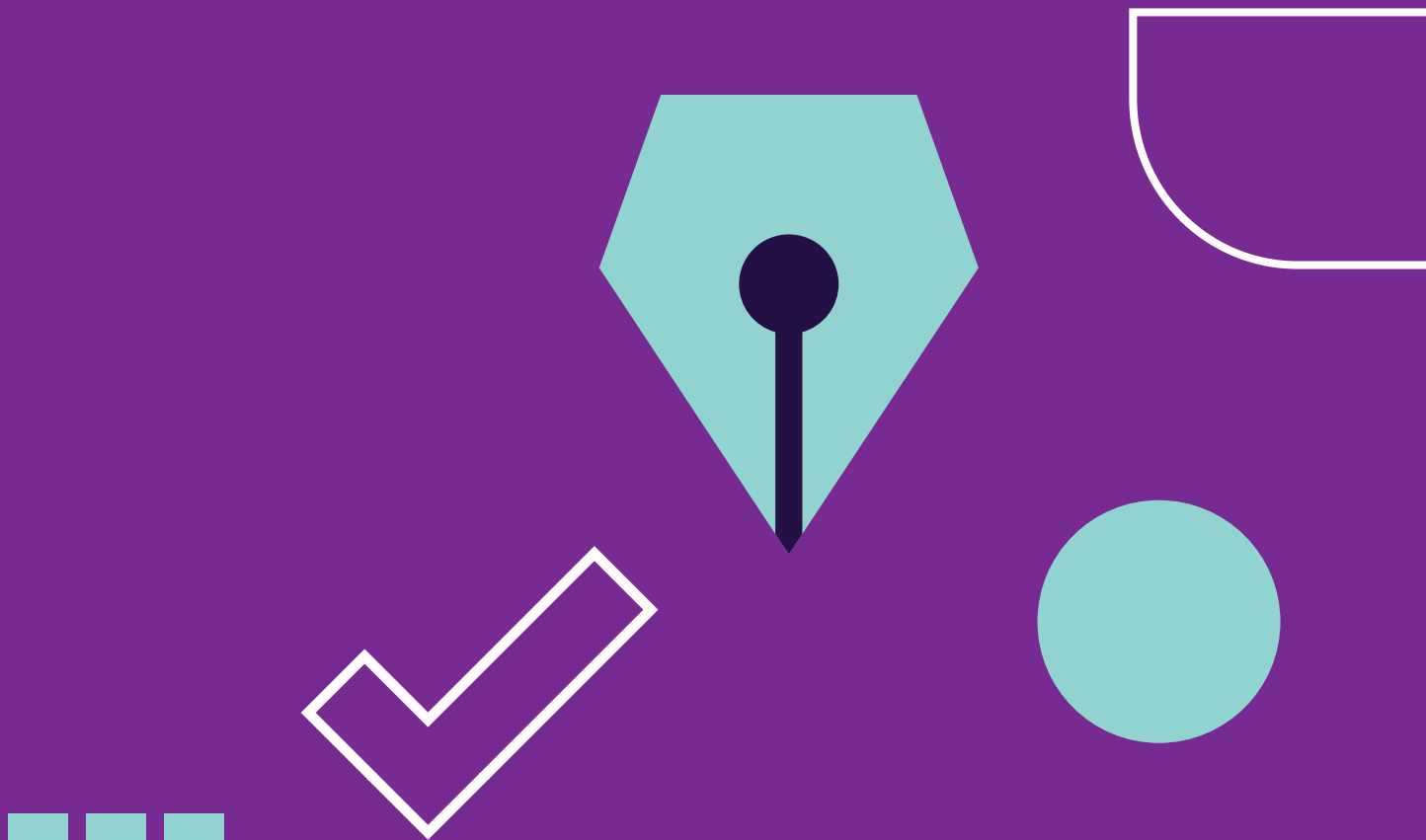
Literacy is everybody's business



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh



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Visit **nala.ie/literacy-awareness** or scan the QR (Quick Response) code to find out more about our literacy awareness services.

Scan on your phone

We use the term organisation(s) throughout this guide. We use it to refer to **businesses, services, workplaces and anywhere that engages with the public**.

Section 1 Introduction

Who are we?

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). Our vision is that adult literacy is a human right. Everyone in Ireland should have the chance to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills to take part fully in society. Everyone should have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

What do we mean by literacy, numeracy and digital literacy?

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are life skills that allow us to take part in and make sense of the world. These skills involve **listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology** to communicate, build relationships, understand information and make informed choices.

Like life, definitions change and our understanding of literacy changes. The literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills needed to participate in society are changing all the time, and will continue to evolve.



There are many routine reading and writing tasks that customers and staff need to carry out. These everyday tasks may not be immediately obvious. See these examples below.

Tasks for staff	Tasks for customers
Reading signs and notices	Reading and checking bills and invoices
Reading and following instructions, for example health and safety instructions	Reading and understanding information about a product or service
Writing out orders and invoices	Making a query or complaint
Entering information on databases	Following organisation procedures
Communicating with colleagues	Reading, writing, filing in forms and sending emails
Writing and sending emails	Understanding health and safety issues relating to a product or service

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland

Around 1 in 5 adults[1] has literacy needs (21% or around 700,000). This means they may struggle with reading and understanding everyday texts. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.



1 in 4 adults[2] struggles with using maths in everyday life (25% or around 835,000). For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating percentages.[2]



Around 1 in 6 adults[3] struggles with basic digital tasks (17% or around 640,000). For example, looking up a website, sending an email or filling out online forms.



1 Adults aged 16 to 65, **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills 2023**. Central Statistics Office (2024)
2 Adults aged 16 to 65, **OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023**. Central Statistics Office (2024)
3 Adults aged 16 to 74, **Digital Economy and Society Index 2025**. European Commission (2026)

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in your workplace

Is it possible that…

… without realising it, you may be excluding some people from fair access to opportunities and services because of unnecessary literacy barriers?

… you are losing money because of time spent dealing with misunderstandings, mistakes or complaints?

… without knowing it, you are losing current and potential customers because of unduly complicated literature and procedures?

… some of your staff, including those most talented and creative, are grappling with unnecessary obstacles that stop them fulfilling their potential and giving their best value to the organisation?

If there is even a possibility that the answer to one or more of these questions is "yes", then it is very important to investigate it. This guide will help you to do that.

Section 2 Literacy friendly approach

Why do we need to address this?

There is an increasing awareness of the need for strong literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills in today's society. NALA is concerned with, on the one hand, encouraging adults with literacy needs to take up learning opportunities while also supporting organisations to be more accessible. Being literacy aware will help make your services more accessible.

NALA helps organisations and businesses do this by becoming literacy friendly. We have produced this guide to take organisations through a range of approaches that will ensure they are not excluding either customers or staff with literacy needs.

We have suggestions for policies and practices that are inclusive and literacy friendly. These suggestions will help organisations to improve their interactions with adults with literacy needs. It will also enhance the efficiency of their operations for all customers and staff.

Why introduce a literacy friendly approach?

Most people's literacy abilities include strengths and weaknesses. For example, someone may be a confident reader but may not be as skilled at spelling or using numbers. There are also different levels of reading, writing and numeracy tasks, from the most basic to the more complex.

As well as this, we use literacy in many different ways for the many different situations we face, even in a single day. Perhaps someone gets a new job and has to improve a particular writing technique or learn how to use a new technology. Or perhaps the bank asks us to fill in a form on the spot to process a transaction.

Changes inside and outside work mean that all of us, at different stages in our lives and in response to different situations, have 'literacy' needs.

What does it mean to be a literacy friendly organisation?

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. Most of all, it understands that challenges with particular types of reading, writing and technology do not indicate a lack of ability.

In everyday terms, a literacy friendly organisation means that customers or staff with literacy needs can:

- ✔ access its services;
- ✔ communicate effectively with services, in different ways;
- ✔ apply for positions for which they have an aptitude and relevant experience;
- ✔ take part in consultations;
- ✔ be treated fairly in light of their general performance and interaction with colleagues and customers;
- ✔ understand and apply policies and procedures; and
- ✔ receive support (or effective training if a staff member) to help them carry out the specific task.

To remove unnecessary literacy related barriers, you need to first review and, if necessary, adapt your organisation's overall policies and procedures.

Your organisation should then look at its communications, website and staff training and work practices – and adapt these if needed as well. You may find that updating your policies and practices to be more literacy friendly will benefit all customers, not just those with literacy needs.

Literacy friendly quality standards

NALA has developed 10 literacy friendly standards:

Communications	
1.	Our staff use **plain English** when **speaking** with people.
2.	We use **plain English** in our **written information**.
3.	We **check** that people **understand** what we have told them.
4.	The **layout** of our office and reception is **clear**.
Staff awareness and responding sensitively	
5.	Our staff are **aware** of literacy friendly work practices.
6.	Our staff **respond sensitively** to the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of people.
Policies and procedures	
7.	We have a **literacy friendly policy**.
8.	We have **specific ways** to help people find and use important information and instructions.
9.	We **support our staff** to improve their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.
Evaluating and improving	
10.	We regularly **evaluate** and continually **improve** our literacy friendly service.

Communications

<table>
<tr><th>Standard</th><th>Delivering it in practice</th></tr>
<tr><td>1. Our staff use plain English when speaking with people.</td><td>Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it.

When you use plain English you:
• use clear language when speaking;
• give relevant information in the right order; and
• help people to understand this information quickly.

To use plain English, you first need to put yourself in your readers' shoes.

See NALA's Writing and Design Tips at nala.ie/writing-and-design-tips


</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. We use plain English in our written information.</td><td>Some top tips are:
• DON'T USE ALL CAPITALS, lower case is easier to read.
• Use line spacing of 1.5.
• Align to the left.
• For emphasis: no italics or underline - use bold.
• Use sans serif font such as Arial, not Times New Roman.
• Define acronyms - what is NALA, ETB, HSE?
• We advise to use the active voice, not the passive.

An example of passive and active voice is:
<table><tr><th>Passive voice</th><th>Active voice</th></tr><tr><td>The cheque will be sent.</td><td>We will send the cheque.</td></tr><tr><td>One to be taken twice daily.</td><td>Take one twice a day.</td></tr></table></td></tr>
</table>

Standard	Delivering it in practice
3. We **check** that people **understand** what we have told them.	When you give someone instructions, you should take a few minutes to find out if they understand them, by using teach-back. **Teach-back** is a way to assess and confirm that people understand what you have told them by asking them to repeat back the information in their own words. For example: "We have talked about your application and I want to make sure I explained it all clearly. To ensure I didn't miss anything can you tell me what you need to do next?"
4. The **layout** of our office and reception is **clear**.	It is important that your office or building is easy to get around. Have you considered the signs you use and their wording? Here are some questions to review your environment. **Navigation Checklist** ✔ **Yes** **No** **1.** Are the names of sections clearly shown? ☐ ☐ **2.** Do signs use a mixture of small and capital letters? ☐ ☐ **3.** Are signs at the same height on walls so people are not looking up and down? ☐ ☐ **4.** Are the colours used in signs the most visible (white, green and yellow)? ☐ ☐ **5.** Are words used to describe items consistent? ☐ ☐ **6.** If you have a display stand for leaflets, is this clearly marked and laid out for the person to follow easily? ☐ ☐

Staff awareness and responding sensitively

Standard	Delivering it in practice
5. Our staff are **aware** of literacy friendly work practices.	It is important that your staff are aware of and know how to respond sensitively to people with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. **Know your customers** There are many reasons why people may find it hard to understand information – these are not always due to literacy needs. Other reasons include age, disability, language, culture, emotion and stress. **'Understanding adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy' and 'Becoming literacy friendly' courses** NALA has developed one hour online courses which are available on the **Professional Development section of learnwithnala.ie**
6. Our staff **respond sensitively** to the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of people.	The Do's and Don'ts Do • Be understanding, sensitive and non-judgemental. • Remind the person that what they say is in confidence. • Where possible, make time to be supportive. • Use plain English when speaking and writing. • Give the person plenty of opportunity to ask question and use the teach-back method. Don't • Use jargon. • Make assumptions. • Suggest someone needs to 'learn to read'. • Lose patience or raise your voice.



Policies and procedures

Standard	Delivering it in practice
7. We have a **literacy friendly policy**.	Many organisations adopt a literacy friendly policy. This policy states that they are aware of the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of their customers and that they will take account of these needs. **Sample literacy friendly policy** We recognise that some adults who use our services have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. We will try to be a literacy friendly organisation by committing to: • removing unneccessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy related barriers to accessing our services; • using plain English in our written and verbal communications; • ensuring our staff have the knowledge and skills required to use a literacy friendly approach; and • regularly evaluating and continually improving our literacy friendly approach.

Standard	Delivering it in practice
8. We have **specific ways** to help people find and use important information and instructions.	When delivering a service, you want to communicate in ways that all your customers understand, particularly when it comes to important information and instructions. **Here are some tips** **Highlight the most important information** When you give a person information, you **highlight the more important points** that are on the instruction sheet. This is useful so they can find this when they go home. **Good 'signposting'** It is good to tell the person what information you need to share with them today. Try to keep to a small number of points that they need to know now. Then tell them where they can get more information if they wish. **For example:** "**You must eat with these tablets** – if not, you will feel sick. There are other side effects but this is the most important one; the others are here in the instruction leaflet if you want to look over them later."

<table>
<tr><th>Standard</th><th>Delivering it in practice</th></tr>
<tr><td>9. We support our staff to improve their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.</td><td>
Many adults would like to brush up on their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. We use a huge amount of reading, writing and number skills in the workplace.

Think of how many times we use these top skills each day.

<table>
<tr><th>Reading</th><th>Writing</th><th>Maths</th></tr>
<tr><td>Understanding health and safety information</td><td>Complete details on forms – for example accident report forms</td><td>Arrive at work on time and plan the use of time effectively</td></tr>
<tr><td>Read instructions</td><td>Fill in time sheets and work related documentation</td><td>Write down the sequence of numbers accurately</td></tr>
<tr><td>Read forms</td><td>Write text messages and emails</td><td>Make calculations using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division</td></tr>
<tr><td>Find and read information and reports</td><td>Write orders, receipts and invoices</td><td>Make necessary calculations of fractions, decimals and percentages</td></tr>
</table>

If one of your staff members would like to brush up on their skills they can:
1. Contact the NALA Freephone on 1 800 20 20 65 (Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5pm).
2. Go online to learnwithnala.ie and start learning straight away.
3. Contact their adult literacy centre in their local Education and Training Board (ETB). Classes are free and in small groups. You will find the list of centres on the NALA website here: nala.ie/find-a-centre
</td></tr>
</table>



Evaluating and improving

Standard	Delivering it in practice
10. We regularly **evaluate** and continually **improve** our literacy friendly service.	As part of using a literacy friendly approach, you should regularly evaluate how you are doing and improve areas where identified. Here are some ways you can do this: **Build monitoring into your regular meetings** Build monitoring of using a literacy friendly approach into your management meetings, general staff meetings or quality assurance procedures. At these meetings put 'literacy friendly approach' on the agenda and you can raise any issues that have come up and share how you have dealt with them. This will ensure your service is continually improving. **Have someone responsible for monitoring** It can work well to have a staff member with specific responsibility for overseeing your literacy friendly practices. This ensures that actions to improve your services happen and that other staff are aware of these improvements.

A positive impact

Many organisations have reported great benefits for their staff, for their customers and for the organisation itself because of steps they have taken to support literacy in different ways. Here are some of the benefits they report:

Benefits for Employees
✔ More likely to apply for promotion
✔ Increased morale
✔ More effective performance
✔ Better team working
✔ Fewer mistakes
✔ Easier to engage in training for new work practices

Benefits for Customers
✔ Fewer complaints or repeat calls for information
✔ More efficient service from an organisation
✔ Easier communication with the organisation

Benefits for Organisations
✔ More committed staff
✔ Staff able and willing to take on new tasks
✔ Less staff turnover
✔ Improved quality of work and job satisfaction
✔ Accurate record keeping

Making it happen

Becoming a literacy friendly organisation involves a commitment to analysing communications and websites, current policies and practices and staff training and development. From there then you can develop an action plan, implement it and review the effectiveness of actions.

Now that you have read Section 2, you may:

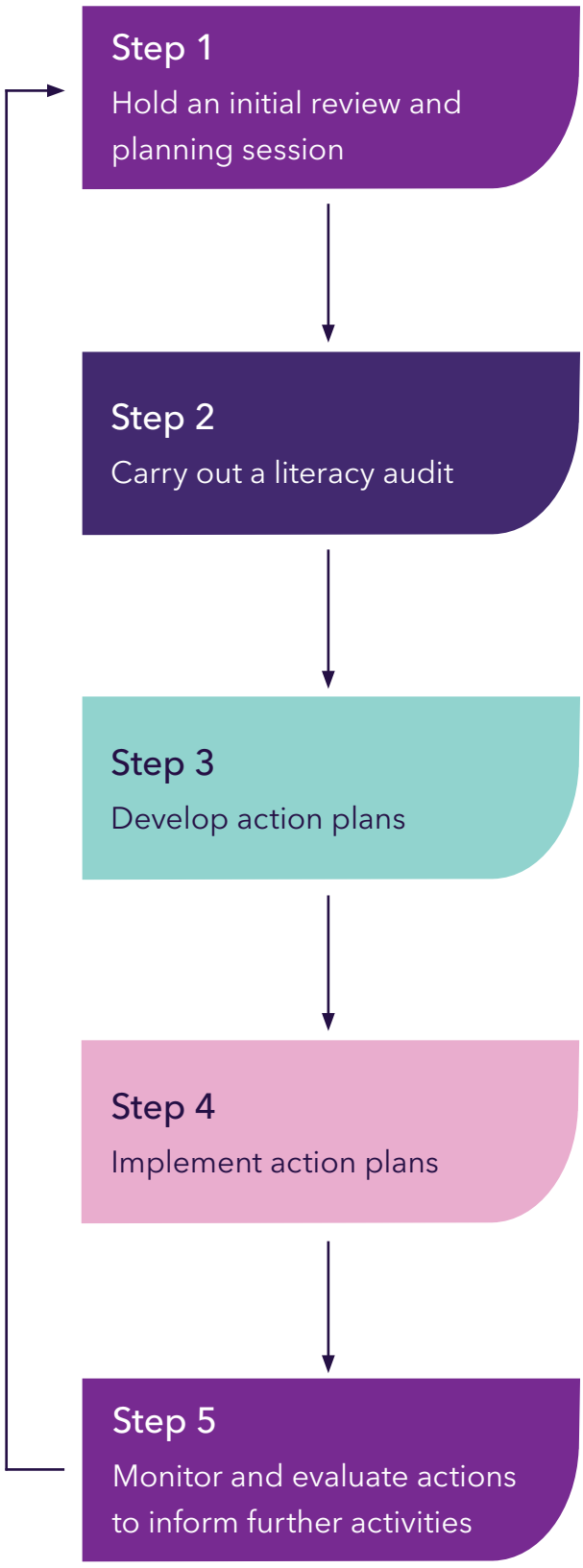
- agree that literacy could be an important part of the functions of your organisation or be willing to investigate if this is the case;
- consider that some of your customers or staff, or both, may find it difficult to handle some of the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy demands they meet; and
- be willing to take five simple steps to make your own organisation more literacy friendly.

These steps will help you to:

- find out the good practice your organisation already uses;
- identify where there may be gaps; and
- look at what actions you can take to change things.

The flow chart on the next page gives an overview of what is involved in becoming a literacy friendly organisation.

Five steps to becoming a literacy friendly organisation



You will find more detail on these five steps in the document **'Making it happen'** available at **nala.ie/making-it-happen**

Appendices

Appendix 1: Signs of possible literacy needs

For customers

If asked to work with written material or read aloud in public, some adults with literacy, numeracy or digital literacy needs may do the following:

- Make an excuse to leave
- Say they forgot their glasses
- Ask someone else to read instead
- Change the subject or create a diversion
- Say they'll take the document home and read it there
- Say their pen has run out
- Get angry or disrupt the situation if they are with other people

If asked to write or to read written material in the course of a telephone conversation, some adults may do the following:

- Use some of the coping strategies listed above
- Ask the other speaker to read out loud the section they are talking about
- Make an excuse to hang up

For staff

If they get training or promotion opportunities at work, some adults may do the following:

- Avoid taking on responsibility or promotion, even when they are capable or have leadership qualities
- When on a training course, avoid working towards qualifications, even when they have potential to progress
- Drop out of a course when qualifications are mentioned
- Fail to turn up on days when reading or writing are used

Certain mistakes made during training or work may indicate that the person has literacy, numeracy or digital literacy needs.

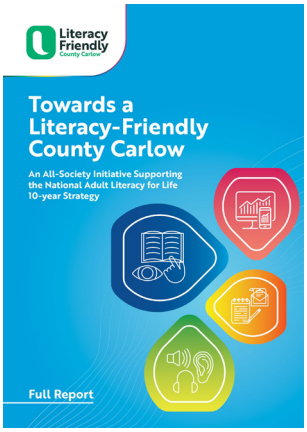
Here are some examples:

- Misunderstandings about what someone wants or needs
- Difficulty following manuals or written instructions
- Mistakes in orders
- Wrong use of equipment
- Damage to equipment
- Distracting colleagues from work
- Unfinished assignments or tasks
- Tasks taking longer than they should

You may have noticed some other examples yourself, which you can write in below.

Appendix 2: Examples of literacy friendly projects

Literacy friendly County Carlow

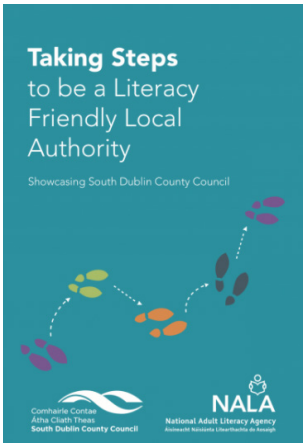


In 2019, Carlow Libraries led a unique collaborative initiative focussing on raising awareness of unmet literacy needs.

The initiative produced a report 'Towards a Literacy Friendly County Carlow' outlining the literacy needs in the county, barriers to improving literacy, the supports available and actions needed.

They also produced awareness videos. Watch the literacy awareness videos at **youtube.com/@carlowcountylibrary**.

South Dublin County Council



In 2012, South Dublin County Council was the first local authority to work with NALA to develop a literacy friendly approach. NALA did a literacy audit as the initial step in becoming a literacy friendly organisation.

The resulting report identified existing good practice in South Dublin County Council and actions to strengthen the council as a literacy friendly Local Authority.

You can read the report on the NALA website:
nala.ie/taking-steps-to-be-a-literacy-friendly-local-authority

Crystal Clear Mark



The Crystal Clear Mark was awarded to pharmacies where there was evidence of, and commitment to, providing a literacy friendly service. This means the pharmacy was taking account of and supporting the literacy and numeracy needs of its customers and communicating clearly.

The mark was developed by the Irish Pharmacy Union, Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD) and NALA and supported by Healthy Ireland. We awarded Crystal Clear Mark for three years and it was free to apply. Note: The Crystal Clear Mark is no longer in operation.

Appendix 3: Training and resources for organisations

NALA offers a range of supports to organisations. We provide resources about literacy and literacy related topics. For more information visit the website pages below or contact us by email at **info@nala.ie** or by phone at **01 412 7900**.

Plain English

NALA provides a plain English service. This includes:

- Plain English editing and training
- Plain English mark for your documents
- Plain English tips and resources

More information: **nala.ie/plain-english**

Literacy awareness and becoming literacy friendly

NALA provides supports on literacy awareness and how your organisation can become more literacy friendly. These include:

- customised training for your organisation
- webinars and **self-directed online courses**

More information: **nala.ie/literacy-awareness**

Health literacy

NALA provides supports and resources to organisations and healthcare professionals on health literacy. These include:

- customised training for your organisation
- webinars and a **Cancer Health Literacy online course**

More information: **nala.ie/health-literacy**

Adult Literacy for Life online courses

Awareness coures have also been created by SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, as part of the Adult Literacy for Life strategy. These cover plain language, literacy and health literacy.

More information: **adultliteracyforlife.ie/aware**

Appendix 4: Supports for staff who want to improve their literacy skills

If a member of staff would like to improve their reading, writing, numeracy or digital skills, they can access free and confidential support.

Freephone 1 800 20 20 65 and we can tell you about all the supports available.

NALA supports for adult learners

NALA provides a range of supports and services for adults to improve their reading, writing, maths and digital skills. These include:

- free workbooks and learning resources
- free online learning and phone tutoring services through **learnwithnala.ie**

Learn with NALA learners have the option of working towards getting a certificate from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

More information: **nala.ie/supports-for-adult-learners**

Local adult literacy services

There are more than 100 adult literacy centres across Ireland through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and community education centres. The centres provide:

- free and confidential tuition
- support one-to-one with a trained tutor or in a small group

The local Adult Literacy Organiser will discuss the learner's needs and help find a suitable tutor.

Find a local centre: **nala.ie/find-a-centre**

References

Central Statistics Office (2024). **Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2023**.

European Commission (2026). **Digital Decade Country Report 2026: Ireland**.

Notes



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. We also provide online learning courses and a tutoring service to adults. We lobby for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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Sandford Close
Ranelagh, Dublin 6
D06 YF65

Phone: 01 412 7900

Freephone: 1 800 20 20 65

Websites:
nala.ie
learnwithnala.ie

Email: info@nala.ie

Company Registration Number: 342807
CHY (Charity) Number: 8506
Registered Charity Number: 20020965

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Arna chomhchistiú ag an Aontas Eorpach
Co-Funded by the European Union

SOLAS learning works

ALL Adult Literacy for Life

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