



The Voice of  
Adult Learning

# National FET Strategy 2025-2030

AONTAS' Consultation Submission

December 2024

## About AONTAS

AONTAS are the 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.

## Summary

This submission outlines three priority areas for consideration in the next FET strategy:

1. Evolving Learner Voice in FET
2. Supporting the Community Education Sector
3. Providing Wrap-around Supports for Adult Learners

These recommendations are informed by a consultation event held on 17<sup>th</sup> October which was attended by 80 people including 57 learners, providers and other stakeholders who discussed issues relevant to the forthcoming FET strategy. This submission also draws on AONTAS’ extensive research, in particular the latest Learners Voices Across Ireland Report (2023-2024) and work completed with community education providers.

### Evolving Learner Voice

- Establish Adult Learner Councils in all ETBs
- Resource Supports for Learner Voice Practice

### Supporting Community Education

- Prioritise and Name Community Education in the Strategy
- Fair Allocation of Resources
- Ringfenced Funding

### Wrap-around Supports

- Transport
- Mental Health
- Childcare
- Furthest Behind First

# Evolving Learner Voice in the Next FET Strategy

Future FET: Transforming Learning (2020-2024) championed Learner Voice practices. We recommend that the next FET strategy should continue to evolve and develop Learner Voice practices by establishing learner councils and further resourcing.

## 1. Establish Adult Learner Councils in all ETBs

AONTAS recommends that next FET Strategy considers establishing adult learner councils in all ETBs. These councils could be incorporated into existing FET governance structures to enhance awareness of learner experience and ensure responsiveness to their inputs.

This would ensure that the sector achieves a level of representation already present in other educational sectors. This recommendation is promising in terms of promoting learner access and retention in FET. Existing adult learner councils in ETBs have proven their ability to address specific issues and affect change at local level, such as public transport and disability access. AONTAS currently provides training for ETB staff on Learner Voice and can support ETBs with capacity building to help establish these councils.

**Diverse Opportunities for Engagement in Practice:** The City of Dublin ETB has 12 student councils. They also implement an incentivized learner survey which was originally designed to meet their responsibility under Quality Assurance but now encompasses learner voice. In addition to these activities they also hold a Learner Conference which includes panel discussions and learner speakers, to support capacity building and the generation of ideas for practice. This is underpinned by support for representation including peer training, and awareness activities.

## 2. Resource Supports for Learner Voice Practice

Learners have highlighted the need for support to participate in Learner Voice initiatives, including increased time for preparation in advance of the event itself (Meyler et al., 2024). Ensuring the effective representation of learners in decision-making and planning processes requires the allocation of targeted resources for capacity building and scaffolding activities (Pobal, 2023).

To support targeted enhancement in this area, a paid staff position could be established in each ETB to support the establishment of learner councils and facilitate learners' effective engagement. Alongside ETB staff support, establishing a paid learner representative role would ensure that information and communication across levels of decision making could be achieved in practice. This important role could support enhanced representation in decision-making that is similar to the activity of representatives in other areas of education.

It is also important to recognise the cost of participating in these structures for learners, and the contribution of their time. AONTAS also recommends that participants should have access to financial supports so that diverse learners from disadvantaged cohorts do not encounter barriers to participation. This will enhance representation from diverse voices at risk of exclusion.

**Generating Solutions in Practice Example:** One ETB student council sought to address ongoing transport issues for FET learners by enabling its members to sit on both the local government Transportation Coordination Unit and the Public Participation Network and engage in collaborative planning.

# Supporting the Community Education Sector in the Next FET Strategy

Community education is of vital importance in the current context of rising inequality, social polarisation and literacy challenges faced by many adults today (Social Justice, 2023; CSO, 2024; Cohen et al., 2024). AONTAS recommends three key areas that the next FET strategy can address to support community education.

## 1. Prioritise and Name Community Education, Capturing Outcomes Beyond Qualification and Progression

AONTAS recommends that the next FET Strategy names community education as a distinct provision within the document and implements new and existing tools to capture the value the sector adds to Irish society.

If the value of the sector, and the issues faced by providers, are recognised and visible to decision-makers, this will assist with the allocation of resources and supports. These issues include the precarity and complexity of funding sources for the delivery of programmes (Cobain et al., 2021) resulting in a reduction in the sectors capacity to respond to increased demand, and emerging need (Magrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019).

To further ensure that the value of the sector is visible to funders and decision-makers, consideration could be given to the development of appropriate outcome evaluation, so that providers can demonstrate the impact of their programmes (AONTAS, 2023; SOLAS, 2024a; Kett, 2015). These outcomes relate to the role community education plays in supporting social cohesion, and democratic participation.

## 2. Fair Allocation of Resources

AONTAS recommends that consideration is given to the weighted allocation of resources within the FET sector overall.

Increased resourcing based on learner engagement would reduce financial stress on the community education sector and ensure that it can respond to increasing demand for supports and services. In 2023, community education received €22.3 million in funding, €16.6 million of funding through ETB investment with an additional €5.7 million delivered through Reach Funding, representing 2% of the overall FET budget (SOLAS, 2024a).

A comparison of enrolment numbers across all FET provisions reveals that the weighting given to funding for different FET provisions may not fairly reflect the levels of engagement with the community education sector. Learner engagement numbers across all FET provisions in 2023 stood at 218,775 (SOLAS, 2024b), with 43,000 of these learners taking part in community education (SOLAS, 2024a). Based on a review of these numbers we can say that the community education sector supports approximately 20% of all learners within the FET system (see table below).

Learner Cohort	Yearly Total Enrolled	Percentage of Total
All Learners enrolled in FET	218,775 (2023)	100%
Learners in Community Education	43,000 (2023)	20% (approx.)

The allocation of 2% of the budget for community education learners who comprise approximately 20% of all learners in the FET system warrants consideration given the challenges in sustainability of programme delivery, the capacity of the sector to provide supports, and the implications for sector staff and the continued increasing demand for community education (Cobain et al., 2021; SOLAS, 2024).

AONTAS recommends an increase in core funding level to €30 million, and an increase of the Reach Fund to €10 million. This would bring the percentage of the total budget allocated to Community Education up to approximately 3.5% of the overall budget, allowing for the fact that most Community Education provision is part-time.

### 3. Provide Ringfenced Funding

AONTAS recommends that there is a commitment to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual ringfenced funding package based on need that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners (O'Reilly, 2021).

Currently, there is a heavy reliance on programme funding that is tied to outputs, rather than needs. This project-based funding of fixed duration has implications for the sustainability of the sector and hampers future planning (Fitzsimmons & Magrath, 2017). Streamlining access to funds and grants would be a particularly beneficial as it would alleviate the administrative burden on providers and increase their capacity to plan and deliver programmes (Cobain et al., 2021).

The allocation of funding at a regional level is based on the discretion of regional decision-makers, which creates a challenging context for the operation and delivery of community education. Ringfenced funding for community education would provide greater certainty to grant-aided community education organisations and the ETBs which support their work.

“Project-based funding is temporary by nature which can undermine the financial sustainability of adult learning systems; and procedures for accessing external funds can be complex and time-consuming, which can result in gaps in adult learning provision and can absorb a significant amount of human and financial resources which could otherwise be available for training,” AONTAS Community Education Network Census, 2021

## Wrap Around Supports for Adult Learners

Learners Voices Across Ireland research has consistently found a need to provide supports that will address the barriers to participation for learners at risk of marginalisation and discrimination (Meyler et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023b). If the sector is to support social inclusion for learners at risk of marginalisation and disadvantage, there is a need to enhance the level of wrap around supports available. This is of vital importance given the recent research finding that 29% of learners are impacted negatively by their circumstances, with implications for their participation in education (Meyler et al., 2023a).

Transport, mental health and childcare were identified as key barriers to education by adult learners who took part in AONTAS research projects across the 2023-2024 academic year. In each of these areas, we must address the needs of the furthest behind first

## 1. Transport

Transport is one of the most frequently cited barriers in research with learners, particularly within underserved rural areas. Many learners have highlighted the fact that transport allowances do not cover transport costs and that challenges remain regarding accessibility and frequency of services in many areas (Meyler et al., 2024). AONTAS recommends reviewing the need for transport solutions in each ETB area and considering the provision of services for areas with poor public transport and ensuring that supplementary allowances are increased to an adequate level of support that meets the needs of learners (DFHERIS, 2024).

“When it’s hard to get to your course, like the weather is crazy and you have to walk in about one hour... So, transport is another reason to do with the [people] leaving [the course]. It’s just too difficult to put yourself there” [...] “If I had access to transport I could level up on my courses, but I cannot reach the other centres,” (Learner quote from the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report, 2024).

## 2. Mental Health and Wellbeing

A survey of learners designed to explore the issue of mental health support revealed that learners would value more support for their mental health (Meyler et al., 2023a). 55% of learners in this study said that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression, and 37% said that mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study. This study highlights the importance of access to mental health supports in adult and community education and the need for expanded supports. 23% of learners responding to this survey favoured “mindfulness classes” and a further 22% of the total responses indicated that while 19% would value increased support from mental health professionals (Meyler et al., 2023a).

“Because sometimes people mightn’t be having a good day or sometimes people are [...] There is a lot of people, a lot of anxiety in... everywhere in our group [...].”

“There’s free counselling advertised on the website, but it’s only limited to six sessions.”

Learner quotes from the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report (2024)

## 3. Accessible childcare

A lack of childcare is a major barrier to education, especially for lone parents, a cohort at risk of high levels of deprivation and financial instability. Research by AONTAS has found that childcare places are unaffordable, and there is a lack of access to places due to high demand for services (Meyler et al., 2023b). National FET Learner Forum participants suggested that more on-site childcare options should be provided by ETBs (Meyler et al., 2023c). In addition to this AONTAS recommends that a public childcare model is implemented to improve the availability of childcare supports for all learners, particularly those at risk of marginalisation.

“I just walk [my children] from school to school, from college to school. Every day is a challenge... I have three [children]. Last year I had three different schools. And I [am] just jumping from one school to another [because I can’t get childcare],” (Learner quote from the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report, 2024).

## 4. Prioritise the Furthest Behind First

The next FET Strategy must prioritise the delivery of supports for the most marginalised and vulnerable learners. Research has shown that those living in Direct Provision faced considerable barriers, expressing 28% lower satisfaction overall with financial supports and childcare supports, respectively (Meyler et al., 2023b). Furthermore, international protection applicants (IPA) continue to face barriers to education access based on Labour Market Access Permissions' and sizeable international student fees requirements. To support the integration of new communities, measures could be taken to ensure this cohort of learners can participate in adult and community education. This could include the replication of the University of Sanctuary measures within higher education, and the provision of targeted supports including enhanced ESOL provisions and support for childcare.

“For someone like me, I’m new here so it’s quite difficult (to source work experience). I don’t know where to go, I don’t know how far the place is, even if I’m searching online - that’s why I just end up calling randomly,” (Learner quote from the Learner Voices Across Ireland Report, 2024).

## Conclusion

The recommendations included in this submission were informed by AONTAS research with adult learners, as well as a consultation carried out on 17<sup>th</sup> October with 57 adult learners and FET staff. These recommendations aim to inform the formation of the next FET Strategy, ensuring that learners’ voices are at the heart of teaching, learning and support provision in FET.

The next FET Strategy will have significant role to play in the current context of rising inequality, social polarisation and literacy challenges faced by many adults today (Social Justice, 2023; CSO, 2024; Cohen et al., 2024). Prioritising, resourcing and championing community education and Learner Voice practices will enable our FET system to play a strong role in helping to make Irish society healthier, more welcoming and a safer place for all to live and thrive in.

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