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## THE AONTAS COMMUNITY EDUCATION NETWORK

# Issues regarding the implementation of the new Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) Operational Guidelines 2012 and its implications for the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN)



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## 1. Summary

**Issue:** The Back to Education Initiative community strand is no longer administered by the Further Education Development Unit (FEDU) of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) it is now the responsibility of local VECs. However, how this fund should be administered at local level is unclear and differences across the country have been found with associated implications for community education groups: some groups only receive funding for tutor hours, others the whole grant as before. With the establishment of the new Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs), there is uncertainty regarding the process that they will employ for administering BTEI funding for community education.

**CEN response:** The BTEI Programme as previously managed by the DES was very successful in that it included not only tutor hours, but also outreach, pre-development and non-pay costs thus enabling community education groups to provide effective responsive provision. This process should be maintained under the administration of the VEC and future Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) as outlined in the BTEI operational guidelines (as it states that the same terms and conditions will apply).

**Solution:** There is a need for clarification and agreement at national level on how this fund will be administered by LETBs to community education groups in order to ensure that groups who are successfully awarded the fund receive it in the same manner as before.

## 2. The Back to Education Initiative

The Back to Education Initiative community strand is an essential funding source for community education organizations providing young people and adults with less than upper second level education a range of part-time accredited learning opportunities that lead to an award on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This funding stream is essential to the sustainability of the community education sector. Community education offers the first step back into education for second chance learners who avail of the extra supports that community education provides in order to gain a qualification and to progress to further education in the centre, or with another education provider such as the local VEC, or into employment.

The community strand of the BTEI was previously accessed from the Further Education Development Unit. However as of November 2011, community education groups wishing to apply for funding under the BTEI (Community Strand) for 2012 had to submit their application to their local VEC, rather than to the Further Education Development Unit (FEDU).

## 3. BTEI Operational Guidelines 2012

The operational change regarding the community strand of the BTEI is that: **The VEC will submit community strand applications as part of their overall 2012 BTEI application. The same terms and conditions will apply to both community groups and VECs.**

The guidelines pay particular attention to the role of community education in achieving the goals of the BTEI funding programme: community education models and outreach are outlined under point 40<sup>1</sup> of the guidelines as specific approaches

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<sup>1</sup> **Innovation 40.** Innovative approaches are important to effectively target groups whose needs are not adequately met by the existing system. Examples of innovation can include systematic outreach and recruitment strategies, partnership initiatives, distance learning, e-learning, workplace learning, community education models, flexible delivery, disciplines covered, teaching approaches and methodologies adopted.

for effectively targeting groups. Furthermore, under point 41 ‘community education’, notes that VECs can “facilitate and support local groups to address the educational needs of their communities by allocating funding for certified programmes”, which will offer a “more coherent and integrated provision across the community”. A key aspect of community education noted within this section of the guidelines is its “ethos and holistic approach, community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in learning that is creative, participative and needs-based.” However, community education groups in the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) have identified that through the new process they are having difficulties in delivering this kind of provision due to reduced funding and greater restrictions.

### 3.1 BTEI funding administration: differences in implementation across VECs

Interpretation of the BTEI guidelines appears to differ across VECs as there is no clear direction about how community education groups and the VEC should work together in the administration of this fund. Changes in the process for administering the BTEI fund have differed across VECs: some VECs are providing the fund as previously administered in that the funding is transferred into the account of the successful applicant of the BTEI community strand. Other VECs are retaining the BTEI community strand fund and are administering it in a very different manner with the addition of new stipulations. Groups in the CEN emphasized their good relationship with their local VECs; however many feel displaced as a community education provider and as a result of the new changes to the administration of the BTEI fund are acting as “VEC outreach rather than community education”.

At the AONTAS Community Education Network meeting (18<sup>th</sup> April), groups documented the variations in the processes of administration and how this impacts on provision. Whilst it must be noted that within a diverse network of community education groups not all have the same opinion on the challenges they presented, it is worth noting that groups who have experienced the greatest changes cited its impact on the autonomy of the organization. The need to maintain the autonomy of community education groups has previously been stated in the *AONTAS CEN Position Paper on an Effective Funding Model for Community Education*<sup>2</sup> in order to ensure a flexible, responsive service can be offered to the community.

*Table 1: National overview of differences in the administration of the BTEI fund by VECs compared to the previous process (FEDU) and the implication for community education provision.*

Differences to original BTEI administration from FEDU to the how it is administered by that VEC (national overview)	Implications to community education provision
<b>The BTEI funds awarded to the community education groups are lodged into the VEC account</b>	No funds are transferred directly to the group.
<b>The VEC does not discharge funds for non-pay costs (although this is part of the funding stream)</b>	Loss of funding, exacerbating an already low level of funding. See CEN funding position paper regarding the implications of this.
<b>Lack of information on the process</b>	Difficulty in planning and organizing of education provision
<b>Variation in how this fund is administered across the country: some groups are awarded the <i>whole fund</i> while others only receive <i>tutor hours</i></b>	See figure 1. If only a small part of the awarded funding is received the shortfall to be made up, if possible, by other funding further exacerbates the already tenuous financial position of groups and their ability to provide effective community education provision. For example, if no funding for outreach is available hard to reach groups won't be accessed, although

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/final\\_cen\\_position\\_paper.pdf](http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/final_cen_position_paper.pdf)

	highlighted in the AONTAS research (AONTAS, 2011) as essential for meeting the education needs of the most marginalized.
<b>Some VECs are taking an administration fee for processing the BTEI e.g. one VEC is taking 10% of the total BTEI budget</b>	Previously administration for the community education group could be met by a % of the fund (at present it is no more than 15%). The reduction means that in some cases only 5% of the administration fund is available to community education groups. This shortfall means a loss of funding which must be recouped through other funding streams thus perpetuating the instability and ineffectiveness of the funding for community education. See diagram of what is required by community education groups for an effective funding model (fig.1).
<b>Awaiting approval from the VEC before commencing provision</b>	Learners are unsure when courses will be held. Courses are put on hold resulting in difficulties in maintaining learners due to uncertain course start date.
<b>Co-ordination of the BTEI will no longer be by the community education groups but the BTEI coordinator in the VEC incurring a 10% reduction in the budget</b>	Move away from local co-ordination to the VEC and reduction in budget. The local community level contact with learners is moved to a more regional level. Local links are effective in responding to the needs of the local community.
<b>Some VECs are now involved in the recruitment of tutors</b>	Loss of autonomy for groups – challenges regarding how the ethos of community education can be maintained if tutors do not have a community education background or the skills to facilitate educational courses in a community education setting.
<b>Some VECs do not involve the community education group in the recruiting of tutors or in terms of line management.</b>	Loss of autonomy for groups. If tutors are supplied by the VEC all staff should have relevant qualifications and experience in adult education and especially to understand the community context in which he/she will work. The local community is best placed to adjudicate on this matter.
<b>If the VEC recruit the tutor will they have to adhere to the Teaching Council requirements? Some groups are under the impression that this is the case.</b>	A vast array of experience has been developed in the sector and not all community education courses require this kind of educational background e.g. tutors with a vast array of experience on the topic e.g. Art cannot be employed unless they meet these criteria. There needs to be an analysis of qualifications across the adult education sector and the opportunity to align these through continuous professional development.
<b>Some VECs are requiring community education groups to use the VEC FETAC Quality Assurance process rather than their own</b>	In order to maintain their FETAC QA and implement their processes many groups want to use their own QA. This is essential particularly as there are changes in the Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), if a group lose their QA they may not be in a position to become a provider again.
<b>Some community education groups cannot share FETAC programmes with the local VEC even though they are receiving BTEI funding.</b>	Lack of access to FETAC Common Award System validated programmes although it was understood that all community and voluntary groups in receipt of Department of Education and Skills funding could access them.
<b>Shifting criteria for BTEI</b>	Some groups stated that FETAC level 1 and 2 are not being supported and therefore those programmes are not being funded. Clarification is needed the eligibility criteria for programmes.

#### Summary of Issues

- Only receiving tutor hours instead of the full grant
- Reduction in the BTEI grant due to an administration fee
- Tutors employed by VEC/input into who group employs/new requirements to hire tutors

- New requirement to use VEC FETAC Quality Assurance process
- Lack of communication and delay in notification to start course
- Shifting criteria for BTEI applications – are FETAC levels 1 and 2 included?

### 3.2 Main Issues: Loss of Autonomy and Continuous Professional Development

Many groups expressed concern that changes to the administration of this fund by some VECs e.g. only providing a specific tutor via tutor hours only, results in a loss of autonomy whereby community education is reduced to an outreach model of provision only. This reinforces the difficulties in funding community education, rather than addressing the challenges noted in the White Paper and more recently the CEN position paper on effective funding and is seen as a regressive step.

Loss of ownership over the FETAC Quality Assurance Process, and the mandatory requirement to use the VEC's QA, means that as a result community education groups will have little or no influence on the tutors employed, the methods of assessment and also control over their funding (if accredited learning is a funding requirement). Furthermore, with the new Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) groups are uncertain about gaining Quality Assurance in the event they lose it. These combined factors leave community education in a precarious position.

Another issue is that of tutors and the new stipulation that they need to meet the criteria of VECs employment regulations, in this case some groups cannot use their existing tutors (although they may have 20 years experience in the subject e.g. Art), the need for a Higher Diploma in Education (for teaching second level students is required). As per the AONTAS research, *Sowing the Seeds of Social Change* (2011), the continuous professional development and skills tutors have in community education is essential.

### 3.3 Challenge to the development and support of community education

#### Reducing community education provision to a model of outreach only

Two views exist within the Governmental White Paper<sup>3</sup>; on the one hand community education is seen as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community. On the other, it is viewed as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level... "it is as an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes. If BTEI funding is only administered in the form of tutor hours and if there is a requirement to use VEC FETAC Quality Assurance processes, it in effect means that community education acts only in the capacity of outreach of community education provision.

### 3.4 Challenges of changes to the BTEI programme for community education groups

It becomes obvious from the multitude of areas to be funded that if funding for tutor costs is only received that all other areas must be met from additional funding. This is an ineffective process as numerous funding streams must be accessed in order to create 'whole funding' for a community education organisation. This will also explain why the average number of funding mechanisms used by community education groups in the CEN totals 4 (some with as many as 12).<sup>4</sup> The inability to sustain a community education organisation with one of the existing funding streams points to the need for an alternative, multi-annual funding mechanism that is cost-effective in the long term. Currently, the time allocated (both staff time and voluntary) to funding applications ranges from 2 – 1000 hours depending on the size of the organisation, number of learners and the kinds

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<sup>3</sup> White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life (2000). Dublin

<sup>4</sup> CEN Research Report on Funding Streams Accessed by CEN members

of funding streams being used.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining this system is both ineffective (cost and time) and also creates an uncertain community education service where access, transfer and progression for learners is limited due to the lack of certainty around funding and continuity of courses.

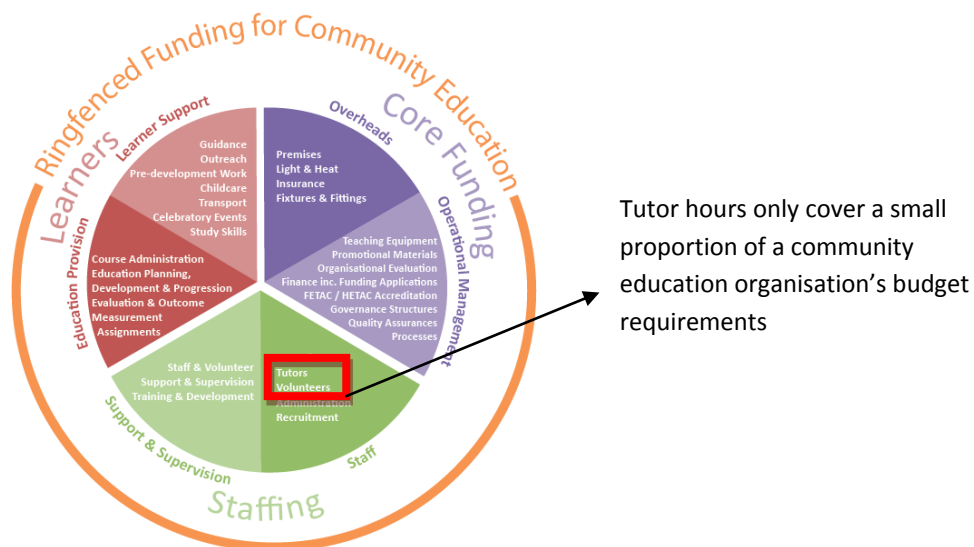


Figure 1. What needs to be funded in a community education organization: Three core areas to be met by an effective ring-fenced funding mechanism.

#### 4. Rationale for funding community education and previous challenges

The White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life (2000) stated that a separate, long-term budget line and a more streamlined funding mechanism for community education should be administered through local adult learning boards (DES, 2000 p. 116). Within the context of the new SOLAS structure, a similar process for funding could be developed through Local Education and Training Boards. Community education represents value for money for DES as even with conservative estimates; learners who start to volunteer as a result of community education could provide a high return of 28.8 million to the State and a low return of 9.1 million per annum.

#### 5. Previous role of the VEC in relation to the BTEI community strand

The previous role of VECs in relation to the BTEI community strand was mainly via the work of Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) in providing some technical support to groups e.g. offering advice on curriculum and accreditation; however the level of support was distinctly different to that of other VEC funding such as the ALCES budget which offered a higher degree of involvement (AONTAS, 2010, p. 95). The AONTAS research also noted the challenges which Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) in supporting groups such as the lack of an agreed standard approach to community education across the VECs (22%) and that community education is undervalued in the VECs (31%).

#### 6. The future of the BTEI community strand

Many groups are fearful for the future of the BTEI community strand, some have heard that it will be subsumed into the LETBs and will not be available to community education groups. There is a need to reassure groups of the future of the BTEI within LETBs, how this will be administered and its future as a sustainable funding source.

<sup>5</sup> CEN Research Report on Funding Streams Accessed by CEN members

## 7. Resolution to the issue:

- Develop clear national guidelines regarding how the VEC (and therefore the new LETBs) and community education groups will work together regarding the BTEI community strand funding process covering issues of FETAC Quality Assurance, the hiring of tutors by community education groups, the criteria of the BTEI funding scheme and when the funds will be available.
  - Community education groups who are granted BTEI funding should receive the full grant that they are allocated
  - No administration fee should be charged by the VEC/LETB for administering the fund to the community education groups
  - Qualifications and experience in the community education sector need to be recognised more broadly
    - The White Paper notes the need to scope out the qualifications of tutors in adult and community education as essential to ensuring that the most effective tutors are available and eligible to teach.
    - Provide adult education tutors with the opportunity to align their qualifications to that those required by the Teaching Council/VEC funded programme criteria are accessible through continuous professional development.
    - In the meantime there needs to be flexibility in hiring tutors according to their experience not just their having a Higher Diploma in Education. There must be some scope to include Prior Experiential Learning for tutors with a strong history of community education practice.
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