



AONTAS COMMUNITY EDUCATION NETWORK SUBMISSION TO QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND (QQI)

Response to the QQI White Paper on Procedures for Focused Reviews
by QQI of the Implementation and Effectiveness of Provider QA
Procedures

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Introduction

Community education is adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland. It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community. The non-threatening and supportive environment in which community education takes place has the effect of increasing the engagement of socially excluded adult learners and those who have had previous negative experiences of education. Adult learners who participate in community education include people living in areas with high levels of social deprivation, Travellers, migrants and people affected by drug addiction, mental health issues, homelessness and unemployment. Such groups may not have the confidence to access formal adult education opportunities in local institutions and so, community education acts for them, as a first step back to education.

The variety of community education courses, from non-accredited to accredited, up to QQI Level 6, meets diverse needs within local communities. Many community education providers are quality assured by QQI, and so, are in a position to provide the opportunity for adults, from the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland, to access accredited courses recognised on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). In 2015, 1,318 QQI major awards and 15,103 minor awards were achieved by learners within the community and voluntary sector¹.

Community education therefore is a particularly effective way of reaching those who are most distant from education and the labour market, and can act as a stepping stone for many towards further learning, qualifications and labour market engagement.

¹ <http://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=dataexports>

AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN)

The Community Education Network (CEN) was established in 2007 by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. It is a network of over 100 independently managed community education providers who work collaboratively, sharing information and resources, engaging in professional development and working to ensure that community education is valued and resourced. Many community education providers within the CEN have recognition by QQI and offer courses leading to awards on the NFQ. Such providers work together, through the CEN, to maintain the robust quality assurance requirements necessary for the delivery of a high standard in accredited programmes. The network has developed a strong working relationship with QQI through its involvement on the Joint QQI/Community & Voluntary Sector Working Group and regular inputs by QQI at CEN meetings.

The community education sector has, in recent years, been affected by significant and disproportionate funding cuts. In spite of this, the sector has continued to prioritise the provision of high quality, accredited learning opportunities within local communities. The opportunity to participate in a programme leading to a nationally recognised award, within a non-threatening, community environment, can provide the motivation for those furthest removed from the education system to take the first step back to lifelong learning. The importance therefore of community providers continuing to offer accredited learning opportunities cannot be overestimated.

The AONTAS CEN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the White Paper and would like to make the following recommendations:

1. Terms of Reference:

On page four it is stated that procedures for focused reviews will include the “development of terms of reference for the review, which will typically be published at the conclusion of the review”. We suggest that the terms of reference would be agreed, published, and communicated with the provider **in advance** of the review.

2. Clarity in Relation to Terminology:

The White Paper makes reference through the document to a “provider statement”. While we appreciate that a provider statement may, by its nature, be required to focus on specific policy areas, we are nonetheless seeking clarity on the difference between this and a self-evaluation, which is a requirement of a quality assurance agreement. Additionally, we request that a self-evaluation can be used as a provider statement.

3. Composition of the Review Team:

It is stated in the White Paper that the review team will consist of a review chairperson “who is a (serving or former) senior leader within a **provider of the same type** as that under review”. While acknowledging that the paper merely gives examples of the types of providers that may be involved, we would **recommend that community education providers are specifically mentioned** here in order to acknowledge the specific expertise, knowledge and understanding required for a team reviewing such a provider. As previously stated, community education providers are very often working with adult learners who are furthest removed from formal education and training opportunities. An understanding therefore of the context in which community education works, the challenges faced by many of the learners, and the intensive support offered by providers would be necessary in order to inform a review of the effectiveness of the provider’s QA procedures.

Clarification is also sought in relation to the panel of review team members, ie how they will be selected and the expertise they bring in relation to each particular area of education and type of provision.

4. QQI Fees:

The White Paper states that “a fee applies to focused reviews of provider QA procedures conducted by QQI and must be paid within one month of completion of the review”. As per section 80 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, which states that QQI may provide for exemptions for the payment of fees in specified circumstances

and/or waivers, remissions or refunds of fees in specified circumstances, **we request that all community education providers are exempt from fees**. The community education sector has a strong social inclusion remit and promotes and facilitates inclusiveness in terms of access to the NFQ. The sector is currently underfunded and the additional imposition of a fee for a mandatory review will hinder its ability to continue to facilitate access to the NFQ by those who are least likely to engage in formal education, and arguably, most in need of access to education. Set fees, such as these, place an unfair and disproportionate burden on an already struggling sector.

5. Appeals:

The White Paper states the commitment of QQI to allow for an appeal by a provider against a withdrawal of approval to the appeals panel (2.13). We recommend that this section includes more information, including the procedure for appeals, a timescale and clarification about which body will carry out the appeal (QQI or the Review Panel or other).

Conclusion:

The role that community education providers play in supporting equality of access to the NFQ complements national policy priorities in the area of Further Education and Training. Therefore we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this White Paper and request that consideration is given to community education provision in the development of all future policy by QQI.

For more information:

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