

EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

aontas



In this issue:

- *Building a further education and training sector that is fit for purpose*
- *Local government reform – challenging times for community education*
- *Project FUTSAL – helping learners achieve their goals*

AONTAS: The Voice of Adult Learning

Note from the Editor

Hello and welcome to this issue of *Explore*!

A major milestone in the sector was reached in May this year with the launch of the Further Education and Training Strategy. AONTAS contributed actively to the strategy, focusing on two priorities: the need for learners to be consulted as the strategy is implemented, and the importance of the social dimension of learning, through recognition of community education. We welcome the publication of the strategy, its commitment to placing adult learners at the heart of the service and the recognition of the role of learning in social inclusion. Berni Brady considers some of the implications of the strategy for AONTAS in the context of a new strategic planning phase, as well as the challenges and opportunities for stakeholders.

Another significant event for the sector was the Local Elections 2014, which ushered in new ETB board members for a five year term. AONTAS was invited to act as a nominating body and to propose candidates with experience of learning within community education to be considered by each Board. We engaged extensively with our membership and put forward candidates for consideration in fourteen ETB areas. We welcome the new Boards and look forward to working with them over the coming years.

While the further education and training sector begins to take shape, the community education sector must also get to grips with reform happening in the area of local government. Reforms led out by the Department of Community, Environment and Local Government introduce a range of structures which have implications for how community education organisations engage at local level. The reforms are considered in greater detail, and Tara Farrell from Longford Women's Link provides a practitioner perspective. Meanwhile, Niamh O'Reilly looks at policy developments in the area of qualifications and accreditation and what these mean for community education providers.

We look back on the highlights of this year's Adult Learners' Festival and put the nationwide winner Project FUTSAL under the spotlight. We consider some of the data and trends coming through our Information Referral Service and what these statistics might tell us about the challenges experienced by learners.

Consultation for our strategic planning process is now well underway and we invite you to help us identify priorities for the organisation during this important period. You can read more about the plan, and contribute responses through a section on our website www.aontas.com/membership.

Until next time,

Niamh Farren, Communications Officer, AONTAS
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Front cover photos: L-R (1) Members of Ballyduff Community of Excellence in Promoting Mental Health Awareness and Well-being – winners of the Munster STAR Award. (2) Dublin GAA player Ger Brennan, who helped us to launch the Adult Learners' Festival. (3) Kilorglin Mens' Sheds Choir. (4) Stephanie Roche, learner from Project FUTSAL – winners of the Nationwide STAR Award.

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New Education and Training Boards appointed

The Local Elections in May 2014 ushered in new Boards in the 16 ETB areas. Board members include 12 elected members drawn from the new Local Authorities in each ETB area. During the summer period, these members began the process of appointing representatives to the Board under Section 11. Section 11 provides for the appointment of five representatives from the ETB area. A number of national bodies, including AONTAS, have been asked by the Minister for Education and Skills to put forward candidates for consideration by each ETB area. AONTAS were asked by the Minister to put forward two candidates who had experience of community education in each ETB area.

Appointments under Section 11 must be made as follows: at least one person from each of the following categories must be appointed: bodies representative of business, industry and commerce; bodies representative of learners; bodies representative of persons engaged in the management of, or leadership in, recognised schools. All such appointees must reside within the functional area of the board and at least 2 of the five must be women and at least 2 must be men.

Following an extensive process, which involved seeking applications from our members, AONTAS put forward candidates for 14 of the 16 ETBs. We wish them the best of luck and thank everyone who expressed an interest in being nominated. We look forward to working with the new Boards over the next five years.

New Further Education and Training Strategy launched



Fiona Hartley, Executive Director, SOLAS, speaks to AONTAS members about the FET Strategy

In May this year Ministers Quinn and Cannon launched the first ever Further Education and Training Strategy. The Strategy is the outcome of six months of research and consultation across the further education and training sector. SOLAS contracted the ESRI to conduct extensive research to inform the development of the Strategy. An Advisory Committee was put in place and a series of workshops was organised to consult with key stakeholders, including adult learners.

The overall aim of the Strategy is to develop a world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland, which will promote economic development and meet the needs of all citizens. Speaking at the launch Minister Cannon said "I want to bring about a revitalised Further Education and Training sector that is 'fit-for-purpose' for all learners who wish to avail of programmes – the unemployed and the employed, school leavers as well as early school leavers, those with disabilities and those who want to pursue particular interests through part-time learning."

Five high level goals have been identified as part of the strategy. They include:

- 1. Skills for the Economy:** to address the current and future needs of learners, jobseekers, employers and employees and to contribute to national economic development
- 2. Active Inclusion:** to support the active inclusion of people of all abilities in society with special reference to literacy and numeracy
- 3. Quality Provision:** to provide high quality education and training programmes and to meet the appropriate national and international quality standards
- 4. Integrated Planning and Funding:** FET provision will be planned and funded on the basis of objective analysis of needs and evidence of social and economic impact
- 5. Standing of FET:** to ensure a valued learning path leading to agreed employment, career, developmental, personal and social options.

Reacting to the Strategy, Berni Brady Director of AONTAS said "We welcome the introduction of the strategy as an important milestone in developing the FET services. We are particularly encouraged to see the importance of the learner voice within the strategy and we look forward to supporting learners to enhance the delivery of the services. We will work with SOLAS to bring a strong lifelong learning approach to the development of the services."

To read the strategy in full visit www.solas.ie

New Ministerial appointments

Following the cabinet reshuffle on Friday July 11th there are some significant changes at both senior and junior Minister level. Jan O'Sullivan from the Labour party is the new Minister for Education and Skills. Ms O'Sullivan is a representative for Limerick city, and is a former 'Super Junior' Minister for Housing and Planning. Damien English has been named as Minister of State at the Departments of Education and Skills and Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation with Special Responsibility for Skills, Research and Innovation. He is a representative for the Meath West constituency. Minister English will work closely with Minister O'Sullivan and Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation Richard Bruton.

Kevin Humphries of Labour has been named Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection with Special Responsibility for Activation. He is based in the Dublin South East Constituency. Ged Nash was named as Super-Junior: Minister for Business and Employment (at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation) with special responsibility for small business and collective bargaining. He represents the Midlands North West Constituency.



Ciaran Cannon, former Minister for Training and Skills, with learners from An Cosán

Reacting to the changes, AONTAS Director Berni Brady said 'On behalf of AONTAS, I would like to pay special tribute to former Minister for Training and Skills Ciaran Cannon. During his time as Minister for State he played a crucial role in the implementation of a significant reform agenda in the further education and training agenda. We thank him for his engagement with adult learners and community education providers during the legislative process and the establishment of SOLAS. We wish him well.'

The Dáil re-convenes on September 17th.

Latest data from QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland)

QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) has just published data relating to QQI - FETAC accreditation in 2013. QQI supplies data to the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS, as part of their work for the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. QQI also supplies national qualifications data to the Department of Education and Skills for international databases such as UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat. *For more information visit www.qqi.ie*

Key findings from the report include:

Almost **40%** of awards in 2013 were achieved by people under the age of **30**

In 2013 over **160,000** certificates were awarded to circa **155,000** learners, representing a total of almost **275,000** QQI - FETAC awards (disaggregated). This is an overall **18%** increase in learners achieving awards, in the five year period 2008-2013; despite a decline of **9%** between 2012 and 2013

Circa **36,300** learners received major awards in 2013 marking a significant decrease of approximately **15%** over 2012 figures

NFQ level 5 continues to dominate, accounting for over half (**60%**) of all 2013 disaggregated awards

The predominant provider types attended by award holders in 2013 were VEC/ Schools, representing a share of **45%** of all awards (compared to a share of **44%** in 2012), private providers hosting a share of **25%** of all awards (compared to **24%** share in 2012) and FÁS, representing a share of **19%** of all awards (compared to a 21% share in 2012)

AONTAS Representational Work

In June 2014, AONTAS was named by then Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn as a nominating body for Section 11 representatives onto the 16 ETBs. We were asked by the Minister to nominate a man and a woman in each ETB area with experience of learning in a community education setting. Our Executive Committee oversaw an extensive selection process which consulted with our members, and proposed candidates to fourteen ETBs on July 22nd. We will begin the process of consulting with those appointed to see how we may support their participation.

AONTAS continues to represent our members in a number of important spaces. In November 2014, AONTAS Director Berni Brady was appointed to the Board of SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority. Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services is a Board Member of the EAEA (European Association for the Education of Adults). Niamh Farren recently joined the National Executive Committee of the INOU (Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed) as a representative of AONTAS. Niamh also participates in the Advisory Group of the HEA National Access Office.

AONTAS AGM

The AONTAS AGM took place in May 2014. Fiona Hartley, SOLAS Executive Director, attended the meeting and spoke to those attending about the FET strategy launched by SOLAS. The Executive Committee was appointed and we welcomed new Executive member Alice Bennett. Alice brings a range of experience as a learner to the Board. Departing members of the Executive this year include Maria Gorman and Noel Fitzgerald, we thank them for their contribution to date and wish them well.

The AGM also featured a series of consultation workshops in preparation for the new AONTAS strategic planning process. A variety of stakeholders contributed to the consultation process, including ETBs, community education organisations, adult learners, partner organisations and individual members. The contributions have helped us to strengthen our approach to this new phase for the organisation. For more information about the AONTAS Executive, the strategic planning process and to download the background document, please visit our website www.aontas.com.

AONTAS Strategic Plan 2014 - 2016

At the AGM in May 2014 a series of workshops took place to provide an opportunity for members to respond to a background document and series of questions about priorities for AONTAS and our next strategic plan.

The strategic plan is being developed in the context of the new Further Education and Training Strategy launched by SOLAS in May 2014. The background document builds on feedback from our members, as well as developments in the external environment, and proposes three goals for the organisation during this exciting phase for the adult education sector. These are: promoting the benefits of adult learning; advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners; and building organisational capacity.

AONTAS is in the process of conducting a series of interviews with stakeholders to inform the development of the plan, which will be launched later this year. We welcome feedback from our members at any stage. Visit www.aontas.com/membership to read the background document or contact Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Membership Services at noreilly@aontas.com.



Alice Bennett was elected to the AONTAS Executive in May 2014

Applications for EAEA Grundtvig Awards 2014

Are you an adult educator working with World War I remembrance or peace and conflict resolution? Then you should apply for the EAEA Grundtvig Award 2014!

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is awarding the best adult education projects with the EAEA Grundtvig Award 2014. This is a unique opportunity for you to gain European-wide recognition and visibility for your project! Through EAEA's 126 member organisations and a wide network of European adult educators and decision-makers your project will receive unique acknowledgement throughout Europe.

The EAEA Grundtvig Award is given yearly to an organisation or project consortium who presents the best project in adult learning. This year the theme is *Remembering World War I for the Future – Adult Education promoting Peace and Cohesion in Europe*.

European Agenda for Adult Learning

AONTAS developed the website and online campaign www.onestepup.ie to raise awareness about adult learning and help people to get in contact with their local services. The campaign is backed up by a Freephone Helpline 1800 303 669. Funding for the project was secured by the Department of Education and Skills from the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme. Work on the project was developed with support from a number of stakeholders, including ETBI, NCGE, Leargas, NALA and the AEOA. At European level, this initiative aims to raise awareness about adult learning through supporting a network of National Co-ordinators.

This project will draw to a close in September 2014. In April, the Commission launched a new call for proposals to promote the EU Agenda. AONTAS was invited by SOLAS to take on the role of National Co-ordinator and make a submission to the Commission. Our application builds on the previous work and proposes further developments to www.onestepup.ie, analysis of the PIAAC data, and development of the Learner Ambassadors initiative. We will be informed about the outcomes of our submission later this year.

Why participate?

There are a number of benefits to participating. These include:

- All participants gain international visibility on EAEA's website and social media channels;
- All participants gain an appearance in the EAEA Grundtvig Award publication that will be distributed in EAEA's events and networks;
- All participants are awarded with a certificate of attendance;
- The best initiatives will be invited to and showcased at the EAEA Grundtvig Award Ceremony at the Remembering for the Future Conference in Sarajevo, 12-14 November 2014;
- The winners will receive a concrete EAEA Grundtvig Award (a piece of art or handicraft);
- The winners will appear in EAEA's press release after the competition and gain a key slot in the EAEA Grundtvig Award publication.

For more information on how to apply visit www.eaea.org



New MEPs elected

European elections were also held the same day as the Local Elections in May 2014. Ireland now has 11 representatives in the European Parliament. In advance of the elections, constituency boundaries were redrawn to reflect this reduction and now include three areas – Dublin, Midlands North West and South. In Dublin the representatives are: Lynne Boylan (SF), Nessa Childers (Ind) and Brian Hayes (FG). In Midlands North West, MEPs elected include Luke Ming Flanagan (Ind), Matt Carthy (SF), Mairead Mc Guinness (FG) and Marian Harkin (Ind). In the South constituency, MEPs elected include Brian Crowley (FF), Liadh ni Riada (SF), Sean Kelly (FG) and Deirdre Clune (FG).

The European Parliament has an important role in terms of EU budgeting and the legislative process. The Parliament also has power in relation to EU institutions, particularly the European Commission. Members of the Parliament sit on a variety of committees. In the case of adult learning, the CULT (Culture and Education) committee is particularly important. Liadh Ni Riada has been appointed as a substitute to this committee.

Closure at All Hallows College

In May 2014, the closure of All Hallows College was announced. The college issued a statement indicating that, 'the challenging landscape of today's third level education arena has led to a diminishing of the college's reserves to an unsustainable level. In addition, the option of growing enrolment figures has been constrained by the cap on the numbers of undergraduates eligible for the free fees scheme.' The statement continued, 'the wind down of the college will begin immediately and will be conducted in a phased and orderly fashion.' The college is making every effort to ensure that students enrolled on existing programmes can complete their courses.

The college indicated that in May, there were 450 students on accredited degree courses and in excess of 70 staff employed. All Hallows had developed a strong reputation and profile for delivering continuous professional development in the community and voluntary sector. The college also developed the pioneering ALBA (Adult Learning BA) Degree. This is an

innovative, competency-based, modular and highly flexible programme that responds to the complex requirements of adult learners. It is based on a highly successful model developed at the School of New Learning at De Paul University, Chicago.

About ninety students are currently taking the ALBA degree, which can take three to five years to complete, with a further fifty students due to graduate in December this year. Approximately 200 students have benefited from the programme to date. ALBA has been a particularly successful model in terms of supporting learners who would have struggled to get a degree in a more traditional third level environment. Costs for participating in ALBA were also lower than those in other third level institutions.

Staff, students and supporters are anxious that the model of learning developed by the ALBA programme may continue into the future, and offer other adult learners the opportunity to experience this unique programme. Our thoughts are with the staff and learners at the College during these difficult times, and we hope for a successful outcome in their efforts.

Remembering Marie Gill

It was with great sadness that we learned of the passing of our friend and colleague Marie Gill in March this year. Marie was Director of Dublin 8 Community Education Centre and a committed advocate of community education. She was involved in AONTAS on a number of levels and was a member of the Executive Committee (2006-2007). She participated actively in our meetings: at AGMs and general meetings, and was a committed member of the Community Education Network. In her own work at D8CEC she continually worked to achieve the kind of community education provision that was worthy of the learners in the Dublin 8 area. She acknowledged and valued the need for a premises where learners could come, and ultimately thrive, and she committed herself to realising this vision as Director of Dublin 8 Community Education Centre for eleven years.

In April 2014, shortly after Marie's passing, Dublin 8 Community Education Centre relocated to new premises in Synge Street, Dublin. This is just one part of her legacy, a sustainable and thriving community education centre. She



Marie Gill, former Co-ordinator of Dublin 8 Community Education Centre

is remembered by many who worked with her as one who encouraged leadership, and who always acted as a passionate advocate for community education.

"When those who have experienced disadvantage are given the very best and of the highest quality, they react from the very best of who they are."

The Further Education and Training Strategy

Building a sector that is fit for purpose

In this article, Berni Brady considers the new five year FET strategy and what it means for those involved in the delivery of adult and community education



Berni Brady at this year's STAR Awards

The eagerly awaited Further Education and Training strategy was launched on May 12th 2014 by Ministers at the Department of Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn and Ciaran Cannon. Both Ministers presented it as an ambitious strategy that seeks to rebuild the entire FET sector; a sector that has been described as responsive to learners needs, but lacking coherence as well as evidence of the outcomes of learning by the ESRI research review of further education and training which accompanies the strategy document.

This comes as no surprise to those involved in the sector. As we know adult and community education only began to receive serious attention and funding less than twenty years ago. The White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life, 2000, was the first attempt at a policy framework since the eighties but only parts of it were implemented. The funding received by the sector was channelled through different programmes which had different reporting mechanisms and little connection between them, while much of the

service was delivered by volunteers. This situation has been primarily the consequence of the lack of status accrued to adult education and to the lack of joined up thinking both within and between departments. The lack of government commitment to developing a co-ordinating infrastructure also meant that, even with the funding that followed the White Paper, the sector grew in an extremely fragmented way. Coupled with this there was little or no connection with vocational training, then provided by FÁS which was funded and organised separately.

The Reform Agenda

By 2008 everything had changed. Unemployment reached a peak after the economic collapse, soaring from just over 4% in 2006 to 14.3% in 2008, and the demand for adult education began to increase rapidly as people began to find themselves on the dole queue. A high percentage of the adults seeking information through the AONTAS Information Referral service had been out of education and training for ten to twenty



Paul O'Toole, CEO of SOLAS

years. On November 29 2010, the government negotiated a financial assistance package with the EU and the IMF totalling €85 billion (including a contribution of €17.5 billion from Ireland's own resources). The programme contained three main elements one of which was an ambitious structural reform agenda which is designed to restore competitiveness and strengthen the economy's growth potential. It is this strand of the programme which has largely driven the Irish Government reform agenda in the area of adult learning/ further education and training over the past two years, resulting in the first five year Further Education and Training Strategy.

The strategy is part of a larger reform agenda which includes the establishment of INTREO, the reform of the VEC sector, the abolition of FÁS, the establishment of SOLAS and the plan for integration of the Vocational Training and Adult/Further Education under the auspices of the ETBs. SOLAS has set itself the mammoth task of redefining the Further Education and Training sector as a coherent entity and the fourth pillar of the education system, and unsurprisingly, there have been a number of significant challenges from the outset. Not the least of these has been trying to develop a co-ordinated plan for the delivery of a service which is characterised by a variety of programmes funded through the further/adult education

section of DES, including non-formal and formal programmes, as well as effecting a smooth transfer of former FÁS training centres to the new ETBs. All of this is being done in the context of the moratorium on recruitment across the public service.

Contributing to the strategic process

The FET strategy itself has been developed as a result of an extensive six month consultation process involving a wide range of stakeholders including learners. AONTAS has been extremely active in contributing to the process bringing the views of our members to the table through an individual stakeholders interview, participation in the focus group consultations and in the FET Advisory Group as well as facilitation of the learners focus group and at Board level. While there is no avoiding the priority given by government to the role of further education and training in developing skills for work, AONTAS as well as other stakeholders, has worked hard to advocate for the wider benefits and the social purpose of adult learning. This is not an easy task in the current economic climate, but the effort shows in the strategy as it seeks to address the twin objectives of economic development and social inclusion. There is also a strong emphasis on the learner which has been a key plank of the AONTAS advocacy work. While AONTAS welcomes and supports the strategy, a number of key concerns have been expressed by members in the context of the current consultation on AONTAS's new strategic plan, a process which was postponed to take account of the development of the FET strategy.

The purpose of adult learning

The most fundamental concern being raised is in relation to the purpose of adult learning and once more this has sparked a debate about the purpose of learning, what it is, how we describe it, what its outcomes are or should be, and how those outcomes can be measured. The debate is not new. At its core is the question about whether the purpose of education is to produce compliant, responsible, skilled and hard-working citizens or to develop the capacity to think, to imagine, to create and transform our society. Or can it embrace all of these things and is it possible to find a balance? In the current Irish economic climate the emphasis on economic recovery and getting people back to work are paramount and many fears have been expressed by those within the adult learning sector about the possibility of losing the kind of provision that has essentially addressed the social purpose of learning, in particular community education which has a track record of attracting those people who are most distant from further education and training and the labour market.

Conflicting agendas?

Traditionally adult education has been regarded by its providers as concerned with the broader needs of the learner and not just his/her skills needs, and has essentially been a free choice for adults, whereas vocational training has been regarded as more functional, focusing on the skills needs of the labour market. Adult education providers pride themselves on taking a more holistic approach to learner needs while in the vocational training sector the emphasis is on getting the job done. Whether this perception is true or not remains a matter of speculation as no concrete evidence exists to support such a view, although it has to be said that learners themselves testify to the importance of the quality of care they receive across a range of supports as crucial to a successful learning experience and outcome, whether in education or vocational training. A key challenge for the new strategy as it moves into its implementation phase is to be able to support the needs of the learner and the needs of the labour market in a way which can produce a successful outcome for both.

The future of community education

Fears have also been expressed by community education providers that their work might not be supported within the new FET strategy. While the legislation establishing SOLAS was being finalised AONTAS mounted a strong advocacy campaign to have community education recognised as a vital part of the services to adult learners, in particular those who are most disadvantaged by lack of access, qualifications and/or other circumstances. As a result community education has been recognised within the strategy as *“a critical access point for many adults who left school early”* and to enable those adults *“to re-engage in civil life and /or prepare for mainstream further education and training.”* SOLAS has committed to continuing to support community education and to assist it to *“clearly demonstrate the benefits, outcomes and progression option for learners”*. The strategy commits to reviewing the funding model for community education and to developing clear access and progression from this provision to other FET and higher education. Within the strategy AONTAS has been identified as a key support partner across four of the five strategic goals in areas including community education, learner voice, literacy and numeracy, RPL and promoting awareness of the value and benefits of further education and training.

The Lifelong Learning Agenda

The mission of AONTAS as an advocacy and promotional organisation has always been to support the broader role of adult education, not just as a means of achieving skills and qualifications and delivering a second opportunity to those



Over 80 members of AONTAS attended this years AGM

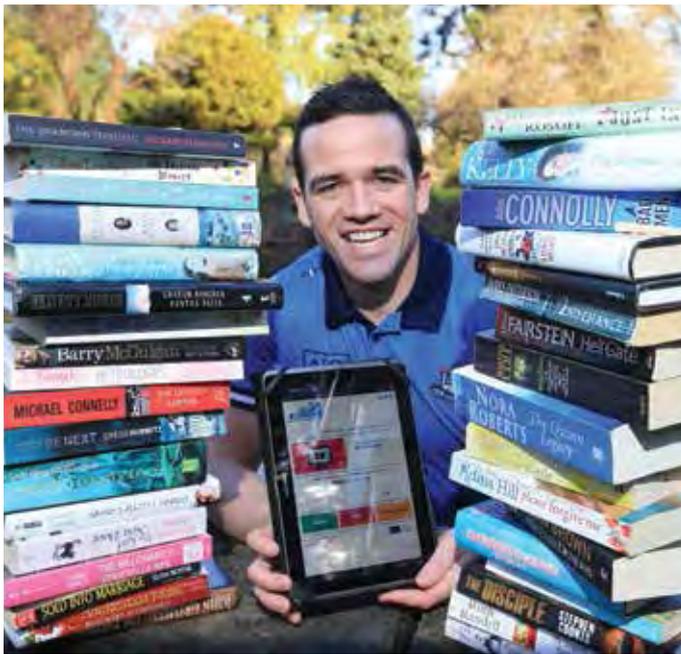
who have not been well served by the formal education system, but also as a means of strengthening personal and communal capacities and playing an important role in delivering an equal society. This may seem like pie in the sky in the current working context, but it is vital to the development and health of democracy and social cohesion. Such a perception was illustrated for me some years ago when a senior civil servant remarked at a meeting to discuss funding for a community based project, *“Transformation is all very well but can it put bread on the table?”* This was a very interesting question and one which gave me much food for thought. It struck me that not only can it supply the bread but it might supply a much better quality of bread, or indeed a choice of bread!

The lifelong learning agenda which embraces myriad forms of learning regardless of age or abilities must continue to form the bedrock on which the different sectors of education and training are built. So can the FET strategy make an impact on embedding the lifelong learning agenda in the education and training system in Ireland? Looking at its mission which is to *“enable individuals and communities to achieve their developmental, personal, social, career and employment aspiration”* it certainly aspires to the key principles of lifelong learning. It is now up to the partners and stakeholders to realise those aspirations.

What are adult learners looking for?

Findings from the AONTAS Information Referral Service in 2014

A recent analysis of statistics from the AONTAS Information Referral Service reveals some of the challenges that still face Irish adults in returning to learn. BY BRID GREENAN



Dublin GAA player Ger Brennan showcases OneStepUp.ie

The AONTAS Information Referral Service supports adults wishing to return to education and training by providing information through its telephone and online service. The work is supported by the 'What Next' information booklet which is reviewed bi-annually. The service was enhanced in 2013 with the launch of OneStepUp.ie which includes a Freephone Helpline 1800 303 669 and an interactive online calendar of learning events. The One Step Up campaign is funded by the European Commission as an initiative which promotes the renewed EU Agenda for Adult Learning.

The launch of OneStepUp.ie had a huge impact on the number of people contacting the Information Referral Service. Between January and April this year there were 186 calls to the service (up from 70 in the same period during 2013) and 2847 user profiles were gathered from the website which has resulted in the collection of rich data on service users and useful insights into those who are returning to education. So far this year calls have been received from people in 23 counties across Ireland and the website is being used by people in every county.

Summary of key findings (January - April 2014)

- Equal numbers of male and females used the Freephone Helpline. On average there is a **51:49** female to male ratio. In previous years there were significantly more females contacting the service
- A higher proportion of people identified themselves as being from urban areas, with the urban to rural ratio being **71:29**
- **41%** of callers to the Freephone are currently unemployed comparing closely with the user profiles on OneStepUp.ie which found that **42%** were unemployed (of these **66%** were long-term unemployed)
- **28%** of callers to the Freephone were currently employed (Full time/Part time) while **40%** of users from OneStepUp.ie identified themselves as being in employment
- **8%** of callers to the Freephone Helpline reported having no formal qualification as their current level of education while **21%** had a Junior Cert or equivalent. **34%** of callers had completed their Leaving Certificate while **34%** had a third level qualification
- **44%** of callers to the Freephone were looking for information about specific courses again comparing closely with the user profiles from OneStepUp.ie where **42%** were looking for courses
- The most popular courses identified by the Freephone Helpline were Health/Fitness/Beauty, Computers/IT, Healthcare, Languages (including English) and Accounting/Business/Finance
- **16%** of Helpline Callers were looking for more general advice or guidance on returning to education compared to **23%** of the user profiles on One Step Up
- The main barriers to education identified by callers to the Freephone Helpline include a lack of information and a lack of suitable courses
- The age profiles gathered from the One Step Up user profiles showed that **50%** of people were between 35-65 Years, **24%** were 18-25 Years, **23%** were between 25-35 Years and **0.02%** were between 65+ Years.

Follow up study sample

A follow-up survey was conducted with a sample of 10% of callers to the Helpline. The aim was to determine whether the information provided by the Helpline helps learners to return to education. Callers were asked what service they contacted, whether they found what they were initially looking for and what action they had taken as a result of receiving the information.

- Callers reported contacting various services including ETBs, Qualifax, Intreo/Local Employment Services, Private Providers, Partnerships and NALA.
- Of the proportion of people that we followed up with, 48% of people found what they were looking for, 52% did not.
- Some of the main reasons why people did not find what they were looking for were: a lack of funding, no suitable courses available to them, no places left on their preferred course or they were offered a different option than what they originally wanted.

Recommendations

Some initial recommendations from the report include:

- Strengthen and streamline supports and services to meet the needs of adult learners and the labour market.
- Provide further opportunities in training and upskilling especially in the area of guidance, for staff responsible for assisting learners in making appropriate choices.
- Address the basic skills deficit for those in the work force by providing work-based learning.
- Provide more appropriate courses to meet the demands of learners.
- Ensure joined-up thinking, good communication and strong working relationships among the personnel and Departments charged with delivering the service.

Visit our website www.aontas.com to read the report in full.

More statistics will be released later in 2014.

Case Studies to illustrate our findings

CASE STUDY 1

Person 1, a female contacted the Information service last year looking for information regarding funding options for a course. She and her husband are both long term unemployed and they moved their young family from Cavan to Dublin in order to have more training and education options. She was looking for funding options to continue with her education as she had left school with a Junior Certificate. Through the information service she received information regarding the Back to Education Allowance. She applied for it and her application was successful. She is now in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance and has completed a FETAC level 5 course. She is hoping to progress on to third level this September.

CASE STUDY 2

Person 2, a male aged 45 contacted the Information service looking for information on where he could sit his Leaving Certificate. He had already achieved a third level qualification but needed the Leaving Certificate to gain entry into a Paramedics course; he also wanted to do his Leaving Certificate to improve his self-esteem and to set a good example to his children. He was referred to his local ETB and he contacted them to enquire about Leaving Certificate subjects in English, Maths and History but instead was offered a FETAC Level 3/4 in Maths or Level 5/6 in Childcare. He felt disheartened that he could not access his preferred course in his local area.

If your organisation is holding a learning event, why not have it featured on the OneStepUp.ie calendar of learning events? Contact Brid Greenan – bgreenan@aontas.com or visit www.onestepup.ie/calendar to submit your event.

The Community Education Network - advocating for the right to provide accredited programmes

The learner is at the heart of the advocacy work of the AONTAS Community Education Network. Established 7 years ago, the network's 120 member organisations engage in advocacy activities in order to maintain a quality learning experience for the thousands of learners who pass through their doors each year. Accreditation is a key part of the quality learning experience. BY NIAMH O'REILLY.



An Advocacy Skills Workshop which took place during this year's Adult Learners' Festival

Currently, a key issue for CEN and AONTAS members relates to the topic of accreditation. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) proposes to charge a fee for existing registered FETAC community education providers who want to continue to provide accredited programmes under the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) members have expressed great concern about this proposed 're-engagement' fee, which may amount to €5000. This means that if community education organisations want to maintain their own Quality Assurance, in order to provide accredited programmes to learners, they will have to pay a fee of €5000. This is in addition to other new fees e.g. for validating programmes. Community education groups have voiced concern that they do not have the financial funds required, but they have the personnel resources to engage in stringent quality assurance procedures.

Why this issue is important

Community education organisations want to reengage with QQI as the ability to provide accredited programmes is a requirement of both their learners, and oftentimes, their

fundors. The proposed QQI fee for re-engagement will result in many groups not being able to provide accredited programmes to the detriment of community education learners and their communities. This proposed fee will be for all providers who chose to engage with QQI meaning that it will apply at the same rate to both private and not-for-profit organisations. However, community education groups are poorly funded and are fundamentally different in their ethos, approach, capacity and objectives to private providers.

As seen in the previous edition of Explore magazine, community education groups offer quality, education provision that is learner-centred and responds to the local community, it allows people to engage in education in a non-threatening, welcoming environment. It provides the learner supports and participatory learning processes that have a history of successful learner engagement and progression. Community education is a particularly effective way of reaching those distant from education and the labour market. For this reason community education must continue its ability to provide accredited programmes and therefore the CEN proposes that

a waiver should apply to independently managed community education providers and no re-engagement fee should apply. This is a provision in the QQI Act (2012).

The call for a QQI fees waiver

Following the AONTAS CEN Focus Group meeting on 28th May, AONTAS prepared a position paper on the proposed QQI fees for re-engagement which was developed in line with the views of CEN members. A template letter was distributed to the CEN and members adapted it and sent it to their local representatives. This resulted in a nationwide drive of CEN members to make their local TDs and Senators aware of this issue from across Dublin, to Limerick, Tipperary, Westmeath, Cork and Wexford. At national level, AONTAS distributed the paper to key TDs including members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection, in addition to the previous and current Minister for Education. AONTAS responded to correspondence that followed from elected representatives, decision makers and officials.

This rather complex issue became a hot topic in parliamentary questions. TDs who have been speaking out on this issue include Maureen O'Sullivan and Joan Collins (Dáil Technical Group), Jonathan O'Brien (Sinn Féin) and Charlie Mc Connalogue (Fianna Fáil). Maureen O'Sullivan raised the issue during Leaders' Questions with Tánaiste Joan Burton. During her response the Tánaiste promised to review the situation and look into it in further detail. Jonathan O'Brien, raised the QQI Fees issue under Topical Issues in the Dáil, and also issued a press release calling on a Fees Waiver for Community Education Providers. To see the impact of the advocacy work not only puts the issue on the political agenda but raises awareness around community education and its valuable contribution to the lifelong learning agenda.

Making the case

Although the outcome of the campaign is yet to be determined, there has been some challenging counter arguments to the call for a fee waiver. It has been proposed that the introduction of QQI fees will partly serve to ensure that only those providers who are serious about complying with those standards and have the capacity to do so, will apply to QQI. However, the CEN would argue that this is not the case because legacy providers have already been through the QA process with FETAC and are serious about complying with standards. Many of them have been audited where the results of which were posted on the former FETAC website, thus demonstrating their compliance. It has also been proposed that fees will help to ensure that only those organisations serious about complying will do so. However, the development of Quality Assurance processes and engaging in the application process involves



Members of the Community Education Network (CEN) at the Lobby for Learning Event in February

a high degree of resource expenditure in terms of resources both staff and volunteers. As it stands, without fees, only groups who are serious about re-engagement would make an application. For example under the previous QA process the estimated time required for making the application to FETAC could be in the region of 100 hours (often voluntary hours). The maintenance, monitoring and internal assessment of such process are also required by the provider.

The ultimate reason for engaging in a call for a QQI fees waiver is to ensure that community education learners gain the same valuable outcome from their learning: a nationally recognised, quality award which has parity of esteem with that obtained by learners in formal education. This is necessary for securing well-paid employment or progressing further to second or third level education. Community education groups are concerned that a proposal to engage with other awarding bodies would result in a devaluing of the achievements of learners in community education.

For a copy of the position paper: The QQI Re-engagement Fee and the case for a waiver for independently managed community education providers visit the AONTAS website: www.aontas.com/commed/meetings

For more information about this campaign contact Niamh O'Reilly at noreilly@aontas.com

Challenging Times

Community Education and Local Government Reform

The Local Government Reform Act (2014) proposes a number of reforms in local government, local and community development. Niamh Farren outlines some of the activities and speaks to Tara Farrell from Longford Women's Link about what the changes will mean for local organisations.



A Hustings event for the Local Elections 2014, organised by Longford Women's Link

The past two year period has seen the further education and training sector experience the most dramatic reform agenda in its short existence. The changes will have a lasting impact on all stakeholders. The establishment of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards along with QQI have significant implications for how community education will be supported and delivered. As the reform agenda progressed and gathered pace AONTAS and the Community Education Network worked hard for the recognition of community education. As a result, providers of community education were recognised as a stakeholder in legislation enacted in 2013 and the new Further Education and Training Strategy launched in May 2014.

For the sixteen Education and Training Boards, recent milestones include the appointment of new Board Members following the Local Elections 2014 and the completion of the transfer of FÁS Training Centres. For the community education sector, the reform process is not over. An ambitious reform agenda led out by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government will reconfigure the local structures that organisations will have to interact with. Community education receives funding from a range of government departments and initiatives and will need to actively engage in this process.

The policy context

Documents underpinning reforms in the Department include the Local Government Reform Act (2014), along with 'Putting People First – An Action Plan for Effective Local Government', which was published in 2012. The Department also established a Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government which produced a report earlier this year to propose mechanisms for how local people and communities could be part of the decision making process.

The reform agenda focused on local authorities, with the Local Elections paving the way for reducing the number of Local Authorities in each county. Both the legislation and the Action Plan commit to a series of actions which affect the funding, delivery and co-ordination of community development activities, both locally and nationally. Meanwhile, the process of dissolving the County and City Development Boards is now underway. County and City Development Boards were formed in the early 2000s, and brought together a number of stakeholders at local level with the aim of reducing duplication, facilitating long term planning and enhancing collaboration. Representation from the community sector was established via Community Fora around the country. While some fora were more effective than others, they provided a mechanism for community representatives to be nominated onto local decision making structures.

A key part of the reform agenda in Local Government is the principle of 'alignment' i.e. where local government will play a greater role in the delivery of local and community development. At local level, community development projects and local area partnerships have to date been the primary

agents of this activity. A cohesion process introduced by the previous government saw Partnership and Leader companies amalgamate at local level. Community development projects were also targeted within this process. Some of them opted to join their local area partnership while those with a focus on women opted to go under the umbrella of the National Collective of Community Based Womens' Networks. In 2011 the government made separate arrangements where annual funding of €1.3 million from the Local Community Development Programme was ring-fenced and disbursed to seventeen women's groups via the Collective.

New structures

So what new structures are being established? First of all, Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) will replace the City and County Development Boards. Committees will include between 15 and 21 representatives, and will include statutory and non-statutory members, with a marginal majority of members drawn from the non-statutory sector. Their role will be supported by a resource worker located within the local authority. LCDCs will have an important role in terms of developing a local economic plan, but will also oversee decision making in relation to budgets. LCDCs are the mechanisms whereby the new SICAP (Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme) funding will be decided. Funding formerly provided directly to Local Partnership groups will now be channelled through SICAP. In July an initial tendering process for SICAP funding was underway.

The Working Group on Citizen Engagement was tasked with exploring how local communities might engage with the LCDCs and wider local government structures. The group, which was chaired by Fr Sean Healy, proposed the establishment of a Public Participation Network, which would be co-ordinated at county level but which would also be active at municipal level. Other structures which support the PPN include linkage groups and a secretariat. The PPN will replace the role formerly taken on by Community Fora and will act as a mechanism where representatives from the community and voluntary sector will be nominated onto local decision making structures. In order to be part of the process, your group must be registered with your local PPN. In order to register, you must align your groups' activities with one of three different electoral colleges – Community, Social Inclusion and Environment. PPNs are now being established throughout the country.



Longford Women's Link Manifesto Group with other Manifesto Groups from around the country



Tara Farrell, Deputy CEO of Longford Women's Link and member of the AONTAS Executive

What the changes mean for local groups

So what challenges do these new structures present to community education providers? Tara Farrell, a member of the AONTAS Executive, is Deputy CEO of Longford Women's Link, and has been actively involved in the reform process at local level. Longford Women's Link has been an active member of Longford Community Forum since its establishment and Tara is also Chair of Roscommon Community Forum. She believes that while the changes present significant challenges for community education organisations, organisations must actively engage with the process as it happens.

'First of all, the changes introduce a whole new set of structures that community organisations will have to familiarise themselves with', she says. 'You may have to interact with four or possibly five structures at local level, which makes it quite complex'. Ten local authority areas, including Roscommon were selected as 'frontrunners' to roll out the alignment process. The transition from community forum to PPN has been different in each county. 'We'd be

concerned not to throw the baby out with the bathwater', she says. 'In many cases, the community forum provided a community infrastructure, with expertise and knowledge. Relationships were built at local level. We'd worry that this might be lost as the new structures take shape', she said. Furthermore, there is a big capacity concern in the sector, where getting to grips with new structures takes time and energy. 'As community organisations, it's important that we don't lose focus on the issues facing the groups we deal with. It's easy to get sidetracked, so we need to keep raising the concerns of the groups we represent and work with.'

The gender dimension is also important. While gender balance is a requirement of the PPNs, the guidelines establishing LCDCs state that 'every effort should be made to ensure a gender balance'. The new SICAP programme does not identify disadvantaged women as a target group. This presents a significant stumbling block for women's groups both at local and national level. 'We have a high proportion of lone parents in Longford, in some areas this would be as high as 40% or 42%' explains Tara. 'This genuinely means that there are barriers for women like transport and childcare to participate with all aspects of society including education.' A small increase in the number of women elected in the Local Elections is a positive step, but is not enough. 'We need women to speak up in the community, raise these issues and engage with the new structures. These are places where decisions are made; this will be a greater challenge if the barriers to women's participation are not recognised.'

Over the past number of years the National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks has fulfilled a key role in supporting the development and connections of the women's movement nationally. At the time of writing this article, future funding arrangements for NWCCN are unsure as the SICAP framework replaces the Local Community Development Programme. This is of particular concern given the role of networks in supporting groups to engage with this new environment. 'It's really important that groups stay informed about what is happening' says Tara. 'Building alliances and joining networks is the best way to get information about what's happening. Groups should contact their local authority to find out about the Public Participation Network – if it hasn't been established yet then the Community Forum may be able to help. These new structures are here to stay, being part of them and learning about how they will work is a priority.'

For further information and policy documents visit www.environ.ie or contact your Local Authority Office.

Adult Learners' Festival 2014

Learning today for a better tomorrow

This year over 450 fantastic events took place throughout Ireland as part of the Adult Learners' Festival 2014. Venues such as museums, libraries, colleges and community centres all offered the chance to pick up a new skill, pursue a forgotten interest or discover a surprising learning opportunity. Events were held in all 26 counties and ranged from small gatherings of learners to massive week long events that celebrated learning. Events included open days about course opportunities, talks and seminars on a range of subjects, practical demonstrations about everything from DIY to Skype, and tours of historic and cultural institutions. Adults showcased their learning through exhibitions of crafts, art and poetry, or spoke about the positive impact that learning has had on their lives. Here's a snippet of events from around the country to give you a flavour of what went on. BY KATHRYN LAING.



Learning Styles Workshop in the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

Kerry

North & East Kerry Development & Kerry ETB came together to hold an event in Castleisland Hotel which promoted adult learning. Local author and poet Tommy Frank O'Connor, who runs a creative writing group in Castleisland, was invited as the keynote speaker. The Equality for Women Measure also contributed and the literacy group from Castleisland attended. Special guests on the day were Buds Family Resource Centre in Ballyduff, who were part of the winning group for this year's Munster AONTAS Star Award. Over 60 people attended on the day and for all involved it was a resounding success.

Limerick

To celebrate the Adult Learners' Festival at Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT), students, staff and members of the LIT community were invited to share the things that they have learned by writing on the "One Thing I've Learned in Life" Graffiti Wall. The graffiti wall was an interactive public display and all members of the LIT community were invited to participate. Students from the 2014 AONTAS STAR Award shortlisted LIT programme 'Leadership and Advocacy' facilitated this event, along with staff and volunteers. The Graffiti Wall was unveiled on Friday 28th February 2014 at 10.00am on the main street of the LIT Moylish Campus

and people were able to participate all day.

Kildare

"The Learning Cafe", a celebration of community education throughout County Kildare, attracted a tremendous crowd to Naas Community Centre for the start of the Adult Learners' Festival. This two hour event was supported by Kildare & Wicklow Education & Training Board, and was organised by The Community Education Service-Kildare for the second year in a row.

A fantastic display of learning achievements and opportunities was showcased on the night by groups from



Yarnbombling in Limerick

around the county. Groups participating included Teach Dara Men's group in Kildare Town, Athy Women's Activity Group, Creative Explosion from Celbridge, Healthy Heart programme offered by the HSE, Curragh Pride Family Resource Centre, Ellen L group from Celbridge, Kildare Traveller Action, Community Effect Programme offered by Age and Opportunity and a photography exhibition from a recent class organised by the Community Education Service in Jigginstown, Naas.

The showcase included a display of materials produced by these groups including jewellery making, arts and crafts, healthy eating materials, photography, committee skills, personal development, video and a demonstration of chair yoga from users of Platinum Clubhouse who finished their demo with a lions roar! Much of the fun on the night was expertly captured by members of Naas Photography Group who volunteered to act as the paparazzi for the evening.

M.C. for the night, Conor O'Leary, introduced a range of speakers from the newly established Kildare & Wicklow Education & Training Board (KWETB) including Susan Cullinane, Community Education Facilitator, Des Murtagh, Adult Education Officer and the Chairman of the board of KWETB, Michael Lawlor. A special theme on the night was funding and this was addressed by the special guest speaker, Jordan Campbell, Programmes Manager with The Ireland Funds. She highlighted their upcoming funding schemes and also best practice for groups applying for funding.

Tipperary

VTOS Clonmel learners enjoyed 'Juno and the Paycock' at the White Memorial Theatre during the Adult Learners' Festival. The play, performed by the Open House Players Theatre Company, was well received and appealed to the diverse audience which included children, teenagers and adults. The audience which was drawn into the drama by the very professional acting, felt the pain experienced by the Dublin tenement dwellers in the early twentieth century, and were transported to the harsh world of the tenements.



Susan Cullinane (Community Education Facilitator) with Michael Lawlor (Chairperson) of Kildare and Wicklow ETB



Katie O'Rourke from AONTAS presents Shannon adult learners with their awards



Students of Ramsgrange Education and Development Centre

Limerick

On Tuesday 25th February, for Green Learning Day, students and staff at The Organic College received a visit from Mark Boyle – otherwise known as The Moneyless Man. Mark, an Irish man who studied Business and Economics with the initial plan of earning a lot of money throughout his career, came across the quote by Mahatma Gandhi 'Be the change you wish to see in the world.' He wasn't sure exactly what that change would be, and set out to discover it. As part of this visit he gave a talk to students and staff about his first year living without money. The afternoon session with Mark was then open to the public and featured tours of the gardens, food tasting and a reflection on community financing.

Clare

On Friday 28th February, Katie O'Rourke AONTAS Learner Supports Officer, visited the Shannon Adult Learning Centre which is part of the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board. They were holding a 'Celebration of Learning' event as part of the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival. Katie met students and tutors and got a flavour of some of the programmes and courses currently on-going in the centre including a Potato Chitting Workshop where the learners were getting seed potatoes ready for the allotment.

Next it was off to Shannon Library to formally open the Celebration of Adult Learning event. This was followed by a Certificate Awards Ceremony for some

of South Clare's adult learners who have gained accreditation in the various FETAC accredited programmes that have been successfully run throughout the year. Learners received FETAC/QQI awards from level 1 to 5 including the Leaving Certificate.

Katie then travelled to Limerick City for a very interesting event where Shannon's creative writing group met with Limerick City and County's creative writing group in a collaborative workshop. This was in preparation for attending Listowel Writers Week in May of this year. This event was held in the Frank McCourt Museum and was chaired by Roisin Meaney, writer in residence, for the Limerick ART Council and well known author.



VTOS Clonmel Learners

AONTAS would like to say a big thank you to everyone that took part in the festival this year & helped us to celebrate and promote adult learning. The 2014 Festival really helped show that 'Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow' is possible and open to everyone. *Date for your Diary - Adult Learners' Festival 23 – 28 February 2015.*

Nationwide winner under the spotlight



Project FUTSAL helps learners to reach their goals.

In February this year, Project FUTSAL was the winner of a STAR Award in the nationwide category. Project FUTSAL (Football Used Towards Social Advancement and Learning) is a joint initiative between the Football Association of Ireland and the Welsh Football Trust and is funded through the European Regional Development Fund's Inter Reg IVA Ireland Wales programme. Local authorities are involved and provide funding to support project co-ordinators. ETBs in each project hub are involved in the academic side of the programme. Third level institutions (eg IT Blanchardstown and DCU) are also involved and help learners to progress. We spoke to Derek O'Neill, Project Manager of FUTSAL about what it was like to win a STAR Award.

Derek, can you tell us what it was like to win a STAR award? What does it mean for the organisation and learners?

It was a great feeling of accomplishment

to win the AONTAS Nationwide Star Award in that a project we set out to develop from scratch three years ago would be recognised nationally for the innovative way it delivers a high quality education programme. The award raised the profile of the project which positively influenced the FAI relationship with project partners such as the Local Authorities and Education and Training Boards, and I believe this will play a key role in ensuring the sustainability and further expansion of the project.

What is your typical FUTSAL learner like? Do they generally come from a sporting background?

The programme is open to anybody who wants to engage with a sports related education programme irrespective of age, ability, disability etc. However, given that football is used as the tool to attract learners, we find that generally participants have an interest in football. This doesn't mean that they have to be good at football or football coaching but it's easier if they have some kind of interest given we deliver a broad

range of football related modules alongside the QQI Level 5 education award programme. The average age of participants is approximately 23-24 but we have had many learners on the programme in their 30s, 40s and 50s and they have been a great influence on the younger learners and vice versa.

What's the most successful element of Project FUTSAL in your view? What's the biggest challenge in organising a programme like this?

I suppose we're happy with all three elements (education, sport and volunteerism) which make up the course. The education programme is the focal point and presents opportunities for people to attain enough points to progress to third level courses via sports related subjects that they have a keen interest in. It's a big eye opener for many of them when they see the number of sports related third level courses that are available to them. Some people who may have never considered a third level course are actually taking the step of applying for and being accepted onto these courses. The football element is important as it's the area which attracted the learners in the first place. For the communities where the learners live, the learners have become a great local resource because as part of the programme they're required to deliver volunteer coaching hours in local schools and clubs. As a result some go on afterwards to become volunteer coaches at local clubs, so it is positively affecting the volunteer base in local communities.

The big challenge to continue the programme is to ensure all the necessary funding elements are secured each year

now that the EU funding which helped start the project has ceased. The FAI makes a significant contribution in the form of providing staff and coaching courses and the Local Authority in each project hub area plays a key role here also. The ETBs have been a very important partner to date but restructuring in that sector has presented many challenges in identifying funding streams to assist the delivery of the academic programme of the project. We hope that the establishment of SOLAS can open up new funding opportunities to help us continue our work.

What kinds of opportunities do FUTSAL participants tend to progress onto once they've finished the programme?

The objectives of the project are to assist people back into employment or onto further education and the project has been very successful to date in this regard. We're awaiting a report from researchers in NUI Maynooth who are evaluating the project but in year 1 alone, when we had our first 90 learners,

60% found full time employment and 20% went onto further education. Around 15 of this cohort actually put their new coaching qualifications to use and found work in the USA as football coaches which was great for them and they were helped by FAI staff who could recommend them to their contacts in the USA. The people going onto third level usually progress to sports courses in the Institutes of Technology. With regards to work opportunities, those successful in finding employment are involved in all sorts of roles and I've personally bumped into some of them who are managing stores, working with youth groups and even two who are currently working at Dublin Airport security. We provided internship opportunities within the FAI this year for around 30 project graduates and this will be a great advantage and addition to their CV and relevant to any sports or youth development work opportunities that may arise in any of the National sporting bodies or local authorities in the country.

What are the plans for the project in the next phase?

Our challenge now is to secure funding to ensure the sustainability of the project. We've already proved the benefits of the project and have had great outcomes but in the current economic climate where cutbacks are rife, even for programmes such as Project FUTSAL, this represents a challenge. The ETB sector has experienced a huge upheaval recently and this represents our greatest opportunity for funding but until budget lines are firmly established and staff restructuring is complete, this poses a bit of uncertainty about where the funding will actually come from. ETBs that we've worked to date with have been a fantastic support and the enthusiasm of ETB staff involved has been a major factor in the success of the project to date.

For more information about Project FUTSAL visit www.fai.ie

Learner Case Study: Rachel Graham

I left school after my Leaving Certificate at the age of 17. I had no ambition whatsoever to go into 3rd Level education. I was only interested in playing football which led me to do a year long FÁS football course. I tried to find work but my CV had no previous jobs or work experience on it and this is why I found it hard to gain employment.

After a year of doing nothing I heard about Project FUTSAL. I applied and I was very surprised at how much I enjoyed it. I felt I was going nowhere at the time but this course really enhanced my life. It was more relaxed than any previous course which made it more enjoyable. As well as the education element, we

also had the opportunity to do many football related certified modules and combined with work experience the course really opened my eyes to the many job opportunities in sport. I had previously only thought of players, coaches and administrators as having jobs in sport and was very surprised to see that there are many opportunities in other areas such as development, social inclusion and women's sport.

I really gave the course my full attention and during the course I managed to secure an internship with the FAI. I grabbed this opportunity with both hands and as a result, I went on to work full time in the Football Association of Ireland.

The course has given me a taste for education which I didn't previously have



Rachel Graham and Stephanie Roche, Project FUTSAL learners

and I've recently been accepted onto a Degree in Sports and Exercise in Carlow IT which starts in September. None of this would have been possible if it were not for Project FUTSAL, because it gave me the confidence to pursue my goals and better myself. It just shows that there are alternative ways of getting into third level courses.

A Brave Road Travelled

By Liz McKeever



It was February 2011 and I was pregnant on my fourth child. I was feeling quite low, maybe even a little worthless and fearful of never getting back into employment. With three school-going children and another on the way, I felt that my life was all about breakfast, cleaning, dinners, homework, bedtime and then more cleaning. With my

husband out working and children in school, I craved some adult conversation and some 'me' time.

I heard about a course that the Boyne Community School were running for parents. The 'Steps' programme was primarily aimed at giving parents the confidence to step out of their normal daily routines, and to acknowledge one's strengths and weaknesses. With confidentiality at maximum level, it was pleasurable to have a cuppa and a chat with like minded parents. When I finished the ten weeks Steps Programme, I enrolled in another course in the school, which was provided by Meath VEC. 'Mapping my Future' enabled me to understand and explore my options, and it gave me the power and confidence to develop my skills for making choices about my future. I finally felt like I found the direction I wanted my life to take. I now had the courage to enrol on a FETAC Level 5 course with Meath VEC, and I was offered a place on their Applied Social Studies course, which was due to begin in September 2011.

Doubting my abilities

At that time, I was very apprehensive about how my life was evolving. I found myself constantly doubting my abilities and irrational fears were always present. I took out my notes from the Steps programme and re-evaluated my options. Would I go back to the routine I knew best, the easy routine of breakfast, dinners, homework and cleaning? Or would I push my fears to one side and grab this opportunity with both hands? My family could do without me for a couple of hours a week, or could they? I had hundreds of reasons not to follow my dreams, but I realised it was now or never. I would probably never get this chance again...

I completed the Applied Social Studies course in June 2013. Although at times it was tough, sometimes I felt like giving up and at times I couldn't see the finishing line, it was an amazing journey. I have made some wonderful friends and had many laughs. What's more is that when I got to this finishing line, I realised that I had developed an abundant thirst for knowledge. In October 2013 I began the next leg of my journey at National University of Ireland Maynooth. In May, I sat my exams in Psychology, Anthropology and Sociology, which marked the end of my first year as a degree student in one of Ireland's most prestigious colleges.

Taking the first step

Finally, I would just like to say thank you to Boyne Community School and Meath VEC for giving me the tools to change my path. In February 2011, I had dreams but did I ever think I was capable of achieving them? My honest answer is 'no'. I am living my dream now, working to achieve my goal in education. It's not as hard as I thought it would be. Once I began this leg of my journey, the amount of support I received from those around me was phenomenal. I feel now that my life is worthwhile and I am looking after myself, through the medium of education, yet I am still able to cope with family life. I have a whole new network of friends now. My advice to anyone thinking of taking the step to improve your life is, go ahead and give yourself the opportunity to realise your true value because you are worth it. Anything is possible, if you just take the first step like I did.

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Thanks to Michael Kenny, (NUI Maynooth and AONTAS Executive Member) who nominated Liz as this month's inspiring adult learner. Do you know an inspiring adult learner? Encourage them to share their experience of adult learning in *Explore* magazine. Contact Katie O'Rourke, korourke@aontas.com.



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