



**Preparation for AONTAS Strategic Plan  
2007-2010**

**Draft Consultation Document**

**September 2006**

**Contact:**

**Berni Brady, Director  
Niamh O'Reilly, Membership Development Officer  
AONTAS, National Association of Adult Education  
83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6  
Tel: 01 406 8220 Email: [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com)**

## Introduction

AONTAS is currently developing a new four-year strategic plan for the period 2007-2010. This document is a draft consultation document, and feedback from members and other stakeholders about the document is essential. We urge you to provide this feedback during October and November 2006.

AONTAS is currently in the final year of its strategic plan *Sustaining Growth and Development 2004-2006*. That plan has five strategic objectives, which have guided the work of the organisation over the past three years. In summary they are:

- Promoting adult learning
- Participating in policy development
- Building the capacity of the AONTAS membership
- Supporting the development of community education
- Developing AONTAS as a learning organisation

The work carried out under this plan is being reviewed, so that the strengths and successes of AONTAS can be built upon in a new strategic plan. A consultation process has started about how the work of AONTAS could develop over the next four years. Initially this has involved discussions among the staff and Executive teams. Ways of building on the existing work of the organisation are being explored, and it will also be necessary to move in new directions to take account of new challenges and meet the needs of adult learners and providers. A strategic plan working group drawn from the Executive and the staff team, will oversee and guide the consultation as it develops.

In the past 18 months, a vast amount of information has been gathered from our members and from the wider environment about possible directions for the adult and community education sector in Ireland. We consulted widely during 2005 and early 2006 on what aspects of adult and community education should be addressed by the next National Development Plan, and also met with a number of other national organisations to talk about our common goals. This material and the feedback from membership networking events has informed this draft document, which outlines possible strategic objectives for AONTAS 2007-2010. Additional sources of material used to compile this draft include the Citizen Learner conference and seminar reports, AONTAS regional meeting reports, learner network reports, the research association feasibility study and the Quality Assurance Framework project report. The AONTAS executive and staff teams have also had discussions about the future directions of the organisation.

We hope that this draft consultation document will stimulate discussion among the wider membership of AONTAS, and we are seeking feedback on its content. We plan to provide a range of opportunities for members and other stakeholders in adult and community education to contribute to the new strategic plan, which will be published in 2007. These will include focus group discussions, meetings, an online forum, and telephone contact where possible. All members will receive this document and their comments will be invited. The strategic plan working group will be responsible for gathering the ideas together and drafting the new plan.

## Document Structure

This document is structured loosely around five key themes, four of which are related to work that the organisation may wish to pursue:

1. Promoting adult and community education
2. Supporting professionalism in adult and community education
3. Promoting adult education for democracy/active citizenship
4. Supporting adult learners

There is also a crosscutting theme of organisational development, which cuts across all other themes and involves the development of structures and resources within the organisation as a whole. This list of themes can be added to as the consultation develops.

**It should be stressed that this list of work areas is open for debate, and may be added to as the consultation develops.**

## Feedback

Members may wish to send this document, with comments and notes, to staff at the AONTAS office. Alternatively, you may wish to draft a short response based on this document, or email or telephone with shorter comments.

**Contact:** Berni Brady at [bbrady@aontas.com](mailto:bbrady@aontas.com) or Niamh O'Reilly at [noreilly@aontas.com](mailto:noreilly@aontas.com), or telephone the office at 01 406 8220 with your feedback.

Postal address: AONTAS, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6.

**Feedback should be sent by 8 November 2006, as we aim to finalise the new strategic plan by the end of the year. We look forward to hearing from you.**

## Draft Structure for Consultation

<u>Theme 1</u>	<u>Theme 2</u>	<u>Theme 3</u>	<u>Theme 4</u>
<b>Promoting Adult and Community Education</b>	<b>Supporting Professionalism in Adult and Community Education</b>	<b>Supporting adult and community education for active citizenship, democracy and participation</b>	<b>Supporting Adult Learners</b>
Promote adult and community learning	Take a lead role in the development of qualifications & support services for adult and community education	Promote education for access, participation and social inclusion	Provide a space for adult learners to network and share experiences
Promote the role and work of AONTAS	Deliver the CEF support programme	Promote and support community education	Enable adult learners to influence policy and practice in adult and community education
Organise political campaigns to raise the profile of adult and community education	Encourage the sharing and spread of good practice & research	Inform policy development in the area of active citizenship	Work to ensure supports are in place for adult learners returning to education
Influence policy	Influence the development of policy in the field of professional development		
<b><u>Theme 5</u></b>			
<b>Organisational Development</b>			
To build an effective membership based organisation that reflects the diversity of adult and community education			
To build the capacity of the Executive Committee			
To build the capacity of the staff of AONTAS			
To develop the technical and financial resource base of AONTAS			
To develop strategic partnerships at local, national and international level			

## **Theme 1: Promoting Adult and Community Education**

### **Rationale**

As part of the last AONTAS strategic plan, *Sustaining Growth and Development*, a lot of work has been carried out to raise the profile of the organisation and of the adult and community education sector. A Communications Officer was recruited in 2005 to concentrate on promotion and to build the AONTAS profile. A new magazine, *Explore*, is being produced on a quarterly basis since 2005, and includes news and views, feature articles and project descriptions from all areas of adult and community education. Approximately 1500 copies are now circulated to AONTAS members, practitioners and political representatives. AONTAS produces regular press statements and provides media training to members seeking to build their own local profile, and media monitoring is carried out to track coverage of the sector.

As well as media work, AONTAS produces a number of information resources for the adult and community education sector. An e-bulletin is circulated monthly, and allows organisations in the sector to exchange information. The AONTAS website was upgraded in 2004, and is constantly updated and reviewed. The staff team provides an information referral service to members of the public who have queries about adult and community education, and resources such as a directory of funding sources are produced regularly. Members of staff and executive also attend and input to public events and exhibitions, organise seminars and stay in constant touch with personnel in the Department of Education and Science, and in the political parties.

Although the promotional work of AONTAS has been stepped up in the past year, there is still a lack of visibility for the organisation and for adult and community education, nationally and locally. Despite our local election campaign in 2004, Adult and Community Education received very little attention in the budgets of 2005 and 2006, and is still overshadowed by stronger interests in the education sector. Members consulted at regional meetings in 2005 expressed concern that AONTAS as an organisation has a relatively low profile, and that at local level their work lacks visibility.

A new AONTAS strategic plan should therefore now build and expand on our current work in the area of media and promotions. In order to build a national profile for both AONTAS itself and adult and community education, an adult learners' festival is being planned for early 2007. It is envisaged that, if successful, this event would be expanded and developed into an annual event that would be high profile. It is also hoped to attract sponsorship to the event, and to encourage providers at local level to use the festival week to promote their own work locally. Adult learning festivals are common in other EU countries, where adult and community education has a better public and political profile.

Other aspects of promotion, such as advertising, publication of resources, conference organisation and political campaigning should also build on foundations that are already in place, but expand considerably over the coming years. The General Election in 2007 is a key opportunity for profile raising and campaigning. AONTAS also needs to take full advantage of new technologies in communicating its message. The promotional work of AONTAS is inextricably tied into its capacity to influence policy at a national level.

**The following suggested objectives and actions could be a way of achieving outcomes on this theme. This list is not written in stone and can be added to or amended.**

### **Objectives:**

- Promote adult learning
- Promote the role and work of AONTAS
- Organise political campaigns to raise the profile of adult and community education
- Influence policy

### **Possible Actions:**

- a) Develop and promote a clear mission statement and description of the work of AONTAS and its role in the adult and community education sector
- b) Establish the Adult Learning Festival as an annual event
- c) Expand media coverage and proactive media work
- d) Expand public speaking role/ profile at major events by staff and Executive
- e) Develop an advertising strategy on a planned yearly basis aimed at national and local level
- f) Develop key publications e.g. Explore and Adult Learner
- g) Organise a biannual national conference
- h) Develop and deliver Election Campaigning – General Election 2007, Local Elections 2009
- i) Build relationships with political parties and policy makers
- j) Establish a policy development working group
- k) Lobby for overarching structures for adult and community education
- l) Build awareness of adult and community education with politicians
- m) Take a lead role in challenging existing adult education policy

**Theme 1**

**Promoting Adult and Community Education**

**Comments and Suggestions:**

## **Theme 2: Supporting Professionalism in the Adult and Community Education Sector**

### **Rationale**

During consultations with members in recent years, the need for professional development and better career structures in adult and community education have been stressed time and time again. Practitioners across the adult and community education sector want to see more opportunities to obtain qualifications in the field; would like to have their experiences recognised; and need more professional support in their jobs. Many individual members of AONTAS are tutors and managers in the sector, and have a keen interest in seeing progress in this area. We also have members from a range of associations such as the Adult Education Officers' Association, the Community Education Facilitators' Association, the Adult Guidance Association etc.

The fact that there are few recognised qualifications for adult and community education practitioners, and little connection between the courses that do exist, has been a problem for the sector for many years. Those employed in adult and community education have a mix of experiences and qualifications, some of which are recognised and some of which are not. Recent developments such as the setting up of the Teaching Council, and changes to part-time workers conditions, have and will impact on those working in the sector in the immediate future. This issue is now an urgent one. The White Paper 2000 made specific recommendations about careers and qualifications in adult and community education. As a starting point, it recommended the setting up of an Inter-Agency Working Group to explore the issues involved. However, this structure has not been set up and no progress has been made in looking at qualifications in the field. AONTAS can take a lead role in facilitating stakeholders from across the sector to come together and have these discussions. This can result in recommendations being made to appropriate bodies, like the Department of Education and Science, or the NQAI, about future qualifications for those working in adult and community education at all levels.

Since the Qualifications Act was passed in 1999, there has been rapid change with the setting up of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the development of a Qualifications Framework, and the establishment of FETAC and HETAC as new awarding bodies. The adult and community education sector is struggling to meet the demands placed on it by new requirements to complete quality assurance templates, to validate all programmes and to ensure progression pathways are available to learners. The NCVA support service, which in the past helped smaller groups deal with the accreditation system, is being phased out. At this point it is unclear how providers will be supported to cope with assessment, programme development, quality assurance and so on in the future. As a body representing a variety of provider organisations, AONTAS has a role to play in fighting for better support services for providers to ensure that the service they offer to learners is of the highest quality possible.

Finally, AONTAS should continue to support the spread of good practice in the sector and should push the research agenda in adult and community education forward. AONTAS already publishes the *Adult Learner* journal in conjunction with the Adult Education Officers' Association, and will continue to do so. The *Adult Learner* has been reviewed in 2006 and will combine both the theoretical and practical aspects of adult and community education in a broader and more inclusive way. AONTAS is also supporting the development of a Research Association to offer peer support to researchers working in the adult education field.

**The following suggested objectives and actions could be a way of achieving outcomes on this theme. This list is not written in stone and can be added to or amended.**

### **Objectives:**

- Take a lead role in the development of qualifications & support services for adult and community education
- Deliver the Community Education Facilitators (CEF) support programme
- Encourage the sharing and spread of good practice & research
- Influence the development of policy in the field of professional development

### **Possible Actions:**

- a) Create a forum to explore the development of qualifications in the adult and community education sector with relevant stakeholders, including Department of Education & Science, Teacher Unions, NQAI, NALA and practitioners with a view to the development of the interagency working group as proposed in the White Paper 2000
- b) Create a tutor network, drawn from AONTAS membership, to inform the work of the forum above.
- c) Develop a consultation paper on future support services/ training within the adult and community education service
- d) Continue to provide the CEF Training and Support Programme on behalf of the Department of Education & Science
- e) Continue to develop the Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and secure funding to mainstream it within the Women's Community Education Sector (WCE)
- f) Promote the use of the WCE QAF as a model of practice in the broader Community Education Sector.
- g) Establish an Executive sub-group to explore and advise on professional development issues
- h) Support the building of a research base in adult education by taking part and promoting research initiatives as appropriate, such as the Irish Research Association in Adult and Community Education. (IRAACE)
- i) Explore the Grundtvig programme as a possibility for developing models of practice for professional development
- j) Set up the practitioners forum for adult and community education as proposed in White Paper 2000
- k) Campaign for flexible funding for adult and community education that supports administration, outreach/pre-development and programme needs

**Theme 2**

**Supporting Professionalism in the Adult and Community Education Sector**

**Comments and Suggestions:**

### **Theme 3: Promoting Adult and Community Education for Democracy/ Active Citizenship/ Participation**

#### **Rationale**

While Active Citizenship is currently in the spotlight following the recent establishment of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship by Government and is a key theme in the EU Communication on Lifelong Learning, the concept of active citizenship is a contested one and needs to be explored further to see what role adult and community education has in promoting it. Inputs from community education representatives on the Executive Committee were of the strong view that participation in community education is in itself the practice of active citizenship and that AONTAS should name and support community education as a key part of its strategic plan.

Community Education Groups not only provide accessible educational opportunities for adults but are almost always deeply involved in other aspects of community development and issues which affect local communities. Through the learning opportunities provided by these groups adults not only begin to understand the issues affecting their communities but begin to also take an active part in developing responses to these issues. Examples of these include involvement in local partnerships, City and County Development Boards, Local Area Planning, health, education and cultural strategies. Effectively this is education for democracy in action. The European Year of Citizenship through Education 2005 highlighted the role of education in underpinning participative democracy. Events and activities undertaken across Europe showed that personal and social development, community development, political and civic participation are dependent on flexible educational processes.

AONTAS has supported community education as an integral part of adult education, promoting its distinct ethos and participative approaches. Its capacity to reach the most marginalized in society and encourage people to participate in their own learning and contribute to their community has been highlighted in AONTAS research and in initiatives such as the Education Equality Initiative. It may be possible to boost the profile of the sector further under the heading 'education for active citizenship'/ 'education for democracy'/ participation because of its role in promoting inclusion, tackling inequality and involving local people in its organisation and delivery. This could be done through research, production of resource materials that value the non-traditional outcomes of community education and highlighting and publishing models of practice which demonstrate active citizenship.

**The following suggested objectives and actions could be a way of achieving outcomes on this theme. This list is not written in stone and can be added to or amended.**

### **Objectives:**

- Promote education for access, participation and social inclusion
- Promote and support community education
- Inform policy development in the area of active citizenship

### **Possible Actions:**

- a) Monitor and contribute to the work of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship
- b) Establish a forum within AONTAS to explore what active citizenship means in the context of adult and community education
- c) Encourage members to establish local discussion fora to explore what active citizenship means for them
- d) Work to support and profile community education, in recognition of its role in promoting local participation and social inclusion
- e) Highlight the work currently been done by the adult and community education service with new communities in Ireland and lobby for resources to support and develop this work
- f) Identify and collaborate with other agencies involved in the active citizenship agenda
- g) Provide support and information to members to ensure that they can participate fully in the General and local election processes
- h) Use local practice to inform the development of policy by key agencies and Government bodies in the area of active citizen ship

**Theme 3**

**Promoting Adult Education for Democracy/ Active Citizenship**

**Comments and Suggestions:**

## **Theme 4: Supporting Adult Learners**

### **Rationale**

Providers and policy-makers are agreed that we should have a *learner-centred* adult and community education service. All of the programmes developed, the supports provided, and the professional development of tutors should be geared towards providing the best possible service to learners. This means listening to the views of adult learners themselves and acting on their concerns.

During 2006 AONTAS has organised a number of learner networking meetings to listen to the views of learners and feed these views to policy makers. The meetings give learners the chance to speak to each other, share experiences, and discuss their own priorities as a group in a neutral space away from their place of learning. Already a group of mature students from third level has been brought together, as well as two groups of men in education. This work is at a very early stage, but it is hoped to expand it during the coming years to create vibrant, self-sustaining learner networks.

AONTAS will continue to lobby for better supports for adult learners in terms of financial support, childcare, facilities etc. AONTAS will also explore ways of involving learners more actively in the work of the Organisation and the Executive Committee.

**The following suggested objectives and actions could be a way of achieving outcomes on this theme. This list is not written in stone and can be added to or amended.**

### **Objectives:**

- Provide a space for adult learners to network and share experiences
- Enable adult learners to influence policy and practice in adult education
- Work to ensure supports are in place for adult learners returning to education

### **Possible Actions:**

- a) Further develop adult learner networks as a forum for learners from all sectors
- b) Support learners to attend policy-making events, focus groups, conferences etc.
- c) Examine ways to involve adult learners in the AONTAS Executive Committee
- d) Promote the experience of men in adult and community education with a view to encouraging more men to participate
- e) Establish an annual Awards Ceremony to celebrate collaborative adult and community learning projects
- f) Continue to lobby to remove barriers to access for adult learners across all levels of education
- g) Collate accurate statistics on participation rates of adult learners in adult education
- h) Support the promotion of non-traditional outcomes of learning

- i) Carry out further research on the adverse effects of barriers to learning for adults
- j) Pursue formal recognition for adult and community education as a sector within Further Education

**Theme 4**

**Supporting Adult Learners**

**Comments and Suggestions:**

## **Theme 5: Organisational Development**

### **Rationale**

Most organisations list organisational development and capacity building as a key objective. In its previous strategic plans, AONTAS has had an objective dedicated to organisational development. Areas addressed previously included building our technical capacity, staff training and development, executive committee development, etc. AONTAS recruited a Membership Development Officer in 2005, which has allowed the organisation to examine its membership base more closely and to foster stronger links with members. Changes have already been made to the constitution to reflect the different categories of membership, and to reflect the cost of running the organisation. Members at the 2006 AGM were very supportive of these changes. AONTAS will continue to encourage active participation of members by supporting them to feed into the work of AONTAS through meetings, fora and other networking events. It is envisaged that members will run networking events locally, which will be supported by AONTAS, and thus will enable the organisation to grow and develop locally from the ground up which is imperative for a responsive national organisation.

Building the capacity of the Executive Committee is a key component of organisational development. During the next strategic plan AONTAS will foster closer working relationships between Executive and staff by establishing working groups and sub-committees to support the work of the organisation. AONTAS will also explore ways to support and build the capacity of individual member of the Executive Committee

AONTAS will also continue with the policy and practice of supporting staff development and building its human, technical and financial resources including diversification of funding.

AONTAS recognises the need to influence policy at European and International level. It has been an active member of the European Association of Education for Adults (EAEA) for many years and has played a key role in shaping its strategic development. AONTAS is also a member, but a less active one of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE). During the period of the next strategic plan AONTAS will strengthen its involvement at European and International level with a view to influencing policy, exchanging learning and sharing models of best practice. AONTAS will explore possibilities of developing transnational partnerships through the Grundtvig Programme.

**The following suggested objectives and actions could be a way of achieving outcomes on this theme. This list is not written in stone and can be added to or amended**

**Objectives:**

- Facilitate members to actively contribute to their organisation – AONTAS
- Build an effective membership based organisation that reflects the diversity of adult and community education
- Build the capacity of the Executive Committee
- Build the capacity of the staff of AONTAS
- Develop the technical and financial resource base of AONTAS
- Develop strategic partnerships at local, national and international level

**Possible Actions:**

- a) Continue to expand the membership base of AONTAS through an ongoing process of recruitment
- b) Continue to support membership by developing relevant responses to their practical needs
- c) Develop meaningful working relationships between staff and Executive Committee members through working groups, sub-committees etc.
- d) Develop an Executive Committee induction scheme for each new Committee and provide ongoing developmental support for members during their time in office
- e) Continue to set aside 2% of the AONTAS Annual Budget to support staff development and training
- f) Develop the capacity of the staff team to ensure that it is able to deliver on the work outlined in the strategic plan
- g) Explore possibilities for the diversification of funding resources for AONTAS
- h) Build on our involvement with the EAEA and the ICAE with a view to influencing policy, exchanging learning and sharing best practice
- i) Explore the development of transnational partnerships under the Grundtvig Programme

**Theme 5**

**Organisational Development**

**Comments and Suggestions:**

