and 4% of women in NCDS never trying to write anything

- nearly two-thirds of both cohorts reported difficulties putting down in words what they wanted to say (60% NCDS, 64% BCS70)

- difficulties making their handwriting legible was a problem for more than a third of BCS70 (39% men, 37% women), and for 49% men and 28% women in NCDS

- one-quarter of BCS70 (23% men, 25% women) had difficulties with all four writing skills – writing, spelling, articulation, legibility. Comparable figures in NCDS were higher for men (28%) and lower for women (17%).
Among the 5% of men and women in both cohorts who reported difficulties with change calculation and/or working out days/dates on a calendar:

- a quarter of men (25% BCS70, 26% NCDS) and slightly fewer women (19% BCS70, 22% NCDS) actually had problems recognising numbers

- more of the younger cohort reported difficulties with the mathematical processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, with more women than men in both cohorts reporting problems with all four: 44% men to 61% women BCS70, 36% men and 43% women NCDS.

Do you have problems with all 4 mathematical processes: addition, subtraction, multiplication, division?
Have I done anything to overcome my difficulties?

Very few men and women reported that they had been on a course to improve their skills. Just 1% in either cohort had been on a course to improve reading or writing, with 2% of 30 year olds in BCS70 and 1% of 42 year olds in NCDS attending a course to help with their basic grasp of maths and understanding of numbers. Many may not have mentioned that they had been on such a course given the low status and stigma that has been attached to such courses, and many more may have developed their literacy or numeracy as part of another course of study for either themselves or their children (for example Family Literacy programmes) and consequently not said that they had been on a course to improve their basic skills. Whatever the reason, adult literacy and numeracy provision must lose its ‘poor relation’ label if more adults – particularly those with a poor grasp of the basic skills – are to feel comfortable reporting they had been on a course, or more importantly, are to attend a course.

Men and women who self-reported difficulties

- slightly more men than women who reported difficulties with reading had been on a course to improve their reading skills (10% to 7% BCS70, 7% to 5% NCDS)

- just 5% of the men who reported difficulties with writing in both cohorts had been on a course to improve their writing, as had 7% of women in BCS70 and 4% of women in NCDS

- only 3% of NCDS and 3% men and 4% women in BCS70 had been on a basic maths/number-work course

Cohort members previously assessed with poor literacy or numeracy skills

- just 2% of those with very poor literacy skills in BCS70 and 4% in NCDS had been on a course to help improve either their reading or writing skills

- among 30 year olds with poor literacy in BCS70, just 1% had been on a course to improve their reading, 2% to help improve their writing. No one with poor literacy in NCDS had been on a course
• maths courses had been no better attended. 2% of those assessed with very poor numeracy in BCS70 and 1% in NCDS had been on a course to try and improve their basic maths and number skills

Have those self-reporting reading difficulties or with poor reading skills tried to improve their reading?
Do I want to improve my skills?

Adults will not attend a course to improve their skills or engage in any other formal or informal learning opportunity if they are not motivated to do so. 8% of 30 year olds in BCS70 and 7% of 42 year olds in NCDS wanted to improve their reading, 9% BCS70 and 13% NCDS to improve their writing, with more than a quarter having wanted to improve their grasp of maths at some time: 29% BCS70 and 28% NCDS. Encouragingly, although so few cohort members either self-reporting or with a poor grasp of the basic skills had actually been on a course, a higher percentage than these overall figures wanted to improve their reading, writing or basic arithmetic and grasp of numbers. This desire to improve must be nurtured if the potential learners who need to improve their basic skills the most are to be engaged and motivated.

Men and women who self-reported skills difficulties

- far more men than women, particularly in the older NCDS cohort, wanted to improve their reading skills: 51% to 41% BCS70, 47% to 26% NCDS
- the proportion of those expressing a wish to improve their writing skills was again highest for men in NCDS: 42% men and 40% women BCS70, 49% men and 36% women NCDS
- more women wanted to improve their maths/number-work than men in both cohorts: 40% to 34% BCS70, 47% to 41% NCDS

Those assessed with a poor grasp of literacy or numeracy

- in BCS70, 15% of those assessed in 1991 with very poor literacy and 11% with poor literacy wanted to improve their reading skills, with 12% of the very poor literacy group and 11% of the poor literacy group wanting to improve their ability to write
- more of the 42 year olds assessed with a poor grasp of literacy in 1995 in the NCDS cohort felt they wanted to improve either their reading or writing skills. Among the very poor literacy group, 19% wanted to improve their reading, 20% their writing. Figures among the poor literacy group were 9% and 12% respectively
a third of those with very low numeracy wanted to improve their basic number-
work skills: 35% BCS70 and 33% NCDS

Do those self-reporting reading difficulties or with poor literacy skills want to improve their reading?

Do those self-reporting number difficulties or with poor numeracy skills want to improve their basic number skills?
Why do I want to improve my skills?

The men and women who said that they wanted to improve their skills, were asked the reasons why they wanted to improve them:

- to be able to help their children
- to improve their chances of getting a job
- to get promoted
- to get a better job
- for their own satisfaction

Whether looking at all men and women or the smaller sample previously assessed with poor skills\(^5\), the reasons most cited for wanting to improve skills among those who self-reported difficulties with reading, writing or basic number-work were own satisfaction, to help their children, to get a job or a better job and lastly, to get promoted. Helping their children came above own satisfaction for the younger BCS70 women who self-reported reading or basic number-work difficulties and wanted to improve these skills, and also for the older NCDS cohort who had been assessed with very poor or poor literacy and wanted to improve their reading skills.

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5. The very poor and poor literacy groups were necessarily combined here, but readers should still bear in mind the small numbers involved (n=38 BCS70, n=33 NCDS).
What motivates those with poor literacy to improve their reading skills?

- **OWN SATISFACTION**: 46%
- **TO HELP CHILDREN**: 55%
- **HELP GET A JOB**: 13%, 24%
- **HELP GET A BETTER JOB**: 33%
- **GET PROMOTED**: 12%

% WANT TO IMPROVE READING SKILLS FOR THIS REASON

What motivates those with poor numeracy to improve their basic number skills?

- **OWN SATISFACTION**: 62%
- **TO HELP CHILDREN**: 53%
- **HELP GET A JOB**: 13%, 11%
- **HELP GET A BETTER JOB**: 21%, 17%
- **GET PROMOTED**: 5%, 6%

% WANT TO IMPROVE NUMBER SKILLS FOR THIS REASON
What motivates men who self-report reading difficulties to improve their reading skills?

- Own Satisfaction: 63%
- To Help Children: 44%
- Help Get a Job: 35%
- Help Get a Better Job: 33%
- Get Promoted: 18%

What motivates women who self-report reading difficulties to improve their reading skills?

- Own Satisfaction: 50%
- To Help Children: 52%
- Help Get a Job: 26%
- Help Get a Better Job: 34%
- Get Promoted: 14%
How do I want to improve my skills?

MEN and women who wanted to improve their basic skills were also asked the ways and places they would find the best to help them improve their skills:

- day, evening or week-end college course
- community centre
- at a local library
- using PC packages
- watching TV programmes
- listening to radio programmes
- books at home

How do those with poor literacy want to improve their reading skills?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>BCS70</th>
<th>NCDS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evening College Course</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC packages</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books at Home</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime College Course</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Resources</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Centre</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% want to improve reading skills by this way
No more than 10% cohort members who had been assessed with or reported poor basic skills and who said they would like to improve their skills felt they would be interested in improving their skills via the radio, TV or weekend college courses. The most preferred places and ways that these men and women would look to improve their skills were at an evening college course, using books at home or PC packages and at a day college course. Evening college courses were by far the most popular choice in both cohorts, with books at home being more in favour among the younger BCS70 cohort. More men than women in both cohorts liked the idea of using PC packages to improve their skills, whereas a group of women, presumably those who had a full-time home-care role, felt they would attend a day-time college course.

6. Very poor and poor literacy groups were again necessarily combined: n=38, BCS70; n=33, NCDS.
Who wants to improve their skills?

Previous research has highlighted the underprivileged circumstances of the men and women who have and report a poor grasp of the basic skills. They were more likely to have experienced disadvantage and poverty during their childhood, to have had an unsatisfactory school experience and to have left full-time education with few or no qualifications. They were more likely to move into low-skilled low-paid work, to have spent more time outside of paid employment and to have had children early. They were also more likely to suffer symptoms of depression and poor physical health. Despite, or perhaps because of, such experiences or circumstances, a sizeable percentage of those self-reporting difficulties and those assessed with literacy and numeracy needs, wanted to improve their skills. But just what distinguishes these adults, those with an expressed need, from those who are not motivated to improve their skills - those whose need remains latent?

Reading and writing

We took a long look at how these two groups of adults looked in 2000. Neither was a homogenous group. However, although differences were not glaringly apparent, certain patterns did emerge. Among the men and women with self-reported reading difficulties and those previously assessed with literacy needs, more of those wanting to improve their skills:

- had a disrupted school career
- had left school at the minimum age with few qualifications
- entered into low grade manual work (and so were less likely to use a PC to do any part of their job).

These men and women tended to exhibit many more signs and symptoms of depression, feeling generally dissatisfied that life had turned out the way it had, never seeming to give them anything that they wanted. This profile was also true for women who self-reported writing difficulties, though not for men.

Maths

Certain signs and symptoms of depression and dissatisfaction were also present among the men and women self-reporting basic calculation and number difficulties or with numeracy needs, who did want to improve their skills.
However, their schooling and employment experiences did not differ from the overall group. Those with poor numeracy and a desire to improve their skills were actually more likely to have enjoyed some extended education, to have gained qualifications, to have received work-related training and to be in non-manual work which required them to use a PC at least some of the time.

How do men self-reporting reading difficulties want to improve their reading skills?

- Evening College Course: 36%
- PC Packages: 28%
- Books at Home: 26%
- Daytime College Course: 9%
- Library Resources: 8%
- Community Centre: 6%
How do women self-reporting reading difficulties want to improve their reading skills?

- Evening College Course: 30%
- PC Packages: 16%
- Books at Home: 23%
- Daytime College Course: 26%
- Library Resources: 16%
- Community Centre: 14%

% Want to improve reading skills by this way
Conclusion

AROUND 1 in 10 adults in Britain age 30 or 42 report having some difficulty with at least one of the basic skills. 1% of each age group went as far as to report they could not read, write, perform basic calculations or work out days/dates on a calendar. The percentage may be small, but even this translates to a lot of people when applied to a population of approximately 60 million.

Among the cohort members reporting difficulties with the basic skills, additional associated problems were more likely to be acknowledged by men reporting reading problems, and older men reporting writing problems in NCDS. More women who reported number-work difficulties expressed problems with the mathematical processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division particularly in the younger BCS70 cohort.

No more than 1 in 5 (range between 7% to 19%) of the adults previously assessed with functional literacy or numeracy difficulties acknowledged that they were still having difficulties. The figures are remarkably consistent with the previous levels of self-reported difficulties among the poorly skilled. In fact, the vast majority of those with very poor literacy felt their reading skills had actually improved over the past ten years. This estimate of improvement is of course subjective, and we have no way of establishing the accuracy of their assessment, as literacy and numeracy skills were not objectively measured in this latest survey. However, as no more than 4% of the very poorly skilled groups in either cohort had attended a course to help improve their skills, it is an open question whether they had in fact improved their grasp of reading, writing or basic number-work since they took the functional literacy or numeracy tests.

Even among men and women reporting skills difficulties very few had been on a course to help improve their skills. The highest proportion was 10% among men reporting reading difficulties in BCS70. Learning programmes for adults do not easily attract those with difficulties. The nature and range of services being offered must be improved if they are to be used by those who most need to be involved.

"no more than 4% of the very poorly skilled groups in either count had attended a course"
Offering most encouragement to those working in the field of adult basic skills provision is the higher percentage of those with literacy and numeracy needs who have wanted to improve their skills at some time – as many as half of those reporting some difficulty and a third of those assessed with poor numeracy. This motivation to learn needs to be channelled into some kind of involvement with formal or informal learning programmes if the Government’s aim of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults in England by 2004 is to be met (Skills for Life, DfES, 2001).

Previous research commissioned by the BSA and conducted by Mori found that the main motivators for adults to want to improve their basic skills were to ‘feel better about themselves’ and ‘to be better at everyday tasks which involve basic skills’ (Getting better basic skills – what motivates adults, The Basic Skills Agency, 2000). The most cited reasons for wanting to develop skills among NCDS and BCS70 cohort members were likewise ‘for own-satisfaction’, but also to help their own children. Children were the prime motivator among the older NCDS cohort assessed with poor skills and the younger women in BCS70 who reported skills difficulties. Improving employment opportunities tended to be cited more often by men with or self-reporting difficulties with basic skills.

From the options of how to improve skills, evening college courses were the favoured choice for cohort members wanting to improve their grasp of basic skills. Other preferences were home tuition – books at home – and the use of PC packages, particularly for men. Day-time college courses were more favoured by younger women in BCS70, presumably young mothers juggling home and child-care responsibilities, with older NCDS women being least in favour of using a PC to improve their skills. While it is important to recognise what strategies are most successful in attracting learners, e-learning options need to be available.

The men and women who want to improve their reading (and to a lesser extent and writing skills), seem to be more vulnerable than those wanting to improve their grasp of basic maths and numbers. Poor socio-economic conditions, limited

"Poor socio-economic conditions, limited schooling and poor employment experiences have culminated in a negative view of their future."
schooling and poor employment experiences have culminated in a negative view of their future. They have obviously felt the impact of their poor skills over many years and in many areas of their life, and want to do something about their disadvantaged circumstances. These men and women are some of the key learners that the Government is aiming to engage in basic skills provision over the next few years. The desire is obviously there, the test will be to provide learning opportunities that can meet their needs.

The numbers who say that they want to improve their skills temper the disappointment at the very low numbers of adults who report difficulties with basic skills and have attended courses to improve their skills. The Government states its mission is 'to give all adults the opportunity to acquire the skills for active participation in the 21st century'. The challenges are here to be met. To help achieve this we must firstly motivate those with 'latent' or 'invisible' needs. Secondly, to turn the desire to improve among those who do acknowledge their poor basic skills into action, we need to work with the reasons and methods they identify as key motivating factors. Thirdly, access to and use of computers and the Internet need to be developed so that those with basic skills needs are not further sidelined from the world of education, employment and in general, any area that calls for information to be accessed – be it for health, well-being or, simply, pleasure.

"give all adults the opportunity to acquire the skills for active participation in the 21st century"
Appendix

Assessment of literacy and numeracy in BCS70 and NCDS

In both BCS70 and NCDS surveys, at 21 and 37 respectively, each of the functional literacy and numeracy assessment tasks consisted of giving cohort members a visual stimuli and then asking a number of questions about it. Although the questions were not identical across cohorts, the tasks were grouped at different levels that corresponded to [then] basic skills standards. For cohort members who successfully completed the assessment a score based on aggregating correct answers across the individual tasks was calculated for literacy and numeracy separately (for full details see Ekinsmyth and Bynner, 1993; Bynner and Parsons, 1997). These raw scores were then grouped into ability categories, with cut-off points reflecting natural breaks in the distributions of scores. To bring the two surveys into line for comparison purposes here, it was necessary to ‘re-group’ the BCS70 scores from the three categories originally devised into a four group format, as used in NCDS. This re-grouping led to a slight increase in the percentage of cohort members with the poorest skills. Table A1a and A1b show that in comparison with NCDS cohort members at age 37, more of the younger BCS70 cohort was assessed with very poor literacy (8% to 6%) and very poor numeracy (27% to 23%) when they were 21.

How many cohort members who had their literacy and numeracy assessed took part in 2000?

90% of the NCDS cohort members who had their basic skills assessed in 1995 and 83% of the BCS70 cohort members who had their basic skills assessed in 1991 took part in the latest round of data collection in 2000. An analysis of response bias shows a slight under representation of the most disadvantaged groups in both cohorts, and males in BCS70. However, the overall picture across the two studies over time is remarkably similar. The reduced samples of cohort members taking part in 2000 are representative with respect to the complete samples that had their basic skills assessed at an earlier date. In tables 1a and 1b we see that although those assessed with the poorest skills were the least likely to have taken part in the survey in 2000, the distribution of this reduced sample of cohort members across the four literacy and numeracy skills groups remained very stable over time in both cohorts.
Table A1a: Distribution of NCDS and BCS70 cohort members by their assessed literacy skills group in original sample survey and in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NCDS</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>BCS70</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>age 37</td>
<td>age 42</td>
<td>% in 2000</td>
<td>age 21</td>
<td>age 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n (100%)=</td>
<td>1711</td>
<td>1541</td>
<td></td>
<td>1623</td>
<td>1352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A1b: Distribution of NCDS and BCS70 cohort members by their assessed numeracy skills group in original sample survey and in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NCDS</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>BCS70</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>age 37</td>
<td>age 42</td>
<td>% in 2000</td>
<td>age 21</td>
<td>age 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n (100%)=</td>
<td>1711</td>
<td>1537</td>
<td></td>
<td>1623</td>
<td>1352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-reported difficulties in BCS70 and NCDS

COHORT members have answered questions on difficulties they had with reading, writing and basic number work when age 23, 33, 37 and 42 in NCDS and age 21 and 30 in BCS70.

The question format expanded between age 23 and 33 in NCDS, with this later format being similarly adopted at age 21 in BCS70 and age 37 NCDS, apart from a slight alteration to the writing/spelling question. In the latest round of data collection in 2000, when NCDS were age 42 and BCS70 age 30, the initial questions that inquired if a cohort member had a skills difficulty were abolished. For example, using table A2a as our reference point, the general introduction and the question 'Since leaving school have you had any problems with reading?' was not asked in 2000. Cohort members were now asked the specific nature of the problems they had with reading, writing or basic maths/numbers/arithmetic, not if they had difficulties per se.

Table A3 shows the percentage of cohort members reporting reading, writing/spelling or basic number and arithmetic problems at each round of data collection. As we can see, the percentage reporting reading difficulties across sweeps has been remarkably consistent. Writing difficulties were only asked in conjunction with spelling difficulties in most of the earlier sweeps, but at age 37 (NCDS) it was possible to isolate the cohort members who only reported writing difficulties – not difficulties with spelling. In NCDS, 4% reported writing difficulties at age 37, increasing to 6% at age 42. 4% of BCS70 reported writing difficulties at 30. Difficulties with numbers were asked in a very different way in the latest round of data collection. By combining cohort members who report difficulties with calculating the right change with those who report difficulties with working out days/dates with a calendar, a comparable percentage with cohort members reporting basic number/arithmetic difficulties in earlier sweeps is found. A 3 indicates the question was asked.
GENERAL INTRODUCTION. As you probably know, thousands of adults have difficulties with reading or writing at one time or another. It would help us if you could answer some questions about your experience of reading and writing.

Since leaving school have you had any problems with reading? ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓

If respondent answered 'yes' they were asked if their difficulties were due to sight problems or just difficulties with reading. If 'difficulties with reading', a number of additional questions were asked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table A2a: Reading Questions</th>
<th>NCDS</th>
<th>BCS70</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Can you read and understand what is written in a magazine or newspaper? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?  (This question is the first [filter] question asked in 2000, thus all cohort members asked this question. If respondent reports difficulties, they are asked some additional questions.)</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Can you usually read and understand what is written in a letter sent to you? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty? OR</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Can you usually read and understand what is written in an official typed letter sent to you? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) If you have to, can you usually read and understand any paperwork or forms you would have to deal with in a job? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) If you have to, can you read aloud to a child from a children's storybook? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table A2b: Writing Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>NCDS</th>
<th>BCS70</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since leaving school have you had any problems with writing or spelling?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since leaving school have you had any problems with writing or spelling?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(IF YES) Is this just with writing just with spelling, or do you have problems with both?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If respondent answered 'yes' they were asked if their difficulties were due to sight problems, problem holding pen/pencil, using keyboard, both, difficulties with writing generally. If 'difficulties with writing generally', a number of additional questions were asked.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) If you need to, can you write a letter to a friend to thank them for a gift or invite them to visit? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Could you write to an employer to apply for a job? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Could you fill in a form, from the council for example, or for a hospital appointment? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Could you write a letter of complaint about something if you wanted to? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) When you try to write something, what is it you find difficult? Do you find it difficult to…..</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• spell words correctly</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• make your handwriting easy to read</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• put down in words what you want to say</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(never try to write anything)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since leaving school have you had any problems with number work or basic maths? OR

Since leaving school have you had any problems with numbers or simple arithmetic?

If respondent answered 'yes', a number of additional questions were asked.

a) When you buy things in shops with a five or ten pound note, can you usually tell if you are given the right change. (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty? (This question is the first [filter] question asked in 2000, thus all cohort members asked this question. If respondent reports difficulties, they are asked some additional questions.)

b) If you need to, can you keep household accounts of what you have spent or saved or what to put by for bills when they come? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?

c) What is it you find difficult with numbers and simple arithmetic? Do you find it difficult to……
- recognise and understand numbers when you see them
- add up
- take away
- multiply
- divide

d) If you need to, can you usually work out what dates go with which day on a calendar? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?

(All 2000 cohort members asked this question)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table A2c: Numbers and Arithmetic Questions</th>
<th>NCDS</th>
<th>BCS70</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since leaving school have you had any problems with number work or basic maths? OR</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since leaving school have you had any problems with numbers or simple arithmetic?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If respondent answered 'yes', a number of additional questions were asked.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) When you buy things in shops with a five or ten pound note, can you usually tell if you are given the right change. (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty? (This question is the first [filter] question asked in 2000, thus all cohort members asked this question. If respondent reports difficulties, they are asked some additional questions.)</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) If you need to, can you keep household accounts of what you have spent or saved or what to put by for bills when they come? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) What is it you find difficult with numbers and simple arithmetic? Do you find it difficult to……</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- recognise and understand numbers when you see them</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- add up</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- take away</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- multiply</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- divide</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) If you need to, can you usually work out what dates go with which day on a calendar? (IF YES) Can you read this easily, or is it with difficulty?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table A3: Level of self-reported difficulties in NCDS and BCS70 at different age points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NCDS</th>
<th>BCS70</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>age of cohort member</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading difficulties</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing and/or Spelling difficulties</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numberwork difficulties</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change calculation and/or problems with days/dates/calendars</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Change calculation problems)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Days/dates/calendars problems)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any difficulty (inc. spelling)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any difficulty</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Commonwealth House
1-19 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1NU
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