

# AONTAS

Submission for the  
Joint Public Consultation on a  
National Strategy on  
Education for Sustainable  
Development (ESD) to 2030



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AONTAS

The Voice of  
Adult Learning

## About AONTAS

AONTAS is a long established (1969), non-governmental 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. We have an unwavering commitment to educationally disadvantaged adults, we offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence-based drawing on research and our extensive meaningful learner engagement activities. Our Strategic Plan: A Vision for Educational Equality (2019-2022) is informed by principles of: social justice, feminism, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality and supporting social inclusion. We continually strive to offer work of the highest quality as an inclusive, informed, dynamic organisation which will act as a cooperative, trusted, critical friend to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We continually engage with learners and educators from further education and training, community education and higher education on a weekly basis, affording us key insights into practice. We have expertise in educational equality and we advocate strongly for community education, as the most inclusive, yet underfunded part of the education system.

Our work covers: Research: Authentically hearing learner voice, particularly those marginalised, through a mixed methods research project, The National FET Learner Forum. Some recent examples of publications in this area are the 2019 Annual Synthesis Report and the COVID-19 FET Learner Report. Democratising relevant academic work in our well-established peer reviewed journal, The Adult Learner. Promoting lifelong learning and access: first week of March the annual AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival (circa 300 events/open days across Ireland), STAR awards recognising excellence in inclusive education projects -and an annual Policy Day event. Encouraging people to engage in learning: Freephone information referral helpline and website [www.onestepup.ie](http://www.onestepup.ie). Building capacity and supporting professional development in community education through the AONTAS Community Education Network (Est. 2007). We have strong European links: designated by the then Department of Education and Skills as the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning. We lead or partner in 8 European funded projects across all levels of Erasmus+, are on the Board of the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) and are linked globally. Co-established the Network of Adult Learning Across Border (NALAB), bringing together national adult learning advocacy structures across Ireland,

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in response to Brexit. Ultimately, all our work, and communication activities aim to advocate for the rights of all adults to engage in learning so as to fulfil their aspirations. Who we represent: Organisations and individuals committed to educational equality for adults: 500 members [all 16 ETBs, over 120 community education organisations, adult learning/access departments of Higher Education Institutions, social justice NGOs, educators and learners across the Island of Ireland].

## Introduction

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to engage in the public consultation process for the new Education for Sustainable Development Strategy (ESD) to 2030. The recommendations made as part of this submission are underpinned by the principals of social justice, feminism, valuing diversity, advancing equality, partnership and supporting social inclusion. Climate change is an urgent crisis that needs to be recognised, prioritised, funded, and collaboratively addressed by everyone. Lifelong learning is the key to building the awareness and capacity needed to address this issue and embed it within our culture. Adult learning can and should be a tool for creating social change. It has a long history in advancing the equality agenda and can support an inclusive and transformative approach in climate action. In this paper, AONTAS outlines our rationale for the inclusion of a feminist principal and approach and explicitly naming community education as a priority and a partner. We provide 3 key actions, a list of further key points and recommendations, and our commitment to this new ESD Strategy.



## AONTAS calls for the inclusion of feminism within the principals of the new Education for Sustainable Development Strategy to 2030

**“Climate change is a man-made problem and must have a feminist solution”**

(Mary Robinson)

The inclusion of an intersectional feminist approach is key to addressing climate issues and creating a culture of sustainable development in lifelong learning. Half of the world’s population is made up of women and women are leaders and champions for social change within their families and communities. A feminist approach for ESD is not about excluding men or prioritising women. As United Nation Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson explains, women are adversely affected by climate change and must be included in tackling this issue (Tabery, Z., 2018). The principal of feminism is to ensure that everyone is included in an issue that impacts on us all. In addition, research shows that engaging women has a positive ripple effect on individuals, families, communities, and countries as outlined in the graphic below.



## The ripple effect of including women and girls in addressing climate change



(Wederman et al., 2019)

In addition, “countries with higher female parliamentary representation are more prone to ratify international environmental treaties” (Women Deliver, 2021). Therefore, an intersectional feminist approach is vital for a national and global strategy in addressing the climate crisis. AONTAS calls for the inclusion of feminism as a core principal and approach in the new ESD Strategy to 2030.

### **AONTAS recommends including and funding community education as a priority area**

Community education is an inclusive grassroots model of adult learning embedded within communities across Ireland. Examples of this include local family resource centres, women’s development groups, and the Men’s Shed initiative. Centres are run by local people, addressing local issues, and utilising a change-oriented and transformative approach to

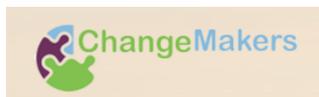
education. The community education model encapsulates much of the same principals as sustainable development education and in fact, can and should be considered as development education due to its capacity and continued efforts in striving for social equity, economic viability, social and environmental protection. In addition, community education engages the most marginalised and vulnerable learners in the tertiary education sector. The new Community Education Network Census (AONTAS, 2021) highlights the diversity of people engaged including lone-parents, refugees, Travellers, people experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities, people who are long-term employed and subsistence misusers.

However, this research also shows the challenges faced by this sector due to its complexity of funding streams which impacts on its security and sustainability (AONTAS, 2021). This sector can provide a pre-existing structure to promote and implement the new ESD Strategy. Community education empowers local people, creates positive social change and fosters sustainable development in lifelong learning. Therefore, it must be explicitly named and funded to continue and expand upon this work. This should include activities such as those outlined in the examples below.



## Examples of sustainable development focussed community education

### [Change Makers Donegal](#)



This organisation raises awareness of local and global development issues with adults across County Donegal. They do this through a range of activities, including workshops, accredited learning, community arts projects, horticulture and environmental projects, activities for specific groups e.g. older people, community debates and more. Their programmes address climate justice, fashion and consumerism, gender equality, women's reproductive rights, human trafficking, maternal health, human rights, environmental workshops (bees, seeds and water), zero waste, fair trade, migration and refugees.

### [Roscommon Women's Network](#)

- Textile Upcycling Project
- Healthy Greener You



Roscommon Women's Network (RWN) is a local community project and charity dedicated to supporting women and families throughout county Roscommon, especially the most marginalised. Their innovative, Drop-In Resource Centre, Social Enterprise Charity Shop, Training Services and Project Match Castlerea, addresses many individual and community needs. They connect and engage with not just women but every member of the community experiencing disadvantage through the Resource centre, Outreach and Predevelopment work. They support the progression of women from engagement to active participation.

### [Development Perspectives](#)



Development Perspectives' mission is to contribute to lessening poverty, inequality and climate change through transformative education and active global citizenship. Development Perspectives supports Irish citizens in

accessing quality learning opportunities with multi-faceted educational approaches in the Development Arena. Their work explores, examines and acts upon a range of issues and challenges that face our world. In order for this to work effectively, we use participatory and interactive learning methods to ensure the greatest impact for participants of our programmes.

## Key Actions

AONTAS suggests the following key actions to support a meaningful and successful implementation of the new Education for Sustainable Development Strategy to 2030:

- 1. Fund and recognise community education as a partner in the delivery of the new ESD Strategy**
  - a. Lifelong learning is key to ensuring the climate crisis is understood and addressed in a collaborative approach by all communities within Ireland. Community education engages the most diverse cohort of adult learners and utilises a transformative change-oriented approach. Funding and supporting this model of education will be key for engaging diverse communities and embedding the principals of sustainable development in Irish culture
  
- 2. Ensure the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) are integrated into all adult learning programmes**
  - a. An example of this might include a cross-curricular approach in Communication Studies modules/components within all Further Education and Training (FET)
  - b. Inclusion of awareness raising and action focussed activities across the tertiary education sector, including community education

### **3. Professional development for adult educators that outlines the vision and mission of the new ESD Strategy with clear activities and methods for implementation**

- a. Providing free capacity building workshops for all practitioners in the education sector can raise awareness of the new programme and create ambassadors located in education institutions across Ireland to prioritise and address climate action. An education policy without professional development cannot be implemented successfully by practitioners
- b. Funding practitioners to engage in additional professional development programmes that are in-line with the mission of ESD

### **Additional Key Points and Recommendations**

- **Climate action must be prioritised and addressed as an urgent issue**
  - Ireland should be a leader in sustainable development with climate issues at the heart of all Government policy. At present, we have a concerning lack of progress (O'Sullivan, 2018)
- **Sustainable development must be tangible and clearly understood by all adult learners**
  - An abstract and complex concept may seem far removed for many people. The language used and all ESD discourse must be inclusive and disseminated in plain English
- **Learners must feel empowered to create change**
  - The value and impact of individual and community actions, and the interconnected relationship between the local and the global, must be explicit. While acknowledging national and corporate responsibility, individual and community-based actions should be promoted and celebrated. Learners and communities must be empowered as part of the solution with positive and uplifting messaging to encourage and support them
- **Learning from best practice**
  - There is a broad range of quality development education programmes in place that foster collaboration between stakeholders, including the [SAOLTA](#) project

## **AONTAS is committed to sustainable development and will actively support the implementation of the new Strategy**

AONTAS is a national organisation with nearly 500 members across the island of Ireland. Our Strategic Plan 'A VISION FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY 2019-2022' Goal 3 focusses specifically on 'Lifelong Learning for Sustainability.' AONTAS is aware of the vital role played by adult educators in achieving policy objectives which align strongly with ESD. A significant number of AONTAS members are on the frontline of ensuring there is public awareness of and engagement with development and global citizenship education issues. We welcome the new Strategy and will actively support and promote its implementation. At present, our work in this area includes:

- Advocating for educational equity and lifelong learning
- Strong partnerships and engagement with IDEA and INAR
- AONTAS is a member of the SAOLTA (development education) Steering Group
- We have created or partnered in projects focussing on elements of ESD including FutureLabAE (change-oriented democracy and digitalisation in adult learning) and 'Adult Learning and Global Citizenship: Sustaining European Cohesion and Challenging the Politics of Fear'
- AONTAS empowers learners through change-oriented capacity building programmes such as our new Sustainable Development Learners as Leaders programme (starting this month)
- AONTAS research includes 'The Feminist Aesthetic and Climate Action: A Case Study on Roscommon Women's Network' (Cobain and Dowdall, 2021)



## Conclusion

The new ESD Strategy has the power to make a positive and meaningful impact in Ireland in addressing climate change. It must do this with an inclusive approach that empowers and encourages active involvement and commitment from all members of our society. AONTAS strongly encourages embedding a cross-Government approach that embedded climate action at the heart of all Government policy, and an integrated education approach that is realised through cross-curricular learning. We look forward to working with you on the implementation of this Strategy and supporting Ireland to be a leader in sustainable development.

This submission was developed by Dearbháil Lawless, (AONTAS Head of Advocacy) Niamh O'Reilly, (AONTAS CEO) and Orla Mannion, (Capacity Building Project Officer)

## References

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## The Voice of Adult Learning

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation  
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1  
[www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)  
01 406 8220

RCN 20013042  
Chy. Reg. 6719  
Co. Reg. 80958

