AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting

Building the Capacity of the Network to Lobby Effectively

Wednesday 12th November 2008
Dominican Biblical Centre, Limerick

Niamh O'Reilly
Membership Development Officer
AONTAS 83-87 Main Street
Ranelagh Dublin 6 Ph: 01 4068220 noreilly@aontas.com
www.aontas.com   www.adultlearnersfestival.com

Introduction

The fourth meeting of the Community Education Network was designed to create a space to launch the Network's definition of community education as a basis for work, promotional work and lobbying. It was also a space to explore policy issues relating to community education and the identification of the way forward for groups in addressing such. The aim of the meeting is to use the outcomes from the discussion space to act as a basis for the lobbying campaign work and also to identity the needs of participants so that the Network can support it. The day was designed to create a space for reflection, discussion and inputs which would inspire ideas and thoughts that would act as a starting point for our pre-Local and European Election lobbying campaign.

Content of the day

The day commenced with an overview of the day and introductions of the participants. A brief background on the Community Education Network and its status, in terms of development and work, was provided. Liz Waters, CEO of An Cosan and CEN steering group member, launched the Network's definition of community education. Liz discussed the development of the definition, what it means in terms of our practice and how we can move forward on this work. A leaflet of the definition was also provided; this also gives information about what community education is and the work of the Community Education Network. This leaflet is the tangible outcome of a year's work of the Network and will be used as part of our future activities: promotion and lobbying.

Members of the Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN) shared their experience of a successful lobbying campaign. Catherine Aylmer and Alona Troy discussed the process in which the appointment of two Community Education Co-ordinators was brought about through the implementation of a specific, well-researched and detailed lobbying campaign plan. Lessons from their campaign include:

- Have a strong, identifiable purpose
- Identify your audiences and tailor message to suit
- Allow sufficient time. Lobbying is a time consuming activity
- Explore and exploit any opportunity which presents itself.

Afterwards, participants took part in discussion groups which focussed on what stops them in their work – with the aim of identifying areas for addressing/lobbying, and what they can do, or learn to improve this situation in order to identify areas for development and support.

The afternoon session commenced with feedback from the discussion groups, details are outlined in this report. A brief overview of policy areas that affect community education was presented and participants were asked for feedback, this will form the basis of further research into policies affecting community education.

Local Labour Councillor, Joe Leddin, gave a presentation on the importance and value of community education and lifelong learning. Lobbying techniques were also discussed, a selection of areas covered include:

1. Write to your local councillor now as they are adopting their Council Budgets
2. When looking for funding ask for double the amount
3. Look at political breakdown of the local council – the bigger group will sway the decision
4. Identify political pacts within the local council – and lobby accordingly
5. Phone or make a personal appointment with councillor
6. Lobby to win hearts and minds
7. Lobbying is ongoing and building a rapport with councillors is important
8. Write to the major and make a presentation to councillors – for mutual benefit, they gain a greater understanding of the needs of community education groups in the area and you voice the needs of your group
9. Attend councillor clinics
10. Ensure you thanks councillor after the event
11. After the local elections find out who the party leaders on the council and make connections with them.

Participants' Discussion

The aim of the discussion group was two-fold. Firstly, it is to determine what prevents the groups from working effectively, in order to identify the issues that exist. The second part focused on what the groups can do to alleviate this problem, in terms of lobbying, and how the Network can support this, through training or a specific action.

Question 1: What is stopping us from getting on with work?

A number of themes emerged regarding the areas that prevent groups from working as effectively as they could. Firstly, **fiefdoms** are a barrier to cooperative work, territorialism creates difficulties 'fear of losing out' and envy of success or innovation. This also alludes to the need for **funding** which creates competition between groups. The lack of funding also has implications resulting in a deficiency in data collection and research, and lack of resources for outreach work (to engage ethnic minorities and hard to reach groups). The driver of funding also dictates criteria which often lead to 'hiding' community education, not naming it for the purpose of meeting the requirements although it serves the same end.

This could be due to a **lack of understanding** outside the community education sector. Participants expressed that within the education system there is a serious lack of understanding around community education, its work, its ethos, its methodologies and outcomes. This creates difficulties for funding, resourcing and valuing this area of education. Furthermore, it also has a knock-on effect for identifying the unique ability of community education to play a role in the current economic situation. There is a fear that adult education will be seen as the only route out of a recession, however community education has the ability to reach those on individuals least likely to engage in education, i.e. those

most marginalized. The **language** we use can also act as a barrier that of the sector may be difficult to grasp both by participants and those outside community education.

Questions were posed regarding education **policy** in Ireland – who develops it, are they educationalist? The agenda for policy development were reflected on: is it driven by the EU/National policy and what is the agenda. If the focus is mainly on the economy where does this leave community education? There also was a sense that social policy was under attack and the abolition of the National Adult Learning Council has created an uncertain environment for community education. Should community education be under the remit of the Department of Education and Science or would it fit into the Department of Social and Family Affairs – are we selling it to the wrong people? Or would it get lost there? These are some of the reflection of the group.

Question 2: What do we need to learn, or do, to change that?

It was expressed that there is a need to be more solutions focused and to propose these when lobbying. The most prominent point that was raised in the groups was the need to measure, quantify, and identify the many **outcomes** of community education in order to put together a strong case for its resourcing, development and expansion. Areas raised include: the spin off to communities and families, 'community cannot change without personal change' and the value of personal development in terms of economic outcomes. A cost-benefit analysis was also recommended to support this work.

Further work on the development of a position on a **distinct funding stream** for community education was recommended. The need for groups to gain their own **independence** was expressed; this could be carried out by: organising fundraising events; charging for classes; renting rooms; applying canteen and childcare charges; and training in professional fundraising.

Furthermore, **lobbying** is vital for putting forward a case for community education: form alliances across the sector, lobbying for more capital, promote community education, lobby at European level (EAEA and EAPN)[1] and ensure politicians stay for the duration of the event so that they are fully aware of the needs of the group. The White Paper of a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity was noted as important document to use for lobbying activities. Linked in with lobbying is the need to raise the profile of community education, local media, in particular community radio, was identified as an effective and accessible method for promotion. It was noted that CRAOL (Community Radio Forum of Ireland) can assist in training local community groups in media, for further information contact your local community radio station.

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[1] EAEA – European Association for the Education of Adults: http://www.eaea.org/
EAPN – European Anti Poverty Network http://www.eapn.ie/

The Way Forward

<u>In terms of addressing question one: what's stopping us in our work a number of action points can be identified:</u>

1. Recognise that competition exists between community education groups, in part as a result of the funding system.

    Action: Work towards strengthening links across the sector, between and with community education groups. Build this work into Community Education Network Meetings.

2. Funding is required.

    Action: Develop this point out for lobbying, illustrate through cost-benefit analysis.

3. Raising awareness and creating a greater understanding of the value of community education is imperative to its development.

    Action: Distribute the AONTAS Community Education Network leaflet, become involved in the Adult Learners' Festival - Tuesday 3rd February is dedicated to community education – put on an event. Host a political event on Friday 6th to coincide with the Lobbying for Learning day, invite politicians to your organisation/Open day. Please view website www.adultlearnersfestival.com for more information.

4. Role of community education in recession.

    Action: Promote the value of community education in addressing issues of the recession: developing the soft skills required to return to the workforce, reaching those most marginalised, role of personal and community development in meeting needs of the economy.

5. Language can be difficult to understand

    Action: Be mindful of the language used in the sector and ensure that we are also reaching learners and can convey our message to politicians also. Use AONTAS Community Education Network leaflet as a resource.

6. Policy

    Action: Raise awareness of policy frameworks within the Community Education Network. Build into the work of the Network.

<u>In terms of addressing question two: What do we need to learn, or do, to change that a number of action points can be identified:</u>

1. Identifying outcomes of community education is essential for building a strong position for community education.

    Action: Identify what outcomes are required, how they might be measured and collated and create guidelines to do so. Distribute to groups and build into the ongoing work of community education groups. Investigate possible areas of research at national level to support this work. Use outcomes in lobbying and promotional work.

2. Distinct Funding Stream.

Action: AONTAS and the Community Education Network to create a position paper that details the processes and mechanisms for a distinct funding stream. Use as a basis for lobbying.

3. Independence for groups

   Action: Share information on sustainable practices for community education groups. Build into the work of the Network.

4. Lobbying

   Action: Steering group and AONTAS to work with the Network to create a lobbying plan in advance of the Local and European elections. Plan to include:

   - *Information on policy frameworks*
   - *Statistics to support claims*
   - *Qualitative information on the outcomes of community education*
   - *Use media work to support this (Sound and Vision project and link in with local radio)*
   - *Case studies and cost-benefit analysis*
   - *Make links with other organisations with similar goals (create alliances)*
   - *Engage in Adult Learners' Festival on Tuesday (Community Education Day) and Friday (Lobby for Learning) day.*
   - *Position Paper on a model for a distinct funding stream for community education*

The Community Education Network Steering Group will plan the work of the Network for 2009 focusing on the actions that arose from this meeting. The Network will be consulted on the way forward and views, comments and ideas are welcomed. For more information on this work please contact Niamh O'Reilly noreilly@aontas.com.

What you can do now:

- Host an event for the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival, Monday 2nd to Friday 6th February 2009. Use Tuesday (Community Education Day) and Friday (Lobby for Learning), where possible, for your event. For ideas and support use our website: www.adultlearnersfestival.com or contact the office: 01 4068220.
- Share your case studies (learners or about your organisation) to support the lobbying work, contact Jenny Gunning: jgunning@aontas.com.
- Spread the word and raise awareness about community education. Distribute and promote the Community Education Network flier to other community education groups, learners and politicians etc. Please download from the website or obtain from the office: 01 4068220.

   http://www.aontas.com/commed/network.html

Registered Participants for Community Education Network Meeting

NAME	SURNAME	ORGANISATION	E-MAIL	PHONE
Aine	Lyne	Co Limerick VEC	ainelyne@clvec.ie	
Alan	Braddish	NEAR FM	alan@near.ie	01-8671190
Alona	Troy	LCEN Northside	atroy@paulpartnership.ie	0872971812
Ann	Dore	ACE Network	acenetwannedore21@hotmail.com	01-2963691
Annetta	Hurley	FICTA	ficta-chair@ficta.com	
Avril	Bailey	An Cosan	a.bailey@ancosan.com	01-4628488
Catherine	Alymer	LCEN Southside	caylmer@eircom.net	061-228596
Heidi	Bedell	TARGET	info@targeteducation.net	01 867 1967
James	Stuart Duffin	Inner City Renewal Group	stuart@ircg.ie	01 - 855 72 07
Joe	Murdiff	MAIN/DMC	joe@main.ie	
Liz	Waters	An Cosan	l.waters@ancosan.com	01 462 8488
Marian	Flannery	Women of the Northwest	marian.flannery@womenofthenorthwest.net	096 31900
Marie	Keegan	Crosscare	mkeegan@crosscare.ie	01-8360011
Mary	Cummins	ACE Network	mbdcummins@gmail.com	01-2963691
Mary	Flannery	Limerick VEC	maryflannery@clvec.ie	061- 419933
Noel	Fitzgerald	Draoicht	noel@draiochtltd.ie	
Nogugu	Mafu	Kade	kadetralee@eircom.net	066 718 1358
Pauline	McDermott	Cavendish House	communityedmayo@eircom.net	094-9023159
Peg	Higgins	Our Ladys of Lourdes Education Group		061 -228596
Sharon	Kennedy	Southwest Wexford CDP	coordinator@swwcdp.com	051 389418
Sinead	McDermott	Cavendish House	sinead.ailill@gmail.com	

AONTAS STAFF

Niamh O' Reilly AONTAS -Membership Development Officer noreilly@aontas.com
Jenny Gunning AONTAS- Information Officer jgunning@aontas.com
Dympna Larkin AONTAS – Membership Liaison Officer dlarkin@aontas.com