

Literacy Advisory Service

Helping you to enhance your work

Right from the Start

A guide to supporting staff
and connecting with customers



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh





Literacy Advisory Service
Helping you to enhance your work

Right from the Start

**A guide to supporting staff
and connecting with customers**

Published by:

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)
76 Lower Gardiner Street
Dublin 1
Telephone: (01) 855 4332
Fax: (01) 855 5475
Web: www.nala.ie
E-mail: literacy@nala.ie

© National Adult Literacy Agency, 2009

ISBN: 1-871737-96-6

Acknowledgements

This guide is the outcome of a process that drew on the contributions of many people who are experts in the fields of literacy, the workplace or both.

Many thanks are due to the following people, who generously provided invaluable comments as the guide was being researched and finalised.

Carl Blake	Senior Programme Manager, Skillnets
Frank Brennan	HR Consultant
Joan Butler and Susan Ward	Literacy consultants, Budge4Ward
Eibhlin Carr and Emma Hunt Duffy	Marketing Department, EBS Building Society
Derek Elders and Louise Kelly	FÁS Skills for Work
Mandy Kennedy	Coolock/Darndale Adult Literacy & Basic Education Service
Patricia Normanly	Equality Officer, HR Department, Dublin Bus

Maureen Gilbert conducted initial research for the guide.

Clodagh McCarthy, NALA Organisational Support Co-ordinator, oversaw the production of the guide. The guide benefited from comments and insights from a number of other NALA staff, especially Bláthnaid Ní Chinnéide, Integrating Literacy Co-ordinator, and Helen Ryan, Policy Officer.

Finally, particular thanks are due to Dr Elizabeth McSkeane, who collaborated on the guide with NALA and whose expertise, rigour and flexibility contributed greatly to this publication.

Foreword

There is an increasing awareness of the need for high levels of literacy and numeracy skills in the knowledge society. NALA is concerned with, on the one hand, encouraging adults with literacy difficulties to take up learning opportunities while also supporting organisations to be more accessible.

To that end, we have produced this guide to take organisations through a range of approaches that will ensure they are not excluding either customers or staff with literacy difficulties but rather have policies and practices that are inclusive and progressive. Doing so will enable organisations not only to improve their dealings with adults with literacy difficulties but also to enhance the efficiency of their operations for all customers and staff.

We look forward to working with and supporting organisations to use this guide and hope that you find it a useful resource. We welcome any comments that might improve its content for future editions.

Inez Bailey

Director

Contents

Introduction	8
How to use <i>Right from the Start</i>	10
Section A: Being literacy-friendly – reasons and responses	11
Why introduce a literacy-friendly approach?	12
What does it mean to be a literacy-friendly organisation?	13
Good Practice: Policies and Procedures	14
Good Practice: Communications	16
Good Practice: Staff Training and Development	17
A positive impact	18
Making it happen	19
Section B: Five steps to being a literacy-friendly organisation	20
Figure 1: Five-step process	21
Step 1: Hold initial review and planning session	22
Step 2: Carry out a literacy audit	23
Step 3: Develop action plans	24
Step 4: Implement action plans	26
Step 5: Monitor and evaluate actions	28
Appendix 1: Signs of possible literacy difficulties	30
Appendix 2: Success stories	32
Appendix 3: Resources and information	35
Appendix 4: Training and development options	37
Appendix 5: Contacts	38
References	39
Feedback Form	41

Introduction

Welcome to *Right from the Start*, a practical guide designed by the National Adult Literacy Agency to help organisations of all kinds maximise the potential of their two most valuable assets in making the organisation succeed – the customers and the staff. This guide gives you the tools to start taking account of literacy issues inside and outside your organisation to:

- enable full access to your services, and
- remove unnecessary barriers to joining or moving up within your staff.

What is literacy?

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

Literacy is one of the most important skills involved in reaching customers and in making the most of the talents of the staff in any organisation. This may not be immediately obvious, yet managers in very different organisations have identified many routine reading and writing tasks that customers and staff need to carry out.

Tasks for staff	Tasks for customers
Reading signs and notices	Reading and understanding information about a product or service
Reading and following instructions, for example health and safety instructions	Reading and checking bills and invoices
Writing out orders, invoices	Making a query or a complaint
Entering information on databases	Following organisation procedures
Communicating with colleagues	Reading, writing and sending e-mails
Writing and sending e-mails	Understanding health and safety issues related to a product or service

Employers in many countries are realising that some people on their staff, and in the general population, find reading, writing and handling numbers difficult. Many have also reported that gaps in these skills could cost their business money because of mistakes, reduced efficiency, absenteeism and poor communication¹.

Are literacy issues affecting your organisation?

Is it possible that...

- ... without knowing it, your organisation is losing current and potential customers because of complicated literature and procedures?
- ... your organisation is losing money because of time spent dealing with misunderstandings, mistakes or complaints?
- ... some of your staff, including the most talented and creative among them, are grappling with unnecessary obstacles that stop them fulfilling their potential and giving their best value to the organisation?
- ... without realising it, you may be excluding some people from fair access to opportunities and services because of unnecessary literacy barriers?

If there is even a slight possibility that the answer to one or more of these questions is “yes”, then it is very important to investigate it. This guide will help you to do that.

1 Leavey, J., 2007. *Improving Teaching and Learning for Adults with Basic Skill Needs through Formative Assessment*. OECD Country Study: Scotland country background report. Edinburgh: Learning Connections.

How to use *Right from the Start*

The guide has two parts.

- Read Section A to find out what it means to be a literacy-friendly organisation and why it is worth taking this approach.
- Follow the five-step process described in Section B to review your current activities and take action to improve them.

Step 1: Hold an initial review and planning session

Step 2: Carry out a literacy audit

Step 3: Develop action plans

Step 4: Implement action plans

Step 5: Monitor and evaluate actions

You may wish to use NALA's Literacy Advisory Service to help with the process. We can provide particular tools for your organisation's needs.

- *Right from the Start* finishes with a tear-off feedback sheet that we would like you to fill in and return to NALA. This will let us know how useful you found the guide and how we can improve it.

Section A:

Being literacy-
friendly – reasons
and responses

Section A: Being literacy-friendly – reasons and responses

Why introduce a literacy-friendly approach?

Most people's literacy abilities include strengths and weaknesses — at a simple level, someone may be an able reader but not as skilled at spelling or using numbers, for example. We can use reading and writing at many levels, from the most basic tasks to the much more complex demands of the changing workplace and modern society.

As well as this, we use literacy in many different ways for the many different situations we face, even in a single day. Perhaps someone gets a new job and has to improve a particular writing technique or learn how to use a new technology. Or perhaps the bank asks us to fill in a form on the spot to process a transaction. Changes inside and outside work mean that all of us, at different stages in our lives and in response to different situations, have 'literacy' needs.

There is a lot of statistical evidence that literacy difficulties are a major issue in Ireland today. An international study from the OECD² revealed that one in six of the Irish workforce and as many as one in four of the general adult population have difficulty completing the reading, writing and number-related tasks that are part of daily and working life.

Literacy difficulties not only have individual consequences but can also carry an economic cost.

One study in the UK³ found that the cost of skills gaps to the UK economy as a whole is £10 billion annually. It is estimated that companies with:

- fewer than 50 employees lose between £900 and £1,600 a year,
- 51 to 100 employees lose £86,000 a year, and
- 1,000-plus employees lose £500,000 a year.

2 Morgan, M., Hickey, B. and Kelleghan, T., 1997. *International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland (A report to the Minister for Education)*. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.

3 Dumfries and Galloway Adult Literacy and Numeracy Partnership, 2007. *Workplace Literacies Pack for Employers*. Dumfries: Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategic Partnership.

What does it mean to be a literacy-friendly organisation?

A literacy-friendly organisation genuinely includes and respects its staff and its customers. It encourages commitment in all parts of the organisation and among all levels of staff to remove literacy-related barriers to access, participation and achievement. Most of all, it understands that difficulties with particular types of reading and writing do not indicate a lack of ability as such.

In everyday terms, a literacy-friendly organisation enables those with literacy difficulties to:

- access its services,
- communicate effectively with it, in different ways,
- apply for positions for which they have an aptitude and relevant experience,
- be included in staff consultations,
- be treated fairly in light of their general performance and interaction with colleagues and customers,
- understand and apply internal policies and procedures, and
- receive effective training to help them carry out their jobs to the best of their ability.

To remove unnecessary literacy-related barriers, it is important firstly to review and, if necessary, adapt your organisation's overall policies and procedures. Your organisation should then look at its communications and staff training and development practices. You may well find that any policies and practices you currently have – or plan to implement – benefit all staff, not just those with literacy difficulties.

To help ensure that any changes have the widest possible impact, it is worth looking at your policies and procedures, communications and staff training and development from the perspective of:

- customer service, and
- internal staffing activities, for example recruitment, health and safety, performance management, training and promotion.

Over the next few pages, you will find a number of guidelines that summarise good practice in policies and procedures, communications and staff training.



Good Practice: Policies and Procedures

To develop literacy-friendly **customer service**, an organisation should develop policies to:

- ensure staff are aware of the potential literacy signals when dealing with customers and interact sensitively with them (see Appendix 1),
- ensure staff communicate with all customers in plain English,
- ensure all legal notices, health and safety information and annual reports are clear,
- offer the customer, wherever possible and without unduly compromising privacy, the option of having staff fill in any essential paperwork to comply with legal requirements,
- offer a range of methods for customers to make contact – letter, e-mail, online forms, telephone and face-to-face,
- ensure procedures for accessing the organisation's goods or services are as straightforward as legally possible,
- give customers a choice of how they wish to be contacted about goods and services, which may include verbal communication,
- allow customers to submit questions or complaints in writing or verbally, which can then be noted by staff and processed using documented procedures, and
- store customer information centrally and securely to avoid the need to make repeat requests for the same information.

To develop literacy-friendly **staff-related activities**, an organisation should develop policies to:

- treat current and potential staff with literacy difficulties fairly,
- reduce the literacy demands of a role to a minimum,
- specify the essential literacy tasks in job specifications and advertisements,
- only ask for qualifications if they are essential for the role,
- include literacy tasks in interviews only when these are essential for the job,
- plan for assessments to be carried out using a wide range of methods, not just paper and pencil or multiple-choice questions,
- support skilled people who have difficulties with reading and writing in applying to work in the organisation,
- ensure managers who conduct staff appraisals are aware of the reading and writing demands of the job and take these into account in their assessments and feedback to staff,
- ensure staff performance is appraised using alternative methods to reading and writing, unless these are integral to the job,
- record and communicate staff progress using alternative methods to writing,
- ensure all internal documents and forms are in plain English,
- ensure staff can use a range of written and verbal methods to take action under any organisational policies,
- ensure staff who need to can get help with any reading or writing task they find interfering with their work or in their being a part of the organisation, and
- plan or arrange individualised programmes that support people with reading and writing.



Good Practice: Communications

To develop literacy-friendly communication with **customers**, an organisation should:

- use plain English in all customer correspondence, both printed and electronic,
- allow customers to receive information in writing over the phone or face-to-face,
- ensure staff use plain English when speaking with customers and the public,
- produce all leaflets, reports, other printed publications and website information in plain English, with suitable images,
- ensure health and safety notices are clear and accessible to all members of the public,
- ensure maps, directions and signage use plain English terms and are easy to follow, and
- organise or arrange external consultation that uses a number of methods, besides surveys, to gather information.

To develop literacy-friendly communication with current and potential **staff**, an organisation should:

- ensure job advertisements and application forms are in plain English,
- advertise internal vacancies and training courses using a variety of methods, not just in writing,
- ensure key employment policies covering areas such as equality, health and safety, bullying and harassment, internet use and e-mail are in plain English and communicated verbally,
- allow staff a choice of making grievances in writing or verbally using grievance procedures – and related communications – that are in plain English,
- ensure disciplinary procedures are easy to understand,
- ensure health and safety notices and instructions are clear and that staff are regularly updated about their meaning,
- present performance appraisal criteria in a range of ways, not only in writing,
- consult with staff, for example for training needs analysis, in a range of different ways and include alternative methods to reading and writing,
- ensure training course outlines and materials are clearly written, in plain English, and
- ensure that any training texts are complemented by other media and sources of information.



Good Practice: Staff Training and Development

To support staff in providing literacy-friendly **customer service**, an organisation should:

- ensure new staff are trained as part of their induction in how to interact sensitively with customers who may have literacy difficulties,
- raise awareness of literacy issues among all levels of staff,
- ensure all levels of staff receive training on how to take account of literacy needs within their roles and within their part of the organisation, and
- inform staff about adult literacy tuition, including how to become volunteer adult literacy tutors.

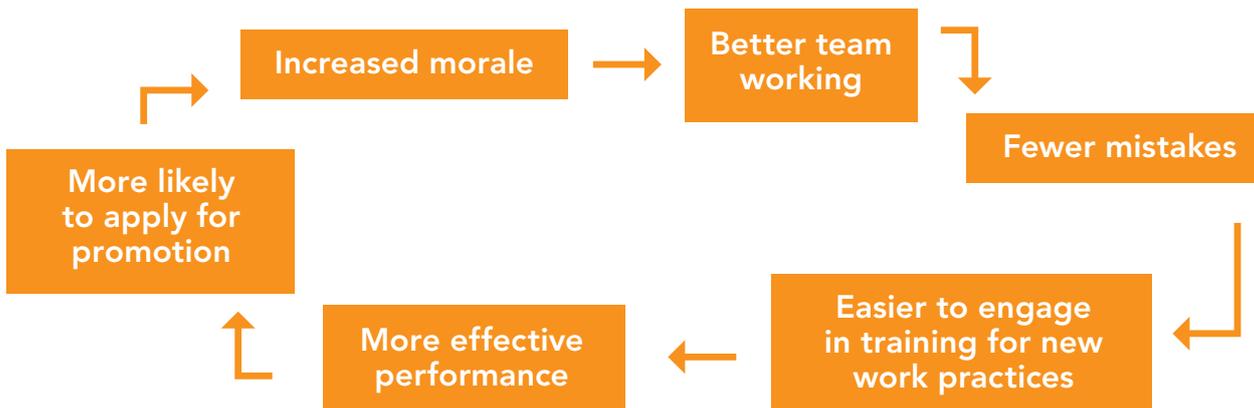
To take a literacy friendly approach to training **staff**, an organisation should:

- use a wide range of methods, including interview, focus group or observation for initial and ongoing assessment of staff training needs,
- identify and record the literacy and numeracy demands of jobs to inform training plans,
- record the literacy demands of each area when analysing jobs or tasks,
- train staff with HR or personnel responsibilities to recognise and react sensitively to people who may have a literacy difficulty,
- design courses in a way that makes them inclusive of people who may have difficulties with reading and writing,
- use a wide range of methods when delivering training, not just written handouts or PowerPoint presentations,
- ensure trainers deliver their courses in a way that is effective for people who may have reading or writing difficulties,
- evaluate the quality and impact of training in a variety of ways, in addition to written forms and questionnaires,
- arrange for designated staff to report the quality and impact of training to relevant colleagues in a variety of ways,
- support staff who need to get help with any reading or writing tasks that they find interfere with their work or with being a part of the organisation, and
- plan or arrange individualised programmes that support people who find reading and writing difficult.

A positive impact

Many organisations have reported great benefits for their staff, for their customers and for the organisation itself as a result of steps they have taken to support literacy in different ways. Here are some of the benefits they report.

Employees



Customers



Organisation



Appendix 2 contains case studies of improvements in staff performance and customer satisfaction through literacy-friendly approaches.

Making it happen

Becoming a literacy-friendly organisation involves a commitment to analysing current policies and practices, action planning, implementing action plans and reviewing the effectiveness of actions.

Now that you have read Section A of *Right from the Start*, you may now:

- agree that literacy could be an important part of the functions of your organisation or be willing to investigate if this is the case,
- consider that some of your customers or staff, or both, may find it difficult to handle some of the literacy demands they meet, and
- be willing to take five simple steps to make your own organisation more literacy-friendly.

Section B will help you to find out how to identify the good practice your organisation already uses, where there may be gaps and what actions you can take to change things. The most effective results will emerge by considering all aspects of your organisation, at all levels.

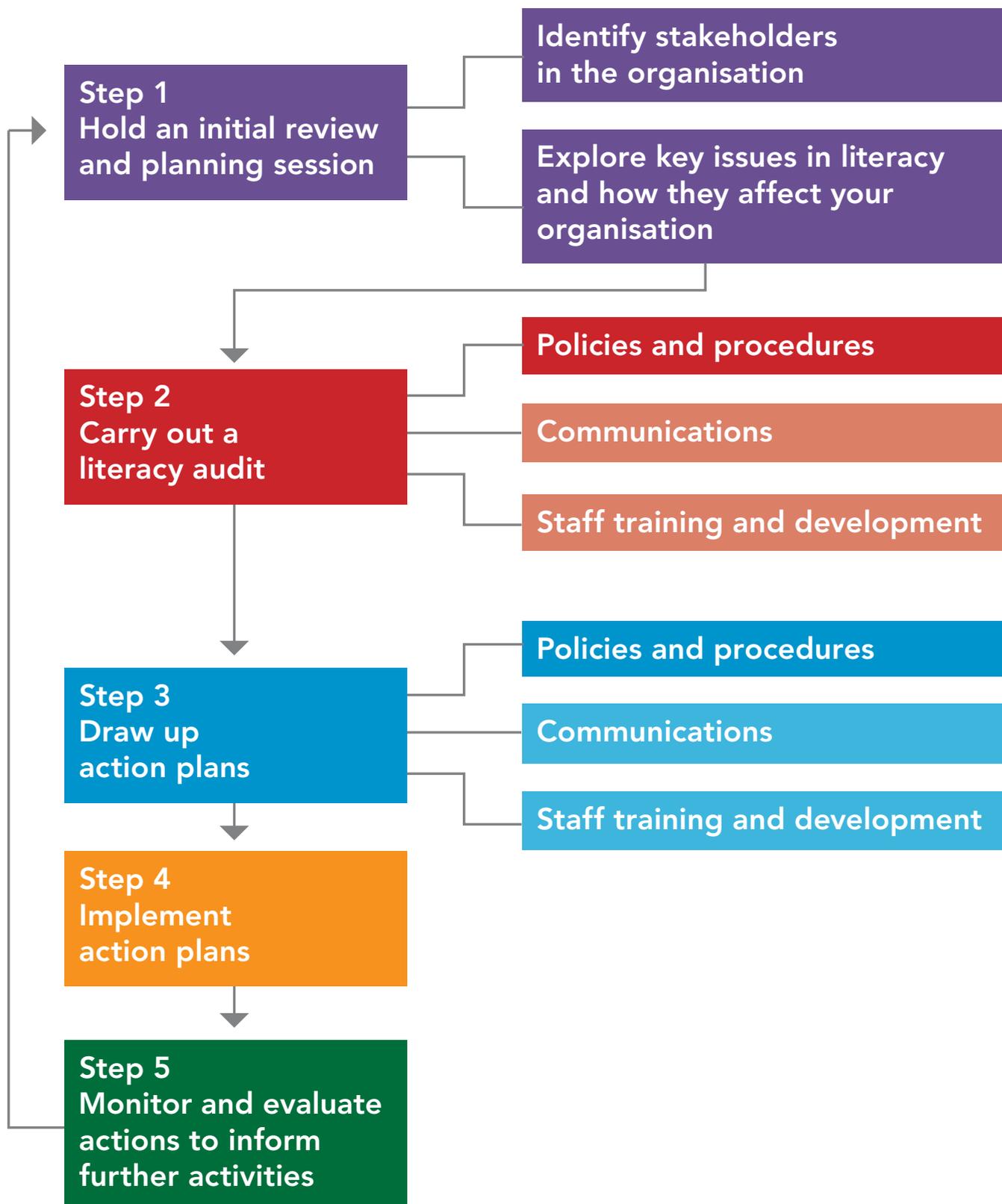
Section B:

Five steps to being a literacy-friendly organisation

The flow chart on the next page gives an overview of what is involved in becoming a literacy-friendly organisation. The steps are designed to be applied to:

- customer services, and
- staffing and recruitment activities, including staff training and development.

Figure 1: Five steps to being a literacy-friendly organisation



Step 1: Hold an initial review and planning session

Step 1, which is carried out in consultation with an expert agency such as NALA, is an initial review and planning session that is intended to help you to reflect on:

- the existing level of literacy awareness in your organisation,
- the mission, values and targets of your organisation and how becoming literacy-aware can help to achieve those, and
- good practice guidelines.

In most organisations, especially large ones, it is important to involve:

- representatives of all key departments and, if applicable, trade union members,
- people who have an in-depth, practical knowledge of how their department works,
- people in positions of responsibility who are able to make decisions,
- people who want to be involved, and
- especially, people who are willing to promote literacy awareness in their area. These people may later become 'literacy champions' to help other parts of the organisation adopt the approach.

NALA can tailor initial briefing seminars to the size and structure of your organisation. These activity-based events cover topics such as:

- definitions of literacy and causes and effects of literacy difficulties,
- the reasons for supporting literacy in your organisation, as well as the potential benefits and demands of doing so, and
- how your organisation's policies, practices and procedures can take account of literacy difficulties.

Later, when some of your training or human resource staff gain experience and an interest in the area, some of this briefing can be done in-house.

Step 2: Carry out a literacy audit

This step will probably be the most extensive of the five steps. At this stage, it is essential to look at what you already have in place; it is very likely that at least some of what your organisation does already supports people who have difficulties reading or writing. It is good to identify this, as existing good practice is an excellent starting point. The audit will also help you to clarify the precise areas where small changes could make a big difference. You should focus on your organisation's:

- policies and procedures,
- communication methods, and
- staff training and development activities.

Key point!

Make sure that the individuals who analyse and make judgements about each area really do have a deep, practical knowledge of how things actually happen on the ground and not only how they should happen.

If your team represents all areas, one or two team members could consult colleagues in the wider organisation to examine each area and bring their findings back to the whole team. A literacy consultant from NALA's Literacy Advisory Service can help your organisation work through the audit, using a set of tools and checklists, and can work with you directly on any actions that arise.

The detailed information generated from the audit provides the basis for Step 3.

Step 3: Develop action plans

When you have carried out the detailed literacy audit, the range of actions you could take to remove barriers will now be very clear.

Deciding on actions

As with all action planning, be specific. Make sure you note:

- what to do and who will do it,
- when the action will be done, and
- most importantly, how your team will know the action has been done and measure its impact on the organisation.

It is very important to think about monitoring and evaluation right from the start. This will help you clarify what result you want to achieve from taking the actions. Monitoring and evaluation are addressed in detail at Step 5, but it is best to weave in these processes right from the start.



When looking at your **policies and procedures**, reflect on any barriers that your current ways of working may pose to customers or staff with literacy difficulties. What can you do to reduce or provide alternatives to the reading and writing demands of doing business with or working in your organisation?



When looking at your **communications**, consider what you can do to make forms, plans, letters, e-mails, manuals, signs, notices, minutes, policies and procedures and verbal communication more literacy friendly.



When looking at your **staff training and development**, think about what you can do to support and encourage staff to improve their literacy skills. Bear in mind also how you can advertise, design, deliver and evaluate staff training in a way that allows those with literacy difficulties to benefit.

Writing up actions

It can be useful to specify an intended action by phrasing it as a positive statement **in the present tense**. Here are some examples.

- Communications, staffing: “Review and amend job descriptions for new and promoted posts so that they are easy to understand and list only essential literacy and other requirements for the role.”
- Policies and procedures, customer service: “Set up a helpline to record messages and queries.”

Try to keep actions **SMART** - **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and with a clear **T**imeframe.

Setting indicators

The action-planning stage is also the time to set indicators of progress towards completing the action. This will help the team to clarify what a completed plan will look like in reality and how best to monitor and evaluate the plans.

Step 4: Implement action plans

You have drawn up plans, decided who is responsible for each stage and developed indicators to show progress. Now is the time to put those plans into practice.

If you have identified several actions, you may need to prioritise. If so, you might find it useful to start with just one of the following three headings in turn:

- policies and procedures,
- communications, and
- staff training and development.



Policies and procedures

Before starting to make changes to a well-established policy or procedure, it may be useful to take part in a literacy awareness briefing to establish the rationale for any change and to encourage and motivate people.

Sometimes quite subtle barriers can be embedded in policies and procedures. For example, a job specification might demand a certain qualification simply because that is the custom, rather than its being a real requirement for the job. It is not always easy to see these barriers in operation; their potential effects are even less visible. This makes the analysis in Step 2, and the resulting action plans, very important.



Communications

Making your written information as reader-friendly as possible involves both the language you use and the way you present the text. A very useful technique as a start is to present the most important documents – for the staff and for the public - in plain English. Appendix 4 has details on where to find out more about plain English.

While it is often necessary to have information in writing, it is worth investigating what types of communication could take place verbally alongside written communication or instead of it. For example, it is often necessary to update health and safety procedures in writing, but for some staff the opportunity to go through them in person as well makes it more likely that they will understand and follow a procedure.



Staff training and development

Working through this process could spark the interest of staff in focused literacy-support activities, including:

- general literacy awareness training,
- dedicated adult literacy tuition, and
- training for trainers to integrate literacy into their work specific training.

More information about the main literacy skills development programmes is in Appendix 4.

One outcome of literacy awareness is that some of your staff might identify that they want to improve their reading or writing or your human resources department may become aware of this need.

Dedicated adult literacy tuition in the workplace is quite well-established in other countries³ and has been implemented with considerable success here in Ireland.⁴ Appendix 3 has more information about the range of supports available.

Other staff training takes the 'integrating literacy' approach, which is a key feature of the literacy-friendly strategy that some organisation have adopted. It involves identifying training needs and planning, delivering and evaluating staff training in a way that takes account of literacy issues. Further details are available in Appendix 3.

Even if you are not currently aware of any staff having problems with their reading and writing, it is always possible that this will arise in the future. By working through these steps, you will be well prepared to anticipate any such needs as they occur.

3 Campaign for Learning, 2008. *Skills for Life: workplace case studies*. [Online]. London: Campaign for Learning. Available from http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/cfl/WorkplaceLearning/s4l/skills_for_life_workplace_case_studies.asp [Accessed 20 January 2009]

4 NALA, 2003. *Closing the Gap: Boosting Productivity and Competitiveness through Workplace Basic Education*. Dublin: National Adult Literacy Agency.

Step 5: Monitor and evaluate actions

Your action plan should include a statement about how the team will monitor and evaluate how the plan is implemented.

One option is to set up a monitoring committee, which could involve some or all of the team. This group should commit to checking progress regularly on all plans at or before every meeting.

Another option is to weave the monitoring of the action plans into the existing processes in your organisation, such as management meetings, general staff meetings or quality assurance procedures. If you put action plans on the agenda of every relevant meeting, literacy-friendly activities and their monitoring will be more easily embedded in the work of the organisation rather than 'bolted on' as a separate issue for only a few people.

Evaluation is a key stage in all your organisation's activities – it is important to see whether the actions you are taking are having the desired effect, and gather evidence to support this. You can use a mix of verbal and written methods to gather evidence: along with traditional surveys and checklists, try using face-to-face or telephone interviews, pictorial diaries, focus groups and role plays.

Key point!

Monitoring and evaluation are an important part of the process, right from the beginning. Be sure to keep track from the start that anything that is supposed to happen does happen. Find out how it is working out while it is still in progress, rather than weeks or months later when it may be difficult to correct any problems. Learning from experience can be supported by monitoring and evaluation at all stages in the five-step process.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Signs of possible literacy difficulties

If asked to work with written material or read aloud in public, some adults with reading or writing difficulties may do the following:

- Make an excuse to leave
- Say they forgot their glasses
- Ask someone else to read instead
- Change the subject or create a diversion
- Say they'll take the document home and read it there
- Say their pen has run out
- Get angry or disrupt the situation if they are with other people.

If asked to write or to read written material in the course of a telephone conversation, some adults may do the following:

- Use some of the coping strategies listed above
- Ask the other speaker to read out loud the section they are talking about
- Make an excuse to hang up

If they get training or promotion opportunities at work, some adults may do the following:

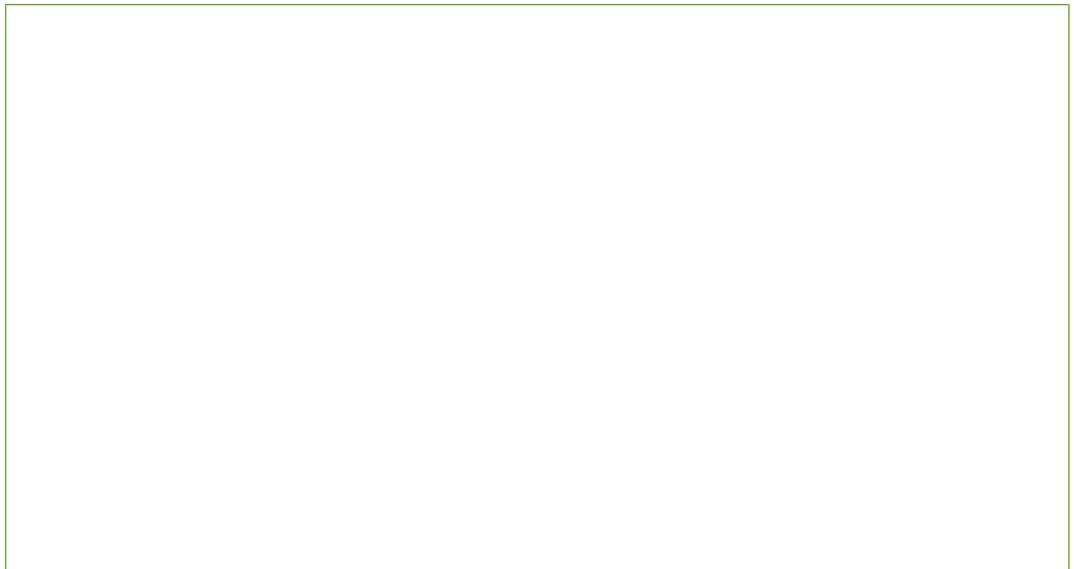
- Avoid taking on responsibility or promotion, even when they are capable or have leadership qualities
- When training, avoid working towards qualifications, even when they have potential to progress
- Drop out of a course when qualifications are mentioned

- Fail to turn up on days when reading or writing are used

Certain mistakes made during training or work may indicate that the person finds reading or writing difficult. Here are some examples.

- Misunderstandings about what someone wants or needs
- Difficulty following manuals or written instructions
- Mistakes in orders
- Wrong use of equipment
- Damage to equipment
- Distracting colleagues from work, lost time
- Unfinished assignments or tasks
- Tasks taking longer than they should

You may have noticed some other cues yourself, which you can write in below.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write down any other cues they have noticed.

Appendix 2: Success stories

Adopting literacy-friendly initiatives has yielded benefits in many places.

Staff training and development

New Zealand



A pilot workplace literacy initiative in the seafood, meat processing and community care industries produced quantifiable improvements for customers and business: problems with assembling and dispatching new products fell by 50% following the initiative.¹

Scotland



An informal survey of communication with the public by the Tribunals Service, which supports the Central Government's Ministry of Justice, found that one in five letters sent out by the Service fell below an acceptable standard. This had been a serious issue, as the Service deals with benefits, tax credits and child support maintenance.

Support for staff who had issues with literacy led to improvements in work-specific areas such as letter writing. It also helped employees with more personal tasks such as CV writing, interview skills and job appraisals – all good news for employees, for the public and for the Tribunals Service.²

1 Workbase, 2006. *Make it Real: Taking the Lead in Literacy*. Auckland: Workbase: the National Centre for Workforce Literacy Development.

2 Learn Direct Scotland, 2008. *Improving Reading, Writing and Number Skills in the Workplace*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Ireland

The Return to Learning (R2L) project is a partnership between local authorities and the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) to give local authority employees an opportunity to attend a workplace basic skills course. Courses can take place in the workplace or elsewhere, for example in a local VEC or library, during normal working hours. A review of the pilot phase, which included almost 150 participants from Mayo, Meath, Offaly, South Dublin and Tipperary South Riding, showed that participants benefited by:

- an improvement of their literacy skills,
- an increase in self-confidence, and
- a reawakening of an interest in learning.

In light of the success of the pilot, the initiative was extended to the remaining 29 local authorities throughout Ireland. A review in 2005 revealed that over three-quarters of participants (76%) believed that participation in the course has enabled them do a better job. Over half (51%) believed that they now had an excellent chance of advancement in work as a result of participation. One participant noted 'It has given me great confidence... I will now ask for help if I need it. I can fill in forms. I couldn't do any of this before'.³

Ireland

"Newbridge Youth Training and Development, a FÁS Community Training Centre, delivers a wide range of vocational education and training programmes. The centre has adopted a whole-organisation approach to literacy, using NALA's "Integrating Literacy Guidelines" as a framework. The manager, trainers, administration and ancillary staff are all trained in how to integrate literacy-aware practices into their work. All the centre's documentation is designed and presented in easy-to-read format and language.

Staff members at the centre report that adopting a whole-organisation approach to integrating literacy has brought marked improvements in participation and learning across all courses and activities."⁴

3 Polaris Human Resources, 2005. *Review of Return to Learning Initiative 2005*. Dublin: Local Authority National Advisory Group.

4 Kathleen Cramer, Manager, Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centre, Newbridge, Co. Kildare

Clear communications

United Kingdom



British Telecom produced a clearer bill in plain English and saw customer inquiries fall by 25% each quarter. Customers also paid their bills more promptly, which improved revenue and reduced the cost of collecting overdue bills. Before the change, BT had been receiving a million calls a year.⁵

United States



When the unclaimed property section of Arizona's Department of Revenue rewrote its letters in plain English, it received about 11,000 fewer phone calls than it had the previous year. The division had more time to do other work and could process about 30,000 more claims. Apart from helping to increase efficiency, the use of plain English helped improve staff morale, as employees were no longer answering the same questions repeatedly.⁶

Canada



When a Toronto-based financial services company agreed to pilot a sample of rewritten customer service instructions, it found that moving to plain English had the potential to:

- improve employee productivity by a forecasted 36.9%; and
- decrease employee errors by a forecasted 77.1%.

The previous set of instructions, designed to help staff deal with customer queries about the company's online banking system, were found to be too complicated and unnecessarily detailed. But because of simpler instructions and increased staff performance, the company forecasted a potential return on investing in plain English of \$3.5 million to \$15.2 million over three years.⁷

⁵ Word Centre, 2008. *The business case for plain English*. [Online]. Available at www.wordcentre.co.uk/page57.htm [Accessed 20 January 2009]

⁶ Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2008. *Plain Language: the bottom line*. [Online]. Available at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm> [Accessed 18 January 2009]

⁷ Grotsky, R., 2004. Plain language: Its effect on organisational performance. *Clarity*, 51, May 2004, 17-19.

Appendix 3: Resources and information

The National Adult Literacy Agency offers a range of supports, including help with implementing this five-step process. We also provide a number of resources about literacy and literacy-related topics.

You can find out about these on our website, www.nala.ie.

Dedicated literacy tuition

Useful resources include:

- An Employer's Guide to Basic Skills at Work
- A First Look at Computers
- Form Filling
- Health and Safety at Work
- Letter Writing
- Managing Change at Work

Distance Learning Service

This service includes: TV programmes, a freephone tutoring support service, workbooks and a website portal, www.literacy.ie, from which you can access a range of websites for tutors and learners.

Distance education learners have the option of working towards accreditation from a choice of nine minor FETAC awards or the Level 2 FETAC Certificate in General Learning.

Among the resources produced by the Distance Learning Service are:

- Read Write Now workbooks and interactive CDs
- Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers
- Written Off? Reader

Integrating literacy into staff training and development

Useful resources include:

- Integrating Literacy Guidelines

Plain English

Useful resources include:

- Writing and Design Tips
- Summary plain English guidelines
- Checklists for clear forms and other documents, available at www.nala.ie

Appendix 4: Training and development options

VEC Adult Literacy Service

VECs around the country, through their Adult Literacy Service, organise initial and in-service training in adult literacy tuition, which is mainly designed for people who want to work as volunteer and paid tutors in the service. In most VECs, the initial tutor-training course is accredited by WIT (see below).

Literacy Awareness Training

This is a one-day course that raises awareness of literacy issues, including their causes and effects, and explores ways of responding.

Contact NALA's Training Department for further details on (01) 855 4332.

Plain English Training

This one-day workshop shows how to update existing documents and write new ones in a literacy-friendly and accessible format.

Contact NALA's Training Department for further details on (01) 855 4332.

NALA/WIT Single Module Certificate in Literacy Methodologies

Waterford Institute of Technology offers the National Certificate in Humanities in Adult and Community Education. This is one of the 12 modules which make up the Certificate. It carries 10 credits towards the full National Certificate (120 credits) and equips people in planning and methods.

Integrating Literacy Programme, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Conducted over 100 hours, this accredited programme is delivered in a series of two-day training sessions within a six-month period. The course equips participants with the teaching skills and approaches to enable them to integrate the development of literacy within their own programme.

Appendix 5: Contacts

Organisation	What it does
National Adult Literacy Agency 76 Lower Gardiner St., Dublin 1 Tel.: (01) 855 4332 Fax: (01) 855 5475 E-mail: literacy@nala.ie Web: www.nala.ie	NALA is an independent member-based organisation that focuses on developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services on adult literacy in Ireland. Anyone with an interest in literacy can join, take part in our events and visit our Resource Room to look at and buy materials.

Organisation	What it does
Irish Vocational Education Association McCann House 99 Marlborough Road Donnybrook, Dublin 4 Tel: (01) 496 6033 E-mail: info@ivea.ie Web: www.ivea.ie	There are 33 VECs in Ireland and the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) represents them nationally. Each VEC offers individual and group tuition through its adult literacy services. VECs also run workplace literacy and family literacy programmes. Contact details for local adult literacy centres are given under the drop-down list of VECs on www.ivea.ie/committees_search.htm

Organisation	What it does
Irish Congress of Trade Unions 31/32 Parnell Square Dublin 1 Tel.: (01) 889 7777 (01) 887 2012 E-mail: congress@ictu.ie Web: www.ictu.ie	ICTU represents 56 trades unions and 770,000 workers in Ireland. The 25 Congress Centres Networks (CCN) provide a range of services for workers, including education and training. Some of these centres offer support in basic skills. A contact list can be found on: www.ictu.ie/html/centres/contact_us.htm

Your local library

The national network of local libraries offers an impressive range of supports to the community. You can find out where your local library is and what services it offers on www.library.ie. Most libraries carry some literacy information and teaching materials. A lot also arrange lectures on the arts, current affairs and citizens' rights and can organise book clubs and creative writing groups. These activities are often interesting for people who have started work on improving their reading and writing.

References

Business NZ, the Industry Training Federation, the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions and Workbase, nd. *The Key Steps Forward for Workforce Literacy*. Auckland: Workbase: the National Centre for Workforce Literacy Development.

Campaign for Learning, 2008. *Skills for Life: workplace case studies*. [Online]. London: Campaign for Learning. Available from http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/cfl/WorkplaceLearning/s4l/skills_for_life_workplace_case_studies.asp [Accessed 20 January 2009]

Casey, H., Cara, O., Eldred, J., Grief, S., Hodge, R., Ivanicv, R., Jupp, T., Lopez, D. and McNeil, B., 2006. You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering... In: NRDC. *Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement*. London: National Research and Development Centre.

Dumfries and Galloway Adult Literacy and Numeracy Partnership, 2007. *Workplace Literacies Pack for Employers*. Dumfries: Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategic Partnership.

Grotsky, R., 2004. Plain language: Its effect on organisational performance. *Clarity*, 51, May 2004, 17-19.

Learn Direct Scotland, 2008. *Improving Reading, Writing and Number Skills in the Workplace*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Leavey, J., 2007. *Improving Teaching and Learning for Adults with Basic Skill Needs through Formative Assessment*. OECD Study: Scotland country background report. Edinburgh: Learning Connections.

McCaffery, J., Merrifield, J. and Millican, J., 2007. *Developing Adult Literacy: Approaches to Planning, Implementing, and Delivering Literacy Initiatives*. Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Morgan, M., Hickey, B. and Kelleghan, T., 1997. *International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland (A report to the Minister for Education)*. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.

NALA, 2005. *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*. Dublin: National Adult Literacy Agency.

NALA, 2003. *Closing the Gap: Boosting Productivity and Competitiveness through Workplace Basic Education*. Dublin: National Adult Literacy Agency.

Polaris Human Resources, 2005. *Review of Return to Learning Initiative 2005*. Dublin: Local Authority National Advisory Group.

Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2008. *Plain Language: the bottom line*. [Online]. Available at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm>
[Accessed 18 January 2009]

Word Centre, 2008. *The business case for plain English*. [Online]. Available at www.wordcentre.co.uk/page57.htm
[Accessed 20 January 2009]

Workbase, 2006. *Make it Real: Taking the Lead in Literacy*. Auckland: Workbase: the National Centre for Workforce Literacy Development.

Right from the Start Feedback Form

Name of organisation _____ Date _____

Please take a few minutes to answer these questions to help us improve this guide.

What is your opinion of the overall structure and content of the guide?

What made it easy to follow?

What factors might have made the content unclear?

What particular piece of information will you take back to your work?

What areas could be improved in future editions of the guide?

Please rate from 1 to 5 the elements of the guide listed below.

1= Poor 2= Average 3= Good 4= Very good 5= Excellent

Clarity of purpose and content	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Relevance to your organisation's needs	1	2	3	4	5
Effectiveness of structure and layout	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for taking the time to fill this in.



