

Community Education

- **Enhancing Learning**
- **Fostering Empowerment**
- **Contributing to Civic Society**



COMMUNITY EDUCATION
ENHANCING LEARNING, FOSTERING
EMPOWERMENT AND CONTRIBUTING TO
CIVIC SOCIETY

Position paper
by the Community Education Facilitators' Association
(CEFA)

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Foreword

As individuals and groups all around the country are struggling to cope with the current financial situation community education offers them a stepping stone to support them as individuals, in their families and in their communities. It offers them a way to re/engage with learning, to support their health and wellbeing, to strengthen their families and communities and to provide pathways to further education and employment. What motivates and sustains us as Community Education Facilitators is the transformation we see in individuals and communities as a result of their participation in community education. Having spent almost 10 years developing Community Education Services across the country we believe in the value of community education.

This position paper sets out the collective thinking of CEFA's members. In it we express our ethos and core principles and we present our overview of community education policy development in the National and European contexts. Using the white paper *Learning for life* as a guiding document, we place ourselves in the Further Education policy context and present our proposals for our communal paths forward.

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CEFA welcomes comments on this position paper and looks forward to further dialogue with our partners in community education.



Nuala O'Brien

Chairperson, CEFA

Executive summary

In *Community Education - Enhancing Learning, Fostering Empowerment and Contributing to Civic Society*, the Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA) presents its view on the ways forward for community education in Ireland. First, CEFA outlines the current state of development of community education and the special role which the Community Education Service (CES), through the Vocational Education Committees' (VEC's) Further Education (FE) Sections plays in achieving Irish and European objectives in further education. Second, the position paper identifies key issues arising before, third, presenting specific proposals for the future development of community education.

CEFA believes that community education plays a key role in personal empowerment, the development of critical thinking, equality, citizenship and social inclusion. Community education spans a continuum of personal development, community development, social analysis and political participation. Such principles and approaches are enunciated both in the Irish policy for community education, the white paper *Learning for life* (2000), supplemented by the National Skills Strategy *Tomorrow's skills* (2007) and in European policy, principally *Action plan on adult learning* (2007) and the Council *Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training* (2010). Community education, in the context of the VECs' FE Service, is delivered through tutors and facilitators; targeted at those socially and educationally disadvantaged; and organized in partnership with other voluntary and statutory providers. In 2010, community education reached 55,953 participants, was delivered through 35 Community Education Facilitators and was budgeted at almost €10m.

This position paper identified four main priorities:

1. The need to refine the objectives of community education in the light of changed economic and social circumstances, combining civic outcomes with making a contribution to the National Skills Strategy;
2. The need for improved knowledge and measurement systems. Hitherto, metrics have focused on throughput and accreditation to the exclusion of equally important, 'softer' social outcomes. A Community Education Technical Unit was promised, but not established. There is already compelling evidence of the value of the positive social impact of community education;
3. The need for improved targeting, with community education going out to the hardest-to-reach and most excluded social groups; and
4. The need for improved coordination of services, ensuring an integrated national and local approach by the many providers in the field.

CEFA sketches the future development of community education in Ireland and presents seven proposals:

1. A national debate on how community education may best be refined, developed and reinforced in the period to 2020 to meet our new social challenges, address structural inequality and contribute to the National Skills Strategy;
2. A multi-stakeholder working group to agree systems that will measure outcomes and progression, setting qualitative internationally comparable indicators, with a research budget. Stakeholders are identified as the Department of Education and Skills, CEFA, AONTAS, the Community Education Network, academics and representatives of the learning community;
3. To improve inter-agency working and referrals, a model Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with associated protocols to guide the work of the Department of Education and Skills, other departments (for example Environment, Community & Local Government), Local Education and Training Boards and local development companies;
4. The new, due operational guidelines to reflect the ethos of community education which we outline, including definitions, learner focus and participation, collective processes, targeting, tutoring, evaluation, continuous professional development, inter and intra agency approaches and appropriate accreditation; followed by a period of structured dialogue with stakeholders;
5. A ring-fenced budget for community education as a distinct line in the public service estimates so as to give it the visibility and prominence already enunciated in Irish and European policy;
6. The Community Education Service to be designated a nominating body for the new Local Education and Training Boards (LETB), so as to achieve the representation of the service and its learners, each LETB having a working group on community education;
7. Resumption of progress toward a Community Education Technical Unit (CETU), with a target date of 2016. This should comprise:
 - A dedicated unit in the department, with its own staff complement;
 - A national coordinator for community education;
 - A specialist expert in community education to advise the unit and the department;
 - A structured action research budget to improve our knowledge of community education, its impact; and fund pilot projects and innovation;
 - Technical support and advice for community education providers; and
 - An advisory forum of the stakeholders already identified.

Introduction

The purpose of this position paper is to:

- Outline the current state of development in the practice of community education, providing an overview of the unique role which the Community Education Service (CES) component of the adult and community education sector plays in achieving Irish and European policy objectives (1);
- Identify key issues arising in community education in Ireland (2);
- Sketch the path forward in the development of community education and outline the specific proposals of CEFA to reach those objectives (3).

The Community Education Service (CES) of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is located in each Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Following the publication of the white paper *Learning for life* (2000) a Community Education Facilitator (CEF) was appointed in each VEC to strengthen the work already undertaken in each VEC area. The facilitators are brought together by the Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA), set up in 2004 to provide a 'sustainable collective voice to influence policy, share and develop good practice while providing support to its members' (CEFA, 2009). This position paper aims to offer an overview and collective voice of Community Education Facilitators working with individuals, community, statutory and voluntary groups with an interest in this sector. This paper presents an overview of the educational policy background for community education, the national and local support structures envisaged for its development, its compatibility with national and international frameworks for lifelong learning and the guiding principles underpinning the work, concluding with specific proposals for sustaining and enhancing community education.

It is CEFA's hope that this position paper will create a dialogue that involves learners; educational providers, such as the VECs; partners in national, local and community organizations and statutory bodies (for example Department of Education and Skills), all of whom have a role to play in this vibrant sector of education in Ireland.

1 Context

This section outlines the universal core principles of community education (1.1.) and then examines how they are applied to Ireland (1.2). A summary is made (1.3).

1.1 Universal core principles

Since the Community Education Service was established, each Community Education Facilitator developed the service in response to the needs of the geographic location. Nevertheless, common core principles guide the work regardless of the local context.

CEFA sees the Community Education Service rooted in the Freirean process of dialogue, reflection and action (Freire, 1970). Whereas formal education has the purpose of passing on, from generation to generation, information about societal norms and structures so as to enable learners to deal adequately with the world, community education aims to empower participants with the skills, knowledge and collective analysis to challenge oppression and to engage in action to bring about change (AONTAS, 2004: 19). All across Ireland, there are communities in which people experience social exclusion of many kinds such as isolation, poverty, educational disadvantage and various forms of discrimination. Community education offers an entry point to overcome such social exclusion by working at a variety of levels. Initially, the work might be in the area of personal development to raise self confidence, reduce isolation, give a positive experience of learning and facilitate life changes. Next, participants might look at the wider community and the effects of social exclusion. From there, they might use the techniques of social analysis to explore the structural factors that contribute to exclusion and finally they may lobby for the issue to be addressed at a political level. Community education is explicitly oriented to emancipation and critical citizenship, with the objective to ‘develop a pedagogy that explores and engages in forms of popular education inspired by a vision of human potential that goes beyond the reductive and economistic abstractions of neo-liberal thought and capable of strengthening participatory democracy in Irish society against the deadly fatalism of free market ideology’ (Finnegan, 2008: 69).

Such an approach often requires a period of pre-development work which is fundamental to the subsequent success of community education. It is at this stage that initial contacts and conversations take place. Pre-development work involves working on an outreach basis, linking with existing groups and service providers. A variety of venues are used for community education including, in Ireland’s case, community centres, parish centres, halls, sports clubs,

function rooms, asylum seeker reception centres, schools, prison visiting areas, VEC outreach education centres, halting sites and Family Resource Centres. It is a methodology that recognizes the need ‘to engage with particular communities on their own terms, to explore with them issues of immediate and local concern and to jointly develop appropriate solutions’ (McGivney, 2000: 6). There are many parallels between the processes used in community education and those used in community development, defined as the ‘organized action’ that follows the critical analysis fostered in community education’ (AONTAS, 2011: 68). It is essentially a democratic process. It cannot simply be managed and measured; it has to be nurtured and cultivated in communities. It requires faith and trust in the people and a valuing of genuinely democratic dialogue and debate’ (University of Edinburgh, 2007: 30). Whereas community education offers a range of learning opportunities in a wide range of areas including arts, group work and information technology, it is also seen as facilitating part of a broader democratic process of social justice and equality (OECD, 2006). Working toward social justice or equality has concrete benefits for society as a whole. Wilkinson and Pickett in *The spirit level* found that countries with the biggest gap between poor and rich had the highest incidence of health and social problems: not only the socially excluded suffer from the effects of inequality, but so too did the majority of the population. Rates of mental illness were five times higher across the whole population in the most unequal than in the least unequal societies in their survey. Inequality increased stress right across society, not just among the least advantaged (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

1.2 The core principles applied to Ireland

The philosophy, aims, objectives and means of developing community education are outlined in the chapter 5: *Community education* in the white paper on adult education *Learning for life* (Government of Ireland, 2000). This defined community education as ‘a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level. Such an approach to community education sees it as an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision-making processes’ (*ibid*, 110). *Learning for life* explicitly and unequivocally committed adult education to supporting consciousness-raising, social cohesion, community-building, building social capital and the promotion of citizenship. The white paper emphasized the importance that community education’s ‘innovation and responsiveness be preserved, despite the formalization of systems which government support implies’ (*ibid*, 114). The white paper was the first expression of

commitment to lifelong learning, expressing the desire that community education be strengthened to work to both social and human capital goals, ‘not just individual development but also collective community advancement, especially in marginalized communities’ (*ibid*, 113).

A Minister of State post was subsequently established to oversee adult and community education. The most recent iteration of policy may be found in the listing of funding criteria for 2011, where the Department of Education and Skills defined community education as ‘learning, generally outside the formal education sector, with the aims of enhancing learning, empowerment and contributing to civic society. It is firmly community-based, with local groups taking responsibility for, and playing a key role in, organizing courses, deciding on programme content and recruiting tutors’ (DES, 2011). Thus community education became a defined, recognized, distinct, stream of adult education in Ireland.¹

In CEFA’s view, community education offers adults an opportunity to access a continuum of learning opportunities from personal development to community development to social analysis to political participation, as illustrated in this diagram:

Personal development	Community development	Social analysis	Political participation
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Source: *Banúlacht*, 1994.

CEFA believes each area is important and aims to integrate these four. This process means that rather than offering a menu of courses without regard for the communities concerned, we support individuals and build the capacity of communities across the four areas. For example, in one location the aim of an art course may be to promote personal development, whereas in another the aim might be to use art as a way of exploring issues that are of concern for a particular community. In other cases, a particular piece of work may integrate all four areas of the continuum.

Within community education, the role of the tutor or facilitator is key - a critical educator in a socially transformative process. In the broadest sense, the role of tutor is that of widening cultural outlook and social conscience (Kruger & Poster, 1990). Tutors, taking the experience of group members as their cue, ‘facilitate a problem-posing process that encourages communities

¹ Although the amount spent on community education each year is known from departmental records (a constant €10m a year over 2009, 2010 and 2011), it is not specifically identified as a budget line in the public service estimates, even though there are many headings with much smaller amounts which are.

to interpret their world in a critical way. This new reading then informs community development collective actions, underpinned by corresponding reflection, undertaken to promote egalitarian change. This approach often works in a way that ... favours collective advancement over personal advancement' (AONTAS, 2011). In order to meet this objective, a tutor must possess good self awareness; be able to establish positive relationships with learners; be sensitive to learner needs and social inclusion issues; and be able to teach in an informal way (Cullen, 2004). Technical supports must be provided, including mentoring, counselling, guidance, referral to other VEC further education services, with low or no fee options for participants.

CEFA believes that community education should be as accessible as possible. In a context of limited resources, choices must be made and here it is important to prioritize those experiencing social exclusion. Community education's locally integrated nature and methodology can play a 'critical role in widening participation among those who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged' (McGivney, 2004: VI). The target groups of community education as identified in Government and EU policy documents include:

- People with disability
- Substance misusers and their families
- Ex-offenders and their families
- Early school leavers
- One-parent families and other parents in need of support
- Travellers
- Homeless people
- Refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers
- Community-based groups
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people
- Older people

Partnership is a key aspect of the community education service and vital to its success: this means a process of consultation that identifies issues and concerns of learners and groups and sets learning priorities. For instance, community education works closely with those organizations responsible for social inclusion, such as Family Resource Centres and the Local and Community Development Programme. The involvement of local community groups is crucial to both maintaining a bottom-up approach to community education and to ensure that the policy impetus of the labour market is balanced by that of the community need for social cohesion. Inter-agency partnership is extensive and involves creating relationships with a range of organizations and services across the statutory, community and voluntary sector. Intra-agency collaboration within the VEC sector also has a very positive effect on service delivery and can be seen tangibly in avoiding duplication; making the best use of resources; adding value

to the work; sharing risks and responsibilities; and encouraging commitment and permanency from all those involved. For example, the Adult Literacy Service supports adults to gain confidence in reading and writing, whereas community education can complement this work by working with adults to critically reflect on why adults are unable to read and write. Community education can lead to action in the community to address this issue, while the Adult Literacy Service provides practical support. It is also important to recognize the different starting points and objectives within VECs, while also acknowledging how they can complement each other in service provision.

Community education uses group work as a way of working, where the process is as important as the content (Government of Ireland, 2000: 113). In this way of working ‘an atmosphere is created where there is more emphasis on dialogue and conversation than the “delivery” of knowledge and skills’ (Community Education & Social Change, 2007: 21). The building of an atmosphere of trust in the learning group is essential so that not only individual learning takes place, but also group learning as a model for democracy, participation and collective action. This is put into practice by:

- Ensuring an appropriate group size to course aim;
- Building group relationships with introductions and group contract;
- Balancing task and process – the goal is the growth of each person as well as achievement or acquisition of skill or knowledge;
- Taking account of multiple intelligences and differing learning styles;
- Encouraging development of trust and safety;
- Exploring individual needs compared to group needs;
- Expecting equality in attitudes and actions, challenging discrimination;
- Giving feedback and review during the course and evaluation;
- Encouraging reflective practice and critical thinking skills; and
- Incorporating community development, active citizenship, global perspectives and environmental awareness.

Progression in community education is not only linear progression up the qualifications ladder or into employment, but can include a variety of outcomes such as personal development, increased self-confidence, being more involved in children’s education, improved health, community activism, joining other groups, new practical skills, volunteering, taking leadership roles, as well as group development. In this context, re-engaging or engaging in learning is of value for its own sake and is followed by a wide range of ‘next steps’ as appropriate pathways are explored and pursued. As McGivney (2004: VI) stated, ‘what may be a small step for one person may be a huge distance to travel for another’.

One of the roles of the Community Education Service is a first-step programme to attract participants back to learning. In planning pathways for participants and groups from community education, consideration is always taken of the other services available within the VEC, such as the Adult Literacy Service, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, the Adult Education Guidance Initiative and in particular the formal strand of the Back to Education Initiative, which can offer the next step in accredited part-time options. Accredited options are therefore offered within the CES where they are not otherwise available within the VEC. The celebration of learning achieved in community education is an important part of the cycle of learning and often groups are awarded certificates of completion which fulfill that purpose. It needs to be borne in mind that the majority of community education courses are of short duration, most ranging from 6 to 12 weeks.

There is reliable information indicating the success of these strategies and approaches, such as those of City of Waterford VEC, County Donegal VEC and the Education Equality Initiative (2006), whose *Lessons and impacts* affirmed the value of outreach, peer support, mentoring, taster activities, flexible course delivery and assessment, learner supports, networking and an integrated approach between statutory and voluntary agencies.

1.3 Summary

This section outlined the universal principles of community education, their theoretical roots and practical application. Community education is rooted in Freirean concepts of empowerment, social inclusion and citizenship and affirms the values of equality and community development. Its principles were expressed in the white paper *Learning for life*, which supported this theoretical framework with principles of social capital, collective action and lifelong learning. In the view of CEFA, community education is constructed from the following elements: a continuum of personal development, community development, social analysis and political participation; delivery by critical educators; targeting the socially excluded; partnership, inter-agency and intra-agency cooperation; appropriate methodologies and progression.

2 Current state of development

This section looks at policy evolution in Ireland since the white paper, setting it in the contexts of both European policy and skills strategies (2.1). The current issues affecting community education are then outlined (2.2) and a summary is made (2.3).

2.1 Policy evolution since the white paper

The 2000 white paper *Learning for life* is the landmark and key reference point for adult education in Ireland in general and community education in particular. Its goals have subsequently been restated in important Irish policy documents, such as the social partnership agreement *Toward 2016*, the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, with commitments to addressing educational disadvantage through lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 2007) and *Sharing our future - Ireland 2025* (Forfás, 2009). The National Skills Strategy set targets within the National Qualifications Framework of increasing qualification levels of 70,000 participants from levels 1-2 to level 3; and 260,000 up to levels 4 or 5 by 2020 (Expert Working Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007). The importance of community education was restated as a priority in the *Programme for government 2011-2016*.

European policy has also had an important influence on the shaping of community education in Ireland. Lifelong learning is seen as a tool by the European Union to address the challenge of both economic growth and social inclusion. In the same year as the white paper in Ireland, the Lisbon Strategy (2000) proposed a European policy framework that viewed lifelong learning as central to achieving the combined objectives of economic growth and social inclusion. This was strengthened by the 2006 communication on adult learning which acknowledged its human and social capital benefits (European Commission, 2006). The subsequent *Action plan on adult learning, 2007-2010* further reinforced this viewpoint: ‘adult learning is not just about getting, maintaining or progressing in a job. It is also about the personal, civic, social and cultural life of the individual and the community, region and state in which s/he lives. This indispensable role of adult education as an agent of social inclusion is well recognized’ (European Commission, 2007: 8). The *Action plan* identified five overarching strategic priority roles to:

1. Reduce labour shortages due to demographic change by raising skill levels in the workforce generally and by upgrading low-skilled workers in particular;
2. Address the persistently high number of early school-leavers by offering a second chance to those who enter adulthood without qualifications;
3. Contribute to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion among marginalized groups;

4. Increase the integration of migrants in society and labour markets
5. Increase participation in lifelong learning and, particularly, to address the fact that participation decreases after the mid-thirties (*ibid*, 7).

In the European Council *Conclusions* of 11th May 2010, adult learning was seen as having a central role in reaching those at risk of social exclusion such as ‘low skilled, unemployed, the elderly, migrants, adults with special needs’ due to its practice of offering learning in a variety of environments and involving multiple stakeholders (Council of European Union, 2010).

2.2 Issues arising

The period from 2000, the date of *Learning for life*, to the present saw the establishment of the Community Education Services and the appointment of 35 Community Education Facilitators. By the end of 2010, the total annual numbers of participants in community education were 55,953. Annual budgets were €10m over 2009-2011. The *Action plan* is clear that a much higher level of investment is required, though, if Ireland is to approach the European average, or aspire to reach the exemplary levels of community education achieved in Britain or the Scandinavian countries (European Commission, 2007: 11). Community education acquired a fresh urgency of purpose because of the growth of numbers below the poverty line since the economic and social crisis enveloped Ireland from 2008. At this stage, several key issues arising from the experience of the past ten years to the present may be highlighted: the need to refine the objectives of community education in light of changed economic and social circumstances and align the funding criteria and returns form (2.2.1); the need for improved knowledge and measurement systems (2.2.2); the need for improved targeting (2.2.3) and the need for improved coordination of services (2.2.4). Each is dealt with in turn.

2.2.1 Refine the objectives of community education

Community education attempts to balance both the needs of citizens for personal and collective development on the one hand; and the needs of the economy and the labour market on the other. There is a real concern, though, that this balance has shifted excessively toward the latter. The European *Action plan* pointed out that in the current context of decreasing resources ‘the maintenance of a balance between vocational, general and liberal adult learning is needed, but so is active citizenship and social inclusion’. This balance is considered to be already tenuous and even non-existent in some countries ‘in the sense that all the focus is on vocational training’ (European Commission, 2007: 40). The *Action plan* is emphatic in arguing that the multiple objectives of community education must be kept in balance.

CEFA considers that community education already contributes to many of the objectives of the National Skills Strategy, *Tomorrow's skills*, through the development of generic skills; reaching out to disadvantaged groups; and being a gateway to the National Framework for Qualifications. Indeed, 48% of learners feel that they should get recognition every time they do a course and further work must be done in the development of accrediting this form of learning (AONTAS, 2011: 159).² The European *Action plan* emphasizes the desirability of adults achieving at least one level higher than they have before ('go-one-step-up') (European Commission, 2007). At the same time, community education offers participants a particular learning experience, a distinct curriculum 'concerned with communal values', which meets the needs and interests of learners and 'locates personal, individual experiences within the broader social and political context'. As *Learning for life* explained, community education has a distinct pedagogy, grounded in a best practice model employed by women's groups in the 1980s, 'where women decide what they need to know and how they want to use that knowledge'; a distinct approach to assessment where the emphasis is 'on sharing in learning rather than competing in it' (Government of Ireland, 2000: 111).

A core challenge is the low measured levels of civic outcomes so far. While community education is 'effective at creating outcomes which foster strong social networks and interpersonal trust and tolerance', it is 'less effective in fostering civic and political outcomes, as the main outcomes in this area were only experienced by a third or less of learners' (AONTAS 2011: 121). Grummell found that in Ireland, 'State policies offer broad support for the ideals of community education - empowerment, participative democracy and societal transformation - but then return to the narrower practice of enabling access for specified groups in Irish society (women's groups, ethnic minorities and older people) (Grummell 2007: 6). This research goes on to say that much community education is about giving a second chance at education so that the individuals can improve their life chances rather than being about social transformation. In order to achieve the stated aim of contributing to civic society, it is essential to adopt a model of community education that can best facilitate such outcomes. CEFA agrees

² The terms 'recognition', 'certification' and 'accreditation' can cause confusion. Whereas some participants in community education seek the most formal form of recognition, namely a FETAC award, others are not seeking additional formal skills but nevertheless value some form of recognition, for example an end-of-course completion certificate. Some courses are referred to officially as 'non-accredited', which, whilst technically accurate, has the unfortunate effect of devaluing their intrinsic quality, their worth to participants and the merit of 'learning for learning's sake'. 'Recognition' of learning is as worthwhile in some contexts as accreditation.

that in order to achieve the social capital outcomes intended by the government in *Learning for life*, debate and agreement is needed on refining the model, with guidelines for community education that will achieve these outcomes.

2.2.2 Need for improved knowledge and measurement systems

Both of the key policy documents cited here, the European *Action plan* and the Irish white paper, emphasized the need for an improved knowledge of the outcomes of community education. The *Action plan* outlined the need for a research infrastructure to support practice-to-policy feedback; validate non-formal and informal learning outcomes; establish comprehensive methods of data collection; and document, research and publish the benefits of adult learning. *Lifelong learning* proposed a Community Education Technical Unit (CETU) to provide research and evaluation support; the development of tracking and progression methodologies; and flexible and relevant accreditation and certification arrangements for the sector.

The unit was not set up, leading to serious deficits in our knowledge and measurement systems. Although some research has been funded on an *ad hoc* basis, CEFA lack a formal infrastructure and research budget to gather detailed evidence on how community education contributes to social inclusion and positive civic outcomes. Although there is the beginning of an indigenous literature on community education in Ireland, it is still quite limited (for example *Lessons and impacts* (EEI, 2006)). The main national piece of research was *More than just a course* (AONTAS, 2010), a survey assisted by Community Education Facilitators, focusing on community education delivered through the VEC Adult Literacy Community Education Service (ALCES) budget. Local research into community education has been carried out by individual VECs such as Galligan (2007) in Donegal and Evoy & McDonnell (2010) in Waterford, both valuable in validating its approach and impact.

At a time of increasing pressure on resources, attention has focused increasingly on showing value-for-money with measurable evidence-based outputs, such as enrollment numbers and levels of formal accreditation attained. Community Education Facilitators are required to make annual returns which focus on the most immediately measurable statistics. Consequently, accountability is narrowed to counting participation and accredited numbers. The focus on what can be measured, rather than what we aspire to measure and what is deemed to be worth measuring, risks undermining the overarching aims of community education. Instead, wider outcomes should be tested with broader indicators that take into account civic and political

outcomes; social engagement; health gains; trust and tolerance; and family well-being. *Lessons and impacts* reported that people experience a range of these outcomes to varying degrees, while *More than just a course* indicated the high frequency of learners experiencing personal development outcomes like positive changes in decision-making, planning and asking for support, particularly important for low-skilled men, findings confirmed by the National Skills Strategy (p156). Such outcomes are important for the public good, for example in better health and well-being, saving on health services. ‘Soft’ outcomes are as important as ‘hard’ ones (Hearne, 2010).

CEFA has been, and continues to be, in discussion with DES on the desirability of indicators to encompass individual, community and social outcomes such as generic skills development; family role modeling; increased social capital; greater community engagement; increased awareness of local issues; and improved capacity to respond to these issues. Societal outcome indicators could include positive change in health behaviours, active ageing, increased capacity to engage with services, heightened political awareness (e.g. development and sustainability) and increased social cohesion. AONTAS and CEFA concur with the need to build up an evidence base to support policy-making on the wider benefits of community education. CEFA strongly believes in the need to develop internationally comparable indicators.

2.2.3 Need for improved targeting

More than just a course raised some important questions about the groups targeted. The research, which surveyed 683 community education learners, found that 74% of learners belonged to at least one of the priority groups targeted by DES (see 1.2, above), but discovered that some specific groups such as lone parents, disadvantaged men, the homeless, Travellers and younger people with disabilities were less effectively targeted. There is still a tendency to recruit ‘traditional target groups such as women and older people, as opposed to more hard-to-reach groups’ (AONTAS, 2010: 10). Ongoing outreach and research work is necessary to widen participation, particularly for such groups as men, hard-to-reach women, older people, Travellers, adults with a disability and gay and lesbian adults. Such work requires appropriate educational methodologies, curricula and materials that ensure ‘a return to education for adults who are hard to reach and meeting the needs of older people, single parents, adults in disadvantaged areas and early school leavers’ (AONTAS, 2010: 35; see also EEI, 2006: 50). Older people are a considerable resource to their societies and communities, especially if given modest support through community education programmes (Society of St Vincent de Paul, 2011).

2.2.4 The need for improved coordination of services

The white paper *Learning for life* outlined comprehensive guidelines for community education and for the role of Community Education Facilitators. Community education and community development are envisaged as complementary areas of work, sharing the ‘common goal of the collective empowerment of the participants based on an analysis of the structural barriers to people’s life chances’ (Government of Ireland, 2000: 110). The subsequent Education for Equality Initiative (EEI) identified the need for an integrated, inter-agency response to address barriers experienced by marginalized groups: ‘no one policy area or service is capable of responding to all these needs in isolation.... Thus, the major policy lesson of EEI activities is that an integrated national and local approach is the only effective way to address educational disadvantage’ (p49). The need for policy coherence across all government departments and agencies is stressed, defined as ‘the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policy actions across government departments and agencies creating synergies towards achieving agreed objectives’ (*OECD Observer*, 2003). CEFA believes that there should be greater synergy between the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government on the one hand and the Department of Education and Skills on the other. Partnership between community development and community education can be effective in creating new opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly as the Community Education Services is the part of the VEC structure with a focus on community. There is however potential for ambiguity at local level in the interpretation of the guidelines for the new Local and Community Development Programme. There is a need to develop, at national level, a structure to support policy coherence and best practice in this inter-departmental work.

2.3 Summary

There is a strong policy framework for community education in Ireland, starting with the white paper for *Learning for life*, supplemented by subsequent policies for social inclusion and skills, reinforced by the European Union *Action plan*. There are four key needs affecting community education at present: to refine community education objectives; to improve measurement systems and indicators; to sharpen targeting and to improve coordination.

3 Paths forward

Through its partnership work with multiple stakeholders, including local communities and by delivering personal, civic, social and employment outcomes in multiple learning sites, community education is well positioned to contribute toward the social dimensions of learning outlined in *Learning for life* and the European *Action plan* and the Council of the European Union *Conclusions*. Achieving these social dimensions requires a broad-based engagement between the actors and the communities themselves. CEFA believes that there is now a unique opportunity to work with key stakeholders on an agreed policy for community education services. Following this, guiding principles for this sector will flow, with clear operational guidelines, aims and objectives and methodologies for monitoring outcomes of the service. Our specific proposals are that:

1. There be a national debate on how community education, as articulated in *Learning for life* and the *Action plan*, may best be refined, developed and reinforced over the period to 2020 so as to meet the new social challenges of this decade, one which takes into account underlying structural inequality and articulates the contribution it can make to the National Skills Strategy;
2. Pending the establishment of a Community Education Technical Unit (See point 7, below), a multi-stakeholder working group be established to determine and agree systems that will measure outcomes, track progression and set down qualitative indicators, set against comparable international indicators, supported by an ongoing research budget. This group should comprise groups such as the Department of Education & Skills, CEFA, AONTAS, the Community Education Network, academic experts in community education and representatives of the learning community (students);
3. A model Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) be drawn up by the Department of Education & Skills; the VECs; CEFA; local development companies and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, to improve inter-agency and intra-agency cooperation, guiding joint work between the Community Education Service and programmes of the local development companies for the benefit of learners and communities; and set down protocols for the referral of community education learners to other VEC services;
4. The fresh operational guidelines on the delivery of community education, currently in preparation in the Department of Education and Skills should reflect the ethos, values,

purpose and intended outcomes of community education as outlined in this position paper. It should include the following elements:

- A definition of community education;
- A focus on the learner in the context of a collective process;
- The targeting of socially excluded groups and communities;
- Inter and intra agency partnership approaches;
- Recognition of learners' participation and appropriate accreditation;
- An appreciation of the importance of tutors
- The measurement of quantitative and qualitative outcomes;
- Evaluation
- Continuous professional development

Publication should be followed by a period of structured dialogue with the stakeholders defined above before they are put into operation.

5. There be a ring-fenced budget for community education, identifiable as a distinct budget line in the public service estimates, so as to match and reflect the prominence given and visibility intended for it in *Learning for life* and the *Action plan on adult learning, 2007-2010*.
6. The Community Education Service be designated a nominating body for the Local Education and Training Boards (LETB) proposed under the Education and Training Boards Bill, so as to achieve the representation of the service and its learners; CEFA proposes that each LETB also having a working group community education.
7. Progress be resumed toward a Community Education Technical Unit (CETU). Granted the country's difficult financial situation, it is understandable that its establishment may not be possible during the period of the *National recovery plan, 2011-2014*, but it is reasonable for such a unit to be established thereafter, with a target date of 2016. The CETU should comprise (1) a dedicated unit within the department, with its own staff complement (2) a national coordinator for community education (3) a specialist expert in community education to advise the department in general and the unit in particular (4) a structured action research budget to support research that will improve our knowledge of community education and its impact and fund pilot projects and innovation in community education (5) the provision of technical support and advice for community education providers and (6) an advisory forum comprising the stakeholders already identified.

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