



European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland

Submission to the 10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy for Ireland

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Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy for Ireland

We welcome the Government commitment to a 10-year whole-of-government adult, literacy, numeracy and digital strategy. The [European Anti-poverty Network Ireland](http://www.eapn.ie) (EAPN Ireland) is making this submission in order to highlight the importance of investment in supports and services to enable adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills and to highlight the link between literacy, poverty and social exclusion. We believe that a strategy to address literacy issues plays an important part in Ireland's response to poverty and social exclusion, this can be achieved if the strategy has a clear vision and objectives with named actions linked to individual Government Departments. In order for the strategy to be successful a whole-of-Government approach to its implementation is essential. It is clear that collaborative partnerships are also important for the implementation of the national strategy on a local and community-based level, to ensure that those who are furthest behind benefit most from the aims within the strategy. Research shows that people with higher levels of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving, using technology skills, are more likely to have better health and a longer life, be employed, and earn better incomes¹. This strategy is fundamental to addressing inequality in Ireland now and in the future. It is vital that the strategy recognises the link between literacy, numeracy and digital literacy supports and the inclusion of marginalised communities into Irish society.

Investment in Literacy Numeracy and Digital skills to address poverty.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has emphasised the importance of investment in secure, effective and efficient public services, supports and structures to support us during times of crisis and beyond. It has also revealed to us the deep-rooted inequality within Irish society, whereby those who were living in poverty prior to the COVID-19 pandemic are more likely to experience ongoing negative impacts of the pandemic relative to the general population. This includes families experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities, migrant communities, and people with literacy issues. The pandemic has highlighted specific inequities, for example the capacity to access education and literacy supports. In a time where internet access is presumed to be readily available to all, for many low-income families, struggling with the high cost of utilities and rent, access to a laptop and broadband represent luxury items.

Investment in literacy, numeracy and digital skills is a preventative measure against poverty and an investment in social inclusion and equality. Research has shown that poverty in Ireland costs the exchequer approximately 4.5bn. annually². The public service cost of poverty in the areas of further education and training is estimated to be about €92.9m per annum. This spending is essential as it

¹ [https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills%20volume%201%20\(eng\)--full%20v12--eBook%20\(04%2011%202013\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills%20volume%201%20(eng)--full%20v12--eBook%20(04%2011%202013).pdf)

² https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/the_hidden_cost_of_poverty_executive_summary/1?e=25010855/78809135 P5

facilitates the inclusion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds into education however the spending directed towards literacy numeracy and digital supports across the lifecycle, in a variety of settings, must be expanded and increased in order to intercept the cycle of disadvantage. The National Adult Literacy Agency has stated that its 2019 funding of €31m provided literacy tuition to 60,000 adults, this represents only 11% of the total number of adults with literacy needs.³ In 2019 €35 million was projected to be spent on adult literacy tuition. This is 0.325% of the total education budget (€10.74 billion) and 4.38% of the Further Education and Training budget (€800 million), working out at €538 per person.⁴ Ireland is ranked in 17th place in adult literacy and 19th in adult numeracy out of 24 countries, as represented by the most recent international adult skills survey.⁵ It is clear that further resources need to be directed towards adequately funded adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills services. This would represent a significant aspect of addressing poverty and social exclusion in Ireland by ensuring people can obtain the necessary skills to reach their potential, expand their choices and seize opportunities, empowering those in society who are most marginalised.

Ireland has signed up to a range of anti-poverty commitments including the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Global Sustainable Development goals. The Adult Literacy Numeracy and Digital Strategy has a part to play in ensuring Ireland can honour these commitments. The European Pillar of Social Rights includes the right to education training and lifelong learning, the right to equal opportunities and the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection and education. The Pillar also guarantees the right to active support to employment which includes training, and requalification, as well as for those who are unemployed, personalised, continuous and consistent support. We also see that within our national strategy, The Roadmap for Social Inclusion, a target has been set to reduce consistent poverty to 2% by 2025. (This target was originally set to be achieved by 2020.) The 10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy can assist in Ireland meeting its anti-poverty commitments by helping to facilitate the reduction of consistent poverty in Ireland. It can do so by ensuring that groups that are most likely to experience high rates of consistent poverty have access to the necessary literacy and learning supports they need that will enable them to participate in society and enhance the learning skills of entire households.

It is clear that an holistic, whole- of-Government approach must be central to the strategy. The literacy strategy should be part of enabling people to engage with employment and increase their household income, which assists in lifting people above the poverty line. However, the strategy also represents an investment in our societal values and our shared humanity, in families and communities, their aspirations and potential. Social inclusion and equality cannot alone be measured by the capacity to engage with employment but should also enable the full participation of everyone to engage with all aspects of their communities and society as a whole.

Below we outline our recommendations for the National Adult Literacy, numeracy and Digital Strategy

1: Target those who are furthest behind

Households with an inadequate income and resources and with low educational attainment are also those with the highest levels of poverty, deprivation, and consistent poverty (both poverty and material deprivation) in Ireland.⁶ The availability of a range of supports via a National Literacy

³ <https://www.nala.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Literacy-for-Life-NALA-2020.pdf> p70

⁴ [Literacy Programmes – Wednesday, 27 Nov 2019 – Parliamentary Questions \(32nd Dáil\) – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

⁵ *PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland*

⁶ De Buitleir, D. (2018). *Income Inequality in Ireland*. MacGill Summer School

Strategy, including numerical and digital, will most benefit low-income households, these are the households mostly likely to rely upon public service provision ⁷. Literacy and numerical and digital skills have lifelong impacts on people including the ability to engage with education, employment, their communities, as well as the earning capacity within households. The cyclical link between literacy and poverty cannot be ignored whereby literacy issues and lower educational attainment negatively impact employment and income opportunities, and in turn employment and income impacts the ability of households to access the range of goods, services and support they require to meet all of their essential households needs, (including the capacity and necessary understanding to address literacy issues.) The adult literacy strategy must be wide ranging in its reach and accessible, in order to break the cycle that contributes to poverty and social exclusion. The groups that need to be decisively targeted by the National Literacy Strategy must include those who are those most likely to experience consistent poverty.⁸ This includes, people who are homeless, people who are unemployed, employees with literacy needs, People with Disabilities, migrant communities, Travellers, lone parent households, and ex-offenders. The success of the Literacy Strategy will depend upon the introduction of no-fee and low fee services, and the ability of these services to reach and engage with those less likely to return to learning, based upon their own resources or circumstances, or those with a limited capacity to engage with literacy services in their current form. The removal of barriers and obstacles that hinder the participation of marginalised groups will be a crucial part of the fulfilling the aims and objectives of the strategy.

2: Multi-annual Funding

The strategy must aim to significantly increase the provision of literacy, numeracy and digital supports and services in the next 10 years and ensure quality learning supports in a wide range of settings, that will ensure access for those most in need of support. The collaborative nature of facilitating the availability of supports within arrange of settings, is central to the implementation of the strategy. In order to ensure this, and enable the participation of groups and individuals most in need, a multi-annual budgetary allocation must be made available. This should include the capacity for budgetary flexibility, in order to recognise and facilitate emerging needs, opportunities, innovation, and revise existing supports and services as required.

3: Establish a Literacy Guarantee

The new strategy should establish a literacy learning guarantee giving a learning entitlement for all adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification (leaving certificate or equivalent). This guarantee would benefit those in society who are most likely to be living in consistent poverty, or those on an income that does not meet the [Minimum Essential Standard of Living](#). The guarantee should operate on the basis of flexibility depending on the participants needs. In Ireland, the Return to Education⁹ model of 270 hours tuition helped to improve literacy, numeracy and personal development skills however international research indicates that 550-600 hours are needed to become fully literate and numerate.¹⁰ The Literacy Guarantee should incorporate state funded paid leave for the purpose of facilitating wide participation with literacy services, targeted specifically at marginalised groups already in employment or those with literacy needs in low paid employment. The strategy must also ensure there are no unnecessary or restrictive conditions preventing those who most need the support (for

⁷ <https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2018-10/CB201718.pdf> p85

⁸ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2019/povertyanddeprivation/>

⁹ [Implementation Guide for NALA / FÁS / VEC - Nala](#)

¹⁰ [Moser Report](#) (1999). Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start.

example people who are unemployed) from engaging with the literacy, numeracy and digital services that emerge as part of the strategy.

4: Invest in Family literacy

The National Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital strategy should integrate a more systematic approach to family literacy. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) recognises that family literacy represents much more than the needs and demands of school work, literacy in the home reflects the history and experiences of families, communities and cultures.¹¹ According to the research, parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on their educational outcomes than any other demographic measure including social class or level of parental income.¹² Family literacy focuses on the adult learner within a family and integrates a range of skills relating to health, education, personal, social and emotional development, and community participation.

The 2020 report on [Family Literacy Practices in ETBs](#) recommends the following:

- An interdepartmental government group on family literacy should be set up to steer the development of national family literacy policy. The group should consist of representative of practitioners, community stakeholders and family literacy experts. There should be family literacy champions and the strategy should encourage the equality outcomes that intergenerational learning can deliver.
- Collaborative family literacy partnerships should be developed in order to facilitate a more systematic approach to family literacy. These would allow FET, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), public libraries and CYPSCs (Children and Young People's Services Committees) to develop provision that harnesses all their skills, resources and contacts with parents who will most benefit from family literacy initiatives. These core groups should meet with other stakeholders and develop a local, needs-based family literacy strategy. Other stakeholders will need to participate less frequently and as local circumstances dictate. The partnership building process should be financially resourced and supported.
- Additional staff should be employed in outreach, brokerage and development of family literacy provision in each ETB area

5: Information and Awareness

The strategy must be accompanied by an information and awareness campaign, to ensure that those who most require the supports and services are aware of the strategy and the availability of an increasing number of services and supports over the next 10 years. It is essential that any campaign around literacy, numeracy, and digital skills recognises that those struggling with these issues have a need that was not adequately met or recognised by the Government, within their surrounding environments, or communities. The unfair stigma associated with literacy issues must be actively acknowledged by the strategy. It must be ensured that those who are seeking to address their literacy or numeracy issues are supported in reaching the realisation that the "shame" or stigma associated with adult literacy or numeracy issues should not be carried by them, but instead represents the failure and absence of available or adequate structures and supports that recognised or fulfilled these needs throughout the lifecycle. The strategy must ensure that those engaging with supports and services are empowered to advocate for and speak out about their experiences

¹¹ <https://www.nala.ie/publications/literacy-now/> P28

¹² Desforges (2003); Feinstein et al. (2004); NESF (2009).

regarding literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and their right to access these supports in order to meet these needs at whatever point in life they find themselves.

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