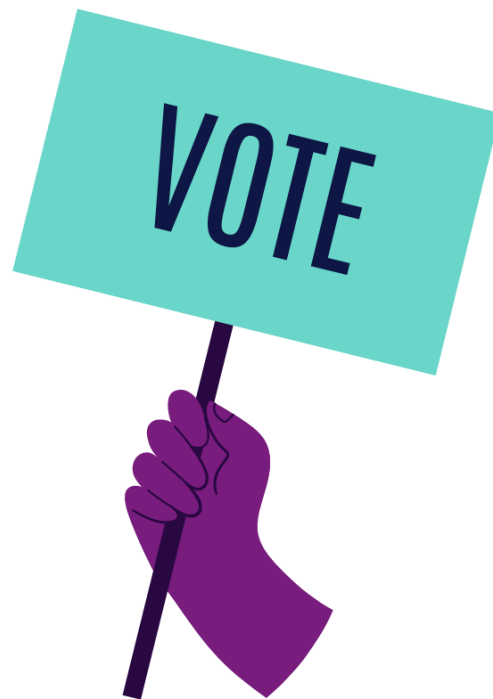


# Our general election asks for adult literacy

8 September 2024



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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## Our asks

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,700 members.

We have seven asks for political parties in this general election. Our asks cover plain language, literacy programmes and literacy policy.



### Plain language

1. Use plain language in your election campaign.
2. Require that publicly funded organisations use the International Standards Organisation (ISO) Plain Language Standard<sup>1</sup> in their communications.



### Programmes

3. Use the National Training Fund for training at Levels 1 to 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)<sup>2</sup>.
4. Fund literacy strategies adequately and effectively.



### Policy

5. Adopt the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp).
6. Develop a strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).
7. Appoint a Minister of State for Lifelong Learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The **ISO Plain Language Standard** is an agreed universal standard for plain language documents across all sectors.

<sup>2</sup> The **National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)** describes what a learner needs to know, understand and be able to do to achieve a qualification at a particular level. The levels range from 1 to 10. The Junior Certificate is Level 3, the Leaving Certificate is Level 5, and a PhD is Level 10.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

ALL	Adult Literacy for Life
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DigComp	European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
FET	Further Education and Training
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IPA	Institute of Public Administration
ISO	International Standards Organization
LGMA	Local Government Management Agency
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UN	United Nations

## Who are we?

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,700 members.

We believe literacy is a human right.

We are committed to making sure that people with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

## What is literacy?

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy 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.

In this document, we use the word “literacy” to refer to all of these skills.

Literacy needs come from educational and wider structural inequalities. Literacy is not about how intelligent a person is.

There are significant consequences for people who have literacy needs. These include missing medical appointments or missing out on promotion at work. Literacy has a major impact on social inclusion and social cohesion. If not addressed, unmet literacy needs create greater social exclusion.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills enable people to make sense of the world, to have their voices heard, and to reach their full potential.



# Why does your party need to know about adult literacy?

## 1. Adult literacy needs are common

There are around 500,000 adults in Ireland (1 in 6) who struggle with reading and understanding everyday text<sup>3</sup> like bus timetables and medicine instructions.

Even more adults in Ireland struggle with everyday maths (around 1 in 4, or 750,000)<sup>4</sup> and digital skills (around 4 in 10, or 1.2 million)<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. Adult literacy is at the heart of big issues in our society

Literacy skills can enable adults to recognise misinformation and disinformation about topics such as health, finance, climate and immigration. Adult literacy education can break cycles of intergenerational poverty and empower citizens to take part in civic, political and community life. Adult education is essential to tackle skills shortages and the digital divide.

## 3. Our Government has already made commitments to adult literacy

This Government introduced Ireland's first dedicated, whole-of-government strategy for adult literacy: **Adult Literacy for Life**<sup>6</sup>. Pillar 1 of Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033<sup>7</sup> (for early years to young adulthood) is about "enabling parents and communities to support learners' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy". Ireland's first financial literacy strategy is also being developed.

## 4. Important new literacy data will be published this December

On 10 December 2024, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) will publish updated figures on literacy needs in Ireland<sup>8</sup>. Your party should be ready to respond.

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<sup>3</sup> CSO 2013

<sup>4</sup> CSO 2013

<sup>5</sup> Cedefop 2020

<sup>6</sup> Government of Ireland 2021

<sup>7</sup> Government of Ireland 2024

<sup>8</sup> **Cycle 2 of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)**

## Literacy needs in Ireland



### Regional literacy levels a concern

Border and Northwest counties (Donegal, Monaghan, Mayo and Cavan) have the highest proportions of adults with no formal education or primary-school education only. In Donegal, 16% of adults have this level of education only. This compares with 6% in Fingal<sup>9</sup> (north county Dublin).



### Older generations most vulnerable

More than a quarter (28%) of over-65s in Ireland have no formal education or primary-school education only<sup>10</sup>.



### Some young men falling behind

While younger generations are more highly educated on average, over one in ten 15-year-old students in Ireland still do not have basic reading skills, and almost one in five do not have basic mathematics skills<sup>11</sup>. Almost twice as many boys (15%) as girls (8%) do not have basic reading skills at age 15<sup>12</sup>.



### Increase in ESOL learner numbers

The number of adults learning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in Irish further education – **usually in adult literacy services** - almost tripled between 2018 (10,000 ESOL learners<sup>13</sup>) and 2022 (29,000 ESOL learners<sup>14</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> CSO 2023

<sup>10</sup> CSO 2023

<sup>11</sup> ERC 2023

<sup>12</sup> ERC 2023

<sup>13</sup> SOLAS 2019

<sup>14</sup> SOLAS 2023

# What can your party do for adult literacy?

## Plain language

### 1. Use plain language in your election campaign

A communication is in plain language “if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.”<sup>15</sup>

#### How your party can lead

Use plain language in all your communications. Here are a few quick tips:

- Be personal and direct - use “you” and “we”
- Keep sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words
- Avoid jargon and explain acronyms
- Use a lot of white space
- Use appropriate images

You can read more [Plain English tips on our website](#). You may also wish to engage NALA’s Plain English Editing Service for your campaign documentation. If so, contact us.

#### Benefits

- ✓ More voters will understand and trust your message.
- ✓ Voters will appreciate your clear communications.

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<sup>15</sup> [International Plain Language Federation](#)



## Plain language is popular

The Plain Language Bill 2019 had cross-party support before it lapsed, when the Dáil dissolved for the 2020 General Election.

In the 2020 General Election, our call for parties to conduct their campaigns using plain language was covered extensively in local and national media.



## 2. Require that publicly funded organisations use the International Standards Organisation (ISO) Plain Language Standard in their communications

The 2020 Programme for Government<sup>16</sup> committed to introduce a plain language requirement for public service communication. The Government hasn't yet done this.

In the meantime, the ISO has recently developed its first Plain Language Standard<sup>17</sup>. This is an agreed universal standard for plain language documents across all sectors. The ISO Plain Language Standard provides a benchmark that could be used in a plain language requirement for public service communication.

### How your party can lead

Ensure that the ISO Plain Language Standard is formally adopted by all publicly funded organisations for digital, print and spoken communications.

The Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery, and Reform could issue a circular to publicly funded organisations. The circular would set out:

- the requirement to use the ISO Plain Language Standard; and
- what resources are available to support staff to use plain language.

Resources include Plain English training and the [Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public](#)<sup>18</sup>.

### Benefits

- ✓ Plain language communication will make public services more inclusive
- ✓ A plain language requirement will help Ireland's public services to comply with important legislation such as the European Accessibility Act<sup>19</sup> and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Government of Ireland 2020

<sup>17</sup> ISO 2023

<sup>18</sup> Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and the National Disability Authority, 2023

<sup>19</sup> EU 2019, coming into force in 2025

<sup>20</sup> EU 2016

### **Plain language saves time**

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council have redrafted their Tenant Handbook according to plain language principles. The new handbook has reduced the number of housing maintenance requests by 15%, saving 23 working days a year.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> LGMA and IPA 2022, p6

## Programmes

### 3. Use the National Training Fund for training at Levels 1 to 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)<sup>22</sup>

The National Training Fund is a dedicated fund for employment-focused training. It supports training for people who are employed or who are looking for work.

The National Training Fund originally supported training at all levels. It is currently used for training at Level 5 and above on the NFQ only<sup>23</sup>. But there is need for employment-focused training at Levels 1 to 4. For example, we know from research into our Learn with NALA distance learning service that half of our learners (at Levels 1 to 3) are employed<sup>24</sup>.

The National Training Fund has a surplus of over €1.4 billion<sup>25</sup>. This money could be put to good use at Levels 1 to 4, without reducing supports for Levels 5 and above.

#### How your party can lead

Unlock the surplus funds in the National Training Fund. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has advised on how this can be done<sup>26</sup>.

Re-open the National Training Fund to Levels 1 to 4. This can be done without unlocking the surplus.

#### Benefits

- ✓ Less money will be wasted
- ✓ There will be a more joined-up system from Level 1 to Level 10
- ✓ People with the most need for upskilling will be supported

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<sup>22</sup> The [National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#) describes what a learner needs to know, understand and be able to do to achieve a qualification at a particular level. The levels range from 1 to 10. The Junior Certificate is Level 3, the Leaving Certificate is Level 5, and a PhD is Level 10.

<sup>23</sup> This is a policy decision based on Indecon's recommendation in a 2018 review of the National Training Fund (Indecon 2018)

<sup>24</sup> NALA 2024, p95

<sup>25</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General 2023, p285

<sup>26</sup> OECD 2023, p140

## 4. Fund literacy strategies adequately and effectively

The Government has a number of strategies which relate to adult literacy, including:

- Adult Literacy for Life: a 10-Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy<sup>27</sup>
- Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood<sup>28</sup>
- Financial Literacy Strategy (forthcoming)
- Further Education and Training Strategy 2025-2029 (forthcoming)

These strategies must be adequately funded and targeted to respond to identified needs. Data must be gathered to find out where the greatest needs are, and what impact different actions are having. With information on needs and impact, funds can be targeted most effectively.

Under the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, the Government should put the **furthest behind first** in policymaking<sup>29</sup>. In education, this means adults with literacy needs.

As a matter of urgency, the next Government must invest in the implementation of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy to build on the momentum and collaboration that has already been achieved.

“We know it won't be easy, but it is clear we need to do more to address evidenced unmet needs in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in the adult population in Ireland to ensure full economic and social participation.”

Simon Harris TD, then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister's Foreword to the ALL Strategy

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<sup>27</sup> Government of Ireland 2021

<sup>28</sup> Government of Ireland 2024

<sup>29</sup> UN 2015

## **How your party can lead**

Ensure that adult literacy services have enough guaranteed multi-annual funding to:

- recruit and retain qualified staff on good working conditions;
- carry out community outreach work to bring people back to education;
- provide a continuum of provision from one-to-one tuition, to small groups, to certified learning; and
- make services available in deprived areas, including rural areas.

Provide adult learners with supports such as:

- childcare;
- counselling and career guidance; and
- allowances for food, information and communication technology (ICT) devices and connections, accommodation and travel.

## **Benefits**

- ✓ Limited resources will be targeted
- ✓ Strategy commitments will be met

## Impact on learners

The most important benefit of resourcing literacy programmes is the impact on learners. Adult learners have told us about how learning has impacted their lives in many different ways. The following quotes are from learners on our Learn with NALA distance learning service<sup>30</sup>:

“It ... gave me great confidence [...] I just felt it was something I was doing for myself as I fell through the cracks in school and probably at home as well. I really did enjoy it and got so much from it.”

“English is not my first language. I speak Portuguese. When I started the Learn with NALA Programme I couldn't even call to ask for the lessons, I asked friend. [...] for the small things in my life even to explain to the doctor how I am sick, I can now do this. I can also go out and buy something, or to look for a school for my kids.”

"I have a learning difficulty and reading and writing was a big problem for me. I am in a job part-time and getting some support here as well. I found it very helpful for me and lets me do the books in my job now.”

You can hear learners from Learn with NALA and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) around the country tell their own stories on our [YouTube channel @Nalalreland](#)

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<sup>30</sup> NALA 2024, p108 – p114

## Policy

### 5. Adopt the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)

The Government aims to increase the share of adults in Ireland with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030<sup>31</sup> (from 62% in 2020<sup>32</sup>). This will require significant policy intervention at all levels of the Irish education system.

At the moment, there are several policies about digital skills across several Government departments. We need a more consistent approach.

We also need a more targeted approach. At the moment, digital skills are mostly taught in schools through “technology-enhanced learning” of other subjects. Digital skills are not taught as a core subject like English or Maths.

DigComp is a European Union-wide framework for measuring digital competences such as “collaborating through digital technologies” and “developing digital content”<sup>33</sup>. It has been adopted and adapted by other countries, for early childhood to adult education.

#### How your party can lead

Adopt, adapt and implement DigComp throughout the Irish education system. Start by designing dedicated primary and secondary curriculums for digital skills, based on DigComp.

#### Benefits

- ✓ DigComp is a readymade framework based on best available evidence
- ✓ Adopting DigComp will enable a consistent approach to digital skills
- ✓ DigComp provides opportunities for international benchmarking

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<sup>31</sup> Harnessing Digital – the Digital Ireland Framework, Government of Ireland, 2022

<sup>32</sup> Cedefop 2020

<sup>33</sup> European Commission 2016



## 6. Develop a strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Demand for ESOL tuition has significantly increased in recent years. ESOL tuition is currently part of the remit of adult literacy services in Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Their work has been essential for the integration of migrants and refugees into Irish society.

Both literacy and ESOL are areas of high demand. In 2022 there were 29,000 ESOL learners and 26,000 adult literacy group learners in Irish Further Education and Training (FET)<sup>34</sup>. ESOL literacy refers to those learners who have literacy needs in their native language. Literacy, ESOL and ESOL literacy each require specific attention and specific expertise.

SOLAS<sup>35</sup> and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) called for “a national framework for publicly funded ESOL”<sup>36</sup> in 2018, noting that “publicly funded ESOL provision in Ireland has developed in the absence of any overall national strategy or policy initiative”<sup>37</sup>.

### How your party can lead

Develop a standalone strategy for ESOL, or address ESOL as a priority area within wider integration strategy. An ESOL strategy should ensure that:

- services have enough resources to meet demand;
- learners receive the supports they need; and
- adult literacy services are supported to achieve their core mission.

### Benefits

- ✓ An ESOL strategy will bring clear direction to ESOL provision
- ✓ Improved ESOL provision will support the integration of migrants and refugees

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<sup>34</sup> SOLAS 2023, p9. The 26,000 learners in adult literacy groups does not include adult literacy learners in one-to-one tuition or learning independently online.

<sup>35</sup> SOLAS is the state agency responsible for Further Education and Training in Ireland

<sup>36</sup> SOLAS and ETBI 2018, p45

<sup>37</sup> SOLAS and ETBI 2018, p44

## 7. Appoint a Minister of State for Lifelong Learning

Participation in lifelong learning in Ireland “lags behind top EU performers”<sup>38</sup>. Adults who have the most need are the least likely to engage in lifelong learning. A recent report from SOLAS found that those with Level 1 to 3 qualifications had a 5% lifelong learning rate. This is compared with a 22% lifelong learning rate for those with Level 9 or 10 qualifications<sup>39</sup>.

Many people in our society are being left behind. At the same time, skills gaps in our economy are not being filled. The OECD has advised Ireland to “provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning”<sup>40</sup>.

Ireland needs one lifelong educational system, that learners can navigate easily. We need to know how learners are progressing across various sectors throughout their lives. We need to ensure that their right to lifelong learning<sup>41</sup> is met. To make this happen, we need joined-up thinking between different departments.

### How your party can lead

Appoint a Minister of State for Lifelong Learning. This cross-departmental role would coordinate the literacy and other lifelong learning work of the Department of Education; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills (DFHERIS) if they remain two separate departments; and the Department of Finance.

### Benefits

- ✓ The Minister of State will ensure that lifelong learning is a priority in Government policymaking
- ✓ Learners will benefit from a more co-ordinated lifelong learning system

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<sup>38</sup> OECD 2023, p21

<sup>39</sup> SOLAS 2024

<sup>40</sup> OECD 2023, p32

<sup>41</sup> This right is set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EU 2017)

## Contact

We are happy to discuss our recommendations further.

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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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**Company Number:** 342807



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