

## **Professional Development and Support Services for Adult and Community Education**

*A Discussion Paper prepared for AONTAS  
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### **Introduction**

The launch of the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, in August 2000 was widely welcomed by providers of, and practitioners in, adult education. The Paper heralded a new-found political commitment to the development of the adult education sector, described in the foreword as, “the last area of mass education which remains to be developed in Ireland”. Its recommendations cover a broad range of issues, including adult literacy, community education, further and higher education, support services, and local and national structures. The White Paper also emphasised the need to take a systemic approach to adult education which recognises the diversity of provision within a more integrated framework.

AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education has, for many years, lobbied for the development of co-ordinating structures to support adult and community education. The proposed national and local structures in the White Paper were seen as a mechanism for co-ordination, and a major step in progressing the professional development of the adult education sector. There are now more resources available to adult and community education than ever before, and this has led to more sophistication in the service. The development and implementation of the various quality assurance frameworks (NALA, Youthreach, FETAC, AONTAS Women’s Quality Assurance Framework) , and the process of strategic planning at local level, have required a range of new skills within the sector including leadership, change management, strategic thinking and planning and the development of partnerships.

### **Staffing in the Adult Education Service**

Today, the modern adult education service is a multi-faceted system, employing a range of professionals who have diverse professional development needs. While the VECs play a major role in the provision of adult and community education many other community based groups, schools and third level institutions also provide a wide range of training and education courses at local, regional and national levels. In terms of staffing at local level those involved in adult and community education could roughly be classified under three headings.

Firstly there are the people who work directly with learners. These include volunteers in the literacy service and in community education groups, teachers who work with the VTOS,

BTEI, PLC and Youthreach services, skills-based tutors, adult education facilitators/tutors who work with the community education groups and guidance and information personnel.

The second category might include staff whose role it is to organise and co-ordinate services and who support not just the development of programmes to meet the needs of learners but also those involved in their delivery. These include Community Education Facilitators, Adult Literacy Organisers, Guidance Co-ordinators, BTEI Co-ordinators, community group leaders and development workers as well as a range of co-ordinators within the higher education system.

The third category includes management personnel whose role is to lead out the strategic thinking and planning for the service and to support staff to develop integrated and team approaches to their work. Managers at this level should be capable of providing 'bigger picture' thinking and of involving their staff teams in anticipating and responding to the ever changing needs of the service. They should also be involved with a range of stakeholders in the service in expanding and developing it as part of the lifelong learning agenda. Included in this category would be Adult Education Officers, Education Officers, Chief Executive Officers within the VEC service, Managers and Management Committees of Community Groups and Directors/Managers of adult and community education services within the higher education level sector. The following table summarises the above categorisation.

<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>ROLE</b>	<b>RESPONSIBILITIES</b>
Management	AEOs, CEOs,EO, Community project managers and management committees Directors/managers in higher education	Leadership Strategic Planning Organisational development Human resources, technical and financial planning and management Quality assurance and accountability
Organisation	CEFs ALOs Guidance Co-ordinators Development workers Programme co-ordinators	Programme planning Curriculum development Support to tutors and groups Networking and capacity building Quality assurance
Teaching and Learning	Tutors Teachers Facilitators Volunteers Guidance and Information staff	Teaching courses Facilitation of groups Skills-based teaching Course planning Curriculum development and assessment Developing progression and transfer

While these broad distinctions are being made for the purposes of this particular paper obviously there are many areas of crossover and it is in the best interests of the service that those working within it are involved as closely as possible in all aspects of its development. However different categories of staff require different types of professional development depending on their levels of skills, qualifications and experience. A training and support

system must therefore recognise this and have a variety of strands including organisational development and skills training as well as networking and sharing information on practice.

### **Growth of Support Services**

Historically as adult education needs emerged, they were responded to through programmes and support services resulting in the recruitment of staff in the VECs to meet the needs of this growing sector. The first Adult Education Organisers were recruited in 1979. Coming from the teaching profession, their role was to develop and support adult education at local level. Programmes such as VTOS later emerged in response to unemployment, and literacy provision on a voluntary basis has been in place since the late seventies. With regard to community education, within most VECs there are panels of part-time community education tutors who work with the community groups in the delivery of programmes. Since the White Paper on Adult Education (2000), adult and community education has seen further staff recruitment within the VECs e.g. Community Education Facilitators, BTEI co-ordinators and Guidance service staff.

In parallel to this statutory provision, community groups, mainly led by women, began to deliver community-based education in local centres, all on a voluntary basis and in some cases supported by the local AEO. Many of these groups are today funded by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs for their anti-poverty education programmes, with some receiving support from the VECs through tutor hours or annual small grants. AONTAS supported the growth of community education through skills training and capacity building throughout the nineties, and this has culminated in the development of the Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework as a professional development tool for the sector.

Support services currently in existence across the service are varied in their quality and consistency, are generally poorly resourced and often unconnected with each other. Within the VEC adult education service different programmes have developed their own support services with particular funding strands but with little cross over to other support services. Examples include the Youthreach, Senior Travellers Training Centres, VTOS. More recently the Community Education Facilitators Training and Support Programme was established and is currently being delivered by AONTAS. The National Adult Literacy Agency provides the main training for Adult Literacy personnel within the VEC service as well as supporting a variety of other initiatives outside of the VECs while the National Committee for Guidance in Education provides a support service for the adult guidance projects run mostly under the auspices of the VECs. Associations formed by VEC personnel such as the Adult Education Officer's Association, the AEGA etc receive small amounts of direct funding from the Department of Education and Science to support activities which could be generally described as networking and practice sharing.

In the community sector the picture is even more complex. As mentioned earlier many community-based groups delivering education and training as their main activity do not receive their funding from the Department of Education and Science but from a variety of sources and Departments, the chief of which is the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Training and support for their staff is provided through a variety of sources including Community Development Support Agencies, national organisations such as AONTAS, National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks, European funded projects and so on.

This ad-hoc development can be attributed to the way adult education service grew during the past thirty years, when it lacked recognition and resources nor had it any coherent policy framework. The service effectively just grew wherever it could be planted in response to need a bit like a seed in the desert. While there are many disadvantages to such a development not the least of which is the lack of sustainability it did, however, allow greater flexibility and creativity to emerge, especially within community education, which has resulted in the organic and learner-centred provision we see today.

In many VECs, a team approach, led by the AEO now exists, which provides structures for sharing information, work practices and communication. Where such a team structure is not in place, or where there is no commitment to a team approach, people working in the service can feel isolated from each other leading to a lack of communication on work practices and sharing of information, planning and involvement.

### **Developing an integrated support service**

The rationale for developing a more integrated support service is mainly to bring coherence and co-ordination across services. Professional development is inextricably tied into structural development and it is no surprise that this was the approach taken by the White Paper. Recommendation 8.1.2 reads as follows:-

*The Government recognises the need to explore the feasibility of developing a generic training programme in this field, to be implemented initially in a modular format on an in-service basis, but ultimately to be available as a pre-service training programme for the sector....(pp151)*

The Paper went on to recommend the establishment of an Inter Agency Working Group representing a broad range of interests whose role it would be to:-

- examine the range of qualifications currently available in relation to the needs of the sector
- identify generic training needs as well as the scope and need for specific specialisms on an elective basis
- explore with relevant third level colleges the scope for a modular and flexible approaches to the development of nationally certified inservice and pre-service training programmes
- make recommendations on the future recognition of qualifications in the adult education service

Furthermore the Paper articulated the necessity *‘to progress this work on a phased basis, underpinned by an inclusive participative consultation process, systematic research and a review of best international practice in this area.’ (pp151)*

Six years on this recommendation is still very necessary and is one which AONTAS would strongly support. Such a group could be set up under the auspices of the National Qualifications Authority which could commission the necessary research and oversee the development of a generic training programme for the sector. The group should include AONTAS, NALA, IVEA and representatives of the Education/Adult Education Departments of the Higher Education sector as its core.

The White Paper also recommended the establishment of a Forum for Adult Education Practitioners by the National Adult Learning Council which would:-

- provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and the sharing of good practice

- provide a mechanism for new thinking and innovation in the field
- enable practitioners to inform policy development
- contribute to the development of solidarity and peer support amongst practitioners

In the absence of the National Adult Learning Council such a forum has not been established. However the need for an opportunity to network and to exchange ideas, information and practice have never been more necessary. This has largely been fulfilled albeit in a fragmented way by various support programmes, professional association meetings and by meetings supported by national organisations such as AONTAS and NALA.

In addition some models of good practice are developing in parts of the service. For example the community based women's education groups network regionally and nationally through the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks (NWCCN) to support their education provision at local level. As a VEC model Co Clare VEC's development of five geographical networks of providers of adult and community education to share information and avoid duplication of provision is also an interesting one.

### **Models of Practice**

Developing a co-ordinated approach to professional development and support is crucial to its success and it is useful to look at some examples of integrated approaches both within and outside the sector. The following three examples illustrate some of the approaches from which learning might be transferred:

- The Steering group structure for the CEF Training and Support Programme
- The Second Level Support Service
- Professional Development Systems in Adult Education in the USA

### **The Steering Group for the CEF Training and Support Programme**

The Steering Group structure was the first of its kind and was established as a result of collaboration between the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science, the VECs and AONTAS following the decision to recruit Community Education Facilitators in 2003. AONTAS was invited by the Department to provide a proposal for a support programme because of its specific expertise in the area of community education and because of its established relationship with the VECs, most of whom are members. The programme is funded by the DES and co-ordinated and delivered by a co-ordinator based in AONTAS. The Steering Group was established as a result of consultation between the partners and its objectives are as follows:-

- To oversee the work programme of the National Training/Support Programme Co-ordinator for Community Education Facilitators (CEFs).
- To approve the training/support programme for CEFs and guide its implementation.
- To develop and maintain links with the Strategic Management Initiative for CEOs/AEOs of VECs, so as to ensure complementarity of both training initiatives.

The group's membership consists of representatives from the Department of Education and Science, IVEA, Adult Education Officers Association, AONTAS and Pobal (formerly ADM) The Co-ordinator attends the Steering Group Meetings.

This model has brought to the table a diversity of views and perspectives on the professional development of adult and community education. These key stakeholders come together to ensure that the Training and Support Programme is grounded in the work of the VECs adult education service and the community organisations, and to use the information emerging

from the programme to inform a national perspective on adult education. The model has opened up lines of communication between various players in the sector at national level.

This collaborative way of working has supported a more integrated approach at national level, but not at local level, as the support is still programme-based, although the content is aimed at developing a team and collaborative approach. However what is emerging is a model that combines networking and generic practice and information sharing at a national level with specific skills based training at a regional level. The CEFs independently of the programme, meet regionally for peer support and to feed into the planning of the national and regional training through designated representatives from each region.

### **The Second Level Support Service (SLSS)**

The Second Level Support Service (SLSS) has both a national identity and a regional work base. The national identity permits coherent and strategic planning on professional development at national level, while the regional base offers ownership at local level of processes designed to meet local needs.

The SLSS emerged as a development aimed at co-ordinating support for teachers in second level schools. At present, the teams supporting the Transition Year Programme (TYP), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate English, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) make up the SLSS. The rationale advanced for cohering the support services for these school programmes into a single organisation was:

- Duplication and overlap could be avoided in generic topic areas;
- Greater efficiency and economy would accrue in the provision of support from the perspective of schools;
- Enhanced capacity to meet the diversity of need in schools;
- A coordinated support service structure would promote a strategic approach to provision; and
- These programmes shared common characteristics in that they were all mature in the system, and were moving from a phase of intensive support to continuing support.

The SLSS became operational as an entity in January 2001. It reached its current complement of thirty-seven Regional Development Officers (RDOs) and Co-ordinators in August 2001. For operational purposes the service has been organised in the following way:

- The SLSS is a national team, consisting of a Director, six National Coordinators and thirty RDOs.
- The national team is comprised of six individual teams, each with a programme specific remit.
- Five regional teams have also been established. The composition of the regional teams is representative of each of the programme teams.
- Task teams are also established from time to time to undertake specific tasks.

The work of the SLSS is overseen by a Steering Committee of the Department of Education and Science. The committee is representative of relevant sections and agencies within the Department, the NCCA, the programme co-ordinators, and others in a position to advise on the work of the support service. The Director for the SLSS reports to the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee relies on working groups to oversee the day-to-day work of each of the individual support teams in their programme, and one group to oversee the administration of the SLSS. The programme working groups are composed of the national co-ordinator, representatives from the inspectorate, the NCCA, the ICDCU, the Director of the host Education or Curriculum Centre, and the Director of the SLSS. The working groups meet as often as is made necessary by the needs of the particular programme and they report to the Steering Committee.

### **Professional Development Systems in the USA**

The practice of organising a professional development system in adult basic education (ABE) dates from the National Literacy Act 1991, under which all states were required to allocate a minimum of 15% of their ABE budget to professional development and research. This mandate prompted many states to develop a system for providing teachers, tutors, managers, administrators and literacy staff with continuing education opportunities.

In a survey of five states that implemented professional development systems, conducted by the National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, key lessons emerged that could contribute to the development of an integrated support service in adult education in Ireland.

The survey found that there was a need for strong national/state leadership that allowed a bottom-up approach to planning and implementation.

### **Key features of such a system are:**

#### **Scope:**

Professional development activities should be aimed at all staff and practitioners in ABE. Activities varied depending on local needs, but generic training was conducted at a regional or state level. The duration of activities varied from short programmes to longer programmes depending on qualifications and needs.

#### **Co-operative leadership:**

National/State level management of the system was required while working with local practitioners to develop the vision. Each of the five states implemented a system that had state level staffing, which played a leading role in shaping the system, setting policy and taking responsibility for the maintenance of the system. This structure allowed a systemic approach to planning, and also enabled monitoring of quality and quantity of activities. It was found that the state led system could ensure more cohesive planning at local level, encourage practitioners to take time out to participate through incentives, and implement a national professional development programme, based on generic training needs that emerged from local level work.

#### **Coherence:**

Good links were developed between the various activities at local level and the national system. Through monitoring of local activities, the state-led leadership was able to put in place national information management systems and data collection across programmes, and to develop a process of continuous programme improvement based on emerging local needs.

#### **Accessibility:**

Accessibility involved ensuring that opportunities to engage in professional development occurred at various times and locations in the state so as to be accessible to all. Having state

leadership and co-ordination ensured that a co-ordinated approach was taken to provision that avoided duplication, overlap, and excess call on peoples' time.

The survey identified several challenges that the system faces:

- How to spearhead change by acting as visionaries responsible for implementing overall reform and growth of the ABE professional development system. This requires thinking on a broader level than just local.
- How to balance top-down and bottom-up needs by involving stakeholders at all levels of planning and implementation.
- Building a shared vision of professional development among the multiple stakeholders.
- Having a truly needs-based system will require not only national and local leadership, but also be underpinned by research that will inform future developments.

## **Conclusion:**

The common features emerging from the models looked at in this paper are:

1. Having a national structure which can:
  - Co-ordinate services with a view to promoting a more strategic approach to planning and implementation across the various support services
  - Create opportunities for generic training in adult and community education
  - Avoid duplication and overlap in generic training, while allowing for innovative needs-based local practice
  - Bring key stakeholders together to input into the development of a national system of professional development in adult and community education.
  - Underpin the development through national monitoring and data collection, combined with local and regional programme planning.
2. Having regional/local/programme co-ordination which ensures that the local or programme support service is designed to meet personnel needs, while feeding into the national planning.
3. Engaging in ongoing research and evaluation to inform future practice

The features of these programmes have very much in common with the original recommendations of the White paper concerning Staff Development and Support. The establishment of the Inter-Agency Working Group would be a very helpful starting point and one which AONTAS would strongly support. The group could begin to examine how existing support services are resourced and delivered with a view to developing an integrated and coherent approach to the delivery of a professional development system for the adult and community education sector as a whole.

While it is recognised that the VECs are the statutory providers of adult education at local level, there are many other locally based providers which are in need of support from a professional development system. These strands of provision differ from one another and will need different responses to their training needs. However the core principles and philosophies underpinning adult education should be at the heart of all education and training opportunities designed for adults and thus should be the generic part of any professional

development programme. It should then be possible to develop modules which will respond to the differing needs of staff in the service taking account of their skills, qualifications and experience.

In the development of any system of support, the contribution, character, and principles of community education must also be taken into account. This type of education has developed from the grassroots. It has put in place participative structures for planning, programme development, evaluation and management. The groups recognise that experience is central to people's development, and that educators/tutors in this sector need to have more than qualifications. They need to have empathy and understanding of the communities they work with. Through the work of the CEFs these groups no longer work in isolation from the VEC statutory adult education service and in many VECs are regarded as key providers at a local level. Therefore, it is essential that this relationship is maintained and built on by including these local providers in the development of the adult education service and its support systems.

## A Vision of a more integrated Professional Development support service

