

'Maximising Resources'

'Budget 2013' - AONTAS Position Paper



November 2012

AONTAS

The National Adult Learning Organisation

Second Floor, 83 – 87 Main Street,

Ranelagh, Dublin 6

01 4068220

www.aontas.com

Follow us on:



Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
AONTAS AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FET SECTOR	2
THE INCREASING DEMAND FOR FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES.....	3
NATIONAL TRENDS	5
TRENDS FROM THE AONTAS INFORMATION REFERRAL SERVICE.....	5
FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING A BETTER SERVICE	6
1. MAXIMISE THE POTENTIAL OF THE ADULT GUIDANCE SERVICE	6
2. COURSE CONTENT SHOULD BE MEANINGFUL AND LEAD TO EMPLOYMENT OR FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING	8
3. PROVIDE A FINANCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR ADULTS WHICH ENABLES THEM TO ENTER AND PROGRESS THROUGH THE QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM.....	10
4. ESTABLISH BETTER DATA GATHERING SYSTEMS IN ORDER TO ASSESS WHAT EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS WORK BEST FOR WHICH LEARNERS	12
CONCLUSION	13
SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS.....	15

The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning.

'Maximising Resources'

'Budget 2013' - AONTAS Position Paper

Introduction

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning. The work of AONTAS is guided by its three year strategic plan, developed through consultation with its members and other key stakeholders. The current plan spans the period 2011-2013 and was published before the announcement of SOLAS in July 2011. While the descriptions and language relating to the new service is changing, the AONTAS strategic plan refers to adult and community education as understood by the definition contained within the White Paper 2000 i.e. *"systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education and training."*¹ It focuses on three key themes:-

- **VALUE:** the key role of adult and community in economic development and social inclusion
- **VOICE:** giving a voice to the adult learner as the central focus of the developing Further Education and Training Service
- **VISIBILITY:** promoting the importance of adult and community education and demonstrating through research the importance and quality of the work done by the service.

AONTAS believes that adult and community education result in a number of outcomes which are critically important at this time – these range from skills for employment, to greater levels of civic participation and volunteering, mental and physical health benefits. Adults who continue to learn lead healthier, happier lives and benefit from better opportunities to progress in employment. Adult education has a powerful role to play in counteracting the cycle of educational disadvantage.

AONTAS and new developments in the FET sector

The Further Education and Training sector is currently going through one of the most significant change processes in its history as it seeks to integrate two strands of learning which have been traditionally resourced and organised separately. AONTAS is a strong supporter of the reforms in the sector and has been working through consultation with its membership and learners to contribute positively to the implementation of these reforms. In January 2012 AONTAS made a

¹ Available from http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/fe_adulted_wp.pdf

comprehensive response to the Department's consultation process and has since provided our membership with information and opportunities to engage in dialogue about the development of SOLAS. In February 2012 as part of the National Adult Learners' Festival AONTAS brought together a group of learners studying at all levels of the National Qualifications Framework to participate in a dialogue with Minister Cannon and members of the SOLAS Implementation Group with a view to informing the development of the new further education and training service from a learner's perspective.²

AONTAS has worked with the Department on the development of guidelines for the BTEI Community Strand and the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme and is currently contributing to the Department's literacy review group and to the working group on the wider benefits of community education. We have published two research reports on the benefits and outcomes of community education with the support of the Department. AONTAS has also developed a strategy to ensure the learners' voice is heard and through analysis of the use of its Information Referral Service has kept a close eye on the current trends in the demand for further education and training.

AONTAS is acutely aware of the constraints of the current financial situation, so the focus of this paper is on the sustainability of the service, the protection of its core work and the best use of resources available to it. We make four practical proposals which we believe would enable the sector to fulfil its potential in responding to recession.

AONTAS represents the views of 550 members including providers of adult and community education in the statutory and voluntary/community sectors, adult learners, trainers, tutors and researchers.

The increasing demand for Further Education and Training Programmes

Since 2008 at the onset of the recession the demand for FET has increased with the rise in unemployment. The current government has responded to this demand through the following actions:

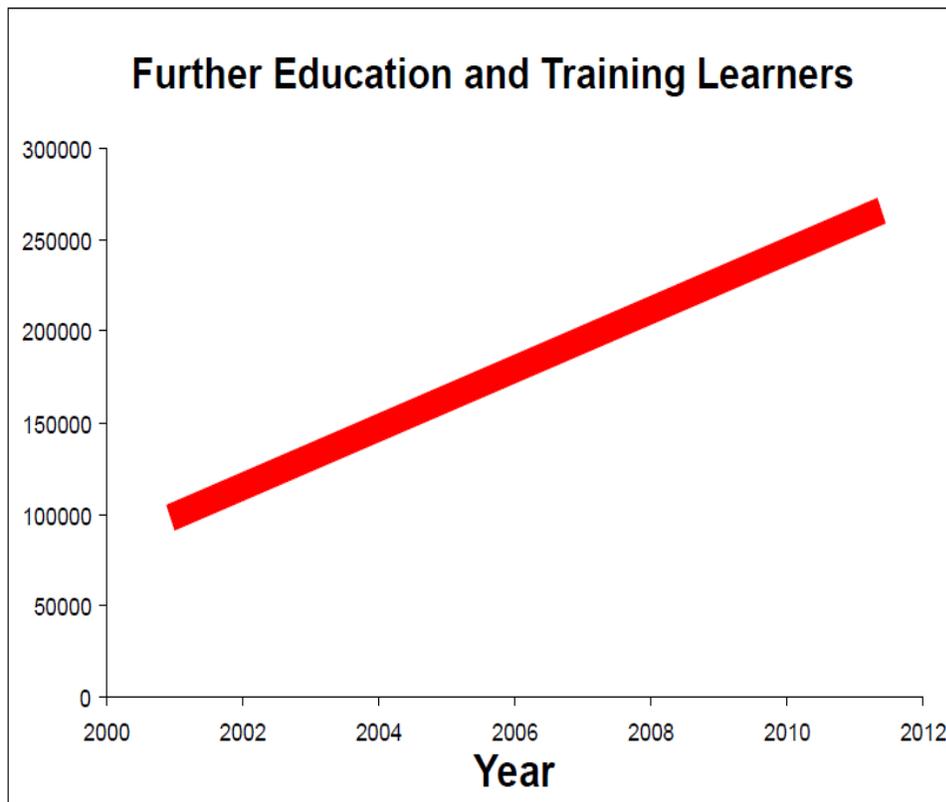
- Recognition of the value of lifelong learning, adult and community education as part of the Programme for Government
- The provision of 172,000 further education places annually which unemployed people can access
- The provision of 114,500 training places annually provided by FÁS and Skillnets along with over 12,000 places under the Labour Market Activation Fund (2010 – 2011).

² A Report from this event is available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/solas-serving-adult-learners-2012/>

- The Jobs Initiative (May 2011) – which allocated 3,000 additional BTEI places, and 1,000 PLC places, and which formally launched the Springboard initiative (delivering almost 12,000 places in total during 2011 and 2012)
- A comprehensive structural reform of the sector, to include the development of a new Further Education and Training Authority, a new Qualifications Authority and the rationalisation of 33 VECs into 16 ETBs.

In April 2012 following information from a series of parliamentary questions AONTAS estimated that approximately 300,000 adults in Ireland are currently engaged in some form of adult learning.³ The increase in participation in FET over the past ten years is illustrated by a graph on Page 3.

Table 1: Participation levels in FET (2001-2012)⁴



³ <http://www.aontas.com/blog/2012/08/28/how-many-people-are-participating-in-adult-educati/>

A figure was estimated based on the number of adults participating in FET, in higher education, non formal learning and evening classes.

⁴ Available from http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/solas_des_presentation_at_aontas_agm_2012.pdf (presentation by Seamus Hemenstall, Principal Officer, DES, to the AONTAS AGM May 2012)

Not only is participation on the increase, but the number of awards made by qualifications bodies has also risen substantially. The July 2012 report on *Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply-Trends in Education and Training* from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs reports on the number and types of awards made by FETAC in 2011.⁵ The total number of FETAC award holders (all award types) reached almost 181,000 in 2011, an increase of approximately 52,000 (or 40%) when compared to 2007. Level 5 awards, at almost 180,000, accounted for more than one half of all awards in 2011. Approximately one quarter of all FETAC awards were in the core skills, language and general studies field of learning (e.g. communications, computer literacy, work experience). The largest training centre types for FETAC awards were VECs/schools, with 46% of all awards made in 2011.

National trends

The focus on adult and community education has recently shifted to how the sector can respond to the needs of people affected by recession, notably those experiencing unemployment. In October 2012 unemployment stands at 14.8%. While unemployment levels have stabilised somewhat, there has been a worrying increase in the number of long term unemployment claimants. Concerns also emerge over the skills profile of those on the Live Register.

Information from the EGFSN based on CSO statistics from the last quarter of 2011 indicates that one in every four on the Live Register was employed in the construction sector. 67% of them are male and 20% are under 25 years of age. 22% are skilled tradespeople. People with lower skills are more likely to be unemployed and this is borne out within the statistics with 31% of people on the Live Register classified as 'early school leavers'.

In terms of progress being made towards the National Skills Strategy targets, there were some slight improvements noted in 2011 with now 18.4% of the labour force identified as having lower secondary level education or less. The NSS aims to reduce this figure to 7% by 2020. 41.6% of the workforce was identified as having a third level education, while 40% had higher secondary education or a further education and training qualification.

Trends from the AONTAS Information Referral Service

AONTAS provides information to any adult seeking to return to education and training through its web-based information booklet, email and its telephone referral service. In addition to national statistics, trends from the service are documented and provide qualitative insights into the profiles and challenges experienced by those returning to education.

⁵ Available from <http://www.forfas.ie/media/EGFSN25072012-Monitoring-Irelands-Skills-Supply-Publication.pdf>

The following trends emerge for the first six months of 2012:-

- There has been a 35% increase in the number of people contacting the AONTAS Information Referral Service in 2012 showing the greater need for clear information for adults who wish to explore their training and education options
- 55% of adults are returning to education in order to gain employment, with 14% looking to gain a new skill
- Returning to education, financial supports and going back to do the Leaving Certificate remain the top three queries in keeping with 2011 trends
- In 2011 35% of people contacting the service were long term unemployed. In 2012 this percentage is down to 24% with 32% of people in either full time or part time employment
- 40% of people reported the Leaving Certificate or equivalent as their level of education to date while 29% have the Junior Certificate or equivalent and 4% have no formal qualifications
- In previous years the ratio of women to men contacting the service was 60:40 this gap has widened to 65:35 in 2012
- Study criteria have changed slightly in the last few years : 2011 saw 37% of people looking for full time education options this has risen to over 50% in 2012
- The two biggest obstacles reported in returning to education were **lack of financial supports** and **lack of suitable courses**.

In providing for the needs of people seeking further education and training, government policy and budgetary decisions need to address the two key barriers identified by potential returners notably lack of financial supports and lack of suitable courses. Key agencies which need to work closely to overcome these challenges include SOLAS and INTREO. Both of these issues are addressed later in this paper.

Four recommendations for building a better service

1. Maximise the potential of the adult guidance service

Adult Guidance has a critical role to play in ensuring greater access, take up, retention and progression from courses.

'As many unemployed people will have to change career in order to re-enter employment, it is important that they have access to appropriate, independent

(provider-neutral) advice on the best education or training option to pursue.'
(Springboard 1st Stage Evaluation 20116)

Both career and educational guidance is currently available through a number of services. These include the Local Employment Service which provides employment, education and training advice in 26 centres around the country. Private guidance providers are also available at varying costs. The Adult Education Guidance Service based in local VECs is available in 40 centres throughout the country. The Service includes information provision and counselling in group and individual settings. Although it is relatively new, evaluation of the service has shown it to have already developed an excellent track record in terms of identifying literacy needs, helping learners to identify courses suitable for their needs and develop progression plans.

Integrate adult guidance pre, during and at point of exit

The provision of guidance services ultimately saves resources by helping direct adults to education and training opportunities that are appropriate to their needs and that help people create a pathway towards employment. The added value of adult guidance has been further emphasised by evaluations conducted on both the Springboard initiative and the PA Consulting Group report on the Labour Market Activation Measures⁷. Based on recommendations within both of these reports, a freephone guidance service was established to coincide with the second round of Springboard.

AONTAS is aware of many examples through its members of the positive impact of adult guidance on retention and progression. For example in 2009 Co. Donegal VEC worked collaboratively with the then Department of Social and Family Affairs to develop a 'Joint Referral Model' in providing greater levels of guidance support for those on the live register. This approach reduced the level of 'course dropout' with 73% of those availing of this service progressing onto education, training or employment.⁸ Recently in Longford VEC, the formal integration of a guidance element to course provision resulted in retention levels of almost 100%.

Protect the quality of the service delivered

All staff within the Adult Education Service are subject to the Public Service Recruitment Embargo including adult guidance staff. Since adult education staff are not considered to be frontline the lack of capacity to replace personnel who have left the service means that the numbers of experienced staff is diminishing while demand increases. AONTAS believes that the

⁶ <http://www.heai.ie/files/SPRINGBOARDSTAGE1EVALUATION.pdf> (P. 29)

⁷ Published in November 2011

⁸ Available from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/better-together/>

overall effect of the embargo is stretching the capacity of the services to respond to the demand. AONTAS believes that the quality of the service to FET learners needs to be protected and for that reason staff in the AEGI should be defined as ‘frontline staff’ and therefore exempt from the PSR Embargo. As the services are reconfigured, and in the absence of a central information resource, Information Officers within the Guidance Service are playing a vital frontline role and ensuring that those most in need are directed to counselling.

The demand for guidance services will inevitably increase and cannot be met given the current resources and the pressure of the embargo. Currently the service is restricted to a number of target groups, which excludes those with a primary level degree. As the LES guidelines also focus on particular target groups, this leaves a cohort of learners with little access to guidance.

As INTREO develops, the Department of Social Protection needs to work closely with the Adult Education Guidance Initiative, both in developing best practice in the delivery of guidance under INTREO, as well as establishing efficient referral mechanisms between both services which result in better outcomes for learners.

Recommendations:

Redefine ‘frontline’ to apply to staff within the Adult Guidance Guidance Initiative

Ensure that strong collaborative work practices are developed between DSP and the AEGI through support and CPD for the staff involved

Use the models of best practice developed under the AEGI in the development and delivery of guidance under INTREO

2. Course content should be meaningful and lead to employment or further education and training

While provision has expanded to meet increasing demand, there is still a skills mismatch between courses offered and the existing labour market. Although this shortage may be small, Information from the FÁS Labour Market Research Unit indicates the availability of current and future employment opportunities in ICT, in pharmaceuticals, the green economy and call centres. There is a lack of awareness about the opportunities available and therefore suitably

qualified individuals ready to take up these positions. The National Skills Bulletin published by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in July 2012 reports that:

“There is an excess supply of labour in Ireland at present. While some skills shortages have been identified in this report, they remain confined to a relatively small number of posts, mostly requiring persons with specialist skills. It should also be noted that, with the exception of ICT skills, the magnitude of shortages is estimated to be relatively low, not greater than several hundred.”⁹

Meanwhile, information gathered through the AONTAS Information Referral Service stated earlier in this paper suggests dissatisfaction with the range of suitable courses offered. One of the key issues raised by learners at the AONTAS Lobby for Learning event in February 2012 was the frustrating experience of being directed to courses which led nowhere, had no recognised accreditation, were too short to acquire new skills or were just plainly unsuitable for the needs of the learner. A number of learners cited instances of doing a number of courses but being unable to get a decent job at the end of it all. Such an experience for someone returning to learning after a long period of time kills motivation and ambition making the person less likely to take up further education and training opportunities.¹⁰

Protect community education provision

Given the unpredictability of the labour market and the substantial cohort of people remaining at the lower end of the skills spectrum, there is a strong case to be made for the continued provision of generic skills, which enable people to move across different sectors and specialise or upskill ‘on the job’. Community education programmes and the Back to Education Initiative provide adults with the opportunity and confidence to move up through the Qualifications Framework. Outcomes generated by community education such as confidence, personal development and wellbeing are also highly relevant to the workplace and consequently the labour market.

Connect with employers

The range of quality learning opportunities across a variety of settings needs to be expanded, including an increase in the availability of learning opportunities in the workplace which is still underutilised in terms of its potential to provide a learning environment for employees. IBEC has already outlined how blended learning models are highly effective in employee engagement and learning.¹¹ There is a need to promote the benefits of workplace learning to

⁹ National Skills Bulletin (EFGSN July 2012) available from <http://www.fas.ie/NR/rdonlyres/896B9269-D80E-419D-8BA8-D771549692F1/2615/NationalSkillsBulletinJuly2012.pdf>

¹⁰ Report available online from: <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/solas-serving-adult-learners-2012/>

¹¹ ‘Further Education and Training – Divergence to Convergence’ (IBEC September 2012)

employers so that they invest in their employees through the provision of study leave, financial or other support.

Greater formal connections are required with employers. While this engagement must be led out at national level, engagement must take place at regional and local level, so that providers can build up relationships with local employers and offer courses relevant to the needs of a local labour market. Course provision under the new Further Education and Training Authority, SOLAS should not be limited solely to ETBs, but should also be open to quality providers in the private and community sector in accordance with local needs. The development of the ETBs under new legislation provides an opportunity to explore and develop new models of engagement with employers. Such a model should allow for engagement between employers and a range of providers at local level.

Recommendations

Ensure that funding for the provision of community education is protected within the new SOLAS service model

Develop a range of opportunities for greater communication and engagement between FET providers and employers

Encourage progression between FET programmes and work experience opportunities, eg Jobsbridge

Encourage greater diversity of provision, through the use of online and blended methodologies

3. Provide a financial support system for adults which enables them to enter and progress through the qualifications system

While adult guidance is vital to supporting an adult through education, finance remains a significant practical stumbling block for those taking up education opportunities as adults. Mature students at third level have taken the brunt of the cuts¹² introduced in budgets over the past three years. New postgraduate students no longer qualify for a student grant, and the

¹² Mature students no longer automatically qualify for the non adjacent rate of the student grant. Budget 2012 reduced the Cost of Education Allowance payable to adults in receipt of BTEA from €500 to €300. Overall 3% reduction in student grants.

student contribution cost continues to increase each year. This slow erosion of financial supports coupled with speculation on the reintroduction of third level fees creates an atmosphere of uncertainty. As well as discouraging learners from pursuing learning opportunities, cutbacks in financial supports can also cause financial hardship to learners, many of whom are already experiencing financial difficulties due to unemployment.

While the introduction of the Springboard initiative is welcome in providing part time third level qualifications for adults who are unemployed, many unemployed adults continue to apply for third level through traditional routes. This is evidenced through the continued uptake of the Back to Education Allowance, which in 2011 had increased by 20% on the previous year.¹³

While those qualifying for BTEA may be eligible to have the contribution cost met by the Exchequer on their behalf, the rising cost of higher education will discourage adults opting for part time study, as they must pay full fees along with the student contribution cost. The lack of financial supports for part time study is one of the factors in the increase in demand for full time study options identified by the AONTAS Information Referral Service quoted earlier in this paper. This issue of parity of esteem for part time adult learners in third level has been one of concern for AONTAS for many years, and has also been highlighted in recent examinations of third level funding, notably the Hunt report in 2011.¹⁴

Explore alternative funding models

While a level playing field for part time adult learners at third level may not be possible in the current financial climate, other supports could be introduced. Social Justice Ireland, in its pre-budget submission has sketched out how a loan system for third level fees could be developed¹⁵. This type of scheme, which would allow learners to borrow to finance both their fees and cost of living, could be expanded to include part time adult learners. This scheme would require learners to begin to make repayments once their income reached a certain level.

Ensure greater policy coherence between DSP and DES

Greater policy coherence is required between the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Social Protection in order to provide a broad range of learning opportunities for jobseekers. This applies particularly to the Back to Education Allowance. An example illustrating the complexities of this issue was raised in a recent parliamentary question, where

¹³ Dept of Social Protection, Annual Report 2011, available from:
<http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Press/PressReleases/2012/Pages/pr200712.aspx>

¹⁴ http://www.heai.ie/files/files/DES_Higher_Ed_Main_Report.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/file/Organisations/2012-09-26%20-%20Budget%20Choices%202013.pdf> (P. 14)

former construction workers were not in a position to reskill at a level appropriate to their learning needs as they had already completed FÁS level 6 training course, and were therefore deemed ineligible for the BTEA.

A holistic approach must also be taken in ensuring that existing levels of childcare support are maintained for learners. The NWCI in its pre-budget submission has pointed out that in order to engage with the Department of Social Protection's activation approach, key target groups such as lone parents must be supported with an appropriate level of financial support or access to quality, low cost childcare provision.

Recommendations

Introduce a loan scheme for part time adult learners

Protect existing supports for adults in FET, including childcare

Ensure greater collaboration between DSP and DES in the delivery of activation supports. Prioritise groups particularly affected by recession (e.g. employed in construction) and facilitate their access to supports at a level appropriate to their needs.

4. Establish better data gathering systems in order to assess what educational interventions work best for which learners

There is a lack of information available on the outcomes of FET which would yield valuable data on where resources should best be directed, which models work best and who benefits. A Technical Working Group under the auspices of SOLAS has already done preliminary work on the collection of data and statistics for FET and has prepared a report for the SOLAS Implementation Group. AONTAS is currently participating in a working group initially established by the Department of Education and Skills to explore the measurement of the wider benefits of community education, and which is now being expanded to include all FET programmes. Its work will inform the development of data gathering systems within SOLAS.

While stakeholders within the FET sector acknowledge the need for more information on the outcomes of adult learning, there are differing viewpoints over what outcomes should be measured and how to measure them. Obviously labour market related outcomes are a priority for government but all forms of education and training have valuable spin off effects which

contribute to more fulfilling lives and stronger communities. Recent research conducted by AONTAS on DES funded community education showed that community education yields significant returns in the areas of health, civic participation and volunteering, outcomes which are equally important to skills for employment.

In the UK, NIACE (the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education) worked with the London School of Economics to use the 'Social Return on Investment' methodology to monetise the impact of adult learning activities. 'Valuing the impact of adult learning'¹⁶ found that an adult who takes part in two part time courses each year will benefit from the following:

- **improvements in health**, which has a value of **£148** to the individual;
- **a greater likelihood of finding a job and/or staying in a job**, which has a value of **£224** to the individual;
- **better social relationships**, which has a value of **£658** to the individual; and
- **a greater likelihood that people volunteer on a regular basis**, which has a value of **£130** to the individual.

Recommendations

Develop and pilot a model for capturing a range of outcomes across FET

Consider funding a longitudinal study of adult learning, which would provide qualitative data on the outcomes of adult learning over a long period of time.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier AONTAS is acutely aware of the financial constraints under which the FET sector is working and we acknowledge the policies and programmes the government has put in place to try to respond to the increasing demand for further education and training opportunities. However this sector still commands the least resources of the education budget and caters for more learners than the formal system. It has developed responsive and flexible high quality provision to respond to the needs of learners and has generally provided good value for money. Through better integration of guidance, innovation in provision, and collective responsibility we can create greater outcomes for learners. Better data gathering

¹⁶ <http://www.niace.org.uk/news/valuing-the-impact-of-adult-learning>

systems will ensure that we plan and deliver more effective services for learners, particularly those at the lower end of the skills spectrum who are especially at risk during recession.

Ireland has been lauded in the European arena for tackling its economic crisis through meeting clearly defined targets. Whilst reform in the sector is long overdue, it must also be acknowledged that the services have built up substantial expertise and capacity to meet the different needs of a variety of learners. Further Education and Training is now a lifeline for many adults especially those who have found themselves out of work and surviving on welfare. In order to survive the crisis and to grow and sustain ourselves as an economy and a society the government needs to protect the core work of further education and training now more than ever.

Summary of Recommendations

Four recommendations for building a better service

1. Maximise the potential of the adult guidance service.

- Redefine 'frontline' to apply to staff within the Adult Guidance Initiative
- Ensure that strong collaborative work practices are developed between DSP and the AEGI through support and CPD for the staff involved
- Use the models of best practice developed under the AEGI in the development and delivery of guidance under INTREO

2. Course content should be meaningful and lead to employment or further education and training.

- Ensure that funding for the provision of community education is protected within the new SOLAS service model
- Develop a range of opportunities for greater communication and engagement between FET providers and employers
- Encourage progression between FET programmes and work experience opportunities, eg Jobsbridge
- Encourage greater diversity of provision, through the use of online and blended methodologies

3. Provide a financial support system for adults which enables them to enter and progress through the qualifications system.

- Introduce a loan scheme for part time adult learners
- Protect existing supports for adults in FET, including childcare
- Review BTEA to ensure greater coherence with DES. Prioritise groups particularly affected by recession (e.g. employed in construction) and facilitate their participation and access to supports at a level appropriate to their needs.

4. Establish better data gathering systems in order to assess what educational interventions work best for which learners.

- Develop and pilot a model for capturing a range of outcomes across FET
- Consider funding a longitudinal study of adult learning, which would provide qualitative data on the outcomes of adult learning over a long period of time.