

Submission to Review of Pathways to Work 2021 - 2025

Submitted to the Department of Social Protection

March 2023

Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 2,300 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 the review of the Pathways to Work.

Literacy, 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.

Unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs have a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. People who have experienced educational and wider inequalities earn less income, are more likely to be unemployed and report poor health. They are less likely to vote, access services or understand health or other public information.



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 skills allow people to seek better employment opportunities, especially as job markets change. They also empower people to advocate for themselves and their communities, use technology and participate in, and make sense of, the world.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland

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

The most recent adult literacy survey¹ showed that:

- One in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or 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, they find looking up a website or sending an email difficult. 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).

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO)² highlights that currently there are 320,050 people (aged 25 to 64 years) who have less than a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 4 qualification (equivalent to a Leaving Certificate). These include:

- 175,640 (55%) employed;
- 7,990 (2.5%) unemployed; and
- 131,460 (41%) not engaged in the labour force.

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.”³

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

² CSO (2022). [Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022](#)

³ Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999). The Matthew Effect in American Education. Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization.

NALA believes that priority should be given to those most in need of experiencing educational disadvantage, the **furthest behind first**. This is a principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴ and in successive national anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies. It means that where funding is limited, State investment should target those most in need. Within such a framework, **the needs of those with less than a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 4 qualification would be met first**. This would include adults who are most at risk of experiencing unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. For the furthest behind first, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning.

Addressing adult literacy needs of people experiencing unemployment

The Government recently published a [10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy](#) that aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential”.

In the Strategy, people who are experiencing long-term unemployment were identified as a vulnerable and priority group.

The Strategy also named the Department of Social Protection as playing a key role in supporting job seekers with unmet needs:

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) should also play a key role in helping to identify, and source support for unmet literacy needs among job seekers and those subsequently placed in employment. A new Work Placement Scheme was recently launched by the Department to provide access to work experience and reskilling opportunities in response to the significant unemployment caused by the pandemic. The Department should work with SOLAS and the ETBs to ensure that integrated literacy, numeracy and digital upskilling support is available if required to all participants on the scheme as an integrated part of the training on offer.⁵

⁴ [Transforming our world](#): the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

⁵ Government of Ireland (2021). [Adult Literacy For Life: A 10-year Strategy](#)

A report from the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) on low work intensity households and the quality of supportive services concluded that:

“the intensity of support available to ensure effective outcomes should increase, particularly for those most distant from the labour market, such as lone parents, people with illness/disability; and those with literacy difficulties, poor English, no work experience or contacts, a history of addiction or time in prison.”⁶

The research found 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. It noted that: “sometimes the service provision is not intensive enough to adequately address the problem ... for example, most literacy support is still provided for only two hours a week.”

The report also recommends:

- Tailored supports for those most distant from the labour market.
- More intensive literacy and numeracy education is required for those with unmet literacy and numeracy needs as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.

Strong literacy pays and builds human capitals

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. Research confirms that people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs who are unemployed are more likely to move into long-term unemployment.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research report on Literacy, numeracy and activation among the unemployed shows that work specific training for people with literacy and numeracy needs helps enhance employment prospects – up to three times the average.⁷

⁶ National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2018). [Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services](#).

⁷ Kelly, E., S. McGuinness and P.J. O’Connell (2012b). [Literacy, Numeracy and Activation among the Unemployed](#). ESRI Research Series Number 25. Dublin: ESRI.

NALA comments on review of Pathways to Work 2021 - 2025

[Pathways to Work](#) identified 83 commitments in total. Many of these commitments could support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to take up literacy learning opportunities and create a pathway to work. However, as the strategy did not specifically name adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs, we cannot assess what progress has been made with supporting adults with these needs.

The most relevant commitments where adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs may be supported are under the two themes:

- Working for Jobseekers (14)
- Working for All – Leaving No One Behind (6)

We have looked at these commitments and added in a column with what progress we would like to see in the remaining implementation of Pathways to Work.

Working for Jobseekers

#	Commitment	Progress needed from 2023 – 2025
5	Fund 50,000 additional places in further and higher education, including via Skills to Compete, Skillnet Ireland, Springboard+ and the Human Capital Initiative.	<p>Of the 21,000 places on Skills to Complete, how many were supporting adults with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs?</p> <p>What courses did they attend and what qualification level did they work towards and/or achieve (if any)?</p> <p>On the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme, were there literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs identified?</p> <p>If so, how were people supported?</p>

7	Increase the number of places in Work Experience Programmes by 10,000.	Did literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs come up as a barrier to participation?
8	Increase the maximum value and funding for the Training Support Grant from €500 per grant to €1,000 to benefit 12,500 jobseekers per annum.	<p>What is the profile of training taken by the 6,318 participants?</p> <p>Did literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs come up as a training need?</p> <p>Where identified, was literacy support integrated into courses at QQI Levels 4 and upwards?</p>
9	Increase participation and funding in Back to Education programmes to 7,700 places (demand led).	<p>What is the breakdown of training that people engaged in?</p> <p>How many did programmes at QQI Levels 1 to 4?</p>
11	Increase funding and places on State Employment Schemes, such as Community Employment, to support an extra 3,000 places for those facing labour market disadvantage.	<p>Is there a recent training needs analysis for people on Community Employment (CE) or Tús?</p> <p>What training have people participated in?</p> <p>Did literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs come up as a training need? If so, what supports were given?</p>
12	Restore face-to-face engagements between Case Officers and jobseekers as soon as possible in a safe manner compliant with all public health guidelines	NALA delivered literacy friendly training to case officers online in November 2022. Are there plans to train up other staff in Intreo offices (reception, financial) in this?

13	Build on progress to date and further develop online service delivery mechanisms via JobsIreland.ie and MyWelfare.ie.	<p>Has the online service delivery been designed using a literacy friendly approach?</p> <p>Is the website written in plain English and uses universal design principles?</p> <p>Any further updates should incorporate recommendations from the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service</p>
14	Through commitments 12 and 13 develop and deploy a blended online and in-person employment service delivery process.	<p>Have these services been designed using a literacy friendly approach?</p> <p>Has all the material been written in plain English and uses universal design principles?</p> <p>Any further service delivery design should incorporate recommendations from the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service</p>
17	Review and update the existing Probability of Exit (PEX) segmentation model.	<p>Has the review noted anything interesting about the question on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills?</p> <p>What is the suggested change to this question?</p>
18	Explore and, if appropriate, develop a holistic diagnostic tool to support Intreo Case Officers in their assessment of individual jobseeker needs.	<p>What will be included about literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills needs in the new diagnostic tool?</p> <p>Will NALA and other relevant stakeholders (such as literacy students and tutors, SOLAS, ETBs) be consulted on the development of this tool?</p>

		<p>Consideration should be given to using NALA's Skills Checker to identify unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs and learning options on Learn with NALA</p>
19	<p>Invest in and embed continuous professional development as a core feature of Case Officers within Intreo.</p>	<p>Can a literacy awareness and using a literacy friendly approach module be included in the dedicated Certificate in Public Employment Service Provision in the National College of Ireland?</p> <p>For staff who have already completed this Certificate, how can we best train them in literacy awareness and literacy friendly approaches?</p> <p>NALA has a free one-hour eLearning module on our Learn with NALA website. See here to access the 'Understanding adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy' course. We are happy to explore how best to promote them.</p>
25	<p>Develop and implement a communications plan to promote the services of Intreo.</p>	<p>Does the communications plan identify and consider the approach needed for adults with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills?</p> <p>The Communications Plan should incorporate recommendations from the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service to ensure effective communications with the hardest to reach</p>
27	<p>Support 50,000 long-term unemployed people to commence in Further Education and Training provision by 2025.</p>	<p>How many adults needed support with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills?</p> <p>What courses did they attend and what qualification level did they work towards and/or achieve (if any)?</p>

28	Monitor and report on a quarterly basis on the level of Further Education and Training provision, referrals from Intreo and take-up rates.	<p>Of the 15,788 people who have been referred from Intreo, were literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs identified? If so, how were they supported?</p> <p>Of the 4,632 who have started or finished their FET course, what courses did they attend and what qualification level did they work towards and/or achieve (if any)?</p>
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Working for All – Leaving No One Behind

#	Commitment	Progress needed from 2023 – 2025
54	Tailoring bespoke job promotion and local recruitment events for older workers where reskilling and upskilling options will be outlined and referrals made to the Education and Training Board, as appropriate.	<p>What is the progress here?</p> <p>Have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs been identified? If so, what supports were given?</p>
55	Developing and operating ‘Returner’ programmes to encourage and support people who left the workforce and have been outside of the workforce for some time to take up employment.	<p>What is the progress here?</p> <p>Have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs been identified?</p> <p>If so, what supports were given?</p>
57	Implement an intensive model of engagement with young people profiled as being at risk of long-term unemployment.	<p>What is the progress of the model of intensive engagement?</p> <p>Have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs been identified? If so, what supports were given?</p>

63	Developing 'Get Work Ready' work and transversal skills programmes to be delivered via the further education and training sector.	<p>Of over the 500 courses been made available within the specific areas of (i) digital skills, (ii) employability (transversal) skills and (iii) specific sector skills, how many have done the programme?</p> <p>What is the participant profile and the regional breakdown?</p> <p>Have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs been identified? If so, what supports were given?</p>
66	Reserve places on public employment programmes for people from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds.	<p>At the workshop, did literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs come up as a barrier? What solutions were suggested?</p> <p>Where needed are there plans to integrate literacy, numeracy and digital literacy supports for people from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds attending a public employment programme?</p>
67	Develop a Traveller and Roma Training, Employment and Enterprise Plan.	<p>What is the expected timeframe for publishing this plan?</p> <p>Are members of those communities involved in the development?</p>

Overall recommendations

NALA recommends that Pathways to Work and the Department of Social Protection should:

1. Actively participate in the new **Adult Literacy for Life Strategy** to address adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy over the next 10 years. We need relevant **government departments** to agree **inter-related policies** and strategically resourced and evaluated **action plans** to work collaboratively towards the same goals. For example, there needs to be an inter-departmental discussion and agreement between Department of Social Protection and other relevant Departments on supporting the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of adults experiencing long-term unemployment.
2. Work with Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (FHERIS), SOLAS, ETBs and the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy to offer **tailored and holistic supports** for adults who are experiencing unemployment with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification (Leaving certificate or equivalent). This should include:
 - career **guidance, counselling and mentoring** where needed;
 - intensive and flexible **options** (face-to-face, blended, distance and online);
 - **peer-to-peer** learning programmes and support;
 - appropriate **supports** as required (a basic income, transport, child and elder care);
 - **work placement** where appropriate; and
 - **progression** opportunities.
3. Provide **financial support to ensure a basic income** for any adult experiencing unemployment to return to education for QQI levels 1, 2 or 3. Other supports such as full-time childcare or elder care and transport costs should also be available.
4. Develop **incentivised work experience programme** for adults with less than a QQI Level 4 qualification. This would include access to a relevant literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning supports on and off the job.

5. Work with **employers to raise awareness of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills** needs in the workplace and link them into the Skills for Work programme delivered through their local Education and Training Boards (ETBs).
6. Use a **literacy friendly approach** that takes account of and supports adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access Department of Social Protection and Intreo services.
7. Building on good practice to date, there is a need for a centrally-led **programme of education and training on literacy awareness and plain language** in the Department of Social Protection and wider public sector.

The Department should:

- Have designated staff attend literacy awareness and plain English / language training.
 - Utilise the [Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service](#)
 - Ensure “All public service communication should be in plain language” in line with current Programme for Government Commitment, June 2020 and the [10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy](#), which states: “The Cross-Government Implementation Group should ensure that each of its constituent members has a clear plan in place to ensure communication in plain language, with a nominated person responsible for coordinating action to deliver on this.”
8. Develop strategic, sensitive outreach and **communications** strategies and assets that reflect and incorporate the lived experience and journeys of Department of Social Protection and Intreo services to enhance engagement and upskilling opportunities.

Conclusion

Every person has a right to develop their 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; to gain employment and progress; and to access the same opportunities as everyone else. By investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills, Ireland can be a stronger and more equal society.

The Pathways to Work Strategy should **specifically identify and prioritise** people who are experiencing unemployment who have unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. The Department of Social Protection should work closely with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (FHERIS), SOLAS and the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy to identify actions on specific literacy learning programmes and associated supports for this group.

NALA is happy to work with the Department to ensure the new Pathways to Work strategy prioritises and supports adults with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs.

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.

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Registered Charity Number: 20020965

Charity Number: 8506

Company Number: 342807

Adult Literacy is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Social Fund.



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