

Vision 2026: Transforming Lives Together

An Cosán's Strategy 2022-2026





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Welcome from the Chair – Anna Durkan



As Chair of the Board, I am delighted to share our new strategy. It is bold, ambitious and builds on the remarkable strengths of the team and expertise that An Cosán has developed. It recognises the need to constantly innovate and improve our services in Early Years Education and Care, Counselling and Family Support, and Adult Community Education.

Our strategy positions us to promote inclusivity by working with the most marginalised. It empowers us to influence systemic change, whether that is directly through influencing government policy, or through encouraging our learners towards active citizenship and enabling them to influence factors that affect their lives.

As an organisation we remain forward-looking in combatting the digital divide and the increasing inequality that women and children face. Since An Cosán began, we have supported over 20,000 people to access education and go on to live better lives. Now, we're working to grow that impact across the country.

We are committed to reaching even more people and having an even greater influence to achieve our Vision of *“a world where everyone can access education to achieve their full potential”*.

Our Mission is *“to empower women and children left furthest behind through learning, leadership and enterprise”*. We put women and children at the centre of everything we do. We are a future-looking, feminist organisation that holds empowerment and equality as core values.

We believe that those who are so often excluded from society – because of living in poverty, because of being sole parents, because of where they come from – have a right to be respected and valued, and to access opportunities.

We have seen people come to An Cosán and be welcomed and supported with whatever challenges they are facing so that they can break down the barriers that have excluded them from education. They are then supported through education to achieve and to dream big for themselves, and for their children, families and their communities.



Introduction from the CEO – Heydi Foster



An Cosán means “the path” and recognises that no matter what journey you face, and how many obstacles lie in your way, there can always be a brighter future ahead. We are all stronger when we walk this path together.

Since 1986 An Cosán has been providing a path to a better future for women and children, originally for the communities of West Tallaght, but now nationwide.

We passionately believe in the transformative power of education to change a person’s path in life. The past few years have been an example of how the path is not always easy.

The need for An Cosán’s services has been highlighted like never before. The pandemic spotlighted the injustice of poverty, of the digital divide and of the burden carried by the most marginalised in our society.

We know the power of community, of collective action, and of standing together. These are values that we embrace and nurture in all our work with learners, families and communities. We have shown that An Cosán can rise to challenges and show resilience and creativity, even in the most difficult times.

Since it began, An Cosán has been proud to be a feminist organisation. Founded by Katherine Zappone and her late wife Ann Louise Gilligan, An Cosán was born out of a motivation to find

new ways and new tools for making social inclusion and socio-economic rights an integral part of society.

We continue to believe in offering the best to individuals and communities who feel isolated, marginalised, disempowered, and discriminated against in terms of race, class or gender.

In our struggle to work for a more just society we commit ourselves to be a ‘One Generation Solution’, and we have placed a particular emphasis on supporting the most vulnerable and marginalised women in society, particularly mothers parenting alone, to break the intersectional cycle of poverty. We know that, if we can raise a woman up through education, her family can escape poverty forever. In just one generation we can and do break the cycle.

I cannot thank those who support us in this journey enough: our funders, our friends and our supporters. Without you we could not provide these vital services to thousands of children, families, learners and communities around Ireland.

Our strategy sets out how we are continuing to champion and empower communities to achieve a better life, to lift themselves up through their own education, and to lift up their families. It explains how we are further strengthening our three core services: Early Years Education and Care, Counselling and Family Support, and Adult Community Education. In parallel, we are increasing our emphasis on promoting inclusivity and influencing systemic change.

Notwithstanding the clarity of direction included in our strategy, we are flexible. We will adapt and respond to change in effective ways. Through ongoing renewal, our strategy will remain relevant.

I am excited by our strategy and by the remarkable commitment of everyone involved with An Cosán. It is an honour to work with people that embody lifelong learning and are so passionate about reaching new horizons.

Strategy Renewal Process

In 2021 we commenced an extensive and highly participative strategy consultation process that led to the creation of our strategy for 2022-2026. The process was divided into three main phases:

- *What have we learnt?*
- Identifying what to retain and build upon and where our strategic journey started.
- *What are our new horizons?*
- Including our strategic visioning and ambition.
- *How will we get there?*
Exploring how to deliver the new strategy as effectively as possible.



Throughout the process a range of our key organisational stakeholders were consulted and involved. This included the staff team, Board of Directors, learners, parents, community partners, relevant Government policymakers and decision-makers, NGOs, corporate partners, and funders.

Close attention was paid to the external environment and how we can best respond in an ever-changing world. Important issues such as digitalisation and the increasing digital divide, economic inequality, poverty and unemployment, migration, female inequality, the pandemic and the environmental crisis were taken into consideration.

Key inputs included:

- An in-depth Adult Community Education Review involving an extensive review of our education services and 40 semi-structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders
- Comprehensive stakeholder conversations with individuals from Tusla, the Department of Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the National Adult Learning Agency, Microsoft, Pobal, Rethink Ireland, SOLAS, Progressive Change, the National Centre for Guidance in Education and AONTAS, Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation
- Three all staff gatherings with over 100 people attending each session
- Three Board gatherings with our Board of Directors
- An external analysis which combined a PESTLE framework (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental analysis) with a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).

During discussions an emphasis was placed on understanding An Cosán's foundations. It felt particularly important to build on the organisation's strengths and hold our values of **connection**, **compassion** and **courage** at the core of all deliberations. This included a continued focus on women and children to reduce poverty, tackling intergenerational poverty and inequality; also,



encouraging servant leadership and upholding quality services that not only fill a gap in the community, but lead to change at policy levels.

We saw that an appetite clearly existed for developing an exciting, bold strategy. During the stakeholder consultations, many people felt that strategic advocacy to influence systemic change was vital to achieve greater impact while continuing to operate at the place of greatest need with the most vulnerable people.

It was remarkable to have conducted such a comprehensive and inclusive strategy renewal

process, especially in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Staff expressed how they were highly enthusiastic for the new direction of the organisation and the strategy with a team member sharing: *“the strategy accurately portrays the safe, warm, nurturing, inclusive, holistic and judgement-free atmosphere that An Cosán promotes.”*

We would like to thank Caplor Horizons who facilitated the process, and the many people who took part in the consultation process.



Who is An Cosán and where do we fit in?

An Cosán was established with the belief that education could be instrumental in bringing about a transformation in society, including tackling poverty. Since then, we have grown to become a national organisation working with over 200 community organisations throughout the country. In this summary, we distil key elements about who we are and how we fit in:

Our Vision

A world where anyone can access education to achieve their full potential

Our Mission

To empower women and children left furthest behind through learning, leadership and enterprise

Our Values

- Connected – meeting the needs of our community in an inclusive way
- Compassionate – being kind, supportive and loving
- Courageous – ambitious and resilient



An Cosán began in 1986 in The Shanty, the home of Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone in the Dublin mountains. Working with a small group of women, living inside and outside of Tallaght, they had a vision that education was the key towards transformation and the eradication of poverty.

Early courses were offered in The Shanty to women from Jobstown. Initial efforts went beyond expectations and within three years, as other women and men joined the efforts, an educational centre was built and opened just outside The Shanty's kitchen door. By the time a decade had passed, over 5,000 adults from the Tallaght West communities had participated in education and training programmes, providing each person with a 'second chance.'

In 1997 people from the wider Tallaght area decided they wanted a community education learning centre within Tallaght West itself. Local residents, friends and supporters who lived outside the area worked together to lobby politicians, raise funds, and garner State support.

The dream of An Cosán – a centre for learning, leadership, and enterprise – was born. In 1999 An Cosán opened its doors at the forefront of creating a system of community education that would be flexible and designed to accommodate the diverse needs and capabilities of every learner, so that their potential would be reached. Of equal significance to the dream was that the inequalities of achievement outcomes between social groups and geographic regions would be reduced.

This is still the dream of our feminist organisation that holds equality and empowerment at our core.

Thank you to Katherine Zappone for contributing to 'Our Story' by sharing her recollections of the early days of An Cosán with us.

What makes us distinctive?

Our approach is based on our focus on the whole person, and those who are furthest behind – as well as how we are rooted in the lives of our learners, children, families and communities.

An Cosán's distinctive model includes:

- welcoming the most marginalised to our programmes (i.e. those left furthest behind)
- providing wraparound holistic support, including financial support, Early Years' education and care, digital support, and one-to-one tutoring, mentoring and counselling
- being inclusive and providing a supportive learning environment

Measuring impact in narrow ways, including value for money assessments, can obscure the profound realities of working with the furthest behind. By its nature, this work involves individual and small group work, wraparound services and individual supports. We are focused on delivering outstanding impact for investment; this is based on delivering the greatest value possible for learners and being highly effective in bringing about a long-term impact within society.

Ethos

Our ethos is one of hospitality: this is to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment to attract and support those most financially vulnerable and to build resilience. For example, meetings and classes begin with an *'opening circle'* to allow a mindful pause and bring participants together. Tea and scones are available to ensure visitors feel welcome.

Feminist Pedagogy and 'One Generation Solution'

Our focus is primarily on women and children as this is the most effective way to end inter-generational poverty: this is the *'One Generation Solution'*. If you educate a mother, you empower her whole family to value and appreciate the benefits of education, and her family can break the cycle of poverty. We have a special focus on promoting skills, not just for adult learners, but for those women and young mothers who are furthest behind.





Wraparound Services

Our wraparound services provide effective support to learners. This is important because returning to learning can be daunting for someone who has been alienated from education. Our services ensure that people can make progress; the distinctive wraparound approach is key to this. Elements include:

- **Free Early Years Education and Care:** this initiative ensures parents enrolled in courses can attend classes in person or online. By providing places for their children, parents will be supported to engage in further education and training opportunities, enabling parents to develop a range of skills and knowledge.
- **Student Welfare and Support:** Students who encounter unexpected difficulties (e.g. finances, fees, registration) can access direct support such as:
 - **Financial Support:** this includes bursaries, phased payment options, and assistance to apply for other funding supports for which people may be eligible.
 - **Counselling:** Any learner who wishes is offered subsidised counselling. Adults returning to learning often find they face, and want to talk through, old fears and challenges that resurface.





- **Tutor Mentoring and IT Support:** Tutors provide a one-to-one service to learners, especially those who need additional help with their coursework and assignments. There is online IT support during classes; this is from an IT moderator available to assist learners. We provide resources for online learning, including both software and hardware solutions.
- **Laptop Loan Scheme:** access to Wi-Fi and laptops are crucial. We lend laptops to low-income learners.



Digital Stepping Stones: This is an online assessment tool we developed in partnership with Accenture to measure a user's digital skills and competence. It is free, available to all and quick to use and shows the user's level and then what digital supports would benefit the user.

- **The Flipped Classroom:** This technique is based on group activities inside the classroom where the focus is on student interaction and learning, and not the tutor lecturing. Our tutors are trained to facilitate learner participation and achievement of learning outcomes; they assist proactively in different ways tailored to learners.



Our Services and Target Groups

Target groups

The groups we work with include marginalised women and men; children; lone parents; early school leavers; long-term unemployed; people on low incomes; people using addiction services; members of the Travelling community; people seeking international protection; migrant groups; former prisoners; and older adults.

The targeting of these groups is underpinned and informed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and highlights our commitment to 'Leaving No One Behind' and to 'Reaching the furthest behind first'. This commitment is described by the United Nations as 'the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for the SDGs. The other two key commitments in the SDGs, relating to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, and a Human Rights Approach, are also highly related to An Cosán's work.

Online programmes also allow us to reach those living in isolated rural areas with limited access to education or transport. The pandemic has worsened the experience of isolation and simultaneously the demand for online learning has increased.

Community Partners

Since 2014 we have partnered with over 200 organisations nationwide to enable marginalised learners to access online learning and create collaborative peer-learning communities. Our network of national and community partners helps ensure programmes are affordable and accessible to those furthest behind in remote, rural and under-served communities across Ireland.

The intention of our collaborative approach includes fostering effective partnerships and



OUR CORE SERVICES



**Early Years
Education & Care**



**Counselling &
Family Support**



**Adult
Community
Education**

developing a consistent approach; engaging in outreach and spreading awareness and access to our adult education programmes; building capacity in the community education sector (including supporting partners delivering technology enhanced opportunities to their member communities); and developing funding models to support partners and the learners they serve.

Services

Since An Cosán was established, over 20,000 adults and more than 4,700 children have benefited from our activities. Our core services have emerged to be: Adult Community Education; Early Years Education and Care; Counselling and Family Support Services.



The groups we support experience educational disadvantage. They are affected by low levels of literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. This compounds social exclusion and increasingly impacts access to information, public services, education, and employment opportunities.

The coronavirus pandemic affected disadvantaged communities most, especially women as carers, and it has exposed Ireland's Digital Divide, with many learners unable to access the internet, a computer, or a place to study.

Early Years Education and Care Services

We provide Early Years Education and Care Services for children up to age 12. We have seven centres across Dublin. These provide

pre-school and after-school services to approximately 250 children, including on-site services for parents. An additional 40 families (with children 0 to 3 years) have been part of our outreach home visit 'Lifestart' programme in Tallaght West; this supports vulnerable parents and carers struggling with issues in their lives.

The seven centres are in disadvantaged areas of Dublin, including Tallaght West, Whitehall and Cabra. Many children are referred by Tusla (the Child and Family Agency). We use the 'HighScope Curriculum' which focuses on the "Plan, Do, Review" model. Conflict resolution skills are nurtured at a young age to build independence, resilience and confidence.

We are a 'one stop shop' with many mothers of children in our Early Years' services availing of





our wraparound support services, empowering and enabling them to enrol in adult education courses.

Counselling

A team of counsellors provides counselling (online or in-person) to clients. This is subsidised for financially vulnerable clients and is part of our wraparound services. It enables personal development for people facing the demands of returning to learning. Counselling is prioritised for those facing domestic violence, suicide ideation and self-harm, plus coercive control.

Family Support

Most parents need support at some time or other in order to achieve good outcomes for their children. An Cosán works with children and families with a huge range of needs – developmental delays and learning needs, emotional difficulties etc. The skilled Early Years professionals employed in An Cosán support parents to deal with these ongoing difficulties, while all the time providing early learning opportunities to their children. Each individual child is allocated a key worker who also works to support the parents in their parenting role. Our home visiting programme supports up



to 40 families and their children with monthly, fortnightly or weekly visits.

Adult Community Education

We offer accredited and non-accredited courses in Access, Further, and Higher Education, using both face-to-face and online delivery. Courses delivered include early years education and care; business administration with digital skills; wellness; personal and professional development; community development and leadership; addiction studies.

Marginalised people don't have the same educational opportunities and many leave school early with poor experiences of the education system. Learners at An Cosán have opportunities to embark on a learning 'pathway' and progress to achieve significant success (QQI level 5, 6, 7 or BA). The further along the pathway a learner can go, the better their prospects become, including employment and income levels.

An Cosán's Adult Community Education (ACE) programmes are aligned to Government

strategies, such as Adult Literacy for Life, policies of the Department of Further, Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, and the SOLAS FET Strategy 2024. They are also aligned to Europe's Digital Agenda 2030.

Our ACE programmes involve:

- Advancing our One Generation Solution to educational disadvantage through transforming learning, building skills, fostering inclusion and creating progressive pathways.
- Significantly contributing to tackling Ireland's digital divide and championing digital inclusion.
- Advocating nationally on Adult Community Education to ensure the voice of disadvantaged learners and our community partners is heard.
- Enabling students to access learning using a blended, digital competence-based model of provision with critical wraparound support services.
- Removing barriers for students using Universal Design for Curriculum Design and Learning (UDL) and Assistive Technology
- Availing of the learner-centred use of pedagogy and technology to connect and motivating students who are disengaged

Our intention is to progress the digital transformation of our national Adult Community Education programme by: (i) significantly contributing to tackling Ireland's digital divide and championing digital inclusion; (ii) achieving a One Generation Solution to educational disadvantage through transforming learning, building skills, fostering inclusion and creating pathways to adult education and employment.

Effectiveness of Services

Individual achievement in Higher Education has been proven to set an intergenerational precedent and facilitate families exiting poverty. Notably, an external review of An Cosán's Higher Education provision conducted in 2021 showed

that for every euro invested, €9 of social value was created. The review stated: 'learners experience an increase in independence and develop better communication and social skills. The review was also very positive in many other respects. For instance, it stated:

'Evidence from external examiner reports and QQI External Authentication reports indicate a high standard of quality assessment and systems for accredited courses in the Further and Higher-level programmes.'

'To take one example, the 2020 QQI External Authentication Report on Further level courses cited: *faultless, beautifully presented documentation throughout*; it also referenced *robust and comprehensive assessment strategies throughout*; moreover, that *the highest standards in all national QQI criteria and standards were clearly attained with excellent administrative processes evident along with clear presentation of all documentation and all evidence easily accessible.*'



Our Strategic Goals

Priority actions relating to each of our strategic goals are set out as follows:

- As part of the process of identifying these, key results for each action were identified.
- Progress can therefore be regularly reviewed by reference to the key results envisaged.
- Furthermore, given the fast-changing world we live in, unforeseen key results will also inevitably arise; these will also be considered when progress is reviewed.

Systematic and regular review will help ensure that we learn and improve.

- This will be done at least annually (linked to the budgeting process).
- We will also consider altering our course at any time if major challenges or opportunities arise (e.g. we rapidly and successfully reconfigured our strategy at the onset of the pandemic).

Whilst the direction below, and the actions envisaged, are clear and compelling, we are agile. We intend to keep our strategy alive and

relevant. We will respond to change and work together in effective ways.

- We are committed to team-working that is consistent with our culture and values and maximises synergies

In summary, we want to:

- continue to deliver high quality services across all our work;
- respond to emerging needs;
- innovate to have leading edge services;
- grow these services;
- measure our impact.

Our strategic goals emerged from the consultative process and are as follows:

- Goal 1 is the essence of what we do on a day-to-day basis.
- Goals 2 and 3 are unifying goals – these stretch us to have a greater influence.



Goal 1: Strengthen Our Core Services

Early Years Education and Care - we will:

- Expand our services, including providing an initiative for mothers of new babies who may require additional support.
- Further develop and monitor our early years environments to ensure they are offering rich literacy and numeracy experiences for all children
- Develop our research, training and continued professional development activities to enable us to attract, employ and retain skilled, reflective Early Years professionals.



Counselling and Family Support - we will:

- Continue to develop and embed a robust family therapy model for all families attending all of our services
- Research and develop shared psychological, speech and language plus occupational therapy services for all children
- Sustain and expand our 'Lifestart Child Development Programme'



Adult Community Education – we will:



- Be recognised as the most effective community education provider in the country that empowers women: and enabling this in various ways, including by building confidence, having pathways for progress and brokering new career opportunities for learners.
- Be Ireland's leading universal, inclusive, accessible technology adult community education provider by actively embracing new approaches and technological developments; regularly refining our teaching and learning approach and practice.
- Be part of the community; be learner-led; have equality between the learner and tutor; include critical reflection; foster empowerment; advance social justice; contribute to civic society; develop skills; support progression; be committed to the development of inclusive learning environments where all learners can be supported to achieve their full potential.
- Grow and develop our Adult Community Education programmes based on: evidence of needs and ensuring a high standard of inclusive teaching; undertaking research and sharing our innovative work in creating and delivering new progressive pathways for non-traditional learners; designing, delivering and assessing our work according to the highest quality assurance standards and by using continuous improvement process and innovation

Goal 2: Promote Inclusivity

Exemplify how to work with marginalised communities inclusively – we will:

- Increase participation and evaluate our work with the furthest behind communities in Ireland.
- Engage with women and children in marginalised communities, identifying needs and enabling access to our services.
- Continue to be a leading feminist and anti-racist organisation, facilitating empowerment and addressing specific issues (e.g., sexual health) whilst working with women from a range of backgrounds (e.g., lone parents, women of colour, Traveller and Roma, LGBTQIA2+, homeless, individuals addicted to substances, etc).

Continue to be pioneers in the area of digital inclusion – we will:

- Be Ireland's national champion in driving digital inclusion in the community sector

- Be a leading advocate to raise awareness and promote the active participation of women in IT and other Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM)-related careers involving digital skills
- Build and participate in international networks of like-minded communities of practice such as 'DigComp CoP' (EU), 'Digital Inclusion National Alliance' (US), 'DigiCo' (pan-European), 'Digital Poverty Alliance' (UK), etc.

Create accessible and inclusive educational community spaces – we will

- Include the voices of learners, and ensure best practices, as part of processes to improve our work (e.g., as part of curriculum development and evaluation).
- Harness our community partner network
- Expand online and blended learning opportunities



Goal 3: Influence Systemic Change

Influence public policy – we will:

- Be a key contributor to relevant national policies (e.g., community and further education, early years, digital inclusion, socio economic rights as it relates to women and children etc.)
- Enable and encourage women and children towards more active citizenship

Evidence our impact on people's lives – we will:

- Share robust evidence showing the scale and depth of the impact of our work (e.g., through publishing the results of internal

research plus partnering and participating in external research)

Become an influential voice in the education sector – we will:

- Become an internationally recognised leader in the community education sector, including through continuous learning, consistency in messaging and building networks.
- Use digital platforms to educate and influence change



Our **Enabling Goals**

These are internal goals that underpin everything we do externally. The intent is to become a more sustainable organisation.

Nurture our team and culture – we will:

- Ensure our values are woven into our culture, continually strengthening the feeling of connectivity, compassion and courage.
- Celebrate achievements and build on each other's strengths
- Be an employer of choice within the Community Education Sector by attracting and retaining talented people (e.g. Board, volunteers, staff); providing opportunities for learning, growth and development; and having effective succession planning.
- Have a continually adapting structure that enables strategic progress whilst empowering people and building cross organisational synergies, effectiveness and capability.

Diversify and increase our funding – we will:

- Grow unrestricted and core funding

- Attract funding for innovation plus learning and development
- Identify and develop opportunities for partnerships and social enterprises

Strengthen our systems and processes – we will:

- Continue to enhance our systems and processes
- Further strengthen our policies
- Design and deliver solutions to support data-informed decision making
- Further improve monitoring, evaluation and impact measurement systems

Improve our internal and external communications – we will:

- Have clear, concise, regular communication about our strategy and plans internally and externally
- Continue to raise organisational profile, including through disseminating the impact our work



Conclusion

The path set out in this strategy can transform the difference that we make. We have every confidence that we will meet and exceed expectations.

When we reflect on the journey we are on, we are so proud of our learners, children, staff, partners and members of our community who have shown incredible strength, including by adapting to major challenges.

The way we have faced issues together, and taken on new opportunities, has been a testament to

our resilience and spirit. It provides well-founded confidence for the future.

The strategy captures how we have learnt from the past to do even better in the future. We therefore finish with the inspirational lines of Maya Angelou. She said: *“Do the best you can until you know better; then, when you know better, do better.”*

We need to bring about greater change. The communities we work with deserve better and we can, and will, do better.













Kiltalown Village Centre,
Jobstown, Tallaght, Dublin 24,
D24 R3PN
01 462 8488
info@ancosan.ie
www.ancosan.ie

