

**Submission to the Department
of Rural and Community
Development's public
consultation on their new
Statement of Strategy to
cover the period 2021-2023**



Date Submitted: 19th October 2020



**The Voice of
Adult Learning**

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October 2020

Introduction and brief outline of submission

This submission is made in response to the Department of Rural and Community Development’s public consultation on their new Statement of Strategy to cover the period 2021-2023. The AONTAS response is meant to inform the Department and make clear the importance of adult and community education to the resilience, survival, prosperity and thriving of rural communities across the country. Simply put, any strategic vision to cover the period 2021-2023 must include and understand the vital role played by adult and community education in promoting rural and community development, and supporting vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland.

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 three 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, Brexit and, of course COVID-19, as well as other challenges and opportunities.

AONTAS looks forward to seeing the Department’s new Statement of Strategy’s high-level goals and objectives, as well as its strategies and actions, place educational equality at the heart of Irish rural life.

Executive Summary of main AONTAS Asks

Fund community education organisations to include non-accredited programmes
Enable community education providers to respond to their local needs
Support community education groups to meet and manage the challenges of COVID-19
Explore three-year funding processes for community education organisations
Link with other Government departments who fund community education organisations so that funding and reporting processes avoid unnecessary duplication to achieve more efficiency and effectiveness

Key Areas for consideration in the Department of Rural and Community Development’s new Statement of Strategy

The Department lists the following areas for public consultation:

Our ability to deliver programmes and policy interventions efficiently and effectively for rural Ireland and communities

Ways in which our existing supports and funding can be directed to best support communities, particularly in respect of the emerging challenges of Brexit, Climate Action and Covid-19
How we engage with our partners, stakeholders and the general public
New policy and/or programme opportunities for the Department to consider as part of the 2021-2023 Strategy
Developing the ways in which the Department measures the performance of our supports and programmes.

The success of a new Statement of Strategy in relation to the above areas will be measured by how well it speaks to the most urgent challenges facing rural Ireland. As outlined by AONTAS in its previous Submission to the Department¹, the most urgent of these facing adult learners, their families and communities in rural Ireland include:

- The ongoing negative impact of COVID-19 across every facet of rural social and economic life
- The future of farming and the agri-food sector
- Climate change and environmental sustainability
- Fallout from Brexit
- Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services)
- Availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups
- Changing demographics (e.g. ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas)
- Transport and Infrastructure
- Broadband/mobile phone connectivity
- Jobs and business
- Managing tourism in a sustainable way

The Value of Adult and Community Education to Rural and Community Development

Adult and Community Education not only lies at the heart of where each of the above challenges intersects, it also holds vast reservoirs of untapped potential for meeting them and overcoming them. As a sector, network of organisations, workers, practitioners and learners, Adult and Community Education already contributes a significant set of unique positive outcomes across various Government Department’s national strategies and policy objectives. Adult and Community Education consistently delivers a disproportionate amount of public goods in comparison to how much Government invests in it². Evidence rooted in lived experience and by independent research shows how the returns across the board provide not only value for money but also predictable. If adequately funded, the sector is poised to help ensure that nobody in rural communities will be left out of accessing and benefiting from education. This importance of Adult and Community Education for local and rural communities is already recognised within the new Department of Further and Higher Education and is reflected in the inclusion of a new Community Education Framework in the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy³ which highlights the need for further collaboration with the Department of Rural and Community Development to advance shared goals.

¹ [AONTAS Submission to the Public Consultation: The Rural Development Policy 2020+](#) (October 2019).

² [AONTAS Annual Policy Day 2020 Pre-Event Paper](#) (March 2020).

³ [Future FET: Transforming Learning](#) (2020) SOLAS



Figure 15: Community Education Framework Suggested Principles

For decades now, the wide-ranging benefits of Adult and Community Education have been documented⁴ at the personal, community and societal level⁵. It is known that for every Euro invested in these forms of lifelong learning there are wide-ranging and deep-running social and economic dividends⁶. For example, there is a net positive impact on

- employment opportunities
- earnings
- career development
- productivity
- crime reduction
- social cohesion
- health and wellbeing

Barriers to accessing and benefiting from Adult and Community Education in Rural Ireland

It is also known that a complex range of factors impede a person’s ability to engage in education, training and overall lifelong learning opportunities⁷. The impact of those impediments on people living in rural areas and experiencing educational disadvantage are vast and last a lifetime. The often-intergenerational negative outcomes of educational disenfranchisement can range from having lower quality of life, poorer health, precarious employment conditions, poverty as well as homelessness and addiction. The Department’s new Statement of Strategy must therefore demonstrate a genuine commitment to breaking this cycle by pledging that quality adult and community education for all will be supported and made a priority. Research carried out by AONTAS last year as part of the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum⁸ raised a number of

⁴ [Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education](#) (2000) Department of Education and Science.

⁵ [The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City](#) (2011) Martin J. Power, Patricia Neville, Maria O’ Dwyer, Department of Sociology, University of Limerick.

⁶ [FinALE “How to Invest” - Financial Indicators for Adult Education](#) (2018) Fox, N. and Fieldsend, G.

⁷ [Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education](#) (2019) Joint Committee on Education and Skills.

⁸ See [Annual Synthesis Report](#) (2019) AONTAS (publication in progress)

crucial issues surrounding learning and rural life that require urgent attention from the Department, these included:

- Poor rural WIFI connectivity: 12% of learners who answered the survey question on home internet stated this was a barrier to accessing Further Education and Training. Just over one in ten 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statement "I do not have home internet access."
- Course availability: learners requested increased course options in their local area, particularly at higher NFQ levels. Learners who live in rural areas feel they have less options to progress to higher NFQ levels in their local area.
- Transport: The cost of transport as a barrier to FET participation

Adequately resourcing Adult and Community Education in rural Ireland would help to ensure that rural learners, their families and communities remain resilient and insulated from the worst consequences of COVID-19, Brexit and the climate crisis over the coming three years. Research has already indicated that the impact of the pandemic will be felt most acutely by people from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special educational needs and learners in rural areas who are acutely dependent on remote learning⁹.

There are certain dimensions of life in rural Ireland that must be highlighted and addressed by the new Statement of Strategy. For example, 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.

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. 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 submission that are projected for rural Ireland in the coming three years and long after. The educational needs and aspirations of people living in non-urban areas can no longer 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. A more equitable education system that includes and enhances rural community development is referred to in the Programme for Government¹⁰, and AONTAS has welcomed specific public investment in education for sustainability, a National Traveller Education Strategy and through the Social Innovation Fund Ireland and Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programmes. However, more must be done sooner to offset decades of urban and suburban educational privilege to ensure a level playing field for rural Ireland.

⁹ ["The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people"](#) (2020) ESRI.

¹⁰ [AONTAS Response - Key Highlights in the Programme for Government](#) (June 2020)

Increasing the Contribution made by Adult and Community Education to Rural and Community Development

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 EU¹¹ 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. Some of the key areas where the Adult and Community Education sector has been and must continue to play a more significant role in supporting rural life include:

- Empowering individuals and entire communities by supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers, enhancing community amenities
- Sustainable development and climate adaptation
- Diversification within farming/agri-food sector
- Economic Development: expansion of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging)
- Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs)
- Facilitating and optimising digital literacy and skills for remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs
- Revitalisation of towns and villages
- Tourism and the expansion of areas such as heritage, recreation and activity tourism

The available evidence clearly shows how Adult and Community Education can facilitate greater balance and equity between urban and rural settings. For example, the ability to get to a training location was six times more likely to be an issue for people in border regions, than for people living in Dublin¹². By definition community education is locally based, and also available in rural communities across the country, while state provision tends to be centred in larger cities, and towns. Communities in parts of the country 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, closing the close digital divide, as well as tackling 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. For example, in rural areas where Direct Provision centres exist, adult and community education provides a safe and supportive space for refugees, asylum seekers and local indigenous residents to integrate, learn and live together in a way that cements social cohesion

¹¹ See [European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience](#) (2020) European Commission

¹² [Adult Education Survey](#) (2017) Central Statistics Office.


and embeds positive intercultural understanding. 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.

Case studies

Longford Women’s Link

	
Organisation	Longford Women’s Link
Website	www.lwl.ie
Service users/learners/beneficiaries	<p>Click on links below for more information about LWL’s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childcare • Women’s Manifesto Group • Women in Business • Women’s Groups • Mobile Childcare • Education & Training • Domestic Violence • Counselling • Community Employment • Willow Traders – New To You

Roscommon Women's Network

	
Organisation	Roscommon Women's Network
Website	www.rwn.ie
Service users/learners/beneficiaries	<p>Click Here for more information on RWN's</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects and groups • Training and courses • Drop in /Information centre • Low cost general counselling • Listening & Referral service • Bereavement counselling • Suicide prevention counselling • Relationship & family therapy • Domestic abuse counselling • Access to education & employment support (one to one mentoring) • Supports groups— ANEW, LGBT, GROW, Living with addiction.

Realising the Full Potential of Rural Ireland

All of the possible opportunities open to rural Ireland in the next three years cannot be fully realised by the efforts of the Department of Rural and Community Development without authentic buy-in and ownership from the people of rural Ireland. As one AONTAS member in Tipperary stated as part of 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 new Statement of Strategy should voice the Department's support for and commitment to all of the constituents of rural Ireland. There must be a visible priority given to empowering people in rural Ireland to embrace and take advantage of opportunities for the positive progressive change that lies ahead. This is particularly important with regards to adapting to climate change and becoming self-reliant champions for sustainability. Adult and Community 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 also fall short of achieving their goals in any meaningful way for the people of rural Ireland. AONTAS therefore calls on the Department to consider the following asks:

- Fund community education organisations to include non-accredited programmes
- Enable community education providers to respond to their local needs
- Support community education groups to meet and manage the challenges of COVID-19
- Explore three-year funding processes for community education organisations
- Link with other Government departments who fund community education organisations so that funding and reporting processes avoid unnecessary duplication to achieve more efficiency and effectiveness

Finally, Adult and 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. The success of Adult and Community Education across rural Ireland is often due to the high 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 therefore be sustainably funded, effectively measured and recognised on an equal footing with other mutually important constituents within the wider education system by the Department. It should be recognised as having a specific and crucial role in increasing not only educational equality but also as decreasing overall socioeconomic inequality between those living in rural areas and their urban counterparts.



**The Voice of
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