

Submission from AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

## **Submission on Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services**

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## 1. About AONTAS

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, is a voluntary membership organisation which includes over 500 members nationwide. The membership profile of AONTAS comprises a rich mix of statutory, voluntary and community organisations as well as individuals who are deeply involved in and committed to the concept of lifelong learning. AONTAS regards its membership as a key resource which provides the organisation with a grassroots, authentic understanding of adult and community education practice from both a practitioner and learner perspective. We support our members through consultation, networking, information provision and by undertaking research. We are dedicated to increasing the profile of adult and community education, influencing policy, supporting adult learners and highlighting the role the sector plays in promoting active citizenship. Our organisation receives funding from the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority).

We are contributing to this consultation from the perspective of community education providers. Community education generally takes place outside institutions and responds to the needs of the community. It is education in the community, with the community and by the community. Community education groups are local, self-managed, voluntary organisations and are supported by a range of agencies and government departments for their education and social inclusion work. Community education is a vital part of community development.

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the Submission on Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services. We believe that a key priority must be to protect, support and strengthen the unique value of the community education, particularly for those experiencing poverty and educational disadvantage.

### Context

The community and voluntary sector in Ireland makes a valuable contribution to society. Over 11,000 groups, 100,000 staff and over half a million volunteers are involved in this essential work. The sector itself has a turnover of over €5.7Bn per year and contributes €2.5Billion per annum (equivalent to a 5% increase in standard rate of income tax OR five times revenue from property tax<sup>1</sup>).

The sector contributes both financial and non-financial contributions: the energy, endeavour, and commitment of all involved; the extent of funds added; all the other additional resources contributed (like premises, equipment etc.) none of which would otherwise be available to the state.

Despite this enormous contribution, it is well documented that since 2008, the voluntary and community sector in Ireland has suffered disproportionately in terms of funding reduction; -7% per annum in contrast with a total fall of government of -7% for the entire period. (The Wheel Analysis of Budget 2014<sup>2</sup>).

In order to ensure that community and voluntary organisations can thrive in the future, it is essential that coherent funding models are in place which can support the community and voluntary approach.

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<https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/Comissioning%20for%20Communities%20Report%202016%20Web2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/Wheel%20budget%202014.pdf>

Some community and voluntary organisations continue to meet the needs of the community due to securing additional funding resources, but this is not the case for all organisations and many do not have a regular stream of funding.

It has been broadly documented (Harvey, 2012), (AONTAS 2011), (Cork City-Wide Community Education Network, 2015) that community education has faced harsh cuts since the recession. Furthermore, funding for community education from SOLAS distributed funds (at €10.58 million) represents 1.64% of total SOLAS FET budget (not including PLCs) and is only 0.11% of the total education budget. It is important to recognise that community education is a poorly resourced part of the education system but it has built its capacity to deliver effective programmes (AONTAS, 2009, LCEN, 2011 and Cork City-Wide Community Education Network, 2015). Community education organisations have maintained their capacity to deliver excellent services due to the involvement of volunteers. They play a significant role in community education provision thus bolstering its ability to deliver programmes despite such financial constraints.

## 2. Definition of Commissioning

AONTAS believes that commissioning should be understood as a strategic collaborative process that links resource allocation for locally identified assessed needs with national policy objectives. This is needed in order to achieve the best outcomes for citizens through appropriate processes which lead to long-term systemic change.

If commissioning is part of an overall funding mechanism for the community education sector then it should not replace grant allocation to groups. A coherent policy rationale for commissioning is an essential starting point, including a clear, and shared, definition of commissioning.

## 2. Proposed Stages and Features of the Commissioning Process

### Key stages and features of a commissioning process

The following sections are in relation to Public Care's Commissioning Cycle.

- **Gap analysis/population needs assessment** - This process should be carried out in partnership with a broad spectrum of stakeholders from across local communities, including community education providers and adult learners. Local knowledge is an essential part of identifying gaps in service provision. Other structures should also play a role e.g. PPNs, CDCs, Regional Skills Fora etc.
- **Review service provision/service design** - In order to design a service, commissioning bodies must have full knowledge and recognition for the role of community education in providing accredited and non-accredited education provision. Community education is also used as a tool for community development and has a role greater than skills development; i.e. as a means of support for individuals in drug recovery, dealing with homelessness or experiencing

mental health issues. A cross-cutting theme that goes beyond community education is that the 'process' of service provision is as important, and pivotal, for effective outcomes.

- **Review strategy/market performance** - The 'Commissioning in Human, Social and Community Services - A Rapid Evidence Review' report notes the increasing emphasis on the achievement of outcomes in Commissioning approaches. This is a major concern for our members. As noted by the report, measuring and demonstrating outcomes for service users in the voluntary and community sector is difficult, as there are no simple measures. In the case of community education, methods for measuring the outcomes of non-accredited programme are being currently developed by ETBI and should be used as a model for measuring outcomes. Accredited programmes and progression rates could also be used as appropriate indicators. However, qualitative data, including case studies, can offer valuable insights into the complexity of issues that face citizens and the appropriate process/interventions that are needed to provide an effective outcome.

In the case of community education, funding providers on the basis of progress towards the achievement of outcomes tends to focus on standardised assessment processes, which may or may not address the adult learners' needs. It runs the risk of teaching skills for a curriculum, only recruiting adult learners who are most likely to succeed and incentivising poor practice in order to get paid for the outcome within a short time frame. The learners' needs are not addressed and this will likely become more complex over time when it will require a multiagency approach to address this. This short-term approach is ineffective in engaging with adult learners and could hinder their progress into further education and employment.

- **Capacity development** - In order to support community education in Ireland, the Government should develop guidelines and training so staff working in the sector can commission effectively. Investment is also needed to build skills in community education organisations so that they can effectively participate in all commissioning exercises (and any related processes such as procurement or tendering exercises).

#### **4. Proposed Principles of Commissioning**

- Commissioning should have regard to the scale of community and voluntary organisations and not exclude smaller organisations from consideration. Community and voluntary organisations should not be at a disadvantage if they are in competition for public funding with profit-making businesses.
- Public commissioners should demonstrate outcomes that maximise societal value (as per The Wheel Report – Commissioning for Communities).
- It is absolutely essential that local communities are equal partners in identifying and agreeing their needs with Commissioning bodies: clear roles and responsibilities for all parties must be established and provision.

- Clear guidelines for commissioning must be agreed at national level and clearly defined at local level so that the same processes are carried out uniformly. Commissioning bodies and prospective recipients of funding should receive information and training on the commissioning process.
- Provision for appeals must also be included in the commissioning process.

## 5. Transitioning Arrangements

### a) What pre-cursors will be required to transition to a Commission approach?

AONTAS would caution against moving all funding to purely a commissioning approach. A mixture of both grant funds and commissioning is required in order to grow and develop the community education sector. Clear guidance, information and appropriate training in the new processes would be a good starting point for transition work. An open consultative process on how commissioning would work, e.g. policy papers that propose the guidelines for commissioning should be made available and open for consultation.

### b) What improvements would you say are required to increase readiness for the services for which you are familiar?

Community education is a progressive, inclusive and effective form of education that happens in the community. It empowers adults, has a beneficial impact on their families and community and reaches people who wouldn't otherwise engage in education. Community education ensures equality of opportunity for marginalised groups and also contributes to the economic regeneration of communities. It is very often the 'first step' back into education and has a proven track record for successfully engaging the most hard-to-reach learners. Community education is the most learner-centred part of the education system, which facilitates responsive, flexible and innovative learning opportunities for learners on a needs basis. In so far as improvements, it requires multi-annual sustainable funding for accredited and non-accredited programmes.

### c) What are the potential risks to overcome?

**There are a number of risks to commissioning, namely:**

The potential loss of grant aid - Core funding is essential to enabling organisations to develop and adapt to the needs of their community. Community education providers are essential to the fabric of both the education and community development system, over reliance of commissioning funding in the absence of multi-annual funding will be hugely detrimental.

The process of measuring outcomes must be appropriate for community education providers. Although great strides have been made in this area documenting the impact of the service on the lives of the learners is complex and due regard to the starting point of the learner must be acknowledged in monitoring systems.

## Recommendations:

- A coherent policy rationale for commissioning is an essential starting point, including a clear, and shared, definition of commissioning.
- Public commissioners should ensure that commissioning exercises maximise societal value – not just reduce costs.
- The process of service commissioning should involve communities in identifying and agreeing their need and in determining appropriate outcomes.
- Funding models should be based on a proportionate and sustainable sharing of risk between funder and service provider.
- Grant-allocation should remain a core mode of funding available to commissioners.
- Grants should be the preferred approach where organisations provide a specialist service or serve disadvantaged or ‘hard to reach’ communities.
- Service commissioning should have regard to the scale of community and voluntary organisations and not exclude smaller organisations from consideration.
- Community and voluntary organisations should not be disadvantaged if they are in competition for public funding with profit-making businesses (because of contract size or capacity to accept risk, etc).
- Regulation should be credible, proportionate, supportive and adequately resourced.

## Further Submissions

Having reviewed and considered the literature review and from the AONTAS experience, a key concern for our members is the potential lack of sustainable funding for community education organisations, who will engage with commissioning. In order to ensure that commissioning is effective, a whole system approach is required, which in effect means that in order to ensure the best possible service to citizens, the best possible providers must be available to enter into commissioning arrangements. In the case of community education, it is important to note the precarious funding system which they exist. In terms of the concept of ‘capacity development’ due regard must be paid to the current funding system for community education. We would reflect the blanket statement: that block grants represent poor value for money, indeed such systems have enabled community education groups to grow, develop, expand and build their capacity to meet the needs of their local communities in an effective and community-led manner. Whilst commissioning has obvious potential benefits, it should not replace block grants as it will lead to great precarity and instability in the community education sector which has a detrimental effect of learner provision.

In general, different funding streams for community education organisations supports various aspects of their work, for example, ETB funding for tutor hours only covers one aspect of community education provision. However, in order to create a full source of funding for community education a number of funding streams must be accessed. This is time consuming, ineffective (in terms of time taken) and does not lend itself to a sustainable sector as long term planning is thwarted due to the short term nature of funding schemes. Through an ERASMUS+ project (finALE), AONTAS will set out to research the current status of funding mechanisms for community education. However, for the purpose of this submission, it is worth noting that from a small scale piece of research in 2011, 78 funding streams were accessed by community education groups. On average 4.5 funding streams was accessed to support their work for the period 2007- 2008. This value decreased to 4 funding streams for the following year. The bulk of funding comes from 10 separate governmental departments, with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local government, the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs comprising the main sources of funding. Further funding mainly originates from charitable trusts. With regard to the time spent by organisations on the funding process there are huge variations, this may be due to the size of the organisation, the number of classes run and the level of funding they receive.

AONTAS is concerned that any funding provided via the commissioning mechanism is cognisant of the challenges facing community education. In particular, the hard-to-reach, resource intensive processes are the needed to support the most hard-to-reach learners back into education. Any outcomes based model must balance the importance of process and not just the outcome of the service.

The AONTAS CEN has produced the following guide for effectively funding community education:

1. Funding will cover the true costs of community education.
2. Multi-annual funding scheme for community education groups.
3. Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include: vocational and non-vocational learning.
4. Education provision that will be covered by the fund will include accredited and non-accredited learning.
5. Funding mechanism will be locally managed.
6. Funding will not be target-led but community-led.
7. Funding administrators will have specific expertise in community education.
8. Effective and authentic evaluation for the funding process.

## **Conclusion**

AONTAS welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the Submission on Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services. We believe that a key priority must be to protect and support the unique value of the community and voluntary approach to supporting people and communities and develop an approach that will help it to thrive in the future.

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