



The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS GUIDE FOR ENGAGING WITH LOCAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTION CANDIDATES

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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Simple Guide for Engaging with Election Candidates in Ireland

This guide will help our members from the adult and community education sector, including members of the Community Education Network (CEN), to communicate with candidates in the run-up to the local and European elections in Ireland on 7th June 2024.

Register to vote:

Firstly, to vote in elections in Ireland, you must register to vote. Check to see if you are registered by visiting www.checktheregister.ie

Why should you communicate with election candidates?

Local and European elections are important for adult and community education groups and organisations because we need the right people in place to achieve positive change and to see action on adult learning issues and challenges that matter to you and your local community. We can support you to engage in advocacy and lobbying, to talk to election candidates if they call to the door, or to invite them to speak and answer questions in your local centres.

Local Elections

Why are local elections important for adult and community education?

County and city councillors have a direct influence on adult and community education in your area. County and city councillors are a central part of the governance structures of Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The ETBs provide state funded and state-run adult, community, and further education across Ireland. They support many independent community education groups with essential resources and support.

After the election, 12 county or city councillors from your area will receive a seat on the board of your local ETB. These local councillors have a real impact on how the decisions and policies for adult and community education across the country are made.

For example, the new councillors will have an influence on a new Further Education and Training Strategy (2025-2029). It will be important that councillors understand the value and impact of adult and community education, and Further Education and Training, and what is needed to address challenges and issues in the sector. We also need councillors who understand the importance of Learner Voice in the running of ETBs. Learner Voice means that adult learners' views and ideas are listened to by teachers and managers, and that this can create meaningful changes in the learning experiences of adults.

What are the issues for local election candidates?

There might be local issues that are particularly important to your group or organisation. Some of the issues we have been hearing from members include:

Lack of stable and adequate funding:

Local community education groups and providers need stable, sustainable funding.

- Tutors need stable and adequate pay
- Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Public Participation Networks (PPNs) must make adult and community education a priority
- The [Reach Fund](#) is very important to community education providers. Are there any changes you want to see made to it?

[Read about AONTAS' work in advocating for funding for community education.](#)

Barriers to adult education:

People need the right conditions in order to go back to or stay in education. Learning does not exist in a vacuum.

- We need more [access to affordable childcare](#)
- We need more [flexible and part-time learning options](#)
- We need more reliable, subsidised public transport, especially in rural areas.

[Read AONTAS research on the barriers to adult education for many around Ireland](#)

Listening to Learners:

If adult learners have the chance to contribute to decisions made by ETBs about how courses and centres are run, they are more likely to stay engaged in and continue with learning.

- Are the candidates aware of the importance of Learner Voice in Further Education and Training?
- Are they supportive of adult learner council being set up in ETBs?

[We're working collaboratively with ETBs on this across the country](#)

How can you communicate with your local candidates?

- In the run-up to the election, candidates will often call to your door
- If you live in an area where candidates don't call, you can use the template letter at the end of this guide and write to your local candidate by post or by email
- Organise or attend public meetings with local candidates.

What can you get noticed and be heard?

Learners make the best advocates:

- Ask current learners in your organisation or group, or people from your area who recently went back to education, to give you a quote based on their personal experience of why a particular issue is important and what needs to change. Add this to your letter or email.
- Invite a learner with you to a meeting or discussion with a local candidate.
- Invite a local candidate to your organisation or centre, and ask learners to prepare questions in advance about the issues that are important to them.
- Contact your local newspaper or radio station about particular issues and include the quotes from learners. Don't forget social media.

Be clear about what you – or learners – are asking of a local candidate:

- Use research to communicate your argument:
 - Many sources are freely available online. Examples include: [Pobal Deprivation Index](#), [the Minimum Essential Standard of Living \(MESL\) research](#) or the [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\)](#)
 - You can also check out News, Blog, and Publications pages on [our website](#).
- Avoid using words or acronyms that someone won't understand if they're not familiar with the adult learning sector. Keep it simple.
- Education providers can talk about their learners, their experiences, the number of courses they take, the possible eventual progression of learners to further education or employment, or the impact of local learning on people's confidence, wellbeing, and the community.
 - Give specific examples of changes to people's lives or to your local area.

Votes matter to local candidates:

If you, and people you know, tell a candidate that their action on or support for a particular issue would encourage you to vote for them, they are more likely to pay attention to it.

Work with all parties:

Talk to candidates of all political parties, as well as independent candidates.

Build relationships with an eye on the future:

Relationships that you develop with a candidate during this election may help you in your future work if that candidate is elected.

Be persistent:

Continue to communicate with a local candidate, and keep communicating with them if they are elected, in order to achieve your goals.

Be prepared to compromise:

Good negotiation skills are an important part of advocacy. You can't always get everything you want. Sometimes it is about progress over perfection.

Things to consider about local candidates:

- Does the candidate clearly express what influence they want to have on their local council? What positive change will they make in your area?
- What is their stance on equal access to education for all?
- Do they understand why adult and community education is important?
- Are they focussed only on employment and economics, or do they consider the personal and community impact of learning, including self-confidence, mental health and wellbeing, and empathy?
- Do they know how ETBs work?
 - Do they plan to seek a seat on their ETB or Local Community Development Committee?
 - Do they know that ETBs are responsible for Further Education and Training?
 - Do they know that ETBs fund community education?
- Would they take the opinions of adult learners seriously and prioritise their feedback in improving adult education policies?

European Elections**Why are European elections important to adult and community education?**

Politicians in the European Parliament have power over where funding goes in Europe and what education policies get made. So, we need allies in Brussels who focus on adult and community education.

We are engaging with European candidates in Ireland and calling on them to support [the ten key recommendations from the European Association for the Education of Adults' \(EAEA\)](#).

Candidates running for European elections in Ireland might not directly change how adult and community education works nationally or regionally. But it's still crucial to talk to these candidates so we can secure sustainable funding and resources for adult and community education.

Who is running for election?

Local Elections

(information provided to us by Adrian Kavanagh, Lecturer in the Department of Geography at Maynooth University)

Local candidates across Ireland (in no particular order):

- [Fianna Fáil candidates](#)
- [Fine Gael candidates](#)
- [Social Democrats candidates](#)
- [Sinn Féin candidates](#)
- [Labour Party candidates](#)
- [Green Party candidates](#)
- [People Before Profit candidates](#)
- [Independent candidates](#)
- [All other candidates for the local elections](#)

European Elections

First [check which constituency you are in.](#)

Then check [which candidates are running in your constituency.](#)

Before the Election:

When you are ready to start engaging with the election consider taking the following steps to ensure that your engagement with the candidates is successful. Get to know who is running for election. Local election candidates must declare their candidacy 4 weeks before Election Day. European candidates have already declared their candidacy.

Consider working with other similar organisations in your local county. You can [search for other likeminded AONTAS members](#) in your area. Checkout [AONTAS' Community Education Map](#)

After the Election:

After the election, develop and maintain relationships with the local councillors and European Members of Parliament (MEPs). Find out who was elected to represent you at local and European levels. Contact them by email, letter, or invitation to visit your organisation. If you spoke to them before the election, continue your conversation.

Who are we?

AONTAS are the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by our robust research and focussed community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults, and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change. Learn more at www.aontas.com

We work every day with our members and partner organisations to ensure that politicians and policy makers across Ireland and in Europe understand the importance of adult education.

Example letter or email inviting candidates to your organisation

This sample letter/email is for our members who wish to invite a local election candidate to visit your organisation.

If you connect with other organisations in your area, you can send a joint invitation and increase incentive for a candidate to come and speak in your locality. If you arrange a meeting and would like someone from AONTAS to join, let us know. If we can, we will be glad to attend and support your work. For more information, email our Policy and Development Officer, Conor Thompson at cthompson@aontas.com

Dear Councillor [Name],

My name is [Name]. I am writing this [letter, email] today as you have declared yourself a candidate for [City, County] Council.

As a representative of [organisation name], which is a provider of [adult, community, adult and community] education in [name of city, town], I would like to invite you to visit our organisation on a date and time that suits yourself so that you are able to meet with myself, my colleagues, and the learners who access our services on a daily basis.

As voters in your constituency, we would like to discuss with you the policy and programme challenges and opportunities that are important to us and which originate from local level in our community.

As a member of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, we believe in the creation of a nation-wide education system that supports lifelong learning for the purpose of building strong, vibrant, and resilient communities.

Some of the challenges and opportunities for [organisation name] as providers and for our learners as we work to create these strong communities include:

- **[Issue 1]**
- **[Issue 2]**
- **[You can add as many issues as you think is necessary and effective]**

If you are able and willing to meet, please contact me by phone at [phone number] or email at [email address] to arrange a date and time that works for you.

Thank you for your time. We at [name of organisation] look forward to hearing from you soon and to speaking with you about how to maintain and develop a vibrant [adult, community, adult and community] system that meets the needs of our community in [name of city, town].

Kindest Regards,

[Signature] [Name] [Phone number] [Email address] [Organisation address]



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