

# **BUDGET 2026: A Fair Deal for Adult and Community Education**

## Introduction

Our communities are currently facing significant social challenges, and we urgently need more funding and resources for adult and community education to tackle these issues. The current Programme for Government pledges to deliver “a caring society” to address poverty and social exclusion. Greater funding for adult and community education in Budget 2026 will enable Education and Training Boards (ETBs), community education organisations and other Further Education and Training (FET) providers to help create a more caring society.

More funding and support are badly needed for organisations and groups working to connect communities and offer education to adults that fits their circumstances and needs. Despite increases in overall FET funding over the past three Budgets, funding cuts to community education providers have been taking place across Ireland in 2025.

People taking part in adult and community education, including those accessing education through Further Education and Training (FET), are more likely to be from working-class backgrounds, have lower levels of formal education, and be at risk of poverty. Budget 2026 can provide greater support to adult learners and ensure “Fair and equal access to quality further and higher education regardless of socioeconomic status, ability or geographical location” (Programme for Government, 2025: 71).

Social cohesion, inclusion and integration are key goals of the current Programme for Government, the document makes a clear commitment to “Ensuring our communities thrive and making our villages, towns and cities safer; to support a caring society; and to continue the focus on addressing poverty and social exclusion,” (Programme for Government 2025: 9).

The four evidence-based budget recommendations in this document will support the creation of a more caring society and ensure that all adults can access the education they want in their community.



## Budget 2026: AONTAS Recommendations

### Ask 1:

Significantly increase overall investment in the Further Education and Training (FET) funding.

‘Skills Development’ funding needs to be increased by a minimum of **€78.82 million** (12%) in Budget 2026, representing a total allocation of **€735.62 million**.

### Ask 2:

Ringfence and enhance funding for the community education sector

Increase in core funding level to €40 million over the next two budget cycles, with an increase to 3.5% of the FET Budget in 2026, growing to 4% in 2027. This would bring the total budget allocated to community education in **2026 to €35 million**, reaching **€40 million by 2027**.

### Ask 3:

Reform learner financial supports across the FET system

Budget 2026 must **remove financial barriers and deliver a fairer FET system** by increasing the rates of core learner financial supports (including BTEA, BTEI, and VTOS) by 24%, in line with SVP’s Minimum Essential Standard of Living benchmarks (VMR, 2024), and standardising levels of support across schemes.

### Ask 4:

Establish a national FET learner hardship fund

Budget 2026 should introduce a hardship fund that is accessible to all FET learners and **invest €5.5 million in the learners who need it most**.



## Why Invest More in Adult and Community Education?

Budget 2026 presents a critical opportunity to support a caring society and to focus on addressing poverty and social exclusion. Further investment in adult and community education can achieve greater social cohesion and economic resilience through adult learning (OECD, 2017; 2023).

Despite ongoing efforts, Ireland continues to lag behind leading European countries in lifelong learning participation, a gap highlighted in the OECD's (2023) assessment of national skills needs. Recent PIAAC Survey results have also shown that literacy needs in Ireland have risen, with one in five people struggling with reading and understanding everyday text, like bus timetables or medicine instructions (CSO, 2024).

This underperformance is particularly concerning in the context of accelerating societal and economic change, including the digitisation of services, the need for a just transition to a green economy, and evolving labour market demands. These are challenges that the adult and community education, and Further Education and Training (FET), sector are best positioned to address (DFHERIS, 2023).

Research also shows that participation in adult education fosters civic engagement, builds social capital, and enhances community well-being (BEEP, 2024; Meyler et al., 2024; Connolly, 2010). At a time when social isolation, democratic disengagement, and polarisation are on the rise, these outcomes of community education have never been more valuable (Ecker et al., 2024; Kitching & Lathrop, 2024; Social Justice Ireland, 2024; Mauri et al., 2024).

This pre-budget submission outlines four key investment areas where targeted funding can have a high impact, supporting learner participation and the development of more inclusive communities. If implemented, these recommendations will strengthen Ireland's adult learning ecosystem and advance the Government's goals for a safer, more inclusive and cohesive society (Government of Ireland, 2025:9).



# Recommendations for Budget 2026

**Ask 1:**

Significantly increase overall investment in the Further Education and Training (FET) funding.

**‘Skills Development’ funding needs to be increased by a minimum of €78.82 million (12%) in Budget 2026, representing a total allocation of €735.62 million.**

In Budget 2025, a total of €4.545 billion was allocated to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Of this, a total of €656.8 million was allocated for ‘Skills Development’. This, along with allocations from the National Training Fund (NTF), makes up the budget for Further Education and Training, which includes funding for adult and community education programmes.

‘Skills Development’ funding has risen over the past three years, receiving €656.8 million in 2025. Despite these increases, community education providers have received funding cuts in 2025 as ETBs were forced to make difficult decisions when faced with insufficient resources. As overall FET funding increases, community education funding reduced by €800,000 from 2023 to 2024.

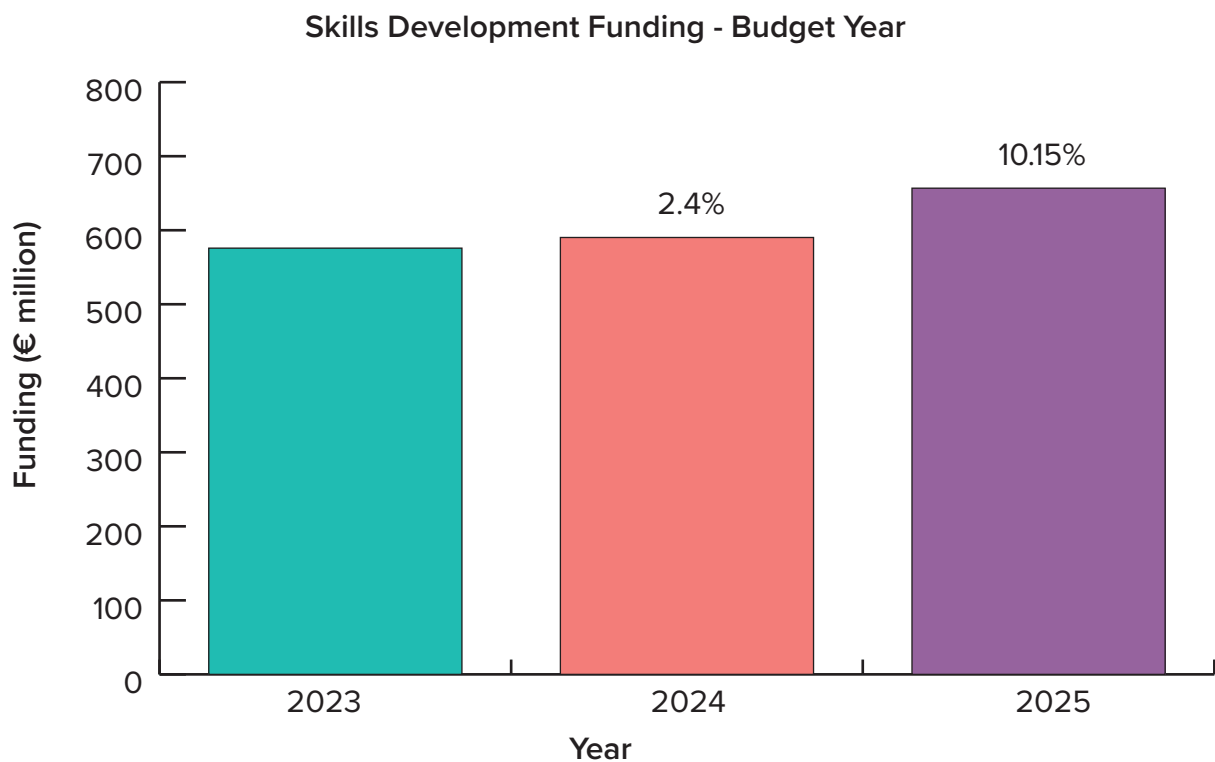


Figure 1. Skills Development Funding Increases 2023-2025

A substantial increase in core funding for the Further Education and Training (FET) sector is badly needed.

The sector has central role in promoting social inclusion, supporting lifelong learning, and meeting Ireland's future skills needs.

Social inclusion through FET provision is highly attainable given the diverse demographic profile of learners from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds (SOLAS, 2024b; 2023a:2023b). This is in line with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (2023) stated ambition to build a unified tertiary education system that meets the need of all learners while supporting diversity and inclusion.

A 12% increase in FET funding will:

- Expand pathways for marginalised groups, ensuring they have access to the right supports on their learning journey (SOLAS, 2020)
- Strengthen regional and community-based provision to support full social and economic inclusion for all (OECD, 2017, 2023).
- Enable the sector to respond more effectively to the green and digital transitions (Government of Ireland, 2025; OECD, 2023)

Recent figures suggest that 229,000 people took part in FET in 2024, an almost 5% increase on the previous year. 1 in 10 people in Ireland over the age of 15 benefit in some way from options in the FET space (Brownlee & Rourke, 2024).

However, funding allocations do not reflect weighting of learner enrolments in the FET space or recognise the value of the sector in terms of supporting social and economic inclusion for all (SOLAS, 2024a; DFHERIS, 2023). A review of the Revised Estimates for Public Service (2025) shows that the higher education sector was allocated 75% of the total education budget of DFHERIS while supporting 55% of the total population. Meanwhile, FET received 25% of the voted expenditure in 2025, but accounts for 45% of the enrolments. This is not a proportionate allocation of funds, and it does not reflect a prioritisation of learners with the highest level of educational needs.



## Enrolment and Budget Allocation for FET Learners and HE Students (2023-2024)

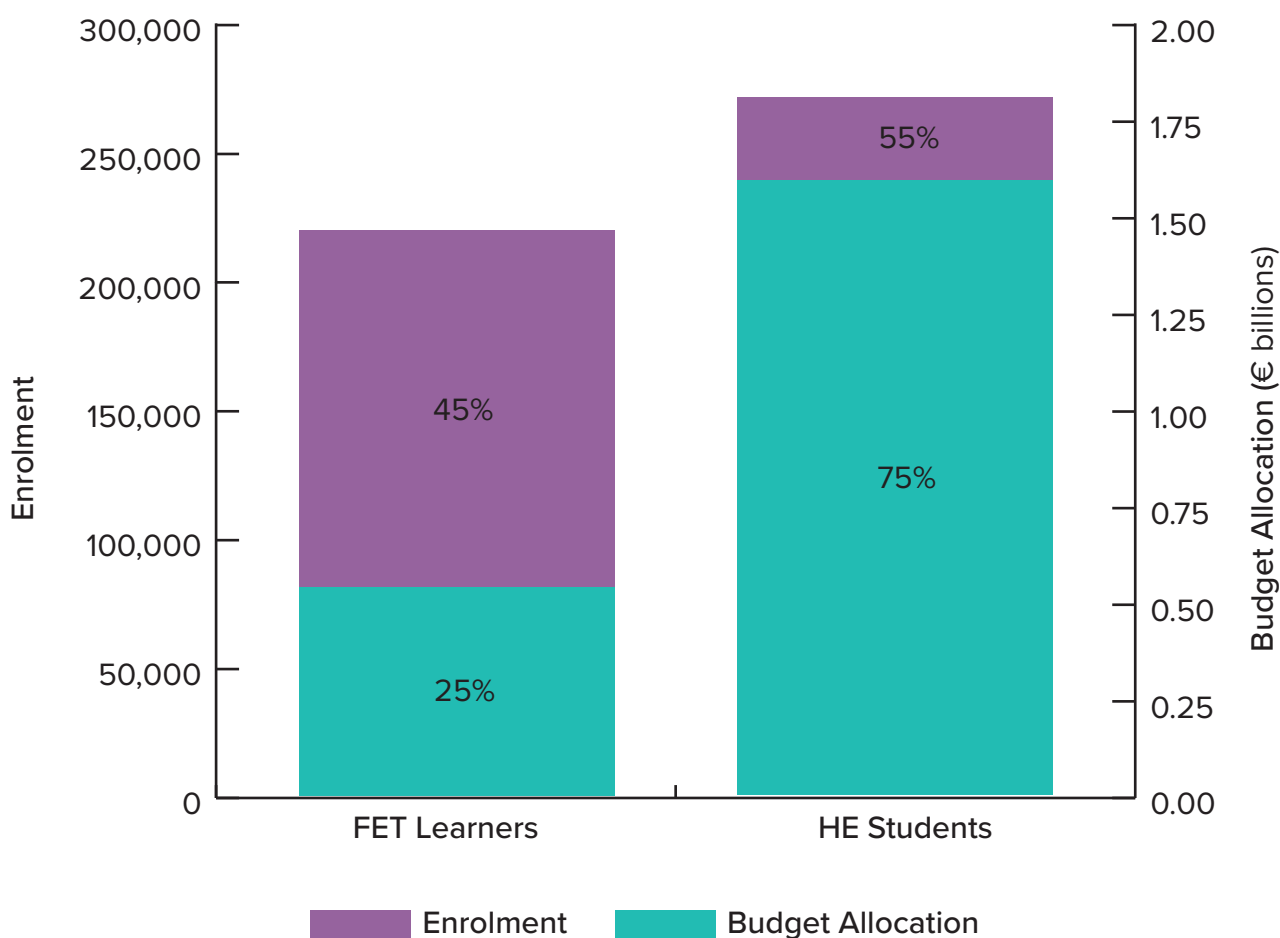


Figure 2. Unequal Budget Weighting Compared with Enrolments

There should be an overall funding increase of €78.82 million, or 12%, to FET funding through DFHERIS. This crucial mode of education should be equalised to funding received by higher education institutions, without a negative impact for funding in the higher education sector. We acknowledge that total FET funding climbs to €1,013.844m when non-voted funding is added, however this still lags behind total funding made available to higher education.

**Ask 2:****Ringfence and enhance funding for the community education sector**

Increase in core funding level to €40 million over the next two budget cycles, with an increase to 3.5% of the FET Budget in 2026, growing to 4% in 2027. This would bring the total budget allocated to community education in **2026 to €35 million**, reaching **€40 million by 2027**.

The model of care in the community education sector addresses social challenges through approaches that are place-based and values-led (Doody, 2021; Cobain et al., 2021; McGuinness et al., 2016). Community education provides a space where underserved and under-resourced communities and more vulnerable or marginalised groups of people (including older people, disabled people, migrants and refugees, and Travellers, among others) are supported through a holistic approach to learning. This approach is pivotal to its success in engaging these learners as evidenced by demographic trends in enrolments (SOLAS, 2024b; 2023a:2023b).

Despite this valuable contribution to the educational landscape, community education funding through ETBs saw a reduction of €800,000 from 2023 to 2024. In 2024, community education received €21.5 million in funding, including €16.5 million of funding through ETB investment with an additional €5.03 million delivered through Reach Funding. Compared with €22.3 million that the sector received in 2023. This decrease is disheartening given that the Skills Development budget allocation increased by 2.4% over the same period.

In 2024, total community education funding represented just 2.1% of the overall FET budget. Funding for the sector is falling at a time when the cost of delivering services and meeting demands is increasing. In 2023, approximately 43,000 learners took part in community education (SOLAS, 2024a). That figure has since increased to 46,000 learners in 2024, whilst overall funding has decreased over the same period.

A comparison of enrolment numbers across all of FET reveals that the weighting given to funding for different FET provisions may not fairly reflect the levels of engagement with the community education sector. Community education accounted for 21% of all FET learners but received just 2.1% of the overall budget.



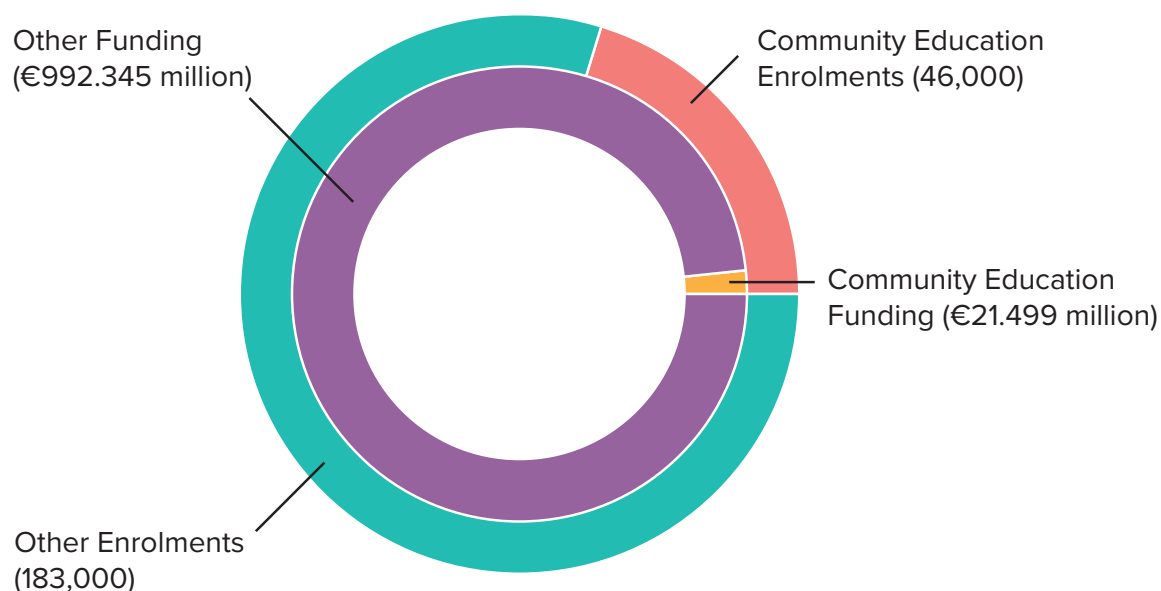


Figure 3. Disparity in Community Education Funding and Enrolments

The allocation of 2.12% of the budget for community education learners who comprise approximately 20% of all learners in the FET system warrants consideration given the challenges in sustainability of programme delivery, the capacity of the sector to provide supports, and the implications for sector staff and the continued increasing demand for community education (Cobain et al., 2021; SOLAS, 2024a).

In recent years, calls for the sustainable resourcing of the community education sector have identified key issues. These include insecure short-term funding streams, and a reliance on multiple streams of funding and grants that are insufficient to cover core costs of operations. This has implications for the capacity of staff and organisations to deliver quality education based on need (AONTAS, 2024; Cobain et al., 2021: 48; Magrath & Fitzsimmons, 2019). Action is needed to ensure that there is consistency and reliability in core funding provisions for operations in the sector so that the benefits of this mode of provision can be realised (AONTAS, 2024; Cobain et al., 2021:13).

Targeted, multi-annual funding is urgently needed to:

- Provide stability for community education organisations, many of which operate with insecure or piecemeal funding (Cobain et al., 2021).
- Strengthen provision in communities experiencing rapid social, cultural, and demographic change (SOLAS, 2024)
- Preserve and grow this crucial grassroots infrastructure that delivers both educational outcomes and wider social benefits (SOLAS, 2024a).

AONTAS recommends an increase in core funding level to €40 million over the next two budget cycles, with an increase to 3.5% of the FET Budget in 2026, and 4% in 2027.

This would bring the total budget allocated to Community Education in 2026 to €35 million, reaching €40 million by 2027, with Reach Funding increasing to €10 million in this period. This funding must be ringfenced and guaranteed to providers on an annual basis.

**Ask 3:****Reform learner financial supports across the FET system**

Budget 2026 must **remove financial barriers and deliver a fairer FET system** by increasing the rates of core learner financial supports (including BTEA, BTEI, and VTOS) by 24%, in line with SVP's Minimum Essential Standard of Living benchmarks (VMR, 2024), and standardising levels of support across schemes.

Adult and community education has a proven impact on the lives of learners who have experienced disadvantage and social exclusion (Cobain et al., 2020; Doody, 2021). However, research by AONTAS and others has consistently found that financial barriers remain one of the most significant obstacles to participation in adult education for this cohort (Meyler et al., 2024; 2023a; 2023b; SOLAS, 2017; Sartori & Bloom, 2023). Without intervention, these barriers risk excluding the very learners most in need of education and upskilling in response to Ireland's evolving economy and future skills needs (OECD, 2017; 2023).

SOLAS data shows that one in three FET learners is unemployed, and many more are in low-paid work or enter FET with low levels of formal qualifications (SOLAS, 2024b). The sector also engages proportionally higher numbers of learners from groups at risk of marginalisation, including Travellers, Roma, and people with disabilities than higher education (SOLAS, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; Sartori & Bloom, 2023). Research conducted by AONTAS has consistently shown the costs generated by participation in education, including childcare costs, and transport, present a particular challenge for these cohorts (Meyler et al., 2024; 2023a; 2023b).

Indeed, the cost of participating in FET is substantial. Indecon (2022) estimated full-time FET learners face costs of €1,112 per month or €10,000 per academic year. This figure is likely to have increased given rising inflation and cost-of-living pressures. These costs are particularly burdensome for households already struggling to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living, which rose by 10.6% in the last year alone (VMR, 2024).

Despite the costs generated by participating in Further Education and Training, supplementary allowances that address costs for meals, transport and accommodation have not been increased since 2002. Meanwhile the percentage change in the Consumer Price Index from January 2002 to June 2024 is 53.4% which negatively affects the adequacy of these payments (DFHERIS, 2024). Furthermore, many learners across the FET sector do not have access to hardship funds or bursaries that can alleviate the strain (DFHERIS, 2024; Sartori et al., 2023).

These financial challenges are intensified by rising poverty levels. The 2024 Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) data show 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 or pupils also experienced drops in disposable income, underscoring the financial strain associated with participation in education. Without targeted supports, low-income learners are at growing risk of exclusion, especially in the context of reduced spending power and increasing living costs (CSO, 2024; Vincentian MESL Research Centre [VMR], 2024).

Variations in support across schemes such as the BTEA, BTEI, and Part-Time Education Option also result in unequal treatment across the FET system (DFHERIS, 2024; Indecon, 2022). These supports are often tied to social welfare eligibility and duration, meaning broader welfare policy directly affects learner income.

Given the strong link between educational attainment and poverty reduction (CSO, 2022), Budget 2026 must remove financial barriers and deliver a fairer FET system by:

- We recommend a 24% (€8.4 million) increase to the Back to Education Allowance, a 24% increase (€7.8 million) to FET Training Allowances, and a 14% increase (€48 million) to the Community Employment (CE) Scheme in line with MESL benchmarks (VMR, 2024), and standardising levels of support across schemes.
- Raising income thresholds and updating means tests to reflect current cost-of-living realities (VMR, 2024; INOU, 2025).
- Expanding eligibility to include adult, community, and part-time learners currently excluded from core supports.

These reforms are essential to realising national commitments to inclusive education, reducing inequality, and meeting Ireland's upskilling and participation targets (OECD, 2023).

**Ask 4:****Establish a national FET learner hardship fund**

Budget 2026 should introduce a hardship fund that is accessible to all FET learners and **invest €5.5 million in the learners who need it most.**

This fund should be designed to offer responsive financial assistance during times of acute need, improving engagement and learner wellbeing. Learners frequently report gaps in financial support, including limited access to ancillary benefits (e.g. fuel allowance or double payments) with implications to manage pressures on finances. This undermines their ability to stay in education (Meyler et al., 2024).

The establishment of a hardship fund would recognise the increased financial pressure associated with participation in education as an adult or young person (Sartori & Bloom, 2023; Meyler et al., 2023). It would further ensure that learners at risk of socioeconomic disadvantage in the FET system have access to similar levels of support as those students in the higher education sector who can access the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) (Sartori et al., 2023). This action would affirm the importance of FET in achieving social inclusion (SOLAS, 2020).

The recent Funding the Futures Options Paper (2024) has recommended the establishment of a pilot hardship fund for learners in PLC courses of €1m. This figure is based on a projection of 7% of 26,389 full time FET learners needing support over the course of their studies at a cost of €558 per learner on average.

AONTAS recommends that this hardship fund pilot be made available to all full-time learners across the wider FET. It is estimated that a higher number of learners will need support due to the high level of reliance on financial supports for this cohort in this sector (SOLAS, 2024b).

Full time FET Learner Enrolments 2022/2023 (30.1% of 218,775 fulltime) (SOLAS, 2024b)	65,845
Estimated learners requiring support (15%)	9,877
Estimated average award per student (based on DFHERIS estimates)	€558
Total Estimated Award 2025	€5.5 million

Figure 4. Pilot Hardship Fund Costing



## Conclusion

Budget 2026 presents a vital opportunity to rebalance investment across Ireland's tertiary education system by recognising the unique and transformative role of adult and community education. Despite making up nearly half of the of all enrolments, FET learners currently receive less than a quarter of total tertiary funding.

This underinvestment undermines Ireland's ambitions for a just transition, inclusive economic growth, and social cohesion. By increasing funding for FET, community education, learner supports, and access measures, Government can deliver on its commitments to equitable education, address pressing skills needs, and ensure that no adult is left behind in Ireland's future. A fairer share for adult learners is not only a matter of equity, but also an investment in a more resilient, caring, and inclusive society.



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**Contact us:**

AONTAS,  
The National Adult Learning Organisation,  
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

T: 01 406 8220

E: [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com)

[www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)

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