



AONTAS response to the new Programme for Government 13th May 2016

The new Programme for Government was published on Wednesday 11th May. You can read it in full [here](#).

AONTAS welcomes the measures relating to adult learning outlined in the Programme for Government that were announced on Wednesday 11th May. As an organisation, we are committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. Our pre-election manifesto focussed on the main issues facing our membership and you can view a copy [here](#). We also developed a General Election postcard as a tool for members and that can be viewed [here](#).

The key areas of the Programme for Government outlined in this response are:

Section 10: Education, p. 86:

- Subsection 6: Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities.
- Subsection 8: Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future.

Section 11. Crime Prevention, Justice and Equality, p. 96:

- Subsection 13: Empowering Women.

Section 10 Education, Subsection 8: Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

- Specific Reference to Adult and Community Education

The new Programme for Government contains specific passages about adult and community education: *“There has been significant change in the Further, Adult and Community Education sector in light of the dissolution of FAS and the VECs, and the establishment of new structures inclusive of SOLAS, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs). We will ensure that these new structures and systems are empowering those who did not get an equal opportunity for education in their youth, and that implementation of educational programs and skills training for those unemployed or underemployed are effective in supporting their path to quality employment. We will do this by initiating a Review of the Further, Adult and Community Education sector by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and an implementation of reforms to ensure the effectiveness of the sector”, p.94.*

AONTAS welcomes the specific reference to ‘community education’ within the Programme for Government and we are heartened to see an acknowledgement of the changed sector.

In particular, the inclusion of ‘adult’ and ‘community’ is encouraging and accurately reflects adult learning provision in Ireland; recently, these terms were frequently replaced by ‘further education and training’, reflecting a trend towards value the economic impact of education above all other factors.

- Equal Opportunity for Education

AONTAS has long argued that community education has a proven track record for effectively engaging the most educationally disadvantaged learners and providing quality educational experiences.

The Programme for Government states: *“We will ensure that these new structures and systems are empowering those who did not get an equal opportunity for education in their youth”.*

Some key points from AONTAS:

- New systems proposed by the new QQI structure are at odds with the stated desire of *'empowering those who did not get an equal opportunity for education in their youth'*. The new proposed QQI re-engagement fee (circa €5000) for community education providers will limit equal opportunities for educationally disadvantaged groups. The imposition of fees to groups who have a history of providing accredited programmes under the previous FETAC structure will result in many groups no longer having the ability to provide accredited programmes to the detriment of community education learners and their communities. Community education provision is dependent on the ability to independently offer accredited programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) because it is a requirement for learners, who want accredited community education programmes, and funders who generally require groups to provide accredited learning.

In our pre-election manifesto, AONTAS called for the proposed fee for QQI re-engagement by community education providers to be waived and we will continue to make this call in our dealings with the new Government.

- Community education only receives 1.6% of SOLAS funding. We believe the most educationally disadvantaged groups deserve and require more sustainable investment in their futures.

Therefore AONTAS calls for an increase of the SOLAS community education budget to 3.2%, particularly to independent community education organisations.

- Empowering learners means they are supported to make an informed educational choice, through guidance, supports, and through a range of programmes (both accredited and non-accredited), in order to engage in education that suits their needs. Access to education and progression to quality employment requires long-term approaches, rather than quick fixes. Holistic, learner-centred education that builds transversal skills – in addition to specific training – is required to make meaningful, sustainable change for unemployed individuals.

AONTAS calls for all adults to have equal access to education that meets their needs.

In relation to the proposed, *"Review of the Further, Adult and Community Education sector by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and an implementation of reforms to ensure the effectiveness of the sector"* (p.94), we recommend that such a process is open to consultation with, and representations by: adult learners, adult and community education practitioners and AONTAS. Qualitative data provides rich, detailed information that is equally important to quantitative data for policy decisions.

- Departmental Changes

We note the proposed changes in structure of the Department of Education: *"A new architecture is required in education to really drive excellence and 'best in class' potential. We will change the structures of the Department of Education to ensure it operates as a dynamic policy leader focused on quality education and improving outcomes for every student"*, p. 93.

We would caution against changes to the Further Education Section. It is vital that a designated section responsible for policy development in the area of adult and community education is retained within the Department.

- Flexible courses within Higher Education

We support the proposed implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (p. 93), and are heartened that flexible courses will be supported which we believe will support adult learners to gain access to programmes.

In relation to the Expert Group report on the Future Funding of the Higher Education Sector (p. 94), we would support funding for courses that offer greater flexibility for learners, particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged;

- by broadening the Springboard Programme to include community education based higher education provision.
- by providing core funding for community education organisations providing higher education courses to disadvantaged groups.
- by establishing a clear mechanism that enables no part-time fees for educationally disadvantaged students.

Furthermore, we would propose financial support for part-time mature students and to maintain existing supports, especially the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA).

We welcome an *“independent examination to identify the supports and barriers to accessing higher education for lone parents”*. We believe that funded, part-time flexible provision – including community based higher provision, with on-site childcare – is essential to widening access by lone parents.

Section 10 Education, Subsection 6: Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities

Section 10 Education, Subsection 6: Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities states: *“Schools buildings must be utilised out of hours if they are to remain at the centre of communities into the future, both throughout the day and throughout the year, including better utilisation of information technology. Afterschool care, homework clubs and other community activities should be permissible”*, p. 92. The potential to use appropriate facilities for adult learning activities at community level is welcomed, while being mindful that adult education involves a different educational process.

Section 11 Crime Prevention Justice and Equality, Subsection 13: Empowering Women

In Subsection 13: Empowering Women (p.105), AONTAS welcomes the commitment to locally-delivered courses for women to assist them to return to the labour market and promote entrepreneurship. With a further pledge to ensure that households headed by women are no longer at a higher risk of poverty and we believe that women’s community education will have a key role to play in achieving this goal.

For more information please contact:

Niamh O’Reilly – AONTAS, CEO.

Email: noreilly@aontas.com.

Phone: 01-4068220.

Social Media

Tweet @aontas

Follow AONTAS on Facebook