

# AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN)



Meeting Report  
20th June 2017

## Theme of Meeting: Opportunities

### Meeting Overview:

This meeting of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) focused on opportunities for the future of community education in Ireland and covered the following areas:

1. Sharing information on both the current structural landscape which community education is situated, and on information and supports relevant to community education providers.
2. An overview of a recently published book by Camilla Fitzsimons, Lecturer at Maynooth University, entitled *Community Education and Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland*. This was followed by a discussion on the implications of neo-liberalism for community education in Ireland, as well as opportunities within the current context. Members of the CEN then discussed priorities and goals for the network.
3. An overview on the structure, purpose and features of the new Programme Learner Support System (PLSS).
4. A discussion about reengagement with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the options for community education providers.

The meeting took place in the Carmelite Centre in Aungier Street, Dublin and the agenda was as follows:

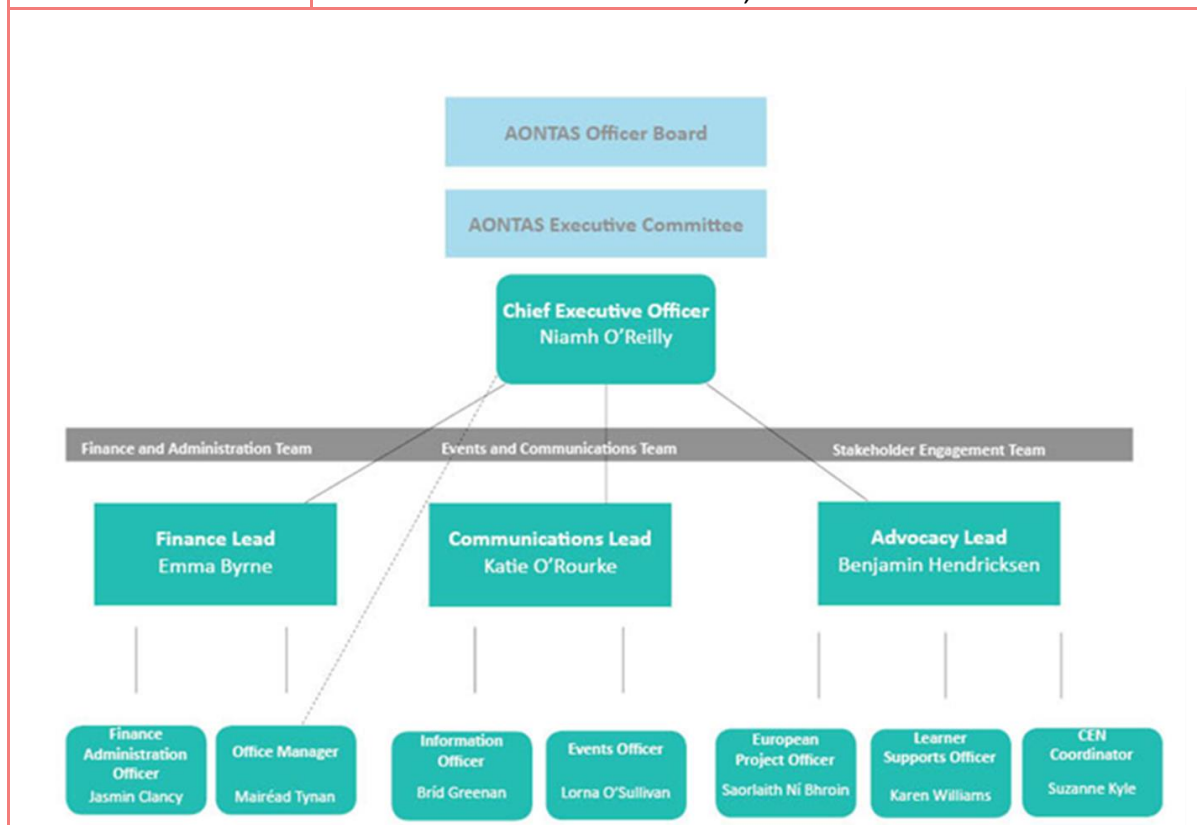
<b>9.45-10.00</b>	<b>Registration, Tea &amp; Coffee and Networking</b>
<b>10.00 – 10.20</b>	<b>Introductions, Updates and News</b> Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator, AONTAS Niamh O’Reilly, CEO, AONTAS
<b>10.20 – 10.35</b>	<b>Introduction to Camilla Fitzsimons’ recently published book about community education in Ireland</b>
<b>10.35 – 11.15</b>	<b>Community Education - Challenges and Opportunities</b> Large group discussion
<b>11.15 – 12.15</b>	<b>Next Steps for the CEN: Identifying Priorities and Developing Goals</b> Small group discussions
<b>12.15 – 1.00</b>	<b>Lunch and Networking</b>
<b>1.00 – 1.30</b>	<b>Programme Learner Support System (PLSS): Introducing the New Education and Training Boards (ETBs) Data Collection System</b> Fiona Maloney, PLSS Coordinator, Education and Training Boards Ireland

1.30 – 2.45	<b>Reengagement with QQI</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update on Consortium Proposal: Suzanne Kyle</li> <li>• Reengagement: Next Steps for the CEN: Small group discussion and feedback</li> </ul>
2.45 – 3.00	<b>Wrap Up</b>

Niamh O’ Reilly, AONTAS CEO, began the meeting with a reflection on the life of Ann Louise Gilligan, co-founder of An Cosán, who recently passed away. Ann Louise was strongly committed to community learning and social justice in Ireland and her legacy continues to be felt in the area of community education.

Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator, then began the meeting by providing an information update which included the following:

<b>New AONTAS staff</b>	AONTAS has undergone an organisational restructure and three new members of staff have recently joined the team. The new structure with all staff members, is illustrated below:
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<b>FinALE (Financing Adult Learning in Europe) Research</b>	<p>AONTAS recently commissioned research on “<i>Where to Invest in Adult Education</i>”. The aim of the research was to identify current models of funding and to identify best practice in terms of funding adult and community education.</p> <p>49 respondents took part in the mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) survey, which asked a range of questions about how community education providers are funded. In addition, and led by the survey findings, eight qualitative interviews took place, with</p>
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	<p>questions designed to further our knowledge of provider experience. Complete results of the research will be shared with CEN members in autumn 2017.</p>
<b>CEN Ten Year Anniversary</b>	<p>The CEN was established in 2007 and AONTAS plans to celebrate its ten-year anniversary in the autumn. In light of this AONTAS staff, in consultation with the CEN Steering Group will be working on a plan to celebrate the achievements of the CEN and its future work.</p>
<b>One Step Up (www.onestepup.ie)</b>	<p>The One Step Up website is managed by AONTAS and provides a platform for adult education providers to promote relevant events such as information and registration days. Once these are added to the website they are included in a calendar of events which is useful for both adult education learners and practitioners. During AONTAS campaigns, events such as these will be promoted through Facebook. To access the One Step Up website please click <a href="#">here</a>.</p>
<b>Erasmus+ Mobilities</b>	<p>AONTAS is currently managing two projects on behalf of a consortium of member organisations:</p> <p><b>1. AONTAS -Making an Impact at European Level (CEN Consortium) 2016-2018</b></p> <p>The consortium members of this project are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>An Cosán Virtual Community College</b></li> <li>• <b>Blue Teapot Theatre Company</b></li> <li>• <b>Clondalkin Addiction Support Programme</b></li> <li>• <b>Exchange House Ireland National Traveller Service</b></li> <li>• <b>Kerry Action for Development Centre Ltd</b></li> <li>• <b>Southill Family Resource Centre</b></li> <li>• <b>Warrenmount Community Education and Development Centre</b></li> </ul> <p><b>2. Adult Education Leaders, Learning in Europe (Consortium) 2017-2019</b></p> <p>The consortium members of this project are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Horticulture LTI, Cork (STAR winner)</b></li> <li>• <b>Irish Men's Sheds Association (STAR winner)</b></li> <li>• <b>EPIC, Business in the Community Ireland, Dublin (STAR winner)</b></li> <li>• <b>SAOL's Fashion Show, Dublin (STAR winner)</b></li> <li>• <b>Longford Women's Link (Partner)</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Activities or mobilities to date include the following:</b></p> <p><b>1. James Clifford from Kerry Action for Development Education (KADE) took part in a job shadowing experience</b></p>

	<p>with European Centre in Training for Employment (ETCE) in Greece, February 2017</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Niamh Mc Call from Warrenmount CED attended '<a href="#">EBSN Basic Skills for Integration</a>' in Luxembourg, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> June 2017</li> <li>3. Joan Keenan from Southill FRC went on a job shadowing experience - Knowledge of best practice and teaching methods by Romanian tutors, 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> June 2017</li> <li>4. Karen Williams from AONTAS went on a job shadowing experience with the Learning for Work Institute in Cardiff, 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> June 2017</li> <li>5. Saorlaith Ni Bhroin from AONTAS attended 'Learning to Live Together' - <a href="#">A Conference on the Future of Citizenship and Human Rights Education in Europe</a>, in France 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> June 2017</li> <li>6. Matthew Waters from An Cosán VCC attended the <a href="#">International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies</a> in Spain, 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> July 2017</li> <li>7. Finola McCarthy, STAR Award Winner, from Horticultural LTI, Cork participated in a course on <a href="#">Emotional Intelligence</a>, in Italy, 3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> July 2017</li> </ol> <p>AONTAS information emails and bulletins contain information on such projects and that there may be other opportunities in the future for CEN members.</p>
<p><b>Consortium Proposal</b></p>	<p>AONTAS staff have attended meetings with the Department of Education (DES) and SOLAS in a bid to secure funding and support for CEN members who wish to reengage with QQI as part of a consortium. Further information on this was provided during the second half of the meeting</p>
<p><b>AONTAS submission to SICAP</b></p>	<p>The current Pobal Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) does not include people over the age of 65 as a target group. Many programmes funded by SICAP provide community education programmes which does not discriminate on the basis of age. In light of this, AONTAS sent a submission to Pobal requesting that people over the age of 65 be included as target group in the next SICAP programme from 2018.</p>
<p><b>RPL Practitioners Network</b></p>	<p>Suzanne Kyle will represent AONTAS and the CEN on the steering committee of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Practitioners Network Ireland.</p> <p>This network is led by practitioners working and interested in the area of RPL. The network aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Provide a coherent practitioner voice to shape and inform policy development</b></li> <li>● <b>Support the development of a community of practice, providing opportunities to share learning, face to face, online and through practical sharing of toolkits and resources</b></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promote good practice, informed by national and international practitioner and policy perspectives</b></li> </ul> <p>The network is open to everyone with an interest in contributing to the development of RPL in Ireland and has two national meetings per year. More information on engaging with the network can be found <a href="#">here</a>.</p>
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A copy of Suzanne’s presentation is available on request.

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Niamh O’ Reilly, CEO of AONTAS, gave an update on new developments within adult and further education policy including:

<b>A Proposed Exchequer Employment Investment Mechanism</b>	The Minister for Education and Skills has started to work on <i>“a sustainable and predictable long-term funding model for the entire HE and FET sectors”</i> which will look at options for funding of higher and further education and will have implications for adult education provision. AONTAS has developed a consultation response which is available on the AONTAS website
<b>The reappointment of Minister Richard Bruton</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minister Richard Bruton retained his position as Minister for Education and Skills</li> <li>• Minister of State John Halligan has also retained his position as Minister of State for Training, Skills and Innovation</li> </ul>
<b>Changes to the SOLAS Board</b>	Three openings to the SOLAS board became available earlier this year.
<b>A new discourse at policy level - Higher Education and Further Education will be taken as a single territory unit</b>	<p>There have been changes to the organisational structure of the DES following the retirement of Peter Baldwin who had responsibility for the SOLAS FET Strategy. The department has moved from ten divisions to nine and Further Education and Training will now come under Deputy Secretary Mary Doyle’s division. This division also includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher Education Policy and Research</b></li> <li>• <b>Higher Education Funding and Governance and Qualifications</b></li> <li>• <b>International</b></li> <li>• <b>North/South</b></li> </ul>

A copy of Niamh's presentation is available on request.

Niamh also highlighted the position of AONTAS as an autonomous lifelong learning advocate and its role in acting as a critical and constructive voice regarding the implementation of the FET Strategy.

AONTAS represents its members on both SIAC (Strategy Implementation Advisory Committee) and PLSS (FET Programme Learner Support Systems (PLSS) and is also represented on the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Steering Committee for the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2019).

AONTAS continues to lobby for the following:

- **A sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education**
- **A doubling of the budget for community education**
- **A waiver of QQI fees for community education providers**

Niamh asked CEN members to consider the following in relation to a future AONTAS campaign:

- **What does the CEN want to achieve for community education?**
- **What are our key requests?**
- **Are they practical and achievable?**
- **Are they in line with the broader message of AONTAS?**

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Following Suzanne and Niamh's presentations, Camilla Fitzsimons of Maynooth University spoke about her recent publication *Community Education and Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland*. This book was written following extensive consultation with CEN members and others involved in community education across the country. Camilla gave a very informative and inspiring presentation about neoliberalism, its implications for community education in Ireland and the possibilities for the sector despite the current challenges. A copy of Camilla's presentation is available on request.

Camilla's presentation was followed by a learning circle facilitated by Bríd Connolly, also of Maynooth University, which provided an opportunity for reflection and dialogue in relation to community education in Ireland. The main points to arise from this discussion were as follows:

- **The lack of recognition for, and understanding of, the wider benefits and value of community education**



- The need for greater representation of community education at local government level
- The outsourcing by government departments to private companies of supports for people who are unemployed, and the impact this may have on community education providers
- The problem of linking welfare payments to attendance in adult and community education courses. The voluntary nature of participation is a key principle of adult education
- Community centres are increasingly having to become economically sustainable. This is having a knock on effect for community education provision with some providers having to pay for the use of rooms in community centres
- Community education providers offer accredited programmes in areas such as childcare and healthcare yet there are few opportunities for employment with good working conditions in these areas. There is a concern about perpetuating the cycle of poverty and giving false hope to adult learners
- There is a need for a strong community voice within SOLAS and on local government structures
- The impact of assessment on accredited community education and how standards and assessments are set needs to be examined
- Different funding streams have different requirements of providers which can create challenges for a sector that is dependent on a wide range of funders
- There is a strong conflict between discourses about education for the economy versus education for the purpose of creating a more just and equal society. Making a case for the latter is increasingly challenging with the current focus on skills for the economy
- The dismantling of support for community development has had a significant knock-on effect for community education provision
- There is a need for strong relationship with the Department of Social Protection (DSP) at local level

The following priorities were identified by the CEN:

- Reviewing and reasserting the principles of community education
- Awareness raising among funders and government bodies of the definition and value of community education
- Highlighting the need for a funding model based on community needs
- Inclusion of people over the age of 65 in community education
- Ensuring recognition for the validity of different models of community education and promotion of the value of non-accredited programmes
- Addressing the challenge of the professionalisation of the sector and ensuring support for volunteerism
- Addressing issues arising out of the outsourcing of job path programmes to private companies



- **Supporting community education providers who plan to reengage with QQI and lobbying for a waiver of fees for such providers**
- **Ensuring community education is on the agenda at local government level**
- **Recognition and valuing of the experience within the sector and the importance of consultation with community providers when policy decisions are being made**

The following short term goals for the CEN were then suggested:

- **Carry out a mapping exercise in terms of community education representation at local government level**
- **Carry out a case study in relation to engaging with local structures**
- **Carry out a campaign for community education – identify our clear message**
- **Further explore the issues involved in reengagement with QQI and identify case studies within the CEN with the aim of highlighting the implications both of reengaging and giving up recognition by QQI as a quality assured centre. These can be used in order to inform providers who are unsure about their future in relation to engagement with QQI**

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After lunch Fiona Maloney of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) provided information for CEN members on the new PLSS which is a joint project between SOLAS and ETBI. The presentation included information on the Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH).

Fiona explained the different elements of PLSS and how it could be used by community education providers. A copy of Fiona's presentation is available on request.

The following queries came from CEN members in relation to the roll out of PLSS:

- **Whether PLSS and SICAP could be linked in order to avoid duplication in terms of data collection and administration?**
- **Whether non-ETB funded courses could be added to fetchcourses.ie?**
- **Whether it will be possible to include courses that learners have completed outside of ETBs to the learner database?**

Concerns were also expressed in relation to the following:

- **The requirement to collect PPS numbers and the implications of this for learners who are already marginalised**
- **The collection of learner data in particular the PPS number and the legal implications of this for community providers.**
- **The requirement for providers to decide which courses they will offer months in advance of the start of the course. There is concern that this will impact on the ability of local community education providers to respond to local and immediate need**

Fiona agreed to continue to engage with AONTAS in relation to such questions from members.

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The final section of the meeting was focused on the next steps in relation to QQI reengagement. Suzanne provided the following update in relation to the CEN proposal which was sent to the Department of Education for funding for a consortium of CEN members who wish to reengage with QQI:

- **An initial meeting took place in March which was attended by representatives of AONTAS, SOLAS and the Department of Education. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the viability of the consortium proposal. The outcome of the meeting was as follows:**
  - SOLAS indicated its concerns in relation to funding any initiative that poses a potential risk in legal terms. The establishment of a legal body, such as a national consortium would be seen in these terms
  - SOLAS indicated that ETBs have a responsibility to quality assure programmes which they fund
  - It was agreed that a second meeting would be necessary to explore the options for community education providers further
  
- **A second meeting took place in April which was attended by representatives of AONTAS, SOLAS and ETBI. The outcome of this meeting was as follows:**
  - Given the new QQI programme validation guidelines, and the heavy administrative requirements associated with engaging with QQI, concern was expressed by ETBI in relation to the capacity for community providers to reengage with QQI
  - ETBI are in the process of developing stakeholder engagement strategies and will develop a strategy for engagement with community education providers around quality assurance and accredited courses. This process will involve an exploration of how to engage with community education providers who were not in a position to maintain their quality assurance agreement with QQI. It was agreed that AONTAS and ETBI would work together to examine the possibilities and challenges for community education providers around this
  - ETBI will meet and discuss the options for engagement with community education providers who currently provide programmes under their own QA but receive funding from their local ETB. Following this AONTAS will be invited to engage in discussions around the next steps for ETBs and community education providers

The following reflections came from CEN members:

- **The fees issue is of concern. Community education providers are currently paying for programme validation fees**

- There is a need for practical support for community education providers, and sharing of ideas and expertise during the process of reengagement
  - The situation in relation to ETBs sharing their programmes is still unclear as they are currently focused on their own reengagement process. This makes decision making for community education providers challenging
  - The impact that reengagement with QQI will have on the relationship between ETBs and community education providers is still unclear and is a cause for concern
  - Despite the challenges involved in reengagement and programme validation a number of community education providers still plan to reengage, either in their own right or as part of a consortium. The option of establishing programme sharing consortia needs to be explored further
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#### **Next Steps for the CEN:**

- Suzanne will work with the CEN steering group and AONTAS staff to develop a short-term plan for the CEN based on the priorities identified by CEN members
- A campaign plan for community education will be developed in consultation with CEN members, based on the priorities identified at the meeting. One of the aims of the campaign will be to secure a waiver of QQI fees for community education providers
- AONTAS will continue to engage with SOLAS and ETBI in relation to supporting community education providers who wish to continue to offer QQI accredited programmes



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