

CEN CENSUS 2020

Community Education in a Time of COVID-19



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Foreword

Community education must be effectively funded so as to address persistent educational inequality. For too long, members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) have sought to gain the deserved recognition for community education on an equal footing with other areas of the education system.

In order to build a robust evidence base, for the first time AONTAS has implemented a broad-scale mixed methods research project on the community education sector, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data. We called it the CEN census, to uncover who engages in community education, what courses are provided, how it is funded, and critically how it effectively supports people to fulfil their potential. This research has taken on even greater importance as it captured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 76 community education organisations. To offer a more expansive understanding, 192 community education learner perspectives offer a rounded description of learning during COVID-19. The emerging picture of community education is one of dynamism in responding to learners, inclusive in terms of learner cohort and challenging due to unsustainable funding systems. It is clear that community education improves lives. This report offers a clear direction for supporting community education through evidence-informed recommendations in working to mitigate educational disadvantage.

This research tells us that community education engages those who are most educationally disadvantaged by

offering learner-centred provision with wraparound supports. For example, of the community education organisations surveyed, 45% state that members of the Travelling community are part of their learner cohorts. Compare this to only 110 Travellers within the entire student population in higher education (HEA, 2021). Community education builds agency and self-confidence, and is a key part of the national access agenda. Moreover, in addition to the decades of expertise gained in tackling educational inequality, community education has been a lifeline for many learners. Offering connection in a supportive environment that acknowledges the lived experiences whilst being acutely aware of the challenges their learners faced, came to the fore during the pandemic. This foundational support enables learners to thrive and the reported facilitative, pedagogic process enables learners to critically reflect on the world, to voice their issues, to become more engaged at class and community level. These tools for societal engagement and critical thinking are vitally important, particularly with the broader issues of the climate emergency, the organized spreading of misinformation and the rise of right-wing, racist agendas.

This report also provides insights into the perennial question: if community education has such benefits, why is it overlooked in national policy and funding mechanisms? Community education is about challenging the inequalities of the status quo. It is non-statutory in nature, committed to learner-centredness and is firmly rooted in the community. With its focus on improving the lives of people, its outcomes also meet the policy priorities of a range of government departments; as evidenced in the research, nine government departments and 51 funding streams fund the 76 respondent community education organisations. It is a patchwork of complex funding and reporting systems, which takes precious time away from engagement with learners. However, the research report notes the expansive impact that investment can have, e.g. through the recent Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage fund by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and SOLAS.

It is clear that community education responded swiftly to the shift to remote learning during COVID-19; however, there is a need to re-engage people who could not participate during this time. There is a need to offer a range of provision, extend learner supports, address digital poverty and end the unsustainable funding mechanisms. If we care about inclusion, now is the time to step up and respond.

Niamh O'Reilly
AONTAS CEO





Acknowledgments

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We would also like to thank all of the community education practitioners who took part in member consultations, interviews, practitioner focus groups, and the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) survey. Your involvement in this research is greatly appreciated, particularly during this incredibly challenging time. We hope that this report will be a resource to you and your organisation. Thanks are also due to the Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA), and all of the Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) who shared the CEN Census

survey with local groups.

AONTAS would like to thank the following organisations for supplying the images in this report:

- Loretto Centre Crumlin
- Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service
- Cope Foundation, Ability@work
- Southhill Family Resource Centre
- Gorey Youth Needs Group
- Irish Wheelchair Association
- Dublin Adult Learning Centre

Finally, we would like to thank all of the community education learners who took the time to make their voices heard at the learner focus groups and through learner surveys. It is hoped that this report will serve to amplify your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, paving the way for even better learning experiences for both current and future community education learners.



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Abbreviations

CEF	Community Education Facilitator
CEFA	Community Education Facilitators' Association
CEN	Community Education Network
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DEASP AFSP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection Activation and Family Support Programme
DELSA	Digital Empowerment for Digitally Upskilling Adults
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ETB	Education and Training Board
FAR	First Aid Responder
FET	Further Education and Training
HEA	Higher Education Authority
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
MAEDF	Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund
MED WG	Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PHECC	Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme



Executive Summary

This report examines the state and position of the community education sector in Ireland and the impact of COVID-19. The analysis is based on data collected from March 2020 to March 2021, and comprises findings from the first Community Education Network (CEN) Census, as well as practitioner and learner interviews, focus groups, and learner surveys. This report addresses readers, particularly policy makers and community education practitioners, who are interested in understanding the scope and impact of community education in Ireland, as well as the sector's response to COVID-19.

The findings from this report illustrate the sector's commitment to engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged learner cohorts such as the unemployed; socio-economically disadvantaged learners; people with a disability; lone parents; migrants; Travellers and Roma communities; people experiencing homelessness; substance misusers; people living in Direct Provision; and ex-prisoners. Findings also convey that surveyed community education groups were offering a wide range of additional and wraparound supports including information technology (IT); literacy; career guidance; childcare; counselling; disability supports; domestic violence services; family support; financial advice; social work; and transport, which are crucial in engaging "hard-to-reach" learner cohorts.

The report points to an increase in educational inequality during COVID-19. The pandemic had an overwhelming impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, manifesting in digital poverty and aggravating other persistent issues

such mental health and domestic violence. This has further clarified the significance of community education and the attendant support structures already highlighted, demand for which increased substantially during the pandemic. Over one third of the respondents to the CEN Census developed new courses in response to COVID-19, particularly those on health/wellbeing and information communication technology (ICT) support. The high level of non-accredited courses reported in this CEN Census (over two thirds of all reported courses) also suggests the sector's commitment to providing learning opportunities in line with learner needs, especially where accredited provision may not have been feasible. Respondents to the CEN Census highlighted the social, physical, and psychological benefits of engaging in non-accredited provision, benefits that became even more significant during this global pandemic. While historically under-resourced and often associated with learner fees, non-accredited courses therefore require consistent support and recognition.

Throughout the period of March 2020 to March 2021 there was a high demand for community education courses, including interest from new learner cohorts.

The continued demand for community education provision, combined with COVID-19 restrictions, however, resulted in waitlists for many groups; according to the CEN Census at least 2,226 learners were waitlisted during this period or were unable to take up courses. While community education providers showed their experience and adeptness in mitigating educational disadvantage during these times, additional resources, such as staffing costs, infrastructural costs, and funding for additional learner supports, were required to meet the needs of the sector. Sustainable funding has been an historic challenge for community education providers, with groups often depending on project-based funding from a wide range of different government departments and other sources. More than one third of the 76 groups surveyed in the CEN Census reported more than two unique funding sources, each of which carries individual reporting requirements. Moreover, the fact that several groups reported learner fees and fundraising as income sources indicates the sector's reliance on non-governmental funding. Further challenges around sustainable funding surfaced during COVID-19 and more than half of the surveyed groups directly experienced funding cuts or anticipated a reduction in funding because of the pandemic.

While this research provides a significant insight into a sector that has previously been overlooked, closer examination is needed:

- To develop a long-term strategy to support the sector, based on consultation with providers and learners, during and beyond the pandemic;
- To obtain further detail on funding structures and additional funding needs, thereby informing the creation of a coherent and sustainable funding

framework to reduce the administrative burden and enable the sector to focus on addressing community needs;

- To attain finer demographic data on community education learners to map local needs in greater depth, which will also help to further understanding of community education's vital role, for example, in supporting skills such as adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills

Recommendations

A. Commit to an equitable, sustainable, multi-annual funding package that empowers community education organisations to address the needs of learners and local communities. This should include:

- An annual Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund* to include the learning from the AONTAS research report (Cobain et al., 2021) on proposed improvements needed
 - Consistency in funding provision processes across all ETBs (to include all aspects of the fund and include staff costs)
 - An extended timeframe and streamlined and clearer guidelines across each ETB to facilitate an equitable application process
- Learner wraparound support funding* for community education organisations to enable access and retention post-COVID-19. Including on-site supports for domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare that will meet multiple Government Department policy objectives
- Ring-fenced funding for non-accredited programmes* to enable marginalised learners to engage in education
- An equity of access to accreditation fund* through SOLAS for community education groups to enable accredited provision (to cover the re-engagement and validation costs)

B. Ensure Community education is recognised as a key part of creating an equitable tertiary education system

- i. Recognise and name community education as key to supporting access to higher education and include in access policy plans and funding opportunities
- ii. Taking a tertiary wide approach to educational access, ensure learners can engage in part-time accredited provision across the National Framework of Qualifications in community education
- iii. Include representative structures for community education and educational equality on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science working groups as part of the Department's Statement of Strategy

C. Support national research to build an evidence base on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learners, with particular emphasis on target groups

- i. Use this report as evidence to inform strategic planning and funding under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- ii. Develop a long-term strategy to address the educational inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the role of community education in redressing this impact
- iii. Support further research into community education, including mapping, funding systems, and contribution to educational equality



Project Overview

To provide evidence necessary to promote a thriving community education sector as defined in the [AONTAS Strategic Plan 2019-2022](#), AONTAS piloted a CEN Census in 2020. The purpose of the CEN Census was to provide factual insight about the community education sector in Ireland, by developing an evidence base that could be used to advocate for needs across the sector.

The CEN Census was designed to:

- Map community education's impact
- Identify learner profile and supports
- Identify funding streams
- Assess the impact of COVID-19

Data was gathered from October to December 2020. In this pilot year, the CEN Census was primarily targeted at members of the [AONTAS Community Education Network](#) (CEN). The CEN is

a network of over 100 independently managed community education providers who work collaboratively by sharing information and resources; engaging in professional development; and working to ensure that community education is valued and resourced. The CEN Census, however, was also completed by some non-CEN groups, contacted through Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA).

#CommunityEdCensus

AONTAS is piloting a CEN Census, which seeks to:

- Map community education's impact
- Identify learner profile and supports
- Identify funding streams
- Assess the impact of COVID-19

CEN Census Advisory Group

A CEN Census Advisory Group was established in January 2020 and comprised experts in the field, including community education practitioners, Community Education Facilitators (CEFs), and academics. The Advisory Group helped to ensure the efficient and effective implementation of AONTAS' annual CEN Census.

Addressing the Impact of COVID-19

In light of seismic changes in the delivery of community education due to COVID-19, the CEN Census sought to capture both quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of the pandemic. As such, the research expanded its remit to gather other urgently-needed data from both learners and practitioners related to this change. Furthermore, it became vital to capture examples of community education's effectiveness in responding to the crisis, and the importance of extant support networks at a local level. Indeed, the crisis necessitated a range of new approaches to gathering meaningful and policy-relevant data.





Methodology

This research takes a mixed-methods approach. Findings are drawn from both quantitative data (e.g. survey responses) and qualitative data (e.g. focus groups and interviews). The key data source for this report is the CEN Census. However, a number of different data sources have been drawn from in order to present a more nuanced and longer-term perspective on community education in a time of COVID-19. To help maintain respondent anonymity, all group and provider names were removed from the detailed findings section, and learner survey responses were anonymised.

Community Education in a Time of COVID-19

76 Responses to
CEN Census



48 Initial Member
Consultations



192 Learner Survey
Responses



3 Focus Group
Discussions



5 Practitioner
Interviews

CEN Census Survey

The CEN Census was an online survey, undertaken using the Online Surveys (formerly BOS) tool, and open to all community education providers. It was promoted chiefly through the AONTAS CEN and by CEFA. The survey was open from October-December 2020. AONTAS launched the CEN Census survey during the event “Community Education in a Time of COVID-19: building back better together for community education,” held virtually on Monday, 12th October. A total of 76 community education groups completed the CEN Census.

The CEN Census was divided into seven sections: “Background to the survey,” “Centre Details,” “Accredited Programmes in 2019/2020,” “Non-accredited Courses in 2019/2020,” “Learner Profile,” “Staff,” and “Community Education during COVID-19.” These sections each came with a series of direct responses, with space also provided for open responses as required. Qualitative feedback was coded and quantified by theme for quantitative analysis where relevant. All questions were optional; however, participants were asked to fill out the form with as much detail as possible.

Initial Member Consultations

At the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, data was gathered through interactions between AONTAS and CEN members. Starting on 16th March 2020, AONTAS staff gathered key information on challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis through 48 individual interactions including phone calls and emails.

The information gathered through these interactions was collated by AONTAS to help inform the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group (MED WG), established by the Department of Education and Skills, and chaired by AONTAS CEO, Niamh O’Reilly. These issues were shared with MED WG participants and collated in a paper entitled “Challenges facing Learners

and Community Education Providers within Tertiary Education” (Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (Including Community Education Issues) Working Group, 2020a). The paper brought to light a number of issues including barriers to learning and concerns regarding the continuity of provision.

Learner Survey Responses

In addition to the CEN Census data, which was completed by community education providers, online learner surveys were administered as part of the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum. This data was compiled over two periods: June 2020 and October 2020 to March 2021. Results from the first period have been published in the COVID-19 FET Learner Report (Dowdall, Lovejoy, and Farren, 2020), while results from the latter period are still being collated and will be launched in the 2020/21 Annual Synthesis Report scheduled for release in July 2021.

The COVID-19 FET Learner Report featured survey data from 900 learners, of which 69 were engaging in community education provision. The learner survey results from October 2020 to March 2021 are drawn from 123 learners who indicated that they were engaging in community education (out of total 1,420 learner survey responses).

Focus Groups and Interviews

A Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group was held via Zoom on 12th June 2020. Six learners participated who had been engaging in community education with various providers across the country. Over the course of the hour-long discussion, learners were asked to reflect on their experiences of continuing their community education courses during the current COVID-19 crisis. These responses, along with community education responses from the initial COVID-19 FET Learner Report, were then compiled into the “Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group and Learner Survey” report released in June 2020 (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a).

Following this, two Community Education Practitioner Focus groups were held on 14th October 2020. Eighteen practitioners representing 17 different organisations from seven different counties took part. Participants were broken into two focus groups for discussions, each lasting 40 minutes. During these discussions, participants were asked to reflect on some of the challenges faced and lessons learned in the transition to remote learning. Discussions also focused on priorities for the coming months. The findings from this focus group were compiled in a “Community Education Practitioner Focus Group” report (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020b).

Additionally, between June 2020 and March 2021, five hour-long interviews were conducted with four community education practitioners. One interviewee had a follow-up interview, conducted in March 2021. In these interviews, practitioners were asked about their experiences during COVID-19 and how they were continuing to support learners during the pandemic. The interviews also asked providers about target groups, demand for courses, and demand for additional learner supports. Finally, practitioners were asked to identify the immediate and long-term needs in the sector.

Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund Research

In January 2021, AONTAS launched an online survey to capture the processes and impact of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF). The MAEDF was the government’s targeted response to support the community education sector and its learners during the pandemic. AONTAS had been advocating for this support since the onset of the pandemic and welcomed its implementation. The survey was specifically designed to capture responses from both community education groups and Education and Training Boards who distributed the MAEDF. Eighteen staff members from six Education and Training Boards responded to the survey. The survey was open to community education groups who chose not

to apply for the MAEDF; those who applied and did not receive the MAEDF; and those who received the MAEDF. A total of 85 community education groups took part in this survey; five of them were those who decided not to apply for the fund and one of them was unsuccessful in their application.

The survey asked what benefits the MAEDF brought to learners and the community, what funding areas would be beneficial in future, and what could be improved to facilitate the administration and implementation of the MAEDF moving forward. These questions were an open-ended format, allowing respondents to write their answers in free text boxes. All responses were then coded by theme and analysed. These findings are presented in a public report, “Making an Impact: A Reflective View of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund” (Cobain et al., 2021). This public report was launched at the AONTAS Policy Day on 5th March 2021.

Limitations of the Research

The COVID-19 crisis resulted in an abrupt transition to a period of emergency remote learning, followed by changes in levels of restrictions when face-to-face learning was possible to varying degrees. This meant that providers were forced to adapt to changing circumstances, oftentimes under extreme pressure. The period in which the CEN Census was open, October-December 2020, was coterminous with a second wave of COVID-19 in Ireland, and on 19th October, the Government recommended the county move to the highest level of restrictions, “Level 5,” for six weeks. This resulted in community education organisations once again migrating almost all of their provision online, meaning that many had immediate priorities that made it challenging to participate in the CEN Census.

Secondly, since access to ICT was an issue highlighted through the CEN Census, it is also clear that learners who may normally have been able to share their experiences in face-to-face settings faced barriers to participation. A number of community

education providers noted that learners were not able to engage in this research due to childcare responsibilities, a lack of familiarity with online platforms, and a lack of appropriate devices. Limited device access was noted in particular by community education groups who work with Traveller and Roma communities. Although there was an option to be sent a hard copy of learner survey, none were requested. Thus, the findings from the learner surveys should be interpreted with this caveat in mind.

Finally, the majority of CEN Census respondents were from Dublin. This reflects the large number of Dublin-based organisations within the AONTAS CEN. It is therefore necessary to be cautious about interpreting the findings as a representative of the community education sector across the whole country.





Detailed Results

This section contains the main research findings gathered in this study. It is broken into four sections: A Profile of Community Education, Organisational Impact of COVID-19, Practitioner Experience, and Impact on learners. Each of these sections are further broken down into sub-sections that will be outlined at the beginning of each new section.

A Profile of Community Education in 2019-2020

Overview

The findings from the CEN Census 2020 indicate that community education across Ireland was largely delivered by small, locally-based organisations, supporting an average of 200 learners per year. Females were strongly represented in community education, with the female learner total (9,053) across all respondents almost three times as high as the male total (3,231).

Other learner groups strongly represented in community education include: the unemployed; people with a disability; lone parents; migrants; socio-economically disadvantaged learners; Travellers; Roma; people living in Direct Provision; substance misusers; ex-prisoners; and people experiencing homelessness. The most commonly selected groups were the unemployed (53) and socio-economically disadvantaged learners (53), followed by people with a disability (49) and lone parents (48).

Learner Groups strongly represented in community education include:



The unemployed

People with a disability

Lone parents

Socio-economically disadvantaged learners

Travellers

Roma

Migrants

People living in Direct Provision

Substance misusers

Ex-prisoners

People experiencing homelessness

During the period of 2019-2020, there were more non-accredited courses provided (401) than accredited (164), with more than three times as many learners engaging in the non-accredited options. Courses focussed on developing a wide range of outcomes across both accredited and non-accredited options, including social inclusion; learning to learn/life skills; mental health and wellbeing; employability; upskilling/reskilling; community development; digital literacy; democratic education; and sustainability. Among accredited courses, employability and upskilling/reskilling was by far most common (125 and 122 courses respectively). Among non-accredited options, social inclusion was most common (239 courses), followed by mental health and wellbeing (227 courses) and learning to learn/life skills (192 courses).

A wide range of funding sources (51 sources) were identified by respondents. The most common source being Education and Training Board funding, followed by learner fees, and then funding from Pobal/Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). Fifty-three groups had more than one source of funding, with ten funding sources being the largest.

The following section outlines further details on the profile of community education groups based on CEN Census participation. This information is broken down into the following topics: location; size; profile of learners; accredited and non-accredited provision; course objectives; funding supports; and learner supports. Each section provides supporting detail in an attempt to outline the present state of community education provision and support structures.

Location

The largest number of CEN Census respondents came from Dublin (29 groups; see Figure 1), which reflects the large concentration of Dublin-based members within the CEN. The second largest number of respondents was from Tipperary (eight); followed by Cork and Donegal (six); and then by Limerick (five). There were 17 counties represented in total. Additionally, one national organisation also took part in the research.¹



Figure 1: Number of community education groups per county

Size

Forty-eight respondents to the CEN Census were small providers, having fewer than ten staff members (see Figure 2).

As shown in Figure 3, 30 groups indicated a learner total up to 50; ten groups reported a learner total of 51-100; and 11 groups reported a learner total of 101-200.² However, if the number of beneficiaries (i.e. total learner interactions)³ is analysed, there were 13 groups who reported more than 500 beneficiaries (compared to nine who reported more than 500 learners).

¹ There were no respondents from Cavan, Kerry, Laois, Leitrim, Louth, Mayo, Meath, Monaghan, and Sligo.

² Two groups answered zero and one group did not provide this figure.

³ The number of beneficiaries is the number of learners who benefited from a particular course, which counts the same learner more than once if the learner benefited from more than one course.

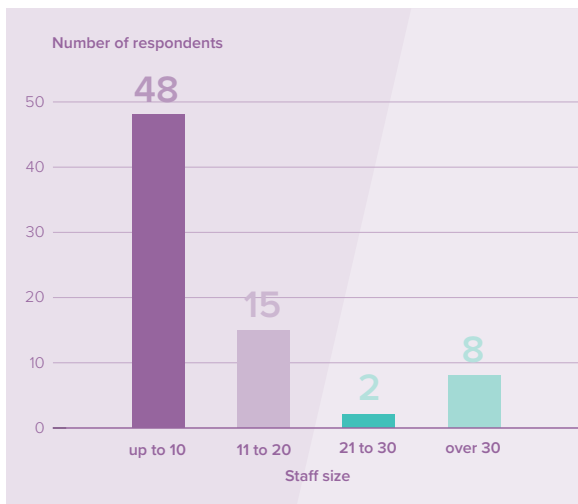


Figure 2: Number of community education groups per staff size

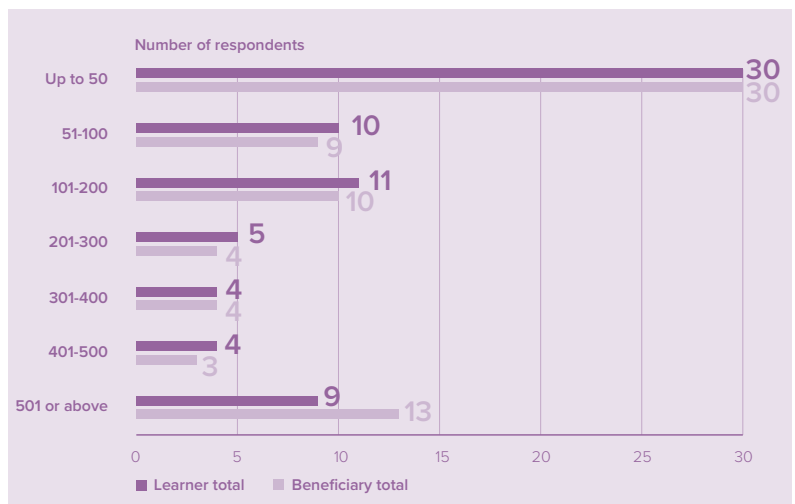


Figure 3: Number of community education groups by learner totals

Profile of Learners

In the CEN Census, community education groups provided information about the profile of learners engaging with their organisation. Figure 4 is the disaggregation of learner totals per community education group by gender. The female learner total across all respondents was 9,053; the male total was 3,231; and there was one non-binary learner reported by one respondent.⁴

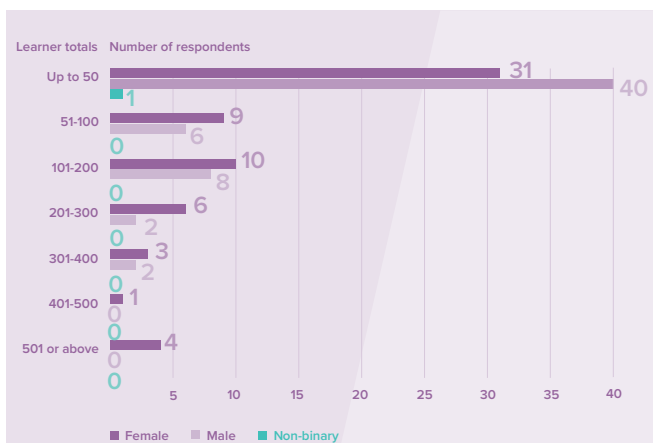


Figure 4: Number of community education groups by learner totals per gender

Figure 5 is the summary of the number of community education groups that engaged with specific learner cohorts. It should be noted that groups could select multiple learner cohorts. The four most common learner cohorts selected were learners experiencing unemployment and social economic disadvantage (53 groups each),

people with a disability (49 groups) and lone parents (48 groups). A number of groups indicated that they were working with “other” groups, including “elderly persons,” “women in abusive relationships,” the “rural community,” and “people working part time.”

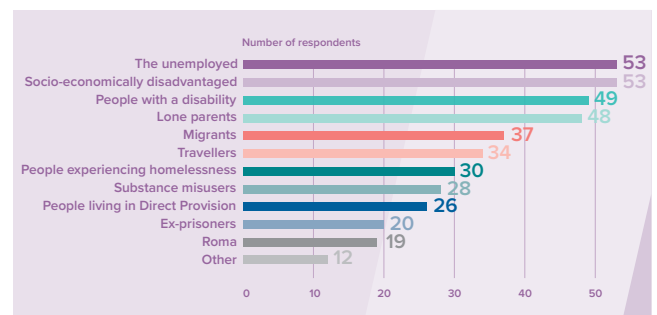


Figure 5: Number of community education groups engaging a particular group of learners

Accredited and Non-accredited Provision

There were more non-accredited than accredited courses provided across all Census respondents (401 vs. 164). Based on learner totals provided, 3,147 community education learners were enrolled in accredited provision, compared to 12,226 in non-accredited provision. Figure 6 is the disaggregation of learner totals per group by accredited and non-accredited courses.⁵ Courses offered by community education providers were wide ranging, meeting a diverse range of learner needs. A range of accredited options were on offer, across Levels 1-8 of the National

⁴ It should be noted that the PLSS system, through which most community education organisations store learner data, only give “male” and “female” as gender categories. This may have resulted in the under-reporting of non-binary learners.

⁵ One group who reported they offered non-accredited courses did not give the learner total of these courses.

Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Indeed, some providers offered BA options, such as a BA in Early Education and Care NFQ Level 8 (in collaboration with IT Carlow). While a large number of the accredited training options were offered through Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a smaller number of groups provided a range of accredited programmes that fell outside of the QQI remit, such as First Aid Responding through Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC), and other courses through Digital Empowerment for Digitally Upskilling Adults (DELSA) or Lámh. Accredited courses included, but were not limited to: “General Learning” (Levels 1-4), “Business Studies,” “Local Global Development,” “Introduction to Performing Arts,” “Literacy and Life Skills,” “Personal and Interpersonal Skills,” “Early Childcare Education,” “Internet Skills,” “Healthcare Support,” “Cultural and Heritage Studies,” “Community Development,” “Facilitation Skills,” “Word Processing,”

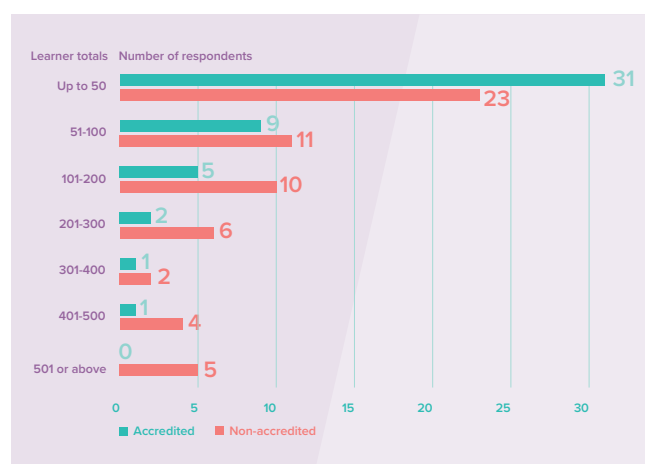


Figure 6: Number of community education groups by learner totals per accredited vs. non-accredited courses

“Bookkeeping Manual and Computerized,” and “Sports and Recreation.”

Non-accredited courses included but were not limited to: “Life Skills,” “Personal Development,” “First Aid,” “Creative Textiles,” “Communications,” “Conversational English,” “Money Management,” “Family Learning,” “Recovery and Wellbeing,” “Yoga,” “Line Dancing,” “Welfare to Work,” “Boat Building,” “Digital Photography,” “Getting Online,” and “Horticulture.”

Course Objectives

Figure 7 presents community education course objective(s). Community education groups could indicate more than one objective per course. These results are disaggregated by accredited and non-accredited courses. Since the total number of accredited and non-accredited courses provided across all respondents are different, as noted above, the percentage of each objective to this total is presented as a standardised measure. For example, mental health and wellbeing was more common among non-accredited courses than among accredited courses (57% of the non-accredited courses compared to 27% of the accredited courses). Meanwhile, upskilling/reskilling and employability were much more common among accredited courses than among non-accredited courses (74% and 76% among the accredited courses, compared to 38% and 16% among the non-accredited courses, respectively).

Additionally, Figure 8 and Figure 9 compare the distribution of objectives within accredited courses and non-accredited courses respectively. The three most common objectives among accredited courses were employability (125), upskilling/reskilling (122), and social inclusion (78) (see Figure 8). The three most common objectives among non-accredited courses were social inclusion (239), mental health and wellbeing (227), and learning to learn/life skills (192) (see Figure 9).

Funding Sources

Figure 10 presents the details of funding streams reported by CEN Census respondents. The categories in the figure include the funding sources mentioned by more than one respondent. The category, “Other,” includes all other funding streams mentioned by only one respondent. As can be seen, funding for community education comprises a mix of public funding, private or philanthropic funding (which is included in the “Other” category), and learner fees.

A total of 51 funding streams were named, including those from across nine government

Community Education Course Objectives

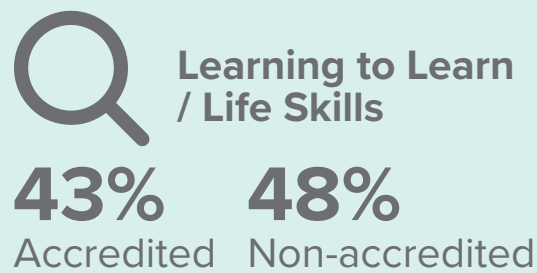
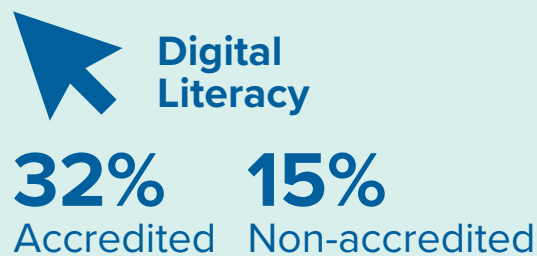
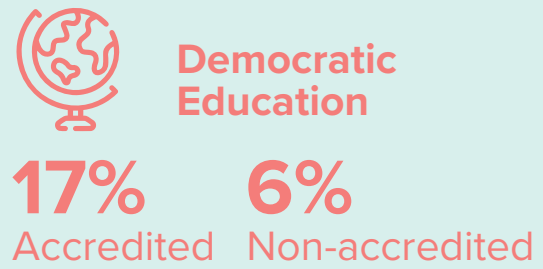


Figure 7: Course objectives compared between accredited and non-accredited courses

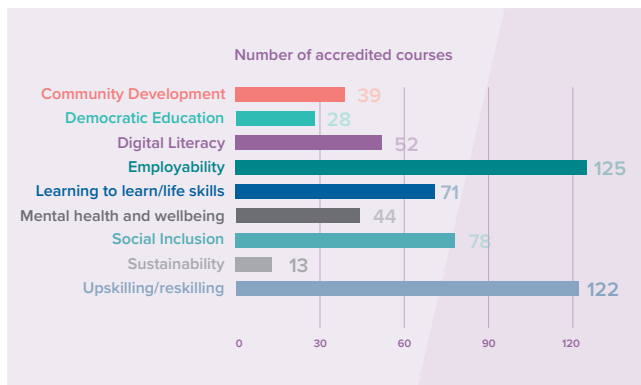


Figure 8: Course objectives of accredited courses



Figure 9: Course objectives of non-accredited courses

departments.⁶ These nine departments include:

- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science / Education and Skills
- Department of Health
- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Department of Social Protection/ Employment Affairs and Social Protection
- Department of Justice / Justice and Equality
- Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment
- Department of Foreign affairs
- Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
- Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

The most common funding source for community education groups was funding from SOLAS, or the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This funding was administered through Education and Training Boards (52) through SOLAS funding; this category is inclusive of groups who received core funding and others who received tutor hours to run specific courses only.

Education and Training Board funding was followed by learner fees (19), and then by

funding from Pobal/SICAP (15) (see Figure 10). These findings tally, broadly speaking, with FinALE research (in which “thirty-four percent (34%) of projects surveyed in this research [were] principally funded by the Department of Education and Skills, with a further 14% funded through a community engagement initiative (SICAP) that is jointly funded by the European Social Fund” (Fitzsimons and Magrath, 2017, p.109). Notably, in the CEN Census, 17 respondents did not receive any funding from an Education and Training Board or Pobal.

The number of funding streams accessed ranged from one to ten, with the average being three (see Figure 11). Fifty-three groups had more than one source of funding, while one group reported ten funding sources, the largest number of sources reported in the CEN Census. This is consistent with previous research into funding streams for community education which demonstrate that most groups rely on more than one source of funding (AONTAS, 2011; Fitzsimons, 2017; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2019).

These findings suggest that some groups likely experience excessive administrative complication or difficulty that could be avoided by the establishment of a single, coherent funding stream centralised by the authority. Often this funding is project-based, and as highlighted in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, “Getting Skills Right: Future Ready Adult Learning Systems” (2019), which cites FinALE and research conducted by Kozyra, Motschilnig, and Ebner (2017):

⁶ Some of these departments were mentioned by only one respondent and, therefore, included in the category “Other” in Figure 10.

“Project-based funding is temporary by nature which can undermine the financial sustainability of adult learning systems; and procedures for accessing external funds can be complex and time-consuming, which can result in gaps in adult learning provision and can absorb a significant amount of human and financial resources which could otherwise be available for training.”

Research conducted by Conor Magrath and Camilla Fitzsimons (2019), also “uncovers growing uncertainty in terms of funding for community education in Ireland and showcases the often-stressful working conditions for those employed at the coal-face endure” (p.48). In short, dealing with multiple funding streams has implications on staff time to complete applications and report to a range of funders with various reporting systems, and takes away from time that should be spent on learner engagement. This research therefore further validates the need for “a new sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education,” as emphasized in AONTAS’ Annual Policy Day paper (2020), “Community Education 20 Years Since Publication of Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000-2020).” This funding must cover the true cost of

community education provision including overhead costs, administration, and provision.

Learner Supports

Finally, Figure 12 presents the number of respondents who mentioned a particular type of free support that was available through their community education organisation. Additional ICT support was the most common (36 groups), followed by career guidance (33) and then by additional literacy support (28). Given that a large proportion of community education moved to online learning at the onset of the pandemic, it is unsurprising that additional ICT support was most commonly cited. As can be seen in the figure, the range of wrap-around supports associated with community education are diverse and holistic, with many seeking to support particular cohorts of learners engaging in community education and to redress some of the barriers they face to achieving their goals in learning and in life (Bailey, Breen, and Ward, 2010).

The findings from the CEN Census 2020 outlined above highlight the heterogeneous nature of community education in Ireland today. Indeed, groups ranged widely in size and in terms of the population of learners supported. Community education providers offered a range of critical wrap-around supports to enhance learning and combat educational and social disadvantage, reflecting community education’s historically grassroots and holistic modus operandi. From these results, it is clear that community

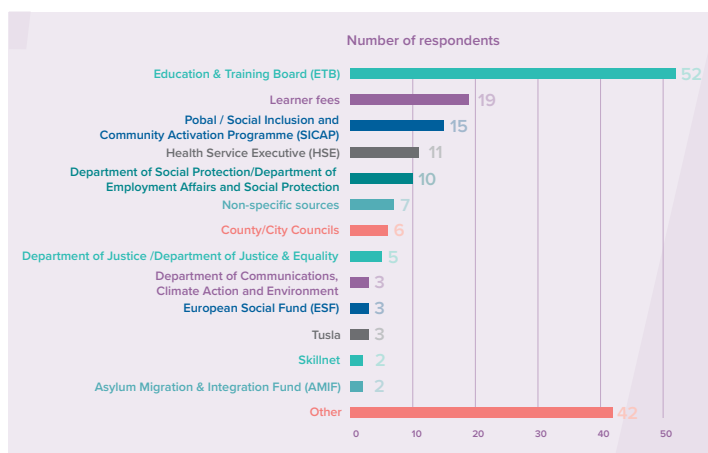


Figure 10: Funding sources per community education group

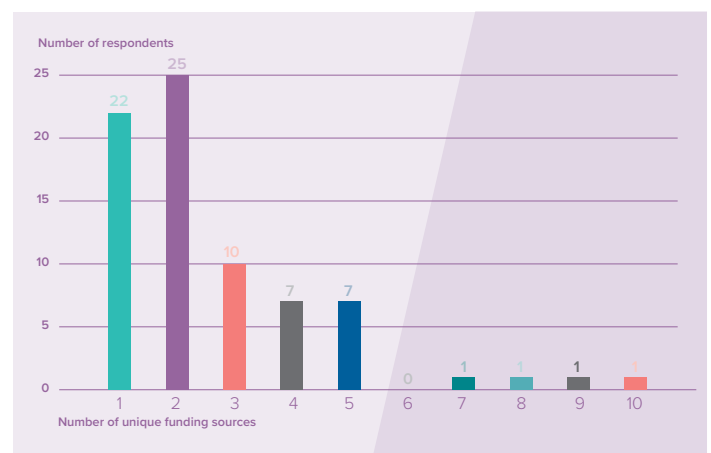


Figure 11: Number of unique funding sources

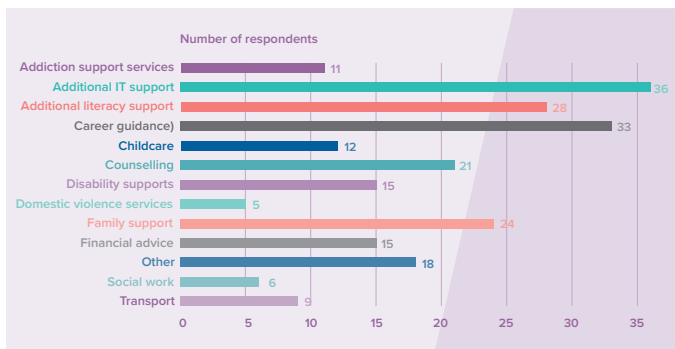


Figure 12: Free support offered

education serves the educational needs of a diverse group of learners, many of whom have traditionally been excluded from education (Kellaghan, 2001; Department of Education and Skills, 2012).

Groups continue to provide a wide range of learning options – meeting objectives from community development to employability – within the local community. The diverse range of both accredited and non-accredited options continues to be a particular strength within the sector, allowing learners to meet their personal goals in lifelong and life-wide learning (AONTAS, 2011; AONTAS, 2009; AONTAS, 2001). This has far-reaching social and economic outcomes, as highlighted by Evans and Egglestone (2019):

“learning and skills contribute to economic growth both directly, by improving the skills base available to employers, and indirectly... this is the case for all levels of learning from basic skills to degree level – research clearly shows earnings, employment and productivity gains for each level of learning. Skills also contribute to social justice, to improve social mobility (the extent to which an individual’s life chances do or do not depend on their family background) and reduce inequality (the gap between rich and poor)” (p.5).

Indeed, the wide range of non-accredited options identified in the CEN Census in particular seek to foster broader personal and societal outcomes, particularly in the areas of social inclusion, mental health and wellbeing, and learning to learn/life skills. These courses often seek to build learner confidence and agency through peer-learning, allowing the learner to progress through further non-accredited learning or onto accredited options in community, further or higher education (Bailey, Breen, and Ward, 2010).

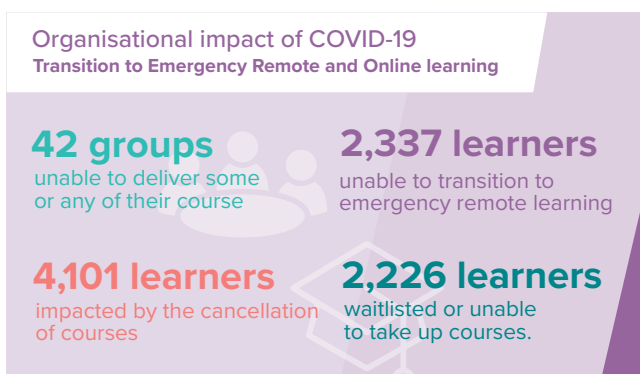
As research in the Irish context has demonstrated, the focus on individual learner needs is rooted in community education’s ability to effectively support marginalised learners (Power, Neville, and O’Dwyer, 2011; Bailey, Breen, and Ward, 2010; and CEFA, 2011). Indeed, community education continues to provide learning options particularly to those who are facing various forms of educational and social disadvantage, such as those who experience socio-economical disadvantages (53 Census respondents) or are unemployed (53 Census respondents), as indicated in CEN Census findings (see Figure 5).

Findings also demonstrated that community education has a critical role in supporting women, with women three times more likely to be participating in community education courses. This figure is less stark than findings from research conducted by AONTAS in 2010 – in which 85% of the learners in community education were women (Bailey, Breen, and Ward, 2010) – but nonetheless highlights the significance of community education’s role in supporting women, in particular. Moreover, the number of groups who indicated they were engaging with lone parents – a cohort in which women are traditionally over-represented – indicates the critical role that community-based education continues to play in empowering women. Community education’s role here is noteworthy, since the 2017 Adult Education Survey (Central Statistics Office, 2018) on adult learning in Ireland found that females are more likely to report some form of unmet demand in

lifelong learning with 35.8% of females reporting this gap compared with 29% of males. Therefore, community education is playing a vital role in providing lifelong learning opportunities to women where needs continue to be unmet.

In summary, the CEN Census showed the generally small-scale nature of community education groups, but also their strong role in supporting vulnerable or disadvantaged learners. There were many more learners reported in non-accredited courses than in accredited courses. Both accredited and non-accredited courses were associated with a broad range of different learning objectives, demonstrating the diverse range of outcomes associated with community education. While Education and Training Boards were the most common funding source identified, community education was supported through a wide range of funding streams, from various Government departments and other sources. The CEN Census showed that a significant amount of income was generated through learner fees, or even derived through social enterprise, which, as will be discussed in the following section, can be somewhat unreliable during a period such as COVID-19, resulting in financial uncertainty for many groups.

Organisational Impact of COVID-19



The COVID-19 pandemic set in motion a number of seismic changes within the community education sector. Following the Government’s announcement on 12th

March, community education providers sought to move provision online where possible, supporting learners in accessing learning through a variety of online platforms and reaching out regularly to maintain contact with learners while helping them to access critical supports such as online counselling. Unfortunately, many learners were unable to make this transition due to lack of access to necessary digital resources and other circumstances that made learning a challenge or an impossibility at this time. Additionally, organisations also faced challenges around staffing, funding, and income streams and organisational capacity, more broadly. In the CEN Census, 41 respondents reported either having experienced funding cuts or the anticipation of a reduction in funding or income.

Over the period of May 2020 to March 2021, varying levels of restrictions meant that community education organisations were able to engage for brief periods in face-to-face learning. When restrictions allowed for classroom-based learning, changes had to be made to ensure the learning environment was safe, and class capacity was significantly reduced to facilitate social distancing. The restrictions also resulted in the cancellation of several accredited and non-accredited courses. Meanwhile, groups described seeing a significant increase in demand for courses, with many courses becoming oversubscribed, resulting in waitlists. Respondents to the CEN Census indicated that 2,226 learners were either “waitlisted/ or unable to take up courses.”⁷ As one respondent noted, “the big challenge is that we have to seriously reduce our numbers during this COVID-19 crisis, online or face to face.” Some courses in particular were in high demand – and groups also responded by setting up courses and workshops to deal with the psychological fallout of the pandemic.

While some groups moved between online and face-to-face learning, others opted to move online for the duration. As highlighted

⁷ Respondents were asked to “Please state how many learners were waitlisted/ unable to take up courses (if any).” This figure represents the sum total of learners listed by 43 groups for this question.

by one practitioner in interview:

“If we were to offer in-person it was likely to be disrupted and they’d have to go back online anyway. We had to think about what we could offer with the least amount of disruption.”

As such, providers found a number of different and often highly creative ways of continuing to support learners during this challenging time. However, following the crisis, they felt that an investment would need to be made into enabling groups to reach out to learners who were turned away or could not engage during the pandemic.

This section will explore how community education groups adapted to the remote and online learning contexts; additional supports provided to learners; the increased demand for courses as a result of COVID-19; staff challenges; the impact of COVID-19 on finances and funding streams; and how community education groups created a safe space for learners. Each section provides supporting detail in an attempt to outline the wide range of ways in which organisations were impacted by and responded to the COVID-19 crisis.

Adapting to Emergency Remote and Online Learning

This subsection examines how community education providers adapted to emergency remote and online learning and what challenges they faced. Asked if they were able to deliver courses remotely, 34 out of 76 respondents (45%) to the CEN Census indicated that they were able to continue working remotely (see Figure 13). However, 17 respondents (22%) were unable to deliver any courses, and the remaining 25 (33%) were able to deliver only some of their courses.

While many courses were able to transition online, the abrupt changes caused by the pandemic introduced many challenges at an organisational level, as staff worked tirelessly

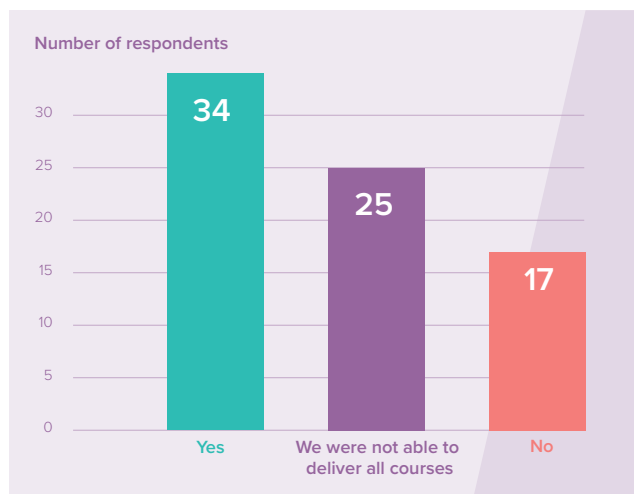


Figure 13: Able to continue delivering courses remotely during COVID-19 restrictions

to ensure the best possible outcomes for their learners given the situation. COVID-19 had a significant impact on what providers were able to deliver online. Respondents to the CEN Census indicated that a wide range of both accredited and non-accredited courses had to be cancelled, particularly those with a practical dimension or work placement. As one respondent noted:

“COVID-19 had an impact on our course delivery and a number of courses were cancelled as a result of this. While we did transition to online, not all courses were suitable for this so therefore did not go ahead, for example FAR [First Aid Responded], FAR refresher, Manual Handling, Lámh, Fire Warden training were impacted by COVID-19.”

Another respondent simply stated, “it was not possible to deliver [courses] online.” In some cases, “practical classes had to stop” due to limited access to necessary resources in a remote context. As one respondent to the CEN Census noted, while “some classes worked very well remotely [others] did not, especially in terms of connectivity, ICT skills, learners [with a] disability and [learners] with English as a second language.”

In some cases, groups reported that “only non-accredited courses were cancelled” while others indicated that accredited courses were significantly impacted, with one group noting the cancellation of “all QQI courses from March to July [2020].” Learners’ options around work experience and placements were also impacted. As one respondent noted, “no course had to be cancelled. Actual work experience off-site for our learners as part of our LTI [Local Training Initiative] Work Experience module, could not be done because of COVID-19.” In some cases, courses had to be cancelled or postponed due to learners’ lack of digital resources. As highlighted by one respondent to the CEN Census, one of their courses had to be “postponed to November 2020 as learners in Direct Provision had no access to computers.” Another group reported the cancellation of a “community centre-based classes for Travellers.”

Where possible, practitioners found innovative ways to engage their learners, trying different approaches to connect both on and offline, even sending materials via post. As one practitioner noted in interview, “we’re being as creative as we possibly can.”

Nonetheless, according to the CEN Census, at least **4,101 learners were impacted by the cancellation of courses.**⁸

In addition, **2,337 learners were said to have been “unable to transition to emergency remote learning/continue learning during COVID-19.”**⁹

As will be highlighted in the section “Impact on Learners,” there were many learner cohorts who struggled to engage, due to challenges relating to their personal circumstances and the exacerbating impact of the pandemic. Moreover, many learners did not have access to the digital devices or broadband that would facilitate full participation. In fact, 27 out of 76 respondents (36%) to the CEN Census indicated that their learner totals were lower for the 2019/2020 academic year than 2018/2019. These figures are stark and suggest the challenges faced especially by disadvantaged learner cohorts and the level of digital poverty experience by learners traditionally engaging in community education.

In addition, staff themselves faced many challenges in adjusting to the largely online environment. As noted by one practitioner, this was a period of major adjustment for tutors, and particularly older tutors who were not familiar with the technology: “one of the facilitators is 80 and the other is in their 70s. They’re enjoying it now, but they were petrified at the first session.” Furthermore, many in the sector had initial reservations



8 Respondents were asked, “How many learners (if any) were impacted by the cancellation of courses since the arrival of COVID-19.” This figure represents the sum total of learners listed by 62 groups for this question.

9 Respondents were asked, “How many learners were unable to transition to emergency remote learning/continue learning during COVID-19?” This figure represents the sum total of learners listed by 58 groups for this question.

about what it would be possible to achieve through remote learning. As described by this practitioner:

“Our work is experiential, so it’s one thing delivering a class but it’s a different thing to facilitate 12 people in a group and actually get interaction between those people online. As for the use of breakout rooms, there’s a big learning curve there.”

One adaptation by this group was to arrange a one-to-one between the tutor and each learner before the first class, “to break the ice, to consolidate the commitment, to ask any questions, and to troubleshoot Zoom.” They requested and were granted four additional hours from the Education and Training Board “for tutor time, doing an interface meeting one-to-one with each of the participants who [would] join [the course] the following week.” Additionally, in many instances another facilitator was assigned to each online group. Indeed, responsive funding supports from such as the HSE, Education and Training Boards, MAEDF, and COVID-19 Stability Fund, were critical to sustaining the organisation’s and sectoral ability to creatively respond to community needs in the pandemic. As highlighted by this practitioner, the need for two facilitators per online classroom was about:

“Being able to attend to bigger sized groups online because you know if you’ve got fourteen faces on a screen and you’re doing work, which is actually about the affective domain and people being able to enquire into their experience, you have to be able to attend to people.”

Throughout COVID-19, practitioners also played a crucial role in supporting learner access to devices and secure broadband,

particularly when funding became available through the MAEDF in December 2021. However, it was also noted by one practitioner that while these devices brought huge benefit to the sector, they needed to be matched by staff resources to support the administration of these devices. Describing their situation with regards to staffing they explained how:

“We have 10 devices that are out on loan, and under the recent fund [MAEDF], we applied for 10 more. I think we could have applied for way more but managing them is the thing. Loaning them out and loaning them back, 20 devices is small really but it’s what we can manage.”

As such, in the initial phase of COVID-19, and subsequent periods of remote learning, the community education sector responded swiftly and adeptly to a wide range of challenges. As outlined by one practitioner, supporting learners to stay engaged was a top priority, since “for some people and families, it’s their lifeline.” However, the rapid move to online learning certainly shook the sector in many ways, forcing community education providers to adapt quickly, without proper reflection. Ultimately, despite the best efforts of tutors and community education organisations, many learners were unable to remain engaged in their courses due to competing responsibilities and lack of access to appropriate devices.

Additional Support for Learners

The challenges faced by learners will be discussed in greater detail in the section, “Impact on Learners,” but it is important to note that changes to the delivery of community education and on those who could participate, had a significant impact on how community education organisations were operating on a daily basis during COVID-19. The information below summarises the supports provided to learners as outlined by community education providers through



both the CEN Census and focus group discussions.

During the initial transition to emergency remote learning, tutors worked around the clock to ensure learners were supported to continue with their courses during COVID-19. This support was intensive and far-reaching, with practitioners providing a range of practical supports and advice to learners as well as more holistic supports traditionally offered through community education. As one practitioner highlighted in interview, particularly during the period of emergency remote learning, this support entailed over “200 calls a week” to learners. They noted that

“when the office closes at 5 o’clock the phone is switched over to my phone. Technically we’re on call seven days a week.”

Figure 14 below highlights the range of free supports provided by community education organisations that responded to the CEN Census in 2020, and the number of respondents that reported an increased demand for (free or otherwise) supports in the context of COVID-19.

ICT learner support needs remained a primary concern throughout the pandemic. As can be seen, 37 respondents (49%)

highlighted that additional support was required to support learners’ ICT needs. Practitioners described supporting learners’ ICT needs through one-to-one telephone calls and liaising with broadband suppliers to ensure learners could gain access to internet at home. Due to its grassroots and holistic approach, community education organisations were able to offer much-needed wraparound supports to learners during COVID-19. As the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (Including Community Education Issues) Working Group (2020a, p.3) points out, “community education provides a distinct avenue of connectedness between some of the most disadvantaged groups in Irish society and statutory and voluntary services now dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.” As a result, community education providers became a critical intermediary or direct provider of these services. These supports were in place prior to the pandemic, but became ever more vital to learners as they faced a wide range of personal challenges during COVID-19. As one practitioner noted in interview:

“[Learners] are aware of our wraparound services, which are provided free or at a really low-cost. Ninety percent of the time it’s free, because we know that people haven’t got the low cost.”

Supports for health and wellbeing were in high demand. The CEN Census demonstrates an increase in demand for counselling in particular, with 23 groups (30%) indicating an increase in these requests. This was also noted by practitioners, with one interviewee describing a “60% increase in our counselling requests, not just for the parents but parents who are also worried about their children.”

The interviewee went on to further describe: “Our counselors have been

fantastic because if they are able to use Zoom or WhatsApp, they are doing it online; if not, they are doing it through the telephone support weekly.”

Practitioners also noted that they were tapping into resources through “the HSE, TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency” and disseminating information “on our website” including “fantastic stuff on how to mind

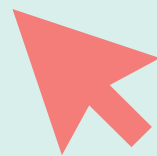
Community Education Responds to COVID-19 by supporting Communities



Counselling



Disability Support



IT Support



Financial Advice



Domestic Violence Services



Childcare



Addiction Support Services



Literacy Support



Family Support Services



Career Guidance



Transport



Social Work

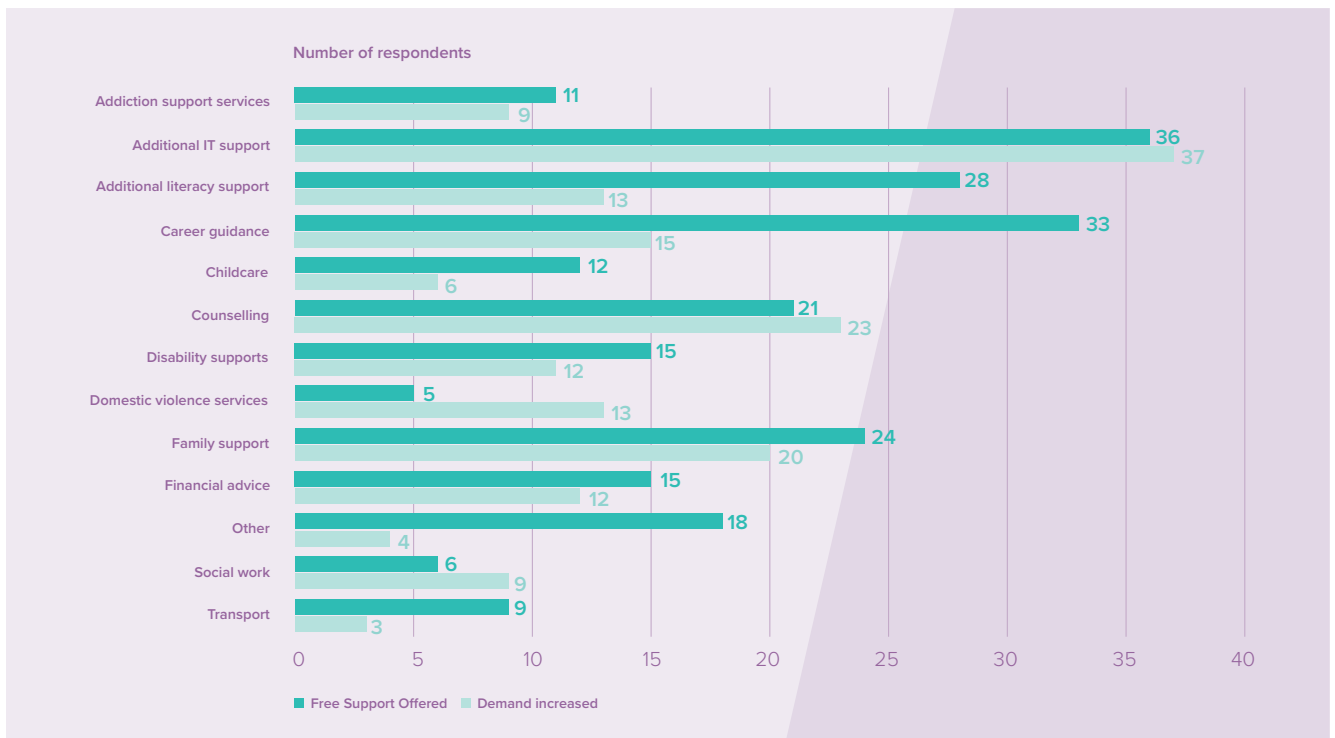


Figure 14: Free support offered and demand increased

your mental health.” Community education classes also provided a space to check-in with learners regularly. As such, providers were using all methods available to them to promote positive mental health for learners and their communities in these challenging times.

Requests and referrals for domestic violence services also saw a stark increase, in line with the rise of intimate partner violence across the globe (OECD, 2020a). In interview with AONTAS, one organisation who had an on-site domestic violence victims’ support service noted that since they began working for the organisation in 2009, they had “never seen the domestic violence service [as busy],” further noting, “it’s a huge issue.” These additional supports required additional resources to meet the increased demand.

Demand for Courses

Community education practitioners made great efforts to engage learners and meet their needs at this time. In many cases, this resulted in the creation of various courses tailored to the needs of learners during COVID-19. Twenty-nine out of the 76 respondents to the CEN Census reported that they developed new courses in response to COVID-19. The range of courses, workshops,

and support groups identified in the CEN Census can be seen in Table 1 below. While many of these courses were designed with the objective of equipping learners to engage with online platforms and continue learning in a remote context, others focussed on maintaining the social dimension of learning and supporting mental health and wellbeing during this challenging time. Meanwhile, some groups supported learner access to critical social welfare supports, while also sharing important health messaging. One respondent stated that courses were also “being developed for same-sex relationship domestic abuse, addiction, and gambling,” examples of the issues which are estimated to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Other respondents indicated that “across all courses [they had] seen a demand for places,” or reported an increased demand for existing courses such as “Healthcare Level 5,” “Special Needs Assisting,” “Manual Handling and Safepass,” and “parenting courses.”

Courses to Support Digital Literacy	Courses to Support Wellbeing
Basic Digital Skills Courses/ IT for Parents	Health and Safety during COVID-19
Zoom Training	Resilience Training
Computer Literacy and Online Beginners courses	Wellness and Mental Health Awareness
iPad Training	Time for Me for Positive Mental Health
WhatsApp Training	Mindfulness
Elders Online	Walk and Talk
Digital Media	Coffee Morning
	Getting Started Keeping in Touch
	Horticulture
	Tai-Chi
	Watercolours
	Creative Writing
	COVID-19 and Social Welfare
	Courses on Domestic Abuse, Addiction and Gambling

Table 1: Courses and workshops developed in response to COVID-19

In interview with AONTAS, practitioners also emphasised the importance of adapting to the current context, and their ability to pivot to meet the learning needs of local communities. As one practitioner noted:

“All the classes are adapted to suit the current climate, because a lot of people are struggling with their confidence and mental health. That is why all the classes

here are confidence building and mindfulness. They’re important in the current climate. There is a demand for classes on mindfulness, anxiety management, and a holistic model of health.”

In another interview, a practitioner indicated the group’s intention to use funding through the MAEDF “to run something around dealing

with the stress levels and that sort of thing, and a little bit of mindfulness, for our learners and our tutors and anybody else we engage with.” They noted that this “was something typically we wouldn’t have done,” adding, “there are services here, but training and education typically wouldn’t have stepped up and done that sort of thing.” The same organisation had also been supporting learners who wanted to reskill in response to the COVID-19 crisis:

“It was quite a few hairdressers trying to change skills. I think that people who are impacted by the COVID-19 lockdown are seeing that they need to do something different. The Special Needs Assisting course that we run, we had a huge diversity of people in it; it’s a very diverse group of learners. A lot of them are in roles that had been affected by lockdown and they’re looking for something a little bit more structured going forward.”

The position of local community education providers also allowed them to stay attuned to learning needs in the local community. As noted by one practitioner:

“Because we’re local and most learners would know us, or know somebody here, they’re able to ring us and say, well actually I’m thinking of doing a course and how do you think I can do it.”

This group, likewise, highlighted that since the pandemic, new cohorts of learners have been engaging in community education: “We are seeing families now for the first time ever who have found themselves unemployed or on PUP [Pandemic Unemployment Payment]. They wouldn’t be used to coming to

organisations like ours.” These new learners were described as “looking for classes at Levels 5 and 6.” The organisation was now able to provide learning opportunities locally for this new learner cohort.

Staffing

While the sector responded adeptly to the crisis, many groups struggled in terms of human resources and capacity, with 20 out of total 76 respondents (26%) to the CEN Census seeing a reduction of staff during COVID-19. Reasons cited for this were “COVID-19 leave” or “sick leave,” “volunteer burnout,” “tutors [with an] underlying condition,” “classes cancelled,” and “vacancies unfilled due to uncertainty around funding.” One respondent noted that it was “difficult to replace/renew Tús [Community and Work Placement Initiative] and CE [Community Employment] Scheme staff during this time,” with another stating that they had seen “no referrals from Intreo” for their CE Scheme since the beginning of the pandemic. Another group noted, “we have four staff on short term layoff since March.”

Meanwhile, “counselors [and] tutors [were] not able to stay in employment” during COVID-19. This issue was also voiced by AONTAS members at the outset of the pandemic, with one practitioner noting that:

“Many tutors in this area are also disadvantaged by being precariously employed. It’s difficult for them to support learners when they are under stress themselves” **Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (Including Community Education Issues) Working Group, 2020a, p.10).**

Another practitioner noted in interview, many “tutors are brought in on a contract basis, so if we’re not able to fill classes or cancel them, the tutor isn’t working.” S/he highlighted how this uncertainty around tuition hours, might result in challenges around finding suitable tutors in the future: “they might look for alternative employment with somebody else. There is always that chance. If their income

was negatively affected all the time, you wouldn't blame them."

Tutors also found themselves working at maximum capacity as they learned to navigate a new kind of community education delivery. As one practitioner noted,

"there was also a lot of one-to-one support with the tutors to get them up and running. They had to learn how to use Zoom and how to set up the groups and the breakout rooms and to bring people into their classrooms. It was a big change for them as well to change their teaching methods, and we had to work through all that."

For some tutors, the limited investment and support made meeting this challenge more difficult.

Finances and Income Streams

Historically, the deficiency of secure, multi-annual funding for community education posed a challenge for independent community education providers; and after the onset of COVID-19, many of these providers lost access to funding sources and revenue streams that had been critical to their provision. As one CEN member noted in Spring 2020:

"Those of us who operate under the social enterprise model now have no income streams. [Our] education income stream ceased overnight (course fees, room rental). We estimate a reduction in income of at least €25,000 from now until the summer period [2020] – this is a conservative estimate at this point and [it] is assuming that we

will be operational by September. In terms of core funding itself, all of our earned income streams for the organisation (some of which go towards core training and education costs e.g. salary, overheads) have now ceased. We do not receive any funding from DES [Department of Education and Skills] so we are in a critical position" **Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (Including Community Education Issues) Working Group, 2020a, p.9).**

At the same time, providers had additional financial needs in providing necessary supports to their learners. This included, for example, the intensive one-to-one support by phone to ensure learners were supported, and in many cases to ensure they could get up and running to engage in online learning.

Respondents to the CEN Census in December 2020 also noted disturbances in funding streams since the onset of the pandemic (see Figure 15). Forty-one groups reported either the experience of funding cuts or the anticipation of a reduction in funding or income. Importantly, almost all of those who already experienced funding cuts (20 out of 24 groups) were also anticipating a further reduction in funding or income, while 31 groups reported neither the experience nor anticipation of disturbances in their funding. This implies an uneven financial situation even within the community education sector, and supporting more disadvantaged groups is essential.

Respondents described seeing a "huge reduction in course fees," which, as indicated in Figure 10 in the first section of this report, were the second most commonly stated source of income for groups responding to the CEN Census. This was pertinent for many groups, while one respondent had "no outside funding [with all their courses being] self-funding."

Another respondent stated that their “core funding [had been] cut.” Two groups described losing funding from an Education and Training Board or Pobal, and three groups described losing funding from a “county council.” Others cited loss of funding sources such as, “DEASP AFSP [Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection Activation and Family Support Programme] Funding (due to reduction in class enrolment and for social distancing reasons);” “IDP Global;” “Tuath Housing Grant”; and “credit union [funds].” Various other streams were also impacted on a case-by-case basis; as one group noted:

“One regular sponsor was not in a position to fund us due to the impact of COVID-19 on their activities.”

Ability to plan and apply for future funding was also impacted, with one group “unable to have [their] AGM, where [they] decide on courses [to offer]”. The lack of funding, meant this central space for future planning did not happen.

Fundraising was mentioned by a number of respondents who noted that their “fundraising [was] down by approximately 33%, [since] our main fundraiser is our charity shop and it has been closed for four months so far.” Another provider indicated a “50% reduction in fundraising income.”

Furthermore, for one group, “income from social enterprise revenue [was down by] 90%.” Providers who relied on “room rental” were also negatively impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions, which meant that they could no longer rely on this funding source. Meanwhile, prior to the announcement of the MAEDF, one respondent noted that there had been “no additional funding accessed throughout [COVID-19] which is crucial for all additional supports.”

While not all groups had experienced a loss of income at the time of completing the CEN Census, as in Figure 15, **37 group out of total 76 surveyed (i.e. 49%) were concerned that they would experience funding or income loss as a result of COVID-19.** In terms of learner fees, it was noted that “potential students [were] very slow to book onto any training courses or workshops through fear of [COVID-19].” Groups also feared “financial penalty if targets were not met” and “that there may be general cuts to budgets because of deficits.” Others voiced concern over specific streams such as the “Ability Programme,” which they felt may “not be funded after July 2021 due to the financial effects of [COVID-19] on the country.” Another respondent felt that while “2021 looks stable, beyond that the Public Finances could/will get precarious in 2022/2023.” They noted that “this upheaval comes on the back of only a slight recovery after the austerity impact on the CVS sector [Community and Voluntary Sector],” citing the Brian Harvey report which

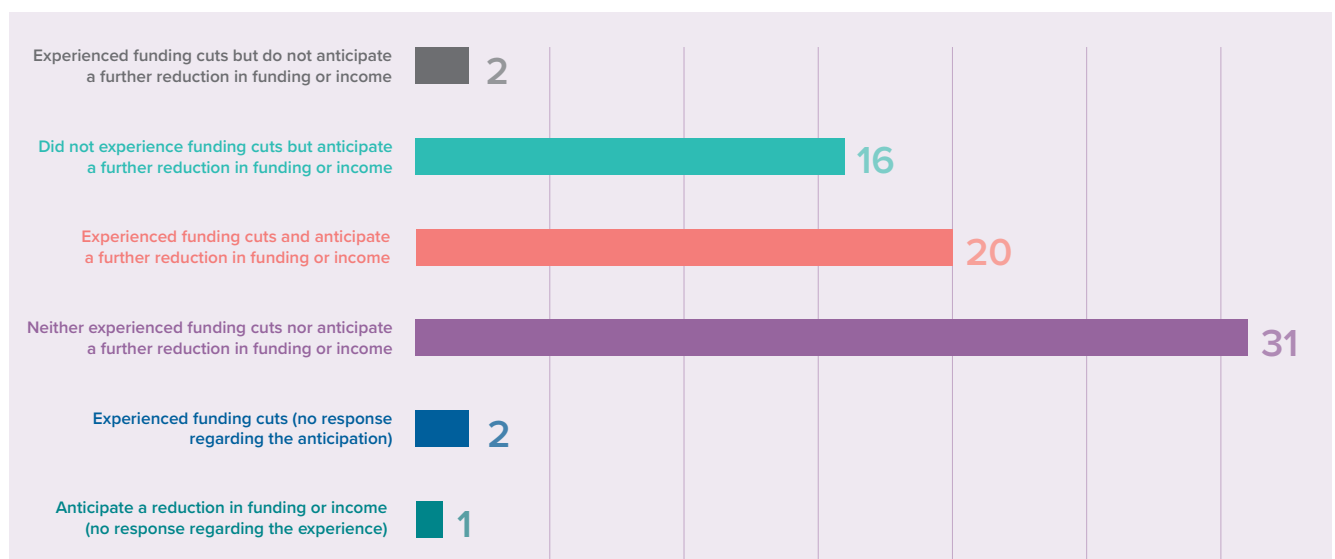


Figure 15: Experience or anticipation of disturbances in funding

described “30%+ cuts in sector” (Harvey, 2012). Others stated a lack of funding for specific models of community education as an issue. As one group highlighted, “there is no provision in the ETBs [Education and Training Boards] for new education models like our organisation in mental health to source funding within the community education system.” All of these fears contributed to a general sense of unease about how the sector would prevail after the crisis, with the potential for these financial hardships having a greater long-term impact.

Creating a Safe Space for Face-to-Face Learning

Providing safe learning spaces during the pandemic posed a significant challenge for community education providers. Asked if they had adequate space in their current facility to ensure learners could safely engage in learning, 29 out of 75 entered responses (39%) to the CEN Census disagreed or strongly disagreed, with another 13 (17%) remaining neutral. During periods when restrictions allowed learners to engage in face-to-face learning, community education providers took great pains to ensure learning could take place safely, with adequate space for social distancing. One respondent to the CEN Census indicated that one of the most substantial challenges they faced was “making the building COVID-19 friendly. The investment of hand dryers, hand sanitizing stations, etc. [was costly].” Another cited the “logistics of ensuring adherence to protocols.” This was further emphasised in interview with practitioners, with one practitioner noting that there was “so much cleaning, so much PPE,” which was “a huge demand on an organisation as well. You have to think ahead with everything. Nothing is straightforward anymore.” These activities also added to necessary staff time and cost.

A number of groups noted that finding “the space to deliver courses safely” was a substantial difficulty. In some cases, groups “had to rent extra space to meet teaching needs,” while others had to “reduce the numbers of learners in classrooms by half,” when face-to-face learning was permitted.

The need for face-to-face learning to support particular learner cohorts, meant that these reductions had a significant impact on the learner experience:

“Level 3 and 4 learners cannot learn remotely, as the learners do not have computers at home, smart phones, or no internet access. We had to open our doors to the learners in September 2020.”

In general, groups also struggled to plan with the continuously changing restrictions, which as one respondent noted, “totally interferes with the continuity of learning.” However, the ability to plan was restored somewhat when, during the Level 5 lockdown, community education providers were given the status of an “essential service.”

As noted by one practitioner:

“Once Level 5 [lockdown] had kicked in, we consulted with the ETB [Education and Training Board] and said, ‘what are the circumstances?’ They confirmed that we remained an essential service. It was much easier to say, look we’re going to do what we can, and this is the number we can have in a class. Every time I advertised a class, it was oversubscribed within 24 if not 48 hours.”

During the Community Education Practitioner Focus Group, participants were also keen to highlight the challenges they faced in having to turn learners away due to reduced capacity. It was noted that many of the groups engaging in community education were also those most at risk of contracting COVID-19 as a result of living in overcrowded conditions that did not allow them to socially

distance, particularly in inner-City Dublin or those living in Direct Provision (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020b). One group mentioned that even though it opened its centre, it encountered significant challenges, as the group experienced many COVID-19 cases in their creche in spite of following regulations.

“There are challenges of having to say no. Now there can only be 5 in a group. We have to say to staff and learners, ‘we can’t.’ All we can do is maintain safety.”

Respondents to the CEN Census likewise acknowledged the importance of face-to-face learning within community education, with one respondent noting that:

“Over 50% of our learners would prefer to be in the classroom onsite based on a survey we conducted with our learners. [Yet] [o]ur largest training rooms allow for up to 9 people allowing for 2-meter social distancing.”

Respondents also noted that even online delivery could not operate at the same capacity as before: “The big challenge is that we have to seriously reduce our numbers during this COVID-19 crisis, online or face to face.”

An investment in outreach was therefore seen as critical to a post-COVID-19 community education response. If this work did not occur, there was a fear that learners who could not be supported through the pandemic would remain distanced from the educational sector. Community education providers felt confident they could redress these inequalities with adequate supports and investment.

Practitioner Experience

Both the CEN Census and the practitioner focus group brought to light a range

of organisational perspectives on what community education practitioners experienced while supporting learners to engage in learning during the pandemic. The findings highlight a range of training needs around remote, blended, and face-to-face learning – areas which many felt needed additional funding and support to build practitioner capacity and confidence. Challenges around mental health for practitioners also emerged as an important issue, with practitioners highlighting the personal and collective challenges they faced during the pandemic. While practitioners took on additional activities and responsibilities in supporting learners during this period, many experienced challenges around managing expectations and workload during this period of great change. Others faced personal challenges associated with the pandemic. Some groups were receiving support in the area of mental health and peer support for practitioners, but this was not available across the board.

The following section outlines practitioner experiences during COVID-19. This information is broken down into the following topics: practitioner training needs during COVID-19, and practitioner mental health and wellbeing. Each section provides supporting detail in an attempt to outline the various ways in which practitioners were supported during the pandemic, and areas where further support is required.

Practitioner Training Needs During COVID-19

The sudden move to online and blended learning had posed a significant challenge for many community education practitioners, many of whom were used to working in a classroom setting. Findings from the CEN Census indicate that resources still need to be made available to support tutors in delivering high-quality, learner-centred online instruction. Indeed, 29 out of 73 entered responses (40%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “Our staff have received training in teaching remotely (online),” with another 19 (26%) remaining neutral (see Figure 16). Meanwhile, just

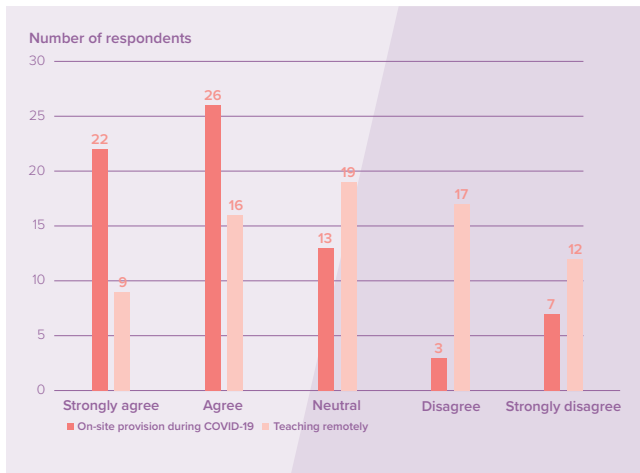


Figure 16: Training staff have received

over half of respondents felt prepared to deliver remote learning, with only 41 out of 75 entered responses (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, “We are prepared to deliver remote learning” (see Figure 17). Another 14 respondents (19%) remained neutral, while the remaining 20 (27%) indicated that they did not feel prepared to deliver remote learning. The fact that so many practitioners were unable to respond positively to this statement indicates not only the lack of resources available for staff training, but also the lack of digital resources available in the sector generally. Indeed, as indicated in the Community Education Practitioner Focus Group (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020b, p.3), some community education providers lacked devices for remote learning, and sometimes the software required posed a challenge. One participant explained:

“We were told by the Education and Training Board that we should use Microsoft Teams. The only problem is the machines we have are quite old and would not accept Teams. We simply couldn’t use it” (p.3).

Prior to the release of the MAEDF, community education groups who were not funded by Education and Training Boards, struggled to procure laptops and other digital resources necessary to ensure continuity of learning in a remote context.

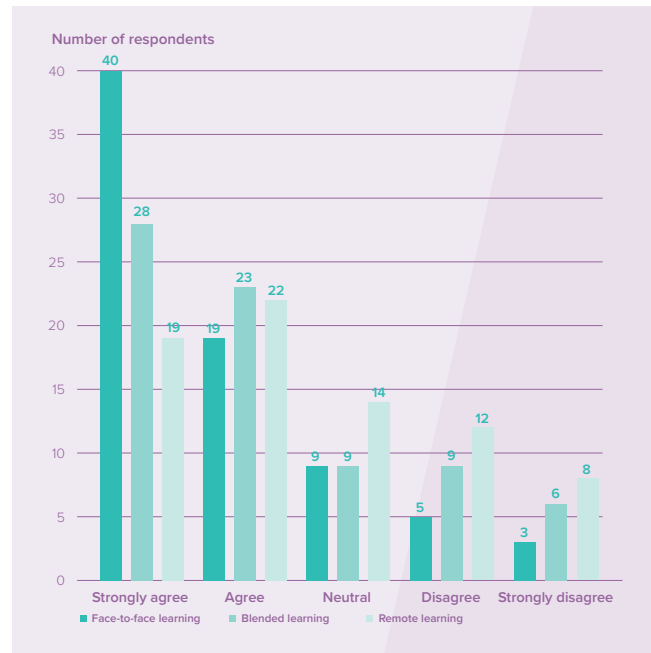


Figure 17: Preparedness for delivering courses

CEN Census respondents indicated that staff had received greater training opportunities to prepare them for face-to-face teaching than for online teaching during COVID-19. Forty-eight out of 71 entered responses (68%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Our staff have received training for on-site provision during COVID-19” (see the aforementioned Figure 16). This training would have involved, for example, following COVID-19 protocol such as social distancing regulations and generally maintaining a safe learning environment. As such, while staff showed great flexibility and willingness to engage learners in a variety of settings during COVID-19, training needs, particularly around blended and remote learning, remained in place at the time of the CEN Census, over nine months after the initial closure of community education facilities.

In line with this, there was the sense of greater readiness to teach face to face or in a blended form than to teach entirely online. In the CEN Census, as in the aforementioned Figure 17, 51 out of 75 entered responses (68%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “We are prepared to deliver blended learning.” Additionally, 59 out of 76 entered responses (78%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “We are prepared to deliver face-to-face learning.”



These findings indicate the strong preference in community education for at least some form of face-to-face learning. This is further qualified by the strong response given to the statement, “Face-to-face learning is important within a community education context,” with which 63 out of 76 entered responses (83%) strongly agreed and another eight responses (11%) agreed. As one practitioner noted in interview, “one of the things we’ve learned is that there is no substitute” for face-to-face learning.

Practitioner Mental Health and Wellbeing

All of the changes set in motion by COVID-19 at both an organisational and classroom level had a significant impact on the staff that were supporting learners during COVID-19. As one practitioner noted:

“It’s an awful lot of change in a short period of time, and it’s not even a change you can leave at work. This whole COVID-19 thing is impacting your personal life as well so it’s just something that isn’t going away. There’s very little relaxing.”

Practitioners felt a strong duty of care for learners, and a responsibility to ensure continuity of learning that in some cases added additional strain during a time when many were themselves experiencing challenges around health, family, and job security. In interview with AONTAS, another practitioner described the realities that providers were facing:

“I wouldn’t like to underplay the effect on staff. It has been such a struggle. Actually, it was worse under Level 3 [Restrictions] than it was under Level 5, because there’s a fantastic amount of work going into achieving only piecemeal things and when it doesn’t come

off you find you actually haven’t got a class after all that work.”

In some cases, mental health supports were also in place for practitioners, with one community education organisation noting, “we were extremely lucky because we have our own National Mental Health Project; they have us online doing self-care programmes.” However, this support was not available across the board, and in the Community Education Practitioner Focus Group, multiple participants cited tutor burnout as one of their major concerns.

Staff also felt concern over the risks involved in face-to-face learning. As one participant noted, “our staff aren’t all young – the majority of us are in the older age group. We’re very good at saying how well we’re doing but you have to say, it’s really a struggle” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020b, p.6). As reported in Cobain and Dowdall (2020b, p.6), there was a concern that the changes had to be implemented without enough time to reflect on them. Some groups understood that they needed to help staff “turn off,” but found it difficult while working with vulnerable learners who were in a moment of crisis. In short, participants all in all expressed that the workload for staff was unsustainable and that there should be more consideration on how to support them.

In conclusion, while practitioners worked to support learners through a period of great change, many themselves experienced challenges in adapting to the new learning environments and expressed a need for further training options to equip them to provide the best support and learning opportunities in a range of different contexts. It is important to remain cognizant of the fact that many practitioners themselves experienced a range of mental health challenges associated with the pandemic and the new working context, which emerged consistently in this research.

Impact on Learners

While the CEN Census was designed to capture data from community education practitioners, particularly on the organisational impact of COVID-19, it also highlights the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 on community education learners. In addition to these practitioner perspectives, AONTAS gathered learner perspectives during the period of June 2020 – March 2021. As detailed in the methodology section, this data was derived partly from a Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group and a series of online surveys completed as part of the National FET Learner Forum. These findings were synthesised below into five topics: learner experience of blended and remote learning; learning at home; mental health and wellbeing; disruption to learning; and finally, the impact on vulnerable / disadvantaged learner cohorts.

Learner Experience of Blended and Remote Learning

While learners sought to embrace the new online learning environment during COVID-19, many faced challenges. In the Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group, one learner described the transition as “very off-putting” commenting, “I’m not very computer literate and initially it scared me as it was so new.” Learners described issues with navigating new platforms and noted that some of their tutors had also struggled to use these platforms at the outset.

WiFi coverage and access to devices came through in learner discussions, with one learner describing their struggle to complete work on an iPad, which they found “hard to use.” Nine out of 56 applicable responses in the June 2020 survey indicated that learners still did not have access to a laptop or computer to complete their work at home. Among community education learners taking their course through an Education and Training Board, 17 learners out of 54 who gave responses to this question had been offered a computer or laptop by their Education and Training Board, while the

remaining 37 had not. Only 16 learners from 48 entered responses were using a “personal laptop (used only by you)” to complete their coursework, while another 11 used a “shared laptop (used by other members of the household).” The largest number of learners (19) were using “a mobile phone with internet to complete their work,” while only 2 indicated that their work was posted. Meanwhile, 51 (of 76) respondents to the CEN Census highlighted that learners had expressed “a need for access to ICT devices to engage in learning.” Practitioners engaging in the focus group confirmed that many learners were using mobile phones to engage in their courses, and further emphasised that “people can have smartphones, but that does not mean they are comfortable using it” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a). At the time of the CEN Census (October-December 2020) only 18 groups were able to make devices available to learners.

WiFi/Internet reliability was an issue for some learners at the beginning of the lockdown, with 12 out of 55 applicable responses indicating that they did not have a WiFi/Internet connection in their home or had an unreliable connectivity. Some learners lacked both a personal laptop and a reliable Internet connection, as one learner noted:

“We only have one laptop and three children using it. Internet access is unreliable at times.”
(Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.8)

These technological issues created stress for several learners, in combination with competing responsibilities: “you have children still out in the front garden. I was so nervous, what if my laptop died, what if we had a WiFi issue, all that is in the background” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.9). One respondent to the CEN Census highlighted that assessment had been an issue for learners during COVID-19, noting “we continued to link in and provide support however lack of computer and WiFi access prevented us completing assessments.”

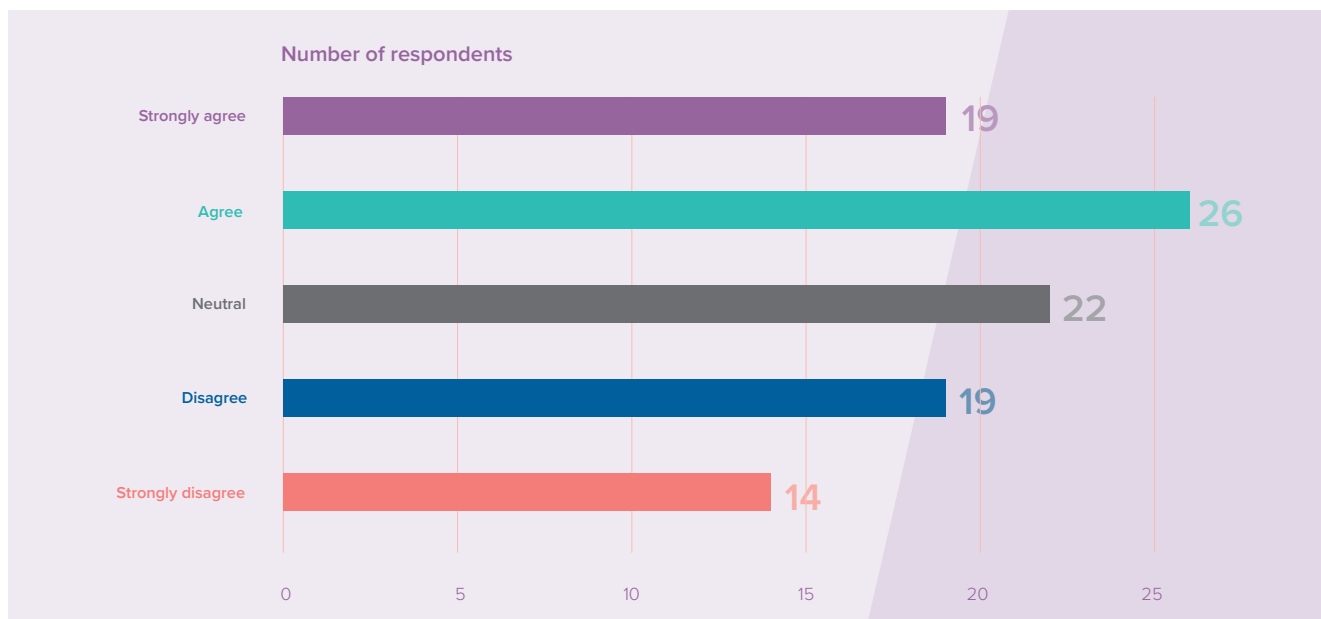


Figure 18: Responses to “I enjoy learning at home”

Learner survey response to assessment remained mixed with 10 out of 34 learners who answered the question selecting “neutral” to the statement, “I feel confident in my ability to complete the alternative assessments in place,” and one learner selecting “disagree.” In response to the statement, “I was informed about any alternative assessment arrangements in a timely manner,” 10 learners were “neutral,” with one learner selecting “strongly disagree.” Finally, 20 out of 31 applicable responses agreed or strongly agreed that the assessments in place were “fair.”

Learning at Home

While a number of learners were able to transition to online learning, a majority showed a preference for face-to-face learning, as indicated in Figure 18 below. Out of 100 applicable responses to the October-March surveys, only 45 learners agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed learning at home. The fact that 33 learners disagreed, indicates that the inability to access the physical learning space posed a substantial challenge for these learners, with many showing a strong preference for classroom-based learning.

This preference was highlighted also in CEN Census findings, in which 71 (of 76) practitioners responded positively to the statement, “face-to-face learning is important

in a community education context.” Survey results from the Dublin Adult Learning Centre echo this, indicating that 93% of respondents “would like to return to class in September [2020]” (see Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.10). Learners expressed that what they missed most in classroom learning was its social aspect: “people, getting out of the house, [a] cup of tea and chat”; “the chance to discuss ideas with my fellow students and the social interaction throughout the day” and connecting “with others in my local community” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.10).

There were also a variety of challenges in many learners’ home environment that made it difficult to engage in online learning. Learners often shared their workspace and devices with children and other family members. This was highlighted across research conducted by AONTAS during the pandemic. As one participant in the practitioner focus group explained, “you can give technology in the form of a laptop, but that is not access.” Indeed, many learners engaging in community education were also experiencing acute socioeconomic disadvantage, which the pandemic had compounded. The learner survey conducted in June 2020 indicated that learners completed their courses in a variety of environments, with the kitchen table (20) and at a desk (15) being the most common,

while 14 stated that they were completing their work on a sofa (6) or in a bed (8). Two of the learners who indicated that they were completing their coursework from “bed” were learners in Direct Provision. Two out of four learners in Direct Provision were not able to complete their course work at home without distraction.

However, there were also some learners who enjoyed remote learning, with 45 learners agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, “I enjoy learning at home” as presented in the aforementioned Figure 18. As highlighted by learners engaging in the learner focus group (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.9), the transition to online learning was an “opportunity” for “getting to know online a bit better” and a “stepping stone” to improved digital literacy. Learners benefited from increased digital skills, realising “a lot of the online stuff is free.” For a learner with a disability, online learning was helpful to “save hassle by cutting out travel” and was “80% of the quality of when I was there in person.” This learner also mentioned that Zoom “helped to create a sense of calm where people take their turn” to speak (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.9).

Still for many, learning from home correlated to a decreased level of satisfaction with the overall learning experience. In fact, as the lockdown continued, community education learners were showing lower levels of satisfaction with learning online. Compared to the initial period of the lockdown, **community education learners’ satisfaction with learning at home decreased by 22 percentage points**, with 37 out of 55 applicable responses (67%) in the June 2020 survey compared to 45 out of 100 applicable responses (45%) in the surveys in the academic year 2020-21. These responses suggest that there is a growing preference for community education learners to return to face-to-face learning.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental and wellbeing remain particularly challenging for community education learners. In the June 2020 survey, 12 out

of 49 applicable responses indicated that these respondents’ mental health was suffering as a result of the crisis, and six out of 46 applicable responses expressed that these respondents had experienced bereavement. Learners also felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had altered their original goals in learning, with 13 out of 47 applicable responses agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, “there have been significant changes to the educational goals (e.g. learning outcomes) of my course/module.” One learner with a disability noted that they had been impacted by health concerns relating to the crisis that had prevented them from learning. Data from the CEN Census reaffirms these finding, with 23 out of 76 respondents (30%) indicating an uptick in requests for counselling at their organisation.

During the learner focus group (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.12), participants described how community education courses mitigated mental health and wellbeing issues. As one learner noted:

“I would have been lost over the summer without my classes.”

Another learner explained how “for about two weeks it was a miserable experience but now [the course] it’s taking up my time, I have a feeling of purpose and accomplishment that online learning gives me” (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.12). One learner expressed in the context of their experience of “recovery education” that wraparound supports were “more necessary” than ever “because of the mental health challenges,” which had become greater because of “ill-health and fears around COVID-19.” The learner pointed out that such challenges could “run you into the ground.” Community education was seen as an important element to mitigate these challenges, contributing to better health, wellbeing, and economic outcomes (Cobain and Dowdall, 2020a, p.12).

As the lockdown continued, community education learners reported increased rates of mental health concerns. Compared to the initial period of the lockdown, **community**

education learners reporting that their mental health and wellbeing had been affected by the COVID-19 crisis increased by 37 percentage points, with 12 out of 49 applicable responses (24%) in the June 2020 survey compared to 58 out of 95 applicable responses (61%) in the October-March surveys. **A higher population of community education learners (an increase of 24 percentage points) also reported struggling with motivation and a lack of structure to their day**, as the pandemic continued, with 13 out of 49 applicable responses (27%) in the June 2020 survey compared to 49 out of 97 applicable responses (51%) in the October-March surveys.

Impact on Vulnerable/Disadvantaged Learner Cohorts

During COVID-19, a compounding of social and educational disadvantage was witnessed across the globe (OECD, 2020b), and in Ireland, many inequalities were made starker. As highlighted by the the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education Issues) Working Group (2020b), in a paper on “Educational Equity and Learner Cohorts,” learners in vulnerable / disadvantaged groups experienced an exacerbation of many of the challenges they faced prior to the pandemic, with many facing job loss, poverty, housing problems, domestic violence, isolation, mental health problems, marginalisation, or lack of essential supports. Learners in these categories faced, in many cases, the challenges mentioned throughout this section more acutely. Indeed, 64 (of 76) respondents in the CEN Census agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The disruption to learning has had the greatest impact on our most vulnerable learners.”

Another cohort of learners who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic were older people. As highlighted by Ward, O’Mahoney, and Kenny (2021), COVID-19 restrictions greatly reduced opportunities for social participation and interactions. This posed a risk of increased loneliness among older adults (p.3). The challenges faced by older people in addition to the above learner

cohorts, were highlighted in a number of practitioner interviews. In addition to facing high levels of isolation and concern relating to their physical health, older people were found to be significantly impacted by digital poverty. As noted by one interviewee:

“The younger people are great, it’s the older people that we’re struggling with... they’re also the ones that we need to be connecting in with, more because they’re only after coming out of cocooning.”

However, many older learners, particularly prior to the arrival of digital resources through the MAEDF, were simply unable to engage in learning online. As one respondent to the CEN Census described: “It has been challenging recruiting older persons to online delivery as many experience digital poverty and lack of digital skill.” Another respondent noted that “older people’s services were unable to continue and half our client group are older people.” Community education groups discovered innovative ways of connecting with older people to help mitigate some of these challenges. As one respondent to the CEN Census noted, “we set up a programme to teach older people digital skills via the telephone.” Another group reported an increased demand for their course on “Basic Digital Skills for adult learners and older adults.”

There is evidence of these challenges in the feedback provided by learners as well. The COVID-19 learner survey and the Forum surveys asked respondents whether they were those living in Direct Provision; Traveller or Roma; non-native English speaker; a lone parent; person with a disability; and/or a person born outside Ireland. Based on these questions, it is possible to identify these vulnerable learner cohorts as presented in Figure 19. All in all, 42 learners (out of total 69) in the COVID-19 survey and 61 learners (out of total 123) in the Forum surveys

identified as being from at least one of these cohorts.¹⁰

Survey text responses illustrate some of the difficulty that vulnerable learner cohorts encountered throughout the pandemic. For example, a lone parent learner commented that they had experienced, “mental and emotional fatigue.” A learner born outside Ireland stated, “[Remote learning is] harder than learning in the centre.” A learner with a disability wrote, “While [I am] very happy to have this course delivered via Zoom by an excellent tutor, it is much better to attend in person.” It is also important to note that community education played a vital role for vulnerable learners as well. One learner with a disability mentioned, “I look forward to our class every week. This is very important for my mental ability to cope with cocooning. It can be so hard.”

To sum up the findings on the impact of COVID-19 on community education learners, these learners in general experienced greater difficulty in the later period of the pandemic than in the initial period. They reported less enjoyment with remote learning, more of a struggle with motivation and/or a lack of structure, and a greater impact on their mental health. Within the context of these challenges, it was also found that community education courses played a vital role in mitigating some of these difficulties. This point connects back to the issues of ICT equipment, internet access, and digital skills, since without appropriate ICT setups and skills, in most cases learners would not have been able to benefit fully (or at all) from community education courses during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

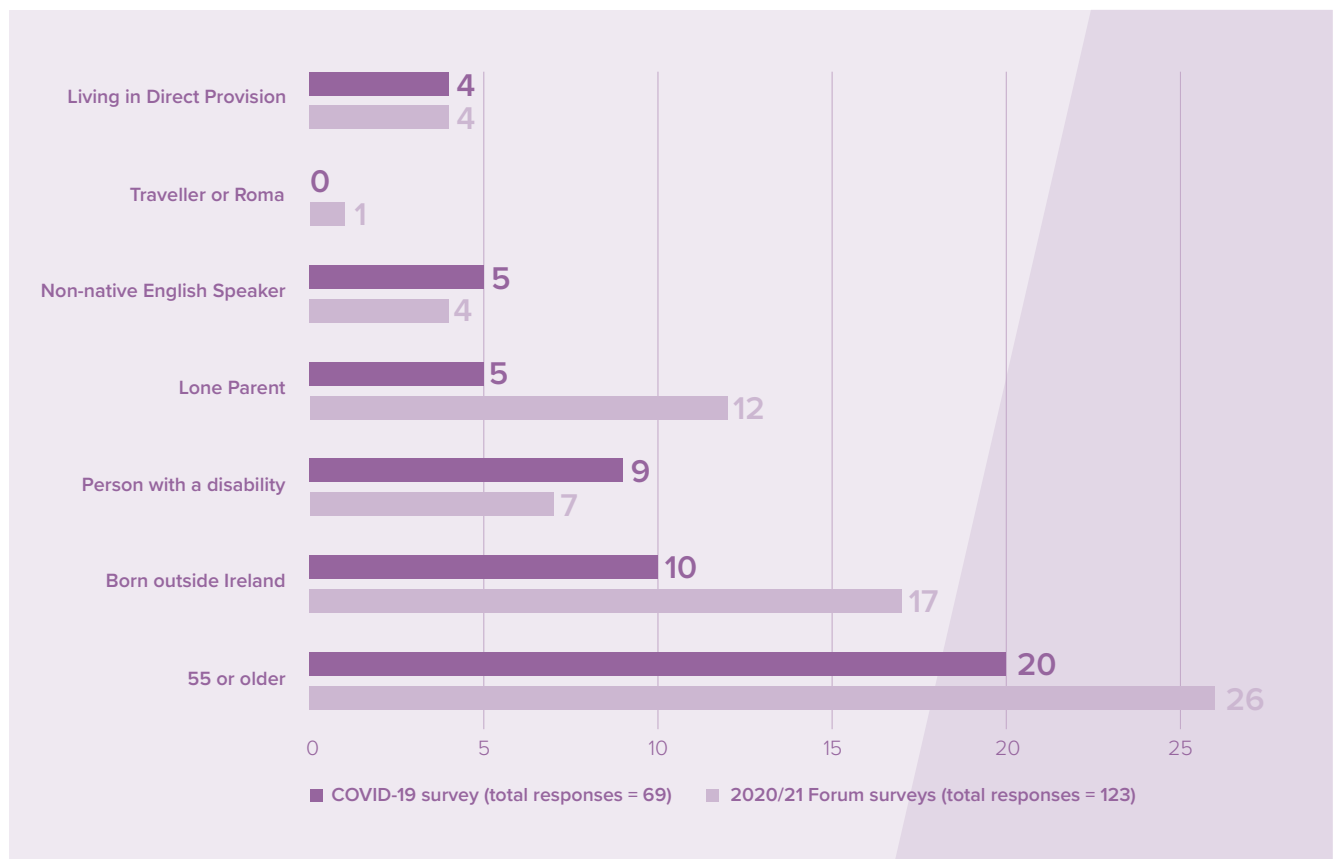


Figure 19: Vulnerable learner cohorts

¹⁰ The sum of each category in Figure 19 is not necessarily equal to the total number of vulnerable learners because one learner could have been in more than one category.



Moving Forward: Priorities for 2021 and Beyond

At the close of the CEN Census survey, respondents were asked what they felt their priorities would be in 2021. The priorities identified highlight the role community education can play during COVID-19 and in a post-pandemic context, and the resources – such as learner and practitioner supports and funding for outreach – that are required by community education organisations in order to achieve their maximum potential in supporting learners to attain their goals.

A number of priorities for the future, and areas for support were also identified in the survey AONTAS conducted on the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund. Here respondents identified areas they would like to see included in a future fund, such as learner supports, programme-based funding, and ICT devices. This section outlines the range of priorities identified by respondents to both the CEN Census and MAEDF survey. Each section provides supporting detail in an attempt to highlight some possible paths forward.

Priorities for 2021 Identified in the CEN Census

In their responses, practitioners highlighted the need for additional wraparound supports to respond to the pandemic, with 70 (of 76) respondents indicating that supports to promote **mental health and wellbeing** were either critical (45) or important (25). This is further justified by learner survey responses, which highlight an exacerbation of mental health

challenges. As previously discussed (see Figure 12), the holistic range of supports provided through community education make it particularly well equipped to deliver on this objective. Furthermore, 64 practitioners responding to the CEN Census felt that community education played either an important (32) or critical role (32) in **providing key messages** to the community around health.

Practitioners also felt that community education played an important role in **promoting social cohesion** during and after the pandemic, with 34 viewing their role in this as critical and 32 considering it to play an important role. Additionally, respondents felt that community education played an important (20) or critical role (32) in the **re-skilling/training** of those who have become unemployed as a result of COVID-19 and were preparing to meet this demand. **Outreach** to new learners and learners who had not been able to continue learning because of COVID-19 was felt to be a key priority, with 52

respondents indicating that some of their energies would be directed toward this task in 2021. As highlighted earlier, **training for tutors** to equip them to provide high quality blended learning was also felt to be required, with 36 groups identifying this as important and 25 considering it critical. While many respondents hoped they would be able to “meet learners face to face to create that relationship-based teaching practice” more frequently in 2021, they also highlighted the need for further support around remote and blended learning. While a great deal of support had been given, additional **digital literacy training for learners** was felt to be needed, with 27 respondents viewing this as important and 37 as critical. **Digital resources for learners** were also required by 67 groups responding to the CEN Census.

Groups were eager to continue providing education courses with a clear community education ethos. As one respondent summarised, “[we want to offer] a safe, supportive learning environment where learners can feel valued, encouraged, and challenged to reach their full potential.” Another noted that they would, “keep doing what we can collectively, thinking and reflecting as we go to be as adaptive, inclusive and innovative as possible, challenge ourselves to include as many as possible, [with] effort [directed] most strongly [toward] those on the margins.”

A Renewed Call for Another Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund

As highlighted by AONTAS’ report, “[Making an Impact: A Reflective View of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund](#)” (Cobain et al., 2021) the MAEDF marked a turning point for community education groups, bringing invaluable resources to the community education sector. Most prominently, it facilitated the purchase of new ICT equipment and laptops to be loaned to learners, which was essential for online learning and teaching. As such, many groups were able to meet their demand for digital resources identified in the CEN Census through this fund. In addition, some

community education providers used the MAEDF to improve their facility and purchase safety equipment to increase the capacity for face-to-face learning. Others deployed the MAEDF to develop additional learner support especially in terms of mental health.

There is no doubt that the MAEDF helped address some of the challenges community education learners faced as a result of the pandemic. Indeed, the report found, “the vast majority (98 out of 103 respondents) would welcome an additional MAEDF” (Cobain et al., 2021, p. 5). Nonetheless, as highlighted in the above report, many community education groups pointed out that the tight deadline and the lack of clear guidelines and information posed significant challenges, meaning that some groups were not able to reap the full benefits from this invaluable fund.

As reported in Cobain et al. (2021, pp. 16-17), respondents to the survey were also asked what areas they would like to see included in a future fund; these are summarised in Figure 20 featured below. Learner support stood out, which has significant implications particularly given that there were groups who could not access this strand of funding in the first iteration. There were several recommendations such as: “funding for mental health programmes,” “more one day courses and relaxation activities,” and “resourcing [of] social support groups, e.g., health and wellbeing support groups, with funding to purchase learning materials and resources that would be beneficial to their development.” Some respondents referred to the challenges in remote learning, such as “some people liv[ing] in spaces where they share accommodation” or situations where “work at home is simply not possible.” Given these challenges, it is understandable why learner support stood out as an area for additional funding.

Another common response was ICT hard/software despite it being the most common funding area in the first iteration of the MAEDF. This is partly because of longer-term ICT needs, such as “a Rent-to-Buy

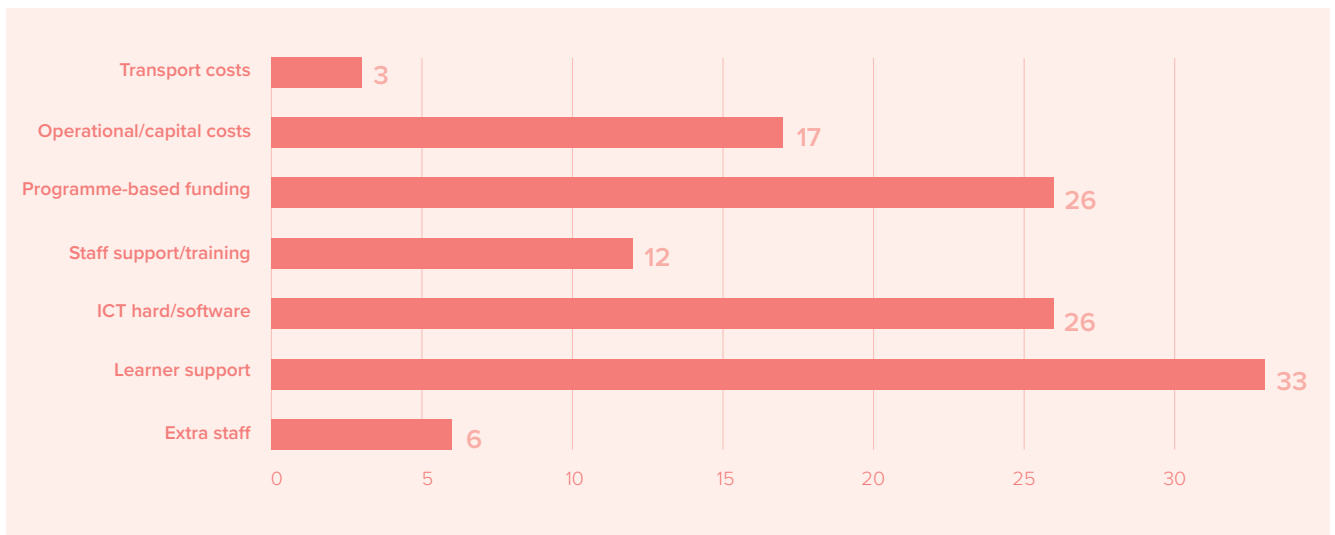


Figure 20: Themes in future funding areas

Scheme so learners will have IT Access [in the] longer term” and “Microsoft Office Suite [l]icences for [l]earners.” For community education groups that used the funding to purchase digital platform licenses to Zoom or Blackboard, the needs for funding naturally reappear once these licenses expire.

The provision of programme-based support was also a prominent area identified within the recommendations. One community education group mentioned, “more focus on rural community activities such as horticulture.” Another commented, “include an option for a centre to fund external courses, for example, a learner would benefit from a fund that covers upskilling.” These diverse needs suggest that community education providers would like to offer a variety of courses to address specific local needs. Flexible funding to support them will therefore be important to help community education groups meet the demand for lifelong and life-wide learning.





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Conclusion

This report, which presents findings from the first iteration of the CEN Census, has aimed to provide factual insight about the community education sector in Ireland, developing an evidence base that could be used to advocate for needs across the sector. The CEN Census provided a systematic overview of the sector, including key information on staff, learner totals and profiles, course types and objectives, and funding sources. In the context of COVID-19, the research was able to capture critical organisational perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on community education. Finally, the report drew from AONTAS' learner surveys and a learner focus group to incorporate learners' vital perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on their learning.

The research findings presented throughout this report highlight the importance of community education in supporting learners (and particularly vulnerable or disadvantaged learners), through the current COVID-19 pandemic. Community education has been a lifeline for many learners during this period. As has been seen, community education providers have shown great dexterity and have engaged learners in innovative ways throughout the crisis, despite the myriad challenges they themselves have faced in these unprecedented times. Yet the learner surveys over the course of the pandemic suggest that community education learners have been experiencing greater difficulty in their learning in general compared to the initial phase of the crisis. Community education providers play a vital role in continuing to engage these learners, both through course provision and a range of associated wraparound supports, including on-site supports for domestic violence, mental health, family, and childcare.

The CEN Census revealed several challenges to community education groups with respect to funding in the time of COVID-19. Forty-one groups reported funding cuts or the anticipation of a reduction in funding or income as a result of COVID-19. Importantly, almost all of those who already experienced funding cuts (20 out of 24 groups) were also anticipating a further reduction in funding or income. Furthermore, several CEN Census respondents reported multiple funding streams, which has implications on staff time, ultimately taking away from time spent with learners.

It is therefore important to support and resource the community education sector in a coherent, consistent, and sustainable way so that it can continue empowering learners and communities effectively and efficiently. While the MAEDF was a welcome step forward to this end, further funding is needed to unlock the full potential of community education in meeting a diverse range

of learner needs during COVID-19 and in the future. In the immediate term, another iteration of the MAEDF is required. This fund must be cognizant of the time needed for Education and Training Boards to administer the fund, and the time taken for groups to successfully apply for and spend the monies. Clearer guidelines across each Education and Training Board are also needed to facilitate an equitable application process. Finally, the MAEDF should be expanded to include funding for additional categories such as staff costs and broader course provision – both areas which require additional support and expansion in light of findings from the CEN Census 2020. In the longer term, a more coherent framework for funding is much needed by the sector, to help reduce the pressure on community education providers and enable them to focus on their main role of supporting learners. This funding model should be sufficiently flexible to allow for changing local needs.

Furthermore, it is clear from these findings that a long-term strategy to address educational inequality, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is also needed; and community education providers and learners should be consulted as part of any future planning. It is vital that the continued impact of COVID-19, particularly on vulnerable learner cohorts, is closely monitored, with the findings from this process being incorporated into plans for corrective actions moving forward.

In light of the high demand for non-accredited learning in community education during 2019-2020, it is clear that further investment into non-accredited learning opportunities should be considered to enable marginalised learners to engage in education. These courses, as the CEN Census findings show, have a strong focus on social inclusion (239 courses), mental health and wellbeing (227 courses) and learning to learn/life skills (192 courses) – objectives which have shown themselves to be particularly valuable in these times. A number of organisations have also reported an increased demand for particular accredited courses, with

learners looking to reskill in response to the COVID-19 crisis. These developments should be monitored with a view to supporting organisations in meeting this demand.

Community education's importance in addressing this demand also has broader implications in terms of its role in assisting access to higher education (Indecon International Research Economists, 2021). It is particularly important to take a tertiary wide approach to educational access and ensure learners can engage in part-time accredited provision in community education.

Learners who have become disengaged from learning due to challenges associated with the pandemic will need to be supported to return to learning in their own time. Moreover, valuable opportunities to engage new learner cohorts, who may not have engaged in community education previously, should not be lost. In line with this, a community education outreach strategy, and increased funding to build organisational capacity to reach out to the local community should be considered.

In short, while this report provides a significant insight into a sector that heretofore has been under-studied, there remains a need for further research. Firstly, the development of a long-term strategy to support the sector should be evidence-informed by a rigorous research framework consulting providers and learners during and beyond the pandemic. Secondly, further detail on funding structures and additional funding needs should be obtained. This will inform the creation of a coherent and sustainable funding framework to reduce the administrative burden and enable the sector to focus on addressing community needs. Finally, finer demographic data on community education learners should be collected to map local needs in greater depth and also to develop a further understanding of community education's vital role in supporting adult learners to develop skills such as adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy (OECD, 2012). Such research will contribute to enhancing educational equality.



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