AONTAS
The Voice of
Adult Learning

Submission to the Department of Rural and Community Development's Statement of Strategy 2025-2028

AONTAS- the National Adult Learning Organisation

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About AONTAS

AONTAS is 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 robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the transformative impact of adult learning on individuals and society. We represent a diverse membership network that connects with communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research, campaigns, and policy recommendations for social change.

Submission Summary

To realise the potential of community education in contributing to Department of Rural and Community Development's (DRCD) strategic goals and SICAP objectives, AONTAS recommends the following:

1. **Recognise the role and value of community education** as a central mechanism for implementing SICAP (2024-2028) and DRCD (2023-2025) strategic goals related to social inclusion, and the empowerment of individuals and communities.

2. **Implement needs-based, sustainable funding models** for community education providers that reflect the intensive, long-term support required by participants. This will further promote the realisation of DRCD (2023-2028) Strategic Goal 4, ensuring effective engagement of SICAP (2024-2028) target groups.

3. **Promote collaborative planning and integrated delivery** of community programmes through Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Local Development Companies (LDCs) in partnership with community education providers. This aligns with DRCD (2023-2025) Strategic Goal 4 of fostering stakeholder collaboration in community contexts.

4. **Affirm a broad definition of social inclusion** that includes full participation in social, economic, and cultural life, supporting DRCD Strategic Goal 3 (2023-2025) and SICAP's (2024-2028) focus on addressing complex barriers to inclusion.

Background

In the current context of rising inequality, social polarisation, and literacy challenges (Social Justice, 2023; CSO, 2024; Cohen et al., 2024), community education offers a critical intervention. It plays an essential role in promoting full participation in society, empowering individuals, and strengthening community resilience (Meyler et al., 2024; Doody, 2021; SOLAS, 2024). In fact, community education is uniquely positioned to advance the DRCD (2023-2025) Strategic Goal 3: "Support empowered, inclusive and resilient communities." Community education also aligns with the objectives of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (Pobal, 2024), which include supporting disadvantaged individuals, promoting lifelong learning, and fostering collaboration among local stakeholders and agencies. For this reason, we recommend the DRCD explicitly recognise and invest in the community education sector as a vehicle for achieving its 2025–2028 strategic ambitions in the forthcoming Statement of Strategy.

AONTAS Recommendations in Detail

1. Recognise the role and value of community education

We urge the DRCD to explicitly name community education as a strategic asset in the 2025–2028 Statement. It offers proven pathways to achieving SICAP outcomes and DRCD's broader goals of empowering communities and promoting equity. This is achieved through its capacity to engage diverse groups and communities at risk of disadvantage (SOLAS, 2024b; Pobal, 2024). This strength of community education lies in its flexible, and tailored programmes that are based on local need. When resourced appropriately, community education providers can establish trust through relational practice, providing holistic supports to address barriers to participation in learner centred practice fostering long-term engagement in learning (Kyle, 2018; Doody, 2021; Meyler et al., 2023; Meyler et al., 2024). Despite this value, community education remains under-recognised in formal strategy documents. Increased visibility for community education in the forthcoming strategy will ensure that it is recognised as a key stakeholder in SICAP delivery, and promote the realisation of its value for individuals and communities.

2. Deliver needs-based funding for community education

In recognition of the intensive nature of interventions in community education supports, consideration should be given to longer term funding cycles that are based on needs analysis at a community level (Darmody & Smyth, 2018; Magrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019). This approach aligns with DRCD Strategic Goal 4 and strengthens SICAP's capacity to reduce inequality and promote inclusion.

Community education providers face persistent challenges with multiple sources of short-term, output-driven funding models that do not reflect the intensive, relational nature of their work (Fitzsimmons & Magrath, 2017; Cobain et al., 2021). This can have an impact on learners who avail of SICAP supports, as participants often experience multiple social and personal barriers to social inclusion and require longer term supports to overcome these challenges (McGuinness et al., 2016; Whelan et al., 2019; Meyler et al., 2023). Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency over funding levels and supports (McGuinness et al., 2016; Darmody & Whelan, 2018). This can hamper the sector's capacity to respond to increased demand, and emerging need (SOLAS, 2024a; Magrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019). An urgently needed review and reform of the funding mechanisms will help the sector respond more effectively to the needs of the communities and groups they serve.

3. Promote collaborative planning and integrated delivery

We recommend formalising and resourcing collaborative planning structures across all SICAP delivery areas. This will ensure a coherent, joined-up approach that leverages the full potential of local and national actors to deliver sustainable community outcomes. This collaborative approach has been affirmed as valuable when considering the measurement of community education impacts, ensuring that the outcomes captured are relevant to both learner experiences, and key decision-makers (Cobain & Neilands, 2025).

This approach can capitalise on SICAP's flexibility in supporting innovative, community-led responses while ensuring that the outcomes attained are meaningful for all stakeholders, including funders. Where collaboration between LDCs, LCDCs, and Education and Training Boards is embedded, outcomes are enhanced through shared planning, efficient use of resources, and reduction in service duplication (Pyne, 2017). However, this collaborative practice is inconsistent across the country (Dermody & Smyth, 2018).

4.   Affirm a broad definition of social inclusion

SICAP's core goals, building inclusive communities and empowering people at risk of disadvantage, are vital to achieving DRCD's vision of a socially inclusive, cohesive Ireland. However, critiques of SICAP implementation highlight a disproportionate emphasis on labour market activation, which risks overlooking deeper social and structural barriers (Dermody & Smyth, 2018).

A skills-focused approach alone cannot address the multifaceted nature of exclusion. Participants often face intersecting personal and systemic barriers, requiring holistic and person-centred educational interventions (Meyler et al., 2023). We recommend that the forthcoming strategy includes an expansive definition of social inclusion that recognises the role of adult learning and community development in promoting wellbeing, dignity, and participation. The European Commission (2010 in Dermody & Smyth, 2018:10) defines social inclusion as a process where disadvantaged individuals gain the opportunities and resources necessary for full participation in economic, social and cultural life. This full participation is necessary for both individual and community wellbeing. Community education can support the full scope of social inclusion as defined above through holistic, learner centred community-based supports (Meyler et al., 2024; Doody, 2021; SOLAS, 2024a, 2024b).

Conclusion

AONTAS remains committed to working in partnership with the Department of Rural and Community Development to ensure the Statement of Strategy 2025–2028 reflects the lived realities of learners and communities across Ireland. We believe that placing community education at the heart of national strategy is not only an investment in social inclusion, but in the long-term sustainability, cohesion, and wellbeing of rural and urban communities alike.

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