

NALA submission regarding National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy

Submitted to the the Department of Education

October 2023



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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1. Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,835 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 consultation on the National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy. We have separately completed the online survey, referring to our detailed responses below (Section 6).

2. 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.



3. 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 (CSO 2013) 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 among many adults where English is a Second or Other Language (ESOL).

The literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy skills that we use and need:

- are not static and evolve constantly.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have it forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them – deskilling.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a lawyer and legal terminology or studying a course and language specific to it.
- Can differ from one skill area to another – for example, a person can be good at reading, but struggle with writing – people have “spiky” profiles.

4. Education Strategy and Adult Literacy

The educational strategy adopted for children now will have an impact on the adult learners of the future. At the same time, the parents of today have a significant influence on their children’s educational experiences and outcomes.

The Department of Education has undertaken, in its Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 (Department of Education 2021), to work with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to progress the inclusion agenda

(p. 17). We support this joined-up approach. Family literacy and childhood education are fundamentally interconnected, and both elements are essential for social inclusion.

5. Literacy and the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland

Adult literacy is an important element of Traveller and Roma inclusion, given the longstanding barriers to their equal participation in childhood education. Literacy is referenced in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (Department of Justice and Equality 2017), specifically:

“SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards will continue to provide training and education that supports Traveller men and women to develop literacy, numeracy and “soft” skills, in line with the Further Education and Training (FET) strategy” (p. 26)

“The Department of Justice and Equality (Irish Prison Service) will, in conjunction with the Education and Training Boards, provide access to Travellers and Roma to education while in prison, including literacy education” (p. 40)

In the past year in particular, NALA has been reaching out to Traveller organisations to:

- raise awareness of options for going back to education and ensure we are informed when advocating on matters such as Traveller education;
- explore potential future collaboration such as a learner ambassador programme; and
- see how we could add value to Traveller organisations’ work.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that Travellers and Roma have achieved the highest levels of educational qualifications. By highlighting literacy needs in these communities, we do not intend to contribute to stereotypes.

6. Our detailed responses to the National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy consultation survey

Question 1: What current actions, policies or processes are working well? What is having a positive impact on Traveller and Roma education or care?

a. Recognition of Travellers as a priority group

The Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy lists Members of the Travelling Community as a “potential vulnerable cohort” for targeted funding (DFHERIS 2021, p. 59). NALA welcomes the recognition of the Travelling Community as a priority group. Further detail is required on how the ALL strategy will translate this recognition into appropriate and impactful actions.

b. Employment initiatives

Employment prospects are an important incentive for educational attainment. The [Traveller Employment Programme](#) by Business in the Community is a good example of work to connect business interests to the Travelling community and support Traveller inclusion in employment.

c. Learner-focused practice in adult education supporting Travellers and Roma

NALA and adult literacy organisations are key providers of education to the Traveller and Roma communities. This takes a learner-led and culturally sensitive approach in accordance with core adult education principles (see, for example, NALA 2012). Learners can avail of flexible options that suit their individual needs.

This includes learning by phone or online through the Learn with NALA website. We have had learners from the Traveller community who found the online option helped them to combine learning and childcare, and learners for whom the personal support of the phone tutoring service (such as reminders of upcoming sessions) was essential.

Please see this short video (less than 2 minutes) on one learner’s experience of returning to education: [Margaret Donovan from Ennis says returning to education changed her life - YouTube](#).

These approaches need to be further developed and resourced in the forthcoming strategy and the Adult Literacy Strategy.

d. Demand for learning

There is high demand for adult literacy services among Travellers and Roma. Adult literacy is the second highest area of further education for Travellers, after YouthReach (SOLAS 2021a), and the third highest area of further education for Roma people, after YouthReach and ESOL – English as a Second or Other Language (SOLAS 2021b). Travellers make up a relatively high proportion of learners on the Learn with NALA phone tutoring service. Data collected by NALA (to be published in a forthcoming report) indicates that at least 4.2% of learners on the Learn with NALA phone tutoring service are Travellers – more than four times their representation in the Irish population, which is less than 1% ([CSO 2022](#)).

e. Family learning

Family learning is a key element of Ireland’s Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020 (DES 2011). It has also been identified as a key theme in the new [Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy](#) that the Department is developing.

Family literacy initiatives address intergenerational educational exclusion by supporting parents to develop their literacy skills and confidence. These can have particular impact for Traveller and Roma communities given that “the majority of Traveller children (67.3%) live in families where the mother has either no formal education or primary education only” (Pavee Point 2019). Across 11 EU countries, it has been found that 20% of Roma, compared with 1% of non-Roma, self-declared that they could not read or write, and Roma children are less likely to be in early childhood education (FRA 2014) - making family learning all the more important.

NALA (2022) has highlighted examples of good family literacy practice across Ireland which are designed specifically for Travellers. These include development of Traveller-specific resources (p. 7), programmes (p. 10), and afterschool support for children and families (p. 17).

f. Traveller organisations linking with adult literacy services

There are strong relationships between Traveller organisations and local Education and Training Boards (ETBs). For example, the Local Training Initiative in the Offaly Traveller Movement is working closely with Laois and Offaly ETB (LOETB). At the induction stage, staff in the Offaly Traveller Movement make one-to-one learning plans with students. If literacy needs are identified, LOETB provide tutors to support learners.

g. Traveller organisations linking with schools and working on retention

Many Traveller organisations are actively engaging with schools, often liaising in particular with DEIS schools. Some Traveller organisations employ staff to focus on education. They often run homework clubs (examples: Donegal Traveller Project, Sligo Travellers' Support Group) and have a focus on school retention.

We note that there is evidence of some improvement in school retention in "Pupils from the Traveller Community 2016-2020" (Department of Education 2023a, pp. 11-14). Around half (47%, according to forthcoming NALA report) of our adult learners were early school leavers, so retention is clearly a factor in developing literacy skills for life.

h. Traveller-led initiatives

The HSE's Primary Healthcare for Travellers Projects, in which Travellers are employed as community health workers, can be seen as peer-led Traveller education projects. They have anecdotally had a positive impact in terms of higher immunisation, more uptake of Breastcheck, and awareness of other health conditions such as diabetes. This model could be replicated beyond health literacy to include a broader focus on education.

i. Role models of educational attainment in Traveller community

The visibility of members of the Travelling community receiving higher education qualifications and positions in public life are valuable role models.

Question 2: What are the challenges or barriers that the Traveller and Roma communities currently experience in primary, post-primary and early learning and care/ school age childcare?

Our understanding of the challenges faced by Traveller and Roma communities in education is informed by views and experiences shared with us by representative groups and by adult learners.

A. Racism is at the core of many challenges that Travellers and Roma face.

Racism leads to:

- discrimination and bullying,

- low expectations,
- over-use of reduced school hours, and
- lack of cultural representation, role models or welcome in the school environment.

In the long term, these issues contribute to the social exclusion of these communities. The disadvantage experienced by Traveller and Roma pupils in education is a human rights and equality issue.

In particular, the practice of over-using reduced school hours for Traveller and Roma pupils is contrary to the support for promoting Traveller and Roma attendance as outlined in Action 10 of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017 – 2021 (Department of Justice and Equality 2017, p. 25).

B. Difficulties with school can lead to poor outcomes later.

The challenges and barriers faced by Traveller and Roma pupils often lead to early school leaving. The ESRI (2017, p. 29) have found that just 9% of Travellers stayed in education beyond the age of 16, while 28% left at the age of 12 or younger. As noted above, around half of learners using NALA’s educational services were early school leavers. There is a strong link between early school leaving and literacy difficulties in later life.

Travellers and Roma are also significantly under-represented in higher education (HEA 2022).

C. Lack of employment opportunities is a disincentive.

IHREC (2017) found that Travellers were ten times more likely than White Irish to experience discrimination in seeking work. This discrimination disincentivises Traveller children and young adults from engaging with education. At a Pavee Point roundtable event on Travellers and Further Education and Training (FET), 16 November 2022, speakers highlighted cases where older siblings gained a qualification but never got a job. This has a negative effect on the motivation of younger siblings in school.

D. School communication needs to be improved.

Communications from schools to parents can be unnecessarily complicated and inaccessible. There is a reliance on digital modes of contact, such as email or apps, in many schools. This is particularly exclusionary for communities with lower-than-average levels of parental literacy and lack of access to digital technologies. Parents’ knowledge of the Irish education system may also be assumed.

E. Intergenerational disadvantage must be tackled.

Parents' negative experiences of education can affect their children in an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. For example, a recent literature review for the upcoming National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy has highlighted the importance of reading at home and access to books in the home (Department of Education 2023, p. 67). It also found that high parental expectations for their children's education are positively associated with student achievement in literacy (*ibid.*, p. 184).

Question 3: What actions do we need to take to address the challenges or barriers you identified in question 2?

A. Tackling Racism

- Make anti-racism and cultural awareness training a core strand of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy, for trainee teachers. Provide in-service training for qualified teachers.
- Enforce the rules around reduced school hours, ensuring they are not disproportionately applied to Traveller and Roma pupils.
- Prioritise ongoing work by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on Traveller history & culture in the curriculum. Extend this to Roma history and culture as well.
- Identify Traveller and Roma role models and make them visible in the school environment.
- Promote ethnic diversity programmes such as Yellow Flag in all schools.

B. Post-school

- Identify factors which have led to the recent increase in retention of Traveller pupils in school, and focus on maintaining/developing those as a priority.
- Align the new Strategy for Traveller and Roma Education with further and higher education strategy, including the ALL strategy, the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, and the National Access Plan 2022-2028.

C. Employment

- Support the development of a national workplace programme for Travellers and Roma that engages with employers and schools.
- Align the new Strategy for Traveller and Roma Education with employment and skills strategy, including the National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025.

D. School communications

- Mandate schools by departmental circular to provide information to parents in plain language.
- Provide Plain Language training as part of continuous professional development.
- Encourage schools to cater for a variety of communication preferences and needs, including non-digital options.

E. Family and community

- Fund family literacy programmes in Traveller & Roma communities (potentially in collaboration with the ALL National Programme Office).
- Support schools to take part in family learning programmes.
- Develop and/or support literacy ambassador programmes in the Traveller/Roma communities.

Question 4: What is your vision for Traveller and Roma education in Ireland?

Our organisational vision is an Ireland where

- adult literacy is a human right,
- everyone can develop their literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy, and
- individuals can take part fully in society.

This requires targeted supports for groups who are currently experiencing the greatest educational disadvantage, such as the Traveller and Roma communities, in accordance with the “furthest behind first” principle enshrined in the UN sustainable development goals. It

also requires the elimination of barriers to participation, including discrimination and cultural exclusion.

Our vision for Traveller and Roma education is guided by the “wealth model” of education. Traveller and Roma learners of all ages bring their own unique assets and experiences to their learning. This should be acknowledged and celebrated. Tools or programmes that recognise prior learning can support this. Non-accredited learning can also provide a boost to confidence, skills and social inclusion.

Our vision for Traveller and Roma education is that members of the Travelling and Roma communities can realistically aspire to the same educational outcomes as their settled peers. This means ensuring equal access to further and higher education by way of clear and flexible pathways. It also means integrating literacy, numeracy and digital literacy and awareness at all levels of the education system. This will ensure that literacy needs don't hold anyone back from reaching their full potential. Travellers and Roma must be supported to achieve their educational goals.

7. Follow on and contact information

NALA is happy to talk further about these recommendations.

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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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Co-funded by the
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