

Literacy changes lives

July 2019



#LiteracyChangesLives

Our mission

Our mission is to advocate for literacy as a right and to collaborate with our partners to influence policy and practice to support the development of literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

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Introduction

Unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy ¹ and are a factor in social exclusion and inequality. The World Literacy Foundation reported that people with low literacy are:

“trapped in a cycle of poverty with limited opportunities for employment or income generation and higher chances of poor health, turning to crime and dependence on social welfare or charity (if available).” ²

Literacy changes lives and Ireland can do better to give everyone a fair chance to thrive in their literacy development. This requires investing in people who have not benefited from our education system during bust or boom.

NALA believes all adults have a right to literacy, numeracy and digital skills so they can:

- take part fully in society;
- continue learning across their lives and extend their education; and
- access the same opportunities as others have done.

Some people have their **literacy needs met**; others do not.

This can be for **many reasons**.



Ireland is in **17th** place in literacy and **18th** in numeracy out of 24 countries.

¹ OECD (2013) Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills

² World Literacy Foundation (2015) The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy

Literacy and numeracy needs in Ireland

Ireland is in 17th place in literacy and 18th in numeracy out of 24 countries.³

The most recent international skills survey⁴ shows that one in six Irish adults (521,550 people aged 16 to 64) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult: for example, reading a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions.

One in four (754,000 people) has difficulties using maths in everyday life: for example basic addition, subtraction and calculating averages.

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office⁵ shows us that currently there are **445,800** people (aged 25-64) who have less than a QQI Level 4 qualification. These include 233,300 (52%) employed; 24,900 (6%) unemployed and 187,600 (42%) not engaged in the labour force.

Many others find technology difficult to use effectively and safely and face increasing challenges as we move more towards a digital world. Literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable people to reach their full potential, be active and critical participants in society and help address poverty and social exclusion.

³ CSO (2013) PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland

⁴ OECD (2013) Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills

⁵ CSO (2018) Education Attainment Thematic Report



1 in 4 adults struggle with everyday maths such as working out a discount or dividing up a bill

1 in 6 adults find everyday text, such as a bus timetable or medical instructions, hard to read and understand



Literacy promotes equality

Literacy is a barometer of equality. Equal societies are happier, healthier and wealthier. Adult learning and education (ALE) promotes “sustainable development, healthier societies, better jobs and more active citizenship.”⁶

Poverty and low literacy are ‘two sides of the same coin’ – they have similar impacts on people: powerlessness; inequality and injustice; feelings of rejection and inadequacy; a sense of hopelessness and failure; social stigma; marginalisation, low health and low self-esteem.⁷

Wilkinson and Pickett state that “greater equality is the gateway to a society that is capable of improving the quality of life for all of us.”⁸ Literacy is part of the solution to creating a more equal society and changing lives for the better.

“ Having better literacy skills does not change structural inequalities but it does increase the likelihood of personal wellbeing and autonomy, social and cultural inclusion, and the development of critical skills to work for just change across our communities.”

Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S., and Walsh, J. (Eds) (2004) *Equality: From Theory to Action*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

- ⁶ UNESCO (2016) 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education
- ⁷ Presentation by Hugh Frazer, Director of Combat Poverty Agency, International Literacy Day, Sept 1987
- ⁸ Wilkinson R. and Pickett K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*



Literacy – what is it?

NALA defines literacy as involving:

“listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.”⁹

Literacy is not only a set of technical skills. Rather it is a process that is shaped and influenced by the social context in which it is used.

Literacy is not neutral, it is bound up with power and powerlessness. Literacy is not about individual intelligence, literacy is about social, economic and cultural opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key. In Ireland there is a widening gap between those that have such opportunities and those that do not. In addition it has been shown that those who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted (Matthew effect).¹⁰ The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda aims to address this through their commitment to reaching the **furthest behind first**.

Inequality in accessing services – especially in relation to the labour market

We know that people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs are treated less equally in society with less access to services and opportunities. In particular this occurs in labour market activation programmes.

“ Not having great literacy skills affects your whole life, your social skills and generally talking to others. I became more confident and better informed about what was happening around me and I felt more confident in carrying out my everyday business as well as conversing with others.”

Distance Learner interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) *What's in it for me?* The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.

⁹ NALA (2012) *Guidelines on good adult literacy work*

¹⁰ Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999), *The Matthew Effect in American Education*. Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization

To build a better society, structures need to change. We need to accept our collective responsibility for literacy inequalities and acknowledge that:

- the schooling system failed some people,
- all public services do not communicate in plain English, and
- government is not adequately responding to the issue.

We need to redress the imbalances that have occurred as a result of wider socio-economic poverty and educational disadvantage. Through building more equal structures we can create better and fairer systems and opportunities for all.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and literacy

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation - highlights the importance of literacy for societal and human flourishing.

“Literacy is essential for sustainable human development in today’s complex and fast-changing societies.” Literacy is a factor in developing agency, opening up opportunities, enriching life experiences and promoting equality.

Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, has set a clear literacy target for 2030. They aim to ensure that all youth and a majority of men and women achieve their full literacy potential. This goal is echoed and expanded on by the World Education Forum:

“We reaffirm that education is a public good, a fundamental human right and a basis for guaranteeing the realisation of other rights. It is essential for peace, tolerance, human fulfilment and sustainable development. We recognise education as key to achieving full employment and poverty eradication.”¹¹

“ I remember we were at a meeting for parents in the school and I’d be down the back of the room in case I’d be spotted or picked out. Now I’m up the front. I’m asking questions about the kids’ education and that’s a whole big difference that education gave me ...it’s opened up the whole world to me.”

Distance Learner interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) *What’s in it for me?* The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.



¹¹ UNESCO (2016) Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4

Low literacy costs, strong literacy pays

Unmet literacy needs costs everyone: our society, economy and environment, financially and democratically.

The cost of low skills to the global economy is estimated at USD \$1.2 trillion.¹² A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy in Ireland¹³ concluded that by investing in literacy there is a positive and rapid return on investment across the board, for participants, the companies they work for and for the exchequer. The report found that “expenditure on adult literacy training generates high economic returns.” It estimated that the annual income gain per person per level increase on the National Qualifications Framework was €3,810. The gain to the exchequer, in terms of reduced social welfare transfers and increased tax payments, was €1,531 per annum.



12 World Literacy Foundation (2015) The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy

13 NALA (2009) Dorgan, J. A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training Research report

Unmet literacy needs also have a **social cost**. This can be seen across the domains of health (both physical and mental), crime, welfare and education and family (World Literacy Foundation 2015). Unmet literacy needs has also been linked to other social issues such as addiction, homelessness and suicide. Ireland can do better, can address inequality and be a literacy leader with improved adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Strong literacy pays and builds human capitals

People with good literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills are more likely to have better health and a longer life, be employed and earn better incomes.¹⁴ Literacy and numeracy are key factors that shape individual life chances and their impact is critical for the labour market in terms of employment, earnings and training expenditure.¹⁵

Literacy also influences our trust in others, our willingness to volunteer and our belief about the contribution we can make to the political process.¹⁶ Literacy enables us to be **critically reflective engaged citizens** which is essential in today's news and media world.

Literacy changes many lives. Research has shown that the positive impact of further education carries beyond families and into communities – a ripple effect that produces broader social benefits.¹⁷

“ I was well into me 50s and I couldn't read or write, and they spotted this when I went in [to adult literacy service] but I've just blossomed from there. I've gone on to do me Junior Cert and I'm working now on getting level 4.”

Learner interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) *What's in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.*

“ I'm more confident to ask my doctor about my health. I ask questions now that I never really understood before.”

Learner interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) *What's in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.*

¹⁴ OECD (2013) Skills Outlook 2013: First results from the survey of Adult Skills

¹⁵ Kelly, E., S. McGuinness and P.J. O'Connell (2012b). Literacy, Numeracy and Activation Among the Unemployed. ESRI Research No 25

¹⁶ OECD (2016) Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills. OECD Skills Studies

¹⁷ Duckworth V. and Smith R. (2019) Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education

Current policy, practice and research

Policy

- Ireland's **National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025** has a target of upskilling 165,000 people from PIAAC Level 1 ¹⁸ in literacy (from 17.5% to 12%) and 256,000 people from PIAAC Level 1 in numeracy (from 25.6% to 17%), by 2025. This is the same target we had in the NSS 2007 and as we did not meet this target, it was rolled over.
- The **National Skills Council spring statement** (2018) identifies key priorities, stating that: "Soft skills, transversal skills and the mastery of core competencies in numeracy, literacy and digital technologies remain critical for employees in all sectors and opportunities to develop and enhance these skills are vital."



¹⁸ CSO (2012) PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) 2012 Survey Results for Ireland

- The current SOLAS [Further Education and Training \(FET\) Strategy](#) outlines 12 elements of the literacy and numeracy strategy. While work on these elements is underway, there has been no significant financial investment to increase the hours of literacy tuition per person. SOLAS are currently developing a new FET Strategy and NALA has put in a submission to this.
- In 2018 SOLAS published a background paper¹⁹ and policy framework²⁰ for skills development of people in employment. The new policy will “target support for vulnerable groups in the Irish Workforce, particularly those who have lower skills levels and who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement or to avail of emerging job opportunities.”
- The recent European Commission [Upskilling Pathways](#) initiative aims to target adults with low levels of skills and without upper secondary education. Ireland produced a plan for this in 2018 and the Department of Education and Skills is looking at actions from this.
- In June 2019 the **European Commission** published three Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland and one recommends to: [“Provide personalised active integration support and facilitate upskilling, in particular for vulnerable groups and people living in households with low work intensity.”](#)²¹

Practice: current adult literacy provision

- **Low number of tuition hours:** Currently adults can receive on average between 2 and 6 hours adult literacy tuition per week through their local adult literacy service in the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are a small number of longer programmes delivered under Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) and some through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI).

¹⁹ SOLAS (2018) [Background paper](#) to FET policy framework for skills development of people in employment

²⁰ SOLAS (2018) Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: [FET policy framework](#)

²¹ European Commission (2019) [Council recommendation](#)

- There is **no financial support or incentive** to return to education for QQI levels 1, 2 or 3, for example tax relief. There is no support for full-time childcare or elder care or transport costs.
- **62,736 adults** accessed local adult literacy services in 2017²² through the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This includes adult literacy groups (including family literacy), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE), Skills for Work and one-to-one tuition.
- **Only 12% of people with literacy needs are accessing adult literacy services.** From EU analysis, including a 2018 Eurostat report, lifelong learning rates for employed people in Ireland, are estimated at 8.3%, below the EU average of 12%.²³ In 2018 the CSO published results from Adult Education Survey which showed that “over half of adults (53.9%) reported participating in lifelong learning (formal and/or non-formal education).”²⁴ While this is welcome, participation is lower from people with higher secondary or below (14%) compared with people who have a third level qualification (55%).
- **Low spend on adult literacy tuition**
In 2017 **€36.44 million** was spent on adult literacy tuition.²⁵ This is 0.38% of the total education budget (€9.531 billion) and 5.7% of the Further Education and Training budget (€638 million). This works out at €580 per person. The **2006 Adult Literacy report**²⁶ from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science proposed a quadrupling of the adult literacy tuition budget from €25 to about €100 million by 2013 with an additional €25 million for improving ancillary and support services.
These recommendations were never implemented.

²² Answer to parliamentary question number 350 https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-01-15/350/#pq_350

²³ SOLAS (2018) Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: [FET policy framework](#)

²⁴ CSO (2018) [Adult Education Survey 2017](#)

²⁵ Answer to parliamentary question number 350 https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-01-15/350/#pq_350

²⁶ Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science Forth Report Adult Literacy in Ireland (2006) http://archive.oireachtas.ie/2006/REPORT_20060531_1.html

Research

- A recent National Economic and Social Council (NESC) report on [Moving from Welfare to Work](#)²⁷ notes that “Some of the interviewees are very far from the labour market, and contend with problems that are difficult to address, such as serious literacy difficulties.” The report recommends:
 1. Tailored supports to help more vulnerable groups to progress. Vulnerable groups include Travellers, African migrants, lone parents; people with a disability; those with literacy difficulties, poor English, no work experience or contacts, a history of addiction or time in prison.
 2. More **intensive** literacy and numeracy education is required for those with unmet literacy and numeracy needs levels, as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.
- The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research report on [Literacy, numeracy and activation among the unemployed](#)²⁸ shows that work specific training for people with literacy and numeracy needs helps enhance employment prospects – up to three times the average.
- ESRI research report on [Literacy and Numeracy Difficulties in the Irish Workplace](#)²⁹ shows a wage differential for employees with literacy and numeracy needs. It found the negative wage impact from having a numeracy need is confined to those with low earnings, while employees with middle to upper level earnings are most negatively affected by having a literacy need.
- A NALA report on the benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland ³⁰ looked at how engaging in lifelong learning can generate a range of possible benefits to the individual, to society and to the community. The findings showed that what benefitted learners most from returning to learning was personal fulfilment, then education and thirdly family.

²⁷ NESC (2018) [Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services](#)

²⁸ ESRI (2012) [Literacy, numeracy and activation among the unemployed](#) Research series Number 25

²⁹ ESRI (2012) [Literacy and Numeracy Difficulties in the Irish Workplace](#) Research series Number 27

³⁰ NALA (2018) [What's in it for me?](#) The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland

Invest in people, invest in literacy, invest in society

Literacy benefits everyone

– individuals, society and the economy. The current literacy tuition provision (average 2 to 6 hours per week), the numbers participating (around 63,000) and the budget (€36.4 million) is insufficient to redress educational and wider inequalities and meet current government and international targets.



NALA has 6 recommendations to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

1	Appoint a Junior Minister for lifelong learning and literacy.
2	Develop a creative, ambitious and aligned Whole-of-Government Strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital skills over the next 10 years. We suggest setting up a National Literacy and Numeracy implementation group with a specific task to develop, oversee and evaluate this strategy. The Group would consist of government departments, state agencies and civil society and should be given a specific budget to allocate to specific initiatives.
3	Introduce a Plain Language Act to require government and public services to communicate in plain English that the public can understand and use. There are currently two plain language bills , one is before Dáil Éireann at second stage and one before Seanad Éireann also at second stage.
4	All adults with literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification should have access to a high quality and relevant learning programme with a local education and training provider that meets the person's literacy development needs. This would include intensive and flexible options; appropriate supports as required (income, transport, child and elder care), work placement where appropriate and progression opportunities. An increased investment in the Skills for Work programme could specifically target employees with literacy and numeracy needs in particular sectors. This could be funded through the proposed increase in the National Training Fund (NTF).
5	Develop new and innovative ways to improve literacy such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blended and distance learning, • family literacy, financial literacy, health literacy and media literacy programmes, • bridging programmes to prepare people for other training, and • integrating literacy into vocational education and training programmes.
6	Introduce a targeted paid learning leave programme for employees in work with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification to develop these skills if they wish to do so. This intervention would be for a maximum time period and funded through our social insurance (PRSI) system.

Some of these are outside the remit of the current budget process.

However some of the recommendations could be **included in Budget 2020** and we have costed these.

Proposal	Action	Cost
<p>Develop a Whole-of-Government Strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital skills over the next 10 years.</p>	<p>Set up a National Literacy and Numeracy implementation group</p>	<p>Civil service staff resources and budget.</p> <p>For example the Netherlands allocated €20 million to a cross-departmental approach to addressing adult literacy.</p>
<p>High quality and relevant literacy learning programmes including intensive and flexible options; appropriate supports as required (income, transport, child and elder care), work placement where appropriate and progression opportunities.</p>	<p>Provide an intensive model of 200 hours, then can top up with 50 hours if required.</p>	<p>Cost for small groups</p> <p>200 hours of literacy tuition x hourly rate of €45.27³¹ = €9,054 per course for small groups of 6 to 8 people.</p> <p>For a group of 8 adults, that works out at a cost per person of €1,132 per person for 200 hours tuition.</p> <p>Cost to achieve NSS target</p> <p>To achieve our target of 165,000 adults, this would require 20,625 groups of 8. The groups would be allocated based on population and need throughout the 16 ETBs and other local education and training services.</p> <p>The total cost for 200 hours for 165,000 adults is: €186.78 million.</p> <p>Divide over next 6 years (2020 - 2025) would require an investment of €31.13 million per year for tuition.</p> <p><i>[Note: not every adult will need 200 hours]</i></p>

³¹ Qualified casual hourly rate €39.84 + €5.43 (Rate + value of accumulated leave) – Department of Education circular

Proposal	Action	Cost
<p>New and innovative ways to improve literacy such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> blended and distance learning, family literacy, financial literacy, health literacy and media literacy programmes, bridging programmes to prepare people for other training, and integrating literacy into vocational education and training programmes. 	<p>Some services are using new and innovative ways but we need to document and share good practice as well as supporting the roll out of a family literacy initiative.</p>	<p>The €20 million budget allocated to the Whole-of-Government Strategy could support innovative ways to improve literacy.</p>
<p>Targeted paid learning leave programme for employees in work with literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a level 4 qualification to develop their basic literacy and numeracy skills if they wish to do so.</p>	<p>Offer 200 paid hours to employers to subsidise the release of their employees to attend the course.</p>	<p>We have estimated the costings using an hourly rate based on the minimum wage³², the average industrial wage³³ and the mid-point.</p> <p>The costings for 200 hours of paid learning leave per person based on the mean of the minimum and average industrial wage³⁴ = €3,286.</p> <p>So for 23,600 employees each year to get 200 hours of paid learning leave (based on €16.43 per hour) would cost €77,549,600.</p> <p>Divide over next 6 years (2020 - 2025) would require an investment of €13 million per year.</p>

³² €9.80 per hour (since January 2019)

³³ €23.07 an hour – source: Central Statistics Office, [Earnings and labour costs](#)

³⁴ €16.43 per hour

Conclusion

Every person has a right to literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Having these skills enables a person to have agency, to have a voice and participate fully in society; to continue learning and extend their education; and to access the same opportunities as everyone else. By investing in adult literacy, Ireland can be a better and more equal society.

To improve adult literacy effectively will require intensive literacy tuition which will increase the success rate for learners and support people furthest behind.

For employees with unmet literacy needs, targeted paid learning leave to support returning to literacy learning would show real government commitment to upskilling and lead the way in Europe.

Ireland must invest in people, invest in adult literacy and invest in society.



The **National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)** is a charity and membership-based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

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National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh