Core skills

A strategy to support functional and employability skills in the adult social care workforce in England

2014-2017
Preface

This is a strategy for the adult social care sector to support functional and employability skills - referred to here as core skills. These are skills that impact directly on the quality of care and support services.

The strategy sets out the issues for the sector around core skills then outlines ways for the sector to address those issues, including support for learning by frontline staff that is closely linked to their work with people who need care and support services.

This strategy will be of relevance primarily to those directly involved in policy and/or with a particular interest in these skills. It will be followed by a detailed implementation plan showing how employers, Skills for Care and other partners can work together to ensure these essential skills are readily available to individuals and organisations.

Implementation products, resources and initiatives will have broad appeal to employers of all types and, in some cases, to employees and people who need care and support.
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1 Core skills

The ability of individuals and organisations to deliver high-quality, person-centred care and support depends on crucial functional and employability skills.

By **functional** skills, we mean the ability to use information and communicate effectively. These skills include English language and literacy, numeracy and the ability to use digital technology.

By **employability** skills, we mean the skills that enable an individual to make a positive contribution at work. Employability skills include problem-solving, working with others, self-management and the ability to act responsibly.

These are the skills that enable individuals and organisations to work, learn and develop together effectively. We see these skills as **core skills**.

These are the skills that underpin both capability and confidence. Individuals need these skills to secure, sustain and then progress in work. Organisations need these skills to function effectively.

**Core skills in action**

Here are just a few examples of activities that demand core skills:

- Communicating effectively with people who need care and support.
- Completing induction and initial learning and development.
- Undertaking an e-learning module.
- Making the Social Care Commitment.
- Time management.
- Understanding and following policies and procedures.
- Keeping accurate written records.
- Contributing at meetings.
- Working with weights and measures.
- Going online to find information.
Everyone working in adult social care needs to be able to use information and communicate effectively, work with others, solve problems, learn and develop. What that means in practice varies according to the job’s particular circumstances, but the importance of these generic skills is growing as the use of information and communication technology spreads, adult social care becomes more complex and the expectations of people who need care and support rise. The challenge for us as a sector is to ensure, particularly at a time of rapid expansion, that workers in all roles have these core skills at whatever level their jobs demand.

What are the issues?

Significant and persistent deficits around core skills already exist in the adult social care workforce. Skills surveys show that somewhere between a fifth and a half of the adult social care workforce lack the core skills their jobs require. These deficits – particularly around information processing and communication skills – undermine both competence and confidence. This in turn restricts the ability of individuals and organisations to learn, develop and adapt to change. All of which places real limitations on the ability of individuals and organisations to deliver the high-quality, values-based, person-centred care and support that the sector aims to provide.

Three factors may increase this core skills deficit:

- pressure to expand and diversify the adult social care workforce
- reconfiguration and transformation of adult social care services
- accelerating use of digital technology.

Why do we need a core skills strategy?

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Core skills enable adult social care workers to:

- work safely and meet quality standards
- work flexibly and adapt to change
- communicate effectively with colleagues and with people who need care and support
- access and participate in learning and gain qualifications
- take on additional responsibilities and progress in their career.

Core skills enable adult social care providers to:

- deliver high-quality person-centred care
- operate flexibly and efficiently
- communicate effectively with staff and with people using care and support
- develop their services
- adopt new technology and new working practices
- adapt successfully to service transformation.

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“In the area of digital skills, the requirement for remote logging of working and increasing use of assistive technology is starting to impact us.”
Lynne Johnson, Care Solutions Group

Demand for adult social care services is growing rapidly as our population ages and medical advances enable more people to live longer with complex conditions. At the same time, the public increasingly expects care and support that is tailored to the individual.

To meet these demands, the sector will need to recruit and retain a larger workforce capable of delivering more complex care in more flexible, responsive ways. It will also need to integrate, reconfigure and transform many services – a process that will place added demands on individual workers and their employer organisations.

Meanwhile, digital technology is transforming the way we use information and communicate. This is not only enabling new ways of delivering services and new working practices, it is redefining the skills needed to use information and communicate effectively.

In other words, at a time when we are seeking to substantially expand the adult social care workforce – recruiting people whose existing core skills cannot be taken for granted, individuals and organisations will need core skills at higher levels than they previously had.

This trend – the growing importance of rising levels of core skills – is only likely to continue. One important implication of this is that these skills will need to be continuously refreshed and developed.

In short, the issues around core skills are twofold:

- How to address current core skills deficits, particularly in relation to information processing and communication skills.
- How to ensure that, as the workforce expands and diversifies and the level of core skills required by individuals and organisations rises, employers are able to continuously refresh and develop these skills.
What support is already in place?

Standards and qualifications

Core skills are well-established in adult social care standards and qualifications. Pre-employment qualifications, Apprenticeships, the Common Induction Standards, the Health and Social Care diplomas and the Social Care Commitment all make explicit and/or implicit reference to the core skills skill-set. This includes not only communication and the functional skills of literacy, English language, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT), but also the employability skills of problem-solving, working with others, self-management and acting responsibly.

Beyond the sector, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) currently supports three types of qualification that relate to using information and communicating: GCSE English and maths, Functional Skills* and awards and certificates in English and maths. There are in addition SFA-approved qualifications in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Funding is available for some of these qualifications when learners enrol as individuals, but when employers commission provision they may be expected to cover its cost.

Digital strategy

The sector’s strategy for digital working, learning and information sharing, published in 2014, includes the principle that everyone involved in delivering care and support is able to work digitally and has opportunity to develop their digital skills. The strategy’s actions include research into skills gaps and issues.

Support for core skills learning

A range of support currently exists for core skills learning in adult social care.

The sector route-way for adult social care helps unemployed people gain the skills and confidence they need to begin working in adult social care. The route-way was developed in 2008 by Skills for Care, with Jobcentre Plus, at the request of the Department for Work and Pensions. It provides the basis for Jobcentre Plus sector-based work academies and other pre-employment training delivered by learning providers. A revised version was published in 2012 and a new interactive version is due for release in 2014.

In 2011, Skills for Care worked with Awarding Organisations to develop an accredited award from the course component of the sector route-way. This Level 1 Award in Preparing to Work in Adult Social Care, consists of five level 1 units that provide a stepping stone to standards of basic competence.

Apprenticeship learning includes (under the term transferable skills) functional skills programmes in English and maths and learning around employability skills.

In addition to care-related employability courses, learning providers in further education offer functional skills and ESOL courses contextualised to work in adult social care. Many workplace learning providers delivering care qualifications also offer learners support with literacy, numeracy and English language. Self-study materials, including e-learning, are also available.

* Functional Skills replaced Key Skills and Skills for Life certificates in adult literacy and numeracy from 2010.
Much of this provision was stimulated by Skills for Life, the national strategy to improve adult literacy and numeracy (2001-2010). Skills for Life played a vital role in raising awareness around adult literacy and numeracy and also in creating national standards, qualifications (the forerunners of functional skills) and learning materials for vocational contexts, including adult social care.

During this period, a good deal of work has been undertaken within the sector to raise awareness of core skills and to find practical ways for employers to help staff develop the skills.

In 2004, Skills for Care’s predecessor organisation, the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPSS), produced guidance for employers on basic skills training after conducting research that suggested at least 20% of adult social care workers lacked the literacy and numeracy skills their jobs required while another 20% had limited English language skills.

In 2006, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), working with Skills for Care, found that although employers recognised workforce issues around core skills, managers typically lacked the confidence, expertise and resources to address the issues. In response to this finding, SCIE and Skills for Care developed the web-based resource, Care Skillsbase, which offers employers tools (including skills checks) to identify and respond to workforce needs around communication and number skills.

In 2007 Skills for Care published a Skills for Life strategy for adult social care. This strategy aimed to promote and develop an adult social care sector in which ‘everyone … has the chance to improve their literacy, language, numeracy and ICT skills.’ It prioritised partnership-working to maximise the availability of flexible, relevant Skills for Life provision to meet the needs of employers, noting that although funding for Skills for Life courses was available, take-up by employers in the sector was low and there was a need to find new ways of delivering support.

In response, Skills for Care developed the Learning through Work guides (2011), a resource to support managers and supervisors deliver bite-sized chunks of informal learning on communication and number skills as part of day-to-day care work and support reflection by members of staff.

In summary: core skills are embedded into standards and qualifications (including pre-employment programmes and Apprenticeships), reflecting broad recognition within the sector that these are essential skills for individuals and organisations. The sector’s strategy for digital working, learning and information sharing acknowledges the growing importance of digital skills. Responsible learning providers build core skills development into occupational competence and continuing professional development (CPD) courses. For individuals and employers wishing to address specific skills such as literacy, English language, numeracy and digital skills, functional skills and other national qualifications are available. In addition, some work has been undertaken to develop other ways to address core skills issues in the sector.
What support is needed?

Support is needed to:

- address current workforce deficits in core skills
- enable the sector to meet core skills needs as it expands
- ensure that individual workers and their employers are able to continuously refresh and develop core skills.

Inclusion in standards, qualifications and formal learning

Currently, opportunity exists to address core skills at an individual’s point-of-entry into the sector, and in the context of formal occupational competence and CPD learning.

To make the most of this opportunity, it is important for the sector to continue to promote core skills learning in the context of standards and qualifications (existing and new) to employers (including individual employers) and learning providers – and by extension to social care workers. Part of this work will involve monitoring how the content and level of core skills required within the sector evolves in response to changes in adult social care and digital technology and then ensuring that these changes are reflected in standards, qualifications and formal learning opportunities.

Time for a new approach

The troubling persistence of core skills deficits after almost a decade of substantial public investment in the skills suggests that it would be unwise to rely solely on formal, qualification-based learning to meet the sector’s core skills needs. There are clearly limits to what can be achieved in this area through qualifications and formal learning.

“Formal learning in the actual workplace is very challenging where care is provided within a person’s own home, e.g. domiciliary care and supported living. We are fans of manager-led learning and team learning and do a lot of learning already within team meetings”

Alton Hobbs, Royal Mencap Society
Limiting factors include:

- the size and distribution of the adult social care workforce
- learning provider capacity (i.e. to meet the needs of the sector)
- funding and operational constraints in the sector
- the need for individuals and employers to continuously refresh and develop these skills
- the evolving nature of the skills themselves.

On the one hand, there are standards and qualifications that address core skills issues adequately and that, with appropriate updating, can continue to do so. These support formal learning programmes that offer organisations and individuals the opportunity to address core skills issues. On the other hand, we have persistent deficits.

The question is, therefore, *What more can realistically be done to support core skills in the sector?*

Work within and beyond the sector strongly suggests that core skills are best developed in context, i.e. when the learning takes place on or close to the job. This kind of embedded or situated learning is much more likely to be applied and consequently much more likely to impact on the quality and safety of care and support services.

In practical terms, this kind of learning happens through the sort of management and supervisory practices, reflection and peer learning that are known to promote high performance working and employee engagement. This style of learning is by definition employer-led, though often facilitated and supported by others with expertise in learning.
An employer-led workplace learning approach to core skills has a number of advantages. It has the flexibility to fit around the operational constraints that restrict participation in formal learning. It enables the skills to be refreshed and developed on a continuous basis – and allows for individuals to go on learning for as long as necessary. It ensures that learning focuses on relevant content at the level needed. It allows for team learning as well as individual learning and, by connecting the learning directly to day-to-day care work, it greatly increases the likelihood that the learning will benefit people who need care and support services. It has the potential, in other words, to be both effective and affordable.

The approach will complement more traditional forms of learning around skills, standards and qualifications. It will also support the meaningful reflection and peer-learning necessary to the development of values-driven care.

From a leadership and management perspective, it will serve to reinforce the people and performance management practices that involve and motivate staff, helping employers to meet inspection requirements and gain quality awards such as Investors in People.

Finally, this approach to learning has considerable potential to aid recruitment and, in particular, retention. It offers the support that many staff, recruited for their aptitude for caring, need in order to cope with the more technical demands of the job. It can enable other staff to undertake the learning they need for career progression. More generally, by adding meaning to work activity, it offers job enrichment. It encourages a focus on learning at work that builds confidence and commitment, and encourages communication and team work. In all these ways it supports employee engagement, the key to retention.
Support for employer-led workplace learning

A programme of support for employer-led workplace learning will be established to help employers:

- address current workforce deficits in core skills
- continuously refresh and develop the core skills of their workforce.

This programme will make available to employers the guidance and support they need to:

- understand the issues around core skills
- identify needs (i.e. gaps between workforce skills and service objectives)
- address needs (risk management, skills development).

This will be implemented in ways that are practical and sustainable, i.e. within the capability of employers, consistent with their operational constraints and affordable.

The programme will cater to the range of different types of employer present in the sector (i.e. large, medium and small employers, private, voluntary and statutory employers, individual employers, rural and urban employers, domiciliary and residential care providers etc).

The programme will aim to equip employers with the confidence, expertise and resources to take effective action on core skills.

It will build on and extend work in the sector to date, with particular reference to practical support tailored to the needs of the sector.

Features of this programme may include some or all of the following:

- Models of learning with guidance for employers to adapt the model according to local circumstances.
  - Models to incorporate e.g. reflection, coaching and mentoring, peer and self-directed learning supported by materials.
- A wide range of resources to support workplace learning, including materials to help employers understand core skills issues, identify and address needs and develop skills.
- Signposting to further resources produced within the sector (e.g. SCIE’s Social Care TV resources), as well as to the wealth of free and/or low-cost digital learning materials now existing on the internet.
- Support for employee learning champions and volunteer coach-mentor schemes.
- Promotion and dissemination of employer good practice in this area.
As an accompaniment to this, work will also be undertaken to:

- research and evaluate the effectiveness of this approach, in partnership with employers and other relevant partners, including people who need care and support
- network the many individuals within the sector who have demonstrated a particular commitment to work in this area
- develop partnerships between organisations within and beyond the sector to promote and support core skills development
- map out a new, facilitative role for learning providers, enabling them to lend their expertise to support employer-led workplace learning, in addition to delivering training and qualifications.

“Traditionally we have employed individuals with the right caring values, who may not have the appropriate level of core skills required to do the job, therefore we like many others find we have qualified staff who are great carers, but who still have elements of poor literacy and numeracy. The employer led model is the right strategy in embedding these skills, but we need more support in developing work based champions/core skills coaches”

Nigel Taylor, CareTech Community Services
To achieve the aims of this strategy, action is proposed under two themes.

**Theme 1: Standards, qualifications and formal learning**

**Aim:** Ensure that core skills are adequately supported in standards, qualifications and formal learning opportunities.

**Proposed action**
- Promote to employers and learning providers the requirement for core skills made by standards, qualifications and formal learning; also the core skills development opportunity that standards, qualifications and formal learning offer.
- Monitor how the content and level of core skills required within the sector evolves in response to changes in adult social care and digital technology and ensure that these changes are reflected in standards, qualifications and formal learning opportunities.

**Theme 2: Support for employer-led workplace learning**

**Aim:** Enable employers to:
- address any core skills deficits in their workforce
- continuously refresh and develop the core skills of their workforce.

**Proposed action**
- Create a programme of support for employer-led workplace learning.
- Map out a new, facilitative role for learning providers.
- Research and evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.
- Network individuals within the sector who are committed to core skills development.
- Partnership work with organisations within and beyond the sector to promote and support core skills development.

Please note that a detailed action plan will follow this strategy, setting out how employers, Skills for Care and other partners can work together to implement these actions. Products, resources and initiatives that follow as part of the implementation will have broad appeal to employers of all types and, in some cases, to employees and people who need care and support.
How will this strategy improve core skills in the adult social care sector?

Over the medium to long-term, it is intended that this strategy will help the sector to reduce core skills gaps. Success will of course depend upon the resource that will be developed following this strategy and upon the extent to which the limiting factors discussed can be addressed. This will require commitment and collaboration from partners across the sector.

How will this strategy improve the experience of people who need care and support?

Core skills underpin the capability and confidence of the adult social care workforce. They impact directly on the quality of care and support that individual workers and organisations provide. This strategy will help to ensure that standards, qualifications and formal learning promote and develop the skills. Perhaps even more importantly, it will create new opportunities for frontline staff to develop these crucial skills through learning and reflection that is directly linked to their work with people who need care and support.

In both these ways, this strategy will support high-quality, person-centred care and support.