

# **Submission to consultation on the successor strategy to Pathways to Work 2021-2025**

Submitted to the Department of Social Protection

**September 2025**



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

## Contents

Summary of recommendations .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Literacy, numeracy and digital skills .....	6
Literacy and equity .....	7
Adult Literacy for Life strategy .....	8
Adult literacy needs in Ireland today .....	9
Literacy friendly organisations .....	10
Research into literacy and employment.....	11
Policy advice on basic skills and employment.....	14
Context to consider .....	16
Our recommendations .....	17
Conclusion .....	20
Contact.....	20

List of acronyms .....	21
References .....	22
About NALA .....	24

## Summary of recommendations

1. Build on the previous strategy
2. Address literacy as a specific priority area
3. Provide literacy-friendly services
4. Prioritise training at Levels 1 to 4
5. Build digital skills foundations

## 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 the successor strategy to Pathways to Work 2021-2025 (Department of Social Protection, DSP 2021).

## 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 equity

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 equity, priority should be given to those who have experienced the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports. This principle has been upheld in successive anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies in Ireland.

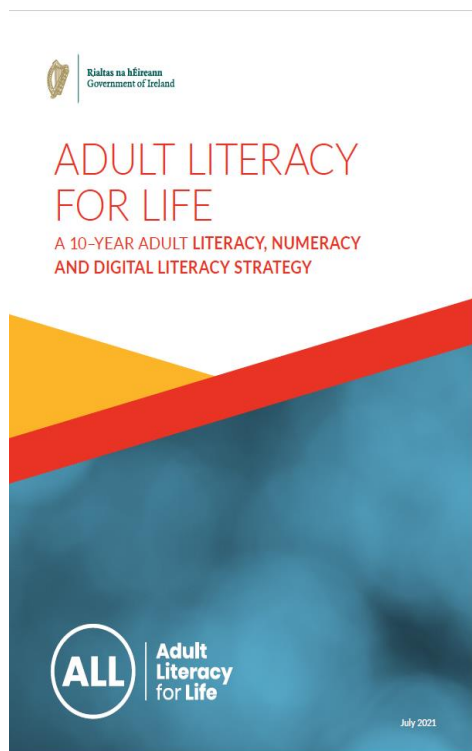


## Adult Literacy for Life strategy

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, p.4).

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 social protection and employment services.

The Adult Literacy for Life strategy highlights the Department of Social Protection’s (DSP’s) “key role in helping to identify, and source support for unmet literacy needs among job seekers and those subsequently placed in employment” (p.50). The strategy also identifies people in long-term unemployment as a priority target group. So the DSP is an essential partner in implementation of Adult Literacy for Life.



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



## Adult literacy needs in Ireland today

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 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.

For example, these adults may find it difficult to work out the best option for them within a range of financial supports from the DSP.

- **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. Filling in an application form, for example, can be challenging for this group.

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. Adults without basic digital skills may struggle to search for jobs or employment supports online.

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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

## Literacy friendly organisations

Given the extent of literacy needs in Ireland, it is important for all organisations to be aware of literacy needs and to be literacy friendly. This means that the organisation 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.

The resources on this page can help the DSP and associated employment services 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 short online course from the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office, "**Let's talk about plain language**"
- 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**"

## Research into literacy and employment

### Latest figures

In Ireland, adults<sup>5</sup> who are unemployed or outside the labour force are more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs than adults who are employed.

Around 1 in 4 unemployed adults have literacy needs (23%) or numeracy needs (26%).

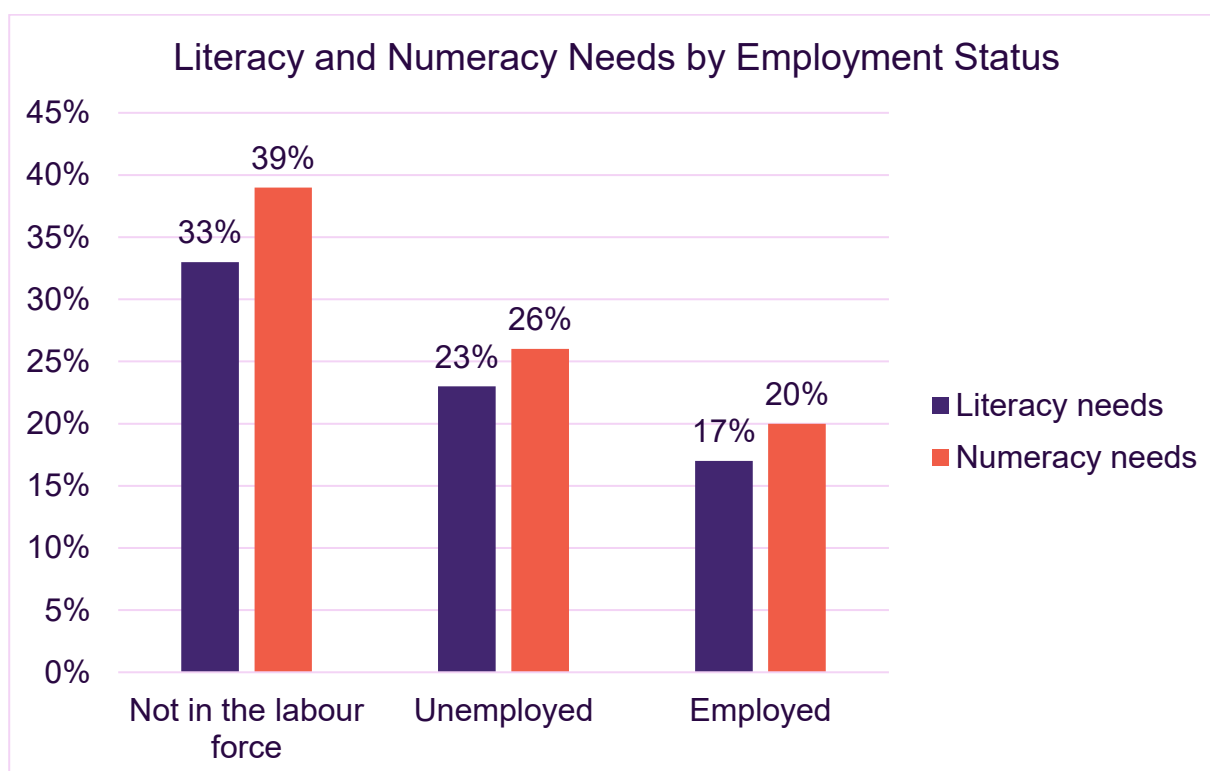


Figure 1: Literacy and Numeracy Needs by Employment Status. Source: OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023

Some sectors have higher rates of literacy and numeracy needs among employees than others (CSO 2024). Jobseekers in these sectors presumably have similar rates.

The three sectors with the highest levels of literacy needs are:

1. Transportation and Storage (35%);
2. Construction (30%); and
3. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (28%).

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<sup>5</sup> Aged 16 to 65

The three sectors with the highest levels of numeracy needs are:

1. Transportation and Storage (34%);
2. Administrative and Support Service Activities (32%); and
3. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (31%).

People with literacy or numeracy needs are also likely to earn less when they are in employment. Figure 2 below shows that the lowest 10% of earners are almost 3 times more likely to have literacy or numeracy needs than the highest 10% of earners.

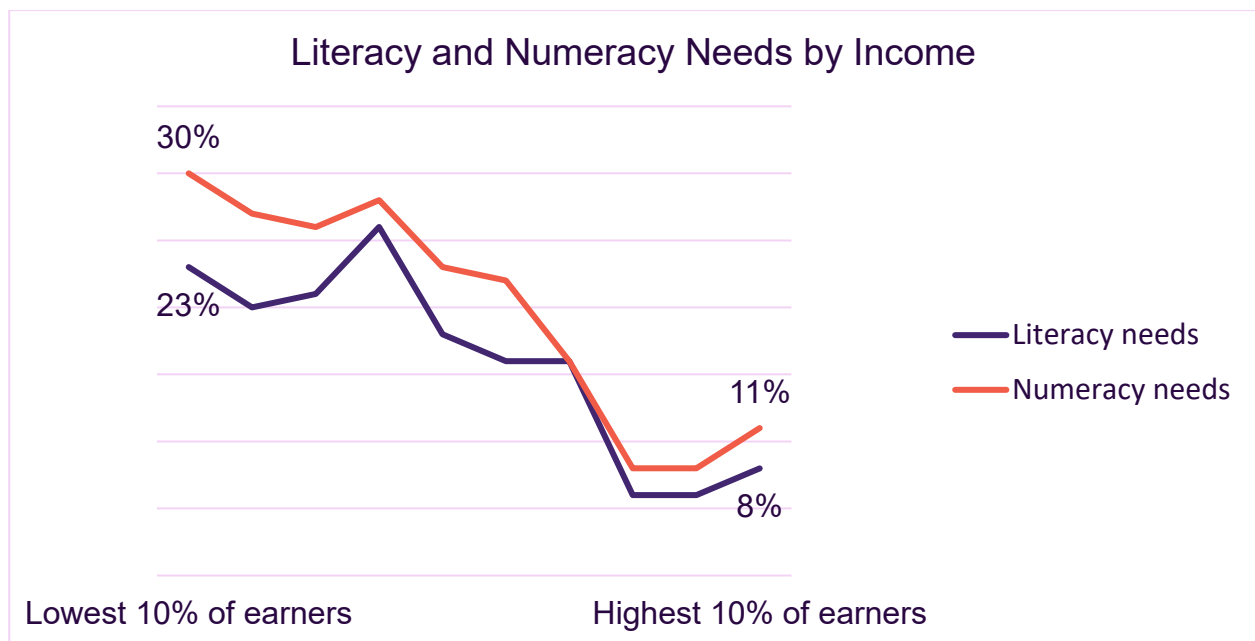


Figure 2: Literacy and Numeracy Needs by Employment Status. Source: OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023

## Employment supports

A 2018 report by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) on “Moving from Welfare to Work” recommended tailored supports for those most distant from the labour market. The researchers noted significant literacy needs among the people they interviewed from low work-intensity households, and they concluded that:

“More intensive literacy and numeracy education is required for those with low literacy levels, as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.” (p.49)

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) found, in their 2012 report on “Literacy, Numeracy and Activation among the Unemployed”, that:

“Having a literacy and/or numeracy difficulty increases the likelihood that an unemployed person will become long-term unemployed.” (p.xiii)

They also found that:

“when those with literacy and/or numeracy difficulties do receive training, they benefit by much more than average: they are 29 per cent more likely to exit the Live Register compared to 11 per cent for the full unemployment population.” (p.xiii)

## **Implications of the research**

In summary, the research says that:

- literacy needs are prevalent among unemployed people in Ireland;
- certain sectors of the labour market have even higher rates of literacy needs;
- people with literacy needs tend to earn less;
- literacy needs are associated with long-term unemployment and low work-intensity households; and
- unemployed adults with literacy needs benefit greatly from training.

Together this evidence shows that it is worth investing in unemployed adults with literacy needs.

## Policy advice on basic skills and employment

### Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills found that the rate of literacy needs has gotten worse in most participating countries, including Ireland<sup>6</sup>. The OECD's "Insights and Interpretations" report on the survey findings suggested that "policymakers should shift their focus from 'life-long employment' to 'life-long employability'", given that

"in today's rapidly evolving job market, individuals need to develop the skills and flexibility to adapt to changing industries and technologies rather than relying on long-term job security with a single employer."

(OECD 2024, p.7)

The OECD has also given advice specifically to Ireland in its 2023 "Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations". It recommended Ireland to foster greater participation in lifelong learning inside and outside the workplace. One way the OECD said this should be achieved, would be to

"provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning."

(OECD 2023, p.28)

### European Union (EU)

At the European level, the Union of Skills (European Commission 2025a) and associated Action Plan on Basic Skills (European Commission 2025b) have just been published. The Action Plan on Basic Skills states that

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<sup>6</sup> The change in Ireland, from 18% of adults having literacy needs in 2012 to 21% in 2023, was not statistically significant

“successful policies [on basic skills] often take a holistic approach, bringing together multidisciplinary services to support people, including housing, health, **employment services** and parental or carer support.”

(p.12, emphasis added)

The Action Plan emphasises that to achieve higher rates of basic skills across the population, disadvantaged groups must be reached, including the long-term unemployed.

## National Skills Council

Meanwhile in Ireland, the National Skills Council has said in its first advice note to government that basic or foundational skills will be their next priority:

‘Looking ahead, the National Skills Council will direct its attention towards development of foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy, [and] lifelong learning’

(National Skills Council 2025, p.27)

Clearly, basic skills and lifelong learning are important policy matters for the successor strategy to Pathways to Work to cover.

## Context to consider

### Low unemployment is an opportunity to reach the furthest behind

Ireland's low unemployment rate means that resources can be aimed at those most distant from the labour market, as pointed out in the Programme for Government:

“At a time of full employment when many sectors are experiencing labour shortages, there is an opportunity to help people who are long term unemployed into work.”

(Government of Ireland 2025, p.99)

This includes adults with literacy needs, who are more likely to be unemployed or to fall into long-term unemployment (as shown in the earlier section on “Research into literacy and employment”).

### Ireland needs a strong foundation of basic skills

At the same time, Ireland is vulnerable to instability in international trade, such as we have seen with recent tariff disputes. It is important to have a high level of basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across the population, so our workforce can adapt to economic shocks.



## Our recommendations

This part of our submission presents practical recommendations for the Department of Social Protection to consider and include in the successor strategy to Pathways to Work 2021-2025.

We believe that these recommendations will help you to meet your aims as stated in the consultation document, including:

- better outreach to disadvantaged groups and adults not in the labour force; and
- a Just Transition to a digital and green economy.

### 1. Build on the previous strategy

The actions in Pathways to Work 2021-2025 relating to education and training were positive. They should be maintained and expanded with more ambitious targets, building on improvements already made.

#### Positive commitments in Pathways to Work 2021-2025

- “Deliver an additional 50,000 further education and training places to help more people to have the opportunity to upskill and reskill.
- Improve access to further education and self-employment opportunities through increased funding for the Back to Education and Back to Work Enterprise Allowance schemes, with additional funding of €10 million per annum available across both schemes.
- Increase the maximum value of the Training Support Grant available via Intreo from €500 to €1,000, with a total cost of €11 million per annum. This will help over 12,500 jobseekers per annum to access relevant and accredited training programmes outside of the formal state provided system of further and higher education”.

(Department of Social Protection 2021, p.9)

## **2. Address literacy as a specific priority area**

The original Pathways to Work strategy references digital literacy once, in relation to Intreo's changed client profile during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mid-term review and updated strategy don't mention literacy. We believe this is a missed opportunity to tackle the poor employment outcomes of people with literacy needs head on.

The next strategy should name people with literacy needs (including digital literacy needs) as a target group for additional, tailored supports. It should also highlight the Department of Social Protection's role in the implementation of the Adult Literacy for Life strategy.

## **3. Provide literacy-friendly services**

We welcome the good work that the Department of Social Protection has already done to be literacy friendly. We would like to see literacy-friendly employment services provided through the successor strategy to Pathways to Work. In practice, this could mean (for example):

- Literacy awareness training for staff (prioritising client-facing staff);
- Taking a plain language approach to all communications;
- Integrating literacy into all training programmes / apprenticeships; and
- Ensuring that people with literacy needs are represented in client consultations.

## **4. Prioritise training at Levels 1 to 4**

We are aware that a recent review of the Public Employment Service recommended encouraging uptake of training opportunities at Levels 5 and 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) on the basis that these courses are associated with better employment outcomes (Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), p.36). Of course, each jobseeker should learn at an appropriate level for them, with high expectations for all. However, this could be an example of the Matthew Effect, where those who already have advantages get more advantages. It is not surprising that adults who have the skills and educational qualifications necessary to do training at

Levels 5 and 6 would also be more attractive to employers.

The review also noted that the majority (68%) of short course referrals by DSP are at Levels 1 to 4, showing that there is a high level of demand for this training. It is no bad thing for jobseekers to be getting the training they need at these more basic levels. In fact, if Ireland is to take a furthest behind approach to public employment services, and to address the particular disadvantages that adults with basic skills needs face in the labour market, Levels 1 to 4 should be the priority.

## **5. Build digital skills foundations**

The latest “Ireland’s Talent Landscape” report (Skillnet Ireland 2025) found that 3 in 4 employers (77%) “highlighted Microsoft Office as pivotal for growth” (p.24) and 1 in 5 employers (18%) find it difficult to source employees with Microsoft 365 skills. These findings show that work still needs to be done on our digital skills foundations.

As noted in the earlier section on “Adult literacy needs in Ireland today”, 27% of adults<sup>7</sup> in Ireland do not have basic digital skills. At the same time, the digital demands of most jobs are increasing, so these people are more and more likely to be left behind in the labour market.

The Government has committed to “invest in digital skills at all levels, from basic digital literacy for all citizens...” (Government of Ireland 2025, p.35). The successor strategy to Pathways to Work should support the implementation of this commitment by working with jobseekers to improve their digital skills as a priority area.

In practice this could mean training case officers to identify digital skills needs and recommend appropriate training as a top priority, especially where jobseekers have scope to learn foundational skills like email, word processing, internet browsing or basic AI tools.

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<sup>7</sup> Aged 16-74

## Conclusion

In this submission, we are calling for a furthest-behind-first approach to employment services in Ireland, which prioritises basic skills needs in accordance with the research evidence and international policy advice.

We welcome the steps that the DSP has already taken to be a literacy-friendly department and the actions for education and training contained in the original Pathways to Work strategy. We urge the DSP to continue and expand on this good work.

## 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
- DPER: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
- DSP: Department of Social Protection
- ESRI: Economic and Social Research Institute
- EU: European Union
- IGEES: Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service
- NALA: National Adult Literacy Agency
- NDA: National Disability Authority
- NESC: National Economic and Social Council
- NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications
- OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- SOLAS: An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Skills Service)
- UN: United Nations

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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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