

AONTAS Annual Report 2023

“Leading Collective Action for Social Change”

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A Message from our Chairperson John D’Arcy

As Chair of AONTAS, it is a pleasure to bring this Annual Report to our members and all of the organisations with which we work across the island of Ireland and beyond.

Adult learning transforms lives on a day and daily basis – you know that and we know that – nonetheless the necessity remains to continually articulate the needs and challenges facing learners and the voices working for those learners. In many ways, this is greater than ever before.

You’ll read within this report how AONTAS continues to help learners and organisations build a voice, and then projects that voice and their messages to policymakers and decisionmakers at local and national levels. AONTAS’ success is based on authenticity, and is grounded in the issues we hear from our members and learners.

I am delighted at the progress made in the increasing profile of adult learning in mainstream print and radio media, as well as a very strong presence on social media. As we have experienced Government changes in Dublin and Belfast recently, and as we approach elections, this level of awareness is vital. We will continue to make the case for adult learning at every opportunity.

I would like to thank the AONTAS Board for their leadership, commitment, and energy in determining our strategy and setting the high standards which our staff continue to exceed. At this AGM, we say farewell to a number of Board members, Daniel Kenny and Colette Ainscough, who stepped down from the Board on 19th July 2023. I would like to thank them sincerely for their work.

In conclusion, none of our impact would be possible without the passion and expertise of our staff, led by our Chief Executive Officer Dearbháil Lawless – thank you. We look forward to continuing this work in 2024.

A Message from our CEO Dearbháil Lawless

In the past year, we have experienced difficult changes in our society that have had a real impact on the adult and community education sector. Our learners and colleagues must not only provide opportunities for inspiring curious minds, building critical thinkers, and instilling a passion for learning. They must also grapple with the rise of fear-fuelled hatred, misunderstanding, and division in our society. Yet, I believe that our community in AONTAS is filled with people who pour their hearts into their work and recognise their personal investment as a means for action and achieving change. This is where I look when I feel overwhelmed by the challenges, and it gives me hope. Together with our members, our work and our actions set a standard. We have a vision and we take action every day in working towards a just, fair, inclusive, and equitable society, bringing people together across the island of Ireland through a commitment to transformative adult learning.

At AONTAS, I'm proud to say that our team has made a great impact in 2023. You can find more inside this report. Here are some of the highlights:

We have continued to advocate for change

In 2023, we lobbied Government departments across the island of Ireland to recognise and invest in adult learning. We attended political party conferences and engaged with Ministers, representatives, and policymakers including now Taoiseach Simon Harris and First Minister Michelle O'Neill. In our advocacy work, we engaged in consultations and created 11 evidence-based policy papers, including a consultation from SOLAS on their mid-term review of the National FET Strategy. We continue to represent the needs and issues raised by our members, with learners as our focus, to seek positive change for the adult learning sector.

We promoted and developed adult learning

The Adult Learners' Festival reached 24 counties with 128 local events and two national events from AONTAS. This celebration, with 2023's theme of '[Create Your World](#)', continues to create a culture of lifelong learning in Ireland and offers a chance for people to find out what's happening in their local area and how they can get involved. We also worked in partnership with AHEAD and NALA to host a 3-day event called '[gATher](#)' to explore assistive technology in education, and we launched the 2023 [Adult Learner Journal](#), the only peer-reviewed journal for adult and community education in Ireland. Our communications activities in 2023 reached over 9 million people.

Connecting and Strengthening the Sector

Our [Community Education Network](#), which works in partnership with over 100 community education organisations, brought people together through 4 meetings, 4 coffee mornings,

and 3 community of practice workshops across the year. The new [Community Education Map](#), which seeks to showcase the diversity and richness of community education in Ireland, gained over 100 groups and is continuing to grow. Our '[Window to the World: AONTAS Adult Education Summit](#)' brought together colleagues and learners from across Europe to discuss key issues and share new ideas in adult education. Keynote speakers included Professor Kathleen Lynch and then Minister Simon Harris TD. The Summit had a media reach of over 2 million people.

Learner Voice and Research

In 2023, we partnered with 13 Education and Training Boards to develop new research findings in Further Education and Training from across the country. Collaboratively, we delivered the [National FET Learner Forum](#) and provided a space for learners to share their voices and connect with others, as well as to gain new data and insights into FET across Ireland at the moment. Many of the learners involved have gone on to speak at a range of events in the promotion and awareness-raising of adult learning. We also brought two fantastic women from the Roscommon Women's Network to speak in Croatia. We are dedicated to Learner Voice and keeping the learner's experience at the centre of our work.

In terms of research, highlights from 2023 included a book chapter on community education in '[Critical Perspectives in Further Education and Training](#)', a report with new results on communities who have been marginalised in our society, the '[Lifelong Learning Participation](#)' report, the first ever '[Northern Ireland Community Education Census](#)' which provides evidence-based research on the need for sustainable funding for community education in Northern Ireland, and a report into '[FET Learners and Mental health in Ireland](#)', in partnership with Jigsaw, which found that 1 in 3 adult learners report that mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study.

We have also made lots of internal changes in AONTAS to improve our systems and conditions for our team. This includes redeveloping our system for CRM (Customer Relationship Management), reducing working hours for staff, and redeveloping team structures and staff roles.

I'd like to thank the Board of AONTAS for their continued dedication. Their time and expertise are essential for our work. Special thanks to our Chairperson John D'Arcy who tirelessly leads us and brings the organisation from strength to strength. To the team, who make AONTAS a fun and enjoyable place to work – I'm privileged to work with a group of intelligent, passionate, and committed people. Huge thanks to our members who make the AONTAS community! You are a wonder and I'm excited for the days ahead.

Dearbháil

Introduction to AONTAS

AONTAS are the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by our robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults, and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change.

In 2023, as part of our new Strategic Plan, we updated our Vision and Mission. These set out what kind of world we want to see (our Vision), and the part we can play in achieving this (our Mission).

Our Vision

A world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities.

Our Mission

To advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice, and collective action across the island of Ireland.

“Leading Collective Action for Social Change”: The AONTAS Strategic Plan 2023-2026

In 2023, we set out our new [Strategic Plan](#) ‘Leading Collective Action for Social Change’, which explores the changes we want to see in the coming years, and how we are working to make these changes happen.

Our Strategic Plan continues to be informed by our six guiding principles:

- Social justice
- Feminism
- Partnership
- Valuing diversity
- Advancing equality
- Supporting social inclusion

The work reflected in this report demonstrates how we live these principles. As a team, we are committed to excellence in governance, and our hard-working staff are highly skilled, well-informed, and passionate about social justice.

‘Leading Collective Action for Social Change’ is based in the understanding that adult learning has proven benefits for the personal and professional development and wellbeing of individuals, communities, and society. However, existing social inequalities prevent people from participating in adult learning.

In turn, this means that people are not aware of or are not being afforded the chance to reach their learning potential. This has an impact on the wider community, and means that disadvantage and social exclusion are perpetuated.

Our 2023-2026 strategy is about AONTAS driving social change from a social equality perspective. This requires collective action to empower communities and wider society, not just the individual. It is about enabling the whole community to grow and flourish together. It is human-centred and rights-based. It encourages a society that respects and values all people, all learning types, and all learning journeys across the island of Ireland.

‘Leading Collective Action for Social Change’ has three objectives. Each one uses the word ‘change’, to underscore how we can move closer to our vision of ‘a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities’.

1. Connect and engage the sector to enable change

As a membership organisation, AONTAS have long and valuable experience in bringing people from across the adult learning and community education sector together. We know that listening to and supporting learners, providers, and all others involved in the sector, helps to form a collective voice to call for change. We have three goals under this objective.

Goal 1:

Provide a structured platform for voices and input to be heard from across the sector.

Goal 2:

Inform national research on the importance of social equality.

Goal 3:

Build capacity within the sector by enabling professional development, sharing knowledge and strengthening networks.

2. Advocate for change

Based on the needs and experiences of our members and the wider sector, we advocate for changes that address social inequality that relates to adult learning. We have three goals under this objective.

Goal 1:

Strengthen and develop the AONTAS organisational voice.

Goal 2:

Evidence and highlight how adult learning is impacted by social inequality.

Goal 3:

Inform and influence stakeholders and the wider public.

3. Empower the change

We recognise that to achieve our mission, we need to be a supportive environment that supports professional development and encourages new ideas. We have three goals under this objective.

Goal 1:

Develop a socially inclusive framework for AONTAS as an employer.

Goal 2:

Integrate a problem-solving culture.

Goal 3:

Enhance organisational infrastructure and explore diversification of funding.

All of our work is aligned clearly with these identified objectives and goals. In this Annual Report, we will explore our activities and outcomes for 2023 and how they contribute to the achievement of the overall Strategic Plan to 2026. We present our programmes, events, and campaigns under the objective they most closely align with, but with the understanding that all our work intersects with multiple parts of the Strategic Plan.

Objective 1: Connect and Engage the Sector to Enable Change

AONTAS have for many years provided essential opportunities for members to link with other adult learning practitioners from across Ireland. These are opportunities to build new connections, to learn from each other, and to share information of common interest. Meeting and listening to each other, and working together on issues that affect us, develops a sense of shared purpose and solidarity.

The objective to ‘Connect and Engage the Sector to Enable Change’ builds on this sense of solidarity, and uses it to focus on improving social equality. The three goals under this objective will help us to enable this change. In this section, we focus on work that is particularly closely aligned with these goals.

Goal 1.

Provide a Structured Platform for Voices and Input To Be Heard From Across the Sector

Our Members

In 2023, we proudly had **376 members** from across the island of Ireland. Our members are organisations and individuals who are working in or have an interest in the adult and community education sector. This includes educators, managers and staff, and adult learners. In 2023, we had **224 organisations** and **152 individuals**, and we welcomed **65 new members** to the AONTAS community.

One of our main goals is to ensure that our members’ voices and perspectives are raised with decision-makers at national level, to make change happen.

Brian, our Membership and Digital Engagement Officer, leads our work with our members. We are driven by what our members need, by their feedback, and the demands of their day-to-day work and lives.

Brian seeks out new information and ideas that might be useful to our members, from funding opportunities to training initiatives to invitations to AONTAS events, and shares them with members through regular direct emails.

This includes some of our new and longstanding members from Northern Ireland, who have become more involved with AONTAS as a result of the [Northern Ireland Community Education Census](#).

We also visit members across the country, and seek to raise their profile nationally and with others in the sector.

We run webinars and information sessions for members on specific topics, like the [Adult Learners' Festival](#) or the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

We offered information around the new [Adult Literacy for Life](#) funding, and one of our members shared the piece on social media, stating: **'Thank you AONTAS for sharing and explaining the #ALL fund to your members.'**

We offer ongoing support to members and an open, pick-up-the-phone approach for questions and queries relating to adult and community education across Ireland. We reach out to lots of different groups, particularly those who have been marginalised by changes in society and technology – for instance, in 2023, we hosted an exhibition stand at the RDS 50+ show reaching over 200 people in person.

Through our events, from the STAR Awards to our AGM, we offer a place for our members to come together and celebrate adult learning, and to identify issues and structures that need to change.

Review of our Membership in 2023

In 2023, our team reached out by telephone to over 1,000 contacts to update their details and ensure that our members hear about the latest opportunities for the adult learning community in Ireland. Contacts within organisations are changing regularly and it is a priority for us to give the greatest value we can to all our members.

It was a wonderful opportunity to connect with and plan how to further support our community. It was also particularly useful to have up-to-date contacts so that we could let as many organisations and adult learning initiatives as possible know about the STAR Awards 2023-2024 nomination round.

Community Education Network

We established the Community Education Network (CEN) in 2007 to respond to a gap in support and resources for groups that deliver learning in local communities across the country, often without adequate funding or recognition. The network has **over 100 independent members**. Through the CEN, we share information and resources, and we offer capacity-building and development opportunities including in-person and online information sessions or job-shadowing.

Community education is often the first point-of-contact learners have with the sector, particularly for people from under-resourced communities or working-class backgrounds, or people who have had negative experiences with education in the past, or are going through a challenging time. It is an ongoing organisational and strategic priority for us to promote, support, and advocate for community education, so that these learners get the

welcoming and nurturing environment they need to get back to learning, in whatever form suits them.

Responding to Community Issues and Needs

We empower community education providers and staff to take actions that are making a big difference both in local communities and nationally. This includes [political participation, voter education, and active citizenship](#), particularly important given recent developments in anti-immigrant thinking and also with political changes and elections. After the riots in Dublin in November, we connected with the CEN and shared our message to the public that one powerful way to combat racism and build inter-cultural understanding is through community education.

We had been hearing about growing issues with racism and tensions in communities from CEN members at coffee mornings. We subsequently [held an event to explore members' concerns about racial and community tensions within community education spaces](#).

Now, the plan is to develop a Community of Practice around this in 2024, and to deliver residential training for practitioners to tackle this issue effectively.

We also held information sessions on issues that community providers are dealing with, such as [access to funding](#) and [Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(QQI\) Programme Revalidating/Validation](#).

We had four meetings and four coffee mornings, with a total of 62 people joining us. The QQI Re-engagement Community of Practice brought staff from across community education together to share practice and information, and provide support. 28 participants attended 4 meetings throughout 2023. We developed and shared a report with the group, a total of 95 practitioners. We were also invited to create and present a poster on this work, and our former colleague Suzanne Kyle created [this fantastic piece](#).

One CEN member commented that their group ‘benefits from being part of the Community of Practice as it offers a platform to identify the commonality in the provisions across the country. It is a supportive space where issues arising in community-based adult learning can be discussed and where providers can advocate for their learners on a national level.’

For AONTAS, the CEN is also invaluable as it is a direct line to community education providers working every day with adult learners across the country. For our advocacy and representation work – primarily led by our CEO Dearbháil, who sits on numerous Boards and working groups relating to adult and community education, or is often invited to contribute to Government discussions on policy changes or give speeches at conferences – the CEN remains a key driving force for our calls for change or our perspectives on what is needed in the sector. This ranges from the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, which prevents learners from doing community education courses or classes, to the lack of public transport especially in rural areas so learners can get to and from courses easily.

Led by our Community Education Officer Lorraine, we held four informal [online coffee mornings](#) where members of the CEN could raise issues they were most concerned about or affected by. At the coffee mornings, attendees discussed issues affecting people in the sector and positive things ongoing in community education. It was a space to share information on programmes, recruitment, and to offer peer support. It was also a space to discuss where we could support members of the CEN. This led us to organise further information events and training.

One such opportunity was Job Shadowing for Learners and Staff in Adult and Community Education in Brussels in November 2023. This is an ongoing Erasmus+ mobility project for adult learners and staff in adult and community education. It gives people the opportunity to see the work of their colleagues and counterparts in Europe, with the goal of helping

people to progress in their work and in their own lives. [Read more about what the CEN members said about job shadowing in Brussels.](#) This work continues in 2024.

See below for a snapshot of information-sharing and learning events for the CEN in 2023:

- [Supporting the Sector - AONTAS NI Community Education Census](#)
- [AONTAS Community Education Network \(CEN\) Meeting](#)
- [AONTAS Support for CEN members on Validation of Programmes: Workshop Series](#)
- [Show Me the Money! AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting](#)
- [Activating the SDGs in the Adult and Community Education Sector in Ireland](#)
- [Political Participation and Community Education Workshop](#)

Based on some of the discussions during these meetings and events, we continually offered opportunities for members of the CEN to have an input at our events and have their voices heard by others in the sector and by decisionmakers at Government level.

This included at our policy event as part of the Adult Learners' Festival in March, our Annual General Meeting in May, and our Adult Education Summit in November. Read more about these events below under 'AONTAS Events in 2023'.

Community Education Map

The need for a map of community education providers across Ireland became clear through our research for the [AONTAS CEN Census 2020](#). Up to this point, there was no one place that visually represented the geographical spread of community education across the island of Ireland.

We saw this as essential for research, advocacy, and networking, to show the breadth and strength of community education and present clear evidence of why it must be adequately and sustainably funded, and valued.

The Community Education Map now features [107 community education groups](#) from across the island.

There have been many steps along the way to get to this point. We built on work from 2022, when we set up a working group and engaged regularly with those closest to the community education sector.

Our main collaborators were the Community Education Facilitators and the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA), who worked with us to identify what was needed, to guide us on how best to develop the map, and to promote the map among community groups and encourage them to sign up.

The working group also included community education centre managers, academics, and people with the relevant technical expertise to set up the map. The developer began work on the creation of the map, guided by AONTAS and the working group.

[We launched the map over a two-week campaign in September 2023.](#) Our focus for the campaign to launch the map was to invite community groups to **Put Yourself On the Map**. Our [message](#) promoted the new AONTAS Community Education Map as a resource for everyone working or interested in community education in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

[Why did we need a map of community education organisations and groups?](#)

Policymakers and funders are starting to understand the real value and importance of community education as one of the backbones of our society. A new framework for community education is being developed, but there is still work to be done in raising awareness of why community education is so special and how it helps people, and to shape policymakers' views on how it really changes lives.

We need to keep working to show why community education groups need additional funding and recognition within the Unified Tertiary Education System, while maintaining a sense of identity and independence.

The map is a collective, nationwide way of providing evidence of the impact of community education. Our September 2023 campaign was funded through the [New European Agenda for Adult Learning](#). We focused on the fantastic and essential work happening in local communities all across the country, and prompted the map as a new space for collective visibility and connection. We invited community education groups and organisations to find us on social media and use the hashtag #PutYourselfOnTheMap.

Communicating the Campaign

To share the campaign with the public and our target audience – people working in community education across the island of Ireland – we put together a plan for written communications and social media over two weeks.

We wrote articles on [What Community Education Means to Us](#) and [What Makes Community Education Special](#).

Our Community Education Officer Lorraine also visited different community education centres across the country, and wrote about the people she spoke to and their work in a series we called ‘On the Road with the Community Education Network’:

[Women’s Collective Ireland](#)

[Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed \(INOUE\) Learning Hub](#)

[The Central Remedial Clinic \(CRC\)](#)

[Roscommon Women’s Network](#)

[Henrietta Adult & Community Education Service \(HACE\)](#)

[Women’s Community Projects Mullingar](#)

Showcasing Community Education

To encourage groups to get involved, we offered a chance to join our [Community Education Exhibitors Partner Showcase](#) at the **‘Window to the World’ Adult Education Summit in November**, and €800 towards the cost of exhibiting. The Partner Showcase was a chance to connect with others and show the group’s achievements and impact. We ran a Q&A session for anyone interested, and we supported groups to apply.

10 community education groups, including providers and learners, showcased their work at the Summit:

- The National Learning Network
- Community After Schools Project (CASPr)
- Exchange House Ireland National Traveller Service
- Irishwomen Development Partnership
- Irish Wheelchair Association Ballycanew
- Near Media Co-op
- Roscommon Women's Network (RWN)
- Longford Women’s Link
- Dublin Simon Community-Client Development
- The Acorn Project

We heard from one attendee at the Summit that, among other aspects of the event, the exhibitors’ stands – which were full of colour, interactive games and models, and beautiful graphics and images – made them **‘feel invigorated and energised back to practice!’**

One participant of the showcase shared how proud they felt to have been chosen for the exhibition. She said:

‘Our learners were initially nervous about attending the event and travelling to a part of the city they were unfamiliar with, but by the end they were discussing what they would do next year if they were invited back.’

We know the map has had a great impact so far, not least because it was mentioned by then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science Simon Harris TD, at our Summit.

In his keynote address at the event in the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, Minister Harris stated that ‘community education is the cornerstone of lifelong learning’, and that ‘the community education map is an invaluable tool to increase visibility and inform policymakers and for research for learners’.

Overall, the map and the showcase helped people get and stay connected, and we showed the solidarity and strength of community education.

AONTAS Events in 2023: Bringing People Together

Every year, we run many different events with the goal of bringing people together to achieve positive change for adult and community education across the island of Ireland. Our events can be small or large, online or in-person, but they always focus on the voices and needs of adult learners and education providers.

‘A Window to the World’: AONTAS Adult Education Summit 2023

Our biggest event of the year was the ‘Window to the World’ Summit, which took place in November in the Aviva Stadium in Dublin. 150 people joined us for a full day of workshops, panel discussions, and activities to explore the idea of adult learning as a way to open people up to new ideas and the world around us. The majority of attendees were education coordinators or officers. We also had adult learners, educators, directors, academics, and others interested in adult learning.

We launched the Summit [in September](#), giving attendees the option to sign up to one of four workshops:

Listening to Learners' Voices Across Ireland: exploring challenges and solutions for FET learners, directed primarily at Education and Training Board staff, focusing on how to better support learners.

Learner Voice as a Catalyst for Change: exploring the importance of [Learner Voice](#) in shaping the future of adult education, particularly strategies and approaches for ensuring that learners' voices are not only heard but actively considered and integrated into decision-making processes, with new insights from [our Learners as Leaders programme](#).

Adult Learning and the Sustainable Development Goals: where participants learned about the benefits of starting an SDG programme with learners.

Creative Arts and Adult Learning: exploring the [benefits of creative arts methodologies](#) for learners, how to facilitate engagement and creativity in class, and where to find resources for adult learning practitioners, with practical tools for setting up and facilitating a creative arts class.

In October, we [announced Professor Kathleen Lynch as our keynote speaker](#), who was to particularly focus on challenging inequalities in education. In her speech, Kathleen talked about the growing 'tendency to reduce students, and citizens, to customers'.

The most significant themes and issues that emerged from the Summit were **mental health, community, belonging, inclusion, equality, democracy**. These are the areas, according to our speakers and participants, where adult education can have the most impact and is most needed.

We also launched the 2022-23 'Learners' Voices Across Ireland' report, based on surveys and interviews with thousands of adults across Ireland who are in Further Education and Training. A consistent theme here was the essential role of adult education tutors in supporting learners.

The event also marked the end of the previous New European Agenda for Adult Learning programme, 'Inclusive Recovery and Transformation: Adult Learning Post-Covid-19 (2022-2023)', and featured discussions on connecting with learners, educators, and policymakers across Europe to address collective challenges.

Impact of the Summit:

Our primary goal with the Summit was to reach our target groups with new ideas and to show AONTAS as a leading voice in the field. We had an overall social media reach of 26,873, and reports in seven local and national newspapers, combined reach of over 2 million people. Charis, our Head of Impact and Engagement, was also interviewed on five local radio stations about the Summit: Near FM, Dundalk FM, Connemara FM, Beat FM, and Tipp MidWest Radio.

We also had 36 pieces of coverage across local and national newspapers, including the Galway Advertiser, Wicklow Times, Dundalk Democrat, and the Independent.

Dearbháil was interviewed by Brendan Courtney on RTÉ Radio 1's 9 O'Clock Show with Brendan Courtney, talking about her personal experience of the positive impacts of adult education on her life.

The Department of Further and Higher Education shared [a post on LinkedIn](#) about the Summit and Minister Harris's attendance, which received 88 engagements and a comment that it was 'a well organised showcase of learner voices. Well done AONTAS'.

A [similar post was shared by DFHERIS on X/Twitter](#), which gained 4,092 views.

For the Summit overall, we had an audience reach of almost **9.5 million people**.

We conducted a survey to get feedback from attendees at the event, and found that collectively attendees' experience of the event was 4.6 out of 5.

87% agreed or strongly agreed that the Summit gave them deeper understanding of current issues in adult and community education. 87% agreed or strongly agreed they made or strengthened connections in the adult education sector.

One person commented that it 'was an excellent event, and it was great to be able to catch up with so many people - as well as to celebrate and champion the importance of adult and community learning.'

[Read more about the Summit and its outcomes.](#)

17th Annual Adult Learners' Festival: Create Your World

In February, we announced the launch of the 17th AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival, with the theme of **Create Your World**. Our message for the festival was that life isn't about finding yourself, it's about creating yourself.

The Festival ran from Monday 6th March to Friday 10th March, with in-person and online events in Dublin and across the country to celebrate the creative side of adult learning. Our main focus for the week, as well as promoting local and regional events from adult and community education providers across the island of Ireland, was to host two large events in Dublin. One focussed on **adult learning policy** and influencing decisionmakers to

create positive change. The other was to celebrate adult learning through **the STAR Awards**. We'll explore these more below in Goal 2.

The AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census launch

In September, we launched a major new research initiative aimed at transforming adult education in Northern Ireland. The first-ever census of community education in Northern Ireland provides evidence of the huge benefits of community education for communities and families. This can be used to help demonstrate the need for reliable, sustainable funding and political support for the sector. We commissioned a consultant based in Northern Ireland to work with us on the Census. Speaking about the launch, our CEO Dearbháil said:

This is an exciting piece of work which will provide an evidence-base for advocacy. This project is bringing groups together from across Northern Ireland by sharing practice, building knowledge and forging solidarity in the sector. This research will show the value and impact of front-line service provision and tell us about the needs of local people, in local communities.

The main finding from the report is an urgent need for ringfenced, multi-annual funding if community education is to provide a truly supportive learning environment that will address long-term needs in Northern Ireland.

The event was launched by AONTAS Chair John D’Arcy, and we had an excellent input from Caoimhe Archibald from Sinn Féin, as well as a panel discussion with Valerie McConville (CEO of CO3), Sandra Bailie (Head of Organisational Development, NICVA), Maria Walshe (Director of Branding, Communications and FET Strategy Implementation at SOLAS), and Ian Getgood (Head of Skills Strategy Branch at Department for the Economy). We also presented the research findings from the census, with Dr Eve Cobain from AONTAS and Dr Colin Neilands.

The main findings from the research were that funding is too inconsistent and dispersed to be reliable and sustainable for community education organisations to deliver their much-needed services. Both accredited and non-accredited courses receive funding from a broad range of sources. The report found that **reliable ringfenced, multi-annual funding is urgently required for community education organisations in Northern Ireland.**

This NI census follows a similar one carried out by AONTAS in the Republic of Ireland in 2020, which significantly contributed to improvements in funding and resources for community education. Minister Harris has ensured that this funding, now called the REACH Fund, is embedded and established for community education in the Republic.

We hope that adult and community education groups in Northern Ireland can use the Census as evidence of the benefits of their work, to advocate for additional support and funding.

Speakers at the event referred to the new AONTAS NI Census report as ‘backing up’ and ‘adding weight’ to the evidence in [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland](#), published in 2022.

We will also continue to hold events and bring people together in 2024.

Find out more about the context for our work in supporting adult education and community learning in Northern Ireland under Goal 2.

National Further Education and Training Learner Forum events

We conduct robust, evidence-based research into adult education, community education, and Further Education and Training (FET). The National FET Learner Forum is a research project that runs through the academic year.

It brings together adult learners in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland. We travel to the ETB and, through a series of facilitated focus groups and a survey, ask learners:

- What has been working well in your course?
- What has not been working well?
- How could your course experience be improved?

We analyse their answers to build up a picture of the learners' experience of FET, and how it meets the needs of adult learners today and in the future. We then report findings to the individual ETB, so they can decide what actions to take for their learners. When all the Forums have been held, we gather all the data together and analyse it to build up a picture of FET experiences across the country. This publicly-available report is called 'Learners' Voices Across Ireland'.

In the 2022-23 academic year, we gathered feedback from **3,508 learners from across the country**, including 939 learners in focus groups and 2,569 survey responses. We hosted **12 Learner Forums around Ireland**.

Findings from the Reports and the Forums strongly influence the focus of our advocacy work. For instance, we used this research in our pre-Budget submission to DFHERIS in 2023 (see the 'Advocacy and Policy' section below for more details). Dearbháil also gave a presentation on AONTAS and our research results, including our mental health research, to the SOLAS Social Inclusion Advisory Group (more about this below under 'Advocacy and Policy'). We have also seen the Forum acknowledged and referenced by policymakers and decisionmakers, such as [the SOLAS FET Strategy Midterm Review](#).

The Forums and our research also have a local and immediate impact. For example, we were delighted to learn at one FET centre that, as a result of learner feedback from the 2022 Forum, a free counsellor had been instated, the canteen had been upgraded, and art hung up around the building. [Take a look at our Forum events from 2023](#)

AONTAS Stakeholder Consultations

In 2023, in preparation for our new Strategic Plan, we worked with Mantra Strategy to host three consultation sessions with our stakeholders right across the country. We wanted our new Strategic Plan to be informed by our members and those interested in our work.

We held these sessions both [online](#) and in-person in [Cork](#) and [Dublin](#).

After these sessions, we are confident that our new plan reflects the needs and vision of our members and stakeholders across Ireland, and across the sector. The plan is in the process of being finalised, and [an outline of it is available on our website](#).

Later Life Online: Closing the Digital Divide

We hosted this event on 10th May, in the Richmond Education and Events Centre in Dublin. It featured a discussion session on access to and knowledge of technology for older people in Ireland, as well as a presentation from An Cosán and a meeting for the members of our Community Education Network. This event also featured colleagues from across Europe who work or specialise in adult learning. It was connected with and funded through the Erasmus+ [TO SWITCH project](#). As part of this project, we partnered with organisations from six other countries to develop guidelines and structures for trainers and coaches who work with later life learners.

We heard from older – or ‘later life’ – learners, who described their experiences of gaining more confidence and competence with technology and digital skills.

We had 62 attendees from a range of ETBs, community organisations, higher education and SOLAS.

We also brought European project partners to the AONTAS offices to share ideas and perspectives on adult learning, and study visits to community education provider

Exchange House Ireland to demonstrate the impact of their work with and for Travellers on their education programmes. [Find out more about Later Life Online.](#)

‘A Catalyst for Change’: AONTAS Annual General Meeting 2023

We held our 53rd Annual General Meeting at the Spencer Hotel in Dublin, and online for AONTAS members from across the island. 48 people joined us on the day.

We shared our recent activities through our annual report, and an updated about the new Strategic Plan, which focuses on AONTAS as a ‘catalyst for change’ in adult learning and in Irish society.

This linked with our keynote speaker Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan, who explores the transformative power of education in her new book *Poor*, which has gone on to win multiple prizes and awards.

‘Adult learning is a social justice movement, it's about creating social change. AONTAS will be a catalyst for change’ - AONTAS CEO Dearbháil Lawless

A big focus on the day was the idea of ‘heart’ and openness in relation to adult learning. We held a roundtable discussion centred on ‘The Language of the Heart’, a phrase used by President Michael D. Higgins to represent language that focuses on people and experience – in contrast with the more formal and sometimes inaccessible language often used in policy documents or funding applications. Participants were invited to review some real-life examples of “policy” language, to consider how we use language in our day-to-day work, and how the words we choose can include or exclude people.

Reflecting on the examples, one participant said, ‘The language is often only accessible to people in the sector. It is not accessible to most people’.

Another noted, ‘Education needs to wrap around the individual and not the other way around’.

What attendees said about our AGM

When we followed up with attendees afterwards, we heard some good feedback about the AGM and its focus. One attendee said they came away thinking about how ‘the words we use are very important to how we promote our courses’. Another attendee said that the discussions and keynote were very interested, and they would have welcomed more focus on ‘what can be done to actually see change happen’.

The need to demonstrate that change is possible and how it can be brought about has become an increasing focus for AONTAS, especially as it is clear that this is what our members and those in the adult and community education sector need. This is why the word ‘change’ now features in each goal of our new Strategic Plan. It is also part of our increasing focus on bringing about policy change through campaigning and targeted advocacy work, which will be explored further below.

[Read more about our AGM 2023 here.](#)

Overall, we held **36 events in 2023**. The [Events section of our website](#) received 3,931 views. We will continue to plan events that meet the needs of our members and bring new information and ideas for the adult and community education sector.

Reaching our Audience: Social Media

The social media landscape altered significantly in 2023, with the change from Twitter to ‘X’. We adjusted to the move away from text-based content and more towards images and video content.

We have found that our audience respond better to **authenticity** and **empathy** on social media, which is particularly important in our society at the moment, but even more so to the adult learning sector and our members.

We took a **thematic approach** to our social media posts, focusing not just on the work and the activity, but also on the issue that it was addressing, on the reasons why it is important, and on the people, names, and faces behind it. This included featuring more of the team on socials posts and personalising our content. This shows that the AONTAS team is approachable, and it shows our values through our work.

In 2023, our overall reach across our socials platforms – including Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram (Meta), LinkedIn, and YouTube – was **726,776**. Our number of followers was **22,243 people** across all platforms, up from 20,133 in 2022.

Our main focus across socials continued to be firstly to serve adult learners and the adult learning community, nationally and internationally, and secondly to promote our work and events.

Our most important social media campaigns:

- One Step Up, which ran in January with the hashtag #MakeTimeForMeIn2023
- The Adult Learners' Festival, which ran from February to the end of March with the hashtag #CreateYourWorld and #ALF23
- Our AGM, which took place in May and focused on AONTAS as a Catalyst for Change
- The Community Education Map, which took place in September with the hashtag #PutYourselfOnTheMap
- The Northern Ireland Community Education Census launch, which took place in September with the hashtag #AontasNICensus

- The Adult Education Summit, which took place in November with the hashtag #AontasSummit23
- Throughout the year, we also spotlighted our members and our relationships with them, particularly through the Community Education Network.
- We also continually promoted the National FET Learner Forum events with the hashtag #FETLearnerForum and #LearnerVoice
- We promoted adult learning across Europe by sharing meetings, projects, and collaborations with our partners and colleagues in adult learning across the EU.

Social media remains an important way to connect with our members, the general public, and also with policymakers including then Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris TD. Here's a highlight from our engagements with the Minister on social media in 2023: [At 'A Window to the World', our adult education summit in November](#)

AONTAS Editorial: News Updates and Blog Posts from the Team

News Stories

With our news stories we share the latest updates for the adult and community education sector, including new announcements from the Department of Further and Higher Education and from funders such as SOLAS.

We published **46 news stories** in 2023, many with a sharper focus on education policy and advocacy, in response to feedback from our members. You can [read all our news stories here](#) but here are some key pieces:

- ["Funding could mean new beginnings for people with different abilities," says Advocate Following the Announcement of New Funding for University Access](#)
- [€5 Million in Funding Announced for Community Education through Reach Fund 2023](#)

- [Historic move away from the Points System and the Dominance of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland](#)
- [New short “micro-credential” courses designed to offer greater flexibility in how people learn and up-skill](#)
- [Community Educators say ringfenced funding is ‘urgently required’ to address inequality, according to new AONTAS NI Community Education Census](#)
- [One in three adult learners say mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study](#)
- [What did Budget 2024 deliver for adult and community education?](#)
- [Community Education Network Responding to Racism and Community Tension](#)

The overall number of visitors to our News section on our website in 2023 was 3,955.

Our CEO has these stories on hand and can point to them in advocacy and lobbying discussions with Government representatives, policy advisers, and other decisionmakers for adult and community education, who we are seeking to influence in order to achieve positive changes for the sector (see ‘Advocacy and Policy’ below for more details).

Blog Posts

We published 26 blog posts across 2023. These focused on a range of topics, and are written by different members across the AONTAS staff team.

A big focus for us in 2023 was to encourage our team to write about what they are interested in and share their work. Here are some fantastic examples:

- [A look back at the ‘Imagining Adult Education: Theory into Practice’ Webinar Series – writing by Project Officer Conor Thompson](#)
- [Lack of childcare continues to be a barrier to accessing Further Education and Training – writing by Research Officer Dr Laura Lovejoy](#)
- [Learners’ Voices Across Ireland: New research findings from 2023](#)

- [Budget 2024: Supporting adult learning will help Ireland become a more equal and just society for all](#)
- [Combining education with wellness to empower people to deal with challenges, live meaningful lives, and contribute to society: a visit to Threshold Training Network in Tallaght in Dublin – writing by Membership and Digital Engagement Officer Brian](#)
- [Raising our Members' Issues at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 2023 – writing by Policy Officer Conor Thompson](#)
- [Tutors are key to a positive learning experience for adult learners – writing by Research Officer Dr Laura Lovejoy](#)

The overall number of visitors to our Blog was 4,496, the highest number of all pages on the website.

Writing like this allows us to share our research and advocacy work, and our relationships with our wonderful members.

Our website had 46,577 views in 2023.

In the News

In 2023, we had a reach of **over 9 million people**. This includes reaching people through our website, news articles, radio interviews, national and local newspapers, and social media platforms including LinkedIn, X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Dearbháil's interview on RTÉ Radio 1's 9 O'Clock Show with Brendan Courtney was particularly impactful, as it led to increased public awareness about our work and about lifelong learning generally. [The interview was also shared by others in the adult education community.](#)

This interview was a prime example of how we are strengthening our organisational voice and highlighting how adult education linked with social inequality. [Here's an example of a response from a listener to Dearbháil's works on X/Twitter.](#)

Learner Stories for Advocacy and Representation

We gather stories from adult learners from all across the island of Ireland showing how going back to education has had a transformative impact on their lives, and encouraging others to go back too.

In 2023, we shared the stories of 6 fantastic learners. This page had 1,324 views in 2023.

Let's take a look at the stories:

[‘My whole life, I have been trying to accommodate for the system, instead of the system becoming accessible for me’](#) - Niamh Murray from Claire on returning to education with dyslexia, and physical and verbal dyspraxia, and the need for more flexibility that facilitates everyone to learn in a way that suits them

[‘You can set yourself up to achieve, even having failed before’](#) - from adult learner to adult educator, Ashling Johnston shines a light on how going back to education can change lives

[‘I now have a clearer picture of what I want to do with my life’](#) - David Lucey shares his story of doing different short courses at Cork College of FET Dunmanway Centre

[‘You meet lovely people and it's completely different to school’](#) - Noel Rafter shares his story of doing different courses at Kilkenny Adult Learning Service, Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, and how the experience has made a difference for him

[‘There are members who say the Active Retirement has been a lifeline’](#) - Dorothy Mawn shares her story of doing courses and supporting others in her local community to do courses through the Ballyshannon Active Retirement and Donegal ETB

[‘There are probably things you’ve always wanted to do. You should always try’](#) - Louise McGirr shares her story of doing different courses through Donegal Education and Training Board

These stories from learners are essential for our advocacy and representational work, especially as evidence of the need, for instance, of further support and funding to create the conditions adult learners need to return to and stay in education.

At the ‘Window to the World’ Summit, Dearbháil’s opening speech was inspired by the meaningful relationship between a learner and an adult educator in Edenderry. Dearbháil told us about Maura and Sarah's journey working together and the life-changing impact it has had on Sarah.

Sharing New Research and Ideas: The Adult Learner Journal

The Adult Learner, the only Irish journal of adult and community education, is a valuable resource that documents the development of adult learning policy and practice and offers a forum for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning. The Journal prioritises ideas that address socio-economic disadvantage, social exclusion, equality, workplace learning, and the study of the teacher-student relationship. Each year, *The Adult Learner* has a theme, as agreed by the Journal’s Editorial Board, which consists of adult, community, and further education practitioners, experts, and academics. Our CEO Dearbháil Lawless has been the Chair of the Editorial Board for *The Adult Learner* since 2022.

Members of the 2023 Adult Learner Journal Board

- Rosemary Moreland, Ulster University, Editor
- José Pedro Amorim, University of Porto
- Koen De Pryck, Vrije Universiteit Brussel
- Bairbre Fleming, University College Dublin
- Nuala Glanton, Adult Education Officers' Association of Ireland
- Fran Kennedy, Adult Education Officers' Association of Ireland
- David Mallows, University College London
- Helen Murphy, Waterford Institute of Technology
- Luke Murtagh, National University of Ireland, Maynooth
- Stephen, O'Brien, University College Cork
- Jane O'Kelly, Dublin City University, Book and Policy Review Editor
- Maria Slowey, Dublin City University
- Bernie Grummel, Associate Professor in the Departments of Education and Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University

We opened the **Editorial Office** for the Journal, led by Giuliana, our Publications and Design Officer. The Editorial Office's primary role is to offer feedback directly to authors on the Style Guide and oversee the copyediting process.

We also created feedback forms that are now part of the peer-review process.

We redesigned the Style Guide and made it into a more accessible format so that contributors can understand it better.

For the 2023 edition, we also created infographics on the peer review process, submission criteria, and timeline.

The idea with these changes was that contributors could have a clear understanding of the process from start to finish. All this information was available on the ALJ section of our website, which received 813 views. [We also hosted two online events to prepare writers for contributions to the journal.](#)

Publications in the Adult Learner Journal 2023

In 2023, the themes focussed on:

- Creating Learner-centred Education
- Learning Development and Holistic Thinking
- Equal Access
- Policy and Practice

We published 7 articles, 1 policy review, and 3 book reviews in the 2023 edition.

The AONTAS team and Editorial Board support contributors every step of the way, from helping them solidify their ideas at the Writers' Workshop to encouraging them to contribute to the Journal, from providing detailed feedback on how to make their arguments stronger to giving them a platform to discuss their work at the discussion event.

Gavan Sheridan, a first time contributor to *The Adult Learner* sent the following email:

'Just a quick note to thank you for all your help and effort, and to your colleagues at AONTAS also. I had no idea where submitting an article idea would bring me. I was nervous under the spotlight this morning, but thoroughly enjoyed the event. Well done to all involved.'

Several articles in the 2023 edition cited work published by members of the Editorial Board and articles from previous editions of *The Adult Learner*, which demonstrates the impact of the journal and those associated with it to thinking and practice in the adult and community education sector.

[The Adult Learner Journal 2023: Online Discussion](#)

In December, we hosted [an online discussion to highlight the valuable contributions](#) to 2023 edition of *The Adult Learner Journal*. This is the only peer-reviewed academic journal of adult and community education in Ireland, and it features new research findings and ideas from experts in the sector.

Led by our Publications and Design Officer Giuliana, this event focused on the central themes of the issue, like creating learner-centred education, learning development and holistic thinking, equal access to learning, and the links between policy and practice. Contributors from the journal shared key messages from their articles and we facilitated discussion groups. This gave people a chance to come together and talk about the different areas they were interested in.

The online event had **70 attendees** and **4 breakout groups** focusing on Creating Learning-centred Education, Learning Development and Holistic Thinking, Equal Access, Policy and Practice.

In 2023, we received our first ever article focussing on Youthreach, '*Youthreach Learners, All Grown Up*'. In the Policy and Practice discussion group during the discussion event, an attendee spoke about how Dan O'Sullivan's article on Youthreach and how the personal stories shared in it can help show the impact of adult educators that is not easily quantified numerically. This attendee suggested that demonstrating stories could be replicated in other policies.

In the 'Development and Holistic Thinking' discussion group, the same sentiment was expressed. One participant said, 'As a sector, we need to be more storied.' Another said, 'providers are witnesses to the measure of individual success, which often goes unseen.'

The event also featured a contribution by adult learner and advocate Jason Harris, who we worked with for a DFHERIS event in 2023 and who took part in the 'Learners As Leaders' programme for 2023 – see below for further details in Objective 2. Jason spoke about the need for greater financial supports for apprentices in Ireland. [Read the Adult Learner Journal 2023](#)

Goal 2. Inform National Research on the Importance of Social Equality

Listening to Learners' Voices Across Ireland: the 2023 National FET Learner Forum Report

In 2023, our newly-appointed Head of Research Dr Thomas Murray initiated a review of the Forum's research and reporting framework. The aim was to align all research initiatives with the new Strategic Plan. This included our goal of informing national research and understanding on the importance of adult learning for social equality.

Working together, the Research Team drew on experiential learning, stakeholder feedback, and advisory group expertise to complete a gap analysis.

The team then developed a new research framework and reporting template for the Forum. Future reports will specify research scope and limitations, integrate statistics and learner voice under strategic themes, and foreground learners' recommendations.

The goal is to ensure Learner Voice contributions are clearly communicated to a wide range of stakeholders and to facilitate stakeholder responsiveness to learners' expressed needs and recommendations.

Research results in 2023

The [2022-2023 Learners' Voices Across Ireland](#) report showed that education has a transformative impact on adult learners' lives.

Learners consistently highlighted areas working well as **tutors' care and teaching**, their centre's **welcoming atmosphere**, and the benefits of learning to their personal experience, including their self-confidence, outlook on the future, and overall well-being.

Learners also consistently highlighted specific areas requiring attention or change, including the significant demand for more courses, notably English for Speakers of Other

Languages. They also flagged issues with local infrastructure and facilities which are creating inequalities and barriers to accessing education for learners across the country. The research also found that [1 in 3 learners feel that stress and anxiety are impacting their ability to learn](#). This need was explored in more depth in our subsequent report [FET Learners and Mental Health: Identifying Supports](#).

Impact of our Research

We draw on our Learner Voice research when calling for policy change. Findings from the Forum research have supported our advocacy work at 'Stepping Stones and Stable Roots', our policy event as part of the Adult Learners' Festival 2023, as well as at meetings of the Education and Training Board Ireland Inclusion Strategy Group.

Regionally, the Forum research offers ETBs an independent resource to understand the experience and perspectives of learners and to facilitate ETBs to respond to what people need in order to make learning better and more effective.

ETBs action report findings they deem appropriate through established governance and quality assurance processes. We meet with ETBs to discuss report findings and recommendations. We welcome the growing culture of embedding of Learner Voice in ETB processes.

The Forum also shows learners that they can have a say in the running of their ETB and their course, and also shows them that they can become more active locally in advocacy and representation to make learning better for future learners in their area.

A key finding of the research this year was the [essential role of adult education tutors](#) in supporting, as well as educating, learners. This is in contrast with common experiences of learning at school, which can be more authoritarian, or experiences of learning at university, which can be more hands-off.

As Thomas remarked in a discussion about the report at the AONTAS Summit, this is ‘something that cannot be taken for granted; it’s essentially care work. It is absolutely essential to value tutors. This will be part of our focus for 2024.’

According to one learner, Thomas said, there was no elevator in the building where their FET course took place. The learner, cited in the new report, stated: ‘I have a disability, and I stopped doing the course because I wasn’t able to go up and down stairs.’

We have continued to raise these issues with DFHERIS and Minister Harris. We welcome investment in buildings and facilities for Further Education and Training, such as this announcement from April 2023 of [€8 million capital funding for further education and training sector](#). Funding must focus on supporting learners as people, and creating the conditions needed so that people can continue learning. This includes access, heating, food, books and resources, and a supportive environment.

Speaking about the 2023 report, Minister Harris stated that ‘learners can trust this will feed directly into future policy planning and advocacy.’

On social media, we had good engagement and responses to the report and to the Minister’s comments, [including this example from SOLAS](#).

[Read more from our ‘Learners’ Voices Across Ireland’ report to explore these issues.](#)

Connecting with Adult and Community Learning in Northern Ireland

In the run-up to the launch, we held multiple events with our colleagues in community and adult learning in Northern Ireland. After holding an event in Belfast in late 2022, ‘Connection and Common Ground among Community Learning Groups’, in February 2023 we hosted an

event in Derry called **‘Supporting the Community Learning Sector: Getting together in Derry’**, hosted by Northwest Regional College.

This is part of our focus on supporting and facilitating adult education and community in Northern Ireland, and our research which has been published in the [first ever census of community education in Northern Ireland](#).

The conversations at the Derry event, in addition to other events we’ve held in Northern Ireland, showed the real need for better collaboration across the Stormont departments, including Education, Communities and Health, to improve the opportunities and experiences of current and future adult learners. We are hopeful that, now that Stormont has been restored, we can continue to facilitate and support adult learning organisations to advocate for improved resources and funding.

Our goal with the census research has been to strengthen the evidence behind the benefits of community education in Northern Ireland and support providers to advocate for what is needed.

Following this launch, Dearbháil was asked to become a representative in Northern Ireland for access to higher education on a working group and in consultations with Government. We are continuing to work with local groups and policymakers to strengthen collaboration and build networks. This includes the [Alliance for Lifelong Learning](#), a new body created to support and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all across Northern Ireland, led by the [Open University in Ireland and Open College Networks Northern Ireland](#) and including representatives such as CO3 and FALNI. We also shared the Census and communicated its findings directly to politicians working in Northern Ireland during the [Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in Athlone in November 2023](#).

In 2023, we were pleased to see [the Irish Government announce a grant of €2 million for Northern Irish students to access the Erasmus+ study abroad programme post-Brexit.](#)

We will continue our focus on the need for further supporting and sustainable funding for adult and community education in Northern Ireland.

Influencing Policy: ‘Stepping Stones and Stable Roots’

The AONTAS Adult Learners’ Festival celebrates adult learning across Ireland, but also highlights the elemental role of adult learning in supporting social inclusion and engagement. As part of the Festival, we hold a policy discussion event, specifically to explore the evolving nature of this role.

The 2023 event, we held ‘Stepping Stones and Stable Roots’ in Dublin on 6 March and focussed on how community education – which is underpinned by principles of social justice – might interact with the new Unified Tertiary Education system.

Guest speakers included **William Beausang, Assistant Secretary General from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)** and **Andrew Brownlee**, Chief Executive Officer of SOLAS.

Other discussions at ‘Stepping Stones and Stable Roots’ from our panellists led to new insights into the Unified Tertiary Education System, and links with community education. Panellists included Dáire Keogh, President of Dublin City University; Fiona Maloney, Director of the then-newly established National Tertiary Office; Melíosa Bracken, Community Education Facilitator; and Tara Farrell, Chief Executive of Longford Women’s Link.

Participants came from a broad range of organisations, and included Community Education Facilitators, community education managers and practitioners, ETB staff

including Adult Literacy Coordinators and Adult Education Officers, and of course learners.

Three learners - **Deborah Oniah, Niamh Murray, and Catherine Gore** – shared their lived experience of the transformative power of Community Education, which can act as both a ‘Stepping Stone’ to help people progress in education and work; and a support system to help people develop ‘Stable Roots’ in themselves and their communities. This unique value of Community Education was recognised by William Beausang, who emphasised that ‘community education is the cornerstone of lifelong learning options and the sector must be supported’.

In roundtable discussions, participants reiterated the need for a variety of ways to access education; and broadly agreed that mechanisms like the Unified Tertiary Education system and Recognition of Prior Learning contributed to increasing access and inclusion.

However, there is also a need for learning paths that do not emphasise ‘going upwards’ in accredited courses as the principal aim.

[Explore the discussion and resulting recommendations in the Stepping Stones and Stable Roots event report.](#)

Celebrating Adult Learning: the STAR Awards

Part of the annual Adult Learners’ Festival, the STAR Awards recognise the very best in adult learning in Ireland. In 2022, we celebrated and acknowledged the incredible work from adult learning providers in adapting during the COVID-19 pandemic to help people continue to access learning and feel supported.

Nominations for the 17th AONTAS STAR Awards were received under five categories. These are adult learning initiatives that support:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Learner Voice
- Social Inclusion
- Sustainable Development through Education
- Third-level Access and Engagement

Our Membership and Digital Engagement Officer Brian leads on the STAR Awards, and guided groups through the nomination process in October and November 2023.

We received 96 adult learning initiative nominations. [Twenty-four initiatives were shortlisted in the five categories.](#) The judging panel met online with the shortlisted groups in mid-February and then choose the overall winners.

The 2023 event, which took place in Croke Park in Dublin, brought together 148 people – despite a heavy downfall of snow the night before! The event was hosted by Dearbháil with special guests Irish international footballers Stephanie Roche and Áine O’Gorman, and kicked off with music from the Forever Young Chorus from Finglas.

Speaking at the event, O’Gorman spoke about the links between sports and education: ‘When you get out of your comfort zone, that’s when you grow and develop. Sport brings everyone together. It gives people opportunities. It’s the same with education.’

There were **eleven winners** on the day, showcasing the very best in adult and community education across the island of Ireland.

[Click here to see the 10 winners of the AONTAS STAR Awards 2023.](#)

Impact of the STAR Awards 2023

The STAR Awards and Adult Learners’ Festival were covered extensively in local online and print media, with 33 pieces of coverage **reaching 466,980 readers.**

Publications included *Kildare Now*, the *Limerick Leader*, the *Leinster Leader*, the *Echo*, the *Irish Examiner*, *Dublin People*, and *Waterford News & Star*.

We also spoke to local radio stations including Dublin City FM, Connemara FM and Tipp FM about the STAR Awards and the benefits of adult education.

BBC Ulster interviewed Fiona and Stacey from START 360 Engage Women's Recovery Project in May, the project that won the award under the category 'Shared Island and Peace Building'. The interview reached an audience of **half a million (538,000) listeners**.

This project supports women who have been in custody or had contact with the criminal justice system. Fiona explained the importance of the project to the women involved, and the wider community:

'We have been supporting communities for almost 30 years ... It's really important that we give women time and space to just focus on who they are as females and their own experiences ... And we can see the outcomes that are really positive for women when they are given that space to support each other and tell their stories. They don't return to court. They don't have police contact. This is a platform for them to grow and change.'

Besides the media coverage of these winners, we have gone on to form lasting relationships with some of the adult education organisations who have represented Ireland at European level because of their association with AONTAS.

For example, 'The Liberty Weavers', who won a STAR Award in 2023 in the 'Learner Voice' winners (small/medium) category, went on to demonstrate the work their organization does at the Lifelong Learning Conference in Brussels in April 2024.

Another example is the 'Whidden Workshops, who won in the Third Level Access & Engagement category. They have applied for the Grundtvig Awards 2024, organised by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA).

A STAR Awards judge also invited the young people involved in this project to join the 'Future Board Leaders' programme, which seeks to introduce new voices from underrepresented communities to Irish charity boards.

Follow-up from the STAR Awards

Towards the end of 2023, we connected with partner organisations who very generously shortlisted our STAR Awards nominations.

It was a highlight to see all the amazing work being done by our members in the areas of social inclusion, learner voice, global citizenship education, third-level access and engagement and health and wellbeing.

In November, Brian and our Policy and Development Officer Conor went out to Maynooth University and joined shortlisted initiative 'ComMUniversity' for a design thinking session, which looked at how we can support older learners. It united learners, staff from local area partnerships, librarians, and educators. Maynooth have secured funding to do more research into this area in 2024. We're looking forward to continuing to work with them, and other organisations involved in the STAR Awards, into 2024.

Goal 3. Build Capacity Within the Sector by Enabling Professional Development, Sharing Knowledge and Strengthening Networks

Adult Learning Events Across Ireland: the Adult Learners' Festival 2023

As we have explored through looking back at the 2023 AONTAS Events, this year's Adult Learners' Festival focused on the theme 'Create Your World.'

There were **130 events** across **24 counties, including two national events from AONTAS.**

The events covered everything from introductions to yoga, finance, or IT training; to meet ups and discussions over coffee.

We also created **a brand-new website** to help people share and find events, with filters to help people find the right events for them. [Take a look at new events website.](#)

In the run-up to the Festival, we held an online information session on 14th February called [‘Fall in Love with Learning’](#) (for the day that was in it). We brought people together to discuss ideas for the festival and for local events, and shared information about what to expect and how we could help.

We offered [free posters and resources](#) to anyone holding events, as well as free graphics to use on social media. We also offered €50 vouchers to the first 50 community groups to register an event on the website. Many groups used the voucher as a prize for adult learners at events or raffles.

We sent out packs with bunting, pens, mugs and other tokens to create a festival atmosphere, including seed bombs that can be planted to create beautiful wildflower plots, all in keeping with the springtime theme of Create Your World.

The most popular events were information sessions, taster sessions, and workshops – suggesting that people want to know more, to get stuck in and get involved.

Festival Impact

Our goal for ALF 2023 was to raise awareness of and celebrate adult learning, to support education providers to run local events across the country, and to highlight the benefits

and value of those events across our channels and with our members and stakeholders, and the general public.

Our total reach for our communications for **the Festival was over 1 million (1,089,174)** people.

Our media reach was **466,980 people**, with 33 pieces of coverage across national, local online and print media. Media coverage for the Festival included a 'Walk and Talk' organised by Tipperary Education and Training Board, which appeared in the Clonmel Nationalist in an article titled '[Celebration of education, diversity, health lifestyle](#)' with a reach of **8,783 people**. The focus of the event was for adults to walk together and talk their experiences and learn about opportunities for learning in TETB.

Another feature was an Open Day at Monaghan Institute, covered in the Dundalk Democrat in an article titled '[Monaghan Institute Open Day takes place this month](#)' with a reach of **5,539 people**.

And another was '[Community groups learn to “sail into wellness”](#)' in Echolive, with a reach of **10,880 people**. The article focused on STAR Award-winning group in the Health and Wellbeing category, [Sailing Into Wellness](#).

As mentioned above, BBC Ulster interviewed Fiona and Stacey from START 360 Engage Women's Recovery Project in May, the project that won the award under the category 'Shared Island and Peace Building', with an audience of **half a million (538,000) listeners**. We worked with Alice PR to promote and communicate the Festival and its impact.

On social media, our overall reach was 47,174 across Twitter/X, Meta (Facebook and Instagram) and LinkedIn.

Just under **7,000 people** visited the [Adult Learner's Festival website](#) during the campaign, an increase of over 1,000 from 2022. We also had **1,618 views** on the Adult Learners' Festival section of aontas.com, with overall website traffic of **8,618**.

The **130 events** that took place across the country were attended by an average of **20 people each**. When we asked for feedback from those who took part in organising the Festival events, here's what we heard:

'Good theme this year, best to keep the themes as broad as possible. Relevant to learners and fitting to learning in their lives'

'Very identifiable theme and hashtag that would be relevant to adult learners'

Survey respondents also called for more communication and more notice ahead of the Festival, with lots of time to plan. We were delighted to receive this feedback and made it a focus for our planning for ALF 2024. It was great to hear that local events were enjoyable and that the resources we offered were helpful, as one respondent told us:

'We had a lovely event and I had great communication with and support from the AONTAS team. Thank you. We also received the €50 voucher which we raffled with our learners.'

This is the highlight of our year, and we look forward to continuing to work with the wonderful staff and managers in adult and community education centres and FET centres across the country.

We are grateful to our members, stakeholders, and to all the adult learners for your enthusiasm, energy and hard work in helping us to make this year's Festival a huge success. [Find out more about the Adult Learners' Festival.](#)

Giving People the Information They Need: One Step Up

One Step Up is an information service aimed at helping people get back to education, or learn something new, at any age and with any level of qualifications. Established by AONTAS in 2015, it is funded by the New European Agenda for Adult Learning, and offers an accessible website and a free phone line that is monitored by our team. It is a first point of contact for people seeking to know their learning options, offering clear information with the aim of increasing participation in adult education in Ireland.

There were 106 direct enquiries for information through email and the One Step Up free-phone helpline. The phone service was wound down in 2023, and we are moving to a focus on other forms of communication including by email and social media.

There were almost 7,000 visits to our tailored website, www.onestepup.ie, an increase of nearly 2,000 on 2022.

We ran an information and awareness-raising campaign in January 2023, to make sure the public know about One Step Up and to offer clear, accessible information on returning to education as an adult. The week-long campaign in January and ties in with the New Year and any resolutions people might make, or ideas to make more time for learning.

This year's campaign was called #MakeTimeForMeIn2023. We ran it from Monday 9th to Friday 13th January 2023. We also used the hashtags #NEAAL #OSU23. Our total social media reach for the campaign was 52,911.

During this campaign, we had significantly more traffic to website, with 359 new users in January and 949 page visits. This is a 300% increase in page activity for the month of January compared to December 2022. It shows the effectiveness of these types of campaigns with driving people to access the information.

We also did interviews with two learners and shared their stories, in order to promote the benefits of returning to learning. They were [Niamh Murray](#) and [Ashling Johnston](#).

There were some fantastic responses to the stories on social media, instance [here for Niamh](#) and [here for Ashling](#). These stories offer inspiration to people who might be considering going back to some form of learning, by sharing how others – who may have had prior negative experiences with education or been out of education for a long time – went back, tried something new, and had a great experience.

Empowering Learners and Educators: Learner Voice Training in Further Education

Learner Voice is a concept in education underpinned by the idea that learning should be guided by those who learn, as well as those who teach. We're now offering Learner Voice Training to staff in Education and Training Boards across the country, as well as learners themselves.

The goal of this training is to embed Learner Voice as a process that is embedded in FET. We offer staff training on the foundations and practice of Learner Voice work, and workshops for learners on leadership, advocacy, and action planning.

We want to help ETBs to in their responsiveness to what learners need, and also to encourage and facilitate more learners to share their perspectives on what works well and what needs to change, which will in turn create the conditions for more people to be able to return to and stay in FET.

In 2023, we published a new handbook to support ETBs' work to support Learner Voice regionally and locally across Ireland, titled the [Further Education and Training Learners as Leaders Handbook](#). It offers ETB staff the theory, tools, and practical resources to facilitate

learners to share their feedback and experiences of learning at their ETB. The handbook is a **free resource** to complement our ongoing Learner Voice Training. The goal is to help make learning better for everyone.

Throughout the year, we held 5 training sessions with staff and learners across the country. Conor and Karyn, from the Advocacy and Research Teams at AONTAS, travelled all over to give this training. This included with Cork ETB, two with Tipperary ETB, City of Dublin ETB in Finglas, Kilkenny and Carlow ETB.

In one training session, with learners from Tipperary ETB, the participants in the session identified key issues on which they wanted to collectively advocate for change. These included a focus on transport, with the provision of a dedicated linked bus service for students across the county to get students to college on time, an updated bus timetable with buses running every 30 minutes, and specialised training to be provided for bus drivers on wheelchair-accessible buses. The learners also identified who the decisionmakers were that they needed to speak to, and the next steps needed, including gathering evidence for research to strengthen their calls for action. [More on our Learner Voice Training.](#)

‘Gather’ with AHEAD and NALA for Assistive Technology

GATHER was a free three-day online assistive technology (AT) event run by AHEAD in partnership with AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). It took place from 22 to 24 May 2023.

Over three mornings, educators from adult and community education, FET and Higher Education came together to share best practice and consider the 'big questions' in the world of assistive technology (AT). We had between 80 and 100 participants each day. The event featured new ideas and research findings from Dr Richie Healy from AHEAD, on students’ experiences from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to now.

A key finding here was that 53% of students were using AT at in 2023, in contrast to 26% before the pandemic in early 2020.

A silver lining to the pandemic is perhaps the emergence of more accessible, built-in support tools, as well as students becoming more accustomed to using AT to support their learning.

The event also featured ideas from the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), and a discussion of artificial intelligence and its potential as an AT tool, with Mary Walsh O'Shea from Waterford and Wexford ETB demonstrating how they are use virtual reality to replicate healthcare settings with learners.

Donegal ETB have established Digital Hubs which are working to close the digital divide. Limerick and Clare ETB are bringing AT into the classroom for all learners to access and use. This reduces the necessity for students with disabilities to disclose a diagnosis. [Read more on the GATHER 2023 webpage.](#)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

In 2022, we had identified a gap in community education provision on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). We worked with University College Cork to help the development of RPL knowledge and skills for community education providers. We recruited 10 CEN members to do a Level 7 course in RPL at UCC. We previously developed this programme with Dr Ciara Staunton at UCC. All 10 successfully completed the course. The community education sector now has a growing number of qualified RPL practitioners with a Level 7 micro-credential. To continue to support this work, we also hosted two Community of Practice sessions for people engaged in the programme. [Find out more about our RPL work.](#)

Objective 2: Advocate for Change

As the National Organisation for Adult Learning, we have built strong relationships with those who make national policy and decisions. Using our evidence base, we act as a link between national policy actions and what happens in practice on the ground.

We are a strong advocate for adult and community education. We respond to policy developments and build effective relationships with key policymakers.

Goal 1. Strengthen and Develop the AONTAS Organisational Voice

Advocacy and Policy

in 2023, we identified issues learners, staff, and providers are experiencing, including the closure of centres, inadequate funding for education providers, the need for more financial supports for learners, and unsustainable conditions for tutors and staff in community education. Learners particularly told us how they're struggling to engage and succeed in education due to the pressures around a lack of accommodation, high rents, and poor transport.

We used our research findings and engagements with members, providers, learners, and policymakers to create an **evidence base**. This means we have a store of knowledge on hand and available for different issues that come up. This has helped us to offer policy solutions to Government departments and to develop our forthcoming national campaign on increasing specific financial supports for adult learners, with a particular focus on Further Education and Training.

Advocacy and Policy Wins of 2023

€5 Million in Funding Announced for Community Education through Reach Fund 2023

€5 million in additional funding through the Reach Fund was announced by Minister Simon Harris TD to help adult learners to learn in their local communities through community education. This was formerly the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund. We

were a key member of the working group that formed the MAED Fund to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, through the Reach Fund, community education providers can apply for funding across several categories. According to SOLAS, the priority is to provide support to the most vulnerable groups in our society, including ‘the long-term unemployed, young people, people with disabilities, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants and refugees, women wishing to return to the labour market, and lone parents.’

Dearbháil stated that AONTAS has been ‘advocating for community education funding for many years and we will continue to advocate for this and other changes that are needed.’

Three Policy Papers Published in 2023

Stepping Stones and Stable Roots: Funding for Community Education

Following on from a pre-event discussion paper ahead of our main policy event of the year, Stepping Stones and Stable Roots, which took place in March as part of the Adult Learners’ Festival, we published a [post-event policy paper with recommendations for change to better support community education across Ireland](#).

This included a simplified data gathering process for learners signing up for courses, rather than the complex system currently in place (known as the PLSS system). SOLAS have made a commitment to doing this in the upcoming Community Education Framework.

We also called for **increased funding and expansion of the Reach Fund**. SOLAS have also committed to this in the Community Education Framework.

After this event, DFHERIS agreed to bring Learner Voice elements into their annual costing event. They then asked AONTAS to support the attendance of over 20 adult learners at their event in June 2023.

AONTAS Leading the Embedding of the Learner Voice Model

A key development from '**Stepping Stones and Stable Roots**', our policy event as part of the Adult Learners' Festival in 2023, was that Assistant Secretary in DFHERIS William Beausang stated that he would bring the Learner Voice format of the day back to colleagues in DFHERIS, with the goal of replicating it at future events.

As a result, in June 2023, we were asked to coordinate 20 adult learners to attend and contribute to DFHERIS' estimates process for Budget 2024. This event involved a speech from Minister Harris and contributions from policymakers, as well as roundtable discussions with learners. For the first time, learners had the chance to speak directly with department officials and Minister Harris about their concerns and asks for Budget 2024.

Highlighting the Need for Improvements in Funding Frameworks and University Access

On 30th May, Dearbháil contributed to the Funding the Future Working Group 2, where she highlighted the necessity for higher education funding frameworks to make changes so that universities can be more representative of the Irish population.

Following the announcement of funding for part-time students in higher education as part of Budget 2024, Professor Tom Collins publicly named and thanked AONTAS.

Funding for part-time students has been a priority issue for AONTAS for years. An example is here from the Irish Times in 2005: '[Aontas calls for part-time students' fees to be abolished](#)'. [We explored this and other issues related to Budget 2024 on our blog.](#)

We also highlighted **the impact of class and income level on opportunities to access university and work needed in this area**. At these meetings, we communicate our research findings and share the concerns of our members with policy makers and other stakeholders in the tertiary education sector. We use these spaces as opportunities to highlight inequality in education and raise policy makers' awareness of key issues.

Clearer Pathways from Further Education and Training to Higher Education

On 7th July, we attended the courses launch from the new National Tertiary Office. These courses have been created as clear pathways between Further and Higher Education. We have been supporting calls for the creation of these programmes for several years. We welcomed this initiative, which we have supported from its inception. Find out more on our blog: [Historic move away from the Points System and the Dominance of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland.](#)

We shared [this piece on social media](#), which received engagement from Minister Harris himself, and also from SOLAS. It gained 4,529 views on X/Twitter alone.

Our pre-Budget Submission in 2023: recommendations for spending in 2024

This submission was made to DFHERIS in advance of their cost plan for Budget 2024. We called for a number of measures to provide sustainable, multi-annual funding for community education providers, and also called for increased financial supports for adult learners.

This included:

Expansion of the 1916 Bursary: AONTAS called for the expansion of this Bursary and welcomed the announcement of this expansion in 2023. Minister Harris recently announced that 600 students will get scholarships for Tier 1 and Tier 2, an increase of 226 students on last year. [We wrote about this on our website.](#)

Removal of fees in Budget 2024: the Government fully removed all Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course fees from 2024. This means that full-time learners won't have to pay fees on Level 5 and 6 courses in ETBs.

We also explored Budget 2024 in detail in a blog post on our website: [What did Budget 2024 deliver for adult and community education? | Aontas](#)

Submission to DFHERIS Statement of Strategy

In April 2023, we made a submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education's 'Statement of Strategy' which, according to their website, is part of their mission to 'develop Ireland's tertiary education, training and research to support people to reach their full potential and create a prosperous, sustainable and vibrant society, ready to meet the challenges of a changing world.'

Our submission focused, among other things, on our calls to provide suitable pay and conditions for staff in the Tertiary Education Sector, to provide free and increased transport services for adult learners, and to build accommodation on-site for rural and low-income students. [Read more here.](#)

Since then, we [supported advocacy work](#) which has led to some improved pay for staff (5%) in Community Training Centres (CTCs) and Local Training Initiatives (LTIs). [Minister Harris made this announcement in July.](#) In 2024, we hope to see improvements in contracts for staff, who have had seek social welfare during the summer months.

We have also heard of plans for reductions in transport fares, and have been working with SOLAS on access to LEAP cards for FET students in part-time courses. We will continue to work on this on behalf of our members and learners.

Another of our calls last year was for DFHERIS to provide capital grants for new or improved suitable learning environments in community education. In October 2023, Minister Harris announced additional capital funding of €5.4 million for the Further Education and Training sector. In line with this, ETBs must submit an 'estates strategy' for 'continuous refurbishment and development of facilities', and they must submit this to SOLAS.

We will continue to work with SOLAS and DFHERIS on behalf of our members and learners, and advocate for important changes needed in the sector in 2024.

Looking Ahead to Advocacy in 2024

We will continue to contribute towards consultations and working groups. We will also attend political party conferences and ardfheiseanna including Labour, Sinn Féin, Fine Gael, and Fianna Fail conferences among others. We will continue to highlight the importance of community education in creating a more equitable society, as well as the need to support learners in Further Education and Training, so that they can succeed and thrive in education.

Representation: Raising Issues with Government and Stakeholders

We represent the views, perspectives, and needs of our members and the adult learning sector at a range of different advisory groups and working groups on a regular basis. We use the evidence from our research to inform our contributions to these discussions and our calls for change in policy and practice at local, regional, and national levels.

Our CEO Dearbháil Lawless sits on a number of high-level working groups and continually attends networking and relationship-building events. This means that the issues being raised with us are regularly being presented to decisionmakers all across Ireland.

In 2023, we represented members at **27 different steering committees and advisory groups**.

This includes the **oversight group for the ‘[Funding the Future of Higher Education](#)’,** which explores the cost of higher education. This high-level policy group was chaired by Minister Simon Harris TD. We also sat on two connected subgroups. The five key areas of focus for these discussions included:

- enhancing quality and international standing of the higher education system

- driving skills and engagement
- enhancing student participation and success, with a focus on under-represented groups
- creating a unified knowledge and skills system which is balanced and integrated
- addressing cost as a barrier to higher education and improving student support

We also sat on the **steering group for the [National Access Plan](#)**, which supports inclusion and diversity. We're also on **SOLAS '[Fostering Inclusion](#)' advisory group**, which seeks to ensure that supports are available to allow any individual, regardless of background or formal education level, to have an opportunity to learn and develop.

Another advisory group we were a part of was for the **'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD)** for further and higher education, which supports the coordination of new and existing initiatives in sustainability. It also provides a forum for collaboration, sharing good practice, and for developing leadership capacity in ESD in further and higher education. It is led by DFHERIS and Dearbháil is the representative.

Another important development in 2023 was Dearbháil's election as **co-chair of the Coalition 2030 Steering Group**. This group advocates as a collective for the effective implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and they critically assess the Irish Government's progress in this.

Speaking about her appointment as co-chair, Dearbháil said:

'I felt that my personal involvement in Coalition 2030 would be a way to act on the SDGs on behalf of AONTAS, and I might also encourage others as a leader within the sector.'

According to Dearbháil, Coalition 2030 calls on the Irish Government to deliver:

- timely and participatory national plans to achieve the SDGs, and these plans are fully resourced in terms of finance and staff
- a well-considered process for ensuring the voices of those furthest behind in society are meaningfully considered in the development of national plans (via National Stakeholder Forums on the SDGs)
- annual progress reports on Government delivery all 17 Goals to both houses of the Oireachtas
- a fit-for-purpose public communications plan on the SDGs to showcase Ireland's progress to date, intended actions, and how the public can get involved.

[Check out the updates from Coalition 2030 for 2023.](#)

Other consultations included an Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in ETBs; a consultation on the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the future of STEM education; a SOLAS consultation on its mid-term review of the National FET Strategy; and a consultation with QQI on Broad Award Standards at NQF Levels 1-4 and their implementation guidelines; a SOLAS consultation on their mid-term review of the National FET Strategy; a consultation on the Department for Education's Traveller and Roma Education Strategy; a Higher Education Authority consultation on its upcoming Corporate Strategy Plan; a consultation on the EAEA Country Reports and a survey on the State of Adult Learning and Education from a civil society perspective; a Department of Finance consultation on their National Financial Literacy Strategy; and, in Northern Ireland a Department for Education consultation on the National Guidance Framework.

The purpose of this work is to ensure that our members and adult learners' issues and perspectives are heard in many different fora and contexts across the island of Ireland. Our role is to ensure that the needs and issues important to those in the adult and community

education sector are front-and-centre, and that we continue to advocate for positive change.

Sharing Findings from our Lifelong Learning Research at QQI Conference

Our Policy and Development Officer Conor gave a workshop presentation on Community Education and the barriers learners face at [the QQI conference](#) in 2023. This gave us the opportunity to bring findings from our [Lifelong Learning research](#) study to a wider audience. We highlighted the evidence on barriers to education for lone parents and other groups who face challenges in engaging in education programmes.

Advocating for More Financial Supports for Learners at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis

On 10th November, we attended the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis at the Technological University of the Shannon in Athlone. We spoke to representatives about improving financial supports for Further Education and Training learners. We also spoke about the issues influencing people's ability to returning to and stay in education. A particular issue is housing.

We were glad to see Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Housing, Local Government and Heritage Minister Eoin Ó Broin TD following us on social media after our discussions at the event.

The support from political parties across Ireland is essential in progressing our members' concerns and the recommendations from our research with learners. [Find out more on our blog.](#)

Organisational Alliances

Alliances in Ireland

We prioritise our relationships with other organisations involved in and related to adult learning, in Ireland, across Europe and across the world.

Some of our key stakeholders include the Department of Further and Higher Education, QQI, ETBI, and the new National Tertiary Office.

Other groups we work with to achieve our goals include SAOLTA, IDEA, Women's Collective Ireland, the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR), Mental Health Ireland, the 'Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation' (which focuses on adult learning in Northern Ireland), College Connect, Maynooth University, and a national working group on the Recognition of Prior Learning.

Alliances in Europe

Under the [New European Agenda for Adult Learning](#) (NEAAL), the **Project Advisory Group (PAG)** provides a coalition and forum discussion among leading education experts and representatives from Government, education institutions, social partners and civil society organisations from Ireland.

We held the first 2023 meeting of the PAG online in May. 14 people joined us for the meeting. The topic for discussion was 'How can we utilise the 2024-2025 NEAAL project to have a strategic impact on the adult and community education field in Ireland?'

[Click here for some insights from social media.](#)

We held the second PAG meeting in person (with a hybrid option) in October at the Richmond Education and Events Centre in Dublin. 12 members attended the meeting, with two joining online. We had a great discussion on Learner Voice and the financial challenges faced by adult learners. Click [here](#) and [here](#) for more insights on our social media.

We also work with the OECD – the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development –and the European Commission, as well as the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), and the Ministry of Education in Greece.

In 2023, we received two invitations for partnerships for European Learner Voice projects, one from the EAEA and another from a Holland-based organisation. This shows the awareness and recognition of our reputation and expertise in Learner Voice.

Dearbháil also sits on the board of the European Association for the Education of Adults, with whom we liaise regularly for our European projects to promote and support adult learning. And Dearbháil is on the Editorial Board for Elm Magazine, which is one of the only publications focussing on adult learning in Europe.

Empowering Learner Advocacy: Learners As Leaders

The Learners As Leaders programme has been running for several years and we have worked with around 30 learners every year. It is funded through the New European Agenda for Adult Learning, for which AONTAS is the national co-ordinator in Ireland. Through the programme, learners develop skills in areas like critical thinking, communication, and creative problem-solving, and they learn how to advocate for themselves and others with similar experiences.

There are two Learners As Leaders programmes each year. We typically run three workshops or discussion sessions during each programme. Learners have an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings, highlight issues, and talk to each other as well as to the AONTAS team. As with all of our Learner Voice work, we are committed to raising the experiences of learners with policymakers, education providers and Government representatives we meet, with the goal of making education more equal and accessible for all.

2023 Programmes:

'You Have the Means' - October and November 2023

This programme focused on the funding, grants, and finances needed to return to and stay in education.

16 adult learners joined us online and in person from across the country, to discuss what they think needs to change in terms of funding for adult and community education to make it more equal and fair across Ireland.

We were delighted to partner with advocacy and campaigning expert Kathleen O'Meara for a session to develop learners' skills in how to design and develop an advocacy campaign. We met the learners in person in Dublin and shared an introduction to research and communications for campaigning.

Most of the learners involved joined us for the 'Window to the World' Summit in November. Two learners who participated in this programme, Michelle McGoldrick and Alan Anthony Quinn, spoke about their experience and calls for action for change in adult learning policy at Summit. Michelle and Alan spoke on a panel with Irish and EU policymakers Nessa White (SOLAS) and Klara Engels-Pernyi (EU Commission). They also met and spoke to Minister Simon Harris. Ahead of the event, we worked with Michelle and Alan to help them prepare, especially with getting their message across, how to structure their arguments, and how to make concise points.

Another learner from the LAL programme, Jason Harris, also spoke at the launch of the 2023 Adult Learner Journal about his experience of the hardship and poverty experienced by apprentices across the country, including the results of a survey he conducted. We will continue to work with these learners for our upcoming national campaign on financial supports in 2024.

Also in January 2023, we wrapped up the **‘Together in the Telling’ programme** from 2022, which focused on the experiences of 9 migrant women and how they can tell their story, be part of a community and inspire others through their courage. Find out more about this programme by [reading our blog](#).

Goal 2. Evidence and Highlight how Adult Learning is Impacted by Social Inequality

A Focus on Marginalised Groups: Our 2023 Lifelong Learning Report

In 2022, national statistics showed a drop in Further Education and Training participation levels among vulnerable groups of people, particularly people from under-resourced communities or those living in poverty or marginalisation. This includes lone parents, those from working class communities, and those in lower-skilled employment. In response to this, in 2023 we conducted research with adult and community education groups across Ireland to gather evidence-based, quality data about the experiences of people who have found it hard to engage in learning, particularly during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, or who left a course or education programme.

Our goal was to find out why inequality in education seemed to be increasing. This resulted in our [Lifelong Learning report](#).

Our research found that major issues that affect whether a person can go back to learning include financial costs, access to childcare, flexible and accessible learning options, access to equipment like laptops and the skills to use them, home environment, personal safety (for instance, exposure to domestic violence), trauma, stigma, self-esteem and confidence. [You can read the Lifelong Learning Participation report here](#).

Impact of the Lifelong Learning Research

We launched this report at our policy event as part of the Adult Learners' Festival, presenting the main findings of the research to the attendees, including William Beausang, then Assistant Secretary at DFHERIS. A panel featuring adult learners explored issues that came up in the report, through their own experiences.

It received national press coverage, particularly in the Irish Examiner: '[Report highlights barriers to lifelong learning for vulnerable and marginalised groups](#)', which has a reach of about 230,000 people.

The research has been referenced by policymakers and by then Minister Simon Harris TD at multiple AONTAS events since its launch, including the 'Window to the World' Summit in November.

It also features in the new Community Education Framework led by SOLAS, and is a key resource in ensuring that groups of people coming from under-resourced communities are included and supported in Further Education and Training.

The report is an important guide and reference for anyone seeking reliable research. It was referenced at the Quality and Qualifications Ireland Conference on 17th November 2023, marking the 20th anniversary of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. QQI also reference the report in their [2023 Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access, Transfer, and Progression in Irish Education and Training](#) (see page 97).

The findings were an important resource for our [Pre-Budget Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education in 2024](#)

One in Three Adult Learners Say Mental Health Problems Affect Their Ability To Learn or Study: Our 2023 Mental Health Report for Adult Learners

On 10th October, which was on World Mental Health Day 2023, focuses on ‘Mental health as a universal human right’, we launched a report on mental health based on the experiences of over 2,500 FET learners who took part in research for the National FET Learner Forum. Developed in collaboration with Jigsaw, the report found that one in three adult learners say mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study. Learners also highlighted the mental health support they receive from their Education and Training Boards, with an emphasis on support given by FET tutors. [Read about the report on our website.](#)

The main findings in the report were that **48% of learners renting said that they find it difficult or somewhat difficult to pay their rent and 1 in 3 learners said that their living situation causes them stress, anxiety, or worry**

The report also found that the financial burden of **transportation costs** can hinder learners’ ability to take part in their courses.

Our CEO Dearbháil raised the findings of the report with SOLAS, at stakeholder meetings, and with representatives from Sinn Féin at their Ard Fhéis.

In response to a press release we developed and shared, we had some brilliant pick-up in local and national media, particularly in [the Irish Examiner](#).

Other publications included:

- Careers news <https://careersnews.ie/mental-health-problems-affect-learning/>
- Kildare now <https://www.kildarenow.com/news/home/1319162/new-report-finds-1-in-3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Limerick Leader <https://www.limerickleader.ie/news/national-news/1319071/national-new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Mayo News: <https://www.mayonews.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>

- Waterford Live: <https://www.waterfordlive.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Tipperary Live: <https://www.tipperarylive.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Letterkenny Live: <https://www.letterkennylive.ie/news/national-news/1319071/national-new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Leitrim Observer: <https://www.leitrimobserver.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Leinster Express: <https://www.leinsterexpress.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Clare Live: <https://www.clarelive.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Nenagh Live: <https://www.nenaghlive.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Inish Live: <https://www.inishlive.ie/news/national-news/1319071/national-new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Limerick Leader: <https://www.limerickleader.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>
- Dundalk Democrat: <https://www.dundalkdemocrat.ie/news/national-news/1319070/new-report-finds-1-in3-adult-learners-say-mental-health-problems-affect-their-ability-to-learn.html>

There were also a couple of pieces about the report on radio including Midlands 103.

Using Our Research for Social Change

Members of the AONTAS team continue to work tirelessly to effect social change and strengthen adult learning. In 2023, this included a book chapter on community education

by Senior Research Officer Dr Eve Cobain and former Senior Community Education Officer Suzanne Kyle, published in 'Critical Perspectives in Further Education and Training', edited by Jerry O'Neill and Camilla Fitzsimons.

In January, our Policy and Development Officer Conor wrote about the National Access Plan, changes in funding for people with disabilities, and the need for the integration of Universal Design in learning environments. [Read more on our website.](#)

Goal 3. Inform and Influence Stakeholders and the Wider Public

Championing Sustainable Development in 2023

We were honoured to be appointed by Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamon Ryan TD, as one of Ireland's champions to help progress the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 26 organisations were selected as part of the 2023-2024 SDG Champions Programme, to raise public awareness of the SDGs and to demonstrate that everyone in society can make a contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The role of an SDG Champion is to act as an advocate and promoter of the SDGs and provide good practice examples of how an organisation can contribute to the SDGs and integrate them into their work and activities.

In line with this, we featured an SDG Workshop as part of our largest event of 2023 – the 'Window to the World' Summit. The workshop was called 'Adult Learning and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): How Can Adult and Community Education Providers Contribute?' It was facilitated by [Changemakers from Donegal](#), who were previously awarded a STAR Award in 2019 for their fantastic work in adult learning.

This workshop explored how adult learning and the SDGs are linked, and the tools available for adult and community education practitioners across the island of Ireland. The

SDGs are an urgent call by all countries in a global partnership for collective action relating to inequality and climate change.

Our particular focus as SDG Champion is on Goal 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Dearbháil has also been appointed as co-chair of Coalition 2030, as mentioned above, and will continue to work with colleagues in the adult learning and charity sector to see the SDGs implemented in a more systematic way in Ireland.

Moving Towards Stronger Advocacy and Campaigning: a Focus on Financial Supports for Learners

In 2023, we started to put plans in place for a national campaign calling for greater investment in adult learners, specifically on financial supports that make it realistic for people to return to and stay in learning. We have heard repeatedly that certain conditions – including the costs of accommodation, the unreliable and inadequate access to public transport and high fuel costs, and the high cost and lack of access to childcare – make it difficult for many people to go back to courses or training as adults.

In 2023, we worked with consultant and campaigning advisor Kathleen O’Meara to start planning a national campaign, with specific targeted asks to improve things for adult learners. We are also continuing to work with the learners we worked with for the DFHERIS consultation on the cost of education, and on the Learners As Leaders ‘You Have the Means’ programme. We will continue to work on this campaign, and launch in 2024.

European Citizenship and Cooperation

We are committed to representing our members not just at national levels but across Europe and internationally. To achieve this, we collaborate with adult education organisations across Europe, including Ministries, state institutions, non-government

organisations, universities, community education groups, policy-makers, practitioners and learners.

In 2023, we worked with 47 partners across Europe. The team visited other adult learning organisations and events in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, and Austria.

We work closely with the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN) and the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), among others, advocating for educational equality and social change.

We are a world leader in **including the voices and perspectives of learners** in adult learning advocacy work, and in understanding and shaping Learner Voice as a process with real impact.

Following a global event in Morocco in 2022, UNESCO invited Dearbháil to speak at their '[Marrakech Framework for Action](#)' policy event on 9 October, which brought colleagues together across Europe to discuss actions on adult learning policy. Because of the importance of the Framework, we proposed using the Project Advisory Group (PAG) – which includes representatives from DFHERIS – and the meetings we have as a space to discuss it and any developments. The members have agreed to this, and we look forward to continuing to progress the plans in the Framework and work collectively towards equal access to lifelong learning for all.

New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL)

We are the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) in Ireland. We are one of just two NGOs in Europe with this role, and it means we have a high level of influence and impact on adult learning policy and activities in Europe. We were asked to act in this capacity by the Department of Further and Higher Education, and co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union and by DFHERIS through

SOLAS. We work with the European Commission and a network of Coordinators to promote adult learning across Europe.

2023 saw the continuation of the NEAAL project, '**Inclusive Recovery and Transformation: Adult Learning Post-Covid-19 (2022-2023)**'. The focus of this project was on recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project involves learner-centred activities, effective stakeholder engagement, capacity-building and wellbeing programmes, a community of practice for educators, and the development of policy submissions that examine and address the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic.

Highlights from NEAAL in 2023

Awareness-Raising and Capacity-Building:

The 'One Step Up' campaign and the 'Learners As Leaders' programme are both funded through the NEAAL.

As discussed in Goal 3 of Objective 1 above, our One Step Up campaign gives people the information they might need to get back to education. In 2023, we reached 52,911 people. As also discussed above, for Learners As Leaders, we had direct engagement with 25 learners on the two programmes.

As mentioned above, we shared the results of the NEAAL project through 'Window to the World' Summit in November, attended by 196 adult educators, learners, and professionals in adult education. One panel discussion on the day focused directly on the interplay between European and national policy in adult education. This panel discussion, also called 'A Window to the World', featured Klara Engels-Perenyi of the European Commission, Nessa White from SOLAS, and adult learners Michelle McGoldrick and Alan Quinn. The discussion was facilitated by Dr Mags Crean of Maynooth University.

We shared information about the NEAAL and associated campaigns on social media across 2023, and our reach was just under 40,000.

European Projects for Adult Learning

In 2023, we were partners in ten European projects, including the NEAAL project described above. These were funded by Erasmus+. The projects primarily focussed on capacity-building and the sharing of best practice.

One major project that finished up in 2023 was **RegALE**, which focussed on regional and local initiatives and activities to support adult learners and adult learning providers across Europe. The RegALE project found that, despite improvements in recent years, there is still a need for greater parity of esteem between adult learning and higher education, and that a continued focus on regional and local structures is needed to combat this, while also working together at national and international levels. [Find out more on our blog.](#)

Another big project that finished up in 2023 was **TO SWITCH**, which focussed on closing the digital divide for older or later life learners. The project partners came to Ireland from all across Europe. While here, we organised for them to visit **Exchange House Ireland**, where they met with teaching staff who presented on their work with learners from the Traveller Community. This project culminated in the ‘Later Life Online’ event we organised in Dublin in May, as discussed above in AONTAS Events in 2023. [Read more about TO SWITCH and the Later Life Online event.](#)

Other projects include:

- BEEP (Basic Education for Empowerment and Participation)
- CITIZENS XLERATOR (democratic education in adult and community education settings)

- AONTAS KA1 project (a mobility project for members of the AONTAS Community Education Network)
- BILDUNG (building inclusive lifelong learning communities)
- GSD (sustainability education in community settings)
- PARTNER UP (Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement for Upskilling Pathways)
- ENHANCE (focussing on Learner Voice)
- VOTL (focussing on Learner Voice)
- Just4All (Adult education)

Study visits from our European partners and colleagues

An important one was with the Partner UP project. We were delighted to host a meeting and study visit of the partners in our Erasmus+ Partner UP project in Dublin. The project supports adult learners to develop literacy, numeracy and digital skills and enable participation in lifelong learning. [Find out more on our blog.](#)

We welcomed Terhi Kouvo, the Managing Editor for Aikuiskasvatus from KVS Finland, to our office in Dublin in June 2023. We had a rich exchange of ideas, including sharing knowledge on the Irish education system, advocacy work, and insights into community education in Ireland. [Click here for some insights from our social media.](#)

Guidelines and Resources from our European work

We created 7 open-access education resources, for instance the [TO SWITCH Project Guidelines](#), which is for teachers of adults learning about digital changes and technology. These teachers are interested in responding to technological changes in our society, and in helping people to learn and adapt to those changes.

[Another resource was from the BEEP Project](#), which focused on political participation for adult learners. As part of this project, we ran workshop sessions the Waterford and Wexford ETB Learners Council, the Tipperary ETB Student Council, and the Cork ETB

Learners' Voices Group. We worked with our project partners to create a handbook of activities, a research report, and guidelines for programme designers and policy makers.

Supporting Members and Learners for European work

We also financially supported over 20 people to attend trainings, events, and conferences outside of Ireland. This included opportunities for members to attend international events to help build collaboration in Europe. For example, members of the CEN participated in the 'Reveal 15 Conference' in Gottingen, Germany, and another group visited Brussels in Belgium. The purpose was to give opportunities to our members to connect with colleagues across Europe, sharing knowledge, resources and ideas on adult education. We also sought to build solidarity and connections across adult education sector in Europe.

One participant said:

'One thing I took home from this visit is the Video CV, which is a brilliant way for employers to avoid biases against people with disabilities, and it gives a better idea of the person applying for the job.'

Another stated: 'This mobility also gave us the opportunity to get to know more about other people working in adult and community education in Ireland.'

Another said that they 'learned so much from this job shadowing, and made new friends too!'

And another said they 'learned a lot about Brussels and their stance on adult education, which I found was very much the same way we do it here in Ireland.'

We look forward to continuing to work with our European colleagues and partners into 2024, to keep facilitating educators and learners to learn and develop, and to keep working collectively to make adult learning accessible and available to everyone, all across Europe.

Objective 3: Empower the Change

Goal 1. Develop a Socially Inclusive Framework for AONTAS as an Employer

HR and Health and Safety Policies and Procedures

In 2023 we comprehensively reviewed our HR policies and procedures. Changes included:

- Full-time working hours reduced to 35 per week
- Hybrid Work Policy put in place
- Remuneration Committee established, to ensure a more robust process for annual salary reviews
- Option to work remotely in another European country for short time periods subject to terms and conditions
- Annual Health and Safety review of the office
- Full review of the HR Handbook.

We conducted an extensive health and safety review in the AONTAS office. This resulted in improvements to the layout of the office and ensures optimal standards of workplace well-being and security.

In 2023 a comprehensive audit of member information was conducted in Salesforce, the AONTAS' CRM. All contact details were updated, this process involved staff engaging with members to reconnect and update any relevant information. Staff received positive engagement from AONTAS members, while also re-engaging with newer staff of member organisations.

Goal 2. Integrate a Problem-solving Culture

Staff Training and Development at AONTAS

In 2023, we facilitated staff to engage in 133 professional development opportunities. This includes programmes such as Adobe InDesign, Nvivo for Research, RPL Level 7, Health and Safety, Project Management, HR for Management, Coaching for Leaders, and Xero Training (finance).

Our then IT and Salesforce Officer Lokesh delivered training to the team on how to use Salesforce. Our Governance and Operations Officer Dwayne delivered a workshop to the team on Artificial Intelligence (AI). He also ran CyberSecurity Awareness training for the team.

Goal 3. Enhance Organisational Infrastructure

IT Strategy in 2023

In 2023, we were planning infrastructure to allow for an easier transition to alternative offices if we ever decide to move. These plans include the minimisation of what would need to be moved from the current head office and also what infrastructure would be needed in the new location. This also includes planning on future office sizing to accommodate the new reality of hybrid and remote working and downsizing of physical space required.

We completed a Request for Proposal for transition of IT infrastructure from on-site to the cloud, and selected a vendor for this.

We completed a proposal for replacement of old printing facilities with newer managed print services, with and agreed carbon emissions offset.

There are a number of immediate benefits to moving to the cloud and removing or minimising the physical infrastructure we have in the premises. These benefits also contribute to the elimination/mitigation of current risks to operations.

Benefit	Benefit Description
Reduced Capital Expenditure	Moving to the cloud eliminates the need for significant upfront investment in infrastructure and hardware.
Scalability and flexibility	Cloud services provide the ability to scale resources up and down as the business needs. This allows for growth without the constraints of an on-premises hardware limitations.
Access anywhere, anytime	Cloud can be accessed anywhere, receives regular updates and improvements without requiring an intervention by the user and it ensures that the business is using the latest features and security enhancements.
Enhanced security	Microsoft invest heavily in the security infrastructure which includes data encryption, identity and access management,

	threat detection, and compliance which helps protect sensitive business information.
Business continuity and disaster recovery	Has built in redundancy and backup features, which reduces the risk of data loss or business interruption due to hardware failures. This enhances business continuity and simplifies disaster recovery planning.

In addition, by making the move to the cloud (Microsoft) and using as many of the Microsoft tools, products and software it makes it easier going forward to secure competitive quotes for support as everything is standardised and will make it easier to evaluate proposals in the future and to transition to another service provider.

With a movement to the cloud under Microsoft and the removal of the physical server from the AONTAS office, there are additional future pieces of work that could be considered.

Future Possibility	Benefit Description
Microsoft Teams for Phone	<p>The current phone situation in the AONTAS office is one where there is a small physical PBX which is what manages the telephones.</p> <p>Once AONTAS is in the cloud, MS Teams could be used for phone calls. For those desks that need handsets, this would require the purchase of Microsoft Teams compatible handsets. There would be no reliance on the PBX sitting on the wall in the main office.</p>

Leading into 2024

Move over from incumbent IT provider to new provider as Phase 1 in cloud migration project, Phase 2 to completion scheduled to commence from May '24 and scheduled to be completed circa July '24.

Replacement of old printers with new managed print service with carbon emission offset and tree planting.

The AONTAS Team

Aisling Meyler, Research Officer

Amy Gibney, Community Education Officer (to January 2023)

Barbara Nea, Head of Advocacy

Brian Desmond, Membership and Digital Engagement Officer (from March 2023)

Charis Hughes, Head of Communications (to June 2023); Head of Impact and Engagement

Conor Thompson, Capacity Building Officer (to June 2023); Policy and Development Officer

Dearbháil Lawless, Chief Executive Officer

Dr Eve Cobain, Senior Research Officer (on leave from October 2023)

Dr Kate Smyth, Communications Officer (to May 2023); Strategic Communications Officer

Dr Laura Lovejoy, Research Officer

Dr Lauren Swan, Head of Research (to March 2023)

Dr Thomas Murray, Head of Research (from October 2023)

Dwayne Keogh, Governance and Operations Officer (from October 2023)

Ecem Akarca, EU Projects Coordinator

Giuliana Peña, Project Officer (to August 2023); Publications and Design Officer

John Ryan, Office Manager (to April 2023)

Karyn Farrell, Learner Voice Officer (from March 2023)

Katie O'Rourke, Head of Communications (to September 2023, previously on leave to June 2023)

Lorraine O'Connor, Community Education Officer (from March 2023)

Lucia Iacovone, Communications and Events Officer (from February 2023, on leave from October 2023)

Marta Feragalli, Finance and Administration Lead (to August 2023); Head of Environmental, Social and Governance

Megan O'Neill, Social Media and Digital Officer (from October 2023)

Suzanne Kerr, Administration Assistant (to August 2023); Office Coordinator

Suzanne Kyle, Senior Community Education Officer (to January 2023)

Traci Barton, Finance and Administration Officer (from March 2023)

Ensuring good governance and financial compliance

Governance in 2023:

Rent Review:

Schedule of rent review to ensure cost saving and value for money including notified repairs.

Integrating GDPR into IT Services:

Benefits of cloud solution – GDPR Compliance with Microsoft Tools (Cloud Environment):

Microsoft Entra ID:

Identity and access management plays a crucial role in GDPR compliance. Entra ID enforces strong authentication and controls user access to data based on the principles of least privilege. This ensures only authorised users can access personal data minimising the risk of unauthorised disclosure.

Microsoft Intune:

Enforces encryption on devices accessing personal data. It allows the remote wiping of lost or stolen devices, and restricts access to programs and data based on user roles and the security of the device. This safeguards personal data even on mobile devices.

Data Loss Prevention (DLP):

Helps identify, classify, and protect sensitive data (e.g., PPSN, DOB, email addresses, etc.). It prevents accidental data leakage by blocking emails or uploads containing sensitive information. It can also add encryption to secure sensitive data at rest (stored and inactive and not being accessed, modified, or transmitted) and in transit (moving from one location to another over a network or between systems).

Security and Compliance Scoring (SCS):

Gives a real time assessment of the security position against GDPR benchmarks and helps identify gaps in security configuration and give actionable recommendations for improvement. This allows for continuous monitoring and improvement for GDPR compliance.

Email Protection:

We have implemented additional security features for phishing, spam, malware and identity threats. We now have multi-factor authentication (requiring multiple forms of authentication before access) and advanced threat detection (suite of security technologies and services to detect, investigate, and respond to advanced cyber threats) to help prevent malicious emails.

Cybersecurity Awareness Training:

Microsoft has training modules and other resources to raise awareness about cyber threats and best practices for protecting data. There is also functionality available to run simulated attacks to further develop staff awareness and understanding.

Internal Financial Controls (IFC):

Full review of Internal Financial Controls against regulations and best practice and updating under change control and placement on collaborative site. New template and standardisation and revision to remove multiple references and extract text that relates to supporting policies. Also the development of policies for Audit recommendations.

Leading into 2024:

Significant cost savings achieved through value for money square footage revision and repair costs incorrectly identified on us delivered by the landlord.

Executive Board Meeting Attendance 2023

Name	17/02	28/0 4	19/0 7	25/1 0	07/1 2	Total Attendance
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Cora Rafter	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3/5	60%
Meliosa Bracken	Y	Y	N	N	Y	3/5	60%
Lilian Nwanze	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3/5	60%
John Buttery	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5/5	100%
Imelda Gaffney	N	Y	N	Y	Y	3/5	60%
Louise Mullins	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	4/5	80%
Colette Ainscough*	Y	Y	n/a	n/a	n/a	2/5	40%
Martin Flynn	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5/5	100%
Martina Needham	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5/5	100%
Pamela Latimer	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	4/5	80%
Daniel Kenny*	N	N	n/a	n/a	n/a	0/5	0%

Liam McCarthy	Y	N	Y	N	Y	3/5	60%
John D'Arcy	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5/5	100%
Deborah Oniah	n/a	Y	Y	Y	Y	4/5	80%
Kayla Dibble*	n/a	n/a	n/a	Y	N	1/5	20%

Daniel Kenny & Colette Ainscough stepped down from the Board on 19th July 2023

Kayla Dibble was co-opted to the Board with effect from 19th July 2023

Audit and Risk Committee Attendance 2023

Members

Name	15/02	25/04	09/10*	Total Attendance
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Martin Flynn	Y	Y	Y	3/3	100%
Anne Brady	Y	Y	Y	3/3	100%
Imelda Gaffney	N	Y	Y	2/3	66%
Cora Rafter	N	N	N	0/3	0%
John Buttery	Y	N	Y	2/3	66%
Marta Feragalli	Y	Y	Y	3/3	100%

*joint meeting with Governance Committee

Financial Statements

Financial statements for 2023 may be found in the appendix.

Company registration number: 80958

CRA number: 20013042

Charity number: CHY6719

**AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation
Financial Statements
For the year ended 31 December 2023**

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

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AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

DIRECTORS

Kayla Dibble (appointed 19/07/2023)
Deborah Oniah (appointed 17/02/2023)
Cora Rafter
Lilian Nwanze
Melíosa Bracken
Imelda Gaffney
John Buttery
Pamela Latimer
Louise Mullins
Martina Needham
Martin Flynn
Liam McCarthy
John D'Arcy
Colette Ainscough (resigned 19/07/2023)
Daniel Kenny (resigned 19/07/2023)

SECRETARY

John Ryan (resigned 04/04/2023)
Marta Feragalli (appointed 04/04/2023)

REGISTERED OFFICE AND BUSINESS ADDRESS

2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street
Ranelagh
Dublin 6

COMPANY NUMBER

80958

CHARITY NUMBER

20013042

CHY REVENUE NUMBER

CHY 6719

AUDITORS

Mazars
Chartered Accountants & Statutory Audit Firm
Harcourt Centre
Block 3
Harcourt Road
Dublin 2

BANKERS

Bank of Ireland
50 – 55 Lower Baggot St.
Dublin 2

SOLICITORS

Ken Kennedy Solicitors
31 Heytesbury Lane
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Report

The AONTAS Directors present their report together with the audited financial statements of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation ('the Charity' or 'AONTAS') for the year ended 31 December 2023.

OBJECTIVES

The **vision** of AONTAS is a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities.

AONTAS was established as the National Adult Learning Organisation to promote and develop adult education in Ireland. This is achieved through actions including;

- Promoting quality adult learning through continuous professional development and the creation of shared spaces for learning and the exchange of best practice;
- Encouraging and facilitating cooperation between adult learning practitioners, organisations and institutions in Ireland and at European level;
- Being the primary advisory and consultative body for the development of adult and community education in Ireland;
- Being an intermediary for communication and cooperation between all individuals and groups involved in adult education in Ireland, and more.

The AONTAS Constitution is available [here](#).

Key Activities

Advocacy and Policy: AONTAS undertakes key research in the field of adult learning and works with our extensive membership to create an evidence base. We use organisational advocacy to lobby the Government and work with key stakeholders to improve the conditions in adult education, the quality of adult learning, and the learner experience. Our team develops policy papers, engages in consultations, and we act as the voice of adult learning. AONTAS hosts the Community Education Network and provides programmes such as Learners as Leaders, as part of this work.

Promoting and Developing Adult Learning: We promote adult learning through campaigns, radio interviews, written media, and videos. We run the Adult Learners' Festival annually and facilitate a national programme of events. Our Learner Stories on the AONTAS website showcase the transformative nature of adult learning and encourage people to engage in programmes. AONTAS provides capacity building for staff and learners, and funds engagement in accredited programmes. An

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Directors' Report

example of this is the 'Recognition of Prior Learning' Level 7 course in UCC whereby AONTAS funded the development of this course, and now funds student costs.

Learner Voice: We undertake a range of activities to ensure learners are provided with a safe and uplifting experience to share their stories with policymakers, staff, and others. This includes the National Learner Forum Research Project, speaking at national and international events, and supporting learners to engage in consultations. We also share our learner voice research findings at representation opportunities, and advocate on behalf of learners. AONTAS continues to act as a leader within the learner voice space and we provide training for adult education staff and learners to facilitate processes at local and regional level.

International Engagement: We develop and manage European-funded programmes to build partnerships, be innovative, and learn from our European colleagues. We also represent Ireland at international events and showcase Irish adult learning initiatives. AONTAS is the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning, and we work directly with the European Commission, National Agency (Léargas), and the Department of Further and Higher Education.

Connecting and Strengthening the Sector: We bring organisations, providers, academics, tutors, staff, policymakers, and learners together to provide a space for communication, cooperation, and discussion. AONTAS identifies challenges and opportunities from these engagements, and we try to address them in partnership with key stakeholders to strengthen the adult learning sector. Examples of this include events such as our annual policy/lobbying day, and our bi-annual Adult Education Summit.

About AONTAS

AONTAS' mission is to advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice, and collective action across the island of Ireland.

Established in 1969, AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, is a non-government membership organisation that promotes the value of adult learning and advocates for the rights of all adults to quality learning across the tertiary education system.

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We have an unwavering commitment to educationally disadvantaged adults. We offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence-based, drawing on research, our membership, and our extensive initiatives that engage with adult learners. AONTAS works in partnership with key stakeholders at national and international levels. Our Strategic Plan '**Leading Collective Action for Social Change' (2023-2026)** is informed by principles of social justice, feminism, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality, and supporting social inclusion. We have expertise in educational equality, learner voice, and community education.

Summary of AONTAS' Progress

Promote and develop adult education in Ireland

- In 2023, we had a reach of over 9 million. AONTAS promotes adult learning through a range of communication channels including our website, news articles, radio interviews, national and local newspapers, LinkedIn, X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and more.
- The Adult Learners' Festival hosted by AONTAS had over 128 events across the island of Ireland with the theme 'Create Your World'. The festival promoted adult learning and provided opportunities for people to find local providers and free programmes in their area.
- AONTAS enabled the growth and development of adult education by lobbying for funding for adult education and improved conditions for providers, adult learners, and staff. We engaged in 11 national consultations including the 'Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in ETBs', 'Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the future of STEM education', 'SOLAS consultation on its mid-term review of the National FET Strategy', and 'QQI's consultation on Broad Award Standards at NQF Levels 1 - 4 and their implementation guidelines'. We also engaged with key stakeholders including DFHERIS, QQI, SOLAS, and ETBI on education matters.
- We hosted an exhibition stand at the RDS 50+ show reaching over 200 people.

Promoting quality adult learning through continuous professional development and the creation of shared spaces for learning and the exchange of best practice

- The AONTAS team contributed to the improved quality of adult learning by providing programmes and workshops such as 'Learner Voice' workshops to 106 staff and learners across 4 Education and Training Boards. Partnering with AHEAD and NALA to deliver an assistive technology event called 'gATHer' to over 100 adult and higher education staff.

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- The STAR Awards in Croke Park brought together 148 people and showcased leading examples of adult education programmes across Ireland. The Awards continue to encourage providers to consider the impact of their work and find new ways to be innovative and inclusive in adult learning.
- The QQI Re-engagement Community of Practice brought staff from across community education together to share practice, and information, and provide support for QQI Re-engagement. 28 participants attended 4 meetings throughout 2023. A report was developed and shared with the group to build understanding and share practice. The report was shared with 95 practitioners.
- AONTAS engaged in 10 European projects focused on adult learning. These projects included capacity building and the sharing of best practice as a core focus. We also welcomed study visits from 3 counties, created 7 open-access education resources, and financially supported over 20 people to attend training, events, and conferences outside of Ireland.
- The AONTAS team engaged in 133 professional development opportunities including programmes such as Adobe InDesign, Nvivo for Research, RPL Level 7, Health and Safety, Project Management, HR for Management, Coaching for Leaders, and Xero Training (finance).

Being the primary advisory and consultative body for the development of adult and community education in Ireland

- In 2023, the AONTAS team including the CEO, Head of Advocacy, and Policy and Development Officer acted as the primary consultative body and representative for adult and community education on 27 different steering and advisory committees. This included the 'Funding the Future of Higher Education Oversight Group' Chaired by Minister Simon Harris, the 'National Access Plan Steering Group', and SOLAS' Fostering Inclusion Advisory Group'.
- AONTAS engaged with over 3,500 learners in adult education to provide a space for learner voice and to build an evidence base for consultation and advocacy in adult education for the benefit of adult learners, and providers.
- Our 2023 'Lifelong Learning' research provided an account of the experiences of marginalised communities, and it has been referenced by DFHERIS, SOLAS, and others. It also features in the new 'Community Education Framework' led by SOLAS.

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- Our team continued to contribute to academic work in the field of adult education. Examples include a chapter in a new book titled 'Critical Perspectives in Further Education and Training', and the publishing of the AONTAS peer reviewed 'The Adult Learner' journal.

Being an intermediary for communication and cooperation between all individuals and groups involved in adult education in Ireland, and more.

- AONTAS' 'Community Education Network' brought community education providers together from across the island of Ireland. 4 meetings and 4 coffee mornings took place in 2023 with 62 beneficiaries in total, in attendance.
- The Adult Education Summit held on November 15th brought together over 150 attendees including staff, tutors, learners, academics, and policymakers. Keynote speakers included Minister Simon Harris T.D., and Professor Kathleen Lynch.
- The AONTAS AGM took place in May with 48 participants representing organisations across Ireland. Our keynote speaker was Dr Katriona O'Sullivan, no. 1 best seller in Ireland for her novel called 'Poor' that describes her personal and educational journey.
- We organised a range of events and meetings in Northern Ireland to bring adult and community education staff and learners together in 2023. This included the launch of our Northern Ireland Community Education Census in Stormont, Belfast.

Strategic Plan

Our Strategic Plan '*Leading Collective Action for Social Change*' has three goals:

Goal 1 Connect and Engage the Sector	Goal 2 Advocate for Change	Goal 3 Empower the Change
1.1 Provide a structured platform for voices and input to be heard from across the Sector	2.1 Strengthen and develop the AONTAS organisational voice	3.1 Develop a socially inclusive framework for AONTAS as an employer
1.2. Inform national research on the importance of social equality	2.2 Highlight how social equality is impacted by adult learning	3.2 Integrate a Problem-Solving Culture
1.3. Build capacity within the sector	2.3 Inform and Influence	3.3 Enhance organisational infrastructure
		3.4 Funding Diversification Planning

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How we deliver our work

The AONTAS programme of work is delivered by a team of professional staff through 4 key areas of communications, capacity building, advocacy, and research. This work is underpinned by social justice, human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, and equality. The broader AONTAS team is made up of the Environmental, Social and Governance Team, Advocacy Team, Research Team, Communications Team, and Impact and Engagement Team.



Achievements, Performance, and Impact

Throughout 2023, AONTAS engaged with members, learners, key stakeholders, and policymakers to improve the conditions of adult and community education for all involved.

Community Education

Our 'Community Education Network' brought practitioners together from across Ireland to identify and discuss key issues in community education. This included the rise of racism and facilitating social cohesion, funding and policy challenges, political participation and democracy, and the upcoming Community Education Framework.

We created a new 'Community Education Map' in partnership with Community Education Facilitators to showcase centres, types of programmes, and learners engaged, across the island of Ireland. AONTAS recognises the importance of community education identity and its impact, and we will use this map as a key tool for showcasing this inclusive model of adult learning.

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Our work in this area included:

- Four 'Community Education Network' meetings in May, September, November, and December
- Developing four CEN Reports
- Hosting four 'coffee mornings' in June, July, August, and September
- Bringing together a Community of Practice for QQI Re-engagement and providing capacity building workshops in May, September, and October

Lobbying for quality and equitable provision

AONTAS identified issues in the sector facing learners, staff, and providers. This included the closure of centres, inadequate funding for providers, inadequate financial support for learners, and unsustainable conditions for tutors and staff in community education. Learners told us how they're struggling to engage and succeed in education due to the pressures around a lack of accommodation, high rents, and poor transport. We used our research findings and engagements with members to create an evidence base. This helped us to offer policy solutions to Government and we engaged in more than eleven consultations.

Our policy papers included:

1. Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in ETBs (January 2023)
2. Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the future of STEM education (February 2023)
3. DfE consultation on the National Guidance Framework (February 2023)
4. QQI's consultation on Broad Award Standards at NQF Levels 1 - 4 and their implementation guidelines (February 2023)
5. DFHERIS' 2023 - 2025 Statement of Strategy (April 2023)
6. DFHERIS' estimates process for Budget 2024 (June 2023)
7. SOLAS consultation on its mid-term review of the National FET Strategy (September 2023)
8. Department of Education's Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (September 2023)
9. HEA consultation on its upcoming Corporate Strategy Plan (September 2023)
10. EAEA Country Reports Consultation – survey on the State of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) from a civil society perspective (November 2023)
11. Department of Finance's consultation on its National Financial Literacy Strategy (November 2023).

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AONTAS also engaged with the OECD, QQI, DFHERIS, the European Commission, IHREC, and the Ministry of Education in Greece for external consultations on lifelong learning and skills. We attended the Sinn Fein Ard Fhéis to lobby their party to prioritise adult education and represented members at 26 different steering committees and advisory groups.

Our 'Stepping Stones and Stable Roots: The Versatile and Enduring Strength of Community Education' policy event brought practitioners together from across the sector to consider learning pathways in the new Tertiary Education Model. Speakers included William Beausang, DFHERIS, Andrew Brownlee, SOLAS, President Dáire Keogh, DCU, and Fiona Maloney, Tertiary Office.

Research and Learner Voice

Upholding learner voice was a central element of our work in 2023. We did this by delivering thirteen Learner Forum events in partnership with Education and Training Boards reaching 3,508 beneficiaries through focus groups and surveys. AONTAS found that tutors, atmosphere, and the wider benefits of FET are working well for learners, while ESOL, course scheduling, and facilities prove to be a challenge. We worked in partnership with the following to deliver this work:

1. Cavan and Monaghan ETB
2. Kildare and Wicklow ETB
3. Longford and Westmeath ETB
4. Kilkenny and Carlow ETB
5. Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB
6. Louth and Meath ETB
7. Tipperary ETB
8. Galway and Roscommon ETB
9. Cork ETB
10. Waterford and Wexford ETB
11. City of Dublin ETB
12. Donegal ETB
13. Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim ETB

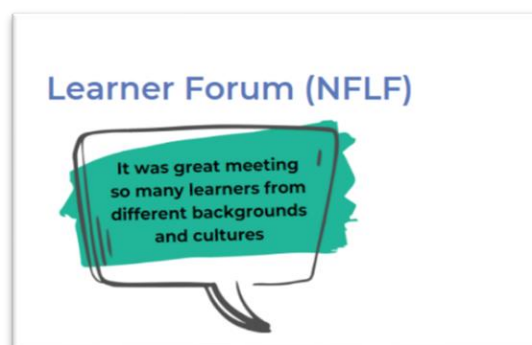
We developed regional reports for each of these activities. Sharing key insights with each ETB to help them inform their practice and make improvements going forward. This work also captured best practice examples across Ireland which helps to build capacity in FET. All of this was brought together in a national report. We sent the 'Learner Voices Across Ireland' report directly to SOLAS and the

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Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. To improve our understanding and practice, we asked ETBs to meet with us and share their feedback and insights, and we also presented to the ETBI FET Directors Forum.

Research highlights in 2023 include:

- 'Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland': a mixed-methods national report with a focus on the voices of marginalised learners. This report has been referenced in multiple national conferences including one organised by Quality Qualifications Ireland and is featured in the upcoming 'Community Education Framework' (national policy).
- 'Northern Ireland Community Education Census': this first of its kind research report in Northern Ireland engaged with 60 community education groups. High-level policymakers attended the launch of this report in Stormont and shared their thanks with AONTAS for this important work. The Alliance for Lifelong Learning have used this research to engage with the Department for the Economy.
- A book chapter on community education in 'Critical Perspectives in Further Education and Training' Eds. Jerry O'Neill and Camilla Fitzsimons by Dr Eve Cobain and Suzanne Kyle
- Mental health research partnership with Jigsaw: AONTAS highlighted the support needed for learners in FET through a research report, blog, and news articles launched on World Mental Health Day. National coverage included the Irish Independent, the Irish Examiner and more.



To build capacity in learner voice, we delivered learner voice workshops for staff and learners in Tipperary, Cork, Kilkenny, and Carlow. AONTAS supported learners to speak at events and consultations including the European Association for the Education of Adults in Zagreb, Croatia, and the DFHERIS Higher Options event in Dublin.

Capacity Building

We worked in partnership with AHEAD and NALA to deliver a three-day event called 'gATher' to over 100 participants. This programme shared best practices and aimed to improve social inclusion for people with additional or diverse needs. It helped build the capacity of tutors and staff across FET and HE. AONTAS continued to address the gaps in community education provision on the 'Recognition of Prior Learning' (RPL) and we funded 10 staff to complete a Level 7 programme at University College

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Cork. To support this work, we also hosted two Community of Practice sessions for people engaged in the programme.

Our 'One Step Up' helpline and website provided key information and referrals for over 6,000 beneficiaries throughout 2023.

To ensure we both lead lifelong learning and practice this concept, AONTAS provided 133 continuous professional development opportunities for our team through 26 programmes. This included time management, HR for management, Adobe InDesign, Nvivo Research, project management, and more.

Connecting People and Promoting Adult Learning

We organised events throughout 2023 that brought people together from across the adult and community education sector and facilitated a national festival to celebrate and promote lifelong learning. Our festival theme in 2023 was 'Create Your World' with the concept that 'life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.' 128 local community events were organised across 24 counties. The Adult Learners' Festival demonstrates to potential learners how and why going back to education could have a positive impact on their lives. The main focus is on creating a sense of fun, community, and creativity around returning to education.

The AONTAS Star Awards were held on March 10th in Croke Park. Our special guests, Irish international footballers Stephanie Roche and Áine O'Gorman, shared their inspiring stories with learners and guests. 26 groups were shortlisted and attended the event and 10 groups won awards in the categories of:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Third-level Access and Engagement
- Social Inclusion
- Global Citizenship Education
- Learner Voice.

We hosted an exhibition stand at the Senior Times 50+ Show in the RDS Dublin and distributed over 600 OSU flyers and gave advice to over 200 attendees about how to get back into education. AONTAS also promoted FETCH Courses and ETB programmes across Ireland. The AONTAS AGM took place on May 24th in the Spencer Hotel. In addition to presenting the Annual Report and Audited Accounts,

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AONTAS' new Strategic Plan was launched, and Dr Katriona O'Sullivan provided a keynote address. Our aim was to hold the narrative around the importance of education for addressing poverty and social inequalities in Ireland. Dr O'Sullivan shared her personal journey with guests and brought the room to tears. She reminded us about the importance of love, care, and understanding, and the need for adequate Government support to include people from under resourced communities in adult education. We had key policymakers and decision makers including DFHERIS, SOLAS, ETBI, and QQI. In addition, we had a wonderful mix of our members from across Ireland.

All-Island Reach

AONTAS provided services across the island of Ireland working in partnership with ETB's and local groups.

The AONTAS team visited 18 counties directly including places such as Wicklow, Tipperary, Cavan, Longford, Belfast, Roscommon, Derry.



We hosted an education summit on November 15th in the Aviva Stadium. Minister Simon Harris, DFHERIS, Professor Kathleen Lynch, UCD, Klara Engels, European Commission, Nessa White, SOLAS, and many others spoke at the event. Bringing together learners, staff, academics, and policymakers from across Ireland and Europe.

We had a community education showcase with 10 education providers and provided workshops for over 150 attendees.

Campaigning and Promotion of Lifelong Learning

AONTAS reached over 9 million beneficiaries in 2023. We organised two main campaigns. One in January to promote adult learning called 'Make Time for Me in 2023' #MakeTimeForMein2023 and one in September called 'Put Yourself on the Map' to generate engagement for our new Community Education Map and promote community education.

Our team sought to provide more engaging and accessible communication through thought provoking blogs, videos, and news items. We wanted to take the time to discuss important topics like relationships with tutors, mental health, language in adult learning and policy, and education theory.

AONTAS reached 9 million through our work in 2023



Examples include:

<https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/tutors-are-key-to-a-positive-learning-experience-for-adult-learners>

<https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/what-is-recognition-of-prior-learning-or-rpl>

<https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/a-look-back-at-the-imagining-adult-education-theory-into-practice-webinar-series>

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AONTAS hosts the only open-access peer-reviewed adult learning journal in Ireland. This is free and available on our website. It provides a space for new and experienced researchers and practitioners to showcase adult learning through research articles, practices, and book reviews.

International Engagement

We worked in partnership with European countries on projects that helped share practice, develop innovative programmes, and build our knowledge of adult learning. In 2023, AONTAS led or partnered on 10 EU projects.

- BEEP (Access to digital learning in community settings for older adults)
- CITIZENSXELERATOR (democratic education in adult and community education settings)
- KA1 (a mobility project for members of the AONTAS Community Education Network)
- BILDUNG (building inclusive lifelong learning communities)
- GSD (sustainability education in community settings)
- PARTNERUP (Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement for Upskilling Pathways)
- ENHANCE (Learner Voice)
- VOTL (Learner Voice)
- Just4All (Adult education)
- NEAAL (New European Agenda for Adult Learning)

We provided opportunities for members to attend international events to help build collaboration in Europe. For example, three CEN members participated in the 'Reveal 15 Conference' in Gottingen, Germany, and another group visited Brussels in Belgium.

UNESCO invited CEO Dearbháil Lawless to speak at their 'Marrakech Framework for Action' policy event which brought colleagues together across Europe following their global event in Morocco in 2022.

Academic Journal Published The Adult Learner Journal



AONTAS published the 2023 edition of the Adult Learner Journal. The only peer reviewed adult learning publication of its kind in Ireland.

Articles includes research and practice from across the adult and community education sector.

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FINANCIAL REVIEW

Income

SOLAS continued to be the primary on-going source of funding, with income of €1,595,700 (82% of total income) in 2023 (2022: €1,595,700 (91% of total income)).

The surplus for the year amounted to €12,521 (2022 deficit: €25,388).

Expenditure

AONTAS' 2023 expenditure on Charitable Activities amount to €1,925,435 (2022: €1,772,865).

Financial position

At the year end, the Charity has current assets of €710,565 (2022: €676,944) and liabilities of €320,875 (2022: €299,775) resulting in net assets of €389,690 (2022: €377,169).

Reserves policy

The purpose of the reserves policy for AONTAS is to ensure the stability of the mission, programmes, employment and on-going operations of the organisation. The reserve is intended to provide an internal source of income for situations such as a sudden increase in expense, one-time unbudgeted expenses, unanticipated loss in funding, or uninsured losses. The reserves are not intended to replace a permanent loss of funds or eliminate an on-going budget gap.

The Board of AONTAS judges that it needs to have a prudent reserves policy that allows it to:

- meet its obligations as an employer by paying redundancy payments, in the event of having to cease operations, to its staff at the statutory minimum level
- Continue to implement its activity plans should an important income stream cease unexpectedly or be delayed.
- Address an appropriate level of liability associated with the lease that it has on the office premises.

The calculation of the required level of reserves is an integral part of AONTAS' planning, budget and forecast cycle. The Board of Directors of AONTAS has set a reserves policy in place to ensure the stability of the mission, programmes, employment and on-going operations of the organisation. The calculations to meet the policy requirements indicated a required target of €340k.

AONTAS monitors the reserves on a quarterly basis when reviewing the management accounts.

The overall level of reserves at 31 December 2023 are as follows:

Unrestricted reserves: €330,962 (2022: €340,172)

Restricted reserves: €58,728 (2022: €36,997)

Going concern

After making appropriate enquiries, the Directors have a reasonable expectation that the Charity has adequate resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. For this reason, they continue to adopt the going concern basis in preparing the financial statements. Further details regarding the adoption of the going concern basis can be found in the accounting policies.

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Directors' Report

STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Constitution

The Charity is a Company Limited by Guarantee in Ireland governed by its Constitution, the Companies Act 2014 and the Charities Act 2009. The Charity does not have share capital and consequently, the liability of the members is limited, subject to an undertaking by each member to contribute to the net assets of the charity on winding up such amounts as may be required not exceeding €1.00.

The Board constitutes the Board of Directors of the Charity under the terms of Article 34 of the Articles of Association of the Charity. Contained within the Charity's Constitution is a mechanism whereby representatives from the membership are elected to become a members of the Board. In the case of all elected positions not being filled, there is an additional mechanism whereby the elected Board can co-opt a person to fill the vacancy. Candidates for co-option must be agreed upon by the Board and will be selected on the basis of relevant skills and expertise required to allow the Board to function at the optimum level of excellence.

There is an induction session with new members of the Board to familiarise themselves with the charity and the context within which it operates. It covers:

- Obligations of Board members
- Main documents which set out the operational framework for the charity including the Constitution
- Resourcing and the current financial position, as set out in the latest published accounts
- Future plans and objectives

Board of Directors' terms of reference are distributed to all new members of the Board, along with the Constitution and the latest financial statements.

The Board is responsible for setting the pay and remuneration of the Charity's CEO and oversight of performance.

The Board of Directors are responsible for approving the charity's compensation framework and for approving any changes to the charity's compensation strategy and framework.

There is a clear division of responsibility at AONTAS with the Board of Directors retaining control over the strategic decision-making and providing financial governance, accountability and oversight. The directors delegate executive authority for the charity's operations to the CEO, who in turn delegates the day-to-day management of specific functions of the organisation to the management team.

AONTAS' Board of Directors are from across the adult learning sector on the island of Ireland. This includes adult learners, community education, the Education and Training Board or FET, Higher Education, and other membership representation.

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The AONTAS Constitution states that the Board must comprise of:

- Chairperson [organisation or individual] (1)
- Individual (1)
- Organisation (7)
- Community education [organisation] (3)
- Adult learner [organisation or individual] (2)

AONTAS' 2023 Board of Directors	
Board Member	Information
John D'Arcy	Director, AONTAS Chairperson
Pamela Latimer	Director
John BATTERY	Director
Imelda Gaffney	Director
Louise Mullins	Director
Martin Flynn	Director
Martina Needham	Director
Liam McCarthy	Director
Cora Rafter	Director
Meliosa Bracken	Director
Lilian Nwanze	Director
Deborah Oniah	Director, appointed 17 February 2023
Kayla Dibble	Director, appointed 19 July 2023
Colette Ainscough	Director, resigned 19 July 2023
Daniel Kenny	Director, resigned 19 July 2023

AONTAS is fully compliant with all Governance regulations. Our Board met five times in 2023 on:

1. February 17th
2. April 28th
3. July 19th
4. October 25th
5. December 7th

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The Audit and Risk Subcommittee met three times:

1. February 15th
2. April 25th
3. October 9th (joint with Governance subcommittee)

Our new Remuneration Subcommittee met on:

1. April 5th

The AONTAS 2023 Audit with Mazars included only one recommendation. In addition, we engaged in SOLAS' 2023 audit and shared our experience as a funded organisation.

In 2023, we identified a need for additional support in the areas of governance, operations, and I.T. to ensure we maintained and continued to strengthen our position in these areas. We created a new position 'Governance and Operations Officer' and successfully recruited someone into this role.

Future plans

The Directors are not expecting to make any significant changes in the nature of the business in the near future.

Principal risks and uncertainties

The Directors have assessed the risks and have taken measures to manage these risks in the Charity as follows:

a. Market Risk

In common with many government-funded charities, the Charity is affected by both the budgetary constraints implemented by the national government and the changing nature of external economic conditions. The Directors are confident that the Charity has adequate financial resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future.

b. Fraud Risk

This risk is mitigated by maintaining segregation of duties for receipt of funds and the payment of creditors. The Directors have put processes and controls in place to ensure that detailed checking is carried out at all stages to ensure the accuracy and validity of all transactions.

Exemptions from disclosure

There are no omissions of the names of any Directors, executive officers or senior staff members for any extenuating personal circumstances.

Funds held as Custodian Trustee on behalf of Others

The Charity does not act as Custodian Trustee on behalf of others.

Events after the end of the reporting period

There have been no significant events affecting the Charity since the balance sheet date.

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Directors' Report

Accounting records

The measures taken by the directors to secure compliance with the requirements of Sections 281 to 285 of the Companies Act 2014 with regard to the keeping of accounting records are the implementation of necessary policies and procedures for recording transactions, the employment of competent accounting personnel with appropriate expertise and the provision of adequate resources to the financial function. The accounting records of the Charity are located at 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6.

Relevant audit information

In the case of each of the persons who are directors at the time this report is approved in accordance with Section 332 of the Companies Act 2014:

- so far as each director is aware, there is no relevant audit information of which the Charity's statutory auditors are unaware, and
- each director has taken all the steps that he or she ought to have taken as a director in order to make himself or herself aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the Charity's statutory auditors are aware of that information.

Auditors

The auditors, Mazars, Chartered Accountants and Statutory Audit Firm, have expressed their willingness to continue in office in accordance with Section 383 (2) of the Companies Act 2014.

This report was approved by the Board of Directors on 26/04/2024 and signed on behalf of the Board by:



John D'Arcy (Chairperson)
Director



Martin Flynn
Director

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Responsibilities Statement

The Directors are responsible for preparing the Directors' report and financial statements in accordance with Irish law and regulations.

Irish company law requires the Directors to prepare financial statements for each financial year. Under that law, the Directors have elected to prepare the financial statements in accordance with FRS 102 "The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland" issued by the Financial Reporting Council, and Statement of Recommended Practice (Charities SORP (FRS 102)), issued by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator.

Under company law, the Directors must not approve the financial statements unless they are satisfied that they give a true and fair view of the assets, liabilities and financial position of the Charity as at the financial year end date and of the surplus or deficit of the Charity for that financial year and otherwise comply with the Companies Act 2014.

In preparing these financial statements, the Directors are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- state whether the financial statements have been prepared in accordance with applicable accounting standards, identify those standards, and note the effect and the reason for any material departure from those standards; and
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the Charity will continue in business.

The Directors are responsible for ensuring that the Charity keeps or causes to be kept adequate accounting records which correctly explain and record the transactions of the Charity, enable at any time the assets, liabilities, financial position and surplus or deficit of the Charity to be determined with reasonable accuracy, enable them to ensure that the financial statements and Directors' Report comply with the Companies Act 2014 and enable the financial statements to be audited. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the Charity and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

By order of the Board



John D'Arcy (Chairperson)
Director



Martin Flynn
Director

Date: 26/04/2024

Independent auditor's report to the members of AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Report on the audit of the financial statements

Opinion

We have audited the financial statements of AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation ('the Charity'), for the year ended 31 December 2023, which comprise the Statement of Financial Activities, the Balance Sheet, the Statement of Cash Flows, and notes to the Company financial statements, including the summary of significant accounting policies set out in note 2. The financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is Irish law and FRS 102 *The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland* issued in the United Kingdom by the Financial Reporting Council (FRS 102).

In our opinion, the accompanying financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the assets, liabilities and financial position of the Charity as at 31 December 2023, and of its surplus for the year then ended;
- have been properly prepared in accordance with FRS 102; and
- have been properly prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Companies Act 2014.

Basis for opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (Ireland) (ISAs (Ireland)) and applicable law. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the *Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Statements* section of our report.

We are independent of the Charity in accordance with the ethical requirements that are relevant to our audit of financial statements in Ireland, including the Ethical Standard for Auditors (Ireland) issued by the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority (IAASA), and we have fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with these requirements.

We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

Conclusions relating to going concern

In auditing the financial statements, we have concluded that the directors' use of the going concern basis of accounting in the preparation of the financial statements is appropriate.

Based on the work we have performed, we have not identified any material uncertainties relating to events or conditions that, individually or collectively, may cast significant doubt on the Charity's ability to continue as a going concern for a period of at least twelve months from the date when the financial statements are authorised for issue.

Our responsibilities and the responsibilities of the directors with respect to going concern are described in the relevant sections of this report.

Other information

The directors are responsible for the other information. The other information comprises the information included in the annual report other than the financial statements and our auditor's report thereon. Our opinion on the financial statements does not cover the other information and, except to the extent otherwise explicitly stated in our report, we do not express any form of assurance conclusion thereon.

Our responsibility is to read the other information and, in doing so, consider whether the other information is materially inconsistent with the financial statements or our knowledge obtained in the course of the audit, or otherwise appears to be materially misstated. If we identify such material inconsistencies or apparent material misstatements, we are required to determine whether there is a material misstatement in the financial statements or a material misstatement of the other information. If, based on the work we have performed, we conclude that there is a material misstatement of this other information, we are required to report that fact.

We have nothing to report in this regard.

Opinions on other matters prescribed by the Companies Act 2014

In our opinion, based on the work undertaken in the course of the audit, we report that:

- the information given in the directors' report for the financial year for which the financial statements are prepared is consistent with the financial statements;
- the directors' report has been prepared in accordance with applicable legal requirements;
- the accounting records of the Charity were sufficient to permit the financial statements to be readily and properly audited; and
- the financial statements are in agreement with the accounting records.

We have obtained all the information and explanations which, to the best of our knowledge and belief, are necessary for the purposes of our audit.

Matters on which we are required to report by exception

Based on the knowledge and understanding of the Charity and its environment obtained in the course of the audit, we have not identified any material misstatements in the directors' report.

The Companies Act 2014 requires us to report to you if, in our opinion, the requirements of any of Sections 305 to 312 of the Act, which relate to disclosures of directors' remuneration and transactions are not complied with by the Charity. We have nothing to report in this regard.

Respective responsibilities

Responsibilities of directors for the financial statements

As explained more fully in the directors' responsibilities statement set out on page 19, the directors are responsible for the preparation of the financial statements in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework that give a true and fair view, and for such internal control as management determines is necessary to enable the preparation of financial statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial statements, the directors are responsible for assessing the Charity's ability to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless management either intends to liquidate the Charity or to cease operations, or has no realistic alternative but to do so.

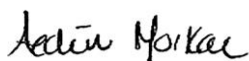
Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance, but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with ISAs (Ireland) will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of these financial statements.

A further description of our responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements is located on the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority's website at: http://www.iaasa.ie/getmedia/b2389013-1cf6-458b-9b8f-a98202dc9c3a/Description_of_auditors_responsibilities_for_audit.pdf. This description forms part of our auditor's report.

The purpose of our audit work and to whom we owe our responsibilities

Our report is made solely to the Charity's members, as a body, in accordance with Section 391 of the Companies Act 2014. Our audit work has been undertaken so that we might state to the Charity's members those matters we are required to state to them in an auditor's report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law, we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the Charity and the Charity's members, as a body, for our audit work, for this report, or for the opinions we have formed.



Aedín Morkan
for and on behalf of Mazars
Chartered Accountants & Statutory Audit Firm
Harcourt Centre, Block 3
Harcourt Road
Dublin 2
Date: 1 May 2024

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Statement of Financial Activities
(incorporating an Income and Expenditure Account)
For the year ended 31 December 2023**

	Unrestricted Funds 2023	Restricted Funds 2023	Total Funds 2023	Total Funds 2022
Note	€	€	€	€
Income from:				
Charitable activities	-	1,920,676	1,920,676	1,701,377
Other trading activities				
- Membership fee	8,280	9,000	17,280	46,100
	<u>8,280</u>	<u>1,929,676</u>	<u>1,937,956</u>	<u>1,747,477</u>
Expenditure on:				
Charitable activities	17,490	1,907,945	1,925,435	1,772,865
	<u>17,490</u>	<u>1,907,945</u>	<u>1,925,435</u>	<u>1,772,865</u>
Net (expenditure) / income	<u>(9,210)</u>	<u>21,731</u>	<u>12,521</u>	<u>(25,388)</u>
Net movement in funds	(9,210)	21,731	12,521	(25,388)
Reconciliation of funds:				
Total funds brought forward	340,172	36,997	377,169	402,557
Total funds carried forward	<u>330,962</u>	<u>58,728</u>	<u>389,690</u>	<u>377,169</u>

There are no recognised gains or losses other than the net (expenditure) / income set out above.

The notes on pages 26 - 42 form part of these financial statements.

All income and expenditure are in respect of continuing activities.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Balance Sheet
As at 31 December 2023**

		2023	2022
	Note	€	€
Fixed assets			
Tangible assets	7	-	-
Current assets			
Debtors	8	146,279	46,497
Cash at bank and in hand		564,286	630,447
		<u>710,565</u>	<u>676,944</u>
Creditors			
Amounts falling due within one year	9	<u>(320,875)</u>	<u>(299,775)</u>
Net current assets		<u>389,690</u>	<u>377,169</u>
Total assets less current liabilities		<u><u>389,690</u></u>	<u><u>377,169</u></u>
Funds			
Restricted funds	10	58,728	36,997
Unrestricted funds	10	330,962	340,172
Total funds		<u><u>389,690</u></u>	<u><u>377,169</u></u>

The notes on pages 25 - 36 form part of these financial statements.

The financial statements were approved by the board of directors, authorised for issue on 26th April 2024 and are signed on its behalf by:



John D'Arcy (Chairperson)
Director



Martin Flynn
Director

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Statement of Cash Flows
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

	2023	2022
Note	€	€
Cash flows from operating activities		
Net (expenditure) / income	12,521	(25,388)
Adjustment for:		
Depreciation	7	-
Operating (expenditure) / income before working capital changes	12,521	(25,388)
(Increase)/ decrease in debtors	(85,252)	161,886
Increase/ (decrease) in creditors	21,099	(250,237)
Net cash used in operating activities	<u>(51,632)</u>	<u>(113,739)</u>
Net decrease in cash at bank and in hand	(66,161)	(113,739)
Cash at bank and in hand at beginning of year	630,447	744,186
Cash at bank and in hand at end of year	<u>564,286</u>	<u>630,447</u>

The notes on pages 26 - 42 form part of these financial statements.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

These financial statements, comprising the Statement of Financial Activities, the Balance Sheet, the Statement of Cash Flows and the related notes, constitute the individual financial statements of AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation for the financial year ended 31 December 2023.

Company information

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation (the “Charity”) is a company limited by guarantee, domiciled and incorporated in the Republic of Ireland with company registration of 80958 and is a registered Charity. The Charity is a public benefit entity. The nature of the Charity’s operations and its principal activities are set out in the Directors’ Report on pages 2 to 18.

The registered office and principal place of business is 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6.

Statement of compliance

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with FRS 102 “The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland” (FRS 102).

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES

The following accounting policies have been applied consistently in dealing with items which are considered material in relation to the Charity's financial statements.

Basis of preparation

The financial statements have been prepared on the going concern basis and in accordance with the historical cost convention. The financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is the Companies Act 2014, FRS 102 “The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland” issued by the UK Financial Reporting Council (FRC) and the Statement of Recommended Practice (Charities SORP (FRS102)) as published by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator which are recognised by the FRC as the appropriate bodies to issue SORPs for the charity sector in the UK. Financial reporting in line with SORP is considered best practice for charities in the Republic of Ireland.

The financial statements are prepared in Euro, which is the functional currency of the Charity. Monetary amounts in these financial statements are rounded to the nearest Euro (€).

Income

Income is recognised when the Charity has entitlement to the funds, any performance conditions attached to the item(s) of income have been met, it is probable that the income will be received, and the amount can be measured reliably. Income is deferred where the Charity is limited by specific performance related conditions that are evident in the funding agreement, where there is a specification of a time period that limits the Charity’s ability to recognise the income until it has performed an activity and when there are specific terms or conditions within an agreement that have not been met and are not within the control of the Charity at year end.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

ACCOUNTING POLICIES (Continued)

Income (Continued)

Income from charitable activities, whether 'capital' grants or 'revenue' grants, is recognised when the Charity has entitlement to the funds, any performance conditions attached to the grants have been met, it is probable that the income will be received, and the amount can be measured reliably and is not deferred.

Expenditure

Expenditure is recognised once there is a legal or constructive obligation to make a payment to a third party, it is probable that settlement will be required, and the amount of the obligation can be measured reliably.

Charitable expenditure comprises those costs incurred by the Charity in the delivery of its activities and services for its beneficiaries. It includes both costs that can be allocated directly to such activities and those costs of an indirect nature necessary to support them. Charitable activities include costs of services and grants, support costs and depreciation on related assets. Non-staff costs not attributed to one category of activity are allocated or apportioned pro-rata to the staffing of the relevant service. Finance, HR, IT and administrative staff costs are directly attributable to individual activities by objective.

Governance costs include those costs associated with meeting the constitutional and statutory requirements of the Charity and include the audit fees and costs linked to the strategic management of the Charity.

Support costs are incurred on those functions that assist the work of the Charity but do not directly undertake charitable activities. Salaries and associated costs which can be attributed to specific projects are charged accordingly.

Funds

Restricted funds

Restricted funds represent grants, donations and other income which can only be used for particular purposes as specified by the donors. Such purposes are within the overall aims of the Charity.

Unrestricted funds

Unrestricted funds represent amounts which are expendable at the discretion of the Directors in furtherance of the objectives of the Charity and which have not been designated for other purposes. It is the policy of the Charity to retain sufficient reserves to cover future commitments in relation to its on-going function and mandate. The provisions are intended to finance:

- Working capital requirements
- Potential setbacks in income
- Unexpected/emergency expenditure

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

Tangible fixed assets

Tangible assets are initially measured at cost and subsequently measured at cost, net of depreciation and any impairment losses.

Depreciation is provided at rates calculated to write off the cost of fixed assets, less their estimated residual value, over their expected useful lives on the following bases:

Fixtures and fittings	-	20% Straight line
Office equipment	-	20% Straight line
Computer equipment	-	20% Straight line

The gain or loss arising on the disposal of an asset is determined as the difference between the sale proceeds and the carrying amount of the asset and is credited or charged in the statement of financial activities.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES (Continued)

Prepayments

Prepayments are expenses paid in advance and recorded as assets before these are utilised. Prepayments are apportioned over the period covered by the payment and charged to the statement of financial activities when incurred. Prepayments that are expected to be realised no more than 12 months after the reporting period are classified as current assets. Otherwise, these are classified as noncurrent assets.

Deferred income

Deferred income consists of grants received in advance which will be recognised upon fulfilment of the related conditions.

Financial instruments

A financial asset or a financial liability is recognised only when the Charity becomes a party to the contractual provisions of the instrument.

Basic financial instruments are initially recognised at the transaction price, unless the arrangement constitutes a financing transaction, where it is recognised at the present value of the future payments discounted at a market rate of interest for a similar debt instrument. Financial assets include cash at bank and in hand and debtors (excluding prepayments).

Financial liabilities are initially recognised at the transaction value and subsequently measured at amortised cost. Financial liabilities include creditors (excluding deferred income and taxation and social welfare).

Employee benefits

The costs of short-term employee benefits are recognised as a liability and an expense.

Termination benefits are recognised immediately as an expense when the Charity is demonstrably committed to terminate the employment of an employee or to provide termination benefits.

Retirement benefits

The Charity operates a defined contribution pension scheme for employees. Annual contributions payable to the Charity's pension scheme are charged to the income and expenditure account in the period to which they relate.

Operating leases

Lease payments are recognised as an expense over the lease term on a straight-line basis. The aggregate benefit of lease incentives is recognised as a reduction to expense over the lease term, on a straight-line basis.

Taxation

The Charity's operations are not for profit and accordingly the company avails of the charities' exemption from corporation tax.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES (Continued)

Judgements and key sources of estimation uncertainty

The preparation of financial statements requires management to make judgements, estimates and assumptions that affect the application of policies and reported amounts of assets and liabilities, income and expenditure. The accounting estimates and associated assumptions are based on historical experience and various other factors that are believed to be reasonable under the circumstances, the results of which form the basis of making the judgements about the carrying amounts of assets and liabilities that are not readily apparent from other sources. Actual results may differ from these estimates.

The key judgements and estimates made in the preparation of these financial statements are as follows.

Going concern

The Charity holds surplus funds in the amount of €389,690 at 31 December 2023.

Based on committed grant income of €1.8m over the next 12 months and cash at bank, the Directors are satisfied that the Charity has adequate resources to continue for at least 12 months from the date of approval of these financial statements and it is appropriate to adopt the going concern basis in the preparation of the financial statements.

Determining lease commitment – Company as a lessee. The Charity holds a lease for its business premises at 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. The Charity has determined that the risks and benefits of ownership related to the leased property are retained by the lessor. Accordingly, the lease is accounted for as an operating lease.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

3. INCOME

Current Year

	Unrestricted Funds €	Restricted Funds €	Total Funds €
Income from charitable activities:			
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS Further Education and Training Grant	-	1,259,316	1,259,316
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS National Further Education and Training Learning Forum (NFLF) Grant	-	336,384	336,384
Erasmus + European Agenda for Adults Learning (EAAL) Grant	-	213,682	213,682
Erasmus + KA2 Bildung	-	6,156	6,156
ToSwitch – Erasmus + KA2	-	7,587	7,587
RegAle – Erasmus + KA3	-	14,778	14,778
Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation (BEEP)	-	16,400	16,400
CitizenXelerator	-	15,634	15,634
ESC Eeuropean Solidarity Corp – KA1 Leargas	-	5,771	5,771
GSD KA2	-	26,883	26,883
Partner Up	-	18,085	18,085
	-	<u>1,920,676</u>	<u>1,920,676</u>
Other income:			
Membership fee	8,280	9,000	17,280
	<u>8,280</u>	<u>1,929,676</u>	<u>1,937,956</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

3. INCOME (Continued)

Prior year

	Unrestricted Funds	Restricted Funds	Total Funds
	€	€	€
Income from charitable activities:			
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS Further Education and Training Grant	–	1,259,316	1,259,316
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS National Further Education and Training Learning Forum (NFLF) Grant	–	336,384	336,384
Erasmus + European Agenda for Adults Learning (EAAL) Grant	–	58,117	58,117
Erasmus+ Mobility 19 - 22 BAM		(258)	(258)
Erasmus + KA2 Bildung		12,322	12,322
ToSwitch – Erasmus + KA2	–	15,168	15,168
RegAle – Erasmus + KA3	–	8,028	8,028
Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation (BEEP)	–	12,300	12,300
	–	<u>1,701,377</u>	<u>1,701,377</u>
Other income:			
Membership fee	<u>36,720</u>	<u>9,380</u>	<u>46,100</u>
	<u>36,720</u>	<u>1,710,757</u>	<u>1,747,477</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

3. INCOME (Continued)

The purpose of the above grants are as follows:

Grant	Purpose
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS Further Education and Training Grant	Core costs of AONTAS to support the delivery of the AONTAS Strategic Plan
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS NFLF Grant	Implementation plan costs of AONTAS to support the delivery of the AONTAS Strategic Plan
EAAL Grant	To develop innovative and community-based methods, identify the needs of learners, and develop policy recommendations for engaging vulnerable and marginalised adults in Irish adult education.
EASI – BLUESS	Blueprints for development skills in Slovakia and Research and innovation in Further Education and Training (FET).
Erasmus + KA2 Bildung	Aims to combine education and knowledge to assist people thrive in society.
ToSwitch – Erasmus + KA2	To create three Intellectual Outputs (IO) aimed at the innovation and improvement of training processes.
RegAle – Erasmus + KA3	ERAMUS+ The Union programme for education, training, youth and sport.
Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation (BEEP)	Within the framework of Erasmus+ programme which aims to facilitate adult education through strategic partnership with the Portuguese National Agency.
Future Lab	For continuous professional development in FET.
Erasmus + Making and Impact at European Level	For mobility of individuals/practitioners in FET.

Income is derived from:

	2023	2022
	€	€
Republic of Ireland	1,612,980	1,641,800
Within EU (outside the Republic of Ireland)	324,976	105,677
	<u>1,937,956</u>	<u>1,747,477</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

4. ANALYSIS OF EXPENDITURE ON CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES

Current Year

Description	Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS FET Grant €	Department of Education and Skills – Solas NFLF Grant €	Erasmus + EAAL Grant €	Others €	Total €
Premises costs	112,582				112,582
Management expenses	94,534				94,534
Office costs	59,329				59,329
Adult Learners' Festival and AONTAS publications	24,355				24,355
Information and resources	48,660				48,660
Learner Forum Project	-	189,773			189,773
Membership, communications and promotions	29,154				29,154
General expenses	19,866		46,052	82,747	128,799
	<u>388,480</u>	<u>189,773</u>	<u>46,052</u>	<u>82,747</u>	<u>707,052</u>
Support costs	871,285	146,958	155,807	44,333	1,218,383
	<u>1,259,765</u>	<u>336,731</u>	<u>201,859</u>	<u>127,080</u>	<u>1,925,435</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

4. ANALYSIS OF EXPENDITURE ON CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES (Continued)

Prior Year

Description	Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS FET Grant	Department of Education and Skills – Solas NFLF Grant	Erasmus + EAAL Grant	Others	Total
	€	€	€	€	€
Premises costs	144,381	-	-	-	144,381
Management expenses	74,481	-	-	-	74,481
Office costs	57,490	-	-	-	57,490
Adult Learners' Festival and AONTAS publications	27,553	-	-	-	27,553
Policy and research	16,187	-	-	-	16,187
Information and resources	45,687	-	-	-	45,687
Learner Forum Project	-	192,626	-	-	192,626
Membership, communications and promotions	39,634	-	-	-	39,634
General expenses	19,075	-	16,766	78,000	113,841
	424,488	192,626	16,766	78,000	711,880
Support costs	835,402	144,277	55,881	25,425	1,060,985
	1,259,890	336,903	72,647	103,425	1,772,865

Included within the above are support costs as follows:

	General cost €	Governance cost €	Total 2023 €	Total 2022 €
Wages and salaries	1,126,539	-	1,126,539	969,074
Audit (including VAT)	-	10,455	10,455	10,455
Others	55,965	25,424	81,389	190,681
	1,182,504	35,879	1,218,383	1,060,985

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

5. EMPLOYEES

The average number of persons employed by the Charity during the year was as follows:

	2023	2022
	No.	No.
Administration	3	4
Project	17	14
	<u>20</u>	<u>18</u>

The number of employees whose total employee benefits (excluding employer's pension costs) for the reporting period which fell within the bands below were:

	2023	2022
	No.	No.
In the band € 60,001 - € 70,000	3	2
In the band € 70,001 - € 80,000	-	1
In the band € 80,001 - € 90,000	1	-
In the band € 90,001 - € 100,000	-	-
	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>

Breakdown of wages and salaries is as follows:

	2023	2022
	€	€
Wages and salaries	951,200	816,401
Social security costs	106,399	89,630
Pension costs	68,940	63,043
	<u>1,126,539</u>	<u>969,074</u>

The key management personnel of the Charity comprise the CEO, Dearbhail Lawless who earned total employee benefits of €88,118 in 2023 (2022: €72,795 for both roles of Head of Advocacy and CEO). The pay of key management personnel is set by approval of the Board.

No Directors or any other persons related to the Charity had any personal interest in any contracts or transactions entered into by the Charity during the financial period.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

5. NET (EXPENDITURE)/ INCOME FOR THE YEAR

	2023	2022
	€	€
Net (expenditure)/ income for the year is stated after charging:		
Depreciation	-	-
Rent	70,000	70,000
Auditor's remuneration for external audit services (including VAT)	10,455	10,455
	<hr/>	<hr/>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

6. TANGIBLE FIXED ASSETS

	Fixtures and fittings €	Office equipment €	Computer Equipment €	Total €
Cost				
At 1 January 2023	7,129	9,939	49,500	66,568
At 31 December 2023	7,129	9,939	49,500	66,568
Accumulated depreciation				
At 1 January 2023	7,129	9,939	49,500	66,568
At 31 December 2023	7,129	9,939	49,500	66,568
Carrying amount				
At 31 December 2023	-	-	-	-
At 31 December 2022	-	-	-	-

7. DEBTORS

	2023 €	2022 €
Membership receivable	11,410	29,450
Prepayments	21,506	17,047
Accrued income	113,363	-
	<u>146,279</u>	<u>46,497</u>

All debtors are due within one year. Membership receivable is shown net of impairment in respect of doubtful debts.

8. CREDITORS

Amounts falling due within one year

	2023 €	2022 €
Trade creditors	15,017	102,813
Deferred income	246,828	116,002
Accruals	26,994	25,806
Tax and social insurance	28,066	22,074
Bank overdraft	3,970	5,123
Other creditors	-	27,957
	<u>320,875</u>	<u>299,775</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

9. CREDITORS (Continued)

Trade creditors, accruals and bank overdraft are payable at various dates in the subsequent year in accordance with the suppliers' usual terms and conditions.

Deferred income comprises grants received in advance in which terms and conditions have not yet been met.

Movements in deferred income are as follow:

	2023	2022
	€	€
At 1 January	116,002	173,954
Deferred during the year	246,828	-
Credited to the income from charitable activities in the Statement of Financial Activities	<u>(116,002)</u>	<u>(57,952)</u>
At 31 December	<u><u>246,828</u></u>	<u><u>116,002</u></u>

Tax and social insurance are repayable at various dates over the coming months in accordance with the applicable statutory provisions.

Other creditors are payables to other creditors and pension control account.

9. MOVEMENTS IN FUNDS

Current Year

	Balance at beginning of year	Income	Expenditure	Transfers	Balance at end of year
	€	€	€	€	€
Restricted funds					
Charitable activities	36,997	1,929,676	(1,907,945)	-	58,728
Unrestricted funds	<u>340,172</u>	<u>8,280</u>	<u>(17,490)</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>330,962</u>
Total funds	<u><u>377,169</u></u>	<u><u>1,937,956</u></u>	<u><u>(1,925,435)</u></u>	<u><u>-</u></u>	<u><u>389,690</u></u>

Prior Year

	Balance at beginning of year	Income	Expenditure	Transfer	Balance at end of year
	€	€	€	€	€
Restricted funds					
Charitable activities	55,525	1,710,757	(1,729,285)	-	36,997
Unrestricted funds	347,032	36,720	(43,580)	-	340,172

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

Total funds	402,557	1,747,477	(1,772,865)	-	377,169
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9. MOVEMENTS IN FUNDS (continued)

Restricted funds are attributable to activities/ projects that are not yet completed as of year-end, which mainly includes EAAL 2024-2025 of (€14,529); Erasmus+KA2 Building of €11,501; ToSwitch – Erasmus+KA2 of €3,514; RegAle – Erasmus+KA3 of €13,134; BEEP of €11,071 and other funds of (€4,979).

Restricted funds for 2022 mainly includes EAAL 2022-2023 of (€14,529); Erasmus+KA2 Building of €11,501; ToSwitch – Erasmus+KA2 of €3,514; RegAle – Erasmus+KA3 of €13,134; BEEP of €11,071 and other funds of (€4,786). On the other hand, Unrestricted funds for 2023 and 2022 solely includes the membership fees of €330,962 and €340,172, respectively.

9. ANALYSIS OF NET ASSETS BETWEEN FUNDS

Current year

	Unrestricted funds €	Restricted funds €	Total Funds €
Debtors	11,410	134,869	146,279
Cash at bank and in hand	319,552	244,734	564,286
Creditors	-	(320,875)	(320,875)
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	330,962	58,728	389,690

Prior year

	Unrestricted funds €	Restricted funds €	Total Funds €
Debtors	29,450	17,047	46,497
Cash at bank and in hand	310,722	319,725	630,447
Creditors	-	(299,775)	(299,775)
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	340,172	36,997	377,169

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2023

10. MEMBERS' LIABILITY

The Charity is limited by guarantee not having a share capital. The liability of the members is limited.

Every member of the Charity undertakes to contribute to the assets of the Charity in the event of its being wound up while they are members, or within one year thereafter, for the payments of the debts and liabilities of the Charity contracted before they ceased to be members, and the costs, charges and expenses of winding up, and for the adjustment of the rights of the contributors among themselves, such amount as may be required, not exceeding €1.00.

11. FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS

	2023	2022
	€	€
Carrying amount of financial assets		
Financial assets measured at amortised cost		
Debtors (excluding prepayments)	11,410	29,450
Cash at bank	564,286	630,447
	<u>596,372</u>	<u>659,897</u>
Carrying amount of financial liabilities		
Financial liabilities measured at amortised cost		
Creditors (excluding deferred income and tax and social insurance)	45,980	161,699
	<u>45,980</u>	<u>161,699</u>

12. OPERATING LEASE COMMITMENT

The Charity has a lease of twenty-five years which commenced in August 2003 relating to its business premises at 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. Rent expense recognised in 2023 amounted to €70,000 plus the €9,914 service charges (2022: €78,476).

The total future minimum lease payments to be paid under non-cancellable operating leases as at 31 December are as follows:

	2023	2022
	€	€
Within one year	70,000	70,000
After one year but no more than five years	180,831	250,831
More than five years	-	-
	<u>250,831</u>	<u>320,831</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2023**

13. RELATED PARTY TRANSACTIONS

The related parties of the Charity are considered to be the directors, their close family members and entities which they control or in which they have a significant interest as well as members of the Charity.

Transactions with Key Management Personnel

Other than as set out at Note 5 there were no other transactions with key management personnel during the current or previous financial year.

14. POST BALANCE SHEET EVENTS

There have been no significant events affecting the Charity since the balance sheet date.

15. APPROVAL OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

The Board of Directors approved these financial statements for issue on the 26th April 2024.