Access and Community Education

Cork Access Network

Submission to the SOLAS Further Education & Training Strategy 2025 -29

Date of Submission – February 21st 2025

Foreword

The national footprint and the depth of local reach of the respective Colleges of Further Education and Training sets SOLAS apart as a focal point and powerful resource for Community Education.

As a key member of the Cork Access Network (CAN), Cork ETB works in partnership with the other post-secondary education providers in Cork, MTU and UCC, local industry and trades unions, to deliver sustainable educational opportunities for all learners, both formal and nonformal, in workplace and community settings.

Cork City Council is the other key partner in CAN and is a prime facilitator of education in the community setting. CAN strives to encourage and empower learners, particularly in the Community Education setting, by profiling both novel and long-standing successful initiatives and activities which are of benefit to individual learners, their families and communities.

CAN acknowledges that Community Education plays a critical and unique role both in the Further Education and Training system and local communities across Ireland. In addition to bringing benefits to learners and their communities, Community Education also plays an important role in supporting a democratic society through its ability to promote active citizenship along with enabling social inclusion and cohesion.

The wider impact of Community Education is shown in increased skills levels, greater sense of community and support structures within the community and a greater thirst for educational advancement.

Successful access initiatives both improve existing and create new pathways, thus leading to greater levels of expectation within the community, and expectations which can only be met by a sustained level of multi-annual resourcing with realistic and appropriate levels of checks and balances built into the review of such funding.

Dr. Barry O'Connor
Chairperson
Cork Access Network

Table of Contents

Section One

1 Cross Sectoral Collaborative Practice,

Section Two

2 Supports which also enhance Access

Section Three

3 Flexible Provision

Section Four

4 Sustainable Funding

Appendices

Executive Summary

The Cork Access Network (CAN) supports collaborative responses of organisations who work and address the issue of educational access and disadvantage and is supported by the Reach Fund and match funding from Learning City partners.

On the 29th of November 2024, Cork Access Network hosted "ACCESS - Transforming the Framework of Community Education" (Appendix A). The event focused on how access to community education can be transformative for both communities and individuals, and provided a unique opportunity for Community Education Organisations, Practitioners and Learners from across Cork City and County to hear about and review the SOLAS Community Education Framework[1] and its implementation and to contribute to making an 'Access and Community Education' themed submission to the forthcoming SOLAS Further Education & Training Strategy 2025 -29.

The event was attended by one hundred and twenty two people representing forty different organisations (Appendix B) from leading statutory providers in the region, including , Cork ETB , Cork City Council, UCC, MTU, HSE, TUSLA and the Library Services from both Cork City and County, along with non-statutory organisations including Cork City Partnership, SECAD, Community Development Projects, Family Resource Centres, Traveller Representative Groups and many local Community Education providers.

This event programme included:

1. A review of the recently published SOLAS Community Education Framework and its implementation.

2. Sharing examples of Best Practice in Community Education.

3. Presentation of the Beachaire Report: A qualitative research project which explored the effectiveness of community education in supporting lone parents to achieve improved educational, economic, and social outcomes for themselves and their children in the Mayfield Community. (Appendix D)

4. A series of showcase presentations of projects supported by The Reach Fund programme and how it has positively impacted upon and benefited community groups across the City and County of Cork.

5. A high-level panel discussion on the theme of access chaired by Dr Barry O' Connor, with Nina Burke - SOLAS, John Fitzgibbon - CETB, Fergus Craddock - ETBI, Deirdre Creedon - MTU, Olive Byrne - UCC, & Margo Hayes - Cork City Partnership.

6. An Interactive evaluation workshop to draw feedback and make recommendations towards community education in the forthcoming FET strategy.

Key Findings

---

1 chrome-://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/f6e1c11684/community-education-framework.pdf

Support for the implementation of the Community Education Framework is evident in the feedback and shows the consultation process was conducted in a thorough and engaging manner on a national level.

The themes presented in this submission are in line with the four areas of the strategy

- How we Learn,
- How we Provide
- How we Coordinate
- How we Fund.

The primary themes which arose in response from the event were

- Cross Sectoral Collaborative Practice
- Supports which also enhance Access
- Flexible Provision
- Sustainable Funding

The key responses from participants who work in community education in multiple different ways have been reflected in this report.

1. Crucial and essential to success is the ability to work together in cross sectoral collaborative partnership. This includes cross government department funding mechanisms and collaboration between Community Education, Further Education & Training, Higher Education Level and Local Government and with other community partners to ensure the best outcomes and progress for participants.
2. The starting point of the strategy is to realise that access to community education starts long before the student sits in the classroom. Motivation, confidence and a suitable learning environment along with transport, childcare and other holistic supports are required if those who need it the most are to be included.
3. A model of qualitative research is required to capture the benefits of Community Education and its impact on the Learner, their Family and the Community
4. Sustainable and multi annual and longer-term Funding Mechanisms are essential to maximise the benefit of Community Education. Core funding needs to support running costs, e.g. premises, utilities and material costs.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this proposal are aligned to four key actions for implementation as referenced in the SOLAS Community Education Framework document.

- How We **Learn** (4.3)
- How We **Provide** (4.4)
- How We **Coordinate** (4.5)
- How We **Fund** (4.6)

1. Cross Sectoral Collaborative Partnership

1.1 Collaboration

The importance of the relationship in the partnership approach was emphasised by participants, as was the value placed upon the importance of a collaborative approach to learning and to learner support. Recommendations included cross government departmental support, interagency and community collaboration, with requests for the development of a collective voice from community educators to be supported.

Respondents said:

"Stakeholders to explore collaborative funding to support   Community Education",

"Community Education partners to form a lobby group"

"Partners and stakeholders join forces"

The above feedback proposes that working together in partnership towards the same aim would be beneficial and would support a successful implementation of action (4.3.4) in the framework.

1.2 The Learner's Voice

Respondents highlighted the importance of the Learner's Voice in all aspects of Community Education. Collaboration with learners, drawing from their lived experiences brings benefit to the design and delivery of programmes.

Respondents said:

"Use examples of someone who navigated the system to be seen by perspective students, local people, local connections are some of the aspects that make CE so effective"

"We *cannot overestimate the power of the Learner's Voice*"

The above proposes embedding a more formal role for the learner's voice in the implementation of the framework, as referred to in point 4.3.4 in the framework.

1.3 Outreach

Regarding localised collaborations and access, respondents said:

"*More outreach from Further Education Colleges to Community Education providers, there is evidence of success within the Learning Neighbourhood model with recent CETB/UCC/ MTU initiatives*"

Other recommendations by respondents are:

"*To work with not just education providers but also with those from broader community resource providers, helping community members to understand the link between the first steps in education and possible pathways in relatable way*"

"*More integrated classes for people with intellectual disabilities, provide more to facilitate community inclusion*"

2   Supports which also enhance access

2.1 Wrap Around Supports

Insights provided through the event, indicate that Community Education is a constant changing and evolving environment. To provide and ensure access to Community Education and to further pathways, a holistic approach with funded wrap around services is required.

A range of different supports are necessary to ensure the participation of those who would benefit the most through their engagement with Community Education, is required for the successful implementation of actions 4.3 .1 of the framework.

Respondents commented:

"*Transport .... and the need for other supports around activities of daily living are regularly identified barriers*",

 "*Wrap around supports are so important when moving to next step, academic support, help with logistics and childcare can make all the difference*"

2.2 The Beachaire Research Report conducted in the Mayfield Community of Cork and presented at the event is a qualitative research project exploring the effectiveness of Community Education in supporting lone parents to achieve improved educational, economic, and social outcomes for themselves and their children. Its findings show the positive impact wrap around supports have on progression routes.

 A significant point to note and quoted from the research states:

 "(*her)participation in community education and subsequent progression into employment had a huge effect and impact on her child, she's encouraging her child to participate and complete her education*" and this was made possible by "*participating in the courses helped her to build*

7

up … self-confidence, she found staff and tutors friendly, welcoming and encouraging and felt she really acknowledged she was treated with respect as an adult, her opinion mattered which hadn't been her experience in formal education"

3. Flexible provision

A key theme to emerge from respondents was understanding the needs of communities and adhering to the principles of Community Education in line with the ethos of supporting learners is crucial to their   contributing to the social, economic and cultural development of their own communities

3.1 Outreach

Respondents stated:

 "Utilise *skills of community groups to reach local community"*

"Diverse representation of community leads and projects e.g. reflect the diversity and different abilities of communities "

"Promote Community Education to those outside the sector, people should not need to find Community Education, we should find them"

3.2 Messaging

Much of the feedback indicated clarity in messaging is of vital importance as is the utilisation of different media to reach different audiences.

Respondents said:

"Multiple approaches to literacy issues, recognising these issues may sometimes relate to digital literacy"

"*Print information, information not always accessible if online "*

"Collaborate with other services, e.g. with Family Resource Centres to reach a broader cohort "

"More community outreach, open days"

 "Bring Back the Adult Education Exhibition" (an annual event held in Cork City Hall from the 1970s to 2016).

3.3 Digital Learning

Concern was highlighted by many respondents regarding the user experience of the Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH)

For example, one respondent stated:

"*User experience of FETCH enrolment is a barrier; the website needs to be user friendly"*

 The above aligns with action 4.5.2 of the framework requiring a more simplified data gathering process.

4. Sustainable funding

The recommendations regarding funding include a sustainable funding model which goes beyond the operational elements is required. Core funding should also support proportioned additional running costs such as   premises, utilities and material costs etc.

4.1 Staffing

Respondents highlighted the financial challenges community organisations were facing in regard to running costs and called for a funding model with more flexibility and sustainability to better coordinate the provision of Community Education in their Communities.

Respondents emphasized:

"Administration support and funding for running cost"

"Running Costs and more teachers"

4.2 Evidence of impact

A respondent stated*:*

 "Transformational change is evidenced in the beautiful research (Beachaire Report) Siobhan spoke about earlier; we did a research project last year. We have evidence that community education is not only transforming individual lives, but also communities and families and we absolutely have the evidence, ... give us the money to do this incredible .... and absolutely inspiring work"

4.3 Quality

Sustainable funding is required to allow for consistency and quality assurance in courses. It would also provide for a better retention of tutors who have built up experience and who in turn can contribute to develop communities of practice.

Respondents said:

 "More directed funding which can reflect the needs of the local area. Funding that only runs from year to year does not allow for planning which incorporates progression,

"The importance of meeting the students where they are at".

Appendix A

Background

Cork Access Network   is an aspect of Cork Learning City and facilitates **Collaboration of Learning City Partners with a particular expertise or interest in ACCESS to Education, Training, Further Education and Higher Education.**

This Learning City activity has a particular focus on SDG 4 "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"*. Cork Access Network (CAN) was established by Cork Learning City partners; Cork Education and Training Board (CETB), Munster Technological University (MTU), University College Cork (UCC) and Cork City Council (CCC) and partners (Cork Chambers, Forsa and J&J).

The network was formed based on the findings of an initial Online Seminar and Workshop in 2020-21 and grown over a series of open events, online and in-person, highlighting different Access themes. Partners share the idea that tackling under-representation and under-achievement in education or training is stronger when it takes a cross-sectoral, inter-agency approach. The Network supports collaborative responses of organisations who worked and addressed the issue of educational disadvantage. The scope of the work outgrew the capacity of the partners who were working at senior level within all their respective organisations. Funding has allowed for the employment of a development coordinator for the Cork Access Network, the post is co-funded by the Reach Fund and Learning City partner organisations and is situated within the Cork City Council Learning City Team.

Cork Access Network works across 4 broad pillars of Access through –

- Further and Higher Education
- Community
- The Workplace
- Schools

CAN's work is informed by the following core principles:

- Taking a 'Strengths based approach' to respond to Educational Disadvantage – build on successes and drive peer learning to share and amplify good practice.
- Hearing the Learners voice - giving a public platform where their own stories of Access and Education/Training Success are shared with Policy makers, Decision makers, Teachers and Learning Leaders

The network embeds the partnership of the founding lead partners of Cork Access Network, Cork Education Training Board (CETB), Munster Technological University (MTU), University College Cork (UCC) and Cork City Council, with Cork Chamber, Trade Unions and Industry. It enables partners who have expertise in education and the area of access to share information, knowledge and promote actions which benefit the most marginalised and those who may have issue accessing the pathways provided by each organisation. This supports positive outcomes for learners by enabling the identification and creation of access pathways between partners and

responding to challenges to participation even when people have gained access to the education system at different levels.

Cork Access Network engages with groups, agencies and organisations who provide formal, informal and non-formal education at all levels, with particular focus on those who often have a negative experience in education the first time around. Highlighting the availability of pathways available and advocating for support and action where there are gaps.

Appendix B

Catherine Sheahan	Cork Learning City
Christine Nolan	Access MTU
Ciarán Lynch	CETB
Cliona O'Geran	J&J Innovative Medicine
Denis Barrett	Coordinator Cork Learning City
Denis Leamy	CE CETB
Dr. Barry O'Connor	CAN Chair
Fiona Dunne	FÓRSA
James Bilson	Access UCC
Juliet Haykal Libbos	Cork Chamber
Karen Duke	CAN Coordinator
Laura Coleman	Access MTU
Martin Flynn	Access UCC
Naoimh Frawley	Cork Chamber
Olive Byrne	Access UCC
Roisín Ormond	Access MTU
Willie McAuliffe	Cork Learning City Chair

Cork Access Network Steering Group Members

Appendix C

Workshop Methodology

The workshop element of the conference was designed to be inclusive and participatory, giving people a chance to share learning, insights and take-aways with each other before the facilitator introduced the structured element of the workshop which was based around five broad questions.

The facilitator guided interactive discussions, encouraged participation, and kept participants focused by asking probing questions relevant to the topic.

122 participants across 40 different agencies and organisations participated.

- verbal responses were recorded by a stenographer
- written responses from each table of participants were collected, collated and assigned to the most appropriate area (of the 24 actions in the plan, under 4 areas; learn, provide, coordinate & fund,) to create the most robust engagement with all stakeholders and to capture broad themes from each.

Appendix D

Groups in Attendance

Blackpool Community Association	Community Education Projects	The Lantern Project -Nano Nagle
Cork City Council	CETB	Cooperative Housing
Cope Foundation	Cork City Libraries	Crawford
Cork City Partnership	Down Syndrome Cork	MTU
Good Shepard	ETBI	Griffith College
Active connections	Dillons Cross Project	Carrigtwohill FRC
Cork Mental Health	Irish Wheelchair Association	LINC
St Joseph's Foundation	Mayfield CDP	Firkin Crane
Mayfield CALP	The Kabin	Northside Community Enterprise
NASC	Prison Service	IPSEDU
Let's Grow Together	SHEP	TUSLA
SECAD	Travellers of North Cork	Durras Community Association
UCC	Welcome English	Farranree Community Association
Farranree CDP	Students	Tutors
J&J Innovative Medicine	Passage West Men's Shed	SOLAS

Appendix E

Summary of Consultation process

On the 29th of November 2024, Cork Access Network hosted ACCESS - Transforming the Framework of Community Education. The event focused on how access to community education can be transformative for both communities and individuals, and provided a unique opportunity for Community Education Organisations, Practitioners and Learners from across Cork City and County to hear about and review the SOLAS Community Education Framework and its implementation and to contribute to making an 'Access and Community Education' themed submission to the forthcoming SOLAS Further Education & Training Strategy 2025 -29 .

This event programme included:

A. A review of the recently published SOLAS Community Education Framework and its implementation

B. Examples of Best Practice in Community Education presented on the day

C. Presentation of the Beachaire Report: this was a qualitative research project which explored the effectiveness of community education in supporting lone parents to achieve improved educational, economic, and social outcomes for themselves and their children (Mayfield Case Study)

D. A series of showcase presentations of projects supported by The Reach Fund programme and how it has positively impacted upon and benefited community groups across the City and County of Cork.

E. A high-level panel discussion on the theme of access chaired by Dr Barry O Connor, with Nina Burke – Solas, John Fitzgibbon CETB, Fergus Craddock ETBI, Deirdre Creedon MTU, Olive Byrne UCC, & Margo Hayes, Cork City Partnership.

F. An Interactive evaluation workshop to draw feedback and make recommendations towards community education in the forthcoming FET strategy

Appendix F

Running Order

Access - Transforming the Framework of Community Education

9.30am - 12.30pm
Friday 29th November 2024

Clayton Hotel (Silversprings)
Tivoli, Cork, T23 E244

9.00 - Registration

9.30 - Welcome
Dr Barry O'Connor, Chairperson CAN

9.35 - Opening Address
Cllr. Gillian Coughlan, Chairperson Cork ETB

9.45 - Irish Wheelchair Association - Community Inclusion
REACH Lighting Presentation **Margaret O'Connor**

9.55 - Moving Age, Farranree - Stories from the Northside
REACH Lighting Presentation

10.05 - Case Study: Transformative Nature of Community Education for Lone Parents
Siobhan O'Neill, Mayfield Community Intergration Project

10.15 - The Travellers of North Cork
REACH Lighting Presentation

10.25 - SOLAS Community Education Framework & New FET Strategy
Nina Burke, SOLAS

10.40 - Durrus Community Council - Community Pride
REACH Lighting Presentation

10.50 - Refreshment Break & Networking

11.15 - Panel Discussion
SOLAS **- Nina Burke,** CETB **- John Fitzgibbons,** ETBI **- Fergus Craddock,** MTU **- Deirdre Creedon,** UCC **-Olive Byrne,** Cork City Partnership**, Margo Hayes,** CAN **- Dr. Barry O'Connor**

11.45 - Panel Q&A

11.55 - Round Table Discussions

12.15 - Reflections

12.25 - Closing Address
Denis Leamy, Chief Executive Cork ETB

12.30 - Close
Dr Barry O'Connor, Chairperson CAN

Appendix G

Mayfield Community Case Study, A qualitative report

(Section of Executive Summary of Mayfield Case Study, please see link for full document) [2]

This case study showcases the work of Mayfield Integrated Community Development Project (CDP) & its sub project Mayfield Community Adult Learning Project (CALP) providing community education and support to lone parents, and the wider community, in the Mayfield area of Cork City. The research was funded by the Beachaire Fund, a charitable fund operating under the umbrella of Community Foundation Ireland (CFI). One of the Fund's objectives is to support education initiatives with a view to affording access to and the benefits of education to children.

In Ireland, households headed by a lone parent with low levels of completed education are amongst those at greatest risk of poverty, facing economic and social disadvantage that have potential lifelong adverse consequences for children. Community education programmes potentially offer 'second chance' return to education opportunities to lone parents and a progression for lone parents to improved mental health and wellbeing, further education, and employment.

The Beachaire Fund appointed the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to conduct qualitative research, through case studies, to explore the impact on lone parents and their children from participating in community education programmes across Ireland.

The research was conducted during the spring of 2023. Twelve people contributed to this case study including management/coordinators (2), community education staff (2), and past community education participants, who are lone parents (8).

All participants received a one4all voucher as a token of appreciation for their contribution to be the research. Participants shared the stories of their life journeys and the ways in which their participation in community education has transformed their lives. A vignette further illustrates the varied and distinctive stories of participants as they move through their lives with the support of community education.

 The stories contain recurring themes of enjoyment of shared learning and support, educational progression, paid employment, more positive feelings around parenting and capacity to parent, enhanced mental health and wellbeing and a deeper sense of self, personal mastery, connection, and for some, motivation, and greater motivation capacity to be involved in their local community.

This includes working in community development and many different forms of volunteering. The stories capture the courage and resilience of the women, many of whom have lived through

---

[2]://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.corklearningcity.ie/media/pzha0f0u/final_mayfield_branded-report-061223.pdf

difficult life situations, and trauma. These include early childhood experiences of growing up in poverty, experiencing addiction firsthand or through a family member, domestic violence, losing a business or home, and fear of becoming homeless. Caring and dedication to children, including those with additional needs, family members who are seriously ill, and aging parents, feature prominently in the lives of many of those who participated in the research.