



Impact evaluation of the Workforce Development Fund, individual employer funding and Essential Training (2022-24)

Final report: executive summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This is the latest of a series of independent impact evaluation reports of the Workforce Development Fund (WDF, also known as ‘the mainstream fund’), Individual Employer (IE) funding and the Essential Training programmes. It incorporates findings from primary research undertaken between May and August 2024 focused on delivery in 2022/23 and 2023/24. The evaluation was commissioned by Skills for Care and was completed by a team of researchers from York Consulting LLP.

This latest evaluation was undertaken in the context of an anticipated change to funding for learning and development in the adult social care sector. This was in the form of an Adult Social Care Training and Development Fund to be claimed through a new digital service and administered by NHS Business Services Authority. In July 2024, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) [announced that these new plans would not proceed](#) but that there would be ongoing funding for adult social care learning and development at levels in line with previous years’ spending. Subsequently, [guidance for the new Adult Social Care Learning and Development Support Scheme \(LDSS\)](#) for 2024/25 was published in September 2024.

The evaluation method involved the following:

Mainstream fund:

- online surveys with 205 employers, with 12 providing detailed feedback via one-to-one qualitative consultations
- one-to-one qualitative consultations with three strategic respondents, 12 lead partners, four learning providers, and four learners
- estimating the economic impact of the fund using a Net Present Value approach.

IE funding:

- survey with 22 individual employers¹, with seven providing detailed feedback via one-to-one qualitative consultations
- one-to-one qualitative consultations with 12 user-led organisations (ULOs) and three personal assistants (PAs).

Essential Training programmes:

- online survey with 78 employers accessing two of the three programmes (Rapid Induction and Refresher Training).

¹ People who employ their own care and support staff using either local authority Direct Payments, their own money, or a combination of the two.

The funding streams

The mainstream fund is provided by the DHSC and managed and disbursed by Skills for Care. Introduced in its current form in 2011/12, the WDF supports continuing professional development of staff in the adult social care sector by providing a contribution towards the cost of vocational learning. More than 200 modules, learning programmes, qualifications and standards were available for funding across 2022-2024. This included health and social care diplomas, condition-specific certificates, assessment awards, train the trainer programmes, and apprenticeship standards. Also provided through endorsed providers were some non-accredited learning programmes, including leadership and management, mental health, and positive behavioural support. In addition, some online learning modules were also funded.

IE funding pays the full cost of training for individual employers and their PAs (within certain criteria). Funding can be accessed directly by individual employers and by ULOs.

Essential Training programmes include three funding packages which were originally introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: rapid induction for new staff, refresher training for existing staff, and a volunteer training programme. Due to relatively low numbers of employers accessing the latter in the period 2022-24, this evaluation obtained feedback on just the Rapid Induction and Refresher Training programmes.

The mainstream fund: effective delivery and range of quality training funded

Stakeholders were positive about the mainstream funding model and associated processes for delivery in 2022-24. These views are reflective of those expressed in previous years' evaluations. Most partnership employers and lead partners highlighted the value of the partnership funding model in supporting employers' access to the mainstream fund. Benefits cited included up-to-date information, support for the application process, better understanding of sector skills needs and networking opportunities.

There was also satisfaction with the range and quality of training accessible through WDF, the funding cap per learner, and the management and delivery of the mainstream fund. Some lead partners commented that processes for claims had improved in recent years.

A few stakeholders suggested potential improvements linked to expanding eligible training provision, developing more automated online approaches to data collection, more efficient and timely communication and three-year (rather than annual) funding cycles.

Stakeholders cited a lack of clarity, transparency and certainty regarding the proposed new learning and development fund and said this would delay employer staff development plans. They were also concerned that lead partners would no longer have a role in supporting employers and administration of funding.

Impacts of the mainstream fund: responsive to needs and improving skills

Stakeholders view the WDF as a responsive and flexible approach to meeting workforce skills needs. This is evident through, for example, funding for a wide range of accredited and non-accredited routes, the inclusion of leadership and management and digital modules, and encouraging employers to invest in further training. Suggestions to further improve responsiveness included more coordinated engagement with learning providers, considering upfront funding for overseas workers' training, provision of cultural awareness training and continued funding for essential training (including in-house and face-to-face).

Employers, learning providers and lead partners cited a range of positive impacts resulting from employers' access to the mainstream fund: improved skills development and staff morale, inclusive learning programmes, and better workforce planning. These, in turn, had supported improved staff retention, productivity and quality of care.

Whilst employer feedback indicated relatively high levels of deadweight associated with the mainstream fund, they also emphasised aspects of additionality such as higher quality/more formal training, reinvestment in further training, access to other funding, stronger networks and apprenticeships recruitment. Strategic respondents also spoke of the added value associated with access to the wider Skills for Care team (providing centralised expertise and marketing) and its networks (supporting informed and effective promotion and distribution of the funds).

The estimated economic impact (Net Present Value) of the mainstream fund across the two years was £109.86m. The return on investment across the two years combined is therefore 5.81 :1, i.e. for every £1 invested in the mainstream fund, an estimated £5.81 will be generated for the economy in England.

Table ES1: Impacts of the mainstream fund

	% Employers (n= 205)		
	Significantly	To some extent	Total
Skills impacts			
Improved the skills/qualification levels of our staff team	48%	42%	90%
Addressed other skills gaps in the organisation	18%	64%	82%
Addressed the most pressing skills gap(s) in the organisation	25%	55%	80%
Impacts for staff			
Increased opportunities for staff progression within the workplace	39%	44%	83%
Improved staff morale	26%	50%	76%
Quality of care			
Improved the quality of care that we provide	35%	56%	91%
We more effectively meet the specialist/personalised needs of people who access care and support	35%	51%	86%
Workforce development			
Become more interested in training	30%	43%	73%
Developed or refreshed training plans	25%	47%	72%
Invested in different types of training than we had done pre-mainstream fund	27%	40%	67%
Taken a different approach to staff development	22%	43%	65%
Undertaken new training needs analyses	21%	44%	65%
Business operations			
Improved staff productivity	24%	46%	70%
Improved efficiency as a business	22%	46%	68%
Improved staff retention	21%	43%	64%
Improved competitiveness within the sector	17%	41%	58%
Source: Employer survey (n=205).			

IE funding: accessible, meeting specific needs and improving PA retention

Most individual employers and ULOs praised the IE and ULO funding models. Both types of stakeholder highlighted strengths associated with accessibility, communication and support during the claims or application processes, and the range of training available. ULOs were appreciative of the ULO fund's flexibility and the autonomy this gave to identify and meet the needs of their specific services. However, some thought that smaller ULOs may not have the resource or time required to apply for the fund.

A series of impacts were identified as resulting from the IE and ULO funding, linked to skills development, job satisfaction, partnerships, quality of care and retention.

Impacts for individual employers

- Improved knowledge and confidence of responsibilities and rights as an employer, which include staff recruitment and direct payments.
- Meeting other employers outside of ULO settings and sharing best practice.
- Affordable training for individual employers who would not have access otherwise.
- Stronger retention of PAs following training and therefore less re-recruitment needed.
- Better awareness of where to access information and resources on employment issues and knowledge sharing.

Impacts for PAs

- More knowledgeable, more informed and know where to access support.
- Improved self-confidence and skills-building following access to peer-support sessions.
- Greater level of job satisfaction and subsequent increase in retention.
- Better able to deal with challenging situations.

ULO also highlighted the added value of the funds (ULO and IE) in providing support otherwise not available for individual employer and PA workforce development. Equally, the local insight and knowledge of ULOs had driven decisions on training delivered via the ULO fund.

Essential Training programmes: underpinning fundamental skills development and contributing to quality care

Employers agreed that the Rapid Induction and Refresher Training programmes were relevant and of quality, acting as a good introduction to new entrants in the sector while also improving the performance and knowledge of more experienced staff. They were satisfied with the number and range of endorsed learning providers and with delivery methods and access to training.

As seen for the previous evaluations, 90% or more of employers said that Essential Training programmes had an impact on their ability to address skills gaps, continuity and quality of care, and infection control. Most also said the programmes helped them to more effectively train staff, keep staff skills up to date and save costs. For some employers, especially smaller, independent providers, no training would have taken place without having access to the essential training.

Table ES2: Impacts of the Essential Training programmes

	Significant or some impact (% of employers)
Quality of care	95%
Addressed skills gaps in the workforce	94%
Infection control	91%
Continuity of care	90%
Ability to meet demand/need	90%
Improved the skills of the workforce	86%
Source: Essential Training employer survey (n= 78).	

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