

# Community Education Network (CEN)

Meeting Report  
23rd June 2016

## Introduction

The Community Education Network (CEN) offers an opportunity for independent community education practitioners to come together at a national level and is focused on the following principles:

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

There are currently many challenges facing community education, including cuts to funding and resources, labour market policies, and the QQI reengagement process. Such challenges have had an impact on morale within the sector and so, a space for practitioners to come together to share learning and provide mutual support is essential and the CEN provides this space. The focus of this meeting (23rd June) was to begin to address these challenges and improve morale by creating a space to learn from other projects about their work, discuss ways of highlighting the value of community education, and promote the work of local projects. The meeting also provided the opportunity to strengthen the relationship between Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the community education sector and to highlight concerns and queries about the upcoming re-engagement process.

AONTAS has recently been through a period of significant change with Berni Brady retiring after twenty-three years as Director. Having developed and supported the CEN over seven years, Niamh O'Reilly has now moved on, following her appointment as CEO of AONTAS. While her absence will be felt within the CEN, her new role will allow her to continue to advocate for the value and importance of community education, a subject she feels passionately about. Suzanne Kyle has recently joined the AONTAS team on a part-time basis as CEN Coordinator and so it is timely that a review of the CEN would take place. This meeting provided the opportunity to begin the process of reviewing the role and value of the CEN.

### The objectives of the meeting therefore were as follows:

- **Update** members on the advocacy work of AONTAS
- **Provide** a space to network and learn about different initiatives around the country
- **Begin** the process of reviewing the role and value of the CEN
- **Share** information on the use of EPALÉ for networking and collaboration
- **Facilitate** an information session between CEN members and QQI

## Meeting Outline

The meeting was held in a hall in the grounds of Warrenmount Community Education and Development Centre. It was chaired by Suzanne Kyle in her new role as CEN Coordinator. Suzanne introduced herself, revisited the role, values and main areas of work of the CEN, and outlined the agenda for the meeting.

The focus of the first part of the meeting was on updates within the sector and providing the opportunity to share learning from each other and other community education initiatives.

A review exercise during the second part of the meeting allowed participants to reflect on the role and value of the CEN and to voice their views in relation to the future direction of the CEN.

The final section of the meeting involved an input about the use of the EPALE platform for collaboration, and a question and answer session with QQI. CEN members had submitted their questions in advance of the meeting and these were responded to by QQI staff. There was also an opportunity for further questions from the floor.

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

**AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting**  
**Thursday, 23rd June 2016**  
**Venue: Warrenmount Community Education Centre**  
**Time: 10am – 3pm**

<b>10.00 – 10.30:</b>	Registration and tea/coffee
<b>10.30 – 10.45:</b>	Welcome, Introductions and CEN update <i>Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator</i>
<b>10.45 – 11.10:</b>	Presentation: AONTAS Updates <i>Niamh O’ Reilly, CEO of AONTAS</i>
<b>11.10 – 11.20:</b>	Introduction to CEN evaluation and review <i>Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator</i>
<b>11.20 – 11.30:</b>	Coffee break
<b>11.30 – 12.00:</b>	Representations of “Home” <i>Limerick City Traveller Health Advocacy Programme</i>
<b>12.00 – 1.00:</b>	Review of the CEN and Consultation Exercise
<b>1.00 – 1.30:</b>	<b>Lunch and Networking</b>
<b>1.30 – 2.00:</b>	Using the EPALE Electronic Platform to promote Community Education <i>Emma Grainger, Leargas</i>
<b>2.00 – 2.50:</b>	QQI input and Q&A session <i>Trish O’ Brien, QQI</i>
<b>2.50 – 3.00:</b>	Wrap up <i>Suzanne Kyle, AONTAS</i>

## Introductions

Suzanne gave an outline of her background and her role within the CEN. She gave an overview of the CEN, criteria for membership and main areas of work. She also highlighted the upcoming review of the CEN and how this will facilitate planning for the future of the Network.

Suzanne then introduced Niamh O'Reilly, CEO who gave an overview of the advocacy work of AONTAS which has covered the following areas:

### The AONTAS Strategic Plan and the three Strategic Goals of:

1. **Advocating** and lobbying for the development of a quality service for adult learners
2. **Promoting** the value and benefits of adult learning
3. **Building** organisational capacity

Some of the advocacy and lobbying work can be seen through the following:

- Manifesto on Adult Learning – Jan 2016
- General Election Postcard – Feb 2016
- Letters to Political Parties – Feb 2016
- AONTAS CEN QQI Submissions (2) – Feb 2016
- AONTAS Submission on Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services – Feb 2016
- Response to the Programme for Government – May 2016
- Response to the DES Statement of Strategy – June 2016

AONTAS also developed a response to the programme for government with specific reference to the following:

#### Section 10: Education, p. 86:

##### Subsection 6: Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities:

- Potential use of appropriate facilities for adult learning activities at community level is welcomed but be mindful that adult education involves a different educational process

##### Subsection 8: Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

- Specific reference to adult and community education
- Equal opportunity for education
- Departmental changes
- Flexible courses within Higher Education

#### Section 11. Crime Prevention, Justice and Equality, p. 96, Subsection 13: Empowering Women

- Welcomes commitment to locally-delivered courses for women
- We believe that women's community education will have a key role to play in achieving this goal

#### The committees on which AONTAS is represented were also highlighted:

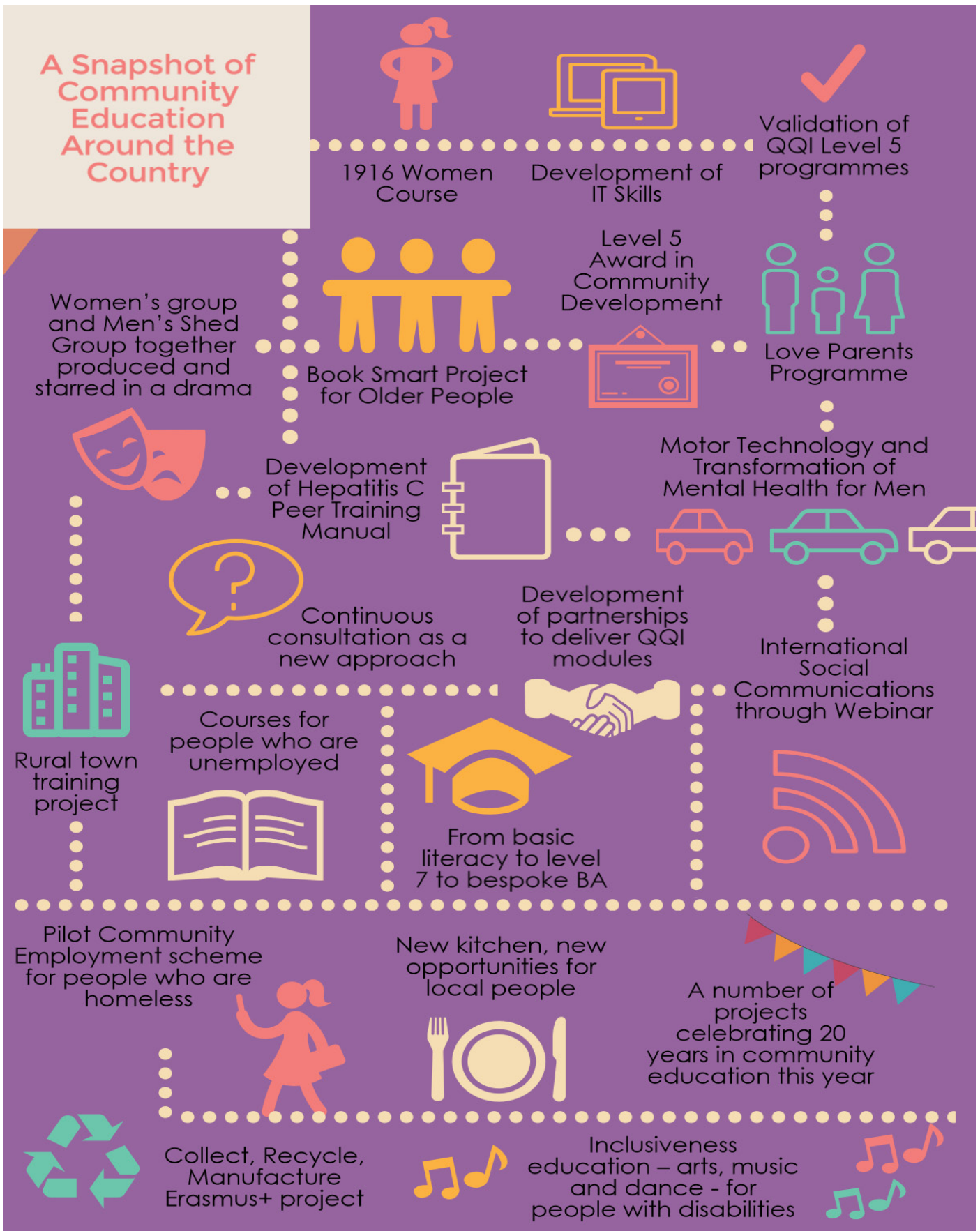
- SOLAS Strategic Implementation Advisory Committee (SIAC)
- Further Education and Training Programme and Learner Support Systems (PLSS) Steering Group
- Access Steering Group for effectively implementing the National Access Plan, 2015 - 2019
- National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Awareness-Raising Steering Group

Niamh also highlighted the following challenges and opportunities for AONTAS:

Challenges	Opportunities
Funding for Community Education (including non-accredited programmes)	European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL)
Reengagement with QQI	Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Training
Support around Quality Assurance	Webinars
	Erasmus + Mobilities

## Networking

There were opportunities for networking during the meeting including an ice-breaker exercise where participants spoke to the person beside them to find out about their work and something noteworthy about an aspect of it. Each person highlighted this information on a post-it note and all notes were attached together to a flip chart page. This resulted in a visual display of the wealth and variety of community education initiatives across the country, a diagram of which can be seen below.



## Erasmus + KA1 Project

During the lunch break some members of the CEN, who are participating in the Erasmus + KA1 Project 'Making an Impact at European Level', took the opportunity to meet and discuss the initiative. Bríd Greenan, Information and Resources Officer gave a brief overview of the project which will see seven CEN members availing of 'mobilities' or opportunities to travel to a European country to attend either a structured course, training or conference or job shadowing in a partner organisation. This project will run until May 2018.

An information pack was given to project partners at the CEN meeting and posted to those who were not in attendance. The pack contained the following:

1. Information sheet on Erasmus + KA1 Project 'Making an Impact at European Level'.
2. Adult Education Mobility Charter 'How to do a Learning Mobility'
3. Example of a Europass CV
4. Example of a KA1 Course 'Creative Storytelling Techniques for Workshop Leaders' (EPALE)
5. Example of a Europass Mobility
6. Project Timeframe
7. Next Steps
8. Consortium Member Contact Details

## Representations of 'Home' by Limerick Traveller Health Advocacy Project

'Home' is a collaborative glass works art project between the Hunt Museum in Limerick city, a Traveller Health Advocacy Programme, and artist Róisín de Buitléar. This was showcased at the meeting and received a great reception.

'Home' explores the complex themes connected to Travellers' understanding of what 'Home' means to them. Through a participative and experiential process thirteen Traveller women explored what these themes might be. Through group reflections they concluded that the meaning of 'Home' to them was 'Community', 'Family' and 'Faith'.

Margaret O'Reilly, Ann O'Driscoll, Bridget O'Donoghue O'Reilly and Teresa O'Donoghue, along with Project Coordinator Mary McCusker gave a presentation highlighting the process, meaning and outcome of the project. They displayed a sample of the glass works pieces created, each piece telling a story about daily life and the struggle for recognition. The initiative resulted in much reflection and had the effect of dispelling myths in relation to Travellers' values and how they live their lives.

The presentation allowed for a question and answer session which resulted in an inspiring and moving conversation, during which the impact of the Carrickmines tragedy was reflected upon. The women were congratulated on their authentic and motivational work and wished the very best in their future endeavours.

The aim of such presentations is to highlight innovative and inspiring projects in order to share learning and ideas and increase morale in a sector that is continuously struggling for recognition. While this project does not necessarily define itself as a community education project, it was agreed that many community education principles and practices were at the heart of their approach to this particular project.

A copy of a booklet, which tells the story of the project, can be accessed [here](#).



## CEN Review

The first stage of a review of the CEN took place at this meeting. Participants were given an outline of the process and asked to reflect, in advance of facilitated discussions, on a number of questions which were presented in their packs. The questions were as follows:

- What do you see as the role of the CEN?
- What are the big issues or threats to community education currently?
- Why do you attend CEN meetings?
- What would you like to see more of in relation to the CEN?
- What would you like to see less of in relation to the CEN?
- Are there areas for improvement in terms of how the CEN is run?
- How often do you feel the CEN should hold meetings?
- How do you feel about virtual CEN meetings?
- What should we be doing in order to support members who cannot attend meetings to have a voice on the CEN?
- There are many community education providers around the country who are not members of the CEN. Do you know of particular groups who would benefit from being involved with the CEN?
- If so, who are they and how should we engage with such groups?

The purpose of this exercise was to provide some time for reflection which would inform the group discussions. Following this, small group discussions focused on the following questions:

- What is your main motivation for attending CEN meetings?
- What is currently working in the CEN/what do you find most useful?
- What is currently not working in the CEN/what are the areas for improvement?
- Any other suggestions/comments/ideas

The main themes that arose during the discussions were as follows:

### Challenges to the Sector:

Funding cuts and less focus on community education from all government departments.

- Uncertainty as to whether policy makers at local and national level understand the issues
- Collaboration with Education and Training Boards (ETBs)
- Labour market policies including SICAP. Lack of regard for personal development work

- Holistic approach not valued
- Targets that are difficult to meet
- Perception of community education
- Community groups left to pick up the pieces
- Diversity of provision

### Motivation for Attending CEN Meetings

- Networking, sharing ideas and information, support, preventing isolation
- QQI link – communication and engagement
- A place to voice concerns
- Information updates
- Advocacy and lobbying, giving a voice to community education – lack of time and resources for groups to do this work
- Professional development
- Re-invigoration, re-charge the batteries
- Learner connections and engagement
- Being part of something bigger
- A place of hope

### What is Currently Working in the CEN/ What Do You Find Most Useful?

- Professionalism of AONTAS events
- QQI engagement
- Submissions and lobbying
- Good quality delivery
- Including “community education” in programme for government

### Areas for Development

- Measuring our effectiveness as a network
- Keeping our foot on the pedal so issues are tackled and community education is recognised and valued
- Supporting CEN members to influence policy
- Engaging new members and members outside of Dublin. Explore the possibility of having meetings outside Dublin
- Continuity of participants at meetings – online or regional meetings may be a response to this
- Sharing good practice and showcasing of work through newsletters, recorded presentations, social media
- Engaging with new stakeholders

### Where to Next?

The consultation exercise was the first stage of a review of the CEN. It will be followed by a review of the Steering Group Terms of Reference, a questionnaire to all members, and some phone conversations with members who engage with the CEN and those who have a difficulty in doing so.

The findings of the review will be presented at the next CEN meeting and will be the basis for a plan of action going forward.

## Léargas EPALE Platform

Emma Grainger from Léargas, who had, at a CEN meeting in October 2015, provided an overview of EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe), gave an update to CEN members which focused on some of the new features of the platform, including communities of practice and closed groups. She also highlighted the opportunities EPALE provided for developing networks and partnerships nationally and across Europe. Members can also access resources, news and information on upcoming events.

Emma also highlighted some upcoming EPALE events taking place nationally. It was agreed that the EPALE platform could potentially provide a forum for CEN members to come together and share information, ideas and resources and keep the lines of communication between CEN members open throughout the year.

All CEN members were encouraged to register for EPALE using the following link: <https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en>. For a copy of Emma's presentation, click here.



## QQI Input

Reengagement with QQI is an issue for many CEN members and so the CEN provides an opportunity to highlight queries and concerns, share information and engage with QQI on a range of subjects. In advance of this meeting, members sent their queries to AONTAS Staff who collated them and passed them on to QQI. A presentation by Trish O'Brien and Collette Harrison of QQI involved answering the questions and responding to queries from the floor. Responses to questions that had not been covered on the day were also sent to Suzanne following the meeting. The questions and responses are highlighted below.

### Applications for Programme Validation

- Can providers collaborate to make validation applications? (Separate validation applications for approval to deliver the same programme/component seem a waste of resources in a sector that is struggling to keep its head above water)?
- Is there currently a cost for applying for programme validation?

## QQI Response

Providers can come together to develop a programme but each submits the programme for validation separately highlighting the context in which they are working. This will replace sharing of programmes.

Page 7 of <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Validation%20Policies%20and%20Criteria%20QP17.pdf> highlights the following:

### 2.6 DIFFERENTIAL VALIDATION

This involves QQI validation of a programme that is based on, or a modification or extension of a QQI validated programme. The QQI validation of the original programme can inform the QQI validation of the derived programme and this can simplify the QQI validation process for the derived programme. QQI validation of a derived programme that relies on the QQI validation of the original programme is referred to as differential validation.

### 2.7 VALIDATION OF PROGRAMMES THAT USE A SHARED CURRICULUM

A shared curriculum is one that is developed for use by two or more providers. It is that part of a provider's programme of education and training that does not depend on that particular provider. A shared curriculum may be used by a provider when developing a programme of education and training. The resulting programme can be viewed to involve an instantiation of the shared curriculum. When QQI validates one provider's programme using a shared curriculum, any other provider (with the permission of the first provider to use that shared curriculum) need only apply for differential

validation of its corresponding programme; see unit (2.6).

The term 'shared programme' has been used by providers and QQI in programme approval agreements to describe what is in effect a shared curriculum. The new terminology will facilitate continued collaboration in the development of programmes and clarify what precisely is being shared. QQI will continue to support and encourage the practice of sharing curricula and collaboration in their development.

### 2.8 COLLABORATIVE PROVISION AND CONSORTIUM PROGRAMMES

A group of providers may form a consortium for the purposes of seeking validation of a collaborative programme (to be provided by members of the consortium).

Specific quality assurance procedures for this kind of collaborative provision require approval by QQI prior to submission of an application for validation. Specialised validation policies and criteria may apply; see unit (16).

Note that a consortium could seek to become a 'relevant provider' with members of the consortium being secondary providers (see section 44( 11) of the 2012 Act).

Fees for validation apply. For fees schedule see: [http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Schedule\\_of\\_Fees\\_July\\_2014.pdf](http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Schedule_of_Fees_July_2014.pdf)

## Programme Review

- If programmes are up for review what is the timeline for this?
- How is a review carried out and what does it mean?
- Will all providers who are validated to run a programme get notification when a programme is being reviewed?
- Will they be involved in the review process?

## QQI Response

- A change in standards could trigger a review of a programme
- Levels 1 – 3 are currently being reviewed. Where it says on QBS that an award is ‘under review’ this means that QQI is looking at the awards standards. It will not impact on a current learner group as providers will be given notification of any change to the award standard and time to develop new programmes in line with the new standard. It would be unwise to submit a programme at levels one to three for validation before the review has been completed
- Information on the development and review of standards is available on the QQI website at the following link: <http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/FET-Awards-Standards.aspx>

## Reengagement Schedule

- Is there a reengagement schedule?
- What are the main areas groups should be focusing on in advance of reengagement?

## QQI Response

- The QQI Corporate Plan for 2016 (p10) at the following link: <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Corporate%20Plan%202016.pdf> indicates ‘Schedule for reengagement with voluntary providers agreed internally and communicated (‘voluntary’ refers to providers that are not obliged by law to engage with QQI)’ by the end of this year
- Discussions on a reengagement schedule with ETBs have commenced
- QQI reiterated that the term ‘voluntary’ in this context means those providers who do not have a statutory obligation to engage with QQI. Private for profit providers also fall in to this category
- Self-evaluation will form the basis for re-engagement and approval of quality assurance procedures

## Reengaging as a Consortium

- If a group has decided to re-engage as part of a consortium what is the process e.g. when QQI contact each provider to review their quality assurance, in line with new guidelines, does the provider then inform them that they are going ahead as part of a consortium?
- In that case, the individual providers will not be re-engaging. Does that mean that QQI will no longer be engaging with those legacy providers?
- While they wait for the consortium to re-engage, how will that impact on the programmes for which they currently have validation?
- When the lead provider re-engages will QQI review their Quality Assurance (QA) as a single provider or will they have to put forward their new governance for monitoring and approval?

## QQI Response

- In the case of a consortium, QA procedures will have to incorporate how the lead provider will ensure the quality assurance of each provider within the consortium
- If a consortium presents to QQI, it is the lead provider that QQI approves QA procedures for that has the direct relationship with QQI. The other members of the consortium have a relationship with the lead provider
- Programmes that have been validated can continue to be used during the process of re-engagement

## Standards Around Programme Design and Delivery

Where a number of providers all apply separately for validation to run a particular programme and each tutor develops his/her own assessments, how are standards and equivalence maintained? For example, it is possible to have two quite different assessments for the same programme, one looking for a 300 word essay and the other looking for a 1,000 word essay on the same assignment?

### QQI Response

The way in which assessment is carried out will differ from programme to programme depending on the context in which the programme is run and the profile of learners undertaking the study. So, for example, in the case of a 300 word essay this may be in addition to other means of assessment whereas another programme may require a learner to write a 1,000 word essay without other forms of assessment. How assessment for a programme will be managed is part of the process of programme validation. There are several references to assessment in the new validation policy: <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Validation%20Policies%20and%20Criteria%20QP17.pdf>.

## External Authenticator Panels

- What is QQI's role in relation to external authenticator panels?
- How are they monitored?
- Are they obliged to participate in continuous professional development in order to ensure standards are maintained?

### QQI Response

- The panels have not been expanded in recent times. The only changes that have been made are in relation to authenticators who may have upskilled and can authenticate new modules
- The process for dealing with external authentication is currently under consideration by QQI. The reengagement process may require providers to outline how they will carry out external authentication and who will undertake this work. In this context, QQI may develop criteria for identifying authenticators
- In this context the responsibility for CPD for authenticators may rest with the providers

## Online Portfolios

Will QQI consider online portfolios of student work?

### QQI Response

This is a method of assessment. If it is presented as part of a strategy for programme assessment and there are quality assurance procedures in place to support it then this could be considered in that context.

## Exemptions for Leaving Cert

Could QQI reconsider their policy of not allowing any exemptions in relation to Leaving Cert completed over five years previous to undertaking the QQI award? It seems unreasonable considering that adult learners may have completed it when they were 16 or 17 and may not return to education before they are 21.

### QQI Response

QQI's policy position on this has been developed to ensure that awards used are current. In general, when learners embark on programmes, it is to achieve the award requirements. It is not the intention that Programmes would 'build in' exemptions from the Leaving Cert.

## Peer Review Panels

- When will these panels be established?
- Who will be represented on these panels?
- Will these panels be reviewing the QA of providers in advance of re-engagement? Will they be responsible for approving or making a recommendation in relation to a provider's Quality Assurance application?

### QQI Response

We currently have an extensive and diverse list of reviewers in place for a number of different purposes and subject areas. This list is added to periodically.

The process of re-engagement enables the approval of quality assurance procedures and so it's unlikely that any review of quality assurance would be taking place in advance of that unless some exceptional issue arose. Panels make recommendations to QQI which in turns makes decisions via its Board and sub-board committee structures. See here for more information: <http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/QQI-Governance-.aspx>.

## Next Steps

All of the feedback from the CEN review will be taken on board and will inform the future work and direction of the CEN. We hope to have two more meetings in 2016, one of which will be in the form of a webinar. We will use these spaces to focus on raising the voice and profile of community education, developing some clear goals for the network and identifying ways in which the reengagement process with QQI can be supported by the CEN.

We are also looking forward to the delivery of a new professional development course for CEN members which will begin in October. 'Community Education for a Better Tomorrow' is an innovative blended learning programme for community education practitioners. This new programme offers community educators opportunities to upskill, enhance their capacity to engage with quality assurance structures and systems, and participate in the creation of quality assurance standards and processes specific to community education.

Designed and delivered by An Cosán Virtual Community College (VCC) in partnership with the AONTAS Community Education Network, this programme is part of the 'Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow' project, funded by the European Commission Erasmus + Programme and the Department of Education and Skills via SOLAS.

The course will take place in six community locations across the country with all participants having the opportunity to come together for workshops at the beginning and end of the course. It is an exciting new initiative and we believe it will strengthen the capacity of CEN members individually and as a collective.

AONTAS is also committed to continuing to work behind the scenes in order to keep community education on the agenda of policy makers. In order to do this this effectively, we are asking that you keep in touch with us in relation to issues you are experiencing as well as the positive work taking place in your area.

We would like to offer a huge thanks to Lia Clarkson and Pauline McGaley, from Warrenmount Community Education and Development Centre, who organised the venue, and to all those who participated in the meeting.

## Contact

For more information, comments or questions please contact Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator, [skyle@aontas.com](mailto:skyle@aontas.com).



**AONTAS**

The National Adult Learning Organisation  
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh,  
Dublin 6, Ireland.

**Contact:** Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator

**Tel:** 01 4068220

**Fax:** 01 4068227

**Email:** [skyle@aontas.com](mailto:skyle@aontas.com)

**Website:** [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)