



The Voice of  
Adult Learning

# From Politics to People: A Culture of Care in Community Education

## Pre-event Background Paper

**AONTAS Adult  
Learners' Festival 2025**  
**#LearnTogetherLiveTogether**



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**SOLAS**  
learning works



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

## Introduction

Our communities are currently facing significant social challenges, and we urgently need more support and recognition for community education by policymakers and politicians in Irish society.

We have a new Government who have pledged to deliver “a caring society” to address poverty and social exclusion, where everyone can access education regardless of socioeconomic status, ability, or their location across the country.

Two things are clear:

- This vision of a caring, equal society cannot be realised without a well-funded and well-resourced community education sector.
- With the increasing focus on the privatisation of public services, the reduction of citizens to customers and human beings to human capital, and an undermining of the suffering and hardship of so many people, a culture of care has not been prioritised

Across the whole island, more funding and support is badly needed for organisations and groups working to connect communities and offer learning to people that fits their circumstances and needs. Funding cuts to community education providers have been taking place across the island.

In Northern Ireland, the draft [Programme for Government](#) states an intent to improve the lives of families and promote safer communities. However, despite the essential services provided by the voluntary and community sector, it continues to face funding crisis after funding crisis. There is also a need for an updated Widening Participation Strategy that recognises the role of the sector and outlines real ways to listen to and support learners in accessing education.

And while in the Republic we now have a [Community Education Framework](#) and [the Reach Fund](#), there is room for improvement. Ultimately, community education has yet to be given the recognition it deserves in Government agendas north and south.

This paper provides the background and context to our event “[From Politics to People: A Culture of Care in Community Education](#)”, which kicks off the 2025 Adult Learners’ Festival this March.

For policymakers and decision-makers, the event will demonstrate why you should care about community education, why it is a solution to contemporary societal problems and policy goals, and why a “culture of care” at the heart of policymaking is ultimately more beneficial and productive for society in the long-term.

For everyone working and learning in community education, this event will recognise the importance of your work and societal contribution, widen the lens to a broader socio-political context, empower your own advocacy work, and remind us of the inherently political nature of community education.

## Background

When it comes to policymaking in Ireland, skills for work are largely prioritised over an education system that functions as a public good.

Speaking at a previous AONTAS event, Professor Kathleen Lynch stated that the Irish Government has been “privatising necessary public services like childcare”, meaning that “many people can’t access education because they can’t afford it.” And because we have “changed the definition of a citizen from a person with rights to a person who buys services”, we are “deprioritising services that are not market relevant, like mental health”.

The result is that formal education that serves the economy – and workers – takes precedence over education that supports personal development and community wellbeing.

At “From Politics to People”, we will focus on the urgent need to bring back a [culture of care](#) to policymaking in Ireland. We will use community education as a model for how this works extremely effectively. This is so urgent because:

- the number of people homeless in Ireland has now passed 15,000;
- families and communities across the country are struggling to support people with mental health challenges, with addiction and substance misuse, with disabilities and additional needs;
- our society is changing at a rapid rate, with an [increase in anti-immigrant thinking](#), violence, and aggression.

These are only some of the examples of how “care” has been deprioritised in policymaking.

Rather than simply focusing on increasing law and order, our Government must turn to education – specifically community education – to combat individualism and division, and to strengthen communities by meeting people where they are at and bringing them together.



## How do practices of care work so well in community education?

The model of care in the community education sector addresses these social challenges through approaches that are place-based and values-led. Community education provides a space for collective action for social change.

People from [underserved and under-resourced communities](#) and [more vulnerable or marginalised groups of people](#) (including older people, those with additional needs, migrants and refugees, and Travellers, among others) are supported through a holistic approach to learning. They are not just seen as students, employees, or workers, but as individuals and their life experience and circumstances are integral to their learning. Listening to learner voices is integral to community education. As [Bríd Connolly writes](#), adult and community education is “a way of working with adults through democratic practice, challenging the traditional set-up of the knowledgeable teacher and passive learner. Democratic practice ensures that everyone has a voice and the educators’ role is to facilitate this, in order to co-create knowledge through dialogue in the learning environment, rather than teaching a series of facts and opinions to be memorised and regurgitated by the learners”.

Many learners and potential learners, and particularly people from vulnerable groups, are grappling with [structural barriers](#) to learning in their local communities, including inadequate financial supports, inaccessible or unaffordable transport, and lack of accessible childcare places.

An education model that prioritises care is particularly important for people from vulnerable groups, especially with challenges like the [digital divide](#) and [online misinformation](#), and to promote [sustainability](#), [health and wellbeing](#), and [respect for diversity](#).

As demonstrated in our learner [research](#), our Community Education Network Census from 2020, and our census of community education in Northern Ireland from 2021, community education has a [proven positive impact](#) on people’s wellbeing and personal development.

## Successes and challenges in community education

The community education sector faces difficult challenges. This includes [precarious and inconsistent funding](#), which means that providers are restricted in what they can offer to learners and communities. Applications for funding (and the associated reporting requirements) demand significant administrative time and resources from providers, which places a strain on organisations, especially smaller ones. The result is that providers cannot or struggle to offer the holistic support and practices of care that are so central to community education – and our society as a whole.

However, we have seen some positive change and increased recognition in policy related to community education across the island. The [Future FET Strategy](#) states that fostering inclusion is a priority, and the [Community Education Framework](#) seeks to make “consistent and positive changes in how we learn, provide, coordinate and fund community education in Ireland.” In Northern Ireland, the Wellbeing Framework of Indicators, used to assess the impact of the new Programme for Government, will include measures that will demonstrate the strengths of community education, suggesting a move towards recognising the importance of a holistic approach to measures of success rather than one purely focused on economic performance and the labour force.

## **For discussion at “From Politics to People”**

With a new Government in place, we must continue to work with policymakers to ensure that the value of community education is clear and its true impact is maximised. A focus on practices of care – and the positive results for social cohesion at a time of increasing social divisions – is essential.

The bottom line is that community education is key to promoting equality, care, and community wellbeing across the whole island. Community education must be seen as a public good. It is uniquely placed to strengthen communities and bridge different groups together, at a time of division and social and political change.

How can we demonstrate to the new Government that their vision for a caring, equal, safe society cannot exist without community education?

How can we continue to challenge the prioritisation of the labour market and the economy over people’s health and our collective social wellbeing?

How can we show the Government that funding and resourcing community education will actually help them achieve the goals outlined in the Programme for Government, while also making our society more cohesive and connected?

[Register here and add your voice to the discussion at “From Politics to People” on Monday 4th March 2025.](#)



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