



SISCo – Supporting Induction in Social Care

The SISCo project

Using web-based tools to support basic skills development in the adult social care workforce in England

Final project evaluation report

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Voices from our employer-partners

We asked our facilitated users to tell us what they had learned from taking part in the SISCo project. Here is what they said:

“How important basic skills are in order to deliver good health and social care.”

“The importance of finding out the skills staff have – some have the right skills and some do not – and what to do about it.”

“I now know that basic skills checks can be done by anyone. You don’t have to be an expert and that we (the organisation) can support people with basic skills needs. That the Common Induction Standards (CIS) are out there and our work force has to be skilled and we must meet the CIS.”

“I learned more about CIS and the relevance of these standards in the workplace; as well as about the methods used to assess literacy and numeracy skills with staff in that context and the various ways of providing evidence.”

“Being aware that there is support there for inductees to meet the standards. Thinking back I was slightly sceptical at the start but am now genuinely using it!”

“Not to take for granted that staff, once shown how to do the job, keep all of the knowledge and skills. Further development and restating knowledge is very important to ensure staff competence.”

“How to identify a need, with basic skills, and how to sit with that person and help them to overcome that.”

“To always look at things with open eyes. It’s important to learn new things and helps you move forward.”

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We would particularly like to thank all the members of staff at our 20 employer organisations in the social care sector in SE England, in particular the individuals who gave considerable time responding to our surveys throughout the project.

Executive summary

Background to the SISCo project

The SISCo project uses web-based tools to support basic skills development in the adult social care workforce. It is a regional project, based in South East England, working with 20 employer-partners who are a representative sample of the national care workforce in terms of size, sector and services offered.

SISCo approaches basic skills from an employer perspective. It aims to help managers take constructive action on basic skills and uses the Skills for Care Common Induction Standards to demonstrate the relevance of basic skills to safety and quality.

Results of research phase

The project undertook extensive user research prior to developing any tools. The research demonstrated that employers value most highly their staff's ability to interact effectively with clients and colleagues. Communication, literacy skills and English language skills are of particular importance.

Our employer-partners told us they would like:

- a more systematic approach to specifying and assessing basic skills at induction, but had concerns about staff reaction to assessment, as well as the resources and expertise required
- a tool that relates and allows you to compare the different social care standards in order to save time and show linkages clearly for staff and managers
- a basic skills assessment that tells them:
 - whether staff have the basic skills required by the job
 - whether staff have a positive or negative attitude to skills development
 - what can be done to improve basic skills
- feedback from a skills assessment that allows them to understand the implications for service delivery of the staff skill profiles.

They also confirmed that they had sufficient IT infrastructure and skills to access and make use of web-based tools.

Developing the web tools

Based on the results of the research, the team developed a specification for a website with three core tools:

- an Action Planning tool: 8 step by step guides to support an organisation identify its basic skills requirements and then take appropriate action to address any issues at both individual and organisational levels
- a Compare Standards tool: an interactive tool enabling users to access and compare the standards that define safety and quality: the Common Induction Standards, the NVQ level 2 Health and Social Care and the GSCC Codes of Practice for workers

- a Check Basic Skills tool: a bank of short, 15-minute learning activities for managers to raise basic skills issues safely and constructively with individual members of staff.

Piloting of the web tools

These tools were developed and tested before being rolled out to the 20 employer partners for a three-month trial. During this period, project facilitators helped the employer-partners make use of the tools in their workplaces and reported their experiences in an online logbook.

The website was also made freely available on the internet. Registrations built up through word of mouth and, during the course of the pilot, over 500 users registered on the site.

The project team was able to collect extensive qualitative and quantitative data about the effectiveness of the tools from both the facilitated employer-partners and the non-facilitated public users.

Results of pilot evaluation

The results from all sources of pilot data correlated to a high degree. The website and the tools received high approval ratings from all users, with over 9 out of 10 users rating the tools as either 'useful' or 'very useful'. Comments from users included:

“You [SISCO] have done it! Now I can assess the basic skills that staff need.”

The most highly rated tool for all users was the Check Basic Skills tool. However, employer-partners were unequivocal that the three tools (Action Plans, Compare Standards Tool and Skills Checks) formed a coherent whole and that to remove any one tool would weaken the overall value of SISCO.

Conclusions

The results of the evaluation suggest that we have correctly identified user needs in relation to basic skills support, and provided effective tools to address those needs. The results also confirm that SISCO's essential approach (i.e. to focus on the relationships between basic skills, sectoral standards and work activity) is sound. Encouragingly, it also suggests that the employer-partners welcomed the opportunity to engage with basic skills issues systematically, a core aim of the project.

A number of recommendations for improvements on existing provision and suggestions for additional services have been made.

1. Background to the SISCo project and website

The SISCo project uses web-based tools to support basic skills development in the adult social care workforce.

A national consultation on the uses of IT in social care recommended that SCIE should ensure learning technology is used to support the learning needs of all care staff, not just the qualified workforce. Research shows that one of the core learning needs in the sector is basic skills (communication and number skills).

SISCo approaches basic skills from an employer perspective. It aims to help managers take constructive action on basic skills and uses the Skills for Care Common Induction Standards to demonstrate the relevance of basic skills to safety and quality.

The project is hosted and funded by SCIE, with support from Skills for Care and SEEDA. It is a regional pilot based in SE England.

The project infrastructure consists of:

- core project team including experts in
 - basic skills and workplace learning
 - e-learning and web development
 - basic skills materials development
 - information architecture and web usability
- technical partners providing web development and hosting
- five facilitators - workplace basic skills practitioners experienced in supporting social care employers directly in the workplace
- 20 employer partners - a nationally representative sample in terms of sector, services provided and size¹.

The project began by establishing baseline data on how employers currently address basic skills issues through a practice audit. A more detailed scoping survey provided the data needed to specify the web tools to be developed.

2. Results of pre-pilot research

2.1 Practice audit

The practice audit was an extensive and in-depth examination of the current practices around induction and basic skills in our 20 employer partners. The audit was conducted in the workplace by the project facilitators.

The key messages from the audit were:

- All the audited social care workplaces operate a formal induction process, often informed by the Common Induction Standards.

¹ During the course of the project, this number reduced to 18, due to two employers being bought up and one employer going out of business. See Appendix A for complete details.

- Social care employers value 'basic skills' – oral communication and report-writing in particular - but do not have systems for specifying the 'basic skills' required for roles.
- Employers agree that a systematic approach to specifying and assessing 'basic skills' at induction is desirable, but consider they lack the necessary resources and expertise; they also have significant concerns about staff reaction to assessment.

2.2 Scoping survey

The scoping survey captured in more detail the employer partners' requirements for web-based support for basic skills. Again this survey was conducted in the workplace by the facilitators.

The key messages of the scoping survey were:

- Care workplaces had sufficient IT infrastructure and support to access web-based tools.
- Employers and managers were confident enough in their IT skills to make use of web-based tools.
- Employers and managers wanted a web site with a tool that maps (i.e. relates and allows you to compare) the different social care standards in order to
 - save time
 - show linkages clearly for staff and managers.
- Employers and managers value most highly their staff's ability to interact effectively with clients and colleagues. Communication, literacy skills and English language skills are of particular importance.
- Employers and managers identified care, nursing, ancillary, admin and clerical, and management roles as those most likely to benefit from basic skills assessment.
- Employers and managers wanted a basic skills assessment that tells them:
 - whether the inductee has the basic skills required by the job
 - whether the inductee has a positive or negative attitude to skills development
 - what the inductee and the manager can usefully do to develop the inductee's skills.
- Employers and managers want feedback from a skills assessment that allows them to understand the implications for service delivery of the post-holder's skill profile.

Based on the results of the research, the team developed a specification for a website with three core tools:

- an Action Planning tool: 8 step by step guides to support an organisation identify its basic skills requirements and then take appropriate action to address any issues at both individual and organisational levels
- a Compare Standards tool: an interactive tool enabling users to access and compare the standards that define safety and quality: the Common Induction Standards, the NVQ level 2 Health and Social Care and the GSCC Codes of Practice for workers
- a Check Basic Skills tool: a bank of short, 15-minute learning activities for managers to raise basic skills issues safely and constructively with individual members of staff.

Prototypes were developed, tested and amended, before being rolled out to the employer partners for a three-month in-service trial. The SISCo web site was also made available for public viewing from 18 June 2007. As the site was a pilot there was no launch publicity, but some targeted invitations to participate were sent out to the SCIE People Management network and Skills for Care's regional dissemination networks.

The pilot phase officially closed on 1 October 2007. The web site is still available for use, and new registrations are continuing.

3. Evaluation of pilot website

The evaluation of the SISCo pilot website has four strands. The first is based on data gathered from the web usage log, which charts the patterns of use across the site by all users. This data is quantitative and aggregated, and represents overall trends.

The second strand of the evaluation is based on the logbooks kept by project facilitators as they visited the employer partners throughout the three-month trial. This qualitative data provided useful insights into employers' reactions to the tools across the course of the pilot.

The third strand is based on data supplied by individual 'public' users of the website, who were not designated employer partners and did not receive facilitation. These users filled in a short online survey providing mainly quantitative feedback at the end of the trial period.

The final strand of the evaluation is based on an extensive closing interview of our employer partners by the facilitators. This feedback provided us with a great deal of qualitative data about the website, the pilot process and how the project was viewed in the social care workplace.

3.1 Overview of levels of site usage

Extensive logging of user activity enabled the tracking of site usage patterns across a range of 'web metrics' throughout the pilot period. The summary usage data is presented in Figure 1 below, together with data from some comparator sites across the same period.

Figure 1: SISCo site usage, with comparators (June-Oct 2008)²

	SISCo	Website for IT workers in charities	Website for a small campaign charity	Web resource on learning disabilities	Website for large national charity	Website for police force	Website for housing association
Pages/visit	8.3	2.03	4.07	4.44	5.69	5.84	7.58
Bounce rate ³ %	37.07	70.62	45.01	48.22	40.24	27.05	26.47
Avg time on site (mins)	5.4	1.52	2.3	2.49	2.29	3.03	4.52

a. Number of site visits

- 1651 individuals made a total of 2444 visits to the SISCo site over the 15-week trial period.

² The data for comparators has been supplied in anonymised form by our technical providers.

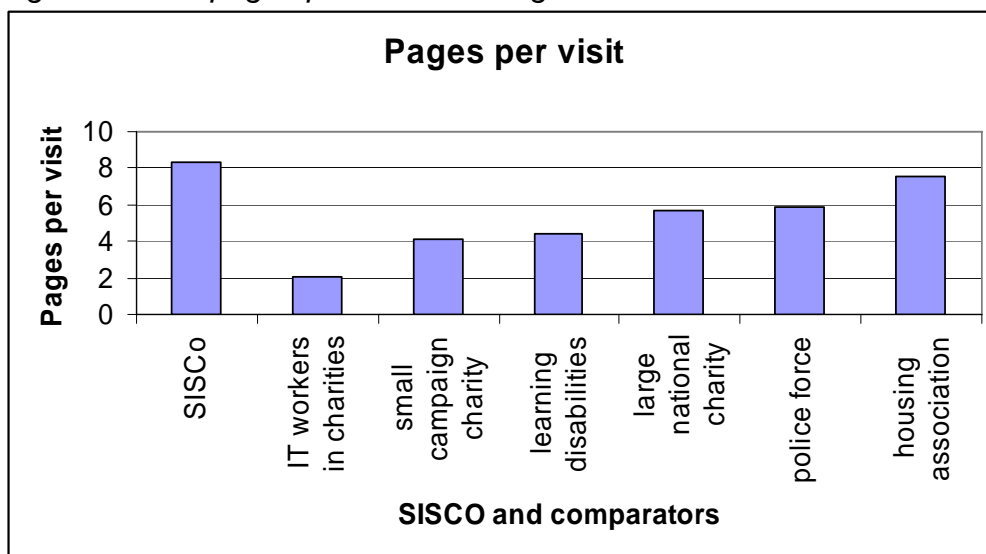
³ The percentage of visits in which the user left the site from the entrance page

- Of these 1651 individuals, 517 became registered users. This represents a conversion rate of over 30% – high for this type of site. This suggests users are judging the content to be of interest and/or use – an interpretation supported by other data outlined below.

b. Content viewed

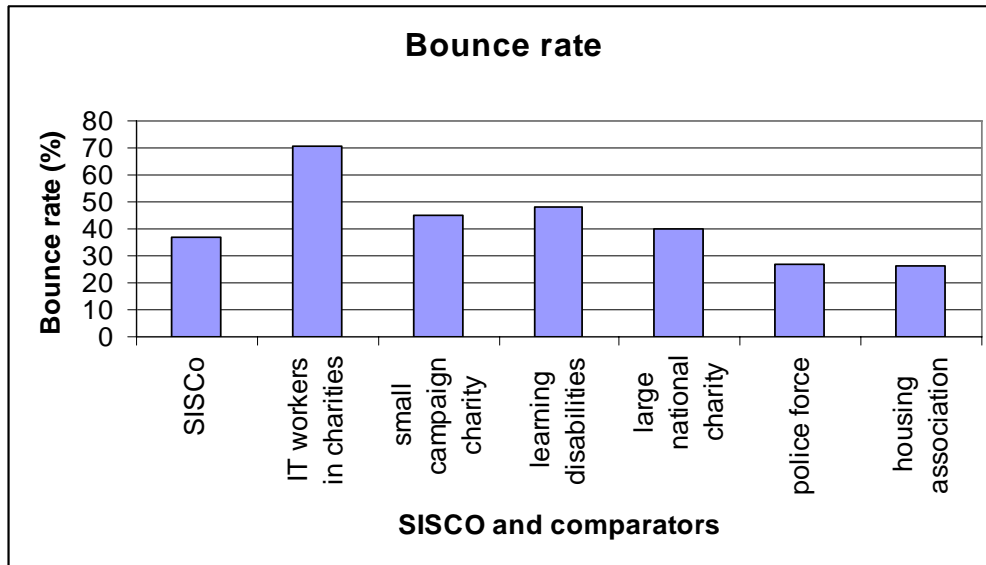
- A total of 20,291 pages of the site were viewed by our users, with an average 8.3 pages viewed on any one visit. This represents the highest level of engagement with the content on the site of any of the sites compared (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Web pages per visit – the higher the better



- The home page 'bounce rate', the percentage of visits in which the user left the site from the entrance page, was 37.07%. Bounce rate is a measure of visit quality and SISCO's relatively low bounce rate generally indicates that site entrance pages are relevant to our visitors (see Figure 3 below).

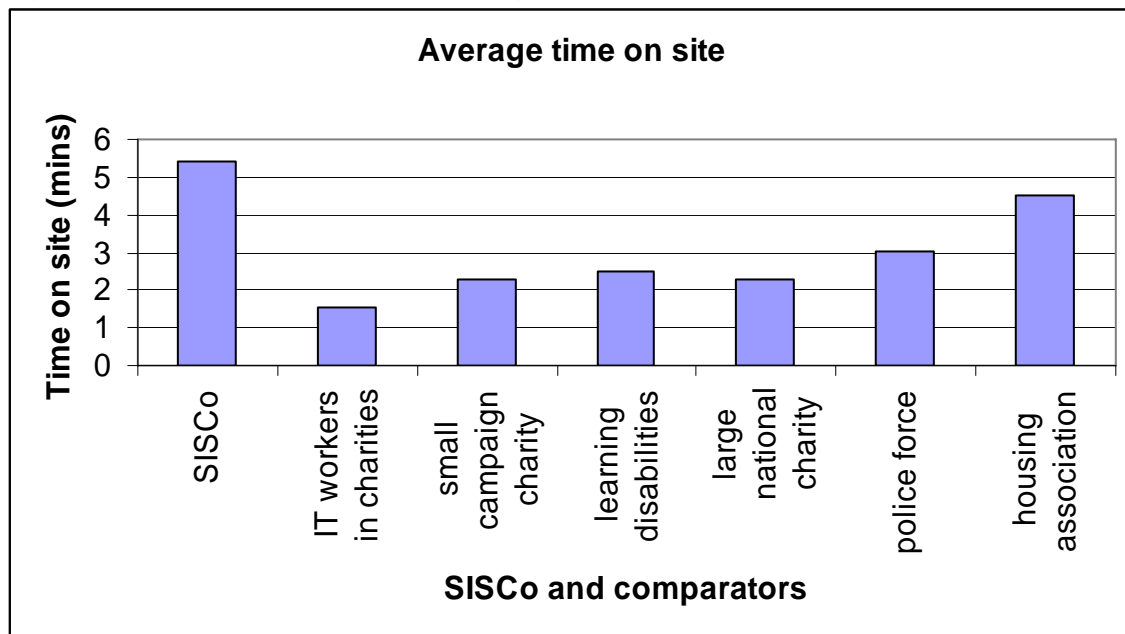
Figure 3. Bounce rate – the lower the better



c. Time spent on site

Time on site is one way of measuring visit quality. If visitors spend a long time visiting a site, they are likely to be interacting extensively with it. SISCO has the highest time on site by some distance (see Figure 4). Again this suggests users are considering it worth their while to stay on the SISCO site.

Figure 4. Time spent on site – the higher the better



d. Most popular web pages

The metrics in this section show levels of popularity and usage relative to other pages within the SISCO site. They do not therefore provide any absolute measure

of utility against any external benchmarks, but they do indicate which parts of the site users liked most and least. The rankings from the user evaluation are used to triangulate this web log data in section 3.3 below.

Figure 5 below shows the top 20 pages viewed on the site during the pilot.

Figure 5. Pages in order of popularity

Page title		Page Views	Time on Page (mins)	% Bounce Rate ⁴	% Exit Rate ⁵
1.	Home page	2,460	00:00:48	37.29%	38.33%
2.	Registration page	866	00:01:10	18.18%	5.08%
3.	Getting started	719	00:00:17	38.46%	4.59%
4.	Check Basic Skills Intro	604	00:00:25	18.42%	5.46%
5.	Facilitator logbook	511	00:02:14	0.00%	4.89%
6.	Login page	505	00:00:22	0.00%	2.57%
7.	Compare Standards Intro	409	00:00:38	10.00%	6.36%
8.	Compare Standards Tool	403	00:00:15	0.00%	1.74%
9.	Check Basic Skills > All Skills Checks	398	00:01:14	0.00%	15.83%
10.	Find Action Plans Intro	382	00:00:47	25.00%	5.50%
11.	My Folder	332	00:00:55	66.67%	6.93%
12.	Action Plans > Getting Started	330	00:00:40	50.00%	7.27%
13.	Registration > thank you	329	00:00:19	0.00%	6.69%
14.	Resources > About Basic Skills	316	00:00:30	0.00%	5.70%
15.	Resources	316	00:00:10	0.00%	3.48%
16.	About SISCo	297	00:00:50	39.13%	24.24%
17.	Find Action Plans > Organisation Action Plans	269	00:01:45	0.00%	11.90%
18.	Compare standards > Select a standard	218	00:00:18	40.00%	3.67%
19.	Contacts	215	00:00:10	33.33%	4.65%
20.	Find Action Plans > Individual action plans	210	00:01:38	0.00%	10.95%

⁴ Bounce rate is percentage of users who leave the site after visiting a single page

⁵ Exit rate is the percentage of people for whom a particular page is the last one they visit before leaving the site. 'Goal' pages, where a user achieves a particular goal such as downloading an action plan or skills check, will usually have higher than average exit rates. A non-goal page other than the home page with a high exit rate may contain misleading or inappropriate content.

Home page

The most popular page is the home page. This is to be expected on a site where most users are arriving as direct traffic rather than via search engines or referring sites (which may link to sites at a deeper level than the home page).

Also to be expected, the home page has the highest bounce rate (people leaving the site altogether after viewing a single page).

Log-in and registration pages

The log-in page can be accessed in two ways. The most common way SISCO users access it is to attempt to use one of the three main channels (Check Basic Skills, Find Action Plans, Compare Standards) without being logged in. This is a 'necessary evil' for a site that requires registration. Inevitably we can see evidence that some users are put off by this, as this page has the highest bounce rate of all the highly visited pages.

However, looking more deeply at the navigation pathways from this page, we can see that only just over 9.75% of users leave the site altogether at this point. Those who do not leave go to the registration page, which in turn has a 4.75% exit rate. We can therefore estimate that requiring registration has caused just under 15% of users to leave the site without using the tools.

The three SISCO tools

Figure 5 shows us that the first tool people go to is the Check Basic Skills tool. This is confirmed in the user evaluation data (see section 3.3). The Skills Checks are the most used of the three tools, and regarded as having the highest utility.

The next most frequently used tool by all users is the Compare Standards tool. The least used of the three tools is the Find Action Plans tool. Again this information correlates with the self-reported data from the respondents to the evaluation survey. See section 2.2c below for more information on how people used the tools.

Other content provided

The utility of the 'Getting started' section (which was added as a result of our pre-pilot user testing) is confirmed by its ranking as the next most popular page after the registration page.

However, the bounce rate of the 'Getting started' section is higher than the bounce rate for the home page. This is an area of the site that will benefit from review of content and structure to encourage users who have shown initial interest to proceed more deeply into the site.

e. Most popular documents

Figure 6: Top 10 documents downloaded

Rank	Document title	No of times downloaded
1	Skills Check 01: Talking about the Principles of Care	53
2	Skills Check 15:	43

	Making an Entry in the Communications Book	
3	Skills Check 05: Effective communication	39
4	Strategic uses of the National Occupational Standards (Skills for Care)	36
5	NVQ Health and Social Care Core unit 1	35
6	Skills Check 06: Abuse and Neglect	34
7	Skills Check 02: Reading about the Principles of Care	33
8	Skills Check 09: Care Plans	31
9	NVQ Health and Social Care Core unit 2	31
10	Skills Check 14: Reporting an Incident	30

Figure 6 reflects the priorities of all users, both facilitated employer-partners and non-facilitated users. We can see that there are seven Skills Checks in the top ten downloads, and no Action Plans. It is interesting to note that three 'non-SISCo' documents are in the top 10. The first is Skills for Care's guidance for managers on strategic uses of the National Occupational Standards. The other two are the complete texts of the Health and Social Care NVQ core units.

These results suggest that users find the Skills Checks to be the most accessible of all the tools provided, and also that providing direct access to relevant documents 'just in time' is highly valued. The NVQ texts and the Skills for Care NOS guidance are already available elsewhere, but users have clearly been motivated to access them by their use of SISCo. This does suggest we should consider adding more quality assured and relevant 'non-SISCo' resources to the site. Complete records of all downloads are available in Appendix B.

f. How the tools were used

Check Basic Skills

The landing page of the 'Check Basic Skills' is the fourth most popular of all pages (after home page, registration and 'getting started'). On this page, users are offered a number of ways to choose the Skills Check. For example they can browse by job role or by work activity.

The most popular way to browse the Skills Checks was to view the complete list of all Skills Checks. This suggests that many users like to know 'what's on offer', rather than having a very specific target in mind. Having viewed the complete list, 25% of users select a Skills Check to download, with Skills Check 1 'Talking about the Principles of Care' being the most frequently selected, followed by Skills Check 5 and Skills Check 9. (See Appendix C for complete list of Skills Checks, and Appendix E for the complete version of Skills Check 1.)

The second most popular route to the Skills Checks documents was 'By job role' with the most popular role being 'Care worker'. Users who selected this job role then most often chose Skills Check 1 ('Talking about the Principles of Care'), SC7

('Develop as a Worker') and SC10 ('Different Ways People Communicate Feelings').

Compare standards

The Compare Standards tool was the second most popular of the three tools. Of the users arriving at the Compare Standards landing page, 60% start the standards comparison process, and 11% go the 'standards library' where complete texts of the Common Induction Standards, the GSCC Codes of Practice and NVQ Level 2 Core Units are available. As we saw above, the complete texts of two of the NVQ core units were amongst the top 10 downloaded documents.

Find Action Plans

The Action Plans are the least used of the three tools. Interestingly, this was the only section of the web site where a substantial number of users arrived at the tool having first looked at the 'Getting started' pages. The other tools were accessed directly from the main menu options on the home page.

Ways of accessing the Action Plans were evenly spread, with approximately the same number of users choosing plans by category (either 'Individual' or 'Organisational') or simply choosing to view all 8 Action Plans. (See Appendix D for complete list of eight Action Plans.) Organisational Action Plans were more often selected than Individual Action Plans.

g. Times of use

Hourly usage was generally as expected with Monday to Friday between the hours of 6am and 9pm being most popular.

3.2 Pilot: Facilitator logbook analysis

a. Pilot objectives

The project's five facilitators supported the use of the web site with the 18 employer partners throughout the pilot period. Facilitators were given a specific set of objectives for the pilot:

- Employers were to use all three SISCo tools (i.e. Action Plans, Compare Standards tool and Skills Checks) sufficiently to provide representative evidence of:
 - the circumstances the tools are used in
 - what employers want to achieve by using them
 - the way they are used
 - their present fitness-for-purpose
 - any revisions that might significantly improve any aspect of SISCo.
- Facilitators were to support (i.e. motivate and, if necessary, assist) employers to complete the items above and, specifically, to:
 - introduce the site to the employer
 - guide the employer through registration
 - work through Action Plan 5
 - use the Compare Standards tool to relate the work task/activity analysed in Action Plan 5 to one or more of the standards included in the Compare

- Standards tool (with a view to better defining safety and quality in task/activity)
 - ensure the employer has read at least three other Action Plans, either independently or with facilitator, and is in a position to rate their usability at the end of the pilot
 - use at least four Skills Checks, one from each skill area (spoken communication, reading, writing, problem-solving with numbers) with a member of staff.
- Facilitators were to record their experience in the online facilitator logbook.
- Facilitators were to complete summative evaluation surveys with employers at the end of the pilot.

b. Facilitator activity

Facilitators logged 66 contacts (mostly site visits) with 18 employer-partners between 20 July and 2 October (see Figure 7 below).

Figure 7. Facilitator activity (summary)

Contacts logged	56 visits, 3 emails, 7 telephone calls
Average visits per employer	3
Average time per visit	2 hours 10 minutes
Total hours spent with employers on site	121
Average time per employer site	6 hrs 30 minutes

The objectives logged by facilitators for these 66 contacts suggest that trialling followed a broadly similar pattern in the various employer-partners.

As might be expected, in their first visit facilitators typically set out to introduce employer-partners to the SISCO web site and tools, ensure that the employer-partner registered and then plan with the employer-partner how to achieve the specified objectives of the pilot. In some cases, facilitators also set out to complete Action Plan 5 during their initial visit but more typically this, and the use of the Compare Standards Tool, was cited as an objective for the second visit, along with work on Skills Checks.

Objectives for contact centred on trialling Skills Checks and Action Plans, progress reviewing and scheduling the final evaluative survey. With one employer, the facilitator also set objectives related to helping that employer with their induction process.

In just over half of all contacts (38 out of 66), facilitators considered they achieved their objectives fully. In about a third of contacts (24), they felt their objectives were only partly achieved. Only in the case of four contacts did facilitators report not achieving any of their intended objectives.

Figure 8. Stated objectives of facilitator contacts

<i>Facilitator's stated purpose</i>	<i>Times cited (across all 66 contacts)</i>
Introduce SISCo web site	22
Register employer	19
Re-register employer (to elicit opening survey)	1
Plan pilot trialling	13
Complete/review one or more Action Plans	28
Use Compare Standards tool*	1
Complete/deliver/facilitate one or more Skills Checks	16
Review progress/Review trialling of Skills Checks	10
Plan trialling of (further) Skills Checks	3
Review Skills Checks as CIS evidence	1
Collect employer feedback on Skills Checks	1
Employer liaison	9
Help integrate CIS into employer induction	1
Schedule closing interview	2
Complete closing survey	1

*Note: using the Compare Standards tool was a stipulated part of trialling Action Plan 5

c. Employer and facilitator experience of piloting SISCo

After every contact, facilitators reported whether the use of SISCo and its tools made the employer-partner feel positive or negative about taking action on basic skills and using SISCo. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

The facilitators then addressed these two questions from their own perspective. Again, the response was almost wholly positive.

These results (detailed in Figure 9 below) suggest that, whatever the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the tools, piloting them was a strongly positive experience for employers and facilitators across the full range of pilot settings. Analysis of the closing survey of employer-partners confirms this (see 3.4 below).

Figure 9. Experience of the pilot for employers and facilitators

<i>Employer and facilitator experience</i>	<i>Type of contact</i>	
	<i>3 emails 7 telephone calls</i>	<i>56 Visits</i>
Employer left feeling positive about taking action on basic skills?	Yes (9), n/a (1)	Yes (55), No (1)
Employer left feeling positive about using SISCo?	Yes (10)	Yes (55), No (1)
Facilitator left feeling positive about taking action on basic skills with this employer?	Yes (9), n/a (1)	Yes (55), No (1)
Facilitator left feeling positive about using SISCo with this employer?	Yes (9), n/a (1)	Yes (56)

d. Who the facilitators worked with

In the course of their contacts with employers, the facilitators worked with a range of employer-representatives (see Figure 10 below). Their primary contacts, however, tended to be either a senior operational manager (four employers) or, more commonly, a training manager (11 employers). At three employers, the facilitator worked with both operational and training managers.

Figure 10. Who the facilitators worked with

<i>Reported as present during logged contact</i>	<i>Number of times reported</i>
Manager/Registered manager/owner	26
Assistant manager	2
Administrator	1
Team leader/senior carer/Key worker	7
Carer	9
Training Manager/Coordinator	30
Senior Workforce Development Officer	2
External training provider	5

e. Narrative accounts from facilitator logs

For every contact they had with their employer-partners, the facilitators logged a narrative account of what took place during the contact. These accounts contain a considerable amount of specific and incidental information about the circumstances in which SISCo was piloted and the detailed feedback employer-partners gave on SISCo and its tools.

Broadly, this information both informs and confirms the evaluative feedback from employer-partners presented below in section 3.4.

To meet their trial objectives, facilitators needed to ensure employer-partners understood what the pilot required of them, how the SISCo website worked, how

the SISCo tools worked and, most importantly, how the tools related to employer-partners' own local circumstances and priorities.

The logs show that although some employer-partners came to the trial with little or no previous experience of web-based tools, facilitators found it relatively simple to establish them as independent users of the SISCo website. The bulk of facilitator-time was spent helping employer-partners first identify the basic skills issues that arose in their own organisations, then understand how the Action Plans and Skills Checks could help them address those issues and finally actually trial the tools.

The logs suggest this was partly because employer-partners lacked confidence in relation to basic skills issues, partly because employer-partners wanted reassurance that they were using the tools correctly and partly because they faced many other demands on their time. (In addition to normal pressure of work, the logs record appointments cancelled due to organisational restructuring, family illness and even the flooding and evacuation of one employer-partner's premises.) In these circumstances, facilitators clearly played a crucial motivational role (as employer-partners themselves acknowledge; see 3.4e below).

On several occasions facilitators report that, at the request of employer-partners, they themselves delivered Skills Checks to staff (as opposed to supporting their delivery by employer-partners). This was requested either so the employer-partner could see how a Skills Check was delivered or due to pressure of work on the employer-partner.

From the logs, it is clear that, in addition to their understanding of SISCo, facilitators drew on knowledge and skills of their own related to:

- facilitation, coaching and mentoring
- basic skills (including workplace assessment and skills development)
- workplace learning, supervision and people management
- care work practices and issues
- training and NVQ assessment in care work.

Comments from the facilitator logs included:

“My role today was to inspire the employer-partner to try the SISCo tools. [The owner] was initially confused about the relationship between the induction booklets that they currently use (from Social Services) and the SISCo tools and website. I explained how one would complement the other, support AQAA and benefit the new starters.”

“My role was (a) to provide background information on SISCo and the latest developments regarding the project and basic skills, (b) to introduce [the training manager] to the website and support her in registration and navigation of the site, (c) to discuss various issues regarding basic skills in social care e.g. NVQ assessment and assessors, ESOL, encouraging staff with basic skills issues to address them.”

“I introduced [the team leader] to the idea of basic skills and how the SISCo tools can support a line manager to develop these skills on the job.”

“[My role was to be] a good listener. [The training manager] needed to talk through issues relating to care NVQs and verification. This probably illustrates the value of a facilitator having a broad experience in education and training. On this occasion I was more directive and gave more prompts than usual to ensure that a certain amount was covered.”

3.3 Non-facilitated user evaluation

By the end of the 3-month pilot SISCO had 517 registered users. Of these, 27 were users directly connected with the project (SISCO team, technical developers, facilitators, advisors) and 20 were employer partners. This left 470 ‘public’ registered users, who used the site without facilitation during the course of the pilot.

A total of 49 non-facilitated users filled in an online user evaluation survey, giving a 10% response rate. They were asked about the overall effectiveness of the SISCO site, and also to rate the levels of utility of individual tools and elements of the web site.

a. Overall effectiveness

Users were presented with five statements about the effectiveness of the SISCO site and asked to rate their level of agreement. The following scores were assigned to their responses:

- Agree strongly (score = 2)
 - Agree (score = 1)
 - Do not have an opinion (score = 0)
 - Disagree (score = -1)
 - Disagree strongly (score = -2)
- Statement 1: “The SISCO website helps users identify the basic skills (i.e. spoken and written English and number skills) that care staff require in order to work safely and meet quality standards.”

Nine out of every 10 respondents agreed that the site helped them identify the basic skills care staff need for their work. There was an overall agreement score of 1.14, where 2 is the strongest possible agreement, and -2 the strongest possible disagreement.

(12 respondents agreed strongly, 31 agreed, and 5 did not have an opinion.)

- Statement 2: “The SISCO web site helps users to consult the care sector standards that define what it means for care staff to work safely and meet quality standards.”

More than 8 out of every 10 respondents agreed with this statement, giving an overall agreement score of 1.12.

(12 respondents agreed strongly, 30 agreed, and 6 did not have an opinion.)

- Statement 3: “The SISCo web site helps users to check and record if care staff have the basic skills required for their jobs.”

Again, more than 8 out of 10 respondents agreed with this statement, with an overall agreement score of 1.08.

(12 respondents agreed strongly, 28 agreed, and 8 did not have an opinion.)

- Statement 4: “The SISCo website helps users to discuss and resolve basic skills issues in a constructive way (including supporting care staff to improve their basic skills).”

Eight out of 10 respondents agreed that the site helps them to discuss and resolve basic skills issues, with an overall agreement score of 1.0.

(9 respondents agreed strongly, 31 agreed, 1 disagreed, and 7 did not have an opinion.)

Two cautionary comments were received:

“Yes, but [the tools] need to be used very carefully or likely to alienate staff and be counterproductive.”

“It is important how and when you use a skills check with staff. Existing staff reported feeling 'singled out' when asked to complete a skills check.”

- Statement 5: “The SISCo website helps care organisations to take coherent, comprehensive action on basic skills.”

As before, 8 out of 10 respondents felt that the SISCo site helped them take action on basic skills, with an overall agreement score of 1.06.

(14 respondents agreed strongly, 25 agreed, 2 disagreed, and 7 did not have an opinion.)

One cautionary comment was received:

“It is designed to do this, but many of the employers I work with will struggle to find the time to complete/introduce it. As many of them have basic skills needs themselves, I am not confident about their willingness to use it.”

b. Levels of use and utility of individual elements

The 49 non-facilitated users were then asked to rate the utility of each of 11 different elements on the SISCo site, these elements included the three main tools (Skills Checks, Action Plans, Compare Standards) as well as the support and guidance sections such as FAQs, and the technical functions, such as ‘My Folder’.

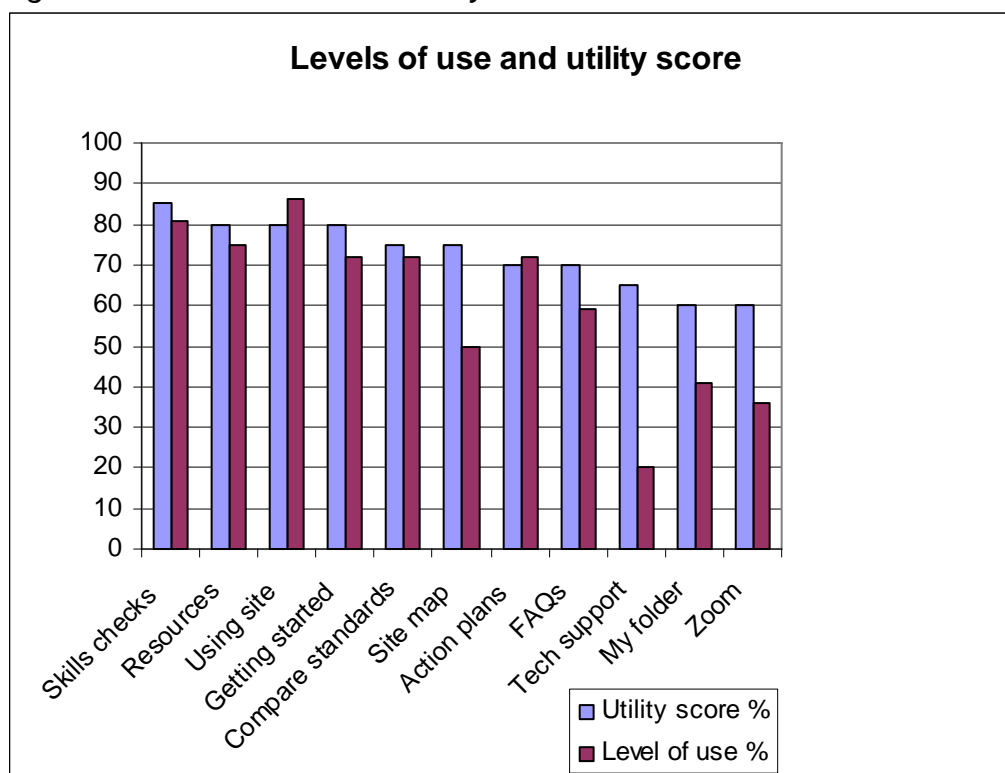
Users were asked to rate each of these elements as either ‘very useful’, ‘useful’ or ‘not useful’, or to indicate if they had not used that particular part of the site.

The data provided information on both levels of use and levels of perceived utility (see Figure 11 below). Levels of utility were scored:

- very useful (score = 2)
- useful (score = 1)
- did not try (score = 0)
- not useful (score = -1)

The final utility measure was the utility score divided by the level of use.

Figure 11: Levels of use and utility of SISCo elements



The most used element of the site was the guidance section 'Using this site'. The most used tool was Skills Checks, followed by Compare Standards then Action Plans.

Technical support was the least used element of the site; the technical project teams received only a handful of queries about the site, most being from users who has lost their usernames and/or passwords.

In terms of overall utility, no part of the site rated below 60%. This is a very high utility score across the board and suggests that our original specification was an accurate reflection of user needs, and that those needs have been well met.

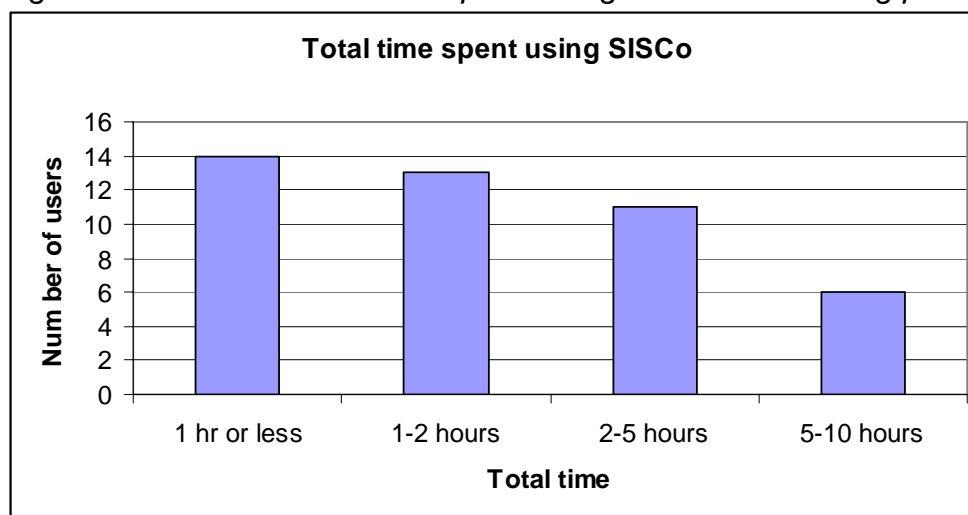
The Skills Checks had the highest level of utility – higher than their level of use, which may suggest that the Skills Checks exceeded user expectation. Action Plans had a lower utility score than level of use. This suggests that of the three tools the Action Plans are the ones that may require revision. This data correlates with the web log data from all users.

The section 'using this site' was the only other element of the site with a lower utility rate than level of use, which suggests that review of this section to better suit user need may be required. Again this correlates with data from the web log.

c. Total time on site

Finally, users were asked to estimate the total amount of time they had spent using the SISCo site during the pilot period (Figure 12). Approximately one third of respondents spent one hour or less, and another third between one and two hours.

Figure 12: Estimated total time spend using SISCo tools during pilot



3.4 Facilitated user evaluation

At the end of the pilot, facilitators collected evaluative feedback from 16 employer-partners using the closing questionnaire. Between 2 October and 1 November 2007, four of the five SISCo pilot facilitators administered this questionnaire to a total of 18 employer-representatives.⁶

In the case of five employer-partners (all privately-owned, four of the five providing residential care) the questionnaire was completed by someone whose primary responsibility is for care management; for nine of the partners it was completed by someone primarily responsible for training. In both of the partners where two individuals completed a questionnaire jointly, one was concerned with care management and the other with training.

Respondents' job titles were:

- Care Home Manager / Registered Care Manager (four respondents)
- Managing Director
- Homecare Coordinator; Homecare Training Coordinator (completed questionnaire together)

⁶ At two employer-partners, the survey was completed jointly by two respondents. SISCo's fifth facilitator had worked with a single employer that was taken over by another organisation and left the pilot.

- Home Support Team Leader; Training Manager (completed questionnaire together)
- Adult Portfolio Officer and Senior Social Care Trainer
- Senior Workforce Development Officer, Housing and Community Care
- Training Co-ordinator (two respondents)
- Training Manager (four respondents)
- External assessor/trainer (previously Training Manager for employer in question).

The survey asked respondents 41 questions divided into ten sections covering respondents'

- perception of SISCO's overall utility
- experience of taking part in the pilot
- motivation for addressing workplace basic skills issues
- assessment of the utility SISCO's main elements
- experience of facilitation during the pilot
- views on using the web as a delivery vehicle for SISCO
- views on enhancing SISCO's utility.

Findings from this survey are presented below.

a. Overall effectiveness

Asked how they would describe SISCO to a colleague, respondents characterised SISCO as follows:

- tool for managers to support staff (one respondent)
- resources to assess skills needed by care staff (four respondents)
- resources to assess basic skills needed by care staff (five respondents)
- resource to support induction (six respondents).

Throughout its development, SISCO has been presented to its South East employer-partners within the context of induction. It is therefore not surprising that about a third of respondents characterise SISCO primarily as an induction tool. For the other two thirds of respondents, it is a care skills assessment tool. Within this group, just over half would identify it as a basic skills assessment tool.

Respondents gave all aspects of SISCO high approval ratings but rated the Skills Checks particularly highly, followed by the Compare Standards tool. Action Plans, although still rated as useful, were considered to be in need of both refinement and further development.

Respondents were in no doubt that SISCO's three main tools formed a coherent whole and added value to each other:

"I think all the SISCO materials are a package and it's best to use them all."

In general, respondents commended SISCO's clarity and simplicity, which, they reported, made it easy to use, even by those with little experience of ICT.

Respondents also commented on:

- support being offered to users during the pilot (and the earlier partnership approach to development of SISCO tools)
- the value of tools and resources to support employers meet regulatory demands
- SISCO and its resources being free.

Asked how SISCO's pilot content could be improved, employer-partners made the following suggestions:

- Expand the range of tools and resources to encompass, for example, higher-level staff, certain client-groups, learning disabilities standards.
- Refine and develop the Action Plans, add illustration and exemplification.
- Streamline existing tools and their presentation, reducing the amount of text and paperwork (e.g. size of PDFs).
- Create supplementary printed versions of selected elements of SISCO.
- Follow-up visits from facilitators to motivate and support further implementation of SISCO.

Asked whether they considered SISCO helped them address basic skills issues in the context of induction, all 16 employer-partners said "Yes, definitely".

Asked why, employer-partners said that SISCO:

- is based on induction standards and targets relevant skills needs
- helps employers analyse what communication skills care work requires
- skilfully blends induction and skills testing
- provides an approach to assessment that staff accept, including making basic skills assessment more acceptable by linking to the CIS
- offers valuable resources that support the induction process.

SISCO's employer-partners also saw a wide range of potential applications outside of induction, including

- recruitment and selection
- supervision
- professional discussions
- appraisal
- NVQ training
- general training
- diagnosis when issues arise in the course of work activity
- refresher training.

"I would like to think that I could tap into it at any time. I would use it at regular appraisal or supervision – then you can monitor ongoing issues. There's a danger that after the induction period you think everything's fine, and no more support is needed, but normally it's not like that."

"The member of staff with whom I completed the skills check on 'Writing a formal letter' found it very helpful to prepare her for a key skills test."

“We need to catch everybody who comes through and follow up to make sure the skills are there! It needs to happen with all staff on an annual basis.”

Asked whether they considered SISCo *really* to be worth using (given all the other demands on their time and attention), 15 employer-partners said ‘Yes, definitely, and one said ‘Yes depending on the type of employer-organisation’.⁷

Asked why, employer-partners said that SISCo enables them to:

- assess basic skills in the context of care work
- improve induction / implementation of the CIS
- improve recruitment and selection procedures
- open a dialogue with staff about training
- generate evidence for inspection
- negotiate more effectively with NVQ providers
- support in-house trainers and training
- support the development of individuals
- respond positively to basic skills issues with constructive feedback
- address specific problems with individual staff
- improve organisational communication, including writing in care plans
- bring organisational practices into line with others in the sector.

“Out of all the induction programmes that I’ve looked at, this is the best to help us achieve our goal.” (Employer-partner comment)

Asked what SISCo might offer additional to its pilot content, employer-partners identified the following:

- ongoing support to engage the organisation as a whole in the use of SISCo tools
- half-day training event to help organisations use SISCo tools, either live or on the website
- printable instructions and information (to support organisations use of SISCo tools to address basic skills)
- forum for users to share ideas, information and questions
- facility (email or website-based) to advise users about updates to the SISCo site
- module to support employers administer assessments (in addition to guidance text already provided)
- Skills Checks designed for higher level staff
- Skills Checks designed for staff who speak English as an additional language
- tools to encourage the development of reflective practice in care
- expansion of the Compare Standards tool to include H&SC NVQ Level 3, Learning Disabilities Award Framework / Learning Disabilities Qualifications
- workbook to record staff progress through CIS, with exercises to improve communication and number skills.

⁷ This employer provides supported employment and is inspected by the Adult Learning Inspectorate

b. Experience of participating in the pilot

Asked to evaluate how useful they had found participation in the SISCo pilot, all 16 employer-partners stated that participation had been very useful and cited

- gains in knowledge and understanding about basic skills in the care context, including 'how basic skills and the CIS can be integrated'
- support for AQAA and inspection
- learning about induction
- learning about workplace assessment for clients (as well as staff).

Specifically, respondents said that through taking part in the SISCo pilot they had learned:

"Not to take for granted that staff once shown how to do the job keep all of the knowledge and skills. Further development and restating knowledge is very important to ensure staff competence."

"That...linking basic skills to induction [led to] less stigma [than a] stand alone [approach]."

"The importance of finding out the skills staff have – some have the right skills and some do not – and what to do about it."

"How important basic skills are in order to deliver good health and social care."

"The importance of basic skills in the workforce and the need to look at them from induction onwards."

"That basic skills checks can be done by anyone. You don't have to be an expert and that we (the organisation) can support people with basic skills needs. That the CIS are out there and our work force has to be skilled and we must meet the CIS."

"More about CIS and the relevance of these standards in the workplace and about the methods used to assess literacy and numeracy skills with staff in that context and the various ways of providing evidence."

"That there is support there for inductees to meet the standards. Thinking back I was slightly sceptical at the start but am now genuinely using it!"

"To always look at things with open eyes. It's important to learn new things and helps you move forward."

"How to identify a need, with basic skills, and how to sit with that person and help them to overcome that."

"How basic skills assessment can be carried out in a manner that is relevant to the individual and his/her workplace."

“I am now better and more confident at identifying staff's essential skills needs. It has heightened and raised my awareness as a trainer of the issues and this is important because, interestingly, I think staff are now more prepared to admit they have a problem and ask for support.”

“That SISCO provides a wealth of material that we can really use.”
 “How people can improve. It picks up the parts that they're not very good on. (Specific areas of speaking or writing.)”

“That it will be useful and take me on the first step towards to introducing skills checks at interview stage.”

“That the SISCO tools could be a good route to develop Team Leaders.”

c. Motivation for addressing workplace basic skills issues

SISCO sets out to empower employers to take constructive action on basic skills in order to assure safety and quality in service delivery. This approach was adopted on the basis of the project's initial research. As part of testing the appropriateness of this approach at the end of the pilot, employer-partners were asked rank five possible reasons for taking action on basic skills, in order of importance to them as employers. These reasons covered the common rationales for addressing basic skills offered by policy-makers and skills providers to employers.

Results (detailed in Figure 13 below) suggest employers are strongly focused on quality of service to clients. Where this requires skills development, they will support individuals to gain skills and even qualifications (conscious perhaps of the weight increasingly given to qualifications in the sector). Supporting individuals to progress their careers, on the other hand, does not appear to motivate the employer-partners. This suggests SISCO's underlying assumptions are sound, at least in relation to these employers.

Figure 13. Reasons to take action on basic skills

Reason offered to respondents	Number of employers rating reason as				
	Very important				Not important
1.To help us deliver a safe, high quality service to clients	14	0	1	1	0
2.To help us retain and develop a skilled workforce	1	12	2	1	0
3.To help individual members of staff gain 'skills for life'	1	3	9	1	2
4.To help individual members of staff gain a basic skills qualifications	0	1	3	11	1
5.To help individual members of staff improve their career prospects	0	0	1	2	13

d. Terminology

On the topic of the term 'basic skills', the survey asked employer-partners how comfortable they were with the term 'basic skills' itself. (SISCO explicitly advises employers not to use the term 'basic skills' with staff and itself adopts the term 'communication and number skills'.)

Offered the statement, "The term 'basic skills' is easy for managers in my organisation to understand":

- 3 respondents agreed strongly
- 11 agreed and
- 2 disagreed.

In response to the statement, "The term 'basic skills' is not perfect, but it is the quickest and easiest way to describe the communication and number skills staff need to work safely and meet quality standards":

- 4 agreed strongly
- 8 agreed,
- 3 disagreed and
- 1 disagreed strongly.

Respondents who felt uncomfortable with the term 'basic skills', identified the pejorative connotation of the word 'basic' and its potential to offend staff.

"I don't think that there is a better [term than 'basic skills'] although staff sometimes have problems with the word 'basic' - it dates back from problems at school and it makes them feel 'thick'".

Nine respondents said there was no better term than 'basic skills' to describe communication and number skills. Other respondents suggested:

- literacy and numeracy
- essential skills
- key skills
- Skills for Life
- effective reporting/writing etc
- communication and number skills.

e. Utility of SISCO's main elements

Employer-partners were asked to rate the utility (and, by implication, value) of the various elements of SISCO. All elements were judged at least 'quite useful' and most either 'useful' or 'very useful'. Of the core functions, the Skills Checks score highest and the Action Plans lowest. These results closely reflect the scores returned by the non-facilitated users (see Figure 11 page 21).

Action Plans

Approximately 70% of users rated SISCO Action Plans as 'useful' or 'very useful' and as this suggests, employer-partners were broadly positive.

Characterising the Action Plans as “straightforward and free of jargon”, employer-partners reported that the documents offered “step-by-step guidance” and “focused the mind”. They give users “a direction” and “show how to take constructive action”. They are “useful for managers who have not thought about basic skills and where they are needed for certain job roles” and “useful to take to managers' meeting to start a discussion”. They also help users to “think about the best ways to support staff” and “plan what you can do about a learning need”.

Employer-partners were able to identify specific benefits arising from their use of the Action Plans that ranged from engaging a director in their organisation with basic skills issues, to gaining a practical understanding of how basic skills underpinned work activity, to taking ownership of basic skills support and development activity (previously referred automatically to an external learning provider).

“We thought of some new ways of helping people to remember things, and how to use supervision to help them with their daily jobs and their reading and writing.”

Where employer-partners had reservations, these arose from the perception that the Action Plans required more time than they had available and did not offer enough specific guidance.

There was, however, a clear recognition from employer-partners that these limitations were always likely to arise given the nature of the situation.

“Any action plan like this is tricky. They are okay and there’s a nice mix.”

Figure 14: Specific Action Plans identified as useful by employer-partners

Action Plan	Why useful
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To start a discussion, particularly looking at health and safety issues and our business plan
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It offers very clear guidance on what to do if a skills check indicates a problem and you have not been the person who did the assessment. This plan links well with plan 5 and they are both very practically focussed.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's good to look at how we can look at how we teach [support] new staff more when they've started in the job. A lot of training happens when inductees are on the job.
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To make managers realise that staff need the LLN to work well Although we have manuals of instructions for tasks we do not consider the importance of basic skills in relation to these tasks and we do not do the same sort of analysis about activities The most practical and structured Action Plan It took us a long time because we did it in depth but it brought out skills required for the job I take for granted and [where] there can be confusion in communication It helped you to recognise the basic skills in even straightforward tasks
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Really useful for managers to think about the consequences. It highlights what will happen if you don't do the other action plans. Action Plan 6 [should be] the first action plan. Safety and quality [are] the most important thing about the work [staff] do
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We thought about ways to help staff do their jobs better and the Seniors can help with this
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They [Action Plans 7 and 8] helped me to think about how we support our staff.

Compare Standards tool

The Compare Standards tool aims to make three important standards easily accessible, in order to help users decide what basic skills are needed to work safely and meet quality standards.

Employer-partners were strongly positive in their evaluation of this tool. Respondents reported finding all aspects of the tool useful and accessible, one describing it as “100% very useful”.

Figure 15.: Compare Standards tool positives and negatives identified by employer-partners

<i>Positives</i>	<i>Negatives</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to follow and use (including colour-coding) • Enables employer who contracts-out NVQ provision to make easy linkage to CIS • Link to manager’s guide to standards • Includes GSCC code • Supports in-house induction workbook • Relevant standards • Encourages use of standards • Makes full texts of standards easily available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of explicit linkage to basic skills • Standards not relevant to employer [supported employment] • Number of clicks required to reach CIS ‘outcome’

Asked how the tool might be improved, respondents suggested adding more standards and making more explicit linkage to basic skills.

Skills Checks

Employer-partners uniformly rated the Skills Checks the most useful aspect of SISCo. They reported finding the Skills Checks easy to use, versatile and relevant, offering strong face-validity to staff and helpful guidance to managers for follow-up action. Respondents also considered the Skills Checks fitted well with supervision practices.

“The Skills checks are really the best bit of the website. They are excellent.”

“The [SISCo Skills Checks] have done it. I can now assess the basic skills that staff need.”

“The Skills Checks are quick and easy to use and help you to find out if there is a problem quite simply and staff can see that the assessments are relevant to their work. They also ensure that there is feedback and planning built into assessment from the beginning.”

Figure 16. Skills Checks positives and negatives identified by employer-partners

Positives	Negatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy for the interviewer and the interviewee to understand and do • Guidance, Feedback and PDP are straightforward and easy to follow • Written to a standard format • Right length • Self-contained, quick, flexible • Structured approach to feedback and training • Provide evidence of assessment • Linked to standards/skills you're trying to develop, well contextualised • Sufficiently embedded in care to assess care as well as basic skills • Non-emotional way of checking staff skills; if used as a 'blanket' with all new staff then everyone would get used to them • Focused on specific work areas, offering opportunity to talk to staff • Presentation (space for interviewer to see what staff are thinking, or the way that they are working out maths problems) • Can be used by staff who are not carers • Can be used to train staff who have never had to e.g. fill in an incident form. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The language is sometimes too colloquial • Some Skills Checks are too similar. • Staff may be frightened by any assessment of their number skills • Linkage of Skills Checks to Action Plans should be clearer • A lot of paper • No space to doodle • Time needed • Potential for problems if Skills Check process not explained to staff member • Skills Check 13 (Filing records) about the alphabet too easy • Rely on Action Plans to cover issues such as how to address skills issues (including what to say to staff with poor basic skills) • Training needed for whoever is to administer Skills Checks • Organisational difficulties in following up a Skills Check • Resistance to assessment from established staff

Asked how the Skills Checks might be improved, respondents suggested broadening the range of Skills Checks, more explicit linkage to Action Plans and developing a training module on how to administer Skills Checks.

Relative utility of tools

Asked to compare the relative utility of the three SISCo tools, 14 respondents judged the Skills Checks the most useful of the tools, one respondent saw Action Plans and Skills Checks together as the most useful and one respondent considered the three tools worked together as 'a package'.

“The skills checks help you to find what the person needs help with and then the action plans tell you how to help them. They go together very well.”

A number of respondents report that while they can put the Skills Checks to immediate practical use the Action Plans demand more time and are less easy to use.

“The action plans are not so easy to use immediately but I would hope that they can be further developed as they are potentially just as valuable.”

The Compare Standards Tool was characterised as a more specialised tool of particular value to users less familiar with the Common Induction Standards.

Asked if any one of the three tools could be removed without making the other two tools less useful, the majority of respondents (11) said no.

“It is important to have the three together even if one or two are used more often.”

Five respondents suggested the Compare Standards could be removed, either because they are not involved in NVQ assessment or because they already feel familiar with the CIS.

Resources

The Resources section aims to offer users a range of useful resources to help them take action on basic skills. Employer-partners identified the ‘About Basic Skills’ section as useful for ‘general/background information about basic skills’, and the glossary useful for adult learning terminology. They also found the ‘Key sources’ section useful for:

- funding and links to other websites giving information on basic skills
- links to information on standards and inspection requirements
- links to other web sites and online tests (“Staff like using the computer and will do some tests on it so it’s good to know where to find them.”)
- links to care sector bodies.

f. Experience of facilitation during the pilot

Employer-partners were asked to consider how important it was to have help (from the project’s facilitators) to understand how to use the SISCO website and its tools. Ten respondents reported that this help had been “very important.” One who reported that the help “wasn’t that important,” also reported that without the facilitator’s prompting they would probably not have found the time to use the site.

Six respondents reported that facilitation had motivated them to make time to trial SISCO and its tools. Five respondents reported that without facilitation they would have lacked the confidence to trial SISCO and its tools.

One respondent reported that without facilitation they would have lacked the confidence with ICT to trial SISCO and its tools. Three respondents reported that facilitation had been very useful, but did not elaborate.

One respondent reported that facilitation had been agreeable but unnecessary (even for colleagues unaccustomed to web tools) due to SISCO’s simplicity and ease of use.

Asked what they had learned from working with their facilitator, respondents identified:

- what SISCO's website and tools consist of
- how SISCO relates to the CIS
- how basic skills relate to care work
- more about basic skills issues such as dyslexia
- how to use the SISCO website and tools to address basic skills issues in their own workplaces.

Regardless of their view of the value of facilitation, employer-partners responded positively when asked if, taking into account their workload, they expected to go on using SISCO on their own, without the help of a facilitator. All respondents stated their intention to go on using the tools and, in several instances, to disseminate the tools further across their organisation.

Two respondents noted that further facilitation would be helpful in these respects:

- ongoing facilitation to implement SISCO across the organisation
- someone to come and roll out the SISCO tools in the organisation.

On this topic of support, respondents were asked whether they would find further guidance on how to use the SISCO tools helpful. Figure 17 below presents employer-partners' suggestions.

Figure 17: Further guidance on how to use SISCO tools: employer-partners' suggestions

- No further guidance needed (six respondents)
- Printed instructions, information (one respondent)
- Tutorial 'disc' (one respondent)
- Snapshot case studies, short pieces of video, written paragraphs, personal testimonies to exemplify how the tools can be used and to motivate potential users (two respondents)
- Scripts for managers to discuss basic skills problems with individual staff (one respondent)
- Amendments to Action Plans and Compare Standards tool (already described in d (i) (ii) and (iii) above) (three respondents)
- Additional visits from facilitator to motivate and guide (one respondent)
- Updates about SISCO (one respondent)

4. Conclusions

The results of the evaluation suggest that, broadly speaking, SISCo has correctly identified user needs in relation to basic skills support and provided appropriate tools to address those needs. The use of web technology to deliver support for managers to address basic skills issues appears to have been well-received and largely successful.

The most highly rated tool for all users is the Check Basic Skills tool, with its innovative Skills Checks. However, employer-partners were unequivocal that the three tools (Action Plans, Compare Standards Tool and Skills Checks) formed a coherent whole and that to remove any one tool would undermine the utility of the other tools and weaken the overall value of SISCo.

“I think all the SISCo materials are a package and it's best to use them all.”
(facilitated user)

This suggests that SISCo's essential approach (i.e. to focus on the relationships between basic skills, sectoral standards and work activity) is sound. Encouragingly, it also suggests that users welcome the opportunity to engage with basic skills issues systematically, a core aim of the project.

These conclusions are based on data drawn from four sources – web usage log, pilot facilitator logbook, online evaluation survey and closing interviews with facilitated employer-partners – with a high level of correlation between them, indicative of reliability. The data collected from our facilitated pilot is particularly rich and useful. It allows us to examine use of the tools quite closely and to a considerable degree from the user's own perspective. A number of significant issues arise.

Although attention has tended to settle on the Skills Checks, the Action Plans are crucial to the project's core aim: motivating employers to take greater ownership of basic skills issues. It is therefore important that the Action Plans function as well as they possibly can.

While the Skills Checks and the Compare Standards tool appear largely to satisfy users in their current form, the Action Plans do not. Feedback on the Action Plans (borne out by feedback on the other core SISCo tools) indicates that guidance on what to do about basic skills is wanted by employers; and that the more structured, practically focused and fully exemplified such guidance is, the more likely employers are to use it and take action.

It is also worth reflecting on employer-partners' feedback regarding the value of facilitation. All respondents report that once introduced to SISCo and its tools, they found them valuable, easy-to-use and worth whatever investment they required of time and effort. They rate SISCo highly and intend to keep using it. Yet, with a single exception, respondents report that without introductory facilitation they would have been unlikely to trial SISCo. Pressure of work, lack of confidence in relation to basic skills and lack of confidence with ICT would all have inhibited them.

Overall, analysis of the pilot evaluation data suggests that SISCo has fulfilled its initial objectives by:

- correctly identifying employer need surrounding basic skills
- producing a set of tools with very high utility ratings from users

but that, to maximise take up of the resource, revision of certain elements is desirable. There are also clear opportunities to add value to the resource, again with a view to enhancing take up.

5. Recommendations

In order to maximise the effectiveness of the existing interface and tools, and to capitalise on the potential identified in the evaluation, these recommendations cover both suggested revisions to the existing interface and tools, and recommendations for further development.

5.1 Suggested revisions

- Refine navigation and information architecture.
- Refine web log data collection log-in/registration process.
- Provide a facility to provide printed packages of Action Plans, Skills Checks and guidance on request.
- Improve communication with registered users e.g. through email newsletter.
- Indicate explicitly how Skills Checks link to standards and qualifications.
- Add Skills Checks specific to domiciliary care and catering for staff who speak English as an additional language.
- Add the full texts of more relevant standards to extend the 'library' aspect of the Compare Standards tool.
- Incorporate NVQ levels 3 and 4 into the mapping, in addition to level 2.
- Refine the structure and approach of the Action Plans.
- Ensure Action Plans cover the specific needs of domiciliary care staff and staff ESOL needs.
- Provide regional information in the resources section.

5.2 Recommendations for further development

Phase 1 of SISCo delivered an evidence-based, practical set of tools to support social care employers address basic skills issues. Our evaluation shows that these tools have been positively received by the sector.

While the tools received high utility scores from all users, pilot evaluation suggests that our 20 core employer-partners benefited significantly from the support of the project's pilot facilitators. Facilitated employer-partners report that facilitators played an important role in motivating them to make time to use the tools (including, in some cases, building confidence around both basic skills and web-based tools), accelerating their understanding of how the tools work and helping them use the tools effectively.

However desirable (in order to maximise actual use of the tools), it is clearly not possible to resource national face-to-face facilitation. However, through the use of interactive online guidance and learning, it is possible to provide a viable and cost-effective alternative to individual facilitation. Adopting a robust user-centred design approach, recommended further developments include:

- a 'self-check' and accompanying skills guidance for managers
- an interactive tutorial: how to use this site
- Interactive action planning tools
- an interactive tutorial: taking action on Basic Skills
- an interactive case study: taking action on Basic Skills
- an interactive tutorial: checking Basic Skills
- one or more interactive case studies: checking Basic Skills
- an extended standards comparison tool, providing more explicit links between basic skills and NVQ.