

Network for Adult Learning Across Borders A Shared Vision for Educational Equality

Date: Friday, 5th March 2021

Time: 11.00am – 1.00pm

Location: Online Via Zoom

Event Registration: <https://www.aontas.com/events/policy-day-adult-learners-festival-2021>

About the Event:

This policy day event will be the closing event of the 2021 AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival and will bring adult learners, practitioners and tutors from across the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, through the Network for Adult Learning Across Borders (NALAB), to discuss adult learning across the region. In keeping with the theme of the Festival, Better Together, the purpose of the event is to bring together our neighbours in adult learning, to learn, discuss and work towards greater educational equality across the region. Participants at the event will have an opportunity to learn about what's happening in adult learning and meet educators and learners through the discussion sessions.

About NALAB:

NALAB - the Network for Adult Learning Across Borders brings the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales together in our shared vision for educational equality. NALAB is an umbrella partnership of leading organisations within the field of adult and community education. Individually each organisation conducts advocacy work and research to promote and protect the rights of adults and their communities to equal participation in quality education and learning. NALAB's regional network advocates for educational equality for adults across the five jurisdictions building expertise, sharing best practice and addressing challenges in both policy and practice. For more information on NALAB please click [here](#).

About the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund:

AONTAS successfully advocated for investment in community education during COVID-19, and welcomed the announcement by Minister Simon Harris TD of an €8 million Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund. Following the implementation of the fund, in February 2021, AONTAS conducted two surveys to capture the processes and impact of MAEDF through the perspective of community education groups and ETB representatives who administered the fund. A brief report developed by AONTAS will be launched at the Policy Day Event. This report celebrates this valuable fund, and, taking a reflective view, considers what we have learned from this first iteration to help inform future processes. For more information on this work please click [here](#).

AGENDA

Chairperson of Event – Tara Farrell (AONTAS, Chairperson)

11.00am-11.15am

Opening and Welcome

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD
(Video Message)

11.15am – 11.35am

The Value of Adult Learning in a COVID-19 Context – The Learner Experience

- Liam Shortall, Republic of Ireland
- Karen Woods, England
- Heather Brown, Scotland
- Emma Williams, Wales
- Denise Donaldson, Northern Ireland

11.35am- 11.55am

How can we make educational equality a reality for all adults across the UK and Ireland

- Niamh O'Reilly, CEO, AONTAS the National Adult Learning Organisation
- Stephen Evans, CEO, Learning and Work Institute, UK
- Trevor Neilands, Chair, Northern Ireland Impact Forum for Adult Learning
- Mhairi Harrington, Chair, Strategic Forum for Adult Learning, Scotland
- David Hagendyk, Director, L&W Cymru, Wales

11.55am-12.05pm

Q & A Session

Chaired by Tara Farrell, AONTAS Chairperson

12.05pm – 12.35pm

Breakout Sessions - Sharing Experience and Supporting Access and Engagement

- [Breakout 1 – Adult Learning, Health and Wellbeing](#)

This session will focus on: How can adult learning help create the wellbeing societies that governments now seek to build as part of the COVID-19 recovery? Perspectives from Wales and Northern Ireland will kick off the discussion.

- [Breakout 2 – Raising the voice of adult and community education across the five jurisdictions](#)

The session will kick start efforts to raise the profile of adult learning across Ireland, Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

- [Breakout 3 – Learners as Leaders](#)

Adult learners are central to advocacy and supporting participation in lifelong learning. For the first time, adult learners from across the regions will meet to plan future collaborative learner voice activities.

- [Breakout 4 – Community Education across the Nations](#)

An opportunity to meet counterparts in the community education field from across the regions; meet, share and discuss how we can build a community education movement.

- [Breakout 5 – Adult Learning across the Five Jurisdictions – Implications for policy](#)

A deepened discussion on collaboration across the regions, sharing policy priorities for adult learning.

12.35pm – 12.45pm

The Value and Future Potential of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund

Niamh O'Reilly, CEO and Eve Cobain, Research Officer, AONTAS

12.45pm – 12.55pm - [Policy Reflections](#)

Phil O'Flaherty, Principal Officer, DFHERIS

Andrew Brownlee, CEO, SOLAS

12.55pm – 1.00pm

Closing Remarks - Tara Farrell, Chairperson, AONTAS

SPEAKERS AND CONTRIBUTORS



Andrew Brownlee

Andrew Brownlee is the CEO at SOLAS, the national further education and training authority, having previously served as Executive Director for Strategy and Knowledge. At SOLAS, he has played a key role in putting in place a strategic performance framework for the further education and training (FET) system, in implementing reforms to support a simplified and more integrated provision model and in developing a new 5 year FET strategy which sets out an ambitious new vision for its next critical phase of development. He joined SOLAS from the Higher Education Authority, where he was Head of System Funding and led the establishment of a comprehensive governance framework and the reform of higher education funding. Prior to joining the public sector he had a long and distinguished career in management consultancy, working for PwC, PA Consulting and Fitzpatrick Associates, developing strategy and managing change for a diverse range of clients, with a particular focus on the education and skills sector.

Heather Brown

Heather Brown is an adult learner from Scotland. Over the last decade or so Heather is proud to have fitted a number of informal and formal learning opportunities around her life as a single mother of kids with complex additional support needs. These include a number of Arts and craft courses, a recently completed BA open degree with the Open University, practical learning Phase 1 in Signalong, and was taking part in a ceramics/pottery course that unfortunately had to be put on hiatus due to Covid restrictions. Through her continuing learning journey Heather has also become a volunteer and a community-based adult education tutor herself and hopes to progress to a formal teaching qualification.



Eve Cobain

Eve Cobain supports the delivery of AONTAS' research initiative, with a particular focus on community education. She received a PhD from Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in 2017 and has published research on community education, feminism and twentieth century poetry.

Denise Donaldson

Denise is an adult learner from Northern Ireland. She works part-time with the Irish News and has just completed a Women in Leadership course with WRDA over Zoom with 16 other women.



Stephen Evans

Stephen Evans became Chief Executive of the Learning and Work Institute in 2016 after two years as Deputy Chief Executive, where he was responsible for Learning and Work Institute's research and development work. He joined from Working Links, a leading provider for employment and skills services, where he led on policy, strategy and business development. Prior to this, he worked for the London Development Agency as Director of Employment and Skills, commissioning programmes and leading the work of the London Skills and Employment Board; was Chief Economist at the Social Market Foundation; and spent six years as Senior Policy Advisor in HM Treasury, leading on policy to cut child poverty, increase employment and boost productivity.

SPEAKERS AND CONTRIBUTORS



Tara Farrell

Tara Farrell is the Chairperson of AONTAS and Chief Executive Officer of Longford Women's Link (LWL). A native of Roscommon, Tara has over 20 years' experience in the Community, Voluntary and Education sectors, working in a variety of areas including Project Management, Social Economy, Gender Equality, Conflict Resolution and engaging in Broadcast and Social Media. She holds an LLM in International Human Rights Law and has also lectured in Political Science in the University of Limerick and Management Development at Dublin City University. Tara is a Director of Irish Rural Link and Roscommon Women's Network. Tara also lectures in Human Rights and Equality at St. Angela's College (National University of Ireland Galway) in Sligo. LWL has been engaged in a number of cross border and all-island programmes for the past number of years – Tara has been a member of the Steering Groups of both The New Common Charter (Centre for Cross Border Studies) and The Next Chapter (IRL, Politics Plus & NICVA) and is also part of the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South East-West Co-operation.



Mhairi Harrington OBE

Mhairi Harrington has worked for over 40 years in Education with her experience spanning Primary Education, Youth and Community Work, Adult Education and Further and Higher Education. As Principal and Chief Executive of West Lothian College from 2008 - 2018 she had responsibility for Strategic Leadership and Governance for all areas and functions of the college. Mhairi has served on a significant number of national, regional and local boards, committees and forums and is currently a member of the Developing Young Workforce Programme Board, has just completed Chairing the Review of the Professional Standards for Lecturers and is a Senior Fellow for the College Development Network. In 2015, Mhairi was awarded TES FE UK Leader of the Year in recognition of her collaborative leadership and partnership working. In 2016, she was awarded an OBE for Services to Education and in 2018 was honoured to be presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Glasgow Herald Higher Education Awards Event.



David Hagendyk

David is Director for Wales at Learning and Work Institute. He is responsible for leading the work of the organisation in Wales and for promoting to government and service providers the value of adult learning and the need for investment and policies to raise productivity, improve progression from low pay and reduce inequality. He has worked in leadership, campaigning and policy development roles in Wales for the last eighteen years. Prior to joining Learning and Work Cymru he worked for nearly seven years as the General Secretary of Welsh Labour. Prior to this he worked as the Political Liaison Officer for the University and College Union Cymru, as the Head of Policy for Welsh Labour, and as a researcher for Huw Lewis AM and Lynne Neagle AM.

SPEAKERS AND CONTRIBUTORS



Colin Neilands

Colin Neilands has been working in adult learning for almost 30 years, primarily in the community and voluntary sector. Colin set up and currently acts as the convenor of the Northern Ireland Impact Forum on Adult Learning, part of the United Kingdom's programme for the European Agenda for Adult Learning: The Forum seeks to share good practice and advocate for adult learning in Northern Ireland. For the past 4 years he has also worked in Northern Ireland as part of the EPALE UK team. Colin recently undertook a consultation on Belfast a Learning City to support the development of Belfast as a UNESCO Learning City. He is also an occasional trainer in good relations and leadership.

Trevor Neilands

Trevor is Chair of the Northern Ireland Adult Learning Impact Forum. He is a retired FE College Principal and is currently pursuing adult learning interests as both a student and a tutor.



Phil O'Flaherty

Phil O'Flaherty has been Principal Officer, leading the Further Education and Training (FET) Section of Department of Education and Skills and now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, since 2013. Phil leads the Department's policy and strategic oversight of reform and development in Ireland's further education and training sector. This includes engaging on significant programmes of work in areas such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills provision and the expansion of apprenticeship training. FET section works with agencies and sectoral stakeholders to support a diverse range of learners to engage with education and training and to develop responses to the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic for learners, educators, workers and employers.



Niamh O'Reilly

(Niamh O'Reilly (PhD Maynooth on community education and HE access policy) is CEO of AONTAS with 18 years' experience in the lifelong learning field as an educationalist with expertise in educational equality, learner voice, community education, policy analysis, organisational development and governance. Recently, she chaired the Irish COVID 19 tertiary education response working group on Mitigating Educational Disadvantage, and serves on the Board of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority.



Liam Shortall

Liam Shortall is an adult learner from the Republic of Ireland and has completed a Level 5 in Business with Tourism with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board. He attended the regional National FET Learner Forum event for Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board in March 2019 and went on to attend the National event in Croke Park in April 2019. Since then, he has shared his learner story with AONTAS through the Learner Spotlight feature in our learner newsletter, has taken part in the Learners as Leaders Peer Mentoring Programme, and has undergone training with Quality and Qualifications Ireland to become a learner representative.

SPEAKERS AND CONTRIBUTORS



Emma Williams

Emma Williams is an adult learner from Wales. She completed her BSc (Hons) in Forensic Science and her PGCE at Wrexham Glyndwr University. She is currently studying towards her MRes in Forensic Anthropology & Bioarchaeology whilst also working as a sessional lecturer in Forensic Science. In her spare time, Emma volunteers as a Mortuary Assistant for the NHS to support them during the pandemic.



Karen Woods

Karen Woods is an adult learner from England. She returned to learning in her 30s after years of struggling with reading and writing. She has since gone on to pursue a career in writing, and recently signed a book deal with publisher Harper Collins for two novels. She is a huge advocate for lifelong learning.