

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) Opening Statement to the Special Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 3 December 2019

NALA thanks the Special Committee for the invitation to present on adult literacy, its impact on the Traveller Community and recommendations for change.

NALA is a charity that advocates for improving adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills supports. Part of our work is raising awareness of literacy and an example of this is captured in this [video](#). It features Margaret Donovan from Ennis who is a member of the Travelling Community and talks about her experience of returning to learning. NALA's goal is to ensure that all Travellers who want to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills can do so.

In Ireland, 520,000 adults (one in six or 18%) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult.¹ This means over half million adults have difficulty reading and understanding a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions. Similarly, 1 in 4 (25%) scored at the lowest level of numeracy. This equates to over three quarters of a million adults not being able to do basic calculations such as dividing up a bill. For the Traveller Community the literacy issue is even more stark with an estimated **half of Travellers having poor functional literacy**.²

Unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy³ and are a factor in social exclusion and inequality. The World Literacy Foundation says those who live with literacy needs “are faced with the prospect of poor health outcomes, welfare dependency, a lack of social cohesion, a higher level of crime and lack of self worth. Poor literacy also limits a person’s ability to engage in activities that require either critical thinking or a solid base of literacy and numeracy skills.”⁴

Low literacy is costing our society and economy in terms of poorer health, productivity, weak employment and earning potential, welfare dependency, less involvement in society as well as inter-generational disadvantage for children and families. It is time to invest in people who have not benefited from our education system during bust or boom It is time to prioritise the **furthest behind first**.⁵

UNICEF states that Travellers are still falling between the cracks, with the vast majority of Travellers ceasing education before junior certificate level.⁶

¹ CSO (2013), [PIAAC 2012](#) - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland

² Department of Health (2010) [All Ireland Traveller Health Study](#). Dublin: Department of Health.

³ OECD (2013) [Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills](#)

⁴ World Literacy Foundation (2018) [The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy](#)

⁵ United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda commitment

⁶ UNICEF Report Card <http://bit.ly/2XCWWND>

Pavee Point's submission to this Committee highlights the grave educational disadvantages experienced by the Traveller Community including:⁷

- Only 13% of Travellers complete secondary education in comparison with 92% of the general population
- 28% of Travellers leave school before the age of 13, compared to 1% of general population
- The majority of Traveller children (67.3%) live in families where the mother has either no formal education or primary education only
- Half of Travellers have poor functional literacy

Since the economic crash in 2008, specific supports for Traveller education were withdrawn and the focus was now to 'mainstream' Travellers into the education system.

In 2016 the European Commission Assessment of Ireland said:

“A mainstreamed approach is only sufficient when outcomes are identical for all components of the target groups; when evidence shows a clear gap between the situation of Roma and Travellers versus the rest of society (for example: regarding their health and housing situation) policies should be adjusted and specific measures should also be developed.”⁸

A 2017 ESRI report, A Social Portrait of Irish Travellers, noted that, “the depth of educational disadvantage experienced by Travellers means that **specific, targeted additional supports will be required** in order for them to participate in mainstream education on equal terms.”⁹

Last Tuesday (26 November) the Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor T.D., launched the Action Plan to Promote Traveller Participation in Higher Education. While welcome, we also need a broader **Action Plan for Traveller Education in Further Education and Training (FET)**.

The Adult Skills survey¹⁰ (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) provides the most up to date statistics on the adult literacy and numeracy skills levels of those of working age since the last survey in 1997. Back then, the poor results for Ireland propelled significant action that saw annual increases in participation and resources for the next decade. However since 2009, and despite the very disappointing results of PIAAC in 2013 (see appendix 1), **investment and participation rates have stagnated**.

⁷ Pavee Point (2019) [Submission](#) to the Special Joint Committee on key issues affecting the Traveller Community: Education

⁸ European Commission (2016) [Effective Roma integration measures in the Member States 2016](#)

⁹ Watson, D. Kenny, O. and McGinnity, F. (2017) [A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland](#): ESRI

¹⁰ CSO (2013), PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland

Ireland's first National Skills Strategy (2007) set the target to reduce the numbers of adults with less than upper secondary to 7% by 2020. Whilst its school and higher education performance targets were reached or indeed surpassed, we failed to reach the low skills target and the same target was rolled over into the current National Skills Strategy (2016), to be achieved by 2020 along with the same approach to reach it. With 12.4%¹¹ of persons aged 15-64 in employment having less than upper secondary (NFQ Levels 1-3), **this target will not be reached again.**

This fact alone illustrates the inadequacy of the approach and resources to tackle the scale of the adult literacy and numeracy issue in Ireland. There remains an outdated view that this challenge will fade with time based on school attendance. In reality, there is a crisis in the learning outcomes for many in society, in particular the Traveller Community. We acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Education and Skills and Education and Training Boards Ireland, who cater for over 60,000 participants in literacy services (12% of those with literacy needs, of which a very small percentage are Travellers), costing less than €600 per person. It is clear **we need a better resourced and coordinated effort by Government.**

Currently NALA is working bi-laterally with nine government departments and their agencies on policies aimed at building literacy and numeracy competence across a number of areas including health and finance (see appendix 3). This experience, along with similar recent developments to address the literacy issue in The Netherlands, Portugal, Finland and Belgium, has guided NALA to call for a **Whole-of-Government approach** that would bring a coordinated national effort to radically reducing the numbers of people with literacy and numeracy needs. This should include an **Action Plan for Traveller Education in Further Education and Training (FET)** in partnership with national Traveller organisations.

Finally, literacy is a barometer of equality and changes lives. Ireland can do better to give everyone a fair chance to thrive in their literacy development. This requires investing in people who have not benefited from our education system during bust or boom. This requires greater prioritisation within the Department of Education and Skills of adult literacy and better alignment of policies and strategies across different Government departments.

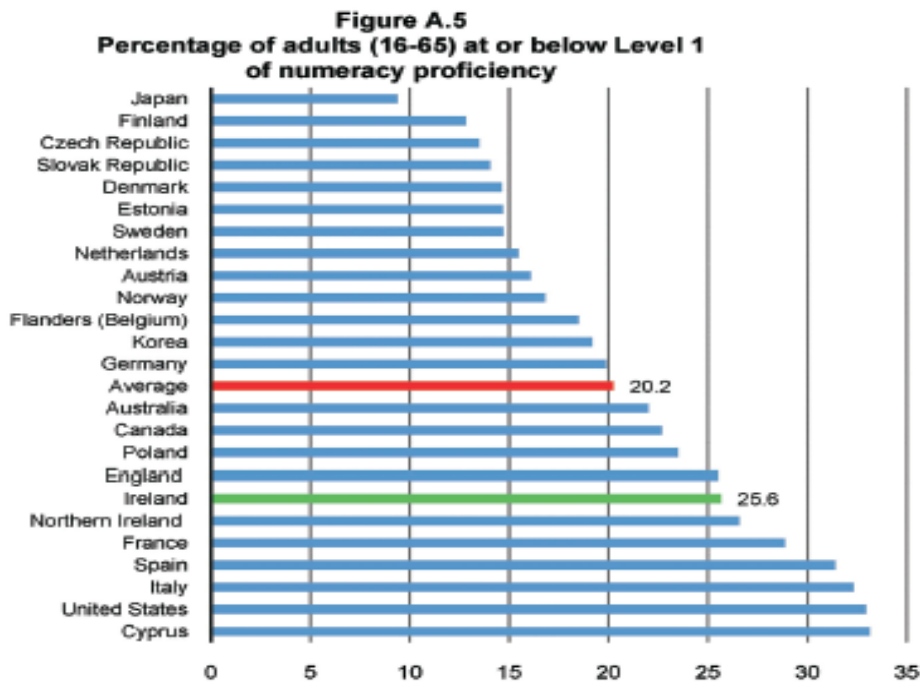
Thank you for listening and our written submission has more detail on our vision for literacy.

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¹¹ See appendix 2 from [National Skills Bulletin](#) (SOLAS SLMRU 2018, p28: Q4 2017)

Appendix 1 Ireland's ranking in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (2013)



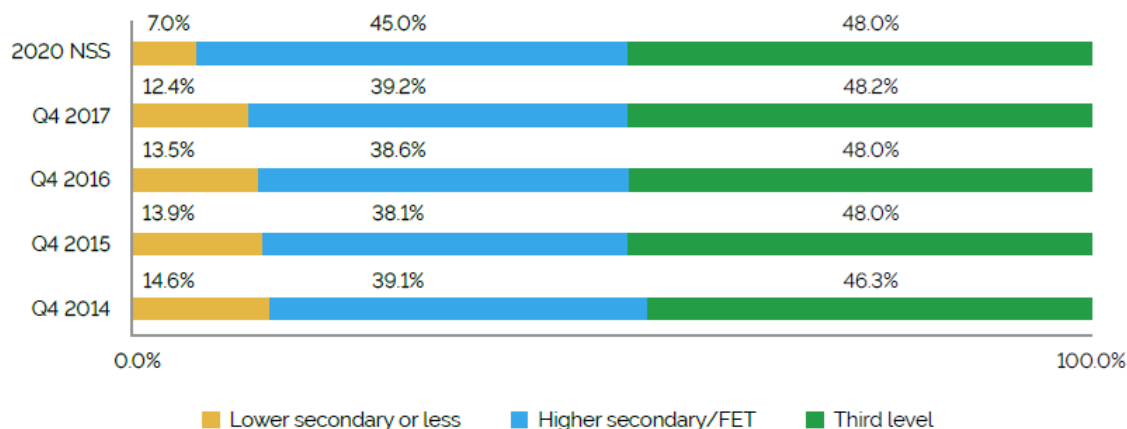
Source: OECD (2013) [Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills](#)

Appendix 2 National Skills Strategy: Progress to date

2.6 National Skills Strategy: Progress to Date

Figure 2.11 presents the educational attainment of the labour force (15-64 years) and the targets set out in the 2007 National Skills Strategy (NSS) which were carried over in the 2016 National Skills Strategy²⁰. Over the period quarter 4 2016 and quarter 4 2017, the share of persons with third level education was 48.4% which was slightly above the 48% NSS target (when excluding those who did not state their education level). The share of those with lower secondary education or less, at 12.4%, was higher than the NSS target for this group but it declined by 1.1 percentage point since quarter 4 2016.

Figure 2.11 Labour Force (15-64 years) by Education and the NSS Target



Source: SLMRU (SOLAS) analysis of CSO data

Note: excludes those who did not state their education level

Source: [National Skills Bulletin](#) (SOLAS SLMRU 2018, p28: Q4 2017)

Appendix 3 Map of Government Departments with policies involving literacy

There are nine Government Departments that have policies involving literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

<p>Education and skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Plan for Education Framework 2016-19 • FET Strategy 2014-19 • National Skills Strategy • Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland • The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 	<p>Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Ireland • Health literacy policy and implementation (Health and Wellbeing Directorate) 	<p>Communications, Climate Action and Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Skills for Citizens • Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the Media Literacy Network • Sustainability Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 and the Voluntary National Review (VNR)
<p>Children and Youth Affairs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family literacy in DEIS schools • School completion programme • First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 	<p>Business, Enterprise and Innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Plan for Jobs • Workplace literacy in particular around sectors identified by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. 	<p>Employment Affairs and Social Protection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NESC jobless households report and low skills trap • Pathways to Work
<p>Finance</p> <p>Competition and Consumer Protection Commission on Financial Literacy</p>	<p>Justice and Equality</p> <p>Prison and probation literacy supports</p>	<p>Rural and Community Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to Read Library Strategy • Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)