



Strategic Plan

2019-2022

A Vision for Educational Equality



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Foreword



We are delighted to present our Strategic Plan 2019-2022, *A Vision for Educational Equality*, as we celebrate 50 years of AONTAS. The collective effort required to create this action-focused plan demonstrates the organisation's firm commitment to tackling educational inequality for systemic social change. AONTAS membership, Board and staff together with key stakeholders actively engaged in an extensive consultation process. Adult learning is transformative with wide-ranging benefits at personal, community and societal level. Persistent educational inequality in the adult population is unacceptable. In this plan we will deliver work of the highest quality for our members so that adult learners have the opportunity to fulfil their education aspirations, which they so richly deserve.

AONTAS takes nothing for granted as we set ourselves on a continuous trajectory of improvement. Building on recent organisational and governance reviews we will deliver value for money with the highest level of compliance and standards as a charity. With a rich organisational knowledge and notable reputation at national and international level, this strategy will focus on what is proven to work for the benefit of adult learners: *learner voice for action* and *a thriving community education sector*. Never standing still we will challenge ourselves to further develop robust evidence of the value of lifelong learning for social, civic, environmental and economic sustainability. Fundamental to our strategy is the engagement with our members and learners within the four strands of our work: a newly created research unit, expanded capacity building activities, effective advocacy and impactful communications. Additionally, a core priority for AONTAS will be financial stability in the context of increasing

compliance with stagnating funding so that we can maintain our autonomy to deliver our unique and complementary service to current provision and alongside national policy including the forthcoming Further Education and Training Strategy. We intend to strengthen the voice of adult learning across the lifelong learning spectrum so that adult learners will be able to make informed decisions on their educational opportunities, benefit from high quality provision, are effectively supported to succeed and are facilitated through a holistic learner pathway across their lifetime. Whether returning to learning to build confidence, undertaking an accredited course whilst in employment or becoming a mature student, AONTAS will prioritise the needs of the learner as the basis for all our advocacy work.

As we celebrate our half-century, over the course of this plan we aim to emerge as a strengthened organisation, deepening our grassroots focus, responding to members as the authentic voice of adult learning whilst maintaining an unwavering commitment to the values from which the organisation emerged in 1969. In conclusion, we wish to thank the Board for its support and vision in developing this strategy; the brilliant, dynamic and committed AONTAS team; our endlessly knowledgeable and supportive members; our primary funders SOLAS and the Department of Education and Skills; and especially every adult learner for whom the delivery of this work is inspired by.

Niamh O'Reilly,
AONTAS CEO

Tara Farrell,
AONTAS Chairperson

Introduction and Context



“ It is amazing seeing people that have struggled, marginalised people, pick themselves up and build their confidence. Education is the biggest thing you can have, that anyone can have. It is that extra door, an opportunity. You start to believe in yourself.

– Adult Learner, INOU



Our Vision

For all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system.

Our Mission

Our mission is to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning.

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. We are a non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969. The name AONTAS is an acronym in the Irish language, Aós Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach, meaning ‘national adult education through voluntary unification’. AONTAS is the Irish word for unity or union. It was the founders’ intention that the organisation be identified by its inclusiveness. AONTAS is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. We are core funded by SOLAS (Ireland’s Further Education and Training Authority) and receive project funding from other sources including the European Commission through ERASMUS+ programmes.

AONTAS has a growing membership of 400 organisations and individuals committed to lifelong learning. Our membership includes adult learners, tutors, statutory, non-governmental, community and voluntary organisations from across the island of Ireland.

AONTAS has built a strong reputation over 50 years. We are experts in community education, giving learners a voice, and advocating for educational equality for adults in Ireland. Through this expertise we have developed networks at regional, national, European and International level, to share knowledge and address the issues of our members.

What do we mean by Lifelong Learning?

AONTAS understands lifelong learning to mean all learning activity, formal, non-formal and informal undertaken throughout life and includes adult and community education, further education and training and higher education. The purpose of lifelong learning is based on UNESCO's four pillars of education: learning to be, learning to do, learning to know and learning to live together.

// Life involves learning throughout all stages.

— Adult Learner

What do we mean by Learner Voice?

Learner voice is about empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening and acting upon their recommendations in order to improve educational experiences at Local, Regional, National and European level.

Voice

As a national organisation AONTAS brings together voices in the field of adult learning connecting learners, tutors, policymakers, academics in order to shape a more equitable system of lifelong learning. AONTAS is an independent advocacy organisation.

- We respond to the needs of our members across Ireland, advocating for a more equitable lifelong learning system by creating an effective bridge between practice, research and policy.
- We ensure that learner voice, the lived experiences of adult learners, remains at the heart of our work.
- We focus on widening participation across the lifelong learning field from adult, community, further and higher education for educationally disadvantaged adults.
- We achieve this through specific activities that link the 'voices' in the field – connecting adult learners and practitioners with academics and organisations involved in adult learning, to inform and support effective policy development and implementation. We will also provide opportunities for these groups to engage with policy makers, public servants and politicians – in order to effect policy change.
- We support community education as a key driver for educational equality and social change, and prioritise the facilitation and promotion of meaningful learner voices activities as an expert in this area.



// There is a saying, 'educate a woman, and educate the whole community' and that is exactly what happened to me.

— Adult Learner, An Cosán VCC

Vision

AONTAS is an authentic, long-standing organisation that will bring a clear, comprehensive and cohesive vision to the field of adult learning.

AONTAS believes passionately in the capacity of adult learning to unlock potential and bring wide-ranging benefits to society. We will provide evidence through a newly established AONTAS research unit that offers learner-centred, practitioner-based research to support our advocacy work. Lifelong learning has the potential to develop a critically engaged society and contribute to addressing current societal issues, support sustainable employment, increase civic engagement, foster critical thinking and improve environmental sustainability.



Value

AONTAS is a valued, trusted, honest broker in the field of adult learning which is further strengthened through effective governance, a professional staff team, and long-term economic sustainability. Our work is underpinned by our core values:

Learners at the heart of our work

- We place adult learners at the centre of our advocacy, communications and research work to create a more equitable system of lifelong learning
- We support learners to become advocates by developing their confidence and providing them with meaningful ways to share their lived experiences

Principles guiding what we do

- We believe in the power of adult learning to transform lives and to effect social change
- We value and promote the benefits of accredited and non-accredited learning in adult, further, community and higher education
- We are an active part of the European community of adult education advocates and we are committed to supporting adult learning at EU level and beyond

Our Principles

Our work is informed by principles of:

social justice

feminism

partnership

valuing diversity

advancing equality

supporting social inclusion



What We Do

Our core activities/areas of work:

Policy and Representation

We respond to member issues, make policy submissions, publish evidence-based policy papers, and host policy events with stakeholders, policy makers and politicians. We are also represented on a diverse range of national steering groups and committees and at EU level.

Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal – *The Adult Learner*

We produce and publish the internationally recognised and long-established (*founded in the 1980s*) Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education – *The Adult Learner* as a joint publication with the Adult Education Officers Association (AEOA). This publication provides essential reading for anyone interested in or studying adult learning.

AONTAS Community Education Network

We support community education organisations through the 100+ member- strong, nationally recognised structure – the AONTAS Community Education Network, established in 2007. We provide its members with essential support, advocacy and continuous professional development opportunities to give voice to and support the sustainability of the community education sector.

Promotion and Recognition

We promote lifelong learning nationally through an extensive communications strategy that highlights the value and benefits of adult learning, and supports members to promote their work.

AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival

The Adult Learners' Festival is an internationally recognised¹ nationwide festival of adult learning that encourages adults to return to education and we support our members to highlight opportunities available through open-day events. The AONTAS STAR Awards recognises excellence in adult learning provision that advances educational equality and holistic learner-centred programmes.

Building a National Lifelong Learning Network

We provide essential opportunities for our members to link with other adult learning practitioners from across Ireland, to build new connections and learn about the latest updates from the sector. This work includes hosting membership meetings, informing members through our social media channels, regular targeted correspondence to members, and through our monthly e-bulletin 'AONTAS News'.

¹ <http://uil.unesco.org/adult-education/confintea/confintea-vi-mid-term-review-2017-status-adult-learning-and-education>

European Activities

We promote Irish adult learning expertise in Europe. We lead and participate in strategically significant ERASMUS+ programmes and extend opportunities to our members. AONTAS is active in all three ERASMUS+ key action programmes: KA1 mobility Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme for adult learning practitioners, KA2 and KA3 as national coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL).

Learner Voice

We support adult learners to become advocates by sharing their lived experiences of adult learning. This includes providing them with an opportunity to share their issues through consultations, publishing learner stories across our communication channels, supporting learners to participate or speak at events, and engaging with policy makers and politicians at national and EU level. We also lead and deliver the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy (2014-2019).

Information to Prospective Learners

We provide information on education and training options to adults in Ireland through our **One Step Up Information Referral Service**. Information is delivered through a Freephone Helpline, our website (www.onestepup.ie), our One Step Up Information Booklet, through targeted communications campaigns, and participation at regional fairs and events throughout the country.

// This course has transformed my thinking because it has made me realise that education is a possible route for me.

– Adult Learner, UCC



Why is Adult Learning so important?

Adult learning enables people to have a better life. Adult learning is more important than ever as the pace of life and change increases in society, in the environment, in political systems and in the work place.

// As I got into the programme, it gave us great confidence in our own ability to do things that I wouldn't personally have dreamed of doing before.

— Adult Learner,
Kilkenny & Carlow ETB



// I got the confidence to apply for college. For me, Building Futures is more than just a programme, I have developed as a person.

— Adult Learner, INOU

Adult learning is transformational and has a role to play in:

Building personal capacity to engage in learning throughout life and adapt to change

Tackling intergenerational educational inequality

Developing critical thinkers, engaged and active citizens

Supporting adults to gain sustainable employment

Supporting environmental sustainability

Cultivating essential 'soft skills' for life²



² World Economic Forum, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_EGW_Whitepaper.pdf



“ It’s the first course that I’ve ever done that has tackled key things that have held me back.

— Adult Learner,
Dublin North West Area Partnership

“ I’ve gained countless friends and the support that I’m receiving [and have been getting] is absolutely phenomenal.

— Adult Learner,
Ballyhoura Development CLG

Persistent Educational Inequalities in Lifelong Learning

There is an increasing need for greater inclusion in lifelong learning (OECD, 2019)³. As of the beginning of this year Ireland is ranked 10th in terms of urgency⁴ to improve adult learning. Ireland currently has a lifelong learning participation rate of 8.9%⁵ (2017) compared to the EU average of 10.9% (EUROSTAT). In order to reach the EU Strategy target of 15% by 2020, we need to act now. A more pressing issue is the persistent inequalities in adult learning participation, as underserved groups continue to face barriers in accessing education.

Given the rapid acceleration of change in society in areas of technology, environment, political systems and in the work place, we cannot afford to continue the trend of widening inequalities.



The Adult Education Survey (AES 2017)⁶ highlights the stark differentials across lifelong learning participation, particularly for people who have gained lower levels of accreditation (OECD, 2019). The most educationally disadvantaged are least likely to engage in adult learning: those with less than Leaving Certificate are seven times less likely to participate in accredited learning than those who hold a degree (2% compared to 14%). People who want to participate in adult learning but are unable to do so cite cost, family caring responsibilities, geographic location (mainly rural learners) and health as barriers.

Other groups who are least likely to participate in adult learning are older people, people earning a low wage, and people in temporary, part-time or self-employment⁷. In Ireland, every tenth employee is an involuntary part-time worker (OECD, 2017). Non-standard workers are more likely to be women, who receive less training and have less employment stability. Part-time temporary workers are 40% less likely than standard full-time workers to receive training and skills development, which leads to further wage inequality (OECD, 2017).

3 OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*, *Getting Skills Right*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>.

4 Future-readiness of each country's adult learning systems to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world of work along six dimensions of: coverage, inclusiveness, flexibility and guidance, alignment with skill needs, impact, and financing.

5 The percentage of persons aged 25-64 who received formal and/or non-formal education and training in the 4 weeks prior to the survey

6 Based on data for 2017

7 (part-time, temporary and self-employment)



AONTAS supports the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) Manifesto

Nine current challenges which adult learning helps to address:

Active Citizenship and Democracy – People who participate in adult education participate more in society, by voting, volunteering or taking active roles in communities. Adult education is the tool for the development of critical thinking.

Health and Well-being – Adult learners lead healthier lifestyles and experience improved well-being. Adult education contributes to personal development and fulfilment. The health of our societies depends upon lifelong learning.

Life Skills for Individuals – Adult education transforms lives. It opens new job opportunities, creates pathways to learning, activates people’s artistic passions and builds new social networks.

Social Cohesion, Equity and Equality – Adult education supports greater social mobility and equalizes societies. Adult learning brings together people from different walks and stages of life. This benefits democracy and social peace.

Employment and Work – Workplace learning is one of the key drivers of adults’ participation in lifelong learning. Adult education increases innovation and productivity of employees, entrepreneurs and volunteers–this makes companies more successful.

Digitalisation – Adult education helps to close the digital gap and provides individuals with digital competences, which are key to personal fulfilment, employment, social inclusion and active citizenship.

Migration and Demographic Change – Civic education and intercultural learning create inclusive societies and cultures. Seniors who learn are more active, work longer and stay healthier. Intergenerational learning enables older and the younger to profit from each other’s knowledge.

Sustainability – Adult education provides competences, information, debating spaces and creativity to develop new approaches necessary for sustainable development. A paradigm shift is only possible through critical, conscious and innovative citizens.

Adult Education and European & International Policies – European & international policies Adult education contributes to main European and international strategies in the fields of growth, employment, innovation, equity, social cohesion, active citizenship, poverty reduction, climate change, internal market, migration, peace and more.



Greater access to sustainable employment

- Higher educational attainment levels are linked with higher employment rates. Persons aged 25-64 years old with a third level qualification are more than twice as likely to be employed (85%) than those with no formal education/primary education (35%) in Q2 2018 (CSO, 2019)⁸

Better health and wellbeing

- Education level is closely linked to life expectancy (LWI, 2017). There are a significant number of international studies that show the benefits of adult learning to mental health and general well-being⁹
- UNESCO (2016) argues that adult learning and education benefits our health behaviours and attitudes. Learning leads to greater confidence and self-efficacy, which translates to a greater ability to manage our own lives and health (LWI, 2017)

A roadmap for 'inclusive growth' (OECD, 2018), the EU Pillar of Social Rights (2018) and the Sustainable Development Goals all highlights the need to ensure opportunities for all, including to lifelong learning. The work of AONTAS to identify issues impeding participation and the required approaches for supporting greater educational equality are needed now more than ever.



⁸ https://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20181218090026_Educational_Attainment_Thematic_Report_2018_full.pdf

⁹ What Works Well-being Centre's – <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/product/adult-learning-life-satisfaction/> ?

Adult Learning Enables a Better Life¹⁰

Educational disadvantage impacts a person's whole life and that of their family, community and society. We know that early school leavers benefit greatly from adult learning engagement (BeLL, 2014)¹¹ but those who benefited most from the education system, continue to do so, as demonstrated by the "Matthew Effect". When the right kind of educational provision is offered with the right supports, the impact can be transformational.

// The programme is accessible, it was run locally on our doorstep, it was inclusive and the peer-to-peer support and learning within the group was fantastic.

— Adult Learner,
Tipperary Public Participation
Network



Supported learner pathways across the field of lifelong learning

Adult learners are telling AONTAS that a wide range of learning options are needed, not only specific vocationally-orientated courses but also non-accredited courses where they can build confidence, gain 'learning to learn' skills and take time to decide which area of learning to focus on. Learners cite the key factors for access and retention as learner supports (childcare, transport, funding and guidance), learning methodology (dialogical, respectful and supportive) and collegiality (peer support and peer learning). Underpinning all the points raised by learners is the need to support people to increase their confidence, which takes time to nurture and requires the right learning environment and autonomy in course choice.

Ensuring that the purpose of adult learning is broad and the provision of learning is diverse is vital to a successful adult education system. It is essential to provide a range of flexible accredited and non-accredited options that enable adults to return to learning with effective supports and develop an adult learning culture that promotes inclusiveness, equality, and democracy.

¹⁰ AONTAS Board Member 2019

¹¹ <http://www.bell-project.eu/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/BeLL-Research-Report.pdf>



What We Know

We know that educationally disadvantaged adults are participating in adult learning: 23% of those who left school early participated in non-accredited education in 2018 (CSO, 2018). We see this in community education, where its location, accessibility and outreach, in addition to the supports of childcare, effectively engages hard to reach groups, particularly women and immigrants.

Importantly, we must listen to the voices of people who want to engage in adult learning but cannot, and to those who are currently engaging in learning or have completed a course who can share insight into how provision can be improved. At the heart of an effective adult learning system is the learner voice. Listening to people is becoming the new norm in public policy.

As Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, stated in 2019: “We know we must reach out further and listen more and better to diverse voices. Too many people have been left behind, and we cannot fail them or expect international co-operation to succeed without them. Their views and their stories, just like data, will be essential inputs for shaping together the standards, rules of the game and guidance needed to help us improve our economies, enrich our societies, safeguard our environment and enhance our wellbeing.”



Our Commitment

We will:

- Engage with the AONTAS membership in an open, inclusive manner characterised by professionalism, respect, warmth and responsiveness in order to build a community of individuals and organisations committed to educational equality for adults
- Collaborate with members and stakeholders working in the field of lifelong learning to promote the value of adult education, ensure learner and practitioner voices are represented at key adult educational events, and identify areas of collaboration to achieve our organisational goals
- Use our platform to represent our members on a national level and highlight key issues in adult and community education with policy makers in order to drive change and improvements in policy and funding
- Value the AONTAS team and will enable our staff to flourish by underpinning our work with shared values of integrity, authenticity, respect, reflection, responsiveness, collective growth, learning, mutual trust, shared accountability and innovation as we strive for excellence
- Continue to further our commitment to a robust system of governance, transparency and accountability to become a leader in the non-governmental sector

// It gave me a sense of belonging.

— Adult Learner,
Dublin Simon Community



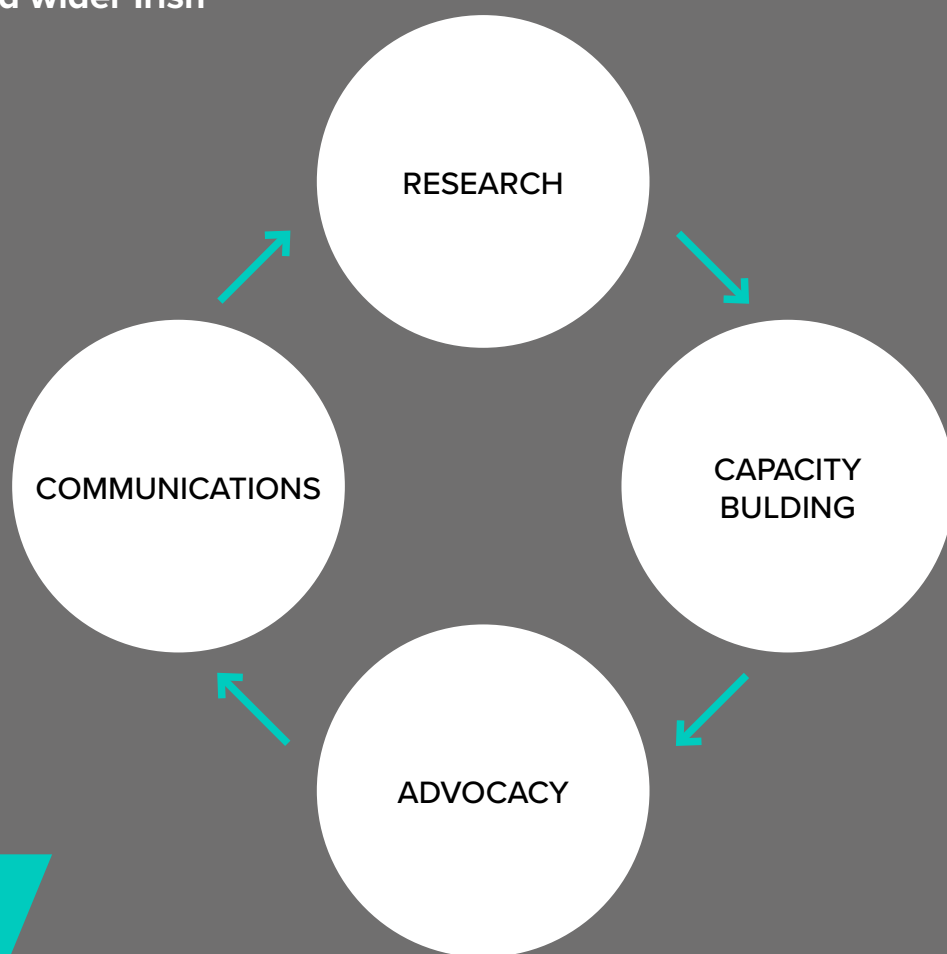
Strategic Plan Goals

AONTAS will achieve three overarching goals in order to create greater educational equality for all adults learners in Ireland:

- 1. Learner Voice for Action: Creating an inclusive lifelong learning society:**
Everyone should have the opportunity to actively participate and succeed in adult learning and to fulfil their educational ambitions regardless of their past educational experience, social class, sexual orientation, civil status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or disability. The policy and practice in the adult, further, community, and higher education systems should be continually shaped by acting on a diverse range of authentic learner voices.
- 2. A Thriving Community Education Sector:** Community education will be sustainably, funded, effectively measured and recognised on an equal footing with other areas of the education system. It will be recognised as having a specific and crucial role in supporting educational equality.
- 3. Lifelong Learning for Sustainability:** Policy makers will recognise the role lifelong learning plays in achieving social, civic, environmental and economic sustainability. We will also ensure the sustainability of AONTAS as an organisation.

How We Will Deliver On Our Goals

The coming four years will see four key complementary areas of work applied to delivering on the above goals: Research, Capacity Building, Advocacy and Communications form mutually reinforcing strands of the one overall approach to making a positive impact on the lives of adult learners, the sector and wider Irish society.





Capacity Building

AONTAS is committed to supporting our membership across the island of Ireland, with a specific focus on rural areas, to engage in advocacy. AONTAS will support adult learners and our members to become even more effective local, regional and national lifelong learning advocates.

Research

AONTAS will support the realisation of the wide-ranging potential of adult learning for societal benefit and progressive social change by providing robust, up-to-date evidence through a newly established research unit that offers learner-centred, practitioner-based research purpose built to inform and enhance the impact of our advocacy work.

Advocacy

AONTAS will deliver grassroots-led, evidence-based policy submissions and position papers that advance educational equality benefiting members, adult learners, their families, local communities and society as a whole.

Communications

AONTAS will communicate the value of our work and that of our members with a range of key stakeholders, policy makers, and politicians, raising public awareness of the importance of adult education.



Goal 1

Learner Voice for Action: Creating an Inclusive Learning Society

I. AONTAS will encourage and promote an inclusive lifelong learning society

Navigating the complex, fragmented field of adult learning requires a range of supports. AONTAS will act as a first point of contact for those seeking information about their learning options by:

1. Continuing to develop and deliver an accessible information service to prospective learners through our One Step Up Information Referral Service, in collaborations with stakeholders and learners. The service will aim to communicate opportunities in adult learning to the public, provide clear information on available options and widen lifelong learning participation in Ireland.

Many examples of best practice in engaging adult learners exist across the island of Ireland. We will highlight, recognise and award those models, communicating their valuable contributions across the lifelong learning field. We will do this by:

2. Communicating the best practices for inclusive adult learning through the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival and STAR awards;
3. Showcasing inclusive adult learning practice through our communications strategy (website, blogs, social media, media relations).



II. Learner Voice: Representing learners in lifelong learning

AONTAS will actively engage with a diverse range of adult learners to share their experiences as part of promoting the intrinsic value of quality learning and to inform the development of lifelong learning policy within and across all forms of adult, community and tertiary learning systems.



We will:

Build Capacity

In order to implement a transformative model of learner voice we will build the capacity of learners to become agents of change.

We will do this by:

1. Building the capacity of learners from across the lifelong learning ecosystem to become empowered self-advocates;
2. Developing tools and resources that can be used to promote effective learner voice engagement.

Research

Adult learners experience first-hand the gamut of barriers to accessing education, progression and retention, and their stories hold valuable insights and powerful messages. Harnessing and sharing their experience can effectively pinpoint the needs of learners, particularly those who are marginalised and excluded from fully participating in all forms of learning. AONTAS will therefore draw on the lived experience of adult learners whose expertise can best guide and inform our research work. We will do this by: Engaging in research with adult learners across the lifelong learning field to support greater educational equality;

3. Implement learner voice projects, forums and meetings to identify recommendations for learner access, retention and progression (including the National FET Learner Forum);
4. Publish the Adult Learner Journal annually; as the only peer-reviewed Journal of adult and community education in Ireland this unique resource will continue to document the evolution of adult learning policy and practice, providing an essential space for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning that target disadvantage, social exclusion, equality, and workplace learning.

Advocate

We believe that listening to adult learners and acting on their recommendations is central to inclusive adult learning policies. We believe that ensuring our advocacy work is driven by their needs and grounded in their voices should be central to our work. We will do this by:

5. Developing a learner-informed advocacy strategy to propose methods for addressing under-participation in adult learning and offer solutions for overcoming relevant systemic barriers.

Adult learning is a vast field and we believe adults will be best served by listening to, drawing on and reflecting the diversity of perspectives within the field to inform and strengthen policies and systems. Increased communication and engagement with stakeholders will therefore underpin our lobbying activities. We will do this by:

6. Bringing together our members and stakeholders involved in adult learning from practice, policy and academia in order to support educational equality for adults¹².

Communicate

Learners are the best ambassadors to encourage adults back into learning, therefore we will ensure that learners are central to our communication work. We will do this by:

7. Implementing a learner voice communications strategy;
8. Providing learners with opportunities to share their story at local, national and international level.



¹² In line with the European Agenda for Adult Learning we will host events for members and stakeholders across the lifelong learning field.

Goal 2:

A Thriving Community Education Sector

We will act as a voice for community education so that it may continue to address educational inequality and ultimately reach its fullest potential for bringing about positive changes in the lives of learners. Our goal is to advocate for an effective model of funding for community education that accurately evaluates its impact in order to ensure that community education reaches the largest number of educationally disadvantaged and marginalised people. To better understand and support the implementation of community education AONTAS will work for an all-of-government collaborative initiative to support community education.

We will:

Build Capacity

Community education is provided across the country by a range of providers, reaching a wide range of learners. To strengthen its ability to provide quality community education we will continue to bring together community education providers and act as a collective voice for the sector.

We will do this by:

1. Strengthening the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) as a community of practice that offers continuous professional development; enables policy influence across the island of Ireland; expanding its membership; continuously promoting the positive impact of community education in society; and actively including the voices of its members across the work of AONTAS.

Research

Community education has amassed a wealth of knowledge and expertise over the decades yet has suffered from longstanding under-funding. AONTAS will harness the knowledge of community education practitioners to identify and generate practices that best support access, progression and retention in adult learning. Gathering and highlighting the evidence around best practice will contribute to securing the future sustainability of the community education sector.

We will do this by:

2. Initiating an annual 'state of community education' census outlining the current funding system for community education and the impact it has at local level to be used as a basis for advocacy;
3. Ensuring that the voices of learners, practitioners, and providers remain core to all community education research.



Advocate

AONTAS will develop evidence-informed policy positions and submissions in line with recommendations from the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) and involve members in our collective advocacy for a thriving community education sector.

We will do this by:

4. Communicating research-informed policy to policy makers and politicians;
5. Ensuring community education voices are included at all relevant stakeholder events.

Communicate

Community education is hugely valuable and often cited at EU level as a model for educational inclusion. However, there is a lack of recognition and understanding regarding the role and potential of community education. We will address this issue by:

6. Implementing a communications strategy for community education with the support and guidance of CEN members. This strategy will be aimed at showcasing the positive impact of community education, and highlighting the barriers CEN members face in delivering quality education.



Goal 3: Lifelong learning for Sustainability

I. Encourage and promote lifelong learning for sustainability

It is widely acknowledged that adult learning has vast potential to address many of the current challenges facing society however there has been a legacy of disproportionately and narrowly focusing learning systems and policies on a single area: the skills agenda. This has been to the detriment of achieving more social dividends in relation to wider and deeper threats. Lifelong learning is specifically named in the Sustainable Development Goals (4.7) because it has a pivotal role to play in environmental sustainability, the democratic process, a potential post-Brexit Ireland. We will provide evidence-based forward-thinking positions on how adult learning can address current and future societal issues as a tried and tested successful mechanism for increasing critical thinking and active inclusive citizenship.

Build Capacity

AONTAS will collaborate with stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations at national and EU level to identify common concerns and collectively share advocacy and research capacity for change.

We will do this by:

1. Developing a Five Nations Network (5NN) for adult learning (Ireland, N Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales) to share expertise, research and regionally coordinate advocacy work around shared goals;
2. Developing alliances with non-governmental organisations for collaborating on critical societal issues where adult learning can play a part to address the challenges faced by learners across borders.

Research

A vast body of research on the broader benefits of adult learning exists. To develop a vision for lifelong learning in Ireland, AONTAS will draw on existing research and engage in new research on specific thematic areas regarding sustainability. We will do this by:

3. Engaging in strategically significant ERASMUS+ /other EU funded projects that focus on sustainability;
4. Conducting research into the impact of adult learning on creating a sustainable society with a focus on employment and the environment.





Advocate

AONTAS will broaden the focus of adult learning at policy level to encompass the development of forward-thinking position papers on adult learning for sustainability across government departments. We will do this by:

5. Consistently developing research-informed policy papers focused on the broader purpose of learning and communicating to policy makers and politicians;
6. Strengthening adult learning in Ireland and internationally by engaging in cross-border collaboration with sibling organisations in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England as well as through the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and in the organisation's capacity as national coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL).

Communicate

Adult learning has huge potential to address critical issues facing society. A specific focus on the broader purpose of adult learning will be communicated in collaboration with our members and stakeholders. We will do this by:

7. Communicating how adult learning can address current and future societal issues to a broad range of stakeholders;
8. Hosting events with stakeholders on issues pertaining to sustainability and the transformative power of adult learning.

II. Organisational development and growth for a sustainable organisation

Governance and Transparency

All of our work will be underpinned by good governance and an engaged staff team. AONTAS will have the people, systems, structures, procedures and resources in place to deliver on our strategic objectives including funding, human resources and governance.

We will do this by:

Ensuring Good Governance

1. Implementing the AONTAS governance review and ensuring adherence to the Charities Governance Code (2019);
2. Building the capacity of the AONTAS Board to deliver on its role and responsibilities.

Human Resources

3. Building human resources capacity and embedding organisational change processes conducted over the course of the last Strategic Plan (2015 – 2018);
4. Initiating a CPD and performance system programme for all staff members to deliver on the Strategic Plan to the highest standards of excellence;
5. Implementing the AGILE project management system for the AONTAS team.

Impact

6. Accurately measuring and reviewing the impact of our work and documenting outcomes for our funders, Board and members.

Funding

7. Meeting all our obligations to our funders through transparent accounting processes in line with best financial practice;
8. Diversifying our funding sources to include a broader range of project-specific funding in line with our Strategic Plan.

Membership

9. Building our membership with a specific focus on community education organisations and members in rural areas by developing clear membership engagement processes aimed at recruiting and supporting all members;
10. Developing a robust regional structure for our membership and introducing new ways of communicating the value of belonging and contributing to the work of AONTAS in order to facilitate growth.

Sustainability

11. We will employ environmentally sustainable practices across the organisation;
12. We will use online tools and digital resources to enhance engagement with our members across the Island of Ireland in an effective, cost-effective and environmentally conscious manner.

Contact Us

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