

Functional Skills  
for Adults

**LSIS** LEARNING  
AND SKILLS  
IMPROVEMENT  
SERVICE

The logo graphic for LSIS consists of several overlapping, flowing, brush-stroke-like lines in shades of orange, red, and brown, positioned to the right of the text.

**Where are  
you now?**  
A diagnosis of  
centre needs

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Information and Customer Centre  
Learning and Skills Network  
Fifth Floor, Holborn Centre  
120 Holborn  
London  
EC1N 2AD  
Tel 0845 071 0800  
[enquiries@LSNeducation.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@LSNeducation.org.uk)

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# Preface

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has defined functional skills as: 'practical skills in English, mathematics and ICT that help learners gain the most out of work, education and everyday life' ([www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19)).

## Why are functional skills needed?

### Learners...

(and their teachers, trainers and advisers) need readily accessible qualifications that best meet their needs.

- Many find the current range of skills qualifications complex and confusing. Functional skills provide a single set of qualifications with a clear ladder of progression.
- Functional skills are suitable for learners of all ages and crucial to their personal development.

### Employers...

and the UK economy need a skilled workforce.

- The changing context of work and employment requires a workforce that can confidently and effectively apply their skills to new challenges.
- Functional skills are fundamental to tackling the skills gap in England.

### The Government...

has placed functional skills at the core of education and training.

- Surveys and research have shown that, for the UK to be economically competitive, the knowledge and skills of the workforce must increase.
- Functional skills focus on efficient application and use of skills in real-life situations.

## Key dates

Date	Activity
September 2007	Start of three-year certificated pilot of functional English, mathematics and ICT in over 1,000 centres in the first year, growing to 3,000 centres by year 3
September 2008	All three functional skills become a mandatory part of the first tranche of Diplomas
End August 2010	Last registration for the Communication, Application of Number and ICT key skills
September 2010	Functional English, mathematics and ICT available nationally
September 2010	First teaching of revised GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT (for examination in 2012)
End August 2012	Last accreditation for the Communication, Application of Number and ICT key skills

# Functional skills – qualifications for all

Functional skills are intended to provide, for the first time, the same standards and qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT for learners of all ages in all education and training contexts.

Functional skills are part of the full range of 14–19 and post-19 programmes:

- In community settings, stand-alone functional skills qualifications provide adult learners with the opportunity to improve their skills and to gain qualifications that have the same value and status as those achieved by learners in other settings.
- In work-based learning, for both NVQs and apprenticeships, functional skills provide the opportunity for learners to apply their English, mathematics and ICT skills in their work and to improve their employability and career opportunities.
- In secure settings, functional skills may provide stand-alone qualifications and the chance to apply and practise skills in vocational programmes.
- Functional skills are also a central part of the new Diplomas.

## Preparing to deliver functional skills

This guide is the first in a series helping you to prepare for implementing functional skills. It is aimed at co-ordinators and managers in settings such as adult learning, work-based learning and the secure estate. Many of you reading this guide will already have experience of delivering key skills or Skills for Life qualifications. You will find that much of the good practice you already have in your organisation is also relevant to functional skills.

This guide will help you to:

- identify your centre's starting point for introducing functional skills
- assess your existing practice in relation to the 10 critical success factors
- recognise the strengths of your provision and plan how you could build on these
- identify the challenges you may face and how you could address these
- plan what you need to do next to prepare for the introduction of functional skills.

The second publication in this series is *Preparing to co-ordinate and manage functional skills*, gives more in-depth advice on strategies and procedures for the successful management of functional skills.

# Getting started


A carefully planned approach to functional skills will help learners to improve their performance in all aspects of their work.

## Who are your learners?

The focus of all provision should be on meeting learners' needs. This is vital, as personalisation is at the heart of teaching and learning functional skills. Adult learners will be studying them for different reasons. For example, functional skills may be an integral part of another course or the learner may have elected to gain the qualifications for personal reasons.

Use a table like the one immediately below to note your main group or groups of learners (e.g. apprentices, BTEC, Diploma). Why will each group be studying functional skills? What might they hope to gain from them?

Learner group	Why will they be doing functional skills?	What might they hope to gain?



## Where are you now?

The checklist below is designed to help you identify your existing knowledge and experience of functional skills. Don't worry if you still have some way to go in your planning – most centres that are not involved in the pilot will not start teaching until 2010.

In our centre we...	Comments
Have experience of delivering/ assessing key skills/Skills for Life	
Have support from senior management as we prepare for functional skills	
Understand the origin and purpose of functional skills	
Have obtained copies of the functional skills standards for staff	
Know the date when we will first start teaching functional skills	
Have decided which awarding body we will register with for functional skills	
Have started to discuss plans with partner organisations	
Are clear about the teaching approaches appropriate for functional skills	

# The 10 critical success factors

There are 10 critical success factors which should inform planning, management and evaluation of functional skills. These have already helped organisations delivering key skills and Skills for Life to improve their provision.

## 1 Promoting a positive agenda for functional skills

Functional skills increase learner achievement in all learning, improve employability and provide a sound basis for progression to further study or training. As these skills will be new to most people, including staff, learners, their parents or employers, you will need to communicate the rationale for them.

A college co-ordinator decided that it was vital that all staff fully appreciated the importance of functional skills and were committed to their success. She held a briefing and followed this up with regular email bulletins to staff about functional skills developments. She is also working on a statement about the value of functional skills that will be included in all course publicity.

## 2 Implementing an effective curriculum model

An effective curriculum model will help each individual learner to achieve. It should be based on good practice and research into delivery of other skills provision, such as key skills or skills teaching. In particular, if you embed functional skills within programmes, this helps to show their relevance, increase motivation and offer the opportunities for application and transfer that lead to mastery of the skill.

## 3 Establishing clearly defined roles and responsibilities

Functional skills often involve staff from more than one curriculum area. Collaborative planning and teaching between specialist and vocational staff can support both the development and application of functional skills. Each member of staff should fully understand the centre's curriculum model and their role within it.

## 4 Co-ordinating activity across the institution/consortium

You may also need to co-ordinate activity with other providers or with employers, and to provide opportunities for staff to meet and plan together and to share ideas and good practice. This is underpinned by comprehensive recording and tracking procedures.

A prison has been using an embedded approach to key skills very successfully for three years. It plans to use this as the basis for functional skills. Specialist English, mathematics and ICT teachers use a teaching room attached to the construction workshop, where learners work towards NVQs in painting and decorating, bricklaying and plumbing. Skills teachers work with the NVQ trainers to identify realistic examples and contexts for teaching the underpinning skills.

## 5 **Delivering effective teaching and learning**

Effective teaching and learning of functional skills are based on a 'personalised' approach, which tailors learning to the individual learner. Each learner should have an individual learning plan, with targets that are based on initial or early assessment. This plan should be regularly reviewed. It is also important to encourage a variety of rich learning experiences, including collaborative problem solving.

A work-based learning provider adopts an entirely personalised approach to teaching functional skills. Tutors visit the workplace and set individual targets with each learner, capitalising on the opportunities to develop and apply functional skills in the workplace.

## 6 **Establishing clear assessment procedures, both internal and external**

Most centres will already have established and robust assessment procedures for skills. You will need to review your systems and identify whether any changes are needed to meet the demands of functional skills assessment.

## 7 **Using resources efficiently and effectively**

Many of the resources that are already used for key skills and skills teaching will be relevant to functional skills. However, it could confuse learners if they contain references to these qualifications. So it makes sense to review existing resources, match them against the functional skills standards at each level, and revise them to show how they relate to functional skills.

## 8 **Embedding quality assurance**

Functional skills should be built into your organisation's quality assurance systems. You will need to identify what information you need, how you will gather it and how you will act on it.

An adult learning provider links its quality assurance process for functional skills to the Common Inspection Framework by carefully monitoring: how well they meet learners' needs; learner achievement; and how effective teaching, learning and assessment are in promoting learning.

## 9 **Delivering appropriate staff development**

Because a wide range of staff will be involved in the delivery of functional skills, their staff development needs will vary. Functional skills should be part of the organisation's overall (continuing professional development) CPD strategy, and each member of staff should have help in identifying and recording their CPD needs in this area.

## 10 **Reviewing and planning ahead**

Functional skills are new – this means that every organisation implementing them needs to review how they are going, and adjust plans in the light of practice.

# Assessing your centre

For each critical success factor, grade your centre using the four-point scale below. Then use the final column to note examples of good practice that you could build on. Later activities will help you to build on your strengths and identify development needs.

- 1** Our centre's provision in this aspect is strong and needs little improvement
- 2** We have strengths in this aspect but there is scope for improvement
- 3** There is some good practice but we need to develop this aspect
- 4** We are weak in this aspect

Critical success factor	Grade	Examples of good practice
Promoting a positive agenda for functional skills		
Implementing an effective curriculum model		
Establishing clearly defined roles and responsibilities		
Co-ordinating activity across the institution/ consortium		
Delivering effective teaching and learning		
Establishing clear assessment procedures, both internal and external		
Using resources efficiently and effectively		
Embedding quality assurance		
Delivering appropriate staff development		
Reviewing and planning ahead		

# Existing strengths of your centre

Almost any organisation that will be delivering functional skills is likely to have experience of key skills and adult literacy and numeracy. This means that there will be systems and practices in place that can provide a firm foundation for development. Below are some key examples – tick each one that is already in place for key skills/Skills for Life.

Systems/practices that will help us introduce functional skills	Tick
We have a named person who is responsible for skills teaching	
Senior managers value the importance of skills teaching	
Promotional material includes reference to skills teaching	
We have a whole-organisation strategy for skills teaching	
All staff have positive attitudes towards skills teaching	
Staff are clear about their role in teaching and assessment	
Staff have opportunities to improve their understanding of skills	
We offer a range of CPD opportunities for staff in their skills role	
Staff have individual CPD plans that include skills teaching	
Opportunities exist for staff to share good practice in skills teaching	
There is effective communication and exchange between vocational and specialist teachers	
We work with partner organisations to plan our skills provision	
Skills teaching is included in learner induction	
Learners have opportunities to develop their skills as an integral part of their overall learning programmes	
We adopt a personalised approach to learning, based on individual learner needs	
Our plans embed skills in vocational and other programmes	
Schemes of work and lesson plans signpost opportunities to develop skills	
Skills teaching resources are contextualised to vocational and other programmes	
There are clear mechanisms for monitoring our provision	
The organisation's quality assurance process, including self-assessment, makes explicit references to skills teaching	
Learners provide feedback to inform monitoring processes	

# Challenges in introducing functional skills

While you can make the most of your existing strengths, functional skills will offer some new challenges. These are likely to include:

- promoting positive attitudes to functional skills
- the concept of ‘mastery’
- personalised learning
- assessment of functional skills.

## Challenge 1: Promoting positive attitudes

The first critical success factor stressed the need for a positive skills agenda. As functional skills will be new to learners, parents, employers and teaching staff, this will be even more vital. Centres need to identify the key messages about functional skills that they want to communicate to these different audiences. Gaining staff support is essential, as their commitment to functional skills is the most important single factor in learner motivation and achievement.

## Challenge 2: Mastery

Mastery is an important concept in functional skills, and all curriculum planning and teaching should be focused on helping learners towards this. Learners demonstrate mastery when they can select from the skills they possess, and apply these to tackle a problem or task. In terms of teaching and learning, this means helping learners to work through this process in contexts that are realistic and relevant to them.

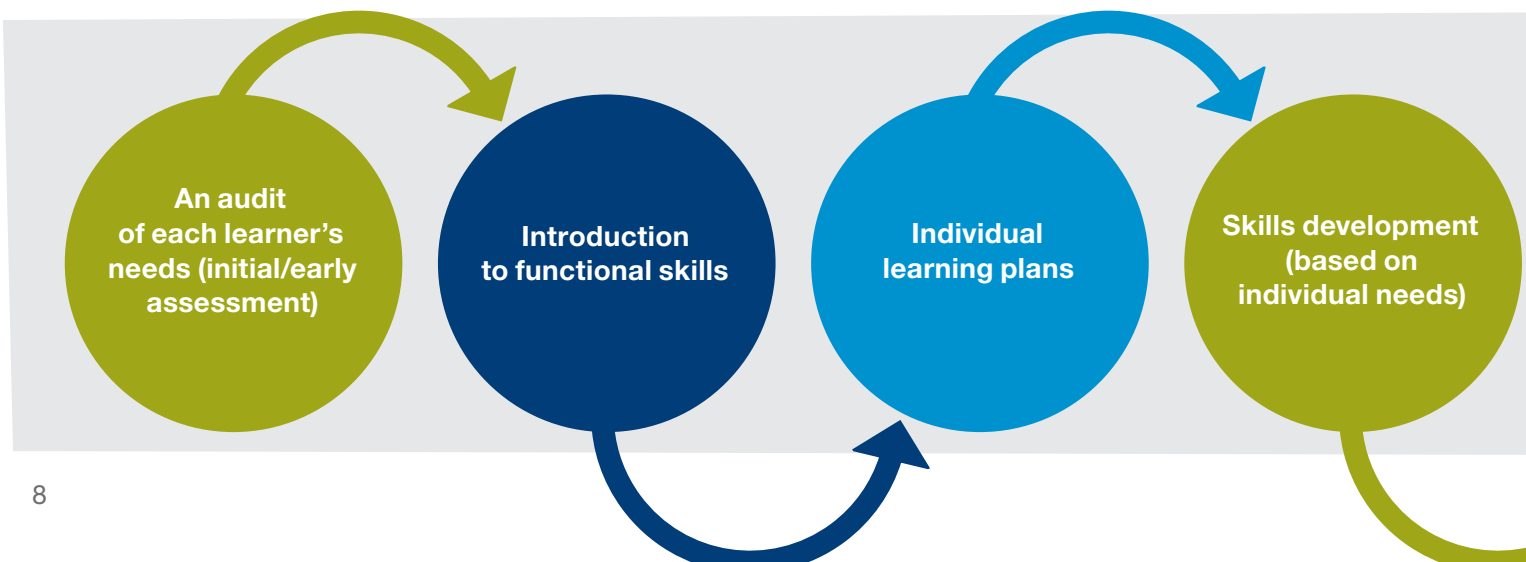
A successful learner:

- builds the full range of functional skills
- practises applying those skills in a range of contexts
- demonstrates mastery in a range of contexts.

## Challenge 3: Personalisation

The best way to develop independent, confident learners across the functional skills is to make connections to their experiences, interests, aims and aspirations. This means personalising learning to the individual.

At the heart of this is an iterative process of skills development and application supported by assessment of learning, continuous review and feedback. The following steps will help ensure the kind of personalised learning that leads to mastery.



## Challenge 4: Assessment

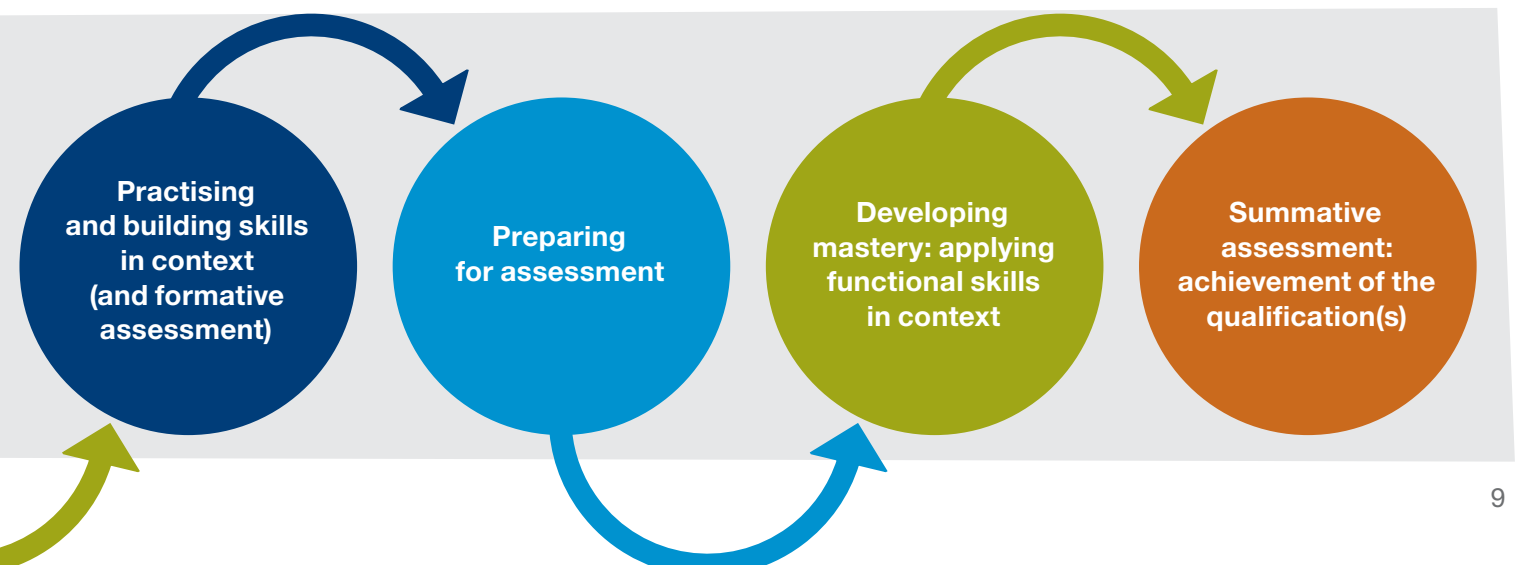
Assessment for functional skills is markedly different from assessment for both key skills and Skills for Life. The likely approach – a task under timed conditions – is different from a key skills portfolio, developed over time. Similarly, the multiple-choice test that candidates took for adult literacy and numeracy, did not test writing under timed conditions.

In addition, the assessments have to assess the full range of process skills which are the focus of functional skills. It may be worth considering setting up your own internal pilot of assessment methods with a small cohort of learners.

### Facing the challenges

Which of the four challenges above do you think your centre will face?  
How might you respond to them?

Challenge	How we could respond
Promoting positive attitudes	
Helping learners develop mastery	
Personalised learning	
Functional skills assessment	



# Building on your strengths

Look back at the strengths you have already identified in your existing provision (page 7) and your grading for the critical success factors (page 6).

Think about how you can build on these in preparing for effective delivery of functional skills. For example:

- If you have good resources for skills teaching, could you review these and plan how to adapt them for functional skills?
- Where you already have an embedded approach to teaching skills, how could you build on this for functional skills?
- How should you change your existing quality assurance and monitoring procedures to ensure they are fit for purpose for functional skills?

List up to 10 strengths in the table below and suggest what you may need to do to ensure that these are a feature of your functional skills provision. You can link these ideas with your organisation’s development plan.

	Strengths of our existing provision	How we will build on these for functional skills
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

# What can help – examples from the pilot

Pilot centres have been working with functional skills for over a year. Feedback about their experiences suggests that they found it useful to:

- Identify a core team of practitioners as early as possible
- Involve learners in evaluating new approaches to teaching and learning
- Actively seek learners' views on their progress
- Emphasise and reiterate how functional skills empower learners to achieve success
- Celebrate success with learners, practitioners and senior management teams



**Links to:**  
**critical success factors (CSF) 1**  
Promoting a positive agenda for functional skills

- Decide on the learner cohort as soon as possible
- Start small: plan, do and critically review a short learning sequence
- Work collaboratively with pilot centres in a consortium
- Share ideas and experiences
- Listen to what the learners are saying
- Include discussion of teaching of functional skills in every departmental meeting



**Links to:**  
**CSF 5**  
Delivering effective teaching and learning

- Agree on and register with an awarding body early on, to receive latest information about assessment
- Work collaboratively with other centres in a consortium to agree who will assess learners, where and when
- Modify existing learner tracking processes to include functional skills
- Amend existing quality assurance systems to include functional skills



**Links to:**  
**CSF 6**  
Establishing clear assessment procedures, both internal and external, *and*  
**CSF 8**  
Embedding quality assurance

- Identify who will teach functional skills during the pilot phase
- Work with all functional skills practitioners to plan appropriate CPD
- Develop partnerships based on 'critical friends' to support the 'plan, do, review' cycle
- Involve the senior leadership team fully in supporting developments through appropriate funding



**Links to:**  
**CSF 3**  
Establishing clearly defined roles and responsibilities, *and*  
**CSF 9**  
Delivering appropriate staff development

## Your development needs

Throughout this guide you have been assessing your centre's existing strengths and considering the challenges you may face when you introduce functional skills. You can now reflect on and visualise your centre's development needs.

Rather than trying to come up with a finely honed list straight away, use this page to brainstorm everything you think needs to be done. You can record this in any way that suits you.



The final activity, on the next page, asks you to organise your development needs into a detailed action plan.

# Action plan

Review the development needs you identified on the previous page and identify what you think are the most important priorities. Then use the table below to draw up a more detailed action plan. Consider how you can link these actions with your organisation's development plan.

<b>Action</b>	<b>Intended outcome(s)</b>	<b>Person responsible</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Resources needed</b>

# Further information and support

## Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

The functional skills standards can be accessed at [www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_6066.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_6066.aspx)

The QCA website [www.qca.org.uk/functionalskills](http://www.qca.org.uk/functionalskills) contains up-to-date information about functional skills developments.

There are a number of documents to download, including:

- *'Functional' skills – Your questions answered* (DfES, 2006)
- *Functional skills: essential for life, learning and work* (QCA, 2008)
- *Functional skills guidance: Amplification of the standards* (QCA, 2008)
- *Final functional skills assessment principles: second year of the pilot programme*
- *Functional Skills bulletin.*

## The Excellence Gateway

The Quality and Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) Excellence Gateway (<http://excellence.qia.org.uk>) contains resources produced by the Functional Skills Support Programme (FSSP) and publications produced as part of the Key Skills Support Programme (KSSP), including:

- *Functional skills in work-based learning* (Learning for Work/KSSP, 2007)
- *Managing key skills and Skills for Life in work-based learning – A handbook for training providers* (Learning for Work/KSSP, 2006)
- *Managing delivery of functional skills* (FSSP, 2007, updated 2008) can be downloaded from <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/functionalskills>
- *Teaching and learning functional English/mathematics/ICT* (FSSP, 2007)
- *Key Skills – a Handbook for Coordinators* (KSSP, 2006)
- *Good Practice Guide: Leading from the middle* (KSSP, 2007)
- *Improving quality through a whole organisation approach to Skills for Life: A health check for providers of further education and training* (QIA, 2007).

## In addition:

- The **FSSP** also offers Regional Network meetings and training and support.
- **Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK)** provides staff skills audit tools ([www.lluk.org](http://www.lluk.org)).
- **Awarding bodies** provide information on: how to take part in a pilot; sample assessment materials and resources; and training.

# The Functional Skills for Adults programme

This resource has been prepared by the Functional Skills for Adults programme on behalf of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The programme supports non-pilot centres preparing to deliver functional skills to adults. These centres include colleges, schools with sixth forms, sixth form colleges, training providers, work-based learning, adult and community learning, and secure contexts.

## Publications

This resource is one of a series of five publications designed to help readers to move forward with the introduction of functional skills. The titles are:

- Where are you now? A diagnosis of centre needs
- Preparing to co-ordinate and manage functional skills
- Preparing to deliver functional English
- Preparing to deliver functional mathematics
- Preparing to deliver functional ICT

## Training modules

The Functional Skills for Adults programme is also offering a series of half-day, in-house briefing and training sessions delivered on demand to non-pilot centres. These training modules are as follows:

- Introduction to functional skills for adults
- Preparing for the transition from key skills to functional skills
- Preparing for functional skills: a workshop for SfL providers
- Using ICT to prepare for the introduction of functional skills to adults
- Transferring whole organisation approaches to the management of functional skills
- Preparing to implement functional English with adult learners
- Preparing to implement functional mathematics with adult learners
- Preparing to implement functional ICT with adult learners.

## Functional Skills Co-ordinators

A functional skills co-ordinator has been allocated to each region in England to facilitate the introduction of functional skills in pilot and non-pilot centres. Please contact them if you need any further information:

<b>East</b>	Jane Williams	FunctionalSkills.East@fsmail.net
<b>East Midlands</b>	Howard Parker	FunctionalSkills.EastMidlands@fsmail.net
<b>London</b>	Lorna Jackson	FunctionalSkills.London@fsmail.net
<b>North East</b>	Judy Carrick	FunctionalSkills.NorthEast@fsmail.net
<b>North West</b>	Barbara Calvert	FunctionalSkills.NorthWest@fsmail.net
<b>South East</b>	Annette Welfare	FunctionalSkills.SouthEast@fsmail.net
<b>South West</b>	Rosemary Brooke	FunctionalSkills.SouthWest@fsmail.net
<b>West Midlands</b>	Heather Frier	FunctionalSkills.WestMidlands@fsmail.net
<b>Yorkshire &amp; Humberside</b>	Gail Lydon	FunctionalSkills.YorkshireAndHumberside@fsmail.net

**LSN functional skills helpline:**  
**email [functionalskills@lsneducation.org.uk](mailto:functionalskills@lsneducation.org.uk)**  
**or telephone 0870 872 8081**

## **About this guide**

This guide is for managers and co-ordinators who have been given responsibility for leading the transition to functional skills. It aims to: identify your centre's starting point for introducing functional skills; assess your existing practice in relation to the 10 critical success factors; recognise the strengths of your provision and plan how you could build on these.

## **About this series**

This guide is one of a series of five publications designed to help readers move forward with the introduction of functional skills.