POOR ADULT NUMERACY COULD COST UK ECONOMY £20 BILLION A YEAR

More than one in three adults feel held back by poor numeracy in daily life

Employers & politicians challenged to join new campaign to improve the UK’s maths skills

Today sees the start of a major new drive to end the UK’s low levels of adult numeracy, which new research suggests could be costing the economy £20 billion a year. The National Numeracy Challenge aims to show millions of people that they can do something to improve their everyday maths skills – and give them the help they need to get there.

Spearheaded by the charity National Numeracy and supported by public, private and voluntary sector organisations, the Challenge will encourage everyone to check their own level of numeracy, using a web-based self-assessment tool, the Challenge Online, www.nnchallenge.org.uk, and lead those who need it towards a programme of personal learning. The initial target is to raise at least one million people out of poor numeracy over the next five years.

New research by economists from Pro Bono Economics published for National Numeracy today reveals the damaging impact that poor numeracy is having on the UK economy. Their report estimates the cost of outcomes associated with low levels of adult numeracy at around £20.2 billion per year, or about 1.3 per cent of the UK’s GDP. This is the central estimate, based on a number of assumptions, within a range of figures between £6.7 billion and £32.6 billion. It comprises costs to individuals, employers and the government, but does not take into account costs to the health service or criminal justice system and may therefore underestimate the real cost of poor numeracy.

The National Numeracy Challenge is launched against a backdrop of recent OECD research showing the UK failing to keep up with other countries. Government figures also show that virtually half the working-age population have the maths skills expected of children at primary school and over three-quarters are below the level equivalent to the maths GCSE that many employers regard as necessary for work.

National Numeracy chairman, David Frost CBE, said: “This new economic evidence shows – yet again – the urgent need for action to tackle poor numeracy. We are now challenging all employers, politicians and anyone who is concerned about poor maths skills in this country to join us in backing the
National Numeracy Challenge. It’s a simple message – if you recognise the problem, help us in doing something about it.”

Also released today is a YouGov online poll showing that over a third of adults (36%) feel they have sometimes been held back by poor maths skills in some aspects of their lives. The most common difficulties involved weighing or measuring, understanding statistics in the media and helping children with maths schoolwork. Of those who rated their own skills as poor, nearly a third (30%) said it had affected their work and nearly a quarter (24%) had found it hard to work out the best deals in shops. However nearly a third (31%) of all those surveyed wanted to improve their maths skills; this rose to 50% among those who rated their skills as poor.

The Challenge aims to work with an expanding network of employers, unions, training providers, education and community organisations to create the largest ever drive to improve everyday maths skills. As the lead partner, the Nationwide Building Society is heading the charge and will be encouraging both its employees and its 15 million members to take the Challenge and spread the word.

Nationwide Building Society chief executive, Graham Beale, said: “A lack of everyday number skills not only threatens the economy and the competitiveness on the country’s job market but can also ruin an individual’s chances in life. We urge others to get behind this really important challenge, whether it’s to improve their own prospects or to provide the opportunity for others to improve theirs.”

Other partners already signed up to support the Challenge include the City of Portsmouth, TUC unionlearn, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, Merseytravel, the Workers Educational Association and a number of public libraries. All are encouraging their employees, members, clients and local residents to take the Challenge and spread the word about the importance of good numeracy. National Numeracy has also written to all UK MPs urging them to take the Challenge themselves and spread the message in their constituencies.

National Numeracy chief executive, Mike Ellicock, said: “The Challenge is all about getting people to understand why it’s worth doing, persuading them that they can do it – anyone can – and then supporting them through the process. It’s different from anything that has been tried before – it’s different in how it approaches numeracy and we hope it’s going to be different in the reach it achieves.”

The Challenge Online can track the progress of particular workforces or of whole populations. Research supported by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will be carried out in partnership with the Behavioural Insights Team (the ‘Nudge Unit’ originally set up by the Cabinet Office) to assess the effectiveness of different forms of learning undertaken through the Challenge. National Numeracy is also establishing a network of ‘Challenge
Champions' to support others in their workplace or community in using the Challenge Online.

Further support from the National Numeracy Challenge has come from the director-general of the Confederation of British Industry, John Cridland, who said: “Having a good standard of numeracy is one of the essential skills that employers look for when recruiting, and is equally important for everyday life. We fully support the National Numeracy Challenge and encourage employers to consider signing up.”

This week also sees the launch at Westminster of an all-party parliamentary group on maths and numeracy.

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Notes to editors:

1. National Numeracy

Founded in 2012, National Numeracy – [www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk](http://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk) – is an independent charity that focuses on adults and children with low levels of numeracy. It aims to challenge prevailing attitudes, influence public policy and research, identify and promote effective approaches to improving numeracy. Where possible, it works in partnership with others to achieve these aims with support from key partner organisations and funders. National Numeracy is a registered company (company no: 7886294) and charity (charity no: 1145669).

2. Pro Bono Economics

Pro Bono Economics - [www.probonoeconomics.com](http://www.probonoeconomics.com) - is a charity (charity no. 1130567) that matches economist volunteers with charities to address questions around measurement, results, impact and value. This is a free service to charities.

3. YouGov

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2151 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 27th February - 1st March 2013. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

4. Earlier research on numeracy skills

The 2011 Skills for Life survey published in full by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in December 2012 showed literacy, numeracy and ICT skills levels for adults in England - [www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/resources/46/index.html](http://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/resources/46/index.html). It revealed a decline in numeracy levels since the previous survey eight years earlier. The OECD published its international survey of adult skills (PIAAC) in October 2013 - [www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/news/98/index.html](http://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/news/98/index.html) and of school students (PISA) in December 2012 hyperlink. These both showed the UK overtaken by a number of higher performing countries. For additional evidence please see – [www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/news/16/index.html](http://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/news/16/index.html)
5. **Additional information is provided in accompanying pack**

a. The National Numeracy Challenge Online  
b. Partner Profiles  
c. ‘Cost of outcomes associated with low levels of adult numeracy in the UK’, Pro Bono Economics  
d. Summary of YouGov poll findings  
e. Supporters of the Challenge  
f. Example questions from the Challenge Online