



Submission to Indecon International Consultants on behalf of the
Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

Public Consultation: Review of the Implementation of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion

Brief outline of submission: This submission is being made on behalf of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, and our membership. The submission is being made in order to highlight areas important to AONTAS and our members as it concerns the Department of Employment and Social Protection's, and wider Government's, actions and commitment to adult education as a tool for the promotion of social inclusion.

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Introduction to AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation exists to promote the development of a lifelong learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education that is accessible and inclusive.

AONTAS is a highly respected non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969. Currently it represents approximately 400 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. The work of AONTAS centres on: Advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners; promoting the value and benefits of adult learning; and building organisational capacity. With particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education when they were young or who are under-represented in learning. AONTAS seeks to:

- widen participation in lifelong learning;
- ensure community education supports quality learning opportunities for the most educationally disadvantaged;
- ensure adult learners are central to local, regional, national, European and International adult learning policy; and
- promote quality adult learning

Drawing on the strength of our members, including through the 100+ strong membership of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) and meaningful relationships with adult learners, we advocate for the rights of all adults to quality learning throughout their lives based on a grassroots, authentic understanding of lifelong learning that benefits the social, personal and skills development of adults, their family and community. In addition, we promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. We have a specific focus on the most educationally disadvantaged and our work seeks to ensure that all adults have the right to participate in adult learning that exhibits the following elements: inclusion, learner support, progression, positive learning outcomes, learner focus, learner choice, a positive learning experience, transformative learning.

Introduction to the submission

AONTAS' response to the Review of the Implementation of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2017 comments on some of the four points noted in the Public Consultation documents:

- 1) The extent of progress made on the high-level goals and National Social Target for Poverty Reduction, taking account of the major socio-economic changes that took place over the period 2007 to 2017
- 2) The extent of implementation of the actions underpinning the high-level goals in the NAP inclusion
- 3) The relevance and comprehensiveness of the monitoring and governance structures underpinning NAP inclusion; and
- 4) Any lessons relevant to inform the approach to dealing with social inclusion at a cross-governmental level

In addition to comments on these points we also provide information about why in the future the DEASP and Government more broadly must make the provision and accessibility of adult education a focus of their efforts to create a more socially inclusive Irish society.

Progress made on the high-level goals of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion

The original twelve high-level goals from the National Action Plan (NAP) for Social Inclusion 2007-2016¹, including the National Social Target for Poverty Reduction, were clear and measurable targets. While the targets became difficult to reach due to the economic crisis that began in 2008, the fact that they were clearly stated and measurable made it possible for the Government and stakeholders to have a clear understanding of what goals would be met, which goals would not be met, and what changes to goals were required over the coming years.

Unfortunately, during the updating of the NAP for Social Inclusion 2015-2017², which extended the original plan by 1 year, the specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic goals presented in the original NAP were altered quite significantly. Several of the goals that were either newly adopted or amended are vague and therefore nearly impossible to evaluate objectively. Examples of these changed and less specific and measurable goals include Goals 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 of the updated plan. In these cases the goals of the 2015-2017 plan set sweeping statements using words like 'promoting', 'creating', or 'identifying action', without stating hard targets.

Specifically regarding progress made, the annual Social Inclusion Reports, such as that published in November 2018, show that targets regarding participation in education for 18-24 year olds' with at most lower secondary in further education have been met. Conversely, the targets set for increasing the share of 30-34 years who have completed tertiary or equivalent education continue to lag by 5 percentage points.³

Implementation of actions of high-level goals

In the NAP for Social Inclusion there are 4 main actions focused on increasing the access and participation of adults in education. These 4 areas are labelled as Education Variation, Second Chance Education, Education and Employment, and Education for People with Disabilities.

While the base drivers of these actions were relevant 12 years ago when the plan first came into being, and remain relevant today, it is disappointing to see the shortfall in progress made in some of these action areas over this time.

¹ *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*. <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/National-Action-Plan-for-Social-Inclusion-2007-2016.pdf> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019]

² *Updated National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2015-2017*
<https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Updated%20National%20Action%20Plan%20For%20Social%20Inclusion%202015-2017.pdf> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019]

³ *Social Inclusion Report Incorporating Annual Reports for 2015 & 2016*.
<http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Social-Annual-Report-2015-2016.pdf> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019]

Education Variations

In the original NAP for Social Inclusion it was recognised that in order to help upgrade the qualification levels of people with low-qualifications it was necessary to provide flexibility in learning, including the provision of learning that limits the amount of time that people are away from their workplace while they are receiving training. The plan continues by speaking about the importance of using flexible learning as a tool for creating a lifelong learning culture.

Unfortunately 12 years later, policies for adult education continue to place an emphasis on the importance of full-time education, which is primarily focused on the needs of people outside employment. While the economic crisis created an obvious need to support the thousands of citizens who were unemployed and required fulltime upskilling this time, it is necessary that all primary funders of adult education in Ireland (including but also beyond the Department of Education and Skills, SOLAS, HEA, and other state agencies with a primarily education focus) act to support a society where lifelong learning is seen as a critical part of a person's personal, as well as professional success. In order to achieve this outcome of a lifelong learning society funders must support learners equally, whether they are in employment and require flexible learning, or are outside employment and require full-time educational support.

Education and Employment for Older People

Education for older people over 65 was noted as an action and priority of the NAP in 2005. However little action has been taken to include older people in state funded education, whether they are out of employment and seeking inclusion in their communities, or require upskilling in order to continue participation in the workforce. Evidence that education for older people has not been a priority, whether for the purposes of employment or broader social inclusion is that policy and data collection about adult learners at the national and EU government levels focuses on 18-65 year olds. For Ireland to promote social inclusion for older people it needs to invest in flexible lifelong learning options including for people over the age of 65. Government also needs to work with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in advance of the next Adult Education Survey in 2021 to ensure that lifelong learning participation rates for those over age 65 are included in the data collection and reporting processes. On the latter point AONTAS has already engaged the CSO on this and other points that will help to improve methodologies for the next survey, which will help all policy makers and influencers further understand Ireland's lifelong learning culture. AONTAS would be happy to continue engaging the DEASP and CSO on this issue in the future.

Relevance and Comprehensiveness of Monitoring and Governance Structures

AONTAS does not have any specific comments to make about the monitoring and governance structures in place for reporting on the NAP for Social Inclusion. However, it is positive that an annual report is published under authority of the Minister for DEASP. This public reporting process ensures public political accountability for ongoing implementation and development of the NAP for Social Inclusion.

Social Inclusion at a Cross-Departmental Level

AONTAS does not have any specific comments to make about the approach to dealing with social inclusion at a cross-departmental level other than to say that while the development of multi-annual cross-departmental strategies is in once instance a positive act, what seems to happen time and again is that other strategies, plans, programmes, etc, are developed by different Departments and agencies and then each department and agency prioritises their own strategy over others, resulting in an incongruous web of commitments and governmental priorities.

Moving forward, for a cross-departmental social inclusion strategy to have a tangible and comprehensive impact on Irish society beyond the successes of individual measurable actions, the DEASP must be innovative in its approach to ensuring that the NAP for Social Inclusion is understood and accepted within all parts of Government, and made to become a central part of other Departments' work planning and prioritisation.

Next Steps and the importance of community education for social inclusion

AONTAS is aware that the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is in the process of developing the next National Action Plan for Social Inclusion as consultations began in February 2018. While AONTAS was unable to contribute a submission to this discussion at that time we would like to provide information about how to improve social inclusion for often neglected and excluded communities in Irish society by way of community education provision.

A proven way to improve social inclusion of disadvantaged, underserved, and hard to reach individuals and communities is through the provision of community education. Building the capacity of communities to meet the learning needs of people through community education, outreach, and meaningful collaboration with public education institutions such as ETBs and Higher Education institutions is vital.

Community education is adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland. It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of people in individual communities. Community education has a track record of effectively engaging with people who wish to return to education, but who may not have the confidence or opportunity to do so through a formal setting. Community education also has a track record of effectively engaging with people who wish to participate in social activities in their community but who find it difficult to find suitable opportunities, or who find opportunities for participation prohibitively costly. These people are therefore unable to participate in their communities as a result of these barriers to participation.

Community education is grossly underfunded and is at risk of disappearing across Ireland. Funding comes from a patchwork of sources such as SOLAS, HSE, Pobal, philanthropic funding, and other state sources in small amounts.⁴ This patchwork system often only provides opportunities to access project funding, with funding for core costs such as building costs and staff costs left inaccessible. To successfully sustain funding for community education Government needs to show a long-term financial commitment to the ethos of community education, which as stated above is education that

⁴ Fitzsimons, C. and Magrath, C. (2017). *FinALE "Where to Invest" Funding Adult Education*. [online] Available at: <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019].

is learner centred, responding to the needs of individuals, whether those needs are for employment, broader social inclusion, or otherwise.

For the most educationally disadvantaged who as examples experience homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, and addiction, it is not simply a case of a person undertaking a course. Education for these individuals is about building a supportive social system that ensures they have the capacity to reach their educational and social aspirations. Community education in Ireland effectively tackles educational disadvantage at a community level and is referenced time and again as a model for other European countries. It is the time to recognise its value at national level.

Community education provides a warm, welcoming environment, participatory educational methodologies, holistic supports such as counselling and vital 'make or break' supports such as childcare and financial support. The outcomes are broad, from basic education to social inclusion.

Examples of community education that provide both economic but also non-economic social benefits for learners include but are not limited to:

- Warrenmount Community Education Centre in the heart of Dublin's Liberties. Warrenmount met the educational needs of 478 learners from 54 countries in 2017;
- Longford Women's Link Retail Skills Programme provided 52 rural women educational opportunity in 2017, whereby 31 gained a QQI qualification and 7 secured employment before the programme finished;
- Transformative College in Mullingar, which receives no State funding, offers vital community education programmes for the promotion of mental health and works to reduce isolation within communities around Longford and Westmeath.

As mentioned previously, the ability to engage in lifelong learning must be viewed in the context of a person's life situation. Supports regarding health issues, access to affordable quality accommodation, and alleviating poverty all contribute to the likelihood of participating in lifelong learning and thereby increasing social inclusion. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, until the most immediate rudimentary barriers erode, educational, economic, and social inequality will persist. Integrated whole-system approaches with wrap-around supports are needed to bridge gaps in engaging and retaining adult learners.

Community education has traditionally offered an alternative— and, arguably more fit-for-purpose — set of supports. For example, counselling services, mentoring, and childcare are not only more person centred, they represent straightforward features of leading best practice on what works well in enabling education to become an empowering force in the lives of learners with positive effects on their families and within their communities; yielding deep and wide socio-economic, and improved health dividends for all society. As we move towards 50 years of AONTAS and reflect on the history of adult and community education, we can observe that, unfortunately, these issues are not new, nor are they exclusive to Ireland. An extensive review of all 35 years of the AONTAS published journal, *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* highlights a number of recurrent themes: the need to cover education costs and ensure there are no fees for learners; the need to provide adequate childcare and revive the mantra of 'no crèche, no class'; and the need to offer a holistic range of supports for learners.



What we have learned over the 50 years of AONTAS is that Irish society does have the answers to such questions through the wealth of knowledge from citizens like adult learners. Community education has consistently met the needs of the most educationally and socially excluded communities. Community education is not just about building bridges between education and the community; it is of and for the community.

Conclusion

AONTAS wants to again thank the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for engaging stakeholders as it concerns the review of the National Access Plan for Social Inclusion. We hope that this brief submissions provides useful insights about how barriers to social exclusion for adults across Ireland can be overcome through the provision of quality and accessible formal and non-formal education, particularly through community education offerings that are grounded in the needs of local citizens.

AONTAS looks forward to seeing the results of this review, and looks forward to engaging the DEASP more frequently in the future as we continue our work of supporting quality adult and lifelong learning across Ireland.