



Don't Stop Me Now!

A Report on the Lifelong Learning
Needs of Older People in Ireland



AONTAS

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AONTAS Mission Statement

The mission of AONTAS is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society

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Section One: Introduction

Section 1: Introduction

“Ancora imparo”

Translation: *“I’m still learning”*

(Michelangelo, Aged 84, while working on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel)

Background to AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. It is a non-Government membership organisation established in 1969. The mission of AONTAS is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities throughout their lives, thus enabling them to participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society. AONTAS is a membership organisation with almost 600 members comprising formal and non-formal adult and community education providers as well as individual learners, tutors and researchers.

The work of AONTAS during its current strategic plan(2007-2010) is underpinned by five key values:

- AONTAS is committed to the concept of lifelong learning and its role in enabling people to participate in the human, social, economic and cultural development of Irish society.
- AONTAS affirms and supports the key role of adult and community education in combating poverty and social exclusion and ensuring that everyone benefits from, and contributes to sustainable economic development.
- AONTAS is committed to the concept of equality of access, participation and outcomes in adult and community education.
- AONTAS affirms and supports the key role of adult and community education in promoting democracy and active citizenship.
- AONTAS is committed , through a process of action and reflection, to its growth as a learning organisation, a model of best practice and a leading centre of expertise in the field of adult learning.

In the autumn of 2007 Age and Opportunity, the Irish National Organisation working to promote greater participation of older people in society, approached AONTAS to explore the possibility of conducting a short piece of research into the lifelong learning needs of older people in Ireland. AONTAS submitted a proposal to Age and Opportunity for funding under the grant area of awareness and education. The aims and objectives of the research, as identified in the AONTAS proposal were as follows:

Research Aim:

The overall aim of the research which informs this report is to examine the extent to which the learning needs of older people are understood and addressed within the adult and community education sector, and to explore how adult educators can be supported to develop innovative approaches and processes which engage older people in learning and strengthen their voice in relation to their right to learn.

Objectives:

The research has six main objectives:

- To map the current extent of provision of learning opportunities for older people in the adult and community education sector
- To consult with older adults to elicit their views on their own learning needs
- To document some examples of best practice
- To identify innovative ways in which adult and community education providers can address the learning needs of older adults
- To explore the possibility of establishing an older learners' network
- To disseminate the findings of the research

The research informing this report was carried out by the AONTAS Policy & Research Officer and a research assistant, and supported by a steering group chaired by AONTAS. It was conducted over a five month period commencing in January 2008. The researcher and research assistant reported to the Director of AONTAS who supervised the staff and the work.

In drafting this report, AONTAS has engaged in comprehensive consultation with service providers, other relevant stakeholders and individuals representing the interests of older people in Ireland, as well as older people directly involved in adult learning.

This report locates the discussion on the lifelong learning needs of older people within the context of existing service provision. It identifies the specific learning requirements of older people, the supports needed to ensure older people's involvement in adult and community education and the current gaps in service provision. Finally the report offers some recommendations to address the future lifelong learning needs of older people.

The findings of the research will be submitted to Age and Opportunity and will be disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. It will also inform AONTAS's strategy to promote and lobby for the educational needs of older people.

Previous work by AONTAS relevant to this research

AONTAS has consistently promoted and advocated for the right of people to learn regardless of age, ability or condition. This advocacy is based on the belief that older people should not only be entitled to pursue learning opportunities but that they also have a great deal to contribute in terms of skills and experience and can be a rich resource to the adult and community education sector.

AONTAS played a key role in the development of the White Paper on Adult Education: *Learning for Life* (2000) ensuring older people were recognised as a target group within the Paper. As early as 1991 AONTAS identified the needs of older people as a priority in its publication, *For Adults Only: A Case for Adult Education in Ireland*, and also conducted a small piece of research entitled, *Never too Old to Learn* (1988) which identified gaps in provision for older people. More recently AONTAS prepared a discussion document at the request of the Department of Education and Science on the lifelong learning needs of older people. This report builds on the discussion document AONTAS produced in 2007.

As a membership organisation AONTAS has established a wide range of networks and connections with adult and community education providers and learners which it can draw on in exploring possibilities for positive engagement with older people. It has also developed a series of learner networks and more recently a community education network which is designed to create much higher visibility for community education and to lobby for its support. Such a model could be successfully used to develop a lobby for older learners to articulate their learning needs and develop strategies to ensure those needs are met. AONTAS also has a distinguished track record of research in a range of areas within the sector. (See Publications section of AONTAS website www.aontas.com)

Structure of this report

This report is divided into six sections.

Section One provides background details on AONTAS, including its mission statement and the key values underpinning the organisation's work. AONTAS's earlier research and experience as it relates to the learning needs of older people are also outlined.

Section Two offers a contextual framework for the research AONTAS has engaged in to draft this report. This section outlines examples of relevant literature and previous research studies conducted into learning in later life. Section Two also situates the research within the current policy context as it relates to learning opportunities for older people in Ireland.

Section Three describes the methodology used in the collection of data during the research phase of this project. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in the process, including the distribution of survey questionnaires and the hosting of focus groups and interviews.

Section Four provides an analysis of the findings identified in the research. This section is divided into two parts. The first part examines the findings from the online survey conducted with service providers. The second part of the section analyses the information gathered from older learners through their participation in focus groups and interviews and their responses to a short open ended questionnaire.

Section Five makes recommendations for future action based on the analysis of findings.

Section Six is the final section of the report and showcases examples of best practice from older peoples' groups around the country.

Section Two: Setting the Context

Section 2: Setting the Context

This section of the report offers a snapshot¹ of prior research conducted on the lifelong learning needs of older people and outlines the current policy context which influences and informs the opportunities available for people to learn in later life.

“Education is the best provision for old age”² Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)

A belief that people continue to learn throughout their lives and continue to benefit from involvement in education in all its forms is not new. *“Education enables older people to face rapid changes in society and in their lives as well as help them continue to participate and be included in their communities. It also helps combat ageism and negative stereotyping”³.*

Demographic Trends

The older population in Ireland is increasing. *“By 2025 it is predicted that 36% of Ireland’s population will be aged 50 plus”⁴.* By 2036 older people (aged 65 and over) will account for one fifth (20%) of the population, which is a significant increase on 11% in 2001. By 2041 the number of people living past the age of 80 is set to quadruple.⁵ However the Irish population has a much younger demographic profile than other European nations, so Ireland is currently in a strong position to make provision for the needs of older people in the future.

Policy Context

The White Paper on Adult Education: *Learning for Life* (2000) highlights *“the critical importance of access to learning as a key tool to coping with change, and the importance of physical, social and mental activity to general well-being”⁶.*

Learning for Life (2000) is a seminal document on adult and community education. It acknowledges the contribution which adult education can make to the process of active ageing. The Paper recognises the disproportionate number of older adults with literacy difficulties in comparison with the rest of the population of Ireland. This can be attributed, for the most part, to the limited opportunities in Ireland to access education beyond primary school before the 1960s⁷. A report by the Department of Education and Science (2000) stated that only one third of adults between the ages of 55-64 had completed second level education compared with two thirds of adults between the ages of 25-34⁸. NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency, is currently conducting research on the coping mechanisms used by older adults in Dublin who experience literacy difficulties.

1 The scope of this research and the limited timeframe in which it has been conducted has not allowed for an exhaustive review of existing literature on this subject.

2 Diogenes Aeries, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

3 Mercken, C. (2004) *Education in an Ageing Society* Pp.9

4 Manpower Ireland Older Workers Survey, March 2008.

5 Central Statistics Office, 2001, Pp.2

6 *Learning for Life* (2000) Pp. 167

7 Free secondary education was not made available in Ireland until 1967.

8 Bunyan, Karen *Learning in Later Life: Age Diversity in an Access to Higher Education Course* Pp. 2

older people, particularly those past retirement age, may experience additional barriers to accessing learning activities due to the emphasis in current education policy on up skilling and training individuals for participation in the labour force.

The White Paper (2000) emphasizes, in particular, the need for training in information and communication technology (ICT) among older people *“as an aid to mobility and communication”*⁹. The research findings, which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections of this report, concur with this recommendation. However current Government funding for adult and community education, including training in ICT for older people, falls far short of existing need.¹⁰

The value of ICT is also recognised in *‘Towards 2016’*: The Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015 *“to assist older people in their home life, social life and where appropriate their work life.”*¹¹ While the stated objective of the Government and Social Partners is to ensure the creation of greater opportunities for older people to participate in education, the emphasis in *‘Towards 2016’* remains on lengthening participation in employment and promotion of training and up skilling for older workers. However, the ASC (Access, Skills and Content) Initiative, which is part of the Knowledge Society Action Plan, devised in 2007, will target vulnerable groups like those at risk of being left on the wrong side of the digital divide, including older people. This plan aims to remove barriers to lifelong learning for such groups through access to ICT skills.¹²

Making their Voices Heard: Campaigns & Lobbying

“It is a great time in Ireland to be an older person, there is an opportunity now to bring about change; a change in attitudes and a change in policy; if not for us, for subsequent generations when they get older” (Betty, Active Retirement member).

The optimism expressed in this quote is well founded if one considers the number of organisations, both new and established, which are working to improve the lives of older people in Ireland today. These include Age and Opportunity, Age Action Ireland, the Federation of Active Retirement Associations, the Senior Citizen’s Parliament, the Senior Helpline, the Older Women’s Network (OWN) (Ireland), the Retirement Planning Council, the University of the Third Age as well as statutory bodies such as the National Council on Aging and Older People.

*“In America, Great Britain and Europe, the older population have become a force to be reckoned with, not merely because there is a much greater number of them around but also they are becoming more vocal and organised”*¹³

In the 21st century, this is increasingly the case in Ireland also. A number of organisations representing older people have engaged in successful activities highlighting the rights of older people. Examples

9 White Paper on Adult Education Learning for Life (2000) Pp. 167

10 In its ‘Demand Your Right to Learn’ Campaign in the lead up to the General Election of May 2007, AONTAS called for investment in adult education to go up by 1% every year over the course of the National Development Plan 2007-2013, up to a total of 10% of the overall education budget (€9.3billion in 2008), from a low base of just 2% of the overall budget.

11 Towards 2016 Pp.64

12 National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 (2007) Pp. 70

13 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn*, Pp. 8

include Age Action Ireland's Positive Ageing Week, Age and Opportunity's Bealtaine Festival and the 'Older and Bolder' Campaign¹⁴. This has not always been the case however. Upon retirement, older people often withdraw from participation in organisations such as trade unions and political parties which results in social and political exclusion.¹⁵ Older people are not a homogenous group, but a diverse group with varying needs, who are separated by socio-economic, gender and ethnicity status. Those experiencing social exclusion due to poverty or membership of a minority group e.g. gay or lesbian, traveller, new communities, disabled etc. may experience further exclusion due to frailty or ill health brought on by old age. Furthermore, "older people whose social, cultural and political formation took place in the first half of the 20th century (in Ireland), tend to question authority less."¹⁶

Improvements have been made in the last number of years including greater recognition of the life-long learning needs of older people at policy level, *White Paper, 2000 and the current programme for Government*¹⁷, recognition of diversity among older people, and support for equality for older people 'Implementing Equality for Older People' (2002) by the Equality Authority¹⁸ and 'Equality Policies for Older People' (2003) an NESF Report. A stronger political voice for older people was demonstrated in the Older and Bolder campaign, mentioned earlier, in the lead up to the General Election 2007. The campaign was driven by a coalition of five organisations working in the age sector¹⁹. The purpose of the campaign in the months leading up to the election, was to raise awareness among the public, policy makers and politicians in relation to older people's issues. It has been largely responsible for the commitment in the current programme for Government (2007-12) to implement a National Positive Ageing Strategy.

Previous Research Exploring the Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People

2008 marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the AONTAS report *Never Too Old to Learn: A Study of Education for Older People in Ireland*. It provides an interesting benchmark for developments over the past twenty years.

The purpose of the report was to:

- document the type of educational activities in which older people in Ireland are engaged and
- identify types of educational programmes which could be easily initiated and would be of benefit to older people in Ireland

These objectives are directly comparable to the research parameters of the study funded by Age and Opportunity which has led to the drafting of this 2008 report. The role of adult education in the lives of

14 The Older & Bolder Campaign is a joint initiative between a number of organisations who are working to achieve a better quality of life for older people throughout Ireland and lobby Government for the implementation of a Positive Ageing Strategy in Ireland.

15 *Age and Change*, 2005, Pobal: Pp. 10

16 *Age and Change*, 2005: Pp. 10

17 The Programme for Government 2007-12 commits to a National Positive Ageing Strategy

18 In *Implementing Equality for Older People* (2002) the Equality Authority calls for the drafting and implementation of an equality strategy specifically for older people

19 Age & Opportunity, Irish Hospice Foundation, Age Action Ireland, Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and the Senior Helpline as documented in 'Challenging Attitudes': The Age and Opportunity Newsletter, pp.4

older people is set out in McCarthy's report (1988) as follows:

*'Adult Education has a role in helping older adults solve or overcome many problems we face as we grow older, such as income, security, health, retirement, bereavement, housing, loss of a recognised status and useful role, access to community services, maintaining relationships and establishing a satisfying quality and standard of life. Adult Education also has an important role in trying to ensure that the wisdom, experience and skills of older people are used to benefit the communities and societies in which they live.'*²⁰

The significance of adult education for older people is as relevant in 2008, if not more so, given the demographic trend among the adult population in Ireland toward living longer, healthier lives. This is recognised in commitments made in both the Social Partnership Agreement 'Towards 2016' and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016.

*"Priority will be given to investment in the type of services that provide a good quality of life for older people...including access to lifelong learning opportunities."*²¹

Analysis of 1988 Service Providers' Survey

In her study, Mc Carthy (1988) identified that *"Active Retirement Associations and Adult Education Organisers are the principle providers of projects and courses for the over 55 age group."*²² The most frequently cited courses for older people were art, painting and crafts. In 2008 art, crafts and design continue to prove popular among older learners, which may reflect the education and outreach programmes of national cultural institutions such as the National Gallery of Ireland, the Chester Beatty Library, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the National Concert Hall. The calendar of events organised each year as part of the Bealtaine Festival also celebrates and promotes the value and importance of the arts in cultivating creativity among older people.

When providers were asked in 1988 what activities they considered most suitable for older people, they *"listed the following in order of importance: painting and arts, crafts, bridge, keep fit classes, outings and flower arranging."*²³

While these have great merit in their own right, in many cases adult education activities have not deviated far from the list of pursuits outlined above. In a report produced in 2007 service providers argued that *"[e]fforts must be made to break away from traditional activities and diversify."*²⁴

Interesting Initiatives in Ireland which were worthy of note in McCarthy's report (1988) included the Vintage Years Project, in Co. Roscommon and the Reminiscence Package Project, Friends of the Elderly, both of which stand up to scrutiny as examples of good practice, even today twenty years after first being documented. Current examples of best practice in the area of lifelong learning opportunities for older people will be identified throughout this report²⁵.

20 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn*, Pp.9

21 National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016, Pp.51

22 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn*, Pp.13

23 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn*, Pp.15

24 Report on the Educational Needs of the Elderly in West Cork (2007), Pp.17

25 See pages 27 – 30

Opportunities for participation in further and higher education have also increased over the twenty years which separate this report from the 1988 study. *'An ESRI study in 2004 indicated that 9.4% of entrants to higher education were mature students.'*²⁶ No recent data exists for the percentage of mature students who might be categorised as older learners (55 plus). However Bunyan (2004) cites a report by Lynch (1999) which suggests only 5% of mature students at that time were fifty years old or over. The new Student Support Bill (2008) which is expected to be passed by the end of the year requires all approved higher education institutions to prepare draft access plans which will promote access for *"people from sections of society significantly underrepresented in the student body"*²⁷, including older people. This provision may improve the number of older people accessing third level education courses in the future.

In a paper exploring the needs of older people in higher education Bunyan (2004) examines the experiences of older learners in an access to higher education course. Findings from the study on mature students aged fifty and over identified that older adults learn differently from their younger counterparts in higher education and can draw on prior learning and life experience when participating in class discussion and completing course work. It was suggested however that institutions attach little recognition or importance to students' prior learning. The paper identified barriers to education for older learners including fears of inadequacy and shame about low educational attainment first time round, as well as fear of failure and negative memories of primary and secondary education. Overall, Bunyan (2004) suggests that adult learners require greater support systems, including one to one attention with tutors. The paper also makes recommendations for institutions to design *"a curriculum that is diverse in teaching methods and appropriate for adults of all ages."*²⁸

It was identified that older women are motivated to learn for different reasons than older men. *"Older women are more likely to return to education for personal reasons whereas older men are more likely to pursue job related qualifications."*²⁹ The paper stated that older men are also more forthcoming with their opinions in classroom discussions than older women.

Changes in Educational Services for Older People

McCarthy's (1988) research uncovered *"a great paucity in the number and variety of educational courses, projects and activities for older people. It is clear from [...] our questionnaire that the educational service being offered to older people in Ireland is minimal"*.³⁰ This is due, in large part to:

*[a] lack of awareness on the part of educational institutions and organisations of the need for courses for older people. The courses and projects being run are of a conservative nature, such as arts, crafts etc. and concentrate more on physical activity rather than on courses which might be more mentally stimulating such as, for example, Introduction to Computers.*³¹

26 HEA National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education Annual Report 2006 Pp.13

27 Student Support Bill 2008, Section 25 (2) (a)

28 Bunyan, Karen (2004) *Learning in Later Life: Age Diversity in an Access to Higher Education Course* Pp. 13

29 Bunyan, Karen (2004) *Learning in Later Life: Age Diversity in an Access to Higher Education Course* Pp. 11

30 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn*, Pp.16

31 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn*, Pp.16

Since then things have changed for the better somewhat in relation to training in ICT. Examples include the proliferation of computer courses now available from the majority of Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and many local libraries, as well as computer courses offered by organisations such as Age Action Ireland's 'Getting Started' Programme. However, research conducted by AONTAS for this report suggests that demand still exceeds current supply³².

The Importance of Social Interaction

A recurring theme in the literature, on the benefits of learning in later life, relates to the importance older people attach to the social interaction inherent in participating in adult education activities. Interacting with others, whether peers, tutors or younger people is seen as a very positive and enjoyable aspect of engaging in lifelong learning.

*"The social aspect of the activities was nearly more important than the activity itself."*³³

Following a local research study entitled 'Report on the Educational Needs of the Elderly in West Cork' (2007), the author suggests in a note to service providers, "consider allowing time for tea and biscuits either before or after an activity...this provides the elderly with an opportunity to converse with their peers and such social intercourse is essential for them." Reminiscence therapy offers older people methods of interacting which values "the importance of allowing the elderly to talk and share their memories"³⁴ This study also highlighted "social interaction with young members of the community..."³⁵ and related intergenerational activities as being beneficial. The findings identified in the literature outlined above, validate the benefits of social interaction among older adults during learning activities. These are also borne out in the AONTAS research.³⁶

It is also necessary to note that the majority of older people wish to participate in meaningful activity which interests them, and which has a practical and functional dimension rather than the tokenism associated with taking part in an activity just for the sake of it. Some older people may be sensitive to the perception within certain sections of society that older people are somehow worthless or unproductive (so effectively challenged in the 2008 'Say No to Ageism' Campaign). "Older people simply want to make a contribution, which is recognised and valued by their community"³⁷.

Participation in Employment

Ireland has one of the highest employment rates across Europe for the age group 60-64 years, at 42.9%³⁸. Despite this only 5% of companies in Ireland employ a workforce whose average age is 50 years or older. In larger companies (50 employees or more) this figure drops to 0%. However, 17% of all Irish employers are currently finding it difficult to fill jobs. Older adults will be relied upon as one of the most important sources of talent for the future workforce.³⁹ A National Council on Ageing and Older

32 See section 4 for further details

33 Report on the Educational Needs of the Elderly in West Cork (2007) Pp.12

34 Report on the Educational Needs of the Elderly in West Cork (2007) Pp.12

35 Report on the Educational Needs of the Elderly in West Cork (2007) Pp.19

36 See section 4 of this report

37 AONTAS Discussion Document on the lifelong learning needs of older people (2007) Pp. 4

38 Manpower Ireland Older Workers Survey, March 2008.

39 Manpower Talent Shortage Survey

People survey conducted in 2000 found that 70% of those working wished to retire more gradually than trends in Irish society currently dictate while 26% of the non-employed (retired, working in the home and other) wished to join the labour market in paid employment⁴⁰. The gap which lifelong learning activities will fill in the lives of some older people in the future may be in relation to workplace training and up skilling.

McCarthy (1988) concludes her report with statistics drawn from an ESRI report published the same year (1988) which revealed that less than 1% of retired people in Ireland participated in educational courses.

*The lack of participation of older people in educational courses could be taken as an indication of how little relevance or interest existing provision has for them. It is how to respond innovatively and creatively to the needs of older people which is one of the many challenges facing adult education in Ireland today.*⁴¹

Figures quoted in a National Council on Ageing and Older People report (2005) put those aged 60 and over participating in informal education during the previous 12 months at 33%.⁴² So participation rates may be moving in the right direction.

However, policy makers and practitioners need to know more about the needs of older people in general and about their learning needs in particular, if they are to succeed in tailoring education services which will bridge gaps in current provision.

*It is clear, that there are serious gaps in the information base on which policy has to be made. Perhaps the most pressing need is to know more about what really makes a difference to the quality of older people's lives, whether in terms of the services already available to them or the ones they would like to access. This would be enormously helpful in planning for the future.*⁴³

The Irish Longitudinal Study of Ageing (TILDA) which was launched in 2006 will gather data on 10,000 Irish people aged 50 plus over a 10 year period. This ambitious study will be vital in addressing the current dearth of information on this important cohort of Irish society. The study covers social, economic and health issues affecting older people and will inform future policy. The findings of this study and others should help to dispel the pervasive myth that older people are a homogenous group, with indistinguishable attitudes shaped by identical life experiences.

This report goes some way to bridging current gaps in information and making recommendations for the future learning needs of older people.

40 National Council on Ageing and Older People *An Age Friendly Society* (2005) Pp.14

41 McCarthy, Mary (1988) *Never Too Old to Learn* Pp.24

42 Informal education activities listed included professional books, educational broadcasting, library visits and the internet. National Council on Ageing and Older People *An Age Friendly Society* (2005) Pp.14

43 Office of Social Inclusion, 'A Social Portrait of Older People' (2007) Pp.34

Section Three: Methodology

Section 3: Methodology

Introduction

The review of literature in the previous section offered a context within which to set the research AONTAS has engaged in for this report. This section details the methods of data collection used during this research. A detailed description of the processes involved is provided below. Information was gathered from numerous service providers around the country and from diverse groups of older people participating in adult learning. The research was conducted on a part time basis over a twelve week period in the spring of 2008. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used, including survey questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. A steering group made up of representatives of adult education providers and older people's organisations, as well as AONTAS staff members guided the researcher and supported the identification of data sources and the collection of information.

Desk Based Research

A trawl of the literature gathered during the initial research phase identified policy documents and existing studies in the field of lifelong learning and older people. Findings and recommendations made in these earlier studies and policy papers, and gathered during this desk based research phase, formed the basis of the literature review (Section 2).

Online Survey

One of the main objectives of the AONTAS research was to map the current extent of provision of learning opportunities for older people in Ireland (see Section 1). It was agreed internally; in consultation with Age and Opportunity and among the steering group that a quantitative survey would best satisfy the objective of mapping service provision within the limited time frame of the research.

An electronic questionnaire was designed to target service providers, following a meeting with a consultant specializing in quantitative research methods⁴⁴ and using survey design software from a web based design resource called Survey Monkey⁴⁵ (See appendix A). An electronic format was chosen over paper for ease of circulation and again to address the short time frame for completion of the research. Recent studies into the use of electronic questionnaires over the traditional paper format stress the validity and benefits of the former, as a viable method of data collection in research⁴⁶.

The questions in the survey were devised with input from the steering group and overseen by the AONTAS Director. The link to the online survey was circulated via email to 301 adult and community

44 Mairea Nelson

45 www.surveymonkey.com

46 See http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_12/gunn/ <http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=19>
<http://www.joe.org/joe/2003august/tt6.shtml> <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol6/issue2/sheehan.html>

education service providers offering learning opportunities to older people nationwide. The email was distributed to Adult Education Officers (AEOs), Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) and Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) Coordinators in each of the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Coordinators in each of the 90 Family Resource Centres in the country were also sent the electronic questionnaire; as were the Education Coordinators in the partnership companies and relevant members of staff in the City and County Development Boards. The recipients were sent two follow up emails over a period of three weeks to remind them to complete the questionnaire. The first reminder was sent more than a week after the initial email went out. The second reminder was sent one week after the first. At the end of the third week the link to the survey was closed.

A total of 91 service providers responded to the online survey. This equates to a response rate of 30.2%. An analysis of the responses received from service providers will follow in Section 4.

Open Ended Questionnaire

A representative of Active Retirement Ireland (ARI), participating in the steering group, provided AONTAS with access to the ARI Annual General Meeting (AGM) held in Galway in April 2008. A short open ended questionnaire was devised and distributed to each of the 300 participants attending the meeting (See appendix B). A total of 139 completed questionnaires were returned by participants. This represents a response rate of 46.3%.

The aim in issuing the questionnaire, was to establish an age and gender profile of a sample of ARI members attending the meeting; to ascertain the types of adult education activities this group of older people engage in; to capture their feelings regarding the impact learning in later life has had on them and to outline their hopes for adult education in the future. An analysis of the responses from the sample of ARI members will follow in Section 4.

Focus Groups

The responses to the open ended questionnaire distributed to participants attending the Active Retirement Ireland AGM supplement the data gathered during four facilitated focus groups with older people which were held in Louth, Wexford and Dublin. Focus groups were identified as a suitable means of fulfilling the objective of consulting with older adults to elicit their views on their own learning needs. The four groups were chosen for the diversity of their membership in terms of gender, levels of educational attainment and socio-economic status. The geographic location of each group was also varied, from extremely rural to city based.

The focus groups took place throughout the month of May 2008 and ranged in size from 3 participants to 23 participants. A total of 42 participants from older people's groups took part. One of the focus groups was organized as a result of contact made at the ARI AGM; others were identified through contact with the AONTAS membership and through links with other service providers. Each focus group lasted between an hour and an hour and a half in duration. The focus groups were facilitated by the

researcher and research assistant. A relaxed and informal facilitation style was adopted to promote trust and ensure ease of discussion, while emphasis was placed on the value of each participant's contribution. The two AONTAS staff members travelled to each of the group's usual meeting places to hold the focus group session. A topic guide was developed and used at each of the sessions to structure the conversation and stimulate the sharing of ideas (See Appendix C). The notes from each focus group were typed up, analysed and coded to identify emerging themes. Section 4 of this report provides a detailed analysis of the findings from all of the focus groups and the overarching themes common to all.

Interviews

In addition to hosting focus groups, AONTAS developed a short template for interviewing older people to further the objective of consulting with older adults, offering them the opportunity to become involved in the research. The target group, in this instance, was older learners who were new to adult education and those who had limited experience of participating in adult education activities in the past. The template was used to gather information from this group on their experiences of barriers to learning in later life and their ideas on what needs to be done to encourage greater numbers of older learners to participate in adult education activities (See Appendix D). A total of 39 interviews were conducted with older adults and most with the generous assistance of a BTEI co-ordinator in a local VEC. The majority of interviewees live in a RAPID area and have experienced levels of social exclusion and have been marginalised at some point in their lives. Some of the interviewees have literacy difficulties. A number of the interviews were conducted by older people, mainly recruited at the ARI AGM, with other older people, who were friends and neighbours of the interviewers. This enabled a small number of older adults to become involved in the research process and hopefully promoted a sense of ownership of this report among this group.

Case studies

The final question in the online survey circulated to service providers in April 2008 requested information on locally based adult education activities for older people that the respondents were aware of and which had really impressed them. The respondents were asked to give their contact details so that AONTAS could follow up with them at a later date. A contact list of 24 service providers was drawn up from the responses. In the last week of May 2008, following a phone around, each respondent on the list was sent a case study template via email (See Appendix E). The template sought detailed information on examples of best practice and innovative programmes of work with older learners around the country, which had proven successful. These case studies are featured in Section 6 of this report and serve to showcase just some of the inspiring groups of older learners engaged in adult education activities in Ireland.

Steering Group

A steering group was set up in February 2008 to advise AONTAS in relation to this research. The group was made up of representatives from Active Retirement Ireland, the Older Women's Network; the IVEA and North Cork VEC, as well as AONTAS staff members, all of whom supported the work of the researcher and gave direction to the research throughout the research phase. The remit of the steering group was to:

- contribute ideas and experience to the research
- support the work of the researcher by providing feedback and advice
- monitor the progress of the research and contribute to its outcomes

The group met on three occasions in the three month period as well as corresponding via email. The collective and individual expertise of members of the steering group was invaluable in shaping this report, as was the in-house support offered by other members of the AONTAS staff team. AONTAS also engaged in consultation with other relevant stakeholders in the final editing of this report.

Section Four:

Analysis of Findings

Section 4: Analysis of Findings

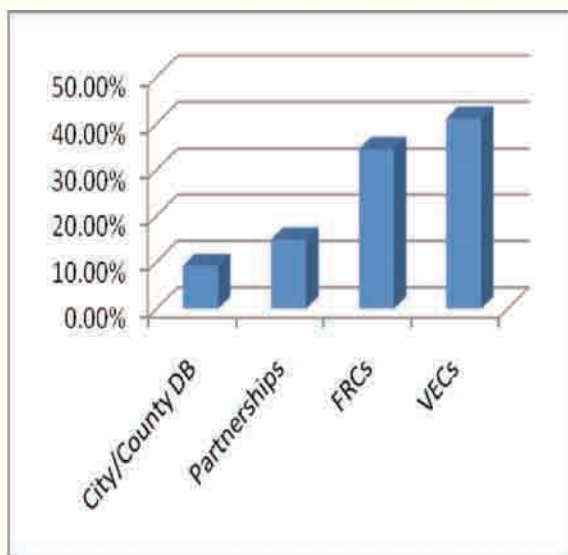
This section of the report is divided in two parts. The first part details the findings from the online survey based on the responses from adult education service providers. The second part details the findings from the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires with older learners. Information on a Learners’ Network for older people, set up by AONTAS, is detailed in the second part of the section.

Part 1: MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF LEARNING IN LATER LIFE

Current Service Provision in Ireland

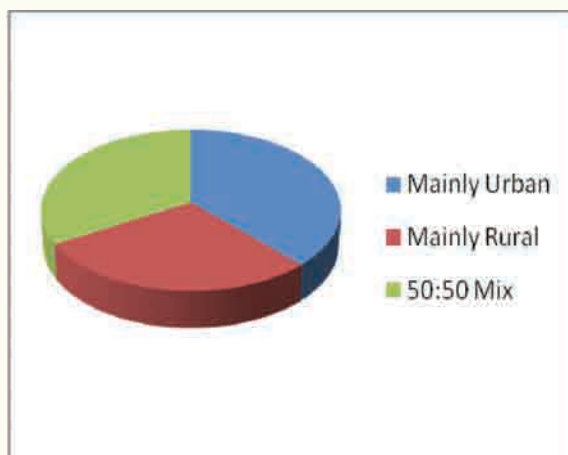
Findings from the online survey

Figure 1: Breakdown of Responses from Service Providers



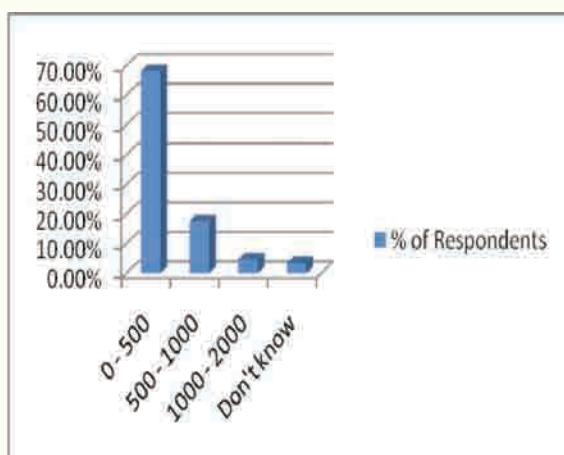
As mentioned in the previous section of this report AONTAS received 91 responses to the online survey. As a percentage of the total number of service providers contacted (301) this equates to 30.2%. The majority of respondents identified themselves as providers working in Vocational Education Committees (VECs). These respondents made up 41.4% of the total. Family Resource Centres accounted for 34.5% of the total. Staff working in Local Area Partnerships made up 14.9% of respondents, with 9.2% coming from City or County Development Boards.

Figure 2: Catchment Areas



The types of catchment areas that providers are working in were equally represented among the responses with 37.9% of respondents working within ‘mainly urban’ catchment areas, 33.3% working within a catchment area with a ‘50:50 Urban/Rural mix and 28.7% working in a ‘mainly rural’ area.

Figure 3: Number of older people accessing respondents’ services on a yearly basis

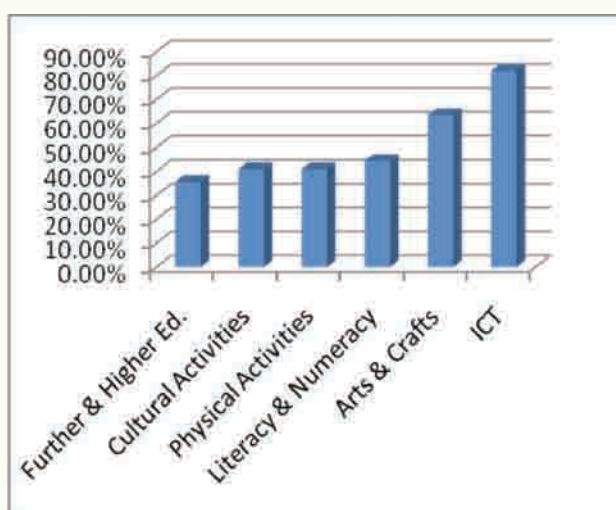


The majority of respondents (68.2%) provide access to services for up to 500 older people every year. 17.6% of respondents said that between 500 and 1000 older learners access their service on a yearly basis. Almost 5% of providers (4.7%) who completed our questionnaire provide services to between 1000 and 2000 older learners each year. 3.5% of respondents were not aware of the numbers of older people accessing their services on a yearly basis.

Respondents were asked if a learning needs assessment of local older people had ever been carried out by their service. The majority of providers have not conducted learning needs assessments for older people in their area (56.3%) while 31% were not aware if an assessment had been carried out. 12.6% of respondents confirmed that an assessment into the learning needs of older people had been carried out by their service.

Learning Opportunities for Older People

Figure 4: Learning Opportunities for older people



One of the main objectives of the research which informs this report was to map existing service provision for older learners in Ireland. In the online survey, providers were asked to chart the learning opportunities their services offered older people. 61 respondents, out of a total of 91, chose to answer this question.

44.6% of those who responded provided basic education such as literacy and numeracy, while 41.1% arranged cultural activities such as museum trips and music. The same percentage

offered physical activities, e.g. health and fitness and the 'Go for Life' programme. 35.7% of those who responded provide further and higher education courses which are accredited.

82.1%, the vast majority, provided Information and Communication Technology (ICT) activities, including basic computers, introduction to internet and email and mobile phone use, e.g. texting etc. This corresponds with the high take up of ICT related activities among older people in the United Kingdom. *"The age of the silver surfer is upon us. More than half of all the courses that people over 65 are taking relate to computer skills."*⁴⁷

47 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) Press Release 6th September 2007 www.niace.org.uk

Government Information Technology Initiatives for Older People

The proliferation of ICT activities for older people in Ireland may be due, in part, to the commitment made in the programme for Government, to set up training programmes on computer literacy for persons over 50 years old. Through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) (Part-time) the Department of Education and Science provides funding for ICT courses for adult learners. Older people are a priority target group in BTEI. In 2007 over 5,000 participants on BTEI programmes were aged 55 years or over. This represented 20.6% of all BTEI participants. Of the 20.6%, 7.9% were aged over 65 years⁴⁸. The interest among older Irish learners in ICT could be attributed to the same factors motivating older learners in the United Kingdom to take up these technologies. *“It is no surprise that computer skills are so popular for older people. The physical distance they have from family and friends is critically important to overcome and getting to grips with ICT helps to reduce isolation, quite apart from satisfying a desire to keep an eye on the latest developments”*⁴⁹

Arts & Crafts

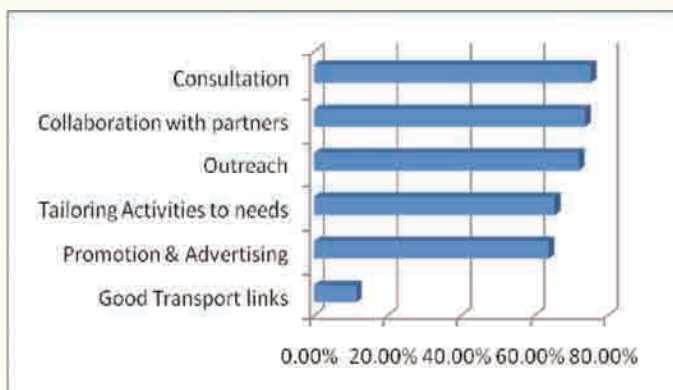
64.3% of providers who responded to the question offered arts and crafts activities to older learners. The importance of these activities; the proliferation of ICT and the enduring popularity of arts and crafts were further highlighted in the consultations with older learners through interviews, focus groups and questionnaires (see Part Two below).

Funding Sources

Respondents to the survey were asked how the courses they provide are funded. The majority of courses are fully funded by the provider, e.g. basic education classes, and are therefore free of charge for the participants. Some courses are part funded e.g. arts and crafts, and require a contribution from the participants while a very few others are self financing, e.g. leisure activities such as field trips; these are typical examples of the types of activities one might expect to be self financing.

Encouraging Engagement

Figure 5: How to engage older people



In the survey providers were also asked ‘How do you encourage older people to engage with your service?’ Consulting with older people directly (75.4%) and tailoring adult learning activities to their particular needs (65.6%) scored high in importance with service providers. Collaborating with other services for older people (73.8%) and engaging in

48 Parliamentary Question (Number 390) to Minister of State for Lifelong Learning Sean Haughey, T.D., 19 May 2008

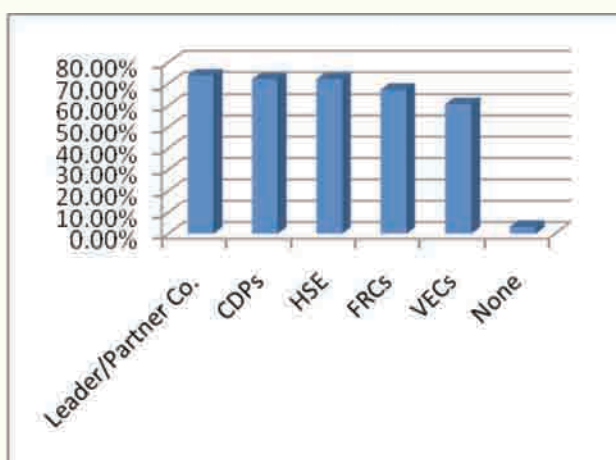
49 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) Press Release 6th September 2007 www.niace.org.uk

outreach work (72.1%) were also rated extremely highly. The majority of respondents also believed that promotion and advertising (63.9%) plays a key role in engaging older people with their services. Good transport links were not deemed by providers to be as important in encouraging older people to become involved (11.5%). This is in stark contrast to the importance many older people we consulted attach to transport links when they consider taking part in adult education activities. The issue of transport will be discussed further, in the second part of this section.

Forming Partnership Links

The online survey also gathered information on the level of cooperation among service providers by requesting details on the types of partner organisations each provider worked with. Leader/Partnership Companies were the most common, cited by 73.8% of providers who completed the questionnaire. Partnerships with Community Development Projects and the Health Services Executive came in a close second, cited by 72.1% of providers.

Figure 6: Partners



Family Resource Centres followed closely behind at 67.2%. 60.7% of respondents had developed partnership links with Vocational Educational Committees (VECs). Other examples of partners recorded by service providers include FAS, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Uduras Na Gaeltachta, Leargas and locally based groups. Overall, it can be inferred that partnerships are common and are considered worthwhile among providers, as the majority engage in a significant level of cooperation

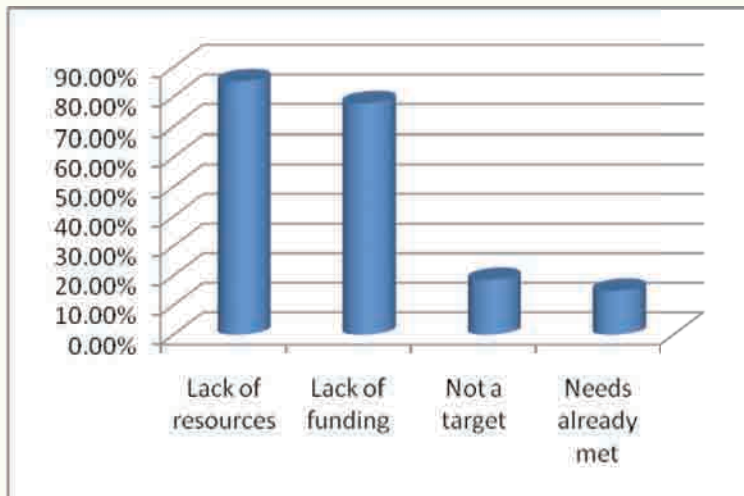
with a varied range of partner organisations.

However it is worth noting that 3.3% of respondents recorded that they did not work with any partner organisations at all. This raises queries in relation to service providers' capacity to engage in partnerships and their access to resources which would support these efforts. The issue is compounded by the results of related questions in the survey which asked 'Are you satisfied the learning needs of older people are being met by your service?' and 'Are you satisfied the learning needs of older people are being met by other services in the area?'⁵⁰ 48.3% of those who responded to the first question agreed that the learning needs of older people locally were being met by their service, while 5% strongly agreed. 38.3% of those who responded disagreed with this statement and 1.7% was in strong disagreement. 38.2% of those who responded to the second question disagreed that the learning needs of older people were being met by other services in the area; in addition, 1.8% strongly disagreed. 27.3% agreed that the learning needs of older people were being met by other services in the area and a further 5.5% strongly agreed with the statement.

The high percentage of respondents who believe the lifelong learning needs of older people are not

being adequately met by their service or by other services in the area emphasises the importance of promoting successful partnerships as one means of addressing the current gaps in service provision for older learners. This is strengthened by the high percentage of respondents (83.7%) who rated *'good connections with other organisations'* as one of the most important elements of best practice when engaging older people in local learning opportunities. Recommendations for the development of supports for service providers wishing to engage in or improve partnership links are discussed in greater detail in the following section of this report.

Figure 7: Challenges for Service Providers



Other information gathered through the online survey unearthed various opinions among service providers with regard to the challenges of meeting the lifelong learning needs of older people.⁵¹ 85.2% of those who responded said lack of adequate resources, e.g. staff; technical resources was the biggest challenge in addressing the needs of this group. 77.8% said lack of funding was the biggest challenge. Interestingly, 18.5% said older people were not an identified target group for their service while 14.8% said older people's learning needs were already adequately met by other services in the area.

Part 2: "USE IT OR LOSE IT!"⁵²

Older Peoples' Experiences of Learning in Later Life

The second part of this section looks at the findings generated by the research conducted with older people. By choosing qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and open ended interviews AONTAS has provided older people with a platform to explore the issues impinging on learning in later life and afforded them the opportunity to have their voices heard.

This section of the report looks at the themes emerging from discussions with and among older adults engaged in lifelong learning and details the responses, in their own words, to current provision of learning opportunities for older people and their vision for the future.

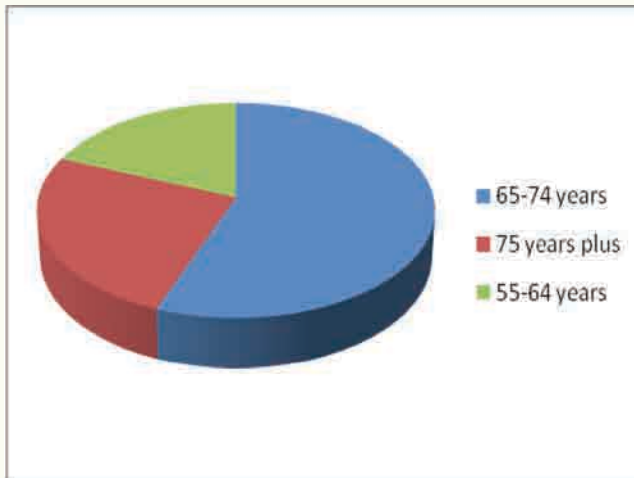
⁵¹ 27 responses out of a total of 91 electronic questionnaires returned

⁵² Catchphrase used by participants in focus groups 1 and 2

SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE to ARI MEMBERS

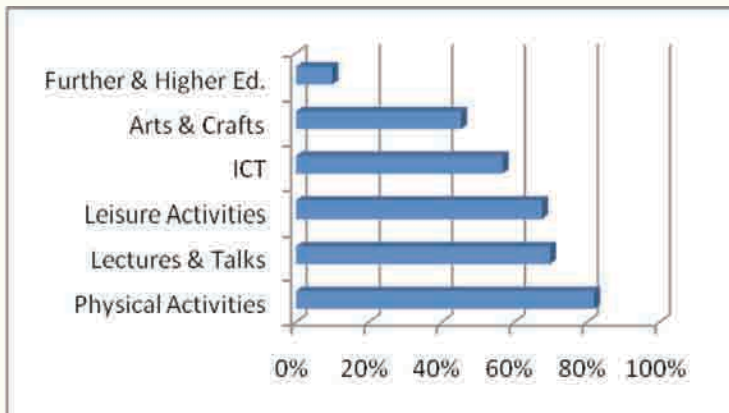
As outlined in Section 3 a one page questionnaire was distributed to every attendee at the Active Retirement Ireland (ARI) AGM in Galway in April 2008. 139 responses were received from participants at the AGM. 80.7% of respondents were female, while 19.3% were male. This reflected the broader gender divide among attendees at the AGM.

Figure 8: Age Range of ARI Respondents



The majority of respondents were aged between 65 and 74 years old (55.8%). 25.4% were aged 75 years and over while 18.8% were between the ages of 55 and 64. Respondents were asked to choose from a list of activities and to indicate which of the activities they participated in. Only 2 people or 1.4% of the total number of respondents said they did not participate in any of the activities listed.

Figure 9: Participation rates among ARI members



The highest participation rate occurred in physical activities such as health and fitness programmes (82%). This most likely reflects the popularity and tremendous success of the Age and Opportunity ‘Go for Life’ and PAL programmes among groups of older people. Participation rates are also high for lectures and

talks (69.8%), e.g. information sessions on entitlements for older people and in leisure activities (67.6%) such as field trips and outings. More than half had participated in activities related to Information Communication Technology, e.g. use of mobile phones and computers (56.8%), while Arts and Crafts (45.3%) also proved popular. Both ICT related activities and arts and crafts proved very popular with all of the older people we consulted and both emerged as important areas of interest, which were brought up repeatedly in the focus group discussions, interviews and questionnaire responses. These activities will be discussed in greater detail below.

Participation in Formal Learning

As might be expected participation rates in adult learning activities are high among members of this long standing and well established organisation, Active Retirement Ireland. However, participation by members in formal learning opportunities which offer accreditation, such as further and higher education courses is relatively low at 10.1%. Retired adults are more likely to have free time on their hands than those still in the work force, but caring responsibilities, e.g. grandchildren/partners or full social lives mean this isn't always the case. However the abundance of free time many older people find themselves with after retirement should make them ideal candidates for participation in further and higher education courses. These findings raise concerns around the potential barriers older learners face when accessing educational opportunities in the formal education sector. These findings also raise questions as to whether institutions are doing enough in their access plans to promote further and higher education among older learners or to support older learners to participate in and successfully complete formal education courses at this level.

In Our Own Words

One of the main objectives of the research conducted by AONTAS was to offer older people the opportunity to describe in their own words what their involvement in adult education activities has meant to them and to discuss the personal benefits of learning. One of the richest sources of information gathered from the research with older learners was the fourth question in the questionnaire to attendees at the ARI AGM. The question asked simply '*What difference has participation in these adult education activities made in your life?*' The following segment offers an analysis of the responses to question four based on the emerging themes, while the table below details the individual responses to the question in the respondents own words.

The responses to question four are clustered around five main themes: *Interaction & Engagement, Skills, Physical/Mental, Knowledge and Information, and Other*. While each of the themes stand alone and deal with specific issues affecting older people the themes are also interlinked and overlap with each of the other themes.

Interaction & Engagement

The importance of adult education activities as a means of interaction and engagement for older people cannot be overemphasised. The respondents to the question cited meeting new people, making new friends and getting to know new groups in the community as one of the biggest benefits to engaging in these activities. "*It helped me to integrate with different groups in the locality and extend my social circle.*" The social side to learning and the interaction it necessitates in groups also has the knock on effect of reducing isolation and combating loneliness among many of the older people who engage in it. "*A feeling of not being left behind.*" The importance of interaction and engagement for older people is reinforced by discussions within the focus groups also (See below). The acquaintances and friendships made also encourage the exploration of new places and new activities together. This in turn promotes a new found interest for some older people in the wider world around them. "*It stimulates me to keep in touch with the outside world.*"

Skills

Responses to question four highlighted the benefits of learning as a means of developing new and existing skills. By engaging in adult education activities some older people discover latent talents they did not know existed. *"I discovered gifts I did not realise I had."* Others described the excitement of awakening new interests "a thirst for knowledge with computers" and honing new skills. *"I am able to communicate with family by email when away on holidays"*. Interestingly, these older people attached great importance to developing new skills in order to master computers.

Physical/Mental

Many respondents attributed better physical health to their involvement in adult education activities *"it helps to keep me agile"* while also keeping their brains active *"It keeps my brain oiled!"* The same sentiments were expressed by members of a number of the focus groups held with older people. Women in the Ardee Active Retirement group⁵³ stated that their involvement means they are *"constantly learning something new"*; this has kept both their minds and bodies active. These women firmly believe that participating in the group keeps them out of hospital. Others responding to the questionnaire believed the physical and mental stimulation which participation in adult learning provides, also helps to reduce stress and increase longevity. *"It has put life in my years and hopefully will add years to my life."*

Knowledge/Information

One of the main benefits of involvement for these older people was a greater awareness of their rights and entitlements and information on services for older people, which they can pass on to friends and relatives. *"I have learned a lot about what I am entitled to. I can share this information with my friends."* Respondents felt that involvement in adult education activities had made them more aware of other cultures *"I know more about people from Poland, Brazil, South America and Europe."* Others responding to this question believed they had gained a keener interest in current affairs as well as knowledge of events, activities and resources available locally.

Other

The final category of 'Other' relates mostly to the personal feelings of the older people who responded. The vast majority reflected very positively on their participation in adult education activities, using words such as *'enjoyable', 'beneficial' and 'wonderful'*. The experiences promoted a sense of purpose and meaning for some respondents who often felt at a loose end otherwise *"Enjoyment, fulfilment, filling my days with a sense of usefulness."* *"I have something to think about every day."* Involvement also improved their self esteem and helped them to engage better with others. *"I feel useful again, I have more to discuss with grandchildren and I have more confidence."*

All of the responses to question four are listed thematically and in tabular format below.

Table 1: Responses to Question Four “What difference has participation in adult education activities made in your life?”

Social Interaction	Skills	Physical / Mental	Information/ Knowledge	Other
Meeting new people and leading a more interesting life	Improve my skills	Have helped me keep physically fit and mentally alert	I have learned a lot about what I am entitled to. I can share this information with my friends	More optimistic outlook on life in third age.
It has made my life more tolerable in every way e.g. new friends, less isolated	Opportunity to learn other skills	Increase in physical life	Knowledge	It helps to enhance my lifestyle. It is a better quality of life and it is very enjoyable
Increase in social life and outings, having a reason to get up and outdoors	Discovered gifts I did not realise I had	Helps to keep mind and body active, gave me an interest in exercise etc	Very informative	Given me much satisfaction and enjoyment since my retirement and a sense of achievement.
Forming more friendships I am much happier	Widened all our circles of various interests	It has put life in my years and hopefully will add years to my life	Kept me informed	Get enjoyment out of doing them (activities) and I have a more interesting time
A pleasure to get out and join in, great company and increased friendship	Given an insight to computers and internet	Nice to see older people so fit and focused	Obtain information on services for elderly	Fills in long winter nights and it's something to look forward to
Lovely to meet others and has enabled me to broaden social networks	New learning i.e. computers	Less health issues, better concentration,	Knowing more about people from Poland, Brazil, South America and Europe	Enjoyment, fulfillment, filling my days with a sense of usefulness
It stimulates me to keep in touch with the outside world	Learning something new	Less aches and pains due to physical activities - more energy	Educational	I feel young at heart and I'm happy

Social Interaction	Skills	Physical / Mental	Information/ Knowledge	Other
We find that our group has helped our social and active life greatly	Learned new skills	More energy to do everyday simple things	Made me more aware of what's going on	Relieving boredom, helping others, enjoyed the challenge
The participation with other people, Has given me the opportunity to meet other interesting older people	My interests are more varied and more interesting	Keeps the mind alert, helps to keep me fit	Has greatly improved my entitlements	A feeling of well being in sharing hard won experience
Support and friendship, widening of social group	Interest in other activities	Has greatly improved my physical fitness	Made me more aware of what's going on and get enjoyment out of doing them	Wonderful, beneficial, very good, Pleasure
Something to plan for, make friends	Fresh interests,	Keeping active and enjoying life	Further info/ education	More aware of what's going on around me
Made new friends, more trips, great for people on their own.	A thirst for knowledge with computers	Kept me active and involved in life outside my home	Enjoyable sharing of knowledge and experiences	Feel useful again, more to discuss with grand children, more confidence
Meeting new people of all ages	Able to communicate with family when away on holidays by email	Keeps me that little bit more agile	More interchange of ideas	Made life more interesting and renewed my hobby of painting
Involvement in my local community. Especially getting to know my many neighbours	Learning new skills	Come and meet our group. We have all ages from 50+ but their attitude to the Association gives them minds and bodies of people much younger		Made me a very happy active person. I have something to think about every day
It has made a world of difference, integration, making friends, a feeling of not being left behind	It has led to good communication skills	More physically and mentally fit		Have a positive attitude to ageing and older people
More sociable, more aware of other people's needs		It keeps my brain oiled! I have to think and remember		Always feel welcome and enjoyable activities
It helped me to integrate with different groups in the locality and extended my social circle		Health and fitness		Its great craic and great company

“If you were Minister for Education...”

The penultimate question posed to the attendees at the Active Retirement AGM 2008 was: “If you were Minister for Education and Science what adult education services would you put in place for older people?”

The main themes that emerged are broken down into five areas. These are Information Technology, Learning Activities, Health and Fitness, Citizen’s Information and Other. Information Technology was by far the largest category with computer classes being the number one request followed by mobile phones. Older people want help and assistance in dealing with modern technology:

“Introduction/assistance in using modern technology i.e. mobile phones, email, internet, TV channels, DVD, CD”

This category was followed by Learning Activities which highlighted a wide range of activities that older people would like to participate in. Included were basic education, bridge, languages and arts and crafts among others. The third category was Health and Fitness. The results showed that participants wanted more health education:

“Encourage over 50 age bracket to do more courses and outdoor activities.”

One participant also wanted more simple health seminars:

“...there are lots of books available but one good talk is worth them all.”

The fourth category was Citizen’s Information and was mainly to do with accessing information in regards to finances, benefits and retirement. The final category was Other and is diverse in its suggestions. Some of the participants stated that more funding was needed, another wanted more transport for rural areas while two believed that people should be encouraged and motivated to share their experiences and strive to reach their full potential.

Older Learners’ Network

The final question put to attendees at the Active Retirement Ireland AGM sought to gauge their interest in setting up an Older Learners’ Network. 103 of the 139 respondents expressed an interest in finding out more about the Network. Follow up contacts were made and as a result the first AONTAS Older Learners’ Network meeting will take place in Galway on Wednesday, 16th July 2008. The meeting is aimed at older adult learners who want to discuss their issues and look at working together to improve adult education provision for older people in Ireland. It also serves to ensure that AONTAS is aware of the challenges facing older learners so that it can support and empower learners to take action on their issues locally and nationally.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

A number of older people who had a limited history of involvement in adult learning were interviewed as part of the research. Over half of these interviewees were contacted by older people recruited

at the ARI AGM. Of those older people who had a limited history of involvement in adult learning most were likely to have previously engaged in arts, crafts and design. 31 of the 39 older people interviewed had participated in an adult education activity in the past. 28 of the 31 older learners had taken part in arts, crafts and design activities. 25 of these said they found it *'most interesting'* and *'very enjoyable'*. Although a number of interviewees (14) admitted that they had only taken part in the arts, crafts and design activities *"because they were organised for us."* When asked in interview what type of adult education activity they would like to see taking place in their locality in the future, the majority of interviewees stated an interest in learning more art, craft and design and new techniques and materials which they had not yet worked with, such as mosaic and bottle painting. This preceded requests for dance classes (such as set dancing, salsa and line dancing), yoga and computer classes.

It is encouraging that these older adults identified further aspects of learning they wish to engage in. However, the majority have opted to participate in similar activities to those they have already undertaken. The service provider plays a vitally important role in introducing other elements to their learning not only through continued consultation with older people but also by strategically and proactively interpreting their needs. This requires considerable skill and ongoing training, which raises issues for consideration regarding the continuous professional development of service providers working in the adult and community education sector.

It is also noteworthy that these older people expressed enjoyment in engaging with other older learners, socialising and chatting, particularly given that prior to taking up learning opportunities, the interviewees engaged in pursuits, which could be considered solitary in nature, such as listening to music, walking the dog and reading. While these are worthwhile pursuits, they do not encourage social interaction and would not be as effective in combating loneliness or social isolation. This was an issue raised in the focus groups.

FOCUS GROUPS

As outlined in Section 3 AONTAS conducted four focus groups throughout May 2008. A total of 42 participants from five different groups took part in the consultation. The focus groups were structured around a number of key questions (See Appendix C). The questions were designed to elicit older people's experiences of adult education activities. The first of these key questions required the members of the group to list and discuss the types of activities they participated in.

Q. What adult education activities is your group involved in?

All of the older people consulted are involved in a wide variety of physical, social, intellectual and cultural activities. The members engage in all facets of arts, crafts and design, including card making, stitching, hosting exhibitions of their work; horticulture and gardening, such as taking part in flower festivals, caring for and cultivating a sensory garden. Demand for and participation in information communications technology activities is very high including internet and email, basic computers, using mobile phones, digital photography and ECDL. Older people enjoy active pursuits also with high numbers engaged in the Go for Life programme, as well as dancing, swimming, skittles, bowling, walking and aerobics. Older adults are participating in language classes (Spanish and Irish); creative writing; field trips to castles, stately homes and gardens; visits to local and national landmarks; tours

of museums and galleries; going to the theatre, as well as organising quizzes and games of bingo and attending talks, and lectures on social welfare entitlements, making wills and areas of interest such as beauty therapy, D.I.Y. and cookery. A number of participants in the focus groups also engaged in volunteer work on a regular basis.

Q. How did people hear about the group?

How people became aware of the existence of their local older peoples' group and how they promote the group among potential new members was discussed by participants in each of the focus groups. Word of mouth was universally acknowledged to be the most common way of finding out about groups and the activities they run, and the best way of spreading the word among newcomers interested in joining. Other popular means of promotion included local radio, a notice on the church bulletin board or in the Sunday missal at Mass or in the parish newsletter. One older people's group overseen by a committee produced its own newsletter to promote the activities offered by the group⁵⁴. Another group established a webpage but this was abandoned due to lack of knowledge about how to maintain it⁵⁵.

The other key questions sought to identify the main issues of significance for adults engaged in learning in later life. The major themes which emerged as common to each group during discussions are detailed below.

Q. What do you get from your participation in this group?

As mentioned earlier in this section social interaction and engagement with others has emerged as hugely significant for older people. It is seen as one of the main benefits of engaging in adult education activities in groups. The older people we spoke to viewed getting out of the house for a few hours and meeting people for a chat and a cup of tea as vital components of their involvement, especially for those living on their own who believed that socialising helped to alleviate their loneliness. In many cases members of a group develop a strong bond with each other and meet up as friends outside the group. This is more likely to occur among female members of the group than among men however.

"I joined for the social aspect" (FG1)

"Good network of support. They look after one another...a sense of community" (FG1)

"They see themselves as a family...friendship is a big part of the process". (FG1)

"Tea, food and good company, what more do you want?" (FG3)

The gender breakdown in almost every group consulted was 20% men and 80% women. This was attributed in part to the fact that women live longer than men and so are likely to account for a

54 Focus Group 1 2nd May 2008

55 Focus Group 2 12th May 2008

bigger percentage in the group, while others believed that women are just more open to learning and socialising⁵⁶.

“Women make more of an effort to get out of the house”. (FG2)

“In the beginning more men were joining but there weren’t enough men to keep them here”. (FG2)

Female participants in another focus group suggested that men are less likely to become learners and are much slower to join groups.⁵⁷ *“If men joined at all it was because of their wives”,* they argued. Male participants in one of the focus groups suggested that *“men are less patient than women, especially with a female teacher or if there is a majority of women in the class, due to women’s more sociable nature, and their continuous chatting!”* (FG1)⁵⁸. This suggests that greater efforts are needed to encourage larger numbers of older men to participate in lifelong learning and to promote innovative practices used when engaging men.

Q. Do members of the group consider themselves to be Adult Learners?

The response to this question from members of the focus groups was overwhelmingly positive and affirmative. The older people we spoke to engage in a variety of learning activities and enjoy learning a little bit of everything⁵⁹. They learn from experts, tutors, guides and from each other. They are learning all the time⁶⁰ and some possess a greater interest in learning now than they did when they were younger⁶¹. As was mentioned by the ARI respondents also, participating in educational activities helps them to keep their minds active. Others were philosophical in their responses, seeing their whole life as a learning process. However, while the majority of older people consulted were positive in their outlook toward learning, the groups recognised that some older people view learning in late life negatively. Some older people do not have fond memories of education the first time around. Others feel embarrassed about returning to learning or they are put off engaging in adult education activities by a sense of inadequacy and a fear of failure.

“Use it or lose it” (FG 1 & 2)

“We would have a go at anything. It is important because it keeps your brain active” (FG3)

“We are all learning from each other all the time. Retelling stories and sharing experiences.” (FG4)

56 Focus Group 1 2nd May 2008

57 Focus group 2 12th May 2008

58 AONTAS 2008 research (funded by the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science) on increasing men’s participation in the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) highlighted similar issues with regard to the differing learning styles between the sexes. (Unpublished)

59 Focus Group 2 12th May 2008

60 Focus Group 2 12th May 2008

61 Focus Group 1 2nd May 2008

“Doesn’t embarrass me at all” (FG1)

“Being a learner at this stage in life makes them feel inadequate” (FG1)

It is this feeling of inadequacy which discourages some older people from engaging in intergenerational learning. Many left school over 50 years earlier and would be intimidated to return to a similar environment to take on younger learners.

“They feel like they would be competing with young people” (FG1)

“Younger people are more intelligent, many have finished secondary school. Older people don’t want to compete with that” (FG1)

These negative attitudes towards learning, the learning environment and their own ability as learners are cause for concern and need to be addressed by service providers, funders, policy makers and older people if they are to be successfully encouraged back to learning and particularly intergenerational learning. Some groups we spoke to had engaged in intergenerational learning in the past and had enjoyed it. Children from the local primary school came to speak to members of the group about their school days and to learn about the groups’ experiences as children. Members of the group then shared their stories, telling the children about the games they played, the dances they learned and what they studied in school. This group of older people really enjoyed their interaction with the children and would be happy for them to come back and visit.⁶²

Q. What learning opportunities would you like to see being made available locally?

Information Communications Technology (ICT)

The interest in, and demand for ICT related activities cannot be too strenuously emphasised in this report. Each of the four focus groups made repeated reference to their desire to attend information and communications technology activities. This finding further supports and strengthens the existing interest in ICT highlighted in the short questionnaire to ARI members and the in-depth interviews. Interest in this area spans basic and advanced computers and ECDL; internet and e-mail; using mobile phones, especially texting and other related skills such as digital photography.

The reasons for older peoples’ interest in ICT are varied. Below are examples which illustrate why these groups of older people place such emphasis on ICT skills.

Many of the people we spoke to simply do not wish to be left behind by modern technology or discriminated against as a result of a lack of knowledge on the area. A focus group participant spoke

about the inequitable treatment of older drivers by insurance companies. Older people who are unfamiliar with the internet and cannot make a query by email are charged a hefty administration fee when they contact the companies by phone. This service is free for customers using the companies' websites. Older people do not want to be at a disadvantage when it comes to modern technologies.

Understanding ICT and having the skills to use them offer older people peace of mind. Many of the older people we spoke to used, or wanted to use email to keep in touch with family and friends when they go abroad. Some also enjoyed using webcams and wanted to learn more about connecting to Skype. Others, who have already taken computer classes, would like to refresh and maintain their computer skills and progress to more advanced courses.⁶³

*"The computer is used for practical reasons as these are of greatest concern to older people".
(FG1)*

"Everyone needs computers. I have one at home. They are brilliant" (FG4)

For participants in the focus groups becoming familiar with mobile phone technology proved equally important. The majority of older people taking part in the focus groups owned mobile phones but few knew how to use them beyond making and receiving calls. Many of the older women, in particular viewed the mobile phone as a portable panic button which could be very useful in an emergency. Members of the older peoples' family have put their contact numbers on speed dial so all their loved ones have to do in an emergency is press a button to call for help. They would all like to learn how to use their mobiles 'properly'. It is great for them to stay in contact with others but they would all like to learn how to text.

An Active Retirement Association (ARA) committee member, participating in a focus group told of his plans to buy eight mobile phones and two digital cameras for the group in order to teach the members how to text. They may learn to use the technology by engaging in some intergenerational learning with the local school children and young people. Two members of another focus group referred to the initiative in Drogheda where students teach the adults how to text on the mobile phones as an example which they could emulate. *"Texting is the main thing. We want someone to come in and show us how to use the mobiles properly"*⁶⁴.

The participants' request for training on the use of mobile phones comes on foot of a statement by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs celebrating the success of the expansion, in 2007, of the Telephone Allowance scheme to include mobile phones. The scheme which offers pensioners a contribution toward their mobile phone costs, benefited 15, 500 older people in its first year of operation⁶⁵. The generous scheme paid out almost €100 million in 2007 to help older people stay in touch with

63 Focus group 2 12th May 2008

64 Focus group 3 29th May 2008

65 Department of Social & Family Affairs Press Release 22nd May 2008

their loved ones.

In its statement the Department noted that new technologies enable pensioners to keep in touch with family and friends and offer security for older people, especially those living alone.

The high level of take up for this scheme among older people, aged 66 plus, illustrates the demand for this type of modern technology and justifies the call for increased funding and investment in ICT training for older people. In her statement, the Minister urges older people to *“embrace the new world of technology which is part and parcel of life today”* and recognises the additional value of texting as a means of staying in touch with people, as well as *“preventing social isolation for those living alone”*. Of course, older people will require support if they choose to embrace new technologies as a means of staying in touch with family and friends. Existing training initiatives piloted in Gorey and Drogheda have proven hugely successful. If computer illiteracy and difficulties with mobile technology could be addressed and resolved participants from the focus groups believe that *“members would be better equipped to communicate, would be able to bridge the digital divide and would no longer lose out financially”*.⁶⁶

Q. What needs to be done to encourage greater numbers of older people to take up learning opportunities locally?

While transport links were not considered by the vast majority of service providers to have much bearing on older people’s decision to participate in adult education activities (11.5% believed good transport links would encourage older people to participate), feedback from the focus groups and the in-depth interviews contradicted this view. Interviewees stressed the importance to them of having access to locally based learning activities available within walking distance of their homes. If this option was not feasible, interviewees highlighted their preference for activities where transport would be provided, particularly for older people living in rurally isolated locations and those with physical impairments brought on by disability or age.

“A free travel pass is useless if there is no local transport available” (FG4).

In areas with poor public transport links members of the groups had to rely on other members who drive and have access to a car to offer them lifts, while staff in day centres arrange car pooling in order to get everyone to and from the activities. Of course participants raised the questions ‘what happens when members of the group become too old to drive?’ and ‘what if staff can’t pick people up?’ (FG3). Participants in this focus group called for a mini bus for every older people’s group, particularly for those in rural areas. A lady attending one of the groups, who lives in a rural area thumbs a lift into the town every week in order to attend the meetings, as she doesn’t have access to any other form of transport (FG4). Not having their own transport means many groups miss out on activities which they enjoy.

“We like to go swimming but can’t go very often because the group doesn’t have access to suitable transport” (FG2)

Another group suggested addressing the need for better transport links and the demand for ICT training by combining the two and applying for funding for a bus for mobile computer classes (FG1). The issue of transport needs to be addressed if greater numbers of older people are to be encouraged to attend adult learning activities.

For a number of the groups their main goal is to own a premises. They hope for a state of the art community centre that could be used by everyone in the community although they would all look after their own rooms. They would like a full time person employed to run this facility and to coordinate activities for all the groups who wish to use the building. Ideally, the premises would have a Coffee Dock where older people could come to relax and socialise whenever they wanted⁶⁷.

The groups are grateful for the premises they currently avail of (some have access to them free of charge and readily acknowledge that without these premises the group would probably have disbanded long ago). However, they would like to have their own premises with access to storage space so they could collect equipment (for example costumes and props for drama activities and various exercise and sports equipment). They would then be able to put down roots. They would also be in a position to expand the types and varieties of activities they provide to their members. Participants said they would gladly share premises with other groups such as the Bridge Club or the ICA. It is important to them to have a place where they can all gather together as there is a strong interaction between these different groups. (FG2)

Section Five: Recommendations

Section 5: Recommendations

Introduction

AONTAS recognises and the research highlights the contribution which older people can make to improve their own learning opportunities. Older people constitute a valuable resource for service providers. They bring with them, a wealth of knowledge and experience which can be drawn on to enhance the content and provision of learning activities for older people.

The findings from the research undertaken by AONTAS which are detailed in Section Four raise issues which require further examination and discussion. This section, the final part of the report, makes recommendations based on these findings. These recommendations are for consideration by Government Departments, Age and Opportunity, AONTAS and other relevant stakeholders to inform future actions for improving lifelong learning opportunities for older people.

The issues which require further consideration are grouped into three broad categories. Each issue is outlined below, followed by the research's recommendation, and accompanied by a number of practical suggestions as to how the recommendation might be implemented.

The implementation of the recommendations which follow will require a strong commitment at the levels of policy formation and service provision. The categories are as follows:

1. MAKE LEARNING IN LATER LIFE A PRIORITY

Older people should be considered a specific target group by all service providers offering learning opportunities both locally and nationally. Service providers need to pay particular attention to attracting and supporting disadvantaged and marginalised older people to participate in learning activities.

- **A commitment to prioritizing older learners should be reflected in any services plans drawn up by providers, including provision for outreach work.**

The recurring emphasis placed on Information Communications Technology (ICT) by older learners consulted during the research highlights the need for greater supports for older people interested in engaging with new technologies.

- **The commitment in the Programme for Government 2007-12 to developing education & retraining for older people, especially in the area of ICT should be fully implemented and supported in the future through increased funding.**

While older learners are a target group for many programmes funded by Government (for example, the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) etc.), the emphasis is on up-skilling and re-training older workers to return to the workforce. As a result many older learners are ineligible to participate in Government funded programmes such as BTEI once they reach the upper age limit of 64. While any initiative which supports learning in later life is to be commended the emphasis on returning to work precludes many older learners from participating and diminishes the role adult learning plays in promoting older

people's personal development and positive mental and physical well being.

- **The upper age limit for participation in programmes such as the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) should be abolished to allow adult learners of all ages to take part.**

The Government should lead the way in promoting learning among older people. Age and Opportunity and AONTAS, and other related organisations can also raise the profile of learning in later life by lobbying Government to prioritise the rights of all older learners.

- **The Government should provide for a multi-departmental focus in the new role of Minister of State for Older People, including overarching responsibility for older people within the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Social Welfare.**

2. FUNDING AND INVESTMENT

If greater numbers of older people are to be encouraged to take part in adult education activities in the future a number of barriers to participation must be addressed and overcome. As identified in earlier sections of the report, the development and progression of older learners depends heavily on the skills and abilities of the service provider.

- **Funding for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for Service Providers should be increased to support those working with older learners. The funding might be used to develop a module of training for service providers specifically focused on the unique needs of older learners. Training opportunities should also encompass training older people how to deliver training to other older learners.**

Older people participating in our research emphasized the stabilizing influence access to a suitable premises would have on the groups, for building their membership base and for increasing and diversifying the learning activities the groups participate in.

- **Investment of capital funding for developing premises for older people's groups or making provision for older people's groups in the premises of existing initiatives such as Youth Cafes, arts institutions etc. should be a priority for providers.**

Transport remains a considerable obstacle for older people who wish to participate in learning activities, particularly for those living in rural areas and those with mobility problems.

- **Increased investment in the rural transport links scheme as committed to in the current programme for Government 2007-12 and 'Towards 2016' should be made in order to combat rural isolation and make accessing services easier. By cultivating partnerships with statutory bodies such as the HSE, service providers can appropriate mini-buses for use by day centre participants experiencing mobility difficulties or living long distances from services.**

Short term and once off funding for learning initiatives involving older people is insufficient to ensure the continued support and development of older learners. When innovative and successful programmes end abruptly the learning can be lost and other programmes fail to benefit from these

examples of best practice. As identified in the in-depth interviews, older people are very happy to attend adult education programmes while opportunities for learning continue. The benefits for older people of participating in a long term learning initiative have been well documented.

In a study of an arts project which was run over a 10-year period, the author noted *“They benefited from better self-esteem and greater self-actualisation, which gave them the courage to confront challenges in other aspects of their lives”*⁶⁸. In order to be successful, projects need to engage older people, help develop their confidence and self esteem and have a positive effect on their lives. This level of success is unlikely to be fully realised in the short term.

- **Multi-annual funding focused on long term provision should be made available to providers. This would ensure successful programmes grow and are emulated elsewhere.**

As mentioned earlier in this section, ensuring the learning needs of older people are prioritised requires a top – down commitment from Government.

- **The Department of Education and Science should further promote learning in later life by developing strategic links with the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Department responsible for administering social welfare and supplementary welfare entitlements to older people. Such co-operation might start with the introduction of funding (perhaps as part of the mobile phone allowance scheme) to develop training for older people in the use of mobile phone technology. Existing schemes have already successfully piloted similar training (Drogheda Partnership) and could be adapted by others.**

3. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

Many of the issues identified through the research conducted by AONTAS will require further research which would, in turn, inform the development of resources to benefit service providers and older learners alike. In relation to lifelong learning, the importance of consultation with older learners cannot be over-emphasised. *“You are pushing an open door with older people, provided the learning is done in a way that they want it to be done. It boils down to consultation first and foremost, to knowing your client base and knowing the population you are trying to accommodate. It is all about conducting needs assessments and then specifically tailoring the service to their needs.”*⁶⁹

- **All providers offering services to older learners should as a matter of course conduct a learning needs assessment to inform the types of activities which their service offers to older people.**
- **Models of best practice should be documented and promoted with a view to further developing and enhancing services for older people**

As identified in section four, there is a considerable disparity between the numbers of older men participating in adult learning activities compared with the high numbers of older women.

⁶⁸ Interview (Dept. Adult Ed., NUI Maynooth) taken from AONTAS discussion document on the lifelong learning needs of older people (2007)

⁶⁹ Interview (NCAOP) taken from AONTAS discussion document on the lifelong learning needs of older people (2007)

- **Further research needs to be undertaken to identify the particular learning needs of older men with a view to producing best practice guidelines for increasing older men's participation in adult education.**

AONTAS has produced similar guidelines for increasing men's participation in the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) which could be used as a basis for further investigation or adapted to take account of older men's specific learning needs.

- **Resources need to be developed to support service providers to increase and improve links with partner organisations e.g. develop a practical user manual similar to the AONTAS information pack for daytime voluntary adult education groups, which would support providers to engage in fruitful and successful partnerships.**

Older people have many valuable attributes to contribute to any learning environment, such as a wealth of life experience and inter-personal skills, however a number of the older people consulted expressed negative attitudes to returning to learning and admitted to feelings of low self esteem and inadequacy.

- **An attitudinal study examining older people's perceptions of adult education and educational settings and their own confidence levels should be undertaken. This would result in the development of strategies to change and improve older people's attitudes to learning.**
- **The skills and life experience of older people should be recognized and pooled as a resource to the adult and community education sector.**
- **The Older Learners' Network established as a result of this research should be funded to enable it to organize meetings, promote its activities etc.**

Conclusion

This report examines the lifelong learning needs of older people in Ireland as identified through research conducted with service providers and older learners in the spring of 2008. Findings from the research identify older people as a diverse and vibrant group within society, whose learning needs are all too often overlooked or neglected. Among this section of society there is a great demand for engagement in learning. Older people are an untapped resource; many with a genuine enthusiasm for adult education activities. They present service providers with both challenges and opportunities for promoting lifelong learning. It is hoped that this report will generate ideas among service providers for developing lifelong learning activities for older people and in consultation with older people.

Section Six: Case Studies

Exploring the new world of technology – Drogheda Partnership Training

Older People learn to use mobiles, iPods and MP3 players

'EMBRACE IT' is the title of the ICT training programme managed by the Drogheda Partnership Company in County Louth. Since 30th October 2007 1, 057 trainees making up 87 training groups have availed of a wide range of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) related courses. "These courses include computers for beginners and those at intermediate level, while one group has moved on to advanced Internet & email usage", says Ina McCrumlish, Project Coordinator with the Drogheda Partnership. "Groups participate in digital photography courses and learn how to make digitally designed T-shirts and shopping bags. A large number of groups have learned how to use mobile

phones, while others have progressed to using iPods & MP3 players" continues Ina.



These training courses were completed by 12th May 2008 but there are plans to recommence activity in September 2008. The groups meet in 10 outreach centres around Drogheda. Ina explains "Two of these training centres are based in the offices of the Drogheda Partnership Company. One of the centres has been equipped with 10 workstations donated by FAS. The other centre is equipped with laptops purchased as a result of funding from the Department of An Taoiseach's 'Access Skills & Content Initiative'".

The decision to target these courses at older people came as a result of the Partnership's 'Using ICT as a tool of social inclusion' strategy. "As a learning organization we believe in ICT access for all. We strive for social inclusion and education equality among all age groups". In the information age it can be difficult for older people, who have become known in ICT circles as 'late adopters' to come to terms with the technological revolution which has taken place over the last number of years. Ina explains "In response to this

need we decided to provide a practical, locally based educational courses which would increase access to ICT opportunities for older people in the area. They now have access to on-line, accurate, integrated information and communication networks. A new world has unfolded for them".

In order to attract interest in the programmes, however, Ina knew that the learning needs to be marketed as life enhancing, fully attainable and fun. The benefits of participation are communicated in the simplest terms devoid of any jargon. "From the moment an older person lifts the telephone to book their place, right through to arriving at the class and participating, they are dealt with in a professional, patient and understanding manner. Our focus is to dispel any fears they may have during the initial stages of contact and to project a welcoming atmosphere".

The older people's interest is sustained by ensuring the training is appropriately paced and is

presented in a format which is easy to understand. Central to this ethos is the belief that all learning is attainable. Ina continues *"To communicate this message we have used the local and national media. I co-ordinated an advertising campaign using local newspapers, community bulletins, church leaflets, radio interviews. In our endeavors to reach out to older people I spoke on radio and invited newspapers to visit our training sessions, the trainees were then able to speak of the benefits of this educational opportunity for themselves"*.



As part of this advertising campaign Ina contacted Meteor seeking their involvement. The company agreed and allowed the Drogheda Partnership to add mobile phone and gadget training to their expanding curriculum. *"We attained sponsorship from Meteor, which included financial support, the provision of mobile phones and assistance with the tutoring. We also received a financial contribution from the DSFA under their family support programme"*.

In February 2008 Meteor organised for a photographer from the Irish Times to visit a training session to take photographs of some local nuns using the mobiles. The photograph of the nuns appeared in the Irish Times with the caption Nuns the Wiser: Meteor sponsors mobile usage class. In March 2008 Ina was contacted to speak on Mary Wilson's Drive Time Programme on RTE Radio One on the 5.00 pm news slot. RTE 1 requested that a participant was also available to speak of their learning experience.

As a result of the media coverage officials from the Department of An Taoiseach contacted the Drogheda Partnership Company to arrange a meeting between the

then Minister of State Tom Kitt, and Colm Butler, Director of the Information Society Policy Unit in April 2008. The Minister of State discussed with the Drogheda Partnership their ICT programme for the over 55's and congratulated them in leading the way in terms of innovation. *"He wanted to know how we made the programme work; how we obtained sponsorship and the lessons we had learned along the way"* says Ina.

The EMBRACE IT programme allows Drogheda's senior citizens to learn about emerging technologies especially those who do not have the financial resources or educational capacity to engage with the information society. Introducing older people to email communication, particularly the housebound, those living in rurally isolated areas or those who experiencing loneliness.

"We also promote the use of ICT as a tool for enhancing citizenship and social rights for older people by enabling them to access government information. The consortium perceives this to be especially important as more and more government information is becoming more readily available on the internet, while paper based documentation is becoming hard to find. Also we work with older people to develop our website, producing web content and information about their communities that counters

negative or absent commentary in the mainstream media”

Like many innovative community based projects the main challenge facing the EMBRACE IT project is lack of continuity of funding. Ina also identifies her own learning as a result of her involvement in this project “From a project co-ordinators’ perspective, the one thing that I would do differently is to ensure fast broadband access is available in every training location before the training began as there were variances in speeds among the training locations”.

Ina concludes by saying *“There is huge demand from older people for ICT training. In the Drogheda Partnership, we believe that everybody has the right to be included. This age group believes they have missed out on the technological revolution. Our project - Embrace IT, sets out to support older people to overcome this barrier. The immediate benefit is learning and the lasting affect is empowerment”.*



Never Too Old To Teach – Failte Isteach

Older people help new migrants with their English.

Named Failte Isteach which, are the Irish words for ‘Welcome In’ the project began in October 2005 and was the direct result of an observed local need among the increasing population of new migrants in a local community in County Meath. Currently ten per cent of Ireland’s population is made up of people who were not born in Ireland. Many members of the new migrant communities in the area were experiencing difficulty in their social and working lives as a result of their lack of English language skills so this community decided to come up with a solution.



Members of the Third Age Foundation, an older people’s organization in the area came up with the idea of using their skills and talents to teach conversational English to newcomers from countries such as , Argentina, China, France, Germany, Spain, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Ukraine and Sweden. *“The project focuses on conversational English, basing lesson plans on daily scenarios such as ‘visiting the doctor’, ‘my work’, ‘shopping’, ‘making a telephone call’ etc.”* says Alison Branigan, a staff member working with the Third Age Foundation. Every Tuesday up to forty adult learners assisted by older volunteers work together on these topics. The children of the learners are also encouraged to come along to the classes with their parents and volunteers assist parents to help their children with homework making this a truly intergenerational process. *“Children often learn English faster than their parents and may have to take on adult responsibilities such as shopping, paying bills, writing letters or answering the telephone as a result so the emphasis of this project is on learning together”* Alison explains.

Volunteers with Failte Isteach generally work with two to three learners and encourage interaction by introducing people from different countries to one another. Together the volunteers and learners identify what they want to work on which varies from communicating in the workplace or socially to understanding rights and entitlements or accessing services such as health and education. Alison explains *“Lesson plans are then designed to suit the needs of the learner taking into account their proficiency in English. Plans can be adapted for all levels from basic through intermediate to advanced”*. There is a high level of collaboration between the project and the local schools with teachers identifying needs and using their expertise to support volunteers to develop lesson plans. The volunteers use a variety of teaching and learning methods including small discussion groups, visual aids, practical demonstrations and role play focusing on everyday activities. *“Classes are delivered at times that are suitable for learners taking into account their home and work commitments”* Alison continues. Volunteers also act as advocates providing assistance where necessary, particularly in relation to rights and services.

“The beauty of this project is that it is totally learner-centred and the needs of learners are met in such a way as to encourage maximum participation”. The project is not just about the transfer of skills and



knowledge. It is achieving much more than that. Alison goes on to say about the Failte Isteach project *"It is building a new sense of community spirit, creating new friendships, facilitating learning and encouraging people to become interested in each other cultures"*. It promotes the value and contribution that older people can and are making to society, generating trust and respect and alleviating isolation through the extension of the hand of friendship and goodwill. *"The project is making a tremendous difference to the lives of all those involved. It has increased the confidence and self esteem of the volunteers as well as the learners and has improved the working and social lives of the newcomers to the area"*.

"The project has been a challenge but one which has been extremely worthwhile according to both volunteers and learners" says Alison, finally. This is a fantastic example of what can be achieved if the collective resources of older people are pooled and used for the benefit of the community. As a result of work Failte Isteach has engaged in there is a greatly enhanced social interaction between new and indigenous communities, thus reducing fear and suspicion, building trust and embracing diversity.



Getting Connected: Grundtvig 2 Learning Partnership engages Older Learners

In November 2003, a single page correspondence crossed the desk of Mary Mc Geehan, Training Officer with Inishowen Development Partnership in County Donegal. *"It was an invitation from Leargas"*, (the Irish Support Agency for European funded programmes) Mary explained, *"to attend an information session on how to make applications for funding under the Grundtvig Programme"*. Mary attended the meeting and came away full of enthusiasm for the possibilities this funding could open up for older learners in her locality. Thus was born a Grundtvig 2 Learning Partnership project named EDOL, European Digital Older Learners. The project which ran for three years, set out to teach Information Technology skills to people over the age of 50, but like all learning processes it brought with it many benefits from friendship and fun to life-changing independence. Two Irish partners, one in the North West and the other in the South East of the country formed part of an online network of communities stretched across seven European countries, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, UK and Ireland.



The EDOL group grew out of another project called 'Silver Surfers' who were availing of basic computer training provided by the Inishowen Partnership. The Irish EDOL group met every Thursday morning for two hours. *"The project offered an opportunity to learn digital photography and conversational Spanish lessons, to use the internet and library facilities"* says Mary. The latter was so the members of the group could research information on the local area with the intention of compiling a booklet. All the groups across Europe were linked in an online learning community and each member set up their own web pages, using the user friendly Tiki Wiki content management system. Members of the different partnership groups communicated regularly, not just by reading each other's pages, but also by 'shoutbox' instant messaging and email. They all shared their life experiences through a project entitled 'When I was Young' on the TikiWiki website. In addition everyone accepted the challenge to write a book on their reminiscences and personal reflections. The participants have

written their own memories, posted treasured pictures to illustrate a series of themes, such as family, home, and schooldays and so on. The project can be viewed on its website at www.edolproject.com.

The Irish group produced a beautiful publication entitled 'Passages from Inishowen' which contains reminiscences of times past, poetry, prose and beautiful pictures which provide a fascinating snapshot of life in the area from a different era. James, a participant in the project who also took the photographs for the front and inside covers describes how the process got started:-

" We sat around the table one morning, all of us waiting on instructions from our tutor. She was trying to tell us how we were going to write a book of short stories, some creative writing and some reminiscence...only the poor woman couldn't get started as someone started to waffle about something they had done or heard; then someone else joined in and knew far more than the last speaker; finally everyone joined in at the same time!"

Et voila! The book began to come together.



“The members of the EDOL Project have shown a strong commitment to learning and great enthusiasm for it and the outcomes of the project reflect that. The members have learned basic ICT skills and English language skills. They have learned to upload multimedia products using a Digital Platform Developed a website, DVD and a number of publications. A few from the group also participated in transnational meetings with other members of the online network. Equally as important though is the growth of mutual respect and the improvement of self esteem in these older learners”, Mary explains.

A key factor in the success of the project was the skill and experience of the tutors who were always there to instruct, guide and at times, gently push the participants to reach their full potential.

“They have come so far along the IT highway since they first came together and it is great to hear them using computer jargon like IT boffins!” commented one tutor.

The co-operation between European partners has been an important requirement not only for the exchange of best practice and adult education methodologies among tutors/teachers, but also for the development and improvement of intercultural understanding among learners. Mary, the Training Officer’s experiences of the project are very positive. *“We are convinced that the mobility of tutors and learners has strengthened the awareness and experience of active citizenship at a European level as well. The project gave me great insight into how other countries runs similar programmes and the type of facilities they have at their disposal and I believe Ireland compares very favourably to other countries in the way facilities and supports are organised for older learners.”*



Older People's Network with Kerry Education Service (KES)

Empowerment and Participation in Later Life

The Older People's Network in North County Kerry is a new initiative supported by the Kerry Education Service (KES), with funding from Age and Opportunity, which is part of an interagency group also encompassing the Kerry County Development Board, North Kerry Together and the Health Services Executive (HSE). The Network consists of representatives from older people's groups throughout the North County Kerry, including active retirement associations.



Michelle Anne Houlihan, Community Education Facilitator with the Kerry Education Service explains *"We aim to provide educational opportunities to older people and promote the benefits of lifelong learning. Kerry Education Service is committed to ensuring that isolated, disadvantaged and under-represented groups, including older people, have access to educational activities"*. These activities include arts and crafts, health related programmes, including physical fitness and Information Communications Technology (ICT). Michelle Anne continues *"We have a strong community based programme that ensures older people in communities in Kerry can access educational and social educational opportunities"*.

However KES also engages older people in meaningful consultation about their learning needs and supports older people each term to devise programmes of courses which benefit them and address issues affecting older people. The service offers groups the opportunity to move toward self-sufficiency by offering committee skills training and the option of developing other skills sets including lobbying, advocacy, networking and participation in decision-making structures in the county. Michelle Anne says *"We are committed to facilitating older learners to see lifelong learning and third age education as an opportunity for them to develop their capacity to participate fully in society. Adult and Community Education promotes the capacity of older people to lead initiatives in their communities"*.

Ageism Workshops

The Kerry Education Service (KES) believes that one of the first steps to empowering older people is to challenge negative stereotypes around ageing. This is done through ageism workshops funded by Age and Opportunity. *"We promote an understanding among older people of the personal, cultural and structural effects of ageism by demystifying the language used to define ageism and ageist*



practices. We also challenge participants in the ageism workshops to question their own attitudes towards older people. Often older people themselves will find they too are guilty of having negative or stereotypical opinions of older people” says Michelle Anne. By confronting these attitudes older people are empowered to move forward and eventually take on a more active and participatory role in representing older people’s views on local decision making structures such as County Development Boards, Parish Councils, and Strategic Policy Committees etc.

Networking Event

The establishment of a North Kerry Older People’s Network and the first networking event, held in Listowel in May, has built on the success of the ageism workshops in encouraging older people to become empowered and active in their communities and in Irish society. Groups participating

in the day included Listowel, Ballyheigue and Knockanure Active Retired, Ballylongford, Ballyduff, Ballybunion, and Duagh Active Retired and Causeway Active Retirement Associations.

The inputs on the day included an inspirational key note address by Sylvia Meehan, President of the Senior Citizens Parliament and a very insightful presentation by a representative from Kerry County Development Board, Community and Voluntary Forum.



Forever Young Chorus - Finglas Cabra Council for Older People

Hitting the Right Notes



In 2007 approximately 200 older people from the Finglas/Cabra area of Dublin attended a performance of the *Young@Heart Chorus*. This choir originated in the USA in the 1980's and has toured all over Northern America and Europe. The performance in October 2007 was their first in Ireland.

Following the performance a meeting was held with the producer of the *Young@Heart Chorus* to gather information on how to set up a similar group in the Finglas/Cabra area. A survey was also conducted among the group of older people who attended the show. The findings of the survey revealed great interest among the group in establishing a similar choir in this part of Dublin. The Forever Young Chorus, which meets in Finglas village weekly to practice, is coordinated by the education action group committee of the Finglas/Cabra Council for Older People. The choir consists of thirty members, four men and twenty six women. A music director, Ms. Chiara Browne, was contracted (with some funding from the

local VEC) by the Finglas Cabra Partnership which supports the education action group; to work with the choir between January and June 2008. The choir's repertoire includes interpretations of modern pop





songs from such well known artists as U2 and Sinead O'Connor. Ms. Christine Ryan, a member of the choir and a volunteer with the education action group committee explains *"we really enjoy every minute of it and love the singing"*.

Once the members of the choir had sufficient opportunity to practice, it was time to showcase their talents! The action group committee set about organising a number of concerts, including a concert in Belfast (as part of a cross border initiative), with the Forever Young Chorus as the main attraction! Concerts took place in the Axis Theatre on the Dublin City University (DCU) campus, in the Finglas Youth Resource Centre and at a venue in East Belfast on various dates in May and June 2008. The choir also participated in the Age and Opportunity Bealtaine festival 2008.

Ms. Ryan finished by saying *"The group is very keen to continue with the choir and we hope we can get funding to bring Chiara (musical director) back in September to continue this project"*.

Appendices

1. Survey on the Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People

This questionnaire will be distributed to service providers offering learning opportunities to older people (i.e. over 55s) including VEC staff, family resource centres, partnership companies and city and county development boards.

Please fill out the questionnaire by placing a tick in the spaces provided or by writing the answer in the text boxes. Any information you include in this questionnaire will be treated as confidential and will only be used for the purpose of generating statistics.

The questionnaire should only take between 5-10 minutes to complete. Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

2. Demographic Information

The purpose of this section is to gather information about your organisation and the older people who use your service.

1. Name of Organisation

* 2. Type of Organisation

- Vocational Education Committee (VEC)
- Family Resource Centres
- Local Area Partnership
- City/County Development Board

Other (please specify)

* 3. How would you characterise your catchment area?

- Mainly Urban
- Mainly Rural
- 50:50 Urban and Rural Mix

4. How many older learners (i.e. over 55s) access your service on a yearly basis?

- Less than 500
- Between 500-1,000
- Between 1,000-2,000
- Between 2,000-5,000
- Between 5,000-10,000
- Between 10,000-20,000
- Over 20,000
- Don't Know

* 5. Approximately what percentage of older learners accessing your service are:

	Male	Female
Less than 10%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less than 25%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Between 26%-50%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Between 51%-75%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
75%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Between 76%-90%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
More than 90%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
100%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*** 6. Has a learning needs analysis been carried out among the older people in your catchment area?**

Yes

No

Don't Know

3. Mapping the Learning Opportunities for Older People

The purpose of this section is to identify the learning opportunities available to older people and how these have come about, i.e. through funding, partnerships etc

* 1. What learning opportunities does your service currently provide?

	55-64 years	Male	Female	65-74 years	Male	Female	75 years plus	Male	Female
Basic Education, e.g. Literacy & Numeracy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information Technology, e.g. Mobile Phone, Computers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Further & Higher Education courses (Accredited)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arts & Crafts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cultural Activities, e.g. oral history, museums, music	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lectures & Talks, e.g. SW entitlements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intergenerational Learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical Activities, e.g. health & fitness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leisure Activities, e.g. field trips	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

* 2. How are these learning activities funded?

	Fully Funded	Part Funded	Self Financing
Basic Education, e.g. Literacy & Numeracy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information Technology, e.g. Mobile Phone, Computers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Further & Higher Education courses (Accredited)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Arts & Crafts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cultural Activities, e.g. oral history, museums, music	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lectures & Talks, e.g. SW entitlements	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intergenerational Learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Physical Activities, e.g. health & fitness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leisure Activities, e.g. field trips	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*** 3. How do you encourage older people to engage with your service?**

- Consultation
- Activities tailored to their needs
- Outreach
- Transport links
- Promotion & Advertising
- Collaboration with other services for older people

Other (please specify)

*** 4. Do you work with any of the following partner organisations:**

- Health Service Executive
- Family Resource Centres
- Community Development Projects
- Leader/Partnership Companies
- Vocational Education Committees (VECs)
- None

Other (please specify)

5. Are you satisfied that the learning needs of older people are being fully met by:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	No opinion/Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Your service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other services in the area	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. If you answered agree or strongly agree to the question above please select from the list below, the most important elements of best practice when engaging older people in local learning opportunities

	Important	Not Sure	Not important
Welcoming & Friendly Atmosphere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strong Outreach Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Good connections with other organisations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff, volunteers who engage well with older learners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Needs based activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Efforts are made to secure 'buy-in' from older people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People are empowered and given a voice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strong social contact	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'Other' (please specify)

7. If you answered disagree or strongly disagree to question 5 in relation to your service, please choose from the reasons why, outlined below:

- Lack of Funding
- Lack of adequate resources, e.g. staff, technical etc
- Older people not an identified target group
- Needs adequately met by other services in the area
- Don't know

Other (please specify)

8. In order of importance,(1= most important) please list below the changes which need to be made to your service, in order to better meet the learning needs of older people in your area

1	<input type="text"/>
2	<input type="text"/>
3	<input type="text"/>
4	<input type="text"/>
5	<input type="text"/>

9. Is there an activity involving older people going on in your local area, which has really impressed you? If you would like to tell us about it put your details in the spaces provided below and we will contact you.

Name:

Email Address:

Phone Number:



AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, funded by Age and Opportunity, is doing research on Older People's Involvement in Adult Education Activities. We would be very grateful if you would take 5 minutes to answer the following questions. The answers you give are **confidential**. Thank you.

1. Are you:

- Male
- Female

2. What age category do you belong to:

- 55-64 years
- 65-74 years
- 75 years plus

3. Do you participate in any of the adult education activities listed below?

- Basic Education, e.g. Literacy & Numeracy
- Information Technology, e.g. mobile phone, computers
- Further & Higher Education Courses (Accredited)
- Arts & Crafts
- Cultural Events, e.g. oral history, museum, music

PTO...

- Physical Activities, e.g. health & fitness

- Lectures & Talks, e.g. Information on Entitlements
- Intergenerational Learning
- Leisure Activities, e.g. field trips
- None
- Other _____

4. What difference has participation in these activities made in your life?

5. If you were Minister for Education what adult education services would you put in place for older people?

6. AONTAS is interested in supporting older people to set up an Older Learners Network¹. Would you like to be kept informed about this? If yes, please record your contact details below.

Name: _____

Contact Number: _____

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it to the AONTAS information stand on your way out.

¹ A Learners' Network is a group of learners who come together on a regular basis to discuss their experience of learning (e.g. the content, delivery, relevance to their needs) and to identify areas of mutual interest. Where concerns are identified, channels to the appropriate organisations or agencies that might take action is facilitated. On issues that are more strategic, networks are given greater access to those who influence policy.



Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People

AONTAS research commissioned by Age & Opportunity

Focus Group Questions

The focus group will be an informal and relaxed space. The facilitator will engage participants in a 'chat' while the note taker records the issues arising. The aim of the focus group will be to explore the *quality* of the learning experience for older people. The focus group will be between 45 minutes and 1 hour in duration.

Questions

Q. Can people tell me about some of the learning activities you do here?

Q. How did people hear about the group?

Q. How long have people been part of the group?

Q. What made you join in the first place?

Q. What keeps people here?

Q. What do people get from the group?

Q. What learning opportunities would you like to see being made available locally?

Q. Why would these be important to you?

Q. How are older people regarded in Ireland today? How do you feel about that?

Q. How does everyone feel about being adult learners?

Q. What needs to be done to encourage greater numbers of older people to take up learning opportunities locally?

Thank You



Research on Adult Education Activities for Older People

Interview Questions for Volunteers

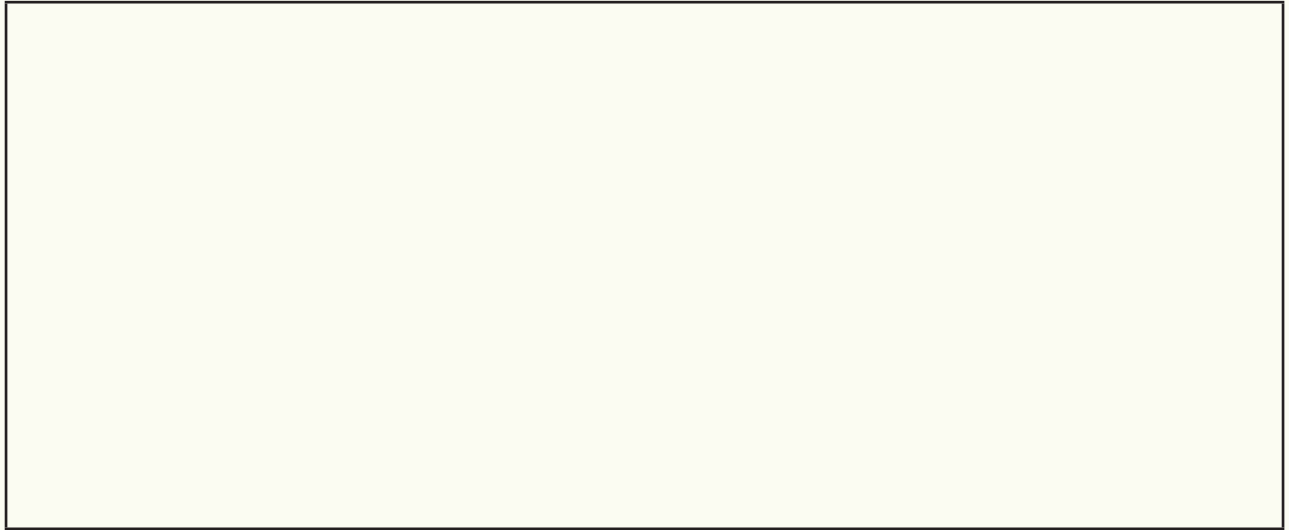
To the Interviewee: *Thank you for participating in this research. It should not take more than 5-10 minutes of your time to answer these questions. Everything you say is **confidential**.*

Q1. What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

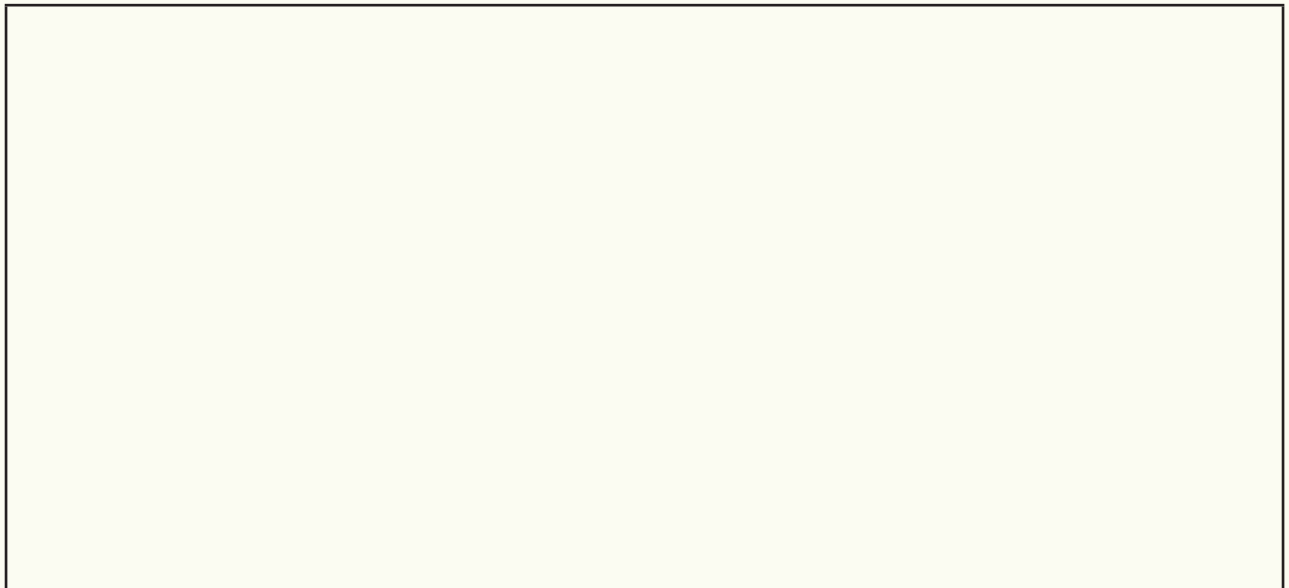
Q2. A) Have you taken part in an adult education activity in the past? If yes, can you tell me about it? (Prompts: *What was it like for you? Why did you choose this activity? What/who encouraged you to go? Why did you stop?*)

P.T.O...

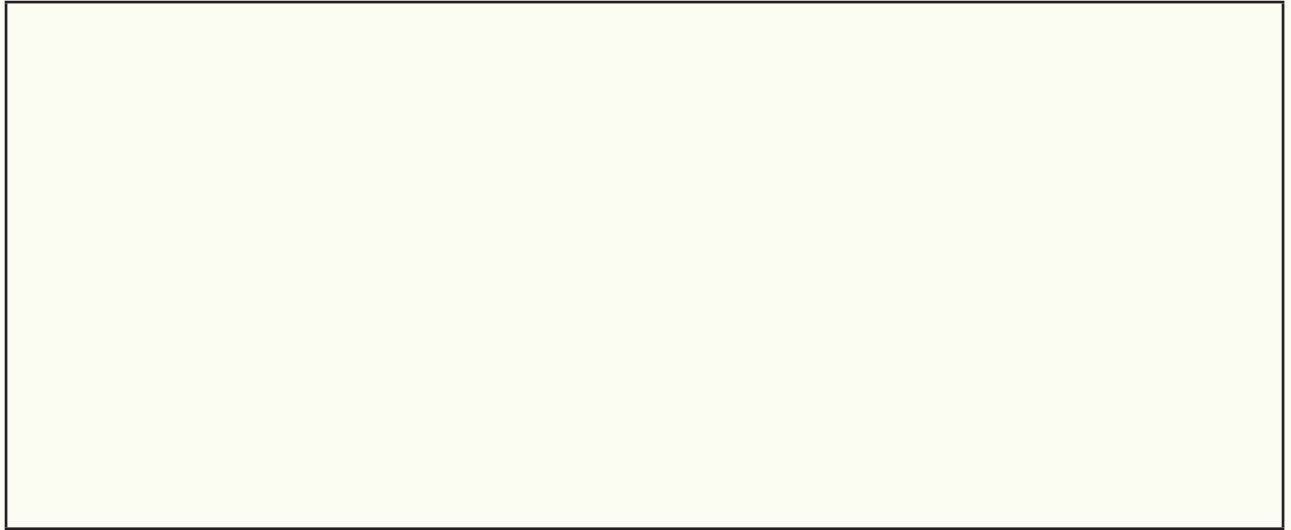
Q2. B) If no, why not? Would you consider taking part in an adult education activity in the future? (Prompts: *What would make it easier for you to do this? What sort of things might put you off?*)



Q3. What adult education activities would you like to see taking place locally? (Prompts: *How would you like to see these being organised /run? Where and when should they take place?*)



Q4. What needs to be done to encourage greater numbers of older people to take up adult education activities locally? (Prompts: *Is there an issue with transport? Would a financial subsidy help? Need more information on the activities available?*)



To the interviewee: *I have finished asking all the questions. Do you have anything else you would like to add? Any general comments?*



Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions and participate in the research.

Appendix E: Case Study Template



Older Learner's Case Study Template

Are you a service provider working with older learners? Are you interested in sharing your experiences of working with older learners? If so please let us know all about it by filling in details in the template below!

Name of Service Provider:

Service Provider Contact Details:

Phone no: _____

E-mail: _____

Name of Older Learners Group:

Group Details:

How many men?

How many women?

-

Age Range 55-64

65-74

Over 75 years

Do you have a specific target group among older people? (For example: Travellers, women, homeless, disadvantaged, etc)

Where does the group meet?

How often does the group meet?

How long has the group been together?

Please describe in detail below, the adult education activities you have organised for older people availing of your service. Attach additional information if required.

How did you identify the need for/ interest in these activities among older people?

Please describe what you, as a service provider, were hoping to **achieve** by offering these activities?

What qualification (if any) is awarded upon completion of this course? _____

Did you receive any financial assistance to undertake this course: Yes No

Did you face any specific **challenges**? (For example; resource issues such as financial or staffing; transport, encouraging older people etc.); if so how did you **resolve** these?

Please detail below, the main **benefits** for older learners and the **outcome(s)** from these activities?

Would you do anything differently next time? What has been the learning for **you** as a service provider?

Additional Information:

Are you willing to share your story with others by allowing your story to be used for media purposes or in AONTAS publications, e-bulletins or website? Yes No

Are you available for interview? Print Radio Television

Can you supply photos along with your story? Yes No

If you are asked to do a media interview, AONTAS will help you prepare.

PLEASE COMPLETE AND RETURN TO:

Name: Adele McKenna, Policy & Research Officer
Address: AONTAS, 2nd Floor 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6
Phone: 01 4068220
Fax: 01 4068227
Email: amckenna@aontas.com



13th June 2008

Dear ,

I am writing to you with regard to the Older Learners' Network, we would be delighted if you could attend this event. The reason we are having this meeting is: to allow older learners to meet and share experiences; to ensure that we are aware of the challenges facing older learners so that we can lobby for your needs; and to empower learners to take action on their issues locally and through AONTAS nationally.

Because learners are at the heart of the work of AONTAS, their views are imperative to our lobbying work and we continually endeavour to reach adult learners and assist them to address the issues which affect them. As such, we are creating methods of communication in the form of *learner networks* that act as a medium for dialogue with, and between, learners. By developing networks, learners are enabled to come together to discuss their experience as an adult learner and also the barriers and issues that arise during their learning journey. It is hoped that through this process of sharing experience specific issues are identified and a solution found through the support and assistance of AONTAS. Adult learners will be empowered to take on these issues and through a collaborative approach with others reach a satisfactory outcome. Learner networks are inspirational in that the learner's experience is used to motivate others to work together for a better adult learning service in Ireland.

Learner Networks will:

1. Be an action driven forum for learners
2. Give learners the opportunity to meet each other in their area

3. Facilitate the sharing of experiences with each other
4. Facilitate and empower learners to take action on issues that affect them
5. Use the information obtained to feed into the policy work of AONTAS and ensure we are responsive to the needs of learners
6. Feed into the policy work of the member organisation
7. Be a space that will allow the sharing of information on policy at national level

We would encourage you to attend this event and become involved in the older learners' network so that we can work together to improve conditions through collaborative media and policy work. It's also a great chance to network! We believe that the interests of learners are best served by those who have a direct experience of adult learning in Ireland: the learners themselves. **P.T.O.**

Date: Wednesday, 16th July 2008

Time: 10.30 – 3.30pm

Venue: The Galway Bay Hotel, The Promenade, Salthill, Co. Galway

We hope to see you there, please phone Niamh O'Reilly or Dympna Larkin at the office on 01 4068220, write to 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6 or email dlarkin@aontas.com to confirm your attendance by Wednesday 9th July. If you require assistance with your expenses in attending this event please let us know: we will cover the cost of public transport or will pay 50c per mile if you travel in a car as a group. I have enclosed the agenda and some posters regarding the meeting. If you require any further information please don't hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Niamh O'Reilly

Membership Development Officer

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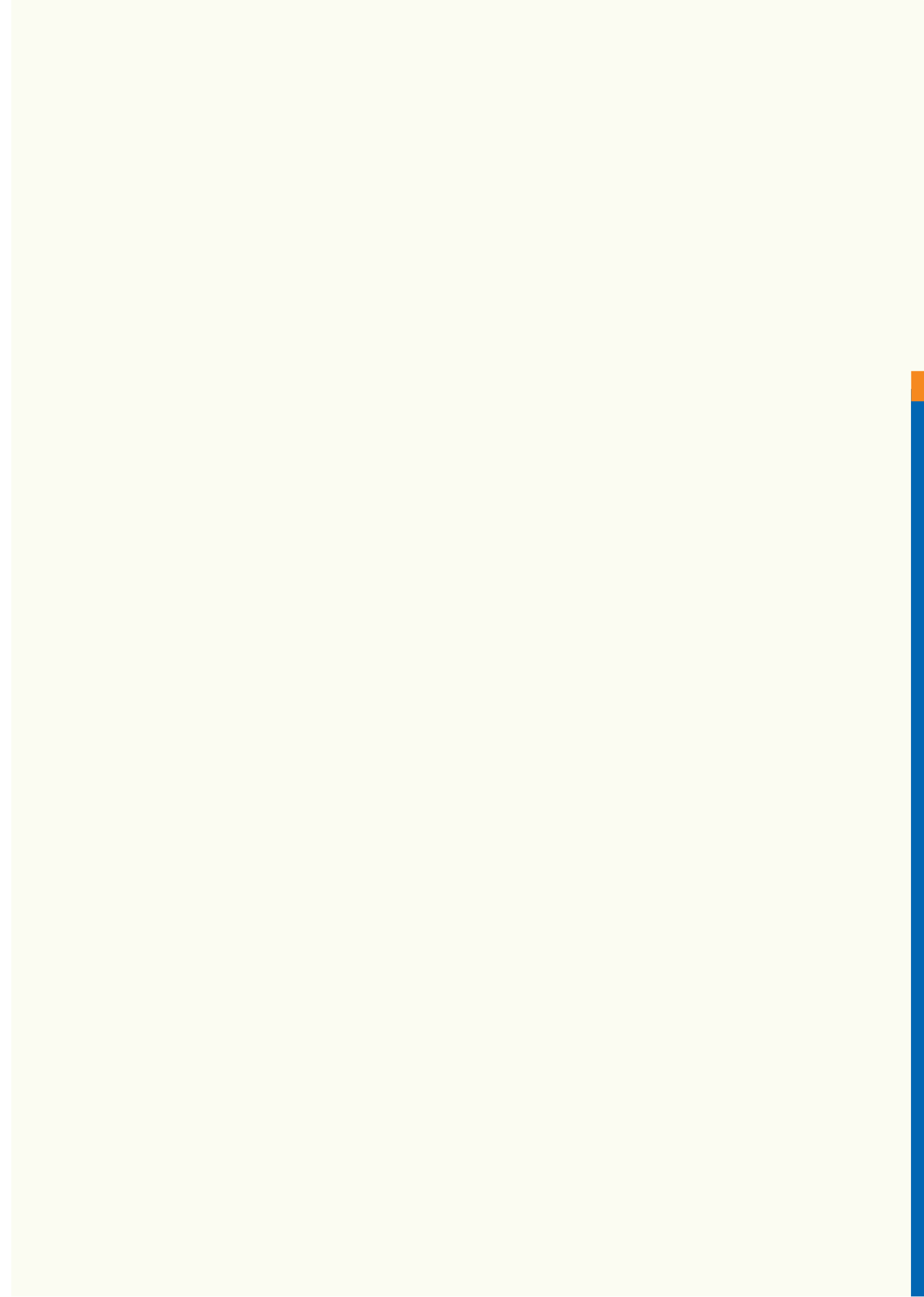
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