AONTAS

The Voice of Adult Learning

Adult Education in the Next EU Budget: 2028-2034

AONTAS,
The National Adult Learning Organisation

Co-funded by the European Union

Adult Learning in the Next European Budget

An opportunity for Ireland to progress EU policy goals through adult learning

AONTAS are the National Coordinator for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) in Ireland. NEAAL is a policy programme which aims to support adult learning across Europe. This paper makes the case for protecting adult learning funding in the next European Budget. AONTAS have consulted with the NEAAL Project Advisory Group in developing this paper.

Summary of Recommendations

Adult learning must be protected and supported in the next European Budget 2028-2034 - the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The chart below summarises our key recommendations for relevant programmes to ensure that it delivers on its value for Ireland, and wider European policy objectives.

Programme	Recommendation	Value to EU Policy Goals
Erasmus+	- Restore the budget allocation to Erasmus+ to at least the Commission's originally proposed envelope of €40.8 billion, defending it against the proposed cut of 4.1% (the box offers €39.165 billion). - Establish a distinct, protected adult education allocation within Erasmus+, with adult education allocations made explicit and protected in the regulation and guidance.	***Competitiveness and values****:* delivers the Union of Skills and civic participation through an existing, proven programme.
ESF+ within the NRPPs	- Protect the social floor spending allocation at 14% within the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), with distinct earmarking for funding streams including adult education. This will prevent competition for funding between different policy priorities, and sectors within the national plans. - Transparent reporting of expenditure and participation in adult learning within these instruments, to ensure the delivery of social objectives outlined in policy. - Structured involvement of learners and civil society in the development of the NRPP to support the development of responsive budgets and plans that meet the holistic needs of society.	***Values and delivery:*** strengthens existing systems, keeps social goals visible and makes what reaches adult learners transparent. Learner and civil society involvement reflects the Irish Presidency's emphasis on democratic participation.
NEAAL	- Protect and promote the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) as a driver of innovation through collaboration across funding mechanisms, to ensure continuity of the project. - This should include a protected line for national coordination of NEAAL in relevant budgets.	***Innovation and continuity:*** keeps adult learning joined up across funding mechanisms, so that progress under NEAAL is sustained
PEACEPLUS	- The current proposal reduces PEACEPLUS from €235 million to €150 million, representing a 36% reduction. - Restore the PEACEPLUS allocation to its previous level of funding under the 2021-2027 MFF programme, in light of the funding crisis for the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.	***Values and security:*** peace, reconciliation and social cohesion on the island.

1. Introduction

The programme for the Irish European Presidency emphasises the resilience of democracies, European values, and skills and competences for the AI era (Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2026). Adult learning is a delivery route for each pillar, including competitiveness, resilience and security by supporting the development of skills and competencies. It promotes social cohesion and European values by bringing communities together during a time when democracy is under increasingly pressure across Europe (Nord et al., 2026). At the same time Europeans continue to see a need for greater cooperation and solidarity to face shared challenges (European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2025). Failing to protect adult education in the next MFF will be a missed opportunity to achieve this goal.

The Council of the European Union itself has acknowledged the importance of adult learning, and in the New European Agenda for Adult Learning it sets out clearly what adult learning is, and the value it delivers for the wider economic and social project of the European Union:

> ***'It is crucial to address the future positively by working on the basis of adult learning needs and having in place formal, nonformal and informal learning opportunities capable of providing all the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to create an inclusive, sustainable, socially just and more resilient Europe.'*** (Council of the European Union, 2021: 1)

It adds that, as an important part of lifelong learning, adult learning 'can contribute to making economies and societies stronger and more resilient', and that people need 'the necessary conditions ... to be agents of change through the choices they make' (Council of the European Union, 2021).

However, the capacity of adult education to act as a policy lever for these goals is potentially affected by changes to funding instruments and a reduction in budget allocations. The Irish Presidency's European Budget proposal (called a 'negotiating box') was released on October 10th and reduces the next eight-year EU budget by 8% (Council of the European Union, 2026). These proposed cuts interact with the restructuring of the four programmes that sustain adult education. Action is needed to protect the funding for adult education as a key lever and force multiplier for EU policy objectives. Our recommendations are presented in brief below.

AONTAS's Recommendations for the next MFF in brief:

1. **Erasmus+:** We recommend a distinct, protected adult education allocation within Erasmus+, and an envelope restored to at least the Commission's €40.8 billion.
2. **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+):** As this fund will now be delivered through National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) we recommend that the social floor spending allocation be protected at 14% with distinct earmarking for funding streams including adult education to support the monitoring of social objectives.
3. **New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL):** Protection and promotion of the importance of NEAAL as a driver of innovation through collaboration and ensure continuity of the project.
4. **PEACEPLUS:** Restoration of the allocation to €235 million, its previous level of funding under the 2021-2027 MFF programme in light of the funding crises for the community and voluntary in Northern Ireland.

2. The Restructure of Funding Instruments: Risk and Opportunities

The current seven year EU budget proposals for 2028-2034 include large scale programme restructuring and 'simplification'. These present a number of concerns for the status and support of adult learning within the next MFF. These include the achievement of social objectives previously supported in ESF+ plans, Erasmus+ programmes in adult learning programmes, and the PEACEPLUS funding reductions at time of increased need.

2.1 ESF+ and the National and Regional Partnership Plans

Recommendation: Ensure a minimum of 14% of funds within NRPPs are allocated to ESF programmes and goals" with distinct earmarking for funding streams including adult education to supporting the monitoring of social objectives.

The European Social Fund has been a key driver of adult education, and the failure to protect allocations in budget lines through the restructure of funding instruments poses risks (European Commission, n.d.a). It is clear that adult learning generates both private and public value, particularly for those at greatest risk of being left behind (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2025).

The Footprint of the European Social Fund in Ireland: Value in Practice

The importance of ESF+ funding to adult learning in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland cannot be underestimated. The Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training Programme (EIST), is Ireland's ESF+ programme for the 2021 to 2027 period. The Programme involves a total investment of over €1.08 billion; €508 million from the EU and €573 million from the Government of Ireland. Much of this funding directly supports learning for the adults and communities that were previously poorly served by formal education systems.

ESF+ Priority Area	Programmes Funded:
Priority 1 – Employment: Supports labour market training and activation measures for all job seekers with a particular focus on younger workers, the long-term unemployed and those underrepresented in the labour market, including people with a disability.	• ETB Training • JobsPlus • Back To Work Enterprise Allowance • Ability • Gender Equality
Priority 2 – Skills and Lifelong Learning: Supports increased access to inclusive education and training at all levels including through the enhanced provision of adult education and targeted support for learners from disadvantaged groups. Promote lifelong learning through support for upskilling and reskilling programmes in key sectors of the economy.	• Springboard+ • Human Capital Initiative • Skillnet • Early Education & Childcare Upskilling • PATH II – 1916 Bursary • Adult Literacy
Priority 3 – Social Inclusion: Provides targeted support for individuals at higher risk of social exclusion, to facilitate their active participation in society and improve employability. Support actions designed to further the personal and social development of those at risk of poverty or social exclusion, in particular young people and children.	• SICAP • Integration of Migrants • Youthreach • Youth Justice Services • Parent and Family Supports

Any cuts to these programmes as a result of funding instrument reform, and loss of protected budget lines would have deeply negative consequences for adult learners and adult educators in Ireland.

What ESF+ funded provision delivers

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is co-funded by the ESF, and its evaluations show what that investment delivers. An ESRI evaluation with a matched control group found that long-term unemployed people with a Leaving Certificate or below who received SICAP employment supports were about 18 percentage points more likely to progress into employment, measured at three to six months and driven mostly by one-to-one supports (Whelan et al., 2020). The benefits reach beyond employment. The review of SICAP over the period 2018-2023 reports that over 70,000 individuals and over 4,000 local community groups were supported to 2020, and a survey of 646 beneficiaries within the review found that 73% said their skills had really improved, 62% their confidence and 59% that the support had definitely helped them become more involved in their community (KPMG, 2024).

The same pattern is visible in further education and training. Through EIST, ETBs receive funding to deliver programmes in line with skills-based objectives, and adult learners themselves describe the value of this provision in terms that reach well beyond employment. In the 2025-26 National FET Learner Forum, which drew on 711 learners in 84 focus groups and 1,122 survey respondents across nine Education and Training Boards, 70% of survey respondents (n = 690/988) reported increased self-confidence after taking their course, and 54% (n = 535/988) reported a more positive outlook on the future. One Post Leaving Certificate learner said their course had “helped me believe in myself” (Farrell et al., 2026). Crucially, 31% (n = 305/988) reported an increased ability to enter employment. These findings are congruent with an earlier ETBI study: 96.6% of the 1,496 learners surveyed would recommend an ETB course, and learners reported personal (76.3%), educational (67.1%) and social (65.2%) benefits in addition to support for employment (32.8%) (Roe, 2021).

Taken together, these findings show that funding for adult learning delivers its returns in confidence, belonging and participation, as a precursor to labour market outcomes. This is particularly important to the socially disadvantaged groups supported in this sector, which is why it should be protected in clear, allocated budget lines within the social funding pots in the next NRPPs (Whelan et al., 2020).

Restructuring and the New National and Regional Partnership Plans

The proposed merger of programmes into a restructured and simplified funding pot to be delivered through nationally tailored NRPPs has both potential benefits and risks. There is much to be gained from implementing simplified funding structures and reduced administrative burden. This will support greater reduction in administrative burdens for those delivering and accessing EU funds and we welcome this development.

However, this new funding pot model merges several funding streams, including cohesion, agriculture, migration, social policy in addition to ESF+, and removes the previously ring-fenced, sector-specific budget lines (European Parliament Research Service, 2025). These changes can have implications for adult education programmes delivered through current ESF+ funding streams.

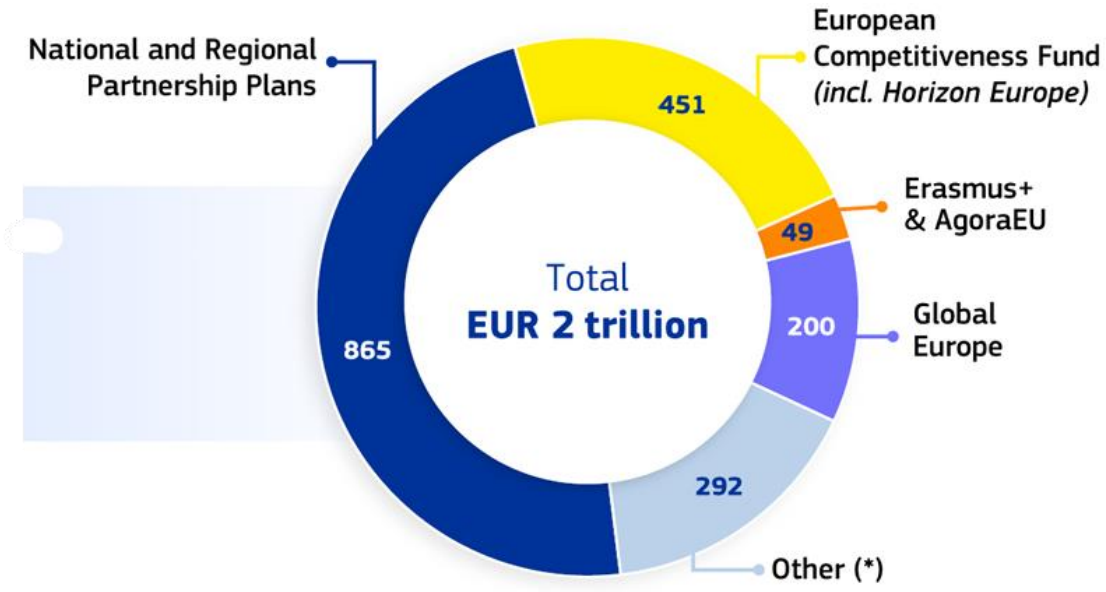


Figure 1 EC (2025) Original Proposal for MFF Restructuring & Funding Package from the European Commission

The Irish Presidency's recent 'negotiating box' keeps a 14% benchmark for social spending but applies it to "the global amount under the Fund", excluding minimum Common Agricultural Policy income supports and Common Fisheries Policy amounts, as well as Social Climate Fund financing. It also reduces the new Partnership Plans envelope by about 3.2% against the Commission's proposal (Council of the European Union, 2026). Previously, the ESF+ received EUR 95.1 billion from the EU budget in 2021-27 (European Commission, n.d.c), so the Commission's description of the 14% protection for 2028-2034 as at least €100 billion (European Commission, n.d.d) looks like a 5% increase but would actually be a fall in real terms due to inflation. With the overall package shrinking, adult education needs clear allocations in budget lines.

As 14% is only a benchmark, with no clear allocation to an ESF+ successor or adult learning, stakeholders have questioned whether funding will reach those who need it most after this new funding model is introduced (European Commission, 2025a; European Parliament Research Service, 2025). The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) has warned that the absence of earmarking risks blurring the objectives these programmes were designed for, whilst promoting competition between sectors for funds rather than collaboration. EAEA asks for "a transparent and structured estimation of the budget allocated to the ESF+" to address this issue (EAEA, 2025a). We echo this call for dedicated named ESF+ budget, with clear allocations for adult education within the NRPPs to support the realisation of its value for adult learners, and our wider European community.

2.2 Erasmus+

Recommendation: Establish a distinct, protected adult education allocation within Erasmus+, with adult education allocations made explicit in the regulation and guidance, and restore the budget to at least the Commission's proposed envelope of €40.8 billion. This will ensure equity of access to this important programme.

Adult education is a key component of Erasmus+, which the Commission calls "the backbone of the Union of Skills" (European Commission, n.d.b; EU Funds Ireland, n.d.). Mobility under the programme contributes to the development of shared European values and enhanced teaching practices (Léargas, 2026), and its impact on learners and educators is significant. Among learners surveyed after Erasmus+ mobility in 2021-2024, 100% reported increased self-confidence, independence and responsibility, 90% reported greater clarity about their personal and professional goals, 79% believed participation improved their chances of accessing their preferred course or training, and 60% believed it improved their employment prospects. Among staff, 80% reported a better understanding of the diversity of contemporary society and 70% a stronger commitment to addressing discrimination and intolerance. Democratic participation and civic engagement featured in 81% of projects, and 76% of organisations kept using project materials after the project ended (Léargas, 2026). The wider RIA-AE network report also highlights the role mobility plays in supporting the implementation of policy practices: across 15 countries, 44% of adult education organisations said the supported actions would not have happened without Erasmus+, although Ireland was not part of that first survey round (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024).

The delivery of this value is under threat. The Commission proposed an Erasmus+ budget of EUR 40.8 billion, integrating the European Solidarity Corps and sports-based objectives (European Commission, 2025b; European Parliament Legislative Observatory, 2025). The proposal also introduces a two-pillar structure and "European Education Pathways for Adults" and promises simplification through lump sums and simplified grant models, with particular attention to newcomers, NGOs and grassroots organisations (ACA, 2025). We welcome these steps and urge the Government to help ensure they are carried through.

However, the Irish Presidency's negotiating box reduces the envelope to €39.165 billion in current prices, €1.66 billion (4.1%) below the Commission's proposal (Council of the European Union, 2026). Because this figure combines previously separate programmes, it is not a like-for-like comparison with earlier Erasmus+ funding for education and training. The reduction poses two key risks to equity of access and to the realisation of Erasmus+ goals:

Adult education has no defined budget line. The two pillars are welcome, but adult education needs explicit protection within them. EAEA reports that adult education currently receives 5.8% of the education and training budget in Erasmus+, and calls for a minimum of 20% dedicated funding, together with investment in implementation structures, capacity building and community-based providers (EAEA, 2025b). The Committee of the Regions has likewise called for clear budget lines in Erasmus+ to avoid competition between education and training, youth and sport (Committee of the Regions, 2026).Without explicit allocations, adult education competes with larger, better-resourced sectors within the programme.

Adult learner mobility has no target. Adult learners take part in Erasmus+ mobility, but the Council's mobility benchmarks cover only Vocational Education and Training learners and higher education graduates. Even where targets exist, delivery lags: only three Member States have reached their VET learner mobility goals, against a Council target of 8% and an aim of 12% by 2030 (Cedefop, n.d.; Council of the European Union, 2024), and in Ireland only 0.1% of VET learners have had a mobility opportunity (Cedefop, n.d.). The higher education ambition is 23% (DAAD Brussels, 2025). Adult learners have no equivalent target, so there is nothing against which to judge whether they are being reached. They also face barriers that younger learners do not, including work and caring responsibilities, so they need to be

resourced and supported to participate (Léargas, 2026). We ask for a tracked mobility target for adult learners, and protected budget lines to fund it, in the next MFF.

2.3 The New European Agenda for Adult Learning

Recommendation: Protect and promote the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) as a driver of innovation through collaboration across funding mechanisms. This should include a protected line for national coordination of NEAAL in relevant budgets, to ensure continuity of the project.

NEAAL is the EU framework for adult learning to 2030, adopted by the Council in 2021. It sets a target of 60% of adults aged 25 to 64 in learning each year by 2030, and Member States put it into practice through National Coordinators (Council of the European Union, 2021). AONTAS has been Ireland's National Coordinator since 2014 (AONTAS, n.d.a), and national coordination has been funded through Erasmus+ (EACEA, n.d.; Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, 2023). It is a small line with a distinct function: it connects national policy and practice to the Commission and to other countries.

The value of that function is visible in what the Irish programme delivers. In 2024-2025 it ran 42 workshops against a target of 18, reaching 666 participants directly, and delivered Learner Voice training to 121 people in person and 37 online (AONTAS, 2026b). Its Project Advisory Group brings government, statutory bodies, ETBs, a literacy agency, a university and a trade union into one forum (AONTAS, n.d.b). AONTAS has secured the 2026-2027 project, Futures in Focus, which will deliver three educator programmes, two Summits and a Learners as Leaders cohort (AONTAS, 2026c).

The continuity of this work is not guaranteed in the next MFF. The Commission's Erasmus+ proposal does not name the Agenda or national coordinators; policy support sits under the second pillar and implementation arrangements are still to be worked out (ACA, 2025). The Agenda runs to 2030, so its final three years fall within the 2028-2034 MFF. The Council Resolution on the Agenda itself asks for continuous, regular funding rather than project-based subsidies, and for EU funds to support its implementation (Council of the European Union, 2021). A protected line for national coordination of NEAAL in the relevant budgets would keep faith with that commitment. Because it is a small line, protecting it asks little of the budget while securing the continuity of the national coordination function.

2.4 PEACEPLUS

Recommendation: Restore the PEACEPLUS allocation to €235 million, its previous level of funding under the 2021-2027 MFF programme. This is urgent in light of the funding crisis for the community and voluntary sector and for further education in Northern Ireland.

PEACEPLUS is a €1.14 billion partnership between the EU, the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, supporting peace and prosperity across Northern Ireland and the border counties, funded by the current MFF in 2021-2027. The Irish Presidency's proposal or 'negotiating box' has since named a line of €150 million for PEACEPLUS (Council of the European Union, 2026), a fall of 36% from the €235 million of EU funding allocated over 2021-27 (European Parliament, n.d.).

This reduction comes at the point of greatest need. In 2026, reductions to the UK Government's Local Growth Fund destabilised voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland that deliver learning, skills and employability programmes. These organisations support participation, confidence-building, skills

development and social cohesion, and the people facing the greatest barriers to education and employment could be further disadvantaged (AONTAS, 2026a).

The further education sector faces a parallel crisis. Northern Ireland's six further education colleges began 2026/27 without an agreed Executive budget, working within a contingency envelope capped at 94% of the 2025/26 baseline, which is a real-terms cut of 13%, or £33.1 million (AONTAS, 2026d). The reported impact is 7,748 fewer enrolments, including 2,681 at Belfast Met, and cuts to ESOL, essential skills in English, maths and IT, evening classes for adults and some community education programmes. Adult learners and newcomers rely most on this provision, in a region where the 2025 lifelong learning participation rate was 35%, against a UK average of 42% (AONTAS, 2026d).

Restoring PEACEPLUS to €235 million is therefore urgent. When funding is being withdrawn from community organisations and colleges at the same time, and officials themselves point to PEACEPLUS as the route forward, a 36% reduction in the programme narrows the one route that officials have identified. As an all-island instrument with a peace and reconciliation purpose (European Parliament, n.d.), a PEACEPLUS successor is one where the Government's leadership carries particular weight, and learners who live, learn or work across the border are among those most exposed (AONTAS, 2026d). We ask the Government to press for the restoration of the allocation to €235 million, for a specific allocation within it, and for explicit eligibility of community learning among the supported activities.

3. The Cost of not Acting

Failing to protect adult education has costs that do not disappear when budgets are cut. As the joint EAEA and AONTAS statement for the Irish Presidency puts it, "Cuts do not make needs disappear" (EAEA & AONTAS, 2026). Those needs reappear elsewhere, as skills shortages, unemployment, social exclusion and weaker democratic resilience. These costs fall unevenly across society. AONTAS research describes a Matthew Effect in which those who already have most education take up most lifelong learning opportunities (Meyler et al., 2023). This issue is echoed in international reports which highlight lack of participation in adult education for disadvantaged groups. The OECD found the largest participation gaps in lifelong learning along lines of skill proficiency, educational attainment and income (OECD, 2025). UNESCO also found that about 60% of reporting countries saw no improvement in participation by people with disabilities, migrants or prisoners (UNESCO, 2022). Overall, Europe remains far from its target of 60% of adults learning each year by 2030, and participation is still strongly shaped by socioeconomic background (EAEA & AONTAS, 2026). Adult education works against this tendency, by offering accessible pathways for learners who are furthest from education (European Commission, n.d.e).

What is at stake is the value that adult education delivers for the wider European project and goals. Competitiveness depends on adults furthest from education having access to the pathways that will give the skills they need to navigate digital and social transitions. Around a quarter of adults across OECD countries have low literacy or numeracy proficiency, and by July 2026 only 15.7% of the Draghi Report's recommendations had been fully implemented, with skills identified as a key barrier. Adult education opens pathways to skills for those most at risk of being left behind (EAEA & AONTAS, 2026).

Adult education also supports social cohesion, security and resilience. In an era of misinformation and democratic disengagement, adults need media and AI literacy to take part in civic life, while community-

based education builds spaces of trust where adults can learn in dialogue with others. The Irish Presidency's priorities of values and democracy, security and resilience, and competitiveness and delivery cannot be achieved without adult learning (EAEA & AONTAS, 2026). Adult education must be supported to deliver on that promise.

Conclusion

Magrath and Fitzsimons (2019) have described the difficulties community educators face as European and domestic funding policies shift. Without structural protection in budget lines, wider inclusion in lifelong learning initiatives funded by the EU is at risk. A clearer EU framework would help the Government deliver its own national goals on lifelong learning. The proposed Multiannual Financial Framework risks further weakening the delivery of programmes through reduced funding allocations, the removal of dedicated funding lines and insufficient safeguards for adult education within broader spending envelopes.

The evidence is clear that adult learning delivers significant benefits for individuals, communities and society, upholding European values and policy priorities through support for skills, civic participation and social inclusion. Maintaining the Commission's proposed funding levels to secure this value is crucial. This includes allocating a clearly identifiable share for adult learning within Erasmus+ and the National and Regional Partnership Plans, strengthening transparency and accountability through objective-based reporting, and ensuring meaningful participation of learners and civil society in decision-making. In light of funding challenges in Northern Ireland, PEACEPLUS allocations must be maintained in line with demonstrated need. These are not new ambitions, but practical measures grounded in existing EU commitments and evidence of impact. The decisions taken now will shape adult learning opportunities across Europe until 2034, therefore, sustained, visible and accessible investment in adult education must remain a central priority.

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