



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Electing Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who will make literacy matter

Who we are

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity in Ireland with 1,700 members.

We believe literacy is a human right.

We are committed to making sure people with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs:

- have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs; and
- can fully take part in society.

We want to ensure that we elect Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who will make adult literacy matter in Europe.

This document sets out:

- Our understanding of literacy
- The literacy issues in Europe
- What we want the MEPs to do
- Where you can get further information

Our understanding of literacy

In the past, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write. These skills were thought to be unchanging no matter when and why they were used. Now, literacy has a wider meaning. It includes literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Literacy involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, build relationships, understand information and make informed choices. Literacy enables us to:

- reach our full potential;
- be active and critical participants in our families, work and society;
- help address poverty and social exclusion; and
- take part in, and make sense of, the world.

Literacy is always changing. It must be constantly developed throughout our lives and is different for each person and setting. For example, you may be good at writing but not reading, or good at maths but not computers. Also, the literacy you need in a bank is different to the literacy you need to visit a doctor.

We are waiting for the results of the latest international adult literacy survey¹. From previous research, we know adult literacy rates for Europe and Ireland.

Europe

- The average adult literacy scores were lower in the southern European Union (EU) member states than elsewhere in the EU, while they were highest in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden ([Eurostat 2022](#)).
- Just 34% of people in the EU with no or low formal education have at least basic digital skills; compared with 80% of people who have a high level of formal education ([Eurostat 2023](#)).

¹ The Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) started in September 2022 and results are expected at the end of 2024 or early in 2025.

Ireland

- One in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggles with reading and understanding everyday text, and one in four adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life - for example, working out a bill or calculating percentages ([Central Statistics Office 2013](#)).
- About 2 in 5 (38%) adults struggle with basic digital tasks - for example, looking up a website or sending an email ([Cedefop 2020](#)). Most people who have digital literacy needs also have other literacy needs.

The literacy issues in Europe

1. Upskilling

The world is changing and we all need to learn new skills throughout our lives. Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are the foundations on which other skills are built. For adults who have lower levels of education, skills and opportunities they run a greater risk of being further excluded from society and work.

As outlined in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Skills Strategy Ireland ([OECD 2023](#)), “developing relevant skills and using them effectively is crucial ... to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world” (p3).

2. Lifelong learning

The European Pillar of Social Rights says that we all have a right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. In the Pillar’s action plan ([European Commission 2021](#)), there is a target that 60% of adults should participate in training every year. This means that we need funding for good quality, accessible learning opportunities, especially for those who require the foundations of literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy.

The OECD Skills Strategy Ireland ([OECD 2023](#)) recognised the need to “provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning” (p24).

3. Plain language

Communicating in plain language (plain English or other European languages) benefits everyone, including people with literacy needs. It is a key commitment of the EU. However, its use of plain language is inconsistent. Plain language should be used in all public-facing information in vital areas and services to support inclusion.

Examples of these vital areas include:

- financial services;
- medicine labels; and
- information about elections.

4. Ensuring inclusion in an increasingly digital world

The EU is driving the digitalisation of everyday services through policies such as the 2030 Digital Decade and the Digital Euro. This has many benefits, but it is important that we do not leave adults with digital skills needs behind. There should always be a non-digital way to, for example, make a payment or access a public service.

What we want MEPs to do

On Friday 7 June 2024, we vote for our MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) for the next five years.

We want to elect MEPs who will fight for adult literacy on our behalf at a European level.

We want to elect MEPs who will:

- **Ensure that people with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs are taken into account when developing and delivering EU actions** – for example, the [EU Accessibility Act 2025](#). This Act will mean that businesses must make certain products and services accessible to people with disabilities.
- **Address the uneven implementation of the [Upskilling Pathways programme](#) across member states**. This programme provides upskilling opportunities to adults with lower levels of education.

- **Ensure that member states prioritise the furthest behind in education and social inclusion programmes funded by the European Social Fund.** For example, in Ireland the [European Social Fund](#) has supported campaigning to encourage adults to “take the first step” back into education.
- **Advocate for our right to lifelong learning opportunities.** Resources will be needed to make this right a reality.
- **Promote plain language.** We want to elect MEPs who will use plain language and who will support the consistent use of plain language in the Commission’s communications.

Where you can get further information

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