

REPORT TO THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT

THE NATIONAL BASIC SKILLS STRATEGY FOR WALES

EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE

OPENING REMARKS

1. Thank you for inviting the Basic Skills Agency to address this Committee. I'm proud that the Agency has been asked to oversee the implementation of the National Strategy on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government.
2. I believe the strategy is a bold and imaginative one and unique because it's tackling the basic skills problem from 'birth to grave', starting from the early years through to adults.
3. The strategy is undoubtedly ambitious. No other industrialised country has managed to reduce the number of young people and adults in need or develop a holistic approach to tackling the basic skills problem. It's especially challenging because it's a bilingual strategy, which will help to raise the standards of basic skills in both English and Welsh.

THE NATIONAL BASIC SKILLS STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

4. We are now at the end of the first year of the strategy. It was approved by the Assembly in 2001 and launched by the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Jane Davidson at our Wales Annual Conference in April 2001. In May 2002, the Year 1 report was presented by the Minister and was the subject of a plenary debate with Assembly Members.
5. As part of our commitment to roll out the strategy we've developed a coherent and detailed Delivery Plan, which includes initiatives designed to have an impact at each phase. In the first year, we have made a start on initiatives in all phases, laying foundations in some areas and achieving substantial outcomes in others. We have also put much effort into raising awareness of the importance of basic skills and establishing in the public consciousness the Assembly's determination to tackle the skills problem.

ULTIMATE GOALS OF THE NATIONAL STRATEGY

6. In Launching the National Strategy Jane Davidson said that the aim was *'to make Wales a country where no one lacks the literacy and numeracy skills most of us take for granted.'*
7. The Strategy focuses on four key measures to reach this aim.
 - Continuous promotion of the importance of basic skills now and in the future.**
 - Action plans and target setting nationally, regionally and locally.**
 - Effective improvement programmes.**
 - New literacy and numeracy qualifications for young people and adults.**

The National Strategy focuses on six ultimate goals.

<i>Ultimate Goal</i>	<i>Baseline - 2001</i>
1. <i>No child begins school unprepared for learning.</i>	A baseline is to be established through teacher survey in 2001.
2. <i>All 7 year olds achieve Level 2 or above in English, Welsh and Mathematics</i>	82% of 7 year olds achieve Level 2 or above in English, 90% in Maths and 87% in Welsh.
3. <i>All 11 year olds achieve Level 4 or above in English, Welsh and Mathematics</i>	78% of 11 yr olds achieved Level 4 or above in English, 74% in Maths and 68% in Welsh.
4. <i>All 14 year olds achieve Level 5 or above in English/Welsh and mathematics at Key Stage 3</i>	62% of 14 year olds achieved Level 5 or above in English and Maths, and 71% in Welsh
5. <i>All 16 year olds leave school literate and numerate.</i>	14% of 16 year olds have no qualifications
6. <i>All adults in Wales have literacy and numeracy skills that mean they can function and progress at work and in society in general.</i>	72% of adults have functional literacy and 68% have functional numeracy

OUR PARTNERS

8. Since September 2001 we have held information seminars and conferences in all parts of Wales and have briefed all key organisations so that knowledge of the strategy and more importantly the importance of basic skills has spread as widely as possible. Earlier this year we hosted our Annual Conference for Wales and almost 700 delegates who attended, responded positively to speakers from other parts of the world on our theme 'Learning from Others'.
9. We know that we cannot deliver this strategy on our own. We need a co-ordinated effort from all organisations concerned with education, work, training and community life in Wales. The Strategy Steering Group, which we have set up, is responsible for advising us on the direction of the strategy. It includes representatives from schools, LEAs, colleges, and the voluntary sector as well as key partner organisations including ACCAC, Estyn and the National Council.

10. We know how important it is for the strategy to support other Assembly initiatives particularly those relating to children, communities, youth and social exclusion, and we are conscious of the Assembly's concern with the problems of youth disengagement. We also recognise the importance of working with employers, business organisations and Wales TUC to tackle the skills shortage issue. The National Strategy embraces all these concerns. We are well aware that 'joined-up action' is an imperative for the Assembly and are keen to see that the strategy reflects this.

PROMOTION

11. Promotion has been an important feature of the first year. It will have been impossible to ignore the widespread coverage on television, billboards, buses and the press. We believe that this quality and level of coverage was needed to put basic skills, and the Assembly's attention to them, on the map.
12. We deliberately went for a high profile, aspirational campaign presenting positive images designed to tackle the negative stereotypes associated with basic skills. Contrary to sometimes popular opinion, people with poor basic skills are not illiterate; children and young people that struggle with basic skills are not 'handicapped'.
13. The majority of adults with low skills are holding down jobs and meeting the same challenges of everyday life as the rest of us. Their skills are just not good enough for the demands of modern life and they are held back and embarrassed by them. More than 20% of adults in Wales are in this group; if they are to be encouraged to do something to improve their skills, they must relate to the campaigns to promote basic skills and recognise themselves and their children in the adverts.
14. Members might also remember that there was not one but six campaigns, addressing three target groups in Welsh and English: firstly parents and carers through a direct 'if you read with me' appeal by young children; secondly, older children and teenagers with a 'basic skills can be fun' message; and finally, adults with a light-hearted, aspirational 'when I was young' theme, with a positive image. The adult advert carried the LearnDirect number. Each campaign used television, local radio, national and local press, billboards and posters and was supported by printed materials and videos distributed free to schools and colleges.

15. To support the campaigns at a local level we made funding available to post 16 organisations to help them extend the national campaign and deal with referrals, although the purpose of Phase 1 was primarily to raise awareness and alter perceptions, rather than to recruit potential learners. Even so, there were 722 calls to LearnDirect and a further 328 approaches direct to colleges.
16. The impact of each campaign has been formally evaluated by Market Research Wales. Results show that:
- ◆ 73% of children remembered the 'Read with Me' advert;
 - ◆ 73% of parents agreed that the adverts 'made me think about the importance of basic skills in my family';
 - ◆ 7 out of 10 parents felt the campaign 'made me realise how important it is to participate in my child's learning';
 - ◆ 75% of adults interviewed felt that the adverts had made a positive statement about basic skills.
17. We have also had informal and anecdotal feedback from teachers who report enthusiastic reactions from children and parents. Teachers have valued the high quality media campaign as it backs-up their efforts to teach and support basic skills. We've also heard positive feedback from adult tutors who report a renewed interest in learning from some adults, as well as existing adult learners expressing increased interest in reading to their children.
18. We are about to start on Phase 2 of our promotion campaign when awareness of basic skills is turned into action. To support a new set of adverts, based on the first, we will produce materials for parents on 'helping your child' and we are investigating the feasibility of producing self-assessment material for adults to use at home. All the evidence suggests that only a small percentage of those in need ever enrol onto a basic skills course. We therefore must do all we can to engage adults through innovative and high quality materials and learning packs.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

19. A significant feature of the strategy has been the extent to which it has enabled us to influence the strategic planning of key organisations, which will help us meet the strategy targets. Particularly strong links have been established with LEAs and organisations concerned with the early years.

20. In the coming year we will strengthen links with the emerging CCETs with a view to influencing the strategic plans for post 16 education and training in the twenty-one CCET areas. This approach will, we hope, offer the best chance of sustainable activity, and ensure the integration of basic skills activity with the wide range of other Assembly initiatives.
21. To support strategic planning we have attached a named officer to each area so that every LEA, college, CCET and community organisation can make direct contact with their link officer.

EARLY YEARS

22. Work in the early years sector is the bedrock of the strategy. If children begin school without the skills they need to make a good start, they are likely to struggle. Even before children start school we must engage parents and children and make an impact on their potential to make the most of education.
23. The strategy sets an ambitious goal that 'no child should start school unprepared for learning'. To give us a baseline for this work, we commissioned Beaufort Research, Cardiff to undertake a survey into children's readiness for school. Questionnaires were sent to all schools in Wales with early years settings, asking teachers for their perceptions of children's readiness for learning by reflecting on their capacity to listen, communicate, question etc.
24. Teachers' perceptions were that the majority of children, about three-quarters, could talk voluntarily to others and engage in play but notably fewer children could listen with interest, ask questions and play co-operatively. Less than a third of children were said to be able to recite rhymes or sing songs and only a quarter could recite numbers in order or recognise their own name. When asked to compare the position over the past 5 years, in all cases more teachers thought the position had worsened than thought it had improved. The most significant deterioration was felt to be in speaking and listening.
25. In schools where more than half the children spoke Welsh as a first language, children appeared to start school with better early reading, writing and counting skills than their counterparts in English medium schools. More chose to look at books; more could recognise their own name. Their listening skills were also better. However, their speaking skills - talking to others, asking questions etc. were not as well developed and they did not as readily engage in play.

26. We must emphasise that the survey did not involve any objective assessment of children's skills. It focused on teachers' perception of the current situation and past situation and must, therefore, be treated with caution. However, it is clear from the findings and from teachers' comments of what is needed to improve the situation, that programmes for parents and children at the earliest stages are needed.
27. We are working in partnership with all organisations in contact with families with babies and young children and have developed and trialled an early years staff training programme, and a programme for parents called 'Language and Play'. We want to ensure that all social workers, health workers, playgroup staff and carers, are aware of basic skills issues and can advise parents on how to help their babies develop their early language and pre-literacy skills in a natural, family-friendly way.
28. From autumn 2002 onwards, we will roll out these programmes in each local authority and make sure that 'Language and Play' programmes are available to parents in all parts of Wales. We will shortly make funding available to LEAs to contribute to the cost of staff to co-ordinate Language and Play programmes and organise the delivery of training.
29. We are also planning to hold a national conference for all organisations involved with the early years to help establish a firm foundation for our early years strategy. We will be using this occasion to launch a CD and book of Welsh and English songs and rhymes we have produced, which will be available free of charge to parents with children aged 0 to 3. The aim will be to encourage interaction between adult and child.

SCHOOLS

LEAs

30. The basic skills strategy for schools is well underway. A programme of Strategic Intervention Grants [SIGs] to LEAs, ranging from £60,000 to £120,000, has helped strengthen approaches to basic skills. Based on an analysis of local data, LEAs have made proposals to extend their work in selected areas. These include:
- ◆ Literacy/numeracy catch-up and bridging programmes in all Key Stages;
 - ◆ Key Stage 4 initiatives with disengaged young people;
 - ◆ Out-of-school programmes to encourage new ways of working and enliven the curriculum;
 - ◆ Measures to share good practice across schools.

31. We will evaluate these activities and establish a dissemination programme to make sure that the most is made of good practice as it emerges.

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

32. In the next phase of the strategy we will develop basic skills training for secondary school teachers. We know that not every teacher in secondary school is equipped to deal with pupils with poor basic skills (especially if their specialism is history, geography or art for example). So we are planning to develop a training programme that will help secondary school staff support pupils in all parts of the curriculum. We will also be exploring the use of volunteers in schools and the training they need to provide extra help for pupils. We have already commissioned a video to help with recruitment.

THE QUALITY MARKS

33. In partnership with LEAs we are making strides towards the Assembly's target that all schools will work towards the standards set by the Agency's Quality Marks for Primary and Secondary Schools. Grants ranging from £10,000 to £36,000 have been made to LEAs to enable them to support schools in gaining the Quality Mark. Already 727 primary and 44 secondary schools have received the award and all LEAs in Wales are involved in the programme. Many LEAs have included the Quality Marks in their Education Strategic Plans and as a key element of their school improvement agendas.
34. We recently commissioned an independent research company to interview a random sample of primary schools with the Primary Quality Mark award. They found that:
- ◆ 98% of schools thought that the Primary Quality Mark was a useful self review and evaluation tool;
 - ◆ 91% said that it had helped to boost staff morale;
 - ◆ 99% would recommend the award to other schools;
 - ◆ 98% had found the Quality Mark process worthwhile.
35. The results from the survey were extremely positive. A similar study has been commissioned with secondary schools and the results from that survey echo the findings from the primary survey.

FAMILY PROGRAMMES

36. Another important development has been the expansion of family literacy and numeracy programmes which help parents with low basic skills develop the skills they need to help their children who may be at risk of falling behind. This has been a very successful programme involving partnerships between LEAs and colleges. Courses are available in every LEA and, in many areas, workshops have made programmes accessible to parents who are not able to attend long courses. Grants ranging from £26,000 to £119,000 have been allocated to LEAs for 2002-3. Funding for teaching the parents is provided by the National Council.
37. We are working with LEAs to develop a planned strategic approach to delivering family programmes. This is so that partnerships with adult providers can be better formulated and schools can make family programmes a sustainable part of their involvement with parents. This year more than 12,000 adults and children have taken part in family programmes of one kind or another and, due mainly to the strategy, we have been able to assure LEAs of their funding up to March 2005.
38. In the coming year we will consult on the development of a Quality Mark for family programmes.

ADULTS

39. One of our biggest challenges with adults is how we motivate people to want to improve their basic skills. We know that those who need help are often reluctant to join classes and there is little support for those who want to study independently.
40. Those learners who have joined classes are mainly taught by teachers who have only the minimum level of training and there is heavy dependence on part-time staff. The qualification structure for basic skills teachers is poorly developed. Within institutions, programmes are often marginalised and there is a lack of co-ordination between basic and key skills programmes. There is much work to do to strengthen basic skills delivery in the sector and we are working closely with the National Council to help inform their policy and funding for basic skills.

POST-16 QUALITY MARK

41. We have introduced a National Support Project to help post 16 providers in colleges, training organisations, prisons and the voluntary sector reach the standards required of the Post-16 Quality Mark. So far 19 programmes have gained the Quality Mark and we expect a sharp increase in applications for the award as our Project, which will provide advice to organisations that want to gain the award, becomes active.

TEACHER TRAINING

42. Well qualified teachers are the backbone of good quality programmes. This year we have begun a programme of intensive teacher training and have trained 1000 teachers to deliver the new adult basic skills curriculum, which the strategy requires to be in place by September 2002. We have also introduced training for staff working with adults with learning difficulties and for those who are teaching adults for whom English is an additional language. Training will continue in 2002/3. We are now consulting on a framework of qualifications for teachers in the adult sector.

NATIONAL SUPPORT PROJECTS

43. There is a pressing need to increase expertise in the post 16 basic skills field. We have used the strategy to establish a series of National Support Projects [NSPs] to give advice and promote development in areas where there is known to be a basic skills need. Leading organisations in Wales have been selected through tender to run projects on behalf of the Agency to strengthen the basic skills work in FE colleges, in training organisations, and in voluntary and community organisations.
44. In the coming year we will be inviting tenders for a National Support Project to strengthen work with adults and children whose first language is neither English or Welsh - a relatively small problem except in the urban areas of Swansea, Cardiff and Newport, but likely to increase, and difficult to deal with where small numbers are dispersed across Wales.
45. We are also planning a support programme for organisations working with disengaged young people, to make sure that they are equipped to deal with any basic skills problems their clients may have.

EMPLOYERS

46. The majority of adults who have poor basic skills are in employment but are trapped in low skill, low wage jobs with few training opportunities and little chance of promotion. They are also the most vulnerable to redundancy as their lack of skills prevents their taking on new challenges and greater responsibility. We need the support of employers to tackle this problem but employers do not always see it as their responsibility to encourage workers to develop the skills they believe should have been learned in school.
47. Our workplace basic skills strategy has at its core the Basic Skills Employers' Pledge through which we will support employers in making a commitment to improving the basic skills of their employees. We have set up a National Support Project to work directly with employers to promote basic skills in the workplace and give employers the support they need to meet the requirements of the Pledge. In the autumn, with the support of the Assembly, we will launch the Pledge with an event for employers.
48. To give us a baseline for this work we have commissioned a survey of current basic skills activity in the workplace. The survey was undertaken by Newidiam, Cardiff and collected the views of more than 3,000 employers across Wales.
49. Findings from the survey confirm our experience that there is little basic skills activity in the workplace and that employers continue to underestimate the degree of basic skills difficulty that exists. They are also not alive to the extent to which this can potentially affect the operations of their business. Evidence collected suggests that many employers are prepared to 'work round' basic skills difficulties. The consequence of this is that low skilled workers are not encouraged to improve the basic skills which would give them access to further training and better job opportunities. They are caught in the 'skills trap' which limits their own and the organisations potential.
50. We know that the Assembly is keen to see trades unions play their part in promoting basic skills. For many employees the union learning representative will be the trusted source of advice on basic skills training, as there may be reluctance to expose literacy and numeracy weakness directly to an employer. This year we have undertaken considerable development work with TUC Wales to raise awareness of basic skills among union learning representatives. We will continue to work with Wales TUC.

51. We have produced bi-lingual publications to support the work with employers and unions and also two videos to promote workplace basic skills; one for trades unions and one for employers. There are Welsh and English versions of both.

CONCLUSION

52. The strategy has made a strong start but there is still much to do.. In the next phase of the strategy we will consolidate and extend the work on each initiative; we will identify the national tests which will enable us to measure the progress we are making towards our target and which will give us the elements of the Wales Tripartite Award. We will also commission a national survey of literacy and numeracy to measure the impact on the population as a whole. We will continue to promote the importance of basic skills.