Submission

Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation Paper

December 2020

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1. Introduction

Age Action welcomes the opportunity to input into the development of the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (ALND) Strategy. It does so understanding that Ireland needs to plan for an ageing population that will see the number of people aged over 65 increase to close to 1.4 million by 2041,[1] from one-fifth to over one-third of the working population over the next two decades.

In making these observations on the Strategy, Age Action draws on the statutory obligation on public bodies to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect the human rights of those to whom they provide services and staff when carrying out their daily work under the Public Sector and Human Rights Duty.[2] We welcome its role to place 'equality and human rights at the heart of how a public body fulfils its purpose'.[3]

Literacy as a competency continues to severely and disproportionately impact those in older age. The 2012 Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) showed the highest percentage of adults at literacy level 1 or below to be in the older age cohort (aged 55-65), with a 28% rate across the cohort and almost double the adult average.[4]

Looking at digital skills, data shows us that older people are currently less likely to use the internet or to have good digital skills which limits people's ability to access their rights and maintain quality of life. Last CSO data showed that 50% of those aged over 75 and 21% of those aged 60-74 have never been online.[5] Of those who are online,

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[1] See http://rebuildingireland.ie/Rebuilding%20Ireland_Action%20Plan.pdf

[2] Set out in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.

[3] IHREC (2019) *Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty*. Available at www.ihrec.ie.

[4] CSO (2013) *PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland.* Available at www.cso.ie.

[5] CSO (2020) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2020.* Available at www.cso.ie.

concerns remain about skills: almost half of those aged 65-74 lack basic digital skills to enable them to navigate online confidently and safely.[6]

Through this submission Age Action is advocating for a rights-based approach to planning, delivery and evaluation to be adopted across the new strategy in order to ensure that people can realise their rights. Literacy is a barometer of equality.[7] Central to enabling an ageing population to realise their ability to age in place and with dignity is the capacity to access information, opportunities and supports on an equal basis to the rest of the population without literacy as a barrier.

Age Action welcomes the aim of this consultation to map both the challenges and opportunities for Ireland in relation to adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy and how best to create an environment where all adults in Ireland have the necessary literacy skills to fully take part in society.

We are pleased to see a recognition in the consultation paper to the breadth of impact of lower literacy skills level across information access, financial decision making and health literacy. We are also pleased to see an explicit recognition of the role of lower literacy levels as a barrier to societal and civic participation. The 2020 NALA report on the cost of literacy outlines the impact of good literacy levels: not just in terms of workplace engagement and wage levels, but in developing human and social capital. It acknowledges that people with 'good literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills are more likely to have better health and a longer life, be employed and earn better incomes.'[8]

This submission is also written in the context of recognising the different needs of those presenting with complex literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs and those requiring digital skills assistance only. Through our work at Age Action we see many people present to our 'Getting Started' digital skills classes with existing literacy or numeracy needs. Consistent feedback to these classes is that the one-to-one teaching format allows for a learner led experience that is tailored to learning aims and literacy needs in the face of evolving technology.

Improving literacy skills will help improve older people's access to social, commercial, health, and public participation opportunities.

Any literacy planning for the next 10-year timeframe needs to recognise that older people are not a homogenous group and bring a diversity of life experience and own situations.

COVID-19 has shown how a failure to adequately plan for our changing population has now placed many older people in precarious and vulnerable situations, with

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[6] Eurostat (2019). *ICT usage in households and by individuals: Individuals: Internet use*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database

[7] NALA (2020) *Literacy Now The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland and why we need to act now*. Available at www.nala.ie.

[8] NALA (2020) *Literacy Now The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland and why we need to act now*. Available at www.nala.ie.

groups living on an inadequate income and without access to the supports that they need. All of these vulnerabilities are exacerbated for those who have literacy issues.

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted older people. Many older people lost their jobs or were unable to work during COVID: 14% of over 65s saw their employment affected. Prior to the pandemic we saw that people over the age of 65 in Ireland had the largest year-on-year rise in being at risk of poverty.

As we move forward to design, plan, implement and evaluate activities under the new ALND strategy, it is important that the meaningful participation of older people is embedded across policies. By adopting a human rights-based approach to policy development, this direct participation will be enabled, and the policies will better meet the need of those they seek to affect.

Age Action supports the call by NALA for a new vision and strategy for the next 10 years to support adults across the width of adulthood with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs and to **prioritise those furthest behind first.**

2. Context

2.1 Policy Context

The 2020 Programme for Government recognises the importance of planning to meet the needs of an ageing population, including to enable a culture of lifelong learning within the workforce. It also acknowledges Ireland's desire to be at the forefront of a digital future.[9]

The National Positive Ageing Strategy in 2013 sets out what Government departments and public agencies must do to make Ireland a great place in which to grow old.[10] Goals include to 'remove barriers to participation and provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities.[11] It also identifies the removal of 'any barriers (legislative, attitudinal, custom and practice) to continued employment and training opportunities for people as they age' as the first objective under National Goal 1 of the strategy. It must be noted that at the time of writing, no implementation plan has been delivered for the Strategy.

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 also contained a number of commitments across the poverty, social inclusion and engagement framework including a commitment to provide income security for older people, to reduce poverty and to extend employment opportunities to all who can work as well as ensuring the pay and conditions are fair. Of note is the commitment to enabling active participation and engagement in society.

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[9] Government of Ireland (2020) *Programme for Government, Our Shared Future.*
[10] Department of Health (2013) *National Positive Ageing Strategy.* Available at www.health.gov.ie.
[11] *Ibid.*

The National Skills Strategy 2025 recognises the impact of an ageing population on skills delivery and specifically identifies the role of education in supporting older people as well as the need to ensure those with the lowest skills of formal education in the labour force are supported.[12]

2.2 Demographic Context

According to the most recent 2016 Census figures, the number of people aged over 65 saw the largest increase of population since 2011. This age group has increased since 2011 by 19.1% (to 637,567). The number of people aged over 85 increased by 15.6% (to 67,555).[13]

At present, just over 13% of the total population is over 65 years of age.[14] Each year in Ireland, the over 65 age group increases by 20,000 people.

The number of people aged over 65 is projected to increase very significantly to close to 1.4 million by 2041,[15] from one-fifth to over one-third of the working population over the next two decades. The Department of Health's Capacity Review outlines that, on the basis of the CSO's moderate population projection scenario (M2F2), the 65-74 age cohort will increase by 42.9%, the 75-84 age cohort will see an increase of 75.9% and the 85+ cohort will see an increase of 95.5% by 2031 from 2016 figures. Regional projections for 2016-2031 show the number of older persons (over 65) will almost double in every region over that time period.[16]

Of note and applicable to the provision of services and policy planning is the low rate of digital access of older people due to skills and affordability. As outlined above, older people are currently less likely than people of other ages to use the internet or to have good digital skills. While there has been an increase in those aged 55-74 who are online in recent years, this group largely has below basic digital skill levels[17] which means they are unlikely to be able to use the internet independently or safely: 43% have digital skills below basic levels, and 24% have never been on the internet.[18] Wraparound supports such as income supports are needed to ensure people can afford to access literacy training and supports and remain connected.

2.3 Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a number of disproportionate impacts on those struggling with literacy issues, no more so than in the sphere of digital skills. It is clear that public health services – and wider Government services – were moved online at a fast rate

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[12] Department of Education and Skills (2016). Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025. Available at www.education.ie.

[13] See http://cso.ie/en/media/csoie/newsevents/documents/pressreleases/2017/prCensussummarypart1.pdf

[14] See http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-cv/qnhscrimeandvictimisationq32015

[15] See http://rebuildingireland.ie/Rebuilding%20Ireland_Action%20Plan.pdf

[16] See http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/rpp/regionalpopulationprojections2016-2031

[17] Eurostat defines basic digital skills through a competence framework that can be simplified as: being able to find information about goods and services, send an email, buy something online and use word processing software. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/tepsr_sp410_esmsip2.htm

[18] Eurostat (2019) *Digitals skills: Individuals level of digital skills*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database

in recent months. **Simply, those not online were at a disadvantage in being able to access many services or public health information**.[19] For example, one of the radio advertisements promoting Government mental health supports referred people online only for further information.

Of note, during the pandemic many shops refused to accept cash as a preventative public health measure.[20] As a result many people felt left with no choice but to hand their financial affairs to someone more digitally literate or to opt into digital services they did not understand.

The UN has noted that barriers that older persons face related to literacy and language may have been magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.[21] Those who lack access and skills to go online did not receive supports to address the issue that they would not have equal access to:

- **Information** (latest updates on Government policy or detail, updates on consumer and advice or information e.g., travel, refunds)

- **Social/emotional connection** (video calls, online interest groups)

- **Commercial transactions** (online shopping for food, household goods, clothing, bedding, appliances, health aids)

- **Health information** (information on minor ailments, access to online booking for GPs who often could not be contacted by phone)

- **Physical and mental health promotion** (home exercise videos/guidance, entertainment and cultural content, information on hobbies to learn, ability to upload content as part of a community)

- **Services** (e.g., information on mental health and bereavement supports, public transport options, renewal of driving licences, telehealth services)

A lack of digital inclusion supports for those with no, or low, digital skills in the face of a suddenly highly digital daily life exposed many older people to a risk of abuse or exploitation. This is due to issues such as lack of skill in navigating online, lack of familiarity in critiquing common online misinformation, scams, or fake businesses. Older people without adequate skills or supports may be unable to access services such as online shopping and banking during the time of lockdown and physical distancing and may be placed in a position where they consent to things they do not understand or hand over management of their affairs to others who are more digitally

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[19] Government reliance on digital channels for transactions with citizens is part of an overarching policy approach and is not supported with adequate funding to support older people to digitally engage. The government ICT strategy notes that it aims to 'prioritise the transformation, modernisation and digitisation of the main existing citizen and business transactional service across Public Services' and create services that will encourage people to go digital under a 'Digital First' approach. Age Action has noted the deficiency of Government digital training funding in public documents.
[20] See https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/blog/date/2020/html/ecb.blog200428~328d7ca065.en.html.
[21] UN Secretary General (May 2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons.* Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/COVID-Older-persons.pdf.

literate.[22] A lack of understanding of technical terms may hamper an ability to give meaningful consent to terms and conditions. Government response measures taken during the pandemic could leave victims of elder abuse in further isolation without access to assistance and support services and may make it even more difficult for them to seek help and support or report abuse.[23]

Of note, Age Action heard of many older people in nursing homes who – in the face of restricted visiting – did not have the device and/or skills to maintain connection with family members and therefore lacked the social interaction and support of family members in making decisions as to their care.

3. Recommendations

For the purpose of assisting in placing the below recommendations in context, they are framed in the thematic areas outlined in the Consultation Paper to accompany the consultation call:

- Theme 1: Different meanings of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for adults

- Theme 2: Improving awareness of and access to literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support for adults

- Theme 3: Bridging the digital divide

- Theme 4: Priorities and actions

- Theme 5: Measuring success

Theme 1: Different meanings of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for adults

Recommendation 1: Conduct an audit of the literacy needs of those in older age (from 55 onwards) - disaggregated by age and including digital literacy – to inform and enable evidence-based policy planning and delivery for an ageing population

Recommendation 1 CSO data shows us that almost 40% of those aged over 65 either have no formal education or are educated to primary level only.[24] However, gaps remain on a full assessment of literacy needs of this older cohort to enable evidence-based policy making for a growing older cohort and to best meet needs. As discussed in Recommendation 9, the absence of clear and comprehensive data on the literacy needs of an older cohort – disaggregated by age – does not allow for evidence to support the tailoring of supports and policy to reflect the diversity of experience and situation in older age.

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[22] *Ibid.*
[23] Age Platform EU (May 2020) *COVID-19 and human rights concerns for older persons.* Available at www.age-platform.eu.
[24] CSO (various) *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 10 Education, Skills and the Irish Language.* Available at https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/le/

The impact of poor literacy needs can have 'devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy.' The 2020 NALA report on the cost of literacy outlines that people at the lowest literacy and numeracy levels earn less income, have poorer health and are more likely to be unemployed. [25] Amongst others, literacy issues extend to impacts on family, employment, ability to access and make decisions around health, wellbeing and community participation.[26]

The benefits of family literacy – and its ripple effect across generations – are well researched and known. Gaps remain in gauging the formal level of grandparent to child impact and further research on this would be welcome.

Looking at digital skills alone, CSO and Eurostat data show us that that while older people remain the most likely of all ages to have never been online, more older people are getting online in the last couple of years. CSO data shows us that despite an increase in those getting online over 60 (21% of those aged 60-74 have never been on the internet – a large fall on 48% in 2018),[27] older people are still the most likely to have never been on the internet (50% of over 75s; 21% of 60-74-year olds)[28]

Looking at skills, 43% of people aged 55-74 have below basic digital skill levels[29], which means they are unlikely to be able to use the internet independently or safely for everyday tasks like banking, ordering tickets or purchasing goods.[30] As discussed later in the submission, how we learn may vary by life experience or situation. Cumulative disadvantage accrued across the lifecourse – particularly through gender or disability – may also play a large role in how we engage with access to education and lifelong learning. To reflect this diversity, Age Action supports the adoption of tailored supports that are learner led and meet their specific needs to enhance their lives

In reality, a lack of confidence and competence online leaves many older people unsafe navigating digital tasks. Recently announced CSO data shows that those aged 60-74 were below the national average – and least likely of all age groups - to undertake any of the personal data management actions measured by the CSO such as checking that a website where they provided personal data was secure or refusing use of their personal data for advertising.[31] This issue of meaningful consent is

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[25] NALA (2020) *Literacy Now The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland and why we need to act now*. Available at www.nala.ie.

[26] NALA (2020) *Literacy for Life A Whole-of-Government approach for investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills for an equal and resilient Ireland*. Available at www.nala.ie.

[27] CSO (2020) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2020*. Available at www.cso.ie.

[28] Compared to 4% of 45-59-year olds and 0% of 16-44-year olds. See CSO (2020) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2020*. Available at www.cso.ie.

[29] Eurostat defines basic digital skills through a competence framework that can be simplified as: being able to find information about goods and services, send an email, buy something online and use word processing software. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/tepsr_sp410_esmsip2.htm

[30] Eurostat (2019). *Digitals skills: Individuals level of digital skills*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database; and Eurostat (2019). *ICT usage in households and by individuals: Individuals: Internet use*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database

[31] CSO (2020) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2020*. Available at www.cso.ie.

increasingly important to an ageing cohort in the context of both a rapid digitalisation of services and also an increasing use of smart technologies in the home to enable ageing in place. Looking at digital inclusion specifically, **both planning for skills supports and the creation of the infrastructure to enable equal access and services for those offline is needed.**

Theme 2: Improving awareness of and access to literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support for adults

Recommendation 2: Adopt a 'Whole of Government' approach to tackle literacy issues in older age and ensure integrated policy delivery across statutory services

Recommendation 3: Provide access to a one-stop-shop for literacy supports to ensure effective support for service users and tracking of service provision for future strategic planning

Recommendation 4: Implement targeted information campaigns for those identified as most in need of supports

Recommendation 2 Age Action is pleased to see reference in the paper accompanying this consultation to a likely Whole of Government approach to create the environment where 'all adults in Ireland have the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully take part in society.' As it currently stands, literacy assessment, provision and evaluation sit across a number of Government departments, with NALA outlining nine of the current Government departments involved in literacy policy or service delivery. To effectively plan for an integrated and streamlined 10-year literacy strategy, it is imperative that all Government departments are actively engaged, assigned designated key deliverables and timeframes, and that the entire process is effectively coordinated by a parent Department with statutory responsibility for delivery.

Recommendation 3 Recognising the varied life experience and situation of those in older age outlined above, it is crucial that a single point of contact can be made for those looking to engage with literacy supports – including onward referral. This will ensure both an ease of service use (e.g., not requiring the learner to navigate the system and make any onward contacts themselves if they do not wish – or are unable - to do so) as well as to effectively track the overall service provision and outcomes for learners.

Recommendation 4 Looking at improving awareness of literacy supports, it is clear that a coordinated information campaign is needed to reach those still distant from supports and with dedicated phone lines and casework support via a one-stop-shop to offer any onward referral to partners as per Recommendation 3 e.g., to local ETBs or partner agencies for localised training. Effective tracking of learner access to supports and pathways will also be enhanced.

Theme 3: Bridging the digital divide

Recommendation 5: A new National Digital Skills strategy should work cohesively with the ALND strategy and coordinate digital inclusion across Government

Recommendation 6: Adopt a rights-based approach to deliver Government services to ensure that those offline do not suffer any greater difficulty in accessing services

Recommendation 5 As discussed above, the remit of digital access currently sits across a wide variety of Government departments. Looking at digital inclusion in particular, several Government departments are involved in the provision of digital supports, notably the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. To ensure the complementarity of strategies and eradicate gaps in delivery of supports online and offline, integration is needed across all relevant strategies across Government. Related to this, a new National Digital Skills strategy is urgently needed to coordinate and monitor digital supports.

True digital inclusion means the provision of equal supports for those offline.

Central to the development of any new strategy is the explicit recognition of Government's responsibility to retain ease of off-line service access and not to require citizens to digitally engage in order to participate in society. For older people, the costs involved in reliance on digital communications must also be recognised and supported and seen as a means of maintaining communication with health professionals, arranging essential services and addressing social isolation. In turn, the new ALND strategy must articulate how it relates to the new National Digital Strategy and should work in concert with its aims to maximise effectiveness.

It is vital that all strategies are future proofed to take account of the need for on-going digital skilling in the face of rapidly changing technologies and what is considered 'standard' technological knowledge. **Digital literacy training can be expected to be an ongoing need as long as technology continues to evolve at pace**, and all new strategies should account for this in setting an approach and principles to determining firstly, what constitutes digital knowledge required to participate effectively in everyday life and secondly, to allow for broadening of training scope in future to accommodate these shifts.

Looking at how digital skills are taught, as outlined earlier Age Action has found that where one-to-one classes which are learner led are provided, older people are as able as other age groups to learn new skills. The EU DIGITOL project echoed this and showed that where older people have digital skills, older people are willing to improve

skills in similar domains as younger people such as online paying of tax, banking, online shopping, engaging in public consultations and identifying fake news.[32]

We know that many older people wish to engage in literacy supports across the spectrum to improve their employability or as part of a wider reskilling package. It is crucial that supports across the ALND strategy recognise and integrate employment skilling as a defined aim for older learners and recognising its need in the wider context of increasing pension age, longer working lives and income insecurity in older age.

Recommendation 6 The public sector ICT strategy aims for Government services to be 'digital first', however an urgent need remains to both clarify and require that all Government services must be equally and easily available to those not online or with limited digital skills. Without doing so – and **adopting an explicit rights-based approach to planning and delivering Government services to enable digital inclusion** – those offline will be prevented from accessing services. A rights-based approach to delivery of Government services will ensure that those offline by choice or necessity do not suffer any greater difficulty in accessing services. Age Action receives regular calls from people unable to access basic Government information or services due to being offline. Recent examples included the requirement to make driving licence renewal appointments online only and the development of the COVID tracker app without initial supports to help people that are not confident smartphone users to understand how to download safely.

It is crucial that the meaningful participation of those most impacted by the new ALND strategy is provided for in its design. Given the 10-year timeframe, ongoing engagement with established networks will be needed to effectively evaluate implementation and refine as necessary. We urge the mainstreaming of the internationally adopted PANEL principles across the new ALND strategy, particularly in its approach to enabling the participation of those who are affected its remit and to ensure the diversity of views and voices:

- **Participation**: People should be involved in decisions that affect their rights.

- **Accountability**: There should be monitoring of how people's rights are being affected, as well as remedies when things go wrong.

- **Non-Discrimination and Equality**: All forms of discrimination must be prohibited, prevented, and eliminated. People who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights should be prioritised.

- **Empowerment**: Everyone should understand their rights and be fully supported to take part in developing policy and practices which affect their lives.

- **Legality**: an explicit application of human rights law and standards.

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[32] AGE Platform (2020) *AGE input to the consultation: Digital Education Action Plan*. Available at www.age-platform.eu.

Age Action welcomes the role of the Public Sector Duty to place equality and human rights at the heart of how a public body fulfils its role.[33] In this context – and in the framework of an increasing digitisation of services - an audit of Government services is needed to assess true access to services, necessary service enhancements and what is needed to promote public participation or consultation. Both new strategies need to articulate both the ways that those that need digital training will be supported and also the ways that Government will reduce the negative impacts of lack of these skills.

Theme 4: Priorities and actions

Recommendation 7: Urgently review the provision of digital skills training and on-going supports for older people - and associated statutory funding - to enable a national roll out of targeted training

Recommendation 8: Standardise the requirement to have all Government information and services – offline and online – in Plain English

Recommendation 7 Age Action sees first-hand the difference that digital literacy skills training and support can make to people that want to become digitally engaged. People can find their lives enriched in ways that are meaningful to them, and that promote health, employability, overall wellbeing and civic engagement.

Through the provision of our Getting Started classes since 2006 that has helped over 44,000 people get online, we have helped many grandparents learn to videocall their overseas grandchildren, helped farmers to access online farming publications and online car sales listings, supported small business owners to learn how to use online tools to translate email enquiries from overseas, supported people to learn how to lodge health insurance claims online, helped workers learn enough skills to work from home, and start businesses. The list of ways that people have empowered themselves through digital literacy is long and diverse. Since the pandemic, Age Action has also assisted plenty of learners to attend events online such as committee meetings and mass, to shop online, and to use the RTÉ Player.

The testimonials of people who have experienced Age Action's Getting Started Programme are evidence of the empowerment pathway digital literacy provides:

"I never used a computer in my life, didn't even have a calculator in work and Age Action have given me the confidence to use technology. It has given me great reassurance that if I ever got sick I could cope a lot better. I feel confident shopping online now. I have a new phone and I am really enjoying using google on it now. I search for new recipes and cooking tips and access the news online anytime I want to now."

"I can manage now to access and engage with my loved ones on Whatsapp. It has opened up a new world to me. I feel more engaged with the world now which is

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[33] IHREC (2019) *Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty*. Available at www.ihrec.ie.

especially needed during this isolating time. I can even ask google a question using my voice. I didn't believe this was possible at first but it is great."

"My tutor was a very good teacher, patient and helpful in so many ways. e.g. how to look up RIP, Bus times, RTE Player, You Tube, List of Candidates for the Election which was very helpful at the time and I was able to help others too in finding the Candidates for their area."

"Absolutely fantastic. Opened up a whole new world for me. I even used a self service machine at a checkout for the first time."

'Thank God for your amazing work as I now have the confidence to pay a bill online and complete other tasks.'

'The more I learned, the better my business became…[moving online] we have found absorbing interests, new friends plus a little financial gain.'

As discussed above, many older learners may benefit from one-to-one training as they are nervous about approaching technology, have negative memories of learning or have particular cognitive difficulties that require tailored delivery or time to reinforce content. Central to the new ALND strategy should be the aim of building individual empowerment to enable people to engage confidently with services.

Age Action also sees many enthusiastic learners who are unable to complete training due to factors outside their control, and allowances should be made to enable people in these situations to gain competence and continue training – many older people have chronic conditions that may flare up, have medical procedures or emergencies, be caring for others who may have medical procedures or urgent needs, be reliant on others for transport which may fall through, and many other reasons that interrupt structured learning times. Of note, Age Action consistently receives feedback across our classes **that the cost (devices and broadband) and quality of internet access continues to be a major barrier to digital skills acquisition.**

In addition, through the years of proving digital training, we have continued to receive calls for **technical supports** from students long after classes have ended. Many relate to auto-updates on devices or simple software issues and without the capacity for on-going technical support people can end up locked out of or unable to use their devices.

Looking at the content of digital skills, digital literacy training should be focused on that which is meaningful to people's lives. This means there is need for some digital outreach and familiarisation supports focused purely on engagement and understanding the basics and the potential of the internet, and not formatted as formal training or certification or set modules. Once there is engagement, further engagement can be structured according to identified outcomes or priorities.

Recommendation 8 Given the low levels of literacy across age cohorts and the increasing digitisation of services, an urgent need exists to mandate Government and

statutory services to adopt a mandatory Plain English requirement to simplify access for those with literacy concerns. As we move to developing a number of strategies across the literacy and digital skill sphere and following the Digital First practice, Age Action urges this embedding of Plain English across all new plans as well as retrofitting to existing services.

Theme 5: Measuring success

Recommendation 9: Collect and disaggregate data by age across all literacy, numeracy and digital skills programme

Recommendation 9 Data recording and reporting are needed to ensure understanding of needs and progress, as well as to enable targets to be set as part of the strategy that can then be measured. Specifically, data need to be recorded on:

- Those over 75 in standardised 9-year age brackets e.g. 74-84, 85-94, 95-104
- Individuals in long-term residential care

Most of the adult education surveys stop data collection at 65 and therefore it is difficult to both gauge the needs and the impacts of training supports. In addition, existing national targets in related strategies do not collect or refer to those in older age and thus prohibits the planning for and monitoring of services for an older age cohort. For example, lifelong learning finishes at age 64 in the latest Further Education and Training Strategy.

Targets should include impact measurements and not simply outputs of numbers trained and hours of training completed. The focus should be on the outcomes such as:

- Do learners feel confident that they can use all the skills from their course independently?
- Has training helped learners in ways that they can make meaningful improvements in their own lives?
- Do learners feel they know where and how to learn more if they want to?
- What barriers are there to people participating in training and how will they be addressed?
- What barriers are there to learners completing training and how will they be addressed?

4. Conclusion

Older persons have long been subject to inadequate protection of their human rights and overlooked in national policies and programmes. Looking forward, we have an opportunity to plan for a more inclusive, representative, and age-friendly society with the option of choice over how we age.

Older people tell us that they want to age in place - meaning the choice to remain living in their communities as long and independently as possible and with access to adequate income, housing and health supports. The vital role of adequate literacy

supports – in particular digital literacy skills and supports as we move to an increasingly digitised society - to enable people to age in place with dignity and control over their own lives has been highlighted during COVID-19, with gaps in the system exacerbated.

It is a time to re-evaluate and reassess the adequacy of educational training supports in older age. A Whole of Government approach to planning for our ageing population is needed, with core literacy commitments embedded across Departmental planning and strategies. The development of the 10-year ALND strategy is a wonderful opportunity to engage an older cohort who may wish to avail of dedicated supports. Given the timeframe of the new strategy we urge that it is seen as a living document that will be subject to regular monitoring and mid-term review.

About Age Action

Age Action is the leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people in Ireland. Our mission is to achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by eliminating age discrimination, promoting positive ageing and securing their right to comprehensive and high-quality services.

Age Action supports and advocates for equality and human rights for all older people. Everything we do is based on a recognition of the diversity of identity and situation among older people and a concern for equality for all older people. In addressing ageing, our work includes a concern to influence perspectives on and responses to ageing. This pursuit of equality and human rights is underpinned by our work to promote ageing in place, life-long learning, and health and wellbeing for older people, empowering them to live as active citizens.