



AONTAS Submission to the Public Consultation on Rural Development Policy 2020+



11th October 2019

Brief outline of submission:

In response to the Department of Rural and Community Affairs' public consultation on the Rural Development Policy 2020+, AONTAS completed the online consultation survey. The AONTAS response is meant to inform the Department of Rural and Community Affairs about the importance of adult and community education. The response comments on the role which adult and community education can and should play in adapting to the challenges and opportunities facing rural Ireland over the next five years with particular attention focused on emerging economic, societal and international developments. These include changing demographics within rural communities, the increasing need to focus on climate change, the diversification of the agri-food sector, new ways of working and the changing nature of jobs, and Brexit amongst other challenges and opportunities.

Documented here are the questions asked by the Department of Rural and Community Affairs and the AONTAS responses to those questions.

Organisation: AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

Name and Role in the organisation: Benjamin Hendriksen (Advocacy Lead) and Sam O'Brien-Olinger (Information and Policy Officer)

Postal address: AONTAS 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, D06 E0H1

Email: bhendriksen@aontas.com and sobrienolinger@aontas.com

Daytime telephone number: 01 406 8220

Web-address: www.aontas.com

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Introduction to the AONTAS submission

The Department of Rural and Community Affairs has been holding public consultations on their new Rural Development Policy 2020+. There was a public consultation held through an online survey as the consultation process is in the beginning stages. AONTAS highlighted the importance of investing in community education for building strong communities; making the argument in our response that adult education and lifelong learning must be at the heart of any new policy that will prepare rural Ireland for the economic, environmental, and demographic challenges expected in the next 5 to 10 years.

Responses to the Department of Rural and Community Development's online public consultation survey

The Department of Rural and Community Development's (DRCD) online public consultation survey's first question asked '**What are the main challenges facing rural Ireland in the next 5 years**'; and proceeds to list ten areas for respondents to prioritise on a scale of one to ten (with 1 being the most significant challenge and 10 being the least significant).

Understanding the subjectivity of the question, AONTAS prioritised the responses as follows:

- 1) Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services)
- 2) Climate change and environmental sustainability
- 3) Availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups
- 4) Future of farming/agri-food sector
- 5) Changing demographics (e.g. ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas)
- 6) Transport and Infrastructure
- 7) Brexit
- 8) Broadband/mobile phone connectivity
- 9) Jobs and business
- 10) Managing tourism in a sustainable way

Question 2 asked to provide more details '**If there are other challenges which you feel were not included in Question 1.**' AONTAS responded to this request by highlighting three features of life in rural Ireland that underlie the challenges and opportunities of each of the above ten areas; and which require attention to overcome them in order for people living in rural areas to fully prosper:

1. There continues to be an unfair imbalance across the country where many rural areas still lag behind urban centres. The lack of essential public services, access to healthcare and education; and infrastructure such as broadband and transport links continue to exclude people, especially already marginalised and disadvantaged groups, from fully participating in society and contributing to the social wellbeing and economic development of their communities and wider rural life in Ireland.
2. Underpinning and sustaining the inequalities experienced by individuals, families, local communities, and entire regions, are barriers to accessing and benefitting from participating in all forms of education and training, as part of lifelong learning.

3. Participation in education in all its forms reflects and supports the resilience of individuals and their communities to face the exact kinds of issues identified in this consultation that are projected for rural Ireland in the coming five years and long after. The educational needs and aspirations of people living in non-urban areas continue to be neglected. Rural regions are still often denied quality education, one of the most effective mechanisms and proven methods for delivering a positive impact across a variety of Government Departments' policies and strategies aimed at improving the lives of people in rural Ireland.

To question number three: **'Based on the categories in Question 1, do you have any suggestions to address these challenges?'** The AONTAS response was:

Adult and Community Education are transformative with wide-ranging benefits at the personal, community and societal level. It is known that for every Euro invested in these forms of lifelong learning there are wide-ranging returns on investment (see Fox, N. and Fieldsend, G., 2018, FinALE "How to Invest" - Financial Indicators for Adult Education).

For example, there is a net positive social and economic impact at

- Micro level (employment opportunities, earnings, career development)
- Meso level (productivity)
- Macro level (economic, crime reduction, social cohesion and health)

It is also known that a complex range of factors impede a person's ability to engage in education, training and overall lifelong learning opportunities. The impact of those in rural areas experiencing educational disadvantage are vast and last a lifetime from a lower quality of life, poorer health, precarious employment conditions, poverty as well as homelessness and addiction; we must commit to breaking the cycle and guarantee quality adult education for all. Adequately resourcing adult education in rural Ireland would provide a guaranteed return on investment across each and every one of the main challenges that will be faced in the next five years.

Regarding 'Question 4. In your opinion, what are the main opportunities available to rural Ireland in the next 5 years, ranked by priority from 1 - 10 (with 1 being the most significant opportunity and 10 being the least significant)?' Understanding the subjectivity of the question, AONTAS prioritised the responses as follows:

- 1) Enabling communities (e.g. supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers; enhancing community amenities)
- 2) Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy)
- 3) Diversification within farming/agri-food sector

- 4) Economic Development: expansion of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging)
- 5) Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs)
- 6) Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural Ireland
- 7) Transport infrastructure and services
- 8) Optimisation of digital connectivity and emerging technologies (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs)
- 9) Revitalisation of towns and villages
- 10) Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation and activity tourism

To Question 5: **'If there are other opportunities which you feel were not included in Question 4, please indicate these in the comment box below'** AONTAS responded with:

Ireland's rural communities have the potential to become recognised leaders in lifelong learning not only within Ireland but also across Europe and the world. While lifelong learning participation rates for Ireland have increased over recent years the country has failed to meet targets set by Government and the EU. If rural policy includes measures for building up, and building on, the capacity of adult learners to adapt and make a positive contribution to the challenges that lie ahead by developing lifelong learning infrastructure in rural Ireland then the current needs and future aspirations of those living outside of our cities and towns can be better met and fulfilled.

Communities in regions that have been left behind can be rejuvenated and thrive where lifelong learning infrastructure is augmented and designed for including those facing the biggest barriers to, and are most distant from, engaging in education. Lifelong learning in Ireland and across Europe is already fighting social isolation, digital illiteracy, xenophobia and racism; while increasing economic and democratic prosperity, civic engagement, social inclusion and cultural integration. Ireland has a strong advantage and established foothold in these areas due to the legacy and ongoing work of its vibrant adult and community education sector. If these important features of Irish rural life are neglected by policymakers then Ireland as a whole will undoubtedly lose ground, missing the opportunity to become world leaders in lifelong learning along with all of its benefits.

In response to **'Question 6. Based on the categories in Question 4, do you have any suggestions to realise these opportunities?'** the response was:

All of the possible opportunities open to rural Ireland in the next five years cannot be fully realised without authentic buy-in and ownership from the people of rural Ireland. As one AONTAS member in Tipperary stated as part of recent membership consultations:

‘The challenge of climate change requires a just transition solution, which will involve adult and community education in two ways. Firstly in terms of proactive retraining and reskilling for workers in vulnerable jobs such as those dependent on fossil fuels towards low or no carbon areas e.g. oil and gas boiler installers switching to heat pumps, electric car maintenance etc. This needs to be carried out in a learner-centred way and cognizant of the fear and disruption that this change will cause to the individuals most affected. It also needs to be resourced imaginatively now in a way which will encourage mature workers to retrain ASAP. The second area is general awareness and understanding of the challenges and solutions around climate change. [...] to embed a new approach and to support learners (and by extension the wider community) towards a low carbon and more sustainable future.’

The constituents of rural Ireland must be empowered to embrace the opportunities before them, not least with regards to adapting to climate change and becoming self-reliant champions for sustainability. Adult education is proven to be one of the most effective forms of self-empowerment available to individuals and their local communities. If rural policy fails to harness this tried and tested catalyst for positive social, economic and environmental change then policymakers risk imposing top-down ineffective measures that may not only fail to be implemented but fall short of achieving their goals in any meaningful way for the people of rural Ireland. Community education effectively engages the hardest to reach groups within rural Ireland, particularly women, lone parents, Travellers and the welcome growth of people from ethnic minority migrant backgrounds. Adult and community education’s success are often due to the quality of educational provision, location, accessibility and outreach, in addition to the supports provided such as childcare. In many cases community education offers the only accessible educational opportunity for learners in rural areas. Adult and community education should be sustainably funded, effectively measured and recognised on an equal footing with other areas of the education system. It should be recognised as having a specific and crucial role in increasing not only educational equality but as decreasing overall inequality between those living in rural areas and their urban counterparts.

The remaining questions in the survey pertained mainly to individual respondents’ age, the county they lived in, gender and so on.

AONTAS
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6
www.aontas.com
01 406 8220

Company Registration Number: 80958
Registered Charity Number: 6719

