

Our asks for Budget 2027

Pre-budget submission

13 July 2026



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Executive summary

The adult literacy challenge

“Literacy skills are fundamental for both personal and economic participation in society. Our Government and my Department remains committed to ensuring every adult has the opportunity to improve their literacy.”

(Minister Lawless, **press release 16 June 2026**, SOLAS 2026)

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is the leading independent voice of adult literacy in Ireland. Since 1980, we have been an advocate for and provided services to adults with literacy needs and literacy educators.

We welcome the Government’s commitment to ensuring every adult has the opportunity to improve their literacy.

The reality, however, is that there are more adults with literacy and numeracy needs in Ireland today than ten years ago¹, despite the Government launching **Adult Literacy for Life: A 10-Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy** (Government of Ireland 2021) five years ago.

Today,

- around **700,000 adults**, including roughly **420,000** workers, have literacy needs
- around **835,000 adults**, including roughly **490,000** workers, have numeracy needs²

These adults are likely to struggle with everyday tasks like reading medicine instructions, budgeting, or engaging critically with online content.

The rate of needs is particularly high in certain sectors critical to the Irish economy, including construction and transportation.

¹ See p17 for numbers backing up this statement and details behind all the numbers in this section

² The main source for literacy and numeracy statistics in this submission is the **OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023** (CSO 2024a), also known as PIAAC – Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. ‘Adults’ are aged 16-65

There are also around **640,000**³ adults in Ireland with digital literacy needs who will find it difficult to engage with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital services.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills are an essential foundation for adults' daily lives and the success of many Government strategies.

The adult literacy skills challenge must be addressed urgently if Ireland is to achieve its social, political and economic ambitions.

Our solutions

We believe that the 2027 Budget can make a significant difference to adult literacy in Ireland if...

1. NALA is provided with an additional €650,000 to maintain and expand our:

- award-winning Learn with NALA distance and eLearning service
- literacy ambassador programmes in Irish prisons
- teaching and learning materials



2. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) fast-tracks the completion of the following reports and ring-fences the funding required to implement their recommendations:

- report of the Expert Group on Literacy Provision
- mid-term review of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy
- strategic advice notes from the National Skills Council (NSC)



In relation to the reports above, we request that DFHERIS ensures that:

- NALA is consulted on the mid-term review of the ALL strategy
- the NSC's recommendation to establish a National Skills Observatory is completed by the second half of this year⁴

³ Digital literacy figures in this submission come from the **Digital Economy and Society Index 2025** (European Commission 2026). They refer to adults aged 16-74

⁴ As noted by Minister Lawless in **response to a Parliamentary Question on 23 April 2026** (Dáil Éireann 2026)

Our solutions in detail

1. Provide NALA with additional funding of €650,000



We receive our main funding on an annual basis from SOLAS to support the delivery of the **Further Education and Training Strategy** (Government of Ireland 2026). This funding has not increased since 2022 except for a contribution in 2025 to increasing pay costs and specific annual project funding to support the ALL Strategy (Government of Ireland 2021). The dedicated funding for our literacy ambassador work in prisons ended at the end of 2025.

This has resulted in us:

- pausing some services
- not being able to multi-annually plan
- not being able to respond to the demand or further develop our services

Table 1 summarises our asks for NALA and their potential impact. More detail on each service follows below.

Service	2026 Funding	Additional funding sought for 2027	Summary of potential 2027 outcomes / impact
Learn with NALA	€750,000	€500,000	1,500 more learners 50 more centres New courses addressing emerging skills gaps
Literacy Ambassador Programme in prisons	€0 (previously €74,000)	€100,000	Programme embedded across Irish prisons
Teaching and learning materials	€80,000	€50,000	50,000 resources distributed in 2027
Total		€650,000	

Table 1: Summary of asks for NALA services

These asks are achievable in the context of DFHERIS's 2026 budget of €410 million for skills and apprenticeships (DFHERIS 2026) and projected €7 billion spending across all departments in Budget 2027 (Hickey 2026).

Learn with NALA

“We are committed to using every resource available to ensure support is easily, and locally, accessible to everyone who needs it.”

(Minister Harris, Minister’s Foreword to the ALL strategy, Government of Ireland 2021, p4)

Our free **Learn with NALA** (NALA 2026) eLearning and distance learning service is accessible online or by phone to any adult in Ireland.

Learn with NALA⁵

- supports over **3,500 learners annually** at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Levels 1 to 3
- is used in **162 centres** - both Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and community and voluntary organisations
- has a **high achievement rate** for QQI qualifications (66% at Level 2 and 60% at Level 3)⁶
- will deliver **12 accredited courses online at QQI Level 1** from September 2026, filling a gap in Ireland’s adult literacy services⁷

Learn with NALA’s innovation and impact was recognised in 2025 when it was awarded a **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Literacy Prize** (NALA 2025).

Learn with NALA has a significant impact on learners’ skills, self-confidence and well-being.

You can hear from some of our learners directly in this video:

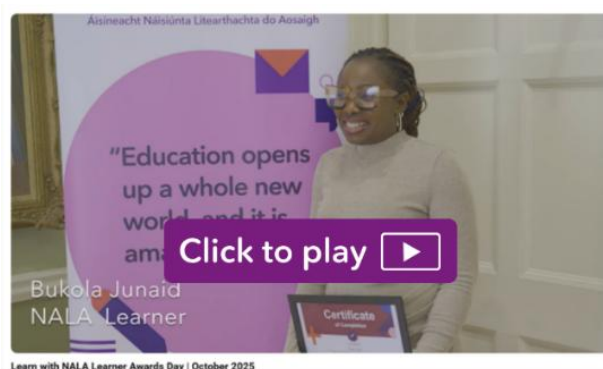


Figure 1: Video about NALA’s Learn with NALA Learner Awards Day, October 2025

⁵ Figures in this section come from NALA’s internal data unless otherwise specified

⁶ These figures are as reported to QQI for 2024. They are based on a learner starting a course or courses and achieving at least one QQI award for one subject

⁷ Our existing non-accredited courses at Level 1 will then be phased out

Learn with NALA's budget has not increased despite

- inflation
- increasing demands in relation to accessibility, verification procedures, and national certification requirements
- a commitment under the ALL Strategy to seek to 'expand Learn with NALA provision and its tutoring service' (Government of Ireland 2021, p56)

In 2025 we completed a strategic review of Learn with NALA's staffing and organisational structure, to inform the future of the service. The review found that approximately **€475,000** more annually from 2026 would enable us to maintain current levels of service.

We submitted the review to SOLAS on 1 August 2025. While we await a reply, we have paused registration of new centres and are operating a waiting list. There are currently 36 centres, approximately 500 adult learners, on the waiting list including

- prisons
- probation services
- disability services
- local youth services
- organisations working with people in recovery

We are asking for **€500,000** more annually from 2027 to maintain our current levels of service and meet growing demand and costs.

The **impact** of this additional annual funding in 2027 would be to:

- support an additional 1,500 adult literacy learners on Learn with NALA, including 1,000 learners on our new Level 1 accredited courses
- register and support up to 50 new centres working with target groups under the ALL Strategy
- begin the process of developing and launching new courses responding to needs such as AI and financial literacy at Level 1 or 2

The **implications** of static funding are:

- extending the pause of centre registrations
- pausing enrolments on the Level 1 accredited courses
- scaling back our provision to learners and centres using Learn with NALA

Literacy Ambassador Programme in prisons

‘Incarcerated Persons and Ex-Offenders’ are one of the 12 ‘potential vulnerable cohorts for targeted funding’ under the ALL Strategy (Government of Ireland 2021, p59). 64% of people in prison in Ireland have less than upper secondary education – over 3,600 people⁸.

NALA has delivered programmes in Irish prisons since 2019. Since 2023, our Literacy Ambassador programme has been delivered 18 times to **246 participants** across 9 prisons. This programme gives people the chance to become ambassadors of learning and literacy in the prison. It has helped participants develop their skills, confidence and sense of purpose.

“It’s given me more confidence to possibly be of help in here and in life on the whole.”

(Programme participant, feedback to NALA)

We received dedicated funding from the Adult Literacy for Life and Building Bridges Programme for this work in the last quarter of 2024 and throughout 2025. The annual budget for the project under Building Bridges was €74,000. This funding was discontinued in 2026.

We therefore had to pause the Literacy Ambassador programme until other funding could be secured. We have recently been awarded a small grant from the Ireland Funds’ Heart of the Community Fund which will allow us to deliver 2 short-term projects in 2 prisons in 2026.

Staff in the prisons we have worked with have expressed their support for NALA seeking more funding to continue the programme. In a recent survey (unpublished, available on request), they told us that its impact included

- more learners coming to the Education Centres
- learners progressing further with their education

⁸ Upper secondary education means Leaving Certificate, Post-Leaving Certificate or equivalent. These figures come from the **Irish Prison Service’s Annual Report 2024** (Irish Prison Service 2025), p26

“I do hope funding can be sought as the ambassador programme has transformed the lives of countless students here that the education section would have missed.”

(Quote from NALA’s 2026 survey of education staff in prisons)

We are asking for **€100,000** annually for the Literacy Ambassador programme.

The **impact** of this additional annual funding in 2027 would be to restore, further develop and embed the programme in Irish prisons, supporting Government ambitions for post-prison employment.

The **current** funding provided by a once-off philanthropic grant will not allow the programme to have significant long-term impact or reach a significant proportion of the more than 3,600 people in prison without upper secondary education.

Teaching and learning materials

NALA's teaching and learning materials are an important and valued part of adult literacy education.

In 2025, 30,000⁹ hard copies of our materials were requested and sent to literacy learners and teachers throughout Ireland.

As of 30 June 2026, we have distributed over 23,000 resources this year. As the costs of meeting the 2026 demand are projected to exceed our budget, we have paused the printing and distribution of materials pending a mid-year review and submission to SOLAS.

We are asking for an additional €50,000 annually to develop and distribute our teaching and learning materials.

The **impact** of this additional funding would be to allow us to meet the current demand and distribute 50,000 copies of teaching and learning materials in 2027.

The **implications** of static funding are to limit access to high quality, best practice literacy teaching and learning materials which support learners and educators throughout the sector.



Figure 2: Level 1 and 2 resources¹⁰

⁹ All figures in this section are from NALA internal data

¹⁰ Our initial print run of 8,000 workbooks ran out within 6 weeks after the February 2026 launch. The workbooks are also available on our website ([NALA 2026b](#))

2. Fast-track and fund Government-commissioned reports



To ensure that adult literacy needs are addressed and ambitions are achieved, we ask that DFHERIS fast-tracks the completion of the following reports and ring-fences the funding required in Budget 2027 to implement the recommendations:

- **Report of the Expert Group on Literacy Provision** (unpublished) that was submitted to SOLAS on 27 April 2026
- **Mid-term review of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy** (pending) that was commissioned by SOLAS in June 2026.
- **Strategic advice notes from the National Skills Council (NSC)** (NSC 2025 and pending)

The **impact** of fast-tracking these reports and actions would be:

- better chance of meeting the Government's targets under ALL and other strategies
- greater co-ordination, efficiency, monitoring and targeting of Government spending on adult literacy
- clarity for stakeholders in ALL including NALA, ETBs, and community providers on roles, responsibilities and resourcing.

The **implications** of delay would be:

- risk of duplication and inefficiencies in adult literacy
- lack of oversight of and monitoring progress on the implementation of the ALL strategy
- continued literacy needs affecting hundreds of thousands of Irish adults.

In relation to the mid-term review and strategic advice notes, we also request that DFHERIS ensures that:

- NALA is consulted on the mid-term review
- the National Skills Council's recommendation to establish a National Skills Observatory is completed by the second half of this year¹¹.

More detail on each report follows below.

¹¹ As noted by Minister Lawless in [response to a Parliamentary Question on 23 April 2026](#) (Dáil Éireann 2026)

Expert Group on Literacy Provision

The ALL National Programme Office set up an Expert Group on Literacy Provision in 2025 ‘to report to [DFHERIS] and make recommendations on how best the aims of the ALL Strategy for literacy provision can be met’ (Expert Group terms of reference, unpublished). NALA was a member of this group.

The Expert Group was asked to make its recommendations ‘within the current envelope of funding’¹² (Expert Group terms of reference, unpublished). This contrasts with the stated need in the Strategy to increase investment.

“There is a need to ramp-up literacy support capacity to fully address current and evolving needs. This strategy seeks to: increase investment in overall literacy provision across FET [...]

(ALL Strategy, Government of Ireland 2021, p56)

The **Budget 2026 Expenditure Report** commits to ‘incorporation of outputs’ from the Expert Group (Government of Ireland 2025a, p90).

Finalisation of the Expert Group report and ring-fencing funding to support its implementation will be essential to meet the ALL Strategy’s literacy and numeracy targets (see p20) and achieve the following key actions in the Strategy (Government of Ireland 2021, p65):

- ‘Increase investment in literacy provision, including more English language support for migrants.
- Consolidate literacy support programmes.
- Embed consistent good practice across FET via strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and ETBs.’

¹² The funding envelope was then reduced by the end of temporary additional funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in 2026.

Adult Literacy for Life Strategy Mid-Term Review

“A mid-term review of the ALL Strategy is planned for 2026. We will [...] work to ensure that the necessary resources are in place to meet our targets.”

(**National Digital and AI Strategy**, Department of the Taoiseach 2026, p73)

The Government’s 10-year adult literacy strategy aims to ‘ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential’ (Government of Ireland 2021, p4).

NALA advocated for and collaborated on the ALL Strategy’s development. We have constructively engaged and supported its implementation since 2021.

We welcome the Government’s recent commitments to a mid-term review of the Strategy including the Budget 2026 Expenditure Report that noted there will be ‘restructuring of governance of the ALL strategy’ (Government of Ireland 2025a, p90). This is essential as the Strategy’s governance structures including the Oversight Group and National Literacy Coalition have not met since summer 2024.

We will engage constructively with the review.

National Skills Council

The National Skills Council (NSC) ‘provides expertise from across society and the economy to advise Government on the direction and high-level objectives for skills policy formation in Ireland’ (National Skills Council Terms of Reference, NSC 2025b, p1).

In its first strategic advice note (**Skills Matter**, NSC 2025a) the NSC:

- highlighted the importance of foundational skills including literacy and numeracy and said it would direct its attention there next (p27)
- recommended the establishment of a National Skills Observatory (p2)

The NSC is currently working on its second strategic advice note to Government.

Early in 2026, the NSC formed a Foundational Skills Working Group which included representation from NALA. The Group made recommendations on foundational skills like literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for Ireland’s society and economy.

We expect that the NSC’s next strategic advice note to Government will include further recommendations for foundational skills, which may have implications for Budget 2027.

“The challenge of low foundational skills is large, growing, and consequential.”

(**Navigating Life with Low Literacy and Numeracy**, OECD 2026, p9)

Further information

About NALA

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), the leading independent voice for adult literacy since 1980.

We are a registered charity, company limited by guarantee and membership-based organisation. We receive annual funding from SOLAS to support the Further Education and Training strategy (Government of Ireland 2026) and the Adult Literacy for Life strategy (Government of Ireland 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



Figure 3: Adult literacy learners at a NALA Student Day

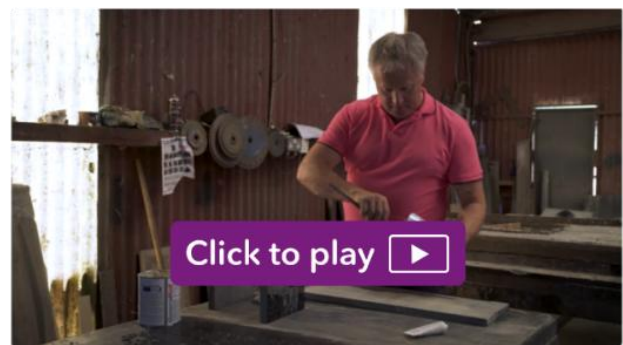
About the adult literacy challenge

Causes and consequences of literacy needs

Findings from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (CSO 2024) show that literacy and numeracy needs are associated with:

- low educational attainment
- low parental educational attainment
- low income
- unemployment or being outside the labour force
- older age
- poor health
- dissatisfaction with life
- low trust in others
- low belief that ‘people like me’ have a say in our political system¹³

These needs have real impact on people’s lives. In this video you can hear from Maurice who returned to education with Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board:



Maurice from Waterford says returning to education helped him get a qualification for his job

Figure 4: Video of Learner Story - Maurice from Waterford

¹³ For more information on all these findings, see our factsheets on

- **Education** (NALA 2025b)
- **Age, gender and country of birth** (NALA 2025c)
- **Employment** (NALA 2025d)
- **Health, happiness and social outcomes** (NALA 2025e)

Literacy and numeracy needs in Ireland

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (CSO 2024) found that:



- **1 in 5** adults¹⁴ in Ireland (21%, around 700,000¹⁵ adults) does not have basic proficiency in **literacy**¹⁶.



- **1 in 4** adults in Ireland (25%, around 835,000 adults) does not have basic proficiency in **numeracy**¹⁷.



Since the previous OECD Survey of Adult Skills in 2012 (CSO 2013)

- The share of adults with literacy needs has gotten worse. It rose from **18% in 2012** to **21% in 2023**)¹⁸
- The share of adults with numeracy needs has stayed the same.

The number of adults affected has also risen to due population growth¹⁹.

¹⁴ Aged 16-65

¹⁵ Estimates of the **number** of people with literacy and numeracy needs in Ireland are based on the findings of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (CSO 2024a) and **census 2022 population data** for adults aged 16-65 (CSO 2023). The same estimates are used by the ALL National Programme Office - see for example the ALL factsheet, '**New Adult Skills Research**'

¹⁶ This means they score at or below Level 1 on a five-level scale. At these literacy levels adults can, at best, understand short texts and organised lists, when information is clearly indicated

¹⁷ This means they score at or below Level 1 on a five-level scale. At these numeracy levels adults can, at best, do basic calculations but may struggle with tasks needing multiple steps

¹⁸ The CSO advises that this is not statistically significant when linking errors between the surveys are taken into account. However, it is borderline and in line with a rise in literacy needs found in most participating countries. For more detail on comparing Ireland's results in the 2012 and 2023 surveys, see our **factsheet on Comparisons** (NALA 2025f)

¹⁹ Based on Ireland's results in the 2012 Survey of Adult Skills, NALA had previously estimated that around 520,000 adults had literacy needs and over 750,000 had numeracy needs (see **NALA 2019**, p1 for example)

Literacy in the workplace

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (CSO 2024) showed that there are many adults with literacy and numeracy needs working in Ireland. About 1 in 6 employees has literacy needs (17%, roughly 420,000 people) and 1 in 5 has numeracy needs (20%, roughly 490,000 people)²⁰. These employees cannot fully develop their potential without these foundational skills.

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills also found that certain sectors have higher levels of need.

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%).

²⁰ The **numbers** of workers with literacy and numeracy needs are rough estimates based on the findings of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (CSO 2024a), census 2022 population data for adults aged 16-65 (CSO 2023) and the **employment rate of 15–64-year-olds in 2023** as found by the CSO Labour Force Survey (CSO 2024b)

Literacy, numeracy and adult learning

The OECD (2025, p52) has found that adults in Ireland with literacy needs are less than half as likely to be in adult learning (32%) as the highest literacy performers (71%).

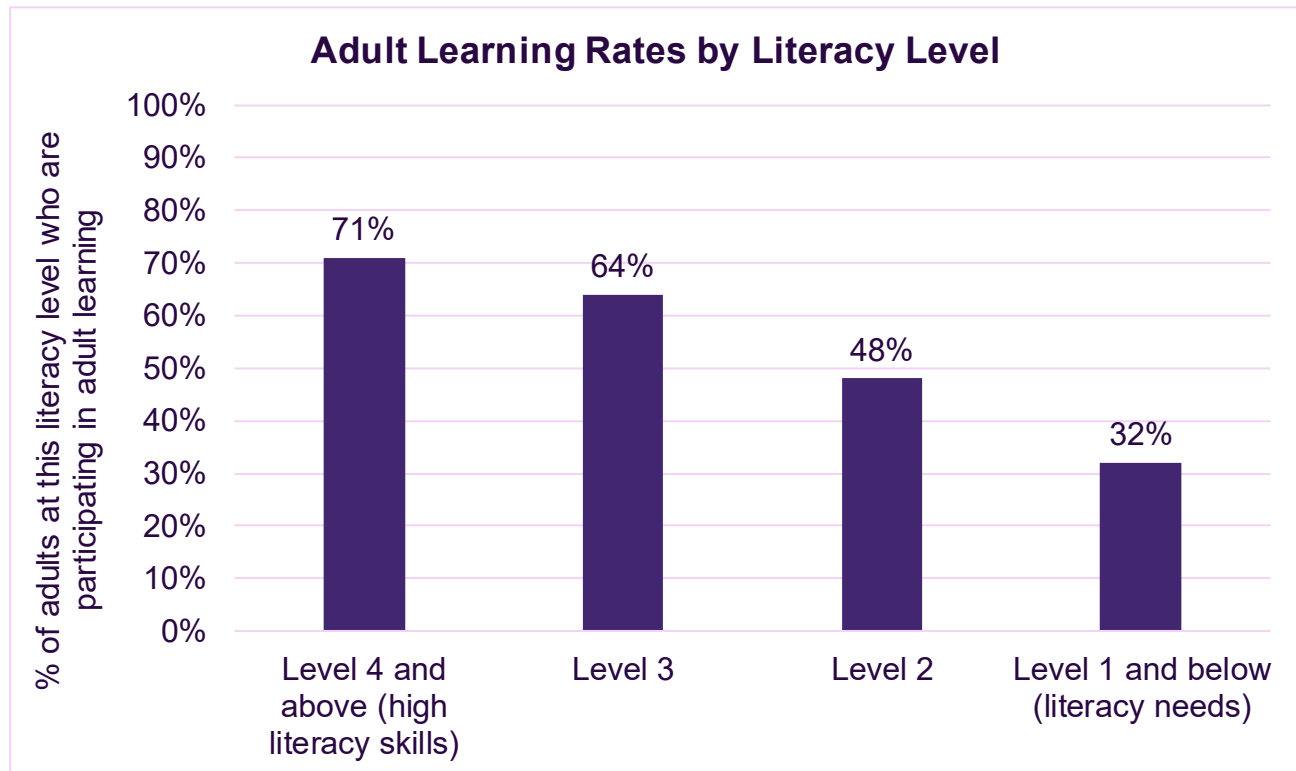


Figure 5: Rates of adult learning by literacy level

Digital literacy needs in Ireland

Findings on digital skills in 2025, from the Digital Economy and Society Index (European Commission 2026), show that



- around **1 in 6** adults²¹ in Ireland (17%, around 640,000 adults) do not have basic **digital** skills²².



The level of digital literacy needs in Ireland has improved over recent years, but the digital demands of everyday life are increasing at the same time.

“This Government will [...] invest in digital skills at all levels, from basic digital literacy for all citizens.”

(**Programme for Government**, Government of Ireland 2025b, p35)

²¹ Aged 16-74

²² This means that they have not done a minimum number of activities in each of five competence areas: Information and data literacy; Communication; Digital content creation; Safety; and Problem-solving. It is assumed that a person who has done an activity has the relevant skills.

About adult literacy policy and provision

Progress on ALL Strategy literacy targets

Table 2 and Figure 4 show where current levels of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are in relation to ALL Strategy targets (Government of Ireland 2021, p13). The digital literacy target has now been met. Literacy and numeracy have not improved and seem unlikely to reach the target levels without increased intervention (see statistics on p17).

Measure	Data source	Baseline	ALL Strategy target (reduce to...)	Deadline	Latest figures
% of adults (aged 16-65) at or below Level 1 in literacy	OECD Survey of Adult Skills	18% (2012)	7%	End 2031	21% (2023)
% of adults (aged 16-65) at or below Level 1 in numeracy		25% (2012)	12%		25% (2023)
% of adults (aged 16-74) without basic digital skills	Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)	47% (2019)	20%		17% (2025)

Table 2: Targets in Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, and latest figures for each target

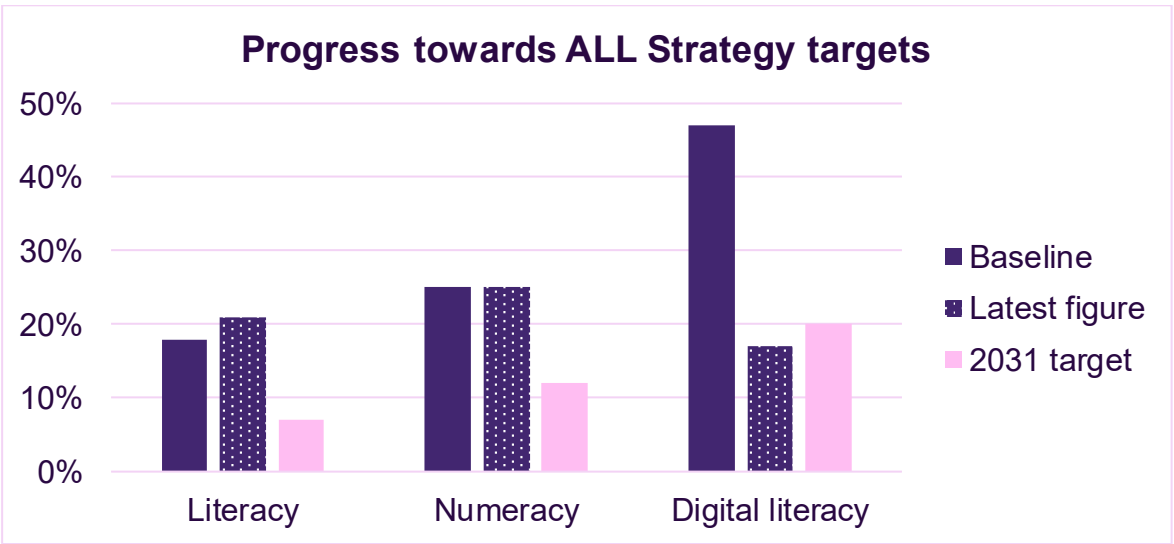


Figure 6: Targets in Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, and latest figures for each target

Other strategies relating to literacy

Adult literacy is a core part of many Government strategies, including:

- **Creating Futures: Further Education and Training Strategy 2026-30** (Government of Ireland 2026)
- **Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood** (Government of Ireland 2024)
- **National Financial Literacy Strategy 2025-2029** (Government of Ireland 2025c)
- **National Counter Disinformation Strategy** (Government of Ireland 2025d)
- **Digital Ireland: Connecting our People, Securing Our Future. National Digital and AI Strategy 2030** (Department of the Taoiseach 2026)
- **Better Public Services: The Public Service Transformation 2030 Strategy** (Government of Ireland 2023)
- **Building Pathways Together: Criminal justice Reintegration through Employment Strategy 2025-2027** (Department of Justice 2025)

Current ETB provision compared to the need

There were 49,304 unique learners on Education and Training Board (ETB) literacy and numeracy programmes²³ in 2024 (Adult Literacy for Life 2025, unpublished). As there are around 700,000 adults with literacy needs in Ireland, and 835,000 adults with numeracy needs, this means that only a very small proportion (perhaps 6% - 7%)²⁴ of adults with unmet literacy needs are in ETB provision.

Lived experience of literacy

At a workshop for our members on 26 May 2026, staff in adult literacy services told us they feel adult literacy is underfunded and undervalued compared with other areas of FET. Members of our Student Subcommittee have also raised concerns about funding issues they have perceived in their own centres. Increased budgets are not being universally felt on the ground.

²³ Excluding English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

²⁴ This is a rough estimate. The number of learners comes from 2024 and the number of adults with needs comes from 2023. The number of adults with needs doesn't include adults over the age of 65 and is based on 2022 census figures

“[...] year on year, SOLAS has been given an increase in budget, yet the most marginalised learners in Ireland, the adults in adult education services, are the ones who are taking the hit. Whatever is happening with that money, it is not filtering through to our sector.”

Adult Education Teachers' Organisation (AETO) member appearing before the **Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 18 February 2026**

List of acronyms

- **AETO:** Adult Education Teachers Organisation
- **AI:** Artificial Intelligence
- **ALL:** Adult Literacy for Life
- **CSO:** Central Statistics Office
- **DESI:** Digital Economy and Society Index
- **DFHERIS:** Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- **ETB:** Education and Training Board
- **FET:** Further Education and Training
- **NALA:** National Adult Literacy Agency
- **NSC:** National Skills Council
- **OECD:** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- **PIAAC:** Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
- **QQI:** Quality and Qualifications Ireland
- **SOLAS:** An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (State agency responsible for Further Education and Training)
- **UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Contact

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations further.

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Registered Charity Number: 20020965

CHY (Charity) Number: 8506

Company Number: 342807



Rialtas na hÉireann
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Arna chomhchistiú ag
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