

AONTAS

Response to

Budget

2020

*Defending our Vision for
Educational Equality*



Defending our Vision for Education Equality

The AONTAS 2020 pre-budget submission supported the organisation's 50 year-long tradition of advocating and lobbying to tackle educational inequality. We do this work with the goal of creating systemic social change so that all adults in Ireland have the opportunity to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system. Our submission was based on our mission to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS developed the pre-budget submission based on our extensive ongoing engagement with adult learners, community education providers, Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners and adult education practitioners across the field of lifelong learning, including at higher level. The proposals in our submission sought to create a fairer lifelong learning system for all adults, not just as a compensatory measure, but to enable a truly positive, learning experience that develops over the lifetime.

The AONTAS pre-budget submission coincided with the recently published Joint Committee on Education and Skills *Report on Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education* (May, 2019) and specifically supports the recommendations of that report; most specifically those regarding community education.

Adult learning is transformative with wide-ranging benefits at the personal, community and societal level. Ireland is improving its standing in lifelong learning participation rates at 12.5%, yet, of even greater concern is the very low lifelong learning participation rate of people who left school early (2.5%)¹. However, educationally disadvantaged adults participate in adult learning: 23% of those who left school early (without Upper Second Level) participated in non-accredited education in 2018 (CSO 2018). This suggests that educationally disadvantaged learners are more likely to return to education by taking non-accredited courses that meet their day-to-day needs and aspirations rather than participate in accredited education that may never have benefited them in their lives to date. If the Government wants to improve the lifelong learning rate across Ireland, specifically for people most educationally disadvantaged, then their needs must be considered in a way that Budget 2020 has not.

The remainder of this response will comment on the lack of action taken to respond to the AONTAS pre-budget submission. It also provides comments on additional policy actions that affect adult learners which were announced or expanded upon in the Budget 2020.

¹ <https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/aontas-welcomes-increase-in-lifelong-learning-participation-rate-to-8.9>.

AONTAS Pre-budget Submission Asks for an Equitable Lifelong Learning System

AONTAS made the following budgetary and policy asks as part of our 2020 pre-budget Submission.

AONTAS Prebudget Submission Asks for an equitable adult learning system		
A Thriving Community Education Sector	Learner Voice for Action: Creating an Inclusive Lifelong Learning Society	Lifelong Learning for Sustainability
Community education will be sustainably, funded, effectively measured and recognised on an equal footing with other areas of the education system. It will be recognised as having a specific and crucial role in supporting educational equality.	Everyone should have the opportunity to actively participate and succeed in adult learning and to fulfil their educational ambitions regardless of their past educational experience, social class, sexual orientation, civil status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or disability. The policy and practice in the adult, further, community, and higher education systems should be continually shaped by acting on a diverse range of authentic learner voices.	Policy makers will recognise the role lifelong learning plays in achieving social, civic, environmental and economic sustainability.
Funding to support sustainable provision	Learner Voice	Funding for adult learning programmes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-annual funding for independent non-profit community education organisations Increase funding for SOLAS funded community education by €5 million with a specific designated budget for quality assurance and QQI reengagement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in continuous professional development for educators regarding teaching and learning, including engaging the learner voice Continue to support the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy. Use the Forum as a model of qualitative data collection for meaningful learner voice engagement across the education system (as appropriate) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain a heterogeneous education system with a specific focus on adult learning programmes that support critical thinking and active citizenship
Accredited courses for community education learners	Further Education and Training	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ringfence funding for adult learning provision across community education and further education with a specific focus on environmental sustainability
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-annual funding for community education to include a budget line for quality assurance costs No QQI fees for reengagement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Increased transport cost support for FET learners Ensure that DEASP does not deduct payments for students who miss a day due to illness/unforeseeable issue 	
Innovation to develop the potential of community education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure there is childcare available for learners – ‘no crèche, no class’ mantra is still pertinent Identify non-standard employees as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework 	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure community education groups can maintain their ability to provide accredited provision on the NFQ Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding Support for interdepartmental communication of the potential of community education to support educational equality 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment 	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the potential of community education as pre-apprenticeship programmes for encouraging female participation in apprenticeships Ensure quantitative measurement is not overly burdensome and is fit for purpose in measuring outcomes – implement the new POBAL ‘distance travelled’ tool for DES funded community education In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning 	Mature Students	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students Let lone parents access SUSI as part-time students given their specific parenting, childcare and accommodation challenges. (DES) 	

1. A Thriving Community Education Sector

Community education effectively engages hard to reach groups, particularly women, lone parents² and those from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds. Community education is effective due to its location, accessibility and outreach, in addition to the supports it provides such as childcare. In many cases community education provides the only accessible educational opportunity for adult learners.

The Primary Asks in the AONTAS 2020 Pre-Budget Submission:

Funding to support sustainable community education provision

1. Multi-annual funding for independent non-profit community education organisations
2. Increase funding for SOLAS-funded community education by €5 million with a specific designated budget for quality assurance and QQI reengagement

In order to be successful in meeting the needs of learners and communities a new sustainable multi-annual funding model must:

- Be a needs-based, multi-annual funding process that responds to community-based needs assessments
- Cover the true cost of community education provision including overhead costs, administration, and provision
- Measure the outcomes of community education by including the 'distance travelled' of the learner³

Cost-Neutral Measures to Support the Development of Community Education requested in the 2020 Budget Submission:

1. Multi-annual funding for community education to include a budget line for quality assurance costs
2. No QQI fees for reengagement
3. Ensure community education groups can maintain their ability to provide accredited provision on the NFQ
4. Funding for accessible higher education provision in a community setting through PATH funding
5. Support for interdepartmental communication on the potential for community education to support educational equality

² When assessing the position of lone parents in Ireland [the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection](#) positively supported research which suggests an 'education first', rather than a 'work first', approach to interventions which, in the longer term, will lift families out of poverty and into employment.

³ The 'distance travelled' by each learner varies depending on their life experiences and the time passed since they were last in education. Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single award mask the life experience of a learner, offering no insight into the people participating and the challenges that education helps them overcome. Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things; from overcoming fears of education by taking a step into adult learning, to receiving a minor QQI award, to being able to help their children complete homework, thereby developing intergenerational as well as immediate social benefits.

6. Explore the potential of community education in the delivery of pre-apprenticeship programmes as a means of encouraging female participation in apprenticeships
7. Ensure quantitative measurement is not overly burdensome and is fit for purpose in measuring outcomes – implement the new POBAL ‘distance travelled’ tool for DES funded community education
8. In the Skills to Advance policy framework, include funding for community education to reach people in non-standard employment, offering them the opportunity to engage in learning

The Result

Budget 2020 has taken no action on any of the budget requests or cost-neutral measures highlighted by AONTAS as needing action in 2020 to support community education. This lack of action to relieve bureaucratic red-tape and shrink funding gaps will be to the detriment of adult learners, particularly those who are most educationally disadvantaged.

AONTAS Actions after Budget 2020

To ensure that action is taken to alleviate these funding and administrative challenges going forward, AONTAS will work with our members throughout 2020-2022, including during the expected 2020 elections, to ensure that these issues which impact community education finally receive policy and funding attention after more than a decade of prolonged inaction.

The provision of accredited and non-accredited community education is too important to ignore its effectiveness for supporting lifelong learning in Ireland. Considering the more than €240 million spent on all Further Education and Training Grants in 2018⁴, as compared to the €10.8 million spent on community education, there is no reason why an additional €5 million cannot be contributed to SOLAS funded community education, and why it cannot be ring-fenced year over year. To create a culture of lifelong learning for all people across the island, regardless of their community, educational history, or socio-economic position, it is important that we support community education as an educational policy tool for building a more engaged society.

2. Learner Voice for Action: Creating an Inclusive Lifelong learning Society

Everyone should have the opportunity to actively participate and succeed in adult learning and to fulfil their educational ambitions regardless of their past educational experience, social class, sexual orientation, civil status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or disability. The policy and practice in the adult, further, community, and higher education systems should be continually shaped by acting on a diverse range of authentic learner voices.

⁴ SOLAS. *Annual Report and Accounts 2018*.

<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Annual%20Report%20English.pdf> [Accessed 15/10/2019].

AONTAS believes effective learner voice structures must be part of any healthy educational system. A meaningful learner voice structure must allow for the voices of the most marginalised to rise to the highest thresholds of policy planning and developing. To ensure these processes are in place, it is important that learner voice is funded and that administrators and teachers are given continuous professional development on how to meaningfully engage learner voices.

The Primary Asks in the AONTAS 2020 Pre-Budget Submission:

Learner Voice

- 1.** Invest in continuous professional development for educators regarding teaching and learning, including engaging learner voice
- 2.** Continue to support the National FET Learner Forum as part of the FET Strategy. Use the Forum as a model of qualitative data collection for meaningful learner voice engagement across the education system (as appropriate)

Further Education and Training

- 3.** Increased transport cost support for FET learners
- 4.** Work collaboratively with the DEASP to establish processes that support learner success in adult education by creating learner-focused referral processes and removing financial punishments for course absences
- 5.** Ensure there is childcare available for learners – ‘no crèche, no class’ mantra is still pertinent
- 6.** Identify non-standard employees⁵ as a specific target group for the Skills to Advance framework
- 7.** Ensure FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment
- 8.** Offer guidance for employees in non-standard employment

Mature Students

- 9.** Increase funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students
- 10.** Let lone parents access SUSI as part-time students given their specific parenting, childcare and accommodation challenges.

The Result

Budget 2020 has taken small steps to tackle some of the issues identified by AONTAS in our pre-budget submission. Here we highlight the issues for which we have advocated for that are being addressed in Budget 2020.

⁵Includes part-time work, temporary work, fixed-term contracting and subcontracting. Non-permanent full-time employees are likely to be women; receive less training; and have less employment stability. Part-time employees are 40% less likely than full-time employees to receive training from employers; immigrants and low skill workers receive less training than all other demographic groups (OECD, 2018).

Childcare:

Budget 2020 announces an investment in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs specifically for the roll-out of the National Childcare Scheme. Budget 2020 states that this Scheme “aims to improve children's outcomes, support lifelong learning, make work pay, reduce child poverty and tangibly reduce the cost of quality childcare for thousands of families across Ireland.”⁶

It will be important for AONTAS and our members to monitor the implementation of this new childcare scheme so that we can ensure adult learners seeking to participate in formal and non-formal learning have access to flexible and affordable childcare that allows them to participate in adult and community education and lifelong learning.

Skills to Advance:

Budget 2020 makes a commitment to support workforce upskilling and roll out the Education and Training Board (ETB)-led Skills to Advance programme to target existing employees with limited formal qualifications. Funding will be provided for an additional 3,000 employees in this area through focussed initiatives targeting employers, individual employees and sectoral and regional responses via a competitive call.

AONTAS welcomes the support for the Skills to Advance programme and re-emphasises the importance of people with low qualifications and in precarious employment being able to take up the learning offer.⁷

Other Asks:

Beyond these two asks on childcare and Skills to Advance, Budget 2020 has taken no action on any of the budget requests highlighted by AONTAS as needing action in 2020 in order to defend Learner Voice as a tool for informed policy making.

We are hopeful that in several areas such as increased transport cost support for FET learners; working collaboratively with the DEASP to establish processes that support learner success in adult education by creating learner-focused referral processes and removing financial punishments for course absences; ensuring FET opportunities are clearly communicated to the general public and employees in precarious/non-standard employment; offering guidance for employees in non-standard employment; and increasing funding to cover part-time higher education fees for first-time mature students, that we will see action once the budget commitments from SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority are made for the year 2020.

⁶ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. *Budget 2020 Expenditure Report*. [http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2020/Documents/Budget/Parts%20I-III%20Expenditure%20Report%202020%20\(A\).pdf](http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2020/Documents/Budget/Parts%20I-III%20Expenditure%20Report%202020%20(A).pdf). [Accessed 15/10/2019].

⁷ Department of Education and Skills. *Main Features Of Budget 2020: Education And Skills*. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Financial-Reports/Estimates/2020-budget-main-features.pdf>. [Accessed 15/10/2019].

AONTAS Actions after Budget 2020

To ensure that action is taken to support Learner Voice AONTAS will with the support of SOLAS continue implementation of the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum. AONTAS will also continue our advocacy and lobbying to ensure that FET practitioners and learners receive the training and supports they need that allow the voice of adult learners to inform the provision of adult and community education across the country.

3. Lifelong Learning for Sustainability

Policy makers will recognise the role that lifelong learning plays in achieving social, civic, environmental and economic sustainability.

The Primary Asks in the AONTAS 2020 Pre-Budget Submission:

- 1.** Ring-fence funding for adult learning provision across community education and further education with a specific focus on environmental sustainability
- 2.** Ring-fence funding for adult learning programmes that are focused on strengthening democracies

Cost-Neutral Measure to Support Lifelong Learning for Sustainability as requested in the 2020 Budget Submission:

Maintain a heterogeneous education system so learners can engage in a range of accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities that best suit their needs and aspirations, particularly in a community education context

The Result

Budget 2020 has taken no action on any of the budget requests or cost-neutral measures highlighted by AONTAS as needing action in 2020 in order to create a lifelong learning society that supports sustainability. This lack of action highlights a lack of commitment from Government to adapt our existing education structures to the changing environmental, social, and economic challenges currently facing our world.

AONTAS Actions after Budget 2020

As part of our new Strategic Plan 2019-2022, and starting with discussions at the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Summit being held on 18th November 2019, AONTAS will be taking new actions including stakeholder engagement efforts and research that support our efforts to evidence and advocate for the education as a tool for progressing environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Budget 2020 Announcements that are positives; worth watching; or concerning

In addition to the items AONTAS advocated for in our pre-budget 2020 submission there are several other items for AONTAS and our members to note as positive; worth watching; or concerning.

Positives

Positive developments in Budget 2020 for AONTAS and our members include increased funding for community development under the Department of Rural and Community Development. We must of course note that while positive overtures have been made to these items in the budget, we must wait and see the actual implementation of these commitments in the coming Finance Act 2019.

Funding increases announced for the Department of Rural and Community Development that are positive for AONTAS members include:

- Increased funding for the PEACE programme which can help mitigate the negative impacts Brexit
- Increased funding for our public library system
- Additional supports under the Community Services Programme (CSP) and Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)
- Providing training and supports to assist and further develop the Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) to strengthen local planning
- Providing support for a range of initiatives in the community and voluntary sector including support for national organisations in the sector and supports to foster and strengthen volunteerism and philanthropy
- Delivering a coherent package to support actions set out in the recently published 5 year *Strategy for the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland* and the first *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland*; and
- Supporting the Community Enhancement Programme⁸

Worth watching

The Budget 2019 announcement in October 2018 highlighted a new ring-fenced policy from the Department of Education and Skills called The Human Capital Initiative. The initiative was stated broadly as having the goal to meet the priority skill needs of enterprise, to drive regional jobs growth and development, and support key economic sectors in responding to the challenges of Brexit.

⁸ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. *Budget 2020 Expenditure Report*. [http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2020/Documents/Budget/Parts%20I-III%20Expenditure%20Report%202020%20\(A\).pdf](http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2020/Documents/Budget/Parts%20I-III%20Expenditure%20Report%202020%20(A).pdf). [Accessed 17/10/2019].

A year from this announcement Budget 2020 has expanded on the Human Capital Initiative. Budget 2020 states the following:

As agreed as part of estimates process in 2019, from January 2020, the Human Capital Initiative will be established within the NTF and will form a key part of the Government's strategic response to Brexit and other challenges facing the economy. In 2020 €60 million will be provided via the HCI which will create 1,500 new additional graduate conversion places and 1,500 additional undergraduate places on courses in areas of identified skills needs. It will also incentivise continued reform and innovation in Higher Education provision.

This being the first year of implementation it will be important to continue watching this Human Capital Initiative policy implementation to ensure that it not only meets skills needs of employers, but is also used to provide opportunities to mature students.

Concerning

Beyond the concerns detailed above, which arose from the Government's lack of action to our own AONTAS asks for Budget 2020, AONTAS also wants to note areas of concern.

National Training Fund (NTF) spending:

Budget 2020 will see the final increase to the NTF from 0.7% to 1%. This annual increase from 0.7% to 1% began in 2018 and will come to completion in 2020. During this time AONTAS has been advocating that a small portion of this overall increase in revenue from the NTF should be spent to support the development and outreach of community education providers. While there are positive statements in Budget 2020 about increased NTF spending that will be directed through SOLAS in order to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners through technology enhanced learning, early intervention supports and supports for those with disabilities⁹, by not diversifying the spending of NTF funds to support community education providers the education system will continue to miss its opportunity to engage with the most educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged learners in our country.

Cut to Rehabilitative Training Allowance:

Since the announcement in July 2019 by Minister of State for Disability Issues Finian McGrath and Minister of Health Simon Harris that the Rehabilitative Training Allowance would be cut, AONTAS and our colleagues from the Disability Federation of Ireland, Rehab Group, Central Remedial Clinic, Irish Wheelchair Association, and Inclusion Ireland have been supporting learners and fighting to have the allowance reinstated. We continue to be disappointed that the Rehabilitative Training Allowance has not been reinstated through Budget 2020.

⁹ Department of Education and Skills. *Main Features Of Budget 2020: Education And Skills*. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Financial-Reports/Estimates/2020-budget-main-features.pdf>. [Accessed 17/10/2019].

The withdrawal of the €31.80 per week allowance prevents people with few other options open to them from starting a course. The cut places pressure on students and their families to fill the financial gap created by the loss of this funding, while the overall saving to Government by applying the cut in 2019 is just €250,000. This cut is a real example of Government not recognising the value for money received through the provision of direct payments to learners wanting to participate in education.

The following quote was released by AONTAS and our partner organisations in a press release after the release of Budget 2020 and highlights the negative impact this cut has.

If people are prevented from accessing such training it will ultimately cost the State more down the line. Very little has changed since Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities last year. This decision indicates that the Government remains selectively blind to the true cost of disability in Ireland.

Further, Inclusion Ireland CEO Enda Egan captured the mood of our organisations after the Budget release when he said that

Government had an opportunity to take action in Budget 2020 to promote rights and equality for people with disabilities and to advance Ireland's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Unfortunately, there is little in this budget that will create any real change for people with disabilities

Conclusion

The AONTAS budget response highlights the lack of new funding available to community education in Budget 2020. There needs to be a shift in Government priorities regarding learning, moving to a broader understanding of learning which funds a range of programmes which develop the whole person. Adult learning increases socio-emotional skills which are vital to support people in a time of rapid societal and economic change. We would encourage a learner-first approach to policy making where learners are the priority, rather than short-term approaches based on an economy-first model.

Budget 2020 continues to promote an economic view of education where education should first and foremost be about skills for the economy. This is a narrow view of education that AONTAS and our members will continue to advocate against. Our Mission commits us to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. That is what AONTAS and our members will continue to do as we move into 2020.

AONTAS

**Response to
Budget 2020**

AONTAS

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