Report to Place, Economic Growth and Environment Scrutiny

Adult Skills: Overview of Oldham Lifelong Learning Service

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5th November 2025.

Reason for Briefing

To provide the committee with an overview and oversight of the Council's Lifelong Learning Service.

Executive Summary

The Council's Lifelong Learning Service has evolved from the borough's traditional adult and community education provision into a modern, community-based learning service. For many years it has supported residents to gain skills, qualifications and confidence through learning delivered in neighbourhood venues across the borough. Today, the service plays a key role in Oldham's skills, inclusion and employment ambitions, helping adults improve their prospects, support their families and contribute to their communities. The service is now entirely funded through the devolved Adult Skills Fund to a value of c.£3.3m per year.

The service has a clear set of Governance arrangements which are intended to challenge the service to ensure it delivers good value and supports local residents to achieve their goals. The report sets out how the service is funded, a high-level overview of performance, governance arrangements and how Members can be assured of the quality of provision.

Service Overview

Area	Position	Update
Participation & Outcomes		Learner numbers, starts, retention, achievement and contract profile all exceeded annual targets. Achievement stands at 86.67% with a pass rate of 98.58%.
Quality & Learner Experience		Learner satisfaction remains exceptionally high at 99.13%. Progression into further learning remains strong and quality improvement actions are on track.
Safeguarding & Inclusion		99.42% of learners report feeling safe. No significant achievement gaps are evident for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities and learners receiving support have lower withdrawal rates overall.
Finance & Delivery		Delivery remains ahead of profile at 105% against a target of 103%, providing assurance that funding allocations have been met.

Recommendations

Note the report, review performance and review assurance provided.

Adult Skills: Overview of Oldham Lifelong Learning Service

1 Background

1.1 The Lifelong Learning Service (LLS) has evolved from the borough's traditional adult and community education provision into a modern, community-based learning service. For many years it has supported residents to gain skills, qualifications and confidence through learning delivered in neighbourhood venues across the borough. Today, the service plays a key role in Oldham's skills, inclusion and employment ambitions, helping adults improve their prospects, support their families and contribute to their communities.

1.2 The service is primarily funded through the Adult Skills Fund, devolved to Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and supports residents to improve their skills, gain qualifications, progress into employment and participate more fully in community life.

1.3 LLS contributes to the Council's wider ambitions for inclusive growth, workforce development and reducing inequalities by supporting residents furthest from learning and employment, whilst responding to local skills and labour market needs. The service is also aligned with the Greater Manchester Strategy[i] and Oldham's Employment and Skills Plan[ii].

1.4 Provision is delivered through three learning centres and over 25 community venues across the borough, helping to ensure accessibility and engagement with local communities.

1.5 The service operates within a robust framework of performance management, quality assurance and external accountability. In December 2021, Ofsted judged the provision delivered by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council as **Good**, in June 2026 the service maintained its Matrix accreditation and in July 2026 GMCA awarded the service the highest score in relation to funding compliance (Substantial Assurance).

1.6 This briefing report aims to provide assurance regarding the service's performance, quality arrangements, governance, external validation and risk management.

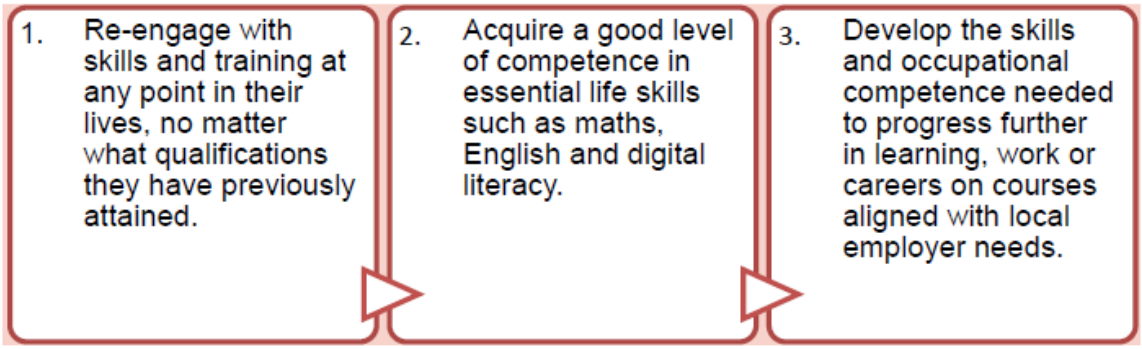
2 Current Position

2.1 The Lifelong Learning Service (LLS) is predominantly funded through the devolved Adult Skills Fund. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has set the framework and strategic goals for providers of adult skills across GM. The Combined Authority is currently consulting on the way the fund operates with any new framework expected to be in place by 1st August 2027 in line with next academic year.

2.2 GMCA's current programme seeks to create "an integrated education, skills and employment support system that works for everyone" as set out within the Greater Manchester Strategy 2025–35 – Together we are Manchester. The strategy is structured around two interdependent priorities:

- Sustained economic growth, driven by innovation, investment, and sector development; and
- Improved quality of life, ensuring residents can access opportunities, support, and good living standards.

2.3 The ASF funding allocation is a key element of the Adult Skills Programme of GMCA's Education, Work and Skills Directorate and has three objectives linked to its priorities. These are to ensure that all residents over the age of 19 can:



2.4 For the academic year 2026 – 2027, the Lifelong Learning Service has been awarded an increased Adult Skills Fund grant with a value of **£3,301,621**. This total allocation is the total sum of the core Adult Skills and Level 3 Adult Skills funding, Learner Support and where applicable, tailored learning. The service has maintained a high value, high-performance programme which has led to increased investment and therefore increased level of funding being applied over the last 2 years (incrementally from £2.8m per academic year in 2024/25). Funding had remained static for the 5 years previously and due to lack of growth in the adult skills funding allocation, it is anticipated that any future growth will need to be because of significant change (See section 7.1).

2.5 GMCA has removed the tolerance for under-performance to manage flex and growth across Greater Manchester. This means that if the service does not meet their stated full target, then it will be penalised (historically achievement of between 95-99% delivery of targets by providers were rewarded with 100% of the contract value). The Lifelong Learning Service has never under achieved. In fact, with the exception of 2019/20 due to the impact of the Covid lockdown in the final half of the academic year, the service has over delivered and sets an internal target to achieve 103% of contract value. This is to support the service meet increase costs of delivery.

2.6 All funds are to be used to support delivery to residents as set out in the Oldham Lifelong Learning Service's Strategic Plan, Self-Assessment Report (SAR), Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), the Oldham Community Learning and will support c. 2,500 learners.

2.7 The ASF allocation for 2026-2027 includes Adult Skills, Tailored Learning, (formerly Community Learning) and Discretionary Learner Support as a combined sum. The Adult Skills element is used to fund the accredited programmes offered by the Service. Tailored Learning will be used to fund the non-vocational programme offered by the Service. Discretionary Learner Support is used specifically for childcare provision and to provide financial support towards the cost of fees, books, travel costs and equipment for learners who otherwise would be unable to attend classes.

3. LLS Strategic Context, Structure and Offer

3.1 Oldham continues to experience significant socio-economic challenges, including concentrations of deprivation, lower qualification levels and higher levels of economic inactivity than regional and national averages. The Service is designed specifically to address these challenges through targeted skills provision and community-based learning.

The Service's strategic priorities focus on:

- Unemployed and economically inactive residents.
- Low-paid residents.
- Hard-to-reach and disadvantaged communities.
- Skills for Life learners.
- Parents and families.
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

3.2 Two-thirds of learners live within Oldham's seven most deprived wards and 44.4% live within the borough's most deprived neighbourhoods.

3.3 The Service underwent a restructure in 2025 which reduced the curriculum structure from 4 curriculum areas to 3. This reduced management overheads and allowed the creation of new frontline roles to support increased targets. The current structure is based around three interconnected Curriculum areas:

- Digital Skills, Employment & Education ()
- English for Speakers of Other Languages
- English & Maths

3.4 The curriculum areas are supported with a range of support teams (Learner support, Safeguarding team, community outreach team, MIS and accreditation)

3.5 Figure 1 sets out the range of courses being offered by the curriculum teams for 2025-26. This is reviewed every year as part of the annual “Plan, Do, Review” cycle.

Figure 1 – 2025/26 Curriculum plan offer.

<table>
<tr><th>Curriculum Area</th><th colspan="3">Offer / Course type</th></tr>
<tr><td>Digital Skills, Education and Employment (DSEE)</td><td>Digital Skills
Qualification & non-qualification courses Entry Level – Level 2</td><td>Education, Training, Early Years, Youth Work and Employment skills
Qualification & non-qualification courses Entry Level – Level 3</td><td rowspan="3">DSEE, English and Maths and ESOL Community Engagement and Delivery
Qualification & non-qualification courses Entry Level – Level 2</td></tr>
<tr><td>English and Maths (E&M)</td><td>English
Functional Skills, GCSE, non-qualification courses Entry Level – Level 2</td><td>Maths
Functional Skills, GCSE, non-qualification courses Entry Level – Level 2</td></tr>
<tr><td>English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL)</td><td>ESOL
Qualifications & non-qualification – Entry Level – Level 1</td><td>British Values / Community Interpreting
Entry Level / Level 1</td></tr>
<tr><td>Full Cost Recovery (FCR) – Not ASF Funded</td><td colspan="3">Art / Water Colours
Full cost leisure courses (cost of delivery is recovered)</td></tr>
</table>

4. LLS Performance

4.1 The service closed the 2025/26 academic year in a strong position, exceeding targets for learner numbers, starts, achievement, retention and contract profile. A full PowerBi dashboard has been created which allows the service to review and analyse the performance of the service in significant detail and this can be demonstrated if Members would like to review.

4.2 The service key performance indicators all exceeded targets for 2025/26 and they include:

- **2,427 learners** and **7,466 starts**, exceeding annual targets.
- Pass rate of **98.58%**.
- Qualification Achievement Rate of **86.67%**, exceeding the 85% target.
- **99.13% learner satisfaction**.
- **99.42% of learners report feeling safe**.
- Delivery achieved a minimum of **105% against profile** and above the 103% service target.
- **More than half** of learners progressed into further learning and **17.42%** reported progression into employment or promotion (please note that this is early analysis and further tracking will take place).
- Early analysis continues to show positive outcomes for learners receiving additional support, with no evident achievement gap for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities.

4.3 The service has persistently achieved a higher achievement rate than both the average provider group (other LA Adult Education provision) and the National average QAR (see figure 2).

Figure 2 - Qualification Achievement Rate Benchmark – 2022/23 to 2024/25

Provider Type	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
OLLS	90.4	90.2	89.6
Provider Group	86.8	87.2	85.9%
National	85.8	87.4	87.1%

Source: DfE National achievement rates tables

4.4 The service minimum Achievement Rate target was set at 85% in line with national and provider average. In 2024-25, whilst the service saw a 0.6% reduction in achievement rate from 2023-24 this was deemed insignificant as the service still posted a proportionally significant higher result to the provider group comparator.

4.5 **Challenges**

4.6 The service is awaiting the final approved report on key performance indicators for 2025-26 which will be released in early November (in line with all skills providers). The service has identified a number of areas that it intends to analyse with a view to putting in place measures to improve the service.

4.7 Whilst retention remains above target at 87.92%, further analysis is required to understand withdrawal patterns at course and curriculum level.

- Attendance remains an area for continued focus, with additional work underway to develop a richer understanding of the factors influencing learner engagement.
- Emerging data shows a significant proportion of learners study multiple curriculum areas, whilst this is positive and shows a broad learning plan, it requires further investigation to understand attendance and withdrawal patterns.

5. Service Internal Quality Assurance and Planning.

5.1 Planning activity is structured across the academic year (see figure 3).

5.2 Autumn Term one – Senior Management carry out a **strategic review –** ensuring alignment with policy shifts. From November onwards final data is available and performance reports are generated. These enable the service to develop curriculum and service level Self Assessments and identify areas for improvement (as set out in the Quality Improvement Plan – which is monitored each quarter)

5.3 Winter – Term 2 – Self assessment and quality assurance panel (Members, officers peers and stakeholders) – Self Assessment submitted to Ofsted.

5.4 Summer – Term 3 - **curriculum design**, reflection on current year performance, target setting, operational planning, Strategic Curriculum Plan Validation (July) initial recruitment (July–September).

5.5 Throughout the year, LLS Senior Management team review monthly performance, produce portfolio updates and provide a termly self-assessment and Quality Improvement Plan review which is presented at the Director Assurance Meeting.

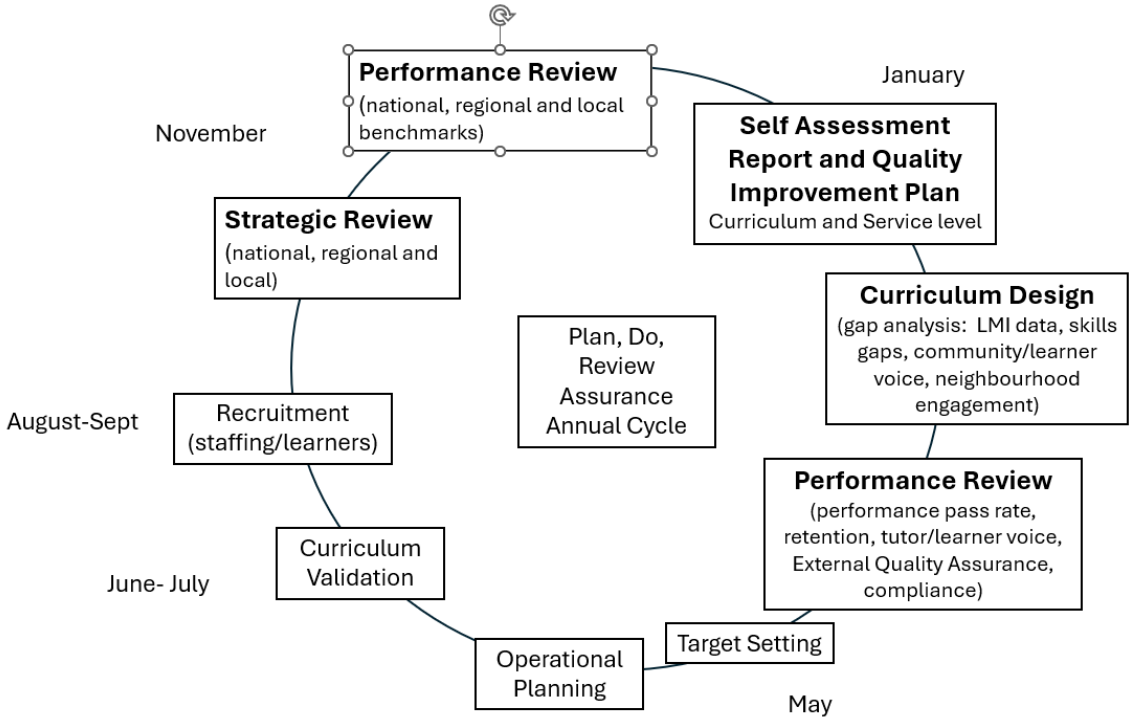
5.6 Quality assurance and planning is a multi-faceted area of work and includes:

- **Quality of Teaching and Learning –** this includes:
  - **Collaborative Learning Walks** - **classroom observation** practices where small groups of educators or leaders visit peer classrooms together to study teaching and learning
  - **Walkthroughs** - **Oversight of quality of education** and learner experience on a service level
  - **Classroom Visit - Curriculum specific** and have specific areas of focus. E.g. subject knowledge, classroom practice.
  - **Desktop audits** – sampling of documentation to ensure compliance.
  - **Peer Review** – opportunity for staff to visit a peer to support professional development.

- **Quality of experience/meeting needs**
  - Learner voice – Feedback from learners
  - Stakeholder voice – Feedback from partners including voluntary,community sector, JCP, Colleges and schools etc.

5.7 All of which culminates into a **Self-Assessment Report,** from which the service sets out key areas for improvement in the published **Quality Improvement Plan.**

Figure 3 – OLLS Curriculum Plan Cycle



6. External Validation of quality assurance

6.1 The service has four main external agencies that provide an assessment as to the quality of provision. These are:

- Ofsted – HM Inspectorate will carry out an inspection every 4 years following the new national Education Inspection Framework.
- Matrix - Accreditation body evaluating the quality of Information, Advice and Guidance (full inspection every 3 years, with an annual progress assessment).
- Awarding Body External Quality Assurance.
- Funder – Annual finance and quality assurance audit

6.2 Ofsted.

6.2.1 The Service is due an inspection imminently. The last inspection took place in December 2021. The service was rated as being Good[iii] across all measures under that inspection framework (quality of education, behaviour and attitudes; personal development; leadership and management and adult learning programmes).

6.2.2 In November 2025, Ofsted published a new Education Inspection Framework, which is now in operation and the service is using the new Further Education and Skills Toolkit[iv] for the next Self Assessment.

6.2.3 The new inspection process focus has a stronger emphasis on leadership and governance as a driver of sustained improvement and inclusion.

6.2.4 Inspectors work with the provider's staff to build an accurate view of the quality of the provision. This includes knowing and understanding how well learners:

- achieve – academically and personally
- belong – feel that they belong to, and are valued as part of, the provider's community, so that they attend, behave and contribute positively to what the provider offers
- thrive – benefit from the right systems, processes and levels of oversight, so that they are kept safe and are able to flourish and/or fulfil their potential, whatever their background or individual needs

6.2.5 The Inspection team will focus on 6 key areas:

- **Safeguarding** – how effectively learners are kept safe and supported.
- **Inclusion** – how well the provider identifies and meets the needs of all learners, particularly those facing barriers to learning.
- **Leadership and Governance** – the effectiveness of strategic leadership, accountability, quality improvement and oversight.
- **Curriculum, Teaching and Training** – the quality, design and delivery of education and training.
- **Achievement** – the progress learners make, qualifications achieved and progression outcomes.
- **Participation and Development** – learner attendance, behaviour, personal development, wellbeing and preparation for future learning and employment

6.2.6 Ofsted will make a judgement for each area which will either be:

1. Exceptional
2. Strong Standard
3. Expected standard
4. Need Attention
5 Urgent improvement.

6.2.7 The next Self-Assessment Report, which is due in February 2027, will be reported against these 6 key areas with an internal self-assessment as to where the service thinks it can place itself. This can be shared with the Scrutiny Committee.

6.3 Matrix Standard Accreditation

6.3.1 The Matrix Standard is the national quality standard for information, advice and guidance services. Accreditation provides independent validation that the service delivers high-quality learner information, advice and guidance and operates arrangements for continuous improvement.

6.3.2 Organisations are assessed against four key areas:

- Leadership and management
- Resources
- Service delivery
- Continuous quality improvement

6.3.1 The Service was last inspected in June 2025 and passed the standard. The service undertakes an annual review meeting with the inspector to ensure that progress is being made on any recommendations. The service has maintained the standard at year 1 assessment was exceptionally positive.

6.4 Awarding Body External Quality Assurance.

6.4.1 The Service maintains **Exam Board Direct Claim Status –**which is an earned trust-based status awarded by UK exam boards which allows the service to direct award qualifications. To maintain this status the service undergoes regular assurance visits to examine internal quality assurance processes. The service has direct claim status with Ascentis, NCFE, NOCN and Pearson. This is an important standard to achieve as it recognises that the internal quality assurance processes are at a very good standard.

6.4.2 External Quality Assurance reviews involve the sampling of learner work, assessment decisions and internal quality assurance arrangements to provide independent assurance that qualifications are being delivered and assessed in accordance with awarding body requirements

6.5 Funder Assurance - Provider Compliance Assurance Review

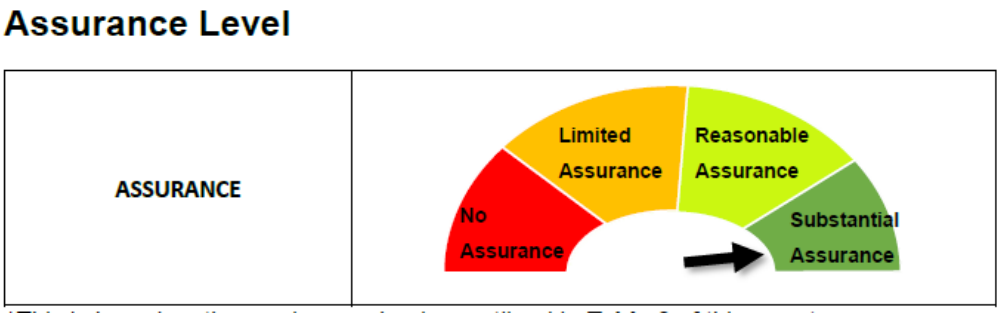
6.5.1 GMCA carry out at least one audit per year, based on risk. The service has maintained a "green" audit from the very first year of devolved funding. The service also attends a monthly compliance and performance meeting and submit a biannual performance returns and reports.

6.5.2 The purpose of the annual Provider Compliance Assurance Review is to provide GMCA with assurance that providers have appropriate systems, processes, and quality arrangements in place, including oversight of any subcontractor arrangements. It also assesses compliance against the Adult Skills Funding and Performance Management Rules 2025-26. The service does not subcontract.

6.5.3 The ASF compliance assurance review of Oldham Council identified "a strong overall control environment, resulting in an overall score of 1 – Substantial Assurance. Evidence reviewed demonstrated consistent ILR data quality, effective initial assessment and prior attainment checks, robust eligibility and residency evidence, and clear use of registers and learner documentation to support learner status, outcomes and guided learning hours. Performance is reported to be on track against the profiled position, with no performance concerns identified."

6.5.4 The Audit Team use a 4 scale assurance dashboard – with substantial assurance being the highest level – see figure 4.

Figure 4 – Assurance Level



7. Governance and Accountability

7.1 Oldham Lifelong Learning operates within the Council's governance framework, ensuring clear oversight, accountability and independent challenge. Governance arrangements are designed to provide assurance that the service delivers high-quality provision aligned to local priorities, Greater Manchester skills strategies and national policy requirements.

7.2 Key elements include:

- **Political oversight** through regular Portfolio Governance meetings involving the Cabinet Member, Deputy Portfolio Holder and senior officers. These meetings monitor strategic priorities, emerging opportunities and risks, and ensure alignment between learning, employment and economic growth objectives.
- **Executive oversight** through Director Assurance meetings, which review service performance, financial management, compliance, risks, learner outcomes and progress against improvement plans.
- **Independent challenge and quality assurance** through a twice-yearly Validation Board comprising external peers, employers, community representatives, learners, strategic partners and Greater Manchester Combined Authority representatives. The Board acts as a critical friend, reviewing service performance, validating self-assessment and improvement planning, and providing challenge on curriculum development and responsiveness to local skills needs.

7.3 In addition, the Council's Post-16 Learning, Skills and Employment lead provides strategic coordination across education, employment and skills policy, maintains relationships with regional partners, and ensures that local delivery remains aligned with wider Greater Manchester and government priorities. This role supports strategic oversight but does not have operational responsibility for the service.

7.4 Together, these arrangements provide a robust framework for political oversight, executive accountability, quality assurance and continuous improvement, helping to ensure that Oldham Lifelong Learning remains responsive to residents, employers and the wider economy.

8. Adult Skills Funding review and Risk Assessment

8.1 GMCA is reviewing its operating model for employment and skills. It is moving towards developing its "LiveWell Journey to employment". The aim is to support the Mayoral ambition to targe interventions at a neighbourhood level, involving local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprises. The review is looking at how much delivery should be delivered at a local level and how much at a GM level.

8.2 Under national government policy, GMCA continues to receive more devolved funding, but the Adult Skills Fund budget has not increased since 2018. The Adult Skills Fund is now under review to see how it can fit within the LiveWell Journey to Employment model and potentially will lead to significant change to both grant and procured provision. The review is due to be published by the end of the calendar year.

8.3 A full-service risk register is available on request, and most risks are managed within the service. This deals with day-to-day operational issues (e.g. data breach, loss of ICT access, loss of facilities etc). However, it is appropriate to state that as the service is 100% reliant on external funding, the impact of the Adult Skills Fund review has the potential to either grow or reduce the service.

9. Conclusion.

9.1 Members are invited to comment on the report. The service prides itself on openness and transparency and would welcome Member involvement in visiting the service, meeting learners and reviewing any operation matters.

i https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/greater-manchester-strategy/
ii https://www.oldham.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/8288/employment_and_skills_strategy_summary.pdf
iii https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50177151

iv https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-september-2026