



The National Adult Learning Organisation  
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Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform  
Paschal Donohoe T.D

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Consultation response submitted electronically to [opendata@per.gov.ie](mailto:opendata@per.gov.ie)

### Consultation response: Public consultation process for the national Open Data Strategy 2017-2022

Thank you for taking the time to review and reflect upon the AONTAS response as it concerns the public consultation process for the national *Open Data Strategy 2017-2022*. AONTAS wants to thank the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for opening the development of the new *Open Data Strategy 2017-2022* to consultation. While we are disappointed we were not aware of and therefore a participant to the consultation process concerning the Foundation Document for the development of the Public Service Open Data Strategy we hope that our comments here provide support to the work already being done and planned at [data.gov.ie](http://data.gov.ie), while also highlighting the potential risks that an open data platform focus creates for the development of informed and meaningful stakeholder/citizen engagement during public policy development processes.

#### About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a voluntary membership organisation. AONTAS exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible to and inclusive to all.

The members of AONTAS number approximately 500 individual, organisational and partner members. AONTAS promotes the importance of adult and community education as a key part of lifelong learning. AONTAS influences the development of policy and lobbies on behalf of sectoral members who work to provide effective and efficiently run adult education. AONTAS also facilitates networking among members and supports their individual work. AONTAS is the voice of adult learning in Ireland where we work to ensure that the voice of learners is heard during the consultative process.

#### Strengths of the draft strategy

Overall AONTAS applauds the Vision and Mission of the *Open Data Strategy 2017-2022*. Creating an open platform similar to that in creation and/or under development in other countries is a sign of Ireland's maturity as a country wanting to be open and transparent with its citizens.



The potential of expanding the information available at [Data.gov.ie](http://Data.gov.ie) to all facets of government is a bold step for the Irish public service and is one that in the long-term will only serve to improve the work of the Irish government, Irish business, and Irish civil society. More informed decision making whereby everyone is working from the same set of audited data points, as is called for in the strategy, will become an invaluable tool and one that will set an important precedent for government accountability and openness in the future.

### Perceived risks of the draft strategy

As specialists in authentic advocacy from a grass roots perspective AONTAS is keenly aware of the importance that high quality robust data has on the ability to inform modern conversations about public policy. However over the past two to three decades as quantitative data has become more important in the policy development process internationally there have been occasions where policy can lean too heavily on quantitative data to the minimization and in some cases complete rejection of qualitative data. The preference for quantitative data over qualitative data can lead to circumstances where the actual voices of citizens are reduced, or deemed to be only their own voice and not a voice that may be indicative of views held by the wider population.

AONTAS wants to highlight that while the benefits of open data are many and are highlighted in the draft strategy, it is important to maintain the voice of the citizen by seeking qualitative data as well. Without active citizen engagement highlighting the experiences and perceptions of the populace it is not possible to collect quantitative data relevant to the policy needs of society. Qualitative data enables depth of understanding on an issue and thus has a valuable role to play in effectively informing public policy. As part of the implementation of the *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019*, AONTAS currently organizes the *National Further Education and Training Forum*, a space where those responsible for the development and review of public policy get to hear directly from the people their policies affect. At this or any time in the future AONTAS is happy to share its experiences with citizen engagement tool and processes.



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As a hypothetical and fabricated example about the importance of qualitative data please consider the following:

A communication campaign has been released by government to promote cycling and walking to work as a way of improving personal health and reducing carbon emissions. Six months after the start of the campaign data is collected and reported which shows that the campaign has been a success and that the number of people cycling and walking has increased since the campaign began. However had citizens been engaged in conversation many would have told government that recent road works, congestion, a recent increase to insurance costs, tolls, parking costs, and transit prices etc. were all contributing to their decisions to avail of alternative modes of transportation. This hypothetical example shows the importance of speaking with citizens. Even though data is available and of a sample size that seems to indicate a successful campaign, speaking with the public directly would have told the more accurate story of why people were changing their commuting habits.

With the risk of government becoming unresponsive to the views of citizens and only concerning itself with stories told by the aggregation of quantitative data AONTAS asks that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform include a statement in the *Open Data Strategy 2017-2022* reflecting the following sentiment; **while access to open data is important to the development of a modern country and economy, the *Open Data Strategy 2017-2022* is not meant to minimize the importance of citizen and stakeholder engagement to the government's understanding of current policy and the development of future policy.** In addition, AONTAS asks that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform make the collection and availability of qualitative data a priority for all of government in the same way that quantitative data has become a priority.

Thank you again for taking time to review the submission of AONTAS. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the consultative process. In the future please feel free to contact me, Ben Hendriksen, directly about other consultation requests from the Departments of Finance or Public expenditure and reform, as policy developed by these departments inevitably has an impact on the work of AONTAS as we strive to fulfil our Mission of advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, while promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning.

Kind Regards,

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