

Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs' Consultation on Priorities for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union

AONTAS - the National Coordinator
for the New European Agenda on
Adult Learning

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AONTAS Priorities for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union:

Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs' Consultation

About AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the transformative impact of adult learning on individuals and society. We represent a diverse, community-based membership network across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research, campaigns, and policy recommendations, ensuring that our work reflects real needs and drives social change.

Background to this Submission

AONTAS is the national coordinator for the [New European Agenda for Adult Learning \(NEAAL\) 2021-2030](#). The main objective of the next programme cycle in 2026, Futures in Focus: Strengthening Adult Learning for a Changing World is to place adult learning at the centre of a future European Society that is inclusive, just, and democratic. This can only be achieved by cross-sectoral collaboration between policy and practice.

AONTAS' role as National Coordinator of the NEAAL programme positions us a key resource to promote this programme in collaboration with key stakeholders during the EU presidency. We strongly urge the Department of Foreign Affairs to actively engage with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to champion Ireland's leadership in upholding the core values of the European Union while promoting adult learning during our tenure holding the EU Presidency.

Recommendation 1: High-level thematic priorities for the Presidency of the Council in 2026?

Ireland's Presidency of the EU in 2026 must put education, and especially adult learning, at the heart of its agenda. Adult learning is the foundation of inclusion, democratic resilience, and sustainability, all of which underpin Europe's competitiveness. It is a strategic lever to advance key policy objectives across many domains. The recognition of the value of adult learning in the objectives for the Presidency is not just an economic necessity but a social and democratic imperative.

The integral importance of adult learning to the themes proposed by the Community and Voluntary Pillar are outlined below:

Theme 1: Strengthening the Vision of a Social Europe

- **Adult learning is a social right** under [Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) and [Principle 1](#) of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). Ensuring access to lifelong learning is essential for tackling poverty and social exclusion.

- **Upskilling and reskilling for disadvantaged groups** including migrants, older adults, and low-income workers, supports income adequacy and employability, reducing reliance on minimum income supports.
- **Education as social infrastructure:** Investment in adult learning, alongside housing, childcare and health, creates inclusive pathways for participation in economic, social, and cultural life.

Theme 2: Enhancing Civil Society Participation and Deepening Democracy

- **Adult learning fosters democratic resilience**: Citizenship education and critical thinking skills help counter disinformation and strengthen civic engagement, aligning with initiatives like the Democracy Shield and the EU Civil Society Strategy.
- **Inclusive governance requires inclusive learning**: Adult learning empowers marginalised communities to engage in policy dialogue, ensuring their voices shape EU decisions.
- **Community-based learning models and participatory structures** (e.g., [the AONTAS National FET Learner Forum](#)) exemplify participatory education that builds trust and social cohesion.
- **Global Citizenship Education**: In today's globalised and interdependent, interconnected world, citizenship has a global dimension. A focus on Global Citizenship Education can ensure that people are informed, aware and empowered to act on pressing social issues to support more just, peaceful, secure, sustainable, tolerant and inclusive societies.

Theme 3: Renewed Emphasis on a Just Transition

- **Skills for sustainability**: Adult learning equips workers and communities for green and digital transitions, reducing vulnerability during economic restructuring.
- **Lifelong learning as a climate and social justice tool**: Education enables informed participation in sustainability initiatives and supports equitable access to new opportunities in the green economy.
- **SDG alignment**: Promoting lifelong learning (SDG 4) underpins progress on other SDGs, reinforcing Ireland's proposed Presidency theme of "Delivering the SDGs: A Sustainable Europe for Future Generations."

Recommendation 2 – Key policy and legislative areas for the Irish Presidency of the Council in 2026.

1. Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

Ireland should prioritise advancing the **New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) 2021–2030**, which emphasises governance, accessibility, quality, and inclusion. AONTAS are the National Coordinators for NEAAL and are positioned to help drive action on this policy area.

Policy and legislative proposals linked to the [European Skills Agenda \(2020\)](#), including **Upskilling Pathways**, [Individual Learning Accounts](#), and [Micro-credentials](#), should be actively progressed.

Driving progress on these key policy and legislative areas aligns with Ireland's track record of leadership in the field of education, and a global vision of learning as a tool for social transformation rather than solely economic competitiveness.

Aim: Strengthen and position adult learning as a driver of social cohesion and democratic participation. Ireland should advocate for increased investment in lifelong learning and ensure that marginalised groups, migrants, older adults, and low-skilled workers, are prioritised in EU funding and policy frameworks.

2. Democratic Citizenship and Civic Education

EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law, and Consumer Protection, Michael McGrath, has played a pivotal role in advancing initiatives like the [Democracy Shield](#). The rise of populism and democratic backsliding across Europe highlights the urgent need for education that nurtures democratic values. Ireland should position its EU Presidency to champion the [Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education \(Council of Europe, 2010\)](#) as a guiding framework for adult learning on this theme. While not legally binding, its principles offer a powerful foundation for shaping Council conclusions or resolutions during Ireland's term.

Aim: Secure Council endorsement for integrating democratic and civic education into adult learning strategies. This could include a declaration linking lifelong learning to the **European Democracy Shield** initiative, reinforcing education's role in combating disinformation and promoting active citizenship.

3. Social Inclusion and Cohesion

Ireland's Presidency should frame adult learning within the broader EU agenda on social fairness and resilience. Legislative proposals under the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, particularly Principle 1 on lifelong learning, should be highlighted. Ireland can leverage its unique position as a high-growth economy to advocate for inclusive education policies that address structural barriers faced by disadvantaged groups.

Aim: Push for measurable targets on participation by marginalised populations in EU Council conclusions, ensuring that the 60% adult learning participation goal by 2030 is met equitably across member states.

4. Skills for Green and Digital Transitions

Action 6 of [the European Skills Agenda](#) and the [Digital Action Plan](#) provide a key basis for action in the forthcoming Presidency. The [Union of Skills](#) initiative and the [Action Plan on Basic Skills](#) provide legislative pathways for Ireland to advance a skills agenda that balances competitiveness with inclusion. Ireland should ensure that these proposals incorporate non-formal and community education models, reflecting a vision of education for social transformation.

Aim: Advocate for flexible, learner-centred approaches, and recognition of non-formal learning, within EU policy frameworks.

Recommendation 3 – Ensuring positive impact for people, businesses and communities across the EU.

1. Convene an Informal Council Meeting on Adult Learning and Skills

Action: As Ireland’s national coordinator for the **New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL)**, AONTAS, working in collaboration with DFHERIS and the Department of Foreign Affairs, has an opportunity to take on a leadership role. Under NEAAL, action is urgently needed to increase participation in adult learning in all its forms (formal, non-formal, and informal) whether to acquire new work skills, foster active citizenship, or support personal development and fulfilment.

Convening a **dedicated informal meeting under the Irish Presidency** could bring together representatives from the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO), the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (EYCS), the wider network of National NEAAL coordinators, and other key sectoral stakeholders to share information and identify areas for collaboration.

Such an initiative would build on the priorities of previous EU Presidencies, reinforce Ireland’s commitment to collaboration in adult education and skills development, and position lifelong learning as a central pillar of Europe’s social and economic resilience.

Purpose: Showcase Ireland’s leadership in promoting inclusive education and align discussions with the **New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL)** and **European Skills Agenda**.

Outcome: Secure Council conclusions committing to increased investment in adult learning and recognition of non-formal learning pathways.

2. Launch a Presidency Declaration on Education for Democracy

Action: Issue a joint declaration linking adult education to democratic resilience, referencing the **Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education** and the **European Democracy Shield** initiative. Leverage Commissioner McGrath’s leadership and work in this area.

Purpose: Position education as a tool to combat disinformation and strengthen civic engagement across member states.

Outcome: Establish a framework for integrating democratic and civic education into EU lifelong learning strategies.

3. Advocate for an EU Action Plan on Inclusive Upskilling

Action: Propose an EU-wide action plan under the **European Pillar of Social Rights** to close participation gaps for marginalised groups (migrants, older adults, low-skilled workers). This initiative would mainstream the learning from the EU project; PartnerUp: Upskilling Pathways into EU policy. Literacy learning can be a key feature of this action.

Purpose: Ensure that the 60% adult learning participation target by 2030 is met equitably,

with measurable indicators for marginalised populations.

Outcome: Embed social inclusion as a core principle in EU skills and education legislation, reinforcing Ireland's commitment to cohesion and fairness.

Recommendation 4 – Communicating the values and benefits of EU membership to citizens and creating a sense of ownership amongst citizens over Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU

The [Programme for Government \(2025\)](#) points out the need to *“bring some of the high-level meetings of our Presidency to cities and counties across Ireland, ensuring the entire country benefits from the profile the Presidency brings.”*

Ireland's 2026 Presidency is a unique opportunity to strengthen public understanding of EU membership and foster a sense of shared responsibility. The approach should combine **clear messaging, inclusive engagement, and visible impact**.

However, the Presidency is not just a government event, **it's a national moment to reaffirm Ireland's role in shaping a democratic, inclusive, and competitive Europe**. By framing the Presidency as a shared project, Ireland can turn EU policy into a story of citizen empowerment. Understanding the benefits of EU membership and the value of the Irish Presidency in 2026, is a matter of adult learning- AONTAS stands ready to support the DFA in this task.

Outreach and Engagement

- Collaborate with organisations like **AONTAS**, and **other sectoral stakeholders** to co-host events and amplify messaging.
- Engage NGOs, and community leaders as ambassadors for EU values.
- Link Erasmus+ **Key Action 1** activities which focuses on **Learning Mobility of Individuals** to the promotion of knowledge sharing as part of presidency activities.

Use Education and Civic Engagement as Anchors

- **Link to Democratic Education:** Tie messaging to initiatives like the **European Democracy Shield** and the **Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship**, emphasising education's role in combating disinformation and strengthening democracy.
- **Link to Education for Sustainable Development:** Link in with projects such as Saolta, a global citizenship education strategic partnership programme for the adult and community education sector in Ireland. This will promote the role of adult education in supporting awareness and generating solutions to the challenges of a just transition.
- **Community Learning:** Develop Presidency-themed learning resources for adult education centres, reinforcing EU values and Ireland's leadership role. This should be linked to projects that use European funding to drive inclusion and innovation.

- **Regional Inclusion:** Organise Presidency-linked events across Ireland, not just Dublin, to ensure nationwide visibility

Leverage Digital and Media Campaigns

- **Storytelling Campaigns:** Share real stories of Irish citizens benefiting from EU education programs (e.g., Erasmus+, AONTAS Learners as Leaders programme).
- **Engage AONTAS Learners as Leaders participants as campaign ambassadors:** Develop their capacity through learning opportunities.
- **Social Media Engagement:** Use hashtags like **#IrelandInEurope** and **#EU2026Presidency** to encourage dialogue and visibility.
- **Emphasise EU Principles:** Highlight democracy, human rights, social fairness, and solidarity as core EU values. Link these to tangible benefits, peace, mobility, economic stability, and rights protections. Use relatable examples such as Erasmus+, inclusion, and digital rights to show how EU decisions affect citizens positively.

Demonstrate Impact

- Partner with organisations like AONTAS, Leargas, Saolta and others to communicate clear outcomes from Presidency initiatives, such as progress on adult learning, skills for green/digital transitions, and democratic participation.
- Publish progress and success stories to show how Ireland's leadership benefits citizens and strengthens the EU.

5. Relevance to Current Council Strategic Priorities

Across Europe, Ireland is seen as a leader in education. The Presidency offers us the opportunity to focus attention on the power of adult learning to create positive social change and tackle our most pressing challenges. By focusing on adult learning, democratic citizenship, social inclusion, and skills for future transitions, Ireland can use its Presidency to position education as a cornerstone of a democratic, cohesive, and competitive Europe.

Currently, participation in lifelong learning across Europe falls significantly short of the 60% target, and remains deeply stratified along socio-economic lines. This gap threatens not only individual opportunity but also the collective resilience and competitiveness of the European Union.

We strongly urge the Department of Foreign Affairs to actively engage with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to champion Ireland's leadership in upholding the core values of the European Union while promoting adult learning. Strategic collaboration with the adult education sector is essential to:

- Promote best practice across Europe
- Drive innovation in lifelong learning
- Respond effectively to shared policy priorities

Integrating the recommendations in this document directly contributes to the EU's strategic pillars:

- **A free and democratic Europe**
 - strengthening democratic resilience and debate
 - protecting free and pluralistic media and civil society
 - upholding the UN Charter and promoting global peace, justice and stability
- **A strong and secure Europe**
 - strengthening resilience, preparedness, crisis prevention and response capacities to protect citizens and societies against different crises, such as natural disasters and health emergencies
- **A prosperous and competitive Europe**
 - the green and digital transitions, including a genuine energy union and investment in game-changing digital technologies in Europe
 - investment in skills, training and education

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The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS,
The National Adult Learning Organisation
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6
D06 E0H1

01 406 8220
mail@aontas.com
www.aontas.com

Chy. Reg. 6719
Co. Reg. 80958
RCN 20013042

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