

Adult Literacy: What is working and what could work better

Report on NALA members' workshop

Event held 26 May 2026



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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About the workshop

In May 2026, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) brought our members together for a workshop on the theme 'Adult Literacy: What is working and what could work better'. An Post kindly hosted and catered the workshop in their headquarters in the Exo Building, Dublin 1.

30 members attended, including:

- learners
- tutors
- Education and Training Board (ETB) staff
- Regional Literacy Coordinators
- community educators
- staff of other community and voluntary organisations
- academics
- NALA board members
- former practitioners



Figure 1: NALA members at the introduction to the workshop

First, our Research and Policy Officer Aoife Crawford set the scene by presenting details about the current adult literacy landscape in Ireland. Then, in four groups facilitated by NALA staff, we explored two questions:

- 1. What has your experience of adult literacy in Ireland been like over the past year?**
- 2. What improvements would make a real difference for adults with literacy needs?**

We gathered members' views through the facilitators' notes, a 'thought wall' where members could leave post-it notes, and feedback forms¹. Each facilitator presented their group's responses to the rest of the room after each question.

The workshop brought together a diverse cross-section of those who support adult literacy in Ireland and use NALA's supports and services. Participants were positive, passionate and ambitious. There was a fantastic energy in the room.

We are very grateful to every NALA member who took part and shared their views on what is working and what could work better for adult literacy in Ireland.



Figure 2: One of the workshop groups in discussion

¹ Direct quotes from feedback forms are presented in orange boxes in this report

What members told us

In this section we summarise what members told us in the workshop and we group their views into themes. We focus on the most common themes that were discussed by most or all of the groups.

Funding and policy

NALA members spoke about a lack of funding in the sector, and described the funding situation as:

- inadequate for the level of literacy needs in Ireland
- inconsistent
- uncoordinated (leading to duplication of efforts)
- not addressing the root causes of literacy needs

We heard that **core budgets have not increased** in recent years. Our members tell us that they are spending a lot of time and effort applying for funding for one-off projects, in competition with each other. They are concerned that funding is not always being spent in the most effective way.

“Money and commitment from Government needed.”

Our members believe that **NALA has an essential role** as a membership-based advocacy organisation. They want us to be stronger in our advocacy. It was recognised that NALA’s funding has flatlined. Members suggested that if more funding was provided for ‘Learn with NALA’ and the provision of NALA teaching and learning materials, this would have a significant impact.

“Lobby, lobby, lobby.”

There is a view among our members that **policy on adult literacy is not joined up**. They talked about how there are various bodies, for example NALA, the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) National Programme Office, the 16 different ETBs, and community education providers, whose roles lack clarity and whose work is not always co-ordinated. It was also clear that all these bodies share a commitment to support adults with literacy needs.

Members did not raise issues with the content of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy or other policies related to adult literacy. Many members felt, however, that **policies are not being implemented** well enough. Members want to see government taking greater ownership of adult literacy. At the same time, members also shared information about the **positive activity** that is happening under (for example) the ALL Strategy and the Financial Literacy Strategy.

“We need to find the means to translate it into action. Much of what came up is embodied in current strategies, but they need to be made to work for the stated government aim of reaching the furthest behind first.”

Our members told us clearly that **adult literacy is not being prioritised**. For example, adult literacy doesn't have the same funding as apprenticeships, adult educators don't have the same status as teachers, and Further Education and Training (FET) doesn't have the same facilities as higher education. Our members strongly believe that adult literacy should be a priority if the government really is going to **focus on the furthest behind first**. There was a clear commitment to this principle across the room.

Provision and practice

At the workshop, all four groups discussed the **decline in volunteer tutors and one-to-one tuition** over recent years. Members are concerned that learners are being pushed into classes rather than having a choice of one-to-one, group or online tuition. Most of our members who took part in the workshop spoke in favour of bringing back volunteers. However, the groups discussed various pros and cons, which are outlined in Table 1:

Pros	Cons
Volunteers facilitate one-to-one provision, which is needed to reach the furthest behind.	There aren't enough resources to train and supervise volunteers, or to keep centres open in the evenings.
The volunteer system has worked well in the past.	Using volunteers diminishes the value of the work that paid tutors do.
Classes are a barrier to adults with education-based trauma, whereas one-to-one rebuilds their self-esteem.	Adults from disadvantaged backgrounds are better served by professional tutors.

Table 1: Pros and cons of volunteer literacy tuition programmes

Members feel that **FET has become more corporate** and focused on economic aims.

They are now expected to focus on:

- recruiting high numbers of learners
- getting learners to do qualifications
- reporting on quantitative metrics

In general, across literacy provision, members want to see **more learning hours and more flexible offerings**.

The following **enablers and barriers for learners** were mentioned:

Enablers	Barriers
Free courses	Lack of broadband
Meeting learners where they are at; addressing their immediate need first	Inadequate transport
Option to get a certificate (including non-accredited NALA certificates)	Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) / Learner Details Form
Peer support groups for learners	Fetch courses website

Table 2: Enablers and barriers for adult literacy learners

Members also had **recommendations for professional development** for literacy tutors and educators, including:

- more funding and time for staff to do professional development
- literacy-specific tutor training
- tutors to upskill according to the needs in their local area
- dyslexia awareness training
- peer-to-peer training and ambassador roles, especially at induction
- clear entry routes into the profession, including an apprenticeship

Issues around tutors' pay, conditions and job security came up across the groups. Members linked this to the sector being underfunded and undervalued. They highlighted the negative impact on adult literacy services when experienced tutors or Adult Literacy Organisers leave or retire and are not replaced. Members are also unhappy about recent cuts to classes, and poor communication around that.

Outreach, awareness and target groups

Many of our members who took part in the workshop work with **target groups under the ALL Strategy** such as the Traveller community, carers, the unemployed, refugees, people with disabilities, people whose first language is not English and people who are in addiction/recovery. Members discussed the challenge of bringing high numbers of learners into the services, while also reaching the people who are furthest behind.

Members shared their suggestions for **how to bring adults with literacy needs into literacy services**:

- use trusted community groups and services like Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) clubs or shops
- have dedicated roles to act as liaison between adults with literacy needs and adult literacy services
- make sure services are community-led
- strengthen links with community organisations working with target groups
- ask target groups what provision would suit them
- use digital literacy (which has less stigma) as a way into literacy and numeracy learning
- make services very easy to spot, with clear signage
- make sure services are welcoming, from branding to staff at reception

“Please try to connect with what is going on locally.”

There is a sense among members that there is not enough advertising or **awareness-raising** now, compared with successful NALA campaigns in the past. Members noted that many people in Ireland don't know about adult literacy needs, and the issue is not high on the political agenda. They acknowledged the costs and challenges of running an impactful awareness-raising campaign in the digital era – with so many media channels available it can be hard to reach our desired audience. But our members do want to see a national campaign with strong learner voices, and more conversations about adult literacy to reduce stigma, which they flagged as the biggest barrier to accessing services.

Types of literacy

Some members argued that NALA and Government should **prioritise adults who have trouble with reading and writing** over other types of literacy learning, as they have the greatest need. These members shared their sense that the Government is currently prioritising other types of literacy. For example, we heard that

- this Government has talked more about financial literacy than basic literacy
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs are being addressed over basic literacy
- digital literacy supports are mostly helping well-educated people
- the term 'literacy' is being diluted and means less and less as it is over-used

However, other members made their case for the importance of other literacies. Digital literacy and family literacy came up most often.

Digital literacy

Members brought up a range of digital barriers in everyday life, including in:

- education and training
- work
- banking
- transport

They talked about how digital skills are required in more and more situations. Members told us that there should always be an alternative to the digital option, and support should always be available.

Members argued for very basic training (Levels 1 and 2) in digital and AI skills, which is suitable for the furthest behind. They also noted that digital learning can be a way into education for adults with basic literacy needs.

Family literacy

Our members also highlighted family literacy as a way into literacy learning for adults. This can be (for example) through a person helping their family member to sign up with a literacy service, or through a parent being motivated to return to learning so they can help with their child's homework. Members discussed the intergenerational nature of literacy needs: how a parent's literacy need can affect a child's educational opportunities and experiences.

“Further input into family literacy needed to prevent further widening of gap between 1st/2nd level ed. and therefore leading to school attendance issues in teenage years.”

Members expressed a sense that family literacy is underfunded and undervalued compared with other areas of educational intervention and research in early childhood, primary and secondary contexts.

Other areas

Literacy-friendly services

Members recommended literacy awareness training for frontline public service staff, and improved accessibility of public services.

Childhood education

Members noted that there are still many children with literacy needs, and shared concerns about problems in the childhood education system. For example:

- a general lack of flexibility
- the ongoing impact of the Covid pandemic
- upcoming changes to the secondary curriculum

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

It was clear that our members are starting to explore what AI tools can do. They felt there is a place for AI in adult literacy and recognised both the opportunities and the risks it creates. Opportunities include saving time. Risks include that we can't trust it to be accurate or to write in plain English by default.

Data

Members also discussed adult literacy data. They highlighted that:

- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills² is too infrequent and doesn't capture the whole population
- The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) may be underestimating the level of digital literacy needs in Ireland
- We need better statistics on provision
- Success measurement should include qualitative outcomes

² Also known as PIAAC, because it is run by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

Messages for the membership

Many positive messages came out of the workshop. We hope that these three will be inspiring takeaways for members who are reading this report:

1. There is **value** in having these kinds of conversations about adult literacy.
2. The adult literacy sector was **student-centred** and used Universal Design for Learning (UDL) before it was widespread – we should give ourselves credit as a sector for being pioneers.
3. **Hope** is important – we must have hope ourselves and encourage the hope people have that their literacy need can and will be addressed.



Figure 3: Members listening at the workshop

What NALA will do with this report

Our members' inputs are essential to inform and guide all our work.

This report will be shared with all NALA staff, NALA's members, Board and subcommittees and SOLAS.

Specifically, over the next year we will use this report to inform our

- ✓ pre-budget submission
- ✓ meetings with policymakers and funders
- ✓ inputs to the mid-term review of the ALL Strategy
- ✓ implementation of our Strategic Plan

We also look forward to holding similar events in the future to continue these important conversations, to inform our work and build our membership community.



Figure 4: NALA facilitator takes note of members' inputs in the workshop

List of acronyms

- AI – Artificial Intelligence
- ALL – Adult Literacy for Life
- CHY - Charity
- DESI – Digital Economy and Society Index
- ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages
- ETB – Education and Training Board
- FET – Further Education and Training
- GAA – Gaelic Athletic Association
- NALA – National Adult Literacy Agency
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- PIAAC – Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
- PLSS – Programme Learner Support System
- UDL – Universal Design for Learning

Contact

We are happy to discuss any questions or comments about this report.

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