AONTAS
The Voice of Adult Learning

Getting to Learn: Removing Transport Barriers to Further Education and Training

Policy recommendations on Leap Card access, travel costs and transport planning

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Prepared by AONTAS with support from ETBI

The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) consistently demonstrates that transport is a structural barrier to Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. In response to this finding, AONTAS have collaborated with ETBI in gathering detailed information on barriers and solutions from nine ETBs. This paper outlines the barriers faced by learners and presents practical solutions to these challenges.

Key Recommendations:

Quick Win for 2026/2027:

Broaden Leap Card eligibility: Extend the Student Leap Card to all part-time FET learners regardless of age, with a simplified application process that addresses the specific barriers faced by those in the IPAS system.

New Initiative for Budget 2028:

Targeted transport supports for those who need them most: Establish dedicated financial supports for FET learners most affected by high travel costs, particularly those in rural areas.

Structural Change:

Align local transport with FET timetables: Increase the frequency and reach of rural services and align routes with course locations and class times through collaborative planning between ETBs, learner representatives, Local Link and local authorities, with ETB shuttle buses where necessary.

Impact of these changes:

- Over 100,000 part-time FET learners supported to access learning through discounted travel.
- Potential new adult learners reached and enabled to access courses.
- Retention improved with reduced course withdrawal due to transport barriers.
- Parity of support for FET learners compared to peers in higher education.

How big is this problem?

A significant number of FET learners are impacted by transport barriers, whether they are barriers to accessing Leaps Cards or financial challenges. The Young Adult TFI Leap Card is available for all 19 to 25 year olds and the Student Leap Card is only available for Students in full time (15+ hours) education/training. Of the 224,676 FET learners in 2025, **61.4% (137,951) were on part-time courses**, and **66.5% (149,410) were over 25 years old** when starting their course and not eligible for Young Person Leap Card. FET learners face significant financial challenges impacting ability to afford transport- **29.3% (65,831) of learners were unemployed before enrolment**, and of those, 48.1% (approximately 31,665) were long-term unemployed (SOLAS, 2026).

The National FET Learner Forum has consistently highlighted transport as a barrier over the last five years. In 2025-26 **the availability of public transport (37%) received one of the three lowest net satisfaction scores from Learner Forum participants.** For availability of public transport, 22% (n = 108/484) were dissatisfied over the period from 2025-2026 (Farrell et al., 2026).

These findings are corroborated by a recent AONTAS survey sent to ETB staff across Ireland in collaboration with ETBI. 13 respondents from 9 ETB areas highlighted a range of issues facing learners**. Severity appears to be influenced by a combination of geographic dispersal, availability of services, affordability, dependency on public transport and characteristics of the learner population**. ETB staff reported potentially serious consequences for learners, including missed classes, difficulties achieving certification, withdrawal and inability to access particular courses.

What are the main barriers?

1. Access to Leap Cards

Student and Young Adult Leap Cards are the main route to discounted public transport for learners, but many FET learners cannot access them or navigate the process of applying. **Eligibility was the most recurring theme in the ETB staff survey with part-time FET, community education, adult literacy, ESOL and short course learners excluded from the Student Leap card requirements**, with many adult learners above the Young Adult age band losing access to that discounted fare again. Some learners fall only slightly below a course-hour threshold. Even where a learner is eligible, accessing a card can be difficult. **ETB staff describe unclear application requirements, difficulty obtaining proof of student status, challenges with documentation for IPAS learners, delays and unexpected refusals.**

Learner Voice groups have shown that change is possible. In recent years, Learner Voice groups or councils in 3 ETBs lobbied for student cards for FET learners, in parity with learners in higher education. These ETBs have now partnered with ISIC to issue recognised student ID cards to registered full-time FET and PLC learners. A gap remains for learners on short and part-time courses (Farrell et al., 2026). One ESOL learner described the effect of being refused a Student Leap card:

> ***"It is very expensive for me to commute to the centre. Last year I could use [the] Student Leap card, this year I was refused a Student Leap card." (ESOL learner, Farrell et al., 2026)***

Access extends beyond eligibility criteria alone. The application and approval process for a Learner Leap Card can be cumbersome and difficult for learners to navigate. Consideration should be given to streamlining the process to make it more accessible and user-friendly.

Case studies submitted by ETBs to the AONTAS survey in October 2026 demonstrate this- with learners having to travel long distances to verify information or collect cards.

Cost of Travel and Static Allowances

Both ETB staff and NFLF learner respondents described learners struggling to meet the cost of travelling to their centre and said that travel allowances fall well short of what they spend. Supplementary allowances for travel and meals have not been increased since 2002 (Farrell et al., 2026). Learners on a range of courses gave specific examples:

> *"So the bus costs 50 euros a week, and you're allowed 17.50." (CTC learner, Farrell et al., 2026)*

One respondent ETB staff member reported learners paying €15 to €20 for a return journey. **In one ETB learner survey (n = 333), 41% spent at least €25 a week on travel and 23% spent €50 or more.**

2. Geographic and Rural Isolation

Rural isolation was the strongest theme in relation to transport barriers, raised by 10 of 13 respondents in the ETB staff survey. Learners without public transport depend on family, friends, neighbours, private transport or taxis. Proximity to provision does not guarantee access: one respondent described a centre on a business park outside town that was hard to reach even for learners living in the same town.

Learners in the National FET Learner Forum focus groups also described areas with no local transport, services that do not stop at the centre, and journeys that require travelling into the city centre first:

> *"If anyone from [town name] wanted to access the training courses in [centre name] the Local Link refused to stop at the centre … they'd have to walk 40 minutes back." (Community Education learner, Farrell et al., 2026)*

3. Timetabling

Eight ETBs described a mismatch between public transport timetables and the practical requirements of learning. Learners in the National FET Learner Forum focus groups gave the same account:

> *"Most students have their class finished at 4pm. But there is a bus that goes only at... 3.30pm. So, I have to leave my class early." (Meyler et al., 2024)*

An ETB staff member noted that learners arrive either late or very early, leave class early or wait long periods afterwards. In their own ETB learner survey (n = 333), **36% cited a mismatch between transport and class times as a key barrier-** aligning with National FET Learner Forum statistics at national level.

Who is most affected?

Rural learners are most consistently and significantly affected. The impact is greatest where rurality combines with other factors: low income, no access to a car, caring responsibilities, disability, age, immigration or accommodation circumstances, or the need to attend frequently. **Learners in IPAS accommodation, Youthreach learners, part-time and community education learners, and learners attending placements were all identified as facing specific difficulties**. Transport disadvantage is not confined to part-time provision: full-time FET and PLC learners are also affected because of how often they must travel. The cost barrier is stark in learners' own words:

> *"I get the bus… it's 15 euro each way and I only get 30 euro a week…" (Meyler et al., 2024)*

The 2025-26 National FET Learner Forum data described how learners who said their financial situation affects their ability to learn and learners in Direct Provision reported the lowest satisfaction with public transport. Female learners also reported significantly lower satisfaction with public transport than men (20% lower) (Farrell et al., 2026).

Transport affects every stage of participation, not only attendance: decisions about whether to enrol, punctuality, learning time lost, missed assessments and certification, access to work placements, retention and progression. One ETB staff respondent shared local survey data that described how 68% of learners in apprenticeships, traineeships and skills training reported a transport barrier, half had journeys over an hour and 46% spent €25 or more a week on travel. Others reported learners making decisions on attendance or facing stress and anxiety related to their journey's.

A Way Forward: Solutions from ETB Staff & Learners

Recommendation 1: Establish dedicated FET transport financial supports for the learners most affected

Cost is a major barrier for learners who already have the least income, and the supports that exist are patchy. Staff described financial assistance as valuable but limited: it is often programme-specific, short-term and inconsistent across FET provision. AONTAS' 2025 submission to the Department of Transport called for cost reduction measures, including expanded student card options for FET learners and subsidised fares on community transport links. The ETB staff survey conducted to support this policy brief reinforces that call.

Learners asked for higher travel and fuel allowances. They advised that any review of allowance levels should better reflect the actual distances learners must travel (Farrell et al., 2026):

> *"Offer more for travel allowance. My allowance doesn't even cover a quarter tank of petrol for what it takes me to drive here five days a week." (Traineeship learner, Farrell et al., 2026)*

AONTAS recommends dedicated FET transport financial supports, such as a subsidised fare or travel allowance, targeted at the learners who face the highest cost burdens:

- **Learners in rural areas:** where public services are sparse or absent, learners rely on taxis, private transport companies, informal supports or fuel, and long distances multiply the cost of frequent attendance.
- **IPAS residents:** accommodation location, limited income and dependence on public transport make regular travel to FET provision costly, and access to discounted fares is compounded by lack of recognition of ID, and high costs due to location and limited income.
- **Learners with disabilities:** where accessible services are not available, learners can be left with costly alternatives to accessing education.

The evidence also points to high travel costs for learners travelling to work placements and apprenticeships, and to the lack of transport for Youthreach learners aged 16 to 20, where staff suggested examining an extension of the School Transport Scheme. These groups should be considered in the design of any support.

Financial supports should be funded as a core, nationally consistent measure and should complement, not replace, better services. In areas with no suitable transport, fare discounts and allowances alone do not remove the barrier.

Recommendation 2: Broaden Learner Leap Card eligibility and simplify access

Eligibility rules were designed around full-time higher education students and do not support adult learners in FET, even though there is a clearly demonstrable need. Student Leap Card eligibility should be extended to part-time, community education, literacy, ESOL and short course learners, regardless of age. This recommendation is relevant to the Department of Transport, the National Transport Authority, Transport for Ireland and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science- the steps they should consider are:

- Extend Student Leap Card eligibility to learners on part-time FET, community education, adult literacy, ESOL and short courses, and review minimum course-hour requirements. This would also remove age as a barrier to accessing discounted fares.
- Issue appropriate learner identification automatically at enrolment to support access to Student Leap Cards.
- Provide a simplified route for learners in the IPAS system, including an accepted form of identification, resolution of photograph-matching refusals and clarity on the acceptance of ISIC cards.
- Consideration should be given to streamlining the process to make it more accessible and user-friendly.

Recommendation 3: Align transport services with education through collaborative planning

The strongest recommendation from the ETB staff survey was to increase the availability, frequency and reach of transport services, especially in rural areas. This means earlier morning and later evening services, more frequent rural routes, more direct connections to FET and community education centres, and more reliable real-time information. Timetables and routes should match course locations and class times.

Collaborative planning is the way to deliver this. There are working examples: the Tipperary ETB FET Student Council has worked with the Tipperary Rural Transport Coordination Unit to identify learner needs and plan accessible routes, and Laois Offaly ETB has used service-specific buses. AONTAS recommends that:

- ETB and learner representatives, Local Link and local authorities plan together, so that transport is considered when courses and venues are chosen.
- Dedicated or flexible services, such as shuttle buses between towns and centres and routes operating on course days, are funded where mainstream services cannot meet need.
- A named body has clear responsibility for coordinating education and transport planning, backed by dedicated funding. Funding was the most prominent implementation constraint identified by staff, and responsibility currently spans several organisations and policy areas.

Learners in the 2025-26 National FET Learner Forum gave examples of what works and what they would like to see (Farrell et al., 2026). At one ETB, learners valued a free shuttle bus to and from their centres:

> *"We have a bus that goes to the campus, which was brought in like two years ago. And I think that's brilliant as well, because you don't need to drive all the way up ... everyone that's in the campus can use that bus." (Adult learner, Farrell et al., 2026)*

Learners also asked their centres to link with local bus services and to align class schedules with bus times:

> *"Is there a possibility that [on] a designated day that Local Links could be used to do a certain amount of runs? Once a month or whenever ... Especially the winter because the loneliness kicks in in winter for 90%." (Community Education learner, Farrell et al., 2026)*

Conclusion

Creating Futures, the FET Strategy 2026-30, commits to learning that is accessible to all, with universal design embedded and learner feedback driving impact. That commitment cannot be met while transport remains a barrier to participation. The three recommendations here (broader Leap Card eligibility, targeted financial supports and transport planning aligned with FET timetables) offer practical steps toward it.

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