



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Submission on the Electoral Commission's Education and Public Engagement Strategy 2025

AONTAS Consultation Submission

MARCH 2025

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About AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969, working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by our robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change.

Introduction

Democratic disengagement and misinformation are rising, threatening social cohesion (Ecker et al., 2024; Kitching & Lathrop, 2024; Social Justice Ireland, 2024). Community education offers a proven solution to counter these challenges by fostering civic participation (BEEP, 2024). This submission highlights the critical role of community education in responding to these challenges and makes key recommendations for support.

Our key recommendations are:

1. Support existing voter education programmes and support local groups to roll these out
2. Embed democratic awareness activities into existing adult and community education programmes
3. Support Adult Learner Councils to be champions of voter education and engagement
4. Connect voter education and registration with the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum

Community Education and Democratic Participation

Community Education provides values led, learner centred programmes that are rooted in local communities and responsive to their needs. This form of education provides accessible, mostly part-time options that include wrap around supports to ensure the

engagement of learners at risk of disadvantage (ETBI, 2021; Cobain et al., 2021; Meyler et al., 2024). As community education is embedded in and responsive to marginalised communities this positions the sector as a key player in addressing democratic disengagement and political awareness.

The need for a response to emerging social issues relevant to democratic engagement has been highlighted by Social Justice Ireland (2024) and TASC (Kitching & Lathrop, 2024) amongst others. In a recent report on inequality and social cohesion, Social Justice Ireland (2024) outlines learning from research which links a rise in inequality, disinformation and polarisation to a rise in populist politics. This has implications for social cohesion and democratic engagement particularly for marginalised communities who are more vulnerable to this social issue. Community education has a central role to play in tackling these issues.

Despite the value that community education offers for learners and communities as a response to social issues, the sector faces ongoing challenges in the delivery of its services and supports to under-resourced communities (Cohen et al., 2024). These issues include the precarity of funding sources for the delivery of programmes, which results in a reduction in the sector's capacity to deliver value for learners and (Cobain et al., 2021; McGrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019). This has implications for the engagement of learners at risk of disadvantage. The sector must be adequately resourced and supported if it is to deliver on its promise for democratic engagement through education.

Key Recommendations for Encouraging Democratic Participation in Adult Education

There are several key areas where democratic participation and voter engagement can be further promoted in collaboration with Electoral Commission.

1. Support existing voter education programmes and support local groups to roll these out

The model of collaboration between AONTAS and DALC (see below) could be scaled up and rolled out across Ireland in collaboration with the Electoral Commission. This activity would involve generating links between local leaders, politicians and education providers to generate actions that would engage local communities. This would need to be supported

with grants for community education providers to support the planning and delivery of programmes locally.

2. Embed democratic awareness activities into existing adult and community education programmes

Adult and community education providers across Ireland are delivering thematic courses on a number of key areas, such as personal development, literacy, green skills, and employment focused opportunities. The providers are linked in with their communities and there is scope to embed voter education into this vibrant landscape of provisions, whether using topical discussions to encourage voting, or running voter registration drives. The sector must be resourced, supported and empowered to conduct this work and maximise the reach of democratic education.

3. Support Adult Learner Councils to be champions of voter education and engagement

Democratic engagement begins in the education sector for many learners. Democratic structures are well embedded in the higher education sector. However, in the Further Education and Training sector, adult learner councils are only emerging in the last number of years. AONTAS have a number of initiatives supporting ETBs to set up adult learner councils. As this sector supports higher levels of engagement for diverse learners at risk of disadvantage (SOLAS, 2022), supporting voter education with and through these councils may have wider impacts for communities at risk of disadvantage who are more vulnerable to misinformation and disengagement (Social Justice Ireland, 2024). The councils could then be local champions for voter engagement and education.

4. Connect voter education and registration with the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum

The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is another arena of practice in the adult learner sector where there is opportunity to promote civic engagement in democratic processes. AONTAS carries out the National FET Learners Forum annually across Ireland, engaging with over 2,000 learners each year. The National FET Learner Forum offers a space for learners to share experience, articulate their needs and influence

the policies and practices that shape their education. As a democratic model of planning and evaluation in adult education there is scope to integrate voter education and registration processes into the operations of the forum.

Democratic Education in Practice

The potential of adult and community education to support democratic awareness and engagement is well illustrated in the following examples of good practice which include options to support voter awareness, combat misinformation, and promote political participation.

1. Voter Education Training

AONTAS partnered with Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) to run a two-day residential experiential training programme on voter education. DALC delivered their excellent Voter Education “Train the Trainer Programme” to 13 AONTAS members. This unique training opportunity for AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) Members was supported through a CEN Community of Practice to promote voter education in community contexts. This community of practice supported the generation of shared insights through positive collaboration including the development and delivery of tailored local programmes. This project demonstrated the value of, and appetite for voter education with learners in under-resourced communities.

As part of this project Belmayne Community Group ran a Voter Education Group focused on a social inclusion voting campaign. This programme aimed to address the issue of low voter turnout in this area and its potential impact on the allocation of resources to this community. Belmayne Community Group worked to actively facilitate engagements between local people and local representatives and brought residents to the Dáil to learn about democratic processes. This learning demonstrated why voting matters for communities at risk of disadvantage, and the potential impact voting can have on communities in order to overcome a sense of political disengagement.

Another example of a programme on Voter Education was run by Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI) Ronanstown and Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI) Mullingar/Women’s Community Projects, Mullingar. This project brought together perspectives from urban area and rural areas to stimulate debate, a key component of a deliberative democracy.

Participants learned about local elections and the voting process, and explored the key issues being discussed in the General Election, along with the benefits and difficulties of being part of the European Union. This fostered democratic engagement and political participation for the learners who took part.

2. [Connecting Communities Storytelling Workshops](#)

AONTAS also delivered three storytelling workshops for community education providers, to help educators and professionals promote empathy and social cohesion in their local communities. The need for fostering more connection and empathy is born out of the growing polarisation in our communities due to emerging anti-immigration sentiments and disinformation. This has implications for the way communities express political sentiments. It is an important opportunity to share information through stories which can help open democratic engagement with key social issues faced by communities at risk of marginalisation.

3. [Community Education Against Disinformation Workshop](#)

AONTAS also hosted an online meeting with members of the CEN, to reflect on their experiences of community tensions and generate insights for practice based on their responses. This workshop led to the development of a Community Education Against Disinformation Workbook. This workbook is currently being developed as part of an IHREC funded project and will be used to promote digital competencies that ensure participants engage with digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative ways. This community-based response to misinformation has potential to support critical engagement with ideas in an era where online information has a significant impact on voting preferences. This work will be further progressed through a Community of Practice using a 'train the trainer' model based on the completed workbook.

4. [Adult Education for Democracy Webinar](#)

As part of the Citizens' Xelerator Project, AONTAS held an online session for professionals in adult education to promote work in education for democracy. This session gave CEN members the opportunities to discuss democratic and civic literacy in adult and community education. During the webinar attendees were introduced to Citizens Xelerator project

resources and activities. These resources promoted a structured approach to support adults with unmet literacy needs to enhance their literacy and promote democratic and civic engagement in their local communities. The model focuses on promoting personal, social, and learning competences while encouraging active participation in community initiatives.

5. [BEEP: Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation](#)

The project identified barriers to democratic participation for groups across Europe, to inform the development of teaching methods that could empower citizens to overcome these obstacles to participation. This European project included a series of workshops, classes, and participatory learning experiences underpinned by a research report. Examples of activities identified as exemplars of practice in community education in Ireland included free online political education to promote the participation of rural women in politics and address the imbalance of representation in politics.

Conclusion

The capacity of the adult and community education sector in Ireland to address issues of democratic engagement and participation in political life is clear. The examples given in this submission highlight the particular strength of programmes that are responsive to local communities and interests, ensuring that the importance of voting is promoted. Moreover, community education provides opportunities to promote and support conversations on social issues which is a key factor in deliberative democratic processes. The Electoral Commission must provide targeted funding so that this value can be realised.

The Electoral Commission should develop strategic collaboration with stakeholders in the system to ensure that the delivery of public education and engagement programmes maximise their impact by drawing on the strengths of the sector's practices. This should include supporting the development of small-scale voter education programmes and connecting with democratic structures in the wider FET system to reach diverse adult learners and promote democratic engagement.

The diversity of programmes developed and delivered in recent years highlight the importance of integrating these recommendations into a strategy that can have a wider

impact on societal wellbeing through the promotion of a healthy, deliberative democracy where there are no barriers to participation.

AONTAS are pleased to submit to this important and timely strategy and would welcome future opportunities to collaborate and drive forward programmes to promote democratic participation and engagement with key stakeholders.

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