

**NALA Policy Brief
on the
NALA Literacy
Advisory Service
(LAS)**

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NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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

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Introduction

This policy brief is for NALA members and policy makers to state NALA's position on our Literacy Advisory Service. The brief will inform and influence the relevant parties to address this area effectively.

Position statement

Objective 4 in NALA's Strategic Plan is to persuade organisations to be fully accessible to people with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

A literacy-friendly organisation genuinely includes and respects its staff and its customers. It encourages commitment in all parts of the organisation and among all levels of staff to remove literacy-related barriers to access, participation and achievement. It may also result in more effective internal and external communication, increased performance improvement and workplace learning.

NALA's Literacy Advisory Service can work with organisations to develop a whole organisation approach to literacy. This includes developing strategic, inclusive and sustainable responses to employee literacy and numeracy development needs, as well as improving customer services and dealings with the public.

The Service can offer advice, information and support to help an organisation to:

- review their **policies, practices** and **procedures**,
- deliver **effective training** and **development** in a literacy aware way,
- **communicate effectively** through awareness of literacy issues and using plain English.

Summary analysis

Background

There is a lot of statistical evidence that literacy difficulties are a major issue in Ireland today. An international study from the OECD revealed that one in six of the Irish workforce and as many as one in four of the general adult population have difficulty completing the reading, writing and number-related tasks that are part of daily and working life. Of a labour force of approximately 2.2 million¹ people, there are currently 479,900 people with lower secondary education or less.²

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). Literacy is one of the most important areas of skill involved in reaching customers and in making the most of the talents of the staff in any organisation. Lack of awareness of the extent and effect of literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland has meant that many organisations are not working as effectively as they could be.

International research, for example from the UK³ and New Zealand⁴ indicates that by being aware of literacy issues and having strategic and inclusive literacy policies, an organisation can be more effective in

¹ CSO website: http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/2008/qnhs_q42008.pdf

² Ibid, Table 23, September – November 2008

³ Financial Services Authority, 2003. *Towards a Strategy for Financial Capability*. London: Financial Services Authority.

meeting the needs of those who use their services. Both citizens and organisations benefit from effective and understandable communications: citizens are more likely to understand and exercise their rights and meet their obligations and organisations are more likely to make better use of their resources.

Policy implications

From Government Departments to state agencies and businesses to community organisations, being aware of and acting on adult literacy issues means not just maximising the workforce but also communicating more effectively and reaching customers.

It is possible that without knowing it the following could be happening in your organisation:

- losing current and potential customers because of complicated literature and procedures,
- losing money because of time spent dealing with misunderstandings, mistakes or complaints,
- some of your staff, including the most talented and creative among them, are grappling with unnecessary obstacles that stop them fulfilling their potential,
- you may be excluding some people from fair access to opportunities and services because of unnecessary literacy barriers.

In order to become literacy friendly, NALA suggest that you refer to *Right from the Start, A Guide to supporting staff and connecting with customers*. This Guide outlines the main steps to take in order to phase in a whole-organisation approach. Organisations can use NALA's Literacy Advisory Service to get detailed advice, information and support in the process.

What organisations can do to become literacy friendly

The NALA Literacy Advisory Service supports organisations to follow a five-step process to address literacy issues coherently. These steps include:

Step 1: Hold and initial review and planning session

Step 2: Carry out a literacy audit

Step 3: Develop action plans

Step 4: Implement action plans

Step 5: Monitor and evaluate actions

NALA believes that organisations would benefit greatly from doing a 'literacy audit'. This is a process that can be assisted by a NALA literacy advisor who can help your organisation work through the audit, using a set of tools and checklists. They can engage with management and staff to identify existing good practice and any gaps. Useful starting points are the organisation's policies and procedures, communications methods and staff training and development activities.

Depending on the action plan developed, NALA can offer specific support in the areas of:

- Literacy Awareness Training
- Plain English
- Literacy-friendly staff training and development

⁴ Workbase, 2002. *Voices from Management*. Auckland: Workbase.

- Workplace Basic Education

Models of development

Over the last number of years, NALA has worked with many organisations on the different areas outlined above. As of yet, no one organisation – outside of the education and training field - has addressed literacy and numeracy as part of a whole organisation approach. This involves doing a literacy audit to look at policies, practices and procedures within an organisation and from that implementing actions.

Some examples from the UK

1. In the UK, an **‘Embedding Skills for Life’ project** was undertaken in **London local authorities**. Phase 1 ran from April 2003 to March 2005, and worked with three London local authorities with the aim of enabling employees, and in particular front-line staff, to develop their literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills. An important focus of the project was its emphasis on a whole organisation approach to LLN development and each developed a 3 to 5 year LLN strategy to take forward these processes. These strategies were also integrated within broader workforce development strategies. A detailed project guide and resources (including guidance materials, case studies, training packages and evidence of what works) were produced during this project.
2. Also in the UK, the Army's basic skills initiative - developed by the Army in partnership with the Basic Skills Agency and jointly funded by DfES and the Army - has been endorsed by the Skills for Life Strategy Unit and the National Skills Envoy as a model of good practice for other major employers in raising skills standards. For more information, check out the webpage:
http://archive.basic-skills.co.uk/newsandevents/news/news_archive/army_shows_employers_the_way_says_national_skills_envoy_dfes/

Policy recommendation(s)

NALA recommends that that the Government, state agencies and other organisations should engage in a process to develop strategic, inclusive and sustainable responses to literacy and numeracy development needs.

Conclusion

Now is the time to advocate for and support the development of a whole organisation approach to literacy. By doing so organisations will be more inclusive, efficient and progressive. NALA is looking forward to engaging with organisations as they consider adult literacy in their work and will continue to contribute to addressing the unmet literacy needs of adults in Ireland.

Further Reading

Right from the Start, A Guide to supporting staff and connecting with customers: NALA, 2009