

# COMMUNITY EDUCATION 2004



# COMMUNITY EDUCATION 2004

*AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education that is accessible to and inclusive of all.*

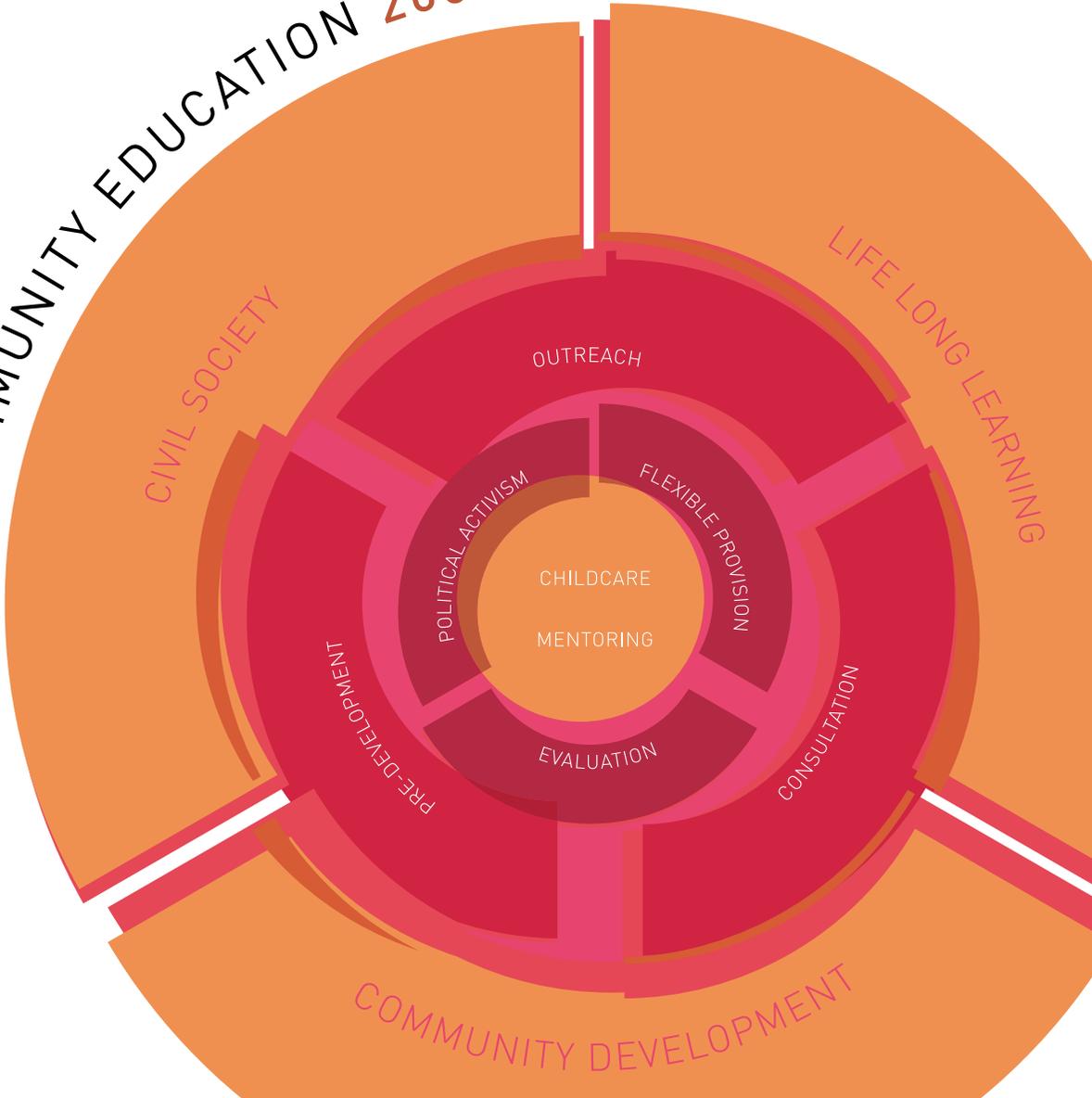
*AONTAS Mission Statement*

ISBN: 0 906826 17 9

# CONTENTS

Introduction	7
<b>Section One: Developments in Community Education</b>	<b>9</b>
The Development of Community Education in Ireland	9
Developments in Adult Education Policy	11
Broader Policy Developments	14
<b>Section Two: Defining Community Education</b>	<b>16</b>
Defining Community Education	16
Dimensions of Community Education	20
Outcomes of Community Education	21
Process and Methodology	23
Elements of the Community Education Model	23
Supports Provided in the Community Education Model	24
A Model for Progression	25
The Role of Community Education in Civil Society	26
<b>Section Three: Key Challenges for Community Education</b>	<b>28</b>
Key Challenges for the Community Education Sector	28
Accreditation	28
Resources	30
Structural Support	33
Taking Ownership of Community Education	35
<b>References</b>	<b>38</b>

# COMMUNITY EDUCATION 2004



## INTRODUCTION

In 2000 AONTAS published a policy document, *Community Education*, in an effort to answer the often asked question: What exactly *is* Community Education? It was the period following the publication of the 1998 Green Paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, when debate on the development of the Adult Education Service was at its most lively for many years. Community Education as a growing and vibrant strand of non-formal education was beginning to achieve something of the recognition it had failed to achieve for many years. Yet for a considerable number of those involved in policy-making, working in mainstream education, or even in Adult Education in its more traditional formats, the concept of Community Education remained a difficult one to grasp.

Three years later the Community Education sector finds itself in a much stronger position, occupying a vital space in the education field, particularly in the lifelong learning context. It is on the verge of achieving what AONTAS and other groups have sought for more than a decade; recognition, resources and a representative structure. The 2000 White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* gave official affirmation to Community Education, devoting a chapter to the sector and promising an injection of funding, supports and key personnel as part of an overall framework for Adult Education. In 2003, some of the recommendations of the White Paper have been implemented: 35 Community Education Facilitators are newly appointed, a national training and support programme for that team is in its early stages, and the *Back to Education Initiative*, a key pillar of the White Paper, is also being delivered in part through the Community Education sector.

With these and other developments underway, such as the introduction of the new National Framework of Qualifications, the sector is entering a new phase full of possibility and opportunity. In light of these changes, it seems worthwhile to pause again and reflect on Community Education and what it actually means. With new definitions emerging all the time, and many groups taking advantage of funding programmes and supports being made available under the Community Education banner, there is a danger that the sector's ethos could be lost as development continues.

This document sets out to describe the key developments in the area of Community Education in recent years. It outlines the main elements of Community Education as understood by AONTAS. The document then goes on to outline the main challenges facing the sector, as well as those facing policy-makers. It updates the previous policy document published in 2000 to reflect changes in the policy environment. We hope that it provides a useful insight and basis for discussion, and that it provokes timely critical reflection within and beyond the sector.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN IRELAND

The VEC sector led the development of Adult Education provision in Ireland at its outset. During the 1970s the night classes in vocational schools formed the backbone of the service, and adults had few other educational options available to them. In the late 1970s and 80s, VEC services began to expand and develop. Adult Education Organisers were appointed in 1979, the first dedicated staff working on adult learning needs. Funding was scarce, but in 1984 a boost came with the introduction of the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) budget. This small budget sustained Adult Education services through the 1980s when there was little other support available.

As the Adult Education service grew, so too did the number and range of groups becoming involved in provision. The growth of the literacy movement in the 1980s gave a new impetus to Adult Education and drew attention to the existence of real educational disadvantage among adults. Another new dimension was added to the service in the 1980s with the emergence of locally based day-time Adult Education groups. They were small groups, relying on local fundraising or once-off grants to survive. Many were women's groups whose management and service users were women. This was no surprise given the barriers facing women wishing to return to education or work. A key feature of the groups was the provision of childcare to learners. Many operated on a 'no creche, no class' basis.

The 1980s brought serious levels of unemployment, poverty, emigration and exclusion to many communities in Ireland, urban and rural. In 1986, a national response came in the setting up of the Combat Poverty Agency, with a remit to support anti-poverty initiatives and networks, and to make recommendations to Government on economic and social planning. Local responses came from community groups established to tackle disadvantage from within, and recognised education as the primary tool in bringing about social change. Local people were facilitated to come together in groups to address problems of isolation, disadvantage and lack of services. The structures and activities of these groups were rooted in the real day-to-day experiences of adults. This was the beginning

of a new movement in Adult Education in Ireland, what we know today as Community Education.

Groups established in the 1980s worked hard with minimal government support, but soon their contribution to communities all over the country was recognised. In 1990 the Community Development Programme (CDP) was launched by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs with the purpose of 'promoting positive change in society in favour of those who usually benefit least' (DSCFA, p.2). Groups tackling exclusion were funded, which led to a range of Community Development Projects emerging nationwide. Core funding was also made available to women's groups with an anti-poverty focus, enabling them to run educational programmes with more stability than in the 1980s.

During the 1990s the momentum continued to grow. A number of groups accessed funding to run NOW (*New Opportunities for Women*) Programmes, one of the EU Human Resource Initiatives. NOW was aimed at developing equality for women in relation to education and training options. In 1998 the Department of Education launched the WEI (*Women's Education Initiative*), a scheme specifically targeting educationally disadvantaged women, under which thirteen projects were funded nationally. WEI was in turn built upon and in 2000 expanded into the EEI (*Education Equality Initiative*) to include all educationally disadvantaged groups, not only women. EEI phase one funded 18 projects nationwide, including men's groups, disability groups and rural community groups, with a second phase of the programme now underway. Many of the EEI groups adhere to the principles and practices of Community Education, but are varied in their composition and purpose. Some are targeting learners at a very introductory level; others target learners at a quite advanced level, in partnership with third level colleges.

Initiatives like NOW, WEI and EEI were successful because of the particular attention paid to the provision of comprehensive supports, including childcare, allowances and mentoring, to participants in each scheme. Such supports are essential features of Community Education.

Another major funding stream which has recently become available to community groups is the *Back to Education Initiative*. This initiative provides flexible options for adults with less than upper second level education to return to learning. Although the main part of the programme is delivered through the VECs, 10% of places (over 600 in 2003) is allocated to community-based providers. 63 projects accessed the first BTEI Community Strand in 2003.

While women's groups spearheaded the development of Community Education in Ireland, their models of practice have been adopted and adapted by a variety of users nationwide so that there now exists a broad range of provision catering to different educational needs. From small beginnings in the 1980s, the sector has emerged as a solid strand of the Adult Education Service, catering to learners at all levels from pre-foundation right up to third level. Its strength is reflected in the number of its participants estimated in 2000 to be at least 30,000 (Dept. of Education 2000, p.117).

## Developments in Adult Education Policy

Developments in the Community Education sector have happened in the context of a wider lifelong learning agenda. The European Commission published a ***Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*** in 2000 which defined lifelong learning as 'all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence.' It was noted that such learning contributes to both employability and active citizenship. It was also noted that non-formal learning, which incorporates day to day experiences, is hugely valuable.

The shift in thinking at European level was reflected in Irish education policy. The lifelong learning perspective allowed Adult Education to take on a new role and since early 2000 much has changed in terms of Adult Education policy. The White Paper, ***Learning for Life***, published in 2000 marked the single most significant development for the Adult Education sector in its history. A warm welcome was given to the recognition of Community Education in the White Paper, where it was described as

'amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education in Ireland' (p.112). Its particular significance was highlighted in three key areas:

- In reaching large numbers of participants in disadvantaged settings
- In pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning in non-hierarchical, community-based settings
- In taking the lived experiences of the participants as a starting point.

The White Paper promised additional resources including:

- **35 Community Education Facilitators (CEFs)**

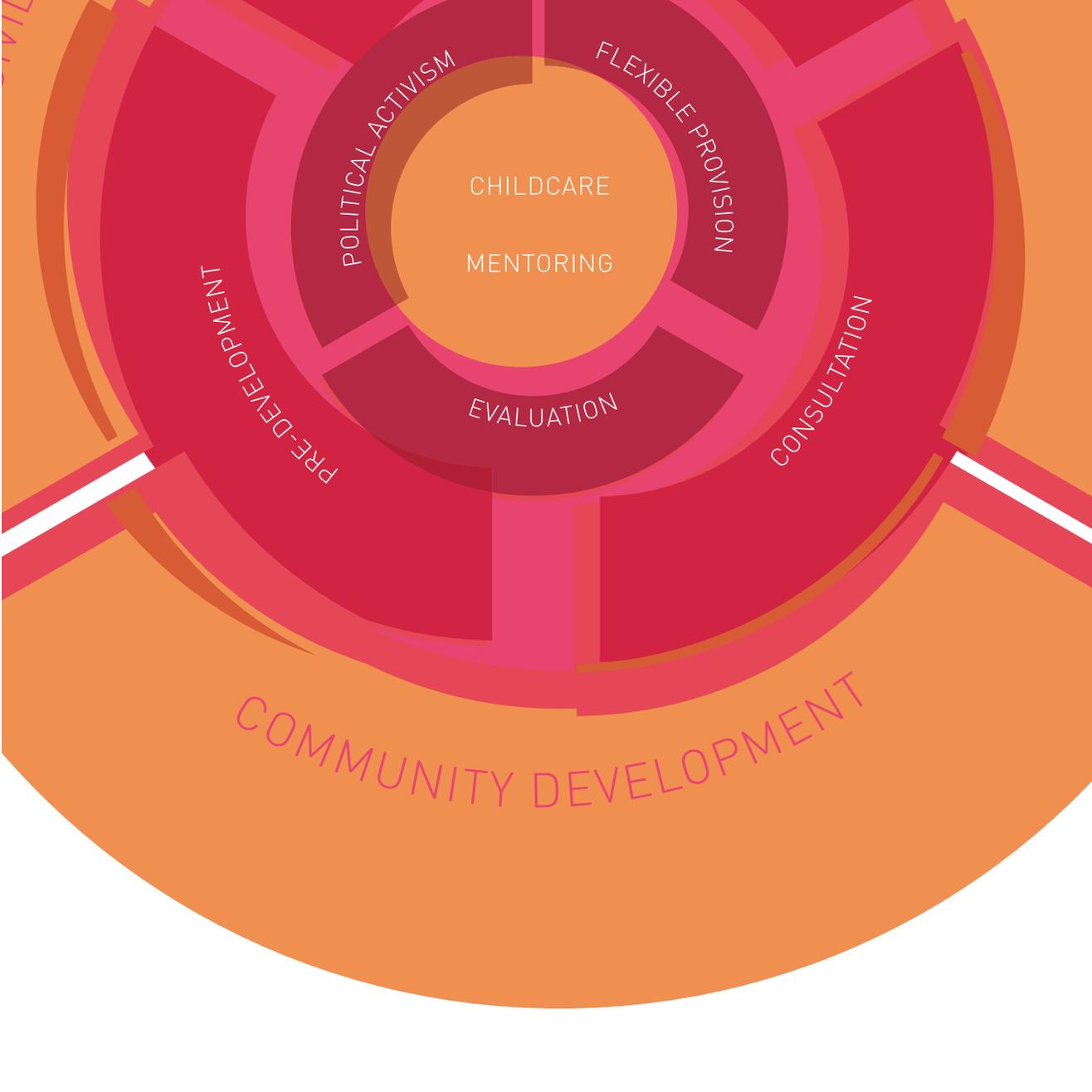
To be appointed to the VECs to give support to local community groups. This would include giving technical/ administrative help, planning networking opportunities and good practice sharing, and strengthening links between the statutory and non-formal sectors.

- **Technical Unit Under NALC**

The National Adult Learning Council (NALC) would have a technical unit supporting Community Education, helping to coordinate and monitor growth in the area, assisting with capacity building, and providing a link from the local to the national level.

- **Additional Resources**

Resources would be provided to Community Groups to allow for long-term planning. This would entail streamlining current funding mechanisms, having longer term funding than before, and creating a separate funding stream for Community Education to be allocated in future through Local Adult Learning Boards.



- **Back to Education Initiative**

Ten percent of the annual increase provided under the *Back to Education Initiative* would also be reserved for the Community Education sector. Over the period to 2006 this will ensure at least 25m extra investment by the Department of Education and Science in the sector.

By late 2003, the Community Education Facilitators were in place and a support programme for them has also started. The Programme is based in AONTAS where a National Coordinator has been appointed to organise it in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science and the VECs. The National Adult Learning Council has been in place since April 2002, but by the end of 2003 had not been established on a statutory basis.

While funding has been provided to Community Education through the *Back to Education Initiative*, the Department of Education and Science has designated no additional funding to the sector outside the existing ALCES budget (Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme).

## **Broader Policy Developments**

The White Paper 2000 has been the most significant policy development in Adult Education to date in Ireland, but a number of other developments in structures and policy have also impacted on Community Education.

### **National Framework of Qualifications**

The **1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act** is one such development. This Act laid the basis for a more streamlined and accessible system of qualifications in Ireland, and will in time create opportunities for groups who have traditionally steered clear of accreditation to develop their own programmes leading to an award.

The Act established three new bodies: FETAC and HETAC (respectively the Further and Higher Education and Training Awards Councils), and the NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland). The Awards Councils will set the standards of awards, but under the legislation any group running a programme can seek accreditation from one of the Councils. This creates the potential for Community Education to build its own distinct scheme of accredited programmes in the next few years.

Among the functions of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is the establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications, and the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression for learners. The framework, published in 2003, will create a single system against which all learning can be mapped, and will allow learning achieved in formal and non-formal settings to be equally valued.

The development of policies in relation to access, transfer and progression will also impact heavily on the Community Education sector. It should eventually become much simpler to move from non-formal to mainstream education, if that is the learner's wish. Mechanisms to accredit prior and experiential learning are being developed as part of the work of NQAI, which will really benefit adult learners. Awards will become more flexible to fit with the non-linear way in which adults progress through education and will be more relevant to community-based learners.

### **Educational Disadvantage**

The rise to prominence of the educational disadvantage agenda is another shift in policy that affects Community Education. An Educational Disadvantage Committee was launched in 2002 to advise the Minister for Education and Science on strategies to target disadvantage across the education spectrum. Also, the Social Partnership Agreement *Sustaining Progress 2003-2005*, names tackling educational disadvantage as one of ten initiatives to be progressed during its lifetime (Dept. of An Taoiseach).

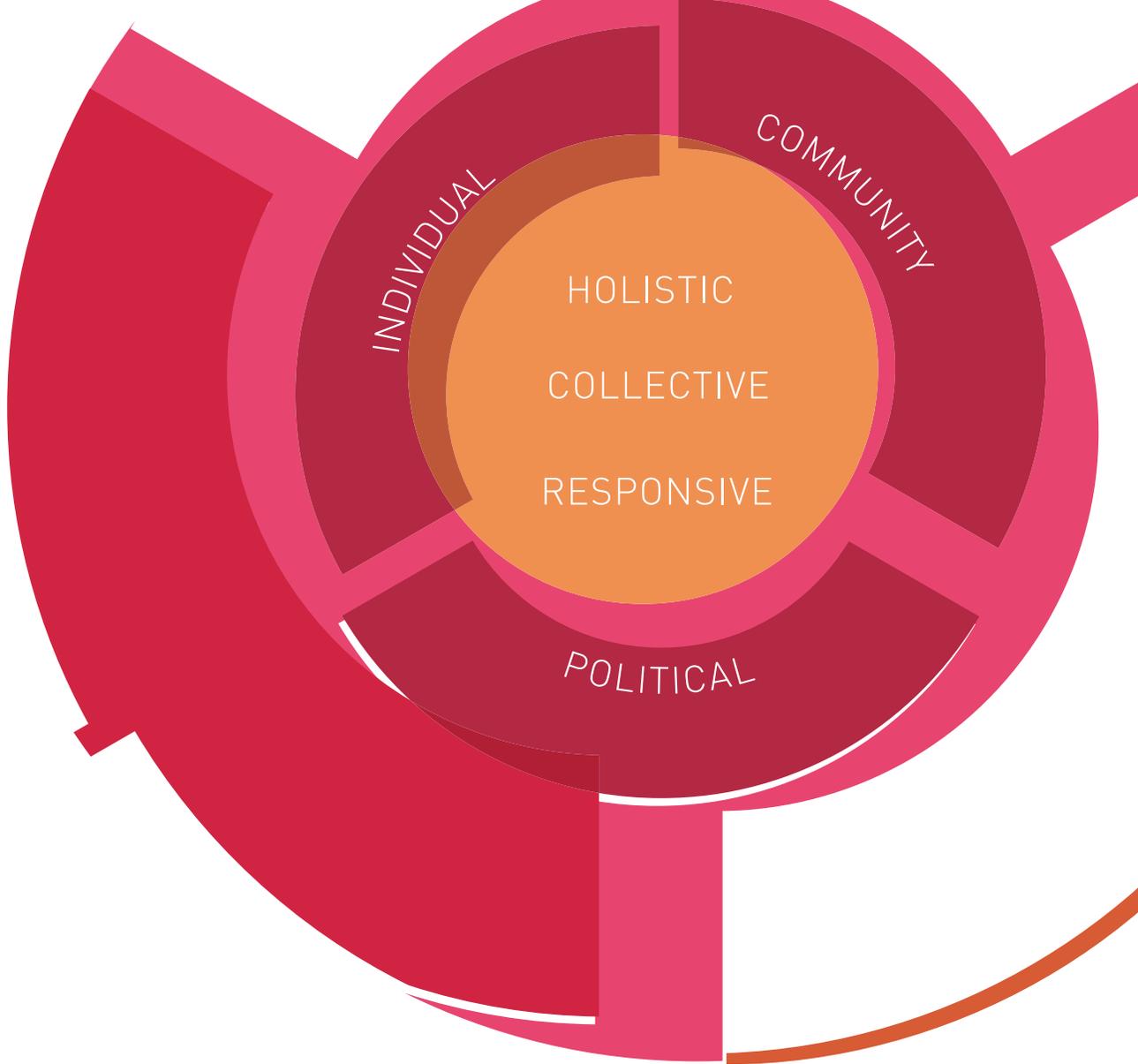
## DEFINING COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community Development groups and Community Education groups have been to the fore in tackling disadvantage for many years. Programmes such as the EEL (*Education Equality Initiative*) which funds projects tackling adult educational disadvantage have shown how successful community groups can be in acting as a first point of contact for hard to reach learners. The value of the intensive outreach and pre-development work carried out by community groups is finally being recognised. In tackling disadvantage, the role of Community Education is therefore a critical one.

### **White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity**

One final development of major significance to Community Education groups was the launch of the White Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity* in 2000. The Paper set out a rationale for developing the relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector. Its content is crucial to Community Education because of the social inclusion agenda of community groups and their anti-poverty or community development focus. The setting up of the new Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in June 2002 was in itself a major change for community groups, as it began a process of review of Government support to the sector which is ongoing. There are currently about 135 Community Development Projects and 50 Local Community and Family groups supported by the Department. Many are involved in the provision of education.

The White Paper made a number of recommendations, particularly in the areas of technical support and funding to community and voluntary groups with a view to strengthening the capacity of the sector. *An Implementation and Advisory Group* has been responsible for overseeing the implementation process. There have been significant advances as a result of the White Paper, notably the distribution of funding to networks and federations in the sector, and for training and support services. The main issue, which is the development of a relationship between the State and the sector, is still being debated.



Increasingly there is a sense that the State sees the Community and Voluntary sector as a service provider, filling a gap in state services at local level. It is also possible to look at Community Education in this way, as a piece of the education jigsaw that caters to a particular group of people who are unable to engage with mainstream education. However, Community Education is about much more than this. It is not only about providing part of a service, but about creating a model of education that will lead eventually to social change.

The White Paper 2000, *Learning for Life*, offers two distinct definitions of Community Education:

- The first sees it as education that takes place in the community but is not necessarily of the community. This 'service' model sees Community Education as a system of provision within the community by a range of institutions including schools, training agencies, universities, churches and others who make premises and resources available locally.
- The second ideologically based definition describes Community Education as 'a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level' (p.110).

AONTAS supports the second definition, which acknowledges Community Education as a **movement and catalyst for social change** and not only as a service. Education plays, and should play, a fundamental role in ensuring the redistribution of resources in society in a more equal way. AONTAS therefore offers the following definition of Community Education:

***Community Education is education and learning which is rooted in a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within***

*the community. It is distinct from general adult education provision, due both to its ethos and to the methodologies it employs. (AONTAS 2000)*

Although there is a strong connection between the underlying ethos of 'general' Adult Education and Community Education, there is nonetheless this key difference: Community Education enables participants to emerge with more than new personal skills and knowledge. They also emerge with a **strong capacity for social action, a sense of collective empowerment and an ability to tackle issues of social justice**. In this, Community Education and Community Development share common ground and have strong overlap in their underpinning philosophies. As Community Development in Ireland has played a hugely significant role in tackling exclusion as part of our anti-poverty strategy, so Community Education has become one of the principal mechanisms used in Community Development to achieve these outcomes.

### **Community Education as a Model for Transformation**

It can be argued that mainstream or formal education has the purpose of passing from generation to generation, information about existing norms and structures in society, to allow the learner to deal adequately with the world as they find it. Community Education has as its intention **the empowerment of participants with the skills, knowledge and collective analysis to challenge oppression and to engage in action to bring about change**. Although it can be said that Community Education sometimes fails to reach this level and that its transforming effects are limited, nonetheless it is underpinned by this radical theory.

Traditional views of education place teachers and learners in a particular relationship, where the teacher holds the knowledge and power and decides what information is needed by the learner at any given time.

In the Community Education model power is shared equally, and tutor and participant engage together in the education process. Participants identify what knowledge is most useful to them, and this agenda is pursued in a flexible, developmental way.

At the more advanced level of the process, a critique of existing social structures can be achieved, and participants develop the capacity to engage in collective action for change.

It can happen that as learners develop on a personal level, they leave behind the community setting and move freely into mainstream education or the workforce. The desire to bring about change and social justice may be weakened at this point. While personal development is a necessary step towards social and political development, there is no guarantee that one will follow the other. Nonetheless, Community Education providers still strive to achieve the goal of instigating social and political change.

## Dimensions of Community Education

With this view of Community Education as a catalyst or movement in mind, and looking into how it works in practice, we can identify a number of key *dimensions* that merit a brief outline:

### **Community Education is Holistic Education**

The holistic nature of Community Education is such that the programme of learning being undertaken is merged into a wider learning experience within a Community Education group or centre. The whole environment is learner rather than curriculum-centred, with specific attention being paid to welcoming and supporting each participant. Hospitality, childcare provision, support in difficult times, conversations, counselling and the celebration of people's lives are all elements that feature very strongly.

### **Community Education is Collective and Responsive**

Community Education often caters to those for whom mainstream education is a step too far. It offers a non-threatening and non-competitive environment for learners who feel alienated from education because of a poor early experience or other reasons.

It provides the opportunity for adults to be involved in developing programmes to address the issues directly affecting their own lives. Learner experiences are valued, and become a learning tool. The power rests with the group, usually working in group sessions with a facilitator who recognises their experiences as a base for learning, unlike the formal setting where a teacher holds power and learning focuses on the individual acquisition of knowledge.

### **Community Education works at Individual, Community & Political Levels**

As the AONTAS definition implies, Community Education should work at different levels which are inter-related. At individual level there is learning, both in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and more importantly in terms of confidence and self-development. At group or community level, participants develop their capacity to interact as a group, to work on local issues that affect the group and to analyse their own and their community's situation. At a political level, the learning is used to form a sense of solidarity with other groups in society who are experiencing the same issues in their lives. There is learning about national policy issues particularly in the realm of social justice. This may eventually lead to active campaigning or support of national movements or lobby groups. All levels are distinct and yet intertwined.

### **Outcomes of Community Education**

As it works at different levels as described, the Community Education process therefore has outcomes at different levels. A mix of tangible and more qualitative outcomes is achieved at both individual and collective level. Some examples are outlined below.

#### **Individual Outcomes of Community Education include:**

- Improved confidence & self-esteem
- Improved communication skills

- Improved ability to commit to and reach specific goals
- Increased knowledge, skill and competence
- Increased motivation and expectations
- Increased awareness of educational and life choices
- Awareness of self and community
- Critical thinking and analytical skills
- Accreditation

**Collective Outcomes include:**

- Development of a mutual support network
- Development of social consciousness and analysis
- Development of capacity to influence policy and decision making
- Ability to organise further personal and group development
- Action to tackle social and community issues

There is also evidence to show that the improvement of a parent's educational level impacts strongly on the development of children and families. The 1995 Report *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* published by the Combat Poverty Agency highlighted the link between a mother's level of education and that of her children. Community Education plays a key role in tackling *intergenerational* disadvantage, insofar as it provides an access route into education to the most marginalized learners.

## Process and Methodology

Community Education is most differentiated from the mainstream by its ethos of empowerment, but its group methodologies are also distinctive. The model is rooted in a process of active participation. In group processes, through consultation and partnership between facilitators and participants, programmes emerge and develop with the needs of learners and so maintain their relevance from beginning to end.

Community Education is a flexible educational process above all, and can be adapted and used by any group of learners or 'community of interest' to achieve its aims. The real experiences of learners are taken as the starting point and are affirmed, discussed and challenged in the learning process. The pressure is taken out of learning and those with negative experiences of early education are introduced to learning very gradually through enjoyable and informal activities. The building of trust, of mutual respect and of confidence through the simple act of listening to each other is core to the learning process. The centrality of the group methodology and of the provision of supports is reflected in the practical elements that make up a typical Community Education model:

## Elements of the Community Education Model

### **Outreach Work:**

Extensive personal outreach to, and development of contact with, those in the community who might benefit from participation in the group, and who may be quite alienated from education for a variety of reasons. Non-threatening approaches are used to build trust often over a considerable period before the learner may decide to first come into a group. Learners are also encouraged back no matter how often they may leave a programme or miss sessions.

**Consultation:**

The group identifies the issues or content to be explored and in co-operation with the facilitator, develops a programme to meet its needs and interests. *Development with*, rather than *delivery* to learners, is the approach used.

**Pre-Development:**

Non-academic activities are undertaken initially to help a group to bond, relax, build confidence and begin to associate learning with enjoyment. Crafts are often a starting point for learners in this phase, as are field trips or small social events. Support needs can be identified at this point.

**Flexible Provision:**

Time, location and programme content in Community Education are flexible and learner centred.

**Political Activism:**

As effecting change is at the heart of the Community Education model, groups will engage in activism at a variety of levels, through both staff and learners, and will work towards social justice where possible.

**Reflective Evaluation:**

Community Education groups reflect critically on their work and programmes, to ensure that their centre and programmes evolve and develop good practices.

**Supports Provided in the Community Education Model**

**Childcare:**

Community Education groups have been to the fore in providing childcare facilities and support to learners. Adults, especially women, cannot access education without this support. Eldercare may also be resourced.

**Mentoring & Support:**

Ongoing mentoring is given to participants, so that whatever issues arise for them can be dealt with sympathetically. Learners' ability to participate successfully on entering education as adults will depend on their ability to balance their learning with other complex issues in their lives. Mentoring supports learners in this task, and learners will be referred to other support agencies if necessary.

**Allowances:**

Some Community Education groups will give small allowances to learners, as an extra incentive to participate and as a support through their learning. Other groups will be able to provide services such as childcare, transport and/or materials, enabling learners to come back into education.

**A Model for Progression**

The Community Education model has proved very successful in attracting participants who could be described as 'educationally disadvantaged.' It recognises the barriers to learning and tries to eliminate them where possible. Community Education provides a 'safe space' for adults to get a feel for learning. It recognises that education is about more than the acquisition of knowledge and is also about growing confidence, sharing experiences, generating ideas and challenging systems.

The Community Education model can be used by a variety of learners at different levels, as it incorporates and recognises formal, non-formal and informal learning. Its flexibility means the sector can cater for learners at more advanced stages of education, and partnerships between third level colleges and community groups have developed as higher level courses increase in popularity. Community Education is increasingly providing its own internal progression routes, and is not simply the branch of education targeting learners at early literacy or foundation levels.

## The Role of Community Education in Civil Society

Education in all of its forms fosters engagement with community, society and the world around us. The outline above of the ethos, purpose and processes of Community Education, suggests that it has a particular role to play in creating a more active civil society. Membership of a community group can in itself be seen as active participation.

In her article *Listening to the Voices*, (Connolly 2003) suggests that a central function of Community Education has been the provision of 'a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people'. In its emergence within the women's movement, and in its subsequent adoption by a range of other groups for use as a development tool, Community Education has offered a way in which people who feel excluded can express their views and have them valued. It has provided a means for individuals to find solidarity with others, and to develop mutual respect. This has allowed groups to bond around social issues and become active agents in their communities and beyond.

Any group whether geographical or issues based, can use Community Education methods to analyse, critique and address the causes of the group's poverty or exclusion. This can lead to empowerment, which is often what disenfranchised groups are seeking. Keogh points out that many Irish adults won't have experienced 'explicit' citizenship education during formal schooling, and so are largely unprepared for participation in society outside of their daily experiences. Other authors claim 'that community participation is, in fact, many people's only experience of democratic processes' (Keogh 2003). In this context, Community Education plays an important role in channelling the views of citizens into action. Its democratic processes enable people to make the connection between the personal and the political (Connolly 2003). Those who feel powerless in the face of state and social structures can find ways to influence their own destiny.

CAPACITY BUILDING

LIFE LONG LEARNING

OUTREACH

QUALITY ASSURANCE

FLEXIBLE PROVISION

OUTREACH

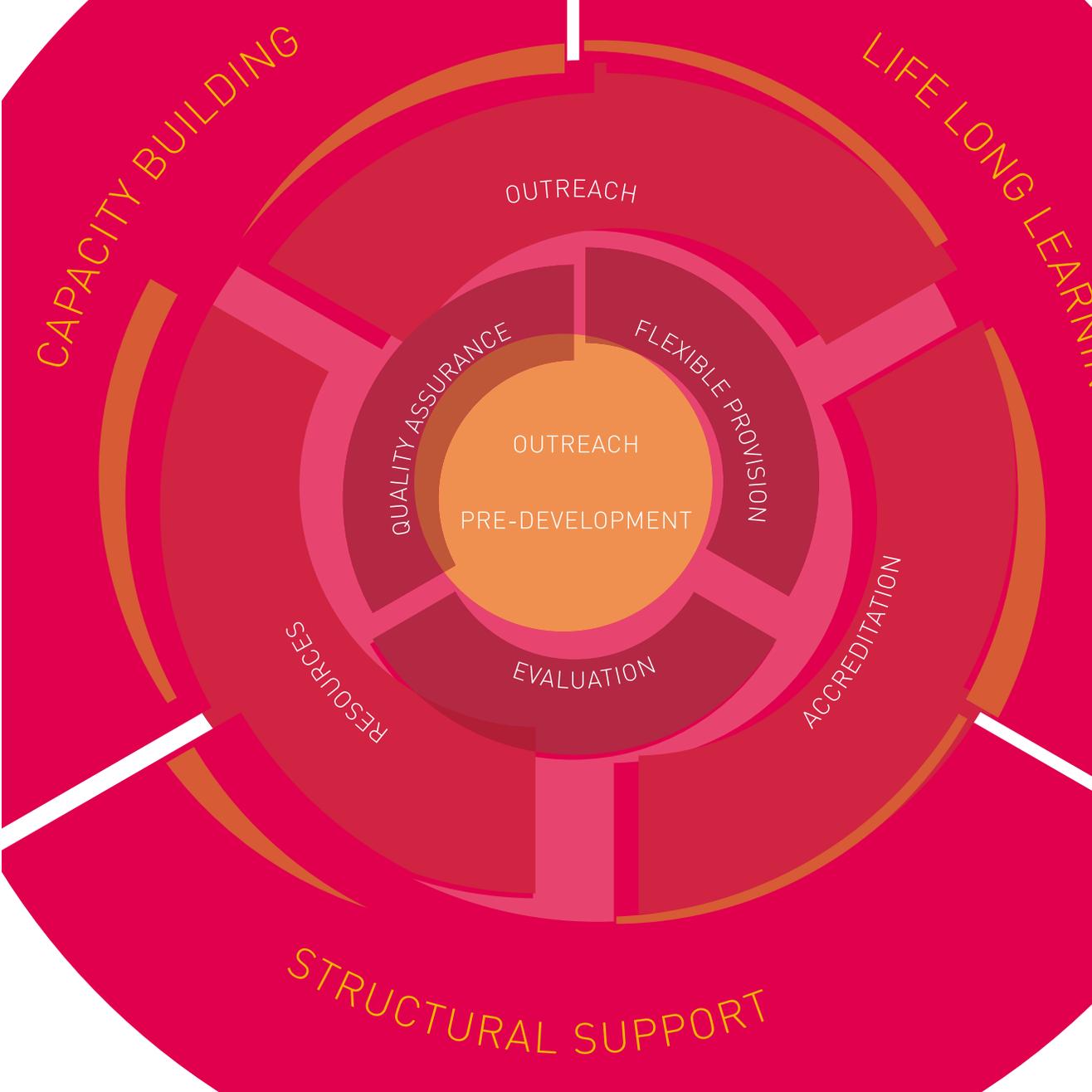
PRE-DEVELOPMENT

RESOURCES

EVALUATION

ACCREDITATION

STRUCTURAL SUPPORT



# KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION SECTOR

## Challenges to the Sector and to Policy-Makers

Growth in the area of Community Education, including increased resources and recognition from the Department of Education and Science, means that real opportunities have been opened up to the sector. However, while Community Education is recognised in the White Paper *'Learning for Life'* as a key strand of the Adult Education sector, it still needs to fully claim its space, not only within Adult Education, but within the education context as a whole. Community Education plays a crucial role in providing access and progression routes for learners, in developing active citizenship and in recognising and embodying the concept of lifelong learning.

The increased visibility of the sector poses a very serious question: How can Community Education continue to advance in a dynamic policy environment without compromising its ethos or abandoning its roots?

A number of key challenges now face Community Education as a sector, and also those working in a range of statutory and policy making bodies.

## Accreditation

Accreditation has always posed challenges to non-formal education providers, and it is certainly true that accreditation is not a goal or a necessary outcome for all learners. However, fundamental changes are happening in our national approach to accreditation and Community Education is challenged to deal with those changes.

## National Framework of Qualifications

The concept of lifelong learning has finally been embedded in the vocabulary of Irish education, and the validity of learning in a variety of sites, both formal and non-formal, has been recognised and worked into the new Framework of Qualifications launched in 2003. The Community Education sector must quickly

learn to use the Framework, which will evolve and develop over time as learner needs become clearer. The Framework will provide immense opportunities to those seeking accreditation who need to combine education with family or work commitments, and therefore access learning in a non-linear way.

The Framework provides for progression within its ten level system. Learners should be able to move from non-formal into formal education, from basic to further education, and from further into higher education in a relatively straightforward way.

The challenge to Community Education will be to develop progression routes not only from the sector into formal education, but within the sector itself. If learners prefer to stay in the community setting and progress to a higher level, they should be able to do so. Links to Higher Education need to be further explored to really open up progression. However Community Education groups need to be strategic when entering into partnership arrangements with formal institutions. Partnerships can be problematic and can create challenges for both Community Education providers and the Higher Education institutes involved.

The challenge to policy-makers and the National Qualifications Authority is to ensure that the National Framework of Qualifications and associated policies are inclusive and flexible. This will facilitate the development of accreditation and progression routes in the Community Education sector. Funding bodies should adequately resource the development of progression pathways, and any necessary technical support.

### **Quality Assurance**

One of the key responsibilities placed on providers of accredited courses under the Qualifications Act of 1999, is to put in place a system of Quality Assurance so that awards achieved by learners are of a certain standard. Although Quality Assurance will only be obligatory for Community Education groups who offer accreditation, it will also be important that groups choosing *not* to run accredited courses can

demonstrate the quality of their provision. Demonstrating quality and outlining its components will also play a part in *defining* Community Education and preserving its ethos.

The challenge to Community Education lies in developing a means to quality assure its provision. Community Education Facilitators, in partnership with providers, will play a vital support role in this regard.

The challenge to the policy-makers and the Awards Councils, will be to support and facilitate the Community Education sector in developing its Quality Assurance mechanisms. Funding bodies will need to resource the sector in this work, and resource the training and development of those engaged in quality assuring provision.

## Resources

Community Education groups are funded from a variety of sources, including the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and a range of other agencies and trusts. This in itself makes long-term planning more difficult, creates an administrative burden and makes reporting a labour intensive activity. The White Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity* promised a review to bring about a more coherent system of funding and supports to Community Groups. A positive outcome from this review would be a major boost to the sector.

Specifically in terms of funding from the Department of Education and Science, the following challenges and issues arise:

### Capacity Building Funds

The allocation of specific capacity building funding for Community Education is key to its development. Community Education Facilitators have been recruited by the VECs and are already generating new demands in the sector. The White paper specified that 10% of

the annual increase provided under the *Back to Education Initiative* would be allocated on an ongoing basis for the development of Community Education.

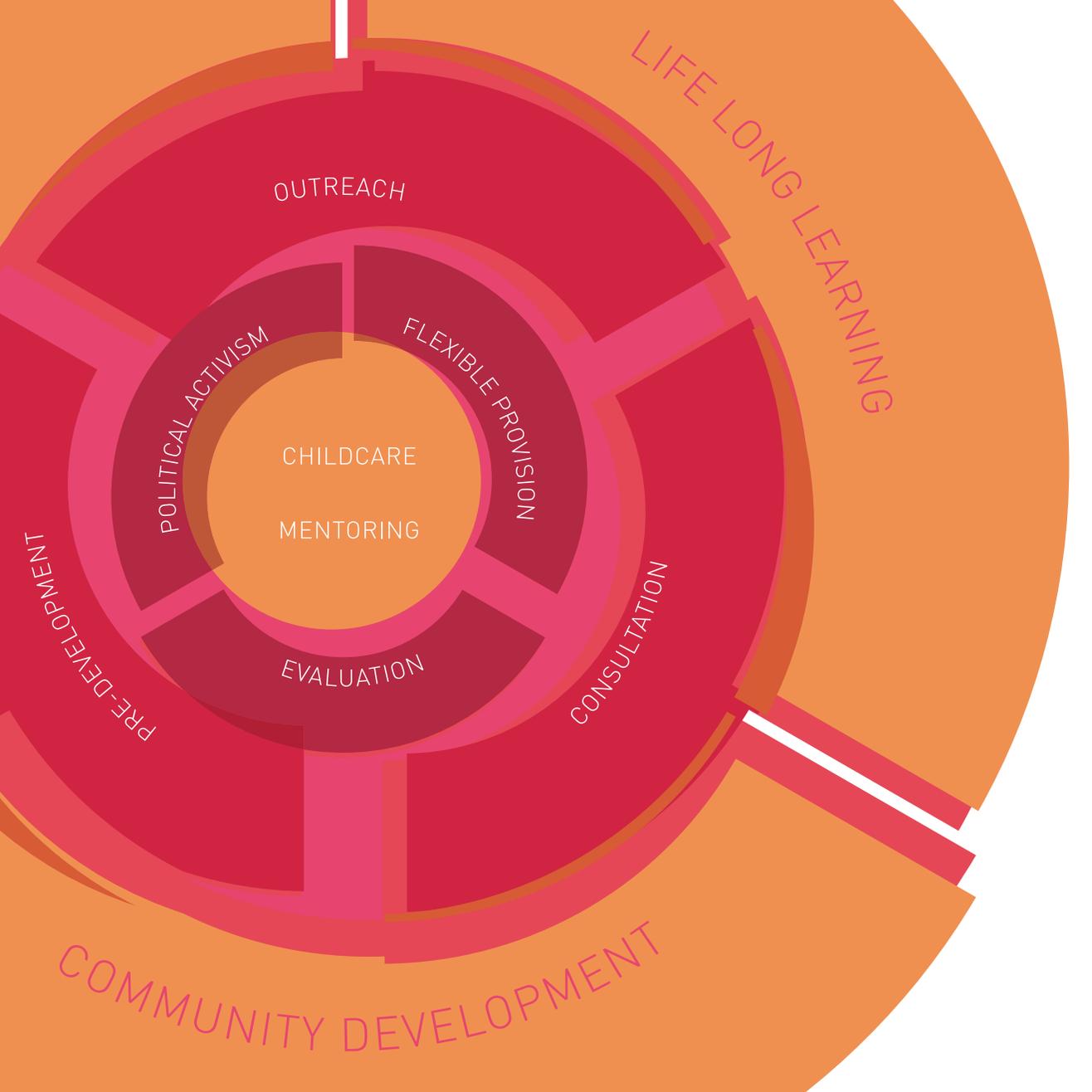
To date the Community Strand of BTEI has been the only additional funding targeted at Community Education. However, the sector plays a key role in attracting hard to reach learners and with the development of the National Framework of Qualifications will provide progression routes for them. An injection of resources is now needed to build capacity and to quality assure provision. The Department of Education and Science should allocate and ring-fence capacity building funds as a priority.

### **Outreach and Pre-development Funds**

Community Education groups have long been to the fore in reaching out to the most isolated adults in society, and offering a safe environment for them to return to education. The value of outreach and pre-development work in building up trust with learners is well understood in the sector. Until recently this kind of work was not valued by funding bodies, but this is beginning to change. Outreach work funded under the Education Equality Initiative (EEI) has been valuable and successful, and earlier projects such as the NOW initiatives also demonstrated its value. Although highly resource intensive, it provided the only means by which some adults could be attracted back to learning.

The challenge to Community Education groups is to document this work and to lobby for better funds to resource it. Groups need to seize the opportunity created by the current drive to tackle educational disadvantage to demand funds for sustained outreach.

The challenge to policy makers and funders is to recognise the value of this work, to mainstream models of good practice of which there are many and to adequately resource outreach and pre-development work as an integral part of programme funding.



OUTREACH

LIFE LONG LEARNING

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

FLEXIBLE PROVISION

CHILDCARE

MENTORING

EVALUATION

CONSULTATION

PRE-DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

## Programme Funds

Under the provisions of *Learning for Life*, 10% of the annual increase in funding to the *Back to Education Initiative* is to be given to Community providers. The first tranche of funding was allocated in 2002/3, with over 1.5m going towards 63 projects in the Community sector. This has been a welcome source of funding for groups that were already running accredited courses and were able to meet the criteria easily.

For other groups, the experience of delivering the *Back to Education Initiative* has been more challenging. The paperwork attached to the programme is quite complicated and the criteria for participation perceived as daunting. Concerns have been expressed about the need for all *Back to Education* courses to be accredited, when learners at basic levels are not ready to seek accreditation.

What the *Back to Education Initiative* experience is highlighting, is the difficulty for Community Education groups in accessing funding which is also available to formal providers, while maintaining a flexible approach. In fact it takes time and practice for groups to be able to optimise their use of programme funds, and this is a capacity-building issue. The Department of Education and Science should facilitate community-based groups in developing their provision and provide the kind of support needed in this early phase of development.

Policy-makers need to take the ethos of Community Education into account when designing new initiatives, ensuring that criteria are appropriate to the sector, and that administrative work is minimised.

## Structural Support

### At National Level

The interests of Community Education are currently represented at a national level by providers and by AONTAS in its role as a policy focussed organisation and because of its large voluntary and community based membership.

A new organisation, the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks (NCCWN) should also in future provide a strong voice for the Women's Community Education sector. NCCWN was formed in 2003, when it developed from the AONTAS S.T.A.N.C.E (Strategies to Advance Networks Collective Empowerment) Project. NCCWN is a collective mechanism for Women's Networks to participate in, develop and respond to national policy in a number of key areas, including Community Education.

### **Technical Unit Under NALC**

As mentioned previously, the White Paper *Learning for Life* proposed that a technical unit for Community Education be set up under the National Adult Learning Council. This unit is designed to progress capacity building, develop research, allocate funds and generally promote the expansion of Community Education within a broader context of Adult Education.

The Department of Education and Science should quickly move to establish this unit, which can only happen after NALC is permanently established. The need to support Community Education as it grows cannot be over-emphasised.

### **Local Structures**

At local level, the challenges of developing a structural framework for Community Education are constantly changing. AONTAS urges that the Local Adult Learning Boards proposed in the White Paper are established as soon as possible. This would give a strong local framework to the sector, allow Community Education Facilitators to work with the Board, and provide a local body with responsibility for the distribution of funds. Already, strong Adult Education teams are emerging within the VECs, with Adult Education Organisers, Adult Literacy Organisers, Community Education Facilitators and Guidance workers, among others, involved. The further expansion and support of this approach will be critical to the growth of the Adult and Community Education service at local level.

But local development will present challenges to Community Education groups too. They will need to lobby for direct representation on Local Adult Learning Boards when they are established. City and County Development Boards are already working through Community Platforms to tackle social inclusion issues, and Community Education groups are involved with County Development Boards and other schemes like RAPID. How to ensure their voice is heard at all strategy tables without becoming over-stretched is something that Community Education groups will need to decide for themselves. However, resources to train and equip representatives from the Community Education sector to take up advocacy roles should be provided by relevant funding bodies.

### **Taking Ownership of Community Education**

**The overall challenge facing Community Education is developing the ability to move forward and grow within the context of the Adult Education Service without allowing the specific ethos of the sector to be diluted along the way.**

With this document and other policy and research documents, AONTAS has tried to define Community Education as leading the education field in tackling exclusion, in working to provide equal access, in breaking down barriers to learning and in fostering active citizenship. It is essential that this work is developed and supported into the future.

The whole environment of education in Ireland is moving and changing. With falling numbers in the school system, Adult Education provision is becoming more popular, and the majority of VEC provision is now in the field of Adult Education. The methodologies of Community Education are being adopted by organisations outside the sector and adapted to their own environment. The spread of good practice from the sector into the formal education system is welcome, as a more 'democratic' approach to teaching and learning can only improve our education system. But there is every chance that Community Education methodologies will be

weakened if they are used in very different contexts. Connolly refers to the 'glass-fence' around Community Education. In this she articulates the way in which Community Education has been under-resourced and contained, while at the same time it seems to be valued. Practitioners of Community Education are safely fenced off while their values and methodologies are used elsewhere.

Policy makers need to take on board learning from initiatives like the EEI, and earlier initiatives such as the WEI and the NOW Programmes which clearly support the Community Education model and draw attention to the critical importance of outreach, pre-development and mentoring in attracting disadvantaged adults into education. But it is important that in mainstreaming such learning, that flexible structures take account of different approaches. Essentially the ethos that underpins Community Education and makes it so vibrant and effective should be preserved and valued.

This document has briefly described the main policy developments affecting the environment in which Community Education operates. Since the 1990s, major changes have taken place in Adult and Community Education with a Green Paper in 1998 and then a White Paper in 2000 giving the sector a new framework. Its recognition in the White Paper as an essential strand of the education service, the promise of resources and supports, and the recent recruitment of a team of Community Education Facilitators are major achievements for the sector. In the wider education agenda, a new Qualifications Framework, a move towards recognising lifelong learning, and the current focus on educational disadvantage all provide huge opportunities to the sector.

But with accelerated development and a more accepting environment for Community Education come real challenges. The ethos and underlying principles of the sector are at stake. What this document has sought to do is outline the central dimensions of Community Education and help to define it. Critical reflection on its roots and its purpose needs to happen throughout the Adult and Community

education sector if its ethos and methodologies are not to be diluted as it develops in the overall context of education. AONTAS hopes that this document provides a starting point for those seeking to be informed about and to reflect upon the development of Community Education, and that the challenges outlined can be met and overcome with the same dynamism and resilience that have become hallmarks of Community Education in Ireland.

## REFERENCES

AONTAS, *Community Education: AONTAS Policy Series*, Dublin, 2000.

Brady, B. & McCauley, F., *Making an Impact: A Response to the Green Paper on Adult Education*, AONTAS, Dublin, 1999.

CHANGE: *Extending Opportunity to Participate and Progress*, EEI Project Report, WERRC, Power Partnership, SKWA, 2003.

Connolly, B., 'Community Development and Adult Education: Prospects for Change?' in Connolly, B. et al (eds), *Radical Learning for Liberation*, MACE, Maynooth, 1996.

Connolly B., 'Group Work and Facilitation Skills' in *Women and Education in Ireland, Vol 1*, MACE, Maynooth, 1999.

Connolly, B., Community Education: Listening to the Voices in *The Adult Learner 2003: Community Education*, AONTAS & AEOA, Dublin.

Department of Education, *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Combat Poverty Agency, 1995.

Department of Education and Science, *Learning for Life* (White Paper), Stationery Office, Dublin, 2000.

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, *United Against Poverty: The National Community Development Programme*, Information Booklet, Dublin, 1998.

*Evaluation of the Education Equality Initiative for the Department of Education and Science*, Drury Research, 2003.

Inglis, T., Bailey, K. & Murray, C., *Liberating Learning*, AONTAS, Dublin, 1993.

Kelleher, P & Whelan, M., *Dublin Communities in Action*, Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin, 1992.

Keogh, H., 'Learning for Citizenship in Ireland: The Role of Adult Education' in Medel-Anoneuvo, C. & Mitchell, G. (eds) *Citizenship, Democracy and Lifelong Learning*, UNESCO, Hamburg, 2003.

McCloy, E., *Education & Community Education: Transfer & Transformation*, unpublished paper, 2003.

NWCI, *Women in Education: Knowledge is Power*, NWCI, Dublin, 2001.

OECD, *Overcoming Exclusion through Adult Learning*, Paris, 1999.

