

AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation

Making an Impact: A Reflective View of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF)



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The Voice of
Adult Learning

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a monumental impact on the education system. National and international reports clearly indicate that educational disadvantage has been exacerbated (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; AONTAS, 2020). The seismic shift to remote learning, has posed a significant challenge to some of the most marginalised learner cohorts. Through actions of the working groups established by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) we know who among the general learner population was among the most affected by the crisis (Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group, 2020a). One of the sectors acknowledged as being among the hardest hit, largely for its work in supporting disadvantaged learner cohorts was community education (Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group, 2020b). Additionally, UNESCO has stated that community education is “ideally placed to help adults, particularly the most vulnerable, such as women and other vulnerable groups to adapt to life changes, such as the ones caused by COVID-19” (2020, p.2). Due to the extent of challenge and the pressing need to mitigate educational disadvantage, in July 2020, AONTAS advocated for a [COVID-19 Community Education Support Fund](#).

Minister Harris’ announcement of an €8 million Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) in November 2020, which was managed by SOLAS, was overwhelmingly welcomed by both recipients and also distributors of the fund, Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This report outlines the positive impact the MAEDF has made through community education provision. Across Ireland, in rural and urban areas, community education organisations used the MAEDF to support thousands of disadvantaged learners and helped to address the impact of structural inequalities during the pandemic. Alongside existing challenges, mainly relating to poverty/socio-economic deprivation, initiatives sought to address digital poverty, isolation, and exclusion across learner cohorts including, for example, Travellers, those living in Direct Provision, lone parents, and older people. The impact of the MAEDF, reached far beyond the individual community education learners who benefited from the fund. A number of community education learners with families at home, were now faced with the challenge of not only continuing their own education, but supporting their own children’s home schooling. These supports were vital to ensuring families were resourced and empowered to continue their learning.

However, the challenge to address reduced engagement by marginalised learners, the stark reduction in accreditation rates, and the ongoing need to address digital poverty calls for an additional MAEDF that builds on the learning from the first call. The success of the fund is due to the unrelenting focus on the learners by community education organisations and ETBs, who both worked additional hours within a narrow timeframe to make the MAEDF a success.

AONTAS commends this effort, while also recognising the need for immediate action to mitigate further disadvantage. **As a result, AONTAS calls for a full expenditure of the existing MAEDF, in addition to an extended MAEDF in 2021.** It would be remiss not to acknowledge the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. It will take long-term planning and support to fully redress some of the damage that had been done by COVID-19. Community education must be at the heart of this solution. For this reason, **AONTAS also calls for a sustainable funding model for community education**, one that values the role community education plays in supporting those most in need.

To inform future processes, following the implementation of the MAEDF, AONTAS conducted a survey in January-February 2021. The purpose of this survey was to reflect on the administration and impact of the MAEDF through both the perspective of community education groups and ETBs who administered the MAEDF. The purpose of this reflection was to capture the MAEDF's value, but also to offer insights on how to improve processes for a future MAEDF and similar funding schemes. Drawing from the findings of the survey, this report highlights and celebrates the benefits that the MAEDF has brought to the sector, to learners, and to disadvantaged communities. With a view to the future, it also considers what has been learned to help inform future processes.



Executive Summary

This executive summary reflects the findings from 103 survey responses: 85 from community education groups and 18 from Education and Training Board staff. These responses represent 12 Education and Training Board areas.

Impact of the Fund:

- It is estimated that the MAEDF has benefited more than 10,000 learners across 483 community education groups throughout Ireland
- Respondents described key benefits of the MEADF as supporting disadvantaged learners, creating safe learning spaces, addressing the digital divide, building stronger learning communities, and increasing community education sectoral capacity
- Funded groups included (but may not be limited to) those that had been engaging with learners who were unemployed, learners with a disability, lone parents, migrants, socio-economically disadvantaged, Travellers, Roma, learners living in Direct Provision, substance misusers, ex-prisoners, and learners experiencing homelessness
- The MAEDF provided community education groups with critical funding to address longer-term needs that had existed even before the onset of COVID-19
- The vast majority (98 out of 103 respondents) would welcome an additional MAEDF

Application of the Fund:

- The largest number of respondents (78) identified support for ICT and online learning as a major benefit of the MAEDF, partly because it was the only category available to groups within certain ETBs and may have been the only plausible category for which they could apply considering the timeframe
- Community education groups used the MAEDF to improve facilities and increase safety measures (e.g. purchasing health and safety equipment, or equipment and materials for a community hub)
- A relatively small number of groups applied/received funding to enable additional learner supports, outreach, or additional courses, although the importance of these areas was expressed by many groups as an area of need regarding future funding opportunities

Lessons for the Future:

- The largest number of respondents (49) mentioned an extended timeframe as the area that would make the MAEDF even more beneficial

- Respondents expressed a need for additional, more streamlined, and clearer guidelines across each ETB to facilitate an equitable application process
- Respondents would like to see all MAEDF categories open to groups across every ETB and for a future MAEDF expanded to include further funding for additional categories such as staff costs and broader course provision

Methodology

In January, AONTAS launched an online survey to capture the processes and impact of the MAEDF. The survey was specifically designed to capture responses from both community education groups and Education and Training Boards who distributed the MAEDF. Eighteen staff members from six Education and Training Boards responded to the survey. The survey was open to community education groups who chose not to apply for the MAEDF; those who applied and did not receive the MAEDF; and those who received the MAEDF. A total of 85 community education groups took part in this survey; five of them were those who decided not to apply for the fund and one of them was unsuccessful in the application.

The survey asked what benefits the MAEDF brought to learners and the community, what funding areas would be beneficial to be included in future, and what could be improved to facilitate the administration and implementation of the MAEDF moving forward. These questions were an open-ended format, allowing respondents to write their answers in free text boxes. All responses were then coded by theme and analysed to present the findings that follow.



Key Findings

Impact of the Fund

As summarised in Figure 1, the stated benefits of the MAEDF stretched across a vast area of identified learner support needs, such as supporting disadvantaged learners, creating safe learning spaces, addressing the digital divide, building learner communities, and increasing sectoral capacity.

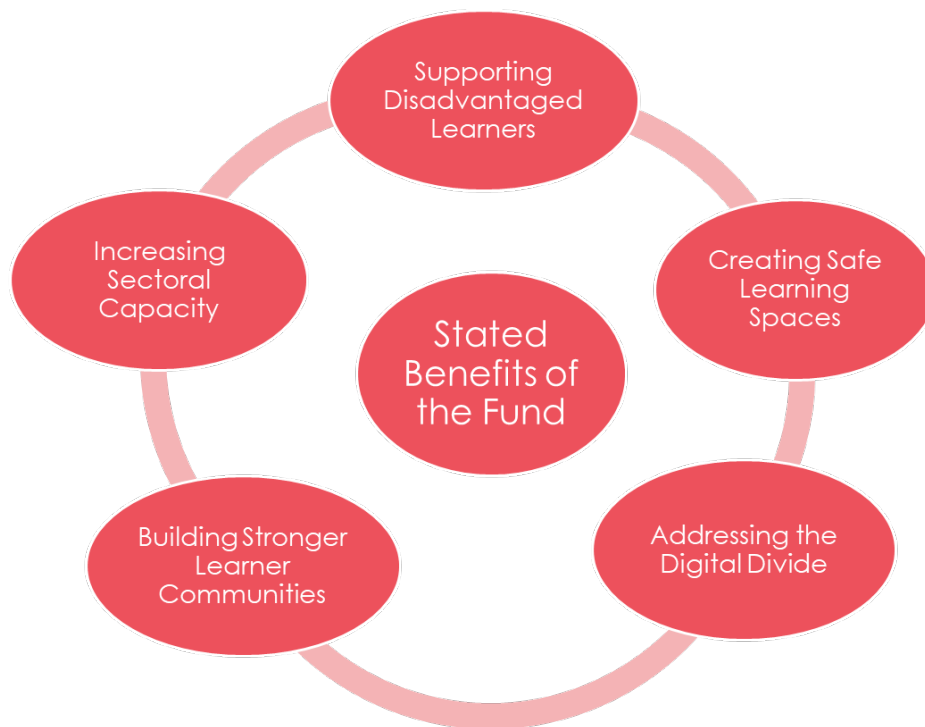


Figure 1: Themes identified as beneficial impacts of the Fund among community education groups

Respondents who received the MAEDF described it as a “game changer,” putting recipients in “a much stronger position starting 2021 than [they] were previously.” Responses demonstrated resoundingly the far-reaching impact of the training supports delivered to a community sector, which has consistently struggled for financial support (Harvey, 2012). This injection of funding was felt to acknowledge the “unique” and holistic approach of grassroots community education provision and its particularly valuable role in supporting learners and communities “through difficult times,” in which “isolation [was] real.” Respondents to the survey acknowledged the impact that the MAEDF had on learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, for many of whom this provision was a lifeline. In particular, funded groups included (but may well not be limited to) those that are engaging with learners who are unemployed, living with a disability, lone parents, migrants, socio-

economically disadvantaged, Travellers, Roma, those living in Direct Provision, substance misusers, ex-prisoners, or people experiencing homelessness (AONTAS, 2020). Indeed, one respondent to the MAEDF survey stated:

“Programmes will run targeting those most vulnerable not currently engaging in education. The programme will also support those that are participating in education to continue their programmes online.”

The impact of the MAEDF for those hard-to-reach groups is already being observed. As one respondent noted, the MAEDF was “enormously beneficial to us in resourcing our IT and online capacity to engage with our refugee families and other hard to reach communities, due to a lack of IT hardware for them.” The MAEDF was applauded for delivering targeted funding with “immediate impact in terms of those most affected by COVID-19.” As one participant surmised:

“This funding has made such a difference to how we can provide our service to the learners. No words can do it justice.”

Crucially, the MAEDF helped to facilitate continued engagement with “hard-to-reach communities” who were most impacted by digital poverty, as well as connecting with those “who feel isolated” and “supporting people to engage and to explore ways to remove barriers to their participation.” Respondents celebrated the fact that the MAEDF was tailored specifically toward “mitigating educational disadvantage and did not have a compulsory labour market support element.” This was felt to be an important component of the MAEDF, validating community education’s holistic and learner-centred approach, which seeks to support the learner, through all aspects of their learning journey, to achieve a broad range of personal and social outcomes.

In many cases, the MAEDF also provided an injection of funding that was long overdue and imminently needed to address the digital divide and meet the needs of under-resourced communities. As one respondent noted, “the learner computers we had on site were ancient. These new laptops will give learners an opportunity to do online courses, upskill, and progress to employment.” Another respondent stated that the MAEDF would “help to

build the digital infrastructure of community education providers and increase their capacity in delivering online learning.” The impact of these purchases was seen lasting even far beyond the current COVID-19 crisis.

Respondents to the survey highlighted how the MAEDF had allowed them to make their facilities safe for learning during COVID-19, which was crucial considering the primacy of face-to-face learning in community education. In addition, groups were able to build their capacity to deliver high-quality learning experiences, by improving their facilities for years to come. As one group noted, “our facility was not fit for use [and the MAEDF] will enable us [to] provide a comfortable facility that the full community [can] enjoy.”

The survey also asked how many learners benefitted from the MAEDF. Based on their answers, it is possible to roughly estimate that the MAEDF has benefited more than 10,000 learners across 483 recipients of the fund throughout Ireland.¹ Respondents also noted that the impact of the MAEDF will grow substantially through 2021, since “learner numbers will increase as the year progresses.” As one respondent stated, the MAEDF gave a “big morale boost at the end of a very difficult year” and “a lot of good projects have now got funding.” This figure should therefore be seen only as one that could potentially grow in future.



¹ The estimate was computed as the average number of learners who benefited from the MAEDF among survey respondents (21 learners) times the number of identified MAEDF recipients (483 groups). The MAEDF recipients were identified based on the list published by SOLAS (2021).

Application of Fund

In order to determine how the MAEDF was used, open survey responses were thematised under the following categories: support for ICT / online learning; non-ICT infrastructure and goods / transportation; mentoring / psychological support; outreach; and additional courses. See Figure 2. Individual responses may have touched on more than one theme identified. Support for ICT / online learning was the most frequent theme. It should be noted, however, that this might be partly because some community education groups were able to apply only under the category of digital technologies, due to ETBs only opening this category for application. The tight timeframe to complete the application and spend the fund may have been another reason why community education groups chose this particular category as it may have been relatively easy to obtain a quotation for purchase.

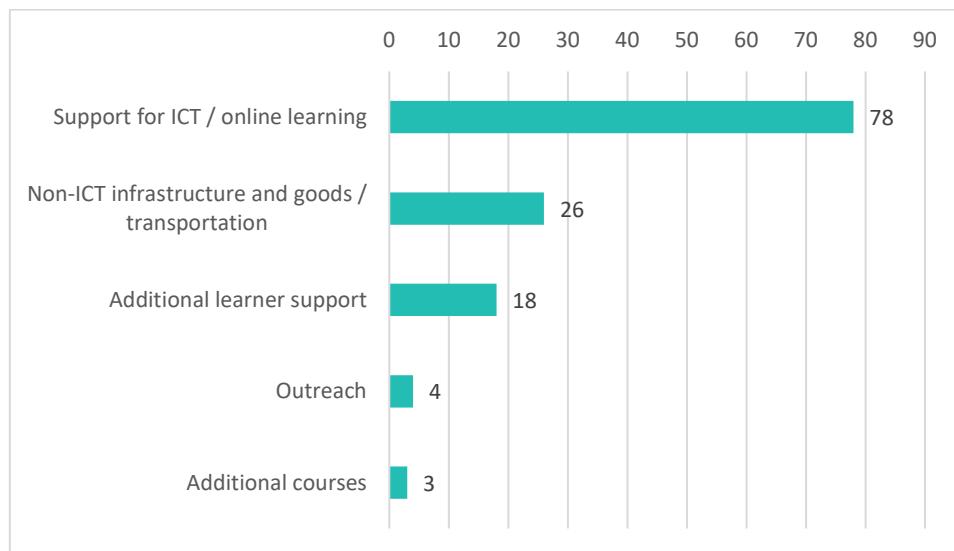


Figure 2: Themes identified as beneficial impacts of the MAEDF among community education groups

Support for ICT / Online Learning

As can be seen in Figure 2, 78 respondents identified support for ICT / online learning as an area of spend. Because of the COVID-19 restrictions, which necessitated online and blended learning, ICT devices and support were essential for most of the community education groups to continue delivering courses. Prior to the delivery of the MAEDF, limited access to devices had been a pervasive issue for learners (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020, p.8). As such, IT devices were an immediate need for groups; the MAEDF clearly filled this critical gap. As one respondent noted:

“[The MAEDF] helped to ensure that learners do not fall behind in their pursuit of community education.”

Another respondent echoed:

“Many of our participants have limited experience and access to IT equipment and have been ‘left behind’ in terms of these essential skills. The current crisis has brought this form of disadvantage into sharp focus and we envisage that the fund will go a long way to alleviate this situation.”

Groups who received funding for ICT/online learning described how the MAEDF “transformed how we work with our groups.” It was noted that the arrival of new IT devices allowed them to coordinate device loan schemes, facilitating the delivery of a huge range of community education provision online. One respondent stated, “the MAEDF grant double[d] our resource of loan devices expanding our scope to offer such a support to participants.” The availability of laptops in particular marked a turning point for learners who were “struggling with Zoom classes on their phones” and were able to “continue attending class[es]” through “laptop loan scheme[s].”²

These laptops and devices helped to support learners from some of the most disadvantaged communities. One respondent noted how the MAEDF enabled them to “distribute laptops to 33 families living in direct provision,” enabling continuity of learning opportunities for these adult learners and their children. The delivery of necessary ICT devices was acknowledged as a major benefit for learners who had been sharing devices with family members including children, “reliev[ing] the pressure in homes.” The challenges around access to devices for parents engaging in community education have emerged consistently during periods of remote learning, as highlighted by one learner engaging in community education who responded to AONTAS’ Learner Survey, noting that they had only “one laptop and three children using it” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020, p.8).

² Devices made available through the MAEDF included laptops, iPads, Chromebooks, tablets, screens, and headphones, mice, keyboards, projectors, charging cabinets, digital age friendly devices, cameras. Other purchases to support online learning included: software, printers, dongles, USB sticks, educational platform accounts, Zoom licences, website development, and a visualiser to record lessons for learners to watch classes back.

In short, respondents foregrounded the significance of the digital technology provided through the MAEDF, which is enabling community education groups and learners to keep learning during the pandemic. The impact of this funding has had an immediate effect for thousands of learners across Ireland; as one group noted:

“[T]he learners have expressed their thanks that they are being provided with laptops. They have expressed that they feel supported.”

Furthermore, IT devices were felt to be a great resource for “the wider community” with “longer term benefit [over] future years too.”

Non-ICT Purchases

A key aspect of the MAEDF, in addition to the provision of ICT devices, was the support which enabled groups to respond to diverse learner needs. Many recipients were able to access funding for other non-ICT resources to assist with blended learning and support continued engagement with learners. Figure 3, provided below, gives an overview of some of these non-ICT resources.



Figure 3: Summary of non-ICT purchases

Some groups used the MAEDF to develop learner support packs, or purchase materials for learners to continue their courses remotely. As one respondent noted:

“The fund has [been] extremely effective. We have successfully linked up online with our older people's group and we have been able to post mail out to over 200 older people living safely at home.”

This group was able to get the “project in action in time for the 3rd lockdown,” allowing it to stay connected with this vulnerable group of learners during a period of prolonged restrictions, in which many older people are experiencing isolation. Another group purchased book tokens to provide learners with the funding necessary to access educational materials such as “study guides.”

While a number of groups used the MAEDF to reach out in creative ways to learners during periods of extended lockdown, others sought to increase their capacity, by applying for funding to improve their facilities and make them safe for learners when restrictions ease and face-to-face learning is again possible. Groups purchased items including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), as well as health and safety equipment, including dividing screens.

Several groups also used the MAEDF to improve their facilities in ways that would allow them to better support their community both during COVID-19 and for years to come. As indicated earlier, these purchases highlight a longstanding need within the sector in terms of financial resources. Purchases included furniture and equipment such as desks, ergonomic chairs, projection screens, printers, and books for libraries. In addition, some course specific purchases were made, including cookery equipment and sewing equipment. As one group noted: “our facility was not fit for use” and the MAEDF “will enable us To provide a comfortable facility that the full community can enjoy.” As such, the MAEDF provided the opportunity for important renovations and improvements to community education facilities.

Additional Learner Supports, Outreach, and Additional Courses

COVID-19 has brought the need for wraparound learner supports and outreach into sharp focus. Eighteen respondents outlined how the MAEDF enabled the provision of critical learner supports. One respondent stated that learners with “intellectual disabilities [such as] autism” were “supported in keeping appointments with members of a multi-disciplinary team” through an online platform, while others explained how the fund enabled them to offer “mentoring support.” Another mentioned that the MAEDF “has provided urgent

counselling to those requiring early intervention.” The availability of such supports is crucial during periods of extended lockdown when “challenges impacting on learning are complex and are negatively impacted by poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation and lack of essential supports” (AONTAS, 2020, p.1).

These wide-ranging challenges are reflected in AONTAS’ engagement with learners during COVID-19. In a learner survey, for example, “10 [of 66] learners stated that their mental health was suffering as a result of the crisis and 6 had experienced bereavement” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020, p.12) and “[s]peaking about their experience of ‘recovery education,’ one learner noted that wraparound supports are now ‘more necessary’ than ever ‘because of the mental health challenges,’ which have been exacerbated by ‘ill-health and fears around COVID-19’ as well as ‘loss of employment’ and ‘restrictions’” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020, p.12). As such, the MAEDF has bolstered groups in providing these vital support systems to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The MAEDF has also helped community education groups to reach out to learners who were disengaged from learning because of challenges associated with the pandemic (as indicated by four respondents). Three respondents also mentioned that the MAEDF allowed them to run additional courses. For example, one respondent stated that the MAEDF was used to connect with “other Community & Statutory organisations regarding referrals to the new programmes supported by [the MAEDF].”



Lessons for the Future

Administration of the Fund

With a view to the future, the survey also asked how the process and/or administration of the MAEDF could be improved. As can be seen in Figure 3, which highlights themes identified in responses, an extended timeframe for applying for and/or spending the MAEDF was the most common response. The limited timeframe for spending the MAEDF sometimes resulted in an underspend for community education groups, who worked around the clock to make purchases in the allocated time. Likewise, ETB staff spent a number of additional hours in the lead up to the holidays ensuring that applications were processed fairly and groups alerted about their outcomes quickly.

Differences in how the application was administered across ETBs, did pose a challenge to some groups. These groups felt the inconsistency of available categories offered through the MAEDF, differing timelines, and different spending requirements upheld by each ETB as a potential area of improvement for a future fund. Groups would like to see consistency across ETBs in terms of what funding is made available to ensure there is equity of opportunity for all community education groups.

More information and/or guidelines was the second most common theme in the survey. In a future round of the MAEDF, a longer timeframe and more information would therefore enable community education groups to have more time to reflect further on what funding areas would be most helpful to apply for, and ETBs to give greater support to these applicants.

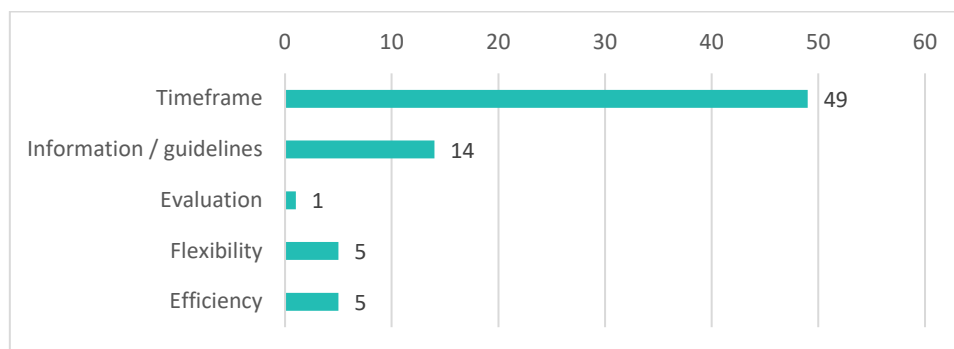


Figure 4: Areas for improvement in process/administration

A smaller number of respondents expressed needs for more flexibility around funding areas and better efficiency in the administrative process of the fund (e.g., “[o]nline portal submissions” and “[l]ess paper work”). One response was about the evaluation of an application; it was stated:

“Applications should be approved on the full amounts applied for. In significantly reducing the allocation it does not allow for the full purchase of intended items and therefore the intended impact is not as great and the project does not become fully implemented as desired.”

A number of these challenges were shared by ETBs and community education groups, both of which believed that more time and greater clarity around the fund would improve the process moving forward. Both groups saw value in the fund and believe that improvements could indeed be made to enhance its impact even more in the future.

Areas of Further Need

When asked if they think another Fund would be beneficial, the vast majority of the respondents (98 out of 103) said, “Yes.” Following this question, respondents were also asked what areas they would like to see included in future in the MAEDF; these are summarised below in Figure 4 featured below.

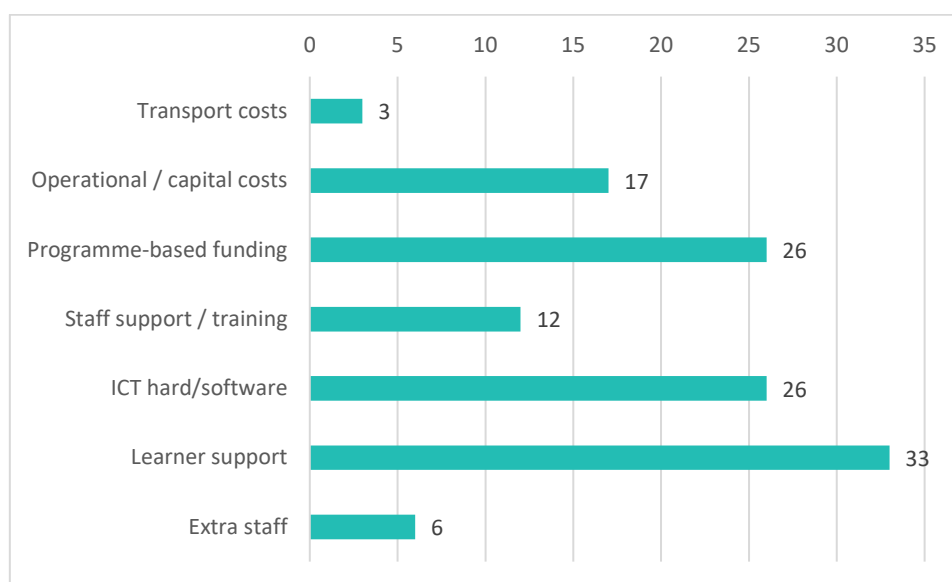


Figure 5: Themes in future funding areas

As can be seen, the desire to see additional funding allocated specifically for learner support was of paramount concern, particularly for groups who could not access this strand of funding in the first round. Recommendations included “funding for mental health

programmes,” “more one day courses and relaxation activities,” and “resourcing [of] social support groups, e.g., health and wellbeing support groups, with funding to purchase learning materials and resources that would be beneficial to their development.” Some respondents noted the challenges faced by learners working from home, with “some people liv[ing] in spaces where they share accommodation” or in situations where “work at home is simply not possible.” These conditions help to explain why respondents believed additional funding specifically for learner supports was such an imperative.

The area of ICT hard/software remained a strong need, even though it was the most common funding area in the first iteration of the MAEDF. This partly relates to longer-term ICT needs, such as “a Rent-to-Buy Scheme so learners will have IT Access [in a] longer term” and “Microsoft Office Suite [l]icences for [l]earners.” For community education groups that used their ICT supports to purchase digital platform licenses to Zoom or Blackboard, there was a question about what to do when these licenses ran out.

The provision of programme-based support stood out as a key recommendation as well, with respondents emphasising the importance of funding “broader life-long learning.” As one group noted, “while IT is very important, funding for more environmental / climate-related initiatives - e.g. horticultural training” would also be welcomed. Courses for relaxation purposes may well be worth investing in, particularly given that AONTAS’ learner survey has indicated that the pandemic has had a significant negative impact on learners’ mental health (Dowdall, Lovejoy, and Farren, 2020).

Operational and/or capital costs were another area that respondents would like to see for funding. This includes outreach activities as well: “[f]unding for promotion and outreach work before re-opening of centres.” One respondent stated:

“There are more challenging times ahead of us and there will be need for new capital development that supports activities at 2m distance for many years to come as best practice for virus safety. Spaces will need to be reconfigured...as [a] standard to support safe practice. These will come at considerable cost to non-profit organisations and non-formal education support service.”

Staff support also came through as an area that should be supported in a future MAEDF. A number of groups would like to see funding made available to pay for tutors to provide courses and the additional resources needed to support learners during these challenging times. One respondent stated:

“[O]ur poor tutor could not support 20 people who had computers, phones, laptops and all needing individual support. He ran another session on voluntary basis for 4 people [which was] much more productive.”

Another comment related to staff support for outreach activities: “I would like to see instruction in areas like good committee skills for voluntary groups [and] [a]ppropriate use of social media for groups.”

Six respondents mentioned extra staff as a desirable funding area of a future MAEDF. One respondent wrote:

“We would also like to see funding to pay staff extra hours or to employ part-time staff to manage a loan scheme but also to spend the time with participants to support them in learning how to use and maximise learning from a distance.”

In other words, the acquisition of ICT devices could not be utilised to their maximum extent to support online learning, if community education groups did not have enough human resources to facilitate their implementation. Another group experienced “a huge demand this Spring (and also in Autumn)” and would like to have “funding for tutor fees to meet demand.”

Three respondents expressed needs for funding learners’ transport costs (e.g., “learner supports including leap cards”). One respondent stated, “[t]ransport and access to supports is a real challenge in rural setting...for many people.” If COVID-19 restrictions ease eventually and learners go back to their learning centres, needs for supporting learners’ transport costs will be expected to become starker.

While welcoming the injection of funding through the MAEDF, survey respondents noted that a demand for funding remained in place. One group stated their hope to see further “assistance with everyday costs – rent, insurance, etc.” made available during COVID-19 “for community organisations who do not receive core funding to cover these costs.”

Conclusion

It is evident from the survey that the MAEDF has had a significant beneficial impact for community education providers and the learners they support. Both community education groups and ETBs celebrated the wide range of benefits the fund brought, and its particular success in mitigating educational disadvantage. The MAEDF was also felt to be “a very welcome boost to the community education.” Through the fund, the “efforts and major contribution of the community sector [had been] recognised.”

While respondents championed the MAEDF, they also highlighted continuing needs within the sector, and made important recommendations to allow the MAEDF to contribute even more to tackling educational inequality. These recommendations included an expanded timeframe for applications and spending, greater flexibility of funding areas, and more information and guidelines. One respondent stated, “[a] lot of good projects have now got funding and it would be great if round two could further help them as well as have monies available for new groups.”

Feedback from this survey should be considered as a first step in fine-tuning the process. It will be vital to consult each ETB for the planning of an additional MAEDF and to hear from community education groups about ongoing and emerging needs. Survey respondents expressed that they hoped such a fund “will be possible again” and, furthermore, highlighted a need for sustained and “secured annual funding [which] is needed for independent community education providers who work tirelessly for their learners and ensure that every opportunity is available to them.” Despite the significant beneficial impact of the MAEDF so far, there remain further needs for funding for the community education sector, which has been engaging with minority, vulnerable, and/or disadvantaged learners to address educational inequality. It is the hope that the information presented in this report will help justify the need for a future MAEDF and a longer-term, sustainable form of funding for the sector.



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About AONTAS

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult education educators, providers, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to access quality adult learning opportunities throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS supports learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in lifelong learning, and advocates for more inclusive and accessible national education policy. AONTAS achieves these aims through research, communications and advocacy. Our work is aimed at working towards an inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.

AONTAS also hosts the Community Education Network, a 100-member strong network of independently managed community education providers. The network is designed to provide a platform for members to work collaboratively, sharing information and resources, offering professional development and working to ensure that community education is valued and resourced. Further information is available at www.aontas.com.

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