

# Better Together

An overview of the current challenges facing the adult and community education sector



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## Introduction

This autumn AONTAS embarked on a series of regional meetings across the country in order to support the sector, strengthen its capacity to organise and lobby, and demonstrate the importance, value and innovation of the work done by adult and community education providers. Since our VEC members are key providers, AONTAS asked them to partner it in hosting the meetings which served as a platform for highlighting the excellent collaborative work delivered across the country and created a vital space for discussion on the current challenges facing the sector.

Lifelong learning and education is a key instrument for addressing the challenges of a recession. Ireland's previous economic success was attributed to a number of factors, one in particular being the educated workforce which provided a basis for a knowledge economy. Investing in our existing strengths, in order to transform the current situation, is vital to our economic survival. To ignore the transformative potential of adult learning and education would, at a minimum, be a missed opportunity; re-skilling and up-skilling are essential, so too is providing a variety of educational opportunities, both formal and non-formal. Investment in adult learning and education is key for the economic development of a country. Adult education and learning fosters sustainable development, social inclusion, active citizens (democracy, tolerance, active citizenship, equity, intercultural dialogue) and also in terms of health benefits, particularly in older learners.

We acknowledge the current fiscal constraints that the Government is under, however we would strongly caution against withdrawing or reducing funding. Such regressive action would cause long-term damage to an already under-resourced sector and would impede the current adult education provision. This paper outlines the current challenges facing the adult education and also highlights a selection of innovative collaborative practices that facilitates quality and effective provision for adults.

## Current Challenges Facing Adult Education Provision

### 1. Increasing Demand with Decreasing Resources and the Mismatch of Provision and Learner Needs

Across the country members have voiced concern about the increasing demand for adult learning opportunities coupled with the decreasing resources for the service. The demographic of learners seeking courses has changed significantly, most notably the increase in unemployed young men with poor literacy levels, and there is an expectation that the service will meet their needs. However many services are full to capacity, there is a lack of continuity between courses, there is a mismatch between courses and the current jobs market and the growth in ad-hoc short courses which are not learner centred are not addressing the current needs of learners. Short-term interventions are only papering over the cracks in the service.

These trends have also been identified in the AONTAS Information Referral Service:

**Increase demand:** From the figures for August and September 316 individuals stated they were on the waiting list for adult education courses. Of which 289 were unable to get a place at the VEC as they were oversubscribed of which 105 were awaiting VTOS courses and 77 for PLC courses.

**Mismatch of provision:** A quarter of unemployed people contacting the AONTAS Information Referral Service stated that the courses available don't suit their needs. A third of all people contacting the service over the past three months feel that there needs to be greater choice and diversification at local level and a quarter of all individuals contacting the service in 2009 have stated that there is no progression routes available for them from ad-hoc short courses being delivered at local level.

*Going forward:*

There needs to be an overall strategy for utilising the current adult education service more effectively, courses must be learner centred, flexible and with progression options. Not only is this good adult education practice but is also the most effective and sustainable approach to supporting people for the social and economic challenges that they and the country face.

## 2. Funding and Moratorium on Staff

In order to meet the needs of learners there must be an effective adult education system, however a number of significant stumbling blocks have been noted across the country. The moratorium on staff has had an effect on the service as a large proportion of staff is female and those on maternity leave are not replaced. The loss in staff has an effect on service provision as there is less capacity at a time when it is most needed.

*Going forward:*

Funding for frontline staff must be maintained. Due to the nature of the adult education system people managing the service must be considered frontline staff, for example AEOs, CEFs, ALOs, Guidance Councillors, Information Officers, and BTEI and VTOS coordinators.

## 3. Overall Strategy

### Visibility and Promotion

There is also a significant need to increase the visibility of the adult education sector, both between stakeholders and those outside the sector. Low visibility affects the level of understanding about the value of adult learning, the opportunities available and also the challenges it faces. Furthermore, a lack of visibility between providers results in a block in the flow of information regarding collaborative models which are operating a local level.

### Structures

The disparate nature of the adult education service is due to the number of stakeholders and providers that operate without an overall co-ordinating body. Many adult education programmes have developed

separately and work independently of each other; this affects the visibility and effectiveness of the service. Where national collaborative agreements exist, such as FAS and the VECs, the collaborative role of staff in the system should be clearly outlined in job descriptions.

In the absence of a national strategy for collaborative processes local partnership work often occurs in an ad-hoc manner which is frequently dependant on the ethos of the centre, the relationship between local providers and the workers themselves. This is unsustainable for developing the adult education system nationally in an efficient, cost effective manner. Many models of collaborative practice are working at local level<sup>1</sup> however collaboration at departmental level is weak as evidenced by the number of funding streams delivered by different Government departments.

### **Building a Platform**

Members have voiced the need to create a space for discussion and policy development. However, Budget 2009 formally disbanded the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) which has had grave consequences for the development of a national framework for adult learning and education. This effectively means that the coordination of, and policy development in, adult learning and education is detrimentally affected.

#### ***Going forward:***

- i. To increase visibility of the sector AONTAS and the IVEA need to have a strong promotional strategy built into their work.
- ii. In the absence of a national coordinating body a lightweight structured forum could be created to inform policy development with the aim of facilitating partnership, collaboration and the sharing of best practice in order to maximise adult education provision given the current fiscal restrictions. The forum could comprise the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, VECs, community education providers, NGOs and other stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see case studies included in this document.

## Case Studies of Collaborative Work Highlighted During the AONTAS Regional Meetings

### Co. Cavan 'Learning Bus'

Co. Cavan VEC was the lead agency in this innovative approach to the delivery of adult education in a rural area. Other organisations involved included FÁS, the County Cavan Childcare Committee, Stepping Stones Playgroup and Cavan Area Rural Transport. €100,000 was secured from Pobal for the purchase and equipping of the facility. The bus is used for the provision of basic adult education, education guidance, community education, youth drop in centre, citizens information, and a drop in facility. The bus will visit various communities in the Cavan area, thus providing access to a number of people around the county.

### Co. Carlow Education and Training Alliance

The adult education service in Carlow VEC some years ago had success in meeting the needs of ESOL learners through a collaboration involving a number of partners. The success of this approach prompted the recent formation of the Local Education and Training Alliance. The Alliance brings together stakeholders involved in education and training, including: Union Learning Representatives, Jobs Facilitators, FÁS, the VEC, the Community Services Centre, SIPTU, local partnerships, adult literacy services, the County Enterprise Board, Chamber of Commerce, and Skillsnets. As the alliance is not a formal structure, other organisations involved in the delivery of learning initiatives may be co-opted over time. The alliance is in its early stage of development but has decided on some initial activities, which include

- The development of an **information booklet**, with details of courses available locally and funding options
- A **web portal**, which will allow for a comprehensive information system with the most up to date information about local courses
- An **Agency Information Exchange Day**, allowing organisations to learn more about each other's roles and activities.

More strategically, the Alliance will focus on the inclusion of its activities under the brief of the County Development Board, where it can be checked, monitored and reviewed.

### Cork Adult Education and Training Exhibition

The Cork Adult Education Council funded by the VEC organises this joint initiative which focuses on meeting the needs of people who are newly unemployed. The exhibition includes stands hosted by a range of providers, from private to third level and leisure courses. The success of the initiative can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of agencies involved, which results in a high level of course referral and easy access to information for those wishing to pursue education and training. The event is also highly interactive, including workshops and guidance sessions. Workshop themes focus on the needs of men; stimulate rethinking and using the recession to change direction or career. Extensive promotion of the event through a variety of media and word of mouth ensured a high attendance.

### **Donegal Adult Guidance Service – ‘The Joint Referral Model’**

This collaborative initiative between Donegal VEC and the Department of Social and Family Affairs is designed to help unemployed people engage with education and training. Jobs Facilitators employed by the Department and staff within the Adult Guidance Services recognised the potential for them to deliver a better service together, as well as to maximise use of decreasing resources. They established the ‘Joint Referral Model’ which involves Jobs Facilitators referring unemployed clients directly to the guidance service, which offers them one to one support in accessing training and education appropriate to their own needs, as well as information on funding and finance available. This is particularly important in reducing the level of drop out in courses. 73% of those availing of the service progressed onto education, training and employment.

### **City of Galway VEC – Promoting the Traveller Economy through a Social Economy Model**

City of Galway VEC is a partner in this initiative of the Galway Traveller Movement, which focuses on promoting the Traveller economy using a social enterprise model. Other agencies involved include City of Galway Partnership, Pobal and Sustainable Energy Ireland. The initiative targets low income households & voluntary housing association tenants to provide insulation. Sustainable Energy Ireland provides the materials, Pobal funds the manager and three workers, while CG VEC provides the tuition and training. Another outcome of this partnership is the establishment of Galway Recycling Co-operative.