



Report on Regional Meetings 2005

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PART I – Summary Report

Introduction

The annual series of regional meetings took place throughout Ireland during October and November. The purpose of these meetings is to give members the chance to stand back from their work, to exchange information and ideas and to network. It is also important as a means for members to feed into the policy work of AONTAS. Issues that arise from the meetings are used to inform the work of AONTAS thus ensuring that our work is responsive to the needs of the membership. It also gives the staff of AONTAS an overview of the adult and community education service nationally.

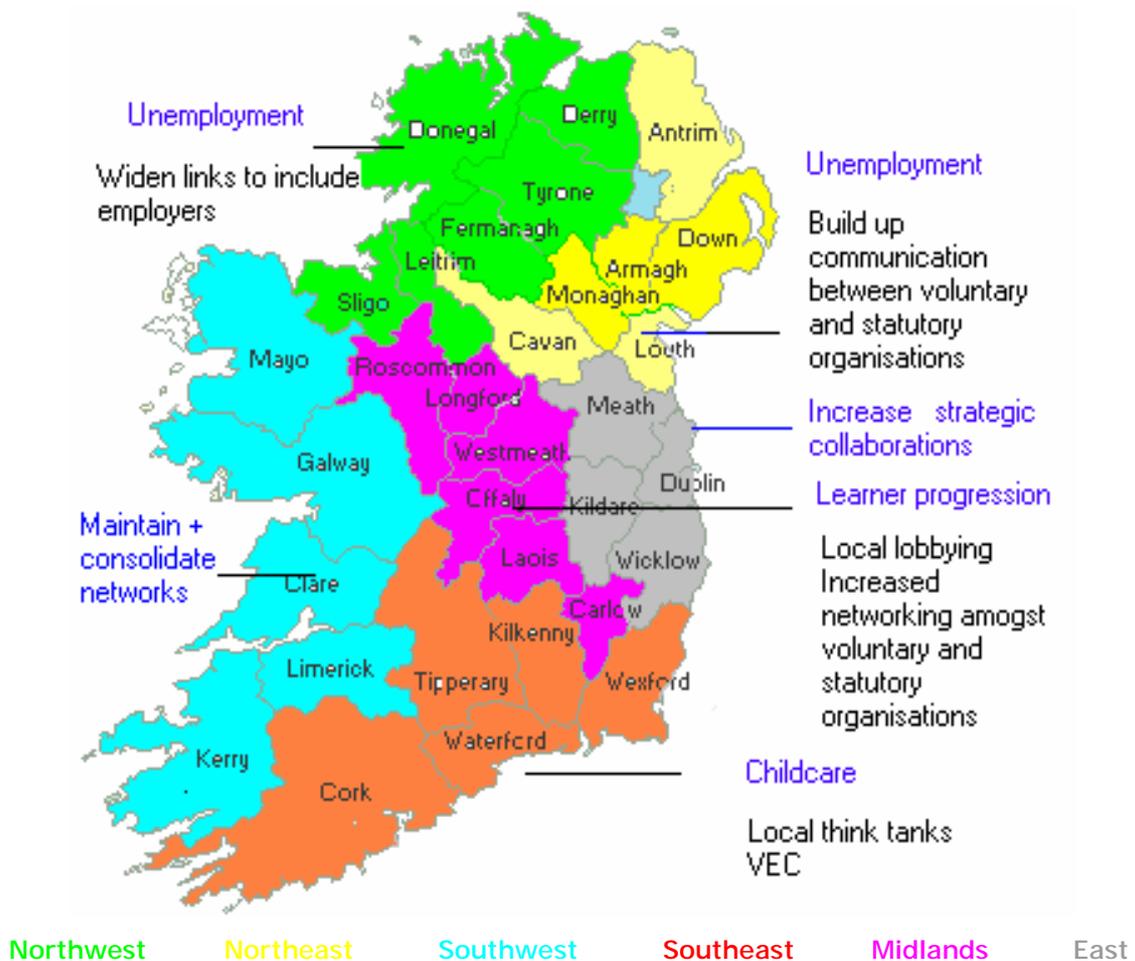
The focus for each meeting was Adult Education and the National Development Agenda: taking into account the end of the current National Development Plan and what issues need to be considered for the next National Plan whilst bearing in mind the new Social Partnership Agreement and the approaching General Election. The agenda for the meetings was devised following consultation with the members. In order to address the issues posed the Director of AONTAS, Berni Brady, gave an overview of adult education and the national agenda, which was followed by inputs from local AONTAS members. The presentations provided a good basis for discussion and attendees were invited to break into smaller discussion groups. Members reflected on what the opportunities are for adult and community education at local and national level, and importantly, how members can take advantage of these opportunities. Methods for incorporating the findings into the work of AONTAS were identified and discussed. The meeting concluded on a motivational note through the launch of the AONTAS publication: Adult Learner 2005. In keeping with the European Year of Citizenship through Education the theme of the journal is Citizenship and Participation.

Members used the space at the meeting for various purposes: to articulate issues; to develop ideas regarding their practice from information obtained at the meeting and through the process of discussion; to identify opportunities that they could use to improve their service from discussion many find ways to deal with their issues; to share models of best practice; and to formulate methods to challenge existing issues and move forward on these by establishing methods such as the no crèche-no course policy.

Outcomes

There have been many developments in the sector; however, significant differences in adult and community education provision were evident across the country. The meetings differed greatly and the inputs, by local speakers and the members, shaped the discussions but also, and importantly, were a reflection of the adult education provision in that area.

There was a common thread throughout the discussion groups – that of the importance of collaboration and interagency work in providing an effective adult and community education service. This relates to the role of interagency work at local level and also inter-departmental work at government level. In order to address our responsibility to all individuals in ensuring freedom to education, collaboration, consultation and networking was identified as key.



In the Northwest the discussions focussed on the role of adult and community education in alleviating the problem of unemployment for the region. Delegates noted that their adult and community education links must expand to encapsulate local employers. This would ensure that learners gain from improved employer understanding of qualifications and increased accredited-workplace learning. The positive links made by members in the region could be used by AONTAS to translate national policy to local members in order to strengthen these issues on the ground.

The main area of discussion in the Southeast was childcare, which may have reflected the participants in attendance many of whom were from Waterford Women's Centre. It was proposed that childcare should be lobbied for with an emphasis on its importance for accessing educational opportunities. Other local opportunities to feed into were local think tanks, such as that in South Tipperary, also the idea of getting onto boards e.g. VEC was noted as a method to influence change. To prevent enabling of the problem a no crèche-no course policy was proposed from the position that instead of being reactive to a problem individuals and groups would make a stand and through participation in local decision-making, change the situation.

The Midlands meeting was attended by a large number of learners and, therefore, the discussion focussed, to large part, on learners' needs. One of the issues that arose was from a learners' perspective – the importance in continuity of courses. Once there is the initial spark from learning it is important that expectations aren't raised only for disappointment to result if further opportunities aren't available. Learners must be able to progress to further courses and interagency work is fundamental to providing a comprehensive adult education service.

A large number of voluntary groups and learners were in attendance at the Northeast meeting. Learners noted that the provision of services was inadequate due to the lack of interagency work. The need to collaborate with learners in the planning, developing and delivery of courses was expressed. Consultation was identified as central to this process, and a climate of mutual respect must be developed to forge links between statutory and community groups.

The discussion in the Southwest meeting allowed development of ideas regarding the importance of maintaining a collaborative approach to adult and community education provision. Local practice has been successful but this must be consolidated and structures to maintain networks must be sustained.

The General Meeting and Eastern regional meeting focussed on ensuring links and networks are sufficient to meet the demands of the sector and looked to widen the links to include other agencies e.g. unions so to strengthen the political case for adult and community education.

Summary of opportunities identified for adult and community education

Local opportunities

VEC plans

The VEC education plans were seen as an opportunity to influence the agenda locally

- The consultation process occurs with groups, agencies and partners
- Members are interested in feeding into the plan through SIM committee councils
- Concerns were expressed as to whether the correct individuals and groups are being consulted for the education plan, particularly those working at grassroots
- It was highlighted that learners must be part of the consultation process

Other opportunities

- Members can identify key people/boards in their locality e.g. councillors
- Translate national policy to members to lobby issues locally
- Local lobbying should be targeted, focussed and have a definite long term goal
- Members highlighted the need for capacity building to lobby local politicians
- Learners must be empowered to lobby locally
- Ensure people at grassroots influence policy

National opportunities

National Development Plan

- Highlight the point that if money allocated from the last NDP has not been spent it must be questioned. This could be accomplished through a parliamentary question.
- Highlight the importance of innovation which is sustainable in the next NDP e.g. pilot schemes that are successful. Furthermore self-evaluation should be established whereby pilot projects can move into the mainstream.

To lobby the next NDP in the following manner:

- a) Promote the idea that adult and community education provides social capital and is imperative to sustain a knowledge economy.
- b) Connect or tag adult education onto other agendas e.g. business agenda
- c) Education for all should be lobbied for as a human right.

White Paper on Adult Education – NALC

- Lobby to implement all the recommendations of the White Paper, and back up with the argument that the main issues in adult and community education are due to the lack of co-ordination in the service: therefore, stress the role of NALC. If NALC were to go ahead, should it be consultative or executive? AONTAS needs to take a position on this. Maybe it should be consultative initially and then executive, there are too many members in its current format.
- Lobby for NALC and Adult Learning Boards as a method for integrating structures.

General Election

- General election: get local TDs to attend learner forum/networks to ensure the voice of the learner is heard
- Members must raise the profile of adult and community education and encourage political parties to pick up adult and community education issues, particularly in the next General Election.

Priorities for AONTAS

Membership

- Ensure learners are part of the consultation process and can influence local agenda. This could be achieved by increasing the capacity of learners through the establishment of learner networks.
- AONTAS could facilitate the bringing together of groups with similar policy issues thereby strengthening lobbying ability locally.
- AONTAS should train people to do the work with agencies – i.e. training for members to lobby locally.
- The creation of spaces to share ideas e.g. small local meetings.

Social Partners

- Prepare a submission for Social Partners regarding adult and community education

Profile of adult and community education

- Increase the promotion of the sector (adult and community education) through use of the media and initiate an advertising campaign
- Ensure we have accurate statistics on participants (adult learners)
- Ensure that personal human interest stories are put forward
- Work on the organisation of a National Adult Learners week
- Produce a book of case studies with stories from learners participating in the various adult education programmes, showing the different progression routes available.

AONTAS – The organisation

- AONTAS should start discussions with unions and others about professionals in adult education. There are far more individuals employed in adult education now than there was 10 years ago and there is a need for AONTAS to work with the unions of those employees
- Members expressed the desire to see AONTAS as a Social Partner and part of the Partnership talks.

Areas to lobby

- AONTAS to ensure that community development projects are funded and supported in the next Development Plan
- AONTAS could lobby for sustainable funding: multi-annual is required to sustain projects, ensure they are efficient both financially and from the point of the service
- AONTAS to follow up on the proposals to provide money for volunteerism
- AONTAS to lobby for the solution to issues expressed by the members (Part II of this report).

Other

- There is a need for coherence across Government Departments – AONTAS has a role to play in encouraging this
- There must be clarification regarding services offered by the VEC and FAS
- The energy is gone out of the adult education sector: we must re-ignite this
- AONTAS needs to be a 'Champion' of adult and community education.

PART II – Details of issues raised

A number of common topics raised pertained to issues for learners and issues for adult and community education providers.

Issues for learners

Information

The importance of getting information out to the public was expressed in most regions. The obstacles to this which were identified included: the wide area to cover with little funding for advertisement in Donegal; the difficulty with language used in publicity, such as acronyms; the reliance on word of mouth by learners for obtaining information; and the fact that those who are in courses have greater access to information.

A general point to note is that further education courses are available to adults, however, many are not aware of this opportunity possibly because of the title of post-leaving certificate implies it is for individuals who recently left school and have completed senior cycle. We must look at creating a knowledge of lifelong learning in school children.

To address this issue, the following recommendations were proposed:

- Postcard advertising campaign by providers of community and adult education
- Workplace promotion of adult education opportunities
- Improved clarity of language e.g. acronyms should be explained VTOS/BTEI.
- Work collectively in creating a space for information sharing through exhibitions
- Increase the outreach work, although time consuming, it offers a line of communication that is clear, accessible and person-centred
- Create a menu of services for prospective learners locally
- Look at the potential for a central area for information in each region
- Use the community and the power of the 'grapevine' to spread the word of existing information services such as adult guidance services
- Increase the sharing of best practice amongst the VECs nationwide

Course Provision

An increasingly flexible approach to adult and community education provision is required in order to improve access. This is of particular importance for women learners where it was suggested that planning courses around school hours or evening classes would be beneficial. Delegates articulated the desire for flexibility in terms of location; provision of outreach courses would facilitate learner opportunities for third level programmes in rural communities. This is also important in terms of areas with a lack of transport.

Learner Support – Financial

A call for an increase in financial support for adult learners was made by a number of delegates. Firstly, the discrepancy in the grant eligibility for mature students of PLC courses was noted. An individual of 21 years is deemed an adult for PLC courses, however, to be assessed for a grant as an independent mature student the individual must be 23 years. The rate of payment for VTOS participants should also be reviewed.

Childcare

Childcare continues to pose a serious obstacle for learners undertaking educational courses. Again, the lack of childcare for BTEI remains problematic. For future developments in childcare provision it was suggested that training rooms for future staff be put in place in crèches, and ensure that both the practical and theoretical aspects of childcare are explored in courses.

Learner Progression

The importance for continuity of, and freedom of, access to courses for a clear progression in learning was expressed in a number of regions. Issues raised by learners on this point focussed on the lack of further opportunities that follow initial training courses, e.g. traveller women in the Northeast felt that further courses were not available following the initial course. Some learners noted that once an initial interest for courses is sparked it is devastating when one cannot continue and build on this through further education opportunities.

Accreditation and Employers

One focus on the accreditation of courses was in terms of its importance in obtaining employment, this was a significant point in the Northeast and Northwest where unemployment levels are high. Delegates noted that employers need to have a clear understanding with regard to qualifications and they must be involved in workplace accredited-learning. A discussion in Donegal centred on the vulnerability of employees in low skilled jobs who have few qualifications and are often the first target for when a company closes.

It was also noted that acknowledgement of qualifications held by non-nationals is fundamental for their continuing education in Ireland. It was proposed that capacity building of all learners in order to self-evaluate one's level would provide a more fluid movement between FETAC levels. The opportunity for BTEI students to leap to other levels was suggested as a means to truly meet the learners needs as one cannot presume the level of all learners. However, contrary to this it was also noted that not all courses should be accredited, particularly with regard to pre-development and outreach work.

Issues for adult and community education providers

Community Education

The main concern for community education was the importance of a dedicated community education budget, and thus multi-annual funding, in order to provide continuity of service to learners and efficiency and stability for the education providers.

Premises

An increase in capital spending was called for to address the issue of lack of premises and other areas were explored, such as, the use of schools in the evening.

Career Progression/Professionalisation

A clearly defined career path must be established for adult and community education providers. It must be ensured that all tutors have proper continuity in work and a definite career structure in place together with the ability to join a union. It was also

expressed that all tutors, including those in third level institutions must receive appropriate training in order to teach adults.

Development

Areas for development in adult education that were identified included: improving gender balance in participation by developing models to attract male learners; develop programmes to meet the needs of migrant workers and non nationals; instil a notion of lifelong learning in teenage learners so to highlight the possibility of adult education; ensure minority groups are catered in particular for travellers and those affected by disadvantage in rural areas.

PART III – Details of each regional meeting

Summary of attendance

CATEGORY	NORTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	MIDLANDS	NORTHEAST	SOUTHWEST	EAST	TOTAL
Voluntary*	20	22	21	20	13	17	113
Statutory	14	21	19	9	15	31	109
Individuals	0	0	0	0	2	6	8
Total	34	43	40	29	30	54	230

* Includes learners

Northwest

The Northwest regional meeting aimed to cater for members based in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Derry. It was held in the Ailim Community Training Development Agency Centre in Donegal Town. The Manager, Sean Lawless kindly supported the organisation of the meeting on Wednesday 5th October.

Of the people who attended the meeting a large number were VTOS learners, together with VEC staff, including: Adult Education Officers; Adult Literacy, VTOS, Back to Education Organisers; Community Education Facilitators; and Guidance staff. Co-ordinators and workers of Women's groups represented community education and representatives from Partnerships and Letterkenny Institute of Technology were also present.

The panel of local speakers comprised: Martin Gormley, the Adult Education Officer of County Donegal VEC; Josephine McGread, Co-ordinator and Guidance Counsellor with Sligo VEC; and Sean Lawless, Manager of Ailim. Martin gave an overview of the service of Donegal VEC; the increase in learners from 2000 in 1999 to almost 14000 in 2004, the expansion of the adult literacy service and the start of the BTEI initiative. He also outlined issues such as the need to fund childcare for BTEI learners, the need to expand workplace literacy, the need to improve coordinating structures at local level and the opportunity that the Education Plans in the VEC present. Josephine discussed the guidance service provided by SAGE and the importance of networking amongst practitioners and the associated referral opportunities. The issues that were elaborated on include: the importance of lobbying for learners e.g. asylum seekers, transport and

childcare requirements and the need for a national psychological assessment service. Finally, Sean outlined the issues for social inclusion, cross boarder issues and the housing problem. His main focus was on the problem of unemployment in the region, particularly with the multi-nationals leaving Donegal town and the potential workforce having poor educational attainment.¹

Southeast

The Southeast regional meeting invited members from Waterford, Kilkenny, Wexford, South Tipperary and Cork. The Literacy Development Centre based in Waterford IT was host to the meeting held on Wednesday 12th October at their College Street Campus. Our members at the centre, including Margaret O'Brien, generously assisted in its organisation.

Those who attended ranged from community groups, VEC staff: Adult Education Officers; Adult Literacy, VTOS, Back to Education Organisers; Community Education Facilitators; and Guidance staff. Co-ordinators and workers of Women's community education groups, employment services, Men's groups, area and community Partnerships and Waterford Institute of Technology were also present. There were also a large number of learners from a local women's group.

The local speakers included: Pauline Ennis, Project Co-ordinator of Access 2000, Wexford; Eileen Condon, Adult Education Officer with South Tipperary VEC; and Monica Heynan working in Education Development at WIT Literacy Development Centre. Pauline's presentation included discussion on the high demand, by learners, for community education, the challenges to women's community education, and the increasingly politicised nature of the sector. Also, the importance of the community education sector in collaborating with statutory bodies through capacity building courses that enable engagement at statutory level was explored; however, this should also be a two-way process. Monica provided a detailed overview of national literacy levels was offered together with developments in the sector regarding educational opportunities for those delivering a literacy service. A look at how best a VEC uses resources for delivering adult education courses was discussed by Eileen, and the increasing demand

¹ Combat Poverty Report on Donegal

and uptake is directly related to an increase in investment was explored. Models of best practice, experiences and stories of the every changing learner base were also discussed.

Midlands

The Midlands regional meeting was held on Thursday 20th October at the Bridge House Hotel, Tullamore. Invitations for this event were sent to members based in Offaly, Laois, Westmeath, Longford, North Tipperary, Roscommon and Carlow. Delegates attended from VECs, women's community education, voluntary organisations, adult guidance services and learners from various projects.

Two local speakers gave presentations; the first from Marion Duffy, Adult Education Officer, of Carlow VEC and member of the AONTAS Executive Committee; the second from Mary Connell, Information Officer, of Laois Adult Guidance Service. Marion described her personal experience of working the sector, the demands for the adult education particularly with regard to the need for English language courses for immigrants. Targeting the most disadvantaged and providing 'education for living' was named as the priority of the VEC. Mary gave an overview of the adult guidance service in Laois, more than 2000 people have used the service since it was established 4 years ago. The service uses the Karl Rogers model in that the needs of the learner inform the model and a holistic approach is taken. Issues for the service include its funding, expansion and follow up capabilities. It was noted that in parts of Laois about 40% of the population have a less than Junior Certificate standard of education.

Northeast

Dundalk was host to the Northeast regional meeting with members invited from Louth, Cavan, Monaghan, Down, Antrim and Armagh. The meeting was held at the Muirhevnamor Community Centre, on Wednesday the 26th October, with the assistance of our member: Ait na Ndaoine and organised in conjunction with the kind assistance of the Manager, Anthony Jordan. Members attended from the local VEC, community development programmes, traveller training centres, women's groups, ethnic minority support groups and learners.

The two speakers who presented were Sadie Ward McDermott, Adult Education Officer, of Louth VEC and John Connolly, Education Co-ordinator with Ait na nDaoine. Sadie discussed the work of the VEC in terms of adult and community education. The strengths of programmes such as the part-time PLC, the BTEI and part-time evening courses were noted and the restrictions on numbers of participants and class sizes due to limited resources were illustrated. The priorities for the VEC were discussed, in particular, the importance of a multi-agency approach. John noted the issue of unemployment in Muirhevnamor, and the important role of education was highlighted. Previous failings to meet the needs of this disadvantaged area was discussed and social questions regarding poverty were presented to the attendees for reflection.

Southwest

Ennis hosted the Southwest regional meeting with members invited from Clare, Galway, Mayo, Limerick and Kerry. The meeting was held at the Temple Gate Hotel, on Wednesday the 9th November. Members attended from the VECs, community development programmes, women's groups, third level institutions and statutory bodies.

Presentations were given by: Moira Greene, acting Adult Education Officer, of Clare VEC; Sara Bourke, Training and Education Co-ordinator, of Tipperary Women's Network based in Knockanrawley; and Frances Egan and Linda Barry, Careers and Access Officer, of Limerick Institute of Technology. Moira outlined the work of Clare VEC over the past 3 years ranging from the number of learners participating in the BTEI programme (1500), the guidance service, and the huge increase in ESOL provision. The benefits from staff development were noted since the introduction of Certificate course in Adult Education for practitioners. In relation to third level provision, the VEC has been collaborating with Clare County Council and Clare County Development Board to achieve funding for the establishment of an external campus which other universities and institutes of technology could avail of. The benefits of Clare VEC taking a partnership approach were discussed in terms of shared resources between programmes and co-ordination of IT courses through and IT Unit. Multiculturalism awareness, opportunities for people with disabilities, environmental awareness courses and the benefit of non-accredited courses were discussed.

Sara described the community education provision in Knockanrawley and outlined the issues posed to learners: childcare, elder care, disability care, rural travel and the need to accredit prior learning. The desire for full recognition of community education was expressed together with a call for improved local planning, multi-annual funding, learner support and citizenship education. Frances and Linda outlined the facilities and work practices of the Institute of Technology Limerick with regard to increasing participation of non-traditional and mature students.

East

The final meeting took place in Dublin and incorporated the General Meeting and the Dublin area regional meeting. Members from all counties were invited to attend the Gresham Hotel on Wednesday November 16th. Members attended from the VEC, community development programmes, women's and men's groups, third level institutions and statutory bodies.

Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, gave a national overview covering the development in adult and community education from the past to present day and outlining the way forward for the sector. The Membership Development Officer, Niamh O'Reilly, outlined the outcomes of the regional meetings and focussed on the opportunities that collaboration presented to the sector.

The keynote speaker, Prof. Anne Ryan of NUI Maynooth, discussed the social purpose the political dimensions of adult education and the layers of networks/linkages that characterise the sector. She explored the aim of adult education, and the types of engagement: as knowledge, as understanding, as justice and in its role in bringing about knowledge from those who engage. This brought together the trends of each regional meetings and the role of collaboration and networking in creating an effective adult and community education service.