

Submission to consultation on Education and Public Engagement Policy

Submitted to the Electoral Commission

26 March 2025

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Summary of Recommendations

1. Make registration and voting processes as simple as possible
2. Make polling stations as literacy friendly as possible
3. Help voters to prepare for voting
4. Raise awareness in inclusive ways
5. Target your education and public engagement efforts
6. Build belief in the political system

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).

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 Electoral Commission's Education and Public Engagement Strategy.

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 (Central Statistics Office, CSO 2024).

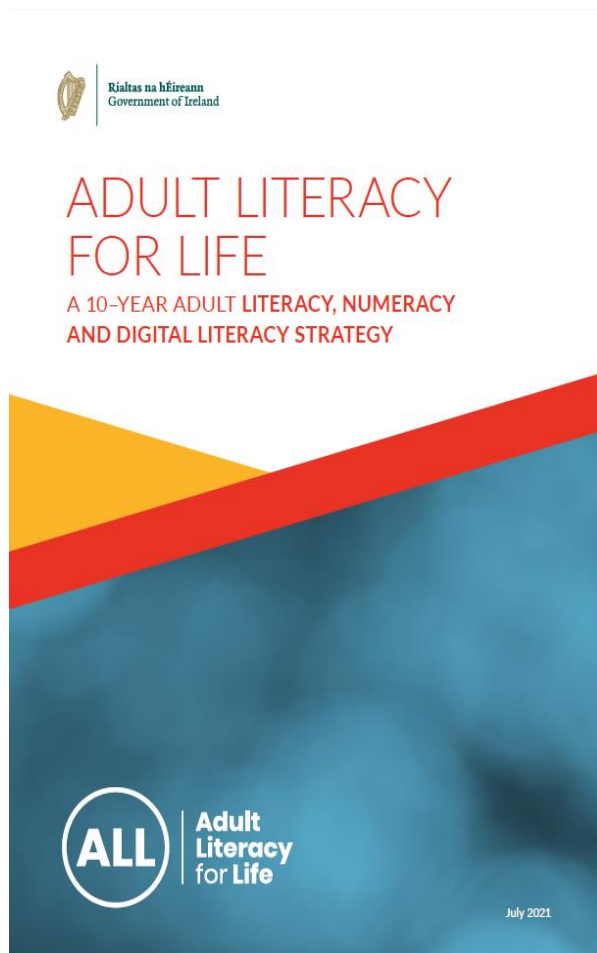
For equality, priority should be given to those who have experienced the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.



Adult Literacy for Life strategy

The Government published a **10-year Adult Literacy for Life strategy** 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. This includes the Electoral Commission and other state bodies.



www.adultliteracyforlife.ie

Adult literacy needs in Ireland today

Findings from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills 2023, released on 10 December 2024 (CSO 2024), show the following:

- **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.

For example, these people would most likely find it difficult to read a long, complex information booklet about a referendum question.

- **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.

For example, the **Irish Times coverage of the survey results** (Irish Times 10 December 2024) highlighted that numeracy can affect understanding of numbers used in politics.

Other findings on digital skills in 2023, from the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 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. Activities include sending an email, fact-checking, or changing software settings.

Updating voter registration details online may be a challenge for this group.

¹ Aged 16-65

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

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 organisations to be aware of literacy needs and to be literacy friendly. This means that the organisation makes it as easy as possible for staff and service users to get the information they need, to use their services and to participate fully.

The resources on this page can help your organisation to be more literacy friendly.

Communications

- NALA's **plain English resources** including our **Writing and Design Tips** (NALA 2024a)
- 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)

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**"

Literacy and political engagement

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 found that in most countries, people with low levels of literacy and numeracy are less likely to believe in their ability to affect government decisions. The OECD calls this belief “political efficacy”⁵.

In Ireland, for example, 25% of adults with high proficiency in numeracy⁶ have high political efficacy, but just 15% of adults with low proficiency in numeracy⁷ have high political efficacy (see Figure 1).

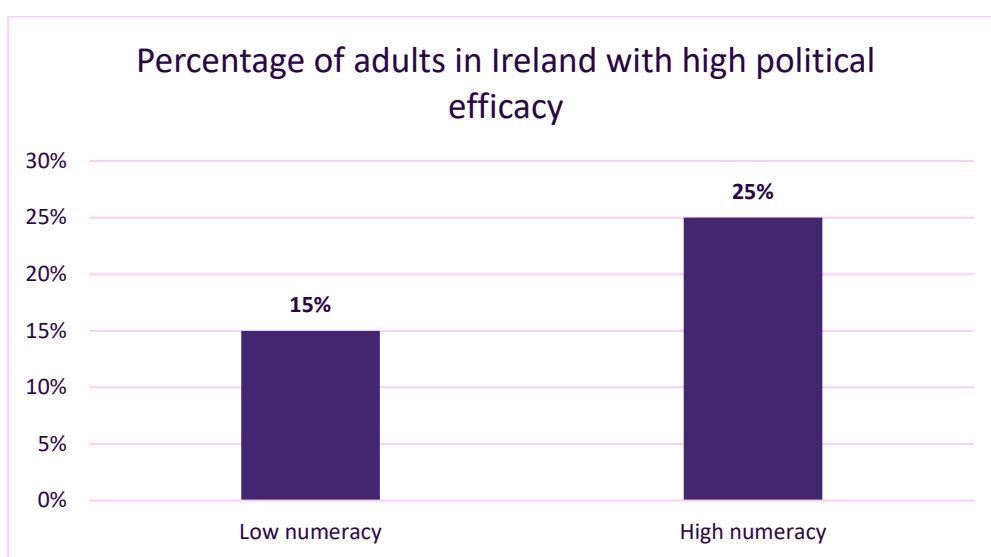


Figure 1: Percentage of Adults in Ireland with High Political Efficacy, by Numeracy Level. Source: OECD 2024b

The OECD highlight in their analysis how low political efficacy relates to disconnection, and lack of digital literacy:

“Many low-skilled adults feel disconnected from political processes and lack the skills to engage with complex digital information, which is a growing concern for modern democracies.”

(OECD 2024b, p24)

⁵ “High political efficacy” means that the person gave a value of 7 or higher on a 10-point scale in response to the question, “How much would you say the political system in Ireland allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?”

⁶ Level 4 and above on a 5-point scale

⁷ Level 1 and below on a 5-point scale

In a review of research literature on the relationship between adult literacy and political engagement, Stromquist (2008) finds that participation in literacy learning generally increases political engagement. She proposes that the learner's improved self-esteem is what leads to the rise in their political engagement. This suggests that skills and self-confidence are both important for political engagement.

There are also barriers within voting systems that can be addressed. For example, international research has shown that the readability of material that people are asked to vote on can affect voter engagement (see for example Garnett and Blais 2020 on referendum texts in Canada, or Parker 2024 on propositions in the US).

A 2017 paper by Summers et al., '**Understanding Voting Barriers to Access for Americans with Low Literacy Skills**', provides a useful overview of how voting barriers affect people with literacy needs. The following is a selection of findings from the study which can be applied to the Irish context.

- **Importance of political efficacy**

"The most frequently cited motivation not to vote was a belief that politicians are dishonest or that the system is rigged, so that voting doesn't make a difference" (p300), while on the other hand, "by far the most frequently expressed, and foundational, motivation to vote was a belief that election outcomes influence governmental decisions" (p299).

- **Voter anxiety**

Voters were more likely to fear having a negative experience in the polling station than to have personally had a negative experience in the polling station. They often worried that the process would be more complicated than it actually is (p300).

- **Difficulties with registration**

Registration was particularly challenging, and "participants who had succeeded in registering to vote typically received external support" (p303). Many voters weren't sure how to update their registration details when they move house, or didn't realise they have to.

- **Help in the polling station**

Some voters were reluctant to ask for help in the polling station as they didn't want to look "ignorant" (p300). However, staff were a very important source of support - "the role of poll workers was crucial in helping the sizeable contingent of voters who were in the wrong precinct or who had not successfully registered" (p305).

- **Awareness of supports**

Many voters were not aware of supports that could help them to learn about the voting process or decide how they will vote, such as information websites.

Response to consultation questions

The online form for the consultation on the Electoral Commission's first Education and Public Engagement Strategy asks the following questions:

1. What are your thoughts on current efforts to encourage people to vote in Ireland?
2. Please share your ideas and/or suggestions to encourage more people to vote in Ireland.
3. Please provide a summary of your submission.

We will answer question 1 briefly first. Then we will share our recommendations in relation to question 2. Finally, we will provide a summary of our submission.

We make our recommendations based on what we know from research evidence and our 45 years as literacy experts. Our responses should be considered in the context of the guiding principles and evidence outlined above.

1. Current efforts to encourage people to vote in Ireland

There are great efforts being made to encourage people to vote in Ireland. For example:

- the **Dublin Adult Literacy Centre (DALC)** is doing inspiring work on voter education;
- adult literacy learning in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and community education centres around the country is supporting voter participation, by improving adults' literacy skills and self-confidence;
- the **Adult Literacy for Life Collaboration and Innovation Fund** can support voter education initiatives, such as the **Active Citizenship Voter Education Course** by DALC;
- many non-profit organisations are working with marginalised communities to empower them to engage in politics and voting;
- the Electoral Commission puts out accessible information about elections on your website and social media channels; and

- the Electoral Commission is forming working groups to address key aspects of voter education and engagement, including adult education.

Historic decisions like including photographs of candidates on ballot papers (driven by **former literacy learner, Ernie Sweeney**) have made the voting process more inclusive. This shows that the system can be changed when there is enough will to do so.

Now, more can be done to build on these foundations. It will be helpful to have the Electoral Commission bring diverse efforts together in a national, strategic approach. Successful local initiatives could be rolled out nationwide.

2. Our recommendations to encourage more people to vote in Ireland

This part of our submission presents practical recommendations for the Electoral Commission to consider and include in your Education and Public Engagement Strategy.

Recommendation 1: Make registration and voting processes as simple as possible

We recommend that you review the whole voting system in Ireland from a literacy perspective, to identify barriers and remove them where possible. This review could consider, for example:

- processes for registering to vote and updating the electoral register;
- timelines for same (these could be a lot more generous);
- how to enable voters who have made a genuine error with registration to cast their vote; and
- design and wording of polling cards, ballot papers, election information and candidate communications.

It will be easier to engage the public in voting if the voting process is more accessible, and easier to navigate and understand. All voters will benefit from a simpler system.

Recommendation 2: Make polling stations as literacy friendly as possible

We recommend that you commit to giving voters with literacy needs a positive experience at the polling station. An ideal polling station would have, for example:

- clear and minimal signage that is designed in accordance with the **Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public** (NDA & DPER 2023);
- an obvious and welcoming help desk; and
- staff who have undertaken literacy-awareness training to recognise when someone needs support.

A positive or negative experience can influence whole families or communities through word of mouth, so this is an important part of voter engagement.

Recommendation 3: Help voters to prepare for voting

We recommend that you invest in awareness campaigns, and support adult education programmes, which explain registration and voting processes. These should run at all times, not just when an election or referendum is coming soon.

Key messages for voters with literacy needs are that help is available in getting ready to vote and in the polling station, and that lots of people ask for help.

Registration drives can be very helpful to support people through the registration process. These drives are also an opportunity to raise awareness of training or other information sources for anyone who would like to learn more about voting.

Recommendation 4: Raise awareness in inclusive ways

We recommend that you take a plain language approach to all communications with the public, using supports available from NALA or others.

“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”

International Plain Language Federation

We don't recommend relying on websites or social media, as you could miss the 27% of the Irish population who don't have basic digital skills (European Commission 2024). Instead, you will benefit from using a diversity of media in your awareness campaigns. We have found that radio is particularly effective at reaching people with literacy needs.

Recommendation 5: Target your education and public engagement efforts

We recommend that you research which communities in Ireland are least engaged with voting, and why. This will provide an evidence base for targeted communications and outreach.

In-person peer outreach is important for marginalised groups who have historically low voter turnout. These relationships can take time to build but the investment is worthwhile. If the Electoral Commission doesn't have a remit to do outreach work, you could collaborate with organisations who do.

Recommendation 6: Build belief in the political system

We discussed above (in the section on Literacy and Political Engagement) how literacy skills relate to political efficacy, and how political efficacy relates to voting behaviour. Based on this, a key message for the Electoral Commission to promote is that voting makes a difference. We recommend that you share examples of real-world impacts that voting can have.

Work to improve digital and media literacy skills can also improve trust in the political system. We have recently published a workbook on media literacy called "**Questions Matter**" (NALA 2024b) which is aimed at adult literacy learners.

To support digital and media literacy you could, for example:

- align your Education and Public Engagement Strategy with the National Counter Disinformation Strategy;
- promote adult learning initiatives in digital literacy and media literacy through your working groups;
- fact-check common misconceptions of how the political system in Ireland works.

3. Summary of our submission

In this submission, we have discussed the level of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland today and how those needs can affect political engagement, including voting.

We have outlined good work which is already ongoing to engage adults with literacy needs in voting.

Finally, we have made six recommendations for the Electoral Commission's Education and Public Engagement Strategy.

We are calling for the voting process and experience to be considered through a literacy lens; for voters to be provided with clear information about voting through a variety of media; and for key messages to be delivered to key communities. Some key messages for adults with literacy needs are that help is available, and voting makes a difference.

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
DALC	Dublin Adult Learning Centre
DESI	Digital Economy and Society Index
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
ETB	Education and Training Board
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NDA	National Disability Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations

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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.

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



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Government of Ireland



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an Aontas Eorpach

Co-Funded by the
European Union

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