Community Education Practitioner Focus Group

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This report summarises the findings from 2 community education practitioner focus groups held on 14th October 2020. Focus groups were held as part of a larger research piece on *Community Education in a Time of COVID-19*, which will include the pilot of the first ever Community Education Census. 18 practitioners representing 17 different organisations from 7 different counties took part in these focus groups. Participants were broken up into two different focus groups for discussions, each lasting 40 minutes. Focus groups were held on Zoom. During these discussions, participants were asked to reflect on some of the challenges faced in the transition to remote learning and some of the positive learning that has come out of this period. Discussions also focused on priorities for the coming months and what is needed to ensure community education is able to deliver quality learning to a diverse group of learners in the context of the pandemic.

The findings presented in this report reflect the major topics raised during discussions. The topics highlighted below are as follows:

- Not all learners could meaningfully engage in remote learning
- Not all community education centres had the technology necessary to move online
- The benefits of face-to-face learning are being lost even in the modified opening of community education centres
- Community education centres are running waiting lists
- During the pandemic, community education outreach cannot happen in the same way and vulnerable learners are most impacted
- Phone calls are essential to keep learners connected, but they are very resource intensive
- Community education facilitators and tutors are at greater risk of burnout
- Communication with local Education and Training Boards posed new challenges
- Community education centres were relied on to deliver critical supports during lockdown
- The funding structure of community education in Ireland challenges the sector's ability to respond to the crisis
- Challenges that vulnerable learners faced before were compounded by the crisis
- Learning space poses a significant challenge for vulnerable learners
- Colder weather months pose greater challenges for community education providers
- Childcare poses a major challenge for learners

Each topic is followed by a summary of recorded conversations. Direct quotations from participants are used as much as possible to provide evidence to support these topics. Based on these topics, the following recommendations for immediate action emerged:

1. The need for unrestricted funding to support device procurement, learner outreach support, and additional staff supports

    - **The new Mitigating Educational Disadvantage fund announced in Budget 2021** will be a welcome addition and our focus will be to ensure those most in need receive the support

2. Communication between ETBs and funded community education groups needs improvements in terms of:

    a. availability of tutors
    b. decisions that impact on the operations of a community education group such as programmes offered
    c. clarity on funding in the context of reduced numbers
    d. clarity on the availability of devices

3. The development of a long-term recovery plan to support reengagement with learners from vulnerable learner groups returning to community education **is essential and should be expanded across the tertiary education system more generally**

4. Increased opportunities and services for staff support and wellbeing to curtail tutor burnout could be offered, **through collaborative support from a range of organisations eg ETBs and AONTAS**

Focus Group Highlights

Not all learners could meaningfully engage in remote learning

The initial lockdown that occurred in response to COVID-19 posed significant challenges for community education groups. At the beginning, participants in the focus group described themselves as being "totally unprepared." Participants also reported a notable drop-off in numbers. The most concerning aspect of this decrease in participation was that, as one participant described, "the most disadvantaged were the first to drop." Another participant elaborated on this point saying:

> "There was no plan going forward. We had to just grab email addresses and start reaching out. Less than 25 % engaged during lockdown. There was no point in putting pressure on people."

For other groups, learners participated for "the first two-weeks" of lockdown restrictions, but began dropping off more as the novelty of online learning began to wane. Dropoff rates were even higher for learners at lower levels, where online learning was more of a challenge:

> "Learners at Level 4 and 5 are ok with technology, but Levels 3 and under don't have the skills. This group, along with older learners, saw about 20% reduction in participation."

In some instances, great efforts had been made to connect learners with the devices needed to continue learning, but in many cases the need for devices exceeded the group's ability to provide access to the hardware necessary to keep learners engaged.

For some groups, access to devices was not the only concern, with learners unable to meaningfully engage even when devices could be provided. As one participant explained, "you can give technology in the form of a laptop, but that is not access." Practitioners commented on the acute socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by learners engaging with their organisations, which the pandemic had compounded. A number of community education learners relied on their mobile phones to complete their courses, but this came with its own challenges. Another participant explained, "people can have smartphones, but that does not mean they are comfortable using it." This comment was further expanded upon by another member of the group who added, "mobile devices are also not ideal for learning." A lack of access to the tools necessary to succeed online therefore posed significant challenges for learners' ability to stay connected while others faced barriers to participation on account of low levels of digital literacy.

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Not all community education centres had the technology necessary to move online

Not all community education providers had access to the devices needed to deliver education to learners remotely. In some instances, there was a problem with the digital software that community education providers were being told they should use, with one participant explaining:

> "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."

For community education groups, who were not funded by Education and Training Boards, procuring laptops was a challenge. As one participant described:

> "We contacted the Education and Training Board for laptops; they came back and said no, but then we went back again. This week they said 'we don't have any, but we have PCs in good working condition. The PCs could be wiped of all software and we can loan out'. This, however, would be costly in terms of investment for software. We had to say no because [they were] just not suitable."

These challenges only added to the difficult scenarios community education groups had to navigate at the outset of the crisis.

The benefits of face-to-face learning are being lost even in the modified opening of community education centres

Participants welcomed the new regulations, which allowed for some modified opening of community education centres, but again, acknowledged challenges to the provision of a holistic community education experience. Face-to-face interaction in these settings was not

the same and providers felt it was important to note the difference. As one participant explained:

> "The tea room in our centre is shut, where before learners would have come in early before class and had a chat. Even though some of us are open we still aren't getting that connection we would have with learners"

This sentiment was echoed by another participant who explained, "we are losing the ability to create the relationship like we would have in the past."

In one case, a centre had opened, but noted the challenges encountered in doing so were significant, as in spite of following regulations, they faced many COVID-19 cases in their creche. Participants also noted that they were engaging with groups such as those in emergency accommodation and Direct Provision who are at higher risk of COVID-19 due to overcrowding. The event led to significant reflection on the role and capacity of community education in the crisis, with the participant explaining, "community education can't be out there taking risks; there are a lot of things that we cannot do in the current climate and that's hard." The outbreak shifted the perspective of the centre, with the participant further adding, "being brave means we have to say no people we would never say no to before."

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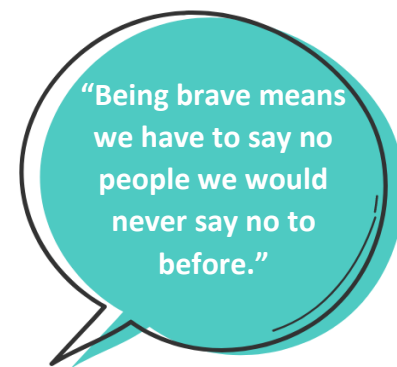
Community education centres are running waiting lists

Community education providers noted that they were having a hard time keeping up with the demand for access to courses. As one participant stated, "now we've a massive waiting list." For many this came down to space and the ability to support learners given the additional resources required in times of COVID-19. As another participant explained:

> "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."

Saying no, was not something community education providers or tutors wanted to do, but was considered a necessity at this time. Community education providers believed that following the crisis, 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, as a means to mitigate some of the challenges that they will continue to face, such as mental health concerns, unemployment and social isolation.

During the pandemic, community education outreach cannot happen in the same way and vulnerable learners are most impacted

In the immediate lockdown, the focus was on supporting adults who were currently engaged in learning. As community education providers move into the new academic year, bringing new learners into community education has posed a number of challenges. Learners are reluctant to come into centres on account of health concerns and community

education staff cannot complete community outreach in the same manner as before the crisis. One participant explained this stating:

> "There is a whole ethical piece around outreach. People are now in crisis. Knowing what supports they need, when to reach out, and when to give them space, can take a lot of time and getting to know the person."

For many community education providers, there was a consensus that significant thought needed to go into any outreach work. However, the limited time to invest in this planning, due to the immediacy of the crisis, meant this crucial reflection and planning was not taking place.

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Phone calls are essential to keep learners connected, but they are very resource intensive

Telephone calls were described by participants as a "lifeline for learners." Community education providers detailed the significant amount of time and energy that was quickly invested into keeping learners connected throughout the period of remote learning. This process, however, was both "resource intensive" and "expansive" with one participant describing:

> "We have 300 people we would need to call in a week to reach everyone. We have to think, 'Can we afford to make those phone calls?'"

In some instances, there were limits to what these phone calls for achieve, especially for marginalised learners. As one participant described:

> "We were caught in a situation where it was difficult to stay in touch with leaners. ESOL learners in Direct Provision might not always have the [phone] credit."

Community education facilitators and tutors are at greater risk of burnout

The crisis posed a number of challenges for tutors, with multiple participants citing tutor burnout as one of their major concerns. Many tutors were asked to quickly move online and replicate the relationships they built in face-to-face settings, which was not always felt to be possible. For a number of tutors, feeling comfortable with online teaching tools was also a challenge. A lot of the success and ability of community education centres to move teaching online was rooted in the "enthusiasm and goodwill of tutors" and "staff dedication." Tutors willingly worked "over and above" to keep learners engaged.

There were limits to this, however. One participant stated that their centre had six Education and Training Board paid tutors stop teaching since the onset of the crisis due to health-related concerns or a feeling that teaching could not effectively be moved online. In centres where a significant amount of staff were volunteers, relying on them to give more and more was not ideal. Another cited concern over staff health and wellbeing in the long term, noting that a number of staff were themselves vulnerable:

> "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."

There was general concern about the lack of time allocated to pause and reflect on the changes that were being implemented. A number of centres recognised the need to work with staff to help them find ways to "turn off", though they recognised the difficulty in doing this when working with vulnerable learners who were in a moment of crisis. The consensus overall was that the workload of tutors was not sustainable and that more consideration needed to be given in regards to how to support tutors in this period.

Communication with local Education and Training Boards posed new challenges

COVID-19 brought to light the need for improved communications with Education and Training Boards. The closing down of Education and Training Board facilities in the first phase of the lockdown was described as happening quickly, leaving little time for communication between Education and Training Boards and community education providers. This had a knock-on effect for community education groups who had little time to respond once decisions were communicated out. One participant described the following scenario:

> "Our Education and Training Board closed down on the Thursday evening. We received notice that night. We had a class scheduled for Friday morning and all of a sudden, we were told we would not have a tutor. It was difficult because these Education and Training Board decisions have an impact on our main operations, but we are not consulted and told information in advance."

Another participant echoed the need for additional Education and Board support for community education groups who were facing significant challenges given their population of learners. Community education groups welcomed the potential for more support from Education and Training Boards and hoped that more open conversations between community education groups and Education and Training Boards would enable coordinate action that could better support learner needs.

Community education centres were relied on to deliver critical supports during lockdown

Recognising the responsive, grass-roots nature of community education centres a number of community education centres were asked to support the administration and delivery of critical local supports in response to COVID-19. One participant described the first two weeks of the initial lockdown as a period of "supporting people to apply for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment" and "supporting food deliveries to vulnerable members in the community."

Some community education providers, who had already been providing critical services, such as domestic violence support, were now required to provide even greater support. As one participant explained:

"Our domestic violence support group is so busy. Guards are in and out several times a day. Delivering required support is a huge shift for the organisation."

For many community education groups, the focus "became broader than education. The social and community side became even more important." This shift in focus, however, had wider effects on the ability of community education providers to allocate time and resources to supporting the implementation of effective online learning processes on top of these additional requests for support.

The funding structure of community education in Ireland challenges the sector's ability to respond to the crisis

Participants in the session had varying funding models with different concerns emerging in connection with these structures. For groups who were fully funded by a government body, a number of the charity emergency grants were off limits, meaning they did not have access to grants necessary to deal with immediate concerns like IT needs or PPE requirements. Another group described really struggling, stating that the decision to run classes, and the financial ability to do so, was really challenged during this period. The participant further explained:

> "Most of the funding we receive is restricted and we only receive it half way through the year. We need to ensure it is spent by the end of the year, but we cannot just spend it on anything. It became a challenge and we put ourselves under huge pressure trying to figure it out."

Other groups described facing targets that were simply not attainable in times of COVID-19. The funding providers that established these targets had not effectively communicated that these numbers would be reduced, causing significant worry for groups. This lack of information left groups worried about whether they could run face-to-face classes, given the number of learners who could be accommodated on site was lower than those established to justify payment of a tutor on that course. For groups who relied on generated revenue through social enterprise or room rentals on their premises, the lack of revenue caused by the crisis resulted in significant concerns about the future. The fear of many providers now is that "we will get what's leftover in the pot, but that won't be much." Participants would like to see concern for community education groups and their funding made a top priority to ensure learners who need these supports can continue to access them.

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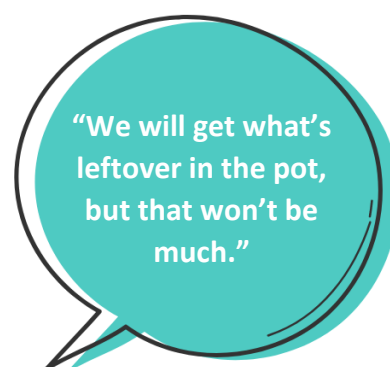
Challenges that vulnerable learners faced before were compounded by the crisis

A number of community education learners faced greater challenges during the crisis due to unemployment and a limited availability of support services. One participant who ran a recovery community education programme described the difficultly of having three learners

pass away during the crisis. Another provider described the resilience one learner demonstrated in finishing her course:

> "She was aged 19, the oldest of 10 children, and pregnant with her first child, all while trying to finish a course online. She had no online access. We tried our best to support her finishing. She did it. I don't know how she did it, but she did. It takes so much."

While this story, of course, had a more positive outcome, the exceptional effort on the part of the learner to overcome these challenges cannot be understated.

Learning space poses a significant challenge for vulnerable learners

The onset of the crisis meant learners had to continue learning offsite, and for a number of community education learners, this was not ideal. Home was not seen to be compatible with learning for all learners, with one participant explaining, "family environment didn't always lend itself to a safe space to learn."
For learners in temporary accommodation, the challenges were also significant. As one community education practitioner described:

> "Family environment didn't always lend itself to a safe space to learn."

> "A number of the learners on our programme were in hostels, recovery centres, or cramped accommodation. They were trying to participant in the course, but often had to do so on their phone walking around outside, which really doesn't work."

Another participant pointed out that a lot of the places where learners would go to complete their work outside of their centre, such as libraries and resource centres were also closed, meaning learners had little place else to turn.

Colder weather months pose greater challenges for community education providers

Community education groups tried to keep connections going in creative and safe ways, abiding by social distancing restrictions, and by promoting outdoor learning opportunities. There were a number of community horticulture courses that remained active and "walk and talk" groups that were set up to keep learners connected. These groups, however, could not continue in the colder months and providers expressed concern over the impact this may have on learners.

Childcare poses a major challenge for learners

While childcare has always posed challenges for learners accessing courses, the current COVID-19 restrictions have increased this challenge. A number of community education centres would have provided "vital services" as part of their package of supports, which often included onsite childcare facilities. These supports closed in the immediate phase, leaving learners to care for young children while learning. One participant described hearing

a phrase that s/he felt captured it best: "working from home means we are now childminding from work." This was a challenge for both tutors and learners, who faced increased childcare responsibilities and differing work schedules as a result of lockdown restrictions.

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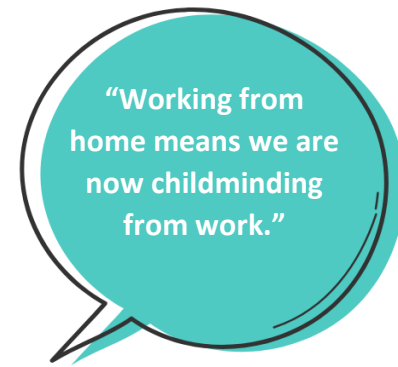
Conclusion

Community education groups faced and are continuing to face a number of challenges in delivering their work. Given that community education groups support some of the most disadvantaged learner populations, the inability of groups to continue to meaningfully engage with learners from these populations in the same way as they did before the pandemic will have a long-term impact. There is a real concern for the impact this pandemic is having on vulnerable learners. Challenges these groups are facing, simply cannot be redressed in a remote learning context. Community education groups are struggling to do their best to support these groups, but are faced with the reality of their limitations in the context of the pandemic, which mean they cannot operate as they did before.

Helping community education address the challenges faced by the pandemic will therefore require the provision of additional supports to face the immediate challenges faced in immediate learning context, but also supporting a future recovery plan that is aimed at remediating some of the barriers that simply cannot be overcome without a return to face-to-face learning.

In the immediate period, community education groups will need further flexible investment that allows them to address immediate financial challenges (eg the need for digital devices, the loss of revenue from room rentals, etc.). They will also need supports to allocate time to staff and tutor wellbeing, to avoid real threat of tutor and staff burnout during this period. Groups will also need additional resourcing to help deliver the services that are now being accessed even more (eg domestic violence supports, unemployment supports, food deliveries, etc.).

During focus group discussions some new positive developments were highlighted as well. Notably, the greater use of digital learning has increased access opportunities for some learners, particularly those in employment who could not meet scheduling demands of onsite learning and those in rural communities were centres were not close by. The importance of these developments should not be lost, but must be discussed in relation to the very real challenges that groups now face.

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