

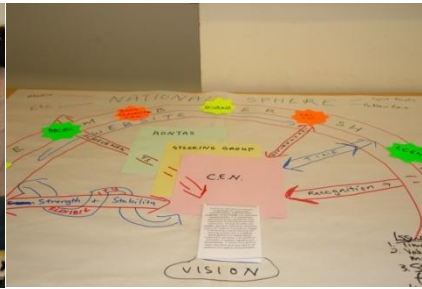
AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting

'Moving Forward with the Funding Issue'

Date: Wednesday 14th October 2009

Time: 9.45am – 1.30pm

Venue: The Carmichael Centre, North Brunswick St, Dublin 7



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Introduction

The seventh meeting of the Community Education Network came at a vital time for the sector as it faces many challenges, both funding cuts and restructuring. It faces higher demand with less resources. The aim of the meeting was two-fold, to develop the community education network further in order to ensure a strong voice for community education and to identify key lobbying areas for the short and long term. If we constantly work in a fire-fighting capacity we will be reactive to needs but not mindful of the network. If we focus solely on the network it will be to the detriment of the lobbying needs of the community education sector. Therefore the day aimed to consolidate the work so far, to offer new ways to develop the network and to focus on the imminent lobbying needs of the sector. A total of 40 members of the community education network attended the meeting.

The day was shaped by the outcomes of the community education network meeting questionnaire which was distributed to members during the summer. We aimed to meet the following recommendations:

Amendments to the logistics of meetings

- **Advance notice** of meetings was identified as important for facilitating attendance. In order to address this, dates for future meetings will be highlighted at the start of the year (September).
 - *This was distributed by email in September and in the update sheet at the meeting.*
- Having meetings only on Wednesday does not always suit so we will **stagger the days** (Tuesday/Wednesday).
 - *We aim to have the next meeting on a Tuesday*
- Many members of the Network were happy to have the meetings in **Dublin**, the importance of having a regional focus was also noted, and therefore we will have at least one meeting outside Dublin.
 - *The last meeting of the Network will take place at a location outside Dublin on Wednesday 24th March*
- Although many members of the Network were satisfied with St. Andrews, in order to create a more interactive and welcoming space the next set of meetings will be carried out in a **new location in Dublin**.
 - *The meeting was held at the Carmichael Centre*
- As there was a split between those satisfied with the **time-frame** and those dissatisfied, the next meeting will be at the proposed time: 9.45am registration, meeting starts at 10am-1.30pm (lunch at 1.30pm) for the Dublin meeting. We will review for the next meetings.
 - *The meeting was at the above timeframe*

Amendments to meeting content

- **Networking** was cited as an important draw to meetings, in order to increase the opportunity for interaction amongst participants we will amend the meeting's agenda to include methods for facilitating networking throughout the day.
 - *Participants were seated at colour-coded tables in order to increase discussion with members they wouldn't otherwise talk to and a short time was allocated at the start of the meeting to facilitate networking.*
- **Discussion** spaces will be facilitated using new methods in order to increase creativity and effectiveness.
 - There was an increase in the number of discussion sessions during the meeting.
- **Information** sharing was also cited as important; we will create an up-to-date newsletter about the sector and also ensure an input pertaining to the sharing of best practice will be incorporated into the meeting.
 - *A 2 page update flyer was distributed to participants*
- In response to the **suggested speakers** for future meetings we endeavor to have education spokespeople from the political parties, international speakers, inputs from CEN members and individuals from FETAC/Grundtvig and from outside the sector.
 - *We will include this in future meetings*
- **Members** of the Community Education Network will be more involved in the facilitation of groups and providing inputs in order to maximize the skills and knowledge use of the Network.
 - *Groups self-facilitated at this meeting, we will encourage members to facilitate groups in future.*

Outcomes of the meeting include:

1. A proposed plan of action for the future expansion and development of the Community Education Network.
2. An Emergency 1 pager advocacy tool for lobbying.
3. Suggestions for future advocacy work.

Content of the day

The day commenced with an overview of the meeting and a networking session amongst participants who were seated in colour-coded tables of six. The day was set into two sessions: re-evaluating the Network and identifying the urgent lobbying issues that they face.

For the session on re-evaluating the community education network, independent consultant Natasha Bailey set out a participative process to facilitate the group to reflect on how the CEN could improve its functioning in order to ensure it could be a strong voice for community education. The aim of the session was to plan further development of the Community Education Network to ensure that it is a network with a shared vision, active participation and excellent communication flow. Natasha gave an overview of the nature of networks, how they operate and function, the group were directed to reflect on the issues facing the functioning of the community education network and a larger piece of group work was then initiated which focused on creating 'network maps' that illustrated how the CEN could operate in order to address the issues identified. Participants then had an opportunity to view other maps and to vote on elements they deemed important for the development of the network.



An overview of the advocacy work of the Network was provided by Niamh O'Reilly, it took into account the advocacy work of the network achieved and how this can be built on in the short and long term. Two key areas were focused on for discussion: the first to identify the immediate challenges facing the community education sector which would be used to create the emergency lobbying tool which was carried out in the small groups, the second was to have an information sharing session on the Report from the Centre for Effective Services on the Review of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) and the Community Development Programme (CDP).

In order to facilitate the network to document the outcomes of their work Liz Waters and Bernadette Walshe from An Cosan shared their experience of evaluating the outcomes of their programmes, a template for this process was provided together with a rationale for investing time into this work. Both expressed the value of this work in terms of securing future funding for programmes, as a method for evaluating the progress of the work of the organisation and to document community education work that highlights its learner-centredness and holistic. A copy of this template is attached to this report.



The day ended with a summary of the outcomes of the ‘network map’ session by Natasha Bailey. The main elements of the maps were discussed and an outline of the features that should constitute further development of the network was discussed.

Participants’ Discussion

Evaluation of the Community Education Network Session

The key common issues which were identified across the seven discussion groups are illustrated in the table below:

Issue	Comment	No. Groups
Participation	Committing to and maintaining consistent participation in current climate, ensuring there are clear benefits for members, resourcing participation	5
Structure of CEN	Needs to retain strength and stability and develop in the futures	3
Membership	Keeping CEN grassroots membership as driving force	2
Communication	Members need to commit to two-way communication	3
Meetings	Inconsistent attendance, location an issue	2
Shared vision	Maintaining a common cause and coherent voice, avoiding conflict	2

The results show that participants understand that Networks cannot survive without their members giving and gaining something, but that CEN members are constrained in how they participate due to the current environment. Another key issue was a need to develop the structure of the network. These two issues are linked as structure can facilitate or constrain participation.



Ideas for Improving the Network

Participants mapped new networks that could address the issues identified. They were then asked to tour all the maps created and each participant had 12 votes to select the important elements of the maps. The table below shows the elements that were voted on and how many votes each received.

Element	Votes
Thematic Sub-groups or meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ QAF standards (13) ▪ Shared skills (13) ▪ Responding to recession, funding (8) ▪ Lobbying (8) ▪ External alliances (8) ▪ PR (8) ▪ Integrating people with a disability (6) ▪ Men’s education (3) ▪ Women’s education (3) 	105 (spread across any reference to this element generic and specific)
Regional Clusters (12 votes for nominating a person from the region to report back to the central CEN meetings from regional clusters)	27
Membership committing to participation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Giving information ▪ Sharing skills ▪ Communicating achievements ▪ Giving their time 	19 (spread across any reference to what members could do)
Review the Steering Group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthen and formalise the group (15) ▪ Elect or nominate members? (6) 	21

Participants also gave nine votes to a question on membership, which was, “Members need to be AONTAS affiliates?” This question related to smaller community groups joining the Network who were not AONTAS affiliates, but who might be interested in membership of the CEN.

Further to ideas about changes to the Network participants were asked if they would make a commitment to something that they could give to the Network in the future, large or small. The following emerged from the 13 individuals who completed this exercise:

- Nine people indicated an interest in joining a sub-group
- Seven indicated that they would be involved in a regional cluster and two of those said they would be willing to host/ set one up
- Two indicated that they would communicate the events of the day to other structures

The use of ICT as communication channels for the Network was highlighted on two of the maps. The results of this aspect of the session show that members are looking for different ways in which to participate in the Network according to their geographical location, expertise and interest. All of the maps highlighted the necessity of members giving resources to the Network, demonstrating that they understand the importance of this feature to the success of the Network.

Also of note, is the interest in reviewing the Steering Group and formalising how it operates. This result indicates that, for some of the participants, they are not clear about the role of the group and the extent of its decision-making power or how it takes into account the opinions or decisions of the wider membership.

Advocacy Session

The session started with an overview of the advocacy work of the Network. Participants were asked to identify the key challenges that community education faces and the methods to meet those challenges. The outcomes can be collated into following themes:

- Funding** Funding must be maintained, there is a huge and more varied demand for organisations that are experiencing significant detrimental cuts to resources.
- Proposed restructuring** There is great uncertainty about the future of the sector, in terms of the possible abolishing of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the possible effect of the Centre of Effective Services review of LDSIP and CDPs.

A redrafted manifesto for the Community Education Network has been produced for circulation amongst the Network. It is envisaged that the manifesto will be available by the 7th November.

There was an open discussion about the Report from the Centre for Effective Services on the Review of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) and the Community Development Programme (CDP). A number of key points were noted:

1. The report that is available on their website is a summary report and does not fully detail the outcomes of the review. This longer report was used in previous consultations with community organizations.
2. There is a great deal of uncertainty in the sector as to potential outcomes of the report: will there be a merging of organizations and will the CDPs be subsumed under the Partnerships.
3. There is significant concern regarding the makeup of the different boards that the CDPs would come under, would the voluntary management board be lost and what would the alternative board be comprised of.
4. The methodology used in the review must be considered, international comparisons may not always be applicable in the Irish context.
5. If the recommendations are to go into effect they must be monitored by the sector.
6. The report has similarities to that which was carried out in Scotland.
7. The review does not include information from national evaluations that have been carried out on CDPs in Ireland.
8. Partnerships have been engaged in monitoring and evaluation for years; they have been expected to do this, have systems in place and are resourced to do this. However CDPs have not carried out this process and therefore may not be in a position to demonstrate outcomes.

In terms of going forward there was a sense that a critique of the review by the Network was required in order to provide a voice for the sector. There was a call for AONTAS representation at the next Centre for Effective Services consultation on Wednesday 11th November. It is hoped that a critique could be prepared by this time in order to support the CEN representative.

The Way Forward

Evaluation

Networks are unique organisational forms and operating them effectively can be complex. However, there is some strong support from this session for piloting some changes to the Network, which also match best practice for the development of Networks. The challenge is to avoid overcomplicating decision-making and management of the CEN. Sub-groups (or task forces) are an excellent way for members of a Network to take responsibility for pieces of work. These do not have to be fixed structures but can be set up for the time needed to accomplish pieces of work and then disbanded.

Regional structures can also facilitate communication and participation when a network becomes larger. The CEN has grown rapidly since its inception and regional clusters could be a constructive way to ensure that groups who cannot attend a whole Network meeting could raise issues that need to be brought to the centre. If

there are to be regional structures and sub-groups communication and decision-making lines need to be extremely clear.

A network is essentially an interagency forum. As such, the following guidelines are useful. Interagency groups need:

- Consistent representation – representatives should also be able to make decisions for their organisations
- Resources for their participation
- Monitoring against agreed indicators
- Clear, written leadership and decision-making guidelines. In other words, what decisions can be made by a Steering Group, a sub-structure and when do decisions need to be made by the wider constituency?

The results of this session show that the CEN might benefit from formalising these processes and testing them with the Network. In particular, setting up sub-groups was emphasised. AONTAS will put together an action plan for future development of the Network and will distribute it to CEN members for suggestions and agreement. All of this work will be carried out in the context of the AONTAS strategic plan so to ensure that future commitments to the CEN will be successfully implemented.

Advocacy

The emergency manifesto has been drafted in accordance to the suggestions voiced by members at the Community Education Network meeting, as attached. All other points that refer to the longer-term work of the Network will be included in the position paper on funding mechanisms for the sector as many allude to the need for sustainable funding.

Moving forward on the manifesto:

1. Members of the CEN to agree manifesto
2. AONTAS to distribute the manifesto to CEN members and suggest methods for promoting this work
3. CEN members to feed back to AONTAS the progress of this work and any support they require.

In order to move forward on the critique of the Report from the Centre for Effective Services on the Review of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) and the Community Development Programme (CDP) the following actions are suggest for immediate effect:

1. Agree a subgroup from within the CEN to carry out a critique of the fuller version of the report
2. AONTAS to support the subgroup in the collating and distribution of the report

Members of the CEN to promote the outcomes of the critique and share with the wider community education sector in order to ensure groups are aware of the CES report.