

JCDES Opening Statement:

AONTAS is a non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969 with over 400 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. Our mission is to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning.

The purpose of our submission was to highlight what we see as the undesirable and harmful impacts of proposed legislative changes on community education providers.

I would like to firstly provide some context for members of the Joint Committee who may be unfamiliar with community education - community education is adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland, delivered by professionally run organisations. The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) has over 110 organisations in 24 counties. Community education has phenomenal scope. It supports participation in accredited and non-accredited programmes; it builds skills and confidence and overcomes barriers to participation. It addresses inequality. It meets policy priorities: increasing lifelong learning participation, upskilling, is socially inclusive and improves wellbeing in the individual and in communities as well as often being a first step back to education. Community education supports the equality of access to education for current and historically underrepresented groups; particularly disadvantaged women and women that are economically inactive.

The variety of community education courses, from non-accredited to accredited, up to and including third level, meets diverse needs within local communities. Many community education providers are quality assured by QQI, and so, are in a position to provide the opportunity for adults, from the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland, to access accredited courses recognised on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Based on this contextual information, it is extremely difficult for AONTAS and our membership to accept the ongoing funding and resource challenges that community education is placed under, without any corresponding assistance or relief from governmental institutions. These challenges are made worse by the proposals for required payment into the Learner Protection Fund for community education providers that is proposed in this Bill and discussed fully in our written submission. I refer specifically to Section 29 of the Amendment Bill – the amendment of section 65 of Principal Act (Arrangements by providers for protection of enrolled learners) which refers to the obligation of certain providers to pay annual charge into Learner Protection Fund and am requesting that ‘not-for-profit’ community education providers be added to the list of providers who will be exempt from payment to the new Learner Protection Fund.

The current list includes any technological universities, institutes of technology, SOLAS, Teagasc, the Royal College of Surgeons to name but a few and it is a shocking oversight that community education providers are excluded. The new Charities Governance Code requires all charities to be compliant by 2020 so this could be a means of establishing criteria.

Speaking for one moment as a community education provider, I can categorically state that failure to do this will have a detrimental effect on the provision of community education to those who are furthest from the education system. And I would ask the question – why should it be even more difficult for those learners to access education? The community education sector has in recent years been affected by significant and disproportionate funding cuts. In spite of this, the sector has continued to prioritise the provision of high quality, accredited learning opportunities within their local communities. I am based in Longford, one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in the country with very little investment and I can tell you that the ability, as a community education provider, delivering 15,625 hours of education provision annually, to be able to reach those learners who are furthest from the system and provide meaningful opportunities for them in terms of accredited learning opportunities cannot be overestimated. Longford is the 4th most deprived local authority area nationally. CSO2018 County Longford and Wexford had the lowest percentage of persons with a third level qualification, both at 32.5 per cent. 18% have no formal education, or primary only. It is therefore critical to highlight today that any additional new fees and resource requirements for providers of community education will have a significant impact on community education providers.

A recent 18-month Retail Skills programme delivered at Longford Women's Link saw 52 participants complete the programme, 12 secured employment, 10 are in further training and 6 exploring entrepreneurship at a cost of €730 per participant.

Some key ambitions from participants on the programme:

I hope to get into a new job

I hope to gain a full-time job in a retail environment

I would like to progress to Level 5/6 to improve knowledge and further myself

A critical issue for us is the fact that all providers of accredited learning are being treated in the same way, despite major structural differences; including whether an organisation is an independent not-for-profit community education provider, or for-profit private provider. It cannot be overstated – a one size fits all policy is not appropriate for the delivery of community education and a shift in thinking is urgently required.

I would also like to point out that in terms of re-engagement with QQI, six AONTAS CEN members re-engaging in 2019 (one in Dublin, two in Wexford, two in Westmeath and LWL) have formed a Community of Practice and are very much setting the QA standards for our sector. However, the fees involved will impact our provision. The total intake of fees for QQI from the 6 will be between €12,000 and €24,000, therefore a fee waiver would be a small investment given the impact of continued provision of accredited learning to our communities. To put this in context, €5,000 allows us to deliver a QQI Level 5 award to 20 women in Longford. The group of 6 in 2018 delivered 438 major awards and 1246 minor awards from levels 5-8 on the NFQ and without this provision, thousands of educationally disadvantaged learners across Ireland would have been unable to access affordable, flexible, and accredited adult learning in the communities where they live and work. The majority of these are women, so the impact of additional financial burdens on providers will have serious implications for women and their families.

An important point to also consider is that community education providers across Ireland exist because there is an unmet demand for holistic learner-centred education that responds to the needs of your local communities.

Since the discussions about fees began, AONTAS has made several submissions and developed policy analyses concerning the impact of fees on the community education sector. Since the discussions about fees began, AONTAS has made several submissions and developed policy analyses concerning the impact of fees on the community education sector. AONTAS made several submissions to QQI (2013, 2014, 2015) clearly highlighting the QQI reengagement fee issue. AONTAS produced two detailed policy papers on the issue of fees (2014) and the scenarios of reengagement (2015) in advance of meeting DES officials and QQI (2015). AONTAS and CEN members participated in all 7 Joint QQI / Community and Voluntary Sector Working Group meetings in 2015.

It is therefore critical to highlight today that any additional new fees and resource requirements for providers of community education will have a significant impact on community education providers.

We therefore ask the Joint Committee members to engage with AONTAS and our membership to understand that approval of these new Learner Protection Fund fees will impact the access learners have to education across the country. And just to note, we are wholeheartedly committed to learner protection and that is centre of our provision – our issue is with the exclusion of community education from the list.