

Submission on the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2026-2030

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

16 February 2026



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Contents

Summary of recommendations	4
Introduction	5
Literacy, numeracy and digital skills	6
Literacy and equality	7
Adult Literacy for Life strategy	8
Adult literacy needs in Ireland today	9
Literacy friendly organisations	11
Positives in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025	12
Response to consultation paper	13
Our recommendations	14
Conclusion	20
Contact.....	20
List of acronyms.....	21

References 22

About NALA 23

Summary of recommendations

These are our 11 recommendations for supporting adults with literacy needs in apprenticeship. They are discussed in detail on pages 14 - 19.

1. Set a target for apprenticeship completion rates
2. Offer alternative ways and supports to respond to the annual survey of apprentices
3. Invite a literacy representative to join the Equity of Access subcommittee of the National Apprenticeship Alliance
4. Provide literacy awareness training to key groups in apprenticeship
5. Provide information about apprenticeship in plain English
6. Reduce financial barriers to learning
7. Focus on induction and preparation for apprenticeship
8. Provide flexible learning options for apprentices and applicants
9. Mainstream good practice in integrating literacy for apprenticeship
10. Integrate digital literacy into apprenticeships
11. Don't cut the length of courses – improve foundational skills instead

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). Our eLearning and distance learning service, Learn with NALA, was awarded a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) International Literacy Prize in September 2025.

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 Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2026-2030.

We thank our members and others who shared their views to inform this submission.

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 United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.

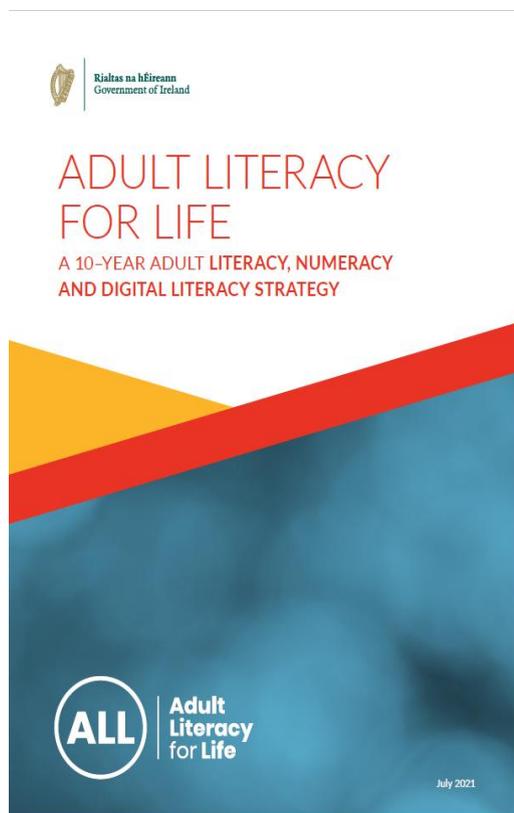


Adult Literacy for Life strategy

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) will be well aware that the **10-year Adult Literacy for Life strategy** was published 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. The apprenticeship system is crucial for the success of the strategy.

The Adult Literacy for Life strategy highlights the importance of numeracy for many apprenticeships (p53), and notes that the literacy needs of those doing apprenticeships at Level 5 and above are often overlooked (p30).



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 (Central Statistics Office - CSO 2024), show the following:

- **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.
- **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.

Many apprenticeships have significant numeracy requirements. All apprenticeships have significant literacy requirements.

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 also showed that literacy and numeracy needs vary by employment sector.

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

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

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

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

It seems likely that similar patterns of need will be found among apprentices and employers in these sectors.

¹ Aged 16-65

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

Other findings on digital skills in 2023, from the Digital Economy and Society Index (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. For example, sent an email, fact-checked something or changed software settings.

Basic digital skills are essential for completing a modern apprenticeship or indeed for thriving in a modern workplace. They are the foundation for the advanced skills that Ireland needs in the digital transition.

³ Aged 16-74

⁴ 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 you make it as easy as possible for staff and service users to get the information they need, to use your services and to participate fully.

The resources on this page can help DFHERIS, educational institutions, apprenticeship consortia and employers to be more literacy friendly. Please share as appropriate.

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)
- the short online course from the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office, "**Let's talk about plain language**"

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**"

Positives in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025

NALA welcomes the Government's efforts to make apprenticeship a first-choice option and to increase the range of apprenticeships available.

Apprenticeship:

- recognises diverse skills and talents;
- allows people with low educational attainment (so far) to reach their potential;
- supports a unified tertiary system with many pathways and definitions of success; and
- is a viable option for people from less privileged backgrounds, as you can earn while you learn.

We particularly welcome the emphasis on diversity and equity of access in the first Action Plan for Apprenticeship, through initiatives such as the

- Access and Inclusion Bursary;
- Traveller Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme⁵;
- Apprenticeship Bursary for Care Leavers; and the
- Equity of Access subcommittee of the National Apprenticeship Alliance.

⁵ While racism against Travellers is not an adult literacy issue, we know from our work with Traveller organisations that it is a major barrier to employment, including for apprentices, and we would like to note our serious concern about this.

Response to consultation paper

The consultation paper for the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2026-2030 sets out 10 questions. In our recommendations we will particularly address the following two questions with a focus on adult literacy:

1. What supports or incentives would encourage learners to engage and stay engaged?
2. What targeted measures would improve participation among under-represented groups?

However, our recommendations will also address other aspects of the consultation paper, such as how apprenticeships can adapt to future economic changes, and where additional investment should be targeted. Throughout, we hope to demonstrate that a focus on adult literacy will support the Government's aims for apprenticeship.

Our recommendations

1. Set a target for apprenticeship completion rates

The first action plan focused on increasing the number of people registering for apprenticeships. The second action plan should now build on that by adding a target for the percentage of registered apprentices who complete their apprenticeship. Reporting on the target should cover the total national completion rate, as well as regional and demographic breakdowns (age, gender and so on).

This will make sure that supports for apprentices are adequate overall and specific areas of need can be identified and addressed through targeted investment.

2. Offer alternative ways and supports to respond to the annual survey of apprentices

At the moment, apprentices are consulted once a year through a voluntary online survey. The responses to the survey reflect the views of apprentices who are comfortable enough in their literacy and digital skills to complete an online survey. Apprentices who lack confidence in these areas are less likely to complete the survey. This introduces a bias into the survey and means that you are not getting feedback from apprentices with literacy needs.

To ensure that the voices of apprentices with literacy needs are heard, we recommend that you:

- offer the option to respond to the survey over the phone;
- enable learning support services to help apprentices fill in the survey; and
- make sure these options and supports are widely and clearly advertised.

3. Invite a literacy representative to join the Equity of Access subcommittee of the National Apprenticeship Alliance

It would be valuable for the National Apprenticeship Alliance to consider the literacy perspective throughout the next five-year action plan. We suggest that a simple but

effective way to do this would be to invite a literacy representative to join the Equity of Access subcommittee. This representative could then provide advice on literacy in apprenticeships on an ongoing basis.

4. Provide literacy awareness training to key groups in apprenticeship

This simple step will lead to further ideas for improvements for apprentices with literacy needs, which we can't envision at our distance from the system. It will also contribute to a more inclusive culture on the ground, which is crucial for getting people with literacy needs in the door.

5. Provide information about apprenticeship in plain English

We often get calls⁶ from prospective apprentices and parents who are struggling to find clear information, all in one place. Understanding entrance requirements is a particular challenge. Sometimes applicants are given different information by different sources, or it is assumed (wrongly) that they have certain background knowledge. The confusion can be frustrating and discouraging.

To recruit more apprentices, particularly from marginalised groups, it is essential that information about apprenticeship is clear and consistent. We suggest that you share our recommended resources with all providers of information about apprenticeship (the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO), apprenticeship consortia, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), guidance counsellors, and so on):

- 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**

⁶ We are not an official source of information about apprenticeships. The volume and nature of calls that we have discussed with the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) confirms that the proper channels are not working for everyone. As agreed with the NAO, we refer these callers to their local ETB Apprenticeship Unit.

designed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and the National Disability Authority (NDA) (2023)

- the short online course from the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office, “**Let’s talk about plain language**”

Clear communication and literacy friendly supports should continue for apprentices after they have registered. For example, it is not clear from this webpage whether current apprentices are welcome to call the Apprenticeship Freephone: <https://apprenticeship.ie/career-seekers/already-an-apprentice>

6. Reduce financial barriers to learning

The more financial supports that can be provided for apprentices, the more attractive apprenticeship will be and the more likely that learners will be able to stay engaged and complete their programme.

For example, we suggest:

- free books and equipment;
- student grant to cover any registration fees; and
- more targeted bursaries for under-represented groups.

You could also consider how the financial incentive structure affects learning motivation. For example, if the rate of an apprentice’s off-the-job training allowance is the same as the pay they are getting on the job, that will send a strong message that the learning they are doing in the classroom is equally valuable.

7. Focus on induction and preparation for apprenticeship

Because the first phase of apprenticeship is on the job, many apprentices start weeks before they have an induction at their off-the-job training centre. Induction is a crucial opportunity for staff to let apprentices know about the expectations of the course and supports available – and to encourage them to avail of supports.

Pre-apprenticeship courses are also very valuable, but they aren't available in every training centre or for every subject. Some are at a high level (Level 5 on the NFQ, National Framework of Qualifications) which won't suit every learner.

Good practice in induction and preparation for apprenticeship should be investigated, rolled out and expanded as far as possible. The earlier an apprentice's literacy needs are identified and addressed, the better.

8. Provide flexible learning supports for apprentices and applicants

The fact that apprentices are time-poor came up again and again in our consultation for this submission. They need a variety of flexible options to improve their literacy skills, that can fit around their busy schedules, and they are likely to be most motivated by learning which directly addresses the requirements of their course.

There is already a lot of good practice in this area. Examples include:

- Literacy learning integrated within the class, so no extra time is required
- One-to-one and group learning support outside the classroom, focused on course materials
- Dedicated workbooks and online resources that apprentices can work through in their own time

Learn with NALA awarded UNESCO International Literacy Prize in 2025

Our online and distance learning service, Learn with NALA (www.learnwithnala.ie), is the biggest provider of Level 2 and Level 3 awards in Ireland.

Learn with NALA is available to apprenticeship applicants aged 16 or over who cannot access a pre-apprenticeship programme. Learners can be directly supported by NALA or do blended learning in a training centre. We have supported many applicants to gain the minimum entry requirements for apprenticeship.

Unfortunately, as we await a review to be completed by SOLAS, we have paused the registration of new centres on Learn with NALA as the current funding made available to NALA by SOLAS does not meet the needs and costs.

In order for the Government to reach its apprenticeship targets and reduce literacy needs in Ireland, all parts of the apprenticeship and literacy educational ecosystem need adequate funding, including Learn with NALA and other adult literacy services in ETBs and community education.

9. Mainstream good practice in integrating literacy for apprenticeship

As touched on in Recommendation 8, integrating literacy into course-specific learning is very helpful for reaching apprentices with literacy needs. Integrating literacy is most effective when it is a whole-organisation approach, championed by management and indeed by your department.

Many ETBs are already integrating literacy into apprenticeship very effectively. The ETB Support to Apprenticeship Group meets regularly to share good practice in literacy support for apprenticeship, including integrating literacy. Good practice identified in this group should be mainstreamed across all training providers, including the third level institutions delivering later phases of off-the-job learning.

10. Integrate digital literacy into apprenticeships

Literacy and numeracy are often covered in learning support and integrated into off-the-job learning, but digital literacy seems to be less established in apprenticeship. This may be due to the age of a “typical” apprentice – but as apprentices become more diverse, and the digital demands of working life increase, it will be important to ensure that apprentices have a good level of digital literacy.

This Government has committed in the Programme for Government to “invest in digital skills at all levels, from basic digital literacy for all citizens [...]” (Government of Ireland 2025, p35). Apprenticeship is a key opportunity to do this.

11. Don't cut the length of courses – improve foundational skills instead

Recent media coverage (for example, **Irish Times 19 January 2026**) suggests that the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is considering cutting the length of some apprenticeship courses, particularly in construction. While this is understandable, we do not recommend it.

It seems likely that the content to be cut would be the more general, transferable skills. But these kinds of skills are essential for long-term resilience in today's ever-changing job market. The importance of foundational skills like literacy, numeracy and digital literacy is recognised by the National Skills Council, which has set up a working group to draft an advice note to government on the topic.

To let people finish an apprenticeship without a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy would do them a disservice. If there is room for improvement in the content of some apprenticeship courses, we suggest using that opportunity to work on apprentices' foundational skills.

Conclusion

In this submission, we are calling for a literacy focus in the next Action Plan for Apprenticeship. We set out practical ways that apprentices with literacy needs can be supported to succeed, and that the apprenticeship system can be more literacy friendly. Our recommendations are based on consultation with people working directly with apprentices and intended to support the government's ambitions both for apprenticeship and adult literacy.

Contact

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
- **DFHERIS:** Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- **DPER:** Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
- **ETB:** Education and Training Board
- **NALA:** National Adult Literacy Agency
- **NAO:** National Apprenticeship Office
- **NDA:** National Disability Authority
- **NFQ:** National Framework of Qualifications
- **OECD:** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- **SOLAS:** Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (State agency responsible for Further Education and Training)
- **UN:** United Nations

References

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

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.**

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

Government of Ireland (2025). **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.**

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.

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



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Arna chomhchistiú ag
an Aontas Eorpach
Co-Funded by the
European Union

SOLAS
learning works



Adult Literacy is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union.