

# An Inclusive Approach for an Inclusive Strategy

The role of ETB FET services in Adult Literacy for Life



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Adult Literacy for Life, the new 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, envisages a whole-of-society approach to ensuring that adults in Ireland have the literacy skills they need to function in an inclusive and equitable economy and society. ETB FET services have the experience and expertise to play a leading role in implementing these objectives.

## Introduction

The world of work is changing rapidly. Anticipating and planning for new occupations and skills needs is challenging. What is certain is that people need a broad range of skills and competences that will enable them to function effectively. This is true not only in working life but in society as a whole, helping to connect people's experiences, motivations, and aspirations both personally and as active members of their communities. This need is particularly relevant in the aftermath of the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Adult Literacy for Life (ALL), the 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, was launched by Minister Harris on 8 September 2021, honouring a commitment outlined in Our Shared Future, the 2019 Programme for Government. Its stated vision is 'an Ireland where every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully engage in society to reach their full potential' (SOLAS, 2021, p. 33).

Many strategies and programmes are already in place across government to support adults to develop and improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. What is new here is that the ALL strategy envisages a whole-of-society approach – government, economy, and community – to implementing its objectives. It recognises that the provision of existing supports across the various organisations and departments is often highly fragmented and uncoordinated.

Additional opportunities and clear progression pathways need to be made available, and the structural inequalities that cause literacy difficulties and hinder access to solutions need to be addressed. The ALL strategy argues that the proposed integrated and collaborative approach will require a strategic response at national, regional, and local levels, similarly to the Healthy Ireland Strategic Plan 2021–2025 and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2021–2025, and that it can be informed by international initiatives.

### Key recommendations of Adult Literacy for Life

The ALL strategy ‘aims to equip all adults with the literacy skills they need’ and is ‘a key step in achieving Ireland’s goal of a fully inclusive and equitable society and economy (SOLAS, 2021, p. 7). It outlines the existing supports and proposes a joined-up, systems-based approach – across education, health, local government, employers, and community – to addressing barriers, connecting these supports, and making them accessible to those in need. It also recognises the need to expand the supports to meet emerging needs, and it envisages that the result will be citizens, an economy, and communities that can meet the work and life challenges that lie ahead.

Implementation of the ALL strategy will be steered by a cross-government implementation committee, chaired by the Minister and supported by a central, department-led Programme Office (and Collaboration Fund). This in turn will coordinate a multi-stakeholder National Literacy Coalition. At regional level, it is proposed that Regional Literacy Coalitions, supported by Regional Literacy Coordinators, will be established under the auspices of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The Regional Coalitions will be the link to local partnership responses and to national and government structures and objectives.

### Current role of ETB FET services in literacy services

ETB Further Education and Training (FET) services are the largest providers of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills services and supports for adults in Ireland, with a statutory responsibility to fulfil this role. They provide a wide range of specialised non-accredited and accredited functional literacy programmes (L1–L4 in the National Framework of Qualifications), including family learning and prison education, to an average of 25,000 learners annually in ETB centres and community settings.

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The courses use real-life content, often provided by the learners themselves, to show the necessity and value of the skills gained to people’s lives and work. Classes are small, tailored to individual needs, and delivered using approaches aimed at promoting self-confidence and continued engagement and enjoyment of learning.

Additional supports help learners to engage meaningfully with their learning, with wrap-around services such as guidance, counselling, and access to digital devices offered alongside teaching. Addressing barriers such as the digital divide and providing appropriate learner support will continue to be essential as the FET sector expands and develops further through the implementation of the ALL strategy.

Literacy, numeracy, and digital skills development are increasingly integrated into higher-level FET training programmes such as apprenticeships, traineeships, and other employment-focused courses. Outcomes from ETB evaluations on apprenticeship courses that provided additional literacy and numeracy support show increased confidence, more propensity to learn, and improved problem-solving skills among participants, as well as achievement of higher grades.

ETBs also have the expertise and resources to provide a coordinated response to the need for developing the transversal skills of those already in employment, through a range of integrated supports. Literacy and digital skills initiatives such as Explore and Skills for Work can work well in conjunction with, or as progression to, more advanced employee development programmes such as Skills to Advance. As a local example, Donegal ETB provided basic training in digital skills to staff at an engineering firm in Killybegs in advance of their pursuing online training in supervisory management.

Other important examples of ETB transversal-skills support are Irish courses for native speakers who wish to improve their literacy skills, and English-language and intercultural courses for migrants, including refugee resettlement and Direct Provision programmes. These are provided to an average of 12,000 learners annually.

ETB FET staff are involved in all relevant education networks in the country and have a long history of working in partnership at local, regional, and national levels to develop and deliver relevant services to adult learners, particularly those who have experienced educational disadvantage. Staff are highly trained and experienced professionals who provide not just teaching and curriculum development and review but also quality assurance, literacy awareness training, recognition of prior learning (RPL), referral and signposting services, and other related expertise to community groups, government departments, and agencies on request.

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In 2020 and 2021, extraordinary demands were placed on ETB FET staff by the Covid-19 pandemic. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), in its research on the impact of the pandemic on teaching, learning, and assessment in FET, found that FET learners ‘consistently commended the availability and responsiveness of teaching staff, the lengths to which practitioners went to keep learners engaged in their learning, and the level of support and flexibility they received’ (QQI, 2020, p. 59).

### Expanded role for ETBs in implementing the ALL strategy

If ETB FET services have statutory responsibility for the above and are already doing it all, it is reasonable to ask why so many people in Ireland still struggle to address their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills deficits. (We might also ask why these deficits exist in the first place.) The ALL strategy outlines some of the issues: structural barriers to access, insufficient opportunities that are uncoordinated across a plethora of organisations, and unclear progression pathways for learners. ETBs will not disagree with this assessment.

For ETBs to carry out their expanded role in implementing the strategy, they require a two-pronged approach:

### 1. *Development and expansion of existing services*

Some existing services being provided by ETBs are long-standing and have been developed over many years, such as the provision of functional literacy programmes. Others are more recent, for example the integration of literacy supports into higher-level course curricula, and digital skills supports for those in employment. Services may traditionally have developed in an ad hoc manner, but today a more strategic approach to the development and expansion of structures is in place.

Adult Literacy for Life offers further opportunities to reimagine the roles of literacy, numeracy, digital skills, and language provision in FET services, including in curriculum and progression-pathways development, learner support, and technology-enhanced and blended learning. This will support ETBs to plan systematically and strategically for the full participation of learners, and will help them support other stakeholders and community partners in realising the strategy's objectives. These opportunities will also take full advantage of the immense potential of digital technologies, which are vital to the successful delivery of the strategy's objectives of facilitating learning in the post-Covid-19 landscape.

### 2. *Key role of ETBs*

The ALL strategy has confirmed the key role of ETBs in its successful implementation, including coordinating and staffing the Regional Coalitions. As key players in the provision of literacy services, and as experienced partners in the relevant local, regional, and national structures, ETBs are best placed to perform this function. Meeting literacy demands in the context of Ireland's Sustainable Development Agenda, the European Commission's priorities (including the European Green Deal and the 2030 Digital Compass), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Social Charter will all require new and flexible strategies at regional and local levels.

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As well as the Regional Coordinator posts, additional resources may be required as a result of the development of action plans by the various partners in the Regional Coalitions. The support and expertise of colleagues in ETBs will inform and guide Coalition partners who may not be as experienced in directly meeting the needs of learners who have new or existing challenges in literacy, numeracy, and digital skills development.

### **Conclusion**

ETBs have a long history in developing and delivering literacy services in Ireland and in working collaboratively and effectively with partners in local, regional, and national fora. They are exceptionally well positioned to play a central role in implementing the timely Adult Literacy for Life strategy, which aims to ensure that citizens are prepared for meeting the challenges of living, working, and thriving in the 21st-century world.

## REFERENCES

Department of the Taoiseach (2019) Our Shared Future: The Programme for Government. Dublin: Government Press Office.

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### Leaving No One Behind

Speaking at a digital inclusion webinar hosted by An Cosán in October 2021, CEO Heydi Foster stressed the need for collaboration between community, state, and corporate sectors to ensure that every adult in Ireland has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital skills to engage fully in society.

“We need a whole of society approach to a whole of society problem. Digital literacy is fast becoming an essential requirement for life, work and learning. Without digital literacy, citizens cannot participate fully in society, or acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the twenty-first century.”

Ms Foster continued:

“Almost one in two adults in Ireland has low digital literacy levels, according to the Digital Economic and Society Index 2018. This is something that we all have a responsibility to address as a matter of urgency.

“A collaboration between community, state and corporate sectors is urgently needed to ensure every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital skills to fully engage in society. Let’s all commit to working together to help those we support realise their full potential!”

“Founded 35 years ago in West Tallaght with a mission to eradicate poverty by empowering people through education, the aim of An Cosán has always been to leave no one behind by reaching out to the furthest behind first.”



**Heydi Foster, CEO of An Cosán, Ireland's largest provider of community education.**