

Johnny Ball reveals all about learning

A visit to the region in July by maths guru Johnny Ball helped to spread the important message of how skills can help people to get on – both at home and at work. With many adults in the North East lacking the Skills for Life needed to progress in learning and work, Johnny's visit to the region came as part of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) North East 'Skills for Life campaign' – raising awareness of the importance in gaining good, basic numeracy skills, equivalent to those expected of an 11-year-old.

Kicking off his visit at Cramlington Market, Johnny worked on a fruit and vegetable stall, serving customers and helping to explain weight conversion. Johnny, who has spent his career popularising maths and making it easy to understand and apply to real life, said:

"The first and most difficult step, is deciding to do something about maths problems, by perhaps signing up to a numeracy course. Facing your problems with a smile can make both maths and even our whole lives more fun."

And market stall holder Mr Quinn agreed. He said:

"I am no expert but I have to use maths every single day in my job. If I didn't have basic numeracy skills, I wouldn't be able to run my business and enjoy the life that I have now. I would encourage anyone who struggles with numbers to sign up for a course now."

Johnny moved to Sainsbury's Team Valley, where he staffed the tills while setting mathematics challenges for shoppers.

Russell Walker, store manager, commented:

"What I think is so vitally important is raising awareness of how we use maths in everyday routines such as shopping. It is perhaps even more important today when we are budgeting that little bit more. I am happy that we could play our part in such an important issue in everyone's life."

Many adults in the North East lack the Skills for Life needed to progress in learning and work. In 2003, when the national Skills for Life survey was conducted, 22 per cent of working age adults in the region had literacy skills below Level 1 and 28 per cent had numeracy skills below Entry Level 3.

Progress has been made and in 2007/08 there were nearly 15,000 Level 1 literacy achievements in the region, compared to just over 12,000 two years ago, and an estimated 1,100 Entry Level 3 numeracy achievements, compared to nearly 700 two years ago.

Johnny's tour continued to County Durham's famous indoor market, once again selling fruit and vegetables to customers and giving demonstrations on how to estimate costs and convert weights. Johnny's tour ended at the KP Snacks factory in Billingham, where he met staff and demonstrated how maths plays a key role in their daily lives - from working out shifts and part-time hours to the day to day calculations they need to make at work.

unionlearn (the TUC's learning and skills organisation) work with the company to fund learning activity. Barney McGill, unionlearn Regional Manager, said: "Encouraging and engaging adults to get back into learning can often be a challenge. By holding events like this, coupled with the fantastic work that union learning representatives are doing, people are not only making the first steps to improving their skills – they're enjoying it and coming back for more."

The Skills for Life campaign is part of the Government's drive to improve basic skills. The Leitch Review of Skills outlined an ambition for 95 per cent of the country's working age population to achieve the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy by 2020. This equates to 597,000 people of working age to achieve Level 1 or above in literacy and 390,000 people to achieve Entry Level 3 or above in numeracy.

Dorothy Smith, interim Regional Director, LSC North East concluded:

"Good numeracy and literacy skills underpin almost everything we do in our daily lives – at work and at home. In difficult economic times, good maths and English skills are more important than ever. Research shows that people who lack Level 1 maths and English will struggle to get half the jobs available, whereas those with good skills can earn an additional £50,000 over their lifetime.

“Tackling poor numeracy skills is a particular challenge but one that we must overcome due to the significant impact that the lack of numeracy skills can have on life chances, leading to low self esteem, unemployment and depression. The increased self confidence and motivation learners gain from completing a course is of huge personal value and helps them start the process of transforming their lives, both at home and at work.”

For further information on improving basic numeracy and literacy skills visit www.direct.gov.uk/geton or call **0800 660800**.

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