

# TRANSFORMING ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

*A Manifesto for Change*





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# OUR VISION FOR ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Throughout my years of working in adult and community education in Ireland, I have seen the life-changing impact of this sector on people's lives and on our society. There have also been great strides from Government and policymakers in creating an education system that is more flexible and inclusive for all.

However, people are still being left behind. The Government must act to make our education system equitable by prioritising those furthest behind first.

Our society has been dealing with major challenges in recent years, and the adult and community education sector has been on the front line. We have had the ongoing housing crisis, rises in the cost of living, COVID-19 Pandemic, increases in violence and aggression against women, the damaging influence of misinformation on social media, and the growing movement towards racism and threats to democracy.

This is made worse by existing barriers, which prevent people from accessing education or staying in their courses. These include a lack of:

- accessible and affordable childcare
- reliable and regular public transport
- mental health supports and counselling for learners
- financial supports to facilitate people leaving low-paid jobs and returning to education or meeting their basic needs while on a programme.

Those working in the adult and community education sector have sought to address these challenges, often with very little funding and recognition for the pivotal role they play in local communities.

Our Government must prioritise people who have faced barriers or those who have not had the same opportunities as others. This means prioritising people with disabilities, working-class people, those living in rural areas, older people, people who have experienced addiction, refugees, lone parents (typically women), people experiencing homelessness, and carers.

Adult and community education offers a clear solution for creating a more equal and inclusive Ireland by reaching out to, and supporting, people that have been marginalised.



But the sector is not recognised for its essential role in Irish society. Its impact is still undervalued. Without it, social issues would worsen. For example, community education is proven to build relationships and solidarity in communities. An investment in adult and community education is an investment in the health and future of our country. We want to see real change within the lifetime of the new Government.

With this manifesto, we are calling for a new vision of how adult and community education is recognised and funded. We need systematic and transformative changes. We recommend revisiting the 2000 'Learning for Life' White Paper to tackle today's urgent challenges, such as social exclusion and homelessness, and the under-resourcing of community education. These issues hinder societal cohesion and access to adult learning. The Government must address them.

New policies and infrastructure won't solve these problems without the right foundations—people need homes, health, food, financial security, and stability. We must stop judging educational success by accredited outcomes and start focusing on the equality of conditions in people's lives.

As a society, we've worked to make education more flexible and person-centred, but we must reframe it as a public good. Education leads to happier, healthier people and will build a more equal, stable Ireland. That benefits us all.

Our vision is an Ireland where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities.

**Is mise le meas,  
Dearbháil Lawless**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At AONTAS, we are committed to advocating for adult and community education as a vital tool for addressing the social injustices and inequalities that have worsened in recent years. In a time of deepening crises—including the housing shortage, cost-of-living pressures, and increasing hostility toward vulnerable groups—adult education provides the knowledge and skills necessary to foster social equality, justice, and resilience.

Our mission is to ensure that adult learning is recognised, valued, and adequately supported across Ireland, empowering individuals and communities to build a more just and inclusive society.

We are calling on the next government to make 5 transformative changes to support adult learners and adult and community education providers.



## **5 TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGES FOR POLICYMAKERS**

1. Reform the financial supports system for adult learners
2. Commit to sustainable, multi-annual funding for community education providers
3. Provide accessible and reliable wraparound services for adult learners including childcare, transport, and counselling
4. Use the National Training Fund to support adults with lower levels of educational attainment
5. Ensure meaningful Public Sector Duty processes in adult and community education.

## **QUICK WINS TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS**

1. Increase financial supports for adult learners
2. Establish a one-stop-shop for financial supports and pathways to adult education.

## **QUICK WINS TO SUPPORT ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROVIDERS**

1. Ensure secure and stable contracts for adult and community education workers
2. Simplify funding criteria, reduce administrative burden on staff

# 5

## **TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGES FOR POLICYMAKERS**



## CHANGE 1

# Reform the financial support system for adult learners

### LEARNER SPOTLIGHT

“The way the system is set up is chaos. For me, I lost my vision at 19. I’ve returned to education now through Laois and Offaly ETB. I don’t receive any financial support for my course. But if I get paid for the work experience I do as part of my course, my blind pension and blind welfare allowances might be taken away”

*Ailish Dunne, adult learner at Laois and Offaly ETB*



The existing system isn’t serving those who need it most. It is too complicated and inconsistent across the country. This puts pressure on people who would like to return to education, and contributes to drop-out rates and lack of engagement.

The Government must simplify the process so that financial supports are available and consistent for all adults across the country.

We know that the majority of people accessing adult and community education are from working-class backgrounds. The existing approach of suspicion against the potential learner and the requirement of proof of the learner’s good intentions is counter-intuitive to increasing equality in Ireland through the education system.

Not everyone was born with the same access to money and education. We need to reform the financial supports system for adult learners so that everyone can access education and have their basic needs met.

## CHANGE 2

# Commit to sustainable, multi-annual funding for community education



## EDUCATION PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

“Community education organisations survive on inconsistent and insecure grants and funding, despite being an essential service, particularly for people who experience disadvantage in our society. Grants often do not cover all costs and have challenging conditions attached. We strongly advise the establishment of ring-fenced and full cost recovery funding for the sector”

*Pamela Latimer, Education and Training Business Development Manager, Longford Women's Link*

Currently, the sector relies on insecure, short-term funding, which impacts the quality of programmes and facilities. Many centres lack essential amenities like proper heating, lighting, accessibility features, and up-to-date digital technology.

We advocate for a 30% increase in funding for community education, bringing SOLAS investment in community education to €30m annually. This includes increasing Reach Funding to €10m per year.

This sustainable funding is crucial for achieving educational equality across Ireland.





## CHANGE 3

# Provide accessible and reliable wraparound services including childcare, transport, and student counselling



### EDUCATION PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

“Access to childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for parents. The absence of good quality childcare is preventing or delaying people’s participation. A voucher system or local childcare arrangement would both enable parents to engage in community education and give children access to the early years curriculum”

*Sinead Mahon, Ronanstown Women’s Collective*

## Accessible childcare

A lack of childcare is a major barrier to education, especially for lone parents, 86% of whom are women. This group faces high levels of deprivation and financial instability.

We urge the expansion of on-site childcare in adult education centres and call for a public childcare model that is fair and sustainable, improves retention in childcare jobs, and supports women and lone parents to access and remain in education throughout their lives.



## LEARNER SPOTLIGHT

“Transport is a big issue. I have to travel 2 hours on the bus every day. It’s expensive but the transport grant often doesn’t cover it. Because of a limited timetable, I often miss a bus and have to wait for hours.”

*John Smith, adult learner (anonymised in our research findings to protect learner confidentiality)*



## *Reliable, frequent and affordable transport*

Adult learners face unreliable public transport, especially in rural areas, making it difficult to attend courses or apprenticeships on time.

We need a public transport system that aligns with course schedules and is free for adult learners, who often come from under-resourced backgrounds.

Transport routes and frequency should be increased, and fuel allowances for adult learners and apprentices should be raised to match real costs.

## *Counselling*

Our [research](#) has found that 1 in 3 adult learners say mental health problems affect their ability to learn or study. This links to high accommodation costs and issues with transport access, which are hindering people’s ability to take part in courses.

Learners need more access and availability of appointments with counsellors. Session must be affordable for learners.



## **CHANGE 4**

# **Use the National Training Fund to support adults with lower levels of educational attainment**

The National Training Fund (NTF) has been in surplus since 2015, accumulating year-on-year. According to DFHERIS, the surplus could reach €2 billion by 2025.

The NTF should be used to support adults with lower levels of educational attainment to take up learning opportunities. The underspend should focus particularly on programmes at levels 1 to 4 on the National Framework for Qualifications.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) reports that nearly 50% of adults struggle with digital skills, 1 in 5 struggle with literacy, and 1 in 4 struggle with numeracy. The fund should be expanded to include these groups. This would help meet the EU lifelong learning target of 60% by 2030.

The Government must use the NTF to make our education system equitable. It must prioritise those furthest behind to step back into education and employment.

## CHANGE 5

# Ensure meaningful Public Sector Duty processes in adult and community education

The Government must commit to a bottom-up approach to ensure the meaningful impact of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (“Public Sector Duty”), particularly for communities at risk of marginalisation and discrimination in our education system.

All public bodies in Ireland have a responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination, and protect the human rights of everyone affected by their policies and plans—including those related to adult and community education, like the Reach Fund and the National Tertiary Office joint courses.

Adult and community education offer essential support for groups who are furthest behind in our education system and most at risk. Civil society organisations focussed on educational equality and learner voice must be central in Public Sector Duty processes in order to ensure that goals of equality and inclusion through participation in education are achieved.

Inviting the participation of those working and learning through adult and community education will demonstrate that policies are having the intended effect and show unintended negative consequences. It will highlight where policy misalignment is creating barriers to education. This is essential to creating an equal Ireland and would support the realisation of Public Sector Duty values across the whole of Government.



# QUICK WINS TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS

The cost of education in Ireland is too high, with hidden expenses that particularly affect adults returning to education. One in three Irish adults surveyed cited the lack of financial support as a major barrier, especially for those from under-resourced communities. This contributes to social and economic inequality, worsening issues like homelessness and mental health challenges. Furthermore, this does not capture the people whose barriers prevented them from returning to education in the first place.

People returning to education, often from working-class backgrounds and at risk of poverty, are being neglected by the current system. While some financial supports exist, the guidelines are unclear and inconsistent. To achieve an equitable education system, more support and resources for adult learners are essential, including a “one-stop-shop” for information, accessible across Ireland.





## *Increase financial supports for adult learners*

Many people who work in low-paid, precarious jobs might want to go back to education but feel it is too much of a risk, personally and financially. To improve a person's circumstances and their quality of life, education must be a realistic and logical option. We are calling on the Government to:

- **Increase social welfare and disability payments for adult learners:** Most weekly payments are below the poverty line, meaning that many adult learners are at risk of poverty. We need to see an increase in social welfare and disability payments to adult learners. This will help keep people in education, improve their career opportunities, and increase social equality in Ireland.
- **Increase supplementary allowances:** Supplementary allowances are financial supports for accommodation, food, and travel. Current meal allowances are just 80 cent per day for full-time trainees, and accommodation allowances are just under €70 per week. This is not enough to cover costs. Many learners are working nearly full-time hours. This either negatively impacts their learning, or they eventually become obliged to leave their courses and return to low-paid jobs.

For more on why increased financial supports are essential, read our [2025 pre-budget submission](#).

## *One-stop-shop for pathways information*

There is no simple system for people to find out about financial supports for returning to education. Information is scattered, unclear, and inconsistent. This deters potential learners.

We need a well-managed website and a free-phone service that provides clear, national information on financial supports and pathways in adult education across Ireland.

# QUICK WINS TO SUPPORT ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Across Ireland, thousands of front-line education workers are helping people return to education, building trust and providing essential support. Yet, adult and community education remains undervalued, and most workers in this sector are women. Current policies worsen gender inequalities through low pay, lack of recognition for caregiving, and limited career progression.

Tutors, who are essential to supporting vulnerable learners, have had to protest against poor pay and conditions. They work at an hourly rate, lack job security, and often rely on social welfare in the summer. Their dedication to improving society deserves fair pay, better conditions, and accessible resources.

Adult and community education is vital for a just society, especially for those most in need, as identified in the National Access Plan.

Amid rising racism and intolerance, investing in local and community education is more crucial than ever.



## LEARNER SPOTLIGHT

My three tutors here are fantastic. They have been so helpful and I really appreciate their support and guidance throughout this course. They provide me with assistance, and let me know what needs to be done and how to do it. They provide feedback and suggestions on my work to help me improve, thus challenging me to do better and has been really helpful when I've had any personal issues – I really appreciate them”

*Blessing Chidiogo, adult learner at Carrick-on-Suir FET Centre with Tipperary Education and Training Board*

## Ensure secure and stable contracts for adult and community education workers

Stable contracts should be provided to programme coordinators, who manage logistics and ensure compliance with regulations.

Many people working in adult and community education centres do so under precarious and insecure contracts.

Education providers rely heavily on administrators to secure and maintain funding, a task that is time-consuming and burdensome.

AONTAS research found that 76 organisations, supporting about 15,000 adult learners, are funded by 9 different Government departments through 51 separate funding streams.

Administrative burden like this creates a heavy workload and a lack of clarity for organisations already offering vital support to our communities.

### EDUCATION PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

“Come December each year, community education providers have little to no security in whether they will be able to keep offering courses and build on the progress made by learners”

*CEN member (anonymous survey, 2024)*



## Simplify funding criteria, reduce administrative burden on staff

Simplifying processes and securing long-term funding would allow education providers to focus more on supporting learners and delivering impactful programmes.

Community education providers work with limited resources but face the same administrative demands as larger institutions, including heavy documentation and funding pressures.

The current rigid criteria for funding also have the effect of discouraging potentially vulnerable learners due to intrusive registration requirements, such as asking whether a potential learner has been in a prison. This goes against the ethos of community education, which prioritises social justice, people’s well-being, and equal access to learning.

We recommend reducing the administrative burden for adult and community education workers by revising funding and accreditation systems to support non-accredited programmes that aid marginalised groups.

# BENEFITS OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION



## LEARNER SPOTLIGHT

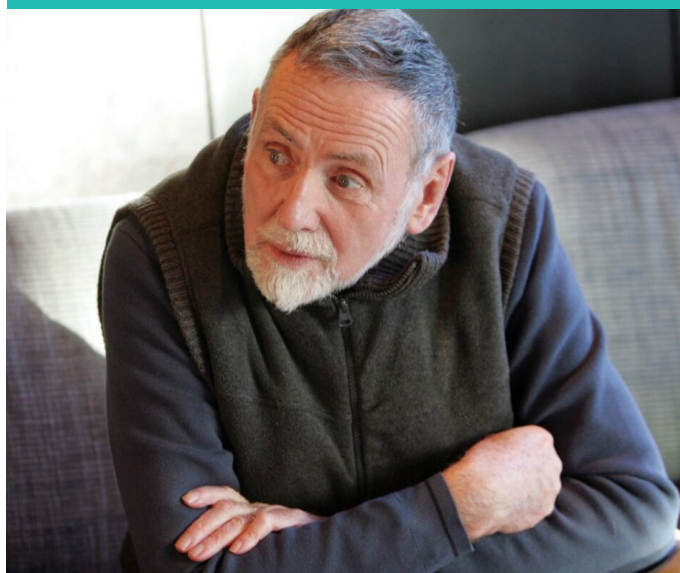
“Community education is crucial for refugees and asylum seekers as it fosters inclusion, offers essential skills, and empowers individuals to rebuild their lives within new communities. Programmes enable participants to navigate daily challenges, integrate into society, and contribute positively to their new environments”

*Duale, asylum seeker in Westmeath*

## EDUCATION PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

“Community education provides a very important entry point for many people seeking sanctuary. It is vital in supporting our migrant community in personal development, boosting confidence and self-esteem, and helping integration into the local community”

*Gerry Callaghan, the founder of New Horizons Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Group, Athlone*





- **Transforms Lives:** Offers both accredited qualifications and personal achievement, boosting self-confidence and mental wellness.
- **Builds Connections:** Provides opportunities to form new relationships and integrate into the community.
- **Diverse Learning Options:** Includes short courses, part-time or full-time classes in various fields, such as digital skills, plumbing, carpentry, art, local history, yoga, healthcare, accounting, and more.
- **Welcoming Environment:** Non-competitive and designed to ease people into or back into learning, allowing for multiple course participation.
- **Broad Range of Opportunities:** Enables career changes, academic progression, or personal satisfaction, from apprenticeships to university or local classes.
- **Gives Purpose:** Beyond skills-building, it enhances participants' sense of purpose and societal engagement.

## SPOTLIGHT: *What is community education?*



Community education is a grassroots change-oriented model of adult learning. It provides an inclusive and healing space for those who are furthest from the formal education system, and – crucially – it is based on what people need and is driven by local communities and local people. It is particularly important for people who have had negative experiences of education and who have suffered the impact of barriers such as poverty, addiction, and social inequality. Its supportive environment is proven to help people come back to and stay in adult learning. It is vital for promoting well-being, social justice, and a more equitable education system in Ireland.

## SPOTLIGHT: *What is adult education?*



Adult education is any form of learning undertaken by an adult. This includes structured programmes, work based learning and ongoing, flexible lifelong learning in a range of settings. Unlike a “student” who typically follows a course in an institution, an adult learner actively engages in learning that can be formal or non-formal education including art classes, literacy, or apprenticeships. Adult education values real-life experience, fosters a democratic learning environment, and involves learners in shaping their education. It supports personal development, inclusion, and community engagement, making it crucial in addressing societal challenges and promoting social well-being.

# ABOUT AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all.

We have over 400 members who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns as we advocate for policy change in our education system to benefit everyone across the island.

We have recently launched a national public campaign, [“Holding You Back”](#), which highlights the barriers preventing people from accessing education. The campaign is a response to issues raised by adult learners, our members, and through our research, which demonstrate that there are not enough financial supports for people to access and stay in education, and that people’s basic needs are not being met, including being able to pay for household bills and meals while undertaking a course. The campaign is supported by actor and writer Emmet Kirwan, who has spoken about ongoing class divides in our education system. It has also featured a mural in Dublin city centre by street artist Emmalane Blake. Speaking about the campaign, our CEO Dearbháil Lawless and one of our learner ambassadors Ailish Dunne were featured on [RTÉ News](#). Find out more at [aontas.com/holdingyouback](https://aontas.com/holdingyouback)



We conduct a Learner Voice research project nationwide, reaching over 3,500 learners last year, and we represent members and learners at 27 different steering groups and committees, including working directly with Government.

We are proud to have had a central role in bringing about positive change for learning in local communities, as demonstrated through the annual €5 million Reach Fund; the expansion of funded part-time courses; and the new Framework for Community Education; and the new model of unified tertiary education with “joint courses” between Further Education and Training and third level that allow people to move seamlessly from local learning to university.

Through our Community Education Network with over 100 members, we are a direct link with educators in local communities across the island, who would otherwise remain unheard, despite being the bedrock of this unified education system.

Last year, we launched the first map of Community Education, with over 130 members across 26 counties, and the first census of Community Education in Northern Ireland. We are the only organisation working across the island to conduct this kind of research and continually advocate for these small-scale community groups who are making a big difference to people’s lives. With little funding, they work to make our education system open and inclusive for everyone – because a rising tide does not lift all boats.

We are a leader in adult learning across Europe, particularly in Learner Voice – which means that learners have a say in shaping their own education. Both in Ireland and across Europe, we work to ensure that education focuses not just on accredited programmes but on human experience and collective social good.

Last year, we reached 9 million people nationally and internationally through our publications and social media. We publish the only peer-reviewed journal of adult education, the Adult Learner, with cutting-edge research in the field. We raise awareness of the benefits and impact of adult learning in the media and through events like our annual Adult Learners’ Festival, which supported 130 local events across 24 counties last March, reaching over 1 million people.

Learn more at [aontas.com/holdingyouback](https://aontas.com/holdingyouback)

**FIND COMMUNITY  
EDUCATION PROVIDERS IN  
YOUR CONSTITUENCY**

**[map.aontas.com](https://map.aontas.com)**





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