

## **Department of Education and Skills Opening Statement for joint Committee on Education and Skills Hearing 19<sup>th</sup> November 2019 re Adult Literacy**

I would like to thank the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for the invitation to take part in today's hearing on the area of Adult Literacy.

Good literacy skills equip citizens to participate in education, in work and in society. The Department of Education and Skills prioritises supporting literacy acquisition both in childhood and throughout adult life.

Definitions of literacy shift over time but what is consistent is that literacy should be viewed as a continuum. There is not a binary position whereby a person is literate or illiterate; every person in this room is placed somewhere along the literacy continuum. Literacy is also not fixed. Like any skill it must be used to be maintained and conceptions of literacy are broadening to include areas such as digital literacy, financial literacy, health literacy and media literacy. To have good literacy skills, a person must be able to apply them in a range of situations and to a range of texts and media.

As members of the Committee will know, children in Ireland, on the whole, perform very well in international surveys of literacy. However, the situation for the adult population is somewhat less positive. Ireland participated in the first round of the OECD's PIAAC survey in 2011-12, which was undertaken to provide data on key adult skills, namely literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. The survey found that on the literacy scale, Irish adults achieved around the survey average placing Ireland 19 out of the 34 countries that have participated to date. The distribution of performance in

Ireland across the population was more even than in many countries so Ireland has relatively fewer people at the lowest and highest levels of the scale. Just under 18% of Irish adults scored at or below level one on the survey, which was an improvement from the 22% who scored at those levels in a comparable international survey undertaken in the 1990s.

The further education and training, or FET, sector offers a wide range of courses, primarily through the 16 Education and Training Boards(ETBs), designed to lead to greater social inclusion, high quality skills supply for the economy and progression opportunities within education. For some people, difficulties with literacy or numeracy can present a real obstacle to further learning.

A key central aim of FET policies and strategies is to ensure that programmes and services are accessible to all learners. The FET Strategy 2014-2019 prioritises literacy and numeracy supports, both through the delivery of dedicated adult literacy courses and through supporting the literacy of all learners who engage with FET. Ambitious targets are set for the ETBs in this area through their Strategic Performance Agreements and Planning Frameworks with SOLAS.

Over €800m is invested annually in the FET sector, and literacy and numeracy is a key component of all FET programmes. Transversal skills, such as literacy and numeracy, form part of the QQI award standards in the FET sector and support for best practice regarding integrating literacy and numeracy in broader FET programmes is set out in the SOLAS report *Integrating Literacy & Numeracy*.

Within the overall investment in FET, some €35 million is spent annually on dedicated adult literacy programmes. Over 65,000 people will participate on these programmes in 2019.

An important task of the adult literacy service, through its English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision, is to welcome and support a diverse cohort of 'new Irish' people. These new community members in Ireland come from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, educational and social backgrounds and the ETBs design and deliver programmes tailored to their needs.

Building on the substantial level of adult literacy and numeracy education already delivered in the FET sector, Government has focused increasingly in recent years on the needs of vulnerable people in employment. Initiatives such as *Skills to Advance* and the EXPLORE programme offer targeted support for employees in lower skilled jobs who need to adapt to a changing work environment. These initiatives are also a significant part of the Department of Education and Skills' national efforts to implement the European Commission's Upskilling Pathways Recommendation: *New Opportunities for Adults*, which aims to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to respond to any questions the Committee might have.