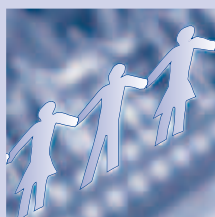# National Adult Literacy Agency

An Áisineacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Strategic Plan
2007-2010

National Adult Literacy Agency
An Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

National Adult Literacy Agency

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NALA Strategic Plan

2007-2010

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to the National Adult Literacy Agency's third strategic plan. This document sets out how we aim to carry out our mission from 2007 to the end of 2010. Our strategic plan explains the main features of our work and places them in the context of a changing society.

Adult literacy policy and practice have developed greatly since our first and second strategic plans. As a result, our focus now needs to change to meet new demands and challenges. Our aim is to play a major part in making sure that all adults have the opportunity to develop their literacy and numeracy skills in a just and equal society, where all types of learning are valued. NALA believes that it is a fundamental human right for all adults to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

What is the National Adult Literacy Agency?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent membership organisation. It has been a leading campaigning and lobbying force since it was set up in 1980.

What do we do?

Since 1980, we have been involved with training, policy making, national co-ordination, research and innovation. In this plan, we will focus on four areas of activity:

- developing policy,
- advocacy,
- research, and
- offering advisory services.

Developing policy

We will develop and propose appropriate policies for adult literacy in the future.

Advocacy

We will argue for appropriate responses to the needs and rights of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties and further strengthen our ability to affect public opinion and Government policy.

Research

We will commission or conduct research into key literacy topics. We will also create opportunities to share research findings, promote effective practice and policy and stay up to date with important research conducted by others.

Offering advisory services

We will provide advice on a professional basis to organisations on how they can address literacy issues through their policies, procedures and activities.

Structure and funding

NALA membership is open to all people and organisations interested and involved in adult literacy development. At our annual general meeting, members elect an Executive Committee, which makes sure that our aims are put into practice. The Executive Committee includes students and tutors, Adult Literacy Organisers and people involved in adult and further education and training.

NALA is a registered company with limited and charitable status. We receive a grant from the Department of Education and Science (DES) that enables us to staff national and regional offices. The DES also fund specific research and development work together with other Government departments, FÁS, other state bodies, the European Union and the private sector.

Our achievements

Many individuals and organisations have contributed considerably to adult literacy work in Ireland. For our part, we have:

● raised public awareness of the extent and nature of adult literacy difficulties,

● put literacy on the political agenda,

● secured increased funding for adult literacy and numeracy work for the VEC Adult Literacy Service as well as the recently created Workplace Basic Education Fund,

● developed and distributed high quality teaching and learning materials,

- increased access to tuition through distance learning options such as CD-ROM and online tuition and the highly acclaimed television series Read Write Now and Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers,

- pioneered a new quality framework for adult literacy services, which has helped them promote a more formal approach to quality,

- developed and launched an innovative assessment framework, *Mapping the Learning Journey*,

- made sure that tutors could receive qualifications for their training, through our partnership with Waterford Institute of Technology,

- helped to reduce the stigma for students of returning to learning, and

- adapted effectively to a changing environment, for example by developing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training for tutors.

Our values

We are guided in all our work by the principle of equality. In addition, our core values are set out in the following statements in *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (NALA, 2005).

- Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education that is concerned with **personal development and social action**.

- Adult literacy learning is an **active and expressive process**. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wish to learn.

- Adult literacy work **respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being**. An ethical code of **trust and confidentiality** underpins all aspects of the work.

- Students' knowledge and skills are vital for effectively organising adult literacy work. Students should have the **opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision**.

- Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is **supportive, relaxed and friendly**.

How we define literacy

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions.

Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

How this plan is organised

In this plan we start by setting out our vision for Ireland in terms of adult literacy, our vision for NALA and our mission statement.

We then outline the five objectives that will guide our work over the next four years and the strategies we will use to achieve these objectives.

Each objective includes a rationale and a number of projects. The rationale describes the context for our work, including the challenges we face. The projects are the activities we will carry out to meet these challenges and to make sure that adults wishing to develop their literacy and numeracy have the right, opportunity and means to do so.

We have worked to make this plan as clear as possible for a wide range of possible readers, in keeping with our actions to encourage and support other organisations to use plain English. While we have done our best to use everyday language, we have kept certain terms that are specific to the adult literacy area and to our planned activities over the next four years. These are defined in a glossary of terms at the back of this plan.

Our vision

We want Ireland to be a place where adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties can:

- take part fully in society,
- improve their literacy and numeracy skills, and
- direct their own learning.

We want NALA to be an organisation that:

- is valued by students, policy makers and providers as an independent, expert resource,
- plays a leading role in research on, innovation in and critical dialogue about adult literacy and numeracy, nationally and internationally, and
- is recognised as being central to improving how the needs of people with literacy difficulties are met.

Our mission

NALA is an independent, member-based organisation committed to making sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs.

Our objectives

We seek to make our vision a reality by pursuing five objectives.

1. Secure the support of policy makers and politicians for providing increased resources to adult literacy and numeracy services.

2. Make it easier for more adults to develop their literacy and numeracy through education and training programmes.

3. Make approaches to teaching and learning more effective.

4. Persuade organisations to be fully accessible to people with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

5. Strengthen NALA's effectiveness as an organisation.

Strategies through which we will achieve our objectives

We intend to achieve each of our five objectives by adopting the following overall strategies.

Advocacy

We will seek to:

- persuade policy makers to increase funding for adult literacy and numeracy,
- support education and training providers to enhance their teaching practice,
- encourage people with literacy and numeracy difficulties to develop their skills, and
- help organisations to be aware of adult literacy and numeracy issues and respond appropriately.

Partnership

We will work with:

- policy makers to develop policies and plans to meet the needs of people with literacy and numeracy difficulties,

- education and training providers to make their programmes more effective and accessible,

- people wishing to return to learning to enable them to access supports and services, and

- organisations to help them respond effectively to people with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Research

We willl:

- position NALA as a driving force in adult literacy and numeracy research,

- commission relevant research and share findings with key stakeholders, and

- use the findings of research to provide evidence-based solutions to adult literacy issues and to inform our policy proposals and advice to organisations.

Voice

We will make sure the views and experience of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties:

- give us further insights into adult literacy issues,

- guide and inform the quality of our work, and

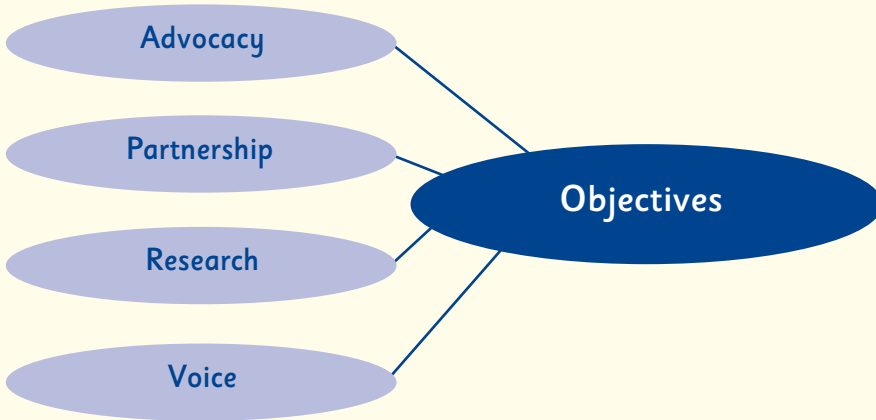- are heard and taken into account by politicians and policy makers.

Figure 1: Overall strategies applied to our five objectives

Focus of this plan

This plan is focused and ambitious in its commitment to tackling the adult literacy issue in Ireland. It concentrates more than our past strategic plans on influencing policy, research and sharing good practice. We believe that concentrating on these areas will serve us better in achieving our objectives.

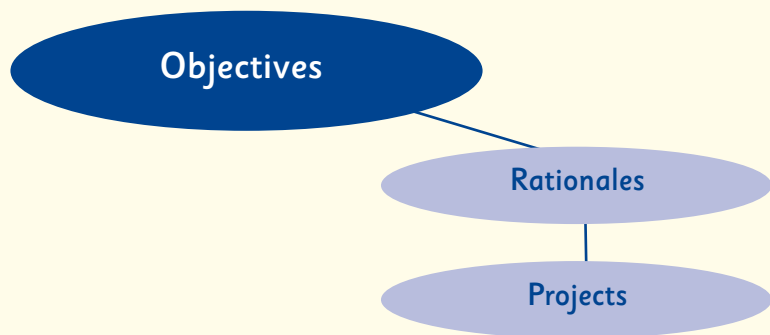The following pages describe each objective's rationale and main projects.

Figure 2: Objectives, rationales and projects

Objective 1

Secure the support of policy makers and politicians for providing increased resources to adult literacy and numeracy services.

Rationale

A number of national and international policies have identified education and training as priorities for social and economic development. The EU Lisbon Strategy 2000 aims at "making the EU the world's most dynamic and competitive economy" by 2010[1]. Education and training are central factors in achieving this[2]. The National Development Plan 2007-2013 makes it a priority to address the "low literacy levels of the Irish adult population and the large number of Irish adults who have not completed upper second-level education"[3]. The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) set out the first National Adult Literacy Programme, identifying broad areas to be developed. The time is right to build on this White Paper and develop more advanced policies to support future work in this area.

There is a gap between developing adult literacy policy and securing the resources to put it fully into effect. Increasingly, Government departments are adopting an evidence-based policy on funding. In an environment where organisations compete for budgets, our challenge is to present compelling arguments as to why adult literacy funding must be considerably increased.

Adult literacy has been the top priority in adult education for a number of years[4], and spending on adult literacy grew to €23 million in 2006, largely through the VEC Adult Literacy Service. However, this accounted for only 0.3% of the overall education budget and represented 15% of spending on adult and further education and training programmes by the Department of Education and Science[5].

Projects

1. Complete research into the nature and scale of resources needed to provide enough effective tuition for all those identified with literacy and numeracy difficulties and give evidence of the value of this investment.

2. Organise an annual international literacy and numeracy conference focused on research and policy and aimed at key stakeholders.

3. Design and carry out a campaign highlighting what adult literacy means for wider social and economic development in Ireland to persuade politicians and policy makers to invest adequate resources to tackle literacy difficulties.

4. Research and publish a NALA position paper on effective adult literacy and numeracy strategies that:

   - examines international best practice,

   - reviews Irish policy,

   - analyses policies and how they are put into effect, and

   - produces recommendations.

5. Organise a campaign to secure support for a comparative international survey to update the information provided by the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey.

Objective 2

**Make it easier for more adults to develop their literacy and numeracy through education and training programmes.**

Rationale

The OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey[6] concluded that one in four of those surveyed in Ireland did not show the literacy skills and confidence needed to take part effectively in society. Nearly 30% of the labour force has lower secondary education or less[7].

With the recent increases in adult literacy budgets, participation in VEC adult literacy services has increased from 5,000 students in 1998 to 35,000 in 2005. However, only an estimated 7% of adults with literacy difficulties receive literacy tuition through local education services[8]. Towards 2016 : Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015 commits to providing 7,000 extra places for students availing of the VEC adult literacy service. These places will be available by 2009[9]. A low rate of participation in adult literacy tuition is a feature of many Western industrialised countries, with at best 10% of adults with literacy difficulties engaged in a literacy programme.

NALA research[10] shows a number of barriers to participation, including the stigma that still exists for some people about returning to education to develop their literacy. International research[11] backs up these findings. So our challenge is to build greater awareness of the range of learning opportunities on offer and make it easier for people to take them up. We will also work to encourage and assist education and training providers to integrate literacy work into the content of all other courses, across all curricula and at all phases of their programmes[12].
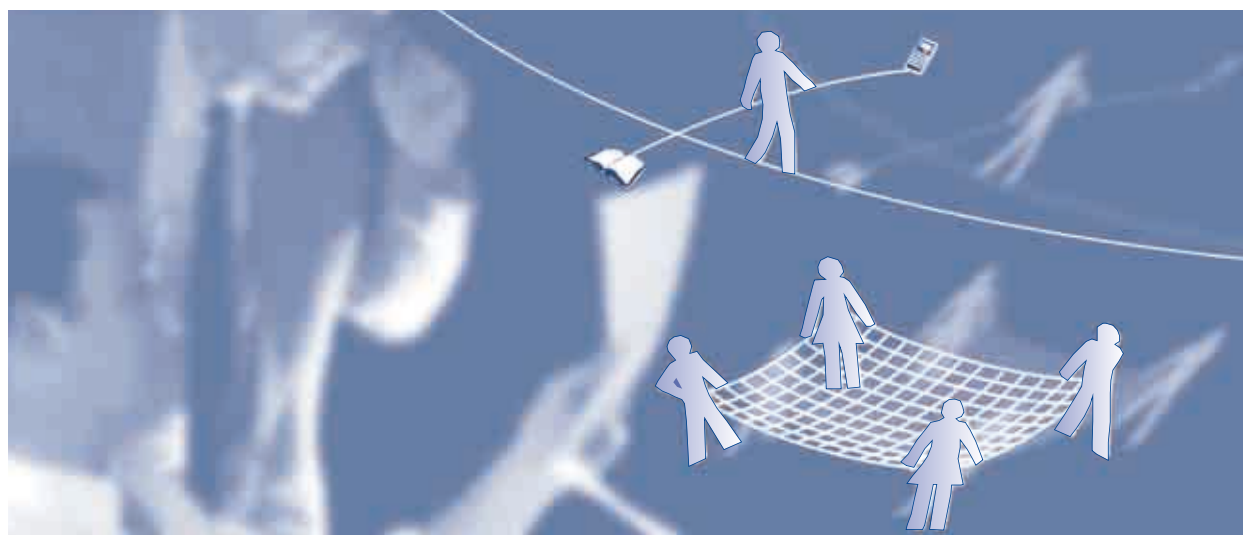
Projects

1. Plan and carry out a major campaign to secure the legal right to paid learning leave for people with less than a Level 4 qualification who wish to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

2. Implement a plan to support and assist education and training providers to integrate literacy and numeracy into their programmes.

3. Conduct research on how to reduce known barriers to engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition. Develop recommendations, share them with relevant education and training providers and implement an action plan that aims to secure support for the recommendations.

4. Lead a national promotional campaign on the benefits of learning to adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

5. Develop and supply a range of distance literacy and numeracy learning programmes with our broadcast, funding and development partners.

Objective 3

Make approaches to teaching and learning more effective.

Rationale

Adult literacy teaching started in Ireland in the 1970s and differs from teaching in the formal education system. Literacy and numeracy programmes are individually tailored to meet each student's needs. Students play a central role in tuition: they have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wish to learn.

Some major changes are occurring in adult literacy teaching and learning. Firstly, the location is changing: as well as learning in local education centres, adults are increasingly developing their literacy and numeracy skills at work, with their family and through distance learning. Secondly, within the VEC Adult Literacy Service, most students take part in group tuition, with only around one fifth receiving one-to-one tuition from trained volunteers. There is an increasing demand for tuition in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL): 10% of the total population in Ireland in 2005 were immigrants[13]. Already, over a quarter of adult literacy students (27%) are in ESOL classes[14].

The definition of literacy is also changing as the concept of 'literacies' becomes more widely understood. This concept recognises that people use different skills for various real-life situations, for example using a computer, reading workplace instructions or understanding a payslip. The challenge for adults is to understand how and when to apply the skills they involve and value their varied literacies. As society becomes more advanced, so do the literacies needed to take part in it.

A side effect of the poor funding of adult literacy in the past is limited research and evaluation, in particular on proven effective teaching and learning methods. We will continue to strive to meet the needs of students, in particular by providing up-to-date information to literacy providers and practitioners. To do this more effectively, however, we need to know from evidence what works and how best to share this information.

Projects

1. Encourage all adult literacy providers to follow *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (NALA, 2005).

2. Conduct research into new approaches to adult and family literacy and numeracy teaching and learning.

3. Design and implement systems for communicating research and evaluation findings and effectively sharing good practice.

4. Develop and implement a plan to enable NALA to submit proposals to public tenders for evaluating adult literacy initiatives.

5. Complete a review of NALA's role in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) as an emerging practice within adult literacy in Ireland.

Objective 4

Persuade organisations to be fully accessible to people with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Rationale

Literacy and numeracy difficulties often prevent people from carrying out a range of everyday activities (for example understanding a contract, filling in a form and using an ATM). Lack of awareness of the extent and effect of literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland has meant that many organisations are not reaching all their customers.

International research, for example from the UK[15] and New Zealand[16], indicates that by being aware of literacy issues, organisations can be more effective in meeting the needs of those who use their services. Both citizens and governments benefit from effective and understandable communications: citizens are more likely to exercise their rights and meet their obligations and governments are more likely to make better use of their resources.

Evidence suggests that organisations can use a number of methods to improve how they communicate with all of their customers. One of these methods is plain English, which takes as a starting point the needs of the reader and what type of information, writing style, layout and vocabulary is most relevant to them. Internationally, plain English has produced significant cost savings and led to increased productivity and efficiency. For example, in the UK, British Telecom received 25% fewer calls each quarter when it produced a clearer bill in plain English[17] and, in Canada, a study on the effects of using plain English in a financial firm showed that it could help staff cut errors by over 75% and increase productivity by nearly 40%[18].

Projects

1. Set up and operate a literacy and numeracy advisory service to help organisations develop whole-organisation approaches that take account of literacy issues. This service will involve:

    - literacy and numeracy awareness training,

    - plain English editing, training and resources, and

    - support on developing and implementing literacy policies.

2. Carry out research on the impact and costs of failing to adopt a whole-organisation approach to literacy and numeracy.

3. Conduct research into the theory behind guidelines on clear writing and layout to increase our expertise in, and arguments for the use of, plain English.

4. Run a series of themed campaigns aimed at different sectors to highlight the benefits of adopting a whole-organisation approach to literacy and numeracy.

Objective 5

Strengthen NALA's effectiveness as an organisation.

Rationale

The recent period of unprecedented growth in Ireland has seen policy and practice in adult literacy change significantly. For NALA this has meant expanding as an organisation into new areas of work and managing increased resources.

During this time, the Government has also shown a shift in its funding of organisations. It now seeks increased accountability, including evidence of the effectiveness of organisations and the value for money they offer.

These trends require a greater investment in both our technical and organisational systems. We need to strengthen our internal structures and how we are run. We need to harness new technologies that will better equip NALA to meet its strategic goals. We also need to improve how we measure what we are achieving.

The time is right for NALA to review its current structure and how it uses its resources and to take the steps we need to strengthen our Executive Committee, management and staff.

Projects

1. Complete a review of our organisational structure and governance and implement agreed recommendations.

2. Develop and implement a 'balanced scorecard'[19] as a way of assessing our work.

3. Research and implement a strategy for membership.

4. Implement a staff and Executive Committee training and development programme.

5. Develop and implement a promotional plan aimed at strengthening and highlighting NALA's position and contribution as a leading expert in literacy.

6. Complete a review of our funding needs in light of this strategic plan.

Glossary of terms

Acclaimed
Praised strongly

Accountability
Answering for actions, for example how funding is used

Advocacy
Actively supporting or arguing for a cause, idea or policy, which may involve raising awareness, recommending particular action and, or, speaking up for individuals' rights

Advocate
To recommend or argue for something

Balanced scorecard
A system that measures how well an organisation performs across four areas — financial performance, customer satisfaction, internal operations and learning and growth — to help it break down its strategy into actions

Best practice
A method or approach that is proven through experience and research to be better than all others at doing something or getting a particular result

Commission
Ordering or giving authority for a task to be carried out

Comparative
Involving a comparison between two or more things, for example countries or projects

Context
A set of facts, conditions or circumstances that surround a situation or event

Critical
In this plan, something that is carefully thought out and judged

Curriculum (plural curricula)
A set of courses, and their contents, offered by an institution such as a school or further education centre

Evaluation
A process of studying something carefully and measuring its features against certain standards to see what is good or needs to be improved

Evidence-based
Something shown by the findings of research to be needed and, or, effective

Framework
A model or system used to organise information or to plan, develop or decide something

Governance
Systems and methods involved in directing and running the affairs of an organisation

Implementing
Putting something into place, for example carrying out the recommendations in a plan

Independent
For an organisation, having its own constitution and being free to plan its own work

Insight
Seeing into a situation; having a deeper understanding

Learning opportunities
The range of literacy learning options, including individual and group tutoring, workplace literacy programmes and distance education, among others

Level 4 qualification
One of the 10 levels of qualifications in Ireland, shown, for example, by an ordinary Leaving Certificate

Mission
An aim of a group, an organisation or a person

National Development Plan
A Government plan to improve the economy and living standards by using EU and other funds to invest in education and training, regional development, social services, roads and so on

Numeracy
A lifeskill that involves the competent use of everyday mathematical language, knowledge and skills and the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations

Objectives
Planned results to be achieved within a stated period in the future

Partnership
Two or more people or groups working together on an activity or to reach a particular goal

Policy
A course of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or person.

Position paper
A document that contains a person's or organisation's opinion on an issue along with evidence to back up that opinion

Philosophy
In this plan, a system of beliefs about how to do something

Practitioners
People working directly in adult literacy, including Adult Literacy Organisers, tutors, trainers and centre managers

Rationale
Reasoning behind an action or belief

Resources
People, equipment, services, funding or materials needed to carry out a task

Stakeholder
A person or group with an interest (a stake) in the actions or policies of an organisation, which means they may affect the actions or policies and, or, be affected by them

Strategic
Something that forms part of or relates to a long-term plan to achieve an aim

Strategy
A plan designed to achieve a long-term aim

Tender
An application to do a piece of work, which describes how it will be done, how long it will take and how much it will cost, among other things

Unprecedented
Never done or known before

VECs – Vocational Education Committees
Educational bodies with main responsibility for adult and further education at county or city level, which are represented nationally by the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)

Vision
In this plan, a mental picture of something positive in the future

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What is NALA?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA was established in 1980 and has campaigned since then for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

National Adult Literacy Agengy

An Áisineacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

National Adult Literacy Agency

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Read Write Now TV literacy series 5 website: www.readwritenow.ie
The Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers website: www.rug.ie

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