



European  
Basic Skills  
Network

# Communicating health information to people with lower levels of literacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current booklet serves as an auxiliary material to the Erasmus+ KA2 project called **Together for Fertility**. The resources and the structure of the booklet are based on a training program that was realised in the framework of the project. The training's themes and the overall structure were both reviewed and accepted by project partners in advance.

The main aim of the booklet is to put forward recommendations and provide practical tools that support the successful implementation of the project plan. More precisely the booklet contains strategic and practical methods on how to communicate health information to adults with challenges in reading, writing, and using digital devices and platforms. Hence, the booklet is aimed at helping project members design outcomes so that they are better fit for inclusion of the target group with basic skills needs.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE ADULT BASIC SKILLS CHALLENGE

The focus on the upskilling of adult in terms of basic skills has long been in the focus of the EU, which is based on alarming data and significant consequences of insufficient proficiency in reading, writing, calculating and basic digital skills. According to the European Commission<sup>1</sup>, almost 20% of the EU's adult population lack the necessary basic skills and close to 22% of them only obtained a lower secondary level of education at most. Similarly, OECD's PIAAC survey<sup>2</sup> indicates that almost 30% score low<sup>3</sup> in literacy and numeracy, and basic digital skills.

Insufficient basic skills have a great impact on individuals' life chances as well as on how societies and national economies function in general. The image<sup>4</sup> below indicates six of the most striking benefits of investing in adult skills.

### Education and skills development have a positive impact on life chances:

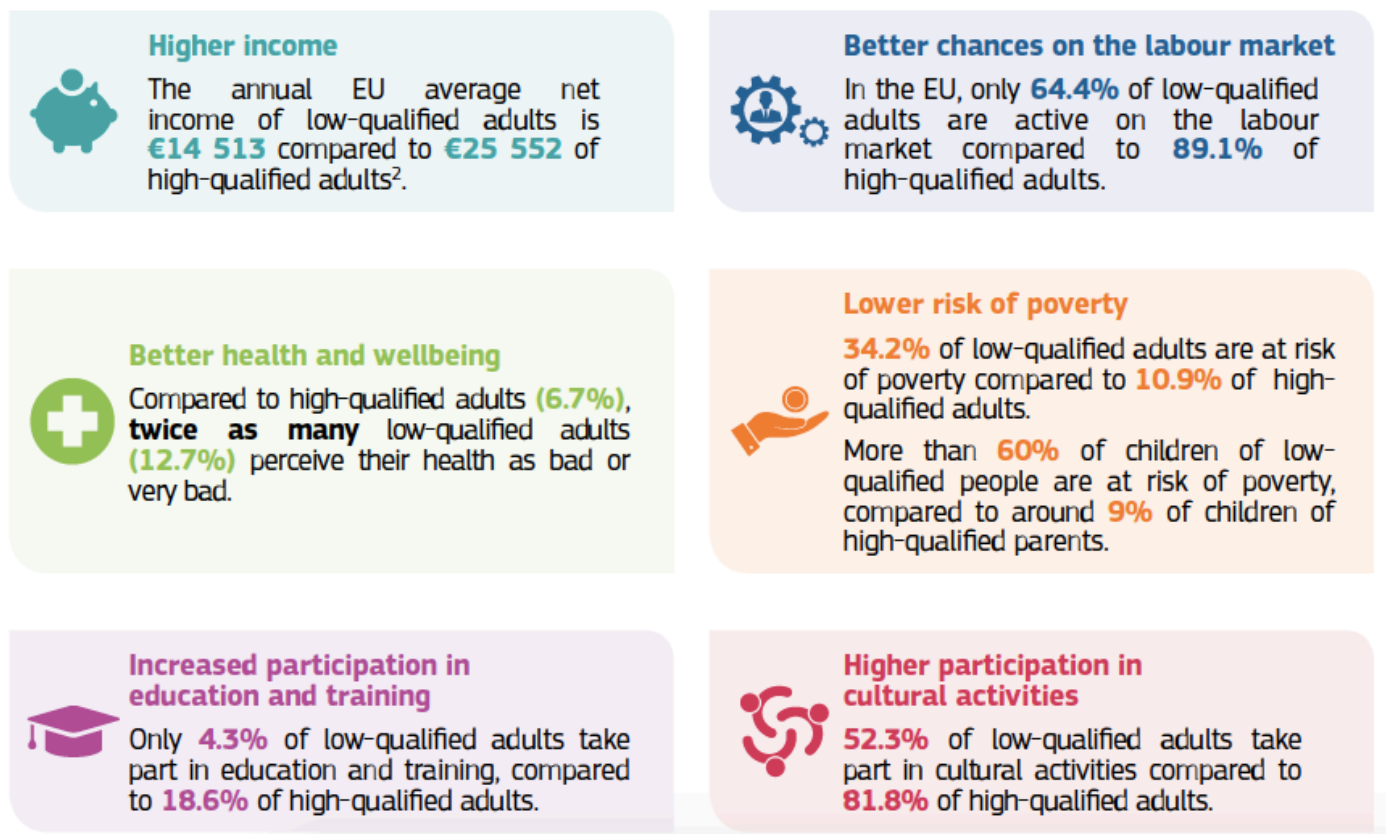


Image 1: Education and skills development have a positive impact on life chances.

1 European Commission. (2016). Upskilling Pathways official webpage. URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224>.

2 The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is a programme of assessment and analysis of adult skills.

3 Data indicates OECD average, at or below level 1 in terms of literacy and numeracy, and failed or not tried in digital skills.

4 European Commission. (2019). Factsheet – Impact of education and skills on life chances. (electronic document). URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224>.

When it comes to communicating health information to adults, basic skills play an important role. Health literacy is a term coined by the general need to comprehend activities and operations in healthcare-related themes and to be able to detect and develop the skills and competences that make us able to understand health information and make informed decisions about our health.

**The World Health Organisation defines health literacy as follows<sup>5</sup>:**

*Health literacy is linked to literacy and entails people's knowledge, motivation and competences to access, understand, appraise and apply health information in order to make judgements and take decisions in everyday life concerning health care, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course.*



**Health literacy has two major elements<sup>6</sup>:**

- health services communicate clearly and take account of possible health literacy and numeracy needs;
- people understand health information correctly and are confident in making decisions and taking action about their health and wellbeing.

Thus, developing health literacy is a complex endeavour that encompasses healthcare, education and training, and has impact on general well-being of citizens in terms of health and employment too. Furthermore, the success of initiatives addressing health literacy inevitably depend on basic skills e.g. reading and writing, calculating, basic digital skills.

For the purposes of the project Together for Fertility, it is important to review directions in which basic skills needs can be addressed for the successful inclusion of adults with lower socio-economic background. The following themes are discussed: the design of outreach initiatives, literacy-friendly content and platforms, and methods to overcome challenges in communication that can be useful for the realisation of the project's outcomes (e.g. training curriculum).

5 European Health Literacy Consortium. (2012). In: WHO. (2013). Health literacy: The solid facts. (online document). URL: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/128703/e96854.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

6 National Adult Literacy Agency Ireland. (2021). A guide to becoming a Crystal Clear Pharmacy. (online document). URL: <https://www.nala.ie/publications/the-crystal-clear-pharmacy-programme-and-its-crystal-clear-mark/>.

### 3. INVESTING IN OUTREACH INITIATIVES

Reaching segments of society who are hard to reach is highly dependent on what we do as an organisation to get in touch with them. Thus, outreach initiatives are of key importance to any project that aims at getting in touch with marginalised communities.



**Successful outreach programs can have a number of benefits to any organisation, such as it follows:**

- initial contact leading to cooperation opportunity in the field of infertility
- encouraging citizens' motivation & persistence to learn and do something about infertility
- raising awareness among citizens, society, and stakeholders on infertility.

When addressing health literacy, outreach initiatives play a significant role in raising public awareness and involve target group in health-related initiatives. Such outreach campaigns can differ in their approaches, hence we put forward two potential directions.

QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES	QUALITATIVE APPROACHES
<p>Initiatives that aim at reaching a great number of people and grabbing their attention to promote the goals of outreach campaigns. They focus on increasing the scope and number of platforms, getting to more citizens (new platforms, additional fields).</p>	<p>Activities that support the establishment of deeper understanding of the themes that the outreach campaigns promote. They focus on improving already existing platforms, channels, materials, connections with regards to making it literacy-friendly.</p>
<p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• launching TV &amp; radio campaigns to promote health issues (e.g. infertility)</li> <li>• organising public events (e.g. information days, local campaigns)</li> <li>• social media campaigns</li> </ul>	<p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• delivering workshops</li> <li>• organising public debates and talks</li> <li>• developing training programs</li> </ul>

To better illustrate how health-related outreach programs can be realised we include a case study designed by the Irish National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA).

### NALA'S CRYSTAL CLEAR MARK

The Crystal Clear Mark is awarded to healthcare institutions by NALA who have turned their own practices, appliances and environment literacy-friendly for the benefit of adults who have difficulties in understanding health information, instructions etc. Organisations, for example pharmacies, are supported by NALA to re-design their platforms and communication according to a list of standards with the use of an online audit tool.

#### 10 quality standards for communication, staff awareness, policies and evaluation:

- Using plain language in oral communication
- Using plain language on medication label
- Checking patients' understanding
- Improving the layout of the physical environment
- Improving staff awareness of health literacy and literacy-friendly work practices
- Responding sensitively to people with basic skills needs
- Developing literacy-friendly policies
- Guide people in finding and using information and instructions
- Provide staff support for developing their own basic skills
- Self-evaluation regarding literacy-friendly services

The online audit tool can be accessed here: [Crystal Clear Mark](#).

Outreach programs should align with the initiating institutions and their partners' capacities in time, finances and human resources as well as the needs of the target audience. It is, hence, highly advised to run a reflective planning session with colleagues and partners to elicit the needs and the necessary information before going into further design. For this purpose, you may find the following section on key considerations to outreach design useful.

## 4. DESIGNING OUTREACH PROGRAMS

### 4.1. Key considerations

There are some design principles along which we can plan our own outreach activities. The following considerations are taken from OECD's publication<sup>7</sup> on how to plan and engage low-skilled adults. They can serve as guiding principles to designing outreach programs and represent key ideas when it comes to adults with basic skills needs and inclusion campaigns.

#### Creative ways of outreach

- Actively reach out to adults in the places they frequent, including workplaces, community institutions and public spaces.
- Identify actors that have established links with adults with low skills.
- Build the capacity of these actors to inform adults with low skills and encourage them to take up learning opportunities.

#### Holistic & personalised guidance

- Develop holistic advice and guidance services specifically for low-skilled adults.
- Set-up one-stop shops and establish partnerships with other organisations serving adults with low skills to ensure that they get holistic advice.
- Ensure that guidance services are provided by qualified staff, who have the ability to tailor the service to the needs and situation of each adult individually.

#### Providing relevant opportunities

- Take into account how adults learn when designing opportunities. They should be practical, problem-oriented and closely linked to the context of the citizens.
- Offer blended opportunities, which give citizens the option to choose a way of access that works best for them.
- Ensure that the mode is appropriate for the target group, make learning enjoyable (e.g. through gamification), and provide additional support where needed (e.g. for online services).

Another perspective is provided by the European project called On The Move<sup>8</sup> and it entails recommendations on how to include citizens from vulnerable target groups. It is important to note

<sup>7</sup> OECD. (2019). *Getting Skills Right: Engaging low-skilled adults in learning*. URL: [www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> On The Move Project. (2016). *European best practice in outreach educational counselling and low-threshold learning opportunities for disadvantaged learners. Project handbook*. (online document). URL: [http://www.onthemove-project.eu/onthemove\\_en.pdf](http://www.onthemove-project.eu/onthemove_en.pdf)

that adults with basic skills needs not necessarily coincide with vulnerable citizens completely, but it represents an essential segment of the Together for Fertility project's secondary target groups i.e. citizens low socio-economic background who are hard to reach.

- **Be aware of the diversity & the specific problems and needs of disadvantaged groups**

Successful outreach programs account for the diversity of the target group, which is based on knowing the specific challenges one's target group faces. It is a good idea to do research on the actual needs before designing the outreach initiative.

- **Include the voices of disadvantaged and under-represented groups**

The active involvement of the people can not only contribute to the efficiency of the outreach campaign, but it also raises the credibility of the actions.

- **Analyse and remove barriers**

Getting to know the target group's specific challenges does not automatically mean that we are ready to lift those barriers for or with them. It needs careful planning and meaningful intervention too.

- **Make use of easy language**

The success of outreach as well as any other initiative focusing on adults with literacy challenges depend greatly on how easy it is for them to make sense of our communication materials in terms of comprehension and access too. The project handbook<sup>9</sup> offers some guidelines for this step:

- Make use of simple words and avoid the use of foreign words.
- Try to find verbs instead of nouns.
- Write and speak in short sentences.
- Do not use abbreviations and/or figures of speech.
- Write concretely. Avoid abstract language.
- Avoid high figures and percentage values.
- Use comparisons.
- Create options for multi-channel perceptions, for example by using pictures, pictograms etc.
- Make use of paragraphs and headings.
- There should be sufficient contrast between background and illustrations. Coloured backgrounds and typefaces should be used carefully. The typeface should be clear and fairly large.
- Test the material with actual target groups before publishing it. Only they can say if it is easy to understand or not.

9 *ibid.* pp 8-9.

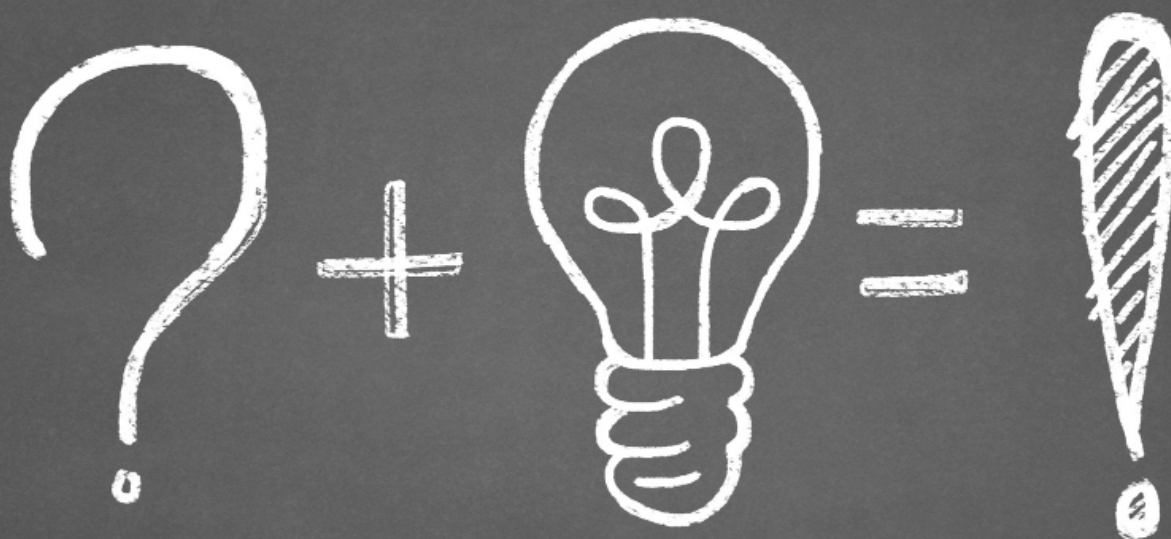


- **Build a network of cooperation**

In quite a few cases it may seem challenging to find the best meeting point with our target group, therefore it can be very helpful to build partnerships with organisations that are already in touch with them. These could be NGOs, mental health institutions, grass-root organisations, social services, local community centres, job centres etc.

- **Make your offer more attractive**

Establishing the target group's motivation to join your program can be one of the main success factors to your outreach program. Make sure you are conscious about the needs of the target group while you are planning your outreach action(s).



### Questions for reflection

- How could my organisation's goals be furthered by an outreach campaign?
- Who could be our target group for an outreach campaign and with whom could we partner up?
- What tools, platforms and communication channels are there for my organisation to launch an outreach campaign?
- What scale should our outreach activity have? Are we doing any outreach activity at the moment that we can join?


## 5. DESIGNING LITERACY-FRIENDLY CONTENT AND PLATFORMS

There are many ways how we can make our communication easier to comprehend to those with basic skills challenges. In this section, two perspectives will be presented: linguistic considerations to text production, and design-related considerations for planning the outline and presentation of communication platforms in your organisation.

### 5.1. Linguistic considerations

The most efficient method for linguistic intervention is to apply plain language which is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. Essentially, it is a more efficient way of writing. If you apply plain language, your target group can find what they need, understand what they find the first time they read or hear it, use what they find to meet their needs. Essentially, authors of texts are advised to place themselves into the shoes of the readers or audience when producing text.

To illustrate how a text can be re-written in plain language the following example is presented from NALA's publication<sup>10</sup> on writing tips:

BEFORE	AFTER
<p>The hospital patient has the right to information relevant to his situation that must allow the patient the fullest insight into all aspects of his situation, medical and otherwise, and, on an informed basis, enable him to make his own decisions or to participate in decisions which have implications for his or her wellbeing.</p>	<div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p>You have a right to information about your condition that helps you fully understand it and make informed choices about your treatment.</p>

Following NALA's publication<sup>11</sup> we put forward writing tips for the better implementation of plain language in your texts.

<sup>10</sup> NALA. (2021). *Writing and design tips*. NALA Resources. (online document). URL: <https://www.nala.ie/publications/writing-and-design-tips/>

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* pp 8-12.

### Write for your audience

Keep your reader in mind and ask the following questions when writing your document.

- How familiar are they with the health terminology your organisation/sector uses?
- What subjects can you assume they understand?
- How will they read the document? Will they read it straight through or skip through it to the sections that interest them?
- Have you given the background to the information?

### Use everyday words

There's nothing wrong with long words, but why use one when a short word will do? If you must use specialised language or jargon, however, explain what it means.

### Keep sentences short

Long sentences can be hard work to read. While there are no strict rules about sentence length, we advise you to keep sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words. Break up sentences with full stops rather than semi-colons, as people are more familiar with full stops.

### Spell out acronyms

When using acronyms, such as IVF (In vitro fertilisation) spell them out the first time you use them. If your organisation uses lots of acronyms, make sure you have a list that spells them out.

### Use plenty of signposts

**Table of contents:** In a long document, a table of contents helps people to find the information they find particularly relevant.

**Introductory paragraph:** If a section of a document is very long, it is a good idea to include an introductory paragraph that summarises the contents.

**Headings:** Headings and sub-headings help people to work their way around a page. They also make the text less intimidating.

**Bullet point lists:** Use bullet points to break down complex text into lists.

### Use clear paragraphs

We recommend that you limit each paragraph to one idea. Leave some white space between each paragraph and avoid continuing a paragraph over a page.

### Be consistent

Be consistent with any terms you use in your documents. It may confuse your readers if you use too many synonyms.

### Use questions and answers

Questions and answers are a great way to get information across or emphasise certain facts. They also mean people can go straight to the area that particularly interests them.

Another list of terms<sup>12</sup> is presented by NALA with synonyms that can be better understood by adults with basic skills needs:

MEDICAL TERMS	
Instead of:	Consider:
acute	sudden and severe
antenatal	before birth
benign	harmless
congenital	from birth
elective	optional
immunise	protect
incision	cut
monitor	keep track of
physician	doctor
post-operative	after the operation

Please note that there could be differences in other languages. Be aware of which of the above-listed terms are easier to understand in your mother tongue. Additionally, literacy audits can be used to review already existing or newly written texts and documents in terms of language. It is a good idea to check with the audit tools in the beginning and at the end of authoring a text too. You may use NALA's materials<sup>13</sup> that are freely available online.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* pp 28-30.

<sup>13</sup> NALA. (2008). *Plain English guidelines at a glance.* (online document). URL: <https://www.nala.ie/publications/plain-english-guidelines-at-a-glance/>.

## 5.2. Design-related considerations



The design of documents can also contribute greatly to reader comprehension especially in the case materials addressed to adults with basic skills challenges. NALA<sup>14</sup> provides the following recommendations for designing documents:

### Use good quality paper

Many types of paper are used for printing and each one reacts differently to ink. The best quality paper is 'uncoated'. Because of its surface, it takes ink well, which improves legibility. The other benefit of uncoated paper is that it does not reflect light.

### Ensure a good contrast

White or light cream paper usually makes your text most readable. But you can use a light-coloured paper or a solid background colour to make your publication more colourful. For best results, make sure there is a strong contrast between the text and the background.

### Watch out for shadowing

Make sure your paper is heavy enough to avoid 'shadowing' – this is what happens when images or text on one side of a page can be seen through the paper. This makes reading difficult, so use a heavier or thicker paper to avoid this problem.

### Leading

The text opposite is 30pt and there is 10pt of space between the lines. This means the leading is 10pt. Add the 30pt type size to the 10pt leading and you get the line space, which is 40pt.

<sup>14</sup> NALA. (2021). *Writing and design tips*. NALA Resources. pp 17-27(online document). URL: <https://www.nala.ie/publications/writing-and-design-tips/>.

### Watch your line spacing

Line spacing refers to the amount of space from the bottom of one line of text to the bottom of the next line. Too little space and the reader will drop lines. Too much and the reader will be unsure if the lines of text refer to each other. If you are using 12 point text, the recommended line spacing is 18pt (or 1.5).

### Use at least 12 point type

Use 12 point (pt) text because it is easy to read.

### Choose a readable typeface

Fonts are generally grouped as 'serif' or 'sans serif' (see illustration). If you use a computer, you will have access to a wide range of typefaces. But it is best to stick to clear, easy-to-read sans serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica.

### Avoid justified text

Avoid using justified text because this can lead to large white space between words. This makes sentences difficult to read. It is best to use left aligned (also called ragged right) text, as shown below.

### Graphs can help

Graphs and images can complement and offer a break from large amounts of text. When you use them thoughtfully, they can be a great way of emphasising important facts and figures. This means placing them near the relevant text and making sure they genuinely clarify or add something to your message.

### Make important points stand out clearly

When you want to emphasise a heading or a paragraph of text use a bigger size or bold.

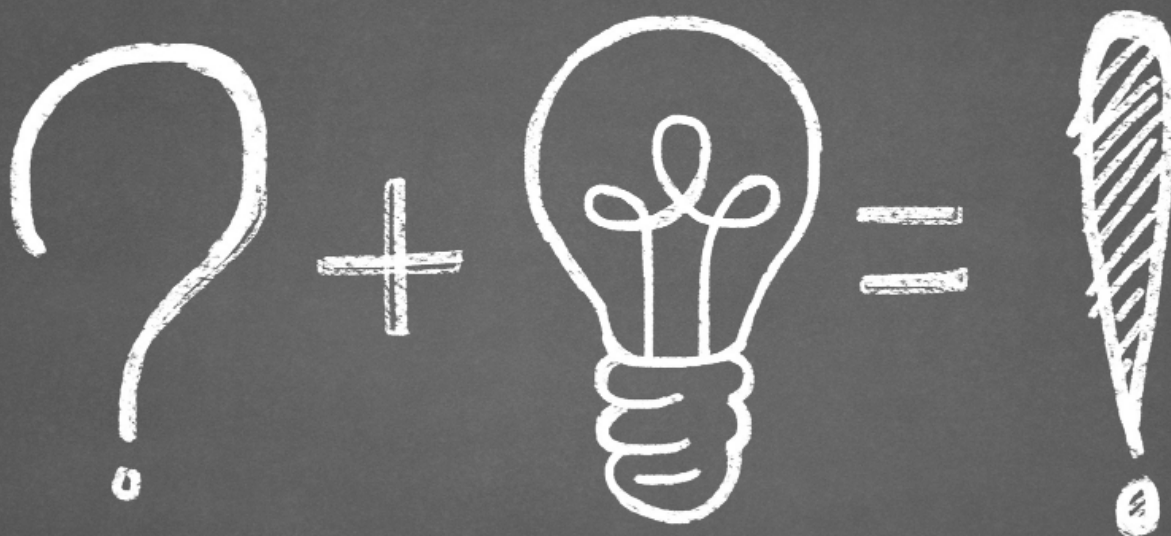
### Avoid background images

Avoid using background images behind text. Many organisations use illustrations as a background image. This makes text harder to read, especially if the background image is very colourful.

The recommendations for layout and document design presented above are merely tips and not rules that apply in all contexts. It is always a good idea to revisit these elements whether they make your document or platform better for your audience. Similarly to literacy audit in the previous section on linguistic consideration, you may find it useful to go through a checklist for document design. You can freely access NALA's checklist<sup>15</sup> for document design. Another key resource<sup>16</sup> for learning about how a healthcare institution can progress towards becoming a literacy-friendly service is also provided by NALA.

<sup>15</sup> NALA. (2008). *A plain English checklist for documents*. (online document). URL: <https://www.nala.ie/publications/a-plain-english-checklist-for-documents/>.

<sup>16</sup> NALA. (2009). *Literacy Audit for Healthcare Settings*. (online document). URL: <https://www.nala.ie/publications/literacy-audit-for-healthcare-settings/>.



### Questions for reflection

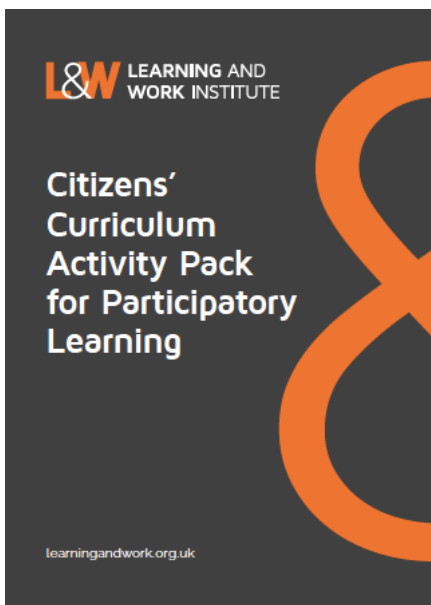
- Do I have the need for re-thinking the texts we release for our target group? Is there a basic skills challenge at all?
- If so, what texts, communicative platforms and channels should be prioritised?
- Who in the organisation could help in re-designing platforms, reviewing texts for plain language?
- What does plain language mean in my mother tongue? Do the above-mentioned recommendations actually help?
- To what extent can we change our communication platforms' design?

## 6. OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION OBSTACLES

In previous sections we have covered recommendations for methods and tools with regards to outreach initiatives as well as linguistic and document design. In the last section we focus on verbal communication approaches that can help facilitate communication with the target group. Both of these methods were applied by EBSN member organisation Learning and Work Institute from the UK in the framework of their key initiative called Citizens' Curriculum that aims at creating a participatory learning opportunity for adults with basic skills needs and proved to be highly efficient.

### 6.1. Participatory learning strategies

Participatory education traditionally focuses on individuals' capacities to bring about change in their own lives through a carefully designed active learning sequences where learners take meaningful responsibility for their own learning.



*By treating everyone with respect and challenging established power dynamics inside the classroom, students become better equipped to change the world outside the classroom. The practices of self-reflection and sharing necessitated by a participatory approach also build community and encourage relationships to develop between members of the group.<sup>17</sup>*

Learner involvement is at the very heart of participatory approaches, which ensures relevance and helps adults develop more confidence in themselves as learners. Hence learner involvement can happen at every stage of the learning process, from programme design to evaluation. The Learning and Work Institute provides a freely accessible methodology guide with lists of activities that anyone can apply in their own context. The presented participatory activities follow a certain order and are grouped around the following themes: engaging learners and finding topics; exploring subtopics in greater depth; participatory evaluation.

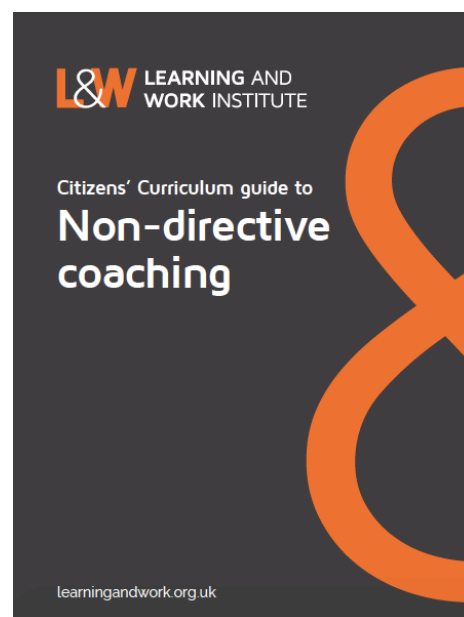
You may use this publication as a methodology guide for events, workshops with educational purposes, shared reflections, info booth activities, training courses etc.

<sup>17</sup> Learning and Work Institute. (2017). Citizens' Curriculum Activity Pack for Participatory Learning. (online document). URL: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/citizens-curriculum-participatory-resource-pack/>.



## 6.2. Non-directive communication methods

Non-directive coaching presents a facilitation method for any event, workshop, consultation where participants take an active and reflective role on their own status. The coach or the facilitator helps them to think through that agenda and then relate their own experiences to the given context in order to achieve the outcomes they wish to. Non-directive coaching is highly facilitative and it may help create motivation, meaningful engagement in context the themes in which it is applied. Furthermore, non-directive coaching has a strong focus on helping people to overcome self-limiting attitudes and assumptions. It does this by questioning those attitudes and assumptions in the context of practical problem-solving. The publication of Learning and Work Institute on non-directive coaching presents a number of tools, methods, and contexts in which one can successfully apply this approach.



### The role of the facilitator/coach:

- Gives the client time to think things through for themselves
- Shows faith in the client's ability to arrive at satisfactory solutions of their own
- Helps the client to take ownership of and responsibility for their own learning.

### Non-directive coaching follows a simple procedure.

- The client explains their objective to the coach.
- The coach helps the client to reframe their objective as a practical problem, e.g. 'How can I achieve X by date Y?'
- With the help of the coach, the client then develops an action plan to achieve their objective. This plan becomes, in effect, a self-directed learning project for the client.
- The client then puts this plan into action and reports back to the coach on what happens.
- The coach helps the client review the outcomes of their actions and make any appropriate adjustments to their action plan and/or their objective.

You may find non-directive modes of facilitation useful in workshops, one-on-one consultations, training events, doing research on target group needs, in semi-structured interviews.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

As indicated, this booklet aimed at providing readers with key considerations, tools and methodologies to get in touch with adults with basic skills challenges, and to re-think how we manage our communications with them.

Communicating health information to adults with low socio-economic background and potentially with lack of sufficient reading and writing skills is a complex challenge that can be tackled by an equally versatile response mechanism. One way of reaching this goal is to become a so-called 'literacy-friendly' organisation. Such an endeavour can only be an organisational ambition that is taken step by step with a constant reflection on where we are at a given moment.

Planning and implementing outreach programs to get in touch with a greater number of people (i.e. quantitative measures) and then establishing a more organic connection with them through other initiatives (qualitative measures) can be a way ahead. Another important success factor to reaching out to new target groups, especially toward those who struggle with reading and writing, is to re-design communication strategies and platforms and review the textual communication materials that one's organisation applies. Following a certain list of research-based recommendations on document design and linguistic intervention can make it easier for adults with lower proficiency in literacy and numeracy to follow up with what you wish to communicate. Finally, some facilitation tools e.g. participatory learning activities, and non-directive coaching methods can spark and maintain the interest and motivation of the newly engaged target group by creating a sense of reflection and thereby ownership over their own matters.