

Submission to consultation on the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's Statement of Strategy 2025-2027

Submitted to the Department of Children,
Disability and Equality

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National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Summary of recommendations

1. Implement the National Strategy for Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy
2. Include family literacy in your supports to parents
3. Promote access to literacy learning for people with disabilities
4. Use literacy data in your evidence base for policymaking
5. Be literacy friendly in your day to day work

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 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 a 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 Children, Disability and Equality's (DCDE) 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.

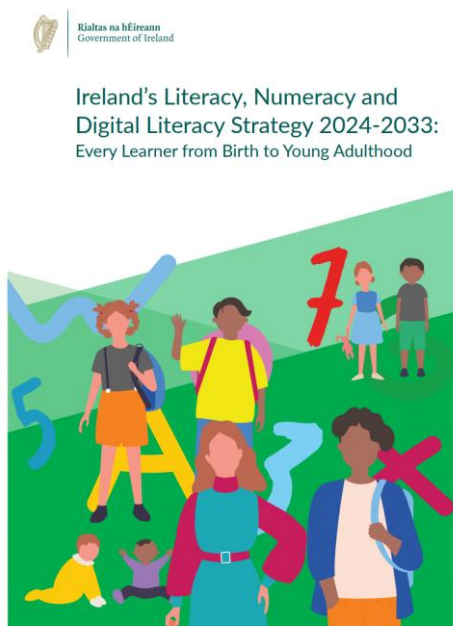
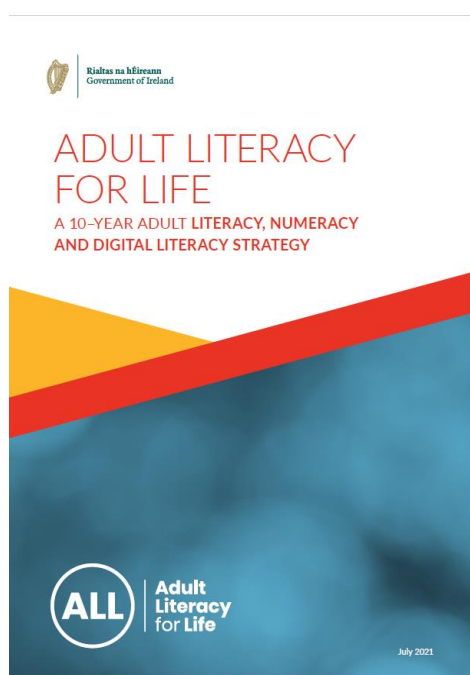


Literacy strategies

The Government published the **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. This includes DCDE along with other government departments.

DCDE has a particular role as co-owner of the **new 10-year literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy for children and young people** published in 2024. The Ministers’ foreword states that “it is vital to maintain investment and ambition in this area” (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, DCEDIY, and Department of Education 2024, p3). The first pillar of the strategy is “Enabling parents and communities to support learners’ literacy, numeracy and digital literacy” (p38). This acknowledges the importance of adults in the family and community for children’s literacy development.

Together, these two strategies have the potential to transform Ireland’s literacy landscape, if fully implemented.



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.

Reading long information booklets on rights and entitlements, 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.

An employer with numeracy needs may need support to meet their obligations to report on the gender pay gap, for example.

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

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

These adults may struggle to find reliable information online, for example. Initiatives like **Supporting Parents** are helpful for these adults but could be even more literacy friendly and accessible.

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.

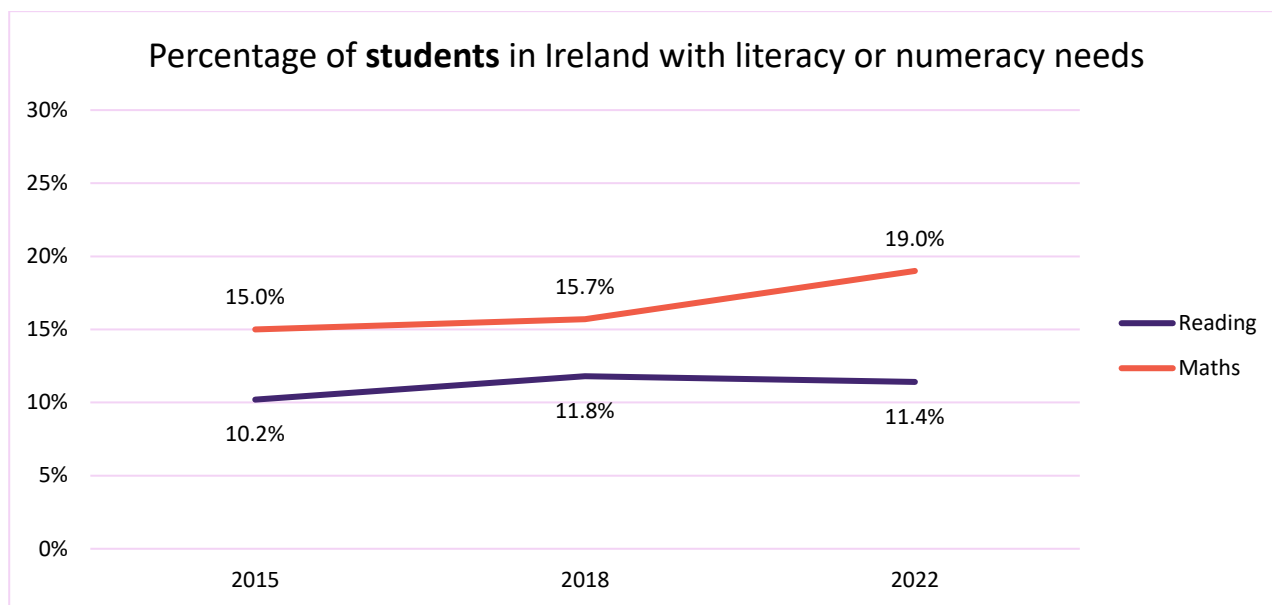


Figure 1: Percentage of 15-year-old students in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 in PISA (2015-2022) (source: ERC 2023).

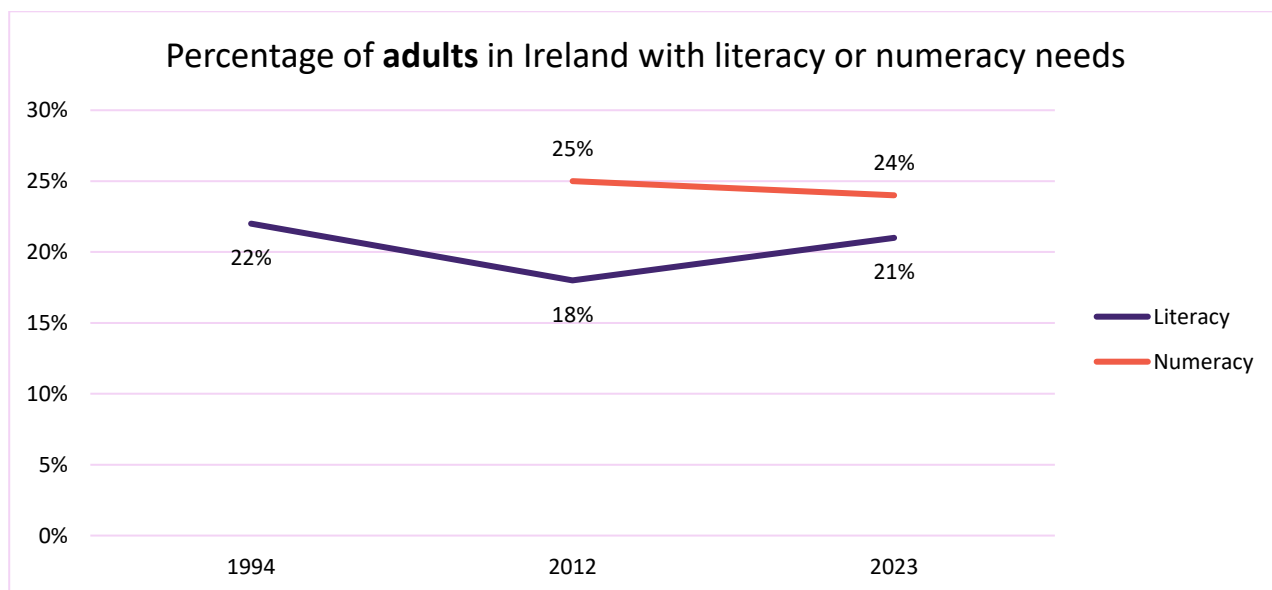


Figure 2: Percentage of adults (aged 16-65) in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (2012 and 2023) and IALS (1994) (sources: CSO 2013 and CSO 2024)

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.

We believe that DCDE can bring this important equality perspective to literacy policy making and implementation.



Family literacy

As outlined in the previous section on literacy and equality, educational disadvantage is often intergenerational.

A family literacy thematic working group has been established under the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy to focus on this key issue. The Strategy describes functional literacy in family life as having “the confidence and ability to read a bedtime story, help with maths, English or Irish homework, or even fill out a form required to register or enrol in school.” (SOLAS 2021, p19).

Several research projects by NALA (e.g. NALA 2004, NALA 2011, NALA 2016, NALA 2020a, NALA 2020b) have shown the benefits of family literacy for both parents⁵ and children. We find that many adults are motivated to return to education by wanting to help with their children’s education - “I would do a course for my children before I would do one for myself” (NALA 2020b, p10).

NALA (2016) has found that family literacy programmes can address educational disadvantage, but that children from all backgrounds benefit. This report also found that family literacy programmes have long-term impact (p4).

Overall, our research into family literacy reinforces the importance of family literacy in creating a more equal society. If parents are empowered to improve their literacy skills as adults, they can pass on those skills to their children and promote a culture of learning in the family.

⁵ In this submission, the word “parent” includes guardians and caregivers with a major role in children’s education

Literacy and disability

NALA is not a representative body for people with disabilities and we do not claim to speak on behalf of people with disabilities.

However, some adults' literacy needs are related to disability, and people with disabilities are highly represented among adult literacy learners. In a recent survey of learners on our eLearning platform, Learn with NALA, 46% of respondents said they have a disability (NALA 2024a). Across Irish further education, 6.7% of learners have a disability. This rises to 11.3% among adult literacy learners⁶.

DCDE will be aware that disability is associated with lower educational attainment, and that significant barriers remain in our education system for children with special educational needs. It may be that a person was not adequately supported with a learning difficulty, or they missed a lot of time at school, or they have cognitive difficulties. Whatever the precise circumstances for each individual, these early disadvantages often have effects into adulthood.

Literacy, like disability, is an equality issue. Shared aims of the disability and literacy movements include:

- Accessible services
- Plain language communications
- Inclusive education
- Lifelong learning opportunities
- Employment supports

⁶ Figures calculated from SOLAS 2024a (all learners) and SOLAS 2024b (learners with disability). 14,825 learners across FET with a disability was divided by the 218,775 learners across FET. 3,545 learners with a disability in adult literacy tuition was divided by the 31,195 learners in adult literacy groups.

Our recommendations

This part of our submission presents practical recommendations for your Department to consider and include in your Statement of Strategy 2025-2027.

We are making these recommendations based on what we know from research evidence and our 45 years as literacy experts. They should be considered in the context of the guiding principles and information set out above.

1. Implement the National Strategy for Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy

Your department has a unique opportunity to improve the literacy situation in Ireland, as co-owner of the National Strategy for Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood. In particular, DCDE can bring a human rights and equality focus to its implementation.

We welcome the strategy and in particular the first pillar on family and community literacy. As mentioned in the Family Literacy section above, a family literacy thematic working group has been established under the strategy. We look forward to working with DCDE on this group to improve family literacy supports in Ireland.

We have some concern that the strategy implementation has been slow to get off the ground. The latest literacy and numeracy statistics from the OECD show that this is an urgent matter which will not get better without increased intervention. We therefore recommend that you make this strategy a priority for implementation across the lifetime of your next statement of strategy.

2. Include family literacy in your supports for parents

It is clear that supporting parents is a key priority for DCDE. We recommend that family literacy should be included in these supports.

To give one simple example of what we mean by this - the [gov.ie webpage on Early Learning and Childcare](#) could include a link to adult literacy supports. Other practical actions can be identified through the Family Literacy Thematic Working Group.

NALA previously managed www.helpmykidlearn.ie, a website providing family literacy resources and ideas which we had co-developed with the Department of Education. Unfortunately we had to deactivate this website earlier in 2025 due to lack of resourcing from the sponsoring departments. The future of Help My Kid Learn, or another initiative to replace it, should be a priority issue under the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033.

3. Promote access to literacy learning for people with disabilities

Adult literacy services are under the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and provision for children with special educational needs is under the remit of the Department of Education. However, DCDE has particular expertise on disability that should inform the provision of literacy learning opportunities across the life course.

We understand from the Programme for Government (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) that under this government there will be a focus on employment activation for those who are furthest from the labour market, including people with disabilities. Taking a “furthest behind first” approach to this means providing high quality learning opportunities for adults who want to improve their basic skills (literacy, numeracy and digital literacy). It also means providing good learner supports in adult and further education settings, such as disability services and accommodations.

The Programme for Government also contains commitments to students with special educational needs, and equal access to education and training in general. The Minister of State for Disability can work across departments to ensure that these commitments are met, with literacy as a key priority.

4. Use literacy data in your evidence base for policymaking

The Department's previous Statement of Strategy rightly sets a goal to have evidence-informed policymaking (DCEDIY 2023, p12). An important piece of evidence for your next strategy is the level of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland, which we have set out in the section above on Adult Literacy Needs in Ireland (p8-10 of this document).

We recommend that you bear this evidence in mind throughout your work, taking a literacy proofing approach to policymaking. We are always happy to advise on literacy matters.

5. Be literacy friendly in your day to day work

As well as bringing literacy into your policymaking, and implementing the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033, DCDE 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 this page and 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 2024b)
- 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 DCDE 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 and contact

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

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations further.

Aoife Crawford
Research and Policy Officer
Tel: 01 412 7919
Email: acrawford@nala.ie

List of acronyms

CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DESI	Digital Economy and Society Index
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
ERC	Educational Research Centre
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 the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UN	United Nations

References

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DCEDIY and Department of Education (2024). **Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood.**

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

Department of the Taoiseach (2025). **Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future.**

Educational Resource Centre (ERC) (2023). **Education in a Dynamic World: The Performance of Students in Ireland in PISA 2022.**

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National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2004). **Working Together: Approaches to Family Literacy**

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2011). **Family Literacy in Action: an Overview of Family Learning Programmes**

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2016). **Impact and Implementation of Family Literacy Programmes: Review and Recommendations**

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2020a). **Enabling Intergenerational Learning: Background Report on Family Literacy Practices in Irish Education and Training Boards (ETBs)**

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2020b). **Family Literacy Practice in ETBs: Guidelines, Case Studies and Recommendations**

NALA (2023). **Making it Happen: Five Steps to Becoming a Literacy Friendly Organisation.**

NALA (2024a). **Learning with NALA: Profile and Experience of Learn with NALA Users, March 2020 – November 2022.**

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

SOLAS (2020). **Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy.**

SOLAS (2021). **Adult Literacy For Life: A 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.**

SOLAS (2024a). **This is FET: Facts and Figures 2023.**

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

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.

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

Sandford Lodge

Sandford Close

Ranelagh, Dublin 6

D06 YF65

Websites:

nala.ie

learnwithnala.ie

Freephone: 1 800 20 20 65

Email: info@nala.ie

Registered Charity Number: 20020965

Charity Number: 8506

Company Number: 342807



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