

Submission to consultation on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's Statement of Strategy 2025- 2028

Submitted to the Department of Further and
Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
Science

May 2025



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Summary of recommendations

1. Keep social inclusion at the heart of the Department's agenda
2. Prioritise basic skills
3. Respond to Ireland's literacy context
4. Analyse available literacy data
5. Monitor literacy needs and provision on an ongoing basis
6. Support and resource the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy
7. Implement commitments in the Programme for Government
 - a. Digital
 - b. Inclusion
 - c. Employment
8. Be a literacy friendly department

Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity and membership-based organisation. We receive annual funding from SOLAS to support the Further Education and Training (FET) strategy (SOLAS 2020) and the Adult Literacy for Life strategy (SOLAS 2021).

We believe that 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. Our mission is to:

- campaign for literacy as human right;
- be leaders and champion best literacy practice; and
- support organisations in their efforts to be literacy friendly.

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) Statement of Strategy 2025-2028.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and to make informed choices in all areas of everyday life.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable people to reach their full potential, to be active and critical participants in society and to help address poverty and social exclusion.



In this document, we use the word “literacy” to refer to all of these skills.

Literacy and equality

Literacy needs arise because of educational and wider structural inequalities. A person with literacy needs is more likely to have:

- parents with low educational attainment;
- poor health; and
- low income.

They are also more likely to be unemployed or outside the labour force (Central Statistics Office, CSO, 2024).

For equality, priority should be given to those who have experienced the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, UN, 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.



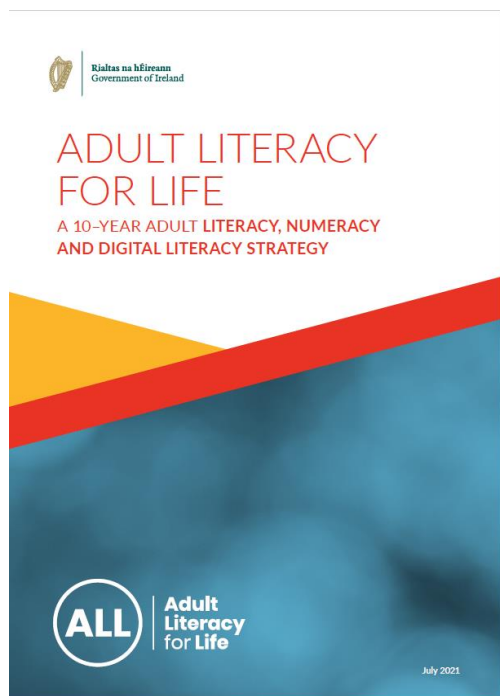
Adult literacy and further education strategies

As DFHERIS will be aware, the Government published a **10-year Adult Literacy for Life strategy** in 2021. It aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential” (SOLAS 2021, p4).

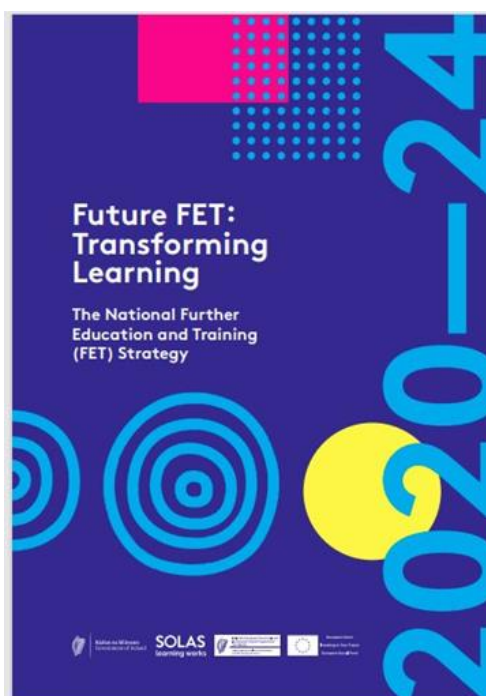
This strategy commits to a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs. It means that a whole range of sectors will understand literacy barriers and work together to remove them.

Literacy is also central to the **National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024** (SOLAS 2020). We expect that this strategy’s emphasis on diverse and inclusive educational pathways will continue in the next FET strategy, which is currently being developed.

DFHERIS has a crucial role to play as the parent department of these strategies.



www.adultliteracyforlife.ie



www.solas.ie

Adult literacy needs in Ireland

Latest figures

Findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills 2023, released on 10 December 2024 (CSO 2024), show the following:

- **1 in 5** adults in Ireland (21%, around 700,000 people) do not have basic proficiency in **literacy**. This means that 1 in 5 adults can, **at best**, understand short texts and organised lists, if information is clearly indicated.

Programme and Learning Support Systems (PLSS) forms, for example, can be a challenge for this group.

- **1 in 4** adults¹ in Ireland (25%, around 835,000 people) do not have basic proficiency in **numeracy**². This means that 1 in 4 adults can, **at best**, do basic calculations but may struggle with tasks needing multiple steps.

The **Irish Times coverage of the survey results** (O'Brien, 2024) highlighted that numeracy can affect understanding of numbers used in politics, and the OECD (2024) found that low numeracy and low “political efficacy” (belief that you have a say in government) are linked in Ireland.

Other findings on digital skills in 2023, from the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) (European Commission 2024), show that

- **More than 1 in 4** adults³ in Ireland (27%, just over a million people) do not have basic **digital** skills. This means that more than 1 in 4 adults have not done at least one activity in each of five digital competence areas⁴. Activities include

¹ Aged 16-65

² This means they score at or below Level 1 on a five-level scale

³ Aged 16-74

⁴ Information and data literacy; Communication and collaboration; Digital content creation; Problem-solving; and Safety skills

sending an email, fact-checking or changing software settings.

These adults may struggle to find information on a website, for example.

Change over time

The level of numeracy need in Ireland has stayed the same (at 25%), and the level of literacy need has gone up (from 18% to 21%), since the last OECD Survey of Adult Skills in 2012 (CSO 2013).

The level of digital literacy need is falling, but still the highest of the three (at 27%), and the digital demands of everyday life and work are increasing.

There is evidence of a “sticky floor” in literacy and numeracy in Ireland. While more and more people are attending third level education, we don’t see the proportion of people with literacy or numeracy needs falling.

On the next page, Figure 1 shows the percentage of 15-year old students in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 in the last three rounds of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Educational Research Centre, ERC, 2023). Figure 2 shows the percentage of adults in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 in the last two rounds of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills. It also includes comparable results from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1994, which covered literacy only, not numeracy (CSO 2013).

In both graphs, a line going down would show improvement over time. In fact, both graphs show that the percentage of young people and adults with needs in these areas is either staying roughly the same, or getting worse.

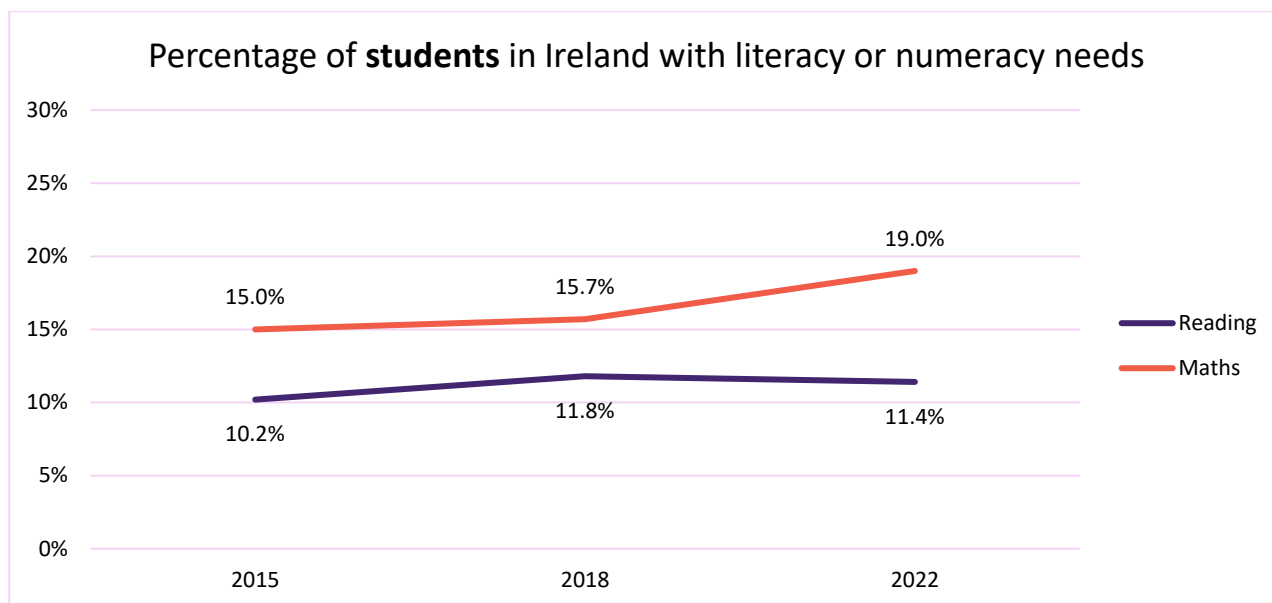


Figure 1: Percentage of 15-year-old students in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 in PISA (2015-2022) (source: ERC 2023).

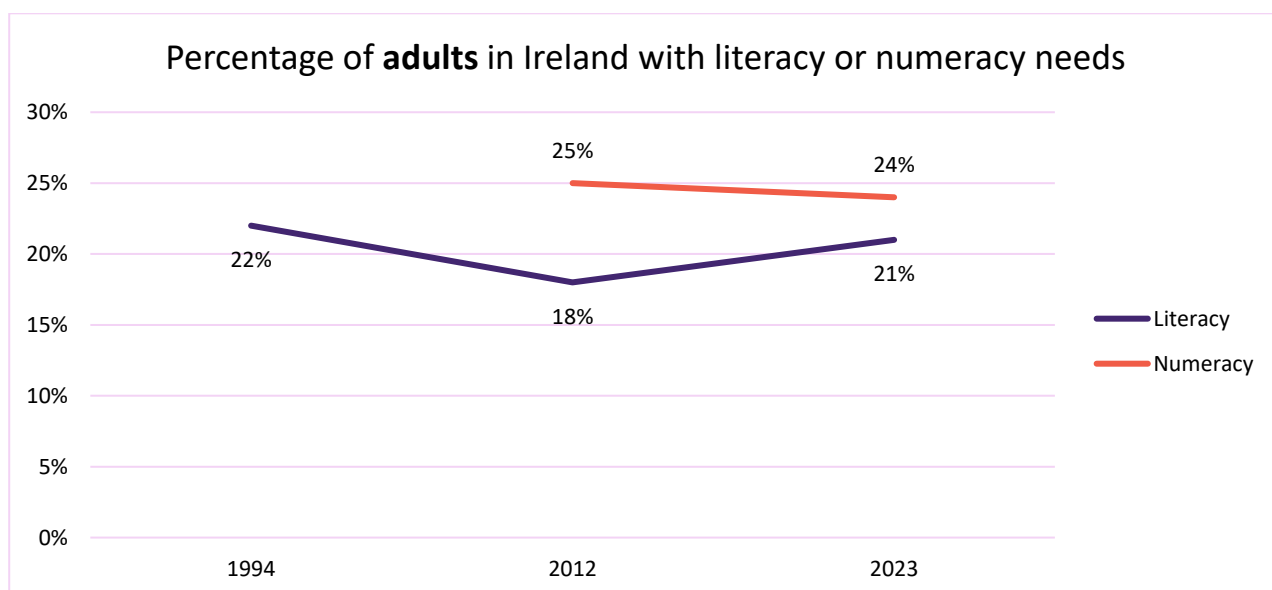


Figure 2: Percentage of adults (aged 16-65) in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (2012 and 2023) and IALS (1994) (sources: CSO 2013 and CSO 2024)

Our recommendations

This part of our submission presents practical recommendations for your Department to consider and include in your Statement of Strategy 2025-2028.

We are making these recommendations based on what we know from research evidence and our 45 years as literacy experts.

1. Keep social inclusion at the heart of the Department's agenda

Previous DFHERIS statements of strategy have highlighted the department's social remit, inclusion agenda and power to enhance social cohesion (DFHERIS 2024, p4). "Support Inclusion" is a strategic goal of the DFHERIS Statement of Strategy 2024-2026 (DFHERIS 2024, p10). We strongly recommend that the Department's next Statement of Strategy keeps this focus on social inclusion.

2. Prioritise basic skills

Skill needs must be viewed as a continuum, and due attention needs to be given to those with the lowest levels of skills if we want them to progress and acquire more advanced skills. The current context of full employment in Ireland requires us to support those with low skills currently in employment (or apprenticeships) along with those who are most distant from the labour market. As the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (discussed on page 9 of this document) shows, we currently have hundreds of thousands of adults at the beginning of the skills pipeline. They have untapped potential to fill skills gaps in our economy.

We recommend that the next DFHERIS Statement of Strategy should specify basic skills as an explicit priority, for both social and economic reasons.

3. Respond to Ireland's literacy context

The DFHERIS Statement of Strategy 2024-2026 (DFHERIS 2024) rightly highlights the context in which the Department is operating. An important context for the next strategy is the level of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland.

We have outlined some key statistics on pages 9 to 11 of this document. As the department responsible for further education, DFHERIS has a crucial role to play in addressing these needs. A good first step would be to acknowledge Ireland's literacy context in the next DFHERIS Statement of Strategy, and commit to responding to the needs identified in the latest evidence.

4. Analyse available literacy data

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills is an invaluable source of information on skills needs in Ireland. It is run by the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The data collected by the CSO for the 2023 survey (PIAAC Cycle 2, Round 1) can tell us a huge amount about who has needs, the nature of their needs and how they might be helped.

However, the data must be analysed to draw out these findings. The cost to analyse the data through further research would be minimal in comparison with the cost of running the survey, and would greatly increase the value of the exercise.

We recommend that DFHERIS funds or commissions research into Ireland's PIAAC Cycle 2, Round 1 data to understand the basic skills needs that the department will be addressing through the lifetime of your next strategy. We recommend that this is done soon, while the data is current.

5. Monitor literacy needs and provision on an ongoing basis

The main survey conducted under PIAAC (Round 1) is only run once every ten years. This is not regular enough to assess the impact of policy interventions. For this reason, many countries take part in Round 2 and/or Round 3 of PIAAC between the main surveys. For PIAAC Cycle 2, we understand that these are expected to be in 2026 and 2029. We recommend that DFHERIS commissions the CSO to take part in PIAAC Cycle 2 Round 2 as part of the department's 2025-2028 Statement of Strategy, and that this project is started as soon as possible. This will benefit the department by providing up to date information on literacy needs, to inform policy decisions.

There are other sources of data on adult literacy in Ireland, but they are not always joined up or readily available. DFHERIS should be able to track learner journeys between school, further education and higher education. We recommend that the department leads a project to collate relevant datasets and identify gaps in information, including in adult literacy. For example, we currently can't say definitively how many adults are engaging in literacy learning in Ireland, and if this figure has risen or fallen due to various changes in literacy policy and provision. The next DFHERIS Statement of Strategy will need good data to inform delivery and accountability.

6. Support and resource the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy

The last DFHERIS Statement of Strategy commits to implementing the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (DFHERIS 2024, p16). This is a welcome commitment which should be kept in the next Statement of Strategy. Adult Literacy for Life needs the continued support of DFHERIS throughout the ten years of the strategy, to reach its goals.

The targets in Table 1 on the next page are set out in the Adult Literacy for Life strategy (SOLAS 2021). As the strategy is only 3 years in operation, the deadline to reach these targets has not passed, but the latest figures show that Ireland will not inevitably make progress towards them. Targeted action, renewed commitment and increased investment are required, to build on the momentum and collaboration that has already been achieved under the strategy.

Measure	Data source	Target (reduce to...)	Deadline	Latest figures
% of adults at or below Level 1 in literacy	OECD Survey of Adult Skills (also known as PIAAC)	7%	End 2031	21%
% of adults at or below Level 1 in numeracy		12%		25%
% of adults without basic digital skills	Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)	20%		27%

Table 1: Adult Literacy for Life Strategy targets and latest figures

7. Implement commitments in the Programme for Government⁵

The new Programme for Government (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) contains many commitments which relate to DFHERIS. Here we highlight examples of commitments which we would like to see prioritised in the next DFHERIS Statement of Strategy, grouped by theme. We also make recommendations for how some of these could be implemented.

a. Digital

This government will:

- “publish and implement a new National Digital Strategy” (p13)
- “implement an eInclusion Strategy to ensure no one is left behind by the move to a

⁵ All page references in this section refer to the Programme for Government (Department of the Taoiseach 2025).

digital society” (p34)

- “invest in digital skills at all levels, from basic digital literacy for all citizens [...]” (p35)

To support the improvement of digital skills at all levels, we recommend the adoption and adaptation of the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp) (European Commission 2016) throughout the Irish education system. DigComp is a readymade framework based on best available evidence, which can respond to changing context. It applies to all levels of competence, so it would enable a consistent approach across the various sectors, institutions and Government departments involved in digital skills education in Ireland. DigComp has already been used in the further education context in Ireland through An Cosán’s digital education work (see this presentation on “**Utilising DigComp 2.1 for Digital Inclusion in Communities**”) and QQI Award Standards for the Digital Core Competence (QQI 2023).

b. Inclusion

This government will:

- “review the financial supports available to adult learners and promote access to education and lifelong learning.” (p72)
- “support third level colleges and further and higher education institutions to support students with a disability, and to provide specific courses for those with an intellectual disability.” (p93)
- “implement the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy” and “take steps to advance financial literacy and financial services inclusion for Irish Traveller and Roma communities.” (p99)
- “invest in integration programmes that support language learning” and “continue to invest in English language classes for people seeking international protection.” (p125)

Enrolments in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) have more than quadrupled since 2021⁶. Adult literacy teams have taken responsibility for ESOL in ETBs, and their work has been invaluable in responding to these demands. However,

⁶ 9,095 in 2021 (SOLAS 2022) to 40,277 in 2023 (SOLAS 2024b)

the long-term arrangements for ESOL provision are only beginning to be strategically considered.

We recommend that DFHERIS commits to developing an ESOL strategy which will cover ESOL, and ESOL literacy (where a person has literacy needs in their first language). The strategy should look at how the intensity of language provision can be increased and how it should be funded in a way which does not detract from investment in core adult literacy.

c. Employment

This government will...

- “ensure citizens with disabilities can access employment on an equal basis to others by focussing on building skills, capacity and independence, and develop bridges from special schools into employment.” (p17)
- “publish a new Employment Strategy focused on intensive engagement and supports to help those most distant from the labour market into the workforce.” (p102)
- “implement an employment strategy for former offenders and support increased access to education and training workshops through the Prison Education Taskforce.” (p119)

As noted above (under Recommendation 2, Prioritise Basic Skills), many people with literacy needs are currently employed. This group is also more likely to be unemployed or on lower wages (CSO 2024), so they are over-represented among “those most distant from the labour market”.

We recommend that DFHERIS works with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Social Protection to make sure that education and training provided as part of government employment strategy serves people with literacy needs, both inside and outside the workplace.

8. Be a literacy friendly department

As well as guiding the provision of literacy education, DFHERIS can also support adults with literacy needs in your day-to-day operations. Being a literacy friendly department means making it as easy as possible for staff and service users to get the information they need, to use their services and to participate fully.

The resources on the next page can help your department to be more literacy friendly.

Communications

- NALA's **plain English resources** including our **Writing and Design Tips** (NALA 2024)
- NALA's **plain English editing and training services**
- the **Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public** designed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and the National Disability Authority (NDA) (2023)

Literacy awareness

- NALA's range of **Literacy Awareness Training** options, including webinars and professional development courses
- NALA's practical guide to being a literacy friendly organisation, **Making it Happen** (NALA 2023)
- the short online course from the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office, "**Let's Talk About Literacy**"

We also recommend that you give due attention to the availability and quality of in-person and telephone services, while working to meet digitalisation targets. It is important to bear in mind that 27% of adults in Ireland do not have basic digital skills (European Commission 2024).

Implementing our recommendations for literacy friendly services can help DFHERIS to meet your obligations under the European Accessibility Act 2025 (Government of Ireland 2023) and the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty (Government of Ireland 2014).

Conclusion

In this submission, we make a number of recommendations which together are intended to assist DFHERIS in developing a Statement of Strategy which takes account of adult literacy needs and the department's crucial role in addressing those needs.

Contact

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations further.

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List of acronyms

CSO	Central Statistics Office
DESI	Digital Economy and Society Index
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FET	Further Education and Training
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NDA	National Disability Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLSS	Programme and Learning Support Systems
UN	United Nations

References

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NALA (2024). **Writing and Design Tips: How to Write and Design your Documents and Materials so they are Easier to Read, Understand and Use.**

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About NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We support adults with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access learning opportunities that meet their needs and to take part fully in society. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice. We also provide support through our online learning courses, tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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