

Submission to the Successor to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025

AONTAS, the National Adult
Learning Organisation

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AONTAS Submission to the Road Map for Social Inclusion

About AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969. Backed by our robust research and focused community engagement, 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 do this work on behalf of our members and adult learners who inform our research and campaigns for social change across the whole island of Ireland.

Social Inclusion through Adult and Community Education

AONTAS are pleased to have the opportunity to submit to the forthcoming Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2025-2030 and promote the expansive understanding of Social Inclusion outlined in the previous policy.

Social inclusion is achieved when individuals have access to sufficient income, resources, and services to enable them to participate fully in community life and engage in activities considered standard in society (Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020–2025).

This submission highlights the role that adult and community education plays in the achievement of this goal. Adult and community education is defined broadly as a mode of education that focuses on social justice and the empowerment of disadvantaged people and communities. This often includes those who have not been well served by mainstream education. Adult and community education includes much of the education provided under the banner of Further Education and Training (FET), as well as community education and nonformal adult education provision.

Because of its inclusive nature and capacity to support diverse cohorts of learners the role of adult and community education to social inclusion cannot be overstated (SOLAS, 2024a). It is foundational to the empowerment of disadvantaged individuals by supporting participation in education and wider social life as active citizens (Dept of Social Protection, 2020). For this reason, learners must be provided with all necessary supports to avail of this vital service.

However, if the sector is to realise its value, then it must be explicitly recognised, and resourced as a key pillar of action to support the realisation of social inclusion as defined

above (OECD, 2017; 2023; Magrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019). This action itself will ensure that this vital public service is accessible to those individuals and communities at risk of exclusion.

Summary of Key Recommendations for Advancing Social Inclusion through Adult and Community Education

Recommendation 1: Prioritise Supports for Adult Learners to Advance Equity and Inclusion through Adult and Community Education.

Support inclusive participation in adult learning by addressing the personal and structural barriers faced by disadvantaged learners. This includes:

- Ensuring equity of access for vulnerable groups through targeted measures and financial support.
- Expanding transport supports in underserved areas.
- Increasing access to mental health and wellbeing services within FET and community education settings.
- Providing accessible and affordable childcare options, including public and on-site models.

Recommendation 2: Recognise the Central Role of the FET Sector in Promoting Social Inclusion

Affirm the FET sector as a key driver of social inclusion by ensuring that the forthcoming Roadmap for Social Inclusion recognises its role in empowering disadvantaged learners and communities. This includes:

- Valuing learner diversity as a strength.
- Ensuring planning and investment are responsive to the needs of sector to expand and improve provisions.
- Supporting the FET sector's capacity to deliver on green and digital transitions with inclusion at the core.

Recommendation 3: Sustain and Strengthen Community Education as a Unique and Vital Pillar of Lifelong Learning

Invest in the long-term sustainability of the community education sector, which provides trusted, learner-centred education to those furthest from the formal system. Key actions include:

- Recognising the value of community education in responding to local needs, supporting wellbeing, and building social capital.
- Increasing core multi-annual funding to ensure stability and reduce reliance on fragmented grant schemes.
- Addressing the gap between learner engagement (21% of FET learners) and funding allocation (2.1% of FET budget).

Background

Despite national strategies, participation in lifelong learning in Ireland remains persistently low in comparison to leading EU countries, a concern highlighted in the OECD's 2023 skills assessment. In addition to this, recent PIACC (OECD, 2024) findings reveal that the proportion of adults in need of literacy support has risen from 18% to 21%. This underperformance and outstanding need for support is particularly pressing in light of rapid digitalisation, the shift to a green economy, and the changing nature of work. These are complex transitions that risk deepening existing inequalities unless inclusive learning pathways are made available to all. The adult and community education sector is uniquely positioned to respond to these challenges, offering flexible, accessible routes to learning for those most at risk of being left behind (DFHERIS, 2023).

However, the value of adult and community education extends far beyond skills acquisition. Participation in adult learning fosters civic engagement, builds social capital, and enhances community wellbeing (BEEP, 2024; Meyler et al., 2024; Connolly, 2010). These outcomes are especially critical at a time when social isolation, political disengagement, and societal polarisation are increasing (Ecker et al., 2024; Kitching & Lathrop, 2024; Social Justice Ireland, 2024; Mauri et al., 2024). Community education spaces, in particular, act as sites of

inclusion, where learners can explore identity, rebuild confidence, and connect meaningfully with others, often for the first time in years (Meyler et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2023a).

To deliver on Ireland's commitments to inclusion and equality, the recognition of adult and community education in policy is essential. This will support policy choices that centre the lived experiences and needs of marginalised adult learners and drive the development of thriving and inclusive communities.

Recommendation 1: Prioritise Supports for Adult Learners to Advance Equity and Inclusion through Adult and Community Education.

To achieve truly inclusive and thriving communities through Further Education and Training (FET), learner financial supports must be reformed to reflect the realities of adult, part-time, and community-based education. While adult and community education has a proven track record in improving the lives of learners who have experienced disadvantage and social exclusion (Cobain et al., 2021; Doody, 2021), access remains unequal, particularly for certain groups and rural areas (Meyler et al., 2023b; Devlin et al., 2025). Research consistently shows that financial barriers are among the most significant obstacles to participation in lifelong learning (Meyler et al., 2024; 2022; Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017; Sartori & Bloom, 2023).

Without targeted action, these barriers risk excluding those most in need of education and training opportunities, particularly in the context of rapid economic change, increasing digitalisation, and a shifting labour market (OECD, 2017; 2023). SOLAS data shows that one in three FET learners is unemployed, and many others are in low-paid or precarious employment or have low levels of formal qualifications (SOLAS, 2024b). The sector also supports disproportionately high numbers of learners from marginalised communities, including Travellers, Roma, and people with disabilities (SOLAS, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; Sartori & Bloom, 2023).

These challenges are taking place in a broader context of rising poverty and levels of deprivation (Roantree et al., 2024). The 2024 SILC data reports an increase in both the at-risk-of-poverty rate (from 10.6% to 11.7%) and the consistent poverty rate (from 3.6% to 5%) (CSO, 2024). Households with students experienced particular declines in disposable income, underlining the financial strain associated with participation in education. Unless

supports are strengthened, low-income learners risk further exclusion, particularly in a high-cost environment (CSO, 2024; Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2024). In this context, social inclusion through education cannot be achieved without enhanced support for adult learners. The Roadmap must consider this issue as a matter of urgency.

Learners across different schemes also experience unequal treatment, with supports such as the Back to Education Allowance, Back to Education Initiative, and Part-Time Education Options tied to social welfare eligibility and duration (DFHERIS, 2024; Indecon, 2022). This patchwork of criteria leaves many adult and part-time learners unsupported.

“Your social welfare is changed to the training benefit, so it’s paid through the college. [However], the social welfare doesn’t register that you’re still getting a payment. So, for the double payments and the fuel allowance we’re not entitled to it but we’re still in fulltime education. You’re kind of being punished for it. And you see everyone in the class going, ‘Double payment now’. It’s serious. The cost of living doesn’t stop for us. Whereas everybody else gets it but we don’t get it. It’s still hitting us the same way.” (Learner in Meyler et

“I was concerned that if I went on a course, any grant that I would get would affect my social and my rent. So, when you are means tested, you have to declare everything – grants and everything. So, I did start a course but then I was like, ‘no, I have to leave ‘cause I won’t be able to afford for my rent to change or the social so...’ that was a big reason for me leaving.” (Learner in Meyler et al., 2023b)

The real cost of participating in FET is substantial. Indecon (2022) estimated that full-time FET learners face average monthly costs of €1,112 or approximately €10,000 per academic year—figures that are likely even higher today due to inflation and cost-of-living pressures since 2022. For many households already struggling to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living, these costs are prohibitive (VMR, 2024).

Given the well-established relationship between educational attainment and poverty reduction (CSO, 2022), Ireland’s strategy for social inclusion and educational equity must include a comprehensive reform of learner supports to:

- Increase core support rates (including BTEA, BTEI, and VTOS) by 24%, in line with MESL benchmarks (VMR, 2024) and standardise levels across schemes.
- Update income thresholds and means testing to reflect current cost-of-living realities (VMR, 2024; INOU, 2025).
- Expand eligibility to include adult, community, and part-time learners currently excluded from core supports.

These reforms are essential to ensuring equitable access, reducing inequality, and supporting participation among those who face the greatest barriers—bringing Ireland closer to its strategic goals for skills, inclusion, and social justice (OECD, 2023).

A focus on income adequacy for learners as a measure of social inclusion in the next RoadMap would miss the centrality of access to services and supports to achieving this goal (Devlin et al., 2025). In addition to reform of financial supports, urgent investment is needed in the wrap around supports that address the personal and structural barriers to education faced by disadvantaged adult learners (Meyler et al., 2023; 2024). For this reason, the next Roadmap must account for the need to enhance transport, mental health and childcare supports to achieve social inclusion through adult and community education.

Transport is one of the more frequently cited barriers in AONTAS research with learners, particularly within underserved rural areas (Meyler et. al., 2024). Many learners have highlighted the fact that transport allowances do not cover transport costs and that challenges remain regarding accessibility and frequency of services in many areas. AONTAS recommends reviewing the need for transport solutions in each ETB area and considering the provision of services for areas with poor public transport. A review of the adequacy of supplementary allowances are also urgently needed to address this issue (DFHERIS, 2024).

55% of learners in a study conducted by AONTAS said that they experience stress, anxiety, or depression, and 37% said that **mental health problems** affect their ability to learn or study (Meyler et al., 2023a). This study highlights the need for expanded support for mental health across adult and community education to support social inclusion.

A **lack of childcare** is a major barrier to education, especially for lone parents, a cohort at risk of high levels of deprivation and financial instability. Research by AONTAS has found that

childcare places are unaffordable, and there is a lack of access to places due to high demand for services (Meyler et al., 2023b). At an Adult Learner Forum run by AONTAS, participants suggested that more on-site childcare options should be provided by Education and Training Boards (Meyler et al., 2023c). However, in order to progress social inclusion through adult and community education a public childcare model must be implemented to improve the availability of childcare supports for all learners, particularly those at risk of marginalisation.

Recommendation 2: Recognise the Strategic Role of Adult and Community in Advancing Social Inclusion and Inclusive Development

Recognising adult and community education, which is funded under the banner of the Further Education and Training (FET) sector, as a central pillar of a social inclusion policy is essential. This will ensure that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just aspirational values but embedded outcomes across the Irish education system. This is in line with DFHERIS's commitment to a system that meets the needs of all learners (DFHERIS, 2023).

The FET sectors proven capacity to engage learners who are most often left behind by traditional education systems is key to the realisation of this aspiration (SOLAS, 2022a; SOLAS, 2022b; SOLAS, 2022c). With a strong track record of engaging people who experience disadvantage, such as early school leavers, low-income earners, people with disabilities, and members of the Traveller and Roma communities, FET is Ireland's most inclusive and accessible route to education and personal development (SOLAS, 2024b; 2023a; 2023b; Meyler et al., 2023a).

Recent figures show that 1 in 10 adults in Ireland engages with FET, and enrolments continue to grow post-pandemic (Brownlee & Rourke 2024). However, this demand is not yet matched by recognition of FET's full potential as a system-wide driver of inclusion and opportunity.

Strengthening the strategic position of FET within the forthcoming Roadmap for Social Inclusion will:

- Reinforce its role in supporting marginalised groups, ensuring accessible, tailored learning pathways for people facing systemic barriers to education (SOLAS, 2020).

- Embed community-based and regional responses to community needs, social isolation, and educational disadvantage (OECD, 2023; Magrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019; SOLAS, 2024a).
- Enable inclusive participation in the green and digital transitions, ensuring the benefits of change are shared and socially just (Government of Ireland, 2025; OECD, 2023).

Recommendation 3: Recognise and Sustain the Role of Community Education in Supporting Social Inclusion and Community Wellbeing

Community education plays an essential role in Ireland's adult learning landscape, reaching learners who are furthest removed from formal education and least likely to participate without grassroots, trust-based provision (Doody, 2021; Cobain et al., 2021; McGuinness et al., 2016). It provides safe, supportive learning spaces where individuals can rebuild confidence, develop a sense of belonging, and begin personal and educational journeys that are often transformative, not just for the individual, but for families and communities (Cobain et al., 2021; Doody, 2021; Power et al., 2011).

Despite its value, the community education sector remains underfunded, insecure, and largely invisible in strategic policy planning. Short-term funding cycles, piecemeal grants, and chronic underinvestment prevent providers from planning sustainably, supporting staff adequately, and fully responding to the needs of the communities they serve (AONTAS, 2024; Cobain et al., 2021; Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019). The result is a persistent mismatch between the value of community education and the recognition and resourcing it receives.

In 2024, community education received just 2.1% of the overall FET budget, despite accounting for approximately 21% of all FET learners. This is a clear indicator of systemic under prioritisation. This allocation represents not only a financial shortfall, but a missed opportunity to invest in one of the most inclusive, community-rooted education models available in Ireland today.

As communities face complex challenges, including rising poverty, isolation, migration, and the erosion of democratic participation, the social role of community education has never been more urgent (CSO, 2024; SOLAS, 2024a; Social Justice Ireland, 2024). Providers are

already supporting learners through these changes, but their capacity to do so is being undermined by insecure, insufficient funding (Cobain et al., 2021).

To deliver on its potential and ensure the long-term sustainability of the community education sector the next Roadmap must:

- Recognise community education as a unique mode of learning, not merely a delivery mechanism within FET, but a distinct space of engagement, empowerment, and personal development.
- Commit to provide multi-annual, secure core funding to give community education organisations the stability to meet demand and deliver consistent, high-quality provision.
- Adjust funding to reflect learner engagement, ensuring that allocation is fair, equitable, and sustainable in light of growing demand and part-time delivery structures.

AONTAS recommends increasing the core funding for community education to €40 million by 2027, bringing its share of the FET budget in line with learner representation. This would support the preservation and growth of a sector that is not only educationally impactful, but socially essential.

Conclusion: Advancing Social Inclusion through Inclusive and Community-Rooted Action

The actions outlined in this submission represent critical steps toward achieving a meaningful vision of social inclusion, one that goes beyond individual economic participation to encompass a sense of belonging, community cohesion, and equitable access to education opportunities.

Social inclusion in adult and community education is not achieved through access alone, but through the sustained presence of inclusive practices, wraparound supports, and locally embedded provision that enable learners to participate fully in the social, cultural, and economic life of their communities.

Supporting adult and community education to this fullest extent means recognising learners' rights to dignity, agency, and support, while valuing the role of local providers in fostering

connection, wellbeing, and progression. These proposed actions will not only address educational disadvantage but will also strengthen our social fabric by empowering learners and their communities to thrive.

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