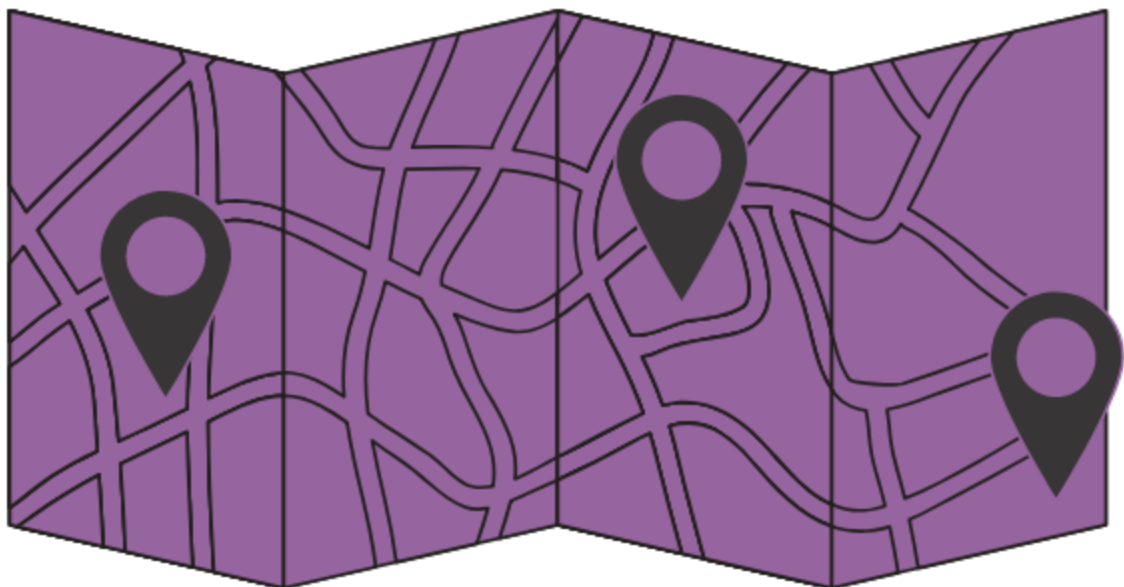




AONTAS Submission to the Public Consultation: Pathways to Work Strategy



25th September 2019

Brief outline of submission: This submission is being made on behalf of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. The submission is being made in response to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection's (DEASP) call for submissions to the public consultation on the *Pathways to Work Strategy*.

The submission argues that the development and implementation of the DEASP's new *Pathways to Work Strategy* should align with other Government policy reports and initiatives already in place regarding adult and community education, economic activation, and ongoing upskilling of the Irish population. In particular, we highlight the recommendations made within the *Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education*¹ and the EU Council Recommendation on the Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults². Whilst national unemployment rates are historically low, there are significant variations at regional and local level. The submission highlights the benefits that could be seen by adults engaging with DEASP through greater engagement and funding from DEASP for providers of community education. The DEASP has a strong history of engaging with community education providers to support access to education for people with low education attainment and low income. This historic relationship traditionally enhanced community education provision as it was based on a strong understanding of the ethos, purpose, and nature of community education. *The White Paper on Adult Education* from 2000 acknowledges the role that the then Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs at the time played in supporting community education provision through the community development programme.³

Through our engagement with adult learners we have highlighted their specific recommendations that would improve their experience of referrals from DEASP into education provision. Learners strongly recommend greater use of guidance services by Intreo staff regarding the different pathways to education and ultimately employment. They also highlight simple changes that are needed to enable flexible provision of social services and education for adults working to return to education and employment.

¹ Joint Committee on Education and Skills. *Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education*. May 2019.
https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/report_s/2019/2019-06-05_report-on-education-inequality-disadvantage-and-barriers-to-education_en.pdf. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

² European Council. *EU Council Recommendation on the Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01)&from=EN). [Accessed 23/09/2019].

³ Department of Education and Science. *Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education*. July 2000. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf. pp.112. [Accessed 24/09/2019].



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Introduction to AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS is Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation for adult and community education providers, and adult learners. It promotes the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocates on behalf of the adult and community education sector. Founded in 1969, it is an independent NGO, with 400 members nationwide.

In addition to promoting adult learning in Ireland, AONTAS is the national coordinating body for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), which is aimed at increasing participation in lifelong learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating best practices. The current European Commission funded project of the EAAL focuses on implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation in Ireland.

As a membership organisation we provide a space for members to share experience, promote their work and advocate for the value of adult and community education.

Premise of the consultation on the new *Pathways to Work Strategy*

The current consultation concerning the Department of Employment and Social Affairs' (DEASPs) new *Pathways to Work Strategy* is being undertaken within the context of a national economy that continues to grow. As stated by the DEASP in the public consultation:

“At over 2.3 million, there are now more people working in Ireland than ever before, with over 400,000 jobs created since the economic low point. Unemployment, which currently stands at 4.5%, continues to decrease towards pre-crisis levels and wages are increasing.

This growth is most welcome but we cannot be complacent. We must make sure that every citizen has the opportunity to benefit from the buoyant economy. We must leave nobody behind.”⁴⁵

Within this context the DEASP states that the next strategy will consider the needs of:

- Long term unemployed people
- People with disabilities
- Older Jobseekers
- Jobseekers from migrant backgrounds
- Jobseekers from traveller backgrounds
- Lone Parents, and
- Unemployed adult dependents of claimants of welfare payments

⁴ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Pathways-To-Work-Call-For-Submissions.aspx>. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

⁵ AONTAS member The Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed produced a document *A Budget for Unemployed People* that breaks down unemployment figures to highlight the relationship between employment and educational status in Ireland. https://www.inou.ie/download/pdf/inou_pre-budget_submission_2020.pdf. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

- Existing workers seeking to develop their careers/earnings.
- Recruitment requirements of employers

With this context for the submission we make the argument that Government broadly, but DEASP specifically should align its new *Pathways to Work Strategy* in line with recommendations from the *Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education* and the EU Council Recommendation on the Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults.

Education inequality and disadvantage and Barriers to Education: Support for community education

In May 2019 the Joint Committee on Education and Skills published a report titled *Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education*. In this report the Joint Committee highlights barriers to education faced by adult learners as they work to gain access to educational opportunities. Examples of these barriers which have a particular impact on adult learners include the financial cost of full-time study, childcare, geography, public transport and lack of institutional access. Within this report are highlighted Joint Committee recommendations for breaking down the barriers to education. Two of these recommendation specifically reference support for community education.

The two recommendations made in the Joint Committee report that refer directly to policy and budgetary support for adult and community education are that:

- support needs to be given to community education to achieve parity of esteem with other sectors in the formal education system; and
- funding for community education is increased in future budgets.⁶

In order to ensure access to people in Ireland furthest from education and employment due to social and economic barriers AONTAS strongly supports these recommendations of the Joint Committee report. As a country and Government we need to increase funding for community education provision across Departments and we need to put in place policies that support the community education sector to achieve parity with other sectors in the formal education system.

The link between social welfare and community education

Community education is locally based adult education which is provided by organisations working in the community and voluntary sector and is aimed at building capacity and skills among people who are furthest from education and employment. The DEASP has a proven history of engaging with community education providers to support access to education for

⁶ Joint Committee on Education and Skills. *Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education*. May 2019. https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/report_s/2019/2019-06-05_report-on-education-inequality-disadvantage-and-barriers-to-education_en.pdf. pp. 25. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

people with low formal educational accreditation and low income. This relationship traditionally enhanced community education provision as it was based on a strong understanding of the ethos, purpose, and nature of community education. *The White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) acknowledges the role that the then Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs traditionally played in supporting community education provision through the community development programme.⁷

Building on this history of positive engagement between social welfare structures and the community education sector, Strand 5 of the current *Pathways to Work Strategy 2016-2020* commits to building organisational capability to deliver enhanced services to people who are unemployed. We request that this strand be further developed in the next strategy to build on past experience and collaboration and include the role of community education as a key support and pathway to education and employment for people who are unemployed.

The advantages of community education to support *Pathways to Work*

In this time of low national unemployment the DEASP has correctly noted in its call for consultation responses that now more than ever we need to be using the social and economic benefits of the current moment to engage adults furthest away from education and employment.

Over the decades a significant body of research has been developed pointing to the success of community education for engaging people furthest from education and employment. The previously mentioned *White Paper on Adult Education* which was published 19 years ago this year identified community education as “a provider in its own right which needs to be resourced.”⁸ It also stated that:

“Apart from the inherent value of the work Community Education groups do, it is reasonable to assume that both in their person-centred, non-threatening methodologies and in their highly integrated connections into the local community, such groups already have the potential for education and training delivery into communities or groups which are frequently hard to reach by the formal providers. As investment increases overall in Adult Education and training, it is desirable that community education interests play an important role in the delivery of education and training, through linking with statutory agencies in a formalised outreach role. This would lead to a new synergy between the sectors, providing the greatest return from the community sector's capacity to innovate and engage with the most marginalised in society.”⁹

⁷ Department of Education and Science. *Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education*. July 2000. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf. pp.112. [Accessed 24/09/2019].

⁸ Ibid. pp. 118.

⁹ Ibid. pp. 117.

Nineteen years after the publication of this document these policy statements are as true as they were in the year 2000.

Ring-fenced funding for community education

In order to support community education as a policy tool for creating pathways to work, AONTAS is asking the DEASP to specifically ring-fencing funding for community education that is aimed at supporting the target groups identified in the upcoming *Pathways to Work Strategy*.

Within the not-for-profit sector of community and voluntary organisations, community education funding is extremely diverse and lacking considering the positive impact it has on the lives of learners. The 2017 ERASMUS+ transnational (Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland) project FinALE drew on research from n56 members of the AONTAS Community Education Network. Findings from this research showed that the most common form of funding for community education is direct government to organisation funding, programme funding, project funding and formula funding. This funding predominately originates from six Government Departments, as well as SICAP, philanthropic funding, learner fees, and other sources.¹⁰

To emphasise the point further; of the funding for community education that does originate from the formal further education and training system via SOLAS, community education receive less than 1/8th the amount of funding per learner as other forms of further education and training. In 2018 SOLAS reported that the €10.9 million spent on community education provision benefited approximately 50,000 learners. This equates to €218 per learner. Regarding total FET provision costs (excluding community education) SOLAS spent €472.5 million benefiting approximately 288,000 learners which equates to €1641 per learner. The funding for community education simply does not cover the true cost of provision for these approximately 50,000 learners.¹¹

As an example of the funding challenges facing community education providers, AONTAS member Longford Women's Link (LWL) awarded a third of all NFQ level 5 awards in Longford in 2017. All LWL QQI awards are delivered as a result of funding from DEASP/philanthropy/ and fees and with no DES/SOLAS funding. Operating in one of the most economically disadvantaged regions of the country; with one of the highest rates of lone parents; who are the most likely people in Ireland to live in consistent poverty, LWL and community education providers like them reach the people that the formal education system is otherwise unable to reach. LWL demonstrates the positive and demonstrable

¹⁰ Fitzsimons, Camilla and Magrath, Conor. FinALE "Where to Invest" Funding Adult Education. <https://eaea.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/01/FinALE-Where-to-invest-Final.pdf>. [Access 24 September 2019].

¹¹ SOLAS. *The 2018 Further Education and Training Service Plan*. http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/14691_SOLAF_FET_services_plan_R9.pdf. pp.30. [Accessed 24/09/2019].

impact of accredited community education provision. Community education has proven its ability to deliver on meeting the needs of the proposed target groups of Pathways to Work.

Upskilling Pathways Recommendation in Ireland and the *Pathways to Work*

What is the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation?

The Upskilling Pathways Recommendation is a European Commission adopted recommendation meant to help adults acquire a minimum level of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent (level 3 or 4 in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) [Level 5 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)]).

Upskilling Pathways targets adults with a low level of skills, e.g. those without upper secondary education and who are not eligible for Youth Guarantee support.

Adults may be in employment, unemployed or economically inactive, with a need to strengthen basic skills. Member States may define priority target groups for this initiative depending on national circumstances.

Irish target groups for the Upskilling Pathways

As part of implementation for the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation in Ireland the Department of Education and Skills had to define target groups which would be the focus of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation implementation.

The target groups identified by the Department of Education and Skills align closely with the groups identified by DEASP in the consultation outline. Therefore it is AONTAS' recommendation that DEASP also focus its attention on these target groups in their own *Pathways to Work Strategy* in order to ensure the most efficient and impactful use of Government supports.

The target groups identified by the Department of Education and Skills under the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation are:

1. Learners with low education attainment in employment
2. Lone parents
3. Travellers
4. Migrants
5. People with disabilities

Supporting adults into education

As important as focusing government resources on identifying the people most in need of supports to access education and employment are the creation and provision of those meaningful supports.

In the DEASP introduction to this consultation it is clear that that DEASP understands that reaching those who continue to remain outside employment, or who are underemployed, or in precarious work, and/or poorly paid, will be very difficult. It will take significant resources and flexibility of traditional service provision in order to meet the needs of this cohort of the population due to the personal challenges or systemic barriers they and their communities may face.

DEASP Intreo must welcome adults and provide them with meaningful options that meet their needs

The provision of public services must be built on a relationship of trust and professionalism between the public servants providing information and resources to the public, and the public themselves. As part of the *Pathways to Work Strategy* AONTAS recommends that a focus be placed on further creating a culture of public service to the people availing of public services.

Through the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF) AONTAS has heard from learners for several years now that improvements in the referral process from DEASP/Intreo could be made to support engagement in appropriate adult learning provision.

The National FET Learner Forum has documented comments from learners about the challenges faced when there is:

- pressure to take up education programmes without adequate discussion and guidance to support an informed choice that meets the adults' education and/or employment needs
Learners in programmes often stated they feel obliged to take up courses so that they can retain their social welfare payment; and
- inconsistent information across social welfare and guidance services regarding their education options.

In the *National Further Education And Training (FET) Learner Forum Advisory Report – 2017*, a recommendation was made that DEASP should enact a customer service charter for supporting adult learners who are referred to FET courses, so that the service they receive are based on an individual and flexible approach.¹² The reason for this recommendation is to acknowledge the individual needs of every person as they begin their learning and employment journey. No one public service offering can meet the needs of every person. Particularly when the people who are going to be the focus of the new *Pathways to Work Strategy* will often face complex and overlapping social, educational, and economic barriers to participation; first in education, and then in long-term sustainable employment.

¹² AONTAS. *National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Advisory Report – 2017*. https://www.aontas.com/48390-AONTAS%20NALF%20Policy%20Report_August_2019.pdf. pp.7. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

Similar to the comments from learners at the NFLF, the INOU's Pre Budget Submission¹³ states the following:

'the INOU published *Building a Quality Public Employment Service* which builds on the organisation's work of exploring unemployed people's experiences of the Intreo model as delivered by the DEASP; LES; and JobPath providers. In the document [they] note the importance of achieving a Public Employment Service "that is open to and available to everyone of working age who wishes to avail of the service"

As the national organisation respected across Ireland for its work with unemployed and underemployed peoples, the INOU has also stated a number of key values and principles for improving services. These are captured in the INOU's document *Building a Quality Public Employment Service*, where the importance of respect and dignity, as well as actively promoting equality and social inclusion is noted.¹⁴

Adult guidance

Another recommendation provided by learners in FET is the need to broaden guidance services and to strengthen links with the Adult Education Guidance and Information Service (AEGIS) within Education and Training Boards across Ireland rather than relying on website information portals. In many cases the adults accessing Intreo or other DEASP services are experiencing challenges using information websites. There is a real and significant fear of returning to education, particularly when a person has not been engaged with the formal education system in many years. Therefore, these learners need additional information, support, and guidance to engage with the adult and community education system.

Resources exist for adult guidance such as the AEGIS, as well as the AONTAS free phone and online information referral service *One Step Up*¹⁵¹⁶. *OneStepUp* is a free information service funded by the European Agenda for Adult Learning via ERASMUS+, and is for people looking to return to education and not sure where to begin. It is a service that could also be utilised by Intreo officers unfamiliar with the adult and community education options available to the people seeking their assistance. The service is available through the website <https://www.onestepup.ie/> as well as through free information booklets that can be accessed by contacting AONTAS. In the past AONTAS has sent copies of *OneStepUp* booklets to Intreo offices and AEGIS' across the country and has also presented that information at

¹³ INOU. *A Budget for Unemployed People* that breaks down unemployment figures to highlight the relationship between employment and educational status in Ireland. https://www.inou.ie/download/pdf/inou_pre-budget_submission_2020.pdf. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

¹⁴ INOU. https://www.inou.ie/download/pdf/building_a_qpes.pdf. pp.4. [Accessed 23/09/2019]

¹⁵ <https://www.onestepup.ie/>.

¹⁶ As part of the 2019 Indecon review of Career Guidance OneStepUp was noted as being used by 11.6% of Guidance Councillors. As a free resource OneStepUp can be utilised by Intreo officers unfamiliar with the adult education options available to the people seeking their assistance. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/indecon-review-of-career-guidance.pdf>. [Accessed 23/09/2019].

Intreo fairs. AONTAS is happy to make presentations to Intreo staff on *OneStepUp* and adult learning more broadly.

Supporting adults in education

Reaching adults currently outside employment and outside the adult and community education sector is of obvious importance to the success of any new *Pathways to Work Strategy*. However just as important is the administration of DEASP policies once an adult has begun education. For this AONTAS recommends an increased level of flexibility for adult learners participating in education that will ultimately help them find their pathway to work.

Through the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum AONTAS has heard that many learners are fearful of losing needed financial supports that they receive through social welfare if they are unlucky to miss a class due to legitimate reasons such as illness or childcare responsibilities. Like other people in employment¹⁷, learners in DEASP supported education continue to have home obligations and also do get sick from time to time. In order to create a welcoming and supportive system of public services that works to help people return to employment we are recommending that DEASP review the terms and conditions governing payment of FET allowances to reduce or eliminate financial penalties laid on learners who are legitimately absent due to illness or parental responsibilities. Removing these barriers to full and meaningful participation in education is critical for the success of learners. Without success while participating in education they will not be able to access long-term sustainable employment which is the ultimate goal of DEASP strategy.

Recommendations for the *Pathways to Work Strategy*

According to our submission AONTAS is making the following recommendations for development of the *Pathways to Work Strategy*.

- 1) As stated in the Joint Committee on Education and Skills' report *Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education*, support needs to be given to community education to achieve parity of esteem with other sectors in the formal education system. AONTAS therefore asks the DEASP to explicitly support the provision of community education as a policy tool for creating pathways to work.
- 2) As stated in the Joint Committee on Education and Skills' report *Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education*, funding for community education need to be increased in future budgets. Regarding the actions of DEASP specifically, AONTAS is

¹⁷ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. *Sick leave statistics for the public service shows improvement*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/668558-sick-leave-statistics-for-the-public-service-show-improvement/?referrer=/en/sick-leave-statistics-for-the-public-service-show-improvement-as-rate-falls-to-4/>. [Accessed 24/09/2019].

arguing that ring-fenced funding is needed for community education which is aimed at supporting the target groups identified in the upcoming *Pathways to Work Strategy*.

- 3) DEASP should direct its policy focus for the new *Pathways to Work Strategy* on the target groups identified by the Department of Education and Skills under the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. These target groups are:
 - i. Learners with low education attainment in employment
 - ii. Lone parents
 - iii. Travellers
 - iv. Migrants
 - v. People with disabilities
- 4) DEASP should enact a customer service charter for supporting adult learners who are referred to FET courses so that the service they receive is based on an individual and flexible approach. The reason for this recommendation is to acknowledge the individual needs of every person as they begin their learning and employment journey. No one public service offering can meet the needs of every person.
- 5) Support quality adult guidance that exists to provide up to date, accessible, and clear information about the local learning opportunities available to recipients of DEASP services. The Adult Education Guidance Information Service (AEGIS) is funded to provide support to adult learners and should be utilised by DEASP in any circumstance where there may be a lack of clarity about the learning options available.
- 6) Appoint a representative of DEASP to join the Project Advisory Group of the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL). Not included earlier in this submission, AONTAS makes this recommendation as the National Coordinator for the EAAL in Ireland. Appointed by the Department of Education and Skills to lead out on the EAAL in Ireland, AONTAS advocates for implementation of the Upskilling Pathways recommendation in Ireland and engages stakeholders to discuss the development and implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. Therefore we hope that the DEASP will be interested in engaging with AONTAS and all other members of the Project Advisory Group on this important issue. We also hope that we have helped to make the case why the new *Pathways to Work Strategy* should be developed according to the target groups and other policy actions be undertaken as part of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

Conclusion

AONTAS thanks the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for engaging stakeholders on work being done to develop a new version of the *Pathways to Work Strategy*. As we have laid out in this submission AONTAS believes it is necessary that the next *Strategy* place a significant focus on the alignment of DEASP policy and services provision with the provision of adult and community education, and implementation of the Upskilling Pathways initiative. We believe that it is necessary for the DEASP to take into account the needs of adults furthest away from education and employment, as well as adults in precarious and/or poorly paid employment. The group of adults that DEASPs new *Strategy* must now work to support face systemic and often long-term and/or even intergenerational barriers to participation in education and employment.

The last decade has seen Government services work to get skilled workers back into employment after the economic crisis. With a national unemployment rate of less than 5% the adults that policy must now support are the hardest to reach and require additional supports and resources not often available in the current mainstream DEASP and Intreo system. A true measure of success for the new *Strategy* would be reflected in how well it supports the remaining approximately 5% who most urgently require this strategy's attention. We hope that our submission goes some way to making the case for an increased focus on the social and education needs of adults before they can access sustainable and decent employment.

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