



AONTAS Community Education Network

Strategic Plan for Work

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Community Education Network

What is the Community Education Network?

The Community Education Network is a new platform for community education groups within the AONTAS membership and it will serve as a space for promoting community education and as a political platform for shaping policy. This work serves under the organizational development section of the AONTAS Strategic Plan. The need for such a platform came to our attention during the strategic plan consultation process; community groups voiced their concern regarding the need for a representative body for community education and to be a stronger voice for community education, and a more direct way to be a part of the policy work of AONTAS. As such the AONTAS staff team and very importantly a steering group, composed of our members from a community education background, guide the work and policy actions of this community education network. It is proposed that these meetings will take place 3 times a year so to ensure the momentum of the work.

The initial work plan set out to define the purpose of the Community Education Network as:

1. To act as a representative body for community education*
2. To strengthen the influence of community education groups in AONTAS
3. To work on lobbying initiatives locally and, through AONTAS, nationally
4. For media and publicity work and to promote the meaning and value of community education
5. To strengthen the capacity of our community education members
6. To act as an identifiable space for the smaller community education groups to feed into
7. To act as a space for exchanging information and for networking
8. To act as a space for dialogue on community education
9. As a starting point to initiate a broader debate on the definition of adult and community education
10. As a method of linking in with external agencies: trade unions, the Wheel, Pobal, EAPN etc.

Who can join the Community Education Network?

Any local, self-managed, independent community education organisation that is committed to raising the profile of, and lobbying for, a community education sector that is committed to social change.

Mission Statement

To achieve a greater public understanding of the value of community education and have it recognised as a distinctly funded sector of the Irish Education system.

* To include development education groups



Definition of Community Education

AONTAS defines community education as education that is rooted in a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness; it is with 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 disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community.¹

Aims and objectives of the Community Education Network

The **Aims** of the Community Education Network are:

1. To **lobby** for distinct, independent resourcing of the community education sector (finance and human resources).
2. To ensure **recognition** for community education in terms of its distinctive nature, value and role in lifelong learning, community development and active citizenship.
3. To have a strong, collective and distinctive voice for community education that **raises awareness** on its achievements and contribution to society.

The **Objectives** of the Community Education Network are:

1. To ensure community education is **resourced** appropriately by gaining commitment from the Department of Education & Science for core funding of activities which will be carried out by **lobbying**; including that of specific departments.
2. To gain increase **recognition** through data collection and an agreed definition of community education.
3. To increase **awareness** of community education through: increased communication; linking with the media; revisiting the White Paper; sharing of best practice and; promotion and development of the Network.
4. **Collaborate** with other community education providers and key statutory agencies in order to bring the Network to a greater audience and to build strategic alliances for mutually beneficial relationships.

Focus of the strategic work plan

In order to achieve the aims and objectives of the Community Education Network the work plan will focus on the following areas:

1. **Resource** – through active lobbying work
2. **Recognition** – through discussion, debate and clarification on the definition of community education
3. **Raise Profile** – through local and national media work.

¹ AONTAS Community Education (2004) p.6.



1. Resource – through active lobbying work

Lobbying priorities:

Resource the community education sector independently

Core funding for community education sector

Reduce bureaucracy – piecemeal funding

Improve human resources in the sector – structures, in-service training

Actions

- Step 1. Define Community Education (consensus)
- Step 2. Research and draft policy position paper
- Step 3. Record and gather case studies
- Step 4. Submission Paper (Budget 2009)
- Step 5. Meet with relevant bodies
- Step 6. Initiate lobbying campaign for Local Elections 2009
- Step 7. Initiate lobbying campaign for EU Constitution

Step 1. Define 'community education' taking into account the following factors: there must be discussion and agreement within the Network on the definition; it must use qualitative information from research to capture other outcomes from the learning; it must be reclaimed on 'our' terms; look at what it is and what it isn't; and reclaim the radical element. The definition will be the basis for the lobbying and promotional work of the Network including the promotion of a greater understanding of its value in terms of being a tool for democratic participation.

Step 2. Research and draft policy position papers, to use as effective lobbying tools, identifying the Networks stance on various themes affecting the Community Education sector (CEN Objective 1). Set criteria and present solutions. Step 3. Record and gather case studies which illustrate the challenges facing the sector and promote examples of best practice (Objectives 2 & 3). Step 4. Create a well-researched and costed submission which will be presented to policy-makers.

Step 5. Meet with relevant bodies, statutory and voluntary, such as committees with an adult education remit to promote awareness of the unique achievements of the community education sector (CEN Objective 3). Step 6 & 7 With a working group composed of the Community Education Network participants, plan, initiate and run lobbying campaign activities with the support of all members and the AONTAS staff.



Community Education Network

2. **Recognition** – through discussion, debate and clarification on the definition of community education

Priorities:

Identify and define community education: its unique nature and the value of its learning outcomes

Continue to identify what changes are needed and move together actively and collectively

For community education to be seen as an equally important element of lifelong learning and not the poor relative

Contribute to the data collection for compiling the database of information on community education providers

Actions

- Agree a definition of community education that can be accommodated by the Network
- Use the Wall of Issues in Community Education Network Meetings to identify needs
- Debate needs of the sector in an online forum – www.clarelifelonglearning.com
- Use the Community Education Network section on AONTAS Website: www.aontas.com
- Use the emailing list to communicate with all Community Education Network Participants
- Contribute to the data collection of information relating to community education programmes in your area.
- Community Education Network members to participate in the Adult Learners Festival – host an event and encourage other groups to take part
- Community Education Network members to write an article for the AONTAS Explore magazine – to highlight their work, share best practice, profile the work of community education groups and demonstrate the value of the Community Education Network
- Explore possibilities for alternative funding sources for community education
- Initiate a mentoring programme of well-established groups and small start-ups
- Participate in training to increase capacity of the Network and share learning with other community education groups in the area.



Community Education Network

3. Raise Profile – though local and national media work.

Priorities:

Highlight the achievements and contribution of community education to society

Ensure we are a recognised Network that is the distinctive voice of community education

Promote the work of Community Education Network and strive for greater participation

Disseminate information to Network members and community education groups

Involve the media to bring community education to wider public

Revisit Community education section of the White Paper

Actions

- Create working groups from within the Network to review the section of the White Paper
- Create links with governmental departments and invite to Community Education Network meetings – to share information on the value and needs of community education
- Link in with existing networks of community groups across the country
- Create a media strategy for the Community Education Network
- Create media strategy for specific lobbying campaign work

The Way Forward

In order to maintain momentum taking action on the specific areas is required. This work plan sets out to give a background to the Community Education Network and to identify specific areas for work.

The success of the network is dependent on participants committing to specific areas of work and agreeing to the following:

- Agree to take up a specific action as outlined in the work plan
- Network participants to maintain contact and strengthen ties for lobbying on common issues
- To raise awareness about the Network and distribute promotional material to local community groups – See attached poster.
- To attend/participate in future meetings of the Network