

# Community Education - Working Together to Address Educational Inequality

A reflective view of the Impact of the second  
round of Mitigating Against Educational  
Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF)

AONTAS Policy Day  
Adult Learners' Festival 2022  
Friday, 11th March 2022



The Voice of  
Adult Learning

"This fund made a huge difference to many community education groups who have such limited access to funding to improve their resources and support learners."

"We are thankful to the ETB for their support of our work. We are based in a rural community and are thrilled to be able to offer quality courses and opportunities to and within our local community."

"The MAEDF is an important and practical fund, that meets the needs of learners directly and in real time when they need it. We need more sources of flexible funding to meet the needs of learners at this time of rapid change."

"Our first group of learners are loving putting the items we were able to purchase to good use."

"This was the first time we applied to the fund and almost immediately, we have seen the benefits."

"It was a difficult challenge to get what we needed in terms of equipment, therefore, we feel that this fund should be made available every year. "

"We are hugely grateful for the MAED Fund. It has helped to support us to support others to reengage back into society following Covid, but it has also allowed us to deliver relevant courses to key target groups and provide skills, training and information that will benefit them in their everyday life."

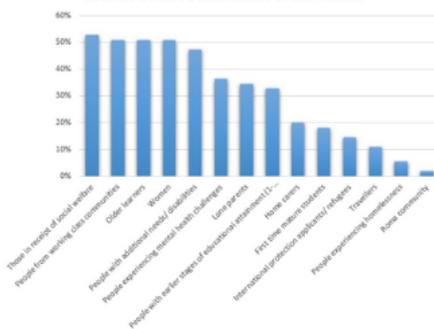
# MITIGATING AGAINST EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE FUND

## Key Findings (2022)



### LEARNER BENEFICIARIES

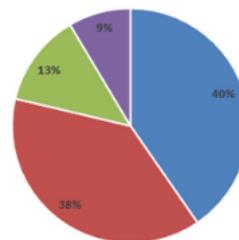
Learner Cohort Beneficiaries of the MAEDF



OVER 80% OF RESPONDENT COMMUNITY EDUCATION GROUPS USED THE MAEDF TO REACH MARGINALISED LEARNERS WHO HAD DISENGAGED WITH LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

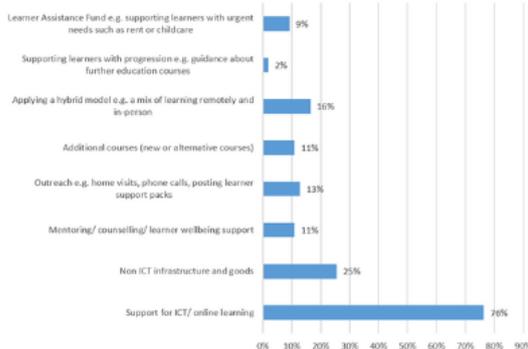
### THE AVERAGE AMOUNT OF FUNDING RECEIVED WAS €2,579

Distribution of MAEDF received by community education groups



“THE WOMEN’S CENTRE IS MANAGED 100% BY VOLUNTEERS. THIS PROJECT MAY NOT HAVE SURVIVED WITHOUT MAEDF”

### 76% OF THE FUND WAS USED TO ADDRESS DIGITAL POVERTY



“HAVING A LAPTOP HAS HELPED ME IMPROVE MY LITERACY SKILLS, MY SELF-ESTEEM AND MY CONFIDENCE.”

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted participation in adult learning (OECD, 2021<sup>1</sup>), and especially that of marginalised learners. According to the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) Census findings (2021), community education has the highest representation of disadvantaged learners in the tertiary education sector. Therefore, to mitigate educational disadvantage during the pandemic, AONTAS advocated for a COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund to channel funding to those most in need. This advocacy work<sup>2</sup> resulted in the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF), an allocation of €8 million in 2020 (round 1), and a spend of €6.85m in 2021 (round 2).

To inform future processes, following the implementation of the second round of MAEDF, AONTAS conducted a survey in January-February 2022. The purpose of this survey was to reflect on the administration and impact of the MAEDF through the perspective of community education groups. The purpose of this reflection was to capture the MAEDF's value, but also to offer insights on how to improve processes for a future MAEDF and similar funding schemes. This paper outlines the positive contribution made by the MAEDF on adult learning and recommendations for SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) regarding future iterations of the fund.

AONTAS survey recipients were overwhelmingly appreciative of the MAEDF ***“this fund made a huge difference to many community education groups who have such limited access to funding to improve their resources and support learners.”*** Also, over 80% of respondent used the MAEDF to reach marginalised learners who had disengaged with learning during the pandemic. The MAEDF reached a diverse array of learners across Ireland, including older learners, refugees, Travellers, people in receipt of social welfare, people with additional needs or disabilities, lone parents, people experiencing mental health challenges, and many others. The MAEDF provided vital funding for groups, one which said ***“This project may not have survived without the MAEDF”***. The majority of the funding was used for Information Communication Technology (ICT) to address digital poverty, supporting on-site learning in a safe manner, wellbeing supports, engaging learners through outreach, introducing new courses to respond to need, enabling hybrid learning and learner assistance support. Due to the shift to online learning and for expedient use of the fund, 76% of the MAEDF was used to address digital poverty, e.g. through providing devices. However, a broadening of the fund and improved timelines, would allow for better planning and utilisation of the fund, for example to draw down the funding for learner support and outreach. Community education respondents noted a range of benefits from the MAEDF, spanning increased social engagement, improved mental health and wellbeing, fostering personal development, increased confidence and self-esteem and improved digital literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/adult-learning-and-covid-19-how-much-informal-and-non-formal-learning-are-workers-missing-56a96569/>

<sup>2</sup> Through engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, SOLAS and Minister Simon Harris TD, AONTAS has been advocating for this fund throughout 2020, and again in 2021, as evidenced by the [CEN Census 2020 research](#), the [COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021](#) and the [Pre-Budget submission](#) for 2021 and for 2022, in addition to maintaining regular face-to-face meetings with Department representatives.

AONTAS commends the effort of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) for supporting groups to benefit from the fund and also the community education organisations that applied for the MAEDF to meet the pressing needs of their learners. Through extensive engagement with our members and adult learners, we know there is still significant unmet needs. Also, as some survey respondents noted, devices and supports were helpful, in engaging marginalised groups **“there was a notable difficulty in maintaining consistent interaction.”** It would be remiss not to acknowledge the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Based on recent Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) data (2022)<sup>3</sup>, the number of QQI Further Education and Training (FET) major awards made in 2021 at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1 to 3 were 50% less than pre-pandemic levels (2019), for NFQ level 4, there were 25% fewer major awards.

As a result, AONTAS calls for a full expenditure of the existing MAEDF, in addition to an extended MAEDF in 2022. It is a relatively small investment but makes a big impact. Almost 80% of the respondents surveyed successfully received funding of €10,000 or less, with the average amount of €2,579. A quarter of the groups surveyed reported that the MAEDF provided more than 21% of their total funding. It is vital that ongoing financial support is offered to community education organisations and that ETBs are supported to distribute supports to reach those most in need.

It will take long-term planning and support to fully redress some of the damage that had been done by COVID-19. Community education must be at the heart of this solution. As a result, AONTAS calls for a full expenditure of the existing MAEDF, and asks Minister Harris to reaffirm his commitment that the **Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF)** will be a **“regular feature of our education system”**, and support efforts for a more a sustainable funding model for community education. Drawing from the findings of the survey, this paper highlights and celebrates the benefits that the MAEDF has brought to the sector, to learners, and to disadvantaged communities. With a view to the future, it also considers what has been learned to help inform future processes.

#### **The recommendations for future MAED funding for community education groups are:**

- Provide a **suitable timeframe** that ensures groups can strategically plan their programme and budget, with a three-month deadline before September, communicated consistently across Education and Training Boards (ETBs)
- Ensure consistent dissemination of the fund across ETBs
- Target support to reach specific groups of learners in future funding, including Travellers and Roma, older people and those with mental health issues
- Provide a category for ‘staff days’ (for example similar to EU project funding) to ensure that staff costs are covered within the delivery of future funding
- Amend future iterations of the fund to cover procurement, scope and consistency of the fund and allow providers to ensure their programmes are holistic, led by learner needs and responsive to the voices and experiences of learners

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-02/qqi-certification-data-and-analysis-2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-02/qqi-certification-data-and-analysis-2021_0.pdf) Page 10

- The new Community Education Framework (FET Strategy 2020-2024)<sup>4</sup> can draw on the findings from this paper in order to build on good practice and improve the consistency of funding to community education groups across ETB areas



<sup>4</sup> [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf) Page 46.

## Introduction

The Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) is a valuable source of funding that enables community education organisations to respond to the increased level of need arising from COVID-19. Targeted funding is vital for community education as recent AONTAS research (2021) noted that 76 community education organisations, were funded by nine government departments, through 51 funding streams while engaging about 15,000 learners across Ireland. Resources are scarce, funding applications complex, and time-consuming. The challenge to address reduced engagement by marginalised learners, the stark reduction in accreditation rates, and the ongoing need to address digital poverty calls for additional MAEDF that builds on the learning gained.

AONTAS advocated for the fund<sup>5</sup>, and carried out a detailed analysis following the first round of the MAEDF. The findings from an additional survey for the second round, focusing on recipients of the fund and those distributing the fund, feature in this paper. The paper offers a snapshot overview that cover 56 groups across 12 ETBs areas, case studies of the positive impact show the tangible benefits of the fund.

### The Formation of the MAED Fund and Sectoral Context

Due to the extent of the challenge and the pressing need to mitigate educational disadvantage, in July 2020, AONTAS advocated for a COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund. Minister Harris' announcement of an €8 million Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) in November 2020, which was managed by SOLAS, was overwhelmingly welcomed by both recipients and also distributors of the fund, Education and Training Boards (ETBs). [A second round of funding offered at the end of 2021](#), which totalled an expenditure of €6.65 million was announced. At the close of 2021, AONTAS welcomed the announcement by Minister Simon Harris TD that the [Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Fund \(MAEDF\)](#) will be a "regular feature of our education system".

This paper outlines the positive impact the MAEDF has made through community education provision. Across Ireland, in rural and urban areas, community education organisations used the MAEDF to support thousands of disadvantaged learners and it helped to address the impact of structural inequalities during the pandemic. Alongside existing challenges, mainly relating to poverty/socio-economic deprivation, initiatives sought to address digital poverty, isolation, and exclusion across learner cohorts including, for example, Travellers, those living in Direct Provision, lone-parents, and older people. The impact of the MAEDF reached far beyond the individual community education learners who benefited directly from the fund.

However, issues remain for marginalised learners. There was a significant drop in participation in education, by Travellers (down 25%), people with disabilities, the over 50s and refugees and asylum seekers (all down 15%) in 2020. Furthermore, the lifelong learning

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<sup>5</sup> Through engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, SOLAS and Minister Simon Harris TD, AONTAS has been advocating for this fund throughout 2020, and again in 2021, as evidenced by the [CEN Census 2020 research](#), the [COVID-19 Community Education Support fund for 2020/2021](#) and the [Pre-Budget submission](#) for 2021 and for [2022](#), in addition to maintaining regular face-to-face meetings with Department representatives.

participation rate for people whose highest level of educational attainment was Junior Cert level halved in 2020, compared to 2019 (SLMRU, SOLAS, 2021). There was a sharp drop in accreditation awards at NFQ level 1-3 in 2021 (down 50% compared from 2019).

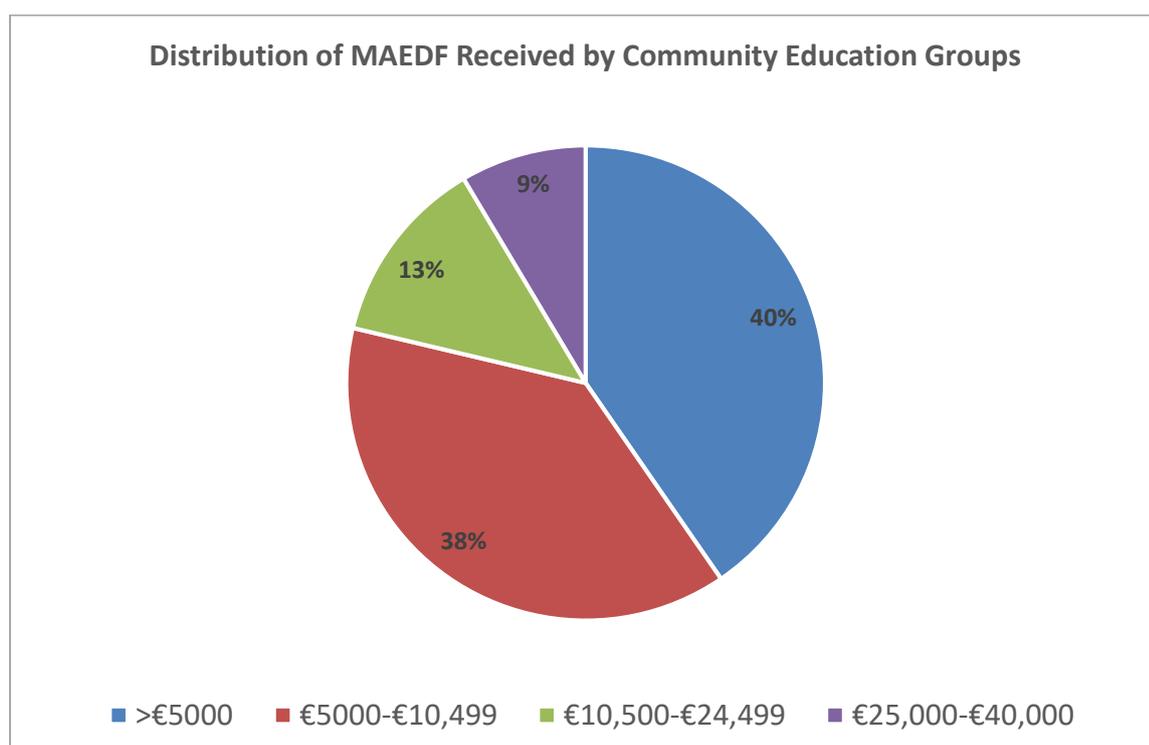
The success of the fund is due to the unrelenting focus on the learners by community education organisations and ETBs, where staff worked additional hours within a narrow timeframe to make the MAEDF a success. AONTAS commends this effort, while also recognising the need for immediate action to mitigate further disadvantage and ensure providers have a longer timeframe for accessing and administering the fund.

In January-February 2022, to inform future processes, following the implementation of the MAEDF, AONTAS conducted a survey. The purpose was to reflect on the administration and impact of the MAEDF through the perspective of community education groups. The goal was to capture the MAEDF's value, but also to offer insights on how to improve processes for future MAEDF funding schemes.

Drawing from the findings of the survey, this paper highlights and celebrates the benefits that the MAEDF has brought to the sector, to learners, and to disadvantaged communities. It also considers what has been learned to help inform future processes.

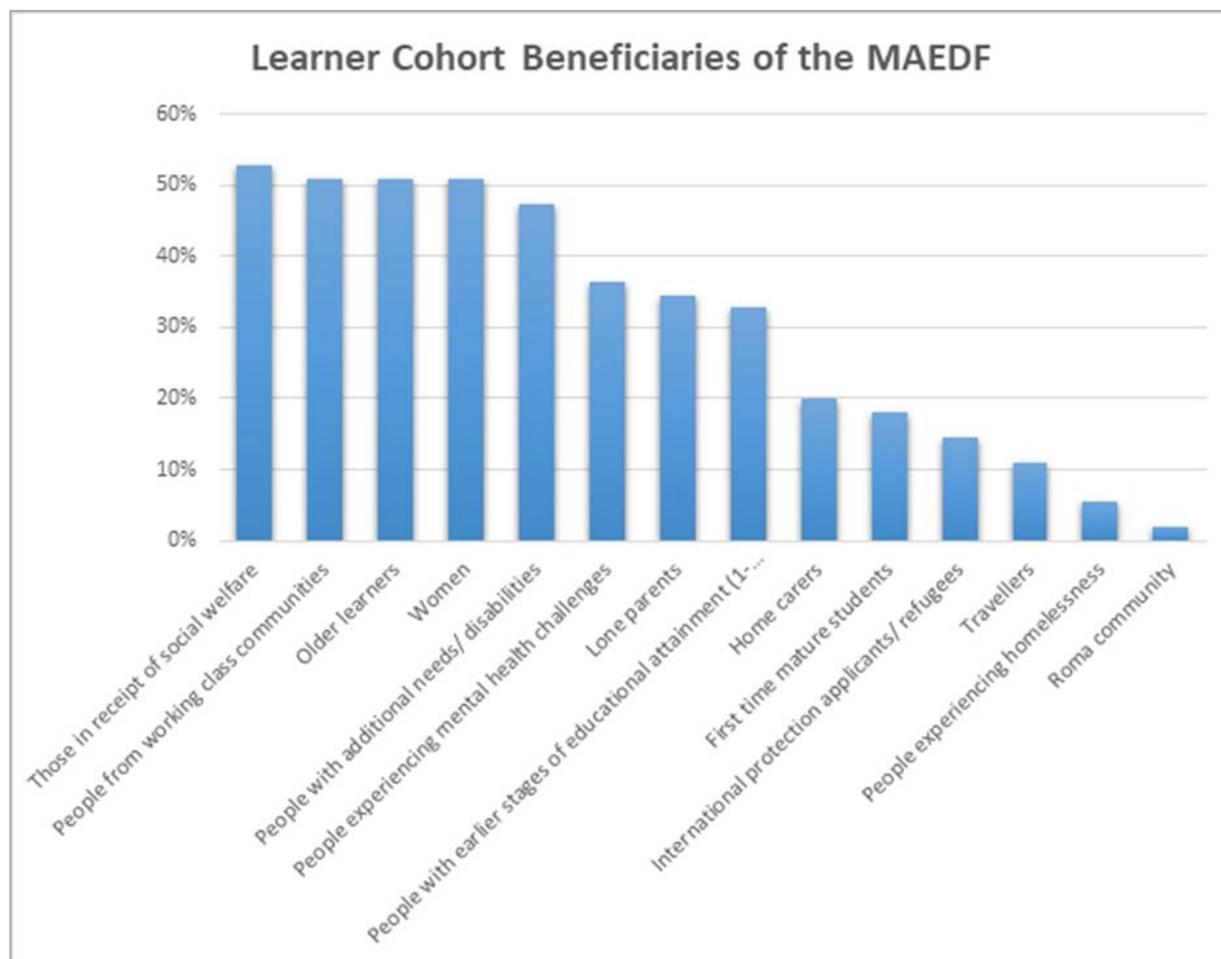
## Drawdown of MAED Funding

The survey results show that the level of MAEDF accessed by community education groups varied. Almost 80% of the respondents successfully received funding of €10,000 or less, with the average amount of €2,579. The lowest amount was €600 and the largest grant was €40,000. Half of the groups surveyed reported that the MAED funding comprised less than 5% of the organisation's total funding. However, for a quarter of the groups it provided more than 21% of their total funding.



## Reaching Educationally Disadvantaged Learners

The MAED fund has been broadly successful in achieving its mission in reaching educationally disadvantaged learners and those most impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to AONTAS survey, the dominant cohort benefitting from the fund have been marginalized learners. This is true for the first and second rounds of the MAED Fund.



## Addressing Lower Learner Participation Rates and Re-engaging Learners

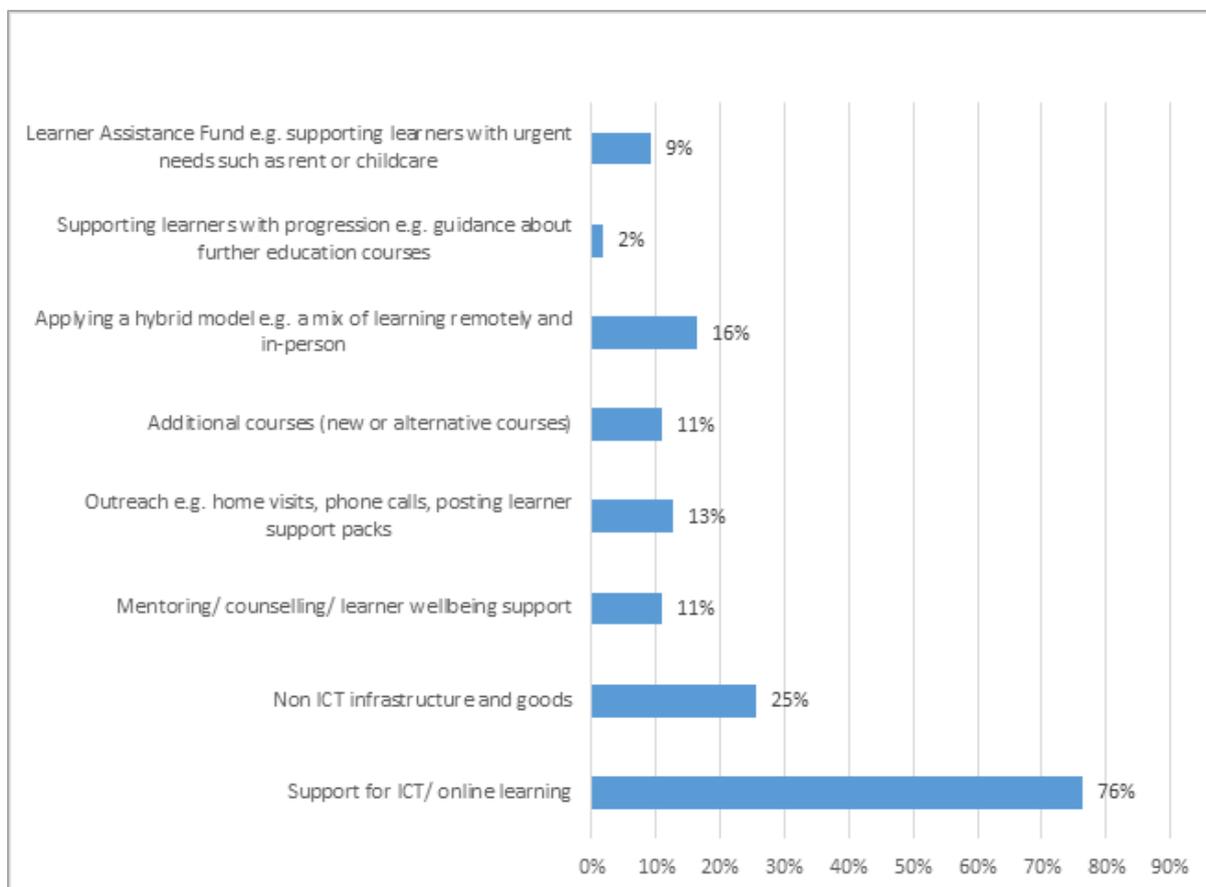
Of all of the community education groups who responded to the survey, over 80% reported using the MAEDF to reach marginalised learners who had disengaged from learning during the pandemic.

To address the drop in education participation rates<sup>6</sup>, community education groups used the MAEDF to address local needs, within the allowed parameters of the funding. The majority

<sup>6</sup> There was a sharp drop in accreditation awards at NFQ level 1-4 (down 49% from 2019) during 2020 and minor awards (down 27% from 2019). National statistics reveal a drop in Further Education and Training (FET) participation levels of approximately 25% by Travellers and a drop of 15% for people with disabilities, the over 50s and refugees and asylum seekers during 2020.

of the funding was used to address digital poverty, supporting on-site learning in a safe manner, wellbeing supports, engaging learners through outreach, introducing new courses to respond to learners' needs, enabling hybrid learning and learner assistance support.

The fund also provided nonverbal communication digital assistive technology, outdoor spaces for learner engagement – in line with COVID-19 public health measures – and laptop and iPad loan schemes.



## The Value of the MAED Fund

### Supporting Community Education Organisations

The MAEDF was a vital funding support for community education organisations as noted by survey respondents, it was a vitally important fund, enabled responsiveness to need and relevant courses that supported participation in learning. Many groups commended the support from their local ETB.

Specific quotes by survey respondents are below:

"This fund made a huge difference to many community education groups who have such limited access to funding to improve their resources and support learners"

"We are also thankful to the ETB for their support of our work. We are based in a rural community and are thrilled to be able to offer quality courses and opportunities to and within our local community."

"The womens' centre is managed 100% by volunteers. This project may not have survived without the MAEDF".

"The MAEDF is an important and practical fund, that meets the needs of learners directly and in real time when they need it. We need more sources of flexible funding to meet the needs of learners at this time of rapid change."

"Fund is an excellent opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities and autism to access learning and communication in their communities."

"The MAED Fund is a very welcome fund to the sector, however we would like to see it expand and to further meet the challenges of the sector"

"This was the first time we applied to the fund and almost immediately, we have seen the benefits."

"We are delighted to be able to benefit from this fund as it is a huger asset in our resources of services for the community we serve."

"We found the MAEDF application was a simple process to apply. The form etc was very clear and easy to work with"

"We are hugely grateful for the MAED Fund. It has helped to support us to support others to reengage back into society following Covid, but it has also allowed us to deliver relevant courses to key target groups and provide skills, training and information that will benefit them in their everyday life."

"It was a difficult challenge to get what we needed in terms of equipment, therefore we feel that this fund should be make available every year."

## Supporting Learners

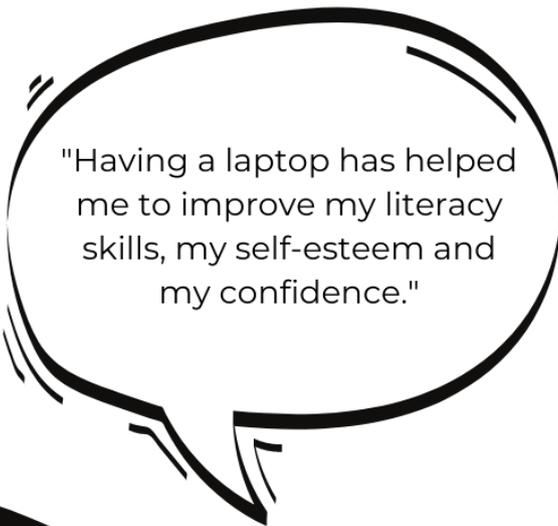
Community education respondents noted a range of benefits from the MAEDF, spanning increased social engagement, improved mental health and wellbeing, fostering personal development, increased confidence and self-esteem and improved digital literacy. Overall, key benefits of the MAEDF included directing funding to support learners to flourish, to support inclusion, connection and collaboration and supporting accessibility and adaptation.

### Supporting Learners to Flourish

Due to this financial assistance and support from community education staff, learners were not only able to continue their education, they also had the opportunity to develop their digital literacy skills and build their confidence. This in turn empowered learners to continue with their courses, and to reap the wider benefits of acquiring these skills, at a time when they were most needed.



"Having a laptop has helped me apply for jobs."



"Having a laptop has helped me to improve my literacy skills, my self-esteem and my confidence."



"We are hugely grateful for the MAED Fund. It has helped to support us to support others to reengage back into society following COVID but it has also allowed us to deliver relevant courses to key target groups and provide skills, training and information that will benefit them in their everyday life. This was the first time we applied to the fund and almost immediately, we have seen the benefits."

## Inclusion, Connection, and Collaboration

The fund was applied to directly address educational disadvantage and social isolation. Many learners in difficult circumstances had the opportunity to reconnect, and feel included and valued in their communities after receiving support with access to equipment, digital literacy learning opportunities, and with support from community education staff. Education providers across the tertiary education system worked tirelessly to ensure no one was left behind.

A highlight of the fund for an organisation working with international protection applicants/refugees was that with support from MAEDF we have just introduced a learning platform to Ireland. About 800 people have signed up, 124 have completed initial courses (not all in the Midlands). We have also 'seeded' the local International Protection community with 20 laptops.

Most vulnerable learners feeling valued and recognized. Supported to take part and be involved in something. It was so, so valuable to our organization during COVID to be able to offer IT equipment so that people did not feel so marginalised.

## Supporting Accessibility and Adaption

While under extremely challenging circumstances, community education providers were supported to continue their work through assistance from the MAED Fund. It allow access to the tools and equipment needed for operating a blended or hybrid model of teaching and learning.

Some older learners have been encouraged to attend in-building programmes due to the air purifiers funded from the MAED fund. We hope this will encourage others to return.

We purchased an outdoor pop-up tent /gazebo in order to be in a position to host small groups/classes outdoors in a safer manner when appropriate.

Items received have all enhanced our service and also have been very beneficial for offering services to people in their own home.

While the MAEDF was appreciated, many organisations commented that the level of learner engagement was oftentimes inconsistent, that there are *“continuing and deep problems with people that will need to be addressed.”*

## Demonstrating the Impact of the MAED Fund

Below are two examples of community education groups, who were winners of an AONTAS STAR Award 2022 and benefitted from the MAED Fund during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Cultural and Heritage Studies LTI, National Print Museum (Dublin)**

This local Training Initiative in Cultural and Heritage Studies provides students with the opportunity to study subjects like archaeology, history, heritage, folklore, Irish culture, customer service and communications, while also training to be a tour guide in the National Print Museum for the duration of their course. Running since 1996, the programme is aimed at long-term unemployed individuals for whom traditional education pathways have previously not worked, those looking to upskill or change career, and those who have an interest in heritage.

The initiative partners with City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDET), who provides the programme funding. The programme values the voice of the learner, who has guided the structure of the course, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 90% of the learners involved progress into Third Level Education or the workforce after leaving the programme, including working with 14 Henrietta Street, National Museum of Ireland Collins Barracks and Turlough Park, Farmleigh, Kilmainham Gaol, Teelings Whiskey, Irish Whiskey Museum, EPIC Museum and St Patrick's Cathedral.

In 2021 this programme was successful in an application for MAED Funding, and have received additional funds to purchase new laptops, Wi-Fi Dongles, and Headsets to further support learners.

### **Aiseiri Progression Programme (Waterford)**

The Programme is a specialised education and training programme which supports men and women in addiction treatment with Aiseiri and in the early years of recovery from addiction to access meaningful education and training, to set career goals, and to develop the confidence and skills needed to achieve these goals. Established in 2014, the project has grown from supporting nine participants to 27 participants and many more in the community in Waterford city and beyond.

The programme partners with other institutions and groups to deliver this initiative, such as the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, Skillsnet, and Pobal. They support people who typically had poor experiences of education, chronic low self-esteem, and social isolation or disconnection. Their weekly programme includes health and fitness courses, training, creative courses such as drama and art, wellbeing classes in yoga, meditation and horticulture, volunteering work, and core skills such as IT and career planning. Their community-based facility has created a thriving recovery community in Waterford city, which promotes belonging, builds confidence, and is a stepping stone into broader community life. In 2021, the Aiseiri Progression Programme was awarded €60,000 in MAED Funding.

## Analysis of the Challenges of the MAED Funding Process

There were different experiences of applying for MAED Funding among community education providers. Some respondents to the survey stated that the process worked well and the ETB team involved in the MAEDF made the process clear and simple. The application form itself was considered straightforward. A request was made for an Irish language version.<sup>7</sup> 60% reported that increased timelines are needed to allow for planning. 15% reported the need for more information and guidelines, and 56% requested an expansion of the categories to respond to learner needs.

### Issues arising included:

#### Procurement and Expenditure Restrictions

- The **€1000 cap on equipment**, such as the inability to buy interactive screens and other vital equipment for blended learning
- **Spend-and-recoup** funding model a big challenge for small organisations.
- Reduce the **cumbersome process of compiling financial quotes** at the application stage and then a set of invoices and receipts at the funding stage. Suppliers will not issue an invoice at the application stage
- **Consider procurement** rules as it makes it difficult to spend money in short timeframes, especially beyond IT devices

#### Timing of Funding Call and Application Deadline

- The **timelines were quite tight** between grant approval and spending
- **Timing of the funding call** was too late - more time needed between receipt of funding and the year-end deadline to have the funds spent
- **Grant should be launched with a minimum of a 3-month timeframe**, so that groups are not under pressure to manage a grant they receive in November and spend it by December
- **Some groups could not apply for the Learner Assistance Fund** due to tight deadlines, and a lack of strategic planning time

#### Scope and Consistency of the MAEDF

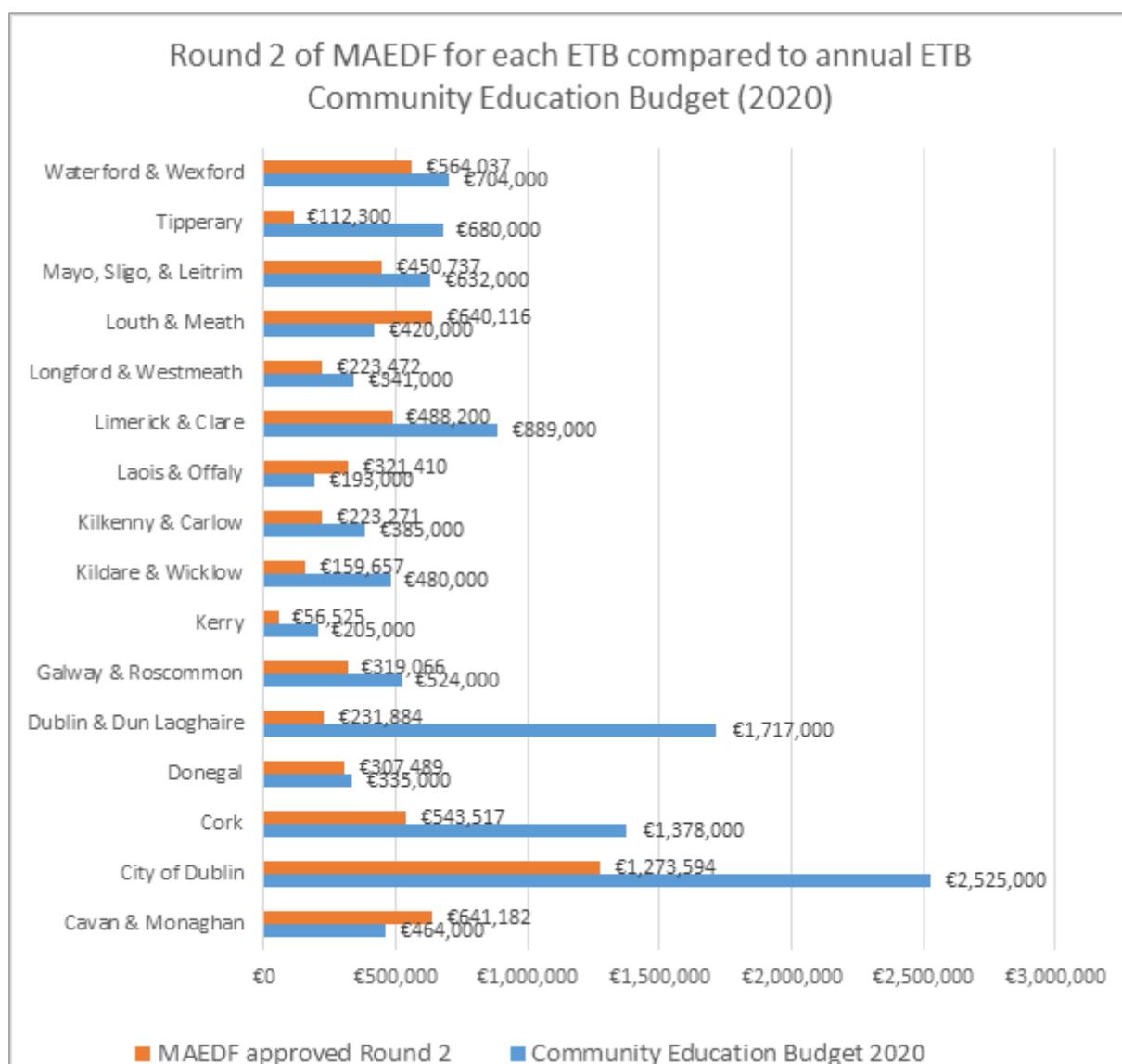
- **Staff Costs** - groups need to have the ability to support and mentor learners on a one to one basis
- **Ongoing assistance** with broadband costs
- **Provide a specific focus on CPD** for tutors, e.g. reflective practice sessions, learner retention, community education approaches
- **Ensure that specific target groups** of learners are targeted for a portion of the MAEDF grant delivery (i.e. 20% must go to Traveller learners)
- Include **funding to evaluate** the impact of the MAEDF
- **ETB grant provision has differed** and, in some areas, providers could not apply for mentoring, guidance hours etc.

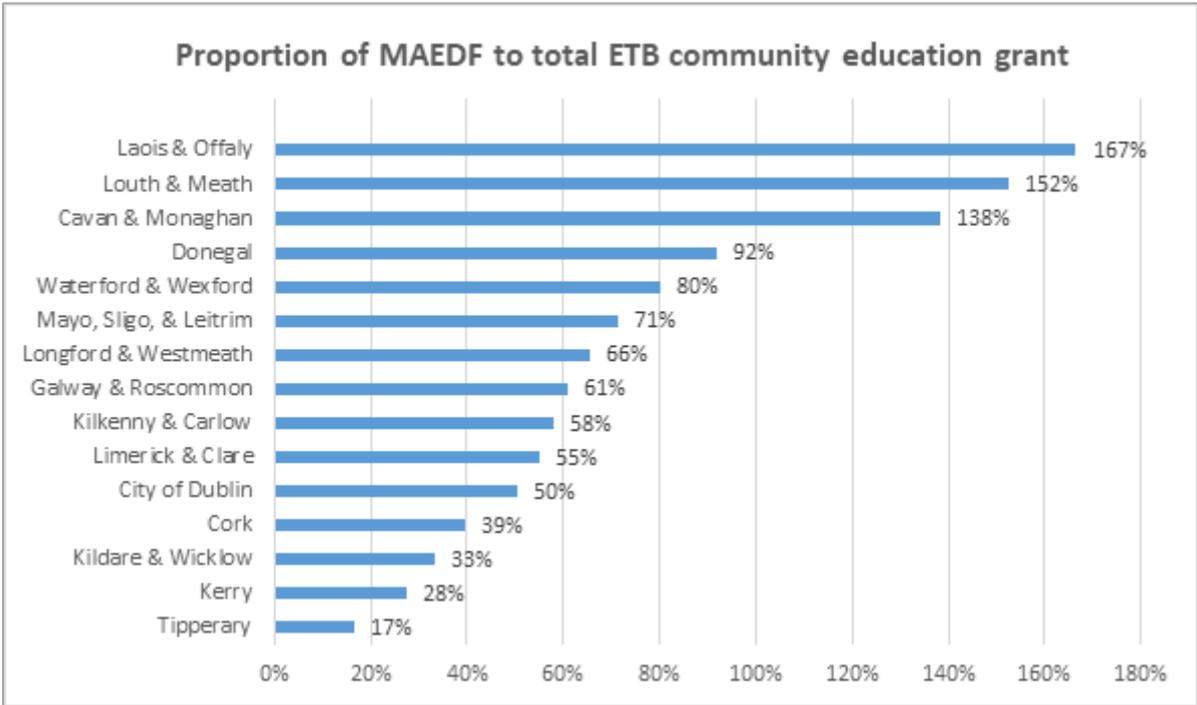
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<sup>7</sup> “Ba chóir go mbeadh gach treoir agus foirm ar fáil trí Ghaeilge.”

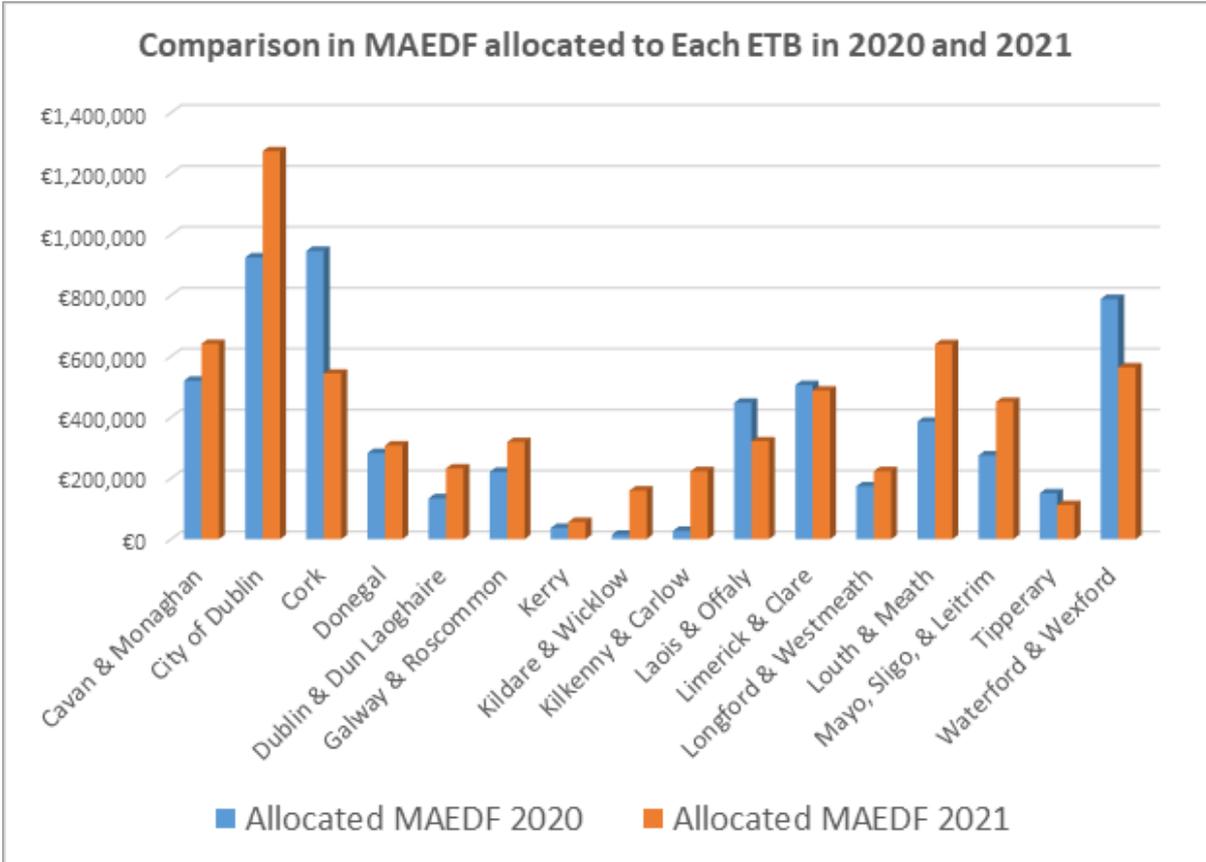
## Variations in Drawdown of the MAEDF

The findings from this MAEDF review highlight the variations in funding for community education across ETBs.<sup>3</sup> Findings demonstrate the differing levels of funding for community education across ETBs, the proportion of the MAEDF compared to the annual community education funding budget and the difference in drawing down funding between the first (2020) and second round (2021) of the MAEDF. There are many reasons for the variations, including those outlined by community education groups in the previous section. The proportion of the MAEDF can be significant compared to the annual community education budget, indicating that increase funding for community education may be needed in that area. Overall, we are not drawing inference between ETBs, rather we are capturing the spending across ETB areas with the aim of sharing the data findings from the two rounds of the MAEDF.





Between the first round of the MAEDF (2020) and the second (2021), for some ETBs the level of draw down increased, for others it decreased. This may be due to a variety of factors, such as the high level of community education funding annually (Cork ETB and City of Dublin ETB), timing, lack of uptake, and issues with tendering process in turnaround.



## Key Learnings and Recommendations



The MAED Fund has been a valuable funding source for community education organisations. Long-standing funding issues for community education remain. However, the forthcoming Community Education Framework, which is led by SOLAS as part of the FET Strategy, has the potential to address these issues, which may help community education providers to encourage learners to re-engage in courses and initiatives.

Community education providers welcome the MAED Fund, which has successfully reached educationally-disadvantaged learners and worked towards addressing digital poverty.

However, the data collected from MAEDF recipients highlights a number of areas that need to be considered in future funding. These include the narrow timeline for MAEDF applications, ineligibility of staff costs, the need for clear information and guidance on the fund, varying and challenging procurement requirements in a short time-frame, and the scope of the fund are noted concerns.

It is important to utilise this feedback and learn from the MAEDF experience to-date, and funding for community education more broadly. As many of the groups are non-government organisations, with little or no core funding, long-standing funding issues must be prioritised.

### Recommendation

**AONTAS calls for a commitment to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and the local communities.**

### This should include:

1. **Learner wraparound support funding** for community education organisations to enable access and retention. Including learner financial support and on-site supports e.g. counselling, domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare.
2. Ring-fenced **funding for non-accredited programmes** to enable marginalised learners to engage in education
3. **An equity of access to accreditation fund** through SOLAS for community education groups to enable accredited provision (to cover the QQI reengagement and validation costs)
4. An annual **Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund** (MAEDF) to include the learning from this paper and the previous MAEDF review (2021) outlined below.

<p><b>Key Learning:</b> The fund reached almost all <b>marginalized learner cohorts</b> as outlined in the MED Paper, but to varying levels.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation:</b> AONTAS calls for targeted support to reach specific cohorts in future funding, including Travellers and Roma, older people and those with mental health issues.</p>
<p><b>Key Learning:</b> The development of a programme and budget, including identifying the individual costs for per item, requires time and careful planning for MAEDF proposals. 60% of groups stated that the timeline was an area they hoped would be improved. This is particularly important for providers that are understaffed.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Provide a <b>suitable timeframe</b> that ensures groups can strategically plan their programme and budget. Promote the fund a minimum 3 months in advance of the deadline and ensure this timeline and communication is consistent across all ETBs. Include a deadline before September so the fund can be utilised for a new academic term.</p>
<p><b>Key Learning:</b> The <b>level of funding</b> was modest, and varied across ETBs but is not indicative of need. While some ETBs provided webinars and clear information to all interested groups, others did not advertise the funds as broadly.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure consistent dissemination of the fund across ETBs.</p>
<p><b>Key Learning:</b> The most important and vital support during the pandemic and in addressing the fall-out of COVID-19 is <b>staff</b>.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Provide a category for 'staff days' to ensure that staff costs are covered within the delivery of future funding.</p>
<p><b>Key Learning:</b> <b>Autonomy</b> to use funds is valuable in enabling community education groups to respond to local need.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Amend future iterations of the fund covering procurement, scope and consistency of the fund and allow providers to ensure their programmes are holistic, needs-led and responsive.</p>
<p><b>Key Learning:</b> Positive, <b>collaborative relationships</b> between community education providers and ETBs are vital to effective dissemination of the fund.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation:</b> The new Community Education Framework (FET Strategy) can serve to draw on good practice and offer consistent application of funding opportunities across ETB areas.</p>

## Closing

It is evident from the survey that the MAEDF has had a significant beneficial impact for community education providers and the learners they support ***“This fund made a huge difference to many community education groups who have such limited access to funding to improve their resources and support learners.”***

While respondents championed the MAEDF, they also highlighted continuing needs within the sector, and made important recommendations to allow the MAEDF to contribute even more to tackling educational inequality.

Feedback from this survey should be considered as a step in fine-tuning the process. It will be vital to consult each ETB for the planning of an additional MAEDF and to hear from community education groups about ongoing and emerging needs. There was a real sense that future MAEDF funds were vital, as one respondent stated, “It was a difficult challenge to get what we needed in terms of equipment, therefore we feel that this fund should be made available every year.”

Despite the significant beneficial impact of the MAEDF so far, there remain further needs for funding for the community education sector, which has been engaging with disadvantaged learners to address educational inequality. It is the hope that the information presented in this paper will help constructively support policy decisions regarding the need for a future MAEDF and a longer-term, sustainable form of funding for the community education sector

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## About AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to access quality adult learning opportunities throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieves these aims through research, communications and advocacy. Our work is aimed at working towards an inclusive, learner centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience. AONTAS also hosts the Community Education Network, a 100-member strong network of independently managed community education providers. The network is designed to provide a platform for members to work collaboratively, sharing information

and resources, offering professional development and working to ensure that community education is valued and resourced. Further information is available at [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com).

### Acknowledgements

AONTAS would like to thank all of the community education groups who took part in the survey and who were support by Education and Training Boards. The feedback you have provided is vital in understanding the impact this important fund and shaping future processes.





# The Voice of Adult Learning

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