

What Did Budget 2026 Deliver for Adult and Community Education?

AONTAS - the National Adult Learning
Organisation

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Budget 2026 will have an impact on adult and community education, and the learners it supports.

The Budget announcement on 7th October included several positive changes for adult learners. However, overall, this Budget could have done more to address the structural barriers to adult and community education that many people face.

Progress in Budget 2026

Budget 2026 includes a number of positive steps that will make a real difference for learners and their families. One particularly welcome move is the Government's plan to review how well student supports are meeting people's needs, especially for international protection applicants and other learners who face real financial barriers when trying to access adult education.

We also welcome targeted increases to income supports for carers and families. The rise in the Carer's Allowance income disregard and Working Family Payment thresholds, as well as increases in child support payments will help ease financial pressures for many adult learners. This is especially important as one-third of learners entering Further Education and Training (FET) are unemployed and many depend on income supports to stay in education.

There was also an increased investment in Further Education and Training, with an additional €19.2 million under the "Skills Development" budget line. We especially welcome Minister Marian Harkin's recognition that this investment should improve access to education for underrepresented groups:

"With this investment, my department will continue to ensure access to education and employment for underrepresented groups – including women, socio-economically disadvantaged learners, and the Travelling community."

Alongside an the increase in FET funding, the €2 million boost for students with disabilities in the FET sector is an important first step towards building this inclusive and accessible system in this current budget.

The inclusion of an increase of [€3.8 million for the PEACEPLUS Programme](#) to support cross-border projects is another welcome addition in Budget 2026, and we hope that this will benefit adult and community education providers in border areas and those working on cross border collaboration. Recent research published by AONTAS has shown that cross border collaboration has the potential to support a response to social issues through joint initiatives that support knowledge sharing. Further investment in this activity will promote peace and community development across the island of Ireland.

Missed Opportunities for Inclusion and Participation

Despite these welcome steps, Budget 2026 misses key opportunities to strengthen adult and community education as a driver of equality, participation, and social inclusion.

While the FET budget has increased by €19.2 million this remains [€59.62 million](#) short of what's needed to [meet demand](#) and [support growth](#). This shortfall limits the sector's ability to deliver on Government goals for [upskilling and reskilling](#), particularly in the context of [potential labour market inequalities](#) in a [context of rapid social change](#).

It is also disappointing that community education was not mentioned in targeted funding measures. Community education [plays a vital role in promoting social inclusion, personal development, and wellbeing](#), supporting people who are often furthest from learning. This omission contrasts with the [Government's stated commitments](#) to build safe, thriving communities and promote a caring society.

While the commitment to review supports for learners in line with the Programme for Government commitments is welcome, Budget 2026 does little to ease the financial barriers to education faced by adult learners. The €10 increase in core social welfare rates falls well short of the benchmarked and indexed levels recommended by [AONTAS](#), [Social Justice Ireland](#), and the [Vincentian MESL Research Centre](#). This means many learners will continue to experience hardship amid a cost-of-living crisis where [accommodation and access to affordable childcare](#) remain major obstacles to participation.

[Social Justice Ireland](#) (2025) highlights how low-income households will be hit hard by the withdrawal of temporary cost-of-living supports. This means many learners from under

resourced groups will be worse off in real terms. While targeted child and family measures are welcome, they will not fully offset the impact of these losses.

Looking Ahead: Planning for Long-Term Sustainability

Community education urgently needs multi-annual funding. The current year-to-year funding model makes it difficult for providers to plan ahead or invest sustainably in their communities.

AONTAS hopes that the new [Medium-Term Expenditure Framework \(MTEF\)](#), mentioned in this year's Budget announcement, will bring greater funding certainty and lead to more transparent, equitable decisions for FET sector funding.

The MTEF's emphasis on fiscal sustainability, spending adequacy, and efficiency provides an important opportunity to strengthen long-term investment in education and community wellbeing. This is because the multi-annual, policy-led approach could help deliver on the aims of the Community Education Framework, ensuring the sector is properly recognised and supported.

Importantly, the MTEF acknowledges the strategic role of FET in tackling skills shortages and promoting lifelong learning. It also recognises the need to balance investment between Higher and Further Education, and to base decisions on solid evidence.

AONTAS looks forward to working with key stakeholders to ensure that this model of forward planning and medium-term investment meets the needs of learners and providers across the FET space through our research and advocacy efforts.

Conclusion

Budget 2026 includes positive measures that will benefit learners and families, including stronger supports for carers, children, and learners with disabilities. However, without significant, sustainable, investment in learner financial supports and community education, the Government risks limiting the transformative potential of the FET system as a whole.

Through the new Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, Ireland has an opportunity to take a more strategic, sustainable, and inclusive approach to funding the wider FET sector.

AONTAS urges the Government to use this opportunity to ensure that future budgets deliver

for all learners, particularly those who rely on adult and community education to build better lives for themselves, their families, and their communities.

This will support progression towards the goals of Minister Lawless outlined in his budget press release:

“We’re making education more affordable and accessible, and backing the talent that will power Ireland’s future. This Budget delivers real change, reducing pressure today, expanding opportunity tomorrow, and setting the course for lasting progress.”



The Voice of
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