



## ***'Concerns for the Community Education Sector in a Time of Change'***

Opinions from the Community Education Network (CEN) on challenges they see facing the community education sector

The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) has sought to raise the voice of, gain recognition for and advocate for effective funding for the community education sector for the past 6 years. Since the establishment of the Network in 2007 the context for community education has changed dramatically, from the absorption of Community Development Projects (CDPs) into Local Area Partnerships, changing economic contexts, reduced funding, increased demands on services, changes to the FETAC process; all in addition to the existing challenges for community education, as it seeks to retain its identity in the context of the development of SOLAS and the new integrated Further Education and Training Service.

In preparation for the Community Education Network (CEN) Meeting on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> October members of the CEN were asked to submit a written piece for inclusion into a discussion document entitled 'Concerns for the community education sector in a time of change'. This document will act as the basis for debate at the meeting and will ultimately become a position paper which will be presented to Minister Ciaran Cannon.

This paper is based on potential scenarios and challenges that CEN members feel the sector is facing, perhaps not all concerns will become a reality within the new SOLAS and QQAAI structures however at a time of change and uncertainty there is a need to create a vehicle to articulate the real fears that community education groups have and how they see progress being made. A full position paper on the scenarios will be available from AONTAS following the October CEN meeting on early November.

A snapshot of the scenarios that members of the CEN raised include:

1. Challenges of an instrumental view of community education and the need to demonstrate community education outcomes effectively
2. Challenges of the new authority, the QQAAI and community education
3. The challenges of changes to the BTEI funding process
4. The need for continuous professional development for a social action model of community education
5. New Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs)
6. The consumption of Community Development Projects (CDPs) into Local Area Partnership Structures.
7. The future involvement of the teaching council

### **1. Challenges of an instrumental view of community education and the need to demonstrate community education outcomes effectively**

Now more than ever organisations such as SOLAS are concentrating their educational programmes on the promotion of employability for the many people who now find themselves either unemployed or under skilled. This is a vital part of the services which can and should be provided at the community and local level by government agencies, academic intuitions and others who are engaged in educational and outreach activities. However

community education needs to provide for a wide range of learners. Community education needs to address the requirements and aspirations of learners who are outside the labour market. They may be stay at home parents, senior citizens, disabled or any other learner who chooses to learn for reasons other than employment. They do not necessarily want to attend courses which are measured by exams or which provide certification for a particular skill set.

Community education workers and those who finance their courses need to be aware of the many benefits which communities can gain from an active involvement in learning within the community. Learning has been shown to have a positive effect on both the physical and mental health of the learner. Education within the community will bring a community together and give its members a sense of civic pride and ownership of their community. To insure that these benefits continue to be felt across the community sector a better understanding of the types of outcomes that can be achieved in community education need to be understood and promoted by those who finance and run community education initiatives. They need to explore and promote the idea of the hidden curriculum and find imaginative ways to measure outcomes which can be seen and appreciated by all stakeholders in the endeavour. Furthermore, the outcomes of community education cannot be reduced to quantitative measures. There is a danger that accredited learning will take priority over non-accredited course provision, the latter often having a key role in determining whether or not an individual will return to education in the first place. Measures of qualitative analysis and indeed, a measure which looks at the transformation of communities as a whole can be developed with the CEN playing a key role here.

Also, it was noted by CEN members that during the SOLAS Consultation Day in Croke Park there was an expressed intention to bring 'training' & 'education' together into one sector. The view that there is no difference between 'education' and 'training' is, in the opinion of some CEN members, flawed and while there is a need for both, there should be a clear distinction between them. Training is about skills acquisition and is generally job-related while education is a broader concept involving learners in an analysis of the world around them and their place in it. Some of the more important elements of Community Education that are not catered for in training are:

- The transformative effect of education on the learner
- The potential for social change
- The promotion of critical thinking
- The promotion of active citizenship

Furthermore the merger of the vocational training sector (formally FAS) with the wider VECs coordinated adult and community education sector has challenges for the kind of provision that is offered. A main concern about this merger is the potential for community education, an activity that has always been voluntary, to be linked to compulsory training as a condition of welfare benefits. There is a fear those responsible for implementing this programme will interpret community groups as a soft target for making contact with people they have traditionally found it hard to reach. Connections between welfare payments and community education will have a detrimental effect on relationships of trust that have been built up over decades and will encourage a quantitative rather than qualitative measurement of learning. Programmes encouraged are likely to be in support of the economic realm with little regard for other immaterial benefits. Community sector organisations should be lobbying for greater

welfare payments to offset the disproportionate cuts in recent years and job creation through stimulus packages rather than bailouts for banks.

The world of adult and community education is to change radically over the next year. What will the landscape look like in a few short years? Will education be re-branded as up-skilling, re-skilling or training? What will happen to the radical theories of transformative education, social change and critical thinking that have been our guiding principles through the decades since the 1980s? Does this mean a return to a banking system of education where learners are just 'skill-bins'? Are we entering an era where the learner is just a consumer and the course a product to be packaged and sold?

***Other questions arising from this section are:***

- How can we articulate and demonstrate the difference between education and training to SOLAS and the place for community education within this?
- How can community education remain voluntary if there is the potential to link it to welfare payments of participants?

***Comments from this section:***

- There is a need for community education, as a collective process, to be both accredited and non-accredited but not always linked to the economic skills agenda.
- There is a need for effective tools to measure the outcomes of community education in qualitative and quantitative terms.

**2. The need for continuous professional development for a social action model of community education**

The impact of the changing environment has spurred on community education organisations to reassess their work, in particular their ethos and model of community education provision. In identifying itself as a collective of community education practitioners the CEN recognized the need for continuous professional development (CPD) as an essential element for maintaining a social action model of community education. The need for reflecting on the social action model of community education is brought into focus because of the changing environment which is dominated by an instrumental view of adult education focusing on skills development and meeting the needs of the economy.

In recent times a model of community education that aspires to social action has become under threat due to the lack of CPD training for practitioners, loss of funding for staff development and the aforementioned emphasis on the instrumental understanding of community education. In response to this issue, which was raised by the CEN, one of the main skills gaps identified by the members of the network is the integration of continuous professional development for social change into the work of community education organisations and as a professional requirement for community education tutors. Continuous professional development for community education models that aspire to social change is important in order to:

- Define the community education sector and support its development

- Clarify what makes it this mode of education different
- Identify the unique contribution that community education makes to the education system and importantly what tutors of community education need to know in delivering this kind of provision.

These questions have been raised by numerous CEN members including at the recent CEN training, which was funded through the Training Links Programme, and aims to support groups to provide CPD for a social action model of community education. Furthermore, any professionalization actions for the further education sector must be cognisant of the experience already built up in communities and the kind of training needed to support an effective, and social action model, of community education.

**Questions arising from this section are:**

- How can this mode of community education provision be maintained within a structure such as SOLAS as it appears to chiefly focus on education for skills and employment is uncertain? Where is the space for a social action model?
- How can we demonstrate the value of the social action model of community education?
- With the reduced and piecemeal funding e.g. only receiving tutor hours, how can community education practitioners be supported through CPD to provide a social action model of community education?

### **3. Challenges of changes to the BTEI funding process**

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.

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).

**Conclusions of this section are:**

In summary 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.

#### 4. Challenges of the new QQAAI and community education

The positioning of community education following the amalgamation of FETAC with other accrediting bodies into the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance Association of Ireland (QQAAI)* is unclear. Overall there is an air of tension, in addition to the validation of programmes, and the squeezing of community education into models of further education that may compound the situation through its relegation of recipients to the lower rungs of the NFQ strengthening the likelihood they will become trapped within low-paid, low-skill sectors of the economy.

The biggest question posed centres on the ability of community education groups to obtain, and maintain its own quality assurance (QA) in order to provide accredited learning opportunities. With the amalgamation of HETAC, FETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Association the drive towards a more centralized system of accreditation appears to be at play, questions surrounding how this will operate at local level are also raised as QA may become centralized at a local level in that only LETBs will be able to provide or be responsible for this process. In order to protect community education there is a need to address the questions around QA, this complex issue is not merely about being able to provide accredited learning but to meet demands of funding streams, many which stipulate that the organization must have its own QA, having control over the tutors employed and thus the ability to provide the kind of community education provision that is in keeping with both the ethos of the organization and the demands of the community it serves.

##### Practitioners comment on the Common Award System – Tara Farrell, Longford Women’s Link

Our predominant concerns for much of 2012 have centered on the CAS (Common Awards System) and subsequent implementation through FETAC. It has proven to be extremely time-consuming with a lot of confusion caused in terms of trying to develop our schedule of courses for 2012/2013. We know from discussing the situation with other CEN members that we are not alone in this. It has resulted in considerable distraction from focusing on our actual learners which we feel is counterproductive to the goals of Women's Community Education. The key challenges facing the community education sector as a result are the dangers that the goals and aspirations of community education providers in terms of adult and community education will be sidetracked in the name of bureaucracy and red tape.

##### **Questions arising from this section are:**

- Will small community education organisations be able to become quality assured within the new QQAAI structure?
- Can non-DES funded community education providers, including those previously supported by FAS, have access to LETBs (FAS and VEC) newly validated programmes under the Common Award System?
- How will community education organizations keep their autonomy: if QQAAI quality assurance is a prerequisite for funding streams, it will then have a knock on effect on securing funding and the hiring tutors.
- Is there the potential for groups to provide accredited learning at all levels of the NFQ? Will they be limited to lower levels of the NFQ?

***Proposed solutions to the challenges include:***

- All community education groups should be able to apply for QQAAI quality assurance and, upon meeting the criteria, be supported in maintaining it.
- All quality assured community education groups, as not-for profit entities in the voluntary sector, should have access to new validated programmes under the Common Award System for sharing with the VEC/FAS/LETBs, regardless of their funding source.

**5. New Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs)**

A challenge facing the sector is the possibility that the experience and expertise of the community education sector may be lost if there are not transparent and open processes in relation to the composition of LETBs. This is particularly significant in the area of Women's Community Education which has an excellent track record in transforming the lives of women, their families and by extension, their communities. The CEN as a collective body can ensure that all members highlight any lack of transparency or any issues of concern in their own areas at Network meetings so that issues can be tackled collectively and not in isolation.

***The question arising from this section is:***

- How will community education be represented in the composition of LETBs?

**6. The consumption of Community Development Projects (CDPs) into Local Area Partnership Structures**

In 2011, the independent CDP structure was consumed into Local Area Partnership structures. This was done without consultation and negotiation and as a result, CDPs lost both their independent management structures (which were often local people from the areas in question) and any assets that these community groups had built up. At the same time, 13 CDPs were closed resulting in redundancies for workers and a loss of community representation and service provision. Many of those working in the sector believe those projects that were closed down were the ones who were not afraid to challenge government decisions they felt were damaging to their local communities. As community education is provided by many CDPs this is of concern for national community education provision.

***Questions arising from this section are:***

- What is the future of CDPs who are merged into Local Area Partnerships?
- Will the role of community education as an important element of CDP provision be maintained and supported?

## 7. The future involvement of the teaching council

On the surface this might seem like an unlikely event to challenge as it is important that high standards are encouraged and maintained within the community sector. A worry is that one of the strengths of bottom up community education has always been the involvement of local facilitators who have crafted their trade on the job. This is at risk of being threatened as the Teaching Council are unlikely to soften their insistence that those registered with the Council must have at least an honours degree. There is a disadvantaging 'catch 22' at the heart of this as many local people have been disadvantaged by an alienating school system where they were not encouraged towards 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and/or have been unable to obtain a degree due to the prohibitive costs of college attendance. There are question regarding the future profession of many of the excellent facilitators who bring an empathy and understanding to community groups will hold if they are not registered with the Teaching Council.

### **Questions arising from this section are:**

- Will Community Education practitioners be able to register with the Teaching Council without a degree and what provision is made for prior experiential learning?
- Will all community education practitioners need to register with the Teaching Council in order to be employed through LETB funds?

## **Closing**

This paper is designed to act as a starting point for discussion on the concerns CEN members have regarding community education. Following the CEN national meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> October we will develop a position paper based on the views of participants which will be presented to Minister Ciaran Cannon. A summary of the questions raised in this paper is compiled overleaf.

*Collated by Niamh O'Reilly (AONTAS) based on previous CEN meetings, queries from CEN members and the Training Links CPD course. Further submissions included from: Camilla Fitzsimons (Respond! Housing/NUI Maynooth), Alan Lyons, Tara Farrell (Longford Women's Link), Stephen Flitton (Warremount Community Education and Development, CED) and members of the community education network.*

## Summary of questions/proposals arising from this Discussion Document

---

### 1. **Challenges of an instrumental view of community education and the need to demonstrate community education outcomes effectively**

- How can we articulate and demonstrate the difference between education and training to SOLAS and the place for community education within this?
- How can community education remain voluntary if there is the potential to link it to welfare payments of participants?

*Comments from this section:*

- There is a need for community education, as a collective process to be accredited and non-accredited which is not always linked to the economic skills agenda.
- There is a need for effective tools to measure the outcomes of community education in qualitative and quantitative terms.

### 2. **The challenges of changes to the BTEI funding process**

- In summary 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.

### 3. **The need for continuous professional development for a social action model of community education**

- How can this mode of community education provision be maintained within a structure such as SOLAS as it appears to chiefly focus on education for skills and employment is uncertain? Where is the space for a social action model?
- How can we demonstrate the value of the social action model of community education?
- With the reduced and piecemeal funding e.g. only receiving tutor hours, how can community education practitioners be supported through CPD to provide a social action model of community education?

### 4. **Challenges of the new authority, the QQAAI and community education**

- Will small community education organisations be able to become quality assured within the new QQAAI structure?
- Can non-DES funded community education providers, including those previously supported by FAS, have access to LETBs (FAS and VEC) newly validated programmes under the Common Award System?
- How will community education organizations keep their autonomy: if QQAAI quality assurance is a prerequisite for funding streams, it will then have a knock on effect on securing funding and the hiring tutors.
- Is there the potential for groups to provide accredited learning at all levels of the NFQ? Will they be limited to lower levels of the NFQ?



*Proposed solutions to the challenges include:*

- All community education groups should be able to apply for QQAAI quality assurance and, upon meeting the criteria, be supported in maintaining it.
- All quality assured community education groups, as not-for profit entities in the voluntary sector, should have access to new validated programmes under the Common Award System for sharing with the VEC/FAS/LETBs, regardless of their funding source.

**5. New Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs)**

- How will community education be represented in the composition of LETBs?

**6. The consumption of Community Development Projects (CDPs) into Local Area Partnership Structures.**

- What is the future of CDPs who are merged into Local Area Partnerships?
- Will the role of community education as an important element of CDP provision be maintained and supported?

**7. The future involvement of the teaching council**

- Will Community Education practitioners be able to register with the Teaching Council without a degree and what provision is made for prior experiential learning?
- Will all community education practitioners need to register with the Teaching Council in order to be employed through LETB funds?