The term 'lifelong learning' is sometimes used in England as an umbrella term for forms of learning that fall outside the school system. However, there is no universally accepted definition of the expression and other terms are more commonly used. The legal framework refers to ‘further education’, which is education taking place in a non-school context for people over the age of full time compulsory education (16 years). Details of this provision are given in the chapter on ‘Adult Education and Training’ and associated articles on funding, quality assurance, teachers and management staff working in adult and further education.

The Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills, working within the Department for Education, has responsibility for adult and further education.

The Government has set out its funding priorities for the further education and skills sector in the Skills Funding Letter: 2017-18. This details funding for the 2017-18 financial year, alongside indicative budgets up to 2019-20, and confirms the Government’s strategic direction for the sector for 2016-2020 as that of ensuring high quality provision that gives good value for money and focuses on young adults, the low-skilled and those who are unemployed. It also highlights government support for providing apprenticeships across all sectors of the economy and at all levels, including degree level; for providing tuition fee loans for learners aged 19+ to study for recognised qualifications; and for supporting community learning provision which meets adult learning needs and identified local needs. Community learning provision aims to help adults of all age and backgrounds to gain a new skill, reconnect with learning, pursue an interest, or better prepare for progression to employment or further education.

The main policy documents and legislation relating to lifelong learning include:

- The Spring Budget 2017
- The November 2017 Industrial Strategy White Paper
- The Enterprise Act 2016
- The Post-16 Skills Plan.

In its Spring Budget 2017 (p.41), the Government announced funding for lifelong learning pilots to test different approaches to help people to retrain and upskill throughout their working lives.
In November 2017, the Government issued the Industrial Strategy White Paper [8]. The strategy includes:

- an adult digital skills entitlement
- a National Retraining Scheme to help people reskill and up-skill as the economy changes, including as a result of automation. The retraining scheme is being informed by evidence from the lifelong learning pilots highlighted above, which are examining the barriers to adults engaging in learning
- a high-level advisory group, the National Retraining Partnership, bringing together representatives from government, businesses and workers, to set the strategic direction for the retraining scheme.

The Enterprise Act 2016 [9] introduced measures intended to aid the Government in meeting its goal of creating 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020, including setting apprenticeship targets for the public sector, creating the apprenticeship levy to help fund them, and establishing the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) [10], with the primary function of setting quality criteria for the development of apprenticeship standards and assessment plans and reviewing, approving or rejecting them. The apprenticeship levy has been payable since 6 April 2017 by employers with an annual paybill of over £3m (€3.4 million*) and is used to invest in apprenticeships. Further information on the levy is available on the Department for Education website [11].

The remit of the Institute for Apprenticeships was extended by the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 [12] to include technical education qualifications.

The Government’s Post-16 Skills Plan [13] outlined its approach to reforming technical education, with the aim of '[supporting] young people and adults to secure a lifetime of sustained skilled employment and [meeting] the needs of [the] growing and rapidly changing economy’ (p. 7). Central to the Plan is reducing and streamlining the possible routes into employment which will be available to 16- to 18-year-olds and adults from 2020 onwards, and which will aim to offer learners a high-quality educational option to prepare them for skilled employment.

In an action plan [14] published in October 2017, providing an update on progress made in developing policy and implementing the reforms set out in the Skills Plan, the Department for Education stated that the initial focus of the technical education reforms would be on 16- to 19-year-olds, but that over time, it also intended to review technical education for adults and technical provision at Levels 4 [15] and 5. [16]

*Exchange rate used: €1 = £0.88, ECB [17], 3 October 2018.