Response to Digital for Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap

Submitted to the Office of Government Chief Information Officer

April 2023

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Contents

Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with close to 2,000 members. We believe literacy is a human right. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

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

This can be for **many reasons**.

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Digital for Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Road Map.

Literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy skills

These skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills enable people to reach their full potential, be active and critical participants in society and help address poverty and social exclusion. These life skills allow us to participate in, and make sense of, the world.

Literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy skills:

- are not static and they evolve.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have it forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them – this is called 'deskilling'.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a financial service for a loan and understanding financial and legal terminology.
- will be different for each person – you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing – people have "spiky" profiles.

Literacy is not about individual intelligence, literacy is about social, economic and cultural opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key.

Literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland

Unmet literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs arise because of educational and wider structural inequalities.

The most recent adult literacy survey[1] showed that:

- One in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable, understanding medicine instructions.
- One in four adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating percentages.
- About 2 in 5 (42%) adults struggle with basic digital tasks. For example, looking up a website or sending an email. Note that the majority of people who have digital literacy needs have underlying literacy issues.
- There are also language needs amongst many adults where English is a Second or Other Language (ESOL).

Literacy and equality

Literacy is a barometer of equality and is the gateway to creating a society that is better and equal for all. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way, but it recognises that individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. At present, those who need to access education and training the most, benefit the least. This is the Matthew effect where "without intervention, those who have acquired more education get more and those that have not, get little or nothing."[2]

NALA believes that priority should be given to those most in need of experiencing educational disadvantage, the **furthest behind first** (principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[3]). Within such a framework, **the needs of those with less than a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 4 qualification would be met first.** Vulnerable adults, who cannot access supports or are refused help when they need it, may not seek help again. For the furthest behind first, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.

---

[1] CSO (2013). PIAAC 2012 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results for Ireland

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

[3] Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

NALA comments and recommendations on Digital for Good

NALA appreciated the opportunity to attend the 30 March 2023 consultation session and to offer these additional comments on the Draft Road map:

- **Participating Departments**:

  As detailed on page ii of the Roadmap, the following Departments are referenced only and are not currently members of the working group:
  - Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
  - Department of Education
  - Department of Health
  - Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

  The following Government Departments are also not listed:
  - Department of Defence
  - Department of Foreign Affairs
  - Department of Finance
  - Department of Justice
  - Department of Transport

  We would recommend that:
  - the four departments referenced only in the Roadmap should become group members given their beneficiaries and the critical roles they will play in enabling and providing digital inclusion.
  - the Department of Justice will need to become a more active participant given its remit in enabling and providing digital inclusion particularly given the Courts Modernisation Programmes.

- **Target groups (p.3):** It should be noted in recent research conducted by NALA[4] and the Bank of Ireland[5] that young people are an emerging group experiencing digital and digital financial inclusion. This is owing to gaps in financial and digital education in primary and secondary level that will need to be addressed.

---

[4] NALA (2022) www.nala.ie/financial-literacy
[5] Bank of Ireland survey conducted by Red C (March 2023)

- **Key determinants (p.4):** As identified at the consultation session, awareness should be added to the key determinants of access, affordability and ability.

- **Basic digital skills (p.5):** We need an agreed definition of basic digital skills based on the European Digital Competence Framework, which should be embedded into the primary and secondary curricula. It is also essential to integrate digital learning and skills into all subject areas and upskill teaching staff as needed in accordance with the European Digital Competence Framework.

  In addition, competency based upskilling opportunities need to be made available to adults in a more systematic life-long and life wide way. We also need themed digital learning for adults, for example on financial digital literacy, health digital literacy and family digital literacy.

- **User-focused service design and Delivery of digital public services (p.5):** Reference should be made here and throughout the Roadmap to the recently launched 3rd edition of the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach.

  All digital public services should be designed using an **accessible and literacy friendly approach**. This means designing your services by:
  - being aware of the unmet literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs among adults,
  - taking account of these needs by using plain language and universal design principles,
  - removing literacy related barriers, and
  - user testing, particularly with vulnerable groups such as people with unmet literacy needs (1 in 6 adults), numeracy needs (1 in 4 adults) and digital literacy needs (2 in 5 adults).

- **Alternatives to digital (p.6):** Develop further detail, discussion and dissemination of the non-digital options to accompany the roll out of the digital Roadmap.

- **Legislation (p.15):** Further consideration and consultation is required on how the universal service obligations will extend to the provision of accessible services and

information to meet consumer needs who have unmet literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs. Contracts should include a requirement on private sector providers to implement the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach.

- **Single front office and Life Event portal (p.24 and p.25):** Rather than creating a new standalone single front office and another "one stop shop," can you create more seamless, user centred information channels in existing locations and organisations that interact with people at risk of digital exclusion such as the Intreo Centres, Citizen Information Centres and local community groups.

We look forward to continued communication and collaboration. Please do not hesitate to contact us for any further information or clarification.

Further reading and references

Bank of Ireland survey conducted by Red C (March 2023).

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

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the National Disability Authority (NDA) Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach

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

NALA (2022). Financial Literacy in Ireland: Challenges and Solutions

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy 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, providing online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.