



ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRPERSON JOHN D'ARCY

2024 has been another busy and productive year for AONTAS as it challenges the barriers facing adult and community learners and the educators who support them. Wider societal issues in Ireland also impact adult and community education and AONTAS have sought to work positively with people to ensure that social justice and opportunity for all remains at the heart of our sector and our work.

Being the voice of adult learning in Ireland remains our top priority with the added commitment that AONTAS use our voice to make positive change in adult learning for individuals, communities and Ireland as a whole.

The range of activities undertaken by AONTAS, whether in-person or online or in newspapers, radio and television, have been well received, and made their mark with our partner organisations, funders and policymakers.

A high point of the year, which brings all of this activity together, was the 2024 Adult Learners' Festival which provides a showcase for the immense work being undertaken day in, day out across Ireland while giving us a chance to celebrate exceptional work at the STAR Awards at Croke Park and our annual Policy Day is a unique and impactful way to engage with key agencies on the pressing issues facing adult and community education.

The activity and progress in this report would not be possible without the expertise, energy, and commitment of the AONTAS staff team led by our Chief Executive, Dearbháil Lawless. It is always a joy to find out about the life changing impact of the work of adult and community education and learners across Ireland through the output of AONTAS and to see the hands-on advocacy with government and state agencies for learners.

More than that, it is awesome to see the care, thoughtfulness and level of planning that underscores all of this activity. I would also like to thank our Board for their stewardship of everything AONTAS does – our Board members are volunteers and are generous with their time and expertise.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge our funders SOLAS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the European Commission, and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland.







A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO DEARBHÁIL LAWLESS

Addressing educational inequality through collective action continues to be at the heart of everything we do at AONTAS. In 2024, we worked together to strengthen the field of adult and community education by advocating for the removal of barriers to adult education and building the capacity of learners, practitioners, and providers to meet systematic and societal challenges.

For me, adult education is fundamentally a

social justice movement. I've been deeply moved by the incredible acts of care, solidarity, and compassion shown in our field, especially during these difficult times. It's this collective action that protects our democracy and creates positive social change.

Tackling Barriers

In 2024, our “Holding You Back” campaign brought public and political attention to the challenges adult learners face from financial pressures and transport difficulties to the lack of clear, accessible information. Together, we made our voices heard. We featured on RTÉ News, Today FM, and across a wide range of media platforms, including the Irish Independent and the Irish Farmer's Journal.

Learner advocates used the power of storytelling to personalise these issues and highlight the transformative impact of adult learning. AONTAS collaborated with activists like Emmet Kirwan and Emmalene Blake to get creative and by using street art and a powerful interview in Hot Press Magazine to amplify the message. In total, the campaign reached over 70 million readers and listeners.

Political Action

We acted and spoke directly to those in positions of power. Launching our election manifesto 'Transforming Adult and Community Education' in the Dáil, surrounded by political representatives and policymakers, was a huge step for the organisation and our members. Adult learners, practitioners, and the AONTAS team shared their stories and urged representatives to take action in the new Programme for Government.

We saw real impact through our ongoing advocacy work in consultations, policy papers, policy meetings, and attendance at party conferences. The new Programme for Government now includes a commitment to review learner financial supports and to “use education to break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion.” Resulting in a step forward on our advocacy journey.

Strengthening Communities

In supporting community education providers to respond to political and climate priorities, we helped with local voter education, sustainability, and climate action projects. Through “train-the-trainer” programmes and the provision of small grants, these initiatives helped build capacity and local action.

Our shared island collaboration also made progress through our involvement in the Alliance for Lifelong Learning. We were proud to explore how the impact of non-formal education is measured in Northern Ireland, supported by the Department for the Economy. This work is an example of the growing momentum for all-island cooperation in adult learning.

Promoting Adult Learning and Driving Learner Voice

Our 2024 Adult Learners’ Festival theme celebrated “Everyday Learning Spaces” with 166 events held right across Ireland. It was a wonderful celebration of learning, concluding with the STAR Awards in Croke Park with the brilliant comedian and actor PJ Gallagher sharing his own learning story with guests. Seven phenomenal groups took home awards, but every shortlisted nominee was a winner as they showcased the power of adult education for Irish society. We reached over 10 million people during the festival period.

AONTAS championed learner voice, working closely with Education and Training Boards nationwide. The National FET Learner Forum provided a space for learners to reflect, to connect with each other, and to share their experiences through surveys and focus groups. We also provided training for learners and staff, and supported learners to share their voice in national and international spaces, including a learner voice workshop in Finland. Helping our European colleagues to see the value of learner voice for themselves.

Thank you

We couldn’t have done this work without the support of our incredible voluntary Board, our dedicated members, and our funders SOLAS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the European Commission, and the Department for the Economy. Thank you for everything!

My heartfelt thank you to our Chairperson, John D’Arcy, whose leadership and kindness have guided AONTAS throughout the year. And to the AONTAS team, thank you for your commitment, passion, intelligence, and humour. You motivate me and make this work enjoyable and I’m so proud to be part of the AONTAS team.

Finally, thank you to everyone in the AONTAS community. Together, we are creating a more just and inclusive future.

Dearbháil



INTRODUCTION TO AONTAS

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

In 2023, as part of our new Strategic Plan, we updated our Vision and Mission. These set out what kind of world we want to see (our Vision), and the part we can play in achieving this (our Mission).

Our Vision

A world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities.

Our Mission

To advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice, and collective action across the island of Ireland.



“Leading Collective Action for Social Change”: *The AONTAS Strategic Plan 2023-2026*

Our [Strategic Plan](#) “Leading Collective Action for Social Change” explores the changes we want to see in the coming years, and how we are working to make these changes happen.

Our Strategic Plan and our work continues to be informed by our six guiding principles:



**SOCIAL
JUSTICE**



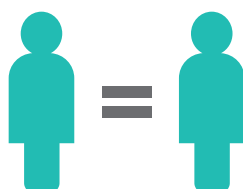
**SUPPORTING
SOCIAL INCLUSION**



PARTNERSHIP



**VALUING
DIVERSITY**



**ADVANCING
EQUALITY**



FEMINISM

Our work is also underpinned by the realisation of [Public Sector Duty](#), and striving to eliminate discrimination, promote equality, and protect the human rights of staff and people involved in the adult and community education sector. The work reflected in this report demonstrates how we live these principles. As a team, we are committed to excellence in governance, and our hard-working staff are highly skilled, well-informed, and passionate about social justice.

“Leading Collective Action for Social Change” is based in the understanding that adult learning has proven benefits for the personal and professional development and wellbeing of individuals, communities, and society. However, existing social inequalities prevent people from participating in adult learning.

In turn, this means that people are not aware of or are not being afforded the chance to reach their learning potential. This impacts the wider community, and means that disadvantage and social exclusion are perpetuated.

Our 2023-2026 strategy is about AONTAS driving social change from a social equality perspective. This requires collective action to empower communities and wider society, not just the individual. It is about enabling the whole community to grow and flourish together. It is human-centred and rights-based. It encourages a society that respects and values all people, all learning types, and all learning journeys across the island of Ireland.

“Leading Collective Action for Social Change” has three objectives. Each one uses the word “change”, to underscore how we can move closer to our vision of “a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities”.

1. Connect and Engage the Sector to Enable Change

As a membership organisation, AONTAS have long and valuable experience in bringing people from across the adult learning and community education sector together. We know that listening to and supporting learners, providers, and all others involved in the sector, helps to form a collective voice to call for change. We have three goals under this objective.

- **Goal 1:** Provide a structured platform for voices and input to be heard from across the sector.
- **Goal 2:** Inform national research on the importance of social equality.
- **Goal 3:** Build capacity within the sector by enabling professional development, sharing knowledge and strengthening networks.

2. Advocate for Change

Based on the needs and experiences of our members and the wider sector, we advocate for changes that address social inequality that relates to adult learning. We have three goals under this objective.

- **Goal 1:** Strengthen and develop the AONTAS organisational voice.
- **Goal 2:** Evidence and highlight how adult learning is impacted by social inequality.
- **Goal 3:** Inform and influence stakeholders and the wider public.

3. Empower the Change

We recognise that to achieve our mission, we need to be a supportive environment that supports professional development and encourages new ideas. We have three goals under this objective.

- **Goal 1:** Develop a socially inclusive framework for AONTAS as an employer.
- **Goal 2:** Integrate a problem-solving culture.
- **Goal 3:** Enhance organisational infrastructure and explore diversification of funding.

All of our work is aligned clearly with these identified objectives and goals. In this Annual Report, we will explore our activities and outcomes for 2023 and how they contribute to the achievement of the overall Strategic Plan to 2026. We present our programmes, events, and campaigns under the objective they most closely align with, but with the understanding that all our work intersects with multiple parts of the Strategic Plan.



OBJECTIVE 1.

CONNECT AND ENGAGE THE SECTOR TO ENABLE CHANGE

AONTAS have for many years provided essential opportunities for members to link with other adult learning practitioners from across Ireland. These are opportunities to build new connections, to learn from each other, and to share information of common interest. Meeting and listening to each other, and working together on issues that affect us, develops a sense of shared purpose and solidarity.

The objective to “Connect and Engage the Sector to Enable Change” builds on this sense of solidarity, and uses it to focus on improving social equality. The three goals under this objective will help us to enable this change. In this section, we focus on work that is particularly aligned with these goals.

Goal 1. Provide a Structured Platform for Voices and Input to Be Heard from Across the Sector

Our Members

In 2024, we had **413 members** from across the island of Ireland. Our members are organisations and individuals who are working in or have an interest in the adult and community education sector. This includes educators, managers and staff, and adult learners. In 2024, we welcomed **44 new members** to the AONTAS community.



One of our main goals is to ensure that our members' voices and perspectives are raised with decision-makers at a national level, to make change happen.

Brian, our Membership and Digital Engagement Officer, leads our work with our members. We are driven by what our members need, by their feedback, and the demands of their day-to-day work and lives. We offer ongoing support to members and an open, pick-up-the-phone approach for questions and queries relating to adult and community education across the island of Ireland. We reach out to lots of different groups, particularly those who have been marginalised by changes in society and technology.

Brian seeks out new information and ideas that might be useful to our members, from funding opportunities to training initiatives to invitations to AONTAS events, and shares them with members through regular direct emails. He runs a membership subgroup within AONTAS, who meet periodically to discuss how best we're responding to the needs of our members. We sent 23 membership emails in 2024, covering lots of topics including our Adult Learners' Festival events, funding opportunities in the sector, new training opportunities, the local, European, and General Elections, and other events like our AGM and our "Holding You Back" campaign. We also ran a webinar and information session for members on the [Adult Learners' Festival](#).

Brian and others on the team went out on 14 visits to members across the country. This includes going to TU Dublin in March for their "Access and Outreach" information day for adult learners; the "[Social Therapeutic Horticulture Club](#)" in Tipperary, winners of Health and Wellbeing category at AONTAS Star Awards; Dundrum Adult Training and Education (D.A.T.E.) in Dundrum in Dublin, who were celebrating 40 years of adult education with an Open Day. Brian also visited DCU to learn about their Age-Friendly University Programme at work, and produced two blogs for our website, one on [a chat with coordinator Christine Kelly](#), and one [on combatting ageism in Ireland](#). We also hosted an exhibition stand at the RDS 50+ show, connecting with our existing members DCU and ALONE, and meeting hundreds of potential adult learners to discuss options and ideas for engagement.

Through our events, from the STAR Awards to our AGM, we offer a place for our members to come together and celebrate adult learning, and to identify issues and structures that need to change. One big new offering from AONTAS is the Members' Hub, launching formally in 2025.

Members' Hub

In 2024, Brian started building a new Members' Hub. This is a new online space for our members to connect on everything related to adult education on the island of Ireland. Members can join discussions, download exclusive resources, and post updates to other AONTAS members. It is a place for members to connect, and share information including upcoming events and opportunities. It is a forum for conversations on different themes, and there will be blogs with new and up-to-date information on various topics relating to adult and community education, including the digital divide and older learners, the need for more supports for people with disabilities, the impact of a lack of childcare on adult learners, and much more.



Brian built 45 web pages for the Hub by the end of 2024, with full roll-out of the site planned for spring 2025. He added 231 members to Hub in advance of the roll-out. Soon, members will be able to access and explore it, and we will enter into a phase of testing and refining it to ensure it is useful for our members and achieves the goal of becoming a place to connect online and share ideas and training tools.

More to come on this in 2025 so watch this space.

Community Education Network

We established the Community Education Network (CEN) in 2007 to respond to a gap in support and resources for groups that deliver learning in local communities across the country, often without adequate funding or recognition. It provides a space for collective action and a national representative voice. The network has over **100 independent members**. Through the CEN, we share information and resources, and we offer capacity-building and development opportunities, including in-person and online information sessions or international job-shadowing.

Community education is often the first point-of-contact learners have with the sector, particularly for people from under-resourced communities or working-class backgrounds, or people who have had negative experiences with education in the past, or are going through a challenging time. It is an ongoing organisational and strategic priority for us to promote, support, and advocate for community education, so that these learners get the welcoming and nurturing environment they need to get back to learning, in whatever form suits them.

Responding to Community Issues and Needs

We empower community education providers and staff to take actions that are making a big difference both in local communities and nationally.

In 2024, led by our Community Education Officer Lorraine, the CEN grew to new strengths. We had two new members, Adult Training and Education (ATEC) from BRILL Family Resource Centre (FRC) and Cranmore Community Cooperative Society.

We continued to bring members of the CEN together for four [online coffee mornings](#). The coffee mornings and engagement with the CEN lead to feedback, which directs how we seek to support CEN Members. We held events in person and online for our CEN members such as an “[Elevate Your Grant Writing Skills](#)” workshop, focussed on crafting impactful grant proposals and effective budgeting among other things. 21 people joined us for this workshop, which was facilitated by Joanne Ryan from Trust Grant Writing.

Recognition of Prior Learning is a massive issue in the adult and community education sector, and we held a webinar on “[Moving Forward with RPL, Advancing the Conversation](#)”, ahead of the [5th VPL Biennale in Kilkenny, which focused on democracy](#).

We held a workshop in July in Exchange House on “[Building Bridges: Anti-Racism Tools for Community Education Network](#)”, which was delivered by Dignity Partnership to help members gain new tools and knowledge for dealing with racism and connecting communities. 33 CEN members joined us for this workshop. This is building on our on-going work in anti-racism and anti-migrant sentiment in our communities, and focuses on bringing people together. The idea is about creating safe spaces around this topic and opportunities for integration for refugees and asylum seekers. [Read more about the workshop here](#).

We have made 9 visits to CEN members around the country. You can [read about them on our blog](#). We have brought members of the CEN abroad on KA1 learning mobilities. This offers job shadowing opportunities and chances to gain practical resources and ideas to bring back to community education centres in Ireland. 15 CEN groups joined our consortium, and members have travelled to three European countries. We had two learner mobilities – the first of their kind. Following on from the mobility to Brussels in late 2023, in 2024, we took a group of six practitioners to Stuttgart in Germany, and three more to Helsinki in Finland. Six adult learners also went on the mobility to Helsinki. It is a new approach to include learners on these mobilities, and AONTAS are a leader in this across Europe.

As part of this project, we at AONTAS co-organised and delivered a Learner Voice workshop and panel discussion at the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) annual conference, supporting learners to share their views. This gave them a chance to meet with their peers in adult education organisations across Europe and share experiences through focus groups and Q&A sessions. This knowledge exchange will support the continued development of practice in adult education across Europe.

The issue of racism and community tensions has been a prevalent one in 2024. In response to misinformation and violence, we issued [a statement in July highlighting the CEN as a valuable resource for people in the sector to come together](#).

Here are some highlights from the CEN this year:

- [AONTAS Attends National Traveller Education Achievement Awards Ceremony](#)
- [Community Education and Shared Learning with our German Colleagues](#)
- [Modelling Wellbeing in Community Education: Fun, Friendship and Fulfilment in Cork](#)

CEN Community of Practice

The CEN Community of Practice is a group that brings CEN members together to learn and share knowledge. There were three meetings throughout 2024, with 10 attendees at each. We also partnered with Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) to run [a free two-day residential experiential training programme on voter education](#). This unique training opportunity was exclusively for CEN Members at Maynooth University in February. Participants received €800 towards delivering their own voter education programme with adult learners. The CEN members involved found the learning valuable and were able to put it into action in their own projects. Following this training, providers like Belmayne Community Group have now begun delivering their own local programmes.

Afterwards, the focus of a CEN Community of Practice was on developing voter education. Members discussed the importance of opportunities for positive collaboration. Belmayne Community Group and Doras Buí teamed up to deliver training in North County Dublin, while Women's Collective Ireland groups in Mullingar and Ronanstown joined forces to design and deliver a programme on voter education. All those in attendance at the meeting have spoken about the positive impact and appetite for voter education with learners and more broadly within their communities.

[Read more about the impact here.](#)

In May, Belmayne Community Group members celebrated the completion of their Voter Education and Active Citizenship programme with a trip to the Dáil. Participants had the opportunity to get close to decision-making in government in Ireland, by taking part in voting simulations, and a tour of the Dáil itself, where they met Cian O'Callaghan TD and received their certificates of completion.

"The only people who are going to change things in the community are the people of the community" - **Ciara Sloan, participant on Belmayne Community Group**

[Read more about this programme and the Dáil visit.](#)

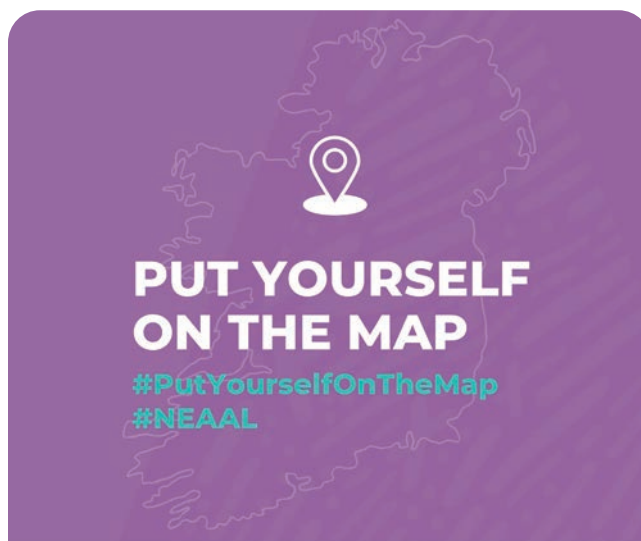
Storytelling for Connecting Communities

We held three storytelling workshops for educators to help them promote empathy and social cohesion in their local communities. With greater polarisation in our society at the moment, we need more opportunities for connection and compassion.

Funded under the NEAAL (more on this in Goal 3 of Objective 2), there were three workshops in this series, one in September and two in November 2024. Lorraine and Larisa facilitated the first one at Limerick's South Hill Hub with LCEN, focusing on empathy and social cohesion for community education providers. Larisa and Rebecca facilitated the second workshop in the series in Ballybane Family Resource Centre in Galway. And Larisa and Lorraine facilitated the third workshop in the Carmichael Centre in Dublin. 35 educators participated in workshops. Participants from the University of Galway and COPE Galway reported that they will use the methods from the workshop and handbook to advance advocacy work. More on the results of this work in the NEAAL section below.

Community Education Map

Building on the [Put Yourself On the Map campaign](#) from 2023, this year we continued to promote and communicate the value and benefits of the [Community Education Map](#) to members and those involved in adult and community education across the island of Ireland. The map is essential for research, advocacy, and networking, to show the breadth and strength of community education and present clear evidence of why it must be adequately and sustainably funded, and valued.



The Community Education Map, led by Adult Education Initiatives Officer Larisa, gained 94 new listings in 2024. The map now features [199 community education groups](#).

Our main collaborators on this project have been the Community Education Facilitators and the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA), who worked with us to identify what was needed, to guide us on how best to develop the map, and to promote the map among community groups and encourage them to sign up.

Policymakers and funders are starting to understand the real value and importance of community education as one of the backbones of our society. The new Community Education Framework is evidence of this. A relaunch of the Map is planned for 2025. [View the map here.](#)

AONTAS Events in 2024: Bringing People Together

Every year, we run many different events with the goal of bringing people together to achieve positive change for adult and community education across the island of Ireland. Our events can be small or large, online or in-person, but they always focus on the voices and needs of adult learners and education providers.

“Transforming Adult and Community Education: A Manifesto for Change”

One of our key events of 2024 was [the launch of our manifesto](#), in the lead-up to 2024 General Election and the formation of a new Government. The launch took place in Leinster House on Wednesday 2nd October, supported by Mairéad Farrell TD, Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Further and Higher Education, Innovation, and Science.

This manifesto was our call to action for Government to make transformative and progressive policy changes that will ensure those furthest behind in our education system are prioritised first. This is essential if we are to have equality in Ireland.

With this launch, we brought adult learners and providers to the heart of Government. There was a panel discussion and a meet-and-greet with TDs, Senators, and political representatives.



“An investment in adult and community education is an investment in the health and future of our country. We want to see real change within the lifetime of the new Government. New policies and infrastructure won’t solve these problems without the right foundations—people need homes, health, food, financial security, and stability. We must stop judging educational success by accredited outcomes and start focusing on the equality of conditions in people’s lives” – Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO

Speaking at the launch was Blessing Chidiogo Ebeledike from Co. Tipperary, who focused on the lack of public transport options for learners in rural areas.

“Where I attend my course in Carrick-on-Suir, the buses are so infrequent going to rural areas that I often have to wait in town for four or five hours for the next bus, or take a taxi, which costs a fortune” – Blessing Chidiogo Ebeledike

We published 44 social media posts around the launch. Between the website and socials, our reach was just under 18,000.

[Read more about the launch.](#)



“Learner Voices Across Ireland” Report Launch 2024

We launched the most recent “Learner Voices Across Ireland” report in October in Athlone. This report is the culmination of the research and findings from the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum, which is our mixed-methods research project on Learner Voice.

The forum consists of surveys and focus groups with adult learners across Ireland, and is held in collaboration with the Education and Training Boards. The findings from the research, as demonstrated in this report, show the most recent and up-to-date data on learners’ experiences of FET in Ireland right now. It is a valuable resource for ETB staff and policymakers in the sector, but also for learners and learner representatives or councils.

This event featured two learner representative speakers as well as panellists from Tipperary ETB, Waterford and Wexford ETB, and SETU. 80 people joined us for the event, including stakeholders from SOLAS, ETBI, ETBs across the country, and those working and interested in the adult and community education sector. Thomas, our Head of Research, was subsequently invited to speak about the launch and the findings from the report on Near FM. Speaking at the launch, he said:

“Learners consistently reported strong demand for their centres to offer canteens and social spaces as well as social events outside of class hours. We believe that these important measures will support friendships, peer learning and cultural exchange in the short-term, and wider community-building and social cohesion over time.”

“64% of people surveyed gained more self-confidence through engaging in adult learning in Ireland in the last year” – Learner Voices Across Ireland Report 2024

“58% of people surveyed gained a more positive outlook on the future”
– Learner Voices Across Ireland Report 2024

The research findings were timely as they coincided with Mental Health Month.





Adult Learner Journal 2024 Launch

We launched the 2024 edition of the [Adult Learner Journal](#) on 21st November at the National College of Ireland.

This journal is Ireland's leading peer-reviewed publication on adult and community education, featuring new ideas and research from experts in the field.

The event, which was attended by 23 people, featured presentations from authors with articles published in this edition, a keynote speech from [Dr Audrey Bryan](#) from DCU, and roundtable discussions on the topics raised in the journal. Audrey described how the focus on employability and productivity is “fundamentally at odds with the values of adult education” and expressed concern about teaching and learning “becoming depoliticised” in order to create a workforce that is “pliable” and “politically docile.”

“In a world where values can feel off-kilter, this journal can be a safety blanket. We invite you to open the journal and wrap yourself up in this safety blanket, which is a source of inspiration to us all” – Rosemary Moreland, Journal Editor

[Read more about the Launch.](#)

18th Annual Adult Learners' Festival: Everyday Learning Spaces

The theme of 2024 was Everyday Learning Spaces, focusing on all the ways people can learn in a way and place that suits them. The Festival ran from Monday 4th March to Friday 8th March, with in-person and online events in Dublin and across the country to celebrate the creative side of adult learning. Our main focus for the week, as well as promoting local and regional events from adult and community education providers across the island of Ireland, was to host two large events in Dublin. One focused on **adult learning policy** and influencing decision-makers to create positive change. The other was to celebrate adult learning through **the STAR Awards**. We'll explore these more below.



National Further Education and Training Learner Forum Events

We conduct robust, evidence-based research into adult education, community education, and Further Education and Training (FET). The National FET Learner Forum is a research project that runs through the academic year.

It brings together adult learners in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland. We travel to the ETB and, through a series of facilitated focus groups and a survey, ask learners questions about what has been working well as part of their course and what could be improved. We analyse their answers to build up a picture of the learners' experience of FET, and how it meets the needs of adult learners today and in the future. We then report findings to the individual ETB, so they can decide what actions to take for their learners. When all the Forums have been held, we gather all the data and analyse it to build up a picture of FET experiences across the country. This publicly available report is called **Learner Voices Across Ireland**.

In the 2023-24 academic year, there were **1,721 learner contributions** to the research, comprising 650 focus group participants and 1,071 survey responses. We hosted **9 Learner Forums around Ireland**, and delivered 9 reports to the ETBs involved.

National Further Education and Training Learner Forum Events:



1,721 Learner contributions

9 Learner Forums around Ireland



1,071 survey responses



650 learners in focus groups

Findings from the Reports and the Forums strongly influence the focus of our advocacy work. For instance, we used this research in our pre-Budget submission to DFHERIS in 2024 (see the “Advocacy and Policy” section below for more details). Dearbháil also gave a presentation on AONTAS and our research results, including our mental health research, to the SOLAS Social Inclusion Advisory Group (more about this below under “Advocacy and Policy”).

Impact of our Learner Voice Work

Professor Ted Fleming of Columbia University and member of the Forum academic expert advisory group recently observed that “Learner voice is one of the most interesting exercises in democracy in Ireland today”.

Diverse ETBs have told us of the impact of the National FET Learner Forum in promoting Learner Voice and supporting local and regional engagement with learners on issues of importance to them and their learning experience.

Mayo Sligo and Leitrim ETB highlighted the importance of FET learners knowing that they are part of a bigger adult learning organisation, one that can enhance and amplify local Learner Voice initiatives: “An external body like AONTAS, working on Learner Voice, adds strength to the process, and independence.”

Waterford and Wexford ETB have highlighted the Forum’s impact on their future planning of learner supports and services: “We will take feedback from this very important annual event and from the AONTAS regional report and will use it to make plans for supports and services that enhance WWETB learning opportunities.”

Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB highlighted the Forum’s impact in terms of shaping the future of learning experiences in FET: “I can assure you that we will act on what you say. We want you to be really honest – this is the opportunity for you to influence and inspire, and to shape the direction of FET in Ireland. We have a commitment to enhance the learning experience for all of you and to put in an action plan. I guarantee you that we will take what you say today on board.”

[Take a look at our Forum events from 2024.](#)

The National FET Learner Forum in the Media

We often get great local and regional interest in the Forum in towns and cities across the country. Here’s some of the pick-up we’ve had in 2024:

- [Southeast Radio](#): Reach of 986
- [Cork Independent](#): Reach of 40,144
- [Dundalk Democrat](#): Reach of 34,789
- [Radio Kerry](#): Reach of 83,000
- [Offaly Independent](#): Reach of 5,993

We shared 43 social media posts about the Forum, with a reach of 18,989. We also issued nine press releases. **Our combined media reach for the Forum in 2024 was 444,626.**

Measuring the Impact of Non-formal Learning

On 29th November, we held a joint event with FALNI (Forum for Adult Learning NI) at the NICVA Centre in Belfast to kick off a research project on the impact of non-formal learning, to be finalised in 2025. There were 45 attendees. Speakers included Joe Collins from ETBI, Celine McStravick from NICVA, and Alex Stevenson from Learning and Work. More on this project in 2025.



AONTAS AGM 2024: “What’s Holding Us Back?”

We held our 54th AGM on 30 May at the Spencer Hotel in Dublin, with the theme **What’s Holding Us Back? Moving Forward with Tackling Barriers to Adult Education**. This theme was the main focus for the majority of 2024, and led to our national public awareness-raising campaign “Holding You Back”, focusing on the barriers to learning for adults. CEO Dearbháil noted that this campaign, in line with the Strategic Plan, was part of the organisation’s “much stronger advocacy approach”.

At the AGM, our keynote speaker was Dr Bríd Connolly, who has published widely on adult and community education, [including with RTÉ](#). Bríd’s inspirational speech focused on women’s rights and the history of adult and community education, particularly community education, in empowering women and communities. She spoke about the social and political changes experienced by women in Ireland, from when AONTAS was first formed in the 1970s, to modern times. She also spoke about the importance of remaining active in the adult and community education sector and continuing the work. She encouraged organisations and groups to keep pushing the boundaries: “Be the square peg in the round hole.”

The event also featured roundtable discussions using “personas” developed by the AONTAS Communications and Impact and Engagement Teams, where participants considered the kind of barriers holding people back from learning, and what could be done to achieve change.

We also had a panel discussion chaired by Dr Lilian Nwanze-Akobo, an academic from Maynooth University and member of the AONTAS Board, the session featured three adult learners, Luke Jennings from START 360, Lorraine McEvoy from The Central Technical Institute in Clonmel, and Ferguson Tobins from Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board’s “Advanced Manufacturing Technology” traineeship. The panel also included two practitioners—Martina Hourigan from Roscommon Women’s Network and Nuala Glanton from Cork ETB.

[Read more about the AGM.](#)

The team at AONTAS reflected on the AGM, offering some feedback:

“All the panellists were inspiring, particularly Luke, as recognition and respect shown to all in Community Education saved his life. I think that, as a youth worker, having encountered the issues he faced, he will inspire other young people. In general, the panel showed where Community Education takes people. It may be a starting point for some, but the result is just the beginning.”

“Brid Connolly was wonderful and as always, warm, dedicated and the greatest proponent and example of community education we know in this country. Brid is the greatest example of Lifelong Learning, having retired she is now doing a master’s in creative writing!”

Overall, we held **37 online and in-person events in 2024**.

The [Events section of our website](#) received **10,230 views, up from 3,931 views in 2023**.

We will continue to plan events that meet the needs of our members and bring new information and ideas for the adult and community education sector.

Celebrating Adult Learning: the STAR Awards

Part of the annual Adult Learners’ Festival, the STAR Awards recognise the very best in adult learning across the island of Ireland. In 2024, we celebrated and acknowledged the incredible work from adult learning providers and the wonderful achievements of adult learners across the country.

Nominations for the 18th AONTAS STAR Awards were under five categories. These are adult learning initiatives that support:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Learner Voice
- Social Inclusion
- Sustainable Development through Education
- Third-level Access and Engagement

Our Membership and Digital Engagement Officer Brian leads on the STAR Awards, and guided groups through the [nomination process](#).

109 groups and initiatives in adult and community education nominated themselves for an award, and out of those 25 groups were shortlisted by an independent panel of judges. The judging process with the shortlisted groups took place in February at the Ashling Hotel in Dublin, and from that the judges selected the winners. [Check out videos from the shortlisted groups](#).



The 7 winners were announced at an exciting ceremony in Croke Park on Friday 8 March, with 160 attendees.

We were delighted that our host, AONTAS Chair John D'Arcy, was joined by comedian and radio presenter **PJ Gallagher**, who spoke with humour, humility, and kindness about his experience of dropping out of school, finding a course - in acting - that suited him, his struggles with his mental health, and his radio show.

In recognition of International Women's Day and the Family and Care Referendum, Sinead Mahon, Coordinator of Women's Collective Ireland, Ronanstown spoke about the importance of supporting women and combatting gender inequality.

We also had a brilliant contribution from adult learner and Belmayne community activist Michelle McGoldrick, who spoke powerfully of the impact of community education.

"Community education has helped shape the person I am today. When I was at my lowest, it was community education that helped me the most"
– **Michelle McGoldrick**

[Read all about the STAR Awards 2024.](#)



Impact of the STAR Awards

Our CEO Dearbháil was on [Newstalk](#) alongside one of the winners on the day, speaking about the benefits of adult learning, not just for skills and employment but also for personal wellbeing and development. The audience reach for Newstalk is 41,000.

“People involved in adult education improve their physical and mental health and become more proactive citizens. Everybody that we meet, more often than not, says that their life has been changed” – Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO

Our Head of Communications Rachael was on NEAR FM talking about the STAR Awards, with a reach of 12,000, and we had a media campaign to promote the Awards, with 46 individual pieces of coverage on national and local media and an overall audience reach of over 10 million readers and listeners. On social media, we had an audience reach of just under 200,000.

Here’s a sense of the feedback from groups on the day:

“We were absolutely delighted with the win and the learners went home on a serious high! Thanks a million for all the support from you and your colleagues throughout the process, it was a brilliant experience for everyone and the event itself was just fantastic!” – Pathfinders Gorey

“We are absolutely delighted and loved the whole experience!” – Women’s Resource & Development Agency (WRDA)

“We had a great day and thank you and all the team for such an amazing welcome and an inspiring day” – Cork College of FET, Douglas Street Campus

One group, the “Intercultural Cookbook” project from St. John’s Junior & Senior Schools in Kilkenny, part of the “Family Learning Programme”, was featured on [KCLR96FM, Kilkenny and Carlow’s number 1 radio station](#).

The project brought together parents, grandparents, and carers to swap cooking recipes and get involved in cooking demonstrations. It also built relationships between people, and encouraged people to get out and about in the community through library visits and other local outings. Results were increased **positive mental health**, and a stronger **sense of belonging** and connection for **people from different backgrounds and cultures**.

At times like these, when we are seeing a lot of social division and disinformation, such projects are essential to our communities. [Read more about the Intercultural Cookbook](#).

Use Your Voice: How to Engage with Local and EU Election Candidates – Webinar

With the elections coming up, we ran an event to encourage members to “Use Your Voice” and offer supports and information on how to engage with election candidates and Government representatives. We were joined by Ronan Kennedy, Senior Public Policy Officer from the [Irish Council for Civil Liberties](#). Ronan Kennedy provided expert input on how to engage with local candidates. Jemma Lee from Léargas explained the impact the EU has on adult education in Ireland. Attendees were also given a quick walkthrough of using the EPAL website, along with an opportunity to ask questions and share experiences. We created space for discussion using the EPAL platform, which features 11 resources including the AONTAS Guide: [How to Engage with Local and European Candidates](#). Read more about [the Use Your Voice! event](#).

Reaching our Audience: Social Media

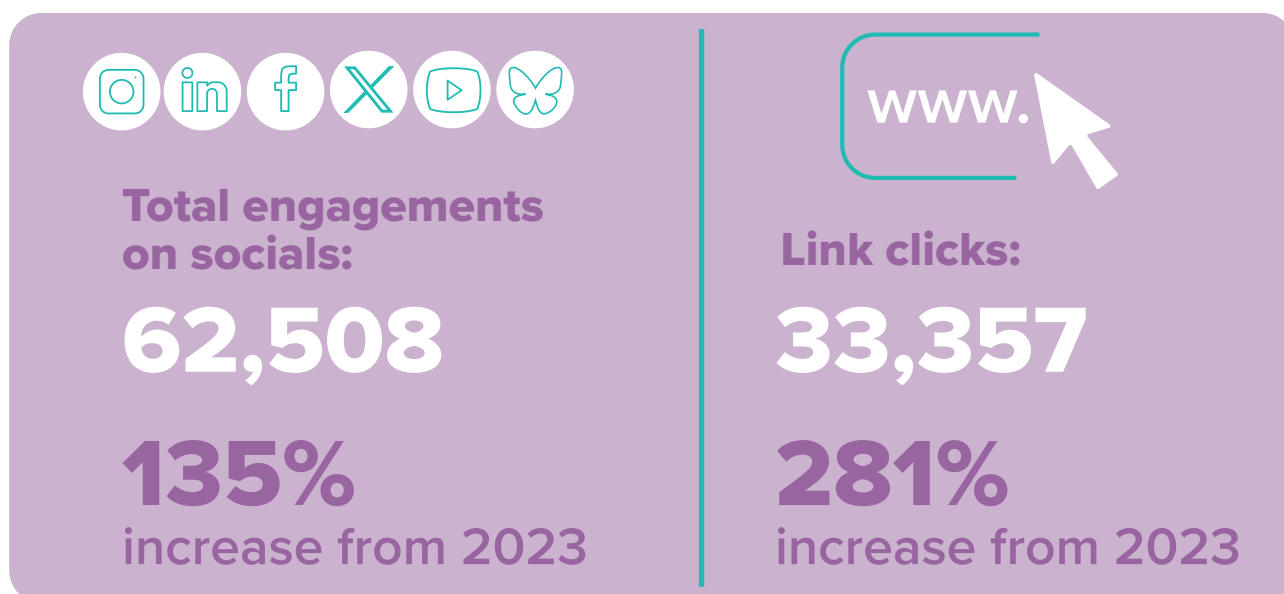
There continue to be rapid changes in the social media landscape, from the changes to Twitter/X, to the developments in AI for social media use. Led by our Communications and Digital Media Officer Megan O’Neil, we have continued to build our focus on video content, which has proven very effective on our social media channels. These currently include Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram (Meta), LinkedIn, and YouTube.

The team are exploring options to move away from use of Twitter/X, especially as its content becomes more polarising and contains more disinformation. In 2025, we plan to explore this further and look into setting up a Bluesky account to expand our reach and seek out the audience that is moving there as a response to changes on Twitter/X.

In 2024, we had:

- 2,745 social media posts, an increase of 63% from 2023
- 2,018 new followers, a 9% annual growth rate
- 956,039 total reach, a 38% increase from 2023

We are focusing on the quality of engagements on our socials, prioritising high-quality content that our audiences respond to.



Our main focus across socials continued to firstly serve adult learners and the adult learning community, nationally and internationally, and secondly to promote our work and events.

Our most important social media campaigns:

- The Adult Learners' Festival, which ran from February to the end of March with the hashtags #EverydayLearningSpaces #FindYourselfHere and #ALF24
- The STAR Awards 2024, as part of the Adult Learners' Festival #STARAwards24
- Our AGM, which took place in May and focused on "What's Holding Us Back?" and barriers to adult learning #AontasAGM24
- The Holding You Back campaign, on barriers to adult learning #HoldingYouBack
- Our Manifesto launch and advocacy work relating to the General Election and the new Programme for Government #SupportAdultLearning
- Throughout the year, we also spotlighted our members and our relationships with them, particularly through the Community Education Network.
- We also continually promoted the National FET Learner Forum events with the hashtags #FETLearnerForum and #LearnerVoice
- We promoted adult learning across Europe by sharing meetings, projects, and collaborations with our partners and colleagues in adult learning across the EU.

Social media remains an important way to connect with our members, the general public, and policymakers.

Engagement with Minister Patrick O'Donovan TD

Minister O'Donovan re-shared our Instagram stories on 4 June, 5 July, 1 August, and 31 October. On 1 November, he invited us to be a collaborator on his [Instagram Reel](#).

He has 4,887 followers and the Reel received 3,558 views.

Top-performing Posts on Social Media

The top performing post was the [Instagram Reel with PJ Gallagher](#) from the STAR Awards. It had a reach of 12,006 and received 235 likes.

The second highest performing was the [Instagram Reel with learner, Petey](#). It had a reach of 6,686 and received 180 engagements.



AONTAS Editorial: News Updates and Blog Posts from the Team

Led by Strategic Communications Officer Kate Smyth, we published **45 news stories and 41 blog posts** in 2024, highlighting the organisation's increased advocacy and policy focus, in response to feedback from our members.

News Stories

With our news stories, we share the latest updates for the adult and community education sector, including new announcements from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and from funders such as SOLAS.

You can [read all our news stories here](#) but here are some key pieces:

- [New resources from AONTAS ahead of General Election 2024](#)
- [“Investment in adult and community education is an investment in the health and future of Ireland” - AONTAS launching political manifesto in Leinster House this week](#)
- [Work with us to use community education to combat disinformation and racism in Ireland](#)
- [Media Highlights from Our Holding You Back campaign](#)
- [Alternative Routes to Higher Education and Much More: Beyond the Leaving Cert](#)
- [Part-Time Fee Scheme for Undergraduate Courses Launched in Athlone](#)
- [Increased funding for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education welcome, but more needs to be done for learners in adult and community education](#)

The overall number of visitors to our News section on our website in 2024 was 6,267, up from 3,955 in 2023.

Our CEO has these stories on hand and can point to them in advocacy and lobbying discussions with Government representatives, policy advisers, and other decisionmakers for adult and community education, who we are seeking to influence in order to achieve positive changes for the sector (see “Advocacy and Policy” below for more details).



Blog Posts

We published 41 blog posts across 2024, an increase of 15 from 2023. These focused on a range of topics, and are written by different members across the AONTAS staff team. It is now a well-embedded custom for members of the team to write about what they are interested in and share their work.

Here are some fantastic examples:

- ["It gave me back my self-worth," says Mary Devereux of the CWELL Diploma at the University of Limerick, which is nominated for an AONTAS STAR Award this week](#)
- [Ink, Imagination and Everyday Learning at the Museum of Literature Ireland](#)
- ["Telling stories didn't feel like it had value to me until I went to acting school" - PJ Gallagher on finding learning that suited him](#)
- [Reflecting on the European Year of Skills: What comes next](#)
- [Exploring Voter Education programmes among Urban and Rural Women Groups in Ireland](#)
- [Budget 2025: AONTAS calls for greater investment in adult learners as approximately 1 in 3 cite lack of financial supports as key barrier to education](#)
- ["As long as there is apartheid within the Irish education system, there will be a class apartheid in our society"](#)
- [Modelling Wellbeing in Community Education: Fun, Friendship, and Fulfilment in Cork](#)
- [What Did Budget 2025 Deliver for Adult and Community Education?](#)

The overall number of visitors to our Blog was 6,354, up from 4,496 in 2023.

Writing like this allows us to share our research and advocacy work, and our relationships with our wonderful members.

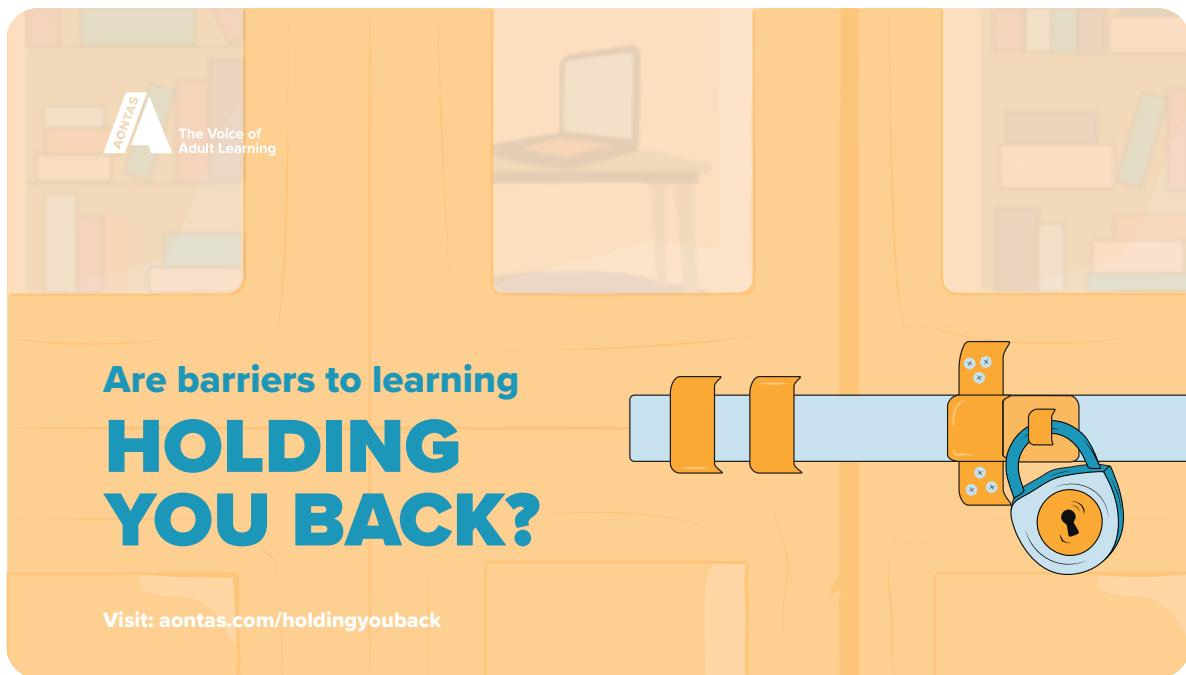
Our website had 37,704 views in 2024.

In the News

In 2024, we reached over **81.5 million readers and listeners** across all of our campaigns and communications activities, led by our Head of Communications Rachael Ryan. This includes reaching people through our website, news articles, radio interviews, national and local newspapers, and social media platforms including LinkedIn, X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

This represents a significant increase in our communications impact from 2023, which was 9 million. This year, our profile was elevated through a national awareness-raising campaign and increased media exposure and visibility of our CEO Dearbháil, including appearances on national TV and radio and in high-quality publications such as *The Journal*.

We received feedback from Alice PR Director Martina Quinn that this increase reflects the improved quality of our messaging and our work overall.



“Holding You Back” in the Media

As part of the Holding You Back campaign, AONTAS were featured in the media online and in print across a range of platforms and publications:

- Dearbháil and one of our campaign adult learner ambassadors, Ailish Dunne, were also featured on the RTÉ Six One News and the RTÉ website: “Paralympian calls for increased adult learning supports.” [Read Ailish’s interview here.](#)
- Our CEO Dearbháil and Ailish chatted to Mario Rosenstock (standing in for Matt Cooper) on the Last Word on Today FM. [You can listen back here.](#)
- A piece by Ailish detailing her personal story was featured in the Irish Independent: “As a person with a disability, I’ve faced many barriers, but education should not be blocked by financial worries.” [Read Ailish’s personal story in the Irish Independent.](#)
- A piece by another of our learner ambassadors Paula McLoughlin was featured in the Irish Independent: “Adult learners struggling to pay household bills due to financial pressure, report shows.” [Read more in the Irish Independent.](#)
- An interview with our campaign spokesperson – actor and writer Emmet Kirwan – was published in Hot Press magazine, which has a readership of over 100,000 across the island of Ireland. Emmet spoke about his support for the campaign and the inequalities of opportunity for people in Ireland who want to engage in education. [Read it here.](#)
- Paula McLoughlin, one of our adult learner ambassadors, was on NewsTalk Breakfast. “I’m a single parent so have to spend €1,000 maybe and an extra couple of hundred quid on top of that for programmes [like] Word and stuff like that - I’m taking that from the family’s kitty,” she said. [Read more here](#) or listen back [here.](#)
- Our CEO Dearbháil was featured on LMFM and the Michael Reade Show.
- Ailish Dunne was featured in the Leinster Express, speaking about her experience of the barriers to learning. [Read the article here.](#)

Learner Stories for Advocacy and Representation

We gather stories from adult learners from all across the island of Ireland showing how going back to education has had a transformative impact on their lives, and encouraging others to go back too.

In 2024, we shared the stories of 9 fantastic learners. This page had 2,306 views in 2024, up from 1,324 in 2023.

As part of our increased focus on video, we also launched the Learner Stories Video Series, where interviews with learners are the focus. This brings the story to life in a whole new way.

These stories from learners are essential for our advocacy and representational work, especially as evidence of the need, for instance, of further support and funding to create the conditions adult learners need to return to and stay in education.

Let's take a look at the stories:

- ["It helps me to switch off from the world. You can learn at your own pace" - Niamh O'Brien](#)
- ["People often focus on what they can't do instead of what they can" - Niall Taylor](#)
- ["I'm surrounded by people and I have lots of friends" - Therese Dwan](#)
- ["I saw everything as part of the process of learning" - Blessing Chidiogo](#)
- ["This place saved my life, it helped me learn to live without addiction" - Petey Smith](#)
- ["I have achieved something that I thought I would never achieve" - Deborah, from the Social Therapeutic Horticulture Programme](#)
- ["In school I was told I would never get anywhere because I couldn't spell, couldn't write a letter. My self-confidence was wiped out, something that lasts until this day" - Ciara O' Kelly](#)
- ["It was my daughter-in-law who encouraged me to take part in this course and I'm so happy that she did" - Nouna Eiffe](#)

Sharing New Research and Ideas: The Adult Learner Journal

The Adult Learner, the only Irish journal of adult and community education, is a valuable resource that documents the development of adult learning policy and practice and offers a forum for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning.

The journal prioritises ideas that address socio-economic disadvantage, social exclusion, equality, workplace learning, and the study of the tutor-learner relationship. This work is led by Giuliana Mc Keown, our Publications and Design Officer and also Journal co-secretary.

Each year, *The Adult Learner* has a theme, as agreed by the journal's Editorial Board, which consists of adult, community, and further education practitioners, experts, and academics.

Our CEO Dearbháil Lawless has been the Chair of the Editorial Board for *The Adult Learner* since 2022.





Members of the 2024 Adult Learner Journal Board:

- Dr Bairbre Fleming
- Dr Bernie Grummell
- Dr David Mallows
- Dearbháil Lawless, *Chairperson*
- Fran Kennedy
- Giuliana (Peña) Mc Keown, *Secretary*
- Dr Helen Murphy
- Dr Jane O’Kelly, *Book and Policy Review Editor*
- Dr José Pedro Amorim
- Prof Koen De Pryck
- Dr Luke Murtagh
- Prof Maria Slowey
- Nuala Glanton
- Dr Rosemary Moreland, *Editor*
- Dr Stephen O’Brien

The **Editorial Office** for the journal is led by Giuliana, our Publications and Design Officer. The Editorial Office’s primary role is to offer feedback directly to authors on the Style Guide and oversee the copyediting process.

We seek to make sure that the process for developing, writing, and submitting articles for the journal is as seamless as possible and that the peer-review process is of a high standard. The journal website contains a new Style Guide – redesigned last year – and infographics on the peer review process, submission criteria, and timeline. There are also feedback forms for the peer-review process.

[We also hosted two online events to prepare writers for contributions to the journal.](#)

Publications in the Adult Learner Journal 2024

In 2024, the journal focussed on “Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning” and “Case Studies on Improving Practice”. There were four articles with a theoretical focus in the first section, and eight practical papers in the second section. The journal also featured two book reviews and two policy reviews.

The AONTAS team and Editorial Board support contributors every step of the way, from helping them solidify their ideas at the Writers’ Workshop to encouraging them to contribute to the journal, from providing detailed feedback on how to make their arguments stronger to giving them a platform to discuss their work at the discussion event.

Here are some key takeaways from this edition of the journal:

- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is a predominant theme in several of the articles, with perspectives on trauma for refugees, tutors’ perspectives, and adult literacy levels on an international scale.
- There is evidence to support the need for increased policies to remove the social stigma often attached to FET, and provide greater employment security for tutors, and more flexible study and funding options for students.
- The importance of training and improved awareness for staff in FET about supporting LGBTQIA FET learners.
- Collaboration between universities and FET staff and tutors to use inclusive teaching strategies to support learners with intellectual disabilities.
- The need for continuing online learning as an option for people who need greater flexibility in their learning, especially more vulnerable groups.

Journal Launch, December 2024

The launch, which took place in the National College of Ireland in Dublin, featured introductions by the authors of various articles from the journal, and informal discussions between attendees. 23 attendees joined us for the launch, which also featured a dedication to Journal Board member and “visionary” educator Luke Murtagh, who sadly passed away this year. Luke was a passionate educator and academic. Our CEO Dearbháil Lawless read a piece from former CEO Dr Niamh O’Reilly, who worked closely with Luke over many years. We also had a contribution from Dr Bríd Connolly from Maynooth University. Speaking about Luke, Bríd said: “People often use the phrase a gentleman and a scholar, but it really did apply to Luke. His PhD thesis was truly groundbreaking.”

Our keynote speaker at the event was Dr Audrey Bryan, Associate Professor of Sociology at Dublin City University, who spoke about the impact of the precarity of contracts and working conditions for staff and practitioners in adult and community education. Audrey quoted Professor [Kathleen Lynch](#) and her work on the corrosive effect of neoliberalism and the skills agenda on education in Ireland. Audrey described how the focus on employability and productivity is “fundamentally at odds with the values of adult education” and expressed concern about teaching and learning “becoming depoliticised” in order to create a workforce that is “pliable” and “politically docile.”

*“Education is political. It drives the work we do” – Dearbháil Lawless,
AONTAS CEO*

“Education is political. It drives the work we do.”

*Dearbháil Lawless,
AONTAS CEO*





Goal 2. Inform National Research on the Importance of Social Equality

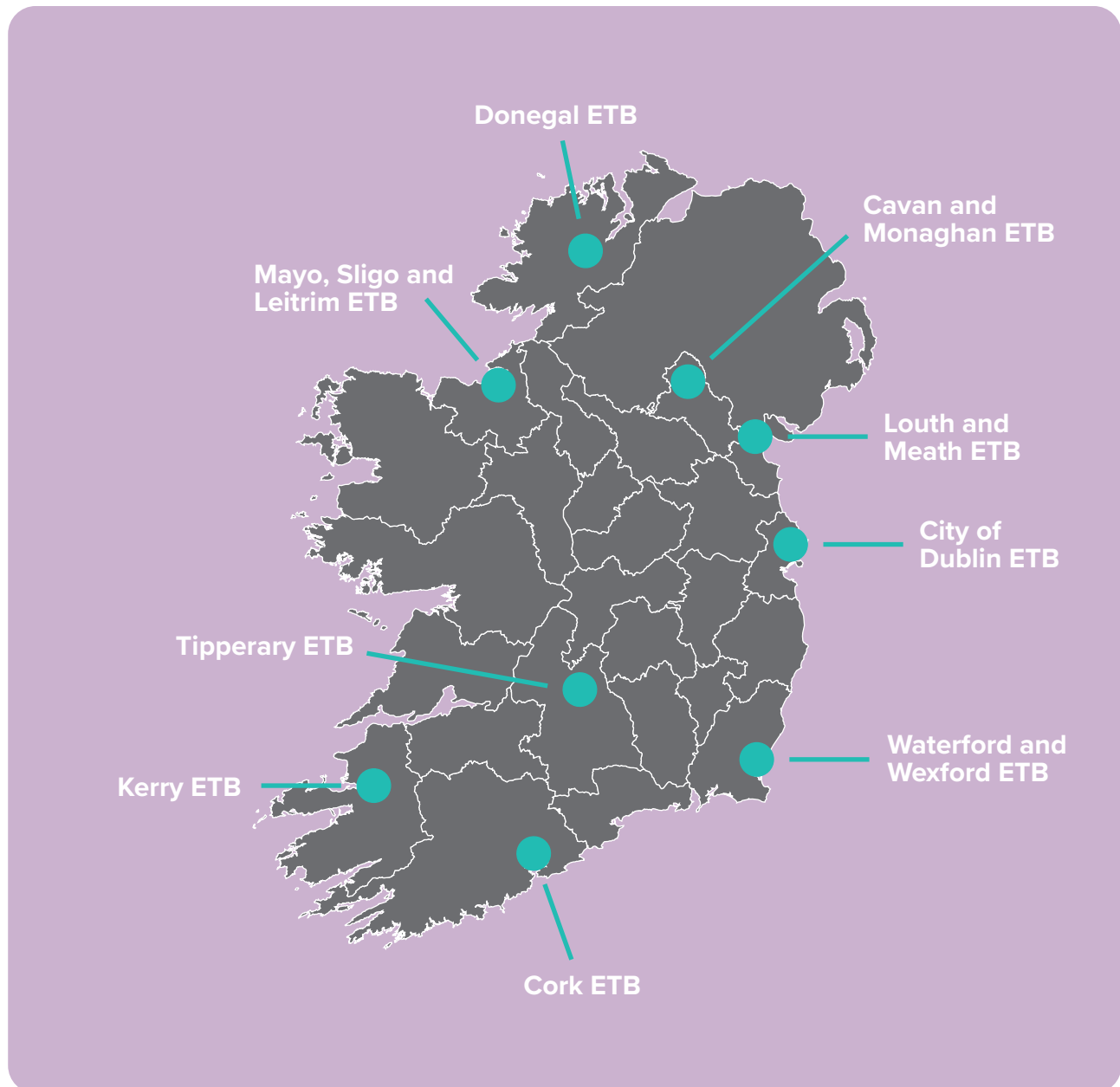
National Further Education and Training Learner Forum

The National Further Education and Training Learner Forum is a Learner Voice project designed to bring together adult learners from across Ireland to ask their views on their FET experience. The purpose of the Forum is to ensure that FET meets the needs of adult learners today and continues to do so in future.

AONTAS are responsible for delivering the Forum. We work in collaboration with each of Ireland's 16 Education and Training Boards to host regional Learner Forum events, to issue an accompanying learner survey, and to build capacity among learners for self-advocacy in Further Education and Training. Since its inception in 2016, the Forum has grown into an annual series of regional and national events, receiving over 14,000 learner contributions.

Regional Learner Voice Reports

In 2024, our Research Team completed 9 Learner Voice reports in collaboration with the following Education and Training Boards:



We subsequently extended invitations to all participating ETBs to meet to discuss the Learner Voice process and report findings.

Head of Research, Thomas, and Head of Advocacy, Conor, held 5 such meetings, attended by FET Directors, Quality Assurance officers and Learner Support officers.

Learner Voices Across Ireland: National FET Learner Forum Report, 2023-2024

The Learner Voices Across Ireland report highlights many successes in FET, with learners expressing high overall satisfaction (91%) with their class participation and the interview process before course commencement, as well as the availability of guidance and advice when first contacting their ETB or learning centre.

The report also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in the provision of mental health support (69%) and additional services such as financial assistance, childcare, and meals (66%). The availability of public transport (37%) is the issue of greatest dissatisfaction highlighted by learners.

Among the other areas highlighted by learners are:

- Respect and inclusion, including hosting social events outside of scheduled course hours to enhance opportunities to connect with other learners.
- Buildings and facilities
- Communications, including advertising courses, supports, and services.
- Supports for work-based learning or work experience placements.

As Dr Joseph Collins, Director of Further Education and Training, ETBI, has highlighted:

“This report is the culmination of extensive consultation and data collection, combining focus groups and a national survey that collectively captured the contributions of 1,716 learners in 2023-2024. The research is grounded in the theory of Learner Voice, ensuring that both the data collection and analysis processes reflect best practices in inclusive research, making the findings more credible and actionable for stakeholders ... A remarkable 99.9% of respondents reported positive experiences with the National FET Learner Forum, illustrating the empowering impact of being truly heard.”

Professor Peter Lavender of the University of Wolverhampton and member of the NFLF academic expert advisory group described the Learner Voices Across Ireland report as:

“The best report yet, very rich in data ... I do not know of many other countries that have something similar. It is important that the LVAI Report is made available internationally as it is very useful.”

99.9% of participants consider their Forum experience to be a positive one.

Let's take a look in more detail:

Respect and Inclusion

95% of learners said that they felt respected by tutors and ETB staff. Learners recommend that ETBs continue to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and inclusion for and among learners. This may include taking more steps to recognise and include people based on things like gender, race, disabilities, or Youthreach status.

Mental Health

64% report increased self-confidence after taking a FET course. 58% report having a more positive outlook on the future. However, 52% of learners experienced stress, anxiety, or depression, with 35% stating it affected their ability to learn. This increases to 75% for people living with long-term health issues, illness or disability and 74% for Traineeship learners. More mental health supports and counselling services are needed. More counselling sessions should be easily available to learners.

Transport

31% of learners are not satisfied with the availability of public transport to and from FET centres and work experience. This is especially important for people living in rural areas. Learners recommend introducing shuttle buses or aligning class schedules to local bus times. Learners also recommend more fuel and travel allowances.

Accommodation

Focusing specifically on people who don't own their own home, 36% said that their living situation affects their ability to learn. 51% of people in Direct Provision say their living situation affects their ability to learn. While 27% said that their living situation causes them stress, worry, or anxiety, another 14% stated that they would prefer not to answer this question, which may indicate a fear of speaking up about the mental health challenges linked with housing.



Buildings and Facilities

Each centre should have a canteen with space for lunch with peers, affordable healthy food, kitchen equipment for learners to use for their own lunches. 87% of learners were satisfied with the availability of laptops for their courses. Laptop loans schemes should be available at all FET centres. IT hardware and software should be up-to-date and there should be WiFi. Everyone should be able to access the centre equally, including those with mobility issues or other physical needs. This includes working ramps and lifts, and sensory rooms for neurodiverse learners. We recommend that FET centres review buildings to support physical accessibility for all learners.

General or Practical Supports, and Guidance

There needs to be more support for practical things that make it possible to do a course, like fees and other costs, childcare, and meals. This includes student cards for FET learners and a Student Hardship Fund – like at universities. It also includes more ESOL courses, and flexibility of timetables, particularly for people with childcare needs.

Communication from Education Centre

41% said they didn't receive information from their centre about supports or services to help them, like with transport, meals, childcare, or costs related to doing the course. o Learners recommend more advertisement of FET courses and how they are beneficial – not just for people's education but also for their mental health and self-confidence, and for meeting new people.

[Read the full Learner Voices Across Ireland report.](#)

We continue to raise these issues with DFHERIS and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science.



“The first thing is a listening ear”: The transformative impact of the Dillon’s Cross Project

A major research publication of this year was **“The first thing is a listening ear: The transformative impact of the Dillon’s Cross Project.”**

This project, from Cork Education and Training Board, focused on providing educational support to female relatives of prisoners and ex-prisoners. We interviewed five learners and three service providers. This report demonstrates the impact of this project for those learners, and provides an evidence base for future advocacy work. [Read the report here.](#)

Researching the Impact of Adult and Community Education in Northern Ireland

Continuing to build on our work in Northern Ireland, we held an event in February in Belfast for community education providers, learners, and policymakers. The goal was to connect people and share best practice, and to inform policy recommendations. 45 attendees joined us for this event. The event was titled “[Connecting People and Sharing Practice in Adult Learning in Northern Ireland](#)”.

The ideas discussed contributed to the impact research we conducted throughout the year, focused on community education and community learning in the north. This research project, led by our Senior Research Officer Eve Cobain, is a collaboration between AONTAS and FALNI (the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland) as part of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning. It is funded by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. It builds on our work with the [Northern Ireland Community Education Census](#), published in 2022.

The aim of this research is to arrive at evidence-based solutions to improve data collection and impact measurement of non-formal adult education, which will:

- Help promote the benefits, value and impact of adult learning, especially non-accredited, non-formal and informal learning, to individuals and wider society
- Support commissioning and funding decisions
- Support the monitoring and evaluation of funded programmes

In order to gather the data for this research, we held [focus groups](#) online and in-person in late 2024, with another to be held in 2025. These focus groups were targeted at people working in “non-formal” education in the north. A report with these new findings and evidence will be published and launched in spring 2025.

[Find out more here.](#)

“The people who most need education are the people least likely to get it.”

Dr Austin O’Carroll,
Founder of Safetynet Ireland





Influencing Policy: Who Does It Cost?

The AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival celebrates adult learning across the island of Ireland, while also focusing on education policy and ways to make our education system more inclusive and equal.

As part of the Festival, we hold an event with an education policy focus, typically on the first day of the Festival. This year, "Who Does It Cost?" took place in the Richmond Education and Events Centre in Smithfield, Dublin, on Monday 4th March. The goal of the policy event was to raise awareness of the cost of education as a major barrier to adult learners, and to gather information and evidence that would contribute to our Holding You Back national public awareness-raising campaign, which was in development at the time.

"Who Does It Cost?" – and our Holding You Back campaign – was by our research findings that nearly 30% of adult learners have said that more financial supports are needed in Ireland. The research findings focus on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the housing crisis on learners, and also the gaps in Government funding for adequate and affordable State-funded childcare and transport costs.

It also shows that information and processes on funding for adult and community education can be difficult to access, likely to use jargon, and inconsistent across different counties in Ireland. According to then Head of Advocacy Barbara Nea, adult learners are "more exposed to societal inequalities that create barriers to education. This means that in general FET and community education learners are more vulnerable to poverty and the financial challenges posed by cost-of-living increases."

In advance of the event, we produced a policy discussion paper detailing the main issues and focus of the event, and giving attendees the opportunity to engage with our research findings and advocacy work beforehand. It provided the background and context to our work, and suggested ideas for action, including funding for part-time FET learners. [Read the Who Does It Cost discussion paper.](#)

The event itself featured inputs from adult learners Adele O'Connor, a programme manager at Doras Buí resource centre; Marlene Conway from Longford Women's Link; and Sultan Ahmed, a learner at Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board. The discussion was hosted by adult learner and Belmayne Community Activist Michelle McGoldrick.

"I feel that there are a lot of intelligent people in low paid jobs they can't afford to give up to further their education. This is particularly true if they have children or family members that rely on them. They could be prepared to make sacrifices for themselves, but it is difficult when you have dependants." – **Adele O'Connor**

The keynote was from Colm O'Reardon, Secretary General of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science, who stated that at the Department "(we) know we need to support learners to participate in education" and are "committed to continuing the work to address the barriers to education."

We also had a stakeholder panel, featuring Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS; Dr Austin O'Carroll, GP and Founder of Safetynet Ireland; Colleen Dube, CEO of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA); Dr Fiona Maloney, then Director of the National Tertiary Office, who has since sadly passed away; and Dr Lindsay Malone, Director of Further Education and Training at Waterford and Wexford ETB. The panel was chaired by Conor Thompson, our then Policy and Development Officer, now Head of Advocacy.

"The people who most need education are the people least likely to get it." – **Dr Austin O'Carroll**

[Read about Who Does It Cost?](#)

Impact of Who Does It Cost?

Our CEO Dearbháil was invited to contribute a piece on the cost of education to *The Journal*, stating that "if we really want a more equal society, we need greater investment in adult learning."

"The current cost-of-living crisis is affecting everyone in Ireland, exacerbated by the housing and accommodation crisis. Adult education offers one clear method of working towards solutions to these social and political challenges." – **Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO**

The Journal has a daily readership of 430,000 and 5.5 million monthly active users.

[Read the article here.](#)

Dearbháil was also invited to speak to Kildare FM about the findings of our research into the cost of adult learning and the ideas shared through our Who Does It Cost? event. Dearbháil joined Eoin Beatty on "Kildare Today" and spoke about the link between adult learning and poverty, and the need for more financial supports for people from working-class backgrounds to go back to education.

“I feel that there are a lot of intelligent people in low paid jobs they can’t afford to give up to further their education”

Adele O’Connor,
Programme Manager at Doras Buí



“There are so many wonderful things happening [in the education sector], but at the end of the day if we don’t make it realistic for people to actually be able to stay in education and complete the programmes without putting them through mad stress levels, it’s not going to work.” – Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO

[Take a look at the interview in more detail here.](#)

Policy Brief: Hidden Costs of Adult Education

In 2024, we took a new approach to developing policy briefs, with more targeted key asks for our advocacy work and evidence to back them up. [One particular policy brief](#), produced by then Advocacy and Policy Officer Conor, and Strategic Communications Officer Kate, offered key insights and actions for policymakers. The policy brief was an important resource and tool for the Advocacy Team in 2024, in meetings with Government representatives and, crucially, in attending Ard-Fheiseanna of political parties Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour, and Sinn Féin.

We disseminated over 300 copies of the brief across the 4 Ard-Fheiseanna. It was well-received by political representatives as it provided an accessible explanation of our policy aims. The brief format increased engagement with our material compared with longer publications which we brought to events previously. [Read the policy brief.](#)

Community Education Against Disinformation

In September, we announced a new project “Community Education Against Disinformation” focusing on supporting adult and community education practitioners to promote solidarity and inclusion for diverse communities living side-by-side in Ireland. Led by our Research Officer Aisling, the goal of this project is to create a workbook that can be used in community education settings to encourage empathy and understanding, and help people to navigate and question disinformation online, particularly on social media. It will get learners thinking about how disinformation and racism has a negative impact on the human rights of people from ethnic minority groups, including the right to equality, to freedom from discrimination, and the right to education. This project is ongoing, and will be launched to the public in autumn 2025. [Find out more about Community Education Against Disinformation.](#)

Goal 3. Build Capacity Within the Sector by Enabling Professional Development, Sharing Knowledge, and Strengthening Networks

Adult Learning Events Across Ireland: The Adult Learners' Festival 2024

In celebration of adult and community education across the island of Ireland, we had 166 adult learning events across 28 counties, run by local education centres, ETBs, community groups, and many others. These groups shared their events on our [website](#) dedicated specifically to advertising and raising awareness of the Adult Learners Festival. There were 7,000 visitors to this site around the time of the Festival.

The Impact and Engagement Team designed the messaging, theme, and graphics for the Festival, as well as working with Doggett to produce a merchandise packs (including posters, flyers, cut-outs, and pens) that could be posted to local groups in support of their events. We held an [online information session](#) for groups interested in the Festival, which was attended by 40 people. We answered questions and gave ideas for events they might run.

Members of the team for the first time made it a priority to go out and visit groups and attend events in person, to show AONTAS' support. An example is this [review of an event at the MOLI Museum](#) in Dublin from then Head of Impact and Engagement Charis Hughes. Other team members went to visit numerous groups including Belmayne Community Group, Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC), Doras Buí, Henrietta Adult and Community Education (HACE), Plant and Seed Swap at the Rediscovery Centre in Ballymun, TU Dublin, Women's Community Projects in Mullingar, and Waterford and Wexford ETB.



A social media campaign to promote Festival events received 75,330 impressions and led to 2,024 website visits. The most popular events were information sessions, taster sessions, and workshops.

Festival Impact

Our goal for ALF 2024 was to raise awareness of and celebrate adult learning, to support education providers to run local events across the country, and to highlight the benefits and value of those events across our channels and with our members and stakeholders, and the general public.

226 social media posts reached over 150,000 people.

The total reach for our communications for the Festival was 10 million readers and listeners across traditional and digital media.

Led by our Head of Communications Rachael Ryan and then Head of Impact and Engagement Charis Hughes, this represents a big increase on 2023, when the reach was 1 million.

Examples of Media Coverage

Here are some examples of AONTAS appearances in the media during the Festival:

- [Adult learner Mary Devereux on Oliver Callan on RTÉ](#)
- [Adult Education, The Cancer Guide and The Importance of Rest on Newstalk](#)
- [“If we really want a more equal society, we need greater investment in adult learning” – Dearbháil Lawless in the Journal](#)

We also had 43 pieces of regional coverage, including 20 regional print-online publications on the STAR Awards.

Thank you as always to our members, stakeholders, and to all the adult learners for the enthusiasm, energy, and hard work in helping to make this year’s Festival a huge success.

[Find out more about the Adult Learners’ Festival.](#)

Empowering Learners and Educators: Learner Voice Training in Further Education

Learner Voice is a concept in education underpinned by the idea that learning should be guided by those who learn, as well as those who teach. We’re now offering Learner Voice Training to staff in Education and Training Boards across the country, as well as learners themselves.

The goal of this training – led by our Learner Voice Project Officer Karyn and our Education Projects Officer Ruby – is to make Learner Voice a process that is embedded in FET. We offer staff training on the foundations and practice of Learner Voice work, and workshops for learners on leadership, advocacy, and action planning. This is under our remit as the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL).

We want to help ETBs to in their responsiveness to what learners need, and also to encourage and facilitate more learners to share their perspectives on what works well and what needs to change, which will in turn create the conditions for more people to be able to return to and stay in FET.

One of the main focuses of this work was to equip staff with the practical tools and resources necessary to set up sustainable Learner Voice structures.

This year, we conducted the training with four ETBs. Our aim for 2025 is to conduct more continuous professional development sessions for staff across ETBs.

Karyn and Ruby also facilitated a Learner Voice training session with 25 learners from Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board. The group was a mix of learners who have previously been involved in WWETB's Learner Council, and new learners who are interested in joining next year. The session had a practical focus on Committee Skills and had two clear aims for participants: to develop a clearer understanding of how an efficient Learner Council functions and equip learners with the practical knowledge, tools and resources to run their own Learner Council meetings.

[Find out more about our Learner Voice Training.](#)

“GATHER” with AHEAD and NALA for Assistive Technology

In May, AHEAD, a non-profit working to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities, organised a three-day event about assistive technology, in partnership with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and AONTAS. Our Education Projects Officer Ruby attended the event and facilitated a session alongside an adult learner – Ailish Dunne, who was also a campaign champion for our Holding You Back campaign – who shared her experience of using assistive technology for learning. Assistive Technology are practical tools that help create an inclusive environment promoting participation particularly in people with a disability. [Find out more about assistive technology and GATHER here.](#)





OBJECTIVE 2. ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

As the National Organisation for Adult Learning, we have built strong relationships with those who make national policy and decisions. Using our evidence base, we act as a link between national policy actions and what happens in practice on the ground.

We are a strong advocate for adult and community education. We respond to policy developments and build effective relationships with key policymakers.

Goal 1. Strengthen and Develop the AONTAS Organisational Voice

Advocacy and Policy

2024 saw AONTAS develop a stronger advocacy focus and a stronger and more influential voice with policymakers and Government. A key focus for our advocacy in 2024 was influencing political party manifestos so that adult and community education was top of the agenda with key political representatives and stakeholders.



Advocacy and Policy Wins of 2024

Our critical result of the year was the direct inclusion of our key policy ask for 2024 – to review financial supports for adult learners – in the new Programme for Government, published in January 2025. Our advocacy and campaigns work throughout the year focused on the cost of education and the barriers to learning for people, especially those from more vulnerable groups or diverse backgrounds. Our work on this included the [Who Does It Cost? policy event](#), our [pre-budget submission](#), our [Holding You Back campaign](#), and our [Manifesto](#). Throughout the year, the Advocacy Team and our CEO also had countless one-to-one engagements, discussions, working group meetings, presentations, and events sharing the evidence and rationale for policy changes and information and ideas from our members, particularly those in the CEN (Community Education Network).

Our advocacy work, policy submissions, pre-budget submission, and Manifesto were all grounded in our evidence-based research from the National FET Learner Forum and our other research activities, and feedback from our members and the CEN.

Let's take a look in more detail:

DFHERIS “Funding the Future” Cost of Education Event

In March 2024, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science got in touch with the team at AONTAS to ask us to invite adult learners to speak at an event they were holding about funding and the cost of education in Ireland. This was the second time the Department made this request to AONTAS, showing our increased status as a reliable go-to leader in the adult learning sector and specifically in Learner Voice.

This shows our success in embedding Learner Voice as a central part of policymaking in Ireland.

We gathered 20 learners to attend the event and speak about their experiences and recommendations on the cost of education in Ireland. Some of the learners had engaged with us before, and spoken at previous events including our Who Does It Cost? policy discussion. The team at AONTAS met with learners beforehand and provided guidance and support about communicating their ideas effectively.

The event took place in April in Portlaoise. It was a great opportunity to influence the Department's spending plans. This was just one factor that contributed to the direct naming of the need to review financial supports for adult learners in the new Programme for Government.

Our Head of Communications Rachael wrote about the event afterwards:

“From our advocacy and research, we have found that there are still too many barriers to education for adults in Ireland, particularly those from under-resourced communities.”

She reports that, on the day, the learners we brought to the event suggested changes such as “abolishing education fees completely, with a promise from graduates to stay in Ireland for four years and pay back the fees when they start working. Another idea was for every individual to get an education “credit” to use at any time during their life.”

Learners also flagged the “lack of mental health supports, scarce accommodation, expensive food on campuses and in local centres, and a lack of transport for rural areas”. [Read Rachael’s piece on our website.](#)

When the annual Cost of Education options paper was published by the Department in September, they stated an intention to look at the costs associated with:

- Reducing the student contribution
- Increasing the supports available to grant holders
- Reducing the cost of student accommodation
- Other measures that will reduce the financial burden of going to college on families and students.

Minister Patrick O’Donovan TD stated: “Reducing the cost of education for students and families is a priority for this Government.” [Read more here.](#)

We will continue to work with the new Minister into 2025, and attend forthcoming Cost of Education consultations. We continue to elevate the voices of learners to ensure policies are working for them, and that education is becoming more accessible and affordable.

Pre-Budget Submission

This year, we took a different approach to our [pre-budget submission](#), which is shared with the Department in July ahead of the development of the new budget. Our primary ask was for the Government to recognise that people are still being left behind in our education system in Ireland, and that approximately 1 in 3 people we surveyed said that lack of financial support is a key barrier to education. This is particularly true for people from under-resourced communities. And it is contributing to ongoing social inequalities and central issues of our times such as homelessness and mental health.

We made a conscious decision to make this pre-budget submission shorter, more accessible, and more direct. It is also more politically conscious, in line with our organisational direction and Strategic Plan goals.

Key asks to DFHERIS in our pre-budget submission:

- Increase investment in community education to €30 million
- Increase social welfare payments for FET learners
- Increase supplementary allowances by 50%

We submitted our pre-budget asks to DFHERIS in July.

Following on from this, we requested a meeting with a Principal Officer (PO) and Assistant Principal Officer (APO) from DFHERIS, which took place on 16th July 2024, to discuss further. They came to the meeting with a copy of the pre-budget submission and prepared questions, highlighting their interest and commitment to working with us, and showing the impact of our submission.



We also attended the Department of Social Protection Pre-Budget Forum in July at Dublin Castle, and represented adult learners' financial challenges to senior DSP Officials.

We have continued to engage with the departments relevant to adult and community education throughout the year, especially in the run-up to the Local and European Elections, and General Election, and the development of the new Programme for Government.

[Read our pre-budget submission for Budget 2025 here.](#)

Budget 2025: An Analysis

Our Policy Officer Rebecca analysed the budget to explore what it actually delivered for adult and community education. She writes:

“Unfortunately, this Budget has missed an opportunity to address the structural barriers to education that would support the participation of more groups who face the greatest barriers to accessing adult and community education.”

Budget 2025 will see an overall increase of 6.4% to the FET system, with an increase of 14.8% in the Skills Development Budget, including an allocation of [€150 million from the National Training Fund](#) to support the development of apprenticeships and work related skills.

Despite the increase in funding for the FET in Budget 2025, it is difficult to know if this will include increases for community education at this time. We believe that the community education sector should be explicitly recognised in the budget allocation process to support forward planning.”

[Read more of Rebecca's analysis.](#)

**“41% of people participating
in adult education are
struggling to pay for
household bills and meals.”**

*Transforming Adult and Community
Education: A Manifesto for Change*



“Transforming Adult and Community Education”: A Manifesto for Change

With the General Election taking place in November 2024, we set out our manifesto calling on the next Government to make transformative changes that will ensure those furthest behind in our education system are prioritised first.

“41% of people participating in adult education are struggling to pay for household bills and meals.”

The Manifesto was divided into:



5 Transformative Changes for Policymakers

Reform the financial support system for adult learners



Commit to sustainable, multiannual funding for community education



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



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



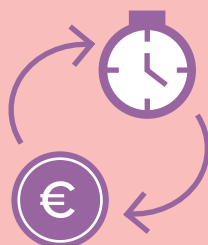
Ensure meaningful public sector duty processes in adult and community education



Quick Wins to Support Adult Learners

Increase financial supports for adult learners

Establish a one-stop-shop for financial supports and pathways to adult education



Quick Wins to Support Adult and Community Education Providers

Ensure secure and stable contracts for adult and community education workers

Simplify funding criteria, reduce administrative burden on staff

We shared the Manifesto widely among candidates for the General Election campaign to raise awareness of the needs of learners and the value of community education.

Manifesto Launch in Leinster House

We launched the Manifesto in Leinster House on 2 October, with TDs, Senators, Leinster House staff, adult learners, and adult and community education providers in attendance. 38 people attended the event.

The launch was supported by Mairéad Farrell TD, Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Further and Higher Education, Innovation, and Science.

It was a landmark occasion, as we brought adult learners into the heart of Government, to speak directly to policymakers.

Speaking at the launch, our CEO Dearbháil Lawless stated:

“There are urgent challenges in our society. Education is not just about the economy. It’s about enabling people to live happy and fulfilled lives, in safe and cohesive communities. Adult education is the policy solution Government is looking for.”

[Find out more about the Manifesto launch.](#)



Impact of our Manifesto

The [2025 Programme for Government](#) directly references our call to review financial supports for adult learners. This is a significant win for a small charity like AONTAS, and is a testament to the hard work not only of the team but of our members and the adult learners who work with us to show policymakers what needs to change to make a real difference.

Education was mentioned in a number of party manifestos. Below are some examples:

Fianna Fáil's manifesto calls for "investment in schools and all levels of education" and "a further 100,000 places in Further Education and training nationally." It also wanted to "prioritise additional funding for ETBs in counties with a high number of towns with deprivation."

The Green Party's manifesto stated an aim to "divert a portion of the National Training Fund into a French-style system of Personal Training Accounts, where workers are allocated money to spend on their professional and skill development."

Fine Gael aimed to "expand access to Higher and Further Education", to "broaden learning opportunities for working adults and to "increase course options for people at any career stage who want to upskill, supporting lifelong learning across all sectors."

Labour stated a goal to introducing "a freedom to learn scheme, funded from the National Training Fund to provide skills vouchers, free part time degree and master's courses as part of our strategy for lifelong learning" to be "managed by SOLAS". It also stated an aim of appointing a dedicated Minister of State for Lifelong Learning and Literacy and "using the surplus in the National Training Fund to invest in lifelong learning" and "reopening the NTF to fund training from Levels 1 to 4." It wanted to "expand enrolment in the FET sector to over 200,000 learners a year and ensure it is properly funded" and to "improve conditions and professional development for teaching staff and adult educators to boost recruitment and retention."

Sinn Féin stated a goal of reducing the cost of education. They would "adequately invest in both our education system and our young people with a range of measures abolishing and reducing costs spanning primary school through to secondary, higher and further education". They aimed to "ensure that the National Training Fund (NTF) fulfils its purpose of being used to fund further and higher education and training" by using it to address the core funding deficit in higher education. They wanted to extend the "Fund for Students" with a Disability across Further Education and Training Fund, so that it applies to all FET courses, not just PLCs at a cost of an additional €5m".

The Social Democrats wanted to "make multi-annual investment in community education the norm, and reform financial supports aimed at – and develop more robust wraparound supports for – adult learners". This inclusion by the Social Democrats specifically highlights our impact as our Head of Advocacy Conor and Strategic Communications Officer Kate met with Gary Gannon, education spokesperson from the Social Democrats, in Leinster House to discuss these asks.

The Social Democrats are the only political party whose manifesto directly mentions community education and uses the language from our pre-budget submission on wraparound supports.

The ask to the reform of financial supports for adult learners is reflected in the new Programme for Government as a commitment to “review financial supports for adult learners”, which lacks the same kind of commitment.

Sinn Féin, Labour, and the Greens committed to broadening the scope of the National Training Fund to training for at Levels 1 to 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications. This was another of our key asks. Our CEO Dearbháil and Head of Advocacy Conor continually engaged with all parties throughout the year at party conferences and in one-to-one meetings, including meeting with Mairéad Farrell TD, Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Further and Higher Education, Innovation, and Science. They shared AONTAS reports, the Community Education Map, and our research results. Dearbháil and Conor also met with representatives from Fine Gael in September in Leinster House.

In 2025, the Advocacy Team and CEO will continue to work with the Department and the new Minister to ensure that our asks remain top of the policy agenda, and our members’ and learners’ voices continue to be heard.

Other Advocacy Wins of 2024

Launch of the Community Education Framework

A long time in the works, this new Community Education Framework was launched in July by Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Patrick O’Donovan TD.

The new framework outlines steps to create positive changes in how community education is provided, learned, coordinated and funded in Ireland. AONTAS contributed to a consultation process with other stakeholders including [Community Education Network](#) members, who shared ideas and discussed the challenges facing the community education sector in Ireland. The goal was to ensure the framework reflects the interests, values, and potential of the community education sector. This process played an important role in shaping the final content for this framework.

In order to gain information for this, in February we conducted a comprehensive survey with the CEN to gather feedback on the draft Community Education Framework. This included an online questionnaire, which had 29 responses, and phone interviews with 119 key contacts in CEN. We also held a focus group held with 15 participants, gaining in-depth discussions and insights. We collected and analysed the data from these various methods and developed a report, which we submitted to SOLAS and the Community Education Framework writing group for consideration.

Impact of our Contributions to the Community Education Framework

When finalised and published, the Community Education Framework contained four main recommendations from AONTAS:

- Include a Learner Voice structure for community education provision
- Consider and include examples of good practices to inform the ETB approach and partnership regionally
- Use plain English in writing the document
- Consider different methodologies for capturing data, including the holistic benefits of community education for individuals and community groups.



**ARE BARRIERS TO LEARNING
HOLDING YOU BACK?**

**TOGETHER
WE CAN
CHANGE
THAT.**

**FINANCIAL
BARRIERS**



aontas m/ ye ac

Because of the strength of the CEN and our strong relationships with members, we were asked to support SOLAS and DFHERIS for the launch of the Community Education Framework in Limerick. We gathered 24 CEN members to attend the launch, and four adult learners to participate in the panel discussion chaired by Dearbháil providing key insights into the value of community education and the benefits of, as well as any concerns about, the new Framework. Their input highlighted the impact and importance of community education in supporting learners and addressing local needs. [Read more about the Community Education Framework Launch.](#)

Part-Time Fee Scheme for Undergraduate Courses Launched in Athlone

In August, Minister Patrick O'Donovan TD announced a new part-time fee scheme for specific undergraduate courses across Ireland. The aim is to provide support and flexibility for people who wish to access higher education but are not able to attend their chosen course full-time. We were invited to attend the launch. And while we welcomed the news, our goal is for funding for part-time learners in FET and adult education to also be prioritised by the Government.

Responding to the launch of the new scheme, our Head of Advocacy and Policy Conor Thompson said:

*"I commend Minister O'Donovan's initiative to support part-time study in higher education. Many adults in Ireland face financial barriers to education, and support with part time course fees is a fantastic step towards making education more accessible to anyone who can't take part on full time programmes. We hope to see this scheme be **expanded into all areas of our tertiary education system** – with a focus on the participation of communities who have been excluded from higher education in the past."*

This has long been an important advocacy ask for AONTAS, and this [Irish Times article](#) from 2005 draws on information from then-CEO Bernie Brady that "27,000 part-time students pay approximately €40 million in fees each year. Many people from socio-economically disadvantaged areas are forced to leave school at an early age."

[Read more about the part-time fee scheme.](#)

€5 Million in Funding Announced for Community Education through Reach Fund 2024

€5 million in additional funding through the Reach Fund was announced by Patrick O'Donovan TD, Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science, to help adult learners to learn in their local communities through community education. This was formerly the [Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund](#). We were a key member of the working group that formed the MAED Fund to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, through the Reach Fund, community education providers can apply for funding across several categories.

SOLAS state that the priority is to provide support to the most vulnerable groups in our society, including "the long-term unemployed, young people, people with disabilities, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants and refugees, women wishing to return to the labour market, and lone parents."

According to Minister O'Donovan: "I welcomed the allocation of €5million under the REACH Fund to community education groups across Ireland, which will support almost 50,000 educationally disadvantaged learners to access and participate in community education."

Clearer Pathways from Further Education and Training to Higher Education

We at AONTAS have long been calling for more flexibility for learners, especially those from more vulnerable groups, to access further and higher education without the pressure of the Leaving Certificate and the Points Race.

Minister Simon Harris TD was very supportive of this approach. The launch of the [National Tertiary Office](#) and the Tertiary Degree Programmes has seen an increasing number of degree courses available to students which can be initiated in a FET Centre – often in people's local community – and completed in a participating university. The courses involved include many different fields such as engineering, construction, nursing, music, business, and software development.

"It is heartening to see a focus on alternative pathways. There is a lot to be gained from us working together across tertiary education and developing new courses that value the diversity of strengths people have. We at AONTAS fully support a move away from the 'points race'" –
Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO

Dearbháil also stated that "the people who have been left behind or excluded from the system previously will still struggle to engage in or complete programmes if we can't provide them with realistic financial support, suitable transport, and cost-effective accommodation. What is meant to be an uplifting experience will only add further stress and isolation, if we do not address the conditions that make adult education a reality for all." We will continue to work with the Department and policymakers to highlight the need for more supports and public services to enable people to take up these degrees.

[Read more about the Tertiary Degree Programmes here.](#)



Policy Papers Published in 2024

“Hidden Costs of Adult Education” Policy Brief

This brief contained three key asks: to fund people to learn part-time; to increase training supports and allowances; and to close the information gap for adult learners to find out details about financial supports. The Advocacy Team used the policy brief at all four political party conferences we attended. It was well received by political representatives as it provided an accessible explanation of our policy aims. We took a new approach to the format of this brief, making it much shorter and more concise than others. This increased engagement with our material, when compared with longer publications used previously at other events. [Read the policy brief.](#)

Submission to the National Women and Girls Strategy Consultation

This document was submitted to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth in October 2024. Key asks in this submission were to promote parity of esteem for the adult and community education sector; to champion the importance of gender-proofing budget and policies in line with Public Sector Duty; to promote a collaborative planning process across Government departments to prevent inadvertent barriers to participation in adult learning, and to ensure policy coherence.

[Read the submission in full.](#)

National FET Strategy 2025-2030 Consultation Submission

This submission contained three priority areas for the next FET Strategy: evolving Learner Voice in FET; supporting the community education sector; and providing wraparound supports for adult learners. These recommendations were informed by a consultation in October with 80 learners, education providers, and other stakeholders. This submission also draws on our research, in particular the latest **Learners’ Voices Across Ireland Report** (2023-2024) and feedback from community education providers through the CEN.

[Read the submission in full.](#)

Looking Ahead to Advocacy in 2025

With the inclusion of a key ask from our Manifesto into the Programme for Government, we will continue to work with DFHERIS and the new Minister James Lawless TD, to ensure that the voices of learners and adult and community education providers are heard, and to seek the policy changes we know will benefit the people most in need.

We will continue to develop policy briefs and submissions, and progress our stronger and more political advocacy focus, with a specific focus on combatting disinformation and racism in local communities, and how to connect communities through adult and community education.

We will also continue our work in Northern Ireland, and improve our relationships with high level stakeholders such as the Department for the Economy, to provide evidence and supports to enable adult and community education providers to advocate for themselves when it comes to funding and supports in the north.

We will also continue to attend political party conferences and Ard-Fheiseanna, including Labour, Sinn Féin, Fine Gael, and Fianna Fáil conferences among others. We will continue to highlight the importance of community education in creating a more equitable society, as well as the need to support learners in Further Education and Training, so that they can succeed and thrive in education.

A New Focus on Public Sector Duty

One aspect of our work that has been developing throughout 2024 and will come into clearer focus in 2025 is our engagement with Public Sector Duty. This is a statutory obligation for public bodies to put into practice actions focused on the elimination of discrimination, the promotion of equality, and the protection of human rights of staff and people availing of their services, according to [IHREC \(the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission\)](#).

IHREC states that public bodies “must assess, address, and report on progress in relation to equality and human rights in their strategic plan and annual reports in a manner that is accessible to the public.”

We made public sector duty a key ask in our Manifesto, demonstrating to our stakeholders and policymakers that we are aware of, and are standing behind, the essential role of public sector duty in ensuring equality in Irish society. In 2025, we will set up an internal working group within AONTAS to engage in this process ourselves, and to ensure that public sector duty becomes a core part of our work internally as well as externally.

We commit to the following actions to implement Public Sector Duty in our work:

- Build the capacity of the organisation and our team
- Host an internal working group
- Set a policy framework of standards that will inform all organisation planning and policy
- Create a values framework based on our principles and values
- Support our learner representatives and member representatives on the Board to challenge and guide the organisation from an equality perspective
- Integrate values in all our work practices and processes

More to come on public sector duty in 2025.



Representation: Raising Issues with Government and Stakeholders

We represent the views, perspectives, and needs of our members and the adult learning sector at a range of different advisory groups and working groups on a regular basis. We use the evidence from our research to inform our contributions to these discussions and our calls for change in policy and practice at local, regional, and national levels.

Our CEO Dearbháil and our Head of Advocacy and Policy Conor both sit on a number of high-level working groups and continually attend networking and relationship-building events. This means that the issues being raised with us are regularly being presented to decisionmakers all across Ireland.

In 2024, we attended four political party conferences:

- **March:** Labour Party. We met 6 Labour representatives, including party leader Ivana Bacik and Further Education spokesperson Annie Hoey.
- **April:** Fine Gael. Our CEO Dearbháil spoke with Simon Harris, party representatives, members, and senior cabinet members about the importance of adult and community education.
- **April:** Fianna Fáil. Our then Policy and Development Officer Conor met the Tánaiste (now Taoiseach) Micheál Martin to discuss our work. He also spoke with Minister Niall Collins about financial supports for adult learners.
- **September:** Sinn Féin. Dearbháil and Conor meet with Sinn Féin delegates and discussed our work, and spoke with Minister Conor Murphy about adult learning in Ireland, north and south.

In 2024, we represented members at **19 different steering committees and advisory groups**. The purpose of this work is to ensure that our members and adult learners' issues and perspectives are heard in many different fora and contexts across the island of Ireland. Our role is to ensure that the needs and issues important to those in the adult and community education sector are front-and-centre, and that we continue to advocate for positive change.

Below is a list of the groups and committees we were part of in 2024:

- Advisory Group on Funding the Future of Higher Education
- Alliance for Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland
- Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults
- Coalition2030
- Steering Group for the Coalition 2030 Pillar on Poverty and Equality
- College Connect Regional Steering Group
- Community Education Framework Implementation Group
- The Community Platform
- DFHERIS FET-HE Advisory Group on Education for Sustainable Development
- DFHERIS Tertiary Education Sector Steering Committee and Working Groups
- Editorial Board for Elm Magazine
- Irish Network Against Racism
- National Access Plan Steering Group
- National Women's Council of Ireland: Women's Community Sector Working Group
- RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) Practitioners Network Steering Group
- Saolta Steering Group
- The Social Policy Network
- SOLAS Digital Learning Working Group
- SOLAS Social Inclusion Group
- Voter Education Steering Group (convened by Dublin Adult Learning Centre, DALC)





NONI/RTX 2024
Dillon Flynn
Sailing Into Wellness

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation
STAR Awards 2024
This is to certify that
Sailing Into Wellness
was a finalist in the category of
Social Inclusion
for making an outstanding contribution to adult learning

NONI/RTX 2024
Gary Eleton
Sailing Into Wellness

In April 2024, our CEO Dearbháil was [appointed to the SOLAS Board](#), under the category “Representing the needs and interests of learners.” Speaking about her appointment to the SOLAS Board, Dearbháil said:

“I’m looking forward to learning about SOLAS’ work in more detail and understanding the bigger picture when it comes to their activities. The adult education space is complex with so many moving parts. Being on the SOLAS Board will help to strengthen my knowledge and capacity. Separately, I will continue our work in AONTAS, advocating for equal access to quality education for everyone. Learners have always been at the heart of everything we do.”

In February, Dearbháil was invited by the Department of the Taoiseach to participate in an independent evaluation of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which will consider “the health service response covering hospitals, the community and nursing homes, along with the wider economic and social response, including the impact on education and businesses.” [Read more about this evaluation process.](#)

In July, Dearbháil sent letters to all Irish MEPs urging them to protect the Chairing of the CULT Committee, an essential function of adult learning policy creation and monitoring in the European Parliament. This call has seen a successful result. The Chair of the CULT Committee is Nela Riehl, an educator from Germany and Ghana, with a focus on social and economic justice. [Read more about the Chairing of the CULT Committee.](#)

Our Adult Education Initiatives Officer Larisa is our representative on the Saolta Steering Group. Saolta is a Global Citizenship Education strategic partnership programme for the adult and community education sector in Ireland between Irish Aid and a consortium of organisations. Development Perspectives is the lead partner in the consortium, which also includes AONTAS, Concern Worldwide, Cork Education and Training Board, Irish Rural Link and the Adult and Community Education Department of Maynooth University. Following on from this, Larisa was invited to chair a panel discussion at a national event in November “Making sPACE for Global Citizenship Education”.

Dearbháil also participated in a panel, and in her capacity as Vice President of the EAEA at a conference on lifelong learning hosted by the European Council President in Brussels, in April. She spoke at a Public Education Symposium at Maynooth University in May. And she attended the Adult Education Officers’ Conference in Athlone in November, with Head of Impact and Engagement Megan Fearon, who spoke at the event about Learner Voice.

After the interview with Dearbháil with [Brendan O’Connor on the Nine O’Clock Show on RTÉ Radio1](#) in December 2023, Dearbháil was invited to give the keynote address at Dochás Centre Women’s Prison in January for their education graduation. Another direct result of the RTÉ interview was the invitation to give a speech at the International Women’s Club in March.

Speaking about these invitations, Dearbháil said: “I think there is ongoing impact from the various events and interviews. People are interested in hearing about our work, and they support us in influencing the narrative in adult and community education.”

Other events that Dearbháil has been invited to include:



Chairing a learner panel for an in-house DFHERIS event on FET in January



Participating in a panel for the launch of the Active Citizenship project with Cork ETB in February



Giving a speech to the Acorn Project as part of the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival 2024 in March



Chairing a panel at the DFHERIS Cost of Education event in Athlone in April



Participating in a panel at a conference on lifelong learning hosted by the European Council President in Brussels in April



Speaking at a Public Education symposium in Maynooth University in May



Co-hosting a workshop with learners from the CEN on Learner Voice at the EAEA Conference in June



Speaking about Learner Voice at the IACTO Conference in Athlone in October



Hosting DFHERIS' Disability Summit in October

Supporting the Adult and Community Education Sector

Adult Education Tutors seeking better pay and conditions

Adult education tutors protested outside the Dáil in February 2024 and held talks with Government representatives about pay and conditions for the sector, and parity of esteem with the higher education sector. This dispute has been long-running, with tutors being paid an hourly rate and no holiday pay or pension entitlements.

Our research through the National FET Learner forum shows the positive and essential impact of tutors on FET students' experiences. The 2024 Learner Voices Across Ireland report shows that 95% of learners said that they felt respected by tutors and ETB staff, and research from 2023 shows that [support from tutors is key to reassuring learners](#).

“Tutors’ expertise in supporting adult learners is particularly important in adult education as many people are coping with difficult challenges in their personal lives, such as poverty, homeless, caring responsibilities, or illness.”

We at AONTAS strongly believe that adult and community education tutors and teachers must have fair and adequate pay and conditions for their work.

“Staff turnover and low pay is a challenge for many sectors, especially in the current economic and housing crises. Adult education tutors must have improved pay and conditions to protect the quality of education provision in Ireland, as well the experience and success of learners, and the wellbeing of our communities.” – Dearbháil Lawless, AONTAS CEO

[Read more about the adult education tutor protests on our website.](#)

In April 2024, Minister of State with responsibility for skills, Niall Collins, confirmed that an agreement has been concluded for tutors working in the further education sector. However, there were still questions about the level of pay and grading for tutors. [Read more in the Irish Times.](#)

Dearbháil and the Liberties Weavers in Brussels

Also in April, Dearbháil was in Brussels with adult education group the Liberties Weavers, former winners of an AONTAS STAR Award, to attend the [Lifelong Learning Conference](#) and share information on the impact of structural inequalities on people looking to return to education as adults, the stigmatisation of working-class people, and the exclusion of older people from learning. Dearbháil, who is Vice-President of the EAEA (the European Association for the Education of Adults), also talked about the importance of Learner Voice and the need to include learners in all levels of programme design and decision-making. [Learn more about the conference.](#)



Outcomes from our representational work



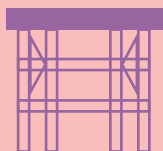
Funding Cuts

We worked to prevent potential funding cuts of 20% for community education providers in one region, which would have resulted in job losses, through direct meetings with funder and correspondence with SOLAS and DFHERIS, resulting in cuts being significantly reduced to 1-2%.



Programme for Government

Successful commitment from the Government review financial supports for adult learners in the new Programme for Government, as a result of our Holding You Back campaign and Manifesto.



Community Education Framework

Successfully influenced the new Community Education Framework to provide more consistent and improved funding for community education, through participating in the writing group and steering committee.



Part-Time Funded Courses for Higher Education

Achieved a long-term AONTAS goal of increased part-time funded courses in Higher Education.



Learner Voice in FET and Community Education – Increased National Focus

We advocated for continued commitment and funding for Learner Voice in FET with the ETBs, SOLAS, and DFHERIS. Due to our influence, the Community Education Framework has a particular focus on supporting Learner Voice.

Learner Voice is now embedded as a process and structure being used by DFHERIS, SOLAS, and ETBs across Ireland. DFHERIS and SOLAS now provide ongoing Learner Voice opportunities, events, and consultations, including multiple FET Strategy learner consultations. The adoption of Learner Voice by these stakeholders shows our impact.



Total shift in SOLAS Learner Voice Consultation

For the previous FET Strategy Consultation, AONTAS facilitated the only Learner Voice consultation. Moving forward in 2024, there was a significant increase in Learner Voice from across the sector, including with AONTAS, showcasing a much greater priority for Learner Voice input in the new Strategy to be launched in 2025.

“Tutors’ expertise in supporting adult learners is particularly important in adult education as many people are coping with difficult challenges in their personal lives, such as poverty, homeless, caring responsibilities, or illness.”

2024 Learner Voices Across Ireland Report





Organisational Alliances

Alliances in Ireland

We prioritise our relationships with other organisations involved in and related to adult learning, in Ireland, across Europe and across the world.

Some of our key stakeholders include the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, QQI, ETBI, and the new National Tertiary Office. Other groups we work with to achieve our goals include SAOLTA, IDEA, ETBI, NALA, AHEAD, Women's Collective Ireland, the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR), Mental Health Ireland, the 'Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation' (which focuses on adult learning in Northern Ireland), Léargas, the Alliance for Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland, College Connect, Maynooth University, and a national working group on the Recognition of Prior Learning.

Alliances in Europe

Under the [New European Agenda for Adult Learning \(NEAAL\)](#), the **Project Advisory Group (PAG)** provides a coalition and forum discussion among leading education experts and representatives from Government, education institutions, social partners and civil society organisations from Ireland. The latest theme for NEAAL is “**Building Stable Roots in a Sustainable Learning Ecosystem**”. Its objective is to grow an empowering adult learning ecosystem that helps learners and education providers, specifically in the community education sector in Ireland. Our Adult Education Initiatives Officer Larisa wrote about this, and a meeting of the PAG, in June.

Larisa writes: “Through this two-year project, we will hold and facilitate **capacity-building workshops and events** for community education providers. We will also be raising awareness on **green and digital transitions**, meaning how all members of our society can be well equipped to participate in and adapt to a **world shaped by technology and climate change**.”

17 people joined the meeting from 14 organisations across Ireland. There were representatives from SOLAS, LÉARGAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), Donegal ETB, SETU, Tipperary ETB, Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Fórsa, the University of Limerick, Cork ETB, SAOLTA, and the University of Bristol.

The focus of the discussions was:

- **introducing digital technologies in community-based programmes**
- co-creation of programmes and a **learner-centred approach**
- the need for **long-term funding** for community programmes
- the importance of creating **new partnerships** and bringing people together from across sectors
- including **future generations** in decision-making
- and the need to make new information **relevant to the lives of learners**.

[Find out more about the PAG on our website.](#)

Our CEO Dearbháil is also on the Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), which is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 120 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide. [Dearbháil was re-elected to the board in 2023.](#)

We continually engage with the EAEA on various EU projects, and provide mutual support by amplifying each other's messages on social media and through digital channels, and by meeting through events and activities across Europe throughout the year.

Empowering Learner Advocacy: Learners As Leaders

The Learners As Leaders programme has been running for several years and we have worked with around 30 learners every year. It is funded through the New European Agenda for Adult Learning, for which AONTAS is the National Co-ordinator in Ireland. Through the programme, learners develop skills in areas like critical thinking, communication, and creative problem-solving, and they learn how to advocate for themselves and others with similar experiences.

This year, we took the LAL programme in a new direction by integrating it into our sharpened advocacy and political focus. Our core theme for LAL in 2024 was **Democracy and Voter Education**.

Because 2024 was a year of elections and political change, we felt it was fitting to build on work we had been doing with adult and community education groups to raise awareness of the importance of democracy and voting for adult learners.

In February, we invited selected members of the Community Education Network (CEN) to take part in training at Maynooth University on how to design and deliver a programme in voter education and active citizenship, in partnership with DALC (Dublin Adult Literacy Centre). The groups involved went on to develop six-week programmes with learners.

13 groups took part overall, and went on to develop their own programmes for learners in their centres. One of these groups was [Belmayne Community Group](#). They organise education initiatives and activities for the local community in Belmayne, Dublin 13. Their Voter Education Group was part of a social inclusion voting campaign. This course equipped residents from the Belmayne area with the knowledge and attitudes necessary to continue their work as leaders in their community. Their work culminated in a visit to the Dáil in May.

[Read all about this Dáil visit in this blog by Larisa.](#)

Programmes on Voter Education were run by Women's Collective Ireland (WCI) and Women's Community Projects, Mullingar. The two providers brought learners together for perspectives from urban and rural areas. Participants learned about local elections and the voting process. They talked about the issues coming up in relation to the General Election, and the benefits and difficulties of being part of the European Union. [Read more about these programmes here.](#)

We are committed to making learners' experience the cornerstone of policymaking for Government and politicians in Ireland and internationally, with the goal of making education more equal and accessible for all. We will have further opportunities for providers and learners through the LAL programme in 2025.





Goal 2. Evidence and Highlight how Adult Learning is Impacted by Social Inequality

Development Education in Ireland and Across Europe

Development education is about tackling social justice issues and recognising the connection between local and global contexts. The focus is on inequality, poverty, human rights, sustainability and the impact of globalisation. Larisa, our Adult Education Initiatives Officer, worked with the IDEA (Irish Development Education Association) to explore the impact of development education and changes that have occurred as a result of it in Ireland and across Europe. Their annual conference in 2024 focused on racism and inclusion, which are also key topics for AONTAS, and will continue to be into 2025.

A recurring theme is the need for more inclusive practices, both in education and in our day-to-day lives, which is particularly relevant in the current context of **growing polarisation and anti-immigrant sentiments**.

[Read more about development education here.](#)

The Scuola Democratica Conference in Sardinia: Learner Voice and Social Inequality

In June, our Head of Research Dr Thomas Murray and Research Officer Aisling Meyler delivered a presentation entitled “Democratic Education? Learner Voice and Adult Education in Ireland” to the International Conference “Education and/or Social Justice” of the journal “Scuola Democratica” at the University of Cagliari, Sardinia. The presentation highlighted the work of the National FET Learner Forum and the relationship between Learner Voice and democracy.

Aisling wrote about her work on this for our blog, stating that her contribution to the conference sought to “ignite debate and progress in researching how adult education policies and learning practices—locally, nationally, and globally—affect the progress towards a more socially just and equal society.”

Over 900 academics, researchers, and adult education stakeholders participated in the four-day event, featuring nearly 200 sessions.

Aisling gained knowledge and insights that contributed to the development of a new project focused on disinformation, anti-racism, and community education in Ireland, with a report to be published and launched in 2025. [Read more about the conference and findings here.](#)

ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages): Addressing Inequalities for Migrant Learners in Ireland

In June, our Learner Voice Project Officer Karyn wrote about the work of Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) in leading the way with new awards for ESOL, responding to the increase in migrant learners in Ireland.

Karyn writes:

“Recognising the ever-changing needs of the learners in their regional centres and the evolving language landscape in Ireland, CMETB took a proactive approach. They commissioned an intensive and ground-breaking project to assess the English language competency of migrant learners, comprising 80 hours of research over a seven-month period.”

This included the development of guidelines and a toolkit to assist with the placement of learners to ensure they are starting at the level most suited to them.

Ultimately, the success of this research paved the way for CMETB to develop ESOL-specific modules at QQI Levels 1 and 2. The approach demonstrates great flexibility and the meeting of learners where they are at.

“Modules and resources have already been shared with seven ETBs,” Karyn writes, “and interest expressed among the remaining eight. The collaboration and sharing of knowledge will no doubt shape the ESOL learning landscape in Ireland over the years to come.”

[Read more about this new approach to ESOL modules here.](#)

Education and Training Boards: Shaping the Future, Leaving No One Behind

CEO Dearbháil co-authored an article on Learner Voice with Dr Lindsay Malone from Waterford and Wexford ETB. “This book touches on the energy and excellence that ETBs and their 32,000+ staff bring to their mission, every day, in every community. It also points to challenges, current and anticipated, and their ambitions for future growth.” Find out more about the book [here](#).



Goal 3. Inform and Influence Stakeholders and the Wider Public

An essential role for AONTAS is not only to engage with stakeholders in the adult and community education sector, but the Irish public on a broad scale.

It has become an organisational priority to widen AONTAS' reach and highlight the importance of adult and community education to many different audiences, including the general public.

Championing Sustainable Development in 2024

Sustainability and responsiveness to the threats from climate change must be prioritised, with climate change as one of the major collective challenges of our times.

At AONTAS, we are proud to prioritise sustainability not just in the work we do, but in how we do it. In 2024, we made specific efforts to reduce our use of single-use materials and prioritise environmentally-friendly actions. For example, at our events we have sought not to use paper or plastic cups and catering supplies, and we have reduced our printing through using QR codes, shared agendas, reusing name badges or using recyclable badges or seed cards. We are always looking for new ways to reduce waste and improve sustainability practices, and will continue to do so in 2025.

In 2023, we were appointed by Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamon Ryan TD, as [one of Ireland's champions to help progress the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). 26 organisations were selected as part of the 2023-2024 SDG Champions Programme, to raise public awareness of the SDGs and to demonstrate that everyone in society can contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The role of an SDG Champion is to act as an advocate and promoter of the SDGs and provide good practice examples of how an organisation can contribute to the SDGs and integrate them into their work and activities.

In October 2024, Larisa, our Adult Education Initiatives Officer, [attended the SDG Champions showcase in Dublin](#), and gave an update on our work in this area as SDG Champion. Our particular focus when it comes to the SDGs is on Goal 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Our CEO Dearbháil Lawless was co-chair of Coalition 2030 in 2024 and she has continued to represent the Domestic and Anti-Poverty Pillar on the Steering Committee. She works with other key stakeholders to ensure the SDGs are implemented systematically in Ireland.

A Greener Tomorrow through Community Education

A key focus for us is “just, green transitions”, meaning the shift to a sustainable, low-carbon economy in a way that is fair and inclusive. It means addressing climate change while ensuring that all communities, including the most vulnerable, have equal opportunities. This involves promoting renewable energy, green jobs, and sustainable practices, while also supporting those displaced by climate impacts and engaging marginalized groups in the process. Climate change will impact vulnerable populations more acutely. We need an immediate focus on changes with social justice in mind. The goal is to create a resilient and equitable society where the environmental and social benefits of the green transition are shared by all.

In order to take action on this, we’re partnering with [Saolta](#) for a new project called “A Greener Tomorrow through Community Education”. This project is funded through NEAAL.

We offered a free Global Citizenship Education “[Train the Trainer](#)” course and €1000 financial support to help members implement their idea for promoting just green transitions with adult learners. The programme ran for 12 weeks from September to December 2024. [Learn more about the programme here.](#)

9 out of 10 participants said this training will influence their work, with one participant stating: “Really enjoyed these sessions. I feel better equipped for working with groups engaging with community education around Global Citizenship, Just Transition and SDG.”

Holding You Back Campaign: Public Engagement

This was our largest ever campaign, with a reach of over 70 million readers and listeners. There were 40 pieces of coverage across national and local media, including being featured on RTÉ News, Newstalk, and Today FM, with pieces also in *The Sun* and *The Farmers Journal*. The total social media reach of the campaign was 99,918. We had 1,396 users of the [Holding You Back landing page](#) on the AONTAS website. [Check out our media highlights from the campaign here.](#)

As part of the campaign, we also had a column in the **Future of Education 2024** report in the *Irish Independent* and businessnews.ie, with a combined audience reach of 2.6 million people. [Read the piece here.](#)

Our campaign spokesperson was writer and actor Emmet Kirwan. An interview with Emmet, conducted by Strategic Communications Officer Kate, was featured in Hot Press magazine, which has a readership of 65,000 in the Republic of Ireland and over 80,000 including Northern Ireland. [Read an extended version of the article on our website.](#)

Our custom-designed mural by artist Emmalene Blake on South Circular Road in Dublin, which sees a lot of traffic and footfall each day. The mural was the focal point for a photoshoot with Emmet Kirwan, Dearbháil, and other team members involved in the campaign.



“It’s a lot easier to do well in education if you live in a stable household or area, and not in poverty. It’s not that easy if you’re living in emergency accommodation, for example, to study if you’re sharing a room with your whole family” – Emmet Kirwan, Holding You Back campaign spokesperson

[Take a look at the photocall with Emmet and Emmalene Blake at the mural on South Circular Road.](#)

Dearbháil also shared some reflections on the campaign on our website, stating:

“Adult and community education is a space of healing and opportunities. For many people, it is the first time they’ve been treated with care and respect in education. Due to their learning, they have the privilege of choice. The choice to continue their learning or the choice to consider new career opportunities. Education impacts the quality of their life, and they can find a love of learning.”

[Read Dearbháil’s reflections on “Holding You Back” here.](#)

“Focusing on skills, the workforce, and economic growth, without envisioning values that promote human rights and flourishing, could further generate inequalities.”

Larisa Sioneriu,
AONTAS Adult Education Initiatives Officers



Influencing Policy, Informing our Stakeholders

Our Manifesto, “Transforming Adult and Community Education”, called on the Government to make transformative and progressive policy changes that will ensure those furthest behind in our education system are prioritised first. This is essential if we are to have equality in Ireland.

One of our key asks – to reform the financial supports system for adult learners – was directly quoted in the new Programme for Government.

In addition, because 2024 was a year of elections, and one of our priority areas was democracy and voter education, we produced two guides for our members on how to engage with local and European election candidates, and one for the General Election.

We also shared information with our members and general readers about how to register to vote, and the process for voting.

Local and European Election Guide

This guide focused on the local and European elections, which took place in June. It was aimed at our members, as a tool to help them in communicating with adult learners about why they should vote and what is involved. It also contained examples of the kinds of issues that adult and community education providers and staff could bring up with election candidates, such as the lack of stable and adequate funding, and the barriers to learning for people that still exist. The guide also contains a sample letter or email that members can use to contact local election candidates and seek a meeting or invite them to an event. [Take a look at the Local and European Elections Guide.](#)

General Election Guide

We shared this guide with our members in advance of the General Election in November. It contained details on the importance of promoting democracy and voter education, and the role of adult and community education in this. It also contained general information on the election process and how it works. For when candidates came calling to the door, we offered ideas on issues that could be discussed including the lack of reliable and affordable public transport, lack of access to affordable and available childcare, and better pay and conditions for staff in adult and community education. This guide also contained a template for an email or letter that could be used for contacting TDs and election candidates. [Take a look at our General Election guide.](#)

European Citizenship and Cooperation

We are committed to representing our members not just at national levels but across Europe and internationally. To achieve this, we collaborate with adult education organisations across Europe, including Ministries, state institutions, non-government organisations, universities, community education groups, policymakers, practitioners and learners.

In 2024, we worked with **24 partners** across Europe. The team visited other adult learning organisations and events in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, Austria, and Finland.



We work closely with the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN) and the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), among others, advocating for educational equality and social change.

We are a world leader in **including the voices and perspectives of learners** in adult learning advocacy work, and in understanding and shaping Learner Voice as a process with real impact.

In order to promote our work, we redesigned our webpage devoted to showcasing European projects, including developing a new and more accessible approach and user experience for those seeking information on our EU projects activities.

[Take a look at our new EU Projects page here.](#)

Conclusion of the European Year of Skills

The [European Year of Skills](#) included a myriad of activities and initiatives across Europe, promoted and brought together by the European Commission. This includes addressing skills shortages related to jobs and the economy, but also to the concept of “just green and digital transitions”, which is everywhere in current discourses on education and training. This refers to moving into a future where all members of our society are well equipped to participate in and adapt to a world shaped by technology and climate change. To mark the end of this thematic year, the European Commission organised a [vibrant hybrid event that took place from Brussels](#). Our Adult Education Initiatives Officer Larisa attended the event, reflecting on the need for greater empathy and human-centred approaches to adult education across Europe.

“Focusing on skills, the workforce, and economic growth, without envisioning values that promote human rights and flourishing, could further generate inequalities” – Larisa Sioneriu, AONTAS

[Read our reflections on the European Year of Skills.](#)

BEEP Comes to a Close

The BEEP project ([Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation](#)) finished up in spring 2024, with findings identifying barriers to democratic participation for groups across Europe, and then develops teaching methods that can empower citizens to overcome these obstacles to participation. The final conference for the project took place in March at the Volkshochschule (The People’s High School) in Vienna. Working with our partners on the BEEP project, we put together a [BEEP research paper](#). We shared participatory processes and best practice examples for groups in adult and community education in Ireland and Europe. We also created a [set of guidelines](#) for political participation for educators and providers. [Read more about BEEP and our findings.](#)

New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL)

We are the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) in Ireland. We are one of just two NGOs in Europe with this role, and it means we have a high level of influence and impact on adult learning policy and activities in Europe. We were asked to act in this capacity by the Department of Further and Higher Education, and the project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union and by DFHERIS through SOLAS. We work with the European Commission and a network of Coordinators to promote adult learning across Europe.

The current theme for the NEAAL is “Building Stable Roots in a Sustainable Learning Ecosystem”. The target groups for this project are learners who are more vulnerable or those furthest left behind by our education system. This includes lone parents, Travellers, people who are homeless, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, older learners, women, marginalised and vulnerable adults, adult and community educators, adult and community education staff, employers, and EU partners.

Our main objective is to enhance a powerful and empowering learning ecosystem for learners, organisations, and the community education sector in Ireland. We are focussed on empowering learners, building the capacity of community education practitioners, raising awareness on the green and digital transition, enhancing the standing and visibility of the community education sector, and promoting the idea that learning can happen anywhere. We aim to facilitate workplace learning, foster innovative learning environments in community education, and emphasise the transformative power of education.

Highlights from NEAAL in 2024

Across 2024 and 2025, we are running a series of programmes and activities. These are:

The [Learners as Leaders](#) programme, which empowers learners across Ireland to be champions of adult learning in their communities.

[Learner Voice development for educators](#), including training in how to embed Learner Voice processes into course design and structure. In 2024, we held 8 sessions with ETB staff and learners from across the country, led by Ruby and Karyn. Interest in the Learner Voice model is growing all the time. We offer staff training on the foundations and practice of Learner Voice work. Our workshops for learners focus on leadership, advocacy, and planning.

Impact of the Learner Voice Training:

As a direct result of the session in January with Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, one of the learners in attendance, Sultan Ahmed, was invited to speak about his lived experience at the AONTAS “Who Does It Cost?” policy discussion in March as part of the Adult Learners’ Festival. The focus of this event was on policy solutions to financial challenges faced by FET learners. Ahmed went on to become a Learner Ambassador as part of our national public-awareness raising campaign Holding You Back in September. [Find out more on our website.](#)

In June, we delivered a Learner Voice training session with 14 staff members from City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB). Since then, they have successfully made several important changes in implementing Learner Voice structures:

They created a Quality Assurance Learner Voice Steering Group. This group is creating a statement strategy for Learner Voice, which will be used across the Prison Education Service.

They identified **16 staff members across the Prison Education service as Learner Voice Representatives.** These staff members will Learner Voice activities in their settings. They have developed a Code of Practice and Informed Consent documentation.

One staff member gave us the feedback that it was a significant change to create a community of practice for Learner Voice. He shared that the training was the first time for many of the staff to meet in person and discuss the topic of Learner Voice. As the staff who attended the training are now Learner Voice representatives in their setting, they can continue this community of practice by having online meetings, attending the facilitation training, and using a shared system for resources. He also noted that Learner Voice was not a term broadly used in the prison setting but now it is becoming more recognisable since the training.





The [Project Advisory Group](#), is a collection of people coming together to direct and focus NEAAL activities. We held two PAG meetings, one in May and one in September. The first meeting – which took place online – included the participation of seventeen participants from fourteen organisations. The second meeting – which took place in person – included the participations of fifteen participants from nine organisations. [Find out more.](#)

[AONTAS on the Road](#), where we travel to education practitioners around the country providing training and new resources. This is the Storytelling for Connecting Communities project, with three workshops facilitated by various members of the AONTAS team. The result of this was a handbook on Storytelling for Connecting Communities, developed by Larisa, which is designed to equip adult and community educators with skills and knowledge to promote empathy and social cohesion in their local communities through storytelling. It is based on research and evidence-based methodologies that demonstrate that the process of telling and sharing stories help us make sense of the world in a way that connects and resonates with people. [Read the Handbook here.](#)

[Innovation in Community Education](#), including new ideas on how to address issues on climate change and the advancement of technology. We selected 6 innovative community education projects for this work. These were Ballycommon TTC; Roscommon Women Network; Northside FRC; CASPr; Community Connect; Cranmore Community C-operative Society. We partnered with Saolta to offer the participants a free, four-week, “Train the Trainer” course on climate justice and green transitions, which took place in September. The idea was to equip participants with knowledge, resources, and certification to carry out their innovative initiatives in their local communities to support just green transitions. Speaking about the workshops, one participant said: “I really enjoyed these sessions. I feel better equipped for working with groups engaging with community education around Global Citizenship, Just Transition and SDGs.” In 2025, this work will be completed and showcased by the team at AONTAS.

European Projects for Adult Learning

Outside of the NEAAL, our main European projects for 2024 were:

Citizens' Xelerator

This project aimed to strengthen the democratic and civic literacy of adult learners. Being aware of and knowledgeable about the workings of democracy and civics has never been more important, both in Ireland and across Europe. It began in December 2022 and finished in December 2024.

We connected this project with our work in voter education and democracy, which is an organisational priority for us.

On the 15th October 2024, Education Projects Officer [Ruby Cooney](#) and Community Education Officer [Lorraine O'Connor](#) facilitated a workshop on self-advocacy with ten learners from CEN member, [Community After Schools Project](#) (CASPr).

On the 21st October Ruby and Adult Education Initiatives Officer Larisa Sioneriu facilitated a self-advocacy workshop with twenty learners from the [Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed](#)'s Learning Hub. The session focused on advocacy and learners were supported in sharing different ways they advocate for themselves with their classmates. Learners are now able to identify how they already demonstrate self-advocacy. Learners can now identify how they can become more engaged in advocacy such as voting.

On the 20th November, 7 learners from the Tipperary Student Council attended an online Create Your Action session to develop committee skills.

On the 14th of November, we held an online session for professionals in adult education and the CEN members to discuss democratic and civic literacy in adult and community education. During the webinar, we introduced attendees to Citizens Xelerator project resources and activities.

In February, we provided members of the Community Education Network with the [Citizens' Xelerator Toolkit](#), along with other resources. Have a look at our [Micro-Learning Session](#) plans for adult educators. These tools offer educators hands on, practical activities to deliver with adult learners on a broad range of topics, including democratic literacy.

In April, for the 27 learners we supported to speak at the DFHERIS Cost of Education event, we used tools from this project to prepare. We facilitated a session with the learners using the [Citizens Xelerator Think Tank Manual](#). This manual provides step-by-step instructions on supporting adults with unmet literacy needs in identifying, addressing, and developing solutions to challenges within their communities. We used this session to brainstorm ideas with learners about what changes they want to see in the cost of education in Ireland. After the event, we held another Think Tank session for learners to follow up on their ideas. This all contributes to our advocacy work, and to how we advocate for positive change for adult learners both in Ireland and across Europe. We also held an [online event in November](#) to showcase the project activities and resources that can be used by attendees. Throughout this project, we have supported **63 activities to take place across the island of Ireland** and we have reached over **300 learners**.

[Learn more about Citizens' Xelerator.](#)

Enhance

The ENHANCE project is driven by the belief that everyone deserves a voice in their educational journey and that these voices can dramatically shape and improve our society as a whole. ENHANCE is all about Learner Voice. It embraces the core principle of adult education – to offer adult learners autonomy, to incorporate learners' past experiences into the approach and structure of their learning, and to create a more equal power dynamic between learners and educators. This project is still ongoing. It began in December 2023 and will continue for 30 months. There are 7 partners on this project.

The project is looking at creating a comprehensive and interactive system or list of existing initiatives that currently promote learners' voices. It will also create of a roadmap and a set of recommendations and booklets for enhancing learners' voices. And it will result in the development of a series of podcasts on the topic that will also be relevant to the public and general society.

Our Communications and Digital Media Officer Megan wrote about this work for our website, providing detail around the "Voice of the Learner 2.0" project, in partnership with [CINOP](#), an education consultancy and research institute, and [ABC Foundation](#), an advocacy group that supports people with developing literacy skills. Megan describes travelling to the Netherlands to explore the Dutch approach to Learner Voice. [Read all about it here.](#)

AONTAS have a key role in the communications and dissemination of the project and its findings. We created communications guidelines for ENHANCE, as well as conducting a website audit and revisions, and social media templates and a content planner for socials. [Find out more about this project.](#)





Just4All

The JUST4ALL project focuses on ensuring underrepresented groups are considered and prioritised in societal and political changes in the face of the climate crisis. The specific focus here is on adult learning and education programmes for groups including women, adults seeking skills training, and migrants. A “just transition” means that all members of our society can be well equipped to participate in and adapt to a world shaped by technology and climate change.

In April, we reached out to adult and community educators and organisations across Ireland for [a survey seeking feedback](#) on their work in just transitions and climate education. This informed a background paper which we produced for this project. [You can read it here.](#)

In November, Head of Impact and Engagement Megan Fearon and Community Education Officer Lorraine O'Connor took part in a workshop in Cyprus, hosted by local organisation CARDET. The workshop was delivered by Solidar and the EAEA and brought together participants from across Europe. Megan and Lorraine were joined by colleagues from Serbia, France, and Sweden, sharing learning on adult education, community development, and European advocacy practices. We produced a paper on [Just Transition, Lifelong Learning and Adult Education in Ireland](#).

PartnerUP

Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement for Upskilling Pathways, or “Partner Up”, is a European project focusing on the effective implementation of the EU’s Upskilling Pathways initiative, an EU process that seeks to help people with low levels of literacy numeracy and digital skills. It was based in the findings from the [Upskilling Pathways initiative](#). This project started in December 2022 and finished in December 2024 with a final conference.

We organised three stakeholder engagement activities, including a panel discussion, roundtable discussion, and an online focus group. The panel discussion included adult learners who have overcome huge barriers to accessing education sharing their journeys. The roundtable discussion allowed stakeholders to give input while using learner personas. On the 11 September, we hosted an online development group as part of the project with key stakeholders working in adult education. [Read the summary from the development group here.](#)

Our Education Projects Officer Ruby went with Head of Advocacy Conor to [Brussels for the conference](#), which focused on “Establishing Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement for Upskilling Pathways”. All partners came together to review project activities and discuss the last steps of the project implementation. At the meeting, partners shared dissemination, and implementation plans for this project. A summary was produced detailing the stakeholders involved, challenges, and solutions going forward for overcoming barriers for people furthest from the education system to engage and develop their literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. [Read the summary here.](#)

Study visits from our European partners and colleagues

Study Visits: Building Bridges Across Nations

In January, our EU Projects Coordinator Ecem hosted a study visit with Karine Nicolay, the Flanders Belgium National Coordinator. Karina came to Dublin and attended the PAG Meeting, visited the AONTAS offices and the team, and engaged in discussions and knowledge exchange on the NEAAL.

There was also a study visit by Terhi Kouvo, the Managing Editor for Aikuiskasvatus from KVS Finland. Discussions between Terhi and the AONTAS team allowed for shared knowledge on the Irish education system, advocacy work, and insights into community education in Ireland. [Find out more.](#)

Takeaways on Diversity and Inclusion: EUCEN Autumn Conference and Smile Symposium

Also in January, Ecem wrote about attending a recent EUCen conference in Barcelona. EUCen is the largest multidisciplinary association for University Lifelong Learning in Europe. We represent Ireland in lifelong learning in Europe through our research and advocacy activities. We are partners with EUCen in the PartnerUP project. [Learn more about this conference and activities.](#)

Community Education and Shared Learning with our German Colleagues

Our Community Education Officer Lorraine wrote about a visit from VHS Germany, as part of our [Community Education in Europe \(KA1\) programme](#). This visit was part of a consortium of adult education organisations who are members of our [Community Education Network \(CEN\)](#). 23 adult educators came from across Germany. Lorraine worked with colleagues in [Henrietta Adult and Community Services \(HACE\)](#) here in Dublin, who are a long-standing member of the CEN and provided the venue for the event. A robust dialogue on the educational systems in both countries followed, with discussion on and exchanges of best practices in both countries. Learner Voice was of particular interest to many of our German guests, in particular the Adult Learners' Festival and how we at AONTAS ensure that the Learner Voice is heard at all levels of decision-making, where possible. The day was an excellent opportunity to bring together members of AONTAS and the CEN, and our European partners, as well as a local organisation, community education providers, and learners – all sharing learning, expertise, and experiences. [Find out more about this visit.](#)

Study Visits with PartnerUP

In February 2024, then Head of Impact and Engagement Charis Hughes attended an in-person study visit in Cyprus over two days. During the visit, partners explored successful strategies and approaches for promoting upskilling and lifelong learning in Cyprus and across Europe.

Ruby attended the online study visits in June with the Hellenic Adult Education Association, the State Education Development Agency (SEDA), and the Latvian Association for Adult Education (LPIA).



OBJECTIVE 3. EMPOWER THE CHANGE

Goal 1. Develop a Socially Inclusive Framework for AONTAS as an Employer

HR and Health and Safety Policies and Procedures

Employee Handbook Updates – 2024 Summary

Throughout 2024, several important updates were made to the AONTAS Employee Handbook, reflecting our ongoing commitment to work-life balance, fairness, and clarity in our workplace policies. This work was carried out in partnership with our HR advisors, Adare HRM, to ensure full alignment with current Irish employment legislation.

Flexible Working and Work-Life Balance

We introduced clearer guidance on flexible working hours, an improved flexitime policy to support a better balance between professional and personal lives. Core working hours are now defined, with flexibility built in before and after these hours to accommodate diverse needs, while maintaining core time for collaborative work during the day.

Working Abroad Policy

As part of our hybrid working model, staff may now work remotely within Europe for up to five weeks per calendar year, subject to approval and alignment with health and safety, and organisational needs. This applies to all staff following their probation.

Annual Salary Review

Our annual salary increment process was formalised, providing automatic scale progression for all employees.

Sick Leave Clarification

We clarified the existing sick leave entitlements, with a focus on maintaining well-being and preventing misuse. Additional support remains available for those with long-term or health-related challenges.

EU Project Travel – TOIL Updates

Time off in lieu (TOIL) for EU-related travel has been standardised. The new structure ensures fairness and promotes rest after overseas work commitments, with additional TOIL for early or late flights and travel over weekends. This is now aligned with TOIL for overnight stays in Ireland to ensure fairness for all staff.

Parental Leave

From August 2024, the duration of Parent's Leave increased in line with national policy — now offering 9 weeks of leave.

Eye Test Reimbursement

A new benefit was introduced, allowing staff to claim reimbursement for eye tests and corrective eyewear up to €175 every two years, ensuring care for employee health and comfort.

Staff Survey and Team Building Days

The team were provided with an opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives, and suggestions confidentially again in 2024. The results of this survey are used to improve policies and practice and provide an open space for sharing feedback. The results of this survey are shared with the AONTAS Board and the team for transparency and good governance. Following the 2023 survey, in 2024 a Library space was created for the team. Providing a quiet and relaxing space for reading with access to a range of academic texts and novels.

In 2024, team building days were organised twice as a thank you for the team's ongoing commitment to the organisation and their hard work. In addition to a Christmas party and in-house lunches. These benefits aim to provide relationship building and fun for the team.

Health and Safety Policies and Procedures in 2024

A full onsite safety audit was conducted in November 2023 by Adare.

Following recommendations from this report, the following changes were made for compliance with H&S regulations in 2024. Office desks were reconfigured to accommodate computer power points and eliminate trip risks. New LED lighting was installed in the office to eliminate staff eye fatigue. A new air-conditioning/ heating unit was installed. Shelving was secured to the wall in the new storage space. All staff completed Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments in accordance with legislation.

Goal 2. Integrate a Problem-solving Culture

We focused on building a workplace where staff feel confident to solve problems together. Through training in Effective Communication and Effective Working Relationships, coaching sessions, and more. Staff had the opportunity to improve their strengths in active listening, collaboration, and clear communication. We encouraged open conversations about challenges, creating space for reflection and shared learning.

These opportunities are helping us to move towards a more inclusive, problem-solving culture where people recognise that their ideas matter and they have the space and time to share. We'll continue to improve together and ensure this learning is embedded systematically.



Staff Training and Development at AONTAS in 2024

- Dialogue Practice
- Finance for non-finance officers
- SORP in financial reporting
- People Management
- Manual handling
- Coaching Sessions
- Adobe Ill
- Facilitation Course
- Train the trainer
- Problem Solving Techniques
- Leadership coaching workshop
- Workshop in Unity in Diversity
- Strategic Leadership
- CO3 Leadership Summit - Belfast
- Corporate Partnership Masterclass
- Professional Diploma in Innovation and Creativity
- Performance Management
- Effective Communication and effectiveness in working relationships
- 2 modules completed on Plain Language Certificate

36 individual and 9 group sessions were provided for the team.

Governance training for Board members was also delivered in person by Carmichael at the Board meeting held on 15th July 2024.

Goal 3. Enhance Organisational Infrastructure

In 2024, we continued to strengthen our organisational infrastructure to support more effective and efficient ways of working. Building on the in-house redevelopment of Salesforce in 2023, we made further improvements in how we use the system to manage membership tracking and communication with members. We also introduced some new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure greater consistency and clarity across teams. In-person strategy days brought the Leadership Team together to reflect, plan, and align on key priorities. These actions have helped create a more connected, responsive, and future-focused organisation, better equipped to meet our goals.

Other actions included:

- Reviewing our IT provision, mapping organisational needs and assessing potential services.
- Moving to a new IT provider and moving organisational data from the server to the cloud. The final stage of this will be completed in 2025.
- Reviewing and improving our organisational workplan and reporting system.
- Redeveloping our Risk Management Strategy and connected reporting.
- Reviewing several governance policies and procedures including Safeguarding, GDPR, Board expenses, and our Gifts Policy.



The AONTAS Team

- Aisling Meyler, Research Officer
- Barbara Nea, Head of Advocacy (until 12 April 2024)
- Brian Desmond, Membership and Digital Engagement Officer
- Charis Hughes, Head of Impact and Engagement (until 24 April 2024)
- Conor Thompson, Policy and Development Officer (until 2 June; started as Head of Advocacy and Policy on 3 June 2024)
- Clare Fleet, Governance and Operations Officer (joined 19 November 2024)
- Dearbháil Lawless, Chief Executive Officer
- Dr Eve Cobain, Senior Research Officer
- Dr Kate Smyth, Strategic Communications Officer
- Dr Laura Lovejoy, Research Officer (until 19 September 2024)
- Dr Thomas Murray, Head of Research
- Dwayne Keogh, Governance and Operations Officer (until 19 July 2024)
- Ecem Akarca, EU Projects Coordinator
- Giuliana Peña, Publications and Design Officer
- Karyn Farrell, Learner Voice Officer
- Larisa Sioneriu, Adult Education Initiatives Officer (joined 25 March 2024)
- Lorraine O'Connor, Community Education Officer
- Lucia Lacovone, Communications and Events Officer (until 30 November 2024)
- Marta Feragalli, Head of Environmental, Social and Governance
- Megan Fearon, Head of Impact and Engagement (started 03 June 2024)
- Megan O'Neill, Social Media and Digital Officer
- Philip Finn, Research Officer (started 14 October 2024)
- Rachael Ryan, Head of Communications (started 10 January 2024)
- Rebecca Jackson, Policy and Advocacy Officer (started 27 August 2024)
- Ruby Cooney, Education Projects Officer (started 05 March 2024)
- Suzanne Kerr, Office Coordinator
- Traci Barton, Finance and Administration Officer

Ensuring good governance and financial compliance

Governance in 2024

The Financial Statement provides a detailed overview of this in the following section.



APPENDIX:

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS 2024

Company registration number: 80958

CRA number: 20013042

Charity number: CHY6719

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation
Financial Statements
For the year ended 31 December 2024

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

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AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

DIRECTORS AND OTHER INFORMATION

DIRECTORS

Kayla Dibble
Deborah Oniah
Cora Rafter
Lilian Nwanze
Melíosa Bracken (Resigned 15/07/2024)
Imelda Gaffney
John Buttery (Resigned 19/04/2024)
Pamela Latimer
Louise Mullins
Martina Needham (Resigned 30/05/2024)
Martin Flynn
Liam McCarthy
John D'Arcy
Anne Whelan (Appointed 15/07/2024)
Deirdre Arnold (Appointed 30/05/2024)
Fergus Craddock (Appointed 30/05/2024)
Charis Hughes (Appointed 30/05/2024)

SECRETARY

Marta Feragalli

REGISTERED OFFICE AND BUSINESS ADDRESS

2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street
Ranelagh
Dublin 6

COMPANY NUMBER

80958

CHARITY NUMBER

20013042

CHY REVENUE NUMBER

CHY 6719

AUDITORS

Forvis Mazars
Chartered Accountants & Statutory Audit Firm
Harcourt Centre
Block 3
Harcourt Road
Dublin 2

BANKERS

Bank of Ireland
50 – 55 Lower Baggot St.
Dublin 2

SOLICITORS

Ken Kennedy Solicitors
31 Heytesbury Lane
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Report

The AONTAS Directors present their report together with the audited financial statements of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation ('the Charity' or 'AONTAS') for the year ended 31 December 2024.

Statement from the AONTAS Chairperson

It is my privilege to present the AONTAS Director's Report 2024, reflecting on a year of significant progress, minor challenges, and unwavering commitment to advancing adult learning across the island of Ireland. In 2024, AONTAS continued to strengthen its role as the voice of adult learning in Ireland advocating for high-quality, accessible and inclusive education. We have amplified learner voices, strengthened the profile of adult and community education, and influenced Government policy to create a more inclusive and equitable education system.

Key Achievements

We successfully reached 81.5 million readers and listeners through our communications and campaigns, including coverage on RTÉ news. Our 'Transforming Adult and Community Education – A Manifesto for Change' lobbying resource was launched in the Dáil and shared with all 250 Oireachtas members. AONTAS provided a central map for showcasing community education provision across the island, and we worked in partnership with Education and Training Boards, and education providers to host 166 during the Adult Learners' Festival.

Challenges

Our members faced difficult challenges in 2024. The financial pressures on community education providers intensified due to competing policy priorities, and we took action to gather evidence and meet with representatives to protect their funding.

Additionally, we navigated increasing division in Irish society and a challenging international political landscape. AONTAS loudly called for action to support social cohesion, we provided small grants for local projects to strengthen communities, and we are continuing to prioritise activities that drive social equality.

Financial Overview

The audited financial statements for 2024 reflect a stable financial position for the organisation. However, the rising costs facing all charities and organisations like AONTAS are a concern in terms of AONTAS providing the high-quality services required by the adult education sector in Ireland. Nonetheless, we will work positively with funders and look to other sources of income to allow us to maintain and continually improve our work for learners and providers with our excellent staff team. We are grateful to our funders, including SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, for their continued support, without which our work would not be possible.

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest gratitude to our members, learners, funders, partners, and supporters. Your dedication, collaboration, and belief in our mission drive our success. A special thanks to the AONTAS Board of Directors and our exceptional staff, whose tireless work ensures that we remain a powerful voice for adult learners across Ireland. Together, we will continue to shape a future where education is truly accessible to all, empowering people and communities to thrive.

John D'Arcy
Chairperson, AONTAS

Directors' Report

STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Constitution

The Charity is a Company Limited by Guarantee in Ireland governed by its Constitution; the Companies Act 2014 and the Charities Act 2009. The Charity does not have share capital and consequently, the liability of the members is limited, subject to an undertaking by each member to contribute to the net assets of the charity by winding up such amounts as may be required not exceeding €1.00.

The Board constitutes the Board of Directors of the Charity under the terms of Article 34 of the Articles of Association of the Charity. Contained within the Charity's Constitution is a mechanism whereby representatives from the membership are elected to become a member of the Board. In the case of all elected positions not being filled, there is an additional mechanism whereby the elected Board can co-opt a person to fill the vacancy. Candidates for co-option must be agreed upon by the Board and will be selected on the basis of relevant skills and expertise required to allow the Board to function at the optimum level of excellence.

There is an induction session with new members of the Board to familiarise themselves with the charity and the context within which it operates. It covers:

- Obligations of Board members
- Main documents which set out the operational framework for the charity including the Constitution
- Resourcing and the current financial position, as set out in the latest published accounts
- Future plans and objectives
- Induction Handbook and Expenses

The Board of Directors' Terms of Reference are distributed to all new members of the Board, along with the Constitution and the latest financial statements.

The Board is responsible for setting the pay and remuneration of the Charity's CEO and oversight of performance.

The Board of Directors are responsible for approving the charity's compensation framework and for approving any changes to the charity's compensation strategy and framework.

There is a clear division of responsibility at AONTAS with the Board of Directors retaining control over the strategic decision-making and providing financial governance, accountability and oversight. The directors delegate executive authority for the charity's operations to the CEO, who in turn delegates the day-to-day management of specific functions of the organisation to the management team.

AONTAS' Board of Directors are from across the adult learning sector on the island of Ireland. This

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Report

includes adult learners, community education organisations, Further Education Colleges, adult education associations, an Education and Training Board, Higher Education, and other membership representation.

The AONTAS Constitution states that the Board must comprise of:

- Chairperson [organisation or individual] (1)
- Individual (1)
- Organisation (7)
- Community education [organisation] (3)
- Adult learner [organisation or individual] (2)

AONTAS' Purpose and Activities

The **vision** of AONTAS is a world where the pursuit of learning for all adults is valued, equal, and strengthens communities.

Objectives

AONTAS was established in 1969 as the National Adult Learning Organisation to promote and develop adult education in Ireland. This is achieved through actions including:

- Promoting quality adult learning through continuous professional development and the creation of shared spaces for learning and the exchange of best practice.
- Encouraging and facilitating cooperation between adult learning practitioners, organisations and institutions in Ireland and at European level.
- Being the primary advisory and consultative body for the development of adult and community education in Ireland.
- Being an intermediary for communication and cooperation between all individuals and groups involved in adult education in Ireland, and more.

The **AONTAS Constitution** is available [here](#).

Our work is underpinned by **core principles**. These are:

- Social justice
- Supporting social inclusion
- Partnership
- Valuing diversity
- Advancing equality
- Feminism

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

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Strategic Plan

Our Strategic Plan '*Leading Collective Action for Social Change*' has three goals:

Goal 1 Connect and Engage the Sector	Goal 2 Advocate for Change	Goal 3 Empower the Change
1.1 Provide a structured platform for voices and input to be heard from across the Sector	2.1 Strengthen and develop the AONTAS organisational voice	3.1 Develop a socially inclusive framework for AONTAS as an employer
1.2. Inform national research on the importance of social equality	2.2 Highlight how social equality is impacted by adult learning	3.2 Integrate a Problem-Solving Culture
1.3. Build capacity within the sector	2.3 Inform and Influence	3.3 Enhance organisational infrastructure
		3.4 Funding Diversification Planning

Main Activities

Advocacy and Policy: AONTAS actively seeks to influence and improve policy. We use organisational advocacy to lobby policymakers and decision-makers for the removal of barriers for learners, and to improve the quality of adult education and the learner experience. AONTAS develops evidence-based policy papers and engages in consultations as the voice of adult learning. In addition, we host the Community Education Network and provide programmes such as Learners as Leaders to facilitate collective action and to support learner voice.

Promoting and Developing Adult Learning: We promote adult learning through campaigns, radio interviews, written media, learner stories and videos. The annual Adult Learners' Festival and the STAR Awards are national programmes led by AONTAS that promote and showcase adult learning provision across the island of Ireland. To drive educational equality, we develop change-oriented programmes in areas such as voter education, storytelling and advocacy.

Learner Voice: AONTAS organises a range of activities to ensure learners are provided with a safe and uplifting experience to share their experiences with policymakers, staff, and others. This includes the National Learner Forum Research Project, speaking at national and international events, and supporting learners to engage in consultations. We also share our learner voice research findings in representative spaces, and advocate on behalf of learners. AONTAS drives learner voice nationally and we provide training for adult education staff and learners to support activities at local and regional level.

Community Education: As an equality focussed and politically active organisation, we work very closely with community education members and pay particular attention to the community education model. This model is underpinned by the principles of social justice and equality, and it uses change-oriented learning to empower people and create collective action. AONTAS hosts the Community

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Report

Education Network (CEN) and undertakes dedicated research and lobbying for providers and learners in this area.

International Engagement: We also represent Ireland at international events and through international networks to showcase Irish adult learning initiatives, build partnerships and to increase our knowledge and understanding. AONTAS is the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning, and we work directly with the European Commission, National Agency (Léargas), and the Department of Further and Higher Education on this programme. We're also part of the International Council for Adult Education, the Hall of Fame for Adult and Continuing Education, and the European Association for the Education of Adults.

Connecting and Strengthening the Sector: We bring organisations, providers, academics, tutors, staff, policymakers, and learners together to provide a space for communication, cooperation, learning and discussion. AONTAS identifies challenges and opportunities from these engagements, and we try to address them in partnership with key stakeholders to strengthen the adult learning sector. Examples of this include events such as our annual policy/lobbying day, and our bi-annual Adult Education Summit.

Core Services and Activities

- The Adult Learners' Festival
- National FET Learner Forum
- The STAR Awards
- Policy Day
- The Adult Learner Journal
- Policy, advocacy and lobbying
- The Community Education Network
- Community Education Map
- Campaigns and events
- News, blogs, and social media
- Learners As Leaders programme
- Learner Voice training for staff, and learners
- National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning
- Community education and equality driven research
- Shared island activities
- Representation in the field of adult and community education.
- Creation of resources and training
- National and EU funded projects that benefit the FET sector

How we deliver our work

The AONTAS programme of work is delivered by a team of professional staff through four key areas; communications, capacity building, advocacy, and research. This work is underpinned by social justice, equality, human rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals. The broader AONTAS team is made up of the Environmental, Social, and Governance Team, the Advocacy Team, the Research Team, the Communications Team, and the Impact and Engagement Team.

Directors' Report



Achievements and Performance

In 2024, we significantly increased our reach through communications and campaigns. Engaging with more people than ever before. Building the profile of adult and community education in Ireland and internationally. AONTAS produced a range of publications, engaged with national and local media. We created opportunities for learner voice, and practitioner collaboration and capacity building.

Advocacy and Policy

- To influence and inform political representatives, AONTAS engaged in lobbying activities throughout the year. This included meeting with FET spokespeople from parties such as Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, and the Social Democrats, attending four party conferences/Ard Fhéis, and writing letters and emails to representatives. The new Programme for Government reflects our efforts with the inclusion of key priorities including the review of financial support for learners.
- The AONTAS team called for the removal of educational barriers, increased financial support, improved policy and improvements in the sector on 20 representative committees and working groups. This included the National Access Plan Steering Group, the Community Education Framework writing group, and the Adult Literacy for Life Coalition.
- Engaged with 12 policy consultations nationally and internationally including facilitating the attendance and preparation of 27 adult learners for the DFHERIS 'Cost of Education' event on April 11th and submitting a paper for the Women and Girls Strategy.
- We developed 'Transforming Adult and Community Education: A Manifesto for Change' for the 2024 elections and launched it in the Dáil on October 2nd with speakers from community and further education. This was sent directly to each of the 250 political representatives.
- Our main lobbying/policy event "Who Does it Cost?" brought over 80 people together, including policymakers, learners and educators to discuss the need for greater investment in adult learning.
- As an active member of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning in the North of Ireland, we met with policymakers and Minister Murphy advocating for adult education. We submitted a policy paper for the NI Programme for Government Consultation.

Directors' Report

Promoting and Developing Adult Learning

- AONTAS reached 81.5 million readers and listeners in 2024 campaigning for and promoting adult learning through social media, news articles, podcasts, radio interview, blogs, videos, and more. 70 million of this reach was part of our 'Holding You Back' campaign in September. Including ambassador Emmet Kirwan.
- A new "Storytelling for Connecting Communities" programme was developed to teach creative methods and foster empathy and strengthen community cohesion. This was delivered in three regions for 35 participants. We also created a 20-page handbook and provided this to participants and shared it for free, online.
- In partnership with DALC, AONTAS organised a two-day residential training programme with people from 13 community education providers. Approximately 150 learners benefited from this programme across Ireland, many of whom registered and voted for the first time after the course.
- We developed and delivered learner voice training in four Education and Training Boards to staff. This supported them to build their knowledge and understanding of the area and their capacity to support it at local and regional levels.
- To address climate justice and support green transitions, AONTAS partnered with SOALTA and created a programme called "Greener Tomorrow in Community Education". Six community education providers engaged with this project, undertaking a residential two-day training programme before delivering local projects in their areas.
- The Adult Learner Journal was launched in the National College of Ireland with 40 guests, including the family of the late Dr Murtagh who the edition was dedicated to. 12 articles on adult and community education were published in the 2024 edition and over 350 copies of the journal were distributed.
- CEO Dearbháil Lawless co-wrote an article for the 2024 Education Matters Yearbook and the upcoming ETBI anniversary book.

Learner Voice

- AONTAS provided learner voice workshops to support the creation of Learner Voice Councils for 62 learners and staff with CASPr, INOU, TETB, and WWETB.
- 1,721 learner contributions through 650 focus groups and 1,071 survey responses were captured as part of the National FET Learner Forum. This project provided a confidential, safe, and supported space for learners to share their experiences and recommendations on Further Education and Training.
- AONTAS hosted nine regional events across Ireland in partnership with Education and Training Boards to support regional and national learner voice action. These events provided people with a chance to meet others in their community, including people seeking international protection, and older people that they may not have engaged with otherwise. Learners listened to each other and utilised the opportunity to speak up and call for action on issues that matter to them.
- ETBI also piloted their Wider Benefits of Adult Learning Tool with learners at the Tipperary ETB event and SOLAS met with learners regarding the new FET Strategy in Dublin, facilitated by AONTAS at Forum events.
- 9 regional reports were developed with specific actions and key learnings after each event. These were shared confidentially with the ETB representative and their FET Director.
- 1 national report titled 'Learner Voices Across Ireland' provided a national evidence base on the experiences and needs of learners for informing policy and practice. This was launched in

Directors' Report

Athlone and has been shared with a range of representatives, educators, policymakers, researchers, learners, and academics.

- 6 digital learning stories and 9 learner voice blogs were created to provide a platform for learner voice. These stories represented diverse people in adult education and highlighted their journey, challenges, and their successes.
- AONTAS supported learners to speak at events and engage in consultations through our 'Learners As Leaders' programme. In 2024, this included a conference in Finland for the European Association of Education for Adults, AONTAS' national advocacy campaign, a national consultation to identify priority asks for DFHERIS' budget in 2025, a disability summit led by DFHERIS, the AONTAS policy day, the STAR Awards, and our manifesto launch. We also put forward and supported a learner representative for the new Community Education Framework Steering Committee.

Community Education

- AONTAS brought community education organisations together through the Community Education Network for three national meetings on February 1st, April 25th, and July 4th. These sessions addressed the needs of members to act on important issues including social cohesion and racism. For example, the July meeting brought together 33 attendees to undertake a workshop with Dignity in Partnership, an organisation led and staffed by people who live or have lived in the Direct Provision system.
- A Steering Committee meeting took place in September to evaluate the work of the network and plan for future action.
- We engaged with the CEN to provide a collective response on the Community Education Framework and supported community education representatives to join the new Steering Committee.
- AONTAS engaged with members and supported critical issues such as potential funding cuts by acting on their behalf, meeting with SOLAS and their ETB, and sending formal correspondence to DFHERIS.
- The Community Education Map increased representation to 199 providers in 2024. This resource was promoted at events and used to showcase the diversity, value and impact of community education through communications, including social media videos.
- Events and visits to support or promote community education helped us to reach over 100 people in this space, including the launch of the Community Education Framework in Limerick on June 4th, the Three Pillars Working Group, the Cork Community Education Gathering, and Women's Community Group in Mullingar.
- AONTAS checked-in and offered support for groups facing difficulties, including calling six providers around the Coolock area during tense community issues.
- We met with key stakeholders regularly to ensure that community education remained on the agenda, and this model was prioritised in policy and national activities. This included meetings with DFHERIS, SOLAS, ETBI, The Wheel, and political parties, among others.

Connecting and Strengthening the Sector

- The Adult Learners Festival campaign reached 10 million readers and listeners promoting adult and community education and informing people about events within their community.
- 166 events took place across 28 counties during the festival under the theme 'Everyday Learning Spaces'. Bringing people together and strengthening the profile and engagement of adult education.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Report

- The STAR Awards were held in Croke Park with over 160 attendees from across the island of Ireland and PJ Gallagher, our celebratory guest. 109 group education programmes were involved in the Awards leading up to the ceremony. They showcased the best of adult learning and the wonderful impact it creates for people and communities.
- To address rising tensions in Irish communities, we applied for IHREC funding to create resources and provide support through action-research. The project called 'Community Education Against Disinformation' kicked off in 2024 with 2 workshops delivered for learners.
- The AGM was held on May 30th in the Spencer Hotel under the theme 'What's Holding Us Back? Moving Forward to Tackling Barriers to Adult Education' with 80 attendees. The event was so popular that people were standing and there was a waiting list.
- AONTAS undertook research in community education to build awareness and understanding of this model. A case study report titled 'The Transformative Impact of the Dillon's Cross Project' was published on April 18th.
- 14 membership visits took place in community education, Further and Higher Education providers.
- AONTAS brought learners and key representatives together to consult them on the new FET Strategy in Athlone on October 17th. Their insights were put together and sent as a formal submission to SOLAS.
- The AONTAS Membership Hub will include a discussion space, resources, and open-access education modules. This was developed in 2024 and will be launched in early 2025.
- The AONTAS team were invited to speak at a wide range of events and conferences on topics including learner voice and community education. For example, the Dochás Women's Prison Graduation Ceremony on January 10th and DFHERIS' internal FET event with 250 staff on January 25th.

Plans for the Future

While AONTAS is making a significant impact through our work, and we are strengthening our relationships with colleagues, partners and friends in adult and community education, we are also facing challenges due to financial constraints, staff turnover, and a lack of time to be innovative in diversifying our funding. These issues are being discussed at the Board and staff levels, and we are actively working to combat these challenges. The Board is seeking to increase our core grant from SOLAS for staff costs, and they are considering options for future pay increases, and monitoring improved policies that support staff. For example, flexitime for the team has proven to be very helpful in supporting work-life balance.

Financial Review

Income

SOLAS continued to be the primary on-going source of funding, with income of €1,599,260 (83% of total income) in 2024 (2023: €1,595,700 (82% of total income)). The deficit for the year amounted to €25,448 (2023 surplus: €12,521).

Expenditure

AONTAS' 2024 expenditure on Charitable Activities amount to €1,955,289 (2023: €1,925,435). Financial position at the year end, the Charity has current assets of €563,939 (2023: €710,565) and liabilities of €220,541 (2023: €320,875) resulting in net assets of €364,242 (2023: €389,690).

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Report

Reserves policy

The purpose of the reserves policy for AONTAS is to ensure the stability of the mission, programmes, employment and on-going operations of the organisation. The reserve is intended to provide an internal source of income for situations such as a sudden increase in expenses, one-time unbudgeted expenses, unanticipated loss in funding, or uninsured losses. The reserves are not intended to replace a permanent loss of funds or eliminate an on-going budget gap.

The Board of AONTAS judges that it needs to have a prudent reserves policy that allows it to:

- Meet its obligations as an employer by paying redundancy payments, in the event of having to cease operations, to its staff at the statutory minimum level

- Continuing to implement its activity plans should an important income stream cease unexpectedly or be delayed.

- Address an appropriate level of liability associated with the lease on the office premises.

The calculation of the required level of reserves is an integral part of AONTAS' planning, budget and forecast cycle. The Board of Directors of AONTAS has set a reserves policy in place to ensure the stability of the mission, programmes, employment and on-going operations of the organisation. The calculations to meet the policy requirements indicated a required target of €340k.

AONTAS monitors the reserves quarterly when reviewing the management accounts.

The overall level of reserves on 31 December 2024 are as follows:

Unrestricted reserves: €341,262 (2023: €330,962) Restricted reserves: €22,980 (2023: €58,728)

Going concern

After making appropriate enquiries, the Directors have a reasonable expectation that the Charity has adequate resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. For this reason, they continue to adopt the going concern basis in preparing the financial statements. Further details regarding the adoption of the going concern basis can be found in the accounting policies.

Principal risks and uncertainties

The Directors have assessed the risks and have taken measures to manage these risks in the Charity as follows:

a. Market Risk

In common with many government-funded charities, the Charity is affected by both the budgetary constraints implemented by the national government and the changing nature of external economic conditions. The Directors are confident that the Charity has adequate financial resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future.

b. Fraud Risk

This risk is mitigated by maintaining segregation of duties for receipt of funds and the payment of creditors. The Directors have put processes and controls in place to ensure that detailed checking is carried out at all stages to ensure the accuracy and validity of all

Directors' Report

transactions.

Exemptions from disclosure

There are no omissions of the names of any Directors, executive officers or senior staff members for any extenuating personal circumstances.

Funds held as Custodian Trustee on behalf of Others

The Charity does not act as Custodian Trustee on behalf of others.

Events after the end of the reporting period

There have been no significant events affecting the Charity since the balance sheet date.

Political Contributions

The organisation did not make any political contributions in the financial year (2023 - €nil).

Accounting records

The measures taken by the directors to secure compliance with the requirements of Sections 281 to 285 of the Companies Act 2014 with regard to the keeping of accounting records are the implementation of necessary policies and procedures for recording transactions, the employment of competent accounting personnel with appropriate expertise and the provision of adequate resources to the financial function. The accounting records of the Charity are located at 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6.

Relevant audit information

In the case of each of the persons who are directors at the time this report is approved in accordance with Section 332 of the Companies Act 2014:

- so far as each director is aware, there is no relevant audit information of which the Charity's statutory auditors are unaware, and
- each director has taken all the steps that he or she ought to have taken as a director to make himself or herself aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the Charity's statutory auditors are aware of that information.

Auditors

The auditors, Forvis Mazars, Chartered Accountants and Statutory Audit Firm, have expressed their willingness to continue in office in accordance with Section 383 (2) of the Companies Act 2014.

This report was approved by the Board of Directors on April 29th 2025 and signed on behalf of the Board by:



John D'Arcy (Chairperson)
Director



Martin Flynn
Director

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Directors' Responsibilities Statement

The Directors are responsible for preparing the Directors' report and financial statements in accordance with Irish law and regulations.

Irish company law requires the Directors to prepare financial statements for each financial year. Under that law, the Directors have elected to prepare the financial statements in accordance with FRS 102 "The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland" issued by the Financial Reporting Council, and Statement of Recommended Practice (Charities SORP (FRS 102)), issued by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator.

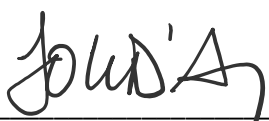
Under company law, the Directors must not approve the financial statements unless they are satisfied that they give a true and fair view of the assets, liabilities and financial position of the Charity as at the financial year end date and of the surplus or deficit of the Charity for that financial year and otherwise comply with the Companies Act 2014.

In preparing these financial statements, the Directors are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- state whether the financial statements have been prepared in accordance with applicable accounting standards, identify those standards, and note the effect and the reason for any material departure from those standards; and
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the Charity will continue in business.

The Directors are responsible for ensuring that the Charity keeps or causes to be kept adequate accounting records which correctly explain and record the transactions of the Charity, enable at any time the assets, liabilities, financial position and surplus or deficit of the Charity to be determined with reasonable accuracy, enable them to ensure that the financial statements and Directors' Report comply with the Companies Act 2014 and enable the financial statements to be audited. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the Charity and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

By order of the Board



John D'Arcy (Chairperson)
Director



Martin Flynn
Director

Date: 29th April 2025

**INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF
AONTAS NATIONAL ADULT LEARNING ORGANISATION**

Report on the audit of the financial statements

Opinion

We have audited the financial statements of AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation (the "Charity") for the year ended 31 December 2024, which comprise the Statement of Financial Activities, the Balance Sheet, the Statement of Cash Flows and notes to the financial statements, including the summary of significant accounting policies set out in Note 2. The financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is Irish Law and FRS 102 *The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland* issued in the United Kingdom by the Financial Reporting Council (FRS 102).

In our opinion the financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the assets, liabilities and financial position of the Charity as of 31 December 2024 and of its deficit for the year then ended;
- have been properly prepared in accordance with FRS 102 *The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and the Republic of Ireland*; and
- have been properly prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Companies Act 2014.

Basis for opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (Ireland) (ISAs (Ireland)) and applicable law. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the *Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Statements* section of our report.

We are independent of the Charity in accordance with the ethical requirements that are relevant to our audit of financial statements in Ireland, including the Ethical Standard for Auditors (Ireland) issued by the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority (IAASA), and we have fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with these requirements.

We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

Conclusions relating to going concern

In auditing the financial statements, we have concluded that the directors' use of the going concern basis of accounting in the preparation of the financial statements is appropriate.

Based on the work we have performed, we have not identified any material uncertainties relating to events or conditions that, individually or collectively, may cast significant doubt on the Charity's ability to continue as a going concern for a period of at least twelve months from the date when the financial statements are authorised for issue.

Our responsibilities and the responsibilities of the directors with respect to going concern are described in the relevant sections of this report.

**INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF
AONTAS NATIONAL ADULT LEARNING ORGANISATION**

Other information

The directors are responsible for the other information. The other information comprises the information included in the annual report other than the financial statements and our auditor's report thereon. Our opinion on the financial statements does not cover the other information and, except to the extent otherwise explicitly stated in our report, we do not express any form of assurance conclusion thereon.

In connection with our audit of the financial statements, our responsibility is to read the other information and, in doing so, consider whether the other information is materially inconsistent with the financial statements or our knowledge obtained in the audit, or otherwise appears to be materially misstated. If we identify such material inconsistencies or apparent material misstatements, we are required to determine whether there is a material misstatement in the financial statements or a material misstatement of the other information. If, based on the work we have performed, we conclude that there is a material misstatement of this other information, we are required to report that fact.

We have nothing to report in this regard.

Opinions on other matters prescribed by the Companies Act 2014

In our opinion, based on the work undertaken during the audit, we report that:

- the information given in the directors' report for the financial year for which the financial statements are prepared is consistent with the financial statements;
- the directors' report has been prepared in accordance with applicable legal requirements;
- the accounting records of the Charity were sufficient to permit the financial statements to be readily and properly audited; and
- the financial statements are in agreement with the accounting records.

We have obtained all the information and explanations which, to the best of our knowledge and belief, are necessary for the purposes of our audit.

Matters on which we are required to report by exception

Based on the knowledge and understanding of the Charity and its environment obtained in the course of the audit, we have not identified any material misstatements in the directors' report.

The Companies Act 2014 requires us to report to you if, in our opinion, the requirements of any of Sections 305 to 312 of the Act, which relate to disclosures of directors' remuneration and transactions are not complied with by the Charity. We have nothing to report in this regard.

**INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF
AONTAS NATIONAL ADULT LEARNING ORGANISATION**

Respective responsibilities

Responsibilities of directors for the financial statements

As explained more fully in the directors' responsibilities statement set out on page 13, the directors are responsible for the preparation of the financial statements and for being satisfied that they give a true and fair view, and for such internal control as they determine is necessary to enable the preparation of financial statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial statements, the directors are responsible for assessing the Charity's ability to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless management either intends to liquidate the Charity or to cease operations, or has no realistic alternative but to do so.

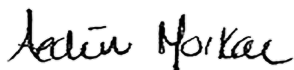
Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with ISAs (Ireland) will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of these financial statements.

A further description of our responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements is located on the IAASA's website at: [http://www.iaasa.ie/getmedia/b2389013-1cf6-458b-9b8f-a98202dc9c3a/Description of auditors' responsibilities for audit.pdf](http://www.iaasa.ie/getmedia/b2389013-1cf6-458b-9b8f-a98202dc9c3a/Description_of_auditors_responsibilities_for_audit.pdf). This description forms part of our auditor's report.

The purpose of our audit work and to whom we owe our responsibilities

Our report is made solely to the Charity's members, as a body, in accordance with Section 391 of the Companies Act 2014. Our audit work has been undertaken so that we might state to the Charity's members those matters we are required to state to them in an auditor's report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law, we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the Charity and the Charity's members, as a body, for our audit work, for this report, or for the opinions we have formed.



Aedín Morkan

for and on behalf of Forvis Mazars

Chartered Accountants & Statutory Audit Firm

Harcourt Centre

Block 3

Harcourt Road

Dublin 2

April 29 2025

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Statement of Financial Activities
(incorporating an Income and Expenditure Account)
For the year ended 31 December 2024**

		Unrestricted Funds 2024	Restricted Funds 2024	Total Funds 2024	Total Funds 2023
	Note	€	€	€	€
Income from:	3				
Charitable activities		-	1,895,921	1,895,921	1,920,676
Other trading activities					
- Membership fee		33,920	-	33,920	17,280
		<u>33,920</u>	<u>1,895,921</u>	<u>1,929,841</u>	<u>1,937,956</u>
Expenditure on:	4				
Charitable activities		23,620	1,931,669	1,955,289	1,925,435
		<u>23,620</u>	<u>1,931,669</u>	<u>1,955,289</u>	<u>1,925,435</u>
Net (expenditure) / income	6	<u>10,300</u>	<u>(35,748)</u>	<u>(25,448)</u>	<u>12,521</u>
Net movement in funds		10,300	(35,748)	(25,448)	12,521
Reconciliation of funds:					
Total funds brought forward		330,962	58,728	389,690	377,169
Total funds carried forward	10	<u>341,262</u>	<u>22,980</u>	<u>364,242</u>	<u>389,690</u>

There are no recognised gains or losses other than the net (expenditure) / income set out above.

The notes on pages 20-34 form part of these financial statements.

All income and expenditure are in respect of continuing activities.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Balance Sheet As at 31 December 2024

	Note	2024 €	2023 €
Fixed assets			
Tangible assets	7	20,844	-
Current assets			
Debtors	8	84,121	146,279
Cash at bank and in hand		479,818	564,286
		563,939	710,565
Creditors			
Amounts falling due within one year	9	(220,541)	(320,875)
Net current assets		343,398	389,690
Total assets less current liabilities		364,242	389,690
Funds			
Restricted funds	10	22,980	58,728
Unrestricted funds	10	341,262	330,962
Total funds		364,242	389,690

The notes on pages 20-34 form part of these financial statements.

The financial statements were approved by the board of directors, authorized for issue on April 29th 2025 and are signed on its behalf by:



John D'Arcy (Chairperson)
Director



Martin Flynn
Director

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Statement of Cash Flows
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

		2024	2023
	Note	€	€
Cash flows from operating activities			
Net (expenditure) / income		(25,448)	12,521
Adjustment for:			
Depreciation	7	2,481	-
Operating (expenditure) / income before working capital changes		(22,967)	12,521
Decrease / (increase) in debtors		62,158	(85,252)
(Decrease) / increase in creditors		(100,333)	21,099
Net cash used in operating activities		(61,142)	(51,632)
Cash flows from investing activities			
Purchase of Tangible Assets	7	(23,325)	-
		(23,325)	-
Net decrease in cash at bank and in hand		(84,468)	(66,161)
Cash at bank and in hand at beginning of year		564,286	630,447
Cash at bank and in hand at end of year		479,818	564,286

The notes on pages 20-34 form part of these financial statements.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

These financial statements, comprising the Statement of Financial Activities, the Balance Sheet, the Statement of Cash Flows and the related notes, constitute the individual financial statements of AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation for the financial year ended 31 December 2024.

Company information

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organization (the “Charity”) is a company limited by guarantee, domiciled, and incorporated in the Republic of Ireland with company registration number of 80958 and is a registered Charity. The Charity is a public benefit entity. The nature of the Charity’s operations and its principal activities are set out in the Directors’ Report on pages 2 to 12.

The registered office and principal place of business is 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6.

Statement of compliance

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with FRS 102 “The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland” (FRS 102).

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES

The following accounting policies have been applied consistently in dealing with items which are considered material in relation to the Charity's financial statements.

Basis of preparation

The financial statements have been prepared on the going concern basis and in accordance with the historical cost convention. The financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is the Companies Act 2014, FRS 102 “The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland” issued by the UK Financial Reporting Council (FRC) and the Statement of Recommended Practice (Charities SORP (FRS102)) as published by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator which are recognised by the FRC as the appropriate bodies to issue SORPs for the charity sector in the UK. Financial reporting in line with SORP is considered best practice for charities in the Republic of Ireland.

The financial statements are prepared and presented in Euro, which is the functional currency of the Charity. Monetary amounts in these financial statements are rounded to the nearest Euro (€).

Income

Income is recognised when the Charity has entitlement to the funds, any performance conditions attached to the item(s) of income have been met, it is probable that the income will be received, and the amount can be measured reliably. Income is deferred where the Charity is limited by specific performance related conditions that are evident in the funding agreement, where there is a specification of a time period that limits the Charity’s ability to recognise the income until it has performed an activity and when there are specific terms or conditions within an agreement that have not been met and are not within the control of the Charity at year end.

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES (Continued)

Income (Continued)

Income from charitable activities, whether 'capital' grants or 'revenue' grants, is recognised when the Charity has entitlement to the funds, any performance conditions attached to the grants have been met, it is probable that the income will be received, and the amount can be measured reliably and is not deferred.

Expenditure

Expenditure is recognized once there is a legal or constructive obligation to make a payment to a third party, it is probable that settlement will be required, and the amount of the obligation can be measured reliably.

Charitable expenditure comprises those costs incurred by the Charity in the delivery of its activities and services for its beneficiaries. It includes both costs that can be allocated directly to such activities and those costs of an indirect nature necessary to support them. Charitable activities include costs of services and grants, support costs and depreciation on related assets. Non-staff costs not attributed to one category of activity are allocated or apportioned pro-rata to the staffing of the relevant service. Finance, HR, IT and administrative staff costs are directly attributable to individual activities by objective.

Governance costs include those costs associated with meeting the constitutional and statutory requirements of the Charity and include the audit fees and costs linked to the strategic management of the Charity.

Support costs are incurred on those functions that assist the work of the Charity but do not directly undertake charitable activities. Salaries and associated costs which can be attributed to specific projects are charged accordingly.

Funds

Restricted funds

Restricted funds represent grants, donations and other income which can only be used for particular purposes as specified by the donors. Such purposes are within the overall aims of the Charity.

Unrestricted funds

Unrestricted funds represent amounts which are expendable at the discretion of the Directors in furtherance of the objectives of the Charity and which have not been designated for other purposes. It is the policy of the Charity to retain sufficient reserves to cover future commitments in relation to its on-going function and mandate. The provisions are intended to finance:

- Working capital requirements
- Potential setbacks in income
- Unexpected/emergency expenditure

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES (Continued)

Tangible fixed assets

Tangible assets are initially measured at cost and subsequently measured at cost, net of depreciation and any impairment losses.

Depreciation is provided at rates calculated to write off the cost of fixed assets, less their estimated residual value, over their expected useful lives on the following bases:

Fixtures and fittings	-	20% Straight line
Office equipment	-	20% Straight line
Computer equipment	-	20% Straight line

The gain or loss arising on the disposal of an asset is determined as the difference between the sale proceeds and the carrying amount of the asset and is credited or charged in the statement of financial activities.

Prepayments

Prepayments are expenses paid in advance and recorded as assets before these are utilized. Prepayments are apportioned over the period covered by the payment and charged to the statement of financial activities when incurred. Prepayments that are expected to be realized no more than 12 months after the reporting period are classified as current assets. Otherwise, these are classified as noncurrent assets.

Deferred income

Deferred income consists of grants received in advance which will be recognized upon fulfilment of the related conditions.

Financial instruments

A financial asset or a financial liability is recognized only when the Charity becomes a party to the contractual provisions of the instrument.

Basic financial instruments are initially recognized at the transaction price, unless the arrangement constitutes a financing transaction, where it is recognized at the present value of the future payments discounted at a market rate of interest for a similar debt instrument. Financial assets include cash at bank and in hand and debtors (excluding prepayments).

Financial liabilities are initially recognized at the transaction value and subsequently measured at amortized cost. Financial liabilities include creditors (excluding deferred income and taxation and social welfare).

Employee benefits

The costs of short-term employee benefits are recognized as a liability and an expense.

Termination benefits are recognized immediately as an expense when the Charity is demonstrably committed to terminate the employment of an employee or to provide termination benefits.

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

2. ACCOUNTING POLICIES (Continued)

Retirement benefits

The Charity operates a defined contribution pension scheme for employees. Annual contributions payable to the Charity's pension scheme are charged to the income and expenditure account in the period to which they relate.

Operating leases

Lease payments are recognized as an expense over the lease term on a straight-line basis. The aggregate benefit of lease incentives is recognized as a reduction to expense over the lease term, on a straight-line basis.

Taxation

The Charity's operations are not for profit and accordingly the company avails of the charities' exemption from corporation tax.

Judgements and key sources of estimation uncertainty

The preparation of financial statements requires management to make judgements, estimates and assumptions that affect the application of policies and reported amounts of assets and liabilities, income and expenditure. The accounting estimates and associated assumptions are based on historical experience and various other factors that are believed to be reasonable under the circumstances, the results of which form the basis of making the judgements about the carrying amounts of assets and liabilities that are not readily apparent from other sources. Actual results may differ from these estimates.

The key judgements and estimates made in the preparation of these financial statements are as follows.

Going concern

The Charity holds surplus funds in the amount of €364,242 at 31 December 2024.

Based on committed grant income of €1.8m over the next 12 months and cash at bank, the Directors are satisfied that the Charity has adequate resources to continue for at least 12 months from the date of approval of these financial statements and it is appropriate to adopt the going concern basis in the preparation of the financial statements.

Determining lease commitment – Company as a lessee. The Charity holds a lease for its business premises at 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. The Charity has determined that the risks and benefits of ownership related to the leased property are retained by the lessor. Accordingly, the lease is accounted for as an operating lease.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

3. INCOME

Current Year

	Unrestricted Funds €	Restricted Funds €	Total Funds €
Income from charitable activities:			
SOLAS Further Education and Training Grant	-	1,259,316	1,259,316
SOLAS National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF) Grant	-	339,944	339,944
Erasmus+ European Agenda for Adult Learning Grant (EAAL) Co-Funding (SOLAS)	-	169	169
ToSwitch – Erasmus + KA2	-	(903)	(903)
RegAle – Erasmus + KA3	-	6,577	6,577
Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation (BEEP)	-	10,155	10,155
CitizenXelerator	-	87,710	87,710
ESC European Solidarity Corp – KA1 Leargas GSD KA2	-	23,549	23,549
Partner Up	-	34,585	34,585
Enhance	-	4,195	4,195
IHREC CEAD	-	5,737	5,737
Just4All	-	9,014	9,014
NEAAL 24-25	-	111,257	111,257
VOLT – Voice of the Learner	-	4,616	4,616
	-	1,895,921	1,895,921
Other income:			
Membership fee	33,920	-	33,920
	33,920	1,895,921	1,929,841

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

3. INCOME (Continued)

Prior year

	Unrestricted Funds €	Restricted Funds €	Total Funds €
Income from charitable activities:			
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS Further Education and Training Grant	-	1,259,316	1,259,316
Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS National Further Education and Training Learning Forum (NFLF) Grant	-	336,384	336,384
Erasmus + European Agenda for Adults Learning (EAAL) Grant	-	213,682	213,682
Erasmus + KA2 Bildung	-	6,156	6,156
ToSwitch – Erasmus + KA2	-	7,587	7,587
RegAle – Erasmus + KA3	-	14,778	14,778
Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation (BEEP)	-	16,400	16,400
CitizenXelerator	-	15,634	15,634
ESC European Solidarity Corp – KA1 Leargas	-	5,771	5,771
GSD KA2	-	26,883	26,883
Partner Up	-	18,085	18,085
	-	1,920,676	1,920,676
Other income:			
Membership fee	8,280	9,000	17,280
	8,280	1,929,676	1,937,956

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

The purpose of the above grants are as follows:

Grant	Purpose
SOLAS	Core costs of AONTAS to support the delivery of the AONTAS Strategic Plan
SOLAS NFLF Grant	Implementation plan costs of AONTAS to support the delivery of the National FET Learner Forum
NEAAL Grant (EU Commission)	To develop innovative and community-based methods, identify the needs of learners, and develop policy recommendations for engaging vulnerable and marginalised adults in Irish adult education.
Erasmus + KA2 Bildung	The Bildung project aims to empower people with the personal, interpersonal and civic skills that they need to become active citizens
ToSwitch – Erasmus + KA2	The project aims to support older people in the current climate of digitalization by providing them with new flexible learning opportunities.
RegAle – Erasmus + KA3	Bringing local and regional networks and structures together to improve adult learning.
Basic Education and Empowerment for Political Participation (BEEP)	BEEP identifies barriers to democratic participation for groups across Europe and then develops teaching methods that can empower citizens to overcome these obstacles to participation.
Partner Up	This project is based in the findings from the Upskilling Pathways initiative.
ENHANCE	Learner voice is the key focus of this partner project across Europe.
Just4ALL	This project focuses on ensuring underrepresented groups are considered and prioritised in societal and political changes in the face of the climate crisis
Erasmus + KA1	For mobility of individuals/practitioners in FET.
VOLT (Voice of the Learner)	Creating a model of learner voice in the Netherlands.
Community Education Against Disinformation project	Co-create with the community education sector an activity workbook addressing issues of online disinformation.

Income is derived from:

	2024	2023
	€	€
Republic of Ireland	1,633,180	1,612,980
Within EU (outside the Republic of Ireland)	296,661	324,976
	<u>1,929,841</u>	<u>1,937,956</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

4. ANALYSIS OF EXPENDITURE ON CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES

Current Year

Description	Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS FET Grant €	Department of Education and Skills – Solas NFLF Grant €	Erasmus + EAAL Grant €	Others €	Total €
Premises costs	128,272	-	-	-	128,272
Management expenses	67,937	-	-	-	67,937
Office costs	54,137	-	-	-	54,137
Adult Learners' Festival and AONTAS publications	19,654	-	-	-	19,654
Information and resources	20,128	-	-	-	20,128
Learner Forum Project	-	193,250	-	-	193,250
Membership, communications and promotions	28,435	-	-	-	28,435
General expenses	14,174	-	31,065	91,077	136,316
	332,737	193,250	31,065	91,077	648,129
Support costs	927,046	147,244	80,193	152,677	1,307,160
	1,259,783	340,494	111,258	243,754	1,955,289

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

4. ANALYSIS OF EXPENDITURE ON CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES (Continued)

Prior Year

	Department of Education and Skills – SOLAS FET Grant €	Department of Education and Skills – Solas NFLF Grant €	Erasmus + EAAL Grant €	Others €	Total €
Description					
Premises costs	112,582	-	-	-	112,582
Management expenses	94,534	-	-	-	94,534
Office costs	59,329	-	-	-	59,329
Adult Learners' Festival and AONTAS publications	24,355	-	-	-	24,355
Policy and research	48,660	-	-	-	48,660
Information and resources	-	189,773	-	-	189,773
Learner Forum Project	-	-	-	-	-
Membership, communications and promotions	29,154	-	-	-	29,154
General expenses	19,866	-	46,052	82,747	148,665
	388,480	189,773	46,052	82,747	707,052
Support costs	871,285	146,958	155,807	44,333	1,218,383
	1,259,765	336,731	201,859	127,080	1,925,435

Included within the above are support costs as follows:

	General cost €	Governance cost €	Total 2024 €	Total 2023 €
Wages and salaries	1,202,845	-	1,202,845	1,126,539
Audit (including VAT)	-	10,978	10,978	10,455
Others	50,482	42,854	93,336	81,389
	1,253,327	53,832	1,307,159	1,218,383

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

5. EMPLOYEES

The average number of persons employed by the Charity during the year was as follows:

	2024	2023
	No.	No.
Administration	5	3
Project	17	17
	<u>22</u>	<u>20</u>

The number of employees whose total employee benefits (excluding employer's pension costs) for the reporting period which fell within the bands below were:

	2024	2023
	No.	No.
In the band € 60,001 - € 70,000	4	3
In the band € 70,001 - € 80,000	-	-
In the band € 80,001 - € 90,000	1	1
In the band € 90,001 - € 100,000	-	-
	<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>

Breakdown of wages and salaries is as follows:

	2024	2023
	€	€
Wages and salaries	1,018,157	951,200
Social security costs	112,947	106,399
Pension costs	76,975	68,940
	<u>1,208,079</u>	<u>1,126,539</u>

The CEO earned total employee benefits of €108,836 (including pension contributions and PRSI) in 2024. The total employee benefits (including pension contributions and PRSI) for key management personnel for the financial year amounted to €425,552. The key management personnel comprise of the CEO, Head of Environmental Social and Governance, Head of Research, Head of Advocacy and Policy, Head of Communications, and Head of Impact and Engagement. The pay of key management personnel is set by approval of the Board.

No Directors or any other persons related to the Charity had any personal interest in any contracts or transactions entered into by the Charity during the financial period.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

6. NET (EXPENDITURE)/ INCOME FOR THE YEAR

	2024	2023
	€	€
Net (expenditure)/ income for the year is stated after charging:		
Depreciation	2,481	-
Rent	80,958	70,000
Auditor's remuneration for external audit services (including VAT)	11,255	10,455
	<hr/>	<hr/>

7. TANGIBLE FIXED ASSETS

	Fixtures and fittings	Office equipment	Computer Equipment	Total
	€	€	€	€
Cost				
At 1 January 2024	3,829	9,939	47,371	61,139
Additions	23,325	-	-	23,325
At 31 December 2024	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	27,154	9,939	47,371	84,464
Accumulated depreciation				
At 1 January 2024	(3,829)	(9,939)	(47,371)	(61,139)
Charge for the year	(2,481)	-	-	(2,481)
At 31 December 2024	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	(6,310)	(9,939)	(47,371)	(63,620)
Carrying amount				
At 31 December 2024	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	20,844	-	-	20,844
At 31 December 2023	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	-	-	-	-

8. DEBTORS

	2024	2023
	€	€
Membership receivable	11,820	11,410
Prepayments	31,693	21,506
Accrued income	40,138	113,363
Other Debtors	470	-
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	84,121	146,279

All debtors are due within one year. Membership receivable is shown net of impairment in respect of doubtful debts.

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

9. CREDITORS

Amounts falling due within one year

	2024	2023
	€	€
Trade creditors	32,099	15,017
Deferred income	111,907	246,828
Accruals	22,932	26,994
Tax and social insurance	30,676	28,066
Bank overdraft	5,342	3,970
Other creditors	17,585	-
	<u>220,541</u>	<u>320,875</u>

Trade creditors, accruals and bank overdraft are payable at various dates in the subsequent year in accordance with the suppliers' usual terms and conditions.

Deferred income comprises grants received in advance in which terms and conditions have not yet been met.

Movements in deferred income are as follow:

	2024	2023
	€	€
At 1 January	246,828	116,002
Deferred during the year	111,907	246,828
Credited to the income from charitable activities in the Statement of Financial Activities	<u>(246,828)</u>	<u>(116,002)</u>
At 31 December	<u>111,907</u>	<u>246,828</u>

Tax and social insurance are repayable at various dates over the coming months in accordance with the applicable statutory provisions.

Other creditors are payables to other creditors and pension control account.

10. MOVEMENTS IN FUNDS

Current Year

	Balance at beginning of year	Income	Expenditure	Transfers	Balance at end of year
	€	€	€	€	€
Restricted funds					
Charitable activities	58,728	1,895,921	(1,931,669)		22,980
Unrestricted funds	<u>330,962</u>	<u>33,920</u>	<u>(23,620)</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>341,262</u>
Total funds	<u>389,690</u>	<u>1,929,841</u>	<u>(1,955,289)</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>364,242</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

Prior Year

	Balance at beginning of year €	Income €	Expenditure €	Transfer €	Balance at end of year €
Restricted funds					
Charitable activities	36,997	1,929,676	(1,907,945)	-	58,728
Unrestricted funds	340,172	8,280	(17,490)	-	330,962
Total funds	377,169	1,937,956	(1,925,435)	-	389,690

Restricted funds are attributable to activities/projects that have specific conditions set out in their funding grant. Restricted funds for 2024, include Partner up fund of €15,922 and other funds of €7,058.

Unrestricted funds are resources that a charity can use at its own discretion in-line with their Internal Controls and financial management. Membership fees in AONTAS, for example, are a type of unrestricted funding.

11. ANALYSIS OF NET ASSETS BETWEEN FUNDS

Current year

	Unrestricted funds €	Restricted funds €	Total Funds €
Fixed Assets	20,844	-	20,844
Debtors	11,820	72,301	84,121
Cash at bank and in hand	324,926	154,892	479,818
Creditors	(16,328)	(204,213)	(220,541)
	<u>341,262</u>	<u>22,980</u>	<u>364,242</u>

Prior year

	Unrestricted funds €	Restricted funds €	Total Funds €
Debtors	11,410	134,869	146,279
Cash at bank and in hand	319,552	244,734	564,286
Creditors	-	(320,875)	(320,875)
	<u>330,962</u>	<u>58,728</u>	<u>389,690</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

Notes to the Financial Statements For the Year Ended 31 December 2024

12. MEMBERS' LIABILITY

The Charity is limited by guarantee not having a share capital. The liability of the members is limited.

Every member of the Charity undertakes to contribute to the assets of the Charity in the event of its being wound up while they are members, or within one year thereafter, for the payments of the debts and liabilities of the Charity contracted before they ceased to be members, and the costs, charges and expenses of winding up, and for the adjustment of the rights of the contributors among themselves, such amount as may be required, not exceeding €1.00.

13. FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS

	2024 €	2023 €
Carrying amount of financial assets		
Financial assets measured at amortised cost		
Debtors (excluding prepayments and other debtors)	11,820	11,410
Cash at bank	479,818	564,286
	<u>491,638</u>	<u>596,372</u>
Carrying amount of financial liabilities		
Financial liabilities measured at amortised cost		
Creditors (excluding deferred income and tax and social insurance)	77,959	45,980

14. OPERATING LEASE COMMITMENT

The Charity has a lease of twenty-five years which commenced in August 2003 relating to its business premises at 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. Rent expense recognised in 2024 amounted to €80,958 plus the €11,508 service charges (2023: €79,914).

The total future minimum lease payments to be paid under non-cancellable operating leases as at 31 December are as follows:

	2024 €	2023 €
Within one year	80,958	70,000
After one year but no more than five years	99,873	180,831
More than five years	-	-
	<u>180,831</u>	<u>250,831</u>

AONTAS National Adult Learning Organisation

**Notes to the Financial Statements
For the Year Ended 31 December 2024**

15. RELATED PARTY TRANSACTIONS

The related parties of the Charity are considered to be the directors, their close family members and entities which they control or in which they have a significant interest as well as members of the Charity.

Transactions with Key Management Personnel

Other than as set out at Note 5, there were no other transactions with key management personnel during the current or previous financial year.

16. POST BALANCE SHEET EVENTS

There have been no significant events affecting the Charity since the balance sheet date.

17. APPROVAL OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

The Board of Directors approved these financial statements for issue on the 29th of April 2025.



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