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Community Education for Social Transformation

AONTAS Report prepared by Dr. Eve Cobain and Dr. Rebecca Jackson

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community education is an effective and underutilised mechanism for tackling disadvantage, strengthening communities, and revitalising democracy. At a time of deepening inequality, rising racism, and growing threats to social cohesion, it provides a proven and inclusive model of transformation, with a methodology uniquely suited to addressing the complex realities of contemporary society. An investment in community education is an investment in people, families, and communities; it is a force multiplier for public policy capable of delivering cost-effective outcomes across wellbeing, education access, integration, employment, and civic participation.

This report considers the practice of community education across the island of Ireland in relation to the sector's capacity to support social transformation. It addresses readers, particularly policy makers and community education practitioners, who are interested in understanding the current scope and capacity of the sector for social transformation, including factors limiting its transformative potential.

The analysis is based on data collected from June to August 2025 and comprises findings from a survey (completed by 38 organisations), as well as focus groups and interviews with community education practitioners and key policy stakeholders. The report also contains stories written by five community education learners, providing insight into the lived experience of those engaging in this personally and socially transformative practice (Table 1).

		Number of Participants
Community Education Practitioners	Survey Practitioner Focus Groups x 2 Practitioner Interviews CEFA Focus Group	38 9 4 3
Policy Stakeholders	Policy Stakeholder Interviews	3
Learners	Learner Stories	5

Table 1. Summary of Research Data

Key Findings

Practitioners report critical issues facing local communities including isolation, low educational attainment and intergenerational poverty

In a context of rapid social change, community education plays an increasingly vital role in supporting marginalised groups, fostering their inclusion and active participation in public life. This is particularly important, as providers highlighted the prevalence of issues such as "isolation" (n=13), "low educational attainment" (n=13), "intergenerational poverty" (n=11) and "unemployment" (n=11). Community education addresses these issues by opening pathways to learning for groups at risk of marginalisation.

Community education is uniquely positioned to support participation in learning for marginalised groups. It has far-reaching outcomes for learners, with benefits extending to families and local communities

All stakeholder groups recognised the unique position of community education organisations in the heart of their communities. The flexible, relational approach particular to community education enables learners who have been excluded elsewhere to re-engage with education. Wraparound supports, encompassing emotional, social, and practical assistance, are central to sustaining participation and progression, with benefits extending far beyond employability. Learners consistently report increased confidence, improved wellbeing, stronger family relationships, and a greater sense of social connectedness. Communities also benefit, as learners are empowered to identify and address local challenges collectively, strengthening civic engagement and democratic participation.

Community education demonstrates huge transformative potential but lacks the resources needed to meet increased learner demand and to maximise its social impact

Community education faces a persistent struggle for recognition and sustainable funding. Despite the clear evidence of its impact, community education is constrained by short-term, fragmented, and inadequate resourcing. In the Republic of Ireland, provision is formally recognised but remains underfunded relative to its scale, with allocations failing to reflect real costs or demand. In Northern Ireland, the situation is more acute: community education is largely invisible in high-level strategies and is heavily reliant on precarious philanthropic and piecemeal funding, a situation worsened by the loss of European Social Fund (ESF) supports post-Brexit. Across both jurisdictions, a narrow focus on completion metrics obscures the intangible but vital outcomes of community education, including confidence, wellbeing, social inclusion, and civic participation. This lack of recognition erodes staff morale and threatens to undermine the sustainability of the sector.

Collaboration offers opportunity for growth and innovation, but only adequate and secure resourcing will enable the sector to fulfil its potential

Collaboration emerges in this research as both a strength and a necessity. Community educators, policymakers, and higher and further education institutions are increasingly working together to develop accredited pathways, including apprenticeships and

community-based higher education programmes. These partnerships enhance access for disadvantaged learners and demonstrate the potential of community education to bridge into mainstream provision without losing its local, relational ethos. However, collaboration is often driven by scarcity, as providers pool limited resources to avoid competition and sustain quality provision. While this spirit of solidarity is admirable, it cannot be seen as a substitute for significant structural investment.

A Way Forward: Recommendations

The report findings point towards four urgent recommendations:

- **Sustainable Funding Models:** Sustainable, multi-annual core funding must replace the current patchwork of short-term schemes, ensuring that allocations reflect demand, enrolments, and the true costs of delivery and provision, including outreach activities and wraparound supports.
- **Recognition of the Community Education Practitioner in Policy Budgetary Decisions:** Inside and outside the classroom, the contribution of professional skilled practitioners must be recognised through the provision of adequate resources both within the structures of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and through adequate resourcing for core staffing costs within independent community education organisations.
- **Formal Recognition of Community Education in Governance and Policy:** Northern Ireland should develop a dedicated Community Education Framework, with explicit recognition of civic and social outcomes.
- **Cross-Sectional and Cross-Jurisdictional Collaboration:** Collaboration should be supported not only as a survival strategy but as a mechanism for innovation, shared research, and policy development, strengthening the sector's capacity to contribute to peace, prosperity, and democratic life on our shared island.

Robert's Story

From my perspective, community education has the ability to transform the prism through which one views self and the world around them. As someone who struggled to succeed within the mainstream educational system, constantly in trouble for my inability to sit still and concentrate, and my unwillingness to do any form of homework, this meant that I came to be labelled a "messer". As a "messer", I was always either sat at the very front of the class where I could be constantly "watched" or put out of the way at the back of the class. Either way, the message I got was that my prospects of success within academia were severely limited to say the least.

The diminishment of my academic prospects didn't bother me, partly because I didn't know anyone who had gone to college and never saw that as an option, and even more so because I really did not enjoy the authoritative environment of the school setting. What I didn't realise was that my experience of school was shaped by my personal experiences of

trauma, which contributed to my inability to sit still and concentrate, and to social structural issues regarding the academic expectations of “people like me”. Both to myself and society, I was supposed to be either a drug addict or a plumber. Academia wasn’t on the cards.

However, after my expulsion from school before my Junior Certificate, I decided to enrol at Youthreach because I heard that I would get paid. This experience changed the trajectory of my life. The authoritarianism of the mainstream school environment was largely removed, and the teachers approached every encounter with students from a place of complete compassion and understanding. There were no negative labels, nobody was forced to sit up the front or down the back, and if someone didn’t feel up to working that day, this wasn’t seen as an act of rebellion and punished. Instead, the teachers asked questions and really tried to get to know you on a personal level so that they could tailor their response to the student’s needs.

Unfortunately, I did still end up a drug dealer and ended up serving a long prison sentence. However, all was not lost. Having battled a deep drug addiction for many years, my positive experience of education provided the spark that changed my life. Unsure of what to do with my time, I engaged with the prison school and found the teachers to be very much like the teachers at Youthreach, non-judgemental and compassionate. This opened my eyes to the power of education as a tool for self-exploration.

This new knowledge then encouraged me to sign up for any self-help courses or initiatives that were offered around the prison. This is how I came across the Alternatives to Violence Project. I had heard people talk about AVP but wasn’t sure what it was. Then one day I was doing laps of the yard and heard that it was on the following weekend. I immediately sought out the facilitator and put my name down. What happened next completely changed the prism through which I saw myself, my circumstances and violence more generally.

Over the three, weekend-long workshops that it took to complete the modules, we explored our violent tendencies, our ego and also what it meant to be a man in our communities. We learned tools that we could use in moments of anger in order to help us regulate and make better decisions and also explored what it would be like to seek non-violent solutions to conflict. Whilst it was acknowledged that our circumstances constrain our ability to make choices to some extent, this course taught us that even within constraining circumstances, there always exists an element of agency and autonomy. It is by recognising this that we can empower ourselves to defy the odds and make lasting changes to the way we approach conflict.

To say that these workshops had a profound impact on me would be an understatement. The learnings gained on the AVP workshops sparked a determination to understand violence to a greater extent. This propelled me further into academia and I have now completed a degree in Criminology, been released from prison and am undertaking research into violence as part of my dissertation. In this way, community education has not only altered my personal view of the world, it has helped to take a once violent man and turn him into a staunch advocate for an end to violence, both intersubjective and structural. To conclude, from my experience, community education is without a doubt a vehicle for social transformation.

“Something somewhere is really going awry for quite a lot of people. That’s a cycle of disadvantage that we really need to break [...] education is huge as part of it.”

– Community education practitioner

1. INTRODUCTION
1.1 TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Our society is undergoing rapid and profound change (Social Justice Ireland, 2023 & 2024, OECD, 2024); as one practitioner participant in this research observed, "something, somewhere is really going awry for quite a lot of people. And that's a cycle of disadvantage that we really need to break [...] education is huge as part of it" (Practitioner). In this context of social upheaval, community education plays a vital role in supporting marginalised groups, fostering their inclusion and active participation in public life.

This form of education is learner-centred and democratic, rooted in dialogue and the co-construction of meaning. It promotes civic engagement and advances equality, often in disadvantaged, disenfranchised communities (Cobain et al., 2024; Doody, 2021; Cobain et al., 2021; Cobain et al., 2023). This approach means it is uniquely positioned to address complex societal challenges such as rising inequality, racism, social polarisation, the climate crisis, and declining civic engagement (Roantree et al., 2024; SOLIDAR, 2024; Social Justice Ireland, 2024; UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2017; Doody, 2021; Irwin, 2019).

The model of community education under consideration in this research is the value-driven and politically-oriented vision of community education set out in the White Paper on Adult Education (Government of Ireland, 2000) and re-affirmed in the more recent "Charter for Community Education", developed by the Three Pillars Group in 2021 (and referenced in SOLAS' Community Education Framework). This research also aligns itself with Ted Fleming's understanding of "transformative learning", in that it considers the process of transformation as at once personal and political (Fleming, 2022).

A Charter for Community Education

Community Education Is...

...is rooted in equality, justice and empowerment.

...creates a voice for those who are furthest from the education system.

...is about social inclusion in its broadest sense.

...is needs based, driven by the community and reflective of lived experiences.

...recognises the value of accredited and non-accredited learning.

...promotes critical thinking.

...is learner centred, flexible, supportive, and developmental.

...is facilitative, group focused and open to new things.

...centres on relationship building.

Embedded within local communities, such provision delivers responsive programmes tailored to the specific needs and interests of those most at risk of exclusion. Its grassroots nature also holds significant transformative potential, particularly for individuals disengaged from formal education, by encouraging progression into further learning and employment (Cobain et al., 2021; Meyler et al., 2023a; SOLAS, 2024). To respond to the needs of those often considered "hard to reach", community education offers flexible, part-time learning options, complemented by wrap-around supports and access to digital resources. Such provision enables learners to embark on a journey of holistic personal development, which can be life-changing for those facing the greatest barriers (Thomas & Brennan, 2023; Meyler et al., 2024; Gallagher et al., 2025; Doody, 2021).

> From the childcare team, who've not only cared for my girls but celebrated every little milestone with me, to the SENCO, who's been instrumental in helping me seek assessments and support for my eldest daughter; they have been there every step of the way. As a single mother, that support system has meant everything. The staff always offer a listening ear, a kind word, and genuine encouragement. For my daughters, it's been a safe, nurturing space. For me, it's been life-changing. (Hazel, community education learner)

These benefits clearly have impact beyond economic inclusion and labour market participation. Learners consistently report improvements in confidence, social connectedness, and overall wellbeing, benefits that extend beyond the individual to families and communities (Cobain et al., 2023; Meyler et al., 2023a; Doody, 2021).

This is particularly important, as community education providers often operate in challenging contexts. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, practitioner survey respondents (n= 38) considered the primary issues facing their community and learners. The highest number of practitioners considered "isolation" (n=13) and "low educational attainment" (n=13) to be key issues. This was followed by "intergenerational poverty" (n=11) and "unemployment" (n=11). Practitioners also flagged the following issues as significant: "prevalent mental health issues" (n=8), "racism" (n=8) and "lack of secure housing" (n=7). Additionally, COVID-19 was reported in discussions as having a continuing negative impact on learners' mental health and wellbeing.

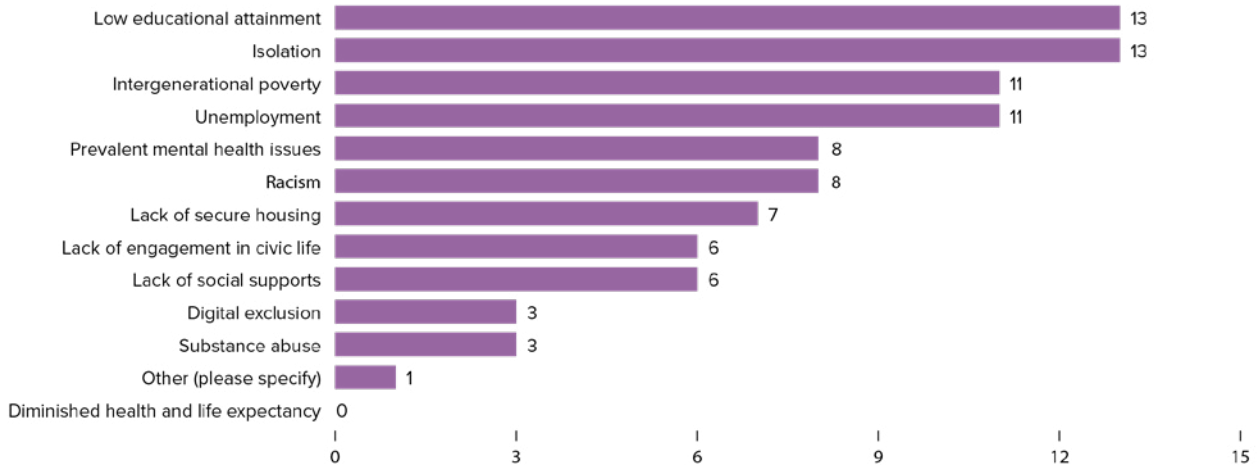

Figure 1. Responses to the question: "Currently, what are the key issues facing your local community (and the learners you engage with)? Please select three."

As highlighted in Figure 2 below, many groups were using transformative learning methods to support a collective approach and form a response to contemporary issues on the ground:

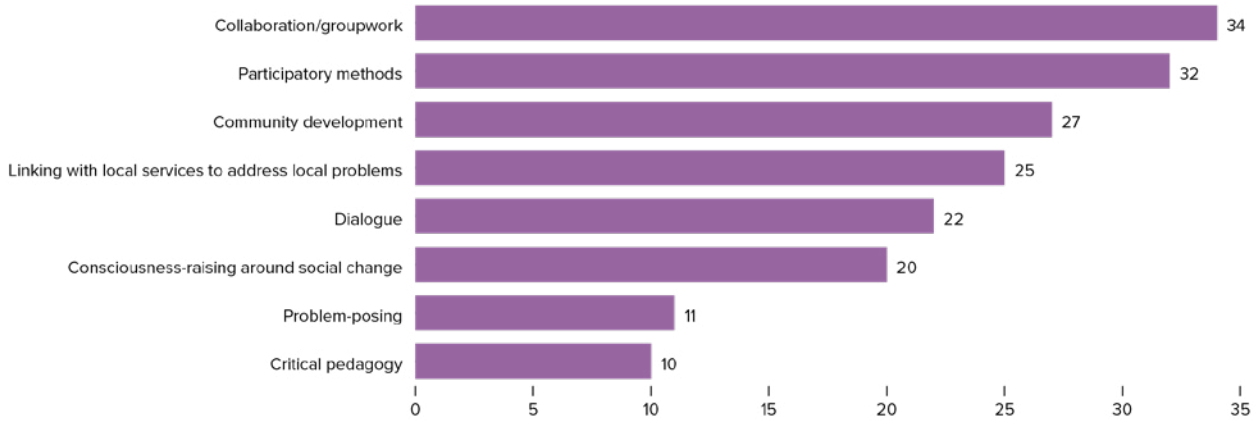

Figure 2. Responses to the question: "Do you use any of the methods below in your community education practice? Please select all that apply."

"Critical pedagogy" (n=10), the practice of "dialogue" (n=22), "consciousness-raising" (n=20) and "problem-posing" (n=11), are all tenets of a Freirean approach to adult learning, which has long underpinned or at least been the aspiration of community education practice in Ireland (Freire, 1972; Connolly, 2005; Connolly, 2007). The Freirean approach is about making sense of the world around us, our place in it, and the power structures that operate across media, politics and everyday life. This process, which Freire describes as "conscientization" (1972), is needed more than ever as we see the rise of hate, racism and misinformation in our communities. As summarised by one practitioner: "it's about enabling people to reflect, to grow, to recognise, to understand circumstances, and that is all part of that conscientization as well and we should really be able to, to offer and promote that" (Practitioner). In line with this, community education organisations were keen not to operate from a deficit approach, but to emphasise the existing knowledge within the community, taking their cue from the learners themselves. Outlining their sense of community development, the same participant noted:

> Actually, what we're talking about is a way of working with people that is about the things that are of concern to them that they bring and the things they want to see changed and what they want that change to look like and then working with them to support them, to organise, to make that happen. (Practitioner)

This mode of practice depends on the capacity of the provider to build trusting relationships with, and between learners over time, with results more likely to be evident over the long term (Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019; Cobain et al., 2024). The realities of this practice have implications for the level of support needed at governance and policy level to ensure that practice is sustainable and the sector realises its full potential as part of wider government response to social challenges.

1.2 COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN THE WIDER CONTEXT

Community education plays a vital role in opening pathways to learning for groups at risk of discrimination, yet its potential to deliver inclusive, socially responsive education remains constrained by a lack of recognition and inadequate funding across the island of Ireland. Despite evidence of its transformative impact on wellbeing, empowerment, and social inclusion (Cobain et al., 2023; Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019), the sector continues to occupy a precarious position in both policy and budgetary processes.

1.2.1 Community Education in Policy

In the Republic of Ireland, community education is formally recognised within national strategies such as the FET Strategy 2020–2024 and the Community Education Framework (SOLAS, 2020; SOLAS, 2024). These policies explicitly highlight its contribution to social inclusion, democratic participation, and lifelong learning, aligning with government commitments in the Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future (2025). However, this rhetorical recognition is not matched by resourcing: while community education learners represent around 20% of all FET enrolments, the sector receives just over 2% of the overall FET budget (AONTAS, 2025). Short-term and fragmented funding cycles undermine stability and restrict providers' ability to sustain the relational, holistic forms of engagement required to reach and retain marginalised learners (Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019; Cobain et al., 2024).

In Northern Ireland, the challenge takes a different form. Here, community education, often delivered through the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, is equally valued by learners but far less visible in overarching policy frameworks. The Programme for Government (2024–2027) prioritises FE and skills for economic development, yet community education is absent from its commitments (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024). Without structural recognition, provision is reliant on an unstable patchwork of more than 50 funders, including multiple government departments and philanthropic sources (Cobain et al., 2023). This creates a fragmented system where provision is short-term, inconsistent, and vulnerable to wider policy changes such as the loss of ESF funding, which has shifted priorities towards economic activation rather than social inclusion (Cobain et al.,2023; Hepburn et al., 2025).

1.2.2 Relevance of Community Education to Social Inclusion

Across the island of Ireland, the need to engage marginalised groups in education to promote social inclusion is similar. Participation patterns in both jurisdictions remain strongly stratified by socio-economic background and prior educational achievement, with those already better off most likely to benefit from adult learning. Groups most in need of accessible, community-rooted learning opportunities also face similar barriers to participation (Woods et al., 2024; Nermond et al., 2024; Meyler et al., 2023a; OECD, 2023). This includes (but is not limited to) those with lower levels of education, lower levels of skills attainment, those with disabilities, and women with caring duties (Cobain et al., 2023; Meyler et al., 2023a; Burns, Leitch &

Hughes, 2015; Pelan, 2023). Community education addresses these barriers through the provision of supportive, responsive, and flexible programmes (Cobain et al., 2023; Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2024; Gallagher et al., 2025). However, without the corresponding visibility in policy, parity of esteem, or stable investment needed to unlock its full potential, community education's role in supporting disadvantaged learners is diminished.

1.3 Methodology

This research takes a mixed-methods approach, with findings drawn from both quantitative data (e.g. survey responses) and qualitative data (e.g. focus groups and interviews), which is advantageous in capturing both a broad scope of provision, as well as in-depth reflection on practice. Below are the central activities that were undertaken across key participating groups. To help maintain respondent anonymity, all group and provider names have been removed from the discussion and survey responses anonymised.

During thematic analysis, the authors coded the focus group and interview transcripts into themes to support reflection on practice. Coding entailed careful reading of the focus group transcripts to identify topics and issues of relevance to the aims of the research and reflection on existing knowledge from previous studies. Patterns emerging from the data were then used to describe community education practices that lead to social transformation and the contextual variables that enable or constrain them. Qualitative data from the survey was also analysed in connection with these codes.

1.3.1 Participant Engagements

Research participants included adult and community education practitioners, members of CEFA, and key stakeholders with an interest in adult education policy and practice. Learners engaged with organisations participating in the research were also supported to develop and share their story. Table 1 below highlights the number of participants that were engaged across key stakeholder groups.

		Number of Participants
Community Education Practitioners	Survey Practitioner Focus Groups x 2 Practitioner Interviews CEFA Focus Group	38 9 4 3
Policy Stakeholders	Policy Stakeholder Interviews	3
Learners	Learner Stories	5

Table 1. Summary of Research Data

Practitioners

Practitioner Survey

A brief survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey. It was completed by community education practitioners working in independent organisations. The survey was shared with the AONTAS Community Education Network and with community education provider contacts from the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland which were made through previous research projects. It remained open from 10 June until 10 August 2025 and generated 38 returns. Respondents were required to name their organisation, and responses that did not identify their organisation were not included in the analysis. It was requested that organisations only submit one response. In the case where two responses were submitted by a single organisation, one was deleted from the sample to ensure that duplicate quantitative information was not included, with qualitative data being saved and incorporated during analysis. In order to maintain respondent anonymity, individual groups responding to the survey have not been named in this research report. The survey consisted of a range of open and closed questions, with a focus on gathering qualitative responses from a range of providers.

Practitioner Focus Groups

Two online discussions were carried out with community education practitioners. The focus groups sought to achieve good geographical spread across the island of Ireland. Nine practitioners took part in two discussions on 25 June and 19 August. The target participants were managers providing community education in independent community education or VCSE organisations. Topics explored in the first focus group included: key issues currently facing local communities and how the sector is responding; methodologies and approaches to learning in community education; observable personal and community impacts; changes in the funding landscape and challenges facing the sector. The second focus group facilitated participatory reflection on initial survey findings, supporting practitioner contribution to research processes, while generating further discussion and exploring any gaps in the findings thus far.

Practitioner Interviews

Purposive sampling was used to ensure richness of data and diversity of experience, with four organisations identified to engage in interviews with researchers (two in NI and two in ROI). Hour-long interviews were carried out online with key staff from independent, community-based organisations delivering value-led community education. Participants were selected on the basis that they have been working in the sector long enough to witness key changes to delivery and were therefore able to discuss any implications this has had on their organisations and the wider community. Participants included had a minimum of ten years' experience working in the sector, with some having more than 30 years' experience.

CEFA Focus Group

A third focus group was held with Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA) members, organised in collaboration with the Chair of CEFA. Following the publication of the White Paper, Learning for Life (2000), a CEF was appointed in each Vocational Education Committee (VEC) to strengthen the work of providers in their area. CEFA was set up in 2004 to provide a collective voice to influence policy, share and develop good practice and provide support to its members (CEFA, 2011). Three CEFs took part in the group discussion, with a focus on changes to the community education landscape over the past number of years.

Policy Stakeholders

Researchers sought to engage key stakeholders with an interest in policy and practice from both the NI and ROI as research informants. Three, hour-long interviews were carried out between the AONTAS Research and Advocacy teams in order to capture the perspectives of this cohort. Topics explored included reflection on the current systems and frameworks in place to support the sector (as well as current gaps in policy); the value and transformative potential of community education and the role of community education within the broader learning landscape; and finally, any future developments on the horizon that could influence the future development of community education.

Learners

Learner stories

Five learners were identified in connection with organisations taking part in this research and invited to share a brief account of the impact that community education has had on their life and on their wider community. Learners represent organisations from across the island. Their stories feature at the close of this report and further showcase the wide-ranging impact(s) of community education.

1.3.2 Limitations

The primary limitation in this research project was time. All data for the report was gathered between mid-June and August 2025, with data analysis and writing taking place between August and September. With the survey and focus groups taking place during the summer months when many practitioners were on leave, many who may have liked to contribute were not available. Certain groups were prioritised for consultation as part of this research based on their assumed knowledge of the sector. Certain groups were not widely consulted, including adult education providers in FET or FE, as well as learners undertaking community education courses. Learner Voice is represented through five learner stories, but this is limited vis-a-vis the wider perspective of learners. Moreover, researchers did not engage learners who had no experience of engaging in community education and indeed, who might benefit from engaging in such courses.

The research provides a snapshot of both ROI and NI sectors in 2025 and, as such, does not take account of wider or longer-term trends. Furthermore, there was a higher response rate to the survey from practitioners in ROI, with 28 organisations responding to the question on location indicating that they were based in ROI, and 9 indicating they were NI-based. This reflects AONTAS' current membership, which is predominantly based in ROI. This research was borne out of advocacy needs identified by AONTAS in collaboration with providers working on the ground. It is primarily based on participants' subjective perception of community education and associated issues. Reported practices were not independently verified. As such, the project can be viewed as a starting point, surfacing key areas of impact and issues that demand immediate attention, as well as some areas for further exploration.

Jenna's Story

If I were asked to describe community education, I would say life changing! Because that is what community education did for me, it changed my life. I will be forever grateful to Ballybeen Women's Centre and all the staff for the part they played in helping piece my life back together.

Coming out of lockdown and having just having a baby I felt so lost, so I applied for a Friday class developing women in the community. That's how my whirlwind journey began. You see the thing with Ballybeen Women's Centre, when they get you in, they have this way of keeping you and before you know it you've enrolled in multiple classes and are there Monday to Friday. When I enrolled in the MAS project (Maternal Advocacy support group), I made true friendships that helped me through my darkest days. We cried, we laughed, we cried some more and drank plenty of tea. I was growing and healing, becoming a better version of myself. The thing I found with community education – it's given through a centre that becomes your safe space, your happy place. Run by strong empowering woman who let you cry and then said, "Right is that you finished now let's see how we handle this problem".

Through community education, I did my Essential Skills Math, English, ICT, OCN in Perinatal Mental Health, my Level 2 and 3 Community Development. I became a certified mental health first aider, designated officer in safeguarding children, protested for a mother and baby unit, spoke at Stormont and a psychology event. I took part in woman breaking barriers course on the challenges women faced trying to get back to work and completed an access course through the Open University, all while grieving the sudden loss of my dad and the breakdown of my relationship in a six-month period. That is why I feel it is so important to have community education because through the lows, the centre lifted me and supported me, guiding me with classes and programmes with ways to better myself and heal.

Since completing my courses, I had the confidence to go to the local school and speak with the headmaster who offered me a job working one to one with a child. I could not believe it – I'd got myself a home for me and my boys, a job; life was good and I could finally say I was happy.

I found with doing so much at the centre and being empowered to have that drive to achieve, I was able to study alongside my work. I am now fully qualified classroom assistant and SEN trained. This academic year I was asked to take the role of general classroom assistant for the new unit p1-p2 class. I would not be where I am today if I had not of took the jump and signed up for that Friday class.

So, is community education needed and helpful? YES! Community education saves lives – it's more than an education, for some people it's their saving grace. I feel there should be more funding for community education to deliver varieties of courses and to improve and grow centres as the need for community education is growing.

2. Transforming Lives; Shaping Communities

This chapter considers the wide-ranging personal and social impacts of community education across the island of Ireland, surfaced by providers and policy stakeholders during this research. The initial part of the chapter explores the unique position of the provider within the local community and how their positioning is crucial to enabling equitable access to learning opportunities. The transformative methodologies deployed by community education providers are also examined, including approaches to outreach, wraparound supports and learning environment. These approaches are explored within the context of our rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Indeed, while the sector supports personal development, lifelong and life-wide, the ripple effects of community education can be seen across the whole Island. In the latter half, this chapter seeks to trace these ripple effects, exploring community education as a shaping force within the community. In particular, it considers the impact on families and local communities, as well as the sector's role in supporting integration and belonging, particularly within the context of the rise of racism and misinformation. Finally, the chapter considers how community education continues to support learners to find (a collective) voice, exploring opportunities for representation, community action, and community solutions to issues on the ground.

2.1 A Local Response to Community Need

Community education's democratic, learner-centred and inclusive mode of practice is ideally placed to respond to local need, particularly in those communities most at risk of marginalisation (Cobain et al., 2024). As can be seen in Figure 3 below, organisations were working to combat many of the key societal issues identified in the introduction through their education provision, with "supporting social inclusion" by far the most commonly reported objective (n=26).

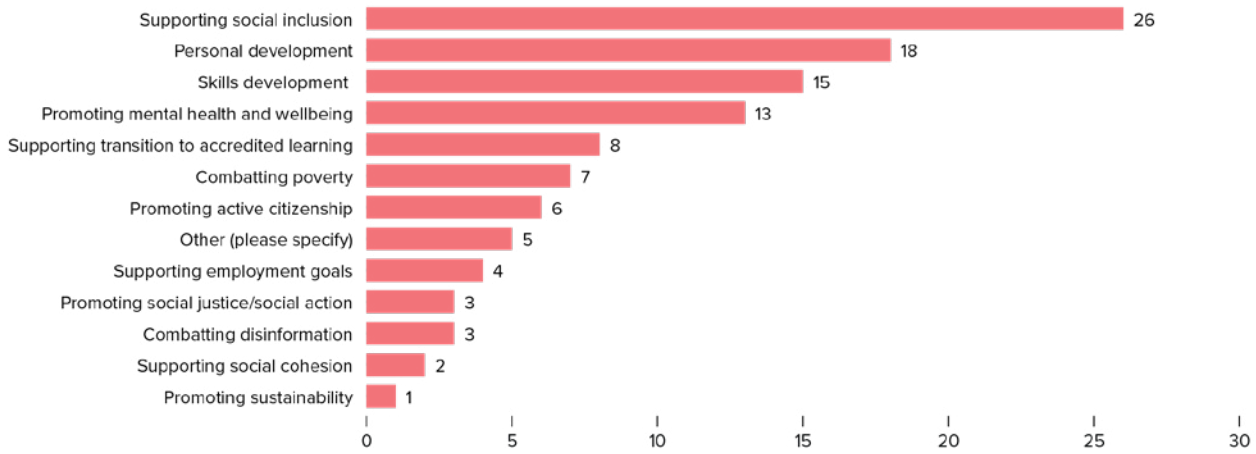

Figure 3. Responses to the question: "What are the key goals of your community education practice? Please select your top three."

A local response to social issues is supported by the accessibility of community organisations, in terms of place, cost effectiveness, and visibility as part of the landscape of services and supports that are known to communities. Across all stakeholder groups, the unique position of community education organisations within the locale of communities came across resoundingly. As expressed by one practitioner: “I don’t think anybody else is in a better position. I think the community is the place where you’re going to get people to come initially” (Practitioner). The presence and visibility of the centre within the community was commented on repeatedly as key to its success in making learning seem like a real option for people in the community and engaging diverse groups of learners.

> It’s so important that the community people see other community people coming because then they know it’s [...] Jonny from the top of the hill coming down to do the carpentry course. They see that [...] those courses are for them. (Practitioner)

In interview, policy stakeholders also highlighted the uniqueness of each provider in their ability to respond to local learning interests and needs: “the provision across each of them is extremely different [...] right across the country and they’re not that far from everybody. You know there’s always something close to somebody.” The significance of having learning options available locally was mentioned across all interviews with policy stakeholders, with participants acknowledging that often learners do not have the option of travelling outside of their locale for learning: “I think the accessibility, that it’s in your local community; you don’t have to travel far.”

While the very presence of the centre within the community was significant in terms of attracting learners, providers described how they also undertook a range of activities to promote learning opportunities in their area, allowing them to effectively target particular groups within the community.

> We’ve always used our feet and a little leaflet [...] but we don’t throw the leaflet in the door, we knock the door, say “hi” [...] what we [a]re, what we do, how we do it, gave them the little leaflet and said you know, if you’re interested in anything, please contact us [...] I think one should go face to face with people. (Practitioner)

While this approach was a key driver of learner engagement though it was not something that organisations typically received any supplementary funding for. Practitioners also spoke of the additional support work they undertook in terms of getting participants “through the door”, and ready to take that next step:

> That big step of, you know, getting through the door is the hardest. I mean, you’ve heard this 100 times. It’s everybody has that issue. So we try our best to build relationships with people by phoning them a couple of times before the start. You know, keeping in contact with them and if there’s any particular issues of, you know, anxiety and stuff, we’ll tell them we’ll be waiting at the front door for them to bring them in. We invite them in for a cup of tea before the class starts. (Practitioner)

Most of the classes delivered by community organisations were free of charge or came with a small charge to cover the cost of a cup of tea and biscuits or other overheads not covered by the funder. Addressing barriers in terms of cost was felt to be crucial in attracting and retaining learners, with one practitioner noting how important it is "in today's climate" to continue to operate with this approach: "we're finding obviously all walks of life but more so people that you wouldn't expect are really depending on these courses [...] they really are."

In all of the ways described above, community education organisations demonstrate their capacity to reach and engage people furthest from the education system. This unique feature is a tool for Governments North and South to meet multiple policy targets around education access, integration, employment and skills acquisition.

2.2 Flexible Pathways: Low-Pressure and Learner-Centred Practice

The additional support provided by organisations around access is vital in giving hesitant potential learners the confidence they need to get on their path of learning. Moreover, it was the slow work of engaging "hard to reach" (often also described as "easy to ignore") people individually that was the first step in helping them to shape the future narrative of the community. This outcome of community education will be discussed in later sections.

Both practitioners and policy stakeholders spoke of the importance of low-pressure learning opportunities, indicating that supporting these first steps was crucial to engaging the learners who benefit from community education provision. In many cases, community education works where other models fail. One practitioner expressed a sense that "formal structures don't match the reality of Ireland today; they are outdated and [...] when you leave school or when you hit a crisis in your life and you need to get some sort of education to go in a different direction or whatever." They noted that many of the learners engaging with their centre had previous negative experiences of education, so a large part of their work was "to remove that fear out of it." The availability of non-formal learning was a large part of this approach, in terms of building learners' confidence and capacity to learn.

> There has to be that space for people to come to something with no pressure, with no qualifications required, with no skill set required that you can have no literacy, or you can have no friends, no job. You may never have worked, but you can walk into a class and feel a part of something. (CEF)

> They don't have to do it within the term [...] If someone needs longer to get their coursework, we let them carry on into the next term you know, so it's such a low pressure and environment and people you just see people's confidence [...] you just see them coming on. (Practitioner)

The flexibility of learning options available within the community setting was also particularly important, since there are often limiting factors at play such as care responsibilities, illness

or other complex needs. As such, while accreditation was desirable for some learners, practitioners felt the need to emphasise that such courses were not the mainstay of community education.

> Sometimes we find that it's not about the certificates for our women, it's about getting out. It's about learning skills [...] Unless [...] we've put that in a funding application form because it strengthens the application, then we don't go with accreditation because the women are coming to us, and they really are the furthest removed [from the education system], [saying] "Oh do I have to write?" And [...] "it's like I'm going back to school" and it kind of frightens them a wee bit [...] The other thing about accreditation, you know, you have to stick to the programme, whereas sometimes women will come in and do DIY and they'll say I'd love to learn this [...] you can tweak it to suit what the group want as opposed to what you have to do to get the accreditation. (Practitioner)

The ability to be learner-led and responsive in terms of provision was noted as a major strength of the sector, with organisations consulting learners on the kind of learning they would like to engage in and conducting regular needs analysis. Indeed, it was considered important for community education providers to be able to offer accredited learning where it represented a good opportunity for the personal and collective growth of their participants. Accredited options were recognised as supportive in terms of helping learners progress to Further Education and employment if that was their goal. "Accreditation obviously is good and you know [...] it's great for their confidence [...] I've got this certificate and, you know, maybe I can do more [...] It really does set them on that path of lifelong learning." Policy stakeholders also spoke of the need for supported pathways into further education and employment.

> Communicating about pathways and communicating about the options of further education and training, it's really, really important [...] I know it's not for every learner, but sometimes it may be for learners and they don't even know it. (Policy stakeholder)

A number of organisations engaged in this research were also offering higher education options within a community setting. This offering promotes the learner's sense of self efficacy, and opens up awareness of opportunities for progression into further learning and employment.

> So we have a wall [...] the kitchen is our classroom, which is ironic. And so, like, on the wall, we have the last 25 years and of women in their hats and gowns. Like so when women come in for the cup of tea and all, they're like, "what's that? I know I [...] could never do that". And then [...] about a year and a half on, they were saying, "oh, I'm really interested in doing that. Well, you know, how can you support me in doing that?" So we do like the prep for college course [...] most of them have gone on to work [...] you know, and well-paid workers. (Practitioner)

2.3 Wraparound Supports

Practitioners were keen to highlight that once learners were engaged with their organisation, they had access to a wide range of emotional, social and practical supports as can be seen in Figure 4 below.

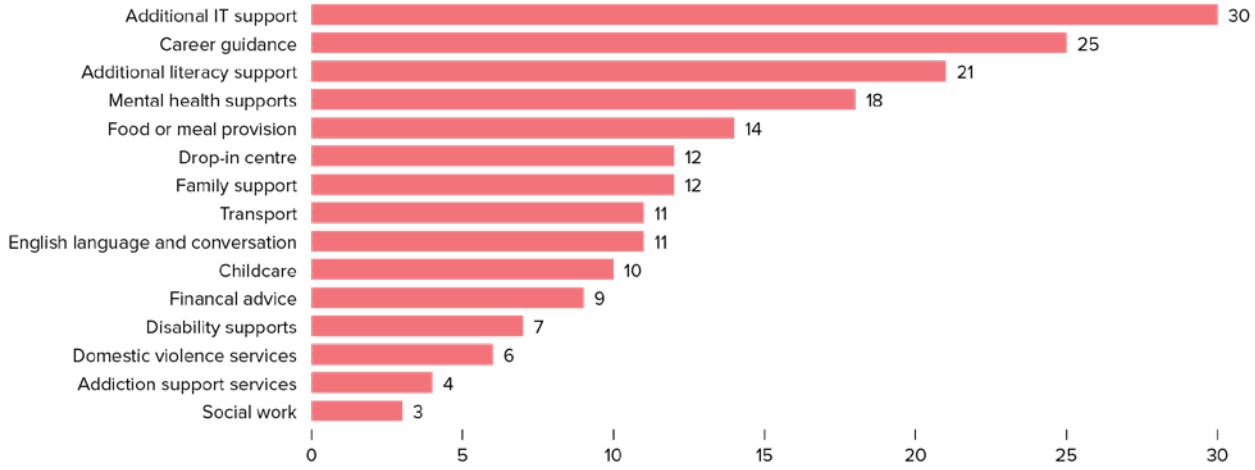

Figure 4. Responses to the question: "Which of the following supports are available to learners engaging in your community education courses?"

Providers were frequently able to provide access to digital resources and IT support, including laptop loans and other resources. "The printer [and] the photocopier is there [...] you know, we'd support you with all of that if you're doing the course with us." Learners also had access to a range of other holistic supports including guidance and mental health supports. Often these resources were available within the same building, but providers were also well positioned to refer learners on to other services "[if] we're not the experts, then we will refer them, and you know support them through that referral and stuff. So, we'll have the opportunity to support people on an individual level, if they need it." One provider spoke of learners within the centre as the experts on identifying and supporting the needs of their peers, and sharing information among themselves on support services available:

> I walk down past the group that were having their cup of tea and one girl was talking about her autistic child and another one was saying, have you tried? Have you gone to there? They'll help you in this one and that one. So it's not just about us providing that information. The experts, the people here using those services are telling the other women. The power of that is amazing. (Practitioner)

The account above highlights community education's ability to enable connection and mutual exchange. This helps build the "social capital" (Putnam, 2000; Dolan, 2008) of marginalised individuals, enabling them to access support, exercise a wider range of capabilities and to make a fuller contribution to society. The cup of tea emerged as a motif throughout discussions, signifying an opportunity for mutual exchange between peers, and also between learners and centre staff or tutors. It was felt that these conversations and moments of exchange simply would not happen if the centre was not there. As noted by one practitioner: "the important piece [is] that we're providing spaces in the community where [...] people feel respected." Holistic supports were often bolstered by further supports to meet the basic material or

practical needs of learners. A number of practitioners described how they were currently responding to financial hardship through a range of practical measures. As noted by one: "we have a food table [...] we have an emergency fund. And we can, you know, give somebody 50 pounds top up of gas and electricity and we can give them food" (Practitioner). While not all organisations were able to offer this degree of financial support, it was clear that organisations, broadly speaking, were seeing and responding creatively to learners' needs in this area.

The significance of access to childcare supports through community education was also frequently stated as a practical consideration in enabling access to learning for women in the community:

> Community education is for some able to provide either support with childcare or childcare itself, and that's one of the biggest barriers for women [...] you don't get that anywhere [else] and women need that. (Practitioner)

This flexible spectrum of supports within the sector is key to its ability to promote its key goal of social inclusion, highlighted in Figure 3 (n=26). These supports not only help to attract the learners who stand to gain the most from community education, but allow organisations to retain learners by providing the necessary scaffolding for participants to achieve their goals in learning.

2.4 Tackling Intergenerational Unemployment

Since unemployment was highlighted as a pervasive issue by almost one third of practitioners responding to the survey (see Figure 1, n=11), community education as a route into meaningful and dignified employment opportunities must be recognised. As succinctly noted by one practitioner:

> I think if there's been any movement [regarding intergenerational unemployment], it's been through our organisations in the community, because we're the organisations that are there, they see us, they trust us. (Practitioner)

Another practitioner shared the story of one woman who was seeking a job in Dunelm Mill's haberdashery department but didn't have IT skills, "so she came here and did her IT class and [...] you know, she got the job she wanted." The role of community educators in relation to supporting employability objectives was also acknowledged in policy stakeholder interviews:

> We've got the 27% economically inactive [in NI] and they're not going to immediately jump to Level 2. A lot of these people aren't going to be in a situation to even go to the FE sector initially. That can be quite intimidating, especially if you're further down the line, you may not actually have access to a college near you (Policy stakeholder) [1]

As such, community education, with its wide range of supports, was seen as a more than viable option in terms of supporting current and future learners at this level.

[1] It should be noted that Level 2 in NI is not equivalent to Level 2 in ROI. For a useful tool comparing qualifications see here: www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-08/Qualifications%20Can%20Cross%20Boundaries-Aug-2023_0.pdf

2.5 Outcomes for Families: The Ripple Effects of Community Education

The benefits of community education for learners highlighted above were far from limited to the individual, and the ripple effects of learning, particularly for the families of those engaging in courses within the community, were expressed repeatedly across interviews and focus groups. These expanded benefits to the families of learners are particularly beneficial in light of the role that education plays in addressing intergenerational disadvantage (Joint Committee on Education and Skills, 2019). Practitioners described how seeing family members learn had the potential to create a new "norm":

> If you see Mammy and Daddy going out to [names place of learning], of course you see it as the norm [...] If you see Mam and Dad and they're sitting at home all day then that's the norm. [...] And I suppose for us, that was all the things we used our adult education pieces [...] to show other members of the families that "look, Daddy can do it, you can do it." (Practitioner)

The centre itself, with its many facilities and wraparound supports, was described as conducive to fostering intergenerational exchange, operating as a space for learning across the lifespan:

> Because we're based in the community centre with other services, we have a nursery, we have the senior service and we have [a] training centre. We find like generations of families come to this building for different things and we find like even the fact that a grandparent is able to say to their kids that I'm learning Irish, you know, I'm learning this [...] it actually builds the positive learning experience, you know, and they can share it with their grandkids, even, you know. (Practitioner)

This was perceived to be an important characteristic of community education, promoting ongoing intergenerational engagement of disadvantaged learners with opportunities across the wider tertiary sector. Another practitioner described how a mother and daughter were undertaking their Level 6 together within their centre:

> She would have been in our creche when she started like, you know, 17 years ago [...] you see the generational kind of shift [...] Last year, we [also] had a mother and daughter and they both graduated in UCD. (Practitioner)

The role of the mother, in particular, was acknowledged in terms of its capacity to shape a child's view of education: "they say, you know, you educate a woman, you educate a village, you know, and it's so true. You know, the women are the role models of a family. And you know, if they're going to change their lives and see the importance of education, that filters down to the children." This finding is congruent with other recent research in the Irish context, including the impact for children of lone parents (Eustace et al., 2023), and demonstrates the need for a diverse range of flexible learning opportunities at community

level. The intergenerational theme also emerged in policy stakeholder interviews, with one participant commenting on how they had been particularly struck by the social impact of family learning when listening to learners share their story. CEFs taking part in this research also commented on having seen the ripple effects in their communities over decades, where parents were accessing learning: “that child grows up thinking, oh, God, even my Mam can go to school, not just kids go to school. Even though it’s not school, you know, it’s education, for me one hundred percent, and especially in the communities that I work with, huge social impact.”

Many organisations were directly influencing family wellbeing by offering courses to support learners with parentcraft, and these were felt to be invaluable not only in terms of providing necessary support for parents, but for creating a good foundation during this critical window for future generations. One practitioner commented on having observed the impacts of where this vital support had not been widely available or availed of:

> I believe the education should be starting like informal education and educating parents as well because I was at a youth conference the other day and a lot of youth workers are dealing with issues that parents should be dealing with and it’s just pass the buck over to the community and youth workers to [...] take up the reins and try to fix these damaged people, where it should be coming from statutory, like either to [...] education or to educating parents. (Practitioner)

As such, a greater investment in community education now will echo through generations to come.

Hazel's Story

My journey into adult learning began in September 2022, shortly after giving birth to my youngest daughter. At the time, I was a single mum of three children under three, living with my parents after leaving an abusive relationship. I was in the depths of depression, overwhelmed, and uncertain about how I would ever improve my situation.

Previously, I had trained in accounting straight after school, but due to mental health struggles, I left and went into childcare training. However, after having children of my own, I found it increasingly difficult to justify working with other people's children while navigating my own family's needs.

It was through a friend's referral that I came into contact with Ballybeen Women's Centre, and from that moment, everything began to change.

She referred me to a programme for mothers struggling with perinatal mental health. The courses – ranging from mindfulness, resilience training, and anxiety management, to heal your life and healthy relationships – were a turning point for me. Not only did they support my mental health, but they also allowed me space to rediscover myself. For the first time in a long time, I had two hours to myself while my daughters were safe in the creche. I started to remember who I was away from being a mum. I found strength, identity, and hope. I was learning that I was capable of more and that I could improve my situation, not just for my children, but for me.

Since then, I've completed a wide range of learning opportunities, including:

- Discover You (OCN Level 2) – Focused on good mental health, wellbeing, and resilience
- GOALS Programme – Helped me identify future aspirations and practical steps to reach them
- Maternal Advocacy and Support (OCN Level 3) – Explored perinatal mental health, the role of peer support, and campaigning
- Mental Health First Aid Training
- Introduction to Counselling (OCN Level 2)
- OCN Level 2 in Counselling – With plans to begin Level 3 this September
- Peer Support (OCN Level 3) with The Parent Rooms

These qualifications didn't just improve my knowledge; they restored my confidence, self-esteem, and sense of purpose. I discovered a deep passion for women's mental health, and now I feel empowered to support others in the same way I was supported.

Personally, my mental health has significantly improved. I feel stronger, more confident, and better equipped to navigate challenges as a single parent. I've discovered joy and a passion for helping others.

For my family, the benefits have been profound. My children now have a more resilient, emotionally present mum. I've learned how to advocate for them – through speech delays,

allergies, potty training, and beyond. My parents have seen the transformation too – my mum even joined me on a mindfulness course. We've also begun learning how to support my dad, who has Alzheimer's, using the tools I've acquired.

For my community, I now give back as a Group Leader for the MAS Project, supporting women facing perinatal mental ill health through peer support. I've also found a strong interest in campaigning – advocating for better resources for women and children. I even spoke at the Women's Parliament in Stormont in March 2025, highlighting the importance of continuity of care for mothers.

None of this would have been possible without the continued support of Ballybeen Women's Centre.

From the childcare team, who've not only cared for my girls but celebrated every little milestone with me, to the SENCO, who's been instrumental in helping me seek assessments and support for my eldest daughter; they have been there every step of the way. As a single mother, that support system has meant everything.

The staff always offer a listening ear, a kind word, and genuine encouragement. For my daughters, it's been a safe, nurturing space. For me, it's been life-changing.

There have been challenges – self-doubt, emotional triggers, personality clashes, and the constant juggle of motherhood and education – but the positives far outweigh the struggles. I am proud of what I've accomplished, and deeply grateful to the friend who first referred me back in 2022. Thanks to adult education and the unwavering support of Ballybeen Women's Centre, I have reclaimed my life, rediscovered my identity, and am now building a future not just for my children; but for myself, as the woman I always hoped I could become.

2.6 Social Cohesion through Community Education

While the ripple effects of community education were observable through generations of local families, the benefits of learning were also seen to extend far beyond all family structures; and the sector's efforts and capacity to connect people and groups who often seemed disparate, or socially isolated, came across strongly in discussion with research participants.

Social Cohesion and Integration

This connection and development of social capital along with the promotion of learner engagement in community life, has the potential to support civic engagement and social cohesion. As one practitioner noted:

> The more marginalised people become, the less involvement they have in any kind of engagement or decision making about the issues that affect the lives of their families and the communities that they're part of. So I think there is a big and a growing issue around, you know, enforced disengagement really, structures that are enforcing that disengagement, polarisation, and that's really problematic. And it's also a means by which [...] marginalised and minoritised communities can easily be scapegoated too. (Practitioner)

The work of community education providers was felt to go some way towards addressing these social issues in terms of providing opportunities for social mixing and relationship building that can foster respect for diversity and community solidarity. Importantly, though, practitioners felt that education was only one part of this picture; and their work in this area needed to be backed up by political will and systemic change to address the structural barriers that generate social exclusion and tension in communities. This cross-sectoral approach to social challenges is particularly important for minority communities.

Migrants and refugees were repeatedly named as a key beneficiary and participant in community education throughout this research. As highlighted in Marleen's story (at the end of this section), as well as supporting individual goals in learning, community education provides an important space for "cultural orientation and integration" and building relationships within the community.

Eight organisations responding to the survey indicated that racism was one of the top three issues that they were facing in their local area. This issue was prevalent in discussions with practitioners in both NI and ROI, with the escalation of racist attacks, riots and protests in the past number of years having a significant impact on organisations working on the ground. As one practitioner described, "It's like we're in middle of it [...] you can have conversations, but you're testing the waters constantly with people like, and racism has just become so blatant."

While some organisations were facing huge challenges in dealing the rise of racism and misinformation, others felt the sector "brilliant at responding to that kind of thing, to the real issues". One practitioner noted that for "ESOL students and people who are local to the north inner city [...] it's been very positive [...] they're doing literacy and computer classes. And we also have an art class [...] We did [an] art exhibition there last week [so] it's important to [...] capture the good work that's happening as well as issues." A CEF taking part in the research also described how work to support integration was an area of growth, highlighting that a group they supported was to:

> Work with local men, and men from the IPAS centre. So, the IPAS centre in [names local area] is all kind of single men. So, it's kind of building that new community [...] The tutor is really experienced, will be well able to kind of [...] look after that group. So, it's really transformed there and we're able to kind of run that as a pilot programme. (CEF)

Another noted that:

> From time to time, we will get funding to do courses like that [...] we're going to be doing a session on, you know, blasting the myths around immigration and asylum seekers and things like that. And again, if you can tell one person in a family, they can share that with their other family members and you know, maybe change people's attitudes towards, you know, people from ethnic minority background. You know, we're not huge in that area. And so it's hard to gauge what the impact of that would be. But I do believe that just, again, chipping away at that at a low level does have a long-term impact on people and how they think; it's about educating people like, isn't it? (Practitioner)

Community education's ability to bring together and even foster relationships among diverse groups through its critical and dialogical methods mean that the practice is uniquely positioned in tackling rising hate, thereby supporting the delivery of government objectives outlined in the Programme for Government, both North and South.

Civic Engagement: Taking Part, Playing a role

Throughout discussion it emerged that the sense of belonging fostered within the learning environment paved the way for a greater sense of personal and collective empowerment, allowing learners who had felt disaffected and disempowered to reclaim a sense of agency in their community. Through its various approaches to learning, community education was able to create a space for people to come together to work collectively on community issues and solutions.

Supporting learners to find a personal and collective voice was found to be key to supporting social outcomes within communities. A number of organisations were offering courses with a focus on active citizenship in response to learners' interest in this area.

> You know the active citizenship voter education [...] Like a lot of the work we do is helping people to kind of engage. To find their voice, to find their confidence, to question [...] I worked with the National Learning Network in our club last year. They were a fantastic group. A really, really amazing group and one woman I was thinking would be a future activist. She was getting on to a local councillor just about transport routes in the town and things like that. So a lot of it is [...] even though we don't see ourselves as kind of activists or people don't name it as that, but through education [...] people start to kind of question and they feel they have the power to [...] and confidence to address [...] individual issues for themselves, but also in their community. (Practitioner)

Another practitioner spoke of a leadership programme within their organisation, supporting learning around political and community structures:

> We brought the women to the actual council chambers [...] they've met with, like the Women's Caucus, you know, and had conversations about what's going on in their community. So, they're using their voices. They feel like their voices are being heard. And then we also do the trip to the Dáil as part of that programme. So, they're seeing about local politics, and then Government [...] and it's fantastic [...] we've had women that never voted before, and then they went out and voted in the local election. (Practitioner)

This type of work to support active citizenship and a more inclusive or representative democracy was taking place across the whole island, with organisations in NI also describing going to the Northern Ireland Assembly: "we examine public policies in Northern Ireland, and we critique them", with lobbying being a key activity undertaken as a result and in collaboration with learners.

As well as supporting greater understanding of the political system, organisations were promoting active citizenship and collective action around issues at a grassroots level and gave examples of how they were responding, through a range of creative approaches, to issues they were facing locally. One organisation, based in the West of Ireland described how learners in their centre had written and performed a play in response to issues they were facing as a result of the regeneration process, that had resulted in families being displaced and dispersed. While there had been a number of attempts to engage the community, these had not been perceived as authentic or successful by community members, so the play was a way to effectively mediate this experience:

> We wrote it. And it was, I would say, semi-autobiographical for some people. And it was how they felt they were treated by regeneration and how things were, and they put that play together and we put it on to two packed houses over two nights. Yeah. Then we made a short film. And we made a short film based on the play [...] and we invited Regeneration to come to the play [...] Now, to me that was using education, the courses and the classes, right? The individuals were residents living within this regeneration process and then tackling social issues with regeneration in a non-confrontational way, because what came across from Regeneration all the time is that every time they had a public meeting it was confrontational. (Practitioner)

Another practitioner described the use of photovoice methods as a tool for mediation and collective reflection. In this case it was used "to mark the anniversary of the [racially motivated] riots [...] Like it's a gentler way of marking it, an easier way." They went on to describe the benefits of the tool in relation to the practice of community education, broadly speaking:

> [It's] useful tool for community education, particularly if you're working with people who may have literacy issues or who, like, it's an interpretive way. So like, if you look [at] like photography as a language in itself. So you look at an image [...] it's about how that's interpreted by the people taking part in the study. So it's like one of the images I took was a shadow of myself. And I presented it to the group and I was like, this is what [name of local area] feels like now. It's a shadow of what used to be. Do you know what I mean? Because there was a great community spirit and everybody was proud of, you know, their working-class roots and you know, that's gone. (Practitioner)

Response to Cross-Governmental Priorities

The issue of sustainability in particular emerged as an area where organisations were mounting a community response: "you know [...] altering clothes instead of buying new clothes, container gardening, you know, grow your own foods where you can [...] little things like that make people think more as a community." Another partitioner highlighted education around "climate issues" as an area where the sector was particularly strong and most aligned with its Freirean roots. While this type of political education work was felt to be key in terms of supporting active citizenship, one practitioner pointed out that in fact all of their work had political significance, and that the personal and social were intertwined within their practice:

> In Ireland, politics is the capital P and it's, you know, the orange and green and it's like, but you know, I mean politics is about your well-being, your health, your education and everything else. And you know women feel better by coming and doing courses. Their mental health improves, their physical health improves, their family improves. You know, that's all political. (Practitioner)

While this practitioner described their work as political in terms of influencing the small daily decisions that govern social life, the big P political context can play a big role in both enabling and constraining the practice of community education.

This chapter has demonstrated how community education generates outcomes that reach far beyond the individual learner, creating ripple effects for families, communities, and society at large. Its role is not only in providing accessible pathways into learning, but also in sustaining democratic participation, integration, and wellbeing in contexts where exclusion, misinformation, and racism are on the rise. For policymakers, this positions community education as a strategic public good that contributes directly to cross-departmental objectives across health, education, social inclusion, and community cohesion. Overall, when the thematic findings of this report are considered, the transformative outcomes of community education are of relevance to a wide array of policy priorities across both Northern Ireland and the Republic. These include outcomes that are relevant to social inclusion, well-being, access to education, and responses to social issues.

The relevant policy priorities that are reflected in research themes are presented in the table below.

	Relevant Policy	Policy priorities reflected in research themes
ROI	Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024	• Social inclusion • Learner support • Participation in education for target groups • Pathways through education • Role of FET as a response to social issues
ROI	Community Education Framework 2024	• Addressing barriers to participation • Practice and methodology to support learner engagement • Responding to social issues • Outcomes for learners encompassing inclusion, progression, wellbeing, and skills development • Community connection and collective action
ROI	Programme for Government 2025: Securing Irelands Future	• Social inclusion, thriving communities, and a caring society • Investing further in a world class education system • Increase access to further and higher education • Further development of the FET sector • Effective integration and social cohesion • Domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence • Climate action
ROI	Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-Being Framework 2025	• Subjective wellbeing • Mental and physical Health • Income and wealth • Environment, climate and biodiversity • Connections, community and participation • Civic engagement, trust and cultural expression
NI	Programme for Government 2024-2027 “Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most”	• Peace, prosperity and planet • Safer communities – collaboration with VCSE • Ending violence against women and girls • Commitment to develop social inclusion strategies • Wellbeing • Early intervention for families • Anti-poverty strategy • Just transition
NI	Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland	• Creating a culture of lifelong learning • Opening pathways to education • Improve social inclusion and wellbeing • Increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at Level 2 and above
NI	PfG Wellbeing Framework	• Thriving children • Equal society • Caring society • Stronger economy • Brighter futures • Safer communities • Living peacefully • Cleaner environment

Table 2. Relevance of Findings to Policy Priorities


WOMEN'S TEC


EASY DRIVE
WOMEN'S TEC

Marlene's Story

My name is Marlene Uju. I am originally from Nigeria. I am a mother to my lovely twelve-year-old daughter. We both moved into Northern Ireland when she was six years old. I came into Northern Ireland in July 2019. Shortly after we moved in, COVID-19 started, an experience I will beat my chest and say it was the worst time of my life and that of many people.

With the outburst of covid life became very challenging for me and my daughter. I barely came into the country and had not made friends. I didn't know anything about my community and the new environment that I relocated to. It was indeed the most difficult time in my life. I was home one day thinking about how to navigate my life circumstances, when my phone rang and it happened to be a lady I met in one of the shopping malls and she has lived here for over two decades and also happens to be an African lady. We exchanged our telephone numbers then and that was it, because we didn't get to talk until that very faithful day she called to check on us. She gave me the names of some women's centres around me and suggested that I should check with them to see if I can do some courses because she believes that it will go a long way to help my mental and physical wellbeing and is a good avenue to meet and bond with other women in the community.

Without wasting any time, I got the Women's TEC telephone number via Google and the rest was a success story. The first course I was offered to do was gardening/foraging. It wasn't only about the course but my meeting other women, making new friends, getting to understand more about the community I live in and most importantly learning the culture of my new home, their foods, their accents , behaviors, their religion, beliefs and some of things about them which will make my integration process very easy.

My involvement in Women's TEC plays a significant role in my life. I did some other courses with the center, such as: Personal Development, OCN Level 2 Computer Skills. Through a Women's TEC referral I was able to do Counseling Levels 1 to 3, Health and Social Care Level 3 with other women's centres. One thing leads to another is my scenario with my involvement in Women's TEC. My involvement in Women's TEC helped me to build my confidence, and self-esteem. It gave me a sense of belonging and the love I received was massive.

In addition, my involvement in Women's TEC turned me into Oliver Twist!! I want some more but in a very positive and impactful way. I was able to take more courses and volunteer within my community via the referrals I got from the centre. I did my Level 3 Aromatherapy and Massage in Southern Regional college, Lisburn, and Level 3 Facilitation Skills with WRDA.

With the skills and knowledge I acquired in these courses I was able to offer voluntary massages to women of ethnic minorities who are traumatised by their asylum process. I volunteer in the inpatient unit of Northern Ireland Hospice, I also volunteer in Diverse Youth NI as a play and development youth worker for young people of 7 to 12 years.

Recently after the completion of my Level 3 Facilitation Skills with WRDA I now deliver sessions on breast and bowel cancer awareness.

In summary, the role of community education in supporting people who recently relocated is very pivotal and cannot be overemphasised. I am a living testimony. Community education provides vital information about local services, amenities around you that you can gain from, transportation, schools, healthcare such as your closest GP and other essential resources that will ease relocation challenges. It also helps in cultural orientation and integration. My involvement in Women's TEC made it easy for me to learn and understand the lifestyle, norms, foods, dance, accents of the locals and this made my integration and settlement very easy.

Community education immensely helps me to connect socially with the locals because I do a lot in my community and this has helped me in building strong relationships. Today and always, I remain a big fan and advocate of community education because I have gained a lot through it. I have taken it upon myself to encourage every newcomer I come across to get involved in it. More so, I offer my services and skills which I got via community education to whosoever needs it as my way of giving back to my community.

3. The Struggle for Recognition and Funding Transformation

In the previous section, the complex social contexts that community providers work in, their response to learner needs and the transformative impact of their practices were explored. This section focuses on the struggle for recognition of the value of community education practice at a governance level, and the impact of the funding environment on programmes and provision over time.

3.1 Struggle for Recognition

There is a sense amongst key decision-makers both sides of the border that community education has a real value for society. In the South, its capacity to respond to social issues is considered a real strength of the sector, and this is reflected in policy. As highlighted by one policy stakeholder it was hoped that the practice of community education could be about more than "numbers, people in people out." In the North, the benefits of practice were more clearly tethered to the idea of economic inclusion:

> We've got the 27% economically inactive and they're not going to immediately jump to Level 2. A lot of these people aren't going to be in a situation to even go to the FE sector initially. That can be quite intimidating, especially if you're further down the line, you may not actually have access to a college near you [...] I would certainly argue that the voluntary sector would be better at engaging the economically inactive. (Policy stakeholder)

Community education practitioners assigned a more far-reaching value to community education, incorporating a response to social issues, the inclusion of learners in society, and a reduction in costs to the public purse over time. However, practitioners were keen to affirm the value of community education as a public good, developing the social capital that is so vital for community wellbeing:

> If they choose to say well, I'm only just doing it for getting out of the house and for social skills? Well, isn't that great as well? It's saving society money on mental health [...] We would have people I know that come to our class every week that if they didn't come to our class, they'd be down at their GP every week. (Practitioner)

While there was a positive response to the value of community education from all respondents to this research there is a sense amongst practitioners that a wider recognition for the work that is done by the sector and its value for society was lacking. This is particularly true for providers in Northern Ireland, who felt that there was an outstanding

need for community education and community development to be recognised in policy. As noted by one practitioner:

> Our hope is that Community Development will be more explicitly articulated in the new People and Place Strategy from [Department for Communities] and then OK, so how are you going to support the education and training?[…] That's a piece of work that really needs to be done and I think it's a precursor to being able then to clearly push for the provision of education and training that supports collective and action and transformative change. (Practitioner)

While community education is better recognised in stand-alone policy in the Republic, some practitioners felt that this was not matched by recognition in ongoing decision-making processes at a governance level, or indeed through the wider FET sector. This was a topic of discussion particularly among CEFs taking part in the focus group:

> I do think sometimes our colleagues in FET think we knit and make tea, I really do believe that that's what they think sometimes. So, I've really been pushing lately just what community is about […] like they were shocked weren't they? […] Absolutely couldn't get over the numbers […] and the stuff that we were doing. (CEF)

For some practitioners, there was a sense that government was not following through on its policy promises to support the sector, with implications for practice and morale. This perceived lack of recognition came across to practitioners in how community education was publicly recognised and celebrated, particularly in connection with the launch of the new Community Education Framework in 2024, which was felt to be rushed without proper community consultation:

> Why not put it [framework launch] off for a month and let him [new Minister] get his feet under the table and let everybody be there and understand what the framework is and how it's going to operate, which I think people still actually don't know or understand or [are] not sure exactly what it means, what it's supposed to mean, what it's supposed to do. (CEF)

Meanwhile "ALL [Adult Literacy for Life] had a huge, big launch in Croke Park but yet Reach which has put out millions of euro into the nationwide, has never had any kind of official launch or official kind of recognition of it" (CEF). The current implementation of the ALL Strategy was felt to be a "bone of contention". As described by one CEF:

> The vast majority of those literacy students are sitting in our classes […] They should have invested more in the community education programme […] and the money should have been put towards us being able to put structures in place that made it easier for people to access literacy programmes […] it's stuff that's done at government level and they don't consult with us. They don't ask us. (CEF)

Another area in which practitioners felt that their views were not being heard was around the processes and stipulations required by ETBs in funding processes, which were thought to pose barriers to learner engagement.

> The personal information that they're requesting from Fetch [PLSS] has had a huge impact on people taking up courses. Most people don't want to give their financial pieces, what they have is their business and no one else's. A lot of people are very scared to give their PPS numbers. Now the ETB require PPS numbers to show that they are actually real people that are doing classes and courses. But [...] I've said it from day one that it wasn't going to work. It's not. It's so very, very difficult to get to sign them up. (Practitioner)

While data gathering is seen to be key to the demonstration of value by decision-makers who took part in this research, they did note a need to review and amend processes that present barriers to participation, and highlighted efforts underway to capture breadth and scope of practice in the field. By capturing this information, pathways through the wider FET system will be made clearer to both decision-makers and learners alike. As noted in one policy stakeholder interview:

> Whilst you know I understand that people can often be loathe to hear numbers and data, when a Minister comes into a meeting, that's what they want to know. They want to know their numbers. So, I think in terms of that transformative piece, to be able to have the Wider Benefits of Learning tool that will understand the learner, the learner journey in community education alongside the information from PLSS, I think that could be transformative. (Policy stakeholder)

Many respondents discussed current challenges they faced around demonstrating the value that community education has due to the often-intangible nature of outcomes, and the impact of relational practices when providing practical and emotional support to learners. These challenges are consistent with recent research on impact measurement conducted by AONTAS and Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI) on behalf of the Alliance for Lifelong learning (Cobain and Neilands, 2025). As highlighted by a practitioner taking part in this research: "I mean we have them [wraparound] services available [...] I don't know how you measure that either." It was felt that these benefits were not fully taken into consideration in funding administration processes or recognised in awards. As noted by another practitioner: "how can you get an award for being confident enough to walk into a building or being confident enough to go to your career guidance?" While various tools are now available, or under development, there remained an issue around how to capture the wider benefits of learning and "distance travelled". Furthermore, providers felt that funders still prioritised "numbers", which ran counter to their approach in working holistically with the individual, with far reaching benefits beyond course completion.

> They [funders] focus on how many people completed a course and they don't stop and think that for like one of our men [...] had severe agoraphobia, and he came to two classes, you know, and for him that was amazing. He stayed the two full classes and a few others [...] but he's not even counted. You know what I mean? And he's going to try and

> come back [...] But like, there's all of that across the board, people going through cancer treatments that this is a lifeline for them [...] you know the government are getting their money's worth, and they don't even see where they're getting their money's worth because they don't try to see where, they're just ticking boxes and checking numbers. (Practitioner)

3.2 Core Funding Challenges

This perceived lack of recognition surrounding the contribution of community education to social life and to the wider FET or FE system is worth consideration within the context of survey findings from this research. Providers faced a multitude of challenges when delivering their services, chief among which was "lack of core funding" (59%, n=19). Respondents also identified a range of other key issues in Figure 5 below, almost all of which relate to funding and conditions for funding.

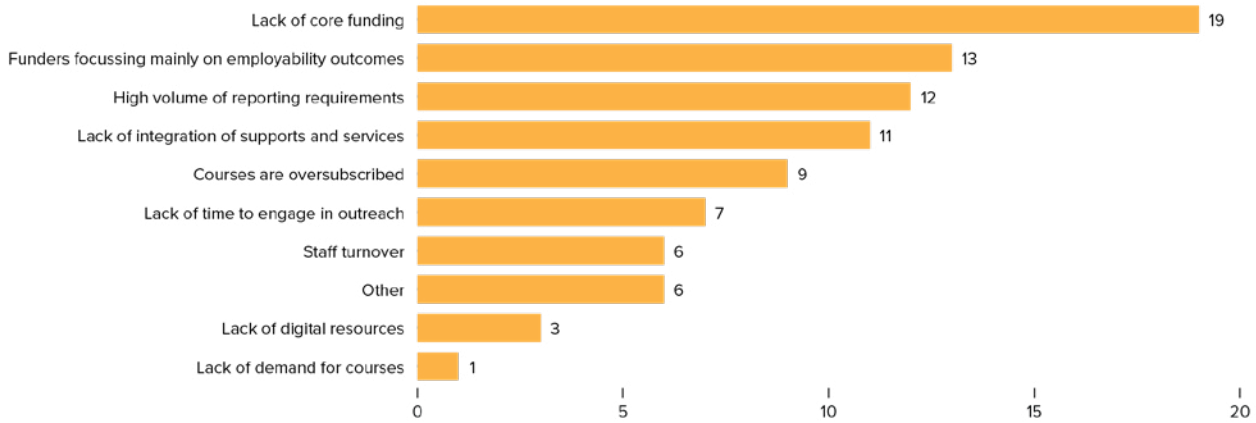

Figure 5. Responses to the question: "What are the key issues that your organisation is facing? Please select your top three issues."

In tandem with the dearth of recognition, the erosion of funding over time is the most pressing issue. In the South, it was noted that much work is underway in the policy and decision-making space to ensure that the allocation of funding from SOLAS to community education providers is managed and delivered in the most efficient way through mapping and reflection on allocation processes (SOLAS, 2024).

> The framework requires ETBs to ensure a more consistent approach of funding across the community education sector, and that community education providers are given some commitment that funding will be consistent [...] there will be a mapping and overview approach to that. (Policy stakeholder)

The North is particularly affected by the loss of ESF funding as a result of Brexit. In Northern Ireland, participants noted that the impact of these cuts were amplified, with the locus of policy and government support shifting towards specific skills-based learning that fails to recognise the role that community education plays in promoting economic inclusion. As noted in one Policy stakeholder interview:

> In the past [...] our department would have had an awful lot of interaction with the community [sector] via the European Social Fund project. Obviously that's long gone and its successor, despite the many promises of the UK Government certainly didn't replicate the level of funding that was coming to the North [...] our department has cut spending on skills around that, even regardless of the ESF money [...] Now there's reasons for that, that's in the face of a wider cut to the Department for the Economy [...] so in all these things, voluntary sector funding is one of the things that would get squeezed [...] and we're not in a position to invest in it as much as we would like to and I would argue probably should. (Policy stakeholder)

Practitioners also noted how the loss of ESF funding had a devastating impact for organisations that had "vested a lot of their [...] resourcing and their focus in under those programmes [...] When that was no longer available, [it] caused really significant issues and it's very hard to turn something around on the head of a pin [...] it became apparent that the drive for the Northern Ireland economy was going to be the driver of anything and everything" (Practitioner). In response to the practitioner survey one participant further underscored this loss: "Loss of ESF funding is 50% of budget lost, £250k per annum – was easier to manage as all projects and courses under one umbrella funding" (Practitioner survey).

Such changes have had further implications for the engagement of learners, as certain criteria must be met before participating in programmes. The UK Shared Prosperity fund, which replaced ESF, was highlighted in terms of its limitations:

> You know, it's very, very strict. You have to be economically inactive, and you cannot have a work coach. So if you're getting supported into employment by a work coach you can't avail of that programme even though you want experience and, you know, support to get back into employment. (Practitioner)

Some providers in the North have started to look at the potential of cross-border collaboration to support the work that they do in the community and to access funding.

> Another issue that we have had with community education in the North since the UK left the EU is funding, there's just no funding for anything. Hence our partnership with Galway [University]. To draw on cross-border money [...], there just isn't the same level of funding. The sector is haemorrhaging good people to you know, [other] jobs, because there's zero job security. (Practitioner)

Funding for the core costs of operations is also an issue for providers in the South. Respondents reported applying for grants from multiple sources to try and source funds for the maintenance of property and the payment of bills. One practitioner spoke of having to seek additional funding to get "the roof repaired or the organisations will have nowhere to go." They described how they "got a capital funding for that, but like, I put in five [applications] and I got one of them" (Practitioner). Often organisations were dependent on small learner fees to "help cover the cost of the light and the heating [...] The tutor hours is covered by the ETB. Nothing else." As such, practitioners repeatedly highlighted the demands they faced in the eternal pursuit of funding to cover basic costs.

> I mean, as you know, funding comes and goes, you get funding from here there and different places and then it changes, you know, but we've no core [funding]. (Practitioner)

> We've tried to look at all different avenues, I suppose, to meet all our learners' needs and obviously finances, like funding would be [...] a major kind of thing; that we're always chasing funds and trying to keep things afloat in relation to the programmes. (Practitioner)

3.3 Reach Funding

Reach funding, and its beneficial role in supporting the engagement of learners farthest from the system, was also discussed as part of this research. The aim of this funding, launched in 2020 during the height of COVID-19, is to "increase the participation of disadvantaged learners in education, particularly those who are undertaking literacy and skills programmes" (SOLAS, 2025). As seen in Figure 6 below, more than half of organisations responding to the survey (in ROI) had been recipient of Reach funding.

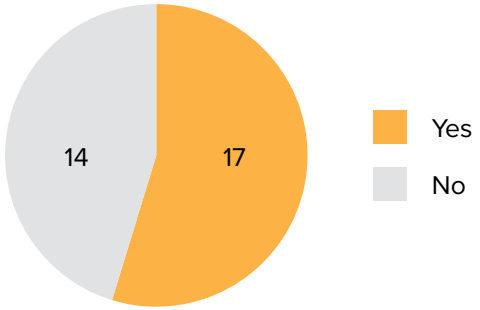

Figure 6. Responses to the question: "Have you been a recipient of Reach funding? (Republic of Ireland only)"

A number or organisations spoke of the transformative nature of Reach for their provision, describing how it had brought much-needed resources to their work and supported them in addressing learner need.

> Last year, the FRC did one course in September on self-development [in named priority area] and this year they have waiting lists and the five courses going to be running in September through Reach. So it's just really kind of flipped on its head [...] So there's the whole community building down there and there's kind of leaders within it you know, evolving [thanks to Reach funding]. (Practitioner)

> We have people if they join classes and courses need materials, and in fairness the Reach Fund has made an awful difference. (Practitioner)

However, despite the benefits, some respondents found the administration of the Reach funding to be challenging. Another respondent noted that in their area, the ETB managed the Reach funding for them, reducing the administrative workload.

> I find that the stress sometimes of the governance of what we're doing, and especially with Reach because the money is bigger [...] [Names group] got €40,000 this year and the same last year. Like that's huge money for us to one group, now they are amazing [...] we're meant to be looking after the governance and following up. (CEF)

> We do have people in our head office who manage the Reach because I just would not be able to do that. But I am aware that CEFs around the country are doing the Reach as well. (CEF)

Respondents repeatedly highlighted the finite nature of funding for operations, illustrating the impact that insecure and finite resources, including Reach, have on operations, forcing them to be "reactive" rather than "proactive" (Practitioner survey). They described the time that must be devoted to accessing funds for operations across multiple sources.

> But for us, in terms of continuing to support women through the pre-development programmes, it's the funding, it's the lack of assurance with it, that we don't know at this point what's going to happen in January. So, like that, our Reach funding is now finally in place until the end of November, but we're scrambling to look for funding to keep the women engaged for the first two weeks in December because again, linking back to the isolation piece, a lot of our women are older women living on their own, very isolated. (Practitioner)

3.4 Implications for Practice: Inadequate Funding and Sectoral Impacts

Many practitioners reported seeing unmet needs in the community in terms of education provision, while facing a concurrent reduction in spending power due to lack of core funding and budget cuts. The impact of inflation and uncertainty for future funding support is also having a clear impact on providers. As highlighted in Figure 7 below, 50% of those responding to the question, "Is your funding model able to respond to the needs you see in your local community?" indicated that it was not.

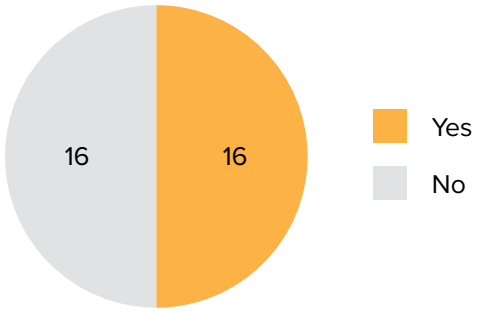

Figure 7. Responses to the question: "Is your funding model able to respond to the needs you see in your local community?"

3.4.1 Missed Opportunities: Rising Demand and Reduced Provision

Unmet community needs and lack of provider capacity to respond to rising demand indicate a missed opportunity to promote community interests through community education. Community education providers reported an increasing interest and demand in community education courses. At the same time, providers reported inadequate levels of funding for programme administration costs and being unable to apply for funds to deliver needed programmes:

> We are a part of a greater local response to individuals and family/ community, who are dealing with the long term affects of drug use. Demand for our services are ever increasing with little or no increase in resources for 12-15 years. (Practitioner survey)

> We usually have waiting lists for our programmes and it's always a pity to turn women down. Some funders only give you a fraction of what you applied for and so it is difficult to deliver the planned programme and to include more women. (Practitioner survey)

> Our current funding model enables us to meet many of the core needs within our community [...] through support from the CDETB [...] However, with the cohort of learners we have, there is a need for more funding around digital literacy and mental health support. (Practitioner survey)

Providers further reported a lack of access to facilities that would enable them to grow and respond to community needs: “the men’s group, we run that for two hours once a week, but we could have that going every day of the week, you know, different times. It’s just we don’t have the space. We don’t have the room to use” (Practitioner).

Providers highlighted with concern that funding has not kept pace with inflation and the rising cost-of-living: “the bills have gone up, so [...] it’s like your money has been cut. Because you have the same money and you know higher bills to pay. But that is obviously a worry going forward, definitely.” At a time when community education is experiencing rising demand, providers anticipated reducing programme delivery due to lack of investment. One provider noted that for the year ahead they “will probably have to look at having less courses [...] which means less people benefit from the service”, emphasising “that’s not the direction you want to be going in”.

3.4.2 Implications for Staffing and Capacity

Short-term funding and lack of investment impacts practitioners’ capacity to plan and deliver sustainable programmes. Programme providers report that they are losing tutor hours provided by the ETB, despite the crucial role this plays in the delivery of services and meeting the needs they see on the ground.

> We don’t have more tutors. We absolutely have been told we don’t have more tutors or more tutor hours this year [...] unless you have a CID [Contract of Indefinite Duration] this year there is no part time hours. Which is a big, big thing, because of budget cuts. (CEF)

> Every year [...] we have to do with the begging bowl and that’s an awful way to say it but that’s what is seems to be. We, for example, three years ago, I got 600 tutor hours. Two years ago I got 400. This year I got 300. Yeah. Now we were trying to explain, 20 hours of those is a 10 week course [...] we’re talking about, that’s 300 for the year. (Practitioner)

As highlighted in the account above, this community now has half the class time led by a professional adult education tutor than they did three years ago, despite an increase in social issues and continued demand for community education provision on the ground. Providers reported that the absence of core funding and precarious, short-term employment arrangements negatively impacted staff retention and wellbeing:

> For me to salary a tutor over a year, I would have to know what I was offering them over the year. And that’s not how my programme works. My programme works whereby the community partners tell me what they want, they plan, they say to me, “oh, this is what we’d like [...] in spring.” (CEF)

> There’s no security in it for young people who are looking to get mortgages or loans for things you know, it can be difficult because they’re on a two-year contract or whatever. (Practitioner)

Consequently, some providers were “forever struggling to find tutors” and expressed concern for the community education sector’s sustainability in a climate of uncertainty and fear. Every time their centre had to do a review of funding, one practitioner noted, there’s a “fear [...] straight away [...] are they going to reduce the funding [...] And you’re responsible for the workforce, and if they lose their jobs, like, that’s lives impacted.”

Key decision-makers who took part in this research considered the issue of precarious funding and lack of planning capacity. They explored a potential response: to deliver community education through a newly established, ETB managed work grade, offering workers some security beyond contracts of indefinite duration. This was seen to have potential benefits for enhancing community education as a career path and developing professional identity and learning in the field:

> The one thing that community education is vulnerable to, is that when there’s a funding restriction, people working in that sector are the most vulnerable. In terms of security of tenure and their employment a lot of them don’t have CIDs [Contract of Indefinite Duration] or maybe they have CIDs, but they’re quite small CIDs [in terms of teaching hours allotted per week]. So, there should be a career path for people in community education [...] But that career path needs some security around it as well. And that gives a rationale to the model where the ETB would look after delivery and tutor employment, and the community groups would look after the materials, utilities and the hosting of the programme to be run. By having people in situ, we have the ability to create communities of practice. We would also have the ability to do CDP where people can learn new skill sets or upskill in the area of community education [...] and get supported through formal learning around their career, and their community education practice as well. (Policy stakeholder)

3.4.3 Funding Decisions in a Context of Scarce Resources

Community Education Facilitators engaging in this research expressed concern for their role and reported that their capacity to support community education was being eroded:

> Our worries in [names ETB] and probably around the country is we are being taken away from that groundwork as CEFs and we’re being really put into the office. We’ve been told we don’t have the budget to travel at the moment [...] we’ve been told we might not have Reach [funding] because of the new adult educator contracts. Our adult educators were used as really kind of resource people for us. So our staff, uh, they’re being taken away. We won’t be able to do Reach by ourselves unless we get staff next year so while there’s loads and loads of positives, you do have to talk about the issues with budget cuts and the real issue about putting CEFs in an office [...] we shouldn’t be office based. If we don’t get out around our community groups, we’re going to lose something really, really special. (CEF)

CEFs highlighted how their role had evolved significantly since it was first outlined in The White Paper (2000):

> We have people sitting in positions in our head office who were called CEFs because they were taken in under that budget when there wasn't another budget to employ them. But they're technically down as a CEF. They've changed it now so that's like a CEF grade, but initially they weren't. They were employed as CEFs And I remember being at a meeting on one occasion and [...] there was four CEFs. But they were joking because they were saying [you're] actually the only real CEF here. (CEF)

This was felt to be a funding adjacent issue among CEFs since "on paper it looks like there are more CEFs, but in reality there are less."

Respondents further observed disparities in practices and support for community education across different regions. CEFs linked these disparities to an absence of formal and consistent recognition for the sector and its work:

> FET directors [...] all have their own way of doing and thinking [though it] probably should be more streamlined, you know [...] I've had no restrictions put on me so far for travel [...] but I can't go above what I offered last year [in terms of funding]. I think it's just down to the way the different ETBs disperse and utilise their different grants. But I know it's a shared view [...] It's what I see, you know, and I think that at government level they're good at saying things and they're not even bothered promoting things. (CEF)

Government stakeholders highlighted an awareness of these issues and described recent efforts, in connection with the implementation of the Community Education Framework, to "bring community education into a more consistent approach [...] more into the FET family." They noted:

> There's a survey going out to the sector that the subgroup have put together, we just have to get it to go to the directors, the FET Directors' Forum [then] that'll be going into the sector [to find out about] the different ways of funding community education because [...] it can be quite different from ETB to ETB [...] So it's kind of looking at things like that [...]. So that's moving forward as well [...] (Policy stakeholder)

Despite widespread acknowledgment of community education's role as a vital contributor to inclusion, wellbeing, and economic participation, this section shows that many stakeholders feel the sector remains under-recognised in governance structures and under-resourced in practice. This gap between rhetorical support and structural recognition represents a fundamental challenge to the sustainability of the sector, and by extension, to the achievement of wider government priorities.

Dylan's Story

Three years ago, I began a journey with Integrate Dance Ensemble that would profoundly shape both my personal and professional life. What started as a simple step into the world of dance quickly evolved into a transformative experience – one filled with growth, opportunity, and an overwhelming sense of community. Today, I not only look back with gratitude but also forward with ambition, inspired by everything I've learned and everyone I've met along the way.

My time with Integrate began with a passion for dance, and that passion was met with open arms. From the very beginning, the environment was welcoming, supportive, and full of energy. It wasn't long before I was given the opportunity to take on a dance internship at 2 Many Dance Moves School of Dance Movement and Meditation under the mentorship and guidance of Becci Whelan, the director of the company and the Integrate Dance Ensemble Tutor. This experience gave me insight into the discipline, dedication, and creativity it takes to be part of something bigger than yourself. It helped me build confidence, develop my skills, and understand the importance of collaboration. Eventually, this internship led to a job within the organization – an opportunity I hold with immense pride.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my current role is being able to give back. I now help lead warm-ups, support other dancers, and mentor those working on solos. Guiding others step-by-step, just as I have learned in the training. This an experience that has come full circle. There's something incredibly meaningful about helping others grow while continuing to grow myself. I've learned that leadership doesn't always mean standing in front – it also means standing beside someone, encouraging them, and helping them believe in themselves.

Dance has always been a source of peace and strength for me. When I'm stressed or going through difficult times, dancing becomes a way to release emotions and reconnect with myself. It's more than just movement – it's therapy, expression, and joy all in one. Through Integrate, I've been able to harness that passion and turn it into something purposeful.

As much as I love being part of Integrate, I know that my journey doesn't end here. I have strong ambitions and dreams that extend beyond what I'm currently doing. One day, I hope to take a step back from the organisation to focus on new opportunities and larger goals. However, this decision will never come from a place of dissatisfaction – it will come from a deep belief in continuing to grow and evolve.

No matter where my path leads, Integrate will always hold a special place in my heart. The people, the lessons, and the experiences have shaped who I am today. I am forever grateful for the support I've received, the friendships I've made, and the trust that's been placed in me over the years. Integrate has given me more than just a platform – it's given me purpose, direction, and a family.

4. Collaboration for Social Transformation

This chapter explores existing collaborations between stakeholders with an interest in community education. Collaboration emerged as a key theme among all stakeholders in the research. The collaborative relationships under exploration are as follows:

- Between community providers and FE(T)/HE providers
- Between community providers and policy makers
- Between community providers themselves (including cross-border)

Collaboration within the sector itself often takes place within the context of innovation, exchange and in response to the need for a unified sectoral voice; yet throughout the research process it also emerged as a perceived necessity, in response to a thinning out of funding opportunities and budgets. This chapter explores the nature of these collaborations and how they might better serve the needs of the sector; it paves the way for recommendations in highlighting the need for meaningful consultation and collaboration, driven by the needs of community providers and the learners they seek to empower.

4.1 Partnership in the FE/FET and HE System

Partnership with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) is key to the delivery of community education. As discussed in previous sections, community education providers have the capacity to reach those groups furthest from traditional learning provision. However, some providers did not feel that this was given adequate recognition. As one practitioner noted: “I also keep reminding the ETB they need us just as much as we need them.”

Examples of practice explored in this research demonstrate how community education might contribute to skills-based training. One provider gave an example of how they supported the design of an apprenticeship programme. In addition to developing the skills base of learners, such a programme has the potential to support sustainability in terms of sectoral operations, a key issue given the challenges in staffing organisations discussed in the previous section.

> The other thing we are looking at as well is at having things like investment in the sector like [...] an apprenticeship programme, that sort of programme. We have apprentices up here for all these sorts of existing trades, but we would have never had anything really like that for the community sector. So, we’re looking at doing a bit of work with government at the minute to see can we have a pilot just to try and build a better security and a bit of stability into the whole sector at the moment. (Practitioner)

Additionally, one policy stakeholder participant reflected on the potential for collaboration with the wider commercial community in developing a response to skills-based education through Skills Academies in the North. It was felt that the current programme was achieving "easy wins" by supporting those who would have succeeded in employment in the absence of the Skills Academy. As such, this programme might better refocus "resources where there's most need as opposed to necessarily almost going for the easy win which we do to a certain extent with by using the Big Four [professional service providers]." This policy stakeholder felt that "we could try and make a better impact on areas where those jobs won't come." This would allow for better economic inclusion by better addressing the needs of those "harder to help cases [...] which maybe wouldn't have had the guaranteed success [...] [though] longer term it may have more impact." Yet it was suggested that government targets might mean that there was some resistance to supporting those who might be less likely to succeed in the programme.

Community education providers also demonstrated the role of their sector in the wider tertiary system, discussing collaborations with higher education partners that facilitated the development of the skills and accreditation necessary for learners to progress onto higher education. The strength of this collaboration was that the community partners could facilitate flexible delivery of programmes and supports as discussed earlier in this report, which is so crucial to learner engagement.

> We've been doing step up programmes up to [QQI] Level 4. So, we partner with UCD, and we partner with Maynooth University. (Practitioner)

> The apprenticeship model really came from supporting women [..] who were entering into that third level space needing a relevant qualification that was flexible to meet the needs of their work and family life. You know, and gaining the skills to have accreditation, to be able to get employment in community education as well and development. (Practitioner)

One practitioner noted how this collaboration offered the partner university an opportunity to conduct outreach activities in their community, which is key for the attainment of access and inclusion goals in the wider tertiary sector (Higher Education Authority, 2022). However, despite the benefits for learners and the key role played in access and inclusion processes, this opportunity for progression in education was limited by funding and resource barriers. As noted by one practitioner, offering a programme in connection with UCD:

> There is a cost to that as well [...] I think it's €265 per module, so it's €1060. It's an awful lot for women that are coming from disadvantaged areas and trying to, you know educate themselves. And so, we try and look for funding, or we support them then. There's load a little funds like in different areas depending on their catchment area. (Practitioner)

These findings demonstrate that community education is woven into the fabric of the wider tertiary education system. It enables and supports the achievement of access and outreach targets of FET and HE providers, despite having far less resources and less government support and recognition.

“You know there’s no easy answer and what’s required are multiple interconnected collaborative responses at strategic level as well as you know, on the ground [...] The North and South needs to come together on this.”

– Community education practitioner

4.2 Partnership between Policy Stakeholders and Providers

The design and implementation of policy that supports and promotes community education in the Republic was seen to be a collaborative process by key stakeholders, with practitioners being invited onto a policy formation group, and other key thematic working groups. In addition to this, a wider community of practitioners will be involved in a process of review and reflection on the Community Education Framework in the autumn of 2025. A process of continuous engagement is considered very important in relation to the ongoing implementation of the strategy.

> Developing the framework itself, we put together a working group or a writing group as we called it, [reflecting] sectoral stakeholder expertise [...] Then the National Implementation Steering Group is that sectoral voice that actually leads [to implementation]. So, it's about emulating the characteristics of community education, people working together, collaborating [...] it's that bottom-up approach as opposed to SOLAS coming in and saying this is what we're going to do. (Policy stakeholder)

This policy stakeholder highlighted that by quarter four, there would be "some kind of national coming together, of community groups and ETBs and SOLAS, as part of this process in terms of next steps for the Framework", noting that "the Framework needs to be looked at as a live document" whose actions must be "worked out", with some "workable quicker than others" (Policy stakeholder). Additionally, there was a sense from this stakeholder that the community education sector needed to see itself as having more responsibility and sense of ownership in terms of the roll out of the Community Education Framework, "proactively working as partners in the process [...] some of them are, and others are maybe [...] [are] less aware of it, but it's taking ownership of the strategy is key to its success and implementation, for all partners involved".

This issue of social challenges requiring a response at both governance and grass roots levels speaks to a need, emerging across this research, to represent community interests in wider policy making processes. As noted by one practitioner: "everybody should be working in collaboration with each other, and I believe [...] it should start at government level. Put in place the legislation, implement it, roll it out. It's followed up with committee meetings, on the ground or whatever" (Practitioner). Importantly, it was felt that community education should not be held responsible for providing the solution to complex social challenges, as these are the domain of policy responses, and cross sectoral solutions.

> I don't think that the community and voluntary sectors are in a position or should be put into a position where they're seen to be the ones responsible for dealing with the issues because A, they're not responsible for making them and B, public sector statutory bodies have public sector duties. They are, you know, statutorily responsible for a lot of these issues, and the services that are becoming so fragmented that [they're] struggling to cope with them [...] They are [...] responsible for ensuring people's human rights are being met and respected. Stepping back and there's no accountability when things go wrong. (Practitioner)

As described by one practitioner, “what is needed is that articulation of a [sectoral] voice around these issues” (Practitioner). This will ensure that decisions made at governance level can support community education to meet needs in their communities as opposed to having a negative impact on their function. Work is already underway in the south to ensure that community education organisations are involved in Public Participation Networks.

> We’ve been liaising with [...] the Department of Rural Community and Development, so hopefully we’re going to have a meeting [...] around developing further relationships with PPNs. So that’s something that’s on the cards as well. (Policy stakeholder)

Effective partnerships depend on good relationships between those in governance and administration, and providers delivering programmes on the ground. This emerged in the account of a key decision maker in Northern Ireland, where it was felt that more responsibility should be taken on by key policy stakeholders to support the development of collaborative structures that would better support the voluntary sector in its collaboration with the wider FE landscape. Highlighting findings from the AONTAS NI Census (2023), they highlighted some inconsistency in terms of these relationships:

> I think a lot of that very much depended on individual areas around it I think especially with our FE colleges [...] Two of them were seeing that there were really good relationships and two were meh, and two were pretty poor. So we did point that out to our colleagues in FE and hopefully that has improved. (Policy stakeholder)

The establishments of service level agreements were discussed, which would formalise community education practice and facilitate the delivery of programmes in communities that need them.

> I think there’s probably a case where there’s a huge onus in our further education colleges, and that’s the bit where the Department would have the control, that we almost need to start looking at actual partnership agreements with the voluntary sector around that with a view to even possibly looking at providing delivery mechanisms within the voluntary sector [...] let’s try and see if we can move the mountain to Mohammed on some occasions to make that learning more accessible as opposed to forcing people to necessarily go into the college. Like, are there libraries we can use? Other community centres we can use? Can we maybe look at the specific demand? So again, are there things that the voluntary sector have identified that would be useful training? (Policy stakeholder)

Crucially, a framework for practice is missing in the North; however, it was hoped that developments were on the horizon, with collaborative networks having a key role to play in this. The formation of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning in 2023 was felt to be a major step forward in this regard. The Alliance was “created to support and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all across Northern Ireland [...] with the strategic aim of supporting the development of a ‘Lifelong Learning Strategy’ and the creation of an associated action plan” (Open University, 2024).

> I think the Alliance [For Lifelong Learning] [...] it's our best hope at the minute around that [...] so we'd be a lot further back without the Alliance (Policy stakeholder).

The development of a Lifelong Learning Strategy in Northern Ireland, in particular, could be of central importance to the promotion and protection of community education practice, as the current lack of recognition at a governance level leaves the sector at risk of neglect in terms of funding. The development of a strategy may offer an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of the sector to the realisation of policy goals, and therefore enhance the level of accountability departments must take for the delivery of these goals through community education. Ministers must be encouraged to see the value of community education if this is to be achieved and the importance of visibility for the people who benefit from the work of the sector may be a key action to consider.

> I think it [community education] would need to be a significant part of it [a Lifelong Learning Strategy] [...] that's for me one of the main weaknesses of our Skills Strategy and going back to the numbers culture. So I think we would almost need to have a separate section within a strategy [on] how we can collaborate [...] with the voluntary sector [...] Despite everything I was saying about numbers earlier on, the most effective way of maybe getting Ministers to do something [is] an individual story; if you can get the right person in front of Ministers and they can articulate how this has changed their life or changed their community. (Policy stakeholder)

In the absence of a strategy, it was felt education could fall between the gaps and generally be ignored as an area of funding consideration unless a specific policy objective of the department was being met by practice. This illustrates a need to formally recognise the sector in terms of its role in the delivery of wide-ranging policy objectives across multiple departments in the Northern Executive, and its role in delivering value beyond economic participation.

> [T]hings are being pared to the bone and it's very easy for one of the things we don't have the primary responsibility [for], such as the voluntary sector, for us to leave that to the Department for Communities as much as anything, and actually go to the voluntary sector when we have a specific need as opposed to probably having as good a relationship as we should have [...] But again, that's something I have been fairly unsuccessfully, I'll be honest, trying to change because again, I've always been very conscious that we have a Skills Strategy target. Our first target around the Skills Strategy is around Level 2, increasing number of people of getting the Level 2 qualification, but we also have a serious undersupply problem with labour. (Policy stakeholder)

Further action on this issue is very much dependent on political will and buy-in at a governance level. Echoing the need for a collaborative response to social challenges, this buy-in must be cross-departmental if meaningful support for the sector is to be realised.

> Unless you have that executive agreement, the Minister probably isn't going to be too worried about what's in the DfE strategy or vice versa (Policy stakeholder).

Building support for the sector in this cross-departmental context would be seen to be very much dependent on the demonstration of relevance to policy goals. It was also noted that the recent Programme for Government in NI may present further opportunity to highlight community education's pivotal role and stimulate increased cross-departmental collaboration:

> I think there's probably an opportunity to see what we can take out of the Programme for Government and see if there's anything we can use that sort of force[s] us to do a bit more and maybe to force communities too a bit more in relation to it [community education]. Again, a lot of that may be coming down to funding, but if we can get a label from something from that Programme for Government that may give us [...] a bit more force to ask for that funding. (Policy stakeholder)

4.3 Collaboration Between Providers

Partnership between community education providers emerged throughout this research as a driver of innovative practice, by supporting the dissemination of experiential knowledge across networks of practitioners. Practitioners described the importance of being able to "pool resources" around key contemporary issues "like misinformation [..] [with groups] that are working in a similar area." Furthermore, it was felt that greater collaboration between providers themselves in connection with policy stakeholders across the whole island would enhance their response to social challenges, as many are common across jurisdictions.

> You know there's no easy answer and what's required are multiple interconnected collaborative responses at strategic level as well as you know, on the ground [...] The North and South needs to come together on this. (Practitioner)

A number of organisations noted that they were already engaging in very successful in cross-border partnerships, sharing practice in relation to issues they were seeing among their learner cohorts, with one group in Belfast, for example, sharing that they had received training around domestic violence support from a group in Longford.

Another key focus of collaborative activity between community organisations was as a response to scarcity in the funding environment. The spirit of collaboration was key here, to avoid competition between providers for resources and ensure they could deliver quality programmes for their communities and learners. This was noted by a number of practitioners:

> I'm a great person for networking. We have to work together [...] in this day and age. Funding is low for doing something. Try to do it as a community. They may have a different resource that we can use. That whole piece is so important. (Practitioner)

> I just think collaborating and doing work together is the only way to go forward at the moment because we haven't got the [...] resources. The staff are all part time, [so] we haven't got the actual resources to keep things going without partnering with another agency [...] (Practitioner)

This activity was not just linked to collaboration between community education providers but a wider landscape of support services and community organisations.

> Pooling resources is something I'm thinking about often. The good work that happens isn't about more money and throw money at stuff like. There is an organisation called Alone. You know, that works with older people [...] And we're thinking of doing a creative writing course [...] with that group. (Practitioner)

> We are more and more looking at collaborations [with other community organisations] even with the ICA who are a huge organisation and have great reach with County Councils, with Healthy Ireland projects [...]. So, where we are exploring collaborations all the time, it is what actually keeps us going. (Practitioner)

Collaborative activities to support funding applications was also discussed as part of this research: "we've only started to do that this year, to be strategic about [it] because we all individually put in for a piece of funding, none of us are going to get it" (Practitioner). From the perspective of key decision-makers, enabling collaboration around funding could increase access to community education for a wider range of learners. This could be supported by mapping provision to make sure that allocations are being distributed in a fair way across communities. Such a partnership approach, it was proposed, would help to move the sector away from a competitive approach to funding by creating a "funding pot" to the benefit of local community education providers more generally speaking.

> I think if we can move to a more partnership-based approach. Look at allocations that are to the benefit to of the community, that all the groups in the community are actually serving and maybe map it out. It's not that the fund, the funding even necessarily has to become triannual or even biannual. But we know that there's going to be a funding pot there again next year, and next year our focus is going to be on this part of the community (Policy stakeholder).

Undertaking this kind of review would require co-ordination and collaboration. It was felt that this could open up funding to new and emerging community groups and assist with the delivery of programmes that were of interest to their members, linking in with established education providers to access to facilities. This is in line with SOLAS's commitment to "identify appropriate, effective, and consistent resourcing to support community education learners through a community of practice approach" (SOLAS, 2024, p.39). An example was given of how this would work in practice:

> Community groups come together and say for example they want to a ceramics making course. And let's say the main drivers are the local

> Women['s] Shed who have access to a building three times a week. They have no capital or building themselves, but they have a big number of people who are interested in it, and they made an application for €20,000 for this project [...] So, funding this programme can have three parts to it. One is the acquiring of a kiln, because they don't have one. Reach could pay for that [...] Then they need a tutor to deliver the programme. So, Reach may pay for that but there might be a way that that could be done internally by the ETB, and all the other costs are met externally through the application [...] There's a whole lot of employment conditions that need to be met, and a Women's Shed certainly doesn't have the capacity to run a payroll every fortnight [...] The management of the salary for the programme is carried out by the ETB's internal portion of the Reach fund allocation of €20,000. By taking this approach, a partner centre can host the kiln [...] we now have a facility [...] in a partner's location with resources that are supported by the ETB [...] Crucially, it builds on existing assets in the community using an asset-based community development model approach. (Policy stakeholder)

In considering how the community education sector can grow and develop in the coming years, novel approaches to provision were discussed by research participants. A further example of a working model was offered:

> In previous funding approaches we looked at allocating the funds out through the local community education network, rather than having the individual groups making applications for them. So, you you'd have the different groups sitting down and taking a wider community perspective as to what activity they wish to see happen and supported for the coming term rather than solely focusing on the plans for the individual groups. Such an approach also enables a wider asset-based approach with greater inclusion for a wider range of groups. It also through this co-operative model allows groups look towards future planning, where the funding of activities is mutually agreed. (Policy stakeholder)

While providers taking part in this research were keen to explore new approaches to funding to ensure that their provision was addressing emerging learner needs, they also felt that continuity of provision was important for their practice and for the learners in their area. As highlighted earlier in this report, many centres felt that their success was in part owing to the amount of time that they had been supporting families locally, with multiple generations accessing their courses and other supports. They also expressed a concern that sometimes there was a perceived pressure to move learners on who had been benefiting from their courses over time. Access to continued opportunities in lifelong learning is therefore an important factor when considering new approaches to funding.

These discussions highlight how collaboration is both a defining strength of community education and a necessary response to financial and policy pressures. Current collaborations illustrate how the sector extends inclusion, innovates practice, and responds flexibly to social needs. Yet they also reveal systemic gaps in governance structures, funding models, and cross-sectoral recognition that limit the potential of collaborative approaches.

5. Towards a Sustainable Model of Community Education Practice

This research demonstrates that community education is not a peripheral or supplementary service, but a strategic sector delivering a wide range of personal and social outcomes, supporting cross-cutting government priorities across the whole island of Ireland Community education provides progression and inclusion opportunities for learners at risk of marginalisation (Meyler et al., 2023a; SOLAS, 2024; Pelan, 2023; Burns, Leitch & Hughes, 2015).

In both jurisdictions, community education responds to and addresses social isolation, and community cohesion (Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain et al., 2021; Iwin, 2019). It also offers the potential to provide community responses to environmental issues and enhance civic engagement (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024; Government of Ireland, 2025; UNESCO, 2022; SOLIDAR, 2024).

It is clear from this research that community education's value is realised through its accessibility as a local resource in communities experiencing a multitude of social challenges. Its flexible, cost-effective options are embedded in community life, providing a warm and welcoming entry point to education. This accessibility is enhanced by the provision of wraparound supports that respond to a range of emotional, social and practical needs and actively address the realities facing disadvantaged and marginalised learners. Indeed, the findings of this report demonstrate the far-reaching impact and value of this provision, for learners, families, and wider society.

Across all sections of this report, a consistent message emerges: the sector has transformative potential, but its sustainability is undermined by under-recognition in budgetary decision-making processes and policy, as well as underfunding in practice. Both North and South, community education suffers from insufficient, insecure, and short-term funding. In the Republic, community education is better recognised in policy as a distinct practice, with a range of personal and social outcomes, yet funding is not adequate to meet the demand that practitioners see on the ground. Here community education continues to rely on a cocktail of short-term funds and the overall funding from the FET sector, in which it is embedded, does not reflect enrolment numbers (SOLAS, 2024; AONTAS, 2025).

Such challenges are amplified in Northern Ireland, where the distinctive practice of community education is largely invisible in high-level strategies. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there is currently no dedicated funding stream for community education; it relies even more so on fragmented philanthropic grants (Shannon, 2017; Cobain et al., 2023). A "lack of core funding" was repeatedly reported as an issue for providers, North and South, and emerged as the chief issue facing organisations responding to the practitioner survey (59%, n=19). Short-term funding and lack of investment impacts providers' capacity to plan and deliver sustainable programmes, forcing them to be

“reactive” rather than “proactive” (Practitioner survey). Furthermore, practitioners across the island described the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, highlighting the challenges they faced in terms of covering basic costs. Some organisations feared that they would have to reduce the number of courses they were able to deliver, reducing their ability to respond to local needs. This marginalisation of community education as a practice across the whole island limits its capacity to shape and scale successful interventions to policy problems.

Collaboration was discussed in this research, across a range of stakeholders, as a response to challenges facing local communities and community education providers. A number of innovative practices have been highlighted, with practitioners also sharing practice across the border. Yet collaboration between providers must not be seen as a solution to the systemic problem of under-resourcing. Instead, collaboration should continue between policy makers and providers on the ground, with genuine consultation and engagement taking place. Echoing the need for a collaborative response to social challenges, collaboration must be cross-departmental if meaningful support for the sector is to be realised.

If the current trend of under-resourcing persists, the transformative practice of community education will face significant erosion, resulting in unmet need and deepening inequalities. This would undermine a plethora of government objectives including those in education, skills, health, integration, and democratic participation. However, if properly supported and harnessed, the sector could be a force multiplier for public policy, delivering early intervention and cost-effective impact across multiple domains.

5.1 Recommendations

This research highlights several opportunities to support and further develop a sustainable model of community education across the whole island:

1. Sustainable Funding Models:

Multi-annual, ring-fenced core funding in both jurisdictions would support programme stability, workforce development, and long-term strategic planning (AONTAS, 2025; Cobain et al., 2023). This funding must take into consideration the number of enrolments, increase in demands for community education opportunities and supports, and the real cost of operations for providers (AONTAS, 2025; SOLAS, 2024). The Reach fund should be increased to support the sector's response to unmet need, and community education providers must be involved in planning processes to support appropriate allocations. If this fund is intended to support learner engagement activities, it should not have to remedy the shortfall created by a lack of core funding for ongoing operations.

2. Recognition of the Community Education Professional in Policy Budgetary Decisions:

The role of the professional Community Education practitioner encompasses a broad range of activities, including outreach and communications as well as programme and support design and provision. Practitioners' deep knowledge of place, people, and community as well as their long-term vision for social inclusion are essential to community education realising its potential for social transformation. The addition of an Adult Education Tutor Grade to ETB provision is welcome, as it provides a career path and stability for tutors. However, more action is needed to support the professionals who deliver supports to local communities.

- The capacity of the Community Education Facilitator to support the development and operation of community education programmes must be protected, with the allocation of funds that allow the full scope of their outreach and engagement activities.
- Far-reaching, transformative outcomes are achieved collaboratively over time through dialogical processes, relational practices and ongoing support. As such, individuals working in the sector need to be recognised and supported as practitioners working in a distinct field of practice. Funders and policymakers need to provide adequate funding to support the retention and continuous development of quality practitioners in community education organisations.

3. Formal Recognition of Community Education in Governance and Policy:

Northern Ireland should consider a dedicated community education framework akin to Republic of Ireland's Community Education Framework (SOLAS, 2024). An explicit recognition of the nature and value of this form of education could assist with visibility in governance decisions across relevant departments while embedding social and personal outcomes alongside economic objectives. At the very least, the contribution of community education to cross-departmental objectives should be recognised and named in policy, with consideration given to the specific value of practices that give rise to social transformation.

4. Cross-Sectional and Cross-Jurisdictional Collaboration:

Shared research, evaluation, and policy development could enhance evidence-based practice, and the establishment of collaborative structures to support practice could foster innovation across contexts. Collaborative planning, from national to local level, is key to ensuring that the issues facing the sector are addressed, while the contribution of community education as a social good is fully harnessed and given just recognition. Such collaboration would position community education as a key contributor to overarching government goals to promote peace and prosperity for all (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024) and ensure a safer, more caring society (Government of Ireland, 2025) while contributing to shared island initiatives.

In sum, the case for community education as a public good is clear. Its continued development requires coordinated policy attention, adequate resources, and an explicit commitment to its democratic, inclusive, and learner-centered ethos. Only through such investment can community education fully realise its transformative potential, addressing social inequalities, strengthening civic life, and preparing learners and communities for the complex social, economic, and environmental challenges of the 21st century.

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Contact us:

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

T: 01 406 8220
E: mail@aontas.com
www.aontas.com

Charity Reg: 6719
Comapny Reg: 80958
RCN 20013042

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