

AONTAS Community Education Network

Strengthening community education through social action and shaping the future of community education within SOLAS

Additional Workshop on Development Education



Date: Wednesday 3rd October 2012

Time: 9.45am – 3.00pm

Venue: Carmelite Community Centre, 56 Aungier St. Dublin 2



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Summary

The 15th meeting of the Community Education Network (CEN) sought to weave together the main policy issues facing community education whilst providing a space to create a way to work as a collective in addressing these challenges. The day was divided into sections: the first section included an update on the work of the CEN and what the current changes to the sector are including the implications of SOLAS; an update on the Continuous Professional Development Course and handbook was provided; and a session on creating a position paper on the challenges facing community education was facilitated. The afternoon session was facilitated by Lourdes Youth and Community Services regarding the integration of development education into community education.

The outcomes of the meeting include:

- A final **position paper** 'Concerns for the Community Education Sector in a Time of Change'. This report will be used as a basis for the meeting with Minister Ciaran Cannon in early 2013.
- A **short paper** on the uncertainty for community education groups regarding the new Qualifications and Quality (QQI) authority
- An **updated paper** on 'Issues regarding the implementation of the new Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) Operational Guidelines 2012 and its implications for the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN)
- Changes to the *Continuous Professional Development for a Social Action Model of Community Education Handbook* – final version to be released in December for CEN members



1. Introduction

The community education network meeting is the only space that draws together community education groups, from various backgrounds at national level. In its 6th year the CEN has grown in numbers, strength, visibility and cohesiveness. The CEN is a key structure within the AONTAS membership that focuses specifically on community education groups and seeks to:

- Share key policy information to community education, e.g. changes in SOLAS
- Act to identify issues and develop collective responses for addressing challenges

- Act as a supportive environment which allows new and more established community education groups to share expertise
- Support the development of research to build strong evidence-based policy work
- Secure funding to create free training opportunities that are innovative and are otherwise unavailable to community education groups, such as continuous professional development for social change.

The aim of the 15th meeting of the CEN was dedicated to creating a more interactive meeting with maximum participation of CEN members in addressing such areas as continuous professional development and a deep exploration of the challenges facing the community education sector at this time.

The agenda of the meeting was developed with the support of the community education network steering group¹ and the outcomes from the evaluation of meeting fourteen and discussions with CEN members. This report incorporates the papers produced, as mentioned in the summary, by way of internet link.

2. Content of the day

Niamh O'Reilly presented a short introduction including the rationale for the day and topics for discussion. Berni Brady provided an overview of the development of the new SOLAS structure; the presentation is available from the AONTAS office. The main areas were focused on included an update on the status of SOLAS, the establishment and role of technical advisory groups within SOLAS (e.g. Wider Benefits Subgroup which Berni is a member), the appointment of Fiona Hartley as the Executive Director of SOLAS and the forthcoming legislation. Changes to the VECs were also highlighted: the amalgamation of 33 VECs to 16, the appointment of CEOs to the new Local Education and Training Boards and the associated legislation. Finally changes to the Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) were highlighted as being a significant change for community education groups.



¹ CEN Steering group members: *Camilla Fitzsimons (RESPOND! Housing), Avril Bailey (An Cosan), Suzanne Kyle (Limerick Community Education Network) and Colm Kilgannon (All Hallows College).*

2.1 Continuous Professional Development for a Social Action Model of Community Education

Two participants and the course facilitator who undertook the Training Links Programme, *Continuous Professional Development for a Social Action Model of Community Education* reflected on their experience of the course. By way of discussion panel Emily Smartt, Stephen Flitton and Noel Fitzgerald,² described the experience of the course in terms of its value, impact on their practice and potential for further delivery with their groups. Overall the course was very well received, it offered a space to re-energise, reconsider the theory of community education, bring the focus of social action back into practice and learn as a collective on how to support each other in maintaining and developing a social action model of community education. An open discussion session with participants of the CEN meeting highlighted their views in relation to the training and how they see AONTAS supporting the future development of this work.

Reflections of CEN meeting participants on the training:

There was a very positive response to the training and its potential to bring a sense of belonging to all staff in an organisation and particularly the tutors who can feel isolated and management who would benefit from working out of a community education ethos. There was a real concern for the need to support this kind of community education and also non-accredited learning specifically aimed at learners moving back into learning or who would greater benefit from more social and political education rather than accredited courses.

The positive aspects of the training included the theory, usability of the handbook, broad themes covered and the use of participants' expertise in creating the training. There were questions raised about how to ensure its sustainability and how to deliver the course at a local level – a skilled facilitator is needed in addition to time, space and resources.

A number of participants expressed interest in delivering the training in their centre. In order to support this the following suggestions were made:

- Projects can come together to deliver the training
- Incorporate the experience of tutors when delivering the training
- Support future training with some funding
- Free online support for delivering the training
- Integrating into CEN meetings

² *Bawnogue Women's Development Group, Warrenmount CED and Independent Consultant (Course Facilitator).*

In terms of the sustainability of the course, elements of CPD could be integrated into the CEN meeting, preferably in the morning session so as not to lose participants in the afternoon. The course could be run again in conjunction with AONTAS and a number of CEN members, who collectively would take the lead on this, at a regional level. For a copy of this Handbook please contact AONTAS, a final version of which will be available online in December 2012.

2.2 Concerns for the Community Education Sector in a Time of Change' – Discussion Session

This session started with a discussion panel who reflected on the topic, chaired by Berni Brady the participants involved were Liz Waters, Brid Connolly, Camilla Fitzsimons and Niamh O'Reilly³. This session was recorded and can be viewed [online here](#). An open plenary session followed this discussion and some of the points raised included the welcoming of discussion around community education provision at all levels of the National Framework of Qualifications, not just at the lower levels e.g. FETAC level 3 and the potential implications of [Regulation 5](#) for adult educators and community education practitioners by the Teaching Council.



The group discussion sessions of CEN participants resulted in the following comments on the Discussion Document themes:

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

There is a need to include the social action model of community education and be able to demonstrate the outcomes in a qualitative manner. There should be a focus on lifelong learning not activation and civic engagement not skills acquisition and unaccredited learning. There is a need to challenge the neo-liberal agenda. This section or the introduction should include information on the community education chapter in the White Paper 'Learning for Life' (2000).

2. Challenges of the new authority, the QQAAI and community education

³ Discussion panel participants: An Cosan, NUI Maynooth, RESPOND! Housing and AONTAS.

3. *Challenges of the time and workload around accountability and Quality Assurance processes in FETAC and the CAS. Regarding the new Common Award System for FETAC courses there is a sense that it is very rigid which impacts on the kind of community education course which can be provided.*
4. The challenges of changes to the BTEI funding process
Further discussion is required on this topic in the document.
5. The need for continuous professional development for a social action model of community education
There is a lack of professional recognition for community education practitioners.
6. New Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs)
Community education must be represented on the LETB.
7. The consumption of Community Development Projects (CDPs) into Local Area Partnership Structures.
The future involvement of the teaching council
There is a need for the recognition of prior experiential learning for community educators.

In addition to the themes in the discussion document there was a call to include the concept of community university and the need to value and support community education at higher levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. As part of the advocacy work of the CEN there is a need to be strategic and to work with allies in bringing forward the needs of the community education sector including the challenges of the Teaching Council regulation. The position paper would benefit from the inclusion of case studies to demonstrate the value of community education.

Taking into account these proposed amendments the Discussion Document has incorporated the comments and is now the Final Position Paper which is available for download [online](#).

2.3 Development Education Workshop

The afternoon session was hosted by Lourdes Youth and Community Services (LYCS) and focused on development education by providing a basic overview of what it is and how it can be integrated into community education courses. The handbook 'Connecting Communities: A Practical Guide to using Development Education in Community Settings' is a LYCS resource for facilitators or tutors working with groups in Community Education and Community Development contexts and information of which can be downloaded [here](#). If you are interested in including development education into the work of your organization please contact Helena McNeill (Local area) or Rachel Dempsey (National area) at LYCS on 01-8230860 or deved@lycs.ie.

3. Future Actions of the Community Education Network

The main focus of the CEN in the coming months is to:

1. Host a focus group meeting with Minister Ciaran Cannon regarding the Position Paper 'Concerns for the Community Education Sector in a Time of Change', potentially during the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival – subject to the Minister's availability.
2. Develop a Training Programme on 'measuring the outcomes of community education' which will be held next year based on the outcomes of the November CEN meeting.
3. Develop a link with necessary bodies and the Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI), persons responsible for the BTEI community strand and the Teaching Council so that issues articulated by the CEN can be addressed.
4. Finalise the CPD for social action model of community education handbook.

The Way Forward

Actions for CEN members to take:

1. Lobby to improve the BTEI funding process for community education groups by using the updated Position Paper on [BTEI](#).
2. Lobby at local level using the Position Paper 'Concerns for the Community Education Sector in a Time of Change'.
3. Nominate yourself to be part of the focus group to meet Minister Ciaran Cannon.
4. Stay up to date with the community education network: To read about previous meetings and manifestoes go to: <http://www.aontas.com/commed/networkcen.html>

Feel free to contact Niamh O'Reilly to discuss anything within this report or if you have questions/issues you have regarding community education.