



## **REGIONAL MEETING REPORT 2002**

May 23 Donegal

May 28 Dublin

May 29 Athlone

June 12 Cork

June 13 Wexford

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## **Section 1: Introduction and Context**

### **Introduction: The AONTAS Approach**

*AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education, which is accessible to and inclusive of all.*

AONTAS is currently in the process of implementing its second strategic plan 'Moving Forward' covering the period 2001-2003. This plan, developed in consultation with membership, is designed to build on the achievements of the adult education sector since the publication of the Green Paper 'Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning' in 1998, and the White Paper 'Learning for Life' in 2000. The White Paper marked the most important development in Irish adult education to date, and addressed many of the issues AONTAS had lobbied on over a long period of time. AONTAS warmly welcomed the White Paper, and has since worked to ensure its recommendations are fully implemented.

In the context of the National Development Plan, and the emergence of a range of initiatives related to lifelong learning and adult education, the current AONTAS strategic plan has a strong focus on policy, and maintaining a proactive input to policy development. The key objectives of the plan are those outlining the AONTAS intention to take its place in important policy fora, and actively provide a voice at national level to the adult education sector throughout Ireland. The achievement of this aim is evidenced by the fact that AONTAS is now represented on a range of key bodies and committees including the National Adult Learning Council (NALC), the National Committee on Educational Disadvantage (NCED), the National Qualifications Authority (NQAI) Consultative Group and the Implementation & Advisory Group (IAG) for the White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity, to name but a few.

AONTAS is further committed through its strategic plan to regular consultation with member groups, to ensure that all views on policy and practice are fed regularly into these fora. In support of policy development, AONTAS is further committed to advising and supporting members in lobbying at local level, and working in partnership with appropriate local agencies. To this end, the organisation has consulted repeatedly with local groups, provided advice on strategic planning, and held frequent regional meetings to allow topical issues to be discussed openly among various local networks.

### *The AONTAS 2002 Regional Meetings*

In May and June 2002, AONTAS held a series of five regional meetings to which members were invited. The meetings were held in Donegal, Dublin, Athlone, Cork and Wexford, and their purpose was threefold:

1. The first aim was to bring AONTAS members up to date with the changes in the adult education environment in recent years, particularly in the context of the 2000 White Paper 'Learning for Life'. All those engaged in the organisation and delivery of adult education at local, regional and national levels have been affected by new policy initiatives and increased investment in the sector. It was important to ensure that groups on the ground were aware of ongoing developments, and the opportunity that exists to influence progress.

**A Presentation by AONTAS Director, Berni Brady**, entitled 'Building the Adult Education Service: The Next Steps' brought members up to date with recent developments, and outlined the issues still to be addressed in the sector. These developments are outlined in the following section of this report entitled 'The Current Context.'

2. The second aim was to provide members with an opportunity to feed their views and concerns into the various fora where AONTAS has representation. This meant gathering views on policy, listening to the experiences of members, and asking members to identify the key practical issues arising in adult and community education in their own local areas.

**An Open Session** allowed participants to raise any issues of concern to them, or to query any of the policy initiatives outlined in the presentation. These concerns are outlined by region in the later sections of this report.

3. The third aim of the regional meetings was to advise groups on how to plan strategically, so that their voices could be heard at local and national levels. In the midst of an array of local agencies and bodies, it was critical that members think about how their own organisations could make an effective contribution to policy and practice, both locally and nationally.

**A practical workshop** outlining the key steps in strategic planning was delivered by AONTAS Project Manager, Maureen Kavanagh. A resource pack containing further advice on developing a strategy and on influencing policy was distributed. In small groups, members were asked to identify the key stakeholders in adult education in their locality and beyond. More specifically, they were asked to consider whom the important organisations and individuals might be in the event that they were arranging a policy consultation in their area. The stakeholders identified are listed in the regional sections that follow in this report.

Arising from the meetings, this report has been compiled in an effort to capture the issues raised at the meetings, and highlight concerns held by practitioners and organisers on the ground. The report makes clear what the common concerns are for those involved in adult education throughout Ireland, but it also highlights particular issues arising in individual localities, which might otherwise be lost in the discussion of national policy. It will therefore be a valuable tool for AONTAS in determining policy priorities, and also for the government bodies and decision makers with whom we are working closely.

### *The Current Context: Building the Adult Education Service*

During the lifetime of the previous Government, adult education in Ireland made great strides. Topping the list of achievements is of course the publication of the Green and White Papers, which demonstrated a willingness on the part of government to invest in and develop the adult education service. Following the publication of the Green Paper in 1998, AONTAS undertook a round of consultation meetings to formulate a response to those proposals. The views of members were merged into the response paper 'Making an Impact' and many of the issues raised by AONTAS in this document were taken on board in the White Paper of 2000. Part implementation followed, and while much remains to be done, the White Paper at least provides a framework for the delivery of adult education in Ireland.

Significant developments in the sector under the previous Government have included:

- **Increased Investment:** The budget allocated to the sector stood at less than 0.1% of the total education budget in 1997. Since then this figure has increased to 2%.
- **Increased Adult Literacy Budget:** The budget for literacy has risen to approximately €16.4m in 2002, from €1m in 1997. The *Read Write Now* series ran in 2000 and 2001, when it attracted up to 235,000 viewers weekly. Workplace learning schemes have been put in place, and the overall number of literacy students has risen from 5,000 in 1997 to 22,733 at the end of 2001.
- **Establishment of NALC:** Earlier in 2002 the National Adult Learning Council was established by then Minister of State at the Department of Education & Science, Willie O'Dea. The council is now in the process of outlining its policy objectives. The budget for NALC in 2002 is €1.143m although its supporting technical units have yet to be established.
- **Introduction of Back to Education Initiative:** BTEI is designed to develop more flexible part-time options in Further Education, to counter a largely inflexible system in Ireland. BTEI prioritises adults with less than upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level education. 6,000 places are available in 2002, and the aim is to make 20,000 places available by 2006.
- **Establishment of an Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI):** Phases 1, 2 & 3 of the service have been implemented in 26 areas. The intention is to develop a database of all learning opportunities, integrated with a national telephone help line. 35 Community Education Facilitators are also being introduced later in 2002.

- **Establishment of NQAI, FETAC & HETAC:** The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is now seeking to develop a national framework of qualifications. FETAC and HETAC are the awards authorities established under the 1999 Qualifications Act.

While AONTAS has welcomed all of the above developments, there remains a significant amount of work to be done, both in implementing the White Paper fully, and in addressing further issues in policy and practice. The White Paper itself should not be viewed as the pinnacle for adult education in Ireland, but rather as the starting point for a long-awaited period of development in terms of policy and investment.

### ***The AONTAS Top Ten***

In 2001, in preparation for the recent general election, AONTAS held a further round of regional consultations to look at developments to date, and outline its electoral aims. Ten issues for the lifetime of this current Government were identified, on which AONTAS campaigned during the latter half of 2001 and spring 2002. These ten are:

1. Retention of a Minister of State with specific responsibility for adult education.
2. Continued investment in the adult education service to bring it up to 10% of the education budget by 2006.
3. Doubling the investment for NALC to ensure the establishment of the Technical Support Units.
4. Establishment of the Local Adult Learning Boards with an attached fund for set-up, support and training.
5. Capital expenditure budget for adult education starting with an initial allocation of €12m.
6. Investment of €20m per annum for the Community Education Sector.
7. Free access for all to upper second level education.
8. Immediate implementation of the recommendations of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education.
9. Abolition of fees for adult students on part-time, distance and modular courses.

10. Development of recognised qualifications for workers in the adult education service, including accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL).

Already, AONTAS has welcomed to her post the new Minister of State with responsibility for Adult Education, Youth Affairs and Educational Disadvantage, Síle deValera. AONTAS now looks forward to the achievement of the remaining aims contained in its pre-election campaign, through the full implementation of the AONTAS strategic plan.

**Section 2: Issues Raised and Stakeholders Identified by Region**

## DONEGAL

### Holiday Inn, Letterkenny, May 23, 2002

A list of those attending the Donegal meeting is provided in Appendix 1.

#### *Issues Raised in Open Session*

- **Childcare Problems:** Associated in particular with the *Back to Education Initiative* (BTEI), for which childcare provision is inadequate. Difficulties result from the mechanisms in place at the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, who will only invest in a particular type of childcare i.e. building crèche facilities. The inflexibility of the childcare made available for BTEI participants therefore becomes a major barrier to participation. For women in rural areas for example, it may be more suitable to have children cared for by a family member or neighbour, but the Department cannot currently resource this kind of childcare.
- **Transport:** Transport to and from courses / facilities is considered inadequate, especially given the size and rural nature of Donegal as a county. Isolation therefore becomes a major factor for potential participants in schemes. The lack of public transport in particular is a huge issue for adult learners in Donegal.
- **Island Facilities:** Transport and travel for those living on the islands is a significant difficulty, given that most courses are run on the mainland. The physical situation of island residents seeking to participate in learning therefore needs special attention.
- **Premises:** Primary school premises are not available for the provision of courses, and the sourcing of adequate premises is very difficult. Rental often comes out of programme funds, and premises obtained may still not be suitable to adult learning.
- **Rural Population:** There were concerns that the numbers required to attend courses in order to secure funding could not always be achieved in a rural setting. There was a very strong request for flexibility from the Department of Education in respect of funding, and a consideration of the size of Donegal, and its scattered population.
- **Learner Focus:** A strong view was held that the learner should remain the focus of the education process, which meant that the views and voices of learners needed to be heard at local and national levels when decisions were being made.

- **Barriers to Participation:** There was a discussion about non-participation, especially among rural men. Finance was identified as a particular barrier to access for both further and higher education. Even where fees were not due, ancillary costs, such as childcare, books and equipment were still creating difficulties.
- **Partnership:** The need to work in partnership locally and regionally in an equal way was identified as a key issue.
- **Investment:** The need for continued and expanded investment in the sector was highlighted. For example in the area of literacy, where significant investment has already been made, learners were still only receiving 2 hours of tutoring per week. Furthermore, in rural areas especially, alternative means of delivering tuition, such as the TV and Radio series were crucial.

*Stakeholders Identified in Practical Session*

<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Non-Statutory</i>
North Western Health Board	Participants/Learners
Health workers: Doctors, Public Health Nurses etc.	Previous Participants
Social Workers	Missing Stakeholder / Non-Participants
Funding Bodies	Community Education Groups
Department of Education & Science	Voluntary Sector
Department of Social & Family Affairs	Redundant Workers
Department of Community (Rural & Gaeltacht) Affairs	Mother/Toddler Groups
Udárás na Gaeltachta	Parents of small children
Partnerships	Second Chance Education Projects
FAS	Sports Groups
VEC	Women's Groups
Schools	ICA
Home School Liaison Officers	Women's Network Ballybofey
VTOS	Men's Groups
YouthReach	Caring Organisations
Adult Education Providers	Special Needs Groups
	Environmental/Green groups
	Community Groups

<p>Family Resource Centres</p> <p>Unemployment Centres</p> <p>State Bodies</p> <p>Teagasc</p> <p>Mental Health Care Providers</p> <p>Public Transport Providers</p> <p>Gardai</p> <p>Juvenile Liaison Officer</p> <p>Information Providers/ libraries</p> <p>Donegal Youth Service</p> <p>Local Councillors</p> <p>County Childcare Committee</p> <p>Legislators / Policy Makers</p>	<p>Transport Providers</p> <p>Travellers' Training Centres</p> <p>Traveller Projects</p> <p>Trade Unions</p> <p>Community Development Projects</p> <p>Priests/Clergy</p> <p>IFA</p> <p>Macra na Feirme</p> <p>Healthy Eating Programmes</p> <p>Art &amp; Craft Projects</p> <p>Parent's Associations</p> <p>Employers</p> <p>Families</p> <p>Local Community</p> <p>The Media</p>
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**This meeting had a lot of energy, and there was a general feeling of determination to continue and develop the work of adult and community education in Donegal.**

## DUBLIN

### Buswells Hotel, Dublin, May 28 2002

A list of those attending the Dublin meeting is provided in Appendix 1.

#### *Issues Raised in Open Session*

- **Terms & Conditions:** Rates of pay, terms and conditions of those working in the adult education sector were identified as largely poor. Currently there are no real career structures and qualifications available, and high staff turnover becomes a problem affecting the quality of services delivered. *Professionalisation* of the sector really needs to be addressed.
- **Ageism:** The tendency to focus on the economic benefits of adult education and lifelong learning created a bias against the participation of older people in schemes and programmes. The adult education sector needs to address the age issue.
- **Access for Part Time Workers:** Part time and shift workers have difficulties in accessing education and training opportunities. This issue arose in the context of a discussion on the BTEI, which was initially targeted at the most disadvantaged. The employment situation in Ireland has since changed, and the numbers of workers in low paid unskilled work has expanded. Schemes therefore need to be available to meet the needs of those employed on a part time basis or in low paid jobs, and not simply the unwaged.
- **Childcare:** Problems for individuals in accessing and financing childcare were common across all groups of adult learners.
- **Quality versus Quantity:** The impact of literacy / adult education in quality terms, as opposed to mere numbers of participants, is not being gauged at local level. Course providers need to be more in touch with the needs of their learners, and it is necessary to measure quality of outcomes in more substantial ways than counting participants.
- **Literacy:** The VECs are currently developing strategic literacy plans to plan a more coherent service.
- **Funding & Investment:** More resources are needed for adult education, especially as regards premises. The lack of suitable premises is resulting in health & safety issues and needs to be addressed.

*Stakeholders Identified in Practical Session*

<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Non-statutory</i>
Open University Tutors	Open University Learners
Universities	Women's Groups
Other Third Level Institutions	ICA
L.E.S. (Local Employment Services)	Community Groups
Outreach Services	Local Networks
Funding Agencies	Community Education Providers
Politicians TDs / Councillors	Frontline staff inc. Project Workers, clerical workers, caretakers
Government Representatives	Adult Education Providers
Department of Education & Science	Adult Education Tutors
Department of Social & Family Affairs	Volunteer Tutors
Department of Community Affairs	Participants / learners at all levels
Adult Education Providers	Wider Community
Adult Education Tutors	Childcare providers
Adult Education Guidance Service	Special Needs / Disability Groups
FAS	Asylum Seekers
VEC (Co. Dublin and Dublin City)	Refugee Charities
Home School Liaison Officers	Travellers' Groups
Teachers	Low Paid Workers
Schools	
Health Boards	
Area Partnerships	
Resource Centres	
Local Authorities	
Equality Authorities	
Libraries	
Refugee Agencies	

## ATHLONE

### Hodson Bay Hotel, Athlone, May 29 2002

A list of those attending the Athlone meeting is provided in Appendix 1

#### *Issues Raised in Open Session*

- **Funding & Investment:** More investment is needed in adult education overall, especially for capital expenditure: Premises are in poor condition, with no caretakers or services. Investment is needed in facilities for Guidance Projects, as funding for these remains too small to develop a comprehensive service.
- **Literacy Levels:** The view was held that literacy levels achieved in primary and 2nd level schools are often poor, and formal education is not catering for all children in the region. This led to alienation from education for adults.
- **3<sup>rd</sup> Level Costs:** Over 23s cannot afford the fees for part time places (at the Institute of Technology and elsewhere). Courses at 3<sup>rd</sup> level need to be better funded, as adult and part time places should be subsidised.
- **Childcare:** Difficulties were arising in accessing childcare, especially for participants in the *Back to Education Initiative* (BTEI). Crèche facilities being established with funding from the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, do not provide the flexibility needed for those wishing to participate. In the rural setting, it is often more convenient to have children cared for by family, and this issue should be addressed jointly by the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform and the Department of Education & Science.
- **Rural Population:** Rural counties are at a disadvantage when services are devised based on population figures. Policies therefore need to be 'proofed' rurally, and resources should not be allocated on the basis of population figures only. Again, the issues of poor transport provision and isolation are affecting learners in this region.
- **Integrated Approach:** It was felt to be crucial to have an integrated approach to the provision of adult education programmes at county and regional level. There is currently fragmentation between a range of organisations, which means duplication of effort and a random approach to providing services. A coordinated and strategic approach involving all relevant stakeholders would be more effective. In this context, Leitrim Partnership was flagged as a model of good practice.

*Stakeholders Identified*

<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Non-Statutory</i>
Lionra	IBEC
Athlone Institute of Technology (Adult & Continuing Education Dept)	Leadership Groups
County Arts Officers	Women's Groups
Adult Education Centres	Women's Networks
Department of Social & Family Affairs	ICA
Department of Community Affairs	Adult Education Centres
Border, Midlands and Western (BMW) Representatives	Chambers of Commerce
Strategic Policy Committees	Travellers
Western Development Commission	Cross Border Groups
FÁS	Farmers Groups
Family Life Centres	Sporting Organisations
VEC	Trade Unions
Adult Education Organiser	Bord Fáilte
Literacy Organiser	
County Childcare Committee	
CERT	
Teagasc	
Partnership Companies - Education & Training Officer	
Health Boards	
County Development Boards	
Libraries	
County Enterprise Board	
IDA	

**The group attending the meeting felt that the opportunity to attend a networking event facilitated by an organisation like AONTAS, with no vested local interest, was valuable. The participant from Athlone Institute of Technology, Michael Tobin, suggested that he could host a further meeting of local stakeholders. AONTAS could support this event by giving a more in-depth input on strategic planning to the group.**

## CORK

### Silver Springs Hotel, Cork, June 12 2002

A list of those attending the Cork meeting is provided in Appendix 1.

#### *Issues Raised in Open Session*

- **Capital Expenditure:** Lack of investment in premises is a big issue, with classes being conducted in unsuitable old prefabs and run down buildings. This in turn is causing health and safety problems.  
Difficulty arises in lobbying for resources, as money needs to come from the Department of Finance to Education & Science. Both departments therefore need to be pursued and pressured on this issue.
- **Overall Investment:** The point was made that investment in adult education should be on a par with that in mainstream third level education.
- **NALC:** Questions arose as to how independent and powerful the National Adult Learning Council might be, and how its policy direction would be determined. This matter is currently under discussion by the NALC members.
- **NALC & LALBs:** Questions were raised about the foreseen relationship between the Local Adult Learning Boards to be established, and the NALC. There were concerns about representation on the LALBs for learners and community education representatives, and it remains unclear how these representatives will be chosen.

#### *Stakeholders Identified in Practical Session*

<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Non-Statutory</i>
FÁS	NALA
CERT	Employers
Teagasc	Adult Guidance Service
County Enterprise Board	Local Tutors
County Development Board	Early School Leavers
CEDO	Local Voluntary Organisations
RAPID	Marginalized Group Representatives
2 <sup>nd</sup> Level Schools with Adult Courses	Geographically Based Community Groups

NYP Coordinator	Community Councils
Partnership Board (Farmer rep; Community Development rep; Education rep)	Community Development Projects
VEC (especially AEO)	Community Learners (Senior Citizens, Young People, Parents, Disabled, Men, Women, Literacy Students, FE Students)
Teacher Training Centres	Community Education Providers
VTOS	Volunteers
Directors of Adult Education Centres	Facilitators (Union Rep)
FETAC	Evaluators
HETAC	Retirement Groups
NQAI Locally	Child Minding Ireland
Gardai	Sporting Organisations
Family Resource Centres	Macra na Feirme
Community Care Services	Muintir na Tire
Third Level Colleges	Carers Associations
Department of Community (Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs)	STEPS (ex-prisoners)
Department of Social & Family Affairs	IBEC
Probation Services	Local Business
Health Boards	Chamber of Commerce
Funders	Transport Providers
Home School Liaison Officers	Craft Council of Ireland
	Literacy Schemes
	Travellers Representatives
	Asylum seekers
	Potential Women Leaders
	Women's Groups and Networks
	ICA
	C & V Fora
	IFA
	Cork Adult Education Council

## WEXFORD

### Talbot Hotel, Wexford, 13 June 2002

A list of those attending the Wexford meeting is provided in Appendix 1.

#### *Issues Raised in Open Session*

- **Community Education Facilitators:** Questions were asked about where the Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) would be placed in relation to the VEC / LALB etc. There was concern as to what definition of 'community education' would be used in the design and fulfilment of these positions, and what the criteria for applicant selection would be.
- **Capital Expenditure:** Investment is needed in suitable premises for adult education which are lacking at present.
- **Childcare:** In general, childcare is poor for adult education programmes. In particular, there were concerns about the requirement to use only registered child minders in order to receive expenses for childcare, when often leaving children with friends or family is more suitable.
- **Integration at Local Level:** A complex array of decision-making bodies, agencies and partnerships now exists at the local level, all of whom are making demands on the time and resources of community education groups. Those working in the field of community and adult education simply do not have the resources to make a significant contribution to each of these bodies at local, regional and national level, and this needs to be addressed. Similarly, it is difficult to establish a rapport with all the various statutory agencies in a given area, and coordinate approaches.

#### *Stakeholders Identified in Practical Session*

<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Non-Statutory</i>
Youth Reach	Adult Education Participants
Youth Train	Adult Education Consultative Network
Health Boards	Community Groups
Waterford Institute of Technology: Adult Education Department	Voluntary Sector
Outreach Wexford/Carlow	Community Development Projects
	Ferns Diocesan Youth Service (FDYS)

<p>Adult Education Organisers</p> <p>Family Resource Centres</p> <p>County / City Development Boards</p> <p>Adrian Patterson (St Peter's College)</p> <p>Community Education Facilitators</p> <p>VEC</p> <p>VTOS</p> <p>Wexford Area Partnership</p> <p>County Wexford Partnership</p> <p>ADM Limited</p> <p>FÁS</p> <p>Home School Liaison Officers</p> <p>Department of Social &amp; Family Affairs</p>	<p>Community Education Providers (Inc. Women, Men, Travellers Reps)</p> <p>Adult Literacy Providers</p> <p>Missing Stakeholder (Those who cannot avail of education because of childcare issues; lack of awareness; miscellaneous reasons)</p> <p>Wexford Platform for Inclusion and Equality (PIE)</p> <p>Access 2000</p> <p>National Youth Federation of Ireland</p> <p>CE Wexford Steering Group (WIT Cert)</p> <p>Regional Guidance Centre (Regional and Local)</p> <p>Men's Groups</p>
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### **Section 3: Discussion and Conclusion**

## **Discussion Overview**

Reading the previous sections of this report should make it clear that despite the many welcome developments in the adult education sector in recent times, many concerns still remain to be addressed. The regional meetings identified a number of common problems or issues being faced by members throughout the island of Ireland. These issues are not necessarily new, but are problems that have not been effectively addressed in the past and therefore recur time and again. These issues include capital expenditure, childcare and overall investment in the adult education sector, and are by no means minor difficulties to be resolved overnight.

The meetings have further identified area-specific issues, or problems that are felt to be more pressing in particular localities. There would appear to be an 'urban-rural dimension' to certain issues, for example public transport and rural isolation, which leave particular population groups in need of special attention when policies are being devised. Again, the concerns being voiced are by no means new, but have been lingering for some time despite the range of policy initiatives coming on stream in recent years. It may be useful to look at the common issues and area-specific issues separately, so that it is clear where resources need to be directed in order to resolve these matters.

## ***Common Issues***

### **Structures**

A number of questions arose about the new structures being put in place to form the framework for the delivery of adult education in Ireland. Members throughout the country were interested in the National Adult Learning Council or NALC, and what its role would actually be within adult education. There were concerns about NALC's ability to remain autonomous, and about its overall purpose in determining policy directions. This may point to the need for NALC to quickly establish its mission and goals, to alleviate concerns at local level about its remit and independence.

Concern was voiced at most meetings about the structure of the Local Adult Learning Boards or LALBs. The means by which representatives would be chosen for the Boards was thus far unclear, and this needs to be addressed quickly by the Department of Education & Science. In particular, there were concerns about how the community and learner representatives would be chosen. As an extension of this issue, members in many regions raised the issue of the recruitment of the 35 Community Education Facilitators, which is due to take place later in 2002. Members wanted to be informed of the criteria that would be used in this recruitment process, and the kind of qualifications that would be necessary for candidates. It was clear that members felt that making third level

qualifications a criterion would create a barrier for those with experience in community education, who might be very suited to these positions. It was also noted that the definition of community education used to underpin these positions would be critical.

A final, and broader issue that arose in relation to structures was the importance of working in partnership at local level. A vast range of local and regional agencies and bodies now exists, many of which have a 'lifelong learning' remit. This places a burden on small community education groups to contribute to each of these bodies, when the resources to do so are not available. The local approach to providing adult education services is becoming increasingly fragmented as these groups carry out their individual remits in isolation. This situation is unacceptable, and groups need to network and coordinate their roles more effectively to improve service provision. Again, NALC and the LALBs were seen as having a key role in coordination. AONTAS delivered a workshop on strategic planning designed to encourage members to start thinking about working in partnership with other agencies. However, it is important to recognise that this kind of approach will demand resources that are not available to all groups at this current time.

### Supports

The various issues surrounding the support of learners returning to education and training arose in all regions. The feeling was that although many new schemes are being made available, a large proportion of the adult population could not access these opportunities because adequate and suitable supports are not yet in place. The issue at the forefront of many minds in this regard was that of childcare.

Childcare is by no means a new problem for those seeking to access adult education in Ireland, and various attempts have been made to resolve the problem. The major concern members were voicing at this round of meetings related to the childcare attached to the *Back to Education Initiative* (BTEI). Unlike VTOS, whereby participants are given an individual childcare allowance to be used as necessary, the childcare attached to BTEI is much less flexible. The funding for BTEI childcare comes from the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, and goes towards the building and staffing of crèche facilities only. This means that parents seeking to participate in BTEI can use only particular crèche facilities, and friends or family members cannot look after children. This is a huge barrier to participation across the country, but especially in rural areas, where the nearest crèche facility can be a considerable distance from the parent's home. The issue of childcare is always a difficult one, but in this instance, can surely be resolved by a more flexible allowance for participants in BTEI.

The issue of fees has been on the AONTAS list of priorities for many years. Again, at this round of meetings, concerns arose in relation to payment of fees for certain adult learners, particularly those on part-time courses, becoming a barrier to participation. It was not simply a matter of counting fees alone in deciding whether or not to participate in a course of learning: ancillary costs like books, equipment and exam fees were also to be considered. AONTAS will again seek to have free access for all to second level education and the abolition of fees for adult learners on part time, modular and distance learning courses placed high on the policy agenda for the current Government.

### **Investment**

Overall investment in adult education was felt throughout the country to be unrealistically low. One member pointed out that investment in the sector should be on a par with that in third level education. Capital expenditure and investment in premises was undoubtedly the key issue identified. Time after time, members reported their forced use of inadequate and unsuitable premises, a lack of care-taking and support staff, and a range of health and safety problems arising out of this situation. Schools were not always made available for courses, and did not necessarily provide an appropriate environment and atmosphere for the adult learner in any case. Rental costs for these premises were coming out of core course funds. The situation is totally unacceptable and should be addressed as soon as possible. AONTAS is seeking a capital expenditure budget for adult education, starting with an initial allocation of €12m.

The view was expressed that despite the increased investment in the sector during the lifetime of the previous government, further serious investments are needed to sustain and grow the sector. The example was given of adult literacy: Despite the increase in the literacy budget from €1m in 1997 to €16.4m in 2002, learners are still only receiving 2 hours tuition per week. Because adult education has started from such a low base, the increase in investment needs to develop steadily.

### ***Area Specific Issues***

#### **Rural Population**

Apart from the major common issues described above, a number of matters caused greater difficulty in specific areas for various reasons. The problems associated with childcare and the BTEI previously outlined were felt more acutely in rural areas, due to the sheer size of the geographical areas involved and the scattered nature of rural populations: The ability to have children cared for by relatives or friends in an isolated area would greatly benefit a parent who currently needs to

travel miles to the nearest crèche facility before attending a course. This leads into a more general point about the urban-rural dimension within adult education, and the need for policy makers to acknowledge that such a dimension exists.

The current government strategy involves the establishment of services on a per capita basis. Courses are funded on the basis that a minimum number of participants are available to partake of the course. However, this is obviously to the disadvantage of potential learners in the rural setting. At the regional meeting in Athlone, for example, the point was raised that it is extremely difficult to make up these kinds of numbers across a vast region with small population centres. This was also true of Donegal, a huge county with a scattered population. It was felt very strongly in the West and in Donegal that the Department of Education & Science needed to revise its 'numbers' policy, and to take into consideration rural population dispersal. This would mean flexibility being brought into Departmental thinking on course funding, and would also mean recognition of the fact that quality of outcome for the learner is more critical in evaluating success than the numbers attending the course. The concept of 'rural proofing' for policies was suggested as a way of determining whether policies would work in a rural context.

### **Transport**

Transport is an issue for all learners, given its cost and the difficulties involved in accessing it. However, it was very apparent in the Athlone region and in Donegal that public transport in particular was a huge issue for learners. Especially in Donegal, as noted already, a vast county with a dispersed population, adequate public transport provision to meet the needs of learners was simply not in place. This is an issue that needs to be addressed, especially in the rural context.

A particular and extreme case of inadequate transport provision presented itself in the case of the island residents of Donegal. Given that most adult and community education schemes are run on the mainland, access to and from the islands to these courses was extremely limited. The case is more than likely similar on the other islands off the Irish coast. Again, AONTAS believes that special consideration needs to be afforded island residents, and that they cannot simply be forgotten about in the organisation of an adult education service.

### **Part-time / Shift / Low Paid Workers**

In Dublin, the issue of access to training and education for part time and low paid workers came through more strongly than in other regions. Since the introduction of the BTEI for example, which

was originally aimed at very disadvantaged unwaged individuals, the employment situation in Ireland has changed. A situation now exists where vast numbers of workers are in very low paid or unskilled employment, or are working on a part time basis. However, the criteria for access to BTEI mean that these individuals cannot access courses because of the incoming wage. This is one of the areas where the net could be broadened to attract more of those who are experiencing educational disadvantage, while still in employment. There was also a view in Dublin that ageism was a big factor in adult education: The constant reference in policy documents to the economic benefits of lifelong learning was doing little to dispel this view.

### **Conclusion**

As the above discussion demonstrates, the AONTAS regional meetings have again proved a valuable source of information on the current state of adult and community education in Ireland. Compiling this report has allowed us to identify the major issues of concern to members, not only across the country as a whole, but also in particular regions. AONTAS now intends to bring these issues to the attention of the policy makers and officials with whom we work, and to voice the concerns of members in the many national fora where the organisation has representation. The report will be distributed to members, so that the issues raised can also be addressed at the local level, and organisations can begin to tackle these issues in developing their own strategic thinking.

AONTAS will be closely reviewing progress in the adult education service over the next number of months. We will be seeking to complete our current strategic plan, and develop the future policy direction of the organisation. This regional meeting report provides a record of the current issues in adult education in Ireland, and can therefore act as a benchmark by which to monitor future progress. AONTAS looks forward to progressing the issues raised by all delegates at the regional meetings, and to working towards improving our adult education service over the lifetime of the current Government and beyond.

**Appendix 1: List of Delegates at AONTAS Regional Meetings**

**MEETING 1: DONEGAL**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Organisation:</b>
Martha Baskin	ICA
Norah Cullinan Breslin	Donegal Co. Childcare Committee
Brid McMenamin	Lifford / Clonleigh Resource Centre
Isabel Doherty	ICA & Set Dancing
Marjorie Doherty	ICA & Set Dancing
Kathleen McCarthy	ICA & Set Dancing
Maureen McLaughlin	ICA & CAIT
Sandra Sweeney	Park View House / North Western Health Board
Breda Rodden	Youthreach Letterkenny
Mary Byrne	HSCL / Rosses Community School
Jim Doherty	Inishowen Community Radio FM
Marrietta Herraghty	Mevagh Resource Centre
Grace Ward	Arranmore Women's Group
Paula Leonard	Donegal Travellers' Project
Eithne Kennedy	Second Chance Education Project
Noreen McGlynn	Second Chance Education Project
Toni Devine	Second Chance Education Project
Kate Morgan	Second Chance Education Project
Josephine Murphy	Second Chance Education Project
Theresa Quinn	Second Chance Education Project
Jan Lewis	Second Chance Education Project
Myles Sweeney	Ionad Teampall Chroine
Bridget Wilhare	Donegal VEC
Mary McHugh	Donegal VEC
Helen McHugh	Donegal VEC
Brid Corrigan	Donegal VEC
Máire McCormick	Donegal VEC

Joyce Burns	Donegal VEC (ALO)
Dolores McGeady	Donegal VEC (ALO)
Brid McIntyre	Donegal VEC (ALO)
Crona Gallagher	Donegal VEC (AEO)
Martin Gormley	Donegal VEC (AEO)
Eugene Burns	Donegal VEC (ALO)
Lee Stephenson	Donegal Youth Service
Mary Gallagher	Mná Cois Ferraige
Maire Bonar	Mná Cois Ferraige
Marie Quigg	Serenity House
Maura Cannon	Serenity House
Joanne Donaghy	Lifford Youthreach
Martina Needham	Donegal Basic Education
Virginia Fox	Donegal Women's Network
Anne Roulstone	HSCL / Deelee College
May O'Donnell	ECHO
Nuala Flynn	HSCL / Scoil Mhuire
Phyllis O'Flaherty	Mná Ceilteach, Gortahork
Pamela Smyth	CAIT Initiative
Tony McDaid	Raphoe Youth & Community Project
Mary Kerr	St Johnston / Carrigans Resource Centre
Annette Conway	HSC Liaison / St Eunan's NS Raphoe
Colm Davis	HSCL Coordinator
Sophie Geraghty	Cumann Uiscédhath Rosguill
Patricia Kiely	Donegal Town Women's Group
Mary Kavanagh Chandle	ICA
Noel Bradley	Mevagh Resource Centre
Bairbre NicGhabhann	Mevagh Resource Centre
Teresa Kenny	ICA
Siobhan Walsh	Adult Education Milford VEC
Denise Delaney	Donegal Travellers' Project
Nellie Hannon	Donegal Youth Service

John McGee	St Fiachra's Centre / Traveller Training
Caitriona NiCheallaigh	Tir Boghaine
Louise O'Brien	Ardara Women's Group
Marion Buchanan	Mevagh Resource Centre
Kathleen Brady	Arranmore Women's Group
Ide Fisher	Donegal Adult Literacy
Margaret O'Donnell	Resource Association Dunfanaghy
Katherine McLaughlin	
Margaret McGinley	
Anne Morgan	
Jacqueline Rooney	
Kenneth McNulty	
Annie McGroary	

**MEETING 2: DUBLIN**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Susan Dunne	Kildare VEC
Mary Quinn	Drogheda Resource Centre
Ina McCrumlish	Drogheda Partnership
Máire O'Brien	Open University Student
Patrice Byrne	IADT-Dun Laoghaire
PJ Garvan	NPCPP (CD VEC)
Pat Ayton	CD VEC
Kathleen Forde	CD VEC
Leonora O'Reilly	CD VEC
Bernadette Brady	CDVEC
Cathleen Hogan	CDVEC
Mike Egan	AONTAS VP
Robin Webster	Age Action Ireland
Susan Cullinane	Network Kildare / Kildare VEC
Mairead Johnston	NWCIAN Education Group
Dolores O'Neill	Clondalkin Women's Community Ed. Steering Group
Jacinta Donnelly	Clondalkin Women's Network
Jacqueline Byrne	Rowlagh Women's Group
Susan Foley	Rowlagh Women's Group
Niamh Maguire	Bray Adult Learning Centre
Maureen O'Rafferty	TUI
Mary Carolan	ICA
Aedin O'Toole	Dun Laoghaire VEC
Katherine Dowds	SIPTU Basic English Scheme
Anne Troy	Ronanstown Women's CDP
Mark Hogan	HACE St Vincent's Trust
Sinead Howard	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
Derek Fitzpatrick	Dublin City Development Board
Paul Carroll	Co. Dublin VEC
John Stewart	NALA

**MEETING 3: ATHLONE**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Organisation:</b>
Jarlath McDonagh	Co. Galway VEC
Mark Kennedy	Roscommon VEC
Sean Beime	Roscommon VEC
Tom Callaghan	Roscommon VEC
Briege Fullam	Roscommon VEC
Tom Costello	Roscommon VEC
Eileen Fahey	Roscommon Partnership Company
Carmel Hyland	Longford VEC
Patrick Clarke	Longford VEC
Paddy O'Rourke	Co. Leitrim VEC
Francis Martin	Co. Leitrim VEC
Mike Dollard	Westmeath VEC
Sheila Donnellan	Co. Galway VEC
Michael Tobin	Athlone Institute of Technology
Eileen Campbell	Western Women's Link
Patrick Bannon	

**MEETING 4: CORK**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Organisation:</b>
Mary Lyne	South Kerry Partnership
Sara Bourke	Tipperary Women's Network
Patricia Kennedy	VTOS Limerick
Carmel Sheridan	City of Limerick VEC
Brenda McKenna	City of Limerick VEC
Jacqui O'Riordan	Higher Education Equality Unit
Michael O'Kelly	Co. Limerick VEC
Margaret Murphy	Adult Education Committee
Loretta O' Brien	Ballymanty
Pat McAuliffe	Co. Limerick VEC
Mary Walsh	Co. Waterford VEC
Una Long	CALP Mayfield
Mary Kelly	CALP Mayfield
Eleanor Calnan	Cork Adult Learning Council
Eamonn Langford	O'Connell Centre for Adult Education
Tony Leary	City of Cork VEC
Wendy Goggin	Southill Integrated Development Programme
Bob Keating	Co. Tipperary S VEC
James O'Laughlin	Cork Adult Education Council
John Ryan	AONTAS President
Eva O'Connell	Cork Adult Education Council
Mary Sherwin	Cork Adult Education Council
Gerry Dunne	Cork Adult Education Council
Sean O Murchu	Adult Education Council
J. Griffin	Cork VEC
Audrey Cullen	Northside Community Enterprises Cork
Sr Florence O'Sullivan	All Hallows Literacy
Majella Gould	CWEI

**MEETING 5: WEXFORD**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Organisation:</b>
Marian Duffy	VTOS Carlow
Ellie Hughes	Access 2000
Samantha Byrne	Access 2000
Pauline Ennis	Access 2000
Nuncie Murphy	Access 2000
Gill Casey	Access 2000
Paddy Nolan	Wexford VEC
Eileen Curtis	Kilkenny VEC
Maria Brennan	Wexford Area Partnership
Margaret O'Brien	FAB Community Development Project
Barbara Murphy	FAB Community Development Project
Anne Beaver	FAB Community Development Project
Christine Cronin	Co. Wexford Partnership
Don Murphy	Co. Wexford Partnership
Andrew Doherty	South East Men's Network
Bernard Morgan	South East Men's Network
Christine Jordan	
Ethna Kinsella	