

Digital Literacy in Adults

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Tuesday, 19 November 2019

Statement by Bill Morrissey, Principal Officer, NDSTMC Division,  
Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

I would like to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for the invitation to the Department to meet with you to discuss the issue of Digital Literacy in Adults.

Digital literacy refers to a set of competencies that allow a person to function and participate fully in a digital world<sup>1</sup>.

The internet and digital technologies are fundamentally transforming the way people live and work today. Being digitally literate is not a luxury, it is a skill necessary to:

- access information;
- access education and employment;
- communicate and socialise,
- manage money;
- purchase goods and services; and
- access supports and government services.

It is relevant regardless of age or social group.

### **Levels of Digital Literacy in Adults**

In terms of assessing the level of digital literacy in adults in Ireland, recent publications from the Central Statistics Office and from the European Commission give some context.

The first, the CSO 2019 Information and Communications Technology Household Survey<sup>2</sup> published last month found that:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/NEWS/Developing-Digital-Literacy-Skills.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-isshh/informationsocietystatistics-households2019/>

- 91% of households have access to the internet at home;
- 88% of individuals had used the internet in the three months prior to interview;
- Finding information on goods and services and email were the most common activities carried out on the internet. The next most common activities selected were instant messaging, reading or downloading online news sites and internet banking;
- Whilst most adults aged 16 to 44 years were recent internet users i.e. in the three months prior to interview, this dropped to two-thirds of persons in the 60 to 74 years age group;
- That 11% of people have never used the internet; and
- That the main reasons stated for not having a household internet connection were ‘Do not need internet’ at 52% and ‘Lack of skills’ at 42%.

The second report is the European Commission’s Digital Economy and Society (DESI) Index 2019 Country Report for Ireland<sup>3</sup> published in June. The report compares Ireland’s overall digital performance against that of our EU peers.

The Report ranks Ireland 12th in the use of internet services dimension, just below the EU average. The Report also states that Ireland performs well when it comes to high level ICT skills. Ireland has the 2nd largest share of ICT graduates and share of ICT specialists in the workforce. The share of ICT specialists in total female employment is the 4th highest in the EU. However, Ireland does not perform as well when it comes to the average digital skills of the wider adult population, including the workforce. In 2019 48% of the adult population had at least basic digital skills, up from 44% in 2017, but still below the 2019 EU average of 57 %. In 2019 28 % of people had digital skills above a basic level, up from 25% in 2017, but below the 2019 EU average of 31%.

The State has a range of initiatives in place which aim to improve the digital literacy/skills of adults, these are delivered by a number of Departments including Education and Skills; Business, Enterprise and Innovation and Communications, Climate Action and Environment, along with bodies under their aegis.

For example the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation collaborate to ensure that skills needs/gaps are identified and met through alignment of education and training provision. They offer a range of initiatives which are focussed on increasing labour force participation, enhancing skills and developing talent, including the *Explore, Skills to Advance* and *Springboard+2019* initiatives.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/digital-economy-and-society-index-desi-2019>

## **Digital Skills for Citizens Scheme**

The focus of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment in this area is on introducing non-liners, or those who have never used the internet before, to use the internet and digital technologies.

The objective is to provide those who have never used the internet before the opportunity to gain the basic skills and confidence to start their digital journey by removing some of the barriers, for example fear, lack of skills, trust, and awareness of what being online can offer, so that they can avail of the benefits of digital technologies.

Such benefits include saving time and money, staying in touch with family and friends, enjoying a wider variety of hobbies and interests, staying up to date with news, accessing government services on-line, and being able to participate in education on-line at their own pace.

Since 2008 the Department has run two schemes designed to help those who have never used the internet before.

The first was the *BenefIT Scheme*, which ran from 2008 to 2016, investing €8.4 million in providing basic training to 157,000 participants.

This was replaced in 2017 by the current *Digital Skills for Citizen Scheme*, an initiative under the Government's *National Digital Strategy for Ireland 2013*. The Scheme provides free informal basic digital skills training where people attending classes will learn the skills they need to take their first steps to getting on-line. Since training commenced in 2017, €4.8 million has been invested in providing basic digital skills training to over 51,000 participants.

The Department recognises that voluntary, community and not-for-profit organisations are well placed to identify, and encourage the people within their communities who have not yet engaged with the internet.

Following a call for proposals in 2016 the Department entered into grant agreements in 2017 with 15 voluntary, community and not-for-profit organisations (Appendix A) including FIT to deliver informal basic digital skills training.

Training classes are available to anyone who doesn't have the confidence, motivation or skills to reap the benefits of digital technologies. Training is targeted at people over 45, farming communities, small business owners, unemployed people, persons with disabilities and disadvantaged groups.

Classes take place in libraries, schools, community centres, marts and GAA clubs across all counties. They are advertised locally, and on the Department's website, with times, venues and content arranged to meet the needs of participants.

Each participant receives 10 hours of informal basic digital skills training in a class of no more than 10 people. An internet enabled device (computer, laptop or tablet) is provided for use during class, or if the person wishes they can bring their own device. The class content is made up of 6 hours of compulsory modules including:

- Introduction to the internet;
- internet safety & security;
- Using email;
- Using search engines and websites;
- Accessing on-line government services;
- Conducting everyday transactions;
- Using online voice and video calls; and
- The use of “Apps”.

In addition 4 hours training is tailored to the specific needs of the participants (as identified by the participants); this may include any of the following modules:

- Specific government online services;
- Social media;
- Video, TV and Radio;
- Shopping on-line;
- Instructional videos on YouTube;
- On-line banking, including the process and security safeguards; or
- Digital photography.

The Department also works closely with other Government Departments to provide relevant content for the on-line government services aspect of the training, for example:

- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has provided tutors with demonstration herd numbers for use on their 'Agfoods' site;
- The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has provided an interactive demonstration of the Motor Tax Renewal application;
- Use of the online Eircode Finder is provided by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment; and
- The Passport Office, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, is contributing an instructional video/demonstration which will allow trainees to learn how to renew their passports online.

At the end of each training course participants are asked to provide feedback by completing an online survey. The Department also receives feedback from the grantees and tutors. The feedback is monitored to allow the Department to see the categories of people participating in the training, and what impact it is having on their daily lives. Almost 20,000 people over the age of 65 have attended the classes, and some 6,500 from the farming community have also benefited from the training.

Data collected from participants who have completed the training demonstrate that the Scheme is delivering a wide range of positive impacts including:

- Improving wellbeing and reducing isolation - over 44% of participants have told us that they feel less isolated as a result of completing the training;
- 61% of all participants now feel competent to use online Government services;
- 61% will use skills learned to stay in touch with family/friends; and
- Participants also reported that their confidence had improved and they were saving time and money by using their skills to access information and make more informed purchasing decisions.

In addition to the work of the grantees in promoting awareness of the Scheme and encouraging people to participate in the training, the Department has promoted the Scheme at the National Ploughing Championship, by distributing promotional material and Information leaflets to Public Participation Networks, Citizen Information Offices and the Local Authority Broadband Officer Network.

Training under the current Scheme will continue until mid-2020. The Department is now looking at how best to move forward with the Scheme in the context of the new National Digital Strategy being developed by the Department of the Taoiseach in partnership with Departments. It is clear that much work remains to be done in this area, with a particular focus on scale, effectiveness and co-ordination of efforts.

Further details on the Scheme are available on the Department's website at  
[www.dccae.gov.ie/digitalskills](http://www.dccae.gov.ie/digitalskills).

Thank you.

## Appendix A

1. Age Action Ireland Ltd
2. Ballyhoura Development Company Ltd
3. County Sligo Leader Partnership Company Ltd
4. ECDL Ireland Ltd
5. Family Carers Ireland Ltd
6. Fast Track into Information Technology (FIT)
7. IE Domain Registry Ltd
8. Irish Rural Link Co-Operative Society Ltd
9. Meath Community Rural & Social Development Partnership Ltd
10. National Council for the Blind Group (NCBI)
11. Roscommon Integrated Development Company Ltd
12. South East Community Training & Education Centre Ltd
13. St Catherine's Community Services Centre Ltd
14. The Cork Academy of Music Ltd
15. Third Age Foundation Co. Ltd