

AONTAS Community Education Network

Influencing policy, facilitating collective action and supporting good practice.



Tuesday 24th March 2015, 9.45am – 3.00pm
Carmelite Community Centre, 56 Aungier St. Dublin 2

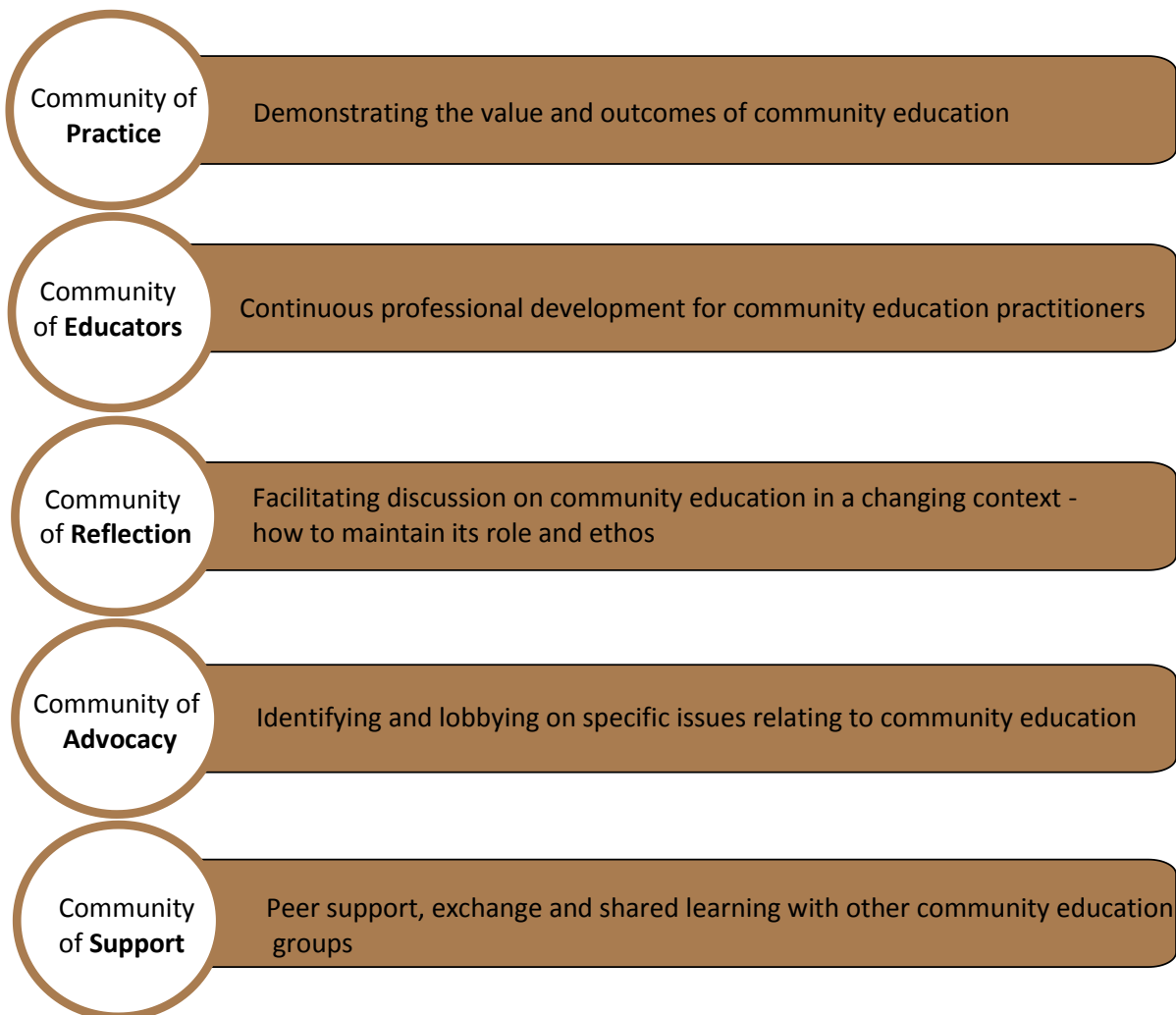


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1. Introduction

The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) has provided a distinct, highly visible, advocacy space for independent community education member organisations of AONTAS. The meeting in March was held in order to regroup with CEN members, to share updates on advocacy work, particularly that relating to QQI and to offer inputs on online technology to support networking and learning. It also offered a space for an update on PhD research that involved CEN members concerning the current model of community education provision that is practiced in Ireland.

Over the past 8 years the CEN has sought to offer community education groups a national network that is seeks to be a:



As CEN meetings act as a learning space a central tenet to the work of the CEN is to support continuous professional development of community education practitioners. The CEN is guided by its definition of community education, as outlined overleaf, and seeks to ensure that such a vision can be supported through collective action.

Community education is a **process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness**. It is **community-led reflecting** and valuing the **lived experiences of individuals and their community**. Through its **ethos** and **holistic** approach community education **builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based**. Community education is grounded on principles of **justice, equality** and **inclusiveness**. It differs from general adult education provision due to its **political and radical methodologies**.

This report will give an outline of the meeting; the main areas covered within the presentations that day, the primary points from the participants' discussions and plans for CEN to focus on going forward.

2. Meeting Outline

Since 2007 CEN meetings have focussed on influencing national policy, facilitating collective action and supporting good practice. In the first part of this meeting there was an overview of advocacy work carried out by AONTAS and the CEN to date including European and national policy work, in particular the advocacy campaign work regarding QQI. A CEN member provided an insight into the newly established local community development committees (LCDCs) and a discussion session was facilitated focussing the reengagement of community education legacy providers. The second part of the meeting centred on supporting practice: through an input on how community educators can use webinars to network with other practitioners, how community education can embrace online learning and an update on PhD research regarding models of practice that operate across Ireland. The agenda was developed with the support of the CEN Steering group¹.

Niamh O'Reilly (AONTAS), chair of the meeting, outlined the objectives and content of the meeting;

Objectives of Meeting

- To outline the lobbying and advocacy work for the community education sector by the CEN to date.
- Discuss QQI reengagement for community education legacy providers.
- Review current issues facing community education with CEN members.
- Collect questions and comments to bring to QQI Community/Voluntary Joint Working Group.
- Explore community education in the Digital Era.
- Reflect on community education practices.

3. Update on CEN Advocacy Work

Niamh outlined the key areas that the CEN engages in advocacy:

- European level: influencing European policy
- National level: lobbying SOLAS and QQI
- Regional level: influencing LCDC and ETBs
- Local level: Organisational work.

The advocacy landscape for lifelong learning is complex with many stakeholders and decision makers, a selection of which are illustrated in the figure below.

¹ CEN Steering Group Members: Liz Waters (An Cosán), Niamh O'Reilly (AONTAS), Tara Farrell (Longford Women's Link), Suzanne Kyle (LCEN), Lia Clarkson (Warrenmount C.E.D Centre), Marian Donegan (Access 2000 Wexford Ltd.).



European level: influencing European policy

At European level the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is a key lobbying body for community education which mainly seeks to influence the European Commission and European Parliament for the betterment of non-formal adult education organisations and learners. At present it seeks to ensure that adult education is on the European political agenda, and also to make some space within the [10 point plan](#) that the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has outlined.

In trying to link the Europe influence to local level a useful example is that the European Commission has responsibility for The European Social Fund which impact on community education through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and also Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). Therefore advocacy at European level impacts on the organisations which receive such funding. Another example with the ERASMUS+ programme, which the EAEA lobbied for increased allocated funding for adult education.

Furthermore, with the new policy alignment/cohesion [Country Specific Reports](#) include information regarding participation in lifelong learning lower EU average (7.3%, as compared with 10,7% in 2013) that can be used by advocacy organisations in Ireland. The EAEA provides a [Civil Society Response](#) to these CSRs, thus providing a strong voice for NGOs and education groups from the voluntary sector.

National level: lobbying SOLAS and QQI

AONTAS advocates for community education specifically by influencing SOLAS, to ensure community education is supported and resourced and that community education learners can influence national FET policy through the [National Adult Learners Forum](#). AONTAS is also represented on the Access

Advisory Group of the Higher Education Authority and focuses on widening participation, the Part-time fees issue and the potential of higher education provision by community education organisations.

Regarding QQI the extensive lobbying work was outlined:

- Since 2013, over 20 submissions for Green and White Papers have been made to QQI
- May – QQI fee issues emerging from the CEN
- 28th May - CEN focus group meeting on QQI issues
- June - Campaign started
- June - Position Paper developed – very detailed paper on the issue used as lobbying tool with template letter. CEN members distributed it to their local representatives
- July – Huge momentum building, high degree of PQs on the issue (mainly Sinn Fein)
- 23rd September – Letter from Jan O’Sullivan to meet with DES to look at issue
- September – Research undertaken and detailed Paper on scenarios for re-engagement of legacy FETAC providers produced in advance of DES meeting
- October 8th – Meeting with Department of Education (Brian Power, Principal Officer, Qualifications and Equity of Access to Higher Education at DES, Hugué Geoghegan (HEO), Wendy Ross)
- Meeting 9th December 2014 with DES and QQI (Niamh O’Reilly and Tara Farrell)

Outcome of the QQI Campaign

- Community education is on the political agenda: local TDs, policy makers in DES, QQI
- Greater awareness about community education
- Greater voice for influencing QQI decisions that impact on the community education sector
- Open engagement with key civil servants in DES and the QQI about accreditation policies that impact on community education
- A hold to the fees issue until there is an appropriate roadmap for community education groups to re-engage
- We are at the table to get full information about what is involved in the re-engagement process so that groups can make an informed decision on their best course of action
- We are working towards engaging in a meaningful dialogue with QQI in order to ensure groups can reengage

CEN advocacy work for 2015

- QQI reengagement of voluntary legacy providers will now take place in 2016; we will be supporting the CEN in the preparatory process.
- QQI developed a Community and Voluntary Working Group of which the CEN are a member (Niamh, Tara Farrell (LWL) and Suzanne Kyle (LCEN) met 3 times
- Requested QA Guidelines for reengagement of community education legacy providers. [Currently open for consultation to public here.](#)

- Requested information for community education legacy providers, QQI are hosting a briefing seminar for legacy providers on 30th June.

Two members of the CEN Steering Group, Tara Farrell (Longford Women’s Link) and Suzanne Kyle (LCEN), gave an overview of their participation in the QQI Joint Community and Voluntary Working Group to date. They identified some features of their involvement including research for QQI responses/queries, dealing with the various levels of understanding of the community sector and perceptions towards those working within the sector within the QQI. Their reflections indicated how their preparation for the meeting were noted as professional and how they were happy with how the overall sector came across. The primary benefits they outlined were that they were given reassurances by the QQI that the current QA policies and procedures would not change greatly from the system for providers currently. Although they did note that there was still no definitive timeframe for reengagement for provider next year. They stressed the importance of the CEN meetings in keeping CEN members engaged in the progress of their work within the Joint Working Group and will strive to lobby for the principle requirements of the CEN.

4. CEN Discussion Session on QQI Advocacy work

As part of our participation on the QQI Joint Community and Voluntary Working Group, AONTAS requested that the QQI respond to the [AONTAS CEN Paper](#) on QQI Re-engagement for Community Education Legacy Providers- A roadmap of scenarios for effective accredited community education provision Version 2 (2015).

QQI’s response to the AONTAS CEN Paper on Reengagement

In response to AONTAS’ concern for the uncertainty regarding re-engagement QQI stated that the fees have not yet been agreed and that fixed costs cannot be avoided and is not related to level of activity or the size on a provider’s operation/programme.

On the issue of capacity the QQI detail some requirements which providers would have to demonstrate;

- They are an established legal entity, with education and training as a principal function
- have appropriate and up-to-date governance systems in operation
- can evidence structural and internal quality assurance systems, to ensure that sustainable provision of education and training programmes, that meet the criteria as outlined in the QA guidelines, (*e.g. demonstration of full knowledge of providers legislative obligations, a credible system for internal monitoring, evidence of the involvement of all stakeholders, demonstration of the full ownership of the QA system*), are in place
- can design, develop, provide, monitor and review programmes
- can assess learners, ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes consistent with QQI requirements
- can continuously self-evaluate towards service improvement
- can engage with the formal external review process of QQI (*as a provider entity in its totality*). This cyclical formal review is the agreed legal requirement of all providers with QQI. Current legislation also requires that the findings and outcomes of all of these reviews must be published.

On the matter of support for groups wishing to enter the reengagement process QQI stated that their legal obligation as a regulatory body is to conduct external evaluations and reviews. This means that they could not provide direct support to providers. They did emphasise that through the Joint Working Group they would be willing to develop and implement information and communication strategies on reengagement for providers.

- In relation to AONTAS’ query on an effective alternative for providers who choose not to re-engage, QQI outlined that while they are not obliged to provide accredited programmes for these providers, that they would be willing to explore other options within the Joint Working Group.

Main Focus of the CEN discussions groups regarding QQI

The group then had the opportunity to have a discussion session where they were asked to:

- Give their views/comments on the QQI Response Paper
- Identify issues they face regarding the QQI reengagement process
- Identify information needed from QQI
- Identify what can AONTAS do and Identify their role in the advocacy campaign.

The CEN welcomed the detailed response from the QQI and appreciate the considerations made for each point in the AONTAS CEN Paper on the Scenarios for Re-engagement. Niamh O'Reilly, Tara Farrell and Suzanne Kyle will represent AONTAS/CEN at the next Working Group of Community/Voluntary providers on Monday 20th April and brought forward the following points.

1. Clarity on community education

- Need to clearly articulate to the QQI what community education is (use CEN groups, explain the difference between urban and rural areas and review our definition of community education)
- It was noted that learners in community education are least likely to engage in formal education

2. Fees

- Fees are still a major issue for all groups; it is a point which arose in every discussion group. It is central to the re-engagement potential for community education groups.
- There was concern that there is no fee schedule and questions were asked as to when it will be available?

3. Capacity (as outlined in the QQI Response Paper)

- There were concerns that within the QQI Response capacity was determined in relation to the functions of the organisation: "I. are an established legal entity, with education and training as a principal function". For some legacy providers the main focus of the organisation is not education e.g. Family Resource Centres (FRCs).
- Regarding the point in the response: "IV can design, develop, provide, monitor and review programmes". Concerns were raised regarding the possibility of groups being able to continue to share programmes.
- A further call for Guidelines was made specifically as a tool for legacy providers in deciding if they have the capacity to reengage.

4. Community/Voluntary

- Concern was expressed that private organisations/colleges may be included in the 175 self-identified voluntary providers.
- There was a call that there should be the same level of scrutiny amongst all providers

5. Guidelines for Re-engagement

- Groups reiterated the need for guidance, and a framework for re-engagement
- Where is the link with the Teaching Council, will there be a requirement around tutor qualifications/being a member of the Teaching Council in relation to QA criteria?

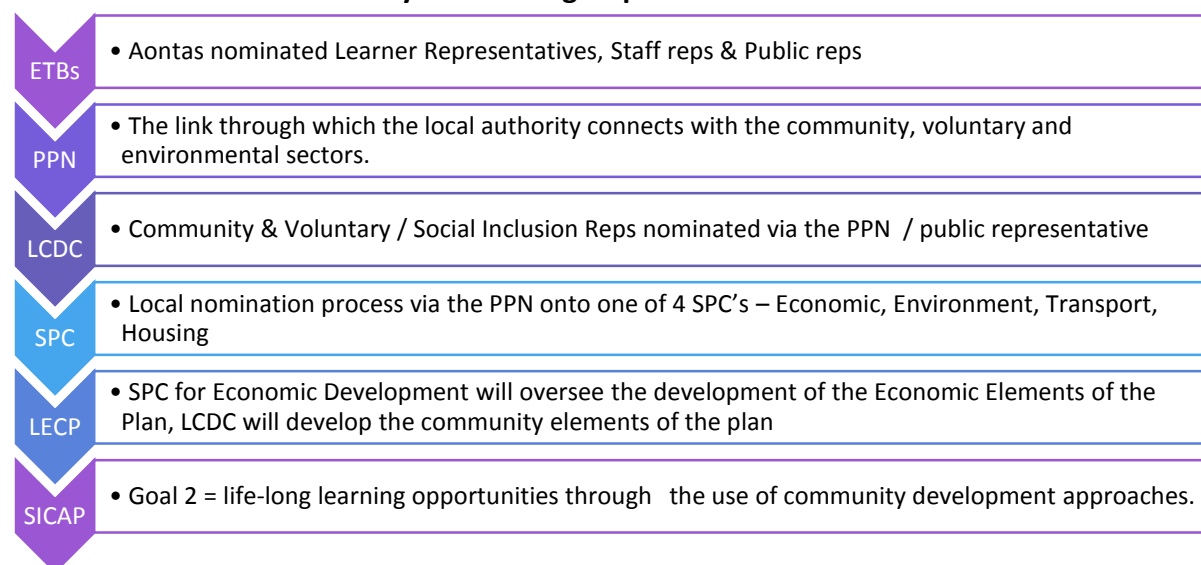
5. Strengthening the CEN to address issues facing community education at regional level

Influencing the new structures at local level - (Nora Fahy, Roscommon Women's Network and ETB Learner Rep

Following the discussion session, Nora Fahy provided an overview of the local structures in place that impact community education provision including SOLAS, ETB's, LCDC and SICAP. Key Local Authority Committees / Programmes at local level which impact on community education were highlighted as:

- **LCDC: Local Community Development Committee.** Section 36 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 provides for the establishment of LCDCs in all local authority administrative areas “for the purposes of developing, coordinating and implementing a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development”.
- **LECP: Local Economic & Community Plan:** A single 6 year LECP Plan will be prepared by the LCDC for approval by the Local Authority
- **SPC: Strategic Policy Committee:** The purpose of Strategic Policy Committees is to formulate, develop, monitor and review policies which relate to the functions of the Local Authority and to advise accordingly. The council remains the decision maker, the SPC acts in an advisory capacity on Economic development, Environment, Transport and Housing Policy.
- **PPN: Public Participation Network:** Every local authority will have its own PPN and this PPN replaces the Community Forum. It will be the main link through which the Local Authority connects with Community and Voluntary, Social Inclusion and Environmental organisations.
- **SICAP: Social Inclusion Activation Programme:** SICAP aims to tackle poverty and social exclusion through local engagement and partnership between disadvantaged individuals, community organisations and public sector agencies. Local Community Development Committees will manage SICAP at a local level.
- **Leader Programme 2014-2020:** EU Rural Development Programme, designed to aid the development of sustainable rural communities

Nora outlined how community education groups can influence these structures:



Nora also noted how the goals within SICAP are important for targeting and promoting community education within local government. Click [here](#) for this presentation.

6. Community Education in a Digital Era

6.1 Strengthening the CEN and local community education groups through online Networking

Dr. Michael Hallissy ([H2 Learning](#) and Chairperson of [D8CEC](#))

Michael’s presentation examined how to use webinars to network with other community education practitioners. He emphasised how online platforms were useful to support interaction but made the point that it did not determine the quality of learning/engagement that takes place. He outlined some of the technical features of some common webinars e.g. Google Hangouts which could be used by the CEN to enable meaningful networks and group events at a distance. The presentation provided a step by step model on how to engage without participants throughout a webinar to keep them engaged. Michael then finished the presentation by describing the challenges and success of a webinar he hosted for the City of Dublin ETB.

Michael’s Tips for an effective webinar

Hosting an engaging webinar – analogy of a dinner party	
Prepare for their arrival	Have resources ready in advance When they arrive you can focus on these and on collaboration
Welcome them warmly	Welcome people by name Create a warm and secure environment
Frequently assess the mood of the room	Frequently check that people are alright Don’t wait till the end of the evening
Have more food (for thought) than you need	Prepare more activities that you need Don’t feel you need to use them all
Make everyone feel included	Give people opportunities to interact Refer to comments made by people by name
Facilitate Connections and conversation, but don’t dominate ever discussion	Your role is to facilitate an environment where learners are exchanging ideas with others, and seeing their peers as resources for ongoing learning
Offer guests something to take home with them	Provide a transcript or a recording of the event Access to slides, readings or continue the discussion on the forum
Know when to say good night; leave everyone wanting more	End on a high point. Don’t try to cover everything. Monitor the energy levels and go with the group.

6.2 How to support community education groups to engage in online learning provision

Liz Waters (An Cosan and President of AONTAS) and The Virtual Community College

Liz provided an overview of the vision of An Cosan against the backdrop of the increasing youth unemployment, unemployment in The Tallaght West region and the number of least school leavers who are the main target group for An Cosan. Highlighting the educational inequality that exists e.g. 99% of Dublin 6 students go on to third level whilst it is 1% in Moyross, Limerick - the link between where someone lives and their formal educational achievements is stark. Liz also noted the causes of education inequality which are structural and the resultant negative impact on people's lives. The An Cosan Virtual Community College offers a '*one generation*' solution, by educating a lone parent to Degree level results in her earning 40% more allowing her children to exit poverty. Liz described the college that uses "21st century teaching and learning technologies, community education can fast tracks individuals and communities out of poverty all over Ireland". It links community education centres across Ireland together online in order to increase student numbers, share knowledge and resources, reach into rural and urban communities and demolish the digital divide.

The objectives of the college

- ✓ To implement the scalable virtual learning framework we have developed
- ✓ To remove *cost, time and place* barriers experienced by people struggling with poverty.
- ✓ Make all our/your programmes, starting with our higher education courses available to anyone, anywhere in disadvantaged communities through a virtual blended learning process.
- ✓ Enable an m-Learning ecosystem in the VCC: Making our resources accessible on mobile and tablet devices; making education couch-able!
- ✓ Create and upskill a network of community educators nationwide
- ✓ To engage a range of skilled volunteers to support and implement our strategy
- ✓ To have corporate partners to support this social enterprise. In particular to support our ambition to scale rapidly and successfully build a sustainable economic business model

Liz described the potential future impact of the community college over the next 5 years: higher education becomes an achievable goal; more than 1000 students will access this enjoyable form of higher education annually; the cycle of intergenerational education disadvantage and poverty disappear and more students gain employment.

7. Reflections on Community Education Research: Update and dialogue on research

Camilla Fitzsimons (Community Education Practitioner, CEN member, PhD student and Lecturer at Maynooth University)

Camilla started off by thanking the CEN members many of whom participated in her research study. Her PhD research sought to build knowledge on community education practitioners and practice across Ireland, explore the impacts of neoliberalism on community education, and investigate ways in which a critical approach can further inform community education's equality based ambition.

Some interesting statistics which she drew from her study of community education practitioners include:

- Precarious working environments – over 80% working more hours than they are paid for.
- 52% working part-time, 11% volunteers.
- 11% were volunteers
- 83% offer accreditation (11% in all their work).
- 3-6% believe the work is primarily about up-skilling for employment.

The majority of community education practice came from the humanistic tradition e.g. in that it seeks to support learner need; next was the critical community education approach e.g. that seeks to create critical classrooms and a minority stated that no philosophy informed their practice and the associated practice included to develop local services.

Camilla drew from participants testimonies on their experiences as community education practitioners, e.g. the pressure from accreditation process on practices. As a methods to address issues within the sector and to support practice the following recommendations were offered by participants:

- ✓ Showcase our work more and put forward a stronger sectoral identity.
- ✓ Keep working with the State but in a more considered way.
- ✓ Strengthen network relationships (AONTAS CEN cited frequently).
- ✓ Extend accrediting opportunities.
- ✓ Make stronger links with oppositional movements.

Camilla ended the presentation with the following quote:

“The levels of exploitation, corruption and inequality are simply unacceptable and the levels of suffering that people are experiencing are also unacceptable. We need to change this and community education is one of the key tools that we have for doing this. Let’s continue this journey!”

Her presentation entitled 'Rekindling Community Education' which examined the experiences of the current practices of community education is available online [here](#).



8. The Way Forward for the AONTAS Community Education Network

QQI

- Continue to actively contribute to the QQI Community/Voluntary Joint Working Group to put forward the case for community education legacy providers
 - Bring forward the comments from the CEN to the Working Group
- Continue to engage in QQI consultation processes
- Initiate a lobbying, pre-election campaign on the main issues affecting community education including 'No Fees for QQI Reengagement Legacy Providers' campaign.

Pre-election campaign

- Explore what other issues exist for the CEN and integrate into Pre-election Campaign
- Engage in a CEN webinar in the autumn regarding future advocacy/lobbying work
- CEN members will explore how they can impact local decision making structures at local level
- CEN members will consider how to engage in Pre-election campaign work
- CEN members will provide information for CEN submissions to the QQI regarding reengagement.

For more information, comments or questions please contact Niamh O'Reilly, Head of Strategic Development, noreilly@aontas.com