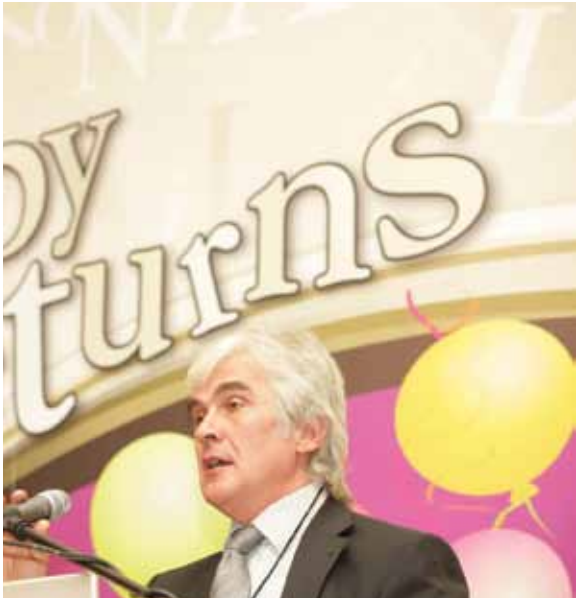


# EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

aontas



- *'Many Happy Returns' – AONTAS celebrates 40 years of adult education in Ireland*
- *Your MEP and Adult Learning*
- *Online Campaigning*
- *Building Alliances – The Equality Rights Alliance and the Older and Bolder Campaign*

## Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this edition of *Explore*!

In this issue we look at the political landscape in the wake of the local and European elections. But rather than focusing on the personalities elected, we look at the opportunities for the adult learning sector. How do you run a decent campaign on a shoestring? How do you get a network of different groups to identify some common issues for a campaign, and facilitate communication and decision making on those issues? What are the opportunities to influence policy within the EU? What's a regular day like for a city councillor?

We hope to answer these questions and more, giving you food for thought in the months ahead. In this issue what we've tried to do is put together a 'campaigns recipe book' for adult and community education groups who want to raise issues strategically and productively with their elected representatives. The main issues for the adult learning sector are profiled, but also we look to related issues – such as the progress of the Positive Ageing Strategy – and the development of the Equality Rights Alliance. Co-ordinators from both these campaigns outline their experience and challenges of influenc-

ing change. We'll take you through the strategies used – from alliance building and targeted training programmes, to using social networking and online tools. Berni Brady talks to Proinsias de Rossa about the potential for campaigning at European level. Finally, we'll look at practical steps that you can take which will help keep a local spotlight on what is a crucial national issue in the current economic climate.

Our own campaign – 'Many Happy Returns', which coincides with AONTAS' fortieth birthday, and which was launched at our AGM continues to run over the coming months. You can read about our birthday wish list inside this issue, which we've compiled based on the issues identified by our membership. During the next phase of our campaign we will be meeting with elected representatives and spokespersons from Government and Opposition to outline our current concerns and our responses to those concerns. As always, you can keep up to date with developments on [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com). Similarly, if your organisation is involved in campaigning work, please let us know about the outcomes!

Until next time,

**Niamh Farren,**  
**Communications Officer**  
**AONTAS**

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## Adult Learners' Festival 2010

Following extensive consultation with all those involved in last year's Festival, AONTAS has set a date for next year's event. The Adult Learners' Festival 2010 will take place from February 22nd to February 26th, on the theme of the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

There were a number of reasons which informed our decision:

Further education / adult learn-

ing already gains significant media coverage and promotion during the month of September. By scheduling the Festival earlier in the year, we can allow for two key promotional opportunities during the year.

After three years, the Festival is already established as a Spring event, and groups already factor events in for that time period.

A date in late February ties in with deadlines for places on Access Courses and VTOS.

The additional lead in after Christmas gives groups and event

organisers more time to plan their events.

Next year is European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion – the Festival will be one of the first events of the year to reflect this theme.

More details about the Festival will be posted on our website [www.adultlearnersfestival.com](http://www.adultlearnersfestival.com).

In the meantime, if you would like any further information please contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer, [nfarren@aontas.com](mailto:nfarren@aontas.com).

## Community Education: On TV!

Members of the Community Education Network have been busy showcasing their activities for a series of television programmes about community education.

The series is funded by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) through the Sound and Vision Fund. Over the past number of months, AONTAS staff members and the CEN Steering Committee have been working together with a crew from DCTV (Dublin Community Television) and Director Donnacha O'Briain.

The series will be unique as for the first time, practitioners will articulate the methodologies and outcomes of community education. The series promises a real insight into the experience of delivering and participating in community education in different parts of the city – including sessions on leadership in an Cosán in Tallaght and story sacks in Warrenmount. DCTV has worked closely with AONTAS and the CEN over the past few months to ensure that the practice of community education is portrayed in a meaningful way.

The series will act as a means of raising awareness and showcasing the distinct features of community education to a variety of audiences, but will also be of use to practitioners in sharing methodologies and techniques. The series will be completed by the end of the year.

If you would like more information about this project contact Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services, [noreilly@aontas.com](mailto:noreilly@aontas.com). For more information about Dublin Community Television visit [www.dctv.ie](http://www.dctv.ie).

## AONTAS celebrates Many Happy Returns!

The AONTAS AGM this year was also the occasion to celebrate 40 years of adult learning in Ireland. In keeping with the theme of birthdays and celebration, AONTAS displayed archive material including images, text and headlines from each decade in the form of a giant birthday cake. The major developments for the past four decades were mounted on panels and displayed alongside photo

graphs in the form of an adult learning timeline.

Professor Tom Collins from NUI Maynooth addressed those attending with his own unique take on the role of adult learning over the past four decades and how it can meet the challenges which lie ahead. Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey officially opened the event. The event also saw the launch of the AONTAS local and European election campaign 2009.

AONTAS says goodbye and thanks to Executive members Morgan Dunne,

Jan Lewis and Stephen Flitton, who stepped down this year, and welcomes new members Deborah Brock (Dodder Valley Partnership), Liz Waters (An Cosán) and Linda Greene (Clondalkin Women's Network).

If you missed the AGM, visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com) to download pdf versions of the timeline, or to read Dr Tom Collins presentation. You can also read more about new and re-elected members of the AONTAS Executive.

**BTEI Guidelines now Available**

The Further Education Development Unit in the Department of Education and Science has recently published the latest BTEI guidelines. These include:

- Guidelines to enhance men’s engagement with Back to Education Initiative funded programmes (prepared by AONTAS).

- Guidelines to enhance cooperation between Back to Education Initiative and Adult Literacy programmes.
- Guidelines for effective planning and delivery of Back to Education Initiative outreach provision.

The guidelines are available for download from the Departments website: [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

**Supplementary Budget 2009**

Following a disappointing Budget in October 2008 in which cuts were made to the adult education sector, the measures contained in the recent supplementary budget recognised lifelong learning and education as a key instrument for addressing the challenges of a recession. The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, the Department of Education & Science and the Department of Social & Family Affairs agreed a joint approach to support those who lose their jobs. As of July 2009 live Register figures stand at 11.9%, with the ESRI estimating that unemployment will rise to 17% by the end of 2010. If this is the case then the activation measures proposed will fail to meet a greater public demand for adult learning. The measures include:

- An additional 6,910 places for unemployed people in the further and higher education sectors including 1,500 PLC places, 700 Redundant Apprentice IoT Scheme places, 280 Accelerated Level 6 Certificate Programmes places, 1,500 part-time third level places and 930 part-time transition courses places.
- Additional Training Initiatives Strategy places including 12,015 ten week and 1,833 twenty week training courses.

- A pilot scheme for short-term workers which will provide training and income support to 277 workers considered to be in vulnerable employment.

While these activation measures are welcomed, AONTAS believes they do not go anywhere near addressing the human fallout of our rapidly deteriorating economy. For example if the ESRI predictions hold true half a million people could be facing unemployment in 2010. Already the pressure on providers is beginning to show with a reported increase of 25% in demand for services in the first quarter of 2009. The effects of the 3% reduction in the budget of the VEC announced in October 2008 and the prospect of a staff embargo will add to the difficulties faced by providers trying to cope with the new situation.

Furthermore, the recent report published by the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, also known as an Bord Snip Nua, outlines a number of additional expenditure savings mechanisms that will directly affect the adult and community education sector. For more information on what is contained in the report, visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

**Submission to the Higher Education Strategy**

The Policy and Promotion Team in AONTAS recently welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the debate on Higher Education in Ireland by making a submission to the National Strategy on Higher Education in June 2009. We identified three significant changes that need to be made to higher education in Ireland including:

- The need for more flexible learning opportunities for adult learners taking into account their work and caring responsibilities.

- The need for a change in the culture and attitude of higher education institutions to ensure the distinct needs of adult learners are met.
- The need for better financial supports for adult learners in higher education including revising the eligibility for maintenance grants for part-time mature students.

From an AONTAS perspective we feel that the National Strategy for Higher Education presents a real opportunity to ensure adult learners returning to higher education are resourced and supported as well as their full-time school leaving counterparts.

To read the submission in full, visit [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

### A forecast of European skills until 2020

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) recently presented the results of the first pan-European forecast of its kind, "Future skill supply in Europe: medium-term forecast up to 2020". The main results of the study are that the level of qualifications and skills is rising across Europe, particularly among younger people - and even more so among women. But inequalities in the level of education persist among Member States.

The forecast shows a declining number of people with low qualifications in almost all EU countries and a steady rise in medium (mostly vocational) and high qualifications, both among the labour force and among the general population.

Cedefop is an agency of the European Union based in Thessaloniki, Greece, and it supports European policy-making in the field of vocational education and training. This skills supply forecast complements Cedefop's forecast of the demand for skills in the medium term, published in 2008. Providing cumulative data for all Member States

except Romania, Bulgaria and Malta (and with the addition of Norway), the forecast also gives results for each country separately.

As a next step it is planned to bring together the separate forecasts for demand and supply and to identify mismatches between those skills people have and those that are in demand on the labour market. The merged macroeconomic forecasts will be updated every two years, allowing policy-makers in the EU and in the Member States to take these projections into account when formulating education and employment policies.

### Official Communiqué regarding new dates for Confinteá VI

Deeply concerned about the global public health risks posed by the developments of the H1 N1 virus, the Government of Brazil and UNESCO decided in early May to postpone the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), origi-

nally scheduled to take place in Belem do Para from 19th to 22nd May 2009.

The Government of Brazil and UNESCO have, however, both remained totally committed to holding CONFINTEA VI before the end of the current year and to take all the necessary measures to guarantee the success of the event. After consulting all key stakeholders, it has been decided to hold CONFINTEA VI from

1st to 4th December in Belem. The city of Belem has been confirmed as the venue for the Conference as it offers all the necessary conditions. Health surveillance and coverage at the entry points in Brazil and to Belem will be guaranteed by the host country.

It has been confirmed by the Government of Brazil that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will take part in the Conference.

### Case studies needed!

The European Association for Educating Adults is inviting groups to provide evidence of the social benefits of adult learning in a recession. Evidence could include how participation in adult education can have a positive impact on social cohesion, health and self confidence.

If you have examples of research, projects or services which demonstrate the social benefits of learning, they will include them in a forthcoming publication, as part of a campaign to ensure that adult education is recognised as an integral part of the recovery plan and in the planning for the post Lisbon strategy 2010-2020. For more information, please visit [www.eaea.org](http://www.eaea.org).

**Irish Gestalt Centre**  
*Self awareness through experiential learning*

**Personal Development Programme** consisting of three residential workshops during November, February and May totalling 18 days. This course facilitates a process of self discovery through experiential learning. The work is done in small groups (maximum of ten) using focused awareness, grounding, bodywork, dreamwork, imagery, artwork and meditation. The courses are held in **Teach Bhride, County Carlow**, a lovely, warm, welcoming centre, with private bedrooms and delicious food.

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|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Residential Workshop</b></p> <p><b>Personal Development Programme</b><br/>                     The 1 year Personal Development workshop is open to people interested in self awareness and personal growth who may benefit from group facilitation and Gestalt: skills in their lives and their workplace.<br/>                     It is also a pre-requisite foundation year for the 4 year Diploma in Gestalt Therapy, which is a professional training programme accredited by IACP.<br/> <b>Core staff: Karen Shorten, Gill Naylor</b></p> | <p><b>Residential Workshop</b></p> <p><b>Diploma in Gestalt Therapy</b><br/>                     A four year professional training in Gestalt Therapy accredited by IACP since 1996.<br/>                     Admission into the programme is dependent on completion of the Personal Development year and provision of satisfactory references.<br/> <b>Training staff: Hank O'Mahony, Tricia Norris, Gill Naylor</b></p> | <p><b>Non residential Workshops</b></p> <p><b>Professional Development</b><br/>                     The Irish Gestalt Centre's continuing professional development workshops include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Supervision,</li> <li>◆ Group facilitation skills</li> <li>◆ Working with Dreams</li> <li>◆ Gestalt Taster workshops</li> <li>◆ Bodywork</li> <li>◆ Advanced Gestalt Skills</li> </ul> <p>Details can be found on the website</p> |
|---|--|---|

For further information please contact Irish Gestalt Centre, Baile Eamon, Spiddal, Co. Galway  
 Tel: 01 8397900 or 091 553548  
 e-mail: [info@irishgestaltcentre.com](mailto:info@irishgestaltcentre.com) website: [www.irishgestaltcentre.com](http://www.irishgestaltcentre.com)

# Birthday Messages

*In the lead up to the local and European elections, AONTAS revised its policy positions, to reflect the current economic climate. The AGM on May 6th saw the launch of a new briefing paper called 'Many Happy Returns'. In this article, Niamh Farren summarises these new positions and explains how they were developed.*



*Berni Brady, AONTAS Director, at AONTAS AGM in May 2009.*

In the space of a two year period, AONTAS found itself having to develop a new campaign, this time in the lead up to the local and European elections. The last general election campaign was launched against the backdrop of more prosperous times with AONTAS making a series of demands to those who were elected. Some changes were made as a result of the campaign, including the criteria for the Back to Education Initiative, which was expanded to include those on low incomes.

As we know, times have changed since then. At the time of writing, unemployment figures stand at over 11% and

rising. With tax revenue diminishing and reduced spending on services, there are now less resources available to the sector. Yet, there has never been a more important time to embrace the notion of lifelong learning. One example of a country that took the approach of investing in learning as a response to a recession is Finland. In the early 1990s, when unemployment rose to 20% the Finnish Government created a strategy for implementing its vision of a Finnish knowledge economy. Finland employed long-term structural change to invest in its human resources which transformed its economy and created a more socially inclusive society. Society in Finland today is now reaping the benefit of that wise investment.

## Development of AONTAS policy

AONTAS policy is determined by a number of different factors:

- The Executive Committee which includes representatives from the formal and non-formal adult learning sector, as well as individual adult learners.
- Our membership (standing currently at 600, and including various organisation, and individual perspectives).
- Networks (such as the Senior Learner Network, and the Community Education Network).
- Queries to our Information Referral Service: In 2008 almost 7000 learners contacted AONTAS about further education and training – this was double the number of queries received in 2007.

Our policy is also very much influenced by the external environment i.e decisions that are made at government level.

***“The cross-departmental nature of funding to community education makes it extremely vulnerable to cutbacks from other government departments.”***



Liz Waters, CEO of an Cosán, and recently elected to the AONTAS Executive.

## Issues for the adult learning sector

AONTAS policy paper 'Many Happy Returns' identifies a number of issues experienced by the adult learning sector in the context of the current economic climate. These are as follows:

### Adult Education providers must be resourced to meet the current demand.

Data gathered from our membership and information service indicate that recent cutbacks in education are stretching an already under-resourced sector. Meanwhile, demand on the services of providers and support services such as Guidance Counsellors and Information Officers is on the increase in response to a greater public demand for adult learning.

*“Demand on the services of providers and support services such as Guidance Counsellors and Information Officers is on the increase in response to a greater public demand for adult learning.”*

General feedback from support services throughout the country also indicates concerns about cutbacks and budgets and that there is a shortage of Adult Education courses available locally and regionally in some areas. It is clear that if providers are expected to deal with the needs of the newly unemployed, that resources need to be put in place to enable them to do this. Recent announcements in the Supplementary Budget are completely inadequate to meet demand.

### People must have access to the most recent, accurate information about their learning and support options.

Users of the AONTAS Information Referral Service report general confusion about the range and location of training and education options, their own eligibility status and the financial and ancillary supports available to them. 68% of learners contacting AONTAS indicated that knowing where to access information is a barrier in itself. This situation is becoming more complicated since the introduction of new initiatives in the Supplementary Budget.

The role of guidance must be strengthened. Adult educational guidance services are often the first port of call for those who have recently been made redundant and who want to go back to education. While information is available to any person requesting it, the restriction of guidance services to particular target groups means that newly unemployed adults have no access to guidance services. Furthermore the services are currently operating within restricted budgets

***“A weakened community and voluntary sector infrastructure will not be able to engage in outreach and support required by adults experiencing educational disadvantage and social isolation.”***

while at the same time demand is growing rapidly. In the current crisis there is a strong argument for the expansion of the service as a means of helping people cope with the recession at a personal and professional level.

**Community education and community development budgets must be protected to ensure that community groups can provide necessary supports to prevent social isolation and marginalisation.**

Community education in non formal settings plays a valuable role in moving people out of poverty and into employment. The Supplementary Budget has cut back expenditure in the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs by €47.4 million with the overall revised budget for this Department now standing at €443.7 million. This allocation may be subject to further change in the context of the recent report by an Bord Snip Nua.

Community and voluntary sector organisations are key to engaging target groups in further education, especially those experiencing educational disadvantage, and are already under resourced to carry out this work. A weakened community and voluntary sector infrastructure will not be able to engage in outreach and support required by adults experiencing educational disadvantage and social isolation.

Community education groups involved in the Community Education Network established by AONTAS in 2007 have identified ways in which they could be supported in their social inclusion work. Community education groups must have a stronger voice within local authority structures. This could be achieved through representation on local VEC committees. Social Inclusion Officers within the local authority need to work closely with community education providers.

**Cutbacks to the National Women’s Strategy and the Equality for Women Measure will prevent women from accessing further training and education.**

The cross-departmental nature of funding to community education makes it extremely vulnerable to cutbacks from other government departments. Both the National Strategy for Women and the Equality for Women Measure have recently been cut by over 50%. Feedback from AONTAS membership highlights that initiatives which target women are being scaled back significantly. These initiatives are crucial to enabling women to access further education, but also to moving into leadership and decision making roles in Irish society.

**Adult learning initiatives which target educational disadvantage, such as VTOS, BTEI, and adult guidance, must continue to be funded and strengthened.**

Budget 2008 announced cutbacks of 500 places in the Back to Education Initiative, and made no further provision for the expansion of VTOS. This contradicts government commitments to retraining and upskilling and should be rescinded. AONTAS believes that an upskilling and retraining strategy should utilise existing adult education infrastructure. While the introduction of new initiatives such as the Pilot Training Scheme for Workers on Part-time is welcome, there are also initiatives in place which can fulfil this function. The Back to Education Initiative is the ‘first rung on the ladder’ for many of those most in need of upskilling or retraining, as it allows lower skilled members of the workforce to take part in flexible and accessible learning activities. Similarly, the demand is rising for places on the VTOS programme which offers second chance education. Both of these schemes have a track record in moving people into employment and enterprise.

**The third level fees structure must recognise the inequity experienced by adult learners.**

AONTAS is fundamentally opposed to the re-introduction of third level fees which will act as a disincentive to adults who may already be juggling the responsibilities of parenting, caring, and paying a mortgage. AONTAS believes strongly that the barriers to accessing third level education go beyond the financial, to include social and cultural factors. Access courses, guidance and initiatives which support adult

***“Finland employed long-term structural change to invest in its human resources which transformed its economy and created a more socially inclusive society.”***



Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey, with AONTAS President Marian Duffy and Director Berni Brady.

learners must continue to be resourced to improve current participation rates in third level among those experiencing educational disadvantage.

Ireland's third level fees structure must commit to parity of esteem for part-time adult learners.

**Financial supports for adult learners need to be continually reviewed and changed in order to make adult learning a more realistic option.**

Over the past number of years, AONTAS has made a case for the revision of the qualifying criteria for the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) which is a second chance educational opportunities scheme for people on welfare payments who wish to participate in full-time education and who would not otherwise be able to do so.

Despite some changes to the scheme, AONTAS is concerned that a number of people still do not meet the qualifying criteria for the Back to Education Allowance. These

are people vulnerable in the current economic climate and most at risk of long-term unemployment. They include:

- People in temporary part-time employment
- People in low skilled, low income employment
- Carers
- Workers not in receipt of statutory redundancy

AONTAS recommends that the qualifying criteria for BTEA be further revised to include these categories. Those who lose their jobs should automatically qualify for BTEA, so that they are not forced to spend time on the Live Register in order to qualify for the supports they need.

**Influencing policy**

This position paper is summarised in a special birthday card which was also launched at AONTAS AGM in May. The card was widely distributed to members, but also to policy makers. AONTAS is also meeting with all of the spokespeople on Education, but also Social and Family Affairs, in government and opposition. Details of the outcomes of these meetings will be made available on [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com). There has never been a more important time for AONTAS to highlight the value of adult and community education and the role and potential it has to play in bringing us out of recession.

For a full copy of the briefing paper, and the AONTAS birthday card, visit our website. For the latest policy news, visit the policy section of the website.

**“68% of learners contacting AONTAS indicated that knowing where to access information is a barrier in itself.”**

# ‘Given the resources, we can deliver’

*Michael Moriarty, General Secretary of the IVEA, speaks to Niamh Farren about the pressure on VECs in the current climate, and how the IVEA is seeking to address those issues.*



*Michael Moriarty, General Secretary of the IVEA.*

**What sort of feedback are the VECs getting from the public? Is there a greater interest in adult education and lifelong learning?**

Our adult guidance service is absolutely swamped with enquiries from people seeking adult education, retraining,

and reskilling. With the doubling of the dole queues over the past year, it's been a phenomenal shock to people. Many of those will have skills which are now surplus to requirement – whether they are in the building trade, or even professional people. For the first time, we're getting solicitors and quantity surveyors contacting us. We've also in that context set up an agreement with FÁS that we'll cooperate, we won't duplicate at local level and we'll work together at local level. So if they have enquiries at their side that are more suited to VECs, they will refer them over to us. This national agreement is now ready to sign off, and that will be implemented at local level. We also ran an intensive campaign to lift the cap on the PLCs places which was set at 30,000. Even though it was set at 30,000 we've taken in an extra 3000 students, because of the huge demand in places. The Minister subsequently introduced 1500 places – we were actually looking for 7-10,000 places. 1500 is only the tip of the iceberg, so we're going to continue to campaign for the provision of additional places. We were very disappointed to see the BTEI places cut – that makes no sense at all. Scarce funds should be targeted. Reskilling and retraining has bailed us out in previous recessions and it should bail us out again. The VECs themselves have been through a number of recessions, since the 1930s, and were actually born in a time of great depression, so we feel we come to the fore during times like this.

You have to rebuild people. People are traumatised. Their identity came from what they were and what they did. A person's career or job very often is a big part of their identity. There's a whole psychological trauma attached as well. VECs are parish based, a hugely important part of the fabric of our society, as well as a hugely important network within our society.

***“So there are two things we need – they are staff, who are not being replaced, and financial resources, which are being cut.”***

***“Overall the adult education service will be weakened and dismantled over time if these cutbacks remain in place.”***

**What role do you think adult education and in particular the VECs can play in meeting the current economic challenges?**

Together with FÁS, given the tools and the resources, we can deliver. We’ve refocused a lot of our local energy on people in work, as well as people out of work. We’re trying to move into the workplace situation to deliver education and training. The VECs as a group are now delivering training, and are pitching for business along with the commercial sector. We’ve already undertaken nationwide training with Bord Fáilte, and we’re now training staff in the HSE. We pitched for that training and we’re delivering it nationwide. We’re also involved with the Skills for Work programme as well. So there are two things we need – they are staff, who are not being replaced, and financial resources, which are being cut. We need a reversal of the Department of Finance mentality that says ‘cut cut cut’. People need an expansion of these programmes, not cutbacks.

**In a recent press statement, you mention the impact of the moratorium on public service recruitment, and its application to the recruitment of Adult Education Officers. Can you explain why the IVEA found this decision particularly unjust?**

The Department of Finance is refusing the appointment of a statutory post, like a CEO. AEOS are the equivalent of principals of the adult education service. In my view, if the principal of a school can be replaced, why not the principal of an adult education service? Not to approve that is to act in discriminatory fashion against a cohort of adult learners, that the Department of Finance don’t seem to care about, as they continue to block those posts. The increase of the pupil teacher ratio of 17:1 will also affect us.

In saying that, I must congratulate the Minister for taking a strong stand and making a strong statement before the Joint Oireachtas Committee. He maintained that in the adult education service, people who are tutors or teachers are delivering a front line service and that they should be considered teacher equivalents, and therefore replaced. That is something. But overall the adult education service will be weakened and dismantled over time if these cutbacks remain in place, and we will see that later this year.

**How is the IVEA seeking to address issues such as the recruitment embargo? What additional policy priorities and recommendations will the IVEA be communicating over the coming months?**

The IVEA is aware of all the submissions the Department of Education have been making to Finance, because the Department of Education has no authority now to sanction appointments. Every single appointment now must go to the Department of Finance. So if you want an AEO, they won’t be replaced. Two are gone in Mayo, and one is gone in Wexford. And the only way the Department of Education can deal with it is to make the case to the Department of Finance. This is despite the fact that these are educational posts – the High Court determined that a few years ago that they were educational in nature rather than administrative in nature.

We’re trying to communicate to people and policy makers who are making these decisions purely on cost. The worst thing that’s happened in the last year is that we focus on the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Nothing has value anymore; everything is seen in cost terms. Value judgements are being made at the moment by people in the Department of Finance on educational issues, and they have no concept or understanding of the value of education. That’s what’s happening – and it’s wrong. I would be afraid that irreparable damage will be done to the whole fabric of the structures that we have to deliver, because when you take away the delivery system, or because you weaken the delivery systems, or you put holes in it by not replacing staff, then delivery will collapse. Perhaps because of teacher union’s strength, in schools they’ve maintained some semblance of delivery. The adult education service will be under particular pressure going forward, and the IVEA will continue to campaign strongly for that service.

For more information about the IVEA, visit [www.ivea.ie](http://www.ivea.ie).

*This interview took place before the publication of the report by the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes. The report recommends reducing the number of VECs from 33 to 22.*

***“The worst thing that’s happened in the last year is that we focus on the cost of everything and the value of nothing.”***

# What the Parties Say

*Ciara Murphy, Communications and Resource Officer with AONTAS examines what the different political parties are promising the adult learning sector.*

Despite draconian budgets and rising unemployment, the recession presents an opportunity to emphasise the social and economic benefits of lifelong learning. Finally, lifelong learning issues are centre stage as the Government espouses the benefits of a smart economy. Fine Gael indicates a third way for higher education, The Labour Party put forward activation measures they believe are 'just the job' while Sinn Féin have a plan to get Ireland back to work. From a graduate PRSI contribution scheme to using libraries as a resource for the unemployed, the Government and Opposition Parties have an opinion on the best approach to upskill Ireland's population and learn our way out of recession.

## Government Parties (Fianna Fáil & The Green Party)...

### On Higher Education

Minister for Education, Batt O'Keefe TD is currently finalising a review of policy options relating to the introduction of a form of student contribution. In the event that it is decided to introduce a form of student contribution, it is the Minister's intention to recommend to Government that any new arrangements will apply to students entering higher education from 2010. Such arrangements would also apply, in 2010, to those students who would have entered higher education this year, 2009. On the issue of the student services charge, the Government increased the amount from €900 to €1500.



*Sean Haughey, Fianna Fáil TD and Minister for Lifelong Learning.*

### On the Back to Education Allowance

In the Supplementary Budget, the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) was changed to allow earlier access to the scheme. From 1 May 2009, to qualify for the second level option, the length of time an individual must be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment was reduced from 6 months to 3 months. To qualify for the third level option, the length of time an individual must be getting a qualifying social welfare payment was reduced from 12 months to 9 months. This is in line with the National Action Plan and when an individual is recommended

by a Facilitator from the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA).

### On Activation Initiatives

The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, the Department of Education & Science and the Department of Social & Family Affairs agreed a joint approach for activation following the Supplementary Budget in April 2009. Activation measures include an additional 6,910 places for unemployed people in the further and higher education sectors, an extra 1,500 Post Leaving Certificate places, and a Redundant Apprentice IoT training scheme. A further 12,015 ten

week and 1,833 twenty week training courses announced in the supplementary Budget will be funded by FÁS, the National Training and Employment Authority as well as 277 places on pilot training scheme for workers on short time and 2,000 places on a six month work experience scheme for people who are unemployed and graduates.

### On Access, Information and Supports

Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Hanafin TD has put in place 70 facilitators in the Social Welfare Offices nationwide to work with unemployed people to identify appropriate training or development programmes which will enhance the skills the individual has and, ultimately, improve his or her employment chances. Facilitators work in co-operation with other relevant service providers such as FÁS, VECs, the adult education guidance initiative, the HSE and other local agencies. Furthermore, Fianna Fáil promised in their Local Election Manifesto to continue to support of the development of public libraries noting that Libraries have the potential to become the focus of information provision for jobseekers, employers and users of public services. The Green Party believe third-level grants are distributed efficiently so that those most in need are enabled to participate in third-level education.

## Fine Gael...

### On Higher Education

Fine Gael, in their position paper 'The Third Way' proposes a graduate PRSI contribution scheme. The scheme would see new entrants to college, after graduation make a contribution through the PRSI system to the value of 30% of the cost of their college education. These funds would be ring fenced for the 3rd level sector. They propose that registration fees are abolished and third level education is free at the point of delivery. In relation to

part-time learners, Fine Gael propose moving gradually to a standardised fee structure for full-time, part-time and postgraduate education.

### On the Back to Education Allowance

Olwyn Enright in a parliamentary question to the Minister for Social and Family Affairs in March 2009 argued for a change in the eligibility criteria to the Back to Education Allowance. She pointed to the anomaly that exists where a person in receipt of statutory redundancy is immediately eligible for the Back to Education Allowance while a person who becomes unemployed but does not receive statutory redundancy must wait for three months for the second level option and nine months for the third level option. Furthermore, Fine Gael believe that low income earners are deterred from going to third level as the Back

to Education Allowance is restricted to people recently in receipt of social welfare benefits. They propose broadening the scope of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) to include low income earners.

### On Activation Initiatives

Fine Gael supports employer led training networks. Fine Gael promise to reverse the cutback in funding for Skillnets companies. Skillnets provides relatively low-cost upskilling for employees which enhances their own employability and the capacity and competitiveness of the company for which they work. Reversing the cut back will cost €10 million. Fine Gael want to finance this by reducing marginally the €146 million FÁS budget for Corporate Affairs, administration and general expenses.



*Brian Hayes, Fine Gael TD and Spokesperson on Education.*

## On Access, Support and Information

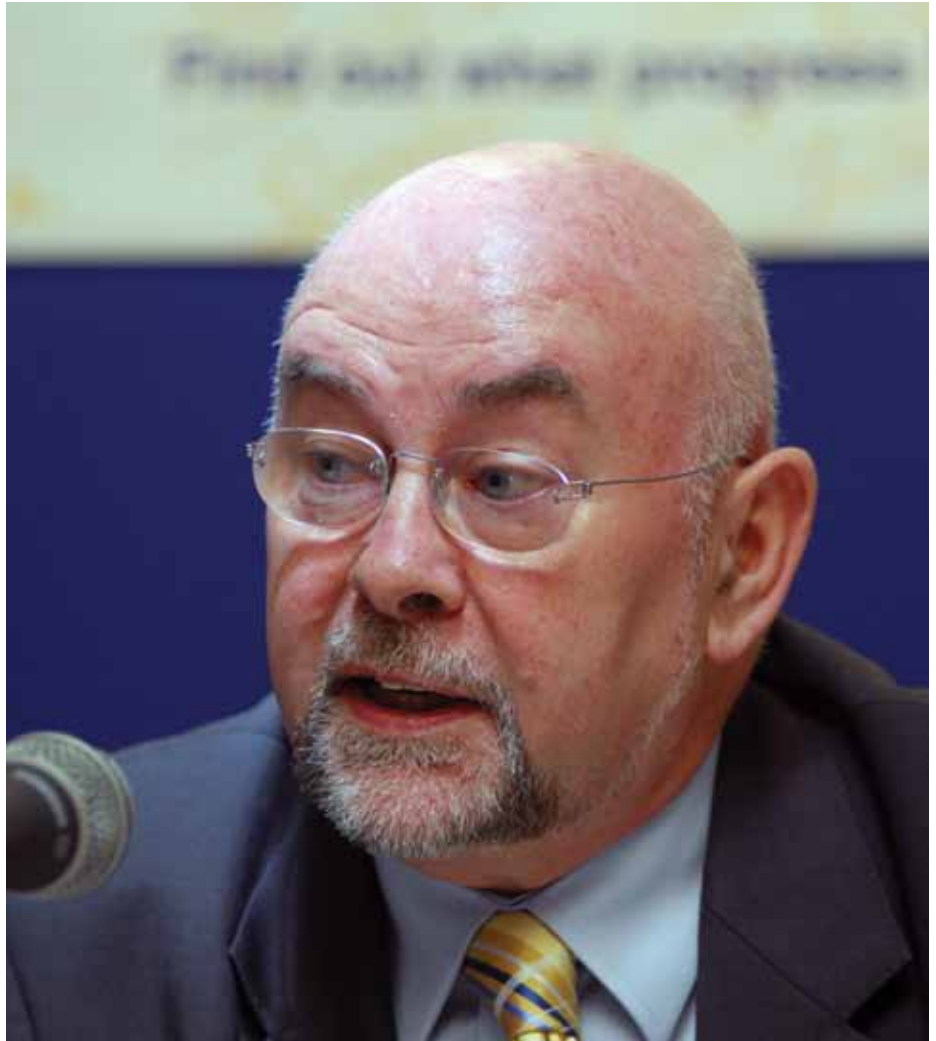
Fine Gael believes that the current maintenance grant system is inadequate both in terms of the level of support it provides to students and in the way in which it is administered. They suggest a review of the system should be undertaken within six months to estimate what level of increase in the maintenance grant may be necessary, coupled with proposals for a more equitable, transparent and less bureaucratic system, administered by a single body. In addition to this they believe the introduction of an effective mentoring system would ensure completion rates for disadvantaged students are enhanced.

## The Labour Party...

### On Higher Education

The Labour Party are fundamentally opposed to the reintroduction of third level fees. Labour Education Spokesperson Ruairi Quinn said in a recent statement, "People who enjoy a third level education end up earning higher incomes, and so pay more taxes. The greater the barrier to entry to third level, the fewer people will be able to afford it and the fewer people there will be in years to come qualified to fill those well paid jobs, higher up on the value chain, that we are supposed to be aiming at. I have no doubt that there is a funding crisis at third level, but slapping fees on families is not the way to address it. The resources for our education system from junior infants to graduate school, should be sourced from the Exchequer and should be funded by general taxation."

Labour proposes enabling unemployed people who want to go back to education, and who are funding their own studies, to claim back up to two years of their income tax. Furthermore, Labour proposes facilitating the provision of outreach cen-



*Ruairi Quinn, Labour Party TD and Spokesperson on Education.*

tres that link up to third level institutions, and facilitate distance or online learning, where available and using spare capacity in our universities and Institutes of Technology for re-training opportunities.

### On the Back to Education Allowance

The Labour Party believes that the qualifying period for the Back to Education Allowance should be reduced to three months. A reduction in the waiting period for the Back to Education Allowance would save the Exchequer the expense of a further 9 months' social welfare payments, in the case of a person wishing to take the opportunity to return to education. It would also act as an incentive to encourage people to improve their

skills, thus reducing the incidence of long-term unemployment.

### On Activation Initiatives

The Labour Party propose a new work and training initiative called 'Earn and Learn', which would enable people to work two or three days a week, and be paid to train for the remaining days. They also propose a Graduate and Apprentice Job Placement Scheme, where new graduates and trainees can receive the equivalent of a Jobseeker's payment while undertaking an internship.

Labour believes the Government's plan to allocate all 51,000 extra training places to FÁS is lazy thinking, and reflects bureaucratic inflexibility when it comes to budgeting for training.

They believe that the VECs, further education colleges and Institutes of Technology should have their existing resources expanded to carry out further training. Labour believes, this expansion in Further Education and Institute of Technology places should be accompanied by an expansion in the number of places on the Back to Education Initiative by 6,000, and an expansion in the number of VTOS places by 20 per cent. In addition to this, Labour believes the hundreds of thousands of people currently on the live register are a vast reservoir of professional experience and skills. A 'Skills Exchange' within VEC colleges, Institutes of Technology or FÁS training centres, would enable those availing of training in one field to use their

previous professional experience to help train other people.

### On Access, Supports and Information

Labour, in their Local Election Manifesto, promised to explore how libraries can be used as local resource centres for people who are unemployed, and looking for information on local jobs, training and CV or job-seeking advice.

### Sinn Féin...

#### On Higher Education

Sinn Féin are against the reintroduction of third level fees. They believe that part-time fees should be eliminated, the number of third level places reserved for mature students increased,

social welfare recipients permitted to retain their benefits while in full-time study and the eligibility criteria for the Back to Work Allowance expanded – all of which will help enable low income and unemployed persons and single parents to return to education.

#### On the Back to Education Allowance

Sinn Féin Education Spokesperson Senator Pearse Doherty has recently called on the Government to reduce the eligibility period for people from low and middle availing of the Back to Education Allowance.

#### On Activation Initiatives

Sinn Féin promises to use positions on VECs to advocate for a coordinated approach between the VECs, FÁS and the third level institutions, to ensure sufficient provision of local training for sectors that will provide jobs in the coming decades. In addition to this, Sinn Féin vows to use positions on VECs boards to ensure an adequate network of local community training centres, literacy services and back to education programmes that correspond fully to the diversity of local need – including increased need as a result of recession-driven unemployment are available.

#### On Access, Supports and Information

Sinn Féin support the reform of the grant system in a way that truly opens access to third level to students from low income backgrounds. Furthermore, they support realistic funding for basic essential student college expenses such as accommodation, childcare, travel and text books.

*Over the summer months AONTAS has arranged to meet with Education Spokespeople from Government and Opposition, with a view to communicating the issues experienced by practitioners and learners. For more information and brief reports from these meetings visit our website.*



Senator Pearse Doherty, Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Education.

# Learning to Lobby

*Earlier this year AONTAS together with the Community Education Network successfully secured funding from the Wheel Training Links Programme. In this feature, Niamh Farren gives some background to the training.*



*Sinead Kelly and Kelly Ann Byrne from an Cosán share their experience of campaigning and lobbying.*

The Training Links Project is an initiative of the Wheel, which brings together a group of community and voluntary organisations to unite in training networks, identify shared training needs, and apply for a grant to access those needs.

AONTAS had been successful before in accessing funding for the scheme, for an intensive media training project involving a number of members of the CEN. This year's initiative aimed to build on that learning – and concentrate on a specific deadline of the local and European elections campaign.

The training took place over a two month period with two three day programmes delivered in Donegal and Dublin. The sessions were delivered by DHR Communications, who have a long history of working with AONTAS and its membership to build capacity on lobbying and campaigning skills.

The training encouraged learning in a number of different ways reflecting the true ethos and values of community education; participants learned from each others experience of campaigning locally, and also got the opportunity to raise questions with some of the candidates. The training included lots of time for reflection, planning, and even incorporated a visit to Dublin City Council to see local democracy in action!

In parallel to the training, the Community Education Network developed a Manifesto, for use in the lead up to the

campaign. The network then identified three specific concerns to raise with councillors on the doorstep. These include:

- Support the proposal to earmark one specific space on the VEC Committee for a community education representative.
- Expand the remit of the Social Inclusion Officer in the local authority to promote community education as a tool in tackling the cause and effect of social exclusion in communities.
- Recognise and promote community education as a means of fulfilling the aims of the local authority development plan.

Groups taking part in the training included An Cosán, Crosscare, Women of the Northwest, D8 Community Education Centre and the Inner City Renewal Group.

## They said...

**“The Training Links programme emphasised the partnership role we need to develop and play with local councillors. This has never been so necessary as we help to sustain local communities’ capacity to cope with change. Also, the sessions re-affirmed and strengthened the pivotal role community education has in nourishing people and communities to cope with transformation.”** (Stuart Duffin, Manager, Inner City Renewal Group.)

**“My experience was one of a very professional delivery of the programme and gaining thought provoking new and creative ways of involving my organisation in lobbying techniques as well as ways of developing ongoing relationships with decision makers.”** (Sharon Kennedy, Co-ordinator of South West Wexford Community Development Project.)

**“I particularly found it an eye opener to see how decision making takes place at the local council level and an awareness of the need to advocate locally which I am busy doing.”** (Brede, Loreto Centre, Crumlin.)

# From the Doorstep to the Council Chambers

*A community education project in Longford ran a unique campaign in the lead up to the local elections, which focused on the lack of representation of women in local government. Niamh Farren spoke to Siobhán Madden, Women's Group Action Facilitator, about the campaign.*

In the lead up to the local elections, the make up of Longford County Council was not dissimilar to many other rural local authorities. Although the council was committed in principle to increasing the number of women represented, only two out of 21 county councillors were women. This pattern was replicated throughout all of the major decision making bodies throughout the county. As Siobhán Madden explains, "It wasn't the fault of any individual man or woman. It is a problem which exists throughout the country. Some of the barriers to women's participation, such as the timing of meetings, lack of childcare and eldercare services, and so on, are organisational. However, there is also a lack of commitment to increasing the representation of women."



*Women's voices being heard during local elections hustings*

## Creating a Manifesto

Longford Women's Link saw the Local and European elections as a real opportunity to initiate dialogue with the local authority about how this could be changed. And so, the Longford Women's Link Manifesto Project was born. Rather than attempt a quick fix solution, the campaign aimed to open up a dialogue between local women and their elected representatives. Over 150 women were involved in identifying the content of the Manifesto. Siobhán explains 'The key demand of the Women's Manifesto was for local election candidates to commit to a recognised, structured process in Longford County Council where women can meet with their local representatives. Suggestions for how this might happen included the possibility of bi-monthly or quarterly meetings linked to the Councils' own meetings. Critical obstacles to women's participation, including childcare and transportation, were also identified within the Manifesto document. 'There was a lot of frustration expressed about money spent without a clear sense of social priorities', she continued. 'There was also a sense of powerlessness about the current system where many decisions seem to happen out of the blue. A strong message from the meeting was the need for long-term sustainable development that builds an inclusive community, and integrates women's perspectives into decision-making.'

## Building a New Structure

Siobhán says, 'Women were greatly encouraged by the candidates' openness, and by their acknowledgement of the need to integrate women's different perspectives. They were also encouraged by the support the candidates gave to the idea of building a working relationship with Co. Longford women after the elections.' Candidates were invited to sign a petition to demonstrate their support for establishing a new structure for women to engage with local decision making.

To secure formal recognition as a distinct sector, local women are now organising to set up a women's forum which would be open to all women in County Longford. At the same time, plans are underway to influence the Corporate Plan of the new council and the Strategic Policy Committees. A funding application has been submitted to Longford County Council to organise an autumn seminar and bringing together key stakeholders. But one thing is clear: there is no going back to how things were. Siobhán says, "The changes women have identified at the level of the personal, community and in how they see politicians are very fundamental. Their message is very clear: they are here to stay as an organised, collective voice at local level".

*To read the Manifesto in full go to [www.longfordwomenslink.org](http://www.longfordwomenslink.org), or contact Catherine Lynch, Head of Services at [catherinelynch@longfordwomenslink.org](mailto:catherinelynch@longfordwomenslink.org) or on 043-3341511.*

# Online Campaigning

*Think that twittering is something for the birds?*

*If your group hasn't already done so, then here are some good reasons why you should get to grips with social networking.*

As resources become scarcer, many groups are now looking to the Internet as an important campaigning tool. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo which have traditionally been associated with collecting friends and connecting people are now playing an important role in helping groups get their message out and mobilise the grass roots. The most well known successes of social networking are associated with Barack Obama's campaign – and politicians and NGOs are fast adapting the techniques of the Obama campaign to spread their message and mobilise their constituencies.

Social networking isn't necessarily about wasting time, it's a valuable communications tool that you can use in your media and campaigning work!

## Five good reasons why you should try using social networking

- 1 **Everyone else is:** Social networking is a growing phenomenon – it's currently estimated that over 200 million users worldwide use Facebook alone.
- 2 **Promote yourself and your work:** Social networking sites are now a really good way for you to promote your events, activities and issues. The networking nature of social media allows for a 'viral' effect, where your messages may potentially get passed on to thousands of people.
- 3 **You are in control:** Sites such as Facebook and Twitter give you an instant way of getting your message out to thousands of people – unmediated by a journalist.
- 4 **Social networking is interactive:** It's not just about you getting your message out there, but about your members, partner organisations, colleagues and interested parties engaging with your issue, and with your organisation. It's a cheap and effective way of getting feedback on your services, consulting new members and building relationships with others.
- 5 **You can build up a target audience:** candidates running for election as well as those already in power are using social networking tools. Follow them on Twitter or other sites, they'll want to keep an eye on what you're doing.

## Successful campaigns

In 2007, the National Union of Students in Britain launched a campaign to overturn bank overdraft charges on their accounts at HSBC bank. The campaign which ran on Facebook, was called Stop the Great HSBC Graduate Rip-Off!!!, and attracted over 4,000 supporters. The campaign was a success with HSBC bank agreeing to reverse their decision

Most recently, Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party was elected as MEP following a successful campaign which used social networking to its full potential. Joe's campaign used a combination of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and webcasting to build a strong group of supporters and initiate discussion on his policies. Joe ran his European campaign for less than €20,000.

## What sites should you use

NGOs currently use a variety of sites – the most popular being Twitter – which allow you to issue short updates to your group of followers, and follow what others are doing. Sites such as Facebook allow you to create a profile, group or cause. Meanwhile, Ammodo is a social networking site especially dedicated to the not for profit sector.



*Joe Higgins, MEP for Dublin, whose campaign featured extensive use of social networking.*

# Online Forums

*AONTAS uses online discussion forums to connect members. In this article, Niamh O'Reilly explains how you can use them to get connected.*

## Why use online discussion forums?

AONTAS strives to provide networking opportunities with, and between, members. Networking facilitates collaborative work, sharing of experience and ideas and promotes a sense of belonging. With the ever increasing demands placed on adult and community education practitioners and the pressures of juggling life as an adult learner, AONTAS has created online discussion forums to allow discussions and updates at a time that suits everyone. These forums will complement the existing AONTAS meetings allowing discussions to continue and collaborative relationships to be forged.

## What are online forums?

An online discussion forum is simply the modern equivalent of a bulletin board and allows members of the forum to share ideas, start discussions and build relationships. In the case of the AONTAS discussion forums, it allows us to stay up to date on the issues that face the adult and community education sector. By creating a method that allows immediate updates we can respond quickly to your issues. It also allows groups to have discussions on specific area of policy, thus building the capacity of groups to voice their issues and collectively seek resolutions to their needs.

## How to join?

To join one of the three AONTAS online forums all you need is an email address. Just go to the web address of one of the groups and click 'join this group', alternatively we will send you an invitation to join if you contact Niamh O'Reilly at [noreilly@aontas.com](mailto:noreilly@aontas.com)

or 01 4068220. We also have support guidelines on how to use it, if required.

## Which forum will suit you?

We have set up three online discussion forums and can create more depending on demand.

### AONTAS Community Education Network Forum

This is geared towards practitioners and learners engaged in community education. It is part of the work of the Community Education Network and its main aim is to provide updates on future meetings, reports, debates on specific areas and the sharing of ideas and policy issues in the sector. So far 36 members have joined the forum and one specific action which was facilitated by this online discussion space was the finalising of the community education network manifesto. The draft manifesto was posted onto the site and members were invited to comment and propose amendments. This allowed further membership engagement in the consultation process for the manifesto and also greater ownership of the final document. To join this forum please go to: [groups.google.ie/group/aontas-community-education-network](https://groups.google.ie/group/aontas-community-education-network).

### AONTAS Learner Network Forum

If you are an adult learner and are interested in discussing your issues with other learners, and with AONTAS, then this is the forum for you. This newly created forum will be a space for all adult learners to come together and share your issues with the education system, what you think should be done and how AONTAS can support

you with this. To join this forum please go to: [groups.google.ie/group/aontas-learner-networks](https://groups.google.ie/group/aontas-learner-networks).

AONTAS is also linked into other online learner forums such as the new qualifax forum ([www.qualifax.ie](http://www.qualifax.ie)) and we will be monitoring that for policy issues that will influence our work.

### Adult Education Practitioners' Forum

This newly created forum caters for adult education tutors, practitioners and guidance counsellors. The aim of this forum is to facilitate discussion in order to contribute and shape our adult education policy work. We would welcome members from the sector to join this discussion group, it is an ideal method for you to ensure that AONTAS is aware of the needs of the sector, to contribute ideas on how AONTAS can address these needs and how collectively we can improve the adult education sector. This online space can also take the form of a learning forum in that members are encouraged to share best practice methods and experience.

To join this forum please go to: [groups.google.ie/group/aontas-adult-education-practitioners-forum](https://groups.google.ie/group/aontas-adult-education-practitioners-forum).

As you know, working and learning in groups is effective and enjoyable so use the AONTAS online discussion forums to network, debate and influence!

## Join us!

*If your organisation is already using social media, join AONTAS.*

*Follow AONTAS on Twitter at [twitter.com/aontas](https://twitter.com/aontas).*

*Or visit us on Ammodo at [www.ammodo.com/nonprofit/aontas](http://www.ammodo.com/nonprofit/aontas).*

# The European View

*The local and European elections may be over, but campaigning on adult learning issues continues to be a priority for AONTAS. Over the coming months, AONTAS will engage with government at local, national and European level to ensure that those who are elected keep their commitments to adult learners.*

*In this feature, Niamh Farren looks at why you should engage with those elected at European level, briefly profiles those elected, and Berni Brady talks to Proinsias de Rossa, Labour Party MEP about progress on the National Action Plan on Lifelong Learning.*

## The European Elections 2009

The European Elections on June 5th introduced a number of new MEPs throughout Ireland, with the overall number of MEPs reduced from 13 to 12. So why engage with MEPs, what powers do they have?

Recent news from the EAEA highlighted the benefits of a cross European approach to the current economic situation. While the responsibility for education and training lies with national governments, some challenges are common to all EU countries. These include: the need for a workforce that will have the right skills for tomorrow's jobs, the threats of ageing societies

and more intense global competition. Some goals, e.g. helping students and learners to move between countries, cannot be achieved by individual countries acting alone. Other goals will be easier to achieve if countries learn from each other and develop common tools, which can then be adapted to meet the specific needs of each country. EU Member States and the European Commission will strengthen their co-operation in order to support future reforms in the Member States.

### So what power do MEPS actually have?

The EAPN (European Anti Poverty Network) in their recent European

Review outlines how the European Parliament represents one part of the institutional triangle which produces policies and laws that apply throughout the European Union. While the Commission proposes new legislation, it is the European Parliament and the Commission that holds the power to pass laws.

The European Parliament has three main functions. These are

- **Legislative Function:**  
The Parliament passes EU laws in conjunction with the Council.
- **Budgetary Function:**  
The Parliament shares budgetary powers with the Council in voting



Gay Mitchell, Fine Gael.



Joe Higgins, Socialist Party.



Proinsias de Rossa, Labour Party.

on the annual budget and overseeing its implementation.

- **Supervisory Function:**

The Parliament can approve or reject the appointment of the Commission and puts written and oral questions to the Commission.

## Who's your MEP?

The following constitutes a quick look at the MEPs recently elected. AONTAS also contacted all of the MEPs elected for a short statement on life-long learning, and those statements are included where they were received.

## Dublin Constituency

This constituency was reduced from four seats to three. MEPs elected include:

### Gay Mitchell (Fine Gael)

Gay was first elected as an MEP in the European elections of 2004. During the past term, he served as Chair of the Development Committee amongst other roles. Previous to his time as MEP, Gay served in the Dáil in a number of different positions.

[www.gaymitchell.ie](http://www.gaymitchell.ie)



Gay Mitchell, Fine Gael.

### Proinsias De Rossa (Labour Party)

Proinsias has served as Labour MEP for Dublin since 1999. He represented Dublin North-West in the Dáil for 20 years. Proinsias was elected leader of The Workers Party in 1988, and left in 1992 to found Democratic Left.

[www.derossa.com](http://www.derossa.com)

### Joe Higgins (Socialist Party)

Joe Higgins is the leader of the Socialist Party and a long time activist in the labour and trade union movement. He lost his Dáil seat in the General Elections of 2007.

[www.joehiggins.eu](http://www.joehiggins.eu)

Gay Mitchell says that "The Lisbon Agenda specifies that the European Union is to become the most competitive knowledge based economy in the World by 2010. To achieve this aim we must encourage more people to improve upon the knowledge they already have. By improving the participation in learning policies for adults, in particular, we can ensure that personal development continues so that those already in the workforce remain employable in the long-term."



Proinsias De Rossa, Labour Party.

## East Constituency

Three MEPs were elected in this constituency. They are:

### Mairead McGuinness (Fine Gael)

Mairead was elected as an MEP in 2004. She is a former RTÉ broadcaster. She is active on agriculture and rural development, global development policy, the environment and food safety and security.

[www.maireadmguinness.ie](http://www.maireadmguinness.ie)

### Liam Aylward (Fianna Fáil)

Liam was formerly Minister for State at the Department of Education with Responsibility for Youth and Sport. Liam is a member of the Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development and a coordinator for the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety.

[www.liamaylward.com](http://www.liamaylward.com)

On lifelong learning, Liam says: "Building and maintaining a strong and flexible framework for lifelong learning is essential for both economic and social growth in Ireland and in Europe. The EU's 'Grundtvig' programme aims to increase the number of people in adult education to 25000 by 2013 and offers support not only to learners but also to teachers, trainers and support bodies; the European Qualifications' Framework makes it easier to transfer and competencies across EU borders and the new EU Lifelong Learning Programme, which will run from 2007 to 2013, has a budget of €7 billion and will draw together existing strands of education, vocational training and e-learning. I am looking forward to building on relationships with lifelong learning organisations in Ireland to ensure that Irish people of all ages can benefit from all that the EU can offer for life-long education and training."

## Nessa Childers (Labour)

This is Nessa's first time to serve as an elected MEP, she is a former Councillor on Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council.

[www.nessachilders.ie](http://www.nessachilders.ie)

On lifelong learning, Nessa Childers says "Education is the best insurance for both individuals and Irish economy. If Ireland is to lift itself out of recession it is essential that we invest in our greatest asset: the Irish people. This means giving people the opportunity to re-train and re-skill in a way that suits their needs.

Only through investment in such lifelong learning can we expect to return to prosperity. As an MEP I will fight for funding for a European Skills Programme through the current EU budget. This programme will be directed at training workers for the green jobs of the future. I have also proposed the expansion of European funds for education exchanges that include older people and "second-chance" education for those who have not completed their formal education."



Marian Harkin, Independent.

## South Constituency

### Brian Crowley (Fianna Fáil)

Brian has represented the Ireland South constituency in the European Parliament since 1994. He is a former member of Seanad Éireann. Amongst other roles, Brian is leader of the F.F. Group in Europe, a member of the Constitutional Affairs Committee and a member of Delegations for Relations with the U.S.A.

[www.briancrowleymep.ie](http://www.briancrowleymep.ie)

### Sean Kelly (Fine Gael)

Sean was elected to the European Parliament for the first time this year. He is a former teacher and is well known for his role in the GAA.

[www.seankellyforeurope.com](http://www.seankellyforeurope.com)

### Alan Kelly (Labour)

As a Senator, Alan was elected to Europe for the first time this year. He has also served as Party Spokesperson on Tourism and Seanad Spokesperson on Finance & Local Government.

[www.alankelly.ie](http://www.alankelly.ie)



Jim Higgins, Fine Gael.

## North West Constituency

### Marian Harkin (Independent)

Marian was first elected to Dáil Éireann in 2002 as an Independent. In 2004, she successfully ran for European election. She is a member of the ALDE Group (Alliance of Liberals & Democrats in Europe) and she joined the European Democrats – a new party formed by former Italian Prime Minister and President of the European Commissioner Romano Prodi.

[www.marianharkin.ie](http://www.marianharkin.ie)

### Pat 'the Cope' Gallagher (Fianna Fáil)

Pat is a former TD and Chairman of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs. This is his first term as an MEP.

[www.patthecope.com](http://www.patthecope.com)

### Jim Higgins (Fine Gael)

Jim was elected to serve as Member of the European Parliament for the North-West Ireland Constituency in June 2004. He is also a Member of the Seanad Éireann – having been elected on the Labour Panel in July 2002.

[www.jimhiggins.ie](http://www.jimhiggins.ie)

Jim says: 'A change is needed in order to see education as something which is linked with ongoing development and improvement rather than linking it with early development which ends when you get a job. Lifelong learning is key in order to ensure that we adapt to advances in thought, technology and societal advances. Ireland needs to increase the numbers of people involved in lifelong learning initiatives and there needs to be greater emphasis on the benefits of lifelong learning from an early age. Over the next 5 years I will seek to improve and promote Irish and EU initiatives aimed at better lifelong learning policies.

For more information about influencing policy at European level, contact the European Anti Poverty Network, [www.eapn.ie](http://www.eapn.ie)

# MEP Profile: The Labour Party and Lifelong Learning in Europe

*The recent local and European elections in Ireland saw some major upsets for the government parties reflecting the dissatisfaction of the Irish electorate with the way the economy has been handled. The burden will have to be shouldered by the Irish taxpayer, who will take severe cuts to personal income and services. In the elections for the European Parliament the Labour Party had particular success with the return of three MEPs, one sitting and two new. Berni Brady talked to Proinsias De Rossa, re-elected MEP for Dublin about the priorities and challenges ahead for the new European Parliament and the role of lifelong learning.*

Speaking about the general outcome of the European elections, while De Rossa welcomed the successes for the political left in Ireland he points to the slight decline in the centre left vote across Europe generally and the increase of the centre right, and in particular the far right and Eurosceptics. With 100 MEPs as a block they will be significant force within the Parliament. This will present both challenges and opportunities for the newly elected members but De Rossa is of the view that a combination of the broad centre right and left should be able to marginalise the agenda of the far right. The first opportunity in his view will be the election of the new President of the Commission. De Rossa thinks that the current President Barossa as he goes forward again will not want to rely on Eurosceptics for his support and will therefore try and respond to the socialist agenda. This opens up possibilities for promoting a strong social dimension to the future work of the Parliament.

## A new Social Progress pact

Labour in Europe will seek agreement on a European social progress pact, with goals and standards for national social, health and education policy to contribute to the fight



*Proinsias De Rossa, Labour Party MEP.*

against poverty as well as Europe's continued social and economic development. The pact proposes an alliance across governance levels – between the European Union, Member State and sub-national authorities, with the Social Partners and civil society, to tackle the full employment and social dimension of the recession. De Rossa contends that only a strong partnership approach will be successful in paving the way for recovery across Europe. He is of the view that a new policy mix is needed to overcome the employment and social crisis, including short,

medium and long-term measures. The current budgetary stimulus should be targeted as far as possible towards job creation and safeguarding viable jobs as a matter of urgency. However, further stimulus measures will be crucial to meet the scale of the crisis.

De Rossa is a strong supporter of lifelong learning and contends that support for lifelong learning, adult and community education should be extended to ensure that people not only have the opportunity to develop new skills to meet the needs of the future, but that people remain moti-

vated to work and learn. In particular he emphasises the need for support for community education in recognition of its ability to attract the most vulnerable people back to learning and also as a route into social and political education.

In January 2008 he voted in favour of the European Parliament's own initiative report by Doris Pack (EEP-ED, DE) on the Commission's Communication, *Adult Education – It's never too late to learn*. 'Education and training are critical factors for achieving the Lisbon strategy,' says De Rossa, and he believes that more needs to be done in order to motivate people to participate. For this to happen lifelong learning needs to be compatible with family life. This calls for social, economic and tax incentives to promote access for adults to education and training.



*Nessa Childers, Labour Party MEP.*

## Towards Lisbon

He does however point out the importance of the review of the Lisbon agenda, which was put together in 2000 in a very different context where the main emphasis was on delivering skills for growing economies. He is of the view that the social agenda has largely been neglected over the past five years in particular and argues that

for a strong social agenda to succeed, support needs to come from national governments across the board. There is now an opportunity to promote this agenda in the new Parliament. In doing so Labour will work for a social progress clause in every relevant piece of EU legislation and social impact assessments when developing EU laws. They propose a European strategy on children's rights to help eradicate child poverty and to guarantee access to education including pre-school childcare. Labour sees the social economy which currently employs over five million people in Europe as a vital source of inclusive job creation, particularly for people on the margins of society.

With regard to the Lisbon Treaty, Ireland will hold a second referendum in October 2009. Many of our European neighbours were baffled about the reasons for the 'No' vote last time around. Apart from the mixed messages promoted by a number of interests fueling fears about issues like neutrality and abortion, De Rossa feels that people were essentially confused about what they should do. He also thinks that many Irish people were convinced about the unstoppable Celtic Tiger, and that while Europe had been good to them they didn't need it any more. This came up all the time during the campaign on the streets he says.

He contends that this time there will be some important differences, the main one being the change in the economic situation. "The other difference is that there will be a much stronger civil society campaign currently being led by the Trades Unions. Already a charter group has been set up to promote the Charter of Fundamental Rights which includes the right to education and access to vocational and continuing training. Coupled with this is the work being done by the 'Ireland for Europe' group which is essentially being driven by business and the political parties themselves."

De Rossa points out that we must take account of the many different strands of the electorate and the many different audiences among the Irish voters ranging across business, civil society, education, social and cultural interests to name but a few. He advises NGOs such as ourselves to focus on the parts of the Treaty which have the possibility to advance and promote lifelong learning such as:

**The new horizontal social clause** which states that in defining and implementing its policies and activities, the EU shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, a high level of education and training and health, the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the promotion of equality between women and men.

**The Lisbon Treaty** clarifies that education and training are 'complementary' competences in which the EU can intervene only to support action by Member States (primarily through financial contributions); It may legislate but not harmonise national legislation.

**The Charter of Fundamental Rights** in particular Article 14 which deals with the Right to Education.

The challenges presented by the crisis now confronting us require fundamental changes. In De Rossa's view it presents us with an opportunity to persuade public opinion that socially progressive alternative economics is possible, sustaining our society rather than undermining it. Regulation of the financial sector is key and the choice is clearer than ever – progressive change for Ireland and Europe or 'more of the same' from conservative parties.

*Berni Brady June 2009*

## Ask Jenny...

**Jenny Gunning from the AONTAS Information Referral Service answers your adult education queries.**

Dear Jenny

I became unemployed 8 months ago. I have been thinking for some time now to return to education however I haven't had the time to return as I'm a lone father raising two young children. I now feel this is the right time for me to return but I can really only manage part-time study. I know that many Higher Education Institutions now offer flexible learning and part-time learning options so I'm not too concerned about finding a course, the area of main concern is the financial cost of undertaking a three/four year degree programme.

Are you aware of any funding available to part-time learners or distance learners in the same situation as myself?

Hoping its good news,

Bill

Hi Bill

Over the past few weeks I have received many letters similar to yours. The abolition of part-time fees has long been a policy priority for AONTAS. Fees for undertaking part-time third level education mean undue financial hardship for adult learners.

In general there isn't much funding available other than claiming a tax rebate on your fees if the course is more than two years long. Go to [www.studentfinance.ie](http://www.studentfinance.ie) and [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie) which are both very helpful. The second website will tell you if the course/college is approved for tax rebate. The AONTAS Information Booklet will tell you more about charity grants and scholarships. We have also produced a supplement specifically aimed at individuals who have recently been made unemployed and are looking for advice on their options.

The government recently announced that 1,500 new free part-time places will come on stream in September in Higher Education Institutions. These free programmes will involve a range of undergraduate certificate and degree-level programmes. The initiative is specifically aimed at upskilling and reskilling people for jobs in the sectors of the economy considered key to driving economic growth. To be eligible for one of these places applicants must be unemployed for at least six months on September 1st, 2009, so you will be eligible to apply.

Best of luck,

Jenny.

Hi Jenny

I am a 41 year old mother of 3 living in South West Dublin. Currently I am working part-time in the banking sector. However I never really had the opportunity until now to sit the Leaving Certificate. In the current climate I feel that I need to start up-skilling and have a qualification under my belt in case my employment situation changes. My ultimate goal in life would be to even go on to University and get a teaching qualification.

Can you please go through some of the full-time and part-time options available to me?

Thanking you in advance,

Bernadette

Hi Bernadette

Your decision to return to education is certainly a wise one in these uncertain times. There are many options available to you when choosing a course but the most important advice I can give you is to make an informed decision and choose a mode of delivery that suits your timetable. It is very important to balance your work and study. There are many places that offer the Leaving Cert part-time through both day and evening courses. VEC Colleges of Further Education tend to be the main providers of Leaving Certificate programmes. To find out more information about these programmes you can download a copy of the AONTAS Information Booklet from our website.

You could also go straight to University as you are now a mature student and anybody 23 by 1st Jan of year of entry to college can apply through the CAO without necessarily sitting the Leaving Certificate; instead you are assessed on your merits and your life experience and interest in a subject. Perhaps you could do some night classes over the next year or so such as Leaving Cert English or an Access course which would help prepare you for college life and the study skills required.

You should research your application requirements on the CAO website when you are ready to apply.

Best of luck,

Jenny.

## Need Answers?

Contact AONTAS on 01 406 8220, or visit our website [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com). AONTAS recently produced an Information Booklet for adults returning to education – give us a call and we'll send you a copy free of charge.

# Building an Alliance for Equality

*In this feature, two Campaign Co-ordinators profile their own campaigns. In the first article, Rachel Mullen writes about the background to the Equality Rights Alliance established in the wake of the cutbacks to the Equality Authority and the Human Rights Commission.*



*Orlagh O'Farrell (Irish legal expert to the EU Legal Experts Group), Proinsias De Rossa MEP, Niall Crowley (equality and diversity expert) and Michael Farrell (FLAC).*

## Background

The Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) is a coalition of over 130 civil society groups and activists (NGOs, Trades Unions, academics and individual activists). We are the voice of women, older people, minority ethnic people, people with disabilities, workers, migrants, travellers, gay, lesbian and transgender people, lone parents, carers and many more who believe that the Irish Government's attack on equality, human rights and social justice is wrong.

***"We are the voice of people who believe that the Irish Government's attack on equality, human rights and social justice is wrong".***

ERA was established initially to oppose savage budgetary cuts imposed on the Equality Authority and the Irish Human Rights Commission in the October 2008 budget. This budget also saw a further erosion of the equality and rights infrastructure, with the abolition of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism and the absorption of the Combat Poverty Agency into the Department of Social and Family Affairs which will amount to an effective silencing of this agency in terms of being a critical voice on poverty. In a matter of months, using the guise of cost saving, the Irish Government has effectively dismantled an equality and rights statutory infrastructure which had taken years to build. Ironically this move on the part of Government initiated one of the strongest movements to emerge in Ireland in recent years, and since September 2008 ERA has grown from 40 members to over 130.

## ERA Mission

To defend and strengthen equality and human rights in Ireland, by building a strong alliance of civil society groups that will hold the government and state bodies accountable for the Irish equality and human rights infrastructure.

## Key Strategic Goals

To strengthen political commitment to an effective and resilient equality and human rights infrastructure in Ireland,

To provide strategic leadership in protecting, strengthening and critiquing the equality and human rights infrastructure (inclusive of those addressing poverty, racism and social exclusion).

## Key Campaign Actions to Date

**Lobbying through:** Parliamentary questions; meetings with key politicians and opinion formers; appearing before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights; keeping the issue alive in the media; meetings with the state bodies in question; planning with alliance members to develop short and longer term actions.

**Strategic campaigns:** ERA ran a campaign in the run up to the European elections targeting EU candidates and members of the public to pledge their support for equality and human rights; ERA plans to deliver a series of advocacy events regionally during the Autumn. This work aims to: hear from people experiencing inequality and discrimination what their key issues are and how they would like to see the equality and human rights infrastructure strengthened; mobilise people throughout the country to voice their concerns regarding the Governments dismantling of our equality and human rights infrastructure.

**Hosting strategic events:** In May 2009 ERA hosted a roundtable to explore the impact of cuts to the Equality Authority in relation to Ireland's obligations under EU equality directives (following this roundtable ERA is about to lodge a complaint and to the EU Parliament and Commission to investigate whether Ireland is in breach of EU equality directives). In the Autumn ERA will host a conference on the theme of: 'building a more robust equality and human rights infrastructure and culture'.

*“Research is demonstrating that societies with the smallest income inequality gap have better outcomes for all citizens...”*

## Key challenges and opportunities

There is no question that currently Ireland is facing many critical economic, social and political challenges. Some key challenges which pertain to the work of ERA to address the crisis in equality and human rights are: Equality and human rights is falling to the bottom of the agenda of politicians, the media, and the general public given the immediacy of such issues as job losses, significant cuts to incomes and cuts to our public services.

Diminishing budgets for organisations in the community and voluntary sector, together with the increased silencing of NGOs by state funders, means that many of our members are forced to be inward looking as they struggle to survive and there is increased pressure on them to avoid dissent as the prospect of cuts from state funders grows more likely.

**There are opportunities however, for campaigns like ERA:** The global and national crisis and the effective failure of the free-market model of economics leaves a vacuum for rethinking how we as a society wish to progress as a more equal society. We can take example from other countries e.g in the Nordic region, where models of development have demonstrated that there does not have to be a trade off between economic growth and achieving equality.

The current context offers an opportunity to rethink the equality, rights and social inclusion infrastructure and lobby to make it more robust. One key weakness in regard to the current statutory model is that approaches to addressing poverty have developed separately to those addressing equality. This can be seen for example in our equality legislation where there is no scope to address discrimination and inequality on the grounds of socio-economic status.

Research is demonstrating that societies with the smallest income inequality gap have better outcomes for all citizens in terms of: cohesiveness; levels of violence; mental health issues; educational attainment; infant mortality; and levels of trust. Such evidence makes a compelling argument that investment in reducing inequality pays dividends for ALL members of society.

## Getting involved in ERA

If your group/organisation would like to join ERA please contact [rachel@eracampaign.org](mailto:rachel@eracampaign.org) or visit our website [www.eracampaign.org](http://www.eracampaign.org) for more information.

# Progressing the Positive Ageing Strategy

*In this second campaign profile, Patricia Conboy, Co-ordinator of 'Older and Bolder' writes about the challenge of putting older peoples issues on the agenda for the local and European elections.*

Older & Bolder is an alliance of eight non-governmental organisations in the age sector in Ireland. The members of the alliance are: Active Retirement Ireland, Age Action Ireland, Age & Opportunity, Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Carers' Association, Irish Hospice Foundation, Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and the Senior Help Line. The alliance is committed to a joint campaign for the development and implementation of a National Positive Ageing Strategy for Ireland.

During the run-up to the local and European elections in June 2009, our members ran a campaign to raise awareness about the National Positive Ageing Strategy. We called the campaign "Older & Bolder on the Doorstep" and encouraged people to use the moment on the doorstep when politicians and canvassers called to their houses to ask questions about the Strategy.

## Campaigning tools

There were a number of different elements in the campaign. We had a Canvass Card which explained what the National Positive Ageing Strategy is and which also set out questions that people could ask canvassers such as: Have you heard about the National Positive Ageing Strategy? If yes, what is your party doing to ensure that the Strategy is developed? If no, what are your party's priorities for older people? The questions focused especially on the need for a meaningful consultation process with older people in relation to the Strategy.



*Kevin Molloy, from Active Retirement Ireland at the launch of the Older and Bolder Local and European elections campaign.*

Copies of the canvass card were distributed through our member organisations and also at consultation meetings with older people which took place in Cork, Sligo, Wexford, Tullamore and Dublin. Older & Bolder staff and supporters also took part in local radio interviews. Older & Bolder saw the local radio interviews as a way of both publicising our meetings and of making contact with older people who are housebound or living in nursing homes and who couldn't participate in our face to face meetings.

## Meeting challenges

One of the main challenges of the campaign was explaining clearly what the National Positive Ageing Strategy is and how it could make a difference to older people's lives. We described the Strategy as a long-term plan for making Ireland a better place in which to grow older. As a blueprint, it will involve all levels of government from Ministers to city and county councils. It will cover policies, services and practices in areas

such as healthcare, housing, transport, income, employment and independent living. The Strategy will also influence the activities of organisations in the private and voluntary sectors.

Since the campaign ended there has been some good news that the Minister for Older People and Health Promotion, Ms. Áine Brady TD has finally announced a public consultation on the National Positive Ageing Strategy. Individuals and groups have been invited to make written submissions by September 24 2009. Older & Bolder is encouraging as many individuals and groups as possible to participate in the consultation. In particular we want older people to have their say in relation to a national strategy that will directly affect their lives when it is implemented.

*Older & Bolder will be providing materials to assist people in making submission so please keep in touch with us by visiting our website: [www.olderandbolder.ie](http://www.olderandbolder.ie).*

# Where to Next?

*The elections may be over, but campaigning work is only beginning. Now that new councillors and MEPs are in place, it's the perfect time to build relationships in the political arena. Niamh Farren looks at some of the options and practical suggestions of how you can keep up the momentum after the elections are over.*



Public meetings keep dialogue open with elected representatives. Photo courtesy of Inaki Irigoien.

According to the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, Active Citizenship does not begin and end at election time - the performance of elected representatives must be reviewed on an ongoing basis. The Partnership explains: 'Voting at elections time is not enough. If we seek a more just and inclusive society we need to continue to engage with our electoral representatives. This engagement is essential to ensure that promises are honoured and our representatives held accountable.'

The Partnerships website [www.vpsj.ie](http://www.vpsj.ie) includes a series of practical ideas that you can use to keep up your engagement with those elected. A good starting point is to write an email or letter to as a note of introduction. You should also follow the issues that you are concerned with in the media so that you are informed about the latest developments, and can ask relevant questions when you get the opportunity.

## Acting locally

A report produced by the Community Education Network following the successful Training Links programme proposes a number of ways to engage with those elected based on members own experience of lobbying and campaigning. Members of the CEN highlight the need to invite councillors and council staff to visit your project, see what is achieved and what could be achieved if your project was given more resources. The network also emphasises the importance of looking at what's already available to you – staff and volunteers within your organisation may

already have access to elected representatives. Remember, building relationships starts from making personal contact. Furthermore, it's important to make alliances with other organisations in your area and work on issues together. But don't stop there! Look at organisations across the border, in another part of the country, or in Europe. Finally, experience within the network highlights the importance of treating politicians with dignity and respect.

## Influencing decision making in Europe

Even as a community project, there are many ways that you can make your voice heard at European level. Recently, Proinsias De Rossa MEP and Mary Banotti, former MEP attended the final Training Links session and suggested a number of ways that groups can find opportunities for influencing policy at European level. These include:

- Identify the **Committees** that Irish MEPs are involved in and lobby them through your local councillor, TD and directly to the MEP.
- Identify the **Commissioners** who are responsible for areas relating to community education. Currently, Vladmir Spidla from the Czech Republic is Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (EMPL). Jan Figel from Slovakia is Commissioner with responsibility for Education, Training and Culture (EAC).
- Use the **European Committee on Petitions** – to influence European policy and ensure that Ireland meets its obligations. The petition may present an individual request, a complaint or observation concerning the application of EU law or an appeal to the European Parliament to adopt a position on a specific matter. For more information, visit the European Parliament website [www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu).
- Ensure that **Ireland's EU Commissioner** has an interest in social affairs.

Visits by Commissioners are often arranged. Information on upcoming visits are organised by the Irish European Commission. Information can be received from Joan Flanagan: [joan.flanagan@ec.europa.eu](mailto:joan.flanagan@ec.europa.eu).

# Meeting the Politicians: Keeping Elected Representatives Accountable

*Public meetings are a great way of encouraging dialogue between citizens and elected representatives. In this article, Dorothee Meyer Holkamp of NEAR 90 fm describes how community organisations on the northside of Dublin came together to use a community radio station to promote active citizenship.*

In the run up to the Local and European elections, NEAR 90 fm held a series of debates in the form of a Question and Answer session during the month of May. A panel of the candidates running for election was present to take questions from lively and well attended meetings by members of the public in the three electoral wards in the northeast of Dublin City, namely Artane, Donaghmede and Clontarf. There was also a European Election debate with the relevant candidates running for a seat in the European Parliament.

## Questions and Answers

As part of our organisation's commitment to local democracy at all levels, these four political debates offered a platform for dynamic discussions between the audiences and the candidates. Moreover, the evenings offered a space for citizens to participate in their society, thus fostering active citizenship. The management of the four election debates involved working closely with other community groups, such as the Northside Community Forum and Target (Trinity Adult Resource Group for Education & Training). The Northside Community Forum is a local platform of over fifty community and voluntary organisations in the Dublin northeast area. The four 'Election Specials' provided a neutral space for people to make up their mind regarding how to cast their vote. Roaming mikes and the possibility to write down questions which were then handed to the presenter, assured a way to include the public in each of the debates. People who could not attend the venues were given the opportunity to voice their questions and concerns via text messages and phone calls. This two-way participation of the candidates and audience alike reflected a value of active citizenship, one of the main beliefs of community radios such as NEAR 90 fm, obliging the candidates to be more accountable. Each of the debates was broadcast live, ensuring a wider listenership than just a general public meeting. The questions fielded by those in attendance were of a high quality, and this was reflected in comments made by one of the European election candidates, Gay Mitchell (FG), who said he hadn't



*A live audience engages in local Questions and Answers with the candidates. Photo courtesy of Inaki Irigoien.*

attended a livelier or more uplifting evening anywhere else on his campaign.

## Encouraging Participation

Extensive publicity of the political debates in form of flyers, posters, promos as well as inviting local and national organisations such as AONTAS via emails and phone calls guaranteed a wide target audience. In addition to providing information for the community, the ethos of NEAR 90 fm is to encourage the community in being involved in production and broadcasting. A couple of NEAR 90 fm's volunteers participated in the broadcasting of the local and European election specials. The election debate in the Donaghmede ward was chaired by Heidi Bedell, Supervisor of the FÁS Community Employment Project at TARGET Education. Ger Dorgan, a former city councillor and regular presenter of the NEAR 90 fm news review programme, hosted the debate for the Clontarf ward.

The debates relied on a strong collaboration at all levels between NEAR 90 fm and other community groups which is a strong component of its outreach work.

For more information, visit:

[www.dublinnortheast.ie](http://www.dublinnortheast.ie)

[www.near.ie](http://www.near.ie)

[www.craol.ie](http://www.craol.ie)

# Diary Of... A Councillor

*In this article, Dermot Lacey, recently re-elected as a Labour party councillor in the Pembroke ward of the Dublin south east constituency describes a typical day.*

The first thing to say is that there is no such thing as a typical day. To be honest, – I love that. One of the many things I like about being a Public Representative is that no day is the same. Today is no different, in that it is different.

## Building better Local Government

After dropping off Sam (9) and Ado (10) to school I'm heading in to the Civic Offices to meet a man with a housing query. Johnny – not his real name – has been living in a very damp flat for the last nine years and has come to me through a friend from Scouting of which I have been a life long member. Hopefully, as a Councillor with some experience of the nuances of the Housing scheme, I can help him.

I head back into the office for a catch up on emails from the weekend, follow up on some queries raised while out and about and prepare my own work for the week. In that sense I am lucky in that my day job with the Labour Party allows me some flexibility. The weekend saw meetings of the Party's Executive Board and Finance Committee both of which I serve as Secretary so I will spend quite some time this week completing the minutes and ensuring that the record of these two important bodies in our structures are kept up to date.

Off then to a Conference in Trinity College on Political Reform in Ireland. This is a subject close to my heart. I believe we can transform our country if we take the leap of faith necessary to reform our political structures. In



*Councillor Dermot Lacey.*

particular I want to see a more relevant Local Government system. Apart from its intrinsic value this would also have the affect of freeing our national politicians away from the parish pump and allow them run the country.

Head back into the office for catch up and then head off to City Hall for the Monthly meeting of the City Council. This one is more important than usual as, apart from the one to elect a new Lord Mayor and Deputy Lord Mayor, it is the first ordinary meeting of the newly elected Council. Looking at all the new enthusiastic faces I can only hope that they are as enthusiastic in years to come as I still am. I passionately believe that Local Government is the future for this country and that is why I am committed to staying involved. One of the really satisfying things about life as a Councillor is

that you really can make a difference. Not in the legislative way that T.Ds can but much more tangibly. You can help people find a home, improve our parks, secure community grants, have trees planted, improve access to culture and recreational opportunities, get a disabled parking space, I could go on. While often small, each of these can radically transform the life of a fellow human being, for the good. One of the best initiatives of the last Council, for example, was the Labour inspired "Right to Read" campaign. This saw extended Library opening hours, provision for study areas in all new housing developments and a number of new books encouraging young people in particular to read.

During the rest of a typical week there might be a VEC meeting where we will work to improve educational services – tomorrow for example I have been invited to attend an Arts Day in Wheatfield Prison as part of a VEC programme for prisoners. Each month we have a meeting of the HSE Forum where we will have an input (limited though it is) into health service provision. Alternatively there might be a local Area Committee dealing with local Council services.

I consider myself to be really fortunate I have a very understanding and supportive wife Jill, and two great children Sam and Ado (Adrian). I work at what I enjoy and I hope I have delivered real changes and made a difference. What more could I ask for?

*For more information about the role of your local council and contact details for elected councillors, visit your local council website.*



**aontas**

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