

The AONTAS Adult Education Summit: Connecting Communities for Collective Action

Summit Brochure

AVIVA Stadium
19th and 20th November 2025



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Co-funded by
the European Union



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Foreword

I'm thrilled to share our 'Connecting Communities for Collective Action' - Adult Education Summit 2025 brochure with you. This event is an opportunity for bringing communities, policymakers, educators, learners, and thought-leaders from across the island of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Europe together. It's a moment to pause, to listen, and to ask hard questions about who our education systems serve, and who they continue to leave behind. This event will help us work together in creating change.

Across societies, we are witnessing deepening political, economic, and social divides. Many people are overwhelmed, exhausted, and disconnected. There are many reasons for this like the cost of living crisis, the rise of misinformation, or a lack of trust in institutions. We are seeing a rise in hatred and discrimination due to fear-fuelled strategic communication from extreme right-wing groups. Yet, adult and community education continues to be the best tool for social cohesion and strengthening our communities. Programmes help us to create connection, critically reflect on the world, rebuild trust, and give people the tools to navigate and change society for the better.

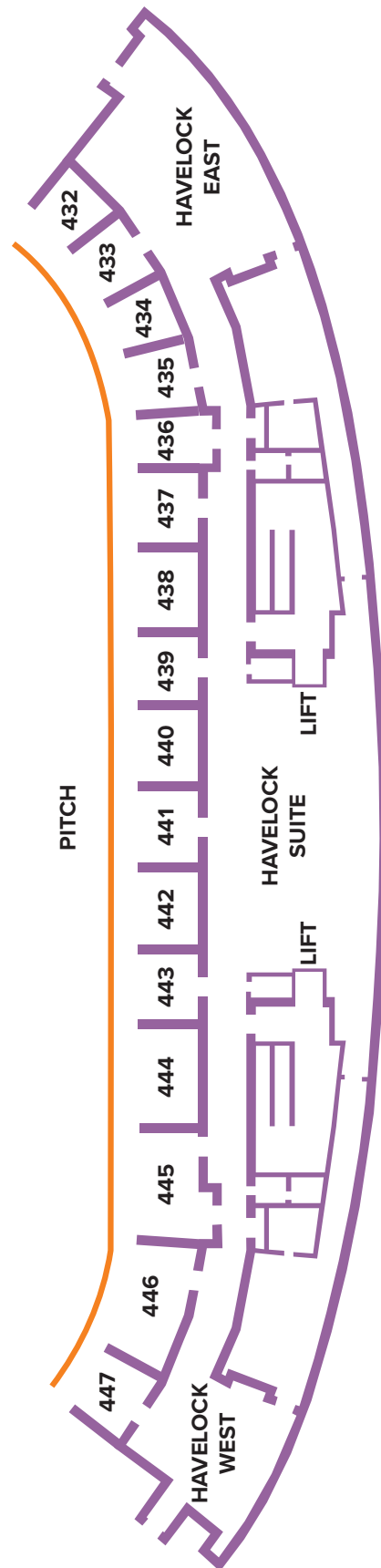
This summit is about examining structural inequalities, listening to the voices of learners, practitioners, policymakers, academics and others. Learning from others and finding out what's happening here and abroad. We are creating the space to work together, to drive equality and recognise the value and significance of adult learning in addressing challenges.

AONTAS is proud to launch two major initiatives: the 2024-2025 Learner Voices Across Ireland report and the 2025 peer-reviewed Adult Learner Journal on November 19th and 20th. These publications provide key evidence for driving change and they showcase the wonderful people involved in adult learning and impact of this sector in Ireland and beyond.

This two-day event includes keynote addresses from Professor Peter Mayo, Associate Professor Sharon Clancy, exciting workshops, music, exhibition stands, international experts and attendees, learner representatives, and more. We aim to make this a transformative experience for you and your colleagues! You'll learn, have fun, and meet new people.

Dearbháil Lawless
AONTAS CEO

WHERE TO GO





How to get here:

Enter through Gate A off of the Lansdowne Road Entrance

Room allocations:

Please refer to the Aviva Stadium floor plan for the location of the following rooms that will be used during the AONTAS Adult Education Summit.

- Havelock East –Registration, Tea, Coffee, Lunch and Exhibition Room
- Havelock Suite – Main Room / Breakout Space
- Havelock West – Breakout Space
- Box 441 – Breakout Space
- Box 433 – Quiet Room / Breastfeeding Space

Agenda: Day 1

Wednesday, 19th November

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 10.30am | Registration |
| 11.00am | Welcome
John D'Arcy, AONTAS Chairperson |
| 11.10am | Performance
Forever Young Community Choir |
| 11.25am | Official Opening
Minister Marian Harkin, Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science |
| 11.40am | Launch of Learner Voices Across Ireland: The National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024-2025 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aisling Meyler, AONTAS Research Officer Learner Initiatives• Karyn Farrell, AONTAS Learner Voice Project Officer• Dr Philip Finn, AONTAS Research Officer• Dr Thomas Murray, AONTAS Head of Research |
| 12.10pm | Learner Voice Panel Discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ruby Cooney, AONTAS Education Projects Officer, Chair• Alex Stevenson, Learning and Work, England• Brenda Ivers, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board• Dr Thomas Murray, AONTAS Head of Research• Jude Ebo-serme Richard, Adult Learner with Louth and Meath Education and Training Board |
| 12.50pm | Learner Spotlight
Cathy Clear, Adult Literacy Learner with Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board |
| 1.00pm | Lunch |



1.40pm

Workshop 1: Making Learner Voice Visible in Practice

(Box 441)

- Karyn Farrell, AONTAS Learner Voice Projects Officer
- Ruby Cooney, AONTAS Educations Project Officer

Workshop 2: Transformative Education in Times of Polarisation

(Havelock West)

Dr Sarah Sartori, Higher Education Strategic Project Lead with South East Technological University

Workshop 3: Collaborative Partnerships for Pathways into Education

(Havelock Suite)

- Colm Downes, South East Technological University
- Sinead Mahon, Women's Collective Ireland
- Kathy Bradley, National Tertiary Office
- Pamela Latimer, Education and Training Business Development Manager, Longford Women's Link

2.30pm

Close Workshops

2.35pm

Keynote Address: Reclaiming Resistance and Resilience

Dr Sharon Clancy, Associate Professor at University of Nottingham

3.00pm

Adult Education Beyond Borders: Panel with Partners Across Europe

- Órla Barry, Head of Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities, QQI, *Panel Host*
- Nessa White, Interim CEO, SOLAS the Further Education and Training Authority
- Lubica Gálová, Vice-Director for Lifelong Learning State Vocational Education Institute, Slovakia
- Raffaella Kihrer, Secretary General, European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)
- Dr John Evers, Chairman, Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen/ Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres

4.00pm

End of Day Responses

4.15pm

Final Remarks

John D'Arcy, AONTAS Chairperson

4.30pm

Close of Event

Agenda: Day 2

Thursday, 20th November

9.30am	Registration
10.00am	Welcome Dr Lilian Nwanze, AONTAS Vice-Chairperson
10.10am	Performance Eddie Winston
10.25am	Official Opening Fiona O’Byrne, Assistant Secretary at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
10.40am	Launch of <i>The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner 2025</i> • Dr Tom Farrelly, Gasta Master, Host • Dr Rosemary Moreland, Editor of <i>The Adult Learner</i> • Kevin McCabe, Adult Education Service in North County Dublin • Fergus Craddock, Inclusion Manager with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) • Fionnaigh Connaughton, Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) • Anne Foster, City of Dublin Education and Training Board • Eleanor Neff, South East Technological University (SETU)
11.40am	Keynote Address: Popular Education in Historical and Contemporary Practice Professor Peter Mayo, University of Malta
12.15pm	Learner Spotlight Chidiogo Blessing Ebeledike, AONTAS Board Member
12.30pm	Lunch



1.20pm

Workshop 1: Equality in Apprenticeships, Learning, and Work

(Havelock Suite)

- **Dr Mary Quirke**, Griffith College
- **Bridget Kelly**, National Traveller Policy Co-ordinator for Traveller Employment and Enterprise with the Irish Traveller Movement
- **Damian Duffy**, Interim Principal and Chief Executive, Belfast Metropolitan College
- **Anne Gaskin Roe**, Apprenticeship Development Manager, ESB Networks

Workshop 2: Anti-racism with Dignity Partnership

(Havelock West)

Rosemary Kunene, Founder, Dignity Partnership

Workshop 3: Storytelling for Connecting Communities

(Box 441)

- **Larisa Sioneriu**, AONTAS Projects Coordinator
- **Aisling Meyler**, AONTAS Research Officer

2.15pm

Panel: Strengthening Communities through Community Education

- **Liliana Fernandez**, Leadership Officer, National Women's Council, Chair
- **Dearbhail Lawless**, AONTAS CEO
- **Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin**, President, Conradh na Gaeilge; Activist, Glór na Móna & Dream Dearg
- **Philomena Abulu Obasi**
- **Vivienne Glanville**, National Programme Coordinator for Women's Collective Ireland

3.20pm

End of Day Responses

3.35pm

Final Remarks

3.45pm

Close of Event

Dr Lilian Nwanze, AONTAS Vice-Chairperson

Session Details - Day 1

Speaker of the Day



John D'Arcy, AONTAS Chairperson

John D'Arcy has been Director of The Open University in Ireland since 2010 and has also worked as Director of The Open University in Scotland and in Wales at times. Prior to joining The Open University, John was Chief Executive of Colleges Northern Ireland and before that had senior roles at BDO Accountants and Management Consultants, the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research. As well as leading the teaching, learning and research work of The Open University across the island of Ireland, John has worked on a number of prime time television programmes with the BBC including Once Upon A Time in Northern Ireland; Patrick Kielty's 100 Years of Union; Languages of Ulster and Simon Reeves in Ireland. He has also led the development of Northern Ireland specific online resources on the University's OpenLearn online platform. These include Time To Think; Why Riot? and Impossible Peace. John is chair of AONTAS as well as the Alliance of Lifelong Learning, Vice Chair of Universities Ireland and a Board member of the Open College Network Northern Ireland. He is a former Chair of Enterprise Northern Ireland, Audiences Northern Ireland and a former Board member of Sport Northern Ireland and the BBC's Broadcasting Council in Northern Ireland. John was a co-founder of the Oh Yeah Music Centre in 2007 and is a Trustee of the Lightbody Foundation. John was awarded an OBE in 2021 for services to education and the arts.

Performance



A special performance from **The Forever Young Community Choir**, celebrating community.

Official Opening



Minister Marian Harkin

Marian Harkin, Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Launch of Learner Voices Across Ireland: The National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024-2025

The AONTAS Research Team will present the findings of the Learner Voices Across Ireland: 2024-2025 report, offering a vital insight into adult learners' views of and satisfaction with their experience of Further Education and Training.



Aisling Meyler, AONTAS Research Officer Learner Initiatives

Aisling is a research officer with AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation. Aisling supports the Head of Research in the delivery of all National FET Learner Forum events, developing reports, delivering and analysing large-scale mixed-methods data. Aisling also supports new learner research initiatives, providing an evidence-base to support AONTAS's advocacy work. She leads the AONTAS Community Education Against Disinformation project. She has a background in the community and voluntary sector and is passionate about peer led initiatives. She loves martial arts and playing music.



Karyn Farrell, AONTAS Learner Voice Project Officer

Karyn is the Learner Voice Project Officer with the AONTAS Research team. She supports the coordination of the National Further Education and Training Learner Forums, and is responsible for the development, delivery and evaluation of Learner Voice training to learners, practitioners and ETB staff. She has a background in arts development, and in project & events management. She is also an experienced adult literacy tutor. In her spare time, she is a keen photographer and writer.



Dr Philip Finn, AONTAS Research Officer

Philip is Research Officer with the AONTAS Research Team. He supports the delivery of all National FET Learner Forum events, including analyzing mixed-methods data and developing reports. Philip has a PhD from Maynooth University and has a track record of policy orientated research on issues relating to economic inequality. In particular, his research with unemployed people and people with disabilities uses lived experience to illustrate the barriers to social inclusion, and the supports required to live self-defined meaningful lives. Philip is further interested in Adult and Community Education as avenues for active citizenship, individual empowerment and collective transformation.



Dr Thomas Murray, AONTAS Head of Research

Dr Thomas Murray is AONTAS Head of Research, leading the Research Team to inform national policy and practice in adult and community education and to offer a robust evidence-base for advocacy. Thomas was Higher Education Lead at An Cosán, Lecturer in Equality Studies at University College Dublin, and visiting researcher at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. His current writing focuses on comparative adult education and democracy 'from below'. He is the author of *Contesting Economic and Social Rights in Ireland: 1848-2016* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Learner Voice Panel Discussion

In this panel, researcher, practitioner, and learner participants will respond to the findings of the Learner Voices Across Ireland research report and consider how Learner Voice can best inform advocacy, policymaking and future developments in adult education.



Ruby Cooney, AONTAS Education Projects Officer, Chair

Ruby Cooney is an Education Projects Officer at AONTAS. She supports the Advocacy Team in implementing different education projects. Ruby collaborates with AONTAS staff to deliver and develop Learner Voice training for both staff and learners.



Alex Stevenson, Learning and Work, England

Alex Stevenson is Deputy Director at Learning and Work Institute (L&W), an independent policy and research organisation in the UK focused on lifelong learning and better work. Alex is L&W's strategic lead for its work on adult essential skills. Alex has led a range of policy research and development programmes for national government, devolved administrations and regional government, including work on adult literacy and numeracy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), digital skills and learning in communities. He led L&W's development work on the Citizens' Curriculum, a learner-led approach to adult essential skills, recently successfully piloted in Wales. Before joining L&W, Alex taught, managed and developed adult essential skills and ESOL provision for over 13 years. From 2019 to 2025, Alex was an executive board member at the European Association for the Education of Adults and is currently an executive committee member at the European Basic Skills Network.



Brenda Ivers, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board

Brenda Ivers is an Adult Education Officer with Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board with responsibility for Quality Assurance, Erasmus+ and Professional Learning and Development. As part of her Quality Assurance management responsibilities, she is deeply committed to creating opportunities where learners feel genuinely empowered to share their voices and see them reflected in meaningful action. Drawing on her experience across both Further and Higher Education, and working with a wide range of learners, she champions the belief that authentic engagement can profoundly shape educational practice and drive authentic and impactful change.



Dr Thomas Murray, AONTAS Head of Research

Dr Thomas Murray is AONTAS Head of Research, leading the Research Team to inform national policy and practice in adult and community education and to offer a robust evidence-base for advocacy. Thomas was Higher Education Lead at An Cosán, Lecturer in Equality Studies at University College Dublin, and visiting researcher at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. His current writing focuses on comparative adult education and democracy ‘from below’. He is the author of *Contesting Economic and Social Rights in Ireland: 1848-2016* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).



Jude Ebosereme Richard, Adult Learner with Louth and Meath Education and Training Board

Jude Ebosereme Richard is a dedicated and ambitious professional currently studying Advanced Health and Social Studies (QQI Level 6) at O Fiaich Institute of Further Education in Dundalk. He holds a Master’s in International Relations and Cooperation and a Bachelor’s in International Relations and Diplomacy, both from the University of Genova, Italy. With professional experience as a Caseworker at the Department for Work and Pensions (UK) and a strong background in customer service, stakeholder engagement, and social care, Jude brings empathy and leadership to every role. As a Learner Representative for LMETB, he’s committed to ensuring that every student’s voice is heard believing that education thrives when learners actively shape their own experience.

Learner Spotlight

A special message from Adult Literacy learner, Cathy Clear of Laois Offaly ETB.



Cathy Clear, Adult Literacy Learner with Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board

Cathy Clear is a remarkable woman from Laois whose inspiring journey is a testament to resilience, personal growth, and the transformative power of lifelong learning. A dedicated student at Portlaoise Further Education Centre, Cathy is also a proud Student Ambassador for Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, and a recipient of the prestigious AONTAS STAR Award. Her passion for literacy has made her a powerful advocate both locally and nationally. Cathy plays an active role in shaping literacy-friendly services across Laois and Offaly. She regularly contributes to literacy awareness training, where she shares her moving personal story and highlights the importance of inclusive, accessible services for all. Her voice continues to inspire change, reminding us that learning is a lifelong journey—and that everyone deserves the opportunity to be heard, supported, and empowered.

Workshop 1: Making Learner Voice Visible in Practice

In this workshop, participants will explore ways to incorporate and amplify learner perspectives and feedback into the educational process. They will discuss strategies to creating a supportive culture of Learner Voice and how to include learners in all levels of decision making. Discussions will centre on the need for transparency and accountability of process and how to ensure that learner feedback leads to visible outcomes and real change.



Karyn Farrell, AONTAS Learner Voice Projects Officer

Karyn is the Learner Voice Project Officer with the AONTAS Research Team. She supports the coordination of the National Further Education and Training Learner Forums, and is responsible for the development, delivery and evaluation of Learner Voice training to learners, practitioners and Education and Training Board (ETB) staff. She has a background in arts development, and in project and events management. She is also an experienced adult literacy tutor. In her spare time, she is a keen photographer and writer.



Ruby Cooney, AONTAS Education Projects Officer

Ruby Cooney is an Education Projects Officer at AONTAS. She supports the Advocacy Team in implementing different education projects. Ruby collaborates with AONTAS staff to deliver and develop Learner Voice training for both staff and learners.

Workshop 2: Transformative Education in Times of Polarisation – An Interactive Workshop

In an era marked by deepening social, political and cultural divides, this hands-on, interactive workshop brings together practitioners to explore the role of transformative education in building social cohesion and bringing about change.



Dr Sarah Sartori, Higher Education Strategic Project Lead with SETU

An adult educator for almost 20 years, I currently manage access routes into higher education from further education for South East Technological University (SETU). My academic background is in Adult and Community Education, and I have led multiple participatory research and arts-based projects exploring and communicating the stories and experiences of cohorts whose voices are often sidelined in public discourse, including people with convictions, Irish Travellers and refugees. I am passionate about transformative education, particularly as a pathway out of crime. I am a trained facilitator of Theatre of The Oppressed, and use arts-based methodologies, drama, and imagery to explore complex themes and ideas.

Workshop 3: Collaborative Partnerships for Pathways into Education

In this workshop, participants will learn about building successful partnerships between further education providers, adult and community education providers and higher education institutions. There will also be a chance to meet others, share their experiences of partnerships and contribute to a set of key principles in developing collaborative partnerships in the future.



Colm Downes, South East Technological University

Colm Downes is a Project Manager at South East Technological University, bringing over 25 years of experience across adult, community, further, and higher education sectors. His career has spanned key roles in Dublin City University (DCU), Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), and Maynooth University, where he has contributed to a wide range of educational initiatives and policy development. Colm holds a Master's degree in Education and Training from DCU and is deeply committed to advancing educational equity. His current work focuses on increasing access to and participation in education for individuals and communities who are most distant from traditional learning pathways. Through innovative project management and strategic collaboration, Colm continues to champion inclusive education and lifelong learning.



Sinead Mahon, Women's Collective Ireland

Sinead Mahon WCI (Women's Collective Ireland) local Coordinator in Ronanstown, Clondalkin has over 17 years' experience working in the area of women's human rights in the community sector in a voluntary and professional capacity. Sinead is passionate about community initiatives and supporting women on their educational journey. This is done at local level by offering first steps programmes, community workshops and women's access to third level education within a community setting through lifelong learning opportunities. WCI Ronanstown is one of the 17 Women's Collective Ireland Women's Community Projects throughout the country delivering the Women's Equality and Development Programme to marginalised women. The main aims of WCI are to help to address poverty, social exclusion and gender inequality experienced by women and to give a voice to community women at local and national level. All of Sinead's education was supported by community education which helped her progress both personally and professionally. Sinead's mantra "When Women Support Each Other, Incredible Things Happen"



Kathy Bradley, National Tertiary Office

Kathy Bradley is a leader in Irish tertiary education, currently serving as a Tertiary Manager for the Southern Strategic Alliance. A proud graduate of both Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (HE), her personal journey as a mature student has fuelled her passion for creating accessible pathways for a diverse student population. As the former Head of the UCC Skills Centre, Kathy cultivated an environment of kindness and support, dedicated to helping students realise their potential and navigate the transition into university life. She founded the center in 2017, and her ethos of student engagement and development has remained at its core. In her role with the Southern Strategic Alliance, she is instrumental in developing alternative, structured routes to higher education. Her work focuses on creating a flexible and robust educational framework that bridge Further and Higher Education. Kathy believes that effective educational systems must be adaptable to meet the needs of all learners, and she is dedicated to fostering inclusive and dynamic learning environments within the Cork and Kerry region.



Pamela Latimer, Education and Training Business Development Manager, Longford Women's Link

Pamela Latimer is the Education and Training Business Development Manager at Longford Women's Link (LWL), where she leads the organisation's Education and Training Department. Having over 14 years of experience in community education, Pamela is deeply committed to creating accessible, high-quality learning opportunities that empower women and support lifelong learning across County Longford and the wider Midlands region. Since joining Longford Women's Link, Pamela has played a key role in expanding LWL's Education and Training programmes to meet the diverse needs of learners. She has been instrumental in developing partnerships with national awarding bodies and higher education institutions, including South East Technological University (SETU), enabling learners to access accredited qualifications locally, from QQI Level 3 to Level 9. Pamela believes that access to meaningful education opportunities not only provides qualifications, but also builds confidence, resilience, and employability for women returning to education or entering the workforce. A passionate advocate for community education, Pamela believes that community education is a transformative tool for both the individual and the wider community.

Keynote Address: Reclaiming Resistance and Resilience - The Critical Role of Adult and Community Learning in Fractured Times

This keynote will draw on my own research and activism on class, community and culture and will seek to “recognise, name, and discuss the systems and inequalities that are creating division within our communities in the current political climate” and to “build further understanding of the value and impact of adult and community education for society and national infrastructure.”



Dr Sharon Clancy, Associate Professor at University of Nottingham

Dr Sharon Clancy is Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham, specialising in post-16 and adult education. Her writing focuses on class, culture and social justice issues with a psycho-social and historical lens. Sharon was Head of Community Engagement at the University of Nottingham between 2007 and 2013. A voluntary sector leader before entering academia, Sharon was CEO of Mansfield Council for Voluntary Services from 2000 to 2007. Sharon is Chair of the Raymond Williams Foundation, a commissioner for the Centenary Commission, and co-editor of the *Studies in the Education of Adults* journal. She convenes, with Dr Iain Jones, the Research Circle on Fostering Democracy, Debate and Dialogue which emerged from the Centenary Commission on Adult Education. In 2025 she was awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship and also won the Lord Dearing Award at the University of Nottingham.



Adult Education Beyond Borders: Panel with Partners from Across Europe

This panel discussion brings together adult education partners from across Europe to share their perspectives on adult education in their countries, and at a wider EU level. The panellists will share insight into EU level trends and challenges, and explore the space for connection between practitioners, learners and policy makers across the continent.



Órla Barry, Head of Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities, QQI, Panel Host

Órla Barry is Head of Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities at QQI and is responsible for the maintenance, development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications and associated policy. Her team host the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) National Coordination Point and the National Europass Centre. She is responsible for the provision of information about qualifications included in the NFQ via the Irish Register of Qualifications and for promoting the NFQ and EQF to a wide range of stakeholders and end users. She is a member of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group and the National Correspondent for the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.



Lubica Gállová, Vice-Director for Lifelong Learning State Vocational Education Institute, Slovakia

Vice Director for Lifelong Learning at the State Vocational Education Institute, active in the field of education and international cooperation. Focused on linking European policies in education with the national context, in particular in increasing quality, flexibility and accessibility of vocational and adult education. In this area, she has initiated and implemented various projects that help implement systemic changes. She is a member of the European Commission's Advisory Groups on the European Qualifications Framework; Europass and adult learning. Since 2024 she coordinates the ESF-funded project aimed at introducing the management of quality in VET and adult education in Slovakia.



Nessa White, Interim CEO, SOLAS

Nessa White is Interim CEO in SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) Authority. Nessa has worked in various Executive Director roles in SOLAS since 2020 and has over 20 years of senior leadership experience in the education and health sectors. During her time in SOLAS Nessa has driven strategic reform, innovation, and collaboration across the FET sector. One of her priorities as Interim CEO is to work towards FET becoming a key provider of lifelong learning opportunities in Ireland. Prior to taking up roles in SOLAS, Nessa worked in the Department of Education as a Project Manager for the Education and Training Board (ETB) - SOLAS Project Management Office leading out on initiatives focused on reform. She also played a key part in driving ongoing change and shared vision of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and was appointed General Secretary of ETBI in May 2018. Throughout her career Nessa has gained extensive experience and expertise, especially in the areas of change management, strategic thinking and leading people.



Raffaela Kihrer, Secretary General, European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)

Raffaela Kihrer is Secretary General of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). She is also the elected Secretary General of the European Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLPlatform), which brings together all education sectors at the European level and is the central point of contact between European civil society and the European institutions in lifelong learning. She has a background in International Development studies and is also a trained teacher in secondary and adult education. She is passionate about learning and takes every opportunity to visit adult education initiatives, especially at the grassroots level, and to reflect on what is needed to enable even more adults to participate.



Dr John Evers, Chairman, Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen/ Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres

John Evers (born 1970) is Secretary General of the Association of Volkshochschulen, EAEA-Board-Member and Chairman of the Austrian Adult Education Conference. He completed his PhD in history through second chance education and worked for many years in the field of basic education and school qualifications (also as a trainer) in adult education.

Session Details - Day 2

Speaker of the Day



Dr Lilian Nwanze-Akobo, AONTAS Vice-Chairperson

Dr Lilian Nwanze-Akobo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University, where she co-directs the Initial Teacher Education Programme for Adult and Further Education. Drawing on her professional, academic, and lived experiences, she is dedicated to advancing equity in education and creating inclusive learning spaces for marginalized communities. Her doctoral research explored the experiences of Black women in adult education in Ireland and introduced a racially and culturally responsive pedagogy, which is now being applied nationally. She also serves as Vice Chairperson of the Board of Directors of AONTAS and is a member of the HEA Anti-Racism Advisory Committee and the National SpeakOut Advisory Committee.

Performance



Eddie Winston

Eddie Winston is an emerging artist. He is a soulful, and inspiring, singer-songwriter from Ballymun, Dublin. Following a hard-fought journey to break free from addiction after 25 years He crafts a unique blend of folk and contemporary sound, pairing acoustic guitar with lyrics that confront serious issues like homelessness, addiction, and loss. His songs to date combine diverse musical influences with powerful social commentary, and his honest and raw storytelling speaks to the struggles of life and the resilience needed to overcome them. He has performed at Dublin's Simon Communities Big Busk alongside Glen Hansard, Imelda May, TRM, Dermot Kennedy and in The Helix with Mary Black, Shobsy, Mary Coughlan, Angeline Ball alongside the RTE Orchestra.

Official Opening



Fiona O'Byrne

Fiona O'Byrne is Assistant Secretary at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, where she leads policy and strategy for Further Education, Apprenticeship, and Skills. Her career spans public service, the private sector and the non-profit sector, including roles in analytics, and consultancy.

Launch of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* 2025

Launch of the 2025 special edition of *The Adult Learner*: Challenging Racism and Creating a More Inclusive Society, with editor Rosemary Moreland and contributing authors, presented in the fast-paced Gasta format led by Dr Tom Farrelly.



Dr Tom Farrelly, Gasta Master, Host

Dr. Tom Farrelly, an Academic Developer/Senior Lecturer at Munster Technological University (MTU), brings over twenty-five years' experience across higher and further education. His credentials include both a Doctorate in Education (following a thesis on the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) by lifelong learners) and an MEd in Adult and Community Education, reflecting his diverse pedagogical expertise. His key research areas include Digital Education, the impact of Generative AI on learning, and championing Open Access publishing. Describing himself as a 'critical technophile,' his work actively promotes effective digital teaching and learning strategies. He is also the originator of the popular, rapid-fire Gasta presentation style, which has been widely adopted for dynamic academic engagement. He is dedicated to supporting the transition and success of non-traditional learners in higher education, notably the Irish Traveller communities and international students. He also serves as a co-chair of MTU's Human Research Ethics Committee.



Dr Rosemary Moreland, Editor of *The Adult Learner*

Our current editor, Dr Rosemary Moreland, has worked at Ulster University since 1994 in the field of adult education and community development. She is Senior Lecturer and Subject Lead for Community Development and co-ordinates the Post-Graduate Social Work and Community Development Approaches programme. A Trustee of the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland, her research interests include examining barriers to adult education; widening access and participation in higher education; and exploring the interfaces between community development and social work. She has published widely in these areas in national and international peer-reviewed journals, as well as contributing book chapters.



Kevin McCabe

Kevin McCabe works as an Adult Education Information Officer for the Adult Education Service in North County Dublin. He has professional experiences of education in both Ireland and the UK and holds a Master of Science in Education and Training Management (Leadership) from Dublin City University. His research interests are adult education, Further Education and Training (FET) policy, and making lifelong learning accessible to adults from all backgrounds.



Fergus Craddock

Fergus Craddock has worked in adult and community education and social inclusion for over 20 years, formerly as the Education Programmes Coordinator in the Dublin Northwest Partnership to his current role as Inclusion Manager with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). He has a particular interest in the transformative effect participation in adult and community education can have on learners, families, communities and broader society by providing a voice to those who feel powerless, especially in communities which have been left under-resourced and marginalised. Fergus holds a Master of Arts in Adult and Community Education, a Postgraduate Diploma in Criminological Studies, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Innovation in Social Enterprise.



Fionnaigh Connaughton-O'Connor

Fionnaigh Connaughton-O'Connor has worked for over 20 years in Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) as an adult literacy tutor, tutor trainer, and most recently as their voter education co-ordinator. She works for DALC who provide targeted adult and community education to people in the North Inner City. Fionnaigh has previously been involved in projects for National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), such as literacy publications, webinars, and prison education. She continues delivering training in voter education, creating resources along with the DALC team for their website and organising their annual Voter Voices conference.



Anne Foster

Anne Foster teaches adults with the City of Dublin ETB across subjects including STEM, climate, and sustainability. She holds postgraduate qualifications in sustainability, development, and education with a focus on diversity and inclusion. With a background in community development and organisational management, she has authored government reports on social development programmes. Over a career spanning more than 35 years, she has designed curricula and courses, initiated adult education programmes, and tutored for the University of Wales and Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University Dublin). She is a member of Adult Education Tutors Organisation and serves on the Teachers Union of Ireland's Adult Education Tutor sub-committee.



Eleanor Neff

Eleanor Neff is a lecturer in the Literacy Development Centre (LDC) at South East Technological University. She has worked in adult education for over 24 years, 17 of those focused on adult literacy. Her experience as an Education and Training Board educator includes designing and delivering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), literacy, and family literacy courses. In 2020, Eleanor worked with the Distance Learning team at the National Adult Literacy Agency before joining the LDC in 2021. She currently serves on the Board of Management of National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), and chairs their Education, Training and Assessment Committee. Eleanor is also a member of the Kerry Regional Adult Literacy Coalition.

Keynote Address: Popular Education in Historical and Contemporary Practice

This presentation will provide an overview of the concept of ‘popular education’ as gleaned from various initiatives from different parts of the world. Special reference will be made to ‘Southern’ Europe and Latin America. Colossal figures such as Antonio Gramsci, Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire will be cited. The intergenerational aspect of popular education is underlined owing to economic imperatives (children working in the fields during daylight time) and non availability of nearby schools and dangers of commuting to them. The historical,revolutionary connections with this type of holistic education is underlined with reference to the Spanish Second Republic in Spain and more recently Cuba, Nicaragua, Grenada and transitional (revolution of the Carnations) Portugal. Reference to key concepts such as praxis, to be distinguished from ordinary practice and Gramsci’s conjunctural analysis will be made. Projects would here include Naming the Moment in Toronto and contemporary popular schools in the Rome area, Italy.



Professor Peter Mayo, University of Malta

Peter Mayo is Professor and UNESCO Chair in Global Adult Education at the University of Malta and Honorary Professor at the University of Nottingham. At present, he is ranked as GPS Scholar top 0.5% for Lifelong Learning, Pedagogy. Founding Editor of Postcolonial Directions in Education, Editor of Convergence. An International Adult Education Journal which he revived from its moratorium and Special Issues Editor of Journal of Further & Higher Education (Routledge). Edits the book series International Issues in Adult Education (De Gruyter-Brill), Postcolonial Studies in Education (Co- Editor, Palgrave-Macmillan) and Critical Education (Bloomsbury Academic). Inducted into International Adult Continuing Education Hall of Fame (2019). Produced 28 books, the latest being the single authored Culture, Power and Education. Representation, Interpretation, Contestation (Routledge, 2025) and ‘Southern’ Europe and Beyond in the Mediterranean. Critical Essays on Adult Learning and Education (De Gruyter-Brill, in press).

Learner Spotlight



Chidiogo Blessing Ebeledike, AONTAS Board Member

My name is Chidiogo Blessing Ebeledike. A passionate advocate for learners Voice. I’m dedicated in ensuring that fellow students are heard and supported. I have served on the Tipperary Student Council for two years and now currently pursuing a level 5 qualification in Culinary Arts at DIFE. Recently, became a student representative on Aontas Board where I’m opportune to work alongside great advocates to foster inclusion and empowerment within the Learning community.

Workshop 1: Equality in Apprenticeships, Learning, and Work

What is needed to ensure a level playing field for all learners seeking to undertake apprenticeships or work placements? This panel brings together practitioners from across the island to discuss how best to ensure equality in apprenticeships, learning and work.



Dr Mary Quirke, Griffith College

Dr. Mary Quirke is a guidance counsellor, researcher, and educator with a strong commitment to inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and equitable career transitions. Holding a PhD from Trinity College Dublin, her research led to the development of Universal Design for Guidance (UDG), which emphasises designing for diversity from the outset. Mary's career spans policy, practice, and research across Further and Higher Education, vocational training, and workplace inclusion. As Assistant Director of AHEAD, she helped establish the pioneering WAM programme for graduates with disabilities. More recently, she has led national SOLAS-commissioned studies on disability and ESOL learning, ensuring learner voices remain central. She is the author of *Adopting a UDL Attitude within Academia* (Routledge) and continues to collaborate with educators, policymakers, and advocacy groups. She works closely with the Irish Deaf Society, Guide Dogs Ireland, AslAm, and others to promote inclusive, evidence-based approaches to guidance and education. Mary has now commenced as a full-time Lecturer with Griffith College in the new School of Psychology.



Bridget Kelly, National Traveller Policy Co-ordinator for Traveller Employment and Enterprise with the Irish Traveller Movement

Bridget Kelly is the National Traveller Policy Co-ordinator for Traveller Employment and Enterprise with the Irish Traveller Movement. In this role, she leads policy development and advocacy to improve employment and enterprise opportunities for Travellers, working closely with stakeholders at both national and community levels. Bridget previously managed the Traveller Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme (TAIP) and continues to provide oversight and strategic guidance to its ongoing work. She has also completed several pieces of research, with a strong focus on labour market equality and addressing the systemic barriers that Travellers face in accessing meaningful employment. Bridget is passionate about creating pathways that promote fairness, opportunity, and inclusion for the Traveller community & all in the world of work.



Damian Duffy, Interim Principal and Chief Executive, Belfast Metropolitan College

Damian Duffy was appointed Interim Principal and Chief Executive in August 2024. A graduate in European Business with Post-Graduate Qualifications in Economic Development, Technology and Public Management, Damian has been involved in working for the public sector in the UK, Northern Ireland, and Europe for over 30 years. Damian has taken the lead on a variety of functions across the College including Curriculum Development, Business Innovation, Skills and Apprenticeships, Learner Services, Prison Learning, Estates and Digital Services. Damian has previously been a member of Strategic Advisory Forum on the reform of youth training and apprenticeships. He is currently Chair of BRCD Skills and Employability Board which supports a capital investment of £850 million. As Co-Chair of Belfast Economy Board he has been closely involved in developing inclusive approaches to employment in the city. Damian has recently completed research on skills ecosystems in Northern Ireland and Ireland and is keen to further develop collaboration.



Anne Gaskin Roe, Apprenticeship Development Manager, ESB Networks

Anne Gaskin Roe Has 35 year experience in ESB Networks, she currently holds the role of Apprenticeship Development Manager, bringing a unique blend of craft experience and strategic HR expertise to champion inclusive and impactful apprenticeship programmes. Since stepping into this role in November 2024, Anne continues to led initiatives that significantly increased female participation in apprenticeships. With over 7 years as a HR Business Partner, she has a proven track record in talent management, stakeholder engagement, and driving data-informed HR strategies that align with business goals. Anne is a collaborative leader, known for fostering strong relationships, promoting safety culture, and delivering measurable results. Her passion for equity in education and development is evident in her leadership of the TY Programme for female students and her recognition by the National Apprenticeship Office in 2023 for outstanding contribution to apprenticeship.

Workshop 2: Anti-racism with Dignity Partnership

This workshop explores practical approaches to anti-racism and how we can build more inclusive communities. Dignity Partnership supports new communities in Ireland through skills development and access to services, breaking barriers to social inclusion and empowering people to reach their potential.



Rosemary Kunene, Founder, Dignity Partnership

After overcoming the challenges associated with information poverty, Rosemary is a dedicated social entrepreneur and experienced community organiser who promotes inclusion through non-formal education programs aimed at addressing information poverty and facilitating meaningful integration for individuals from refugee and migrant backgrounds within Irish society. She holds an MSc in Cooperatives and Social Enterprise and a BA in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development. Rosemary is passionate about community empowerment and participation.

Workshop 3: Storytelling for Connecting Communities

This workshop explores the method of storytelling and digital storytelling as ways to foster social inclusion, cohesion and empathy in communities.



Larisa Sioneriu, AONTAS Projects Coordinator

Larisa is the European Projects Coordinator at AONTAS. She has over ten years of experience in coordinating, developing and facilitating adult education projects in Ireland and overseas. Throughout her work, she has explored extensively the method of storytelling as way of fostering meaningful educational experiences.



Aisling Meyler, AONTAS Research Officer

Aisling is a research officer with AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation. Aisling supports the Head of Research in the delivery of all National FET Learner Forum events, developing reports, delivering and analysing large-scale mixed-methods data. Aisling also supports new learner research initiatives, providing an evidence-base to support AONTAS's advocacy work. She leads the AONTAS Community Education Against Disinformation project. She has a background in the community and voluntary sector and is passionate about peer led initiatives. She loves martial arts and playing music.

Panel: Strengthening Communities through Community Education

How can community education transform lives and break cycles of disadvantage across generations? This panel explores how learning in the community empowers people to shape their futures, foster belonging and active citizenship, and build stronger, more inclusive communities.



Liliana Fernandez, Leadership Officer, National Women's Council, *Panel Host*

Liliana is a migrant activist originally from Venezuela, living in Ireland since 2013. She is deeply passionate about equal representation of minority groups in Irish politics. Liliana directs National Voter Registration Day, educating and empowering minorities to engage with the Irish political system. Fernández trains migrants, asylum seekers and disabled groups on the Irish political system, and mentors migrant women running in local elections. As leadership officer at the National Women's Council, she leads campaigns to promote women's leadership and representation, advancing inclusivity in Irish politics. Liliana has been listed as one of Ireland's rising stars and new talents by the Irish Independent in 2025.



Dearbhail Lawless, AONTAS CEO

Dearbháil is the Chief Executive Officer of AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation. Dearbháil is a passionate advocate and educator who has taught in community, further and higher education. Dearbháil is the Vice-President of the European Association for the Education of Adults, and a Board member of SOLAS, D8 Community Education Centre, and Coalition 2030. In 2022, she received a Dublin City University Alumni Award, and she was previously shortlisted for Excellence in Academic Teaching. She believes that adult learning is the greatest tool for creating positive social change.



Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin, President, Conradh na Gaeilge; Activist, Glór na Móna & Dream Dearg

Rugadh agus tógadh Ciarán i mBéal Feirste, áit a bhfuair sé oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge ar dtús i mBunscoil Phobal Feirste agus ar Mheánscoil Feirste (Coláiste Feirste) ina dhiaidh sin. Chaith Ciarán seal ag teagasc i nGaelscoileanna Bhéal Feirste agus ag obair le grúpaí teanga éagsúla sa chathair. Chaith sé 5 bhliain ag obair mar Bhainisteoir Abhcóideachta le Conradh na Gaeilge nuair a d'oscail siad oifig i mBéal Feirste agus is urlabhraí agus ball gníomhach don Dream Dearg go fóill é. Le déanaí ceapadh Ciarán mar Chomh-ordaitheoir Pleanála Teanga le Fís an Phobail, in Iarthar Bhéal Feirste. Ar bhonn pearsanta, bhí baint ag Ciarán le bunú roinnt tionscadail teanga ó thuaidh, ina measc Fóram na nÓg, Glór na Móna agus Laochra Loch Lao CLG. Is Cathaoirleach é ar Fóram na nÓg agus Laochra Loch Lao faoi láthair. Is cathaoirleach é ar Bhunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh chomh maith.

Ciarán was born and raised in West Belfast, where he was among the first generation to receive education from nursery to post-primary through the medium of Irish. Ciarán spent some years teaching within the Irish-medium sector and working for other language projects in the city. He managed the first office of Conradh na Gaeilge in the north as Advocacy Manager for five years from 2014 and he is a spokesperson and active member of An Dream Dearg since its foundation. In 2022, Ciarán was appointed language planning coordinator with Fís an Phobail, developing and delivering a language plan for West Belfast. In a personal capacity, Ciarán has helped establish some key Irish language initiatives including Glór na Móna, Fóram na nÓg and Laochra Loch Lao CLG. He is the current chair of Fóram na nÓg and Laochra Loch Lao CLG and in February 2025, Ciarán was elected as the first Belfast born President of Conradh na Gaeilge in over 30 years.



Philomena Abulu Obasi, Educator, Diversity and Inclusion Consultant

Philomena Obasi (B. A. (Ed.), MPA, MBA, HDip FE, GYW/GCE, SDG Advocate) – Cultural Diversity/Inclusion Consultant, Anti-Racist Facilitator/Design, INAR/ITM. Ireland is an increasingly multicultural society. Philomena is an experienced facilitator of discussions on racism and inclusive learning/working spaces. She facilitates adult and youth groups in integrating an understanding of diversity and interculturalism. She also works with young people from minority backgrounds through leadership and mentoring programmes. She is a registered member of The Teaching Council of Ireland.



Vivienne Glanville, National Programme Coordinator for Women's Collective Ireland

Vivienne Glanville is National Programme Co ordinator for Women's Collective Ireland (WCI) who work directly with women experiencing disadvantage, through 17 Grassroots Women's Community Development Projects and a National structure. Their mission is to support grassroots women through collective and practical actions to achieve their full human rights and true equality. Women's Collective Ireland work directly with grassroots women, to build women's confidence and self-esteem through Feminist Community Education. Vivienne works on the design and delivery of national programme development strategies in support of the organisation's strategic and implementation plans. Vivienne held a previous position with the organisation as local Coordinator in Ronanstown, Clondalkin for 14 years. Vivienne has over 20 years' experience working in the area of women's human rights in the community sector in a voluntary and professional capacity. Vivienne is passionate about community initiatives which support the development of women and women's engagement in civil society. She believes in women's community education as a catalyst for change. Vivienne holds an MA in Women, Gender and Social Justice (UCD). Vivienne strongly believes that women's voices, particularly those of marginalised, socially excluded, minority and working-class women, must be included in all areas of decision making; to result in meaningful change and gender equality.



BECOME A MEMBER

We have your back.

If you are working with adult learners or returning to learning yourself as an adult, becoming an AONTAS member is for you.

We have been advocating for adult learning since 1969 and we are deeply committed to amplifying learner voice, widening participation in education and increasing inclusion and social justice across the island of Ireland.

We have a vibrant community of **over 470 members**, connecting **over 850 people committed to adult learning**. Our members come from many types of organisations and backgrounds.

These include:

- Community and voluntary organisations
- Statutory organisations
- Adult learners and tutors
- Nongovernmental organisations.





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

Whether you are a small, medium, or large organisation or an individual who is committed to quality access to adult learning, social justice, and supporting social inclusion, we would love to welcome you to our community.

There are sustainable membership tiers for all groups. Connect with our Membership team for details.

With AONTAS Membership you get:

- Access to AONTAS events and webinars
- Access to the Community Education Network if you work in community education
- Access to the AONTAS Members Hub
- Opportunities to influence policy at local, national, and European levels
- The support of our Communications, Impact and Engagement, Advocacy and Policy, and Research teams.

Become an AONTAS member today!

membership.aontas.com



SAVE THE DATE:

THE ADULT LEARNERS' FESTIVAL 2026 2ND - 6TH MARCH



Looking back on the 2025 festival:

Thanks so much to everyone who joined us for this year's Adult Learners' Festival, which celebrated "Connecting Communities".

The adult and community education sector came together to hold **149 events** across **26 counties** this year! There were coffee mornings, yoga classes, cultural tours and so much more!

The theme was inspired by the significant social challenges in our society and the recognition that a culture of care has not been prioritised by policymakers and politicians in Irish society.

Education is political. In challenging times, adult and community education has the power to change minds and change lives – for the better. This 2025 Adult Learners' Festival explored how to keep people connected and to strengthen our communities. We face challenges in our society at the moment, and

some issues are framed to intentionally divide us. But adult learning brings people together, it helps us to ask questions and examine the world around us. Adult and community education is a path forward, for us all. It is a bridge between the past, present, and future, a way to unite people and show the ties that bind. Through adult and community education, we are Learning Together and Living Together, and there is a place for everyone.

Register your event and be a part of the 2026 festival!



Let's celebrate adult learning together!

We want to promote the work you're doing in adult and community education, and make learning accessible to everyone. **We reach about 5 million people every year across all our channels.**

We are encouraging all our members and those working in adult and community education to run taster sessions, meet-and-greets, coffee mornings, or other events to bring learners and potential learners together during this week.

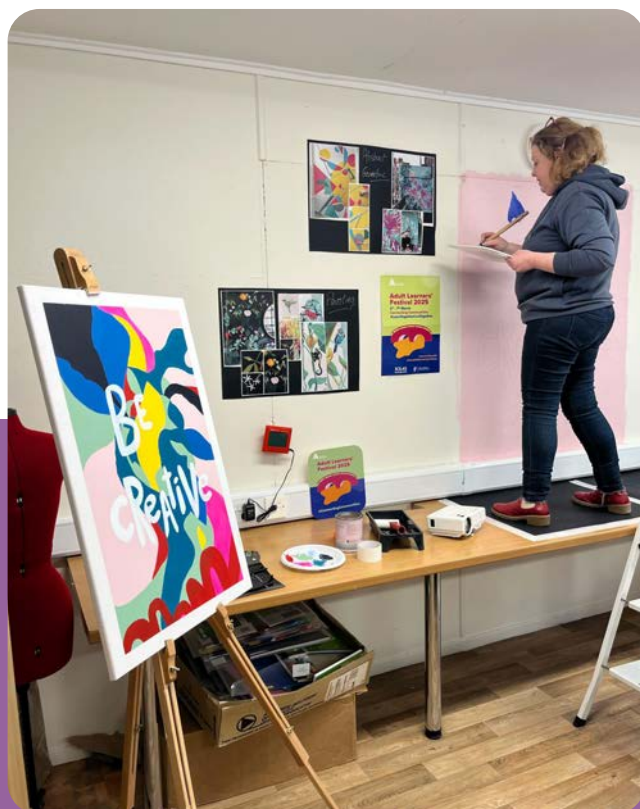
Our team will be out and about attending as many events as we can during the week of the Adult Learners' Festival. The AONTAS team will highlight your work on our social media channels.

Get involved and make the upcoming festival the most impactful yet!

We're here to help

From planning your event to promoting it locally and nationally, AONTAS is here to support you every step of the way. Keep an eye on our website for resources and promotional tools to help you make the most of the festival and highlight the value of adult learning in your community.

Reach out to communications@aontas.com to find out how we can help you get involved and make your event shine!



adultlearnersfestival.ie

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