

AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting



Surviving and Thriving in changing times

Date: Wednesday 4th December 2013

Time: 9.30am – 3.45pm

VENUE: Carmelite Community Centre,

56 Aungier St. Dublin 2



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Summary

The 20th meeting of the Community Education Network (CEN) focussed on a range of issues relevant to Community Education. The first was developing, enhancing and mainstreaming Equality Practice in the sector. The CEN has secured expertise from the Equality Authority via Catherine Lynch to support Community Education providers in their Equality Practice. Formal training will take place in the New Year.

AONTAS Director Berni Brady updated the group on the latest developments in the Further Education and Training sector at policy level. The group discussed the potential implications for Community Education.

Independent facilitator Mary Rafferty then led a session on managing change individually and organisationally. This led on to a discussion of the CEN, challenges, and opportunities and the priorities for 2014.

Finally, Sara Bourke completed her tenure as CEN Co-ordinator and Niamh O'Reilly will resume the role in January. Welcome back Niamh!

Introduction

The Community Education Network offers an opportunity for independent community education practitioners to come together at a national level. The CEN is a key structure within the AONTAS membership which aims to be a -

- Community of Practice: demonstrating the value and outcomes of community education
- Community of Educators: continuous professional development for community education practitioners
- Community of Reflection: facilitating discussion on community education in a changing context - how to maintain its role and ethos
- Community of Advocacy: identifying and lobbying on specific issues relating to community education
- Community of Support: peer support, exchange and shared learning with other community education groups



Content of the Day

The agenda for the day was developed with the support of the CEN Steering Group¹ as follows:

9.30 – 9.45am	Registration, tea & coffee
9.45 – 9.50	Welcome, Introductions and overview of the day – Sara Bourke, AONTAS
9.50 – 10.30	Equality in Community Education – Catherine Lynch Equality Training Needs Analysis Identifying provider support needs Sign up for our free training, supported by The Equality Authority!
10.30 – 11.15	Current policy changes in Further Education and Training – Berni Brady – Director AONTAS Questions and Answers
11.15 - 11.30	The CEN in an era of Change – Mary Rafferty (external facilitator) Sharing the current experience of change on the ground
11.30 – 11.45	Coffee break/Networking
11.45 – 1pm	Community Education Providers in an era of Change – Mary Rafferty Managing the challenge of change. <i>How are the CEN and its member organisations meeting the challenge?</i> <i>How can we build on the experience to date, both collectively and individually?</i>
1.00 – 1.30	Free Lunch/ Networking
1.30 – 3.30	The CEN in an era of Change – Mary Rafferty From surviving to thriving: Planning and action <i>What do members need from the CEN? What does the CEN need from members?</i> <i>How must the CEN itself change?</i>
3.30pm	Close of Meeting

Equality Mainstreaming in Community Education

Equality is a core value of Community Education; however, organisations vary in how formally they plan for, implement and monitor it. Groups who are registered or wish to register with QQI are aware that formalising, mainstreaming and monitoring equality are requirements for acceptance as a provider.

The AONTAS CEN has secured expertise from the Equality Authority to support groups to review and enhance their equality mainstreaming activities. The Expert assigned to us is Catherine Lynch. Catherine has extensive expertise in the area of equality and diversity in organisations. Some of her roles include Equality/Diversity manager in UCD, Director of National Collective of Community Based Women’s Networks, and the European Network against Racism (Irl). She is also a Board member of Longford Women’s Link and the National Women’s Council of Ireland.

¹ CEN Steering Group members: Catherine Alymer (LCEN), Avril Bailey (An Cosán), Camilla Fitzsimons (RESPOND! Housing), Colm Kilgallon (All Hallows College), Rachel Morrissey (D8 CEC)

Catherine introduced the project and explained that it would involve approximately 12-15 organisations coming together for a days training to review their equality policies, practices and monitoring. This would enable them to go back to their organisations and make relevant enhancements. Catherine will be available to support groups by phone and email with specific issues they may have. The results will be put up on the website and reported to all CEN members to enable the learning to be mainstreamed across all the groups in the network.

The group proceeded to a general discussion of what areas they would like support on. Issues raised include working in ways that challenge discrimination, methodologies for real promotion of diversity within centres and groups, engaging people from specific target groups, reasonable accommodation for disability, managing a diverse classroom, equality proofing and monitoring outcomes etc. The proposed project will deal with discrimination across all 9 grounds.

If you are interested in becoming involved in the project, please contact Niamh O'Reilly – noreilly@aontas.com.

What are the latest developments in Further Education and Training? Berni Brady– AONTAS

Berni Brady outlined the latest developments in the FET sector. Key features since the last CEN meeting included

- SOLAS (www.solas.ie) has been formally established in October and the Board appointed including Berni Brady. They are developing a 5 year Further Education and Training (FET) strategy. Initial scoping research is being carried out by the ESRI – to which Community Education providers were invited to submit. It is hoped to have a draft strategy available for consultation in the New Year.
- Former FÁS centres and programmes such as LTI are to transfer to their local ETBs during 2014. It is intended that there be no disruption to service at learner level during the changes.
- Key SOLAS objectives include a high quality provision to meet the needs of learners with a priority for people who are unemployed.
- The PIAAC results which measure literacy and numeracy skill levels across the OECD were released in October. This offers a rich data set which not only benchmarks Ireland against other OECD countries, but provides valuable information on the interaction between skill levels and socioeconomic factors such as age, gender, occupation etc. Information about the whole project including the raw data can be found [here](#) and on the Irish dataset [here](#).
- A new Principal Officer has been appointed to the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Skills
- Following Berni's presentation here was a short discussion. There was much diversity in the analysis with some participants at the 'this should not be happening' stage, some angry at developments, some struggling to understand the implications for their organisation, some clear and focused on opportunities.

Concerns for community education providers in the new environment

- Concern re future funding streams – organisations really need multiannual funding inclusive of all aspects of the work – as outlined in the CEN pie chart diagram.

- Focus on vocational training and activation for people who are unemployed may threaten the value of unaccredited programmes and those for people currently outside the labour market – people with disabilities, home carers, older people etc. We need to be able to really meet the needs of all learners if we are to be truly “Learner Centered”.
- Obviously supporting people who are unemployed is the major focus at the moment, but there is also a need to look at wider funding schemes, e.g. HSE, DSP, Private trusts etc and how their provision will fit in the new structures. Will they be absorbed into SOLAS too? Or remain separate?
- What about learners who are not looking for a job – different learning goals – Education is broader than getting a job. How will this be resourced under a new scheme? With all the measurement is it OK to just learn for a hobby, or for a social outlet, or for personal support e.g. parenting? This work must not be lost.
- Must keep the disadvantaged learner at the centre – what do they need – show how Community Ed really meets those needs.
- Still very little information on the ground, especially re LTIs and FÁS programmes after June 2014.
- Will small providers be unseen and excluded?
- Seems to be a push towards using for profit private providers rather than community ed groups – not for profit?? DSP – Job Path Industrial job coaching working against developmental education systems.
- May be opportunities to tender for new programmes – but payment methods need to have some upfront – not like Momentum.
- Need to invest in monitoring systems which is time and resource intensive – hard for small providers whose focus is on working face to face with learners who need support. We would love to do it – but how will it be resourced. Recent training was great – is there a role for CEN in bringing material together?

The CEN in an Era of Change

Mary Rafferty then facilitated a session on change starting with looking at participant’s experience of other personal and professional change in the past. Discussing feelings, reactions, and learning revealed mixed reactions to and experiences of change. Points raised included:-

- How you see it depends on where you are; sometimes positive sometimes negative
- Before it – fear – afterwards – positive
- Difference between initiating change vs. change done to us
- Stage in change – the grief – the shock – adjustment- Creative responses – opportunities, Identify needs – gaps and meet them
- Change is necessary when things are broken or not right for current times
- Makes you learn adaption techniques – develop / find new capacities within yourself
- We must equip ourselves to notice and be aware of change – to respond and analyse from a values perspective
- Shared challenges/change can be powerful / brings people together
- Change can be resisted: Need to inform/educate those with power to change
- Change is constant; we need to find ways of influencing it, and getting the best possible outcome from it for our learners.

Moving on to the CEN itself, participants discussed the strengths of the Network including

- Wealth of experience in education
- Nationwide & large size of network
- Access to information – getting the right and relevant information at the right time.
- CEN gives us access to policy makers, i.e. QQI, BTEI, SOLAS etc., Good to meet people face to face.
- Has support structure within AONTAS and sustained by AONTAS.
- Allows issues to be raised on the ground to be fed up to policy level.
- Network is broad, working in all sectors of Community Education.
- That broadness can divide network but makes connection to understand each other
- Only structure that supports community education in all its diversity
- Great personal support and enrichment from networking with passionate like minded people.

There were also some concerns –

- Are the values of community education for social change being lost?
- Is AONTAS the right organisation to support community education?
- Is the voice of small providers and those not funded via Dept of Ed or FÁS being heard at CEN?
- Tensions between securing funding and meeting real learner needs, and between securing funding and organisational freedom /independence. What about non accredited learning and fostering critical thinking?
- Managing the diversity of CEN – both strength and a weakness.

We then discussed current challenges and potential solutions -

- Making more organisations aware of CEN, especially at local level to facilitate networking in ETB areas. Suggestion: members need to talk to other providers in their area and spread the word. It would be good to have regional meetings.
- Make CEN more visible - Continuing to have a coherent voice for Community Education in the policy arena. Need to keep inputting to FET strategy at all stages. Suggestions: Members need to participate in the meetings / fora / consultation opportunities available and/or create alternatives. Increase media profile, working with AONTAS nationally and each group locally
- Continue to highlight the wider benefits of learning; personal development, people skills intergenerational outcomes etc to society as a whole. Suggestion: CEN should work with SOLAS to develop agreed indicators & evaluation system for soft outcomes and pilot such an approach.
- Need to stop preaching to the converted and to talk to stakeholders outside Community Education and FET. Suggestion: seek support from employers, health professionals etc on soft skills and modular approaches etc.
- Members would like to know more about what others are doing to support more collaboration, making connections within network to do projects together, assist / support each other. – Suggestion to set up a closed Facebook page or other electronic networking system. Possibly also set up sub groups for particular interests. Noted that a list of participants is circulated at every meeting with emails, so members can contact each other. The CEN co-ordinator can raise queries from individual providers with the network as a whole.
- Look at alternative models for resourcing community education, possibly social enterprise. Suggestion: invite speaker on social enterprise to a CEN meeting.

- Need to manage lack of resources and stress for individuals and organisations.

Priority focus going forward

- Lobby within the FET strategy and SOLAS for a holistic, multiannual funding stream for community education building on the CEN pie chart model, using some aspects of the existing LTI and BTEI models.
- Build on the outcomes training, bringing together the participants to pilot an approach to measuring the economic, social and cultural outcomes of Community Education.
- Look at the potential of Community Education groups coming together as a consortium with regard to QQI.
- Provide / share information re ETBs and new funding streams, tendering processes etc.

Conclusion

Finally the meeting thanked Dympna and Sara for their work and wished them well in their career break and future careers respectively. Niamh O'Reilly will resume the role of CEN co-ordinator in January.