

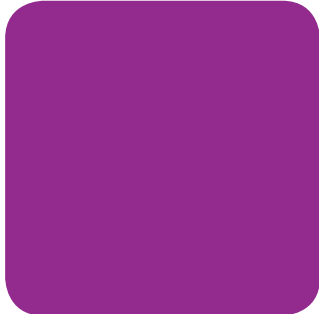
**Building a Grassroots Learner Voice:
Using the AONTAS toolkit to develop Local
Learner Forums**



**Report of the Adult Learners'
Forum of Ireland (ALFI) meeting**



**Wednesday
26th October 2011
Dublin**



What is the Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland (ALFI)?



The Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland is a platform organised by and for Adult Learners with the support of AONTAS. Its purpose is:

- To articulate and represent the issues Adult Learners face on returning to education and training
- To share information and build the capacity of Adult Learners to bring these issues to the attention of policy and decision makers
- To promote the value of Adult and Community education

Membership of ALFI is open to adults who are planning to or already pursuing second chance education opportunities with particular emphasis on Levels 1-5 on the National Qualifications Framework. Learners who are pursuing higher education opportunities for the first time as an adult are also welcome to join the ALFI.

Dear all,

It was a great pleasure to host the second Adult Learner's Forum of Ireland (ALFI) meeting on Wednesday 26th in the Ashling Hotel, Dublin. Despite the diabolical weather immediately before the meeting, over fifty Adult Learners, including community education learners, literacy learners, mature students and senior learners from across Ireland participated at the event. The aim of the meeting was to build on the enthusiasm from last year and see how a strong national organization, truly representative of Adult Learners, could be built.

Learners had asked AONTAS to look at how they were going to be supported to come together outside of national meetings. In 2010 everyone agreed that a Forum that met only once a year would find it difficult to generate momentum to build on actions, but that it would be impossible for Learners to come together at a national level on a regular basis due to financial constraints and time commitments.

We believe that in order for the ALFI to become a sustainable structure it will need to be supported by Local Adult Learner Forums across the country. In order for the ALFI to work in meeting nationally, learners will need their own local spaces to meet regularly. It is only through the development of Local Learner Forums where Learners can develop how and what they want to address that the ALFI will be able to become a strong collective national adult learner voice.

With that in mind, the second ALFI meeting was built around Local Adult Learner Forums. The inputs on the day were structured around two themes: **What** a local learner forum is and **How** it works.

AONTAS launched "**Hearing the Adult Learner Voice: A Toolkit for creating a Local Adult Learner Forum**" at the meeting and we outlined **What** a Local Adult Learner Forum is. The inputs from Aisling Ryan, Limerick City Adult Learners' Forum, and John Gates, Global Learners' Network outlined **How** Local Adult Learner Forums work. Their inputs inspired us all in the day, by giving practical advice on what to do and giving us the belief that it was something that could be replicated across the country.

We were also honoured to have John Lonergan, former Governor of Mountjoy Prison, officially launch the toolkit and deliver the keynote address, delighting participants with his input on the role of education and the power of positive thinking in bringing about change in society, ending the day on a suitably uplifting note.

Key to the success of the day was the engagement of all the participants in discussions after the inputs. It was clear that there was an appetite and energy for making Local Adult Learner Forums a reality. While that enthusiasm was clear, there also was a recognition that this would need to be met with support from AONTAS over the course of 2012 to continue to build a strong Adult Learner voice, with the ALFI becoming a genuinely representative national Adult Learner Forum.

We would like to thank all the participants for their commitment and enthusiasm for Learner Forums: the momentum generated on the day gives plenty of scope for the development of Local Adult Learner Forums and the ALFI over the course of the next few months.

On behalf of AONTAS I would like to acknowledge and thank the commitment of our voluntary steering group who provide huge support for the ALFI work: Christy Flanagan, Una Buckley, Pat Mc Cormack and Liam Kilbride. I would also like to genuinely acknowledge the commitment of the Limerick City Adult Learner Forum and for meeting with me to discuss and share their experience to help us develop the toolkit. I would also like to especially thank Áine Lyne, Limerick City VEC, for all her time in making those links between the Limerick City Learners and AONTAS.

Best Wishes
Damien Walshe

Overview of the Day



Welcome from Una Buckley

Una Buckley, Learner Ambassador for the Global Learners' Network and member of the ALFI Steering Group, opened the day by welcoming everyone to the 2nd ALFI meeting. Una asked everyone to write down on a piece of paper what their dream was as a child. She said that her dream was to be a teacher, but due to circumstances outside her control she left school early and forgot all about her dream. Returning to education as an adult, her dreams finally came through when she became an adult literacy tutor and reminded everyone of the power of Adult and Community education to make dreams come through.



Context for the meeting

Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, set the context for the 2nd ALFI meeting, briefly outlining AONTAS' continuing commitment to supporting Learner Voices and the role Learner Forums can play in this. Berni outlined the vision of ALFI as "The Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland is a Learner-owned space that will work to create a collective Learner voice to represent the issues Adult Learners face, to promote the value of Adult and Community Education and support Adult Learners to share information and build their capacity to represent the issues they face".



"Hearing the Adult Learner Voice: A Toolkit for creating a Local Adult Learner Forum"

You can read the toolkit [online](#), or phone 01-406 8220 for a copy

Damien Walshe, Learning Advocacy Officer, introduced the AONTAS toolkit for supporting Local Adult Learner Forums. From the last meeting of the ALFI, it was clear that one of the challenges was to build a sustainable national Learner Forum that was a representative space for Adult Learners from across the country. The role of the toolkit is to support the development of Local Adult Learner Forums and is based on the experience of the Limerick City Adult Learner Forum.

Damien provided a brief overview of the toolkit, including what a Local Adult Learner Forum is, how to set one up and how AONTAS can support Learners in developing their own Forum, highlighting that the toolkit is meant to be a working document that will hopefully inspire Adult Learners to start their own Local Adult Learner Forums, developing a strong grassroots in order that the ALFI becomes a sustainable national collective.



Aisling Ryan, Limerick City Adult Learner Forum

Aisling Ryan outlined her role as a member of the Limerick City Adult Learner Forum since it was established in 2005, emerging as a project for the EU year of citizenship through education supported by Limerick City VEC. Over 150 Adult Learners met in 2006 for a discussion on what kind of Adult and Community education they wanted in Limerick and this formed the basis of a Learner Charter.

The Learner Charter highlights what Learners felt was important when undertaking community classes such as respecting each other, that it isn't school and it is a social avenue where people learn together and make friends; and was presented in 2006 to tutors, coordinators, communities and Learners in Limerick. Having invested so much time in the Charter, it was decided to continue together as a strong voice for Adult Learners, hence the Limerick City Adult Learner Forum was born.

How the Limerick City Adult Learner Forum Works:

- Together as a collective group, it represents Learners from across Limerick City, with thirteen members
- It is a voice for Learners, it is Learners representing Learners: that is its ethos and aim.
- It is run by Learners who understand how other Learners feel, and offers support when needed to Adult Learners
- Together it is a voice for Learners, and allows Learners to be involved in decision making

What the Limerick City Adult Learner Forum has done:

The Forum made a presentation to the Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN) and from this has two members of the forum sitting on the LCEN, which meets every six weeks to discuss adult education in Limerick. Presentations were also given to Mary Immaculate College adult education students, highlighting what Learners of their upcoming classes need and want from their classes and tutors. The Forum has published two newsletters and distributed these to all centres, and the forum has met with Learners on their registration days for classes to offer any support required. A member of the forum sits on the AONTAS ALFI Steering Group and in 2011 the Forum organised a Learner-only event where Learners from all the centres were invited to an information morning, highlighting the work of the Forum and how it can support Adult Learners in Limerick.

Aisling recognised the support from Mary Flannery and Áine Lyne, from Limerick City VEC, and pointed out to Learners that when setting up, you do need a good support structure around you. While it can be slow, be patient to recognise the rewards. The Forum in Limerick started in 2006 and is only getting recognition now: perseverance and dedication are needed. Setting up a Learner Forum is a challenging but rewarding achievement, and members have grown in confidence, actively speaking on committees and making presentations to small and large groups.

Aisling hoped that her presentation would convince Adult Learners present at the ALFI of the benefits of a Forum and that many more are formed in various parts of the country, as without a voice there will be no learning from each other or a support structure. She wished everyone good luck with plans in the future and hoped the work of the Limerick Forum has shown how as a group that a Local Adult Learner Forum can and does work.



John Gates, Wales Adult Learners' Forum and Global Learners Network

John spoke of his own journey as an Adult Learner, his involvement in supporting Learner Forums locally, nationally and globally, specifically focusing on the structures built up in Wales. He pointed out that while this structure took time to develop in Wales, it certainly gives some thoughts on a model that could be adopted or adapted in Ireland.

The 9 Steps For Wales

1. Learner

The individual decides to become a Learner

2. Learner Activist

The Learner is encouraged and decides to become a Learner activist

3. Learning Centre

It is the Learning Centre that is the home of the Learners' Forum. This is where potential activists are *identified, nurtured and supported*. This is where Learners gain and practise the skills they will need. This is where Learners often speak up for the first time, say what they think, what they want. If they see that nothing happens, Learners will become disillusioned very quickly.

4. County Level

Link in with 22 Learning Festival Meetings, County Learning Reviews and County Learning Plans

5. Regional Level

Link in with Learning Festival Meetings, Regional Learning Plans North across Wales

6. National Level

Links with the Adult Learners Forum of Ireland (ALFI)

7. United Kingdom Adult Learners' Network

Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England

8. European Adult Learners' Network

John noted that not all education decisions are taken at a national level and there is a need for Learners to make their case at a European level- and for learners to look to build links to develop strategies to access European funding.

9. Global Adult Learners' Network

CONFINTEA is a world-wide conference on adult education, held once every 12 years. For over 60 years no learners were invited. John and other learners were invited to CONFINTEA in 2009 spoke, looking for three things:

- Recognition of the Learner voice
- Acceptance of the **International Adult Learners' Charter**
- Recognition of the concept of Learner Ambassadors.

John said that over the years, a lot of work in Wales had been put into Learner Forums that were starting to bear fruit. Among enlightened providers they have had Learner Forums and Learner involvement for several years. John outlined how in Wales that ESTYN (the inspectorate for Wales) has employed Adult Learners to evaluate how education providers are listening to Learners and discuss with Learners about the work they have completed and are working on. This has been a huge leap forward in having Learner Inspectors as it puts the Learner at the centre of evaluation, and has Learners talk to Learners about their experiences.

John finished with two quotes which he said had particular significance for the ALFI and Learners in Ireland. One was directed to Learners in Wales, but it is as relevant to Learners anywhere: *"The message is pretty clear. To get the learning system you deserve in the years ahead let your voice be heard consistently – make it clear and make it loud"* and finally at a conference in Edinburgh, an adult learner said to John: *"If enough people stand together and shout with one voice. Not even the walls of Jericho could stand against them"*.



John Lonergan, Former Governor of Mountjoy Prison

John was invited to formally launch **"Hearing the Adult Learner Voice: A Toolkit for creating a Local Adult Learner Forum"**. John focussed his input on the importance of peer support to encourage Adult Learners get involved in actions such as ALFI. He said that involvement in any group is about confidence and that for every human being one of the first steps they take is overcoming their own lack of confidence. For people to get involved and make something work they need enthusiasm, confidence and belief, and the power that comes from supporting each other. While everyone has a role to play as an individual, we all require support along the way. He used a quote from a prisoner who recounted their life in a short story: "I alone must do it, but I can't do it alone"- which applies to all of us. No person is self-made- we are all totally indebted to sharing of knowledge and expertise that we all give generously, which Adult Learners can offer each other through the ALFI.

He said that the only way to bring about change is by nurturing the potential within us. Once someone overcomes one hurdle, the appetite to achieve more that awakens once their confidence has increased is amazing. Participation gives you a sense of achievement and allows you to bring others with you, but it is worth remembering that for a group to function everyone needs to be sensitive to difference and to offer support when needed.

He said as a body ALFI and Adult Learners had a right to be heard, and that you don't need to apologise for this heard. He reminded the participants that they are the experts in relation to Adult Education and to encourage other learners to get involved.

Discussion

The discussion space allowed Learners to reflect on the inputs of the morning and specifically to respond to the idea of Local Adult Learner Forums. The facilitated discussions got Learners to focus on Aisling and John's presentations and then develop collective responses from each group. Learners were asked three specific questions and all of them were to contribute to the debate "**Making Local Learner Forums Work**".

Firstly, Learners were asked to put in one word, an immediate response to the presentations capturing what they felt in relation to Learner Forums. These responses were brought to the wall and placed under the section "**How we feel**".

Secondly, Learners were asked to develop three key actions that they would commit to after the meeting in order to start the development of Local Adult Learner Forums and these were brought to the wall and placed under "**What We Will Do**".

Finally, Learners were asked what they wanted from AONTAS to support the development of Local Adult Learner Forums and placed on the wall under "**What we want from AONTAS**".

How We Feel:

In responding to the inputs of the morning and the idea of setting up Local Adult Learner Forums, the overwhelming feeling from participants was positive, as can be seen from this Word Cloud, where the words in the bigger text represent words that Learners chose the most in describing how they felt about Local Adult Learner Forums and the inputs of the morning.

challenging **curious** educational empowerment encouraged energised enlightened excellent excited
fearful foresight good happy helpful **hopeful** informative informed
inspired interested lifelong motivated nervous optimistic
passion **positive** proud scared vision



What We Will Do:

Groups responded by looking at practical steps they, as Adult Learners, would commit to taking to start developing Local Adult Learner Forums. Across the groups there was a commitment from the Learners present for a number of actions to get Local Adult Learner Forums “off the ground” in their area, such as:

- Commitment to **promote** Local Adult Learner Forums with other Learners
- Spread the word on what a forum is by **distributing** the AONTAS toolkit
- **Organise** a meeting with other interested Learners and start a Forum!
- Seek **support** from key practitioners, such as VEC staff, tutors, local Partnership company, Community Groups etc
- **Define** what the Forum was and develop actions for what it will do
- Ensure that Local Adult Learner Forums are **inclusive** of all Learners
- **Link** in with Limerick City Adult Learner Forum to learn from their experience

Copies of the Toolkit can be downloaded from the [AONTAS website](#) or by contacting AONTAS on 01-406 8220.

What We Want from AONTAS

Participants saw that AONTAS would play a key role in supporting the development of Local Adult Learner Forums and identified areas additional to those in the toolkit:

- **Promotion** of the value of Local Adult Learner Forums to Learners and education providers through Explore, the AONTAS website and Social Media
- **Network** and link existing and emerging Learner Forums and Adult Learners interested in having their voice heard
- Provide **information** to Local Adult Learner Forums on where to seek support on organising, training opportunities and local contacts
- Give **strategic** analysis by linking Local Forums to the national level at ALFI

What Next?

One of the key aspects of the Adult Learners’ Forum of Ireland (ALFI) will be that Learners are aware of it, are keen to be part of it and see this as the place for having their voice heard in relation to Adult and Community education at a national level. We hope participants at the ALFI will spread the word to other Adult Learners, and that the message will continue to be spread. You can contribute to this by committing to spreading the word, by passing on this document or downloading the toolkit and starting a discussion on Local Adult Learner Forums.

One of the new ways we are looking to promote ALFI and Adult Learner Forums is by using our website. On the day of the meeting, AONTAS recorded short videos with three Adult Learners, getting them to talk about what the ALFI meant, what they had got from the day and how they would get involved in the future. This can be viewed on the [AONTAS website](#) and we hope to build on this in the future, getting Adult Learners to have their voice heard.



How to Make Local Adult Learner Forums Work

It was clear from the energy, enthusiasm and commitment from Learners present on the day that there is a momentum to the work of the ALFI and that generating Local Adult Learner Forums is vital to make the ALFI a truly representative, national Adult Learner space. One participant said ***"It would be good to get a follow up call to make sure actions are followed though"***, demonstrating an appetite from participants to get a Local voice developed. That commitment was recognised as one participant said ***"Well done to everyone who attended despite flooding. Keep up momentum of ALFI"***.

Other learners reiterated their enthusiasm for ALFI, getting the opportunity to meet Learners from across the country, and hear inspirational inputs from Aisling Ryan, John Gates and John Lonergan. ***"Once again I have enjoyed myself immensely. I will leave here with renewed vigour to continue with the focus of adult learning"***. It is clear that Adult Learners recognise the need for them to get others to take the plunge and see who will join them locally- but with the support of their peers. This was best summed up by one of the Learners in their feedback, who quoted John Lonergan ***"I alone must do this, but I cannot do this alone!"***



Conclusion

The purpose of the day was to present Local Adult Learner Forums as a way to develop the ALFI as a national platform that genuinely represented Adult Learners from across the country. The energy and enthusiasm from participants on the day reflected that building a grassroots Learner voice is something that members of the ALFI are passionate about.

Learners recognised their role in starting Local Adult Learner Forums and committed to talking to other Learners about Forums and starting meeting about what they could do. And AONTAS is committed over the course of 2012 to supporting the development of ALFI structures and emerging Local Adult Learner Forums through Promotion, Networking and Information as identified at the meeting.

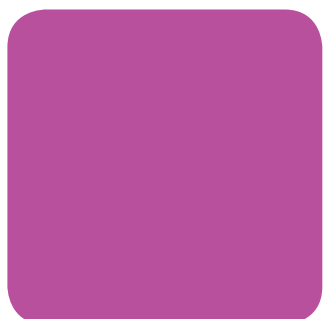
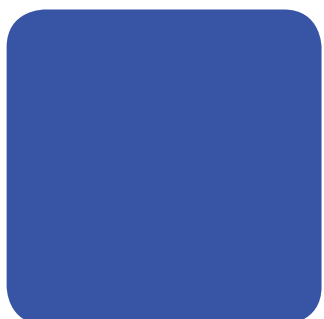
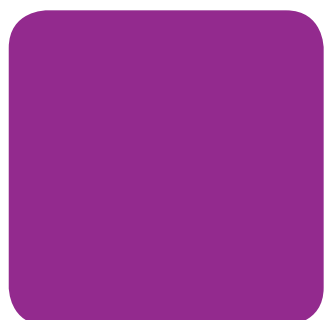
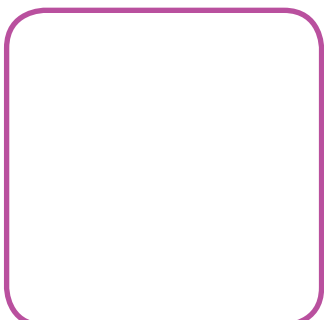
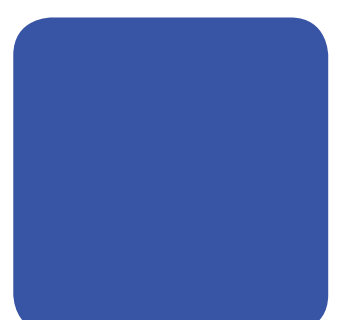
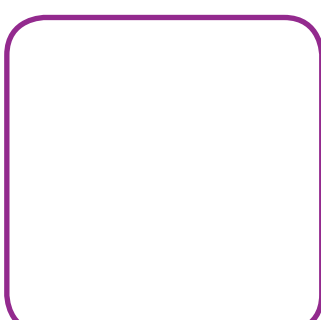
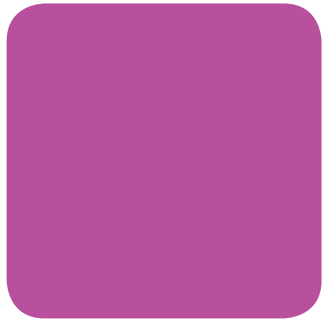
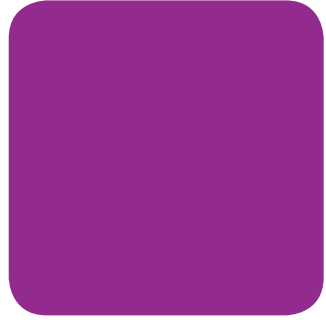
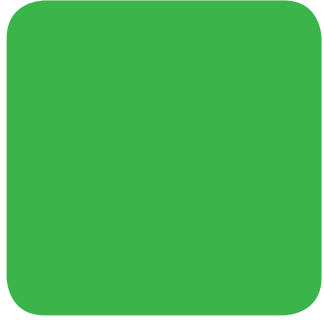
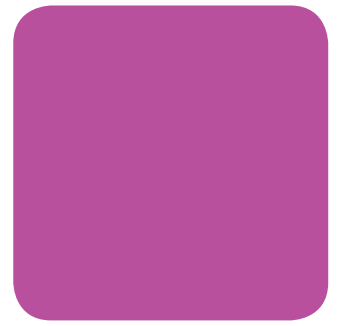
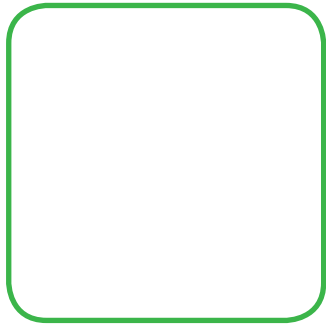
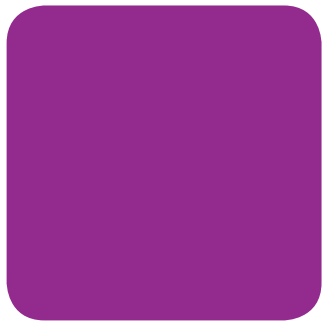
The long-term strategic aim is that each county will have a Local Learner Forum which feeds into the development of the ALFI, which is recognised as the national Adult Learners' voice on issues in relation to Adult and Community Education and the actions developed at this meeting will go towards making that a reality. While this will be a long process, the structures agreed on today provide a framework for Adult Learners to build on to ensure that their voice will be heard locally, regionally and nationally.

**IF YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS OF WANT MORE INFORMATION:
PLEASE CONTACT DAMIEN WALSH AT 01 4068220 OR EMAIL**

dwalshe@aontas.com

BECOME A FAN OF AONTAS ON FACEBOOK!





AONTAS 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6
Telephone: 01 4068220
Email: mail@aontas.com
Fax: 01 4068227
Web: www.aontas.com

