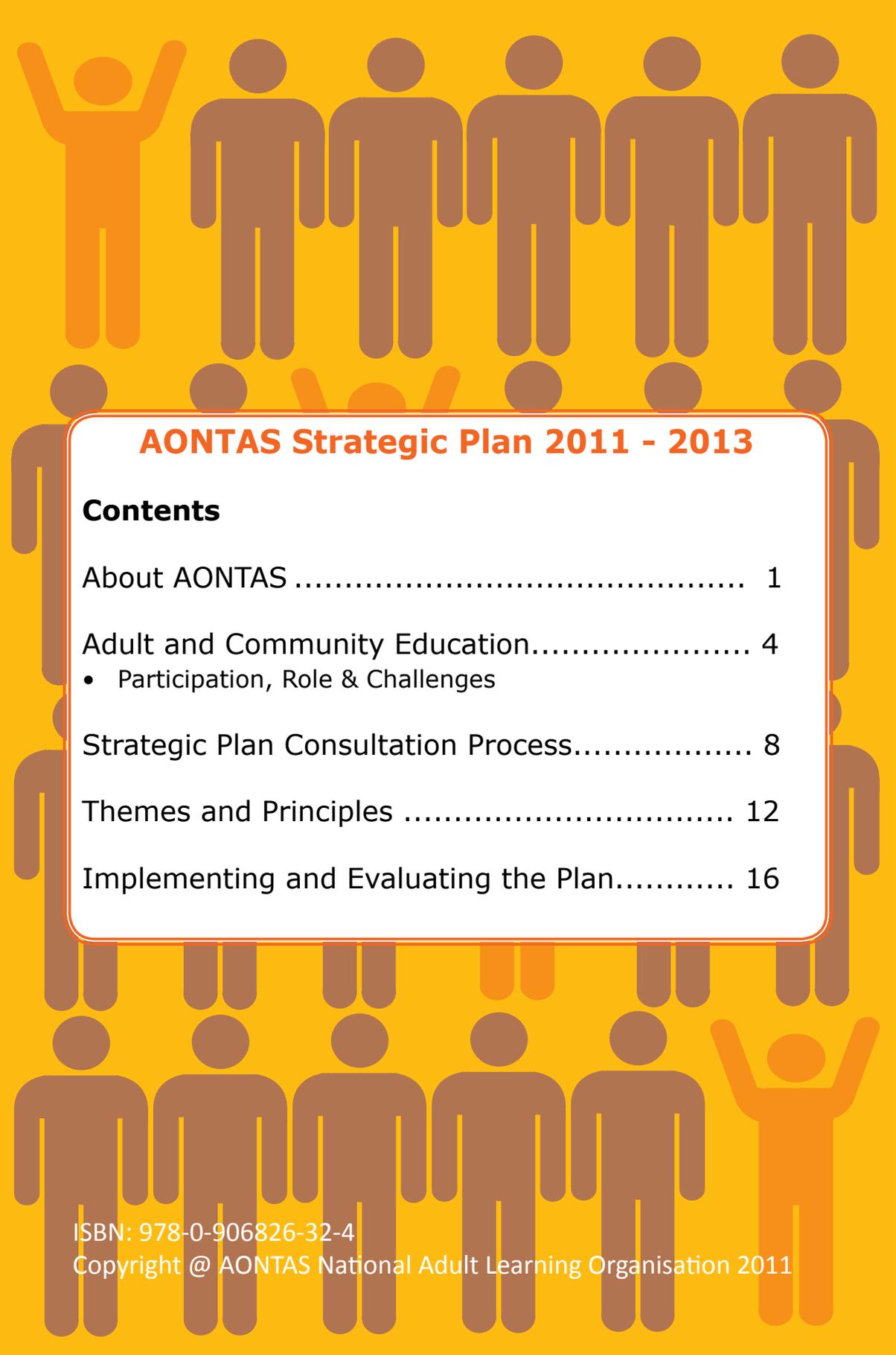


AONTAS

The Voice of Adult Learning





AONTAS Strategic Plan 2011 - 2013

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AONTAS – The Voice of Adult Learning

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. We are a non-government membership organisation established in 1969. The name AONTAS is an acronym in the Irish language; Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach, meaning ‘national adult education through voluntary unification’. The word AONTAS itself is also the Irish word for ‘unity’ or ‘union’, so the intention of the founders was that AONTAS would be identified by its inclusiveness. We are a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. We are core-funded by the Department of Education and Skills and we receive project funding from other sources from time to time.

Mission Statement

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



AONTAS as a membership organisation believes in the right of every adult to continue their learning throughout their lives.



What AONTAS believes in

AONTAS as a membership organisation believes in the right of every adult to continue their learning throughout their lives. We believe that adult and community education are equal and key components of the lifelong learning spectrum and are of vital importance to both the individual and to society as a whole. For the individual, adult learning provides a means of achieving ones full potential through developing confidence and skills essential for employability, nurturing creativity and imagination, enhancing family relationships and enabling civic participation. For society at large adult learning is essential to building a sustainable economy, promoting social change, highlighting structural inequalities and building a healthy democracy.

**Adult and community
education is an essential
part of the wider education
and training sector**



Participation in Adult Learning

The number of adults engaged in adult learning has increased dramatically over the past two years reflecting the increase in unemployment. A comparison between figures from the Department of Education and Science in 2008, and more recent figures from the Department of Education and Skills for 2010 show an increase of approximately 36,000 learners participating in adult, community and further education initiatives such as adult literacy, VTOS, PLCs, Senior Travelling Training Centres, Youthreach, and Community Education programmes bringing the numbers to more than 130,000 adults.

These figures exclude adults who participate in evening courses as well as those engaging in third level education. AONTAS estimates that as many as 30,000 learners participate in non-formal learning in community based projects funded by a mix of government departments and miscellaneous sources, while FAS provided 157,000 places in 2010.

PLC courses offered by colleges of further education also experience high participation of adults. In September 2010 research carried out by the TUI found that there were 90,000 applications for a maximum of 31,000 places available throughout the country.

Adult and community education acts as a progression route to higher level education borne out by the fact that one in every five applicants to the CAO in 2010 was a mature student. The numbers of mature students in university have increased from 9.6% in 2007/2008 to 10.3% in the 2009/2010 academic year. In the IOT sector this change has been even more pronounced, with the percentage rising from 12.3% in 2007/2008 to 17.6% in 2009/2010. 21,500 applicants had been approved for the Back to Education Allowance, in October 2010 with the final number of applicants expected to be even higher. In 2010 an additional 12,000 places were made available under the new Labour Market Activation Measures targeting people who are unemployed, an initiative welcomed by AONTAS.

The Role of Adult and Community Education

Adult and community education is an essential part of the wider education and training sector as it:

- **delivers a second chance option for early school leavers**
- **provides an effective way for adults to engage in accredited learning at FETAC level 1-5.**
- **provides opportunities for learning new skills, job promotion and changing career.**
- **prepares learners to access and progress to HETAC levels 6+**
- **delivers wider benefits to adult learners in terms of civic engagement, health and equality.**
- **has the capacity to engage in collaborative models of working with other education and training providers.**
- **delivers information and guidance to potential adult learners**

Adult and community education is unique in that it not only meets national policy priorities for all learners, including targeting the most disadvantaged groups, at the qualification levels identified in the National Skills Strategy but also results in wider benefits for adult learners, their families and communities thus delivering a highly effective, responsive form of education provision. A key strength of the sector is its learner-centred approach. It has developed strategies, approaches and supports that encourage learners back to education and enables them to develop their confidence, skills and abilities.



Challenges for Adult and Community Education.

The importance of adult and community education in a time of recession cannot be underestimated. It is a key driver of economic recovery and social development. High levels of unemployment and increasing demand for adult education and training in the context of diminishing resources is currently challenging providers to deliver a quality service.

Despite significant investment in adult, community and further education since the publication of the White Paper, Learning for Life in 2000, 21% of the current labour force still has the equivalent of a Junior Certificate or less(FETAC levels 1-3)

In 2009 81% of unemployed people contacting the AONTAS information referral service had been out of education and training for at least ten years and over half of that cohort had been out for more than 20 years. They will require additional support if they are to re-engage with education and training.

The drop in literacy levels in the second level system reported by the OECD in 2010 will also have implications for future demands on the service.

During the strategic plan consultation process AONTAS members identified the following key challenges for the adult and community education sector:-

- **Achieving recognition from government of the key role played by adult and community education in economic recovery, and resourcing it adequately to fulfil that role**
- **The effect of the Public Service Recruitment Embargo on the capacity of statutory providers to respond to learner demand**
- **The budgetary changes in financial supports for adult learners wishing to progress to higher education**
- **The need to strengthen and support adult guidance services to enable them to deliver appropriate information and supports to adult learners**
- **The need for training and education initiatives which are meaningful, flexible and lead to progression to further education/training and employment**

**Strategic Plan Consultation
Process**



Strategic Plan Consultation Process

During 2010 AONTAS engaged in a broad and deep consultation with its own members, key stakeholders and individuals to develop a strategic plan to guide it through the next three years. The details of the consultation process can be viewed on the AONTAS website at www.aontas.com. As part of the consultation process we reviewed the work of our Strategic Plan 2007-2010.

A summary of the key achievements of the past four years is outlined below:

Policy

Prioritised influencing policy in the area of adult and community education through working consistently to bring issues of relevance to the attention of the Minister for Lifelong Learning and party political education spokespeople.

Built strong relationships with a new staff team in the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science and developed partnerships with key stakeholders in the sector.

Developed and disseminated 16 submissions/position papers and a suite of manifesto and lobbying tools representing the range of issues of concern to our members.

Engaged in research on a range of issues including the lifelong learning needs of older people, integrating development and adult education programmes and exploring the outcomes of DES funded community education.

Collaborated with the Further Education Development Unit on drawing up guidelines for engaging disadvantaged men in education.

Published the Adult Learner Journal on an annual basis in partnership with the Adult Education Officers' Association.

Promotion

Developed and delivered a strong promotional strategy including establishing the Adult Learners' Festival as a key event in the adult and community education calendar.

Developed a strong communications strategy resulting in stronger links with local and national media through the website, online networking, ebulletins and publications.

Assisted 13,000 learners through the delivery of the AONTAS Information Referral Service.

Used the analysis of information from the Information Referral Service to inform policy and establish partnerships with other information providers including the NQAI , the HEA and the VEC Adult Guidance Services.

Practice

Established and developed the AONTAS Community Education Network to raise the profile of, gain recognition for and resource community education.

Established a Senior Learner Network as a result of needs identified in the research report: Don't Stop me Now – the Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People.

Supported members to develop their lobbying skills through training.

Delivered training in the use of the Quality Assurance Framework with Women's Community Education groups culminating in the Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education.

Developed and delivered a model of best practice of professional development for Community Education Facilitators which can be replicated within the VEC Continuous Professional Development Programme.

Partnership

Hosted conferences, seminars and networking events for AONTAS members and other stakeholders including visiting delegations from outside of Ireland.

Represented AONTAS at national and international events.

Worked with key stakeholders such as IVEA, NALA, NCCWN in the development of policy and advocacy for the sector.

Built a network of partners who support the Adult Learners' Festival in a variety of ways.

Organisational Development

Strengthened the Staff Team through continuous professional development.

Managed effectively and made the best use of financial resources available to the organisation, in particular developing value for money practices in the current economic climate.

Strengthened the AONTAS Executive Committee through training in governance and drawing on their experience as practitioners in the sector.

The new plan will build on those foundations to deliver its key objectives over the next three years. The consultation process identified three key themes which will underpin the work of AONTAS for the next three years, namely **Value, Voice and Visibility**.

VOICE

VISIBILITY

VALUE



THEMES AND PRINCIPLES

The work of AONTAS over the next three years will focus on three key themes underpinned by three key principles

VALUE: AONTAS as a membership organisation:-

- believes in the concept of lifelong learning as a means of enabling people to contribute to and participate personally, socially, economically and collectively in the development of Irish society.
- affirms and supports the key role of adult and community education in promoting equality, social inclusion and active citizenship.
- commits to the development and sustainability of a quality adult and community education service.

VOICE: AONTAS as a membership organisation:-

- commits to acting as a critical voice for the adult and community education sector, to lobby for change and reach a wide audience.
- supports and affirms the voice of adult learners as the core of its advocacy work.
- commits to articulating the key elements of a quality adult and community education service and lobbying for its development.

VISIBILITY: AONTAS as a membership organization:-

- commits to promoting the importance, value and role of adult and community education at local, national and international levels.
- supports and affirms the achievements of adult learners as a means of drawing attention to the key social purpose of adult learning.
- commits to articulating and demonstrating the importance and quality of the work done by the adult and community education service.

A number of objectives and actions have been identified for each theme as follows:-

Value: Objectives

- AONTAS will work with our members and key stakeholders to develop a quality adult and community education service incorporating high standards of professional development for adult educators.
- AONTAS will work with our members and key stakeholders to develop and progress systems of accreditation for adult learners pursuing both formal and non-formal learning including the Recognition of Prior and Experiential Learning (RPEL).
- AONTAS will identify and carry out research which will inform our promotion and lobbying work to benefit learners and support the work of policy and decision makers, providers and practitioners.

Actions

In order to achieve these objectives AONTAS will:-

- Keep informed of and contribute to policy developments in adult and community education at national and international level.
- Create discussion fora for learners and practitioners to share experience and inform the professional development of adult educators.
- Develop a strategy for community education which will strengthen its role as a key provider in the sector.
- Develop in collaboration with key stakeholders a position paper on the Continuous Professional Development needs of adult educators with a view to informing policy and practice in this area.
- Work closely with the NQAI and accreditation bodies to promote the importance of qualifications for adult learners pursuing both formal and non-formal modes of learning.
- Identify in collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills new areas of research in the field of adult and community education and carry out that research.
- Disseminate the outcomes of research to inform policy and practice for the adult and community education sector.

Voice: Objectives

- AONTAS through engaging in ongoing consultation processes with our members and key stakeholders will establish itself as the expert in the field of adult and community education in order to bring issues to the attention of government, media, decision makers and the general public.
- AONTAS will critically evaluate the status of adult and community education as an integral part of the education system and lobby for financial and human resources to ensure that a quality service is available to adult learners.
- AONTAS will support the capacity of learners to articulate issues of concern to them and to influence policy and practice in adult and community education.

Actions

In order to achieve these objectives AONTAS will

- Make a strong case for the development of the adult and community education service through a lobbying and advocacy strategy.
- Create discussion fora for our members to enable us to articulate the issues and challenges facing us and document the outcomes of these discussions.
- Document and share examples of best practice.
- Act as spokesperson for adult and community education in media and public arenas.
- Develop strong relationships with political spokespeople and public servants in government departments with a view to ensuring that adult and community education is fully recognized and resourced as a key player in the education system.
- Inform and critically respond to policy in keeping with our values.
- Develop and consolidate the National Adult Learners' Forum as a platform for adult learners.
- Establish a joint policy working group with the National Adult Literacy Agency to advance our common agenda for the adult and community education sector.

Visibility: Objectives

- AONTAS will work collaboratively with our members and key stake holders at local, national and international levels to promote the value, outcomes and benefits of adult and community education.
- AONTAS will build on and strengthen our communications strategy using our membership, external networks and communicative tools including websites, publications and e-communications.
- AONTAS will work collaboratively with and support our members to develop their own communications strategies and media campaigns.

Actions

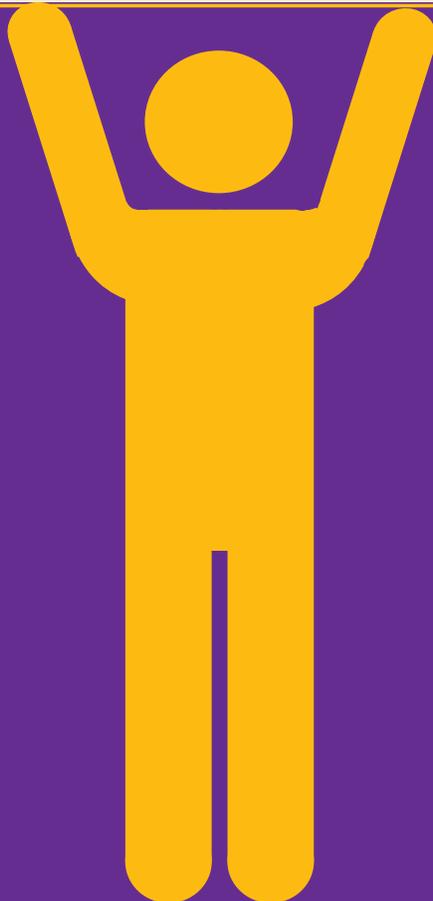
In order to achieve these objectives AONTAS will:-

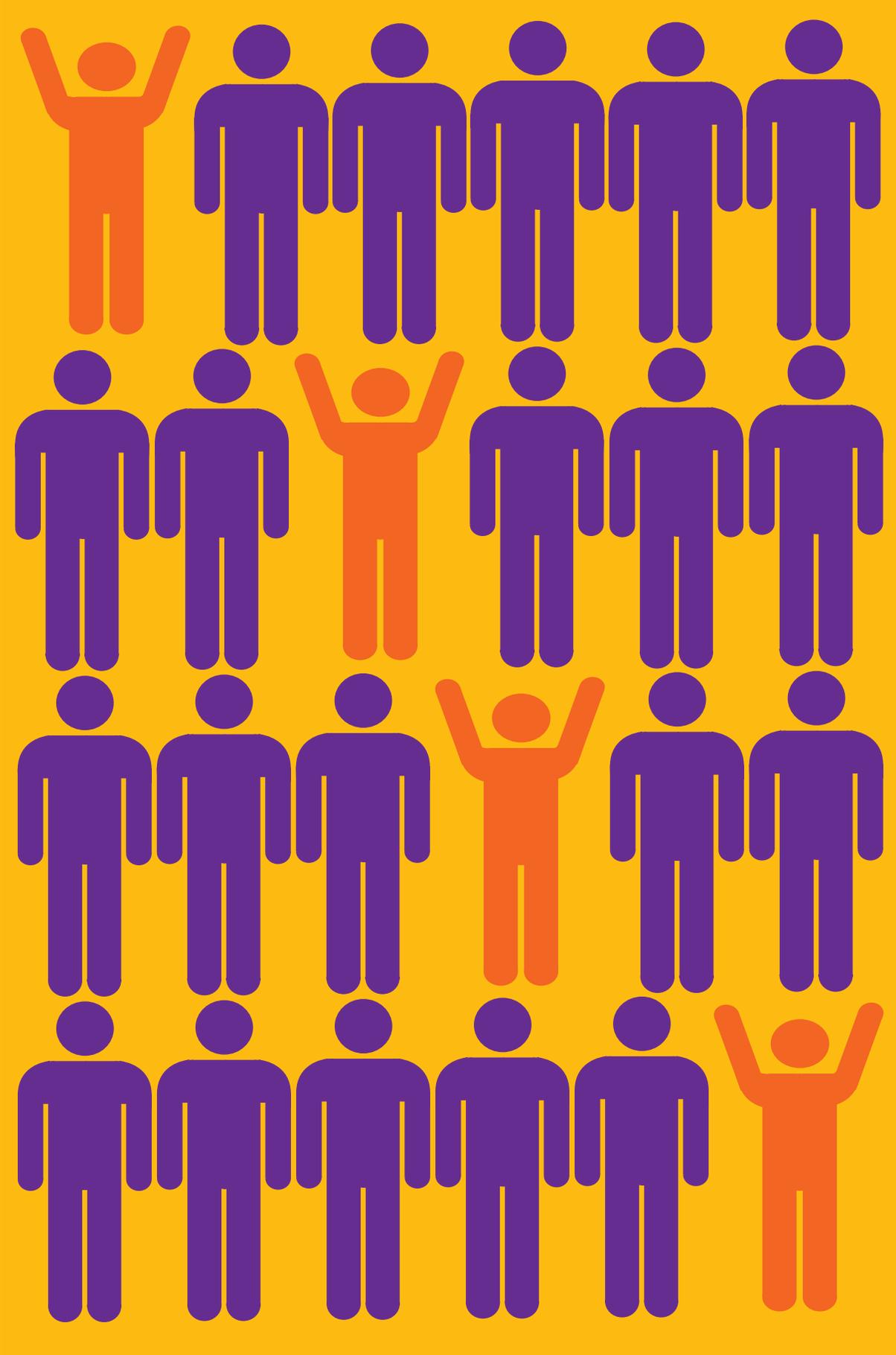
- Organise and develop the annual Adult Learners' Festival as a key promotional vehicle for the adult and community education sector.
- Promote the value, outcomes and benefits of adult and community education using evidence from national and international research.
- Promote learning opportunities for adults through the AONTAS information referral service and information booklet.
- Represent our own work and that of the wider sector at national and international fora e.g. through participating in Grundtvig projects, the EAEA and ICAE.
- Make full use of our publications, website and social media to promote the value, outcomes and benefits of lifelong learning.
- Develop and carry out campaigns to ensure adult and community education strengthens and consolidates its place on the political agenda.
- Develop and deliver training to our members to develop their own local media strategies and campaigns.

Implementing and Evaluating the Strategic Plan

AONTAS will;-

- Develop annual workplans
- Review progress twice yearly
- Hold six Executive Committee meetings each year to monitor the progress of the plan
- Prepare Annual Reports and Financial Statements
- Report to the General Membership at the Annual General Meeting
- Submit annual reports and financial statements to the Department of Education and Skills.





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