



AONTAS submission to the Department of Justice and Equality as part of the consultation on the new National Women’s Strategy and Action Plan 2017 – 2020.

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation on the new National Women’s Strategy and Action Plan 2017 – 2020.

About AONTAS

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, is a voluntary membership organisation which includes over 500 members nationwide. The membership profile of AONTAS comprises a rich mix of statutory, voluntary and community organisations as well as individuals who are deeply involved in and committed to the concept of lifelong learning. AONTAS regards its membership as a key resource which provides the organisation with a grassroots, authentic understanding of adult and community education practice from both a practitioner and learner perspective. We support our members through consultation, networking, information provision, and by undertaking research. We are dedicated to increasing the profile of adult and community education, influencing policy, supporting adult learners, and highlighting the role the sector plays in promoting active citizenship. Our organisation receives funding from the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority).

As an organisation, we are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS believes that lifelong learning is key to economic success, personal, social and cultural development and as such has a range of outcomes and benefits for the learner. These benefits include: developing confidence and skills essential for personal development, employability, nurturing creativity, promoting good health, enhancing family relationships and enabling civic participation.

Educational Inequality

Education is the fast-track out of poverty. Educational inequality and underachievement is intergenerational and characterised by poverty. Communities struggling with the injustice of poverty are characterised by poor educational achievement and associated outcomes:

extreme poverty; unemployment; poor health and wellbeing; multiple addictions; mental health issues and suicide.

For many adults, a lack of educational qualifications and opportunities has militated against their ability to participate fully in society, the economy and employment. Educational attainment is a powerful predictor of adult life opportunity, including lifespan and health, employment opportunities and participation as an active citizen, locally and nationally.

Community Education

AONTAS has a Community Education Network (CEN) with a membership of over 150 organisations. Community education is a different model of education to that offered by the formal State sector; it has been particularly successful in targeting those hardest to reach to engage in education. Community education offers a safe first step back into education, catering to the needs of a diverse range of adult learners. Community education is local, accessible and holistic and is grounded on principles of justice, equality, social inclusion and citizenship where the learner is fully supported on their lifelong learning journey.

Community education organisations are vital grass root providers of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities for marginalised adults who are least likely to engage in formal learning opportunities.

Learner Voice

The learner voice sits firmly at the heart of our work at AONTAS; from high level policy and debate, to membership, to our frontline service.

Through the stories and experiences of individual learners the true value of adult learning can be communicated. These stories are essential to promote the benefits of adult learning and to highlight the way in which adult learning can transform the lives of ordinary people.

AONTAS engages and listens to the Adult Learner Voice through a number of mechanisms, some of which include:

- [#ImAnAdultLearner:](#)
Learners sharing their journeys and stories of returning to learning.
- National Adult Learner Forum:
The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014 – 2019 commits to listening to and consulting with learners in FET. The establishment of a National Adult Learner

Forum was identified as a tool to place learners at the centre of the FET service, recognising the value of their contribution and offering them an opportunity to shape policy decisions.

- **Engaging at supranational and international levels:**
AONTAS learners engage at policy debate at EU and international levels by speaking at conferences.

Barriers for Adult Learners

In a context of demographic change and increasingly complex needs of society, adult education is a crucial instrument for promoting social cohesion. However, often non-formal adult learning is underfunded compared to other sectors of the education system.

The barriers facing adult learners are multi-faced and complex. Barriers include:

- 1. Funding:** AONTAS believes that the most educationally disadvantaged groups deserve and require more sustainable investment in their futures. Since the establishment of the CEN in 2007 the context for community education has changed dramatically, with significant funding cuts to the community and voluntary sector, resulting in a reduction in the provision of services and, in some instances, the closure of organisations.
- 2. Childcare:** In many instances, women are the primary carers for minor children. Lack of affordable childcare has been cited by learners as one of their greatest barriers to returning to learning.
- 3. Transport:** Rural centres are not always accessible by public transport. The cost of transport is hence, a significant barrier to returning to learning for those most marginalised.
- 4. Social Inclusion:** Learners from disadvantaged communities oftentimes lack social recognition or a sense of self-worth and value due to discrimination. Community education can provide the tools to learners to empower them to challenge inequality. Many lifelong learners have cited personal wellbeing, confidence and development, increased social inclusion and integration and improved mental health among the wider benefits of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning can address inequality, boost local economies and create stronger communities.

Migration trends, as identified by Census 2011, indicate that a significant population of migrants resident in Ireland come from non-English speaking countries of origin. Over

500,000 people speak a language other than English or Irish at home. 145,000 of these are Irish nationals. Coupled with the recent Migrant Crisis, Ireland has undergone an unparalleled demographic transformation. The diversity of female adult learners and the complexity of their needs must be addressed. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is not always for those seeking to learn English, hampering integration and the ability to find sustainable employment.

5. **Access:** One of the greatest barriers to access is course fees, in particular for higher education. Many learners are also prevented from engaging in FET due to the entry eligibility criteria. Increase supports and an expansion of pre-existing programmes will be necessary in order to facilitate learners who have returned to learning.

Recommendations

The current Programme for Government includes specific reference to community education. The National Women's Strategy 2017 - 2020 should also acknowledge the intrinsic value of community education provision.

1. Funding

- A sequential increase in investment for community education by increasing the percentage of SOLAS funding for community education programmes from 1.6% to 3.2%
- Ring-fenced funding for community education providers who wish to reengage with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

2. Childcare

- Increase childcare supports for learners and make information on these supports readily available for adult learners

3. Transport

- Provision of travel allowances for both rural and urban learners

4. Social Inclusion

- Promote the wider benefits associated with FET to learners, eg personal development
- Encourage social inclusion and integration by providing social spaces for learners in all FET centres to interact outside of the classroom
- Use FET centres to disseminate information about health promotion strategies eg mental health awareness campaigns
- Increase teaching hours and supports for ESOL learners

- Due to the complexity of managing diverse classes, ESOL tutors require additional support in terms of smaller class sizes so that they can better cater for learners' needs

5. Access

- Strive to provide consistent course choice and availability across Ireland
- Broaden the Springboard programme to include community education based higher education provision
- Provide core funding for community education organisations providing higher education courses to disadvantaged groups
- Establish a clear mechanism that enables no part-time fees for educationally disadvantaged students
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- Increasing access to FET

AONTAS strongly recommends that adult learners are meaningfully consulted in relation to this consultation.

We would also highlight the need to broaden the understanding of learning to take into account the wider benefits and contribution of learning to society, beyond skill needs of the economy.

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