



The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS Pre-Budget 2027 Submission: Investment Where It Matters Most

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About AONTAS

Founded in 1969, AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland. Backed by our robust research and focused community engagement, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We do this work on behalf of our members and adult learners who inform our research and campaigns for social change across the island of Ireland.

Executive Summary

At AONTAS, we advocate for adult and community education as a tool for social justice and equality. In a time of deepening cost-of-living pressures, increasing hostility toward vulnerable groups, and rapid changes in how we live and work, adult education builds the knowledge, skills, and resilience people need to participate fully in society. We are calling on the Government to **prioritise those furthest behind first** in Budget 2027.

Investment in adult education is essential if the Government is to deliver on its ambitions for inclusive social and economic development. Realising *Programme for Government 2025* commitments to lifelong learning, skills development and equal opportunity requires meaningful change in how adult learning, and learners, are funded and supported (Government of Ireland, 2025a).

Community education is one of the most cost-effective tools the Government has for reaching adults furthest from education, employment and essential services. It delivers measurable outcomes across the priorities of multiple departments, from poverty reduction and public health to equality, integration and community development. Yet it remains chronically underfunded relative to its reach. Approximately one in five Further Education and Training (FET) learners access learning through community education, with many facing significant barriers to participation. Without adequate investment in both provision and learner supports, those with the most to gain are the least likely to benefit.

Budget 2026 was a step in the right direction, with the SOLAS FET allocation increasing by 4% to €1.1 billion. But there is further to go if adult education is to achieve parity of esteem with higher education. Without further investment, access to lifelong learning will be shaped by a person's socio-economic background, with a risk that some people will be left behind (SOLAS, 2026a).

Five Asks for an Inclusive FET Sector

Ask 1: Invest in FET to Realise Goals of Inclusion and Skills Development

Investment	€59.62 million , a modest increase of 5.5% .
Impact	224,676 FET learners benefitting while creating an inclusive, resilient society that can adapt to social and digital transitions.

Ask 2: Ringfenced, Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education

Investment	An annual increase of €3.5 million over four consecutive budget years , to bring funding levels up from €21.7m to €35m (3.2% of total FET budget).
Impact	Community education expanded to reach beyond current 45,438 learners . Sector stability, with capacity to develop and maintain programmes that support inclusion, cohesion, literacy, and skills development .

Ask 3: Reform Learner Supports and introduce a FET Learner Assistance Fund

Investment	<p>Increase learner allowances by 16.4% including BTEA (€5.98 million), VTOS (€5.01 million), Community Employment (€47.56 million), and BTEI (€24.36 million).</p> <p>Increase supplementary allowances by 55.1% (€9.71 million).</p> <p>Implement a FET Learner Assistance Fund (€5.56 million).</p>
Impact	<p>Approximately 75,000 FET learners (1 in 3) are unemployed; many will benefit hugely from the removal of financial barriers and introduction of support that meets their needs.</p> <p>Ensuring learners have adequate support reduces costs to the exchequer over time.</p>

Ask 4: Extend the Fund for Learners with Disabilities across All FET Provisions

Investment	Increase total allocation from €5.7 million to €19.1 million over a four-year budget cycle (approx. €3.5 million per year).
Impact	<p>People with disabilities have an at-risk-of-poverty rate of 76% when the costs of disability are accounted for (DFI, 2026).</p> <p>Creating conditions for success in FET and transitions to employment.</p>

Ask 5: Allocate Funds to a Shared Island Community Education Fund Pilot

Investment	€500,000 for a pilot that will build and develop an all-island community education ecosystem.
Impact	100,000 community education learners engaged across the island. Progress Government commitments to strengthen collaboration while contributing to cross-border skills infrastructure (Government of Ireland, 2025c).

Context: What Has Changed Since Budget 2026?

Rising Poverty

The *Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (published March 2026) shows the at-risk-of-poverty rate rose from 11.7% to 12.6% and would have reached 14.9% without cost-of-living supports that are no longer in place. Consistent poverty stands at 4.7% nationally but **18.1% for unemployed people, 13.9% for those unable to work due to long-standing health problems, 12.2% for renters, and 7.8% for children aged 0 to 17**. These are precisely the groups community education serves, offering pathways into further education and employment that reduce the risk of poverty (CSO, 2026a).

A New Statutory Cost on Providers

Pension auto-enrolment (My Future Fund) commenced on 1 January 2026. **Employers now contribute 1.5% of gross pay for eligible employees, rising on a phased basis to 6% by year 10 of the scheme** (Government of Ireland, 2024). AONTAS supports pension coverage for community education staff, who have long experienced precarious conditions. However, for small providers on fixed, annually confirmed grants, an unfunded statutory cost increase directly affects already stretched budgets.

Continued Funding Insecurity

AONTAS members report having no confirmation of their grant agreement until the second quarter of each year. This uncertain, unstable funding environment has consistently emerged as a key concern of the sector in research (Mcgrath & Fitzsimons, 2019; Cobain et al., 2021; Cobain & Jackson, 2025). No service can recruit, retain staff, or plan learner provision in a context of financial instability. Multi-annual funding commitments are standard practice in other State-funded social services and should apply equally to community education. This will support reduced administrative burdens within ETBs and provide stability for the sector.



Budget 2027 Asks

Ask 1:

Invest in FET to Realise Goals of Inclusion and Skills Development

Increase the FET sector’s funding allocation by €59.62 million (5.4%) to support 224,676 FET learners and the delivery of key policy objectives in the next budgetary cycle.

In Budget 2026, the Skills Development allocation remained essentially flat, with an overall reduction of €704,000. Within this, capital funding was reduced to support current day-to-day spending, a structural choice that prioritises immediate costs over long-term investment capacity (Government of Ireland, 2025a, p. 208). The current allocation of €676.1 million to Skills Development represents approximately 18% of the total DFHERIS budget.

This allocation does not reflect the scale of opportunity that the FET sector delivers for learners and society. In 2025, FET supported **224,676 learners, representing 44.6% of total tertiary enrolments in Ireland**, with approximately 18% of DFHERIS funding. Higher education, by comparison, supported 278,880 learners (55.4% of tertiary enrolments) in the 2024-2025 academic year, yet received 70.09% of the total DFHERIS budget (Government of Ireland, 2025b; HEA, 2025a). Given the capacity of the sector to support skills development and resilience in the face of ever-evolving social challenges, this funding allocation must be reconsidered to give the sector the parity of esteem it deserves (SOLAS, 2026b).

Programme	2025 Current (€000)	2025 Capital (€000)	2025 Total (€000)	2026 Current (€000)	2026 Capital (€000)	2026 Total (€000)	Change %
A: Skills Development	569,813	107,000	676,813	583,109	93,000	676,109	0% (flat)
B: Higher Education	2,250,732	245,801	2,496,533	2,418,890	234,000	2,652,890	+6%
C: Research, Innovation and Science	46,113	342,219	388,332	48,209	408,000	456,209	+17%
Gross Total	2,866,658	695,020	3,561,678	3,050,208	735,000	3,785,208	+6%

Table 1: DFHERIS Voted Expenditure Budget 2026; Source: Budget 2026 Expenditure Report 2026 p. 208, Vote 45.

Nonetheless, the 4% increased allocation to SOLAS for the delivery of FET in Budget 2026 was a welcome measure. Continuing to increase this allocation by 5.4% (€59.62 million) is a modest investment that can support the expansion of pathways for marginalised groups, strengthen regional and community-based provision, and enable the sector to respond to the green and digital transitions (OECD, 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025; Gallagher et al., 2025).

Ask 2:**Ringfenced, Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education**

Establish a ringfenced Community Education Fund, with an increase in annual allocations of €3.5 million over four consecutive years. This will increase the allocation to community education to €35 million (3.2% of the FET budget). Funding should be allocated to organisations on a multi-annual basis to support stability, strategic planning, and sustained impact. This investment should also provide for an explicit uplift to meet additional statutory employer costs, including pension auto-enrolment contributions.

Community education is a vital part of the adult learning landscape, supporting 45,438 learners. This rich and vibrant sector is made up of grass-roots independent organisations, built by communities, for communities, to meet their needs in holistic and responsive ways. It is distinguished by its accessibility: provision is local, often free, and wraps practical and personal supports around learning. It reaches adults that mainstream provision does not: people with unfinished formal education, lone parents, people with disabilities, migrants, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, older adults, carers, and people living in consistent poverty (Cobain et al., 2021; Doody, 2021; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

The breadth of provision is significant, as are the outcomes it produces. Community education supports adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills; English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); accredited learning from National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 1 to 5; collaborative tertiary programmes; inclusive formats for diverse learners; sustainability, health, and wellbeing programmes; civic and democratic education; arts and creative learning; and progression pathways into further and higher education and employment. The need for the opportunities provided by the sector cannot be understated:

- Around one in five adults (approx. 20%) in Ireland have unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs (Government of Ireland, 2021; OECD, 2024). Community education is an essential part of the delivery infrastructure through which the *Adult Literacy for Life* strategy reaches these adults.
- Education is one of the strongest predictors of escaping poverty. CSO SILC data consistently show that the risk of poverty falls sharply with educational attainment (CSO, 2026). For people with negative prior experiences of education, community education is an accessible entry point.
- Investment in adult literacy generates a measurable economic return. Adjusted for cumulative consumer price inflation since initial analysis in 2009, each additional level on the NFQ is associated with an estimated annual income gain of €4,900 for the learner and €1,970 for the exchequer, reflecting reduced welfare transfers and increased tax receipts (NALA, 2009; CSO, 2026b).
- Beyond economic returns, community education builds social cohesion, civic engagement, confidence, and wellbeing in communities experiencing fragmentation, isolation and growing distrust in institutions (Connolly, 2010; BEEP, 2024; Kitching & Lathrop, 2024; Meyler et al., 2024; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

However, community education funding flows through broader FET allocations in which it is neither visible nor protected. Despite accounting for 20% of all FET learners, community education received just 2% of the overall FET budget. In 2025, community education received an overall increase of 0.93%, rising from €21.5 million to €21.7 million overall. However, the Reach Fund allocation dropped by 6.56% (from €5.03 million to €4.7 million), amid challenges around application timelines, and organisations administration of funds within programme cycles and wider funding constraints.

To address the challenge of funding insecurity, Budget 2027 must commit to increase and ringfence the overall allocation by 38% to €35 million over the coming years. This will address the rising costs of operations, fair resourcing of personnel, and programme planning and development that can help the sector to realise policy objectives. An annual increase of €3.5 million represents approximately a 16% uplift on current funding levels and will achieve this objective within four years.

Ringfencing this funding is crucially important. First, it ends the cycle of year-on-year uncertainty that prevents providers from retaining staff and planning provision. Second, it makes visible the real cost of delivering community education, in grass roots projects which is obscured under current funding models. Third, it ensures that auto-enrolment, a welcome social policy, is not effectively financed by cutting learner places (McGrath & Fitzsimons, 2019; Cobain & Jackson, 2025;).

Protecting community education with its own budget line is vital to ensure that the social return is realised.



Ask 3:**Reform Learner Financial Supports and Introduce a Learner Assistance Fund**

Increase full-time learner supports by 16.4% including BTEA (€5.98 million), VTOS (€5.01 million), BTEI (€24.36 million), and CE Schemes (€47.56 million). Increase supplementary allowances by 55.1% (€9.71 million). Implement a Learner Assistance Fund at a cost of €5.56 million.

Budget 2027 must deliver on the expenditure and policy analysis of learner supports committed to in the *Budget 2026 Expenditure Report* (Government of Ireland 2026b p. 90). AONTAS calls on the DSP and DFHERIS to act on that commitment to achieve concrete reform across four areas:

- Increase core learner income supports by 16.4% (e.g. BTEA, VTOS, CE, and BTEI) to address income shortfalls, in a context of rising costs-of living standardise rates across schemes (DFHERIS, 2025; CSO, 2026a; Social Justice Ireland, 2026).
- Increase all supplementary allowances (meals, travel, and accommodation) by 55.1% to restore their real 2002 value, at an estimated cost of €9.71 million (DFHERIS, 2025).
- Raise income thresholds and update means tests and eligibility requirements to reflect current cost-of-living realities, in line with the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Means Testing (2024) and the Programme for Government (2025) commitment to review cliff edges in income supports.
- Introduce a Learner Assistance Fund of €5.56 million for all FET learners, equivalent to the Student Assistance Fund available to higher education students, to address acute hardship and prevent dropout.

Income inadequacy remains a challenge for many households and learners dependent on social welfare (CSO, 2026a; Social Justice Ireland, 2026; Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2026). Financial barriers are the most consistently reported obstacle to FET participation across three years of AONTAS Learner Voice research. The *AONTAS Learner Voices Across Ireland Report 2024-2025* found that 24% of all learners surveyed said their financial situation affected their ability to learn (Farrell et al., 2025).

For this reason, we are requesting a 16.4% uplift in learner allowances based on Social Justice Ireland's (2026) formula of benchmarking core social welfare rates at 27.5% of average weekly earnings to ensure income adequacy. Using the most recent CSO Earnings and Labour Costs data (2026b), average weekly earnings stand at €1,074.61. Applying the 27.5% benchmark to current welfare rates yields a minimum adequate social welfare rate of €295.52 per week, an increase of €41.52 per week for BTEA, VTOS, and BTEI, and €46.99 per week for CE schemes.

Supplementary allowances for meals, travel, and accommodation have not been increased since 2002. The Consumer Price Index has risen by 55.1% over the same period (DFHERIS, 2025). The current meal allowance of €0.80 per day and accommodation allowance of €69.90 per week represent a real terms cut of more than half its original value. Learners described attending on an empty stomach to save money, hitchhiking to college as their only transport option, and inadequate support for transport costs when travelling over distances (Farrell et al., 2025).

In the context of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, it is important to highlight that there is no equivalent to the higher education Student Assistance Fund for FET learners. The ask for a Learner Assistance Fund for FET is costed on an estimated 15% of full-time FET learners requiring support at an average award of €558 per learner, based on DFHERIS methodology (DFHERIS, 2024). This fund should be designed to offer responsive financial assistance during times of acute need, which undermines learners' ability to stay in education (Meyler et al., 2024).

A recent *Funding the Future* options paper (DFHERIS, 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 PLC learners needing support over the course of their studies, at a cost of €558 per learner on average. AONTAS recommends that this assistance fund pilot be made available to all full-time learners across the wider FET sector. 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, 2025b).

Full-time FET Learner Enrolments 2023/2024 (28.9 % of 230,007 total learners) (SOLAS, 2025b)	66,472
Estimated learners requiring support (15%)	9,971
Estimated average award per student (based on DFHERIS estimates)	€558
Total Allocation to Learner Assistance Fund Required	€5,563,818

Table 2: Costings for Learner Assistance Fund; Source: DFHERIS Cost of Education Paper, 2025.

Ask 4:**Extend the Fund for Learners with Disabilities Across All FET**

Increase the total allocation from €5.7 million to €19.1 million over a four-year budget cycle (approx. €3.5 million per year) so that all learners with disabilities can access support no matter which programme they attend.

In 2024, 15,528 FET learners reported having at least one disability, representing 6.8% of all FET enrolments (SOLAS, 2025a). Given that 22% of the Irish population has a disability (CSO, 2022), this figure is likely a significant undercount, reflecting barriers to disclosure and identification that are themselves evidence of a system not yet fully adapted to this cohort's needs (Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters, 2025).

The programme breakdown provided in the *This is FET: Learners with Disabilities 2024* report (SOLAS, 2025a) reveals a structural inequity in how support is currently allocated. Community education and adult literacy together account for 7,703 learners with disabilities (approximately half of all disabled FET learners), yet access to the Fund for Learners with Disabilities is targeted at PLC provision, which accounts for just 2,263 learners (14.6% of the cohort). This means that the majority of disabled FET learners are in programmes that remain outside the full scope of the fund.

These learners are also among the most economically vulnerable. In 2024, 32.7% of FET learners with disabilities were unemployed on entry, and a further 22.3% were inactive for other reasons. Fewer than one in five were in employment (SOLAS, 2025a). This group is therefore disproportionately reliant on social welfare payments that fall short of meeting the costs of disability, now estimated at €488 to €555 per week (Disability Federation of Ireland, 2026), while also bearing the direct costs of FET participation estimated at €1,112 per month (Indecon, 2022).

Investing in support for these learners is of utmost importance. The SOLAS FET Learners with Disabilities report (2025a) records a certification rate of 74.6% and a completion rate of 92% for this cohort. No learner should face barriers to participating FET, especially when evidence shows disabled learners face acute levels of educational disadvantage. Educational attainment levels of people with disabilities are lower than the general population. The percentage of people with disabilities over 15 years of age who leave education after primary level is 14.4%, which is nearly double the general population's rate of 7.4% (CSO, 2022).

These are the learners that FET reaches, and AONTAS research highlights the value of participation for this group. When it comes to positive outcomes, 66% of learners with disabilities reported an increase in self-confidence during their course, and 52% reported an increased positive outlook on the future (Farrell et al., 2025).

This ask is directly aligned with three Government priorities. Under Pillar 1 of the *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030*, the Government has committed to progressively realising an inclusive education system for all learners. The *Creating Futures FET Strategy 2026-2030* identifies widening participation among learners facing the greatest barriers as a central objective (SOLAS, 2026b). And the Programme for Government commits to inclusive education and equal opportunity as cross-cutting principles (Government of Ireland, 2025b). Extending the Fund for Learners with Disabilities to all FET provision types is the concrete, costed action that would give each of these commitments meaning for the 13,265 disabled FET learners currently outside its reach.

The following costing applies the per-learner rate implied by the current core Fund for Learners with Disabilities allocation to the full population of disabled FET learners, adjusted for delivery mode:

Cohort	Learners	Per-learner rate	Cost
PLC (existing allocation)	2,263	€2,519	€5,700,000
Other full-time provision	2,668	€2,519	€6,720,692
Part-time provision (25% pro-rata rate)	10,597	€630	€6,676,110
Total	15,528		€19,096,802

Table 3: FSD Allocation Costs; Sources: *This is FET Learners with Disabilities 2024* (SOLAS, 2025a); *This is FET Facts and Figures 2024* (SOLAS, 2025b). Per-learner rate calculated by AONTAS from these sources. The 25% part-time weighting reflects AONTAS' policy position.



Ask 5:**Allocate €500,000 per Year to a Shared Island Community Education Fund Pilot**

Budget 2027 can support the development of an all-island community education network that can reach 100,000 learners by allocating €500,000 per year to a Shared Island Community Education Fund Pilot.

Community education is uniquely positioned to bring people together across social, cultural, and community divides in spaces defined by trust, dialogue and co-created learning (Cobain et al., 2024). This format of learning has great potential for civic bridge-building across the island but requires Shared Island investment to realise the proven capacity of community education to deliver social cohesion outcomes, and support dialogue across the island of Ireland (Irwin, 2019; UNESCO, 2022; Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

The Shared Island initiative has made significant investments in cross-border cooperation: €40 million committed to the North South Research Programme (HEA, 2025b); over €50 million announced for 10 new Shared Island programmes in November 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2025c); almost €2 million to 64 community-based projects through the Shared Island Civic Society Fund in 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2025d); and €34.5 million in PEACEPLUS funding for shared learning (SEUPB, 2024). What is absent is any dedicated funding stream for all-island collaboration in adult and community education.

An annual allocation of €500,000 represents a modest and proportionate investment relative to existing Shared Island commitments, with the potential to deliver high-impact outcomes. The proposed pilot would strengthen practitioner networks to support structured cross-border collaboration, enable learner exchange, and drive joint curriculum development, while building a robust shared evidence base across the community education sector. This investment directly advances the core objectives of the Shared Island Initiative and aligns clearly with Programme for Government 2025 commitments to deepen all-island cooperation, strengthen communities, and support inclusive lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 2025b).



Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

Expenditure decisions in Budget 2027 are essentially equality decisions. Section 42 of the *Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014* places a positive obligation on all public bodies, in the performance of their functions, to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and treatment, and protect the human rights of those to whom they provide services. Community education is essential to the achievement of the Public Sector Duty throughout the wider FET sector. It is a gateway into education and inclusion, demonstrably reaching groups across the nine equality grounds, in addition to those who experience the greatest educational and socio-economic disadvantage. A budget that leaves learners furthest from the education system facing financial barriers, and community education underfunded, is a budget in which the Public Sector Duty is weakest exactly where it is needed most. The table below provides examples reflecting the diversity of learners supported by the sector.

PSD Target Group	Evidence of Need	What Community Education Provides	AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) Example
Unemployed people and women	For unemployed people, there is a consistent poverty rate of 18.1%, the highest of any economic status group (CSO, 2026a). One parent households and older adults living alone face deep income inadequacy (CSO, 2026a; VMR, 2026).	Accessible re-entry routes to learning without the prerequisites, costs, or formality that can exclude this group from mainstream provision.	<u>Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed</u> : Shaping Futures (LTI) programme supports learners to take up employment or progress on to further education. <u>Women's Collective Ireland</u> : Provide courses such as Financial Literacy and "Skills for Her Future" for women.
Disabled people and people with long-term health conditions	Consistent poverty rate of 13.9% among those unable to work due to long-standing health problems (CSO, 2026).	Flexible, local, supported provision; assistive technology and universal design for learning, where funded.	<u>Blue Teapot Theatre Company</u> : Provides arts-based education for people with disabilities that challenges narratives around intellectual disability and nurtures learners' talents.
Lone parents	Lone parent households consistently record among the highest deprivation and poverty risk rates in SILC (CSO, 2026).	Local provision compatible with caring responsibilities; childcare as an enabling support.	<u>One Family</u> : Provides adult education and training to people parenting alone or sharing parenting, including the New Steps and New Futures programmes, which support progression to education and employment.
Children in poverty	Consistent poverty rate of 7.8% among children aged 0 to 17 (CSO, 2026).	Family learning and parental education is an important lever for children's outcomes.	<u>Dorás Buí</u> : Provides social support and informal programmes that support the wellbeing of lone parents and vulnerable families to build resilience and economic independence.

PSD Target Group	Evidence of Need	What Community Education Provides	AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) Example
People in rented and insecure housing	Consistent poverty rate of 12.2% for renters against 1.4% for owner-occupiers (CSO, 2026).	Free and low-cost local provision that remains accessible to households with limited disposable income.	<u>Cork Simon & CETB:</u> The “Great to Train” (GTT) initiative, funded by Cork Education and Training Board and led by Cork Simon Community, focuses on building personal and work-related skills for individuals accessing homeless services.
Travellers and Roma	Profound, well-documented educational inequality and labour market exclusion across national equality data.	Community-based, culturally appropriate provision built on trust; often the only educational setting engaged with.	<u>Exchange House:</u> Provides a wide range of accredited and non-accredited learning programmes, from adult basic education to senior citizen learning that supports progression and wellbeing.
Migrants and people in the International Protection System	Language is the gateway barrier to employment, services, and integration.	ESOL and integration provision embedded in local communities.	<u>Welcome English:</u> Provides social support and ESOL classes to support migrant communities and learners in the international protection system.
Adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs	A substantial minority of adults score at the lowest literacy and numeracy levels (OECD, 2024).	The primary delivery infrastructure of the <i>Adult Literacy for Life</i> strategy.	<u>Dublin Adult Learning Centre:</u> Provides basic adult education courses covering literacy, numeracy, and digital skills.
Older adults	Social exclusion, isolation, and loss of independence are key challenges facing older people in Ireland.	Digital skills, civic participation, and wellbeing programmes that sustain independence and connection.	<u>Age & Opportunity:</u> Engage Programme offers courses and workshops promoting personal development, community collaboration, and active citizenship.

Conclusion

Budget 2027 is an opportunity to meet existing Government commitments. Each ask in this submission is costed, evidence-based, and mapped to the departments and national policy frameworks it serves, and to the groups protected under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (Section 42, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, 2014).

Equality of access is the foundation of this submission. The learners who rely on community education and adult literacy are disproportionately drawn from groups that experience the greatest barriers to participation in public life: people with disabilities; Travellers and Roma; older adults; people with low levels of formal education; lone parents; migrants; and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty places a legal obligation on public bodies to have regard to equality and human rights in the performance of their functions. For DFHERIS and DSP, that obligation is not met by policy statements alone. It requires that funding decisions reflect the needs of those furthest from education and employment, not simply those easiest to reach.

This is also a question of value for public money. No single department captures the full return on investment delivered by community education, and this is precisely why it is persistently underfunded. The costs sit in one department's vote, while the benefits accrue across health, housing, employment, social protection, equality, and community development. Community education reduces reliance on social welfare, improves health outcomes, builds civic participation, and supports social cohesion (NALA, 2009; McGuinness et al., 2016; Cobain & Jackson, 2025; Gallagher et al., 2025;). A funding model that recognises only the education cost, while ignoring the wider social dividend, systematically undervalues the sector and underserves the people who depend on it.

Budget 2027 should therefore treat community education as the cross-cutting investment in people, communities, and places that it is. DFHERIS should be recognised as the lead funder, with explicit acknowledgement of the sector's role in cross-government policy delivery. The asks in this submission are not requests for additional spending in isolation; they are the minimum investment required to deliver on equality commitments that the Government has already made, to the people those commitments were made for.

AONTAS and our members would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission with Government officials and public representatives.

Appendix 1: Scheme Rates, Enrolments, and Projected Budget 2027 Uplift Costings

The 16.4% uplift is derived from the Social Justice Ireland's (2026) formula of benchmarking core social welfare rates at 27.5% of average weekly earnings to ensure income adequacy. Using the most recent CSO Earnings and Labour Costs data (2026b), average weekly earnings stand at €1,074.61. Applying the 27.5% benchmark yields a minimum adequate social welfare rate of €295.52 per week, which is an increase of €41.52 per week for BTEA, BTEI, and VTOS, and €46.99 for CE schemes.

Scheme	Administering Dept.	Enrolments 2024	Current Weekly Rate (2026)	+16.4% Weekly Increase	Uplifted Weekly Rate	Payment Weeks	Est. Annual Cost of Uplift
BTEA Back to Education Allowance	DSP: rate mirrors qualifying payment	<u>3,697</u> PQ, 11 June 2025	<u>€254.00</u> Max Jobseekers Allowance (JA) rate, Jan 2026	+€41.52	€295.52	39 weeks Academic year only	€5.98m 3,697 x €41.52 x 39 wks.
VTOS Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme	DFHERIS: Allowance paid at max JA rate	<u>3,098</u> SOLAS FET Facts 2024	<u>€254.00</u> Max JA rate, Jan 2026	+€41.52	€295.52	39 weeks Academic year only	€5.01m 3,098 x €41.52 x 39 wks.
CE Community Employment	DSP: Wage-based; €254 + €32.50 top-up	<u>19,463</u> DSP Annual Stats 2024 (p.25)	<u>€286.50</u> Min. rate, Jan 2026 (€254 + €32.50)	+€46.99	€333.49	52 weeks Year-round	€47.56m 19,463 x €46.99 x 52 wks.
BTEI Back to Education Initiative (part-time)	DSP: Participants retain core SW payment.	<u>22,579</u> SOLAS FET Facts 2024	<u>€254.00</u> Max JA rate, Jan 2026	+€41.52	€295.52	26 weeks Part-time est. ¹	€24.36m 22,579 x €41.52 x 26 wks.
Total estimated cost of income support uplifts (excluding Hardship Fund and supplementary allowances)							€82.91m

¹ Estimated programme duration to indicate potential costs pending confirmation from ETBs.

Appendix 2: Distribution of FET Learners with Disabilities

Programme	Delivery Mode	Learners with Disability	% of Disabled FET Learners in Programme
PLC	Full-time	2,263	14.6%
Youthreach	Full-time	980	6.3%
Specialist Training Providers	Full-time	806	5.2%
Specific Skills Training	Full-time	501	3.2%
Community Training Centres	Full-time	352	2.3%
VTOS Core	Full-time	274	1.8%
Other Full-Time Programmes	Full-time	832	5.4%
Full-Time Subtotal		5,008	32.3%
Adult Literacy Tuition	Part-time	3,947	25.4%
Community Education	Part-time	3,756	24.2%
BTEI Groups	Part-time	1,729	11.1%
ESOL	Part-time	1,269	8.2%
Evening Training	Part-time	378	2.4%
Other Part-Time Programmes	Part-time	385	2.5%
Part-Time Subtotal		11,464	73.8%
Skills to Advance	Part-time and Full-time	326	2.1%
Total (Unique Learners)		15,528	100%

Note: Learners are unique within programmes but not necessarily across programmes; programme-level subtotals therefore exceed the unique total of 15,528 (SOLAS, 2025a).

Appendix 3: A Whole-of-Government Investment

Department	Policy frameworks served	How community education delivers	AONTAS Asks
Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) / SOLAS	FET Strategy 2026-2030 (Creating Futures); Adult Literacy for Life (2021); Community Education Framework (2024); Forthcoming Tertiary Strategy.	Core delivery infrastructure for NFQ Levels 1 to 5, literacy, lifelong learning; supports participation of target groups and access routes into tertiary education.	1, 2, 3, 4
Social Protection	Roadmap for Social Inclusion (2026-2030); Pathways to Work (2026-2030); link between social protection rates and training allowances.	Education is among the strongest routes out of poverty; community education reaches adults furthest from the labour market; financial supports promote participation.	3, 4
Health	Healthy Ireland Framework and its successor; Forthcoming Drugs Strategy.	Health literacy programmes, mental health and wellbeing provision, and community settings for health promotion and social prescribing referral.	1, 2
Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht	Our Rural Future Successor; Addressing gaps in lifelong learning in rural Ireland (OECD, 2026); Successor to the Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy.	Community education organisations are anchor institutions in disadvantaged and rural communities, sustaining participation and volunteering, while offering programmes that support policy goals.	1
Children, Disability and Equality	National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 Pillar 1; National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028.	Targeted, accessible provision for disabled learners, Travellers and Roma, and other groups across the nine equality grounds.	2, 4
Justice, Home Affairs and Migration	Forthcoming Migrant Integration Strategy (due 2026).	ESOL and integration-focused community provision: the first and often only educational contact point for migrants and people in the protection system.	1, 2
Taoiseach (Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office; Shared Island Unit)	Whole-of-government child poverty commitments. Shared Island objectives.	SILC 2025 records consistent poverty of 7.8% among children; supporting parents into learning and improving household income directly serves child poverty goals. Community education has a role to play in developing cross-border lifelong learning and skills initiatives, in addition to fostering dialogue and cohesion.	3, 4, 5

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