



# **Communications briefing for Skills Accounts**

July 2010



## **Purpose**

This pack has been prepared for use by the Skills Funding Agency, BIS, strategic partners, providers and those who have been involved in the Skills Accounts trials. It provides the latest communications material, including key messages and information relating to the launch of the new, fully integrated Next Step service. On 2 August 2010, the new Next Step telephone and face-to-face services went live, backed up by a new customer relationship management (CRM) system to streamline the customer experience.

However, we have decided that in order to be sure the new website is fit for purpose we need to undertake a period of further testing to confirm its operational stability. In the meantime customers can continue to access online services through the existing Careers Advice and Skills Accounts websites that will be available until the new Next Step website is fully operational.

This document outlines arrangements for Skills Accounts prior to the implementation of all three channels of the new integrated national Next Step service. We welcome your input and contributions.

**For updates, questions and input please contact:**

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## KEY HEADLINE INFORMATION

A Skills Account is a personalised online service that empowers individuals to take control of their learning and working life. A Skills Account provides access to a range of information and advice on skills, careers and financial support in a single, easily accessible location.

Skills Accounts will become an integral part of the Next Step web channel which will be operational soon. Once operational, customers will register for Next Step. For those who have previously opened a Skills Account, they will continue to use their user name and password to access their secure on-line personal space "my Next Step".

In the meantime, those accessing the Next Step web address, [www.direct.gov.uk/nextstep](http://www.direct.gov.uk/nextstep), will be directed to access the Skills Account website.

## SKILLS ACCOUNTS

For those who are thinking about learning a new skill, or a change in their career, returning to work or learning, a Skills Account is the place to start. A Skills Account will help an individual to:

- Identify the skills they have
- Match their skills to possible job roles
- Choose the right course
- Find out if they can get funding to support them
- Track how much money the individual and the Government have invested in their recent learning
- Develop an action plan for their skills development and access services to help them make the next step
- Build a personalised CV to use when applying for jobs

The Skills Accounts universal offer is currently available throughout England for any individual who may wish to research and access learning. Learning Providers involved with the trial are available through the course search tool in the Skills Accounts system.

[www.direct.gov.uk/skillsaccounts](http://www.direct.gov.uk/skillsaccounts)

## THE SKILLS ACCOUNT CONCEPT

### 1. What is a Skills Account?

A Skills Account gives individuals access to a range of integrated services which will help them to take control of their learning and working life. Through a Skills Account, individuals will receive greater choice and support, enabling them to make their own decisions regarding their future. Skills Accounts are designed to provide a gateway through which individuals can access personalised careers advice including details of courses in their area, and assess their eligibility for government funding to contribute towards the costs of their learning. By highlighting the actual value of their chosen course, the aim is to encourage more learners to invest in their own skills. The introduction of Skills Accounts has not altered any of the existing eligibility criteria or entitlements.

A Skills Account also includes a confidential record of an individual's achievements which they can choose to share with employers, careers information and advice services or others who may find it helpful. For those individuals who make use of the Next Step service, a skills action plan will be produced which provides a personalised plan of the individual's key areas for development. Individuals may also access the skills diagnostic tool (which is being re-named the Skills Health Check), on the Skills Accounts website to create their own action plan to record their key areas for development. It is also possible to review and update an action plan as more skills are gained.

The skills account website can be accessed at [www.direct.gov.uk/skillsaccounts](http://www.direct.gov.uk/skillsaccounts)

All functionality within Skills Accounts will transfer to the Next Step careers website once it is introduced in the near future.

## SKILLS ACCOUNTS TRIALS

### 2. Who is responsible for policy, delivery and implementation of the trial?

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is leading on policy relating to the trials and the Skills Funding Agency is leading on delivery.

### 3. What has been the purpose of the Skills Accounts trial?

The Skills Accounts trial aimed to test out how Skills Accounts could be developed to meet the Government's long term vision for Skills Accounts by 2015 as described in Leitch World Class Skills. With the change of government, it is now anticipated that evaluation of the trials will help to inform the development of the proposed national system of Lifelong Learning Accounts. (See Appendix 1 for further background information on the trials).

### 4. How is Skills Accounts being rolled out?

*Fuelling Potential – A Blueprint for skills accounts and the adult advancement and careers service*, includes the following commitment:

*‘From August 2010, all Skills Funding Agency accredited providers who access funding for individual learning from the Adult Learner Responsive budget will be asked to make adult learners on their programmes aware of skills accounts and the adult advancement and careers service and the benefits of opening a skills account, using material provided by the Skills Funding Agency. We will also encourage these providers to go further if they can in helping people open accounts, but that will not be a requirement. We will continue to extend the number of providers who will be able to open accounts on behalf of their learners, ensuring they can embed accounts into their arrangements for supporting learners’.*

Skills Accounts will become an integral part of the Next Step service using a single brand from August 2010. However, as the Next Step careers website has not yet been introduced, customers will continue to access Skills Accounts in the short term.

During the second year of the trials, improvements have been made to the Skills Accounts website and the Skills Accounts service has been carefully expanded to include all regions of England, introducing new audiences in a phased roll out. The final release of the discrete Skills Accounts website was made in May 2010, bringing a number of enhancements, including a new CV writing tool. These tools and services will be integrated into one website (combining Skills Accounts, CAS and nextstep) when the new enhanced Next Step careers website is introduced.

### 5. How will we learn from the Skills Accounts trial?

The purpose of this trial has been to test how the new service can be best delivered to individuals and to identify any potential problems or shortcomings in the service before further roll-out. We commissioned a full independent evaluation of performance. The most recent evaluation report will be published by BIS following a Ministerial submission. A further report is due in August 2010 that will bring together findings and recommendations from across the universal trial and the "trials within the trial".

### 6. Is the name Skills Accounts here to stay?

The name "Skills Account" will be used until the new Next Step careers website is introduced. The Skills Account name and branding will then be replaced by the one single

brand, "Next Step", and the secure personal space on the Next Step careers website will be known as "my Next Step". The government is also considering the introduction of a new national system of Lifelong Learning Accounts. It is anticipated that this system, if introduced, would build on the current Next Step web service from autumn 2011.

#### 7. How many individuals have participated in the Skills Accounts trial?

The first year of the trials generated over 20,000 applications for Skills Accounts, which has since risen to over 100,000. It is anticipated that the numbers will continue to increase significantly. All those who have opened a Skills Account during the trials will have full access to a new secure personal space, "my Next Step" once the new Next Step careers website is introduced. The purpose of the Skills Accounts trial of creating a quality system for the individual and to ensure that they experience a positive service from their Skills Account has been fully evaluated, with positive results.

### OPERATING SKILLS ACCOUNTS

#### 8. How do individuals access Skills Accounts?

A Skills Account can be opened in a number of ways:

1. Online through [www.direct.gov.uk/skillsaccounts](http://www.direct.gov.uk/skillsaccounts) or [www.direct.gov.uk/nextstep](http://www.direct.gov.uk/nextstep)
2. Within the trial regions, as part of the targeted trials, some colleges and training providers will be offering Skills Accounts to specific groups of learners.
3. The Next Step face-to-face channel (from 2 August) can open a Skills Account for an individual and provide additional support.
4. The Next Step telephone channel (0800 100 900) can register an individual's interest in a Skills Account
5. ESP Providers in IES trial areas can open a Skills Account on behalf of an individual
6. Work Focussed Providers can open a Skills Account on behalf of an individual

For further information, please refer to the Skills Accounts Provider Guidance Manual and the Skills Accounts Frequently Asked Questions.

#### 9. How do you ensure the product is easy to understand?

Skills Accounts have been designed to make it easier for individuals to access information. The tools and services currently available via Skills Accounts will become fully integrated into the new Next Step careers website. A range of communications material is available, including a quick guide for providers which outlines how the transition will take place. ````

### MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

#### 10. How are Skills Accounts marketed?

A range of marketing materials has been developed to enable partners to effectively promote Skills Accounts, including leaflets, posters, and postcards. Skills Funding Agency Learner Services Teams are responsible for ensuring partners have the available marketing materials at their disposal until these are replaced with the full range of Next Step branded materials.

#### Promotion of Skills Accounts through Next Step

The new Next Step leaflets reference 'registration with Next Step' as part of the offer. In the short term, until the introduction of the new Next Step careers website, we are continuing to promote Skills Accounts as part of the wider Next Step offer. To avoid

confusion for Next Step customers, we have asked Prime Contractors to ensure that Next Step advisers explain the situation to their customers and continue to promote Skills Accounts (using existing Skills Accounts collateral as appropriate), and outline to their customers the benefits of opening a Skills Account. This includes the automatic transfer of information provided by customers to register for a Skills Account to the Next Step website once available.

#### 11. What communications materials are available?

There are numerous communications materials available for partners and stakeholders on the Skills Funding Agency's Campaign Resources Site [www.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/campaignresources](http://www.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/campaignresources)

Marketing materials such as posters and leaflets were available to order directly from Granby marketing **until 30 July 2010 only.**

The following collateral is still in use (subject to having been ordered or distributed previously), so please continue to use these materials:-

Publication Numbers:

- A3 posters male version - LSC-P-NAT-100518
- A3 posters female version - LSC-P-NAT-100519
- \*NEW A1 posters male version - LSC-P-NAT-100516
- \*NEW A1 posters female version - LSC-P-NAT-100517
- A5 Leaflet LSC-P-NAT 090170
- \* NEW postcard – generic LSC-P-NAT-100550

Other available materials include:

- \* Postcard – Carers (North East and South West only)
- \* Postcard – Working Tax Credits (North West only)

A small supply of the generic postcard and A5 leaflet are also held at National Office for ordering whilst stocks last.

The Skills Funding Agency produces a Provider Update, which will feature updates on Skills Accounts alongside news on other policy areas. If you would like any further information about this bulletin, please contact Ann Crago at the Skills Funding Agency .

#### 12. Will you start communicating Skills Accounts to the press?

There aren't any plans to conduct pro-active press activity about Skills Accounts. All reactive press enquiries regarding Skills Accounts should be directed to the Skill Funding Agency Press Office on 02476 823 515.

### TRAINING AND SUPPORT

#### 13. Is there a helpline for stakeholders?

No. Stakeholders should contact their regional Skills Funding Agency Learner Services Team for advice/queries at your local Skills Funding Agency Office.

#### 14. Is there a helpline for regional partners?

Regional partners and stakeholders should contact their regional Skills Funding Agency Learner Services Team for advice/queries at your local Skills Funding Agency Office.

A customer technical support line (0800 100 900) is available to provide the first level of support, for example; if a user experiences any technical issues or error messages whilst visiting the site.

#### 15. What materials are available on the Skills Accounts services/products for Stakeholder staff?

The following Skills Accounts materials are available:

- Communications brief
- Delivery partners guidance manual
- Quick Guides to support stakeholders:
  - Learning Providers
  - Employment and Skills Providers
  - Work Focussed Training Providers
  - Skills Funding Agency
  - Next Step advisers
  - Strategic Partners
- Generic presentation
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for providers
- Next Step Q and A's
- Skills Accounts key messages for transition to Next Step

#### 16. Is specific guidance available for providers to operate Skills Accounts?

Specific guidance and FAQs are available for providers when communicating with learners and for raising awareness with staff. Skills Accounts key messages for transition to Next Step have also been produced. Please contact Margaret Warren for more information.

### **PROVIDER INFORMATION**

#### 17. Will additional staff be required?

Within the Strategic Learning Providers, opening a Skills Account should be undertaken as part of the standard registration process/meeting or for Next Step through the skills diagnostic tool. Therefore delivery partners should not require any additional staff.

#### 18. Will stakeholders and individuals have the opportunity to feedback through a formal process?

Stakeholders' and individuals' input is crucial to the future development of Skills Accounts/Next Step. Regular telephone surveys continue to take place as part of the evaluation process, and findings are used to inform future developments. There is also an opportunity to provide feedback via a facility on the Skills Accounts website.

#### 19. What are the benefits for individuals and stakeholders?

For individuals, careers information and advice is available, including information on learning opportunities and financial support all in one place; offering them an opportunity to find the information they need to take control of their learning and working life.

For delivery partners, they have the opportunity to help mould future policy as well as begin to understand the changes and processes that are taking place within the FE sector. This includes what they need to do to adapt and compete in the demand led funding environment we are moving towards.

## 20. Where can organisations not involved in the trials find additional information?

Stakeholders will be able to access further information by referring to the Skills Accounts pages of the Skills Funding Agency website. Regular information on Skills Accounts will be disseminated via the Skills Funding Agency's provider Update.

Alternatively if you have a specific query, please liaise with your Skills Funding Agency Skills Accounts contact, on the regional Learner Services Team.

## 21. Do colleges still have to run the usual eligibility checks on an individual, who has checked their entitlements via their Skills Account?

Yes; having a Skills Account does not remove the requirement for providers to ensure that individuals are eligible for funding. The declarations regarding eligibility on the Skills Account website are made by the individual. The burden of audit evidence is still on the learning provider.

## 22. How will you ensure that individuals have access to the most accurate information?

The National Learning Directory (NLD) is being replaced with a new Next Step Course Directory from 2 August 2010. This will be accessible via the Skills Accounts website. Providers in the first instance should contact [www.coursedirectoryproviderportal.org.uk](http://www.coursedirectoryproviderportal.org.uk) for further information.

## STAKEHOLDER AWARENESS

### 23. How are stakeholders engaged in the Skills Accounts trials?

A full programme of briefings and presentations involving national and regional Skills Funding Agency staff has taken place throughout the implementation of the trials during 2009/10.

### 24. Can private training providers get involved in the Skills Accounts trials?

The current Skills Account trial is focusing on testing and trialling systems and processes predominantly through ALR routes. However, private providers not offering ALR are still able to raise awareness of the Skills Accounts website to their customers.

### 25. What has been the feedback and experience of stakeholders and individuals who have taken part in the trials of Skills Accounts?

Over 100,000 adults have requested a Skills Account since the trials commenced in the South East and East Midlands Skills Funding Agency regions in September 2008.

Feedback from the trials of the Skills Accounts service gathered through the independent evaluation is very positive. Two telephone surveys, each of 450 users participating in Skills Accounts trials, found that ninety-four per cent of those interviewed thought that Skills Accounts are a good idea, around 80 per cent of respondents in each survey said that having a Skills Account would encourage them to take part in future learning, and the tools on the site received high ratings for usefulness.

Further details are contained in the [Evaluation of the Skills Account Trials](#) – Skills Account Holder Telephone Survey (December 2009). Further evaluation reports will be available during the coming months, following submission to Ministers.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

### 26. How will Skills Accounts fit in with the wider development of Next Step?

The telephone and face-to-face channels for Next Step will be launched on August 2 2010. The new Next Step website is currently under development, and when this goes live the functionality contained within the Skills Accounts website will transition to the Next Step website. In the meantime, customers will continue to access the existing Skills Accounts and Careers Advice Services websites.

Once the Next Step careers website is introduced, all Skills Accounts tools and resources will become an integral part of the Next Step website. Information provided by customers for registration for a Skills Account will be transferred to the Next Step website. The customer will continue to use their user name and password to access their secure, on-line personal space, "my Next Step" in which they can store their personal careers and learning information.

For more information, refer to *Fuelling Potential – A blueprint for skills accounts and the adult advancement and careers service*.

### 27. What plans are there for communicating the integration of Skills Accounts within the single Next Step website?

A Skills Accounts into Next Step – Provider Reference Guide has been produced, and was circulated to providers in Update. However, currently, we are still raising awareness of the discrete Skills Account website, which will continue to operate until the new Next Step careers website goes live. There is also a Next Step Q and A's document which answers relevant questions around the transition arrangements.

Further information will be made available through the internal staff Bulletin and the Provider Update, or by contacting Margaret Warren.

## DATA PROTECTION

### 28. What steps are taken to protect my data?

The Chief Executive of Skills Funding and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) take Data Protection matters extremely seriously. The Chief Executive of Skills Funding (commonly referred to as "the Skills Funding Agency") is registered as a Data Controller with the Information Commissioner for the purposes of handling personal data. Anyone who applies for a Skills Account is provided with an explanation of how their data will be used.

The systems and processes implemented by the Skills Funding Agency for managing personal data are reviewed regularly for security purposes in accordance with government requirements. Skills Funding Agency staff designated to handle personal data receive training in Data Protection requirements. Should you have any questions regarding how we handle personal data, you can make enquiries of the Skills Funding Agency under our Privacy Policy [skillsaccounts.direct.gov.uk/Terms.aspx](http://skillsaccounts.direct.gov.uk/Terms.aspx)

### 29. How will we capture lessons learned from the trials?

Lessons learned from the trials with particular customer groups will help to determine the benefits for the learners involved, and to inform ongoing development of the Next Step service and the development of a proposed national Lifelong Learning Account system.

In developing Skills Accounts, we have been careful to learn the lessons that led to the closure of the Individual Learner Accounts (ILA) programme. For Skills Accounts, the contracting and payment mechanisms have been based on mainstream Skills Funding Agency processes (transferred from the Learning and Skills Council) through the Adult Learner Responsive (ALR) funding model. Therefore no actual money transfers “outside the system”. Skills Accounts provision is only delivered through providers approved to receive Skills Funding Agency funding and who continue to comply with the organisations rigorous quality assurance arrangements.

The vision for Lifelong Learning Accounts is currently part of the Consultation on the future direction of skills policy; *Skills for Sustainable Growth*. (July 2010). This will link closely to the evaluation, which will consider whether the systems in place have added value to the individuals’ experience.

### 30. What is the history of Skills Accounts?

Lord Leitch in his 2006 report "Prosperity for all in a global economy: World Class Skills" first recommended that public funding for skills should be routed through a learner account. The Government accepted this recommendation and in "World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England" outlined their intention to introduce Skills Accounts in 2008/09.

The Government then set out its long term vision for Skills Accounts in its June 2008 "Work Skills" paper, stating that "from the age of 18, depending on existing qualifications, all young adults who do not go to university will now have access to a range of entitlements up to Level 3 to spend on their vocational training, be it at a local college, training provider or in work through Train to Gain" through a Skills Account.

Skills Accounts also formed an important part of the national skills strategy, *Skills for Growth* (November 2009) through which Skills Accounts increasingly put learner choice at the forefront of driving improvement and quality in the skills system and *Building Britain's Recovery, Achieving Full Employment* (December 2009) which strengthened the role of Skills Accounts within the IES service. *Skills for Growth* included commitments that in the future Skills Accounts would be offered to all young people when they turn 19, Train to Gain learners and Apprentices. Skills Accounts would become an integral stage of the development of demand-led funding, and the number of organisations offering provision where Skills Accounts could be used would treble to 1500, giving adults greater choice of learning.

The paper, "Fuelling Potential – A Blueprint for skills accounts and the adult advancement and careers service", published in March 2010, states that "Skills accounts will enable adults to take control of their skills and career development by providing a personalised online record of their qualifications, personal information on public funding entitlements for skills and a record of the funding the Government has invested in their training. They will be part of a single online channel with the tools we are developing for the aacs".

In July 2010, BIS published: "Skills for Sustainable Growth" a consultation on the future direction of skills policy. This indicates that BIS are considering how to create a national system of Lifelong Learning Accounts (LLAs), in which every adult would be given an LLA when beginning any new learning. There is a 12 week consultation period, ending on 14 October 2010, in which to provide views on the vision for LLAs and their potential usefulness.

With a new Department for Education now in place, it will also be necessary to revisit the area of determining the best ways to enable young people to find out about Next Step and registration for the Next Step service from autumn 2010 onwards.

### 31. What was the trial of Adult Learner Accounts (ALAs) in 2007?

Yes. A small-scale trial of ALAs aimed at Level 3 learners started in the South East and East Midlands in 2007. The target was for 4,000 people to open an ALA in the first year and we comfortably exceeded that target and have ensured that all lessons learned from the ALA trials have been incorporated into the development of Skills Accounts.

Evaluation of ALAs found that:

- One-third of ALA learners chose their course to help them get a new or better job or gain promotion

- A further third chose their course to help them move on in education
- Learners really do value the choice and the support offered
- Learners also welcome advice on progression opportunities and over half of those surveyed reported that they had accessed further careers advice since opening their ALA

The ALA trial will end once all individuals involved have completed their learning.

### 32. The Skills Voucher has been renamed and repositioned – why?

It was clear from early evaluation that many individuals found the funding information displayed on the voucher useful. However, learners and providers found it hard to use the voucher meaningfully when this didn't trigger funding to the provider. As a result, the voucher was phased out in October 2009 and replaced with an indication of the Government funding which an individual's chosen course may attract. This can be found under the 'Funding for Learning' section on the Skills Accounts website.

As the voucher is no longer in use, any individual who approaches a learning provider with a voucher should be advised that the voucher is their personal guide to how much money may be available for their learning, and there is no longer a need to provide the learning provider with a copy of the voucher.

### 33. What were the trials with particular customer groups?

Skills Accounts play an important role in supporting both learners and those seeking employment. For individuals seeking work it is important that a Skills Account supports their journey to sustainable employment.

A series of additional trials of Skills Accounts have been taking place with particular customer groups in a number of regions, with the aim of informing future development of the service. The additional trials have looked to meet the needs of the following customer groups:

- Integrated employment and skills trials - In the West Midlands, Employability Skills Programme (ESP) Providers and Next Step advisers help customers to open Skills Accounts, as part of their integrated package of support, to help them to achieve sustainable employment. Skills Accounts are embedded in ESP to support IT development, career progression, job search and employability.
- A learner with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities - one college in the East of England, offers individuals Skills Accounts through an adviser who opens a Skills Account with them.
- Train to Gain learners - A trial with Train to Gain providers in Yorkshire and Humberside to determine the benefits of employers offering Skills Accounts to employees to support skill development, as part of Train to Gain activity.
- Offenders in the community - working with the Probation Service in the South East.
- Carers - The North East and the South West regions are trialling a back to work entitlement of up to £500 for those who have been carers for at least 5 years, including parents, to support their return to the labour market.
- Working Tax Credit Allowance trial - The North West region is trialling an entitlement of up to £500 for those on low incomes to support their progression in the labour market.
- Level 3 learners - In the East Midlands and South East, customers undertaking Level 3 learning have been able to use their Skills Account to access additional learner support funding. No new learners will be started on this trial, but existing learners will be continuing until the completion of their chosen courses.

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

**Next Step** – adult careers service

**ALA** – Adult Learner Accounts

**ESP** – Employability Skills Programme

**IES** – Integrated Employment & Skills

**ILA** – Individual Learning Accounts

**MIAP** – Managing Information Across Partners, now re-named the Learner Records Service

**SLP** – Strategic Learning Providers

**Universal** – offer available to all adults

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

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