

Report on ACL Essex for the People and Families Scrutiny Committee

ACL is Essex County Council's adult (aged 19+) learning service and is the third largest Adult Community Learning service in the country. It sits within the Place and Public Health Function, and as of January 2020 has moved from the Economic Growth and Localities Directorate to the Public Health and Wellbeing Directorate. After going through the Organisational Design process, it launched its new service design in September 2019.

Its learners have many different backgrounds and experiences, as well as different challenges that they have faced. Some have just wanted a second chance at getting GCSEs, getting a job through a course or apprenticeship, or maybe getting the qualifications that they need for a new career or to get to university. Others have come because they want to improve their health and wellbeing, reduce loneliness and isolation, or develop their love of learning further. ACL is not just about second chances; it's about third, fourth, fifth and sixth chances. It is about helping learners to achieve the learning goals they have set their sights on, throughout their lives. An example of this is in the following quote from a current ACL learner:

"I have some fantastic news to tell you. I have managed to secure my dream job supporting the local community with tackling loneliness and isolation. I am so excited to have this opportunity as it is something that I have experienced myself. I have also secured a second job as bank staff supporting children and adults with disabilities. After taking redundancy I never believed that I would have a job where I can make a difference. I am still doing the computer course and am hoping that this will lead me to gain a qualification. I want to thank my tutor and the team who delivered the courses. I most certainly used some of the things which I have learnt there to secure my job. Dreams are possible."

ACL's purpose is quite simply: 'Improving lives through learning'.

National Context

Since 2017 there has been an increasing national focus on the importance of lifelong learning (adult learning) in terms of the growing need of the population to access learning throughout their lives e.g. re-training, work progression, social mobility, health and wellbeing, for example. This importance has been recognised across the main political parties with different commissions having been set up, as well as the Commons Education Select Committee on Lifelong Learning that is being reconvened.

The 2017 Industrial Strategy White Paper also noted its importance through committing to the creation of a National Re-training Scheme. This is a key intervention that is currently being prototyped in different areas of the country and will link with a National Skills Fund.

Think tanks like the Royal Society of Arts, the Learning and Work Institute, and Nesta, have also seen its importance and have developed various policy reports evidencing need, impact, and future direction. Whether this is around digital inclusion, re-training over the life-course, workplace poverty and inequalities, community cohesion, social isolation and loneliness, mental and physical health, productivity, family learning, or an aging population.

In the Learning and Work Institute's report 'Health, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK', it identified ten strategic challenges that resonate with the above in terms of the role of adult learning and its wide-ranging impact:

An aging population; Lifestyles (i.e. diet/exercise – physical health); Mental health and wellbeing; Fair work; Skills mismatches; Productivity; Poverty of place; Engagement, involvement and empowerment (community cohesion and integration); Community safety and security; and Sustainable development. The report provides evidence on some of the key ways that lifelong learning helps with these big challenges and shared outcomes:

- Improving health behaviours
- Extending life-expectancy and disability-free life expectancy
- Reducing lifestyle diseases
- Enabling a more efficient healthcare system
- Enabling access and advancement
- Enabling productivity
- Developing individual skills
- Building social capital
- Empowering communities
- Encouraging participation

Adult learning policy needs to be considered in close relation with employment, health services, and community development policy, so as to provide a holistic approach in order to positively affect people's lives across a range of areas and outcomes.

Whilst the above focuses on benefits to individuals, wider society and services also benefit from lifelong learning. Research from the Government Office for Science shows that in principle, local authorities can realise approximate savings of between £2.10 and £3.50 for every £1 invested into adult learning programmes. Given the number of public services actually benefiting, other research suggests that local authorities more realistically see 49% of savings (the 51% including other beneficiaries like DWP, NHS, Police, for example).

Essex Context

Through its Essex Skills for Growth Strategy published May 2019, Essex County Council has recognised that a lifelong learning approach is crucial for contributing to a more enriched and prosperous county for residents and businesses. This is in terms of sustainable and inclusive economic growth, social mobility and justice, and healthy communities that flourish.

It is recognised that there are a great many opportunities and lifelong learning can enable people to access these. But there are also many economic and health challenges in Essex that are 'wicked' issues which have no simple solutions. These range across diverse public services and key geographic areas (e.g. social isolation and loneliness increasing, stagnant social mobility, rising mental ill-health, and an aging population).

That Strategy notes that the gap between the wealthiest and most deprived places in the county remains wide, with economic inactivity remaining particularly high in Tendring (26.5%) and Maldon (25.1%) compared to Essex as a whole (19.8%). The county also has disproportionately fewer local jobs relative to the size of its population, and which is most acute in parts of South Essex and in coastal areas.

In terms of skills, Essex currently lags behind in terms of qualification levels; only 31% of residents are qualified to at least Level 4 compared to 39% nationally, whilst 7.6% of residents in Essex have no qualifications at all. Government data also suggests the need to improve literacy and numeracy levels in the county – 127,600 adults in Essex have literacy skills either at or below the level expected of 9-11 year olds and 415,000 adults have numeracy skills either at or below this level (all working age adults with an Entry Level 3 and below numeracy or literacy qualification) (BEIS 2012).

Essex, Southend and Thurrock combined have seven Further Education Colleges, two Universities, and a University College. Southend and Thurrock both have their own adult learning Centres.

What is ACL?

Robert Halfon MP and Chair of the Education Committee says, it's time to get serious on lifelong learning – and ensure everyone has the chance to prosper; ‘...with an adult community learning centre in every town in the country. These centres are the lifeblood of adult learning.’ In Essex we are lucky to have nine Adult Learning Centres across the county, offering people opportunities to gain new skills or re-train, learn and grow in confidence, as well as being healthier and more resilient to life's changes.

- Essex County Council commissions Adult Community Learning (ACL) Essex to deliver learning to the residents of Essex in order to support its strategic objectives. ACL Essex is principally a direct delivery service with a local focus.
- A small amount of delivery is carried out by sub-contractors to extend the reach of the service within the County. Managers have developed strong partnerships in areas where residents are most in need and partnerships are in place with employers, mental health commissioners, and Family Learning groups.
- ACL Essex provision is delivered across the whole political County in 9 main centres. Provision in the unitary authorities of Southend and Thurrock is delivered by separate ACLs. In addition to the main centres, the Service delivers learning in community venues. Childcare for learners and staff is available in 3 centres.
- ACL learners have access to a diverse range of accredited and non-accredited courses which support them to achieve their goals and aspirations, encourage creativity, and promote safe and healthy lifestyles. The service offers qualifications to help people move nearer to, enter or progress within the workplace or gain skills to enhance life chances.

In order to increase its impact and enable a sustainable service, ACL has recently launched a new look Service structure following the Organisational Design process within Essex County Council. It is now developing an ACL Strategy so that its purpose, intent, and impact is clearly understood; as well as reflecting ACL's ambition of working holistically and collaboratively across a range of shared outcomes for the residents and communities of Essex.

The Future of ACL

ACL is developing a new three-year Strategy because it recognises that lifelong learning is crucial to the economic success and healthy lives of residents, communities and businesses of Essex. That ACL acts across all the life stages of residents, from Family Learning, Apprenticeships and qualification courses, to community learning (one's that don't lead to a qualification) and wellbeing courses, means that it is in a key position to make a tangible difference to people's lives.

Consequently, ACL completely aligns with ECC Strategic Aims and sees itself a key part of helping to realise these for residents: Enables Economic Growth; Helps People Get the Best Start and Age Well; Help Create Great Spaces to Grow Up, Live and Work; and Help the Council Achieve Less with More.

As part of the new service design ACL also developed its own Strategic Aim and Priorities to reflect both the intent for the Service, but also to align with these wider ECC Organisational Aims and Priorities.

ACL is a conduit that helps to improve the health and wellbeing of learners, enables them to access basic skills, and to be able to progress and gain Level 4 qualifications where appropriate. This needs to be done in a way that is even more flexible, accessible, and agile in order to meet learners' needs, expectations and future requirements.



To achieve success, ACL recognises that it must have a collaborative mindset, working together internally, as well as with other service areas and partners, to realise holistic and transformational change for learners, businesses and communities, in the context of our key strategic drivers (which reflect those mentioned in the above section on the national picture).

Indeed, the link between good employment and education with health and wellbeing, for example, is noted in both the Essex Skills for Growth Strategy and the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2018-2022). This synergy is reflected in ACL's newly defined Curriculum Delivery Areas: Working Lives; Personal Development and Wellbeing; Social Mobility and Inclusion.

Figure 1 shows the proposed key drivers in terms of opportunities and challenges, the Curriculum Delivery Areas, and an example of a new National Outcomes Framework Pilot that ACL will be piloting. This is to evidence what the actual impact of lifelong learning is across a range of outcomes.

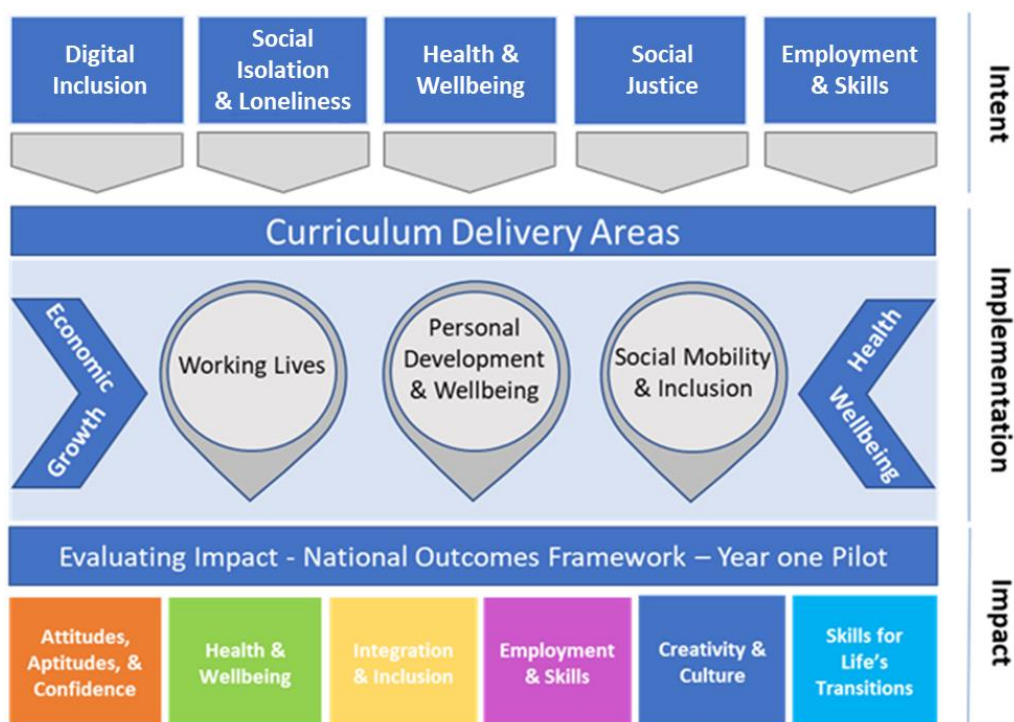



Fig 1

Examples of Impact (full academic year impact results 2018/19)

 11,000 individual learners and 21,000 enrolments	 72% of people said that their course helped them make new friends	 97% pass rate on GCSEs with 76% achieving 9-4 grades	 298 new apprentices
 23% of learners live in a disadvantaged postcode	 33% of learners had no or low previous qualifications	 67% of people said that their confidence had increased	 36% of people said their health and wellbeing had improved

Additional Information

Video Case study – ACL Apprenticeships:

Billy Turner, Distribution & Installations Manager at ECL

<https://youtu.be/uoQDPCLN6AA>

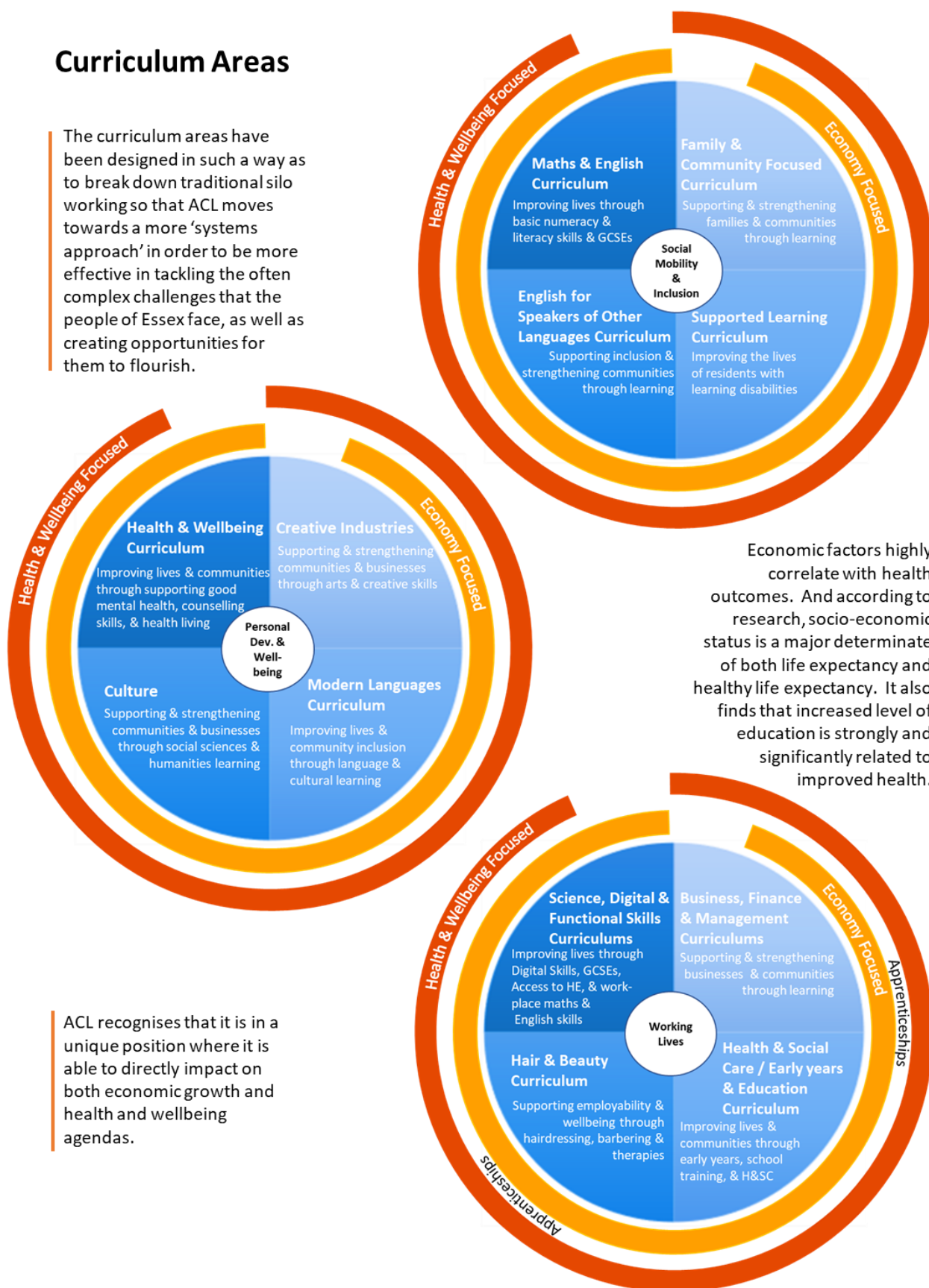
Reports:

Learning and Work Institute –

[‘Health, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK’](#)

Curriculum Areas

The curriculum areas have been designed in such a way as to break down traditional silo working so that ACL moves towards a more ‘systems approach’ in order to be more effective in tackling the often complex challenges that the people of Essex face, as well as creating opportunities for them to flourish.



Economic factors highly correlate with health outcomes. And according to research, socio-economic status is a major determinate of both life expectancy and healthy life expectancy. It also finds that increased level of education is strongly and significantly related to improved health.

ACL recognises that it is in a unique position where it is able to directly impact on both economic growth and health and wellbeing agendas.

