

# **Submission to consultation on a successor strategy to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025**

Submitted to the Department of Social  
Protection

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National Adult Literacy Agency  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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## Summary of recommendations

We are recommending that the successor strategy to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 should:

1. Mention current literacy strategies
2. Report on outcomes and targets
3. Support adult learners
4. Target disadvantaged groups
5. Bring Departments together for family literacy
6. Advance literacy friendly public services

## 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 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 a successor strategy to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (Department of Social Protection, DSP 2020).

## 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 (CSO 2024).

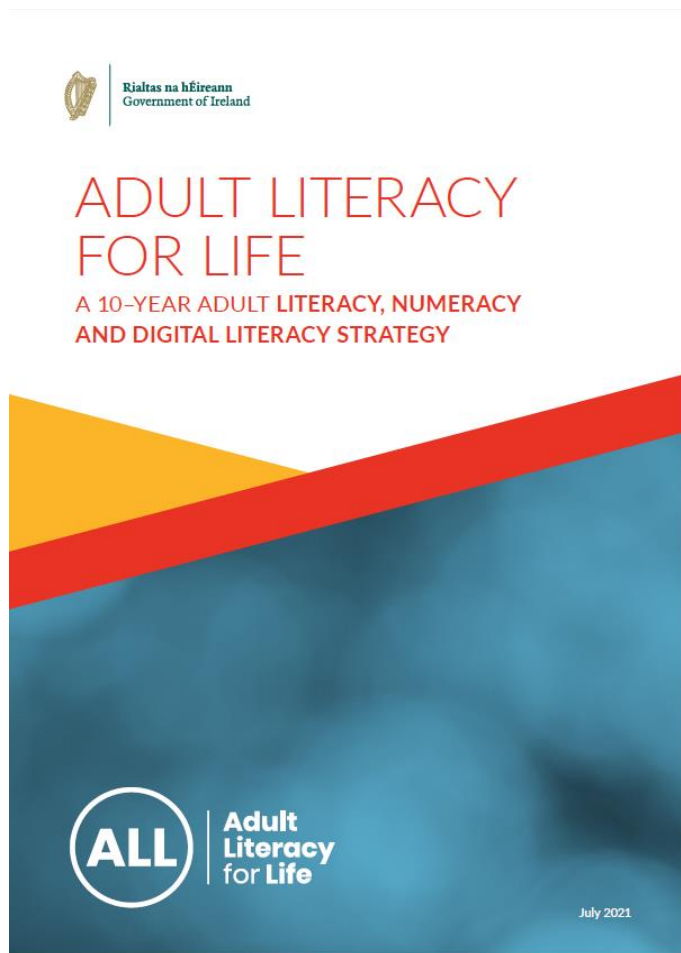
For equality, priority should be given to those who have experienced the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.



## Adult Literacy for Life strategy

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. This includes the DSP, and all government bodies working to enhance social inclusion in Ireland.



[www.adultliteracyforlife.ie](http://www.adultliteracyforlife.ie)



## Adult literacy needs in Ireland today

Findings from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023, released on 10 December 2024 (CSO 2024), show the following:

- **1 in 4** adults<sup>1</sup> in Ireland (25%, around 835,000 people) do not have basic proficiency in **numeracy**<sup>2</sup>. This means that 1 in 4 adults can, **at best**, do basic calculations but may struggle with tasks needing multiple steps.
- **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, when information is clearly indicated.

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

- **More than 1 in 4** adults<sup>3</sup> 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 areas<sup>4</sup>. For example, sent an email, fact-checked something or changed software settings.

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<sup>1</sup> Aged 16-65

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

<sup>3</sup> Aged 16-74

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

# Adult literacy and social inclusion in Ireland today

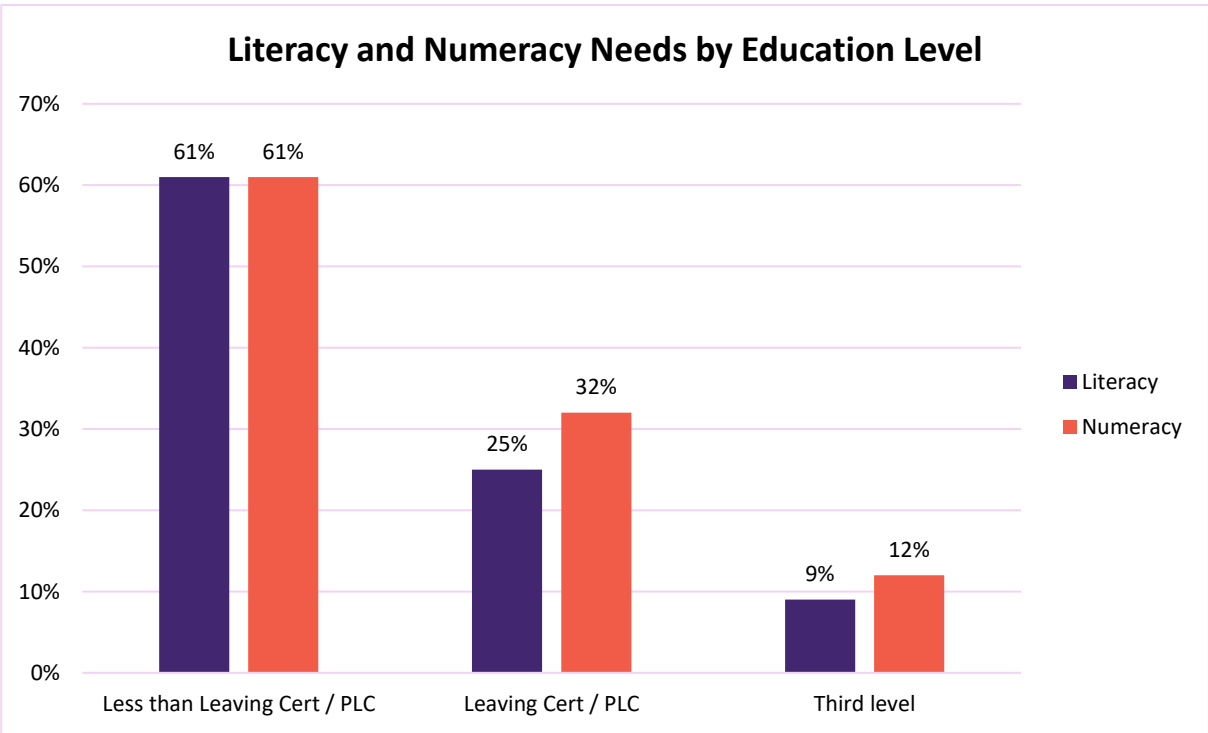
Literacy needs are associated with many aspects of social exclusion.

All statistics in this section are from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (CSO 2024).

## Education

Figure 1 shows that adults with less than upper secondary education (a Leaving Certificate or a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) qualification) are much more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs.

This means that early school leaving is a major risk factor for literacy and numeracy needs.

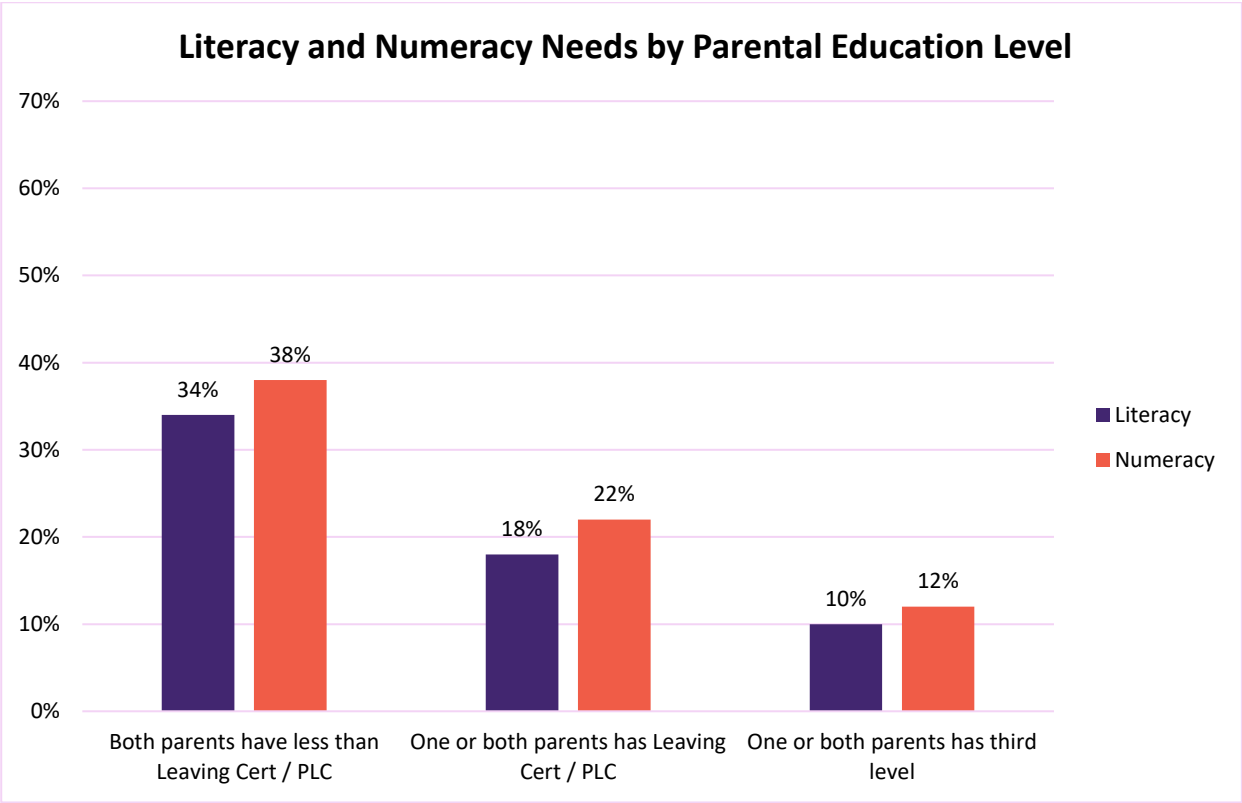


**Figure 1:** Percentage of Adults with Literacy or Numeracy Needs by Level of Highest Educational Attainment to Date

## Parental education

Figure 2 shows that adults whose parents didn't finish upper secondary education are more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs.

This means that some children are at a disadvantage when it comes to gaining literacy and numeracy skills, most likely because their parents are less able to support their learning.

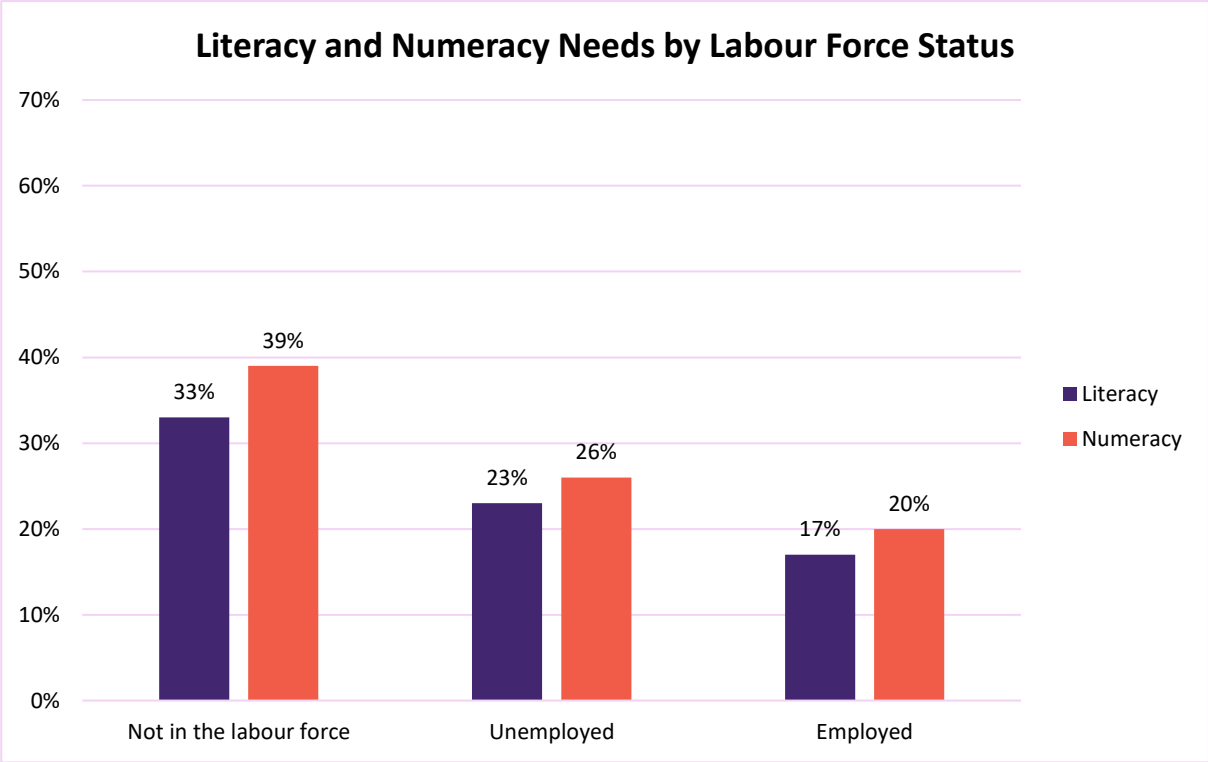


**Figure 2:** Percentage of Adults with Literacy or Numeracy Needs by their Parents' Level of Highest Educational Attainment to Date

## Labour force status

Figure 3 shows that adults who are unemployed, or not in the labour force, are more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs.

To put it another way, this means that adults with literacy or numeracy needs are less likely to be employed, and therefore they are at greater risk of poverty.

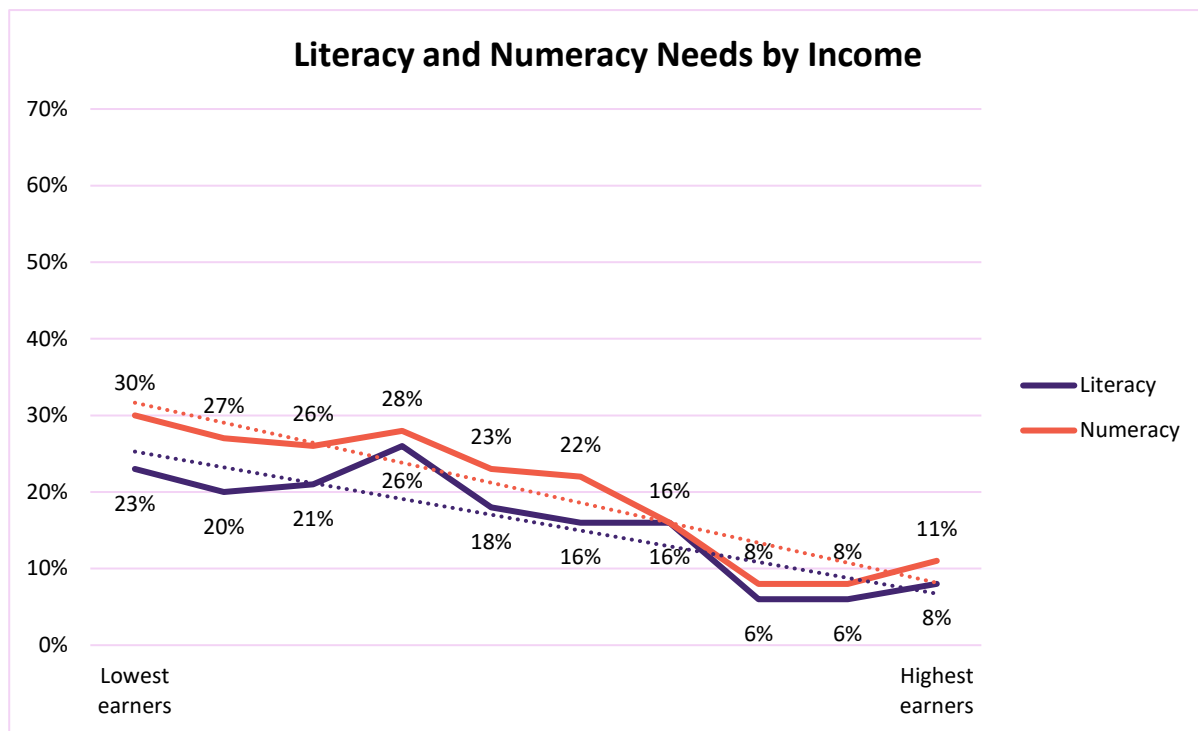


**Figure 3:** Percentage of Adults with Literacy or Numeracy Needs by Labour Force Status

## Income

Figure 4 shows that adults on lower incomes are more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs.

To put it another way, this means that adults with literacy or numeracy needs are more likely to have low incomes, and therefore they are at greater risk of poverty.

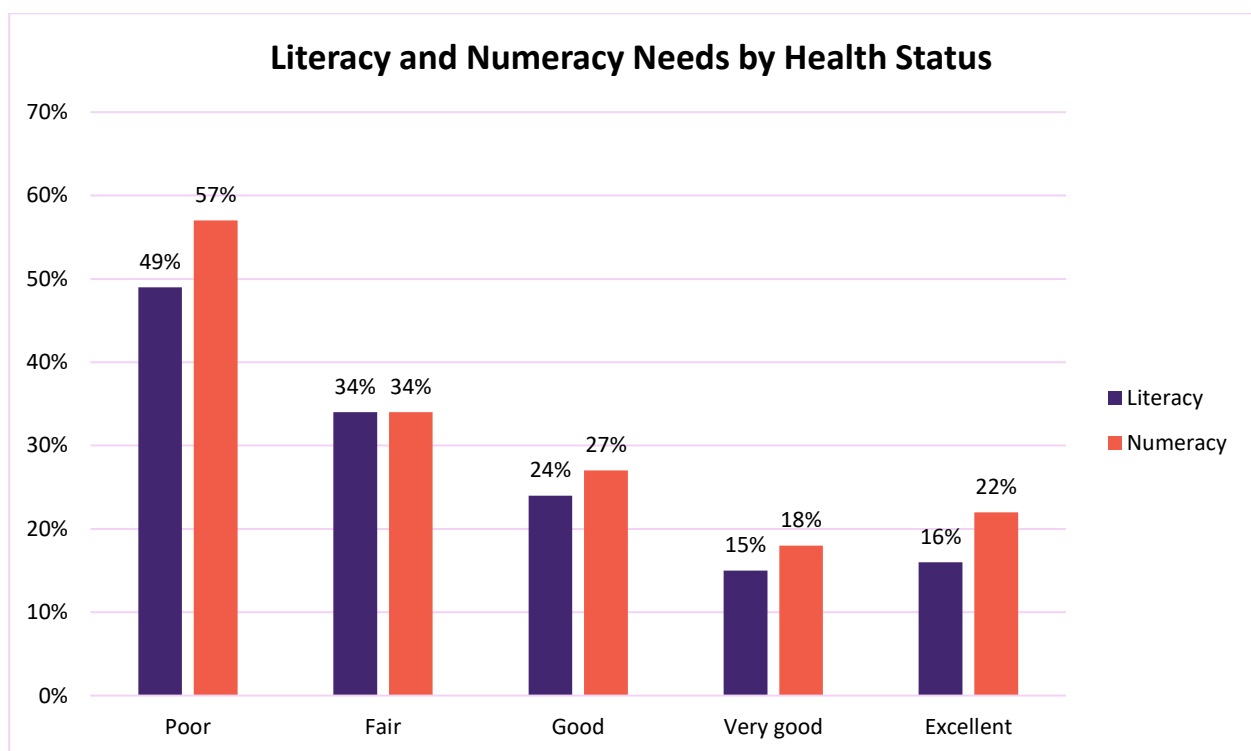


**Figure 4:** Percentage of Adults with Literacy or Numeracy Needs by Income Decile

## Health

Figure 5 shows that adults who report poor health are much more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs.

This means that adults with literacy or numeracy needs are more likely to have poor health – maybe because they find it difficult to navigate the health system, and maybe also because poor health is associated with social exclusion generally.



**Figure 5:** Percentage of Adults with Literacy or Numeracy Needs by Self-reported Health Status

## Our recommendations

This part of our submission presents practical recommendations for the DSP to consider and include in the successor strategy to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (“the successor strategy”).

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

### 1. Mention current literacy strategies

We have demonstrated in the previous section that literacy is an important aspect of social inclusion. Assuming that the successor strategy is an umbrella strategy like the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, it should cover the following literacy strategies and related strategies:

- Adult Literacy for Life: a 10-Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (SOLAS 2021)
- Further Education and Training Strategy 2025-2029 (in development)
- Ireland’s Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, DCEDIY, and Department of Education 2024)
- National Financial Literacy Strategy 2025-2029 (Department of Finance 2025)
- Digital for Good: Ireland’s Digital Inclusion Roadmap (Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform 2023)
- eInclusion Strategy (forthcoming - commitment in Programme for Government, Government of Ireland 2025)
- A Well-being Framework for Ireland: Understanding Life in Ireland (Department of the Taoiseach 2021 – p21 covers Knowledge and Skills)

## 2. Report on outcomes and targets

The Report Cards for the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025/>) mark various commitments as “achieved with ongoing delivery” where the commitment is simply to monitor and report on a subsidiary strategy. What has been achieved is just the fact of the reporting - it is not clear from the report cards how much progress has been made with implementing the subsidiary strategies or achieving their outcomes.

Within the reporting, the narrative detail doesn't necessarily refer to specific targets. Often the focus is on outputs, such as actions taken, rather than outcomes, such as the impact of those actions.

It would be more meaningful to have a Red, Amber, Green system for reporting on how far implementation of subsidiary strategies has progressed, and to publish the latest figures for key numerical targets.

## 3. Support adult learners

The Programme for Government commits to “review the financial supports available to adult learners and promote access to education and lifelong learning” (Government of Ireland 2025, p72). This is particularly important for potential learners who are experiencing poverty. They face many practical barriers such as course fees, costs of transport and childcare, and inflexible work arrangements if they are in employment, just to name a few.

Lifelong learning is a right enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission 2017, p11). Unfortunately, people with qualifications at Levels 1 to 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) are the least likely to engage in lifelong learning in Ireland. In 2024 they had a 5.6% lifelong learning rate, compared to a 26% lifelong learning rate for people with qualifications at levels 9 to 10 (SOLAS 2025, p6). This means that those who are most at risk of social exclusion are not accessing



lifelong learning.

The Programme for Government commitment to review supports for adult learners should be put into action, and outcomes monitored, under the successor strategy.

#### **4. Target disadvantaged groups**

The OECD in its 2023 Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations recommended that Ireland should "provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning" (OECD 2023, p124). This includes supports to offset direct and indirect costs. They list "individuals with low education and skill levels, parents and carers, and the inactive or long-term unemployed" (p124) as disadvantaged groups who could benefit from targeted supports.

The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy lists the following as "potential vulnerable cohorts for targeted funding" (SOLAS 2021, p59):

- Older adults (55+)
- Members of the Traveller Community
- People with disabilities
- Low-paid workers
- Carers
- One-parent households
- Incarcerated people and ex-offenders
- People recovering from addiction
- Long-term unemployed
- Migrants
- International Protection Applicants
- People with language needs

We know that certain groups are more at risk of literacy needs and social exclusion more generally. Providing targeted support to disadvantaged groups will enhance the effectiveness of the successor strategy.

## 5. Bring departments together for family literacy

Figure 2 showed that there is still intergenerational disadvantage in Irish education – a major concern for social inclusion. The positive side of this is that supports for parents can help to improve literacy outcomes for children, breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

“Family literacy” means working with adults, both with and without their children, to improve their literacy skills and self-confidence so that they can have “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” (Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, SOLAS 2021, p19).

Family literacy is a key part of both the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy and Ireland’s Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 (DCEDIY and Department of Education, 2024). Three departments now share responsibility for learning across the life course:

1. Early years - Department of Children, Disability and Equality
2. School - Department of Education and Youth
3. Adulthood – Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)

A Family Literacy Thematic Group has been convened to support the implementation of relevant actions across these strategies, but its impact is limited due to the lack of dedicated investment. Its work aligns with the Department’s historic role in supporting families with various financial measures such as Working Families Payment and Child Benefit.

As an overarching, cross-government strategy, the successor strategy will have a unique ability to bring these departments together, to focus on basic skills and relevant supports for the furthest behind in our society.

## 6. Advance literacy-friendly public services

Given the extent of literacy needs in Ireland, it is important for public service providers to be aware of literacy needs and to be literacy friendly. This means that the public body makes it as easy as possible for staff and service users to get the information they need, to use their services and to participate fully.

While digitalisation of public services has many benefits, there is a risk that people with (digital) literacy needs will be left behind. A truly public service must maintain high quality services in person and over the phone to ensure that everyone's rights are met. The successor strategy can promote this rights-based approach to public services across government departments.

In the context of the successor strategy, the DSP is a particularly important department because people with literacy needs interact with the department on a daily basis for welfare and employment services. We recognise the strides the Department and its agencies such as the Citizens Information Board have taken to incorporate plain English in its communications. The resources on this page can help your Department to continue to develop its literacy friendly services.

### 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 and the National Disability Authority (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**”

## Conclusion

In this submission, we make the case for literacy to be a priority in the successor to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, with particular focus on family literacy, disadvantaged groups, and public services. We are calling for supports for adult learners to be improved, so that adults in poverty can participate in lifelong learning. We make specific recommendations as to what strategies should come under the successor strategy, and how progress should be reported.

## Contact

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations further.

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## List of acronyms

- **ALL:** Adult Literacy for Life
- **CSO:** Central Statistics Office
- **DCEDIY:** Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- **DFHERIS:** Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- **DPER:** Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
- **DSP:** Department of Social Protection
- **ERC:** Educational Resource Centre
- **FET:** Further Education and Training
- **ISO:** International Organization for Standardization
- **NALA:** National Adult Literacy Agency
- **NDA:** National Disability Authority
- **NFQ:** National Framework of Qualifications
- **OECD:** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- **PIAAC:** Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
- **PLC:** Post Leaving Certificate
- **UN:** United Nations

## References

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

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

Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (2023). **Digital for Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap.**

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Department of Finance (2025). **National Financial Literacy Strategy.**

Department of the Taoiseach (2021). **First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland.**

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European Commission (2024). **Ireland 2024 Digital Decade Country Report.**

Government of Ireland (2025). **Draft Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future.**

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

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

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2023). **Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations.**

SOLAS (2020). **Future FET: Transforming Learning.**

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

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.

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**Company Number:** 342807



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