

Submission on Courts Service Strategic Plan 2024-2027

Submitted to the Courts Service

March 2024

Contents

Introduction	3
Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy	3
Literacy needs in Ireland.....	4
Literacy and equality.....	4
Policy in Ireland	5
Digital literacy	6
Literacy and the Courts Service	7
NALA's work with the Courts Service	7
Recommendations for the Courts Service Strategic Plan 2024-2027	8
Conclusion.....	9
References	11
About NALA.....	12

Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,800 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.**



We are pleased to contribute to the development of the Courts Service Strategic Plan 2024–2027.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy 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 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, numeracy and digital skills:

- are not static and they evolve.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have 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 involves financial and legal terminology.
- are different for each person – you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing.

In this submission, the word “literacy” may refer to all these skills (for ease of reading).

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

Literacy needs in Ireland

Unmet literacy, 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, 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. Most people who have digital literacy needs have underlying literacy issues.

There are also literacy needs among many adults where English is their Second or Other Language (ESOL).

Literacy and equality

Literacy is a barometer of equality and is a way to creating a society that is better for all. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way - individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. At present, those who need to access education and training the most have the least access. 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” (Kerckhoff & Glennie 1999).

NALA believes that priority should be given to those experiencing the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). Within such a framework, the needs of those with less than a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 4 qualification should 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, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.

Policy in Ireland

The Government has published a [10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy](#) (Government of Ireland 2021). It aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential”. The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy commits to a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs. It means that a whole range of services will understand literacy barriers and work together to remove them. To realise this cross-Government approach, it is essential that the Courts Service Strategic Plan 2024-2027 is aligned with the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy.

The Government has also committed “to make Ireland one of the most digitally inclusive States in the EU” through [Digital for Good: Ireland’s Digital Inclusion Roadmap](#) (Government of Ireland 2023, p1). The Roadmap sets out that achieving this goal will require technological infrastructure, clear and accessible information, and ongoing engagement with service users. The Roadmap does **not** endorse a digital only approach:

“We recognise that digital government can never fully replace human interaction. In an inclusive digital government, technology on its own should not constitute the only channel of communication – even if we have addressed all barriers relating to access, affordability and ability.”

(p24)

NALA urges the Courts Service to maintain its commitments to:

- plain language,
- user engagement, and
- providing non-digital options in line with the Digital Inclusion Roadmap.

The [Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public](#) (Department of Public Expenditure NDP and Reform and NDA 2023) has been updated to assist public services to take a universal design approach to communications with service users. We strongly recommend that the Courts Service regularly refers to this toolkit when designing websites, forms, and any other communications.

Digital literacy

UNESCO (2018) defines digital literacy as follows:

“Digital literacy is the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies [...]. It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy.”

(p6)

Digital literacy is increasingly required to navigate day-to-day life, with ever more services provided digitally. Yet Ireland still has a high level of digital literacy needs (42% as discussed above). Even if the target set out in [Harnessing Digital: the Digital Ireland Framework](#) to “increase the share of adults with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030” (Government of Ireland 2022, p4) is reached, one in five adults in Ireland will still be without “basic” digital skills. This reality must be acknowledged when providing services to the public.

Service providers need to understand the lived experience of people with digital literacy needs. Participants in NALA’s Student Development Fund have shared their experiences of online services (NALA 2022). The report collated the following feedback from 1,282 adult students in 76 further education and community education centres.

- Some students had no difficulties online (students in 15 of 76 centres).
- Others had some difficulty, especially with navigating a website, online banking and forms, and too much content or cluttered content.
- Others found online services tough. In 17 of the 76 centres involved, students said they had limited experience of using online services. This was due to:
 - Connectivity: having no device to access the internet;
 - Capabilities: Lack of literacy skills and relying on family or friends to do the online service work for them.
- Students said that automated phone services are a challenge.

Literacy and the Courts Service

The Courts Service has committed in its Strategic Vision 2030 to be both “user centric” (Courts Service 2020, p2) and “digital first” (p7). The ten-year modernisation programme has already increased the number of services provided digitally, for example, the new Digital Jury System. The Corporate Strategic Plan 2021-2023 (Courts Service 2021) detailed further that there would be a new User Research and Service Design function, focusing on vulnerable users, and simplified procedures throughout the service.

NALA welcomes the commitments to engage with users and simplify procedures. These will help all users, particularly users with unmet literacy needs. Engaging with the courts system is stressful for anyone, and people with unmet literacy needs may experience complex language, digital systems or lack of assistance as additional barriers to accessing justice.

It is important for all organisations to be aware of literacy needs and to be literacy-friendly. This means that organisations should implement policies, practices, and systems that make it easier for people to navigate, understand, and use their information and services. For the Courts Service, this might mean:

- simplifying forms;
- providing a helpline to support people who want to use the digital systems; or
- various other practical steps based on user feedback.

NALA’s work with the Courts Service

NALA has had very constructive engagement with the Courts Service primarily through our plain English editing and training services.

Training

Since 2021, over 100 staff, including the Senior Management Team have received plain English training from NALA. NALA is currently working with the Courts Service to develop a short customised elearning course to introduce two topics: being literacy friendly and writing in plain English.

Editing

Our editing service has provided plain English editing support for parts of the Courts Service's website. We also gave feedback on forms and documents you were developing on important topics such as:

- assisted decision-making and capacity, and
- text about debt.

Some of our feedback included feedback from an adult literacy learner.

Forum involvement

It was also an honour to have been involved with the Courts Service Civil Society Forum. This allowed us to:

- keep up to date with your work to modernise the Court Service, particularly your online services,
- share our insights from a literacy and plain English perspective on the new video of the Four Courts,
- network and learn from other forum members,
- take part in the Access to Justice initiatives.

Recommendations for the Courts Service Strategic Plan 2024-2027

1. Align with the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy

Explicitly align your strategy with the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy and contact the ALL National Programme Office in SOLAS to identify opportunities for collaboration.

2. Make digital inclusion an explicit priority

Highlight digital inclusion in your strategy. Consider dropping "digital first" terminology which devalues non-digital options. Perhaps use 'digital and non-digital options'.

3. Continue to focus on vulnerable users' needs

Continue to focus on vulnerable users' needs, including adults with unmet literacy needs. Consider establishing a user forum or panel to gather and implement their feedback throughout the modernisation programme.

4. Continue to focus on clear communications

Embed the [Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public](#) throughout the organisation and conduct research to evaluate the impact of the changes you apply as a consequence.

5. Further develop the Courts Service relationship with NALA

We recommend you consider the following collaborations.

- a. Provide literacy awareness and plain English training to judges and staff, prioritising public-facing staff that have not taken training to date.
- b. Offer short refresher training to staff who have completed initial NALA plain English training.
- c. Develop tailored training for Courts Service staff on forms, web-text, and user experience.
- d. Develop a mentoring programme for Courts Service staff to help create and sustain a literacy friendly service.
- e. Take part in the [NALA Plain English Network](#) on LinkedIn and present on the modernisation and transformation projects that have been completed.
- f. Consider undertaking a literacy audit of key public facing elements of the Courts Service to identify additional areas for enhancement.
- g. Collaborate on case study research for publication and dissemination.
- h. Ensure key Court Service resources are plain English edited, particularly forms for vulnerable Court users.

Conclusion

NALA commends the Courts Service for its efforts to date in relation to literacy, and urges the Courts Service to prioritise literacy needs in the development of its Strategic Plan 2024-2027. We advocate a rights-based and universal design approach which puts the needs of the furthest behind first, and supports access to justice for all. In practical terms, this means maintaining non-digital services, making all services as literacy friendly as possible, and providing support to use digital services.

Follow on

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations with you further.

Contact person:

Aoife Crawford

Research and Policy Officer

Tel: 01 412 7919

Email: acrawford@nala.ie

References

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

Courts Service (2020). [Strategic Vision to 2030](#)

Courts Service (2021). [Corporate Strategic Plan 2021-2023](#)

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and the National Disability Authority (NDA) (2023). [Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public: A Universal Design Approach](#)

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

Government of Ireland (2022). [Harnessing Digital: the Digital Ireland Framework](#)

Government of Ireland (2023). [Digital for Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap](#)

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

NALA (2022). [NALA Student Development Fund Report 2022](#)

United Nations (UN) (2015). [Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

UNESCO (2018). [A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2](#)

About NALA

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.

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

Sandford Lodge
Sandford Close
Ranelagh, Dublin 6
D06 YF65

Websites:

nala.ie
learnwithnala.ie

Phone: 01 412 7900

Email: info@nala.ie

Freephone: 1 800 20 20 65

Registered Charity Number: 20020965

Charity Number: 8506

Company Number: 342807



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Có-mhaoinithe ag an
Aontas Eorpach
Co-funded by the
European Union

SOLAS
learning works



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