

Providing leadership in adult literacy

We want Ireland to be a place where
adult literacy is a valued right and where
everyone can both develop their literacy
and take part more fully in society

Strategic Plan, 2011-2013



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh



Introduction

The National Adult Literacy Agency is 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. According to the last international literacy survey, one in four - that is, about half a million - Irish adults have problems reading and writing.

This strategic plan sets out how we aim to improve outcomes for adults with literacy difficulties in Ireland from 2011 to 2013. We developed the plan following a review of our work and consultations with adult literacy students, our members and other key players in adult literacy and further afield.

This strategic plan contains three main objectives. They are to:

- form detailed policy to expand adult literacy services and integrate literacy and numeracy development across education and training programmes,
- support education and training providers to implement policy on integrating literacy and explore and develop new approaches in adult literacy practice, and
- make it easier for people with literacy difficulties to take up learning opportunities and use public services.

You can view and download additional information on our work at www.nala.ie.



National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Contents

05

About NALA

08

What we mean
by 'literacy'

10

Our vision

14

Our mission

16

Our objectives

22

How we will
achieve our
objectives

24

Glossary

26

References

About NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent organisation that is:

- the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills, and
- is committed to raising adult literacy levels.

We are a member-based organisation. Our members are individuals and organisations interested and involved in adult literacy. At our annual general meeting, members elect an Executive Committee, which oversees our work.

We are a limited company with charitable status. We receive a grant from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that enables us to staff offices in Dublin and Cork. The DES, along with other Government departments, State bodies, the European Union and the private sector, also funds specific research and development work.

Our track record

Since we were established in 1980, we have increased awareness of the adult literacy issue in Ireland and secured a response to the issue from the State. The quality of that response, and its growth over the years, has been at the core of our work to ensure people with literacy difficulties can avail of the tuition and support they need.

Since 1997, we have been a dedicated force behind the:

- 30-fold increase in adult literacy funding, and
- 10-fold increase in the number of adults involved in VEC adult literacy services.

Over this time, we have brought many innovations to the field of adult literacy and developed the organisation as an expert resource. Our achievements include:

- developing quality, curriculum and assessment frameworks;
- successfully lobbying for the creation of a fund for workplace literacy programmes;
- designing new models of literacy tuition for target groups such as unemployed people; and
- using technology, especially television, to increase awareness and support learning.

We stand for:

- literacy as a human right and a tool for change,
- respect for equality and diversity,
- involving people with literacy difficulties in our work,
- learning and growth,
- partnership, and
- transparency and quality.

Rationale for our plan

Although Government policies contain targets for raising skills and building social inclusion, we need to draft and agree with our partners a more robust policy and implementation plan specifically on integrating literacy into further education and training. Moving the integrating literacy agenda forward has benefits both for the achievement of national targets and for those taking part in further education and training.

While we seek specific Government policies and enhanced practice among education and training providers, we also need to continue our work to improve access to education and training. People with literacy difficulties have low levels of participation in tuition, but this can be improved by raising awareness of the options available. Allied to this is the need to improve access to public services, especially for people with literacy difficulties, so that everyone has a chance to take part more fully in society. Using plain English in communications is a significant step in this direction.



What we mean by 'literacy'

Literacy involves:

- listening,
- 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.

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.

If a person needs to develop confidence and skill in particular aspects of literacy, it does not mean that they have difficulty with all of the basics. Equally, if a person has a qualification, it does not always mean that they have high levels of literacy. Many adults who have not practised their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills. Here are some examples of what people say to us.

"My reading is fine, but because my spelling is not great I don't do any writing."

"My reading and writing are good, but I'm very bad at maths."

"I'm ok at maths and computers, but I find reading hard, especially big words."



Our vision

We want Ireland to be a place where adult literacy is a valued right and where everyone can both develop their literacy and take part more fully in society.

Challenges to achieving our vision

Extent of literacy difficulties and appropriate responses

The International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997 highlighted the extent of literacy difficulties among Irish adults. According to the survey, **one in four Irish adults has a significant literacy difficulty**. To date, this remains the most up-to-date information on adult literacy levels in Ireland.

People with literacy difficulties are more likely to be unemployed and at risk of social exclusion.¹ Indeed, a recent report published by the Economic and Social Research Institute states that men and women with literacy difficulties are more likely to be long-term unemployed.² In addition, research published by NALA in 2009³ reports that people with literacy difficulties are likely to have lower earnings and lower career aspirations. They are also less likely to become involved in their community, vote or do voluntary work.

The Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science believes that, to address the “unacceptable” adult literacy levels in Ireland, a concerted, planned approach to adult literacy development is “the most urgent requirement”.⁴

National and European policies have been devised to achieve this aim. In Ireland, the National Skills Strategy (2007) promotes a vision of Ireland in 2020 based on a well-educated and highly skilled population. The European Union’s Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training (known as ET2020) set a target that “...all learners attain an adequate level of basic skills, especially in reading, mathematics and science”. They state that co-operation on basic skills should be a priority in the first cycle of ET2020’s implementation.

Despite policy commitments and increased resources in further education in recent years, around a third of the adult population

in Ireland still has less than a Junior Certificate or equivalent qualification. The Department of Education and Skills provides funding for a range of part-time back-to-education programmes aimed at this group, recording 130,000 participants in 2008. These participants include 45,000 adult literacy students served by VEC adult literacy services. This figure, however, is less than 10% of those with significant literacy difficulties and includes people who are learning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). On average, most of these students can access only two hours' tuition a week, which equals two weeks' full-time education a year.

Changing policy and funding environment

After a decade of economic growth, Ireland now faces a far more difficult economic situation and much changed labour market. These circumstances will increase pressure on people who may need greater and more targeted literacy support to take part in society and improve their chances of employment. Those most in need should receive the most State support.

Limited engagement in adult learning

People with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to take part in education and training.⁵ Those with few or no qualifications have also benefitted least from investment in training.⁶ It is essential to fill this gap with targeted and flexible learning opportunities for people who wish to develop their literacy and numeracy.

There are significant gains to individuals, their families and community if they can develop their literacy. For example, for adults taking part in intensive adult literacy tuition, a move from one level on the National Framework of Qualifications to the next leads to increased earnings of almost €4,000 a year.⁷ According to research carried out by the UK's National Literacy Trust in 2008,⁸ those with improved literacy are more likely to own their own home and get involved in local issues.



Our strategic plan: an essential response to the challenge

Our mission

Our mission is to be the voice of adult literacy in Ireland and, with our partners, influence policy and practice to support people in developing their literacy.

Our objectives and actions

We have three objectives, each with related actions that will be central to raising adult literacy levels in Ireland over the next three years.

Objective 1: Policy

Work to ensure that national adult literacy policy priorities are implemented.

Objective 2: Practice

Develop better literacy and numeracy learning opportunities through:

- an integrated learning approach, and
- other effective methods such as distance and blended learning.

Objective 3: Access

Make it easier for people with literacy difficulties to:

- take up literacy and numeracy learning opportunities, and
- use other services aimed at the public.

Objective 1: Policy

Work to ensure that national adult literacy policy priorities are implemented.

Why NALA wants to do this

One of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007) targets is to reduce the number of adults with significant literacy difficulties to between 10% and 15% of the adult population by 2016. We will only know how much progress has been made in achieving this target when the results of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) are published in 2013.

In 2007, the National Skills Strategy set a target of upskilling 70,000 people from levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to level 3 and a further 260,000 up to NFQ levels 4 and 5 by 2020.⁹ The National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement says: “The progress made so far regarding the implementation of the Skills Strategy indicates that the most significant challenge for the period to 2020 is upskilling those at Levels 1-3 to Levels 4 and 5. This challenge will now be given a specific focus...and ensuring the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills will be key factors in determining the extent to which this challenge is met”.¹⁰

There is a need to further develop policies to achieve the national targets contained in existing policy statements on adult literacy.

Two key policies need to be prioritised:

- 1) expanding the current adult literacy service, and
- 2) integrating literacy development across adult education and training, using national and international research on best practice.¹¹

Together, these provide the best chance for us and our partners to make a real difference to adults with literacy needs and the country's adult literacy levels.

Actions

- 1.1 Publish what NALA identifies as the required developments for raising national literacy and numeracy levels.
- 1.2 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 in the following areas:
 - intensive literacy for people in the labour market,
 - family literacy for those wishing to develop their own and their children's literacy,
 - general adult literacy programmes for people in the community, and
 - incentives to encourage greater participation.
- 1.3 Continue to work with lead agencies and key policy makers concerned with the wider adult education and training sector (Department of Education and Skills, IVEA, FÁS) on how to progress a national plan to integrate literacy and numeracy within their programmes.
- 1.4 Form a policy working group with AONTAS to advance our common agenda for the adult learning sector.

Key performance indicator

There is clarity between partners about roles, the policy priorities, agreed steps and timeframe to implement them.

Objective 2: Practice

Develop better literacy and numeracy learning opportunities through:

- an integrated learning approach, and
- other effective methods such as distance and blended learning.

Why NALA wants to do this

New approaches are required to enable adult literacy students to overcome barriers to accessing, taking part and achieving success in adult and further education and training. Research carried out by the Basic Skills Agency in 1997 shows that students who received literacy support while engaged in further education were three times less likely to drop out of their course.¹² Together with our partners, we are well placed to guide the development of new approaches to enable students to overcome barriers to access, participation and success in adult and further education and training.

Our joint work with the IVEA on integrating literacy, in particular, is a good model for future collaboration. A combined research project in a VEC further education college¹³ is another example of successful partnership. We have also worked nationally with FÁS Community Training Centres to create an integrated strategy for literacy and numeracy development.¹⁴

We see flexible and blended learning options as important parts of the opportunities available to people who wish to move up through the National Framework of Qualification from levels 1, 2 or 3. We have developed a distance learning service and wish to further explore digital technologies to expand learning opportunities.

We keep our members up to date about relevant changes in teaching and learning through our events for students, volunteers, tutors and managers. Our links with students, in particular, have been crucial in ensuring that we hear, consider and communicate students' views.

Actions

- 2.1 Contribute to the plans of VECs and FÁS to adopt an integrated literacy approach through policies, guidelines, continuous professional development and support materials.
- 2.2 Research effective methodologies and the impact of teaching and learning in adult literacy.
- 2.3 Explore the use of digital broadcast technologies to provide new learning opportunities.
- 2.4 Develop additional content and accreditation options for www.writeon.ie, including Recognition of Prior Learning.
- 2.5 Offer professional and student development events linked to Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (2005).

Key performance indicator

There are agreed benchmarks that will support continual measurement of our progress towards:

- achieving an integrated learning approach, and
- developing other effective teaching methods such as distance and blended learning.

Objective 3: Access

Make it easier for people with literacy difficulties to:

- take up literacy and numeracy learning opportunities, and
- use other services aimed at the public.

Why NALA wants to do this

One of our main concerns is to encourage adults with literacy difficulties to take up learning opportunities. To fulfil this, we will continue to raise awareness of the literacy issue and the options available through national advertising, in partnership with An Post, and through other media work.

Another main concern is to influence and support organisations to be more accessible to people with literacy difficulties. By using plain English and other appropriate approaches, organisations can reach more people – in particular those with literacy difficulties – and enable them to fulfil their potential, access entitlements and better use services. Without these approaches, organisations may be losing current and potential customers due to complicated communications and procedures. These not only lead to misunderstandings, mistakes and complaints but also create an unnecessary disadvantage for people with literacy difficulties.

Research conducted internationally demonstrates the business case for using plain English. For example, local governments and private companies have seen significantly reduced costs and improved staff morale and efficiency as a result of rewriting even one key letter,¹⁵ set of instructions¹⁶ or application form.¹⁷ In Ireland, there is growing awareness of and interest in using plain English, particularly among the public sector. To date, NALA has worked with four Government departments, more than a dozen State bodies and a number of local authorities to improve their written communications.

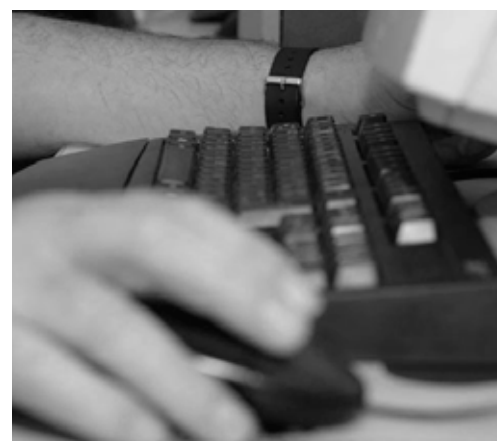
Actions

- 3.1 Lead a national promotional campaign on the benefits of learning for adults with literacy and numeracy needs.
- 3.2 Become the recognised national leader in plain English through our services to organisations and our awareness campaigns.
- 3.3 Work with the Department of Health and Children, the Health Service Executive and other health bodies to develop a health literacy policy and implementation plan, building on the results of the European Health Literacy Survey (due to be published in 2011).
- 3.4 Develop and implement a web strategy to include awareness raising, learning and communications.

Key performance indicators

More people are accessing learning opportunities as a result of NALA's actions.

More organisations are communicating in plain English as a result of NALA's work.



How we will achieve these objectives

We intend to achieve each of our three objectives by using the following strategies.

Partnership

We will work with:

- adults with literacy difficulties,
- people wishing to return to learning,
- education and training providers (VECs and FÁS),
- organisations dealing with the public, and
- policy makers, including the DES, and other stakeholders such as AONTAS and other non-governmental organisations.

Voice of adult literacy

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

- reflected in our work, and
- considered by politicians, policy makers and public bodies.

Advocacy

We will seek to:

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

Research

We will:

- position ourselves as a driving force in adult literacy and numeracy research,
- commission relevant research and share findings with key stakeholders, and
- use evidence to inform our policy proposals and our advice to organisations on adult literacy issues.

How we will implement and evaluate this plan

We will:

- develop annual work plans;
- use the balanced scorecard to evaluate our progress and use of strategies each month;
- deliver monthly progress reports to our Executive Committee; and
- publish annual reviews of our progress on this plan, in particular in relation to our key performance indicators.



Glossary of terms

Accreditation

In education, certifying that someone has a certain standard of knowledge or skills.

An example is when someone receives a certificate or other qualification from an educational institution or professional body when they successfully finish a course.

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

Benchmarks

A standard by which something can be measured or judged

Balanced scorecard

A system that measures how well an organisation performs across four areas — financial performance, customer satisfaction, internal operations and learning and growth

Blended learning

A mixing of different teaching and learning techniques, usually face-to-face tuition and computer-based learning

Distance learning

Learning that takes place when learners and tutors are separated by either space or time, for example by communicating over the phone or internet instead of face-to-face in a classroom

European Health Literacy Survey

A survey of eight European countries to identify and compare rates of health literacy

Evaluation

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

Framework

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

Implementation plan

A plan designed to assist a person or organisation to manage and monitor their work

Integrating literacy

Designing and delivering education and training programmes in a way that helps participants develop course-related language, literacy and numeracy skills as part of the core subject

IVEA

Irish Vocational Education Association – an organisation representing Vocational Education Committees

Key performance indicator

A sign that shows how well a project or activity is working and how it could work better

Learning opportunities

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

Numeracy

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

PIAAC

Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) - a survey to assess and compare the basic skills of adults around the world

Plain English

A way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it

Policy

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

Rationale

The reason for doing something

Resources

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

Vision

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

Voice

In this plan, taking account of the views and experiences of adults with literacy difficulties

www.writeon.ie

The website that allows adults to check their skills and then work on areas that they need help with learning. Learners can then use this site to apply for a national award at Level 2 or 3.

References

- 1 Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, FÁS (2009) *National Skills Bulletin 2009*. Dublin: FÁS.
- 2 O'Connell, P.J. et al (2009) *National Profiling of the Unemployed in Ireland, Research Series Number 10*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
- 3 National Adult Literacy Agency (2009) *A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training*. Dublin: NALA.
- 4 Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science (May 2006) *Fourth Report: Adult Literacy in Ireland*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- 5 Morgan, M. et al (1998) *International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills –Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Forfás.
- 6 FÁS (2009) *Irish Labour Market Review 2008*. Dublin: FÁS.
- 7 National Adult Literacy Agency (2009) *A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training*. Dublin: NALA.
- 8 Dugdale, G. and Clark, C. (2008) *Literacy Changes Lives: An Advocacy Resource*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- 9 Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills –Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Forfás.
- 10 Department of Education and Science (2010) *National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement*. Available at: <http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/PR10-03-20.doc>
- 11 Casey, H. et al (2007) 'You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering....': *Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement*. London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.
Kis, V. (2010) *Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - Ireland*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- 12 Kis, V. (2010) *Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - Ireland*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- 13 Hegarty, A. and Feeley, M. (2009) *Literacy-friendly further education and training*. Dublin: NALA.
- 14 Mc Skeane, E. (2009) *Living Literacy – a whole organisation approach to integrating literacy in vocational training*. Dublin: NALA.
- 15 Plain Language Action and Information Network (2010) 'Plain language: the bottom line'.
Available from: www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm
- 16 Grotzky, R. (2004) Plain language: its effect on organizational performance. *Clarity* No. 51 (May 2004), pp. 17-18.
- 17 Word Centre (2008) 'The business case'.
Available from: <http://www.wordcentre.co.uk/page57.htm>

Copyright @ National Adult Literacy Agency 2010

ISBN: 978-1-907171-11-6

Published by:
The National Adult Literacy Agency
Sandford Lodge
Sandford Close
Ranelagh
Dublin 6
Telephone (01) 412 7900
Fax (01) 497 6038
Email info@nala.ie
Web www.nala.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency

Sandford Lodge
Sandford Close
Ranelagh
Dublin 6

Telephone (01) 412 7900
Fax (01) 497 6038
Email info@nala.ie

NALA website:

www.nala.ie

Literacy learning websites:

www.writeon.ie
www.literacytools.ie

Freephone support line:

1800 20 20 65



EUROPEAN UNION
STRUCTURAL FUNDS



National Development Plan



National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh