



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Department of Transport Statement of Strategy 2025- 2028

AONTAS Submission

March 2025

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.

Introduction

Transport is essential for social inclusion, allowing people to access education, work, and essential services. However, research consistently shows that transport barriers prevent many adults—especially those at risk of marginalisation—from participating in education (Giordano et al., 2025; Meyler et al., 2024; Kelly & Fenton, 2024). Addressing this issue must be a priority in the Department of Transport's forthcoming Statement of Strategy. To address this barrier to education for adult learners, AONTAS presents the following recommendations for the Department of Transport's forthcoming Statement of Strategy.

Key Recommendations

1. **Support collaborative planning of local community-based services:** Actively partner with local institutions and learners to create reliable, community-based transport solutions that match education timetables and meet learners' needs. This approach can increase retention and participation among disadvantaged groups.
2. **Reduce cost-based barriers for groups at risk of disadvantage:** Consider cost reduction measures, such as the expansion of student card options to learners in Further Education and Training (FET), or subsidised fares on community transport links. This will ensure that no learner faces barriers to participation.

These recommendations are in line with the key priorities under the Department's previous Statement of Strategy including, the principle of connectivity, sustainability, accessibility and stakeholder engagement (Dept. of Transport, 2023).

Background

The adult and community education sector successfully engages learners from diverse backgrounds, and many of those are at risk of socio-economic disadvantage (ETBI, 2021; SOLAS, 2024,). Engaging in adult and community education is particularly beneficial for these learners, yet access to reliable, transport at appropriate times is not assured. The availability of public transport features as the primary area of dissatisfaction raised by FET learners in the National FET Learner Forum, and Survey (Meyler et al., 2024). This forum and an accompanying survey supports adult learners to reflect on their experiences in Further Education and Training so that policy and practice can respond to their needs. One in five of the 2023/2024 cohort of survey participants expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of public transport when travelling to and from their FET course. While 59% (n = 331/558) expressed satisfaction, this was the lowest satisfaction score recorded across all areas surveyed. Overall, focus group participants shared broadly negative experiences of using local public transport to access their FET centre and outlined the ways in which unreliable, infrequent, and unaffordable transport impacted their learning (Meyler et al., 2024: 51).

“Sometimes the buses are really unreliable. So there is a transport issue. If you miss the bus, there is not another bus for 3 hours or 4 hours.”

“If I had access to transport I could level up on my courses, but I cannot reach the other centres.”

“Most students have their class finished at 4pm. But there is a bus that goes only at... 3.30pm. So, I have to leave my class early”

The cost of transport is also an issue, particularly in areas that are under served by public transport. This has implications for low-income adult learners and their experience of learning (Carroll et al., 2021; Meyler et al., 2024).

“I get the bus... it’s 15 euro each way and I only get 30 euro a week... That’s all I’m entitled to unless I claim off the government some allowance. I was told to leave the course by the INTREO office to sign on so as to change my situation. I’d lose the course if I did that... they don’t exactly care.”

“[You can’t get] Local Link...so I have to get a private bus and for me, my private bus is €50 a week.” “No travel allowance. I’ve always got 20 euro a week.” “Travel cost is 100 euro for 1 week. I receive 27.50 per week.”

The impact of lack of transport on disadvantaged or marginalised adult learners in Further Education and Training (FET) is a significant issue that can amplify social inequalities. Because of this, there is a pressing need for innovative, inclusive solutions.

Recommendation 1: Support collaborative planning of local community-based services

Collaborative planning is key to the development of community-based transport initiatives that would support the full engagement of adult learners in their education of choice. Engaging multiple stakeholders such as Education and Training Boards, and Adult Learner Councils can support this work, as it would allow for the identification of routes, and timetables that do not conflict with learner schedules.

A particular focus on rural areas is needed given the inadequate public transport options as infrequent services and high costs can place significant pressures on learners who may already be facing economic hardships (Giordano et al., 2025).

Recent collaborative initiatives undertaken by an Adult Learner Council have demonstrated the potential of local solutions to these issues. The Tipperary ETB FET Student Council have worked with the Tipperary Rural Transport Coordination Unit to identify learner needs for transport and plan for accessible routes. This creates a direct link between the FET student representative group and local transport coordination. Other responses include the use of service specific buses, as is the case in Laois Offaly ETB.

These locally responsive community-based transport initiatives or partnerships with local transport providers can ensure that adult learners can attend training sessions and access educational resources without undue hardship. They provide cost effective access to education for people in rural areas without adequate local transport may particularly benefit, disabled, elderly, and low-income families and migrants when designed appropriately (Bailey et al., 2019; Carroll et al., 2021; Meyler et al., 2023; Murray, 2022; Lavan et al., 2024).

Recommendation 2: Reduce cost-based barriers for groups at risk of disadvantage

Providing funding for transport has been found to be beneficial in supporting learners at risk of marginalisation in adult education (Murray, 2022). To alleviate the cost of transport, focus group participants in AONTAS research recommended the provision of student leap cards, or transport allowances to all FET learners to enable them to avail of public transport discounts.

“The saving is enormous because I know the fares can be huge. 56 is something for the train... but it’s only something like 26 as a student. It’s a huge saving. I have family up and down, and I have to go up and down. They didn’t have this course anywhere”

Addressing this issue in a cost-of-living crises is particularly relevant for groups of learners at risk of marginalisation, supporting social inclusion and wellbeing through access to education (MESL, 2024, SOLAS, 2023). Transport should never be a barrier to education. By implementing these cost-effective and community-based solutions, the Department of Transport can directly improve access to Further Education and Training for thousands of learners. We urge policymakers to act now—because when adults can access education, entire communities benefit.

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