

AONTAS Toolkit

Engaging with Candidates for the 2020 General Election



Election Day 8 February 2020

#LearnersVote2020

#GE2020

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, an umbrella body committed to advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS works on behalf of its membership and regards them as the key resource providing the organisation with a grassroots understanding of adult and community education practice and learner perspective. The membership profile comprises a rich mix of statutory, voluntary and community organisations involved in the provision of adult learning, as well as individuals who are deeply involved in and committed to the concept and practice of lifelong learning.

AONTAS provides a crucial platform for member organisations to share experience and best practice, promote their work and advocate on the value and necessity of adult and community education.

For more information please visit: www.aontas.com

Purpose of the Toolkit for Engaging with General Election 2020 Candidates

This AONTAS toolkit for engaging with General Election 2020 candidates has been developed to support AONTAS members who will be actively engaging with election candidates leading up to election day on 8th February 2020. The toolkit provides information that will help you highlight the importance of adult and community education as a policy tool useful for creating the more compassionate and prosperous society within which we all want to see one another thrive.

The toolkit provides tips about how you can develop your own election-based advocacy skills, and provides tools and techniques that will allow you to engage candidates about the adult learning issues that matter to you and/or the organisation, learners, or other stakeholders whom you represent.

AONTAS' Role in the General Elections

As a membership organisation AONTAS believes in the right of every adult to have access to quality adult learning throughout their lives. We work every day with our members and likeminded organisations to ensure that politicians and policy makers across Ireland understand the importance of lifelong learning for creating a more economically prosperous, but also socially inclusive society.

In the coming election AONTAS will be supporting our members' advocacy work through this toolkit and through any other supports we can provide at your individual request. As a national organisation, AONTAS will be working to support all of its members to ensure adult learning is on the policy agenda in the 33rd Dáil Éireann.

Get out to Register and Vote

The purpose of this toolkit is to give you as a member of AONTAS tools so that you are able to engage with Ireland's General Election 2020 candidates. However, engaging with candidates on the issues only takes our shared goals so far. To make a sustainable impact and difference it is important that you, your colleagues, and the learners you know get out to register to vote, and then vote for candidates who show a commitment to supporting adult and community education. Without elected politicians who support adult learning and who understand the value and benefit it brings to our society, our advocacy work will be much more difficult in the coming years.

How to: Registering to Vote

To vote on Election Day you must register to vote. Check to see if you are registered by visiting: www.checktheregister.ie

If you are not registered to vote you can download the forms needed to register from <http://www.checktheregister.ie/PublicPages/AppForms.aspx>. Please note you must register to vote by **Wednesday, 22nd January 2020**.

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Why are General Elections Important to Adult and Community Education?

It is important that AONTAS and our membership engage candidates on issues important to the development of a well-funded and vibrant adult and community education sector. Once elected these politicians will have direct policy influence over adult and community education in Ireland including spending priorities and setting policy which connects education policy with other policy areas that affect the creation of a strong adult learning sector.

During the election AONTAS is focusing our time and effort supporting members in various constituencies to influence candidates. If you do plan on engaging with candidates you can follow the steps and identify the issues highlighted in this toolkit.

What Should you Seek in a Candidate?

When speaking or engaging with candidates for local election listen closely for the following cues from candidates to know if they have an understanding of adult and community education.

- a) Does the candidate clearly express what influence they want to have? Have they considered how they would like to support educational equality and access?**
 - i. You may wish to ask them explicitly if they plan to make any changes or improvements to education policy if elected.
- b) Does the candidate understand the financial and administrative challenges faced by providers of adult and community education, including but not limited to:**
 - i. fees for reengagement and programme validation with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI);
 - ii. disjointed state funding that arises when funding is provided by more than 10 Government Departments;
 - iii. burdensome and duplicative regulatory reporting requirements?
- c) Does the candidate speak about and/or recognize the wider-benefits of learning such as social inclusion, civic engagement, and health and well-being, beyond the benefits of employment and macro-economics?**
- d) Does the candidate understand and appreciate the importance of hearing from and acting on the voice and opinions of adult learners during the development and implementation of adult education policies?**

Issues you may wish to advocate for from candidates

During the General Election you will want to advocate for specific issues of importance to you and/or your organisation. Beyond the issues important to you personally, or which are important for your organisation these issues might also be worth exploring with candidates.

Funding

- a) Funding for non-profit community education providers which covers all aspects of provision beyond only the cost of tutors is critical. For example funding provided by various government departments such as the Department of Rural and Community Development or the Department of Education and the 16 regional Education and Training Boards to community education providers usually does not cover the costs required for general administration, building costs, or additional costs like reengagement and programme validation fees that must be paid to another state agency Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).
- b) Support from the candidate to ensure that Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Public Participation Networks (PPNs) make the development of, and support for, adult and community education a priority in their region.

Barriers

Removal of barriers to participation such as access to childcare, flexible and part-time learning options, and access to subsidised transportation, to name a few. Many different barriers to participation that have been recognised and reported on can be found in the [2017 National Further Education and Training Learner Forum Report](#).

Ideas for Connecting with Candidates

Build relationships with decision makers: Seek to engage candidates about the issues you care about.

Learners make the best advocates: People with experience of adult learning are the best placed to advocate for changes that will have a positive impact on their lives. If you do have a meeting with a candidate, or invite them to your organisation, have them engage with learners.

Be clear about what you are asking of a politician: Use research, data, and precedents to communicate your argument. Be able to put your point across clearly and in a language that candidates unfamiliar with the adult learning sector can understand.

If you are a provider, talk about the number of learners, their experiences, the number of courses they take, and the eventual progression of learners.

Votes matter: The more people who raise an issue with an elected representative, the more attention it will receive. In this election AONTAS is promoting the use of the hashtag #LearnersVote2020.

Work with all parties and candidates: Talk to candidates of all political parties, as well as independent candidates to inform them about the issues that matter to you.

Use a variety of tactics:

- a) talk to candidates on your doorstep, use AONTAS provided template letters, and write emails
- b) organise or attend public meetings
- c) contact the media and use social media. In this election AONTAS is promoting the use of the hashtag #LearnersVote2020.

Be persistent: Think long-term. Relationships that you develop with a candidate during this election may help you in your future work once that candidate is elected.

Be prepared to compromise: Good negotiation skills are an important part of advocacy. You can't always get everything you want, but if you are persistent you will be able to see progress toward improving the education system.

Successfully Engaging with Candidates

Consider taking the following steps to ensure that your engagement with the candidates is successful.

- **Get to know the candidates running for election. Most candidates have declared their candidacy at the time of this toolkit's publication. Their campaigns are underway and you can find out more by searching online and keeping abreast of news across all forms of media. Many candidates will be running for re-election and will have offices or campaign headquarters you can contact.**
- **Consider working with other similar organisations in your constituency. You can search for other likeminded AONTAS members in your part of the country by searching the AONTAS website by [Clicking Here](#).**
- **Ask candidates questions when they call to your door. Ask for their views about the issues that matter to you; what do they know about adult and community education? Ask how they will ensure a voice for adult and community education if they are elected.**

Review the sections of this toolkit titled ***What you should seek in a candidate*** and ***Issues you may wish to advocate for form your local candidates***, for more information.

After the Election

After the election you need to maintain relationships with 'TDs' (Teachta Dála, the members of Irish Parliament). To do this consider taking the following two steps after the election:

- **Research the names of the people elected to represent you. Make contact with them using email, writing a letter, or inviting them to see the work of your organisation. To find out who your TDs are after the election on 8th February 2020 [Click Here](#).**
- **Communicate the issues you defined during the election to the newly elected representatives. If you have spoken to them before the election then continue your conversation. If this is your first communication with them, introduce yourself and your issues**

How do you know who is Running for Election?

The most up to date and centralized information about who is seeking (re)election is available thanks to Adrian Kavanagh, Lecturer in the Department of Geography at Maynooth University.

[Click Here](#) for constituency information about General election candidates on Adrian Kavanagh's website. Scroll through the webpage available through this link to find your constituency and the candidates running.

Draft Letter or Email Inviting Candidates to Visit your Organisation

THIS TEMPLATE LETTER/EMAIL IS PROVIDED FOR AONTAS ORGANISATIONAL MEMBERS who wish to invite an election candidate to visit your organisation.

While this template letter is addressed from one organisation, if you are able to connect with multiple other organisations in your area you can send a joint invitation and create more of an incentive for a candidate to come and speak with several providers and learners at once. If you arrange a meeting and would like someone from AONTAS to join you let us know. If the timing and location is workable, we will be glad to attend and support your work. You can contact Advocacy Lead Ben Hendriksen at bhendriksen@aontas.com.

Dear [Name],

My name is [Name]. I am writing this [letter, email] today as you have declared yourself a candidate for [Constituency].

As a representative of [organisation name], which is a provider of [adult, community, adult and community] education in [name of city, town] I would like to invite you to visit our organisation on a date and time that suits yourself so that you are able to meet with myself, my colleagues, and the learners who access our services on a daily basis.

As voters in your constituency we would like to discuss with you the policy and programme challenges and opportunities that are important to us and which originate from local level in our community.

As a member of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation we believe in the creation of a nation-wide education system that supports lifelong learning for the purpose of building strong, vibrant, and resilient communities.

Some of the challenges and opportunities for [organisation name] as providers and for our learners as we work to create these strong communities include:

- **[Issue 1]**
- **[Issue 2]**
- **[You can add as many issues as you think is necessary and effective]**

If you are able and willing to meet please contact me by phone at [phone number] or email at [email address] to arrange a date and time that works for you.

Thank you for your time. We at [name of organisation] look forward to hearing from you soon and to speaking with you about how to maintain and develop a vibrant [adult, community, adult and community] system that meets the needs of our community in [name of city, town].

Kindest Regards,

[Signature]

[Name]

[Phone number]

[Email address]

[Organisation address]



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