

Community Education as a support for lone parents - Thematic Analysis of Eight Case Studies:

a qualitative exploration of the power
of community education to support
lone parents to fulfil their potential in
education, employment, and society.

September 2023



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September 2023

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

This research is a qualitative exploration of the power of community education to support lone parents to fulfill their potential in education, employment, and society.

Households headed by a lone parent with low levels of completed education are among those at greatest risk of long-term unemployment and poverty in Ireland. The economic and social disadvantage faced by these households has potential lifelong adverse consequences for children from these one-parent families. The stark economic reality of the link between education, employment, and poverty is highlighted in research conducted by the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI. 2023)¹ which showed that lone parent families, without an earner, had the highest risk of poverty. This confirmed a definitive link between education, employment, and poverty. Households headed by lone parents in employment are also at risk of poverty where the earner is in low paid employment².

In 2020, the Bechaire Fund commissioned AONTAS and the ESRI³ to jointly conduct a scoping study into the possibility of researching the role of community education in supporting lone parents facing economic and social disadvantage in Ireland. This was based on the premise that community education provides ‘second chance’ access to adult learners, reaching those who are most disadvantaged in their communities.

The 2020 scoping study found that there had been limited research conducted on the impact of community education programmes in Ireland. It noted the large body of international evidence telling us that person-centric educational programmes such as those at the core of community education can have a transformative impact on the lives of adult learners and that improved educational attainment for mothers can also lead to benefits for their children.

¹ Roantree, B. and K. Doorley (2023). Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report, Jointly published Reports 4, Dublin: ESRI and Community Foundation Ireland, <https://doi.org/10.26504/jr4>

² <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/Lone-Parents-Employment-Report-Summary12.pdf>

³ Community Education’s Role in Supporting Lone Parents facing Education and Social Disadvantage. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS). Authors: Eve Cobain, Leah Dowdall, Niamh O’Reilly (AONTAS) and Merike Darmody (ESRI). October 2020.

In January 2022 the Bechaire Fund appointed the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to conduct qualitative research to explore the effectiveness of community education in supporting lone parents to achieve improved educational, economic, and social outcomes for themselves and their children. The primary intention of the research, as set out by the Bechaire Fund, is to bring evidence-informed recommendations to policy makers to bolster the case for increased funding to strengthen the community education sector and to improve access for lone parents to the opportunity to return to education as a pathway to fulfil their potential in education, employment, and society.

2. Methodology

The research methodology was qualitative, appreciative, and participatory at all levels. The data was gathered through semi-structured conversations, interviews and focus groups, all designed to capture community education provision and practice as experienced by lone parents.

Over 200 people contributed to the research between June 2022 and July 2023. This included policy informers (8), community education management (24), community education staff/facilitators/tutors (36), and community education participants (135) across 8 community education settings and beyond. The research is unique in an Irish context, due to the range of participants in different roles and the in-depth nature of the case study approach. The qualitative methodology was purposeful, inviting stories of participation, encouraging reflection, and sharing of experiences of community education as lone parents in contemporary Ireland. The intention was to capture the story of community education in practice, as experienced by lone parents, predominantly women, across a range of different community settings in Ireland.

The research was supported and steered by a Research Advisory Committee (RAC) which was a mix of academics and people with rich experience of social research, community development, and community education, particularly as a support for lone parents.

The research unfolded in four phases from January 2022 to November 2023:

Phase One: Context Setting March – June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of Background Paper and methodology • Consultation with policy informers within the statutory sector
Phase Two: Field Research June 2022 – July 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection of case study sites • Data gathered across 8 case study sites
Phase Three: Analysis and Reporting of Findings July – September 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of 8 individual standalone case studies • Thematic analysis of case studies • Findings applied to the Policy Context
Phase Four: Dissemination and Policy Informing November 2023 – 2024.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between CES, the RAC and Community Foundation Ireland (CFI) to prepare dissemination strategy for the research assets

3. Research Findings

There are two layers to the research findings. Firstly, there are 8 case studies which are standalone pieces of research showcasing community education in settings across Ireland. Each case study can be read as a standalone and discrete piece of research and is a resource to inform the implementation of evidence-informed policy and service development locally. The links to the case studies are available on page 31 of this report. You can find out more about the 8 organisations involved in the research here.



Secondly, this report captures the thematic analysis of findings across all 8 case studies. This includes the stories of 135 community education participants, the perspectives of management (24) and community education staff including tutors, facilitators, key workers, and administrators (36).

The research contributes to and confirms the body of research telling us that community education provides opportunities for a return to education for lone parents that can open new and diverse pathways within education, economic activity, as well as involvement and representation in community development and political representation. The community setting is powerful in this regard in that the trusted and safe environment draws people in, particularly those who have poor experiences of formal education in the past and/or trauma during their lives.

All 135 participants in this research were lone parents in caring roles. This includes caring for their children; some were also caring for older parents and roughly one third were caring for children with additional needs. Many participants were naturally very caught up in their caring roles and consequently experiencing isolation that impacted their mental health.

The findings show that participation in community education positively impacts mental health and wellbeing for lone parents and their children. This happens because of a mix of components, including personal development and the wraparound support provided creates a sense of psychological safety in the community education setting. A key feature is the one-to-one support from community education tutors and facilitators who are experienced working in community settings and working with the diversity of experiences of participants, including trauma.

The research highlights that community education is a component part of the wider system of provision and is contributing to the delivery of national policy, including further education and training (FET), labour market activation, health and wellbeing. Community education is a vital part of the overall system of provision and an integrated approach to delivering a range of national policies. There is strong evidence to support investment in community education to ensure a robust response to the needs of lone parents in contemporary Ireland.

There are ten main messages arising from the research.

Message One: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Participation in community education brings feelings of connection and belonging for lone parents who feel isolated.

Participation in community education brings a sense of belonging which eases the loneliness and isolation experienced by some people who are parenting alone. Gathering for shared learning supports the mental health and wellbeing of lone parents and their children. The personal transformation that arises, through feelings of safety and belonging, prepares the ground for continued engagement and progression to further education, training, paid employment or better paid employment, and community involvement. The research also shows enhanced English language proficiency and feelings of integration for participants who have moved to Ireland from other countries. The findings suggest that there is scope for more proactive strategies on the part of government agencies to encourage and support engagement by lone parents with community education and thereby gain the benefits of increased mental health and wellbeing.

Message Two: Progression to Further and Higher Education

Participation by lone parents in community education results in personal transformation, strengthened self-confidence and personal agency which motivates progression to further and higher education.

Participation in community education facilitates personal transformation in terms of enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem, strengthened motivation, and personal agency. This personal transformation occurs in a safe setting through the psychology of group work, wraparound support, and facilitation on the part of the tutors. The growth in personal confidence and motivation is a significant driver in supporting participants to continue their community education journey and progress to further and higher education and employment.

Message Three: Progression to Employment

Lone parents who complete community education are highly likely to progress to further and higher education, training, paid employment, and involvement in their community.

Participation in community education enables progression to further and higher education, training, paid employment or better paid employment, and involvement in community development. The findings show the potential and power of targeted employability programmes, designed and provided by community education sites, such as New Futures Employability Programme (One Family) and the Moving On Programme (St Catherine's Community Services Centre). Community education prepares people to progress, with skills

and confidence, to further and higher education. The results of this research show that paid employment in social care, childcare, and special needs assisting are the most frequently mentioned careers resulting from community education. There are labour shortages in all these areas currently in Ireland and community education is playing a role in responding to this skills gap.

Message Four: Safe Places and Wraparound Support for Lone Parents

Wraparound support is a known distinctive feature of community education and is one of the main success determinants for participation, completion, and progression on the part of lone parents.

Access to and participation in community education by lone parents is made possible through wraparound support provided in community education settings. This wraparound support, which is only available where funding and circumstances permit, is tailored to the learner and their needs. It is often associated with a place or building which is rooted in the community and acts as a hub for accessing support and is a place of safety, welcome and inclusion. Wraparound support includes childcare, parenting support, travel allowance, peer support, IT (Information Technology) support, equipment, driving lessons, mentoring, key working, career guidance, and personal counselling. It also includes one-to-one support, provided by community education tutors and facilitators, who are trauma-aware and experienced and many of whom have lived experience of lone parenting themselves. The impact of participation in community education is particularly empowering for those who have experienced trauma in their lives and/or difficulty in their primary or secondary education experience.

Message Five: Childcare Matters

Access to onsite childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for lone parents.

Access to on-site childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for lone parents. Childcare, in the settings where it is provided, offers a double positive impact in that it benefits both parent and child by connecting them positively with their community. For younger children, it offers exposure to the early year's curriculum of education, development, and care. The absence of good quality, affordable childcare and after-school care is a block for many lone parents, preventing or delaying their participation in community education.

Message Six: Quality Community Education Staff

The quality and dedication of community education tutors/facilitators are distinctive features of community education and important determinants of success.

The distinctive features of community education include the quality and competence of staff in community education settings. The competency, dedication, and lived experience of administrators, coordinators, tutors, and facilitators involved in the design and delivery of community education contribute to the longstanding reputation of the settings. This, along with childcare provision, is the most significant attractor that continues to draw in and support participants to complete their community education journeys and prepare for their next steps.

Message Seven: Positive Role Models

Role models are a wonderful source of inspiration and encouragement for lone parents.

The research confirms the power of positive role models and lone parents participating in community education are inspired and encouraged by women who they can identify with and who have gone before them on the journey through community education – ***if you can see it, you can be it***. The authentic role models within community education settings are a vital source of inspiration and encouragement that drives the positive impact of community education. The results remind us of the power of imitative behaviour and role modelling to shape the habits and choices of the next generation as children witness, with pleasure, their mothers engaging with and enjoying education.

Message Eight: Positive Impact on Families

Participation in community education by lone parents has a positive ripple effect through the family by enhancing parental wellbeing and positive role modelling for children.

Lone parents' participation in community education has a positive ripple effect on their children, wider family relationships, education, mental health, and wellbeing. This includes an enhanced capacity to parent and positive role modelling for children, sparking interest in and excitement about education, and a lived experience of its value. The research found that mothers believe that their own contentment can have a nurturing and calming effect on children's mental health and wellbeing. The research also shows that participation in community education and progression has the power to increase the financial status of a family.

Message Nine: Collaboration and Partnership

Community organisations are agile and can respond well and swiftly to local needs through strategic partnerships and practical collaboration arrangements.

The research shows evidence of partnerships and collaborations, new and old, forming to advance community education provision, reach into communities, and enhance accreditation processes. The community organisations that participated in this research each have long-established and trusted relationships with organisations that help further their goals. Good relationships, agility, and ability to innovate enable community education settings to respond to emerging local needs and work collaboratively with shared resources. This includes partnerships with further and higher education and training institutions as well as collaborative arrangements with local authorities, the HSE, philanthropy, the private sector, and other community organisations locally.

Message Ten: Metrics and Monitoring

Community settings gather useful quantitative and qualitative data to inform education, training, and employment policy and yet use of this data is under resourced and under utilised.

The research confirms the multiple sources of funding for community education across government departments, agencies, corporations, and philanthropy. This comes with many different administrative requests and requirements for monitoring data, however, there is no one coherent system. As a result, we are missing the full picture of community education. There are missed metrics and opportunities to gain a more coherent sense of its power to effect and sustain positive change within communities as well as within the wider system of education provision within the state. Community education generates rich data through different systems across different settings. The results show that there are health benefits and changes in attitudes, behaviour, confidence levels, relationships, financial standing, and progression to further training, education, and paid employment or better paid employment resulting from participation in community education. Uniformity of data points and data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed.

4. Recommendations

The **overall conclusion** arising from the research is that community education programmes are already in place, having evolved organically to meet the current needs of lone parents. With increased investment, the effectiveness of this means of support to lone parents, and the innovative and agile response of community education providers, could be sustained and scaled up to further enhance its power as a response to contemporary policy imperatives.

The **overall recommendation** of this research is for policy makers and funders to maximise the power of community education to deliver specific policy commitments. This will be achieved by capitalising on the model of community delivery as a safe place for lone parents to begin their return to education. This means designing a funding model that creates a single point for delivery of funding to sites for community education programmes that deliver positive outcomes across several policy areas and reduces the administrative burden for sites. This funding would be on a multi-annual basis and would recognise that effective delivery of community education, for lone parents, also requires funding for the related wraparound support.

Overall Recommendation

- **Strengthen investment** in community education as a local response to vulnerable people, including lone parents.
- **Redesign and/or rationalise** the number of funding streams requiring administration by community education settings by delivering improved funding through multi-annual investment. Combine into a single application 'one stream' funding to cover people, wraparound support and physical infrastructure (whether courses are delivered in person or using digital platforms).
- **Design** a funding model, or platform, that creates a single point of delivery of funding to community education sites for programmes that deliver positive outcomes across the range of relevant policy areas.
- **Align** statutory funding and monitoring requirements to simplify the related administration.

The ten recommendations are laid out below:

Mental Health and Wellbeing		
1	Maximise the mental health and wellbeing benefits of participation in community education for lone parents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness of the mental health benefits of participation in community education across government departments. • Conduct research into the benefits of participation in community education to enhance mental health and wellbeing and as a place to bring in health promotion and psychoeducation for population health. • Scope out opportunities for the HSE and Mental Health Ireland to invest in the psychological supports and counselling offered in community education settings. • Pilot a social prescribing programme designed to explore the impact of social prescribing referrals to participate in community education, on improved mental health and wellbeing.
Progression to Further and Higher Education		
2	Promote better understanding of the mutuality between community education settings and relevant statutory providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote and activate the pathways (existing and new) from community education to further and higher education. This is already happening and could be further enhanced by being more clearly articulated and widely communicated. • Make provision for student grants accessible to those taking courses on a part-time basis in the FE/HE sector. • Recognise and invest in the role of Community Employment (CE) as an important precursor and partner to community education.
Progression to Employment and Improved Employment		
3	Utilise the power of community education to respond to employment needs and skills gaps.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale up Employability Programmes targeted at lone parents building on the learning from New Futures Employability and Moving On Programmes. • Agencies, with responsibility for training for employment, fund locally designed employment skills programmes developed by community education providers to meet the needs of the local jobs market. • Invest in digital innovation and opportunities to continue to bring online/hybrid learning to lone parents.

Safe Places and Wraparound Support for Lone Parents

4	Invest in Community Education Settings and Wraparound Supports for Lone Parents to engage in Community Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in community education settings located in the heart of local communities and wraparound support to allow the demonstrated benefits of engaging in community education to deliver positive outcomes for policy areas such as social inclusion, health and wellbeing, child poverty and progression to employment and improved employment. • Combine investment into a single source of funding covering physical infrastructure and delivery of wraparound support with appropriate monitoring metrics and leverage the power of community education to bring multiple benefits to lone parents and their children.
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Childcare Matters

5	Ringfence Free Childcare for Lone Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make provision for free childcare for lone parents participating in community education through a voucher system and/or a local arrangement to enable lone parents to engage in community education and for their children to access and benefit from the early years' curriculum.
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Quality Community Education Staff

6	Invest in Community Education Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-design the funding model for community education programmes to offer multi-annual funding and design the scope of the funding to ensure that it covers the provision of core facilities and resources, and wraparound support and enables the recruitment and retention of experienced staff on contractual terms that can support consistent and expanded delivery of effective programmes to lone parents. • Provide specific skills training and CPD for all staff in relevant topics such as trauma informed care and the delivery of online learning. • Dedicate 3% of grant funding to cover costs of CPD.
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Positive Role Models

7	<p>Recognise the value and power of good role models</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in community education settings and the staff teams that facilitate and nurture the power of positive role modeling for better outcomes. • Conduct specific research into the psychological benefits of positive role modeling for vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, in community education settings.
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Positive Impact on Children and Families

8	<p>Recognise the power of community education as part of the suite of family support and interventions to address child poverty.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine investment into a single source with appropriate monitoring and leverage the power of community education to deliver on policy areas such as social inclusion, health and wellbeing, child poverty and progression to paid employment.
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Partnership and Collaboration

9	<p>Incentivise collaboration and partnership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivise collaboration and partnership locally between community settings and further and higher education providers. • Facilitate flexible accreditation systems that encompass community education. • Showcase the greater impact and efficiency of working together to achieve better outcomes for lone parents. • Explore partnership opportunities with employers and other relevant agencies locally.
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Metrics and Monitoring

10	Strengthen metrics and Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design and implement a centralised monitoring system with metrics that better capture and report the impact on lone parents and their children of participating in community education programmes.• Ensure lone parents are a named target group for data capture.• Invest in supporting community settings to strengthen the methods and metrics for tracking the journey through community education.• Ascertain potential links to the What Works Initiative and the drive to gather more coherent small area data to build regional and national data sets to better support policy and service development.
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1. Introduction

This report presents the thematic analysis of the findings from research, conducted by the Centre for Effective Services (CES), into the role of community education as a support for lone parents in Ireland. The research was funded by the Beachaire Fund and conducted by CES between January 2022 and September 2023.

This report draws together the results of the **combined** analysis of 8 Case Studies, including 11 vignettes, which showcase contemporary community education in practice in community settings across Ireland. You can read the case studies on page 31 of this report.

The research provides insights into community education as it is situated in local community settings, which, in turn, are situated within the wider system of mainstream service provision in a specific location, community, county and region. The emphasis, in tune with the terms of reference, is on lone parents and their participation and experience of contemporary community education. You can find more information about the 8 local community settings on their websites via the links below.



Each Case Study can be read as a standalone and discrete piece of research and is a resource to inform the implementation of evidence-informed policy locally.

This thematic report presents an overview of the research and 10 recurring messages that emerged from the analysis of **all** 8 case studies which include 11 vignettes.

The strength of these messages across the case studies is resounding evidence to inform policy development, specifically relating to community education provision within the wider system of further education and training in Ireland. The findings show the power of community education as a support for lone parents and strong evidence to support investment in community education so that it is maximised as a robust response to the needs of lone parents in contemporary Ireland.

Background to the Research

The Bechaire Fund is a charitable trust operating under the umbrella of Community Foundation Ireland (CFI). One of the objectives of the Bechaire Fund is to support early education initiatives with a view to improving access to education and affording the benefits of education to children living in Ireland.

Households headed by a lone parent with low levels of completed education are among those at greatest risk of long-term unemployment and poverty in Ireland. The economic and social disadvantage faced by these households has potential lifelong adverse consequences for children from these one-parent families. The stark economic reality of the link between education, employment, and poverty is highlighted in research conducted by the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2023)⁴ which showed that lone parent families, without an earner, had the highest risk of poverty. This confirmed a definitive link between education, employment, and poverty. Households headed by lone parents in employment are also at risk of poverty where the earner is in low paid employment⁵.

⁴ Roantree, B. and K. Doorley (2023). Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report, Jointly published Reports 4, Dublin: ESRI and Community Foundation Ireland, <https://doi.org/10.26504/jr4>

⁵ <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/Lone-Parents-Employment-Report-Summary12.pdf>

In 2020, the Bechaire Fund commissioned AONTAS and the ESRI⁶ to jointly conduct a scoping study into the possibility of researching the role of community education in supporting lone parents facing economic and social disadvantage in Ireland. This was based on the premise that community education provides ‘second chance’ access to adult learners, reaching those who are most disadvantaged in their communities.

The 2020 Scoping Study found that there had been limited research conducted on the impact of community education programmes in Ireland⁷. It noted the large body of international evidence telling us that person-centric educational programmes such as those at the core of community education can have a transformative impact on the lives of adult learners and that improved educational attainment for mothers can also lead to benefits for their children.

Following recommendations in the 2020 Scoping Study, to better understand the position of lone parent households in a national context, the Bechaire Fund also commissioned Dr Elizabeth Nixon in 2021 to conduct an analysis of the impact of increased educational attainment on households headed by lone parents in Ireland using data from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study. Of the households headed by a lone parent mother in the GUI study, at the outset when their children were less than a year old, 40.2% had achieved highest education level at lower secondary or below with a further 33% having completed their Leaving Certificate.

By the time their children were age 9 years, 40% of the mothers heading up these lone parent households with educational levels of Leaving Certificate or below remained in that situation 9 years later⁸. This suggests that lone parents face significant barriers in accessing further education and experiencing the potential benefits for them and their families that come from the improved educational attainment.

The AONTAS/ESRI (2020) Scoping Study provides the backdrop for this research and is an important accompaniment. It provides details in terms of academic references, context, and rationale.

⁶ Community Education’s Role in Supporting Lone Parents facing Education and Social Disadvantage. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS). Authors: Eve Cobain, Leah Dowdall, Niamh O’Reilly (AONTAS) and Merike Darmody (ESRI). October 2020.

⁷ [Aontas ESRI Scoping Study.docx](#)

⁸ Based on the data available for analysis in 2021.

The 2020 Scoping Study recommended the adoption of a qualitative, case study based, approach to the research design. This recommendation was based on the subject matter and the population size in Ireland. The study deduced that this was the optimal way to explore in depth the experience of learners, who are lone parents, and the experience of the providers of community education, where lone parents form a significant proportion of the learner group.

Following a public tender process in 2021, the Bechaire Fund selected the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to conduct the research.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research is to explore the effectiveness of community education in supporting lone parents achieve educational, economic, and social outcomes for themselves and, their children.

The primary intention of the research, as set out by the Bechaire Fund, is to bring evidence-based recommendations to policy makers to bolster the case for increased investment to strengthen the community education sector and improve access by lone parents to education.

Overview of the Research

CES was successful in tendering to conduct the research and was awarded the contract in January 2022.

The research showcases community education, for lone parents, in community settings across Ireland. The methodology was qualitative and appreciative, drawing on the stories of community education participants and providers in a range of community-based settings and curating them into a compilation of 8 standalone case studies.

In 2022, CES advertised the launch of the research, hosted two online workshops and held discussions with several organisations who were interested in participating in the research. As can be seen from the detailed description of the research methodology in this report, participation by the 8 community organisations in the standalone case studies required time, effort and reflection on the part of contributors in partnering with the CES research team to conduct the research and to capture the reality of their experience of community education.

Over 200 people contributed to the research between June 2022 and July 2023. This includes policymakers and policy informers (8), community education management (24), community education staff/facilitators/tutors (36), and community education participants

(135) across 8 community education settings and beyond. The research is unique, in an Irish context, due to the range of participants in different roles and the in-depth nature of the case study approach.

2. Methodology

The centre piece of the research methodology is the suite of 8 case studies. Each case study is a discrete standalone piece of research, as well as contributing to this thematic report, that conveys a universal understanding of community education as a support for lone parents. The data gathering was through semi-structured conversations, interviews and focus groups, all designed to capture community education provision and practice as experienced by lone parents.

The qualitative methodology was purposeful, inviting stories of participation and encouraging reflection and sharing of experiences of community education in contemporary Ireland. The intention was to capture the story of community education in practice, as experienced by lone parents, predominantly women, across a range of different community settings in Ireland.

The majority of the lone parents who participated in the research were female. The sample included Irish people and people of other nationalities, such as British, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, African, American, Iraqi, Czech Republic, and Indian. The age profile ranged from people in their early twenties to eighty years old.

The sample included a mix of current learners participating in community education programmes during the research period as well as those who had participated in similar programmes in the past. This longitudinal approach to the selection of participants allowed the research to capture a common feature of the learner experience of community education – as an incremental and step by step progression (often not in a linear fashion) to achieve a range of personal goals. Those goals include improved mental health and wellbeing, increased educational attainment, employment or better employment, and community involvement.

The Research Advisory Committee (RAC)

The research was supported and steered by a Research Advisory Committee (RAC) comprising academics and people with rich experience of social research, community development and community education, particularly as a support for lone parents [Research Advisory Committee.docx](#).

The active input and advice of the RAC was a valuable and distinctive feature of the methodology that facilitated careful preparation and acted as a reference point, to ground the research in practice and academically. The RAC convened in Spring 2021 and provided their

guidance and input to the research tender design and selection and met 8 times over the lifetime of the research commencing in January 2021 and closing in October 2023.

Phases of the Research

There were four phases of work, beginning with a context setting to place the research in contemporary Ireland and community education, and the changing nature of lone parenting and one-parent families. This was followed by the field research and analysis phases, culminating in the policy informing phase. Table One provides an overview the phases of the research and timeline:

Table One: Overview of the Phases of the Bechaire Funded Research	
Meeting of Research Advisory Committee (RAC) at launch of research	January 2022
Phase One: Context setting	March to June 2022
Invitation to express interest in participating in the research	March 2022
Initial consultation with policy informers	April 2022
1 st Online workshop announcing the research and inviting stakeholder participation	28 th April 2022
Selection and preparation of the 8 Case Study settings	February – December 2022
Phase Two: Field Research	June 2022 – July 2023
Field research begins	June 2022
2 nd Online workshop sharing the progress and inviting participation in the research	29 th November 2022
Field Research completed	July 2023
Phase Three: Considering the Findings	July – September 2023
Preparation of Case Studies and final consultations with Case Study settings	May – September 2023
Draft Report prepared for consideration by the RAC and policy makers	September 2023
Second consultation with Policy Makers	October 2023
Closing Meeting with the RAC	26 th October 2023
Phase Four: Policy Informing	October 2023 +
Final Report and research assets ready for dissemination to inform and influence policy development relevant to community education, lone parents, and their children.	November 2023 – 2024

Phase One: Context setting

The research commenced in January 2022. The first phase involved the preparation of a background paper placing the research in context, drawing on the existing research literature and the current situation relating to lone parent families and community education provision in Ireland [Background Paper.docx](#). The purpose was to establish a contemporary picture for community education and how lone parents engage with, and participate in, community education.

The aim was to set the scene for this research to demonstrate the value of a more strategic approach to community education on the part of the State. A more strategic approach would maximize the power of community education to support lone parents and their families socially, educationally, and economically. This is based on the premise, as mentioned earlier, that returning to education is good for both lone parents, and their children, on numerous fronts and across a range of pressing policy domains including education, training, employment, health, and wellbeing.

Phase Two: Field research

The field research commenced in June 2022 and was completed in July 2023. Considerable time was invested in preparing and selecting the 8 community settings to participate in the research.

An essential criterion for participation in the research, on the part of the community settings, was a high participation of lone parents in community education programmes.

Other **criteria** included:

- geographical location, to gain insights from across Ireland, in both rural and urban settings,
- achieving a mix of accredited and non-accredited programmes,
- potential for mix of current and past participants to capture the experience of community education over time and at different points in a person's life,
- and capacity to actively participate in the research process. This included capacity to give time to the process of preparation and working with the CES research team, advertising the research locally, inviting lone parents to participate, scheduling focus groups and interviews, arranging refreshments, and vouchers for participants.

The Beachaire Fund financed the research. It was a principle of the Fund that the case study sites and participants would not be 'out of pocket' because of contributing to the research. In recognition of their time and effort, the Beachaire Fund gifted each of the 8 case study sites with a bursary to support their participation in the research. Every lone parent who participated in a focus group or interview received a one4all voucher as a token of appreciation of their time and any expense incurred in contributing to the research.

Each site spent time consulting with the CES researchers, reviewing the draft case studies, providing feedback with the input of their management team and Boards. This consultative process facilitated the production of the final versions of the case studies.

The CES research team held initial conversations with over 30 community-based organisations before the final sample of 8 case study sites was agreed. Later in this section, we explore insights from findings related to limitations faced by over 20 organisations which would have liked to participate in the research. These limitations include lack of capacity to engage in research and/or to identify lone parents amongst their learner populations.

The methodology for each case study included the following:

- Research visit to each site.
- Selection of samples of lone parents (current and past participants of community education) to participate in the research.
- Focus group with current community education participants.
- Focus group with past participants of community education.
- One-to-one interviews with a sample of lone parents to deepen insights into a person's experience which led to the creation of the vignettes.
- Focus group with management.
- Focus group with community education staff/tutors/key workers/facilitators.

The focus groups were in person or on zoom, semi-structured, and participatory, and approximately 90 minutes long. The research process was designed to encourage participants to share their journey through and experiences with, community education. This included an exploration of the benefits, enablers, and ripple effect on their children and families.

The one-to-one interviews followed the same themes as the focus groups, inviting participants to share their stories of their community education journeys. Those who participated in the one-to-one interviews did so on a voluntary basis and were encouraged to come forward based on the themes and topics of their own life experience. All were briefed

by a key worker⁹ or community education coordinator in advance of interview and assured of anonymity.

Sample sizes and response rates varied across each site, depending on lone parent numbers and capacity to engage. Table Two provides an overview of the methodology and response rates.

Table Two Case Study Sites Methodology and Participation Levels¹⁰	
1. Doras Buí, Coolock, Dublin.	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (2) • Tutors (5) • Participants (past and present) (33) • One-to-one participant interview (3) Total: 43
2. The Acorn Edenderry, County Offaly.	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (2) • Tutors (4) • Participants past (5) • Participants current (6) • One-to-one participant interview (2) Total: 19
3. One Family	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (3) • Tutors (4) • Participants past (11) • Participants current (12) Total: 30
4. An Cosán, Jobstown, Tallaght.	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (7) • Tutors (9) • Participants past (5) • Participants current (9) Total: 30

⁹ A key worker is a named/dedicated contact person in mental health or social care who helps coordinate a person's care across the systems and services, including mental health, social welfare, education and financial/resources.

¹⁰ All 135 participants were lone parents.

5. Longford Women’s Link (LWL)	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (3) • Tutors (4) • Participants past (7) • Participants current (5) • One-to-one participant interview (1) Total: 20
6. St Catherine’s Community Services, Carlow	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (3) • Tutors (4) • Participants current (5) • Participants past (7) • One-to-one participant interview (2) Total: 21
7. Mayfield Integrated CDP (Community Development Project), Cork City	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (2) • Tutors/facilitators (2) • Participants past¹¹ (7) • One-to-one participant interview (1) Total: 12
8. WCI Ronanstown (Women’s Collective Ireland), Clondalkin, Dublin.	Consultations with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (2) • Tutors (4) • Participants current (4) • Participants part (5) • One-to-one participant interview (5) Total: 20

¹¹ It was not possible, at the time of this research, to access *current* community education participants in Mayfield CDP who were lone parents. This was partly due to capacity and also to the fact that lone parents are not specifically identified within the full cohort of community education participants.

Phase Three: Considering the findings

The third phase involved the analysis of all data, preparation of the 8 case studies, 11 vignettes and this summary thematic report. A separate analysis of the data for each site was conducted resulting in a case study specific to each community setting. Links to each case study for the 8 sites are provided below:

- [An Cosán](#)
- [Doras Buí](#)
- [Longford Women's Link](#)
- [One Family](#)
- [St. Catherine's Community Services Centre](#)
- [Acorn Project](#)
- [WCI Ronanstown](#)
- [Mayfield Integrated CDP](#)

The combined results of all 8 case studies were then subjected to a larger thematic analysis to inform this summary report. This analysis included the stories of 135 community education participants, and thematic analysis of the perspectives of management (24) and community education staff including tutors, facilitators, key workers, and administrators (36).

This phase also included the preparation of a working paper on the [policy context](#). This mapped the potential impact of community education on the lives of lone parents and their families onto the main policy domains. These include health and wellbeing, family support, education, training, labour market activation, employability, and community development.

Phase Four: Evidence base for informing policy

The fourth and final phase of the project involved preparing the research assets, including this thematic report, the suite of 8 case studies and 11 vignettes. The CES research team worked with the RAC and Community Foundation Ireland (CFI) to develop a communications strategy for disseminating the research.

General Overview

Insights from the research methodology

The research commenced with the process of sourcing and encouraging sites to engage and they in turn sourcing and encouraging lone parents to engage.

Each site took charge of advertising the research locally and sourcing research participants in a sensitive and ethical manner, guided by the CES research team. In some sites, research participants self-identified as lone parents and volunteered to participate in the research. In others, there were natural groupings of lone parents engaged in specific programmes targeted at people parenting alone, who volunteered to participate in the research.

Feedback on the research process

The 8 sites that were in a position to participate in this research did so as a purposeful and strategic choice. Their commitment to the process was appreciated. The feedback received, from the sites, indicates that the process was a positive experience of reflection and led to the production of a rich, and unique piece of research, with the support of the CES team and the Bechaire Fund. There was great appreciation of the research for profiling and celebrating community education and its powerful role in specific communities of primarily women lone parents and their children. The process of the CES research team drafting and sharing the case studies confidentially with each site in advance of completion was also powerful in terms of engaging and working with community education providers. This participatory methodology worked well, and all sites plan to use their individual case study as an evidence-based resource for funding applications and informing policy locally.

Methodological Challenges

Several methodological challenges were encountered, all of which are informative and reflective of the reality of community education. The core challenges included sourcing sites with capacity to engage in the research, as well as capacity to identify and draw in specific samples of lone parents to participate in the research.

Sourcing the lone parent samples

The challenge in sourcing and gathering lone parents to participate in the study reflects the nature of community education and the limited resources available in each setting. There are no specific resources dedicated to research, monitoring, and evaluation of the impact on the learner and their family of the work in community settings. The challenge in sourcing lone parents to participate in the research also reflects the fact that whilst lone parents are in the population and participating in community education, they are not specifically targeted by all settings, or identified and recorded as such in the monitoring of community education delivery and outcomes. This is an important finding of the research as it means that lone parents are at risk of low visibility and recognition in the policy making process.

Longitudinal aspects – distinguishing current and past learners

There were challenges in terms of isolating samples of learners who were prospective (participating in a current programme during the research period) and retrospective (learners who had participated in programmes in the past). Many learners on current programmes had participated in courses in the past. This reflects the organic and incremental nature of community education. It tends not to follow a neat and linear pathway and people circle around, drop out and return, some eventually completing their community education journey and for others it is a lifetime of learning. The start and end points are not clearly demarcated and so the research methodology worked with this reality by being flexible and open to the different stories and pathways through community education shared by the research participants.

Terminology - ‘Lone Parents’

Another challenge of note is the terminology used during this study and how best to reference people who parent alone or one-parent families. For the purposes of this research, we worked with the language of each site and the preferred language of research participants. This varied from those who chose to self-identify as single parents, lone parents, people parenting alone and one-parent families. This terminology challenge is a contemporary one and links to the current deliberations on the definition of the family and the diversity of family constellations.

Terminology - ‘Community Education’

This research has essentially two topics under consideration and threaded together – community education and lone parents. The research question relates to how community education supports lone parents to fulfil their potential and succeed in education, employment, and active involvement in society.

The term 'community education' came under scrutiny during the research and the history and development of community education is discussed in the CES Background paper. It is a broad term that warrants some attention to clarify its meaning and scope within the context of this study.

Community education includes the breadth of content covered in the research across the 8 sites. Learning life skills and personal development through courses such as art, drama, yoga, and mindfulness are part of the community education experience for many adult learners. This is a wider understanding of education than that held traditionally and yet having these skills and learning experiences is, for some people, a precursor to enabling progression to more formal education and potentially employment.

Many adult learners begin their community education journey with memories of difficult past experiences of formal education and/or from a place of trauma or after a crisis in their lives. Community education providers often use terminology such as courses and programmes to describe their community education offering. For the purposes of the research, we worked with the language of each site and the preferred language of participants and providers. We include the individual lone parent within the definition and the goal of personal transformation through education. We also include the larger community development and societal goal of developing awareness of the political and social context of their world.

'Community education is education in the community for the community, led by the needs of the community, it is about transformational change, it is not just about the mature individual learner gaining a qualification and the impact that this has; it is about the impact on the children, the family, and the wider community and learning about the issues that they are facing; it is about the systems and structures they are part of, and we use the term community education all the time'

[An Cosán].

3. Policy Context

This research was designed to build the case for investing every effort to support lone parents to return to education for their own benefit and for that of their children. Community education provides the opportunity for a return to education, progression and preparation for a return to work or acquiring skills for better employment opportunities.

The following points serve as a reminder of the policy context and the carefully considered rationale for conducting the research.

One: Lone Parents and Poverty

Lone Parents experience the highest levels of poverty and deprivation in Irish society and are arguably the people most distant from second chance education which would be a major step to support them to move out of poverty.

Box One: High Levels of Poverty and Deprivation Experienced by Lone Parents.

Statistics from the latest Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show that consistent poverty in one-parent families rose to 14.1% in 2022, almost three times the rate of the general population (5%).

- The proportion of people living in enforced deprivation increased from 13.8% in 2021 to 17.1% in 2022.
- Those living in households with one adult and one or more children aged under 18 have the highest deprivation rate in 2022 at 45.4%. This is up from 44.9% in 2021.
- This rate is 18.2% for households with two adults and 1-3 children aged under 18, meaning that one-parent families are approximately 2.5 times as likely to be living in enforced deprivation as two-parent families.
- Almost half of households (49.3%) said they had at least some difficulty in making ends meet in 2022, compared with 42.0% of households in 2021. This number is 73.7% for one-parent families, highlighting the need for more targeted supports.
- 7.5% of persons with third level degree or higher were living in enforced deprivation, compared to 24.7% of those whose highest level of education is primary or below. This affects lone parents significantly, who are statistically less likely to hold advanced degrees, with 1 in 5 lone parents unable to access formal education due to the cost.
- Children are the age group most likely to be living in enforced deprivation. 20.1% of persons aged under 18 were living in enforced deprivation, compared to 10.9% of persons aged 65 and over.

Source: [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\): Enforced Deprivation 2022](#)

Two: Community Education as an intervention

Research shows that community education is a specific intervention, with distinctive features including the provision of wraparound support, that can support lone parents to return to education and in so doing enhance their potential to flourish, personally, educationally, financially, economically, and societally. Community education, as an intervention, is an important enabler of social cohesion and lifelong learning and is part of Ireland's strategic response to the national skills strategy.

Box Two:

Community Education to support progression to further education, training and employment.

A robust body of research indicates that community education in Ireland has a long-held reputation for providing a first step, second chance or re-entry into education for individuals and groups affected by multiple disadvantages. Community education programmes and courses are based on the needs expressed by the group or community and contribute to enhanced employability and increased social capital and networking in the community.

Community education is effective in supporting people to grow in confidence and self-esteem and gain skills and guidance which support their access to the labour market. Community education has far-reaching economic outcomes. It contributes to economic growth, improving the skills base available to employers. It also contributes to social justice and social cohesion, improving social mobility and equality.¹²

The Further Education and Training Strategy, **Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024** (SOLAS, 2020)¹³ highlights community education as an approach that brings communities together to learn, develop and innovate to address local issues and promote local opportunities. It also supports participation and re-engagement in education and training. The Strategy refers to community education as 'variable part-time' provision which is 'outside the formal education sector' and falls within part-time FET provision which facilitates more flexible access to learning. The Strategy proposes seven core principles towards developing a community education framework that will bring together all relevant stakeholders for a more consistent approach to community education provision.

Further Education and Training (FET) is noted as a valuable enabler of social cohesion. Ireland is a diverse and vibrant society, and the Programme for Government commits to encouraging and enabling full inclusion and equality for all. The Department of Further Higher Education Innovation and Science acknowledges the importance of community education in facilitating integration of our diverse population; FET now has a vital role in

¹² Community Education's Role in Supporting Lone Parents facing Education and Social Disadvantage. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS). Authors: Eve Cobain, Leah Dowdall, Niamh O'Reilly (AONTAS) and Merike Darmody (ESRI). October 2020.

¹³ https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

enabling this equality and cohesion to flourish in communities throughout the country, working with the Government to create a fair, inclusive, and equitable Ireland for all¹⁴.

According to the Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) integrating disadvantaged groups into the labour market is crucial to ensure no groups are left behind and improve Ireland's overall employment performance¹⁵. Community education, as an intervention, is part of the continuum of lifelong learning and forms part of Ireland's skills strategy (OECD, 2023)¹⁶

¹⁴ Minister Simon Harris TD Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Foreword. Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024. https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

¹⁵ OECD (2018), *Good Jobs for All in a Changing World of Work: The OECD Jobs Strategy*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264308817-en>.

¹⁶ OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations, May 2023. <https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland-d7b8b40b-en.htm>

Three: Children are a policy priority

The Government places high priority on supporting children, particularly those most likely to experience poverty, and has set a vision to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child.

Box Three:

Government commitment to making Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child.

The government's vision is to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child. This is important given the natural wish that every child be happy and well-cared for, and because childhood is the foundation of realising broader economic, environmental, and social goals.

In spring 2023 the government established a Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach (the Programme Office). In August 2023 the Programme Office published the initial Programme Plan: "From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025"¹⁷.

The objective of the Programme is to focus cross-government attention on those areas that will make the greatest difference, especially for children who are more likely to experience poverty and who face greater challenges in overcoming it. The programme builds on the six priority areas identified by Government which have the potential to bring about significant change for families and children. These are:

- Income support and joblessness
- Early learning and childcare
- Reducing the cost of education
- Family homelessness
- Consolidating and integrating Family & Parental Support, Health, and Well-being
- Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for Children and Young People affected by poverty.

The role of the Department of the Taoiseach is to co-ordinate and focus cross government action. The Programme Office is intended to drive implementation of a broad range of commitments that will impact on the six areas. It will also undertake a small number of strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of cross-government responses.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/7c189-child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office/>

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis of the research across the 8 Case Studies. A first analysis was conducted at case study level and the results can be found in the individual case studies. This was followed by a thematic analysis across **all** 8 case studies.

The findings of the thematic analysis are set out under the following headings:

- Overview of the 8 Case Studies
- Community education settings
- Distinctive features of community education
- Community education content
- Benefits of community education
- Examples of journeys through community education
- Outcomes and impact of community education
- Success determinants
- Challenges facing community education.

The thematic analysis includes 6 vignettes which have been selected from the suite of 8 case studies. The vignettes are real life stories anonymised to protect the identity of the people who generously shared their stories.

Overview of the 8 Case Study sites

The 8 case study sites were selected carefully to give insight into contemporary community education in practice around Ireland, as experienced by lone parents. The case study sites hold many similarities as well as distinctive features. They represent the stronger end of the spectrum of community education providers and others with less capacity and resources also exist. Table 3 provides an overview of the 8 case study settings.

Historically the 8 sites are community organisations that have developed over many years, availing of a variety of state and/or European funding, supplemented by local community financial contributions and voluntary work. Each site has been shaped by the skills of locally based trainers, tutors and mentors who operate within a variety of local social structures and venues. Each site started as a community-based development organisation or group responding to the needs of their respective communities.

Trusted Reputation

All the case study settings have been situated in and serving their communities for over twenty years, and some for longer. For example, St Catherine's Community Services Centre in Carlow was set up in 1979, and An Cosán and Doras Buí were set up in 1986.

All the settings show agility in terms of their capacity to respond to evolving needs in their local areas. This includes the capacity to draw in funding, from a variety of sources for specific projects, to partner with a range of other organisations to progress their work (e.g., third level institutions, and other community organisations locally) and to work, in their own ways through the challenges of accreditation.

All have long-standing and well-established reputations locally, and nationally, as trusted places to go for support. The research found that this trusted reputation was a significant draw that attracted lone parents to engage in community education in the first instance.

Funding Sources

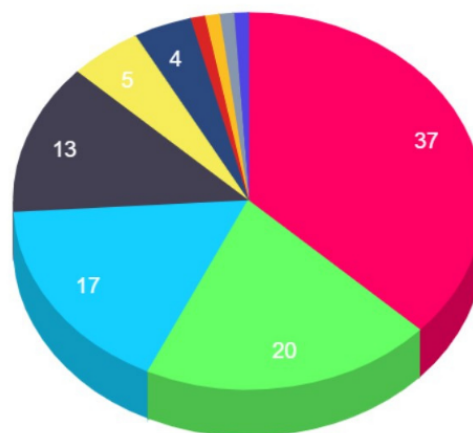
The findings indicate that all the sites receive funding from a wide range of sources as depicted in Figure One. This confirms previous research that showed the same patterns and associated challenges. This means that there is considerable and separate administrative work for each funding source. It also means that different data is gathered in different forms and the benefit of having the full story of community education, for lone parents and others, is lost to policy makers.

Figure One:

Rough Representation of Funders and Amounts Contributed Across All 8 Sites

*Average Total Funding from Available Data= 2,376,792 euro

DCEDIY/ DSP/ Government Departments	37% = 879,413 euro
ESF	20% = 475,358 euro
TUSLA	17% = 404,055 euro
POBAL	13% = 308,983 euro
HSE	5% = 118,840 euro
County Councils/ Community Centres	4% = 95,072 euro
SICAP	1% = 23,768 euro
Philanthropy	1%
Donations	1%
Fundraising	1%



There are moves to rectify this situation through the work of SOLAS in developing a Framework for Community Education¹⁸ that offers the opportunity to record, reflect and recognise the diversity of community education that exists across Ireland. While this is welcome, the findings suggest that the work of the community organisations could be made more effective and potentially maximised to respond most effectively to community needs when the settings are resourced and supported to gather and collate data that can inform their own practice and service development locally. The insights gained from research into and measurement of the benefits of community education programmes could support the work of site teams in creating and implementing effective programmes locally. The insights could also be leveraged to inform the development of policy and to support investment in service development nationally.

Each case study site is characterised by unique features as described in Table Three.

Table Three: Overview of the 8 Case Studies Settings	
<p>Doras Buí, Coolock, Dublin.</p> <p>Founded in 1986 as part of EU's Second Programme to Combat Poverty.</p>	<p>Doras Buí is a long established and multifaceted community facility in Coolock, North Dublin founded in 1986 as Parents Alone Resource Centre. In 2002 the Resource Centre (PARC) amalgamated with the Early Years' Service (Sugradh) under the name Doras Buí¹⁹. Doras Buí has a long history of welcoming lone parents and providing wraparound support for people to participate in its programmes and courses which include personal development, health, gardening, drama, creative writing and music.</p>
<p>The Acorn Project Edenderry, County Offaly.</p> <p>Formally founded in 1998 under Youth Work Ireland Midlands.</p>	<p>The Acorn Project is a multifaceted community facility that serves people in the County Offaly community across all stages of the lifecycle. In 2022, Acorn transferred the administration of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) accreditation processes from a previous in-house arrangement to the Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB). The Acorn Project is a LOETB Further Education and Training (FET) site working in collaboration with the LOETB.</p>
<p>One Family</p> <p>Formally established as Cherish in 1972, and One Family in 2004.</p>	<p>One Family is a national organisation dedicated to providing information, education, training, and support for people parenting alone. One Family provides a virtual community for people parenting alone. One Family delivers the New Futures Employability Programme – an online community education programme funded through the ESF (European Social Fund) and DSP (Department of Social Protection).</p>

¹⁸ <https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-FET-06.pdf>

¹⁹ The name Doras Buí (yellow door) was decided during a focus group with people in the community who felt that yellow was a welcoming colour and the door is always open.

<p>An Cosán, Jobstown, Tallaght.</p> <p>Founded as The Shanty in 1986, and An Cosán in 1999.</p>	<p>An Cosán²⁰ is a unique community-based organisation, founded in 1986 and located in Tallaght, County Dublin. An Cosán's mission is to empower women and children left furthest behind, through learning, leadership and enterprise. The vision is a world where people can access education to achieve their full potential. An Cosán provides a wide range of community education courses and QQI accredited programmes, some in collaboration with South East Technological University (SETU), covering Levels 1-7 on the National Framework of Qualifications.</p>
<p>Longford Women's Link (LWL)</p> <p>Founded in 1995.</p>	<p>Longford Women's Link is an independent community facility in a housing estate in Longford town. LWL operates as a social enterprise with roots in social justice and feminism. It has childcare facilities onsite and a mobile childcare unit. LWL provides specific support for people experiencing domestic violence. In 2022, LWL successfully re-engaged with QQI accreditation for programmes provided.</p>
<p>St Catherine's Community Services, Carlow</p> <p>Founded in 1974.</p>	<p>St Catherine's is a multifaceted community services facility that provides community education programmes targeted at mothers aged 17-35 years. St. Catherine's is responding to a growing proportion of new communities that are benefiting from services and supports with a strong multicultural ethos.</p>
<p>Mayfield Integrated CDP (Community Development Project) Cork City Cork City</p> <p>Founded in 1990.</p>	<p>Mayfield Integrated CDP is a long-established community project situated in the middle of Mayfield and has been the site for many community-based pilot initiatives over the years, including MABS (Money Advice and Budgeting Service) and CIS (Citizens Information Service). It has a unique legacy relationship with Cork ETB, and both Mayfield Community Adult Learning Project (CALP) tutors are on long-term contracts with the ETB, based on terms agreed in the 1980s.</p>
<p>WCI Ronanstown (Women's Collective Ireland), Clondalkin, Dublin.</p> <p>Founded in 2002.</p>	<p>WCI Ronanstown is one of Women's Collective Ireland's 17 grassroots community development projects around Ireland. WCI Ronanstown offers a range of community education programmes including a level 7 programme in Gender Studies and Social Justice in collaboration with UCD (University College Dublin). This is on an outreach basis to women living in the Clondalkin area of West Dublin.</p>

²⁰ 'the Path or pathway' in English.

Community Education Settings

Eight community education settings contributed to this research. All are community development organisations that have a long history of responding to the needs of the local community. All are rooted in the community and have built up a relationship of trust within their communities. This is based on the fruits of many years of listening and responding to the needs of their communities and drawing on a wide range of funding and finance sources to sustain their presence within the community.

Relational Aspects

There is a strong relational aspect to community education, and this is one of the reasons why it works so well, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as lone parents.

This relational aspect also works to build local partnerships and collaborative arrangements between the community settings, including with universities and other agencies locally and regionally. Relationships matter in facilitating nimble and purposeful responses to local needs, championed by local people.

“One Family completely understands the challenges of parenting alone. You see this in all their services.”

[One Family]

Safe places – buildings at the heart of communities

The results point to the importance of the community education setting, as a building, situated in local communities, to attract and encourage lone parents to reengage with education, and in effect reboot or start again, with support around them.

Participants made many references to the welcoming atmosphere they experienced as they entered the case study settings. They valued the continuity of support available to them which is manifested through the continuous presence of the site at the heart of their community.

The settings are also safe places for those who have recently come to Ireland where they can begin to form a better understanding of the local community and begin to form relationships that build their connections with and support their integration into that community.

The following vignette illustrates the power of community education settings as safe places to support connection, learning and progression.

Vignette: 'Vanessa' Doras Buí

This vignette highlights the power of community education to support lone parents to parent to reconnect and strengthen their life skills. The impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the parent and her child is demonstrated, through social connection, mindfulness, and learning relaxation techniques. The value of good information, signposting and support and encouragement to find employment is also evident.

Vanessa was in her late twenties when she first did a parenting course at Doras Buí. One of her children was a toddler at the time and she was having a hard time getting him into a sleep routine. Her toddler was attending the Doras Buí crèche, so she knew about the courses they ran there, and when she heard about a sleep-focused parenting course, she signed up straight away, along with a friend of hers who was experiencing similar challenges. Within two weeks, she had a good sleep routine in place, and things were much easier to manage at home.

In the six years since, Vanessa has gone on to do countless courses in Doras Buí. These include cooking, art, flower arranging, and learning about mindfulness through crystals, which was her favourite.

Over the years, Vanessa has developed a deep connection with the centre and a sense of security in knowing she can drop in to receive support or advice of any kind whenever she might need it, from both the staff and the others who take part in courses. Vanessa has a busy schedule and hopes to return when the school holidays come around.

Staff at Doras Buí supported Vanessa in finding grants that allowed her to become a qualified beautician and go on to find employment in the health and beauty sector. Looking back the biggest impact of her time with Doras Buí has been on Vanessa's mental health and on her children's well-being at school. Covid was a hard time for the family for lots of reasons.

Online classes gave Vanessa an opportunity to learn about mindfulness and chat with other people who had gone through similar experiences as her. She was able to share these skills with her children when the time came to go back to school after the lockdowns. One of her children was very anxious and found it difficult to manage being separated from the teacher during the school day. Vanessa found that when she was able to relax, so could her child, and she shared the exercises from the online class with her children. These included breathing exercises and tracing love hearts on the palms of their hands. The online classes during Covid meant that support was possible, and yet Vanessa was happy to see things go back to the way they were in person.

'Not everyone is brave enough to talk online or say how they are really feeling'.

'The most valuable aspect is the tutors, who really listen and understand that everyone has their own story. The classes are there to teach new things and yet the standout feature is the support. For me it is all about the support'.

Distinctive Features of Community Education

The results confirm the distinctive features of community education which include:

- **Community development values** and underpinnings including commitment to social justice and social transformation through the education of participants leading to their own personal development as well as the development of the communities to which they belong.
- Centres/settings within communities with **good reputations and trust** that has been earned over many years of service to their local communities.
- **Welcoming and invitational ethos**. The importance of reception, relationships and outreach and all communication even the most micro including the power of a warm smile and a cup of tea.
- Purposefully **incremental nature** of the learning with carefully sequenced steps to allow for the build-up of confidence and skills. Small incremental steps on the part of a lone parent e.g., from attending a coffee morning through personal development, QQI levels to completing a degree and for some, master's degrees.
- The **psychology of community education** and the building and nurturing of peer support as a powerful enduring human support.
- **Wraparound support** is integral to community education including childcare, guidance and counselling. The provision of psychosocial supports is threaded through all stages of delivery. This is engendered into the culture resulting in a strong ethos of peer support which continues long after the courses are complete.
- The **vital role of the tutor/facilitator** in community education in caring about, supporting, and encouraging participants. The purposeful encouraging behaviours on the part of tutors/facilitators was a recurring theme across all 8 case studies.
- **Rooted in feminism and social justice** in a way that is natural and generative and of value to community development in all its aspects, e.g., social inclusion, integration into the local community and strengthening community ties, which in turn enhance people's sense of purpose, mental health, and wellbeing. Participation in community education can lead to advocacy and activism at a community level in support of gender equality and social justice.
- **Role Models**. The findings show that community education participants see and are inspired by others, particularly women, who have journeyed the path before them through similar challenges, e.g., lone parenting, being separated, marital breakdown and the emotional and financial challenges that can arise in these situations.

- **Flexible and responsive approach** to individual and local needs. Conversations are important in unearthing and responding to the needs of the individual, in meeting sectoral needs and in meeting regional needs (e.g., delivering programmes to teach skills that can meet the needs of a new local employer such as Center Parcs in Longford).
- **Trauma informed provision** to respond to the fragility of some women’s situations and the many difficult life situations that lone parents have experienced or are experiencing, including domestic violence, addiction, poverty, and war.

Enablers

The results point to enablers that draw in and support lone parents to engage, attend and complete community education programmes and courses.

The enablers are features of community education, and the way it is delivered, that actively encourage engagement, attendance, and participation, **a drop in rather than drop out model of provision**. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) report that the completion rate for community education courses was 92% and the accreditation rate was 71% in 2020 (ETBI, 2021)²¹.

The enablers include the gentle, purposeful encouragement on the part of staff, which supports participants to feel safe, look up to and trust those who refer in or who greet community education participants in the first instance.

‘A pedagogy of care prevails throughout the ethos and culture of community education’.

‘Nurturing trusting relationships and providing support.’

[St Catherine’s Community Services Centre, Carlow]

The power of the reputation of the community organisation or setting works together with the network of contacts across Community Employment supervisors, community educators, social workers, health professionals, and other supporting professions and community workers. The research confirms the culture of care and values of community education that are inculcated subtly through the organisation.

²¹ ETBI make these estimates based on SOLAS’ 2020 funding allocation and estimates of provision inputs and outputs for ETBs and other FET providers.

Community Education Staff

The results indicate that staff, including tutors, facilitators and key workers²² are a valuable resource in community education settings. Tutors and facilitators are highly qualified and experienced across a range of domains including social care, IT, legal, communications, personal development, and early years. Many have third level qualifications and the majority have over 10 years of service in community education. Many have come through the community education pathway themselves and embody the experience of progression and transformation serving as powerful role models to participants.

Tutors/facilitators work as a team, carefully watching and acting as advocates for the participants, where necessary and appropriate. For example, sourcing work placement, Community Employment (CE) schemes, pockets of funding and support in tune with their specific needs or life circumstances. Being present to, and getting to know the participants, is central to the process.

‘The tutors believe in all participants, sense their potential from the outset’

[Ronanstown Case Study]

Lone parents participating in community education feel seen, valued, and encouraged and receive a transfusion of energy from the staff who are tutoring and facilitating the programmes. This creates a sense of connection and solidarity which becomes the stable ground to learn in safety. This is vitally important particularly when participants have experienced trauma. The case studies show that the support and encouragement of staff is central to lone parents’ engagement in their courses and progression afterwards.

‘They see the potential in you’.

[The Acorn]

‘Staff are alert to and understand the lives of learners who have experienced trauma.’

[An Cosán Case Study]

²² A key worker is a named/dedicated contact person in mental health or social care who helps coordinate a person’s care across the systems and services, including mental health, social welfare, education and financial/resources.

Childcare

The research confirms that access to on-site childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for lone parents. Access to quality affordable childcare frees lone parents to focus on their education and to progress to further and higher education and employment, in accordance with their preferences and aptitudes. Access to quality childcare also brings benefits to children through the early years' curriculum, social interaction and feelings of involvement and inclusion within the community.

'Without childcare here, none of us would be here.'

[An Cosán Case Study]

The absence of or lack of childcare leads to, at best, deferral of take up of community education until children are at school and, even then, must be worked around school hours.

The results of the research highlight the complexity associated with the provision of childcare and the challenges this poses to community education providers. Many of the settings were able to provide onsite childcare in the past and this is no longer the case due to changes in funding models and requirements. The changes in design of benefits means that lone parents face additional costs of childcare as a real barrier to taking up opportunities to participate in community education.

Enablers/Encouragers

In summary, the enablers, and encouragers for lone parents to participate in community education include:

- **Invitational appeal** of information and advertisements on social media.
- **Psychological safety** of the setting surrounded by trusted people who understand the lived experience of lone parenting and are role models and champions of women's participation.
- **Community education staff** inculcating a sense of **belonging and connection** through psychosocial supports and incorporation of group psychology, one to one and peer support to reinforce and encourage participation and completion.
- **Childcare** on site and easy to drop off and collect children and the relaxed feelings that this brings.
- **Transport** and/or transport allowance.
- **Counselling/Therapy.**

- **Learning life skills**, e.g., healthy living, nutrition, money management, and information about parenting.
- **Signposting** to other services and supports, as appropriate, including Information and support specific for those experiencing domestic violence.
- **Continuous physical presence of the setting in the community**, acting as a beacon for lone parent to engage or reengage with community education at different points in their lives.

Community Education Content

The findings show that content of community education varies from site to site in accordance with the specificity of programmes and course provision. The programmes offered by the 8 case study sites span a wide range of course content. The research showcases this variety and the scope that the diverse range of programme content offers to meet the diverse needs of individual lone parents.

The content varies from personal development and health and wellbeing courses (e.g., art, crafts, photography, gardening, yoga, and mindfulness) through to accredited programmes (e.g., social care, childcare, and business administration).

Content of community education across the 8 Case Study Sites

Specific skills for employment	√
Creative arts and crafts	√
Family / parenting	√
Mental health/ wellbeing	√
Personal development	√
Information Technology/ Computers	√
Citizenship/ Rights/ Social justice	√
Social care and political studies	√
Business / Finance	√
Leisure and hobbies	√
Gardening/ horticulture	√
Health	√
Women and Social Change in Ireland	√
Childcare	√
Special Needs Assisting	√

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) maintains a record of all accredited community education provision. To receive accreditation, groups must supply proof of enrolment and successful measures to meet quality standards. Some settings provide accredited courses outside of the QQI remit, such as first aid.

The content of accredited community education programmes²³ is predominantly under the themes of social care, social policy, childcare, special needs assisting, business administration, retail, health, and beauty and responding to specific employment opportunities in an area, e.g., meeting the skills required by a significant employer in a region, such as Center Parcs in Longford.

All content has relevance to the labour market and the movement through QQI Levels 3 to 8 has the power to prepare people, incrementally, for employment across the range of skills that are needed in the contemporary labour market. These include skills where the labour market is currently facing skilled staff shortages such as social care, childcare, and special needs assisting. These areas are also included in the sectors that are projected to grow in the coming years²⁴ and fit with the OECD recommendation to support the development of skills for future societies and economies²⁵.

The findings on the content of courses and programmes for lone parents across the 8 case study sites mirror Pobal (2022) data which indicates that the most popular area of learning for lone parents undertaking course placements, through the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), was personal development (40%) followed by health and welfare. Three quarters (76%) of industry certified course placements were in health and safety. Health and welfare accounted for half (50%) of all accredited course placements²⁶.

There are examples of personal development, creative and wellbeing related courses that hold people, including lone parents, for a while in a safe space. These include gardening, photography, mindfulness, and the creative arts. The results indicate that there is value in self-development or personal development courses to help build confidence and wellbeing.

²³ The Community Education Network (CEN) Census showed that in 2020 independent community education groups delivered 401 non-accredited courses, compared with 164 accredited courses. Accredited courses ranged from Levels 1-8 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (AONTAS, 2021).

²⁴ Social and Economic Council (2023), *About the SER*, <https://www.ser.nl/en/SER/About-the-SER>

²⁵ OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations. May 2023.
<https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland-d7b8b40b-en.htm>

²⁶ Source: Lone Parent Top three areas of learning for SICAP lifelong learning courses by course type 2018-2021.

These can be a vital a first step for many participants as they return to education and progress in their journey through community education. Personal development programmes are a valuable precursor and bridge to further and higher education.

There are also examples of community education programmes deliberately tailored for lone parents including:

- Learning for Everyday Life (St Catherine's Community Services Centre)
- The Moving On Programme (St Catherine's Community Services Centre)
- The New Futures Employability Programme (One Family)
- STEPS Programme (Ronanstown CDP)

The findings confirm wraparound support, personal development, guidance and wellbeing as core to community education.

Accreditation

Accreditation of community education content was a recurring theme across the 8 case studies. Accreditation is an important quality assurance measure and a means of external validation of community education. The main findings are that accreditation is important to learners and they value the certificates that they achieve and the graduation ceremonies that are held to mark completion and achievement. AONTAS (2010) found that accreditation is very important to learners and recommends that accreditation be made more widely available as an option, and yet not as a requirement.

The research confirms that accreditation is also important to community education providers. While it is valued as a means of endorsing programmes, the associated administration has proved challenging for most providers, particularly smaller community organisations. Funding is needed ensure providers can access accreditation and manage the administration costs (AONTAS, 2021).

The results show that many community organisations have chosen to leave the QQI system and seek other means of achieving accreditation for their community education provision.

There are examples of collaborative arrangements with local ETBs and third level institutions to share the administrative burden associated with accreditation processes. This illustrates the potential to leverage existing resources through partnerships and collaborations to manage the accreditation process whilst also providing a bridge, in the local community, to access nationally recognised qualifications.

Partnership and Collaboration

The design of community education is informed and supported by a range of partnerships and collaborations. These have evolved to lift and share the burden of administration associated with accreditation and funding of courses allowing the community education organisation to focus on delivery of accredited courses to those most in need in their community. They have also allowed the community education organisation to provide a bridge to lone parents to access education in their community that leads to qualifications and further education opportunities that are physically distant from their communities and simply not otherwise accessible to lone parents.

Examples include WCI Ronanstown working in partnership with UCD; St Catherine's, An Cosán, and Longford Women's Link working in partnership with the South East Technological University (SETU) and The Acorn Project with Laois Offaly ETB.

[The Acorn Project](#), in partnership with LOETB afford AMETS (Acorn Midlands Education and Training Service) gives participants access to accredited training and education without the administrative workload. This frees AMETS up to devote time and resources to doing the community education piece well whilst offering skills training to participants to meet local labour market opportunities.

Partnering with South-East Technical University (SETU) has meant that St Catherine's, An Cosán and Longford Women's Link can deliver programmes to lone parents in their communities. The enablers learners to achieve nationally recognised accreditation and access local labour market opportunities in areas such as health, social care and childcare.

The WCI Ronanstown partnership with UCD is a creative way to achieve academic recognition, legitimacy and accreditation at degree level whilst at the same time holding true to community-based education.

The following vignette illustrates the incremental journey through community education within the supportive environment and shows the preparation for and progression to third level education.

Vignette: 'Monica' WCI Ronanstown

Monica (Pseudonym)

This vignette highlights the incremental journey through community education, as a starting point and support for a return and progression to mainstream education. It shows the draw of and trust in the good reputation of WCI Ronanstown. The determination and self-motivation of Monica to progress is evident even with the responsibility of caring for a child with additional needs. The gradual nature of the journey enables this progression.

Main Points:

- Self-motivation and readiness to return to education with careful timing to align with caring duties.
- The draw of the reputation of WCI Ronanstown and its location in the community.
- A child with a diagnosis of autism who is now in late teens, and Monica was ready to return to education.
- Caring patterns and commitments have kept Monica busy throughout her life, until she is now ready to attend to her own education, dreams, and progression.
- Through community education and related support, Monica experiences a *gradual* shift in self-confidence, capacity, and clarity about her needs and ambitions.

Starting point

Monica is a lone parent in her late forties with four children. Her life, until recently, has been characterised by caring roles, including caring for elderly parents until they died and for her daughter, who was diagnosed with autism and is now in her teens. Monica worked nights for over twenty years in healthcare, nursing homes, and other care settings. This choice of work was determined by her desire to be around during the day for her child, so other forms of more regular nine-to-five employment were not possible.

Following the deaths of her parents and her youngest daughter reaching secondary school, Monica noticed that she had more time and freedom from caring duties. This stirred her to begin exploring her own education and progression prospects. Timing and readiness were important factors for Monica – the timing of her children's stage of development – all in their late teenage years, combined with her own readiness and drive to receive an education.

Monica happened to bump into a woman in her local shop, and they got talking and discussing life in general. The woman was aware of Monica's family situation as a lone parent of a child with additional needs. The woman discretely mentioned WCI Ronanstown and the range of courses and supports. This chance encounter sparked an impulse in Monica and activated her motivation to explore the possibility of returning to education.

Monica loves learning and felt a desire to return to education. However, she did not believe she was smart enough and never thought returning to education was a possibility

for her. She found out about the Steps Programme through social media and was instantly drawn to the idea of returning to education. The low cost of the course, along with the flexible hours, meant that she felt it was possible for her.

'You forget who you are when you are caring for others, I wanted to find myself and be more than just a mother.'

Benefits to self:

Monica shared that she feels that the small and carefully sequenced steps of community education worked for her and supported her to progress at her own pace and without feeling overwhelmed. She experienced the tutors as clear and encouraging and their support sparked and encouraged a deeper sense of self-motivation within her. This helped overlay previous experiences of secondary school which were difficult for Monica. She describes the supportive environment at WCI Ronanstown as facilitating a gentle build-up of positive energy and a gradual shift in her power. This transformation means that Monica now feels able to make decisions to support her own future and progress further with her education. The class discussions and sharing helped her to understand her own life and appreciate what she has done and the skills that she already has. The fears about her own ability started to fall away and going to college began to take shape as a real possibility.

'The preparation for college really changed me, and I began to be more mindful of myself and to put my needs and ambitions first.'

'The way the tutors facilitated our learning was absolutely fantastic; they listened, encouraged, and were there after class for one-to-one support – we just had to get ourselves to class, and after that, the magic unfolded.'

'It has opened my mind to my own potential and to life's potential. I cried when I achieved an A in one of my assignments.'

'I realise that if I had had more support as a younger person, my life could have gone down a different road.'

'I have become clearer, more assertive, and more focused on what I want to do with my life.'

Benefits to Children

Monica has noticed that since she started community education, her children place a firmer value on education. They are watching her study and are interested in what she is learning, and they want to discuss this with her. They see the changes in her confidence and her enhanced sense of satisfaction with life. Monica's youngest child, who is still in secondary school, has started talking about college and going to college – words and intentions that Monica had not heard her voice before. Monica's son, who left school before his Leaving Certificate has recently returned to education and started a course. Monica believes that she is a role model for her son, and it was her example that spurred him to do this.

'If you can do it, I can do it.'

Challenges

Monica noted the challenges that lone parents overcome to return to education. These include the challenges of finding accessible and affordable childcare, a lack of support and/or low expectations of family, and where you come from/geography. Monica noticed that she and some of her peers struggled with writing essays and assignments and welcomed the support from tutors around academic writing and study skills.

Hopes

Monica expressed hope for her future as she prepares to commence her degree in Social Care. She described how she can see a possible pathway to go on from the STEPS Programme and complete a degree and a masters. She is exploring these options and feels that all this is possible because of the support that she has received from the people in WCI Ronanstown.

'I feel my life is getting better; I am happier in myself. Before community education, my life looked so bleak.'

Monica expressed gratitude to WCI Ronanstown and the tutors, who have been such a support and inspiration to her.

Community education as a path to paid employment or better employment

Community education, as an intervention, can work hand in hand with Community Employment (CE) schemes. The community education component offers self-development and skills training to CE participants that provide an essential foundation for an individual to progress to further training and employment. These interventions working hand in hand can lead to paid employment or to acquiring skills that lead to better/higher paid employment.

The following vignette illustrates the power of Community Employment (CE), in tandem with community education, to support lone parents to return to education and to progress to employment.

Vignette: 'Martha' Mayfield Integrated CDP

This vignette showcases how activation, through a Community Employment Scheme (CE) coupled with community education and encouragement can support a younger mother to overcome barriers and return to education. It shows how the power of a trusted community setting, encouraging staff, coupled with a sprinkling of self-motivation, can activate personal agency and progression. Martha's story highlights the challenge of returning to education and how onsite accessible childcare can support an easier and earlier return for lone parents.

Starting point

Martha grew up in Mayfield. Martha experienced an unplanned pregnancy at age 17. Martha had to stop going to school and stayed home to care for her daughter full time for the first few years. Martha's entry point into community education was through a Community Employment Scheme in a local Community Childcare setting.

Martha recalled that it was the reputation of the centre and the atmosphere of encouragement that attracted her to take up the place on the community employment scheme and begin her community education journey. Martha said she felt encouraged by friends and the coordinator was approachable and known and trusted in the community.

The staff encouraged Martha to participate in community education. Martha considers herself to be a practical hands-on person and the academic aspects of school did not suit her. Martha held a fear of education and a belief that it was not for her.

'Looking back, I did not think I would ever work or have a job, I had no confidence, somewhere, deep down I knew I would like a qualification, but I never thought it would happen, it was just not something that I had been brought up to know about or believe was possible.'

'I knew that I wanted to do something with my life'.

*'I was carried on a wave of encouragement, I took a chance and hoped for the best'.
'At that point I felt that I had nothing going for me, I loved my child and wanted to do my best by her, I grew up thinking that the dole was special and important to have and hold on to and I never really thought about education, or that education was important'.*

Martha described how she did twenty hours a week on a CE scheme working in a creche and did a module of childcare QQI Level 5 one night a week. Studying at night suited Martha as there was no childcare and she relied on family for childcare support until her son went into the early years' childcare scheme.

Martha singles out the encouragement she received from community education tutors as the main support for her. She also valued the **flexibility** around assignments and the information and guidance that she received from tutors and staff. There was also some flexibility around caring for her child in that she could bring her child to the crèche where she worked for a little while after she had collected her from school.

'It was the one-to-one encouragement from tutors and people who know what life is like, people I trust'.

'I became homeless for a while and the information, advice and support was valuable'.

Difference made in her life:

Martha reflected on the difference that her participation in community education has made to her life and that of her child. She believes that it gave her a taste for education as a positive experience and inspired her to continue.

'I got a taste for education, I got a taste for work, and I enjoyed it, I would never have afforded to study, to go to college to get an education'.

'Community education showed me how important education is.'

Martha reflected that her own experience of people being kind, caring and supportive of her brought out her own propensity for kindness and opened opportunities for volunteering and

paid employment in social care. Martha recalled her community education journey over four years from being at home caring for her child to gaining qualifications and working in her community.

'I saw a lot of kind and helpful people, it showed me how to be kind and made me want to be kind to others and to be helpful, I work now with people who are affected by addiction, I learnt how to be kind – if you do not know it you cannot show it'.

'I could guide people who are struggling, I now work in an area where I support and guide people who are struggling with addiction'.

Ripple Effect

Martha looked back on her life and the ripple effect of her participation in community education on herself and her child. She noticed how it shifted her mindset and the lens through which she views the world. Martha shared her new understanding of and appreciation for education and realisation of her own potential and that of her child.

'It changed my view of education, and I am now a role model for my child.'

'I was very young when I had my child, at the beginning my main priority was caring for my child and keeping him safe, now I am more mature, and I know it is important to show him the way'.

'For me I want my child to have the best education that they can to move their life forward, if someone had guided me when I was young, I could have gone on to college'.

Stage of the Journey

Martha is now working as a Special Needs Assistant in a local school and loves her work and feels a sense of satisfaction in what she is and does. She also volunteers in a service that supports people recovering from addiction. She feels a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with how her life is unfolding. She feels she is contributing, and her life has meaning and purpose.

'I am now financially independent and no longer reliant on social welfare; I am working in a job that I love, and I am thinking of going back to college'.

Digital Innovation

The results show digital innovations that were accelerated during the COVID 19 pandemic when the community settings demonstrated a quick response to the situation by providing programmes online.

The move to provide online and hybrid learning has been another enabler for lone parents, particularly those who are isolated geographically and/or due to lack of childcare. There are also examples of supporting participation through digital mentoring and support, as well as laptop loans.

Community organisations have invested in training tutors, and other support workers, in how to deliver courses in an online environment. They have adapted their approach and sought to replicate online the supportive environment enjoyed by participants in face-to-face learning. This has been done by building one-to-one engagement between learners and tutors/mentors and providing wraparound support. This includes laptop loans, IT skills and infrastructure support, building learner confidence to share and participate in group learning in an online environment and signposting potential next steps for learners.

The findings show that community education organisations can build upon their trusted reputation in their community to provide digital platforms for learning that are accessible to lone parents. To do so requires both investment in IT infrastructure and skills training for educators but also investment in wraparound supports which are tailored to support learners in a digital environment.

‘The fact that it was online was helpful, especially with the fact that I live in rural Ireland. One Family completely understand the challenges of parenting alone. So, with every service I accessed, I saw that level of understanding that was embedded into it.’

‘Online education makes things possible that were not possible for me before.’

‘I have mastered the laptop; I have lost my fear of computers.’

[One Family]

The content of community education is surrounded by the **wraparound support**, already mentioned, which includes:

- Childcare
- Career guidance
- Counselling
- One-to-one support
- Travel costs
- Food and nourishment
- Study support
- Digital support, broadband and laptop loans
- Practical help and guidance with CV preparation, interview skills, job search and support to bounce back.

Benefits of Community Education for Participants

The research highlights the value and power of community education to support lone parents in four main aspects of their lives: health and wellbeing, progression to further and higher education, securing paid employment and community involvement.

The results confirm the benefits of community education for participants. The findings align with the research literature (Aontas-ESRI, Scoping Study, 2020).

The feeling and energy of encouragement was palpable during the focus groups. The power of psychosocial support was a strong theme throughout and a key enabler for lone parents, particularly those whose confidence has dipped and drained over the years. This self-confidence is supported and restored through community education.

The growth in self-awareness and personal agency that occurs through community education is evident. This is facilitated by the quality of tutors, wraparound supports and working with the group.

The benefits of participating in community education for lone parents are:

- **Growth in self-confidence**, experiencing having a voice for the first time, and **feeling empowered**, with several women mentioning that at the start they were unable to speak in a group setting at all.
- **Personal development**, including feeling enhanced self-esteem and a stronger sense of self.
- Sense of **belonging and connection** that settles the person and allows them to relax into the learning and this is across the diversity of participants including age and ethnicity.
- **Friendships** are formed and natural peer group support is activated in a slow, incremental, and organic way.
- Opportunity for adult **interaction** is a key benefit, given their caring role for children and position in the home.
- **Feelings of safety, belonging, and being connected**, less lost, less lonely or isolated, as well as helping them to learn enjoy their own company through healing and skills learnt including mindfulness.
- Feeling the **joy of learning and the motivational effects** that propel them on their journey.
- Experiencing a **gateway to new experiences**, new hobbies, and passions, as well as providing activities otherwise beyond the reach of participants, such as residential retreats and trips to the countryside.

- **Educational progression** including progression to QQI levels 5 and 6 at a local college and degrees to Level 9 (master's degree) at university.
- Progression to **employment** that they enjoy and feel proud of, including roles in the public sector, health and social care, the arts, and community development.
- **Capacity and confidence** to care for and enjoy their children and be more involved in life.
- **Giving back** and an enhanced capacity to volunteer and give to their community, including involvement on the Board of the community organisation that they first engaged with.
- **Intercultural connections** and greater empathy and understanding for people from other places.
- **Enhanced communication skills** and confidence including improved English language skills for people who have come to Ireland and English is not their mother tongue.
- Enhanced understanding and **appreciation of diversity** – this is an evolution in community education in recent years as noted in Moving On Programme (St. Catherine's Community Services Centre, Carlow) – change from all Irish women participants in the past to a truly multicultural experience.
- **Enhanced mental health and wellbeing** with participants being better placed to progress to complete higher education levels, take up employment and engage more fully in their local community.

The following vignette illustrates the power of community education to bring the above benefits.

Vignette: 'Joy' St Catherine's Community Services, Carlow

This is an example of a journey from crisis and trauma to a sense of progress, personal agency and appreciation of life and work. It depicts the theory of transformation and change, whereby, when held safe, and supported, and encouraged, a person can move through a crisis to a place of healing and possibility.

This vignette contains themes of growing up within a family afflicted by domestic violence and addiction and experiencing an unexpected teenage pregnancy. It shows a lone parent's rise out of very difficult circumstances through community education and the wraparound support. Joy progressed, over a period of five years, from QQI Level 3 to Level 7 and now works in a community development role within her community.

Start of the Journey

Joy's journey started over 20 years ago. She grew up in a complex and traumatic family environment surrounded by addiction and violence. Joy's parents suffered from alcoholism and other forms of addiction since Joy was very young.

Joy became pregnant at age 16. Joy found out about the Moving On Programme²⁷ in St. Catherine's, Carlow through the social worker that she was assigned while she was in the hospital giving birth to her baby. Because Joy was so young, the social worker came into the hospital and spoke with her. During the conversation the social worker told Joy about the Moving On programme and suggested that participation on the programme could be very good for Joy.

Joy trusted the social worker and came to St. Catherine's. However, she did not stay, the first time. She recalls how she felt uncomfortable:

'I felt uncomfortable. I know it was a group of young mothers, but I was the youngest. A lot of people in the group, they had two children or three children. I just felt lost. I didn't know where I was going in life. And I left the programme. Even though the coordinator tried to persuade me to stay. I just didn't feel ready. I remember that feeling of being lost.'

'I remember coming to the realization that everybody in the room was the same. We were all on the same page; we all had kids. We all had things in common. I gave it a chance. I don't think I gave it a chance the first time. It was too daunting for me. I felt I was too young. And I lost my vision psychologically.'

Enablers & Support

Joy shared how she persisted and returned to St. Catherine's the following year, spurred on by an inner motivation and reassured by the trusted reputation of St. Catherine's. Joy met again with the coordinator and discussed her situation, her ambitions, and caring for her little one. Joy felt encouraged by this one-to-one meeting and signed up to return to the Moving On Programme, for the second time. Joy was reassured of a place for her baby in the creche on site in St Catherine's and this was a significant enabler.

'The big attraction was that that my baby was able to come here with me. He was able to go to Creche; that was a big thing; it was a huge support; I just literally dropped him off, and then I was just able to attend the course without worry.'

The tutors and the coordinator were amazing women, amazing role models; they made me see things in myself that I couldn't see. You know that I had a future even with a young child.

'The support, the sense of belonging, sense of not being judged. Walking in here, as a teenager, and pushing a buggy, and being accepted.'

²⁷ The Moving on Programme is a back to education programme for mothers aged 17 to 35 years, in receipt of social welfare. It is a QQI Level 4 Major Award in Employment Skills (Ordinary Leaving Certificate equivalent). The programme has been running in St. Catherine's Community Services Centre Carlow for over twenty-five years, having been originally conceived under an EU funded Horizon Initiative back in 1996.

The combination of the support of the dedicated Social Worker who helped Joy find housing for herself and her baby and the childcare and support at St Catherine's enabled Joy to stick with her community education journey.

'My social worker encouraged me. She was very important, that social worker, I still meet her to this day passing in the street, and we'd still talk. It was very good but also very scary to have a social worker involved in your life.'

Difference Made

After completing the Moving On Programme, Joy went on to a Community Employment Scheme and continued her education and personal development through that programme. Joy continued to progress further with her education over a period of seven years. She completed a degree in Applied Social Studies and now works in community development on a women's project in her local area. Over the years as she was studying, Joy returned many times to St Catherine's for support and connection with the staff and people and she now works in a related area and the connections continue to deepen.

Joy shared how finding work within her community in a role she loves has made such a difference to her life. Joy loves working in community development, giving back to the community, and relishes witnessing the progression of other young women of all nationalities and diversity.

Joy described how sure she was that she wanted to work in social care and community development and the satisfaction she gets from her work.

'I wanted to work with the travelling community or residential care or with adolescents, maybe kids in the care system. My plan was to work with people. Just as I finished college a job came up in a community development role. I had looked at and admired all these people for so many years. I felt I can do this. So, I applied for the job as a Project Worker in my local community.'

'I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up, and that's OK too. But I do know I love what I do, never ever dread coming into work. I love this job working in and for my community.'

Joy expressed gratitude for the support that she and her child received over the years at St. Catherine's. Joy was glad to share her story in the hope that it would help show others the way.

The Journey through Community Education

The research results show patterns of activation and engagement with community education by lone parents. The findings point to three main **points of entry** to community education for lone parents.

Entry Point 1. Labour Market Activation:

This entry point is generally through Community Employment and/or encouragement from the Department of Social Protection, e.g., letter as in the case of New Futures Employability Programme run by One Family and the Moving On Programme run by St. Catherine's Community Services in Carlow.

The findings suggest that this entry point is activated by or linked to changes in social welfare benefits and shows the importance of careful design of social welfare benefits, structure, and transition points. For example, the transition points in the one parent allowance structure are significant and an opportunity to carefully encourage engagement in community education once the full range of wraparound supports are available to facilitate a positive experience. There are also risks associated with social welfare transition points and if they are not carefully designed, they can lead to further poverty for lone parents.

Entry Point 2. Trauma or significant life event:

Entry into or beginning community education occurs following a trauma or significant life event including recovery, homelessness, loss of a business or a job resulting in a recommendation or referral from a social worker, family support worker, or public health nurse. The findings suggest that an experience and/or referral can prompt a soft entry through a gardening course, a flower arranging class or an art class or art therapy, for example. The knowledge and awareness of the referrer or recommender is important here in that it requires an understanding of the power of community education in the first instance for a person, such as a social worker or public health nurse, or recovery facilitator, to refer or recommend community education as a good option for someone in need of support.

This entry point fits well with the practice of social prescribing and community education is another option that could be offered by General Practitioners (GPs), health professionals and others when working with people who are seeking a way to address mental health challenges and/or social isolation.

Entry Point 3. Personal Agency - Self referral:

The findings indicate that for this entry point the person feels a readiness which can be psychological readiness as well as situational readiness in terms of, for example, their children’s ages, feelings of independence, self-motivation, and inner drive to return to education. Sometimes this readiness is stimulated by a volunteering experience or encouragement from a friend.

1. Labour Market Activation (e.g., employability programmes)	2. Crisis (or Trauma or significant life event)	3. Personal Agency/ self-referral
Lone parent receives a letter from the Department of Social Protection informing them of and encouraging them to attend a specific programme, e.g., New Futures Employability Programme (One Family) and the Moving On Programme in (St Catherine’s Carlow)	Lone parent is referred by a social worker, Community Employment Scheme supervisor, Public Health Nurse or key worker from another health or social service, e.g., Tusla, addiction/mental health and recovery.	Lone parent experiences an internal impulse or resolve to return to education often prompted by a readiness – psychological and timing (e.g., children settled at primary school).

The following vignettes show real life examples of the journey through community education, the entry points, benefits, and ways in which community education positively impacts the lives of lone parents.

These vignettes and those included earlier in this report show how lone parents become aware of community education opportunities, mainly through word of mouth and information that is personalised in some way and are attracted in by the warm welcome.

The concept of readiness comes through in the data, and this includes timing and psychological readiness to participate in community education.

The power of encouragement, trust, reputation of the community organisation and its staff, and relationships is demonstrated. The energy and atmosphere of encouragement and support, by tutors/facilitators, many who have travelled similar meandering paths in their own education, is a vital and authentic draw for lone parents. The role modelling and signposting is evident. The mental health and wellbeing benefits of community education are also highlighted.

The following vignette shows the power of community education and local trusted networks and relationships to attract in and hold a young mother, to capture her imagination and support her to engage with education. It shows how community education, and its wraparound support can support a young person to follow through with her education and progress.

Vignette: 'Cara' The Acorn

Starting Point

The starting point of Cara's community education journey was a friend recommending that she go in and talk to someone in the Acorn. Cara felt ready; she felt a sense of motivation; she knew she wanted to do something for herself but did not know where to go or what to do. Her friend encouraged her to go into the Acorn, reassuring her that there would be something for her in there.

Cara followed her friend's advice, knowing the Acorn was a trusted community organisation. Cara recalls how the first conversation with the tutor at the Acorn was so encouraging and supportive that it gave her the inspiration to begin her community education journey. Cara felt heard and understood and that a course was possible, and she could do it while her child was at school nearby.

The location attracted Cara because the Acorn was near her home and her child's school. The course in business was in tune with Cara's hopes for herself. She had dreams of being a secretary and/or working in business. The combination of readiness, timing, and location drew Cara in.

Supports

Cara is grateful for the support and encouragement that she has received, since the start, from the tutors and staff at the Acorn. She finds the study tough enough, whilst also caring for her child, and working through the modules is challenging. Cara believes that the support of the group is vital; there are ten others on the course with her, and they all support each other.

'It can be overwhelming at times doing the study alongside mothering, but it feels good to achieve on the course and build my confidence.'

Impact

Cara reflected on the impact of community education on her life to date. She noticed that she is more sociable and enjoys meeting people and the feeling of doing something for herself. She feels she has more energy and is more dynamic in all aspects of her life since she returned to education. Cara described a new sense of hope for her future and for her child. She described how her child also benefits from Mammy participating in education.

'My child is curious about what Mammy is up to.'

Cara hopes to find work once she has completed her course and to come off her lone parents' allowance, earn her own money, and feel good about this.

Cara was glad to participate in this research and glad that attention is placed on lone parents. She believes childcare would support more lone parents to return to education without having to wait until their children are in school.

'Community education gave me a spark of hope that there is a way out of this with support and when I put some work in –it has shown me how can I help myself.'

Vignette: Sabina (Pseudonym) Longford Women's Link

This vignette highlights the power of community education to hold a person in a safe place for a time, particularly when they have come from another country and/or experienced trauma. It shows the progression through community education to further education and employment as well as enhanced self-confidence, English language and communication proficiency.

Sabina came to Ireland about six years ago from India. She had very poor English language skills on arrival in Ireland. She was married at one point and has one child. Sabina had been through a very difficult period of life with domestic violence, and she sought the support of Longford Women's Link as she was advised that they provide support for women. Eventually, she and her child left the abusive relationship. Sabina has been a lone parent for the past few years.

Starting Point

Sabina had no right to work when she first came to Ireland, and this changed when her child was born. She went on Job Seekers Allowance and secured a place on a Community Employment (CE) Scheme, working in childcare. This brought her to Longford Women's Link (LWL). She had had a long period out of paid employment since leaving her home country. The CE placement in the creche in LWL worked well for her as her child attended the creche whilst she was working there.

Enablers and Supports

Sabina is grateful to Longford Women's Link and to Ireland for giving her a home, an education, and employment in childcare that she loves. Sabina expressed gratitude to the Irish government for giving her the Job Seekers Allowance and place on the CE scheme.

Sabina expressed appreciation for the support that she received from LWL, including personal counselling, which enabled her to leave an abusive relationship and begin living independently with her child. She recounts that every time she needed support, both personally and with her studies, the staff of LWL were there for her.

Sabina is working and studying childcare (Level 5). The course is online one night a week, and this works well for Sabina as she does not need to seek childcare. She received a laptop loan from LWL so that she could complete her studies. All these

enablers have made it possible for Sabina to pursue her studies whilst also caring for her child.

Impact

Sabina reflected on her experience with community education and support at LWL and the difference it has made to her life. The main impact it has had on her life is that she now feels safe and secure, and her self-confidence is restored.

'I feel that Longford is a safe place for me and my child.'

'I was not confident one year ago; now I am full of confidence, freedom, and independence. Knowledge and working with children are a joy – I want to learn more and go on to study to degree level – I feel that confident'.

'Anxiety was there before – I was shy – but now I feel no anxiety.'

'I had no English language before coming to LWL, and now I can communicate well in English.'

Sabina has plans to complete her Level 5 and progress further in her studies. She has hopes of getting a degree and maybe a master's degree. The support and encouragement that she received from LWL, coupled with the option to study online, has made this feel possible for her.

Outcomes and Impact

The research was a qualitative study and therefore it was not appropriate to **count** outputs or apply specific progression metrics.

However, the research did clearly draw out the impact of participation in community education on lone parents across a range of psychological, health and progression domains. These include improved mental health and wellbeing, sense of belonging and connectedness as well as progression to further education, training, and paid, or better paid employment, along with the financial and psychosocial benefits that employment brings.

Participants were invited to reflect on the difference that participating in community education has made in their lives. All 135 participants shared stories of the positive difference made. This included progression and many (estimated over one third) have progressed along the QQI levels to further and higher education and paid employment.

Mental health and wellbeing

Participants reported enhanced family relationships and an increased sense of purpose, connectedness, belonging, and self-esteem.

All participants reported some movement and/or progression in their lives because of their participation in community education. Participants reported noticing a shift in their self-confidence. One participant described how critical her experience with community education has been for finding her sense of self again after feeling very lost. Participants also spoke about how community education has given them a sense of purpose and a good routine to their days.

The results indicate that community education gives lone parents space to be themselves, to connect with other women, attend courses and experience an opportunity to focus on themselves. Participants shared how their participation in community education expanded their mindset and understanding that other people are facing and experiencing similar struggles. The sense of shared experiences and being with people who understand was empowering for participants.

The free or affordable counselling services and support offered for people experiencing domestic violence are an important precursor to achieving educational and employment goals for lone parents who have experienced trauma in their life. This is based on the premise that motivation and capacity to progress is dependent on **mental health**.

Impact on children and family life

The findings show the power of participation in community education to positively impact the lives of children of lone parents in terms of addressing poverty, enhancing the health and wellbeing of the mother and how this in turn transfers to the child. This is an important added value of participation in community education and shows its power to impact positively on subsequent generations.

One participant emphasised that community education empowered her to see herself as a whole person, beyond her role as mother, and this new perspective had improved her relationship with her child as well as being able to impart life skills, learned through the programmes, to her child.

'It encouraged me and helped me find who I am as a person other than a mother, or as a worker, or anything. Community education is very empowering, and I would encourage anyone to do it.'

'It was important to find who I am as a person other than a partner, or mother, or friend, I could start fresh and be someone new.'

[An Cosán]

Another mother learned about the impact of domestic abuse and interparental conflict can have on children and families through participating in counselling, and in turn learnt to insulate children from these challenges and support them with their own issues. Another participant described community education as the foundation for her progression to further education, saying that if she had entered at Level 5, she believes she would have been too overwhelmed and would have probably dropped out. The participant believed that her progression through the education levels has been enabled by taking incremental and steady steps.

All the research participants believe that their participation in community education has had a positive impact for their children. Participants described how they noticed improvements in their mental health, such as feeling calmer and having a stronger sense of self which they believe have influenced the way they parent their children. Several participants described how their participation has had a positive impact on the wellbeing of their children, both through the direct support provided for children and through their improved capacity to parent.

'There is a lot more laughter and joking in our day to day. Before I came to An Cosán, I was down in the dumps and stressed as a parent.'

[An Cosán]

Participants shared the positive impact on their children in terms of the structure and routine that are brought into their lives. They shared how they believe that their return to education is an important way to be good role models for their children. The results indicate that they were purposeful in their intention that their involvement in community education showed their children that they could achieve too. One participant spoke about how she wanted to encourage her children to go onto third level education and felt her example would support this. Another participant described a wish to show her child, who is living with a learning disability, that there are opportunities to achieve beyond the formal education route. Participants discussed how their interest in their children's education and the options for this were strengthened through their own community education experience.

'My son proudly tells people about how his mammy goes to the school and that his baby sister goes with her.'

[An Cosán]

Success Determinants

The research points to 12 success determinants for community education. These are components that are prerequisite for lone parents, particularly women who have experienced trauma, to successfully engage, get started and complete their community education journey.

During the field research in one of the community settings, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) welcomed the time and opportunity that participation in the research had afforded the team to reflect on and to evaluate the positive impact their work on the lives of lone parents. In facing the day-to-day challenges of delivering programmes, she commented that it can be all too easy to forget the *“magic that happens in the lives of lone parents”* that cross their threshold and engage in community education programmes with them. The research sought to capture the practices across the 8 case study settings that allow this transformation to happen.

The community settings that participated in the case study research all encompass these **12 features** in their work in support of lone parents:

1. Warm welcome and open door.
2. Psychological safety, confidentiality and feelings of readiness and belonging as a foundation for learning.
3. Time and space offered to people to talk and be listened to in the immediacy of their situation.

4. Personal development content and emphasis of community education
5. Emotional support, guidance and counselling, particularly in times of crisis – the immediacy of being there at the right time and working things through.
6. Cultivation of friendships and peer support.
7. Childcare and early years services (including a sliding scale of fee for childcare).
8. Management, staff/facilitators know and understand what life is like as a person parenting alone.
9. High quality community education courses and the tutors/facilitators.
10. Flexibility of the tutors/staff and always finding a way to work around challenges that arise which supports the cultivation of resilience and self-efficacy.
11. The psychology of group processes and emphasis on actively developing a sense of support and connection with fellow learners, nurturing an open atmosphere free from judgement.
12. Information, advice, and signposting to other services.

Challenges for Community Education

The research draws attention to the main challenges currently faced by community education providers. These include visibility and valuing of community education, funding, accreditation, childcare, digital inclusion and monitoring and metrics to truly capture the impact of community education.

Visibility and Value of Community Education

A first challenge is to reframe community education as a fully understood valuable form of education, that fits within the full system of education, in contemporary Ireland. Community education historically has been underdeveloped at a policy level. This presents an opportunity to scale up community education's power to influence positive change both at individual, family, community, and societal levels. The research indicates that participants experience community education as valuable. It supports personal development and progression to a range of next steps, including further and higher education and paid employment or better paid employment.

Multiple Funding Streams

A second challenge is the number of funding streams that support community education programmes and the challenges of managing the administration relating to each. This includes the variation in applications for funding and the administrative requirements for monitoring returns.

The range and complexity of funding is a known and recurring theme in the research and has been highlighted by AONTAS and others (ESRI & AONTAS, 2020; The Wheel 2023) as a challenge for providers, with potential impact on the sustainability of provision.

Accreditation

The third challenge is working with a robust and reliable system of accreditation that is user friendly and efficient. Several sites have made the strategic decision to move from being a standalone QQI centre to being a satellite centre of their local ETB for accreditation of its programmes. The move away from QQI accreditation on the part of all the Case Study sites, apart from Longford Women's Link and An Cosán, confirms the significant challenges experienced with the accreditation process and the associated arduous administration work. This is particularly true for smaller community organisations with less capacity and resources.

Metrics and Monitoring

A fourth challenge is to ensure that funders and the system at a national level recognises and develops specific indicators and systems to capture the transformative power of community education. Activity and output indicators are commonplace, such as numbers registering, attending, completing, and progressing to further education, training, and employment. However, there are currently no agreed performance indicators or ways to systematically track and capture the transformative impact, including psychological outcomes, at an ETB or national level.

Each site uses different systems (e.g., Outcomes Star) to support and measure the soft outcomes of learners. However, there is currently no systematic way of integrating this data at an ETB or national level. Therefore, the transformative nature of community education programmes is not being adequately integrated into the overall evaluation of the programmes. As a result, there is the possibility that if courses are planned at a national level, purely based on hard outcomes, many vulnerable learners may miss out due to the lack of programmes being made available to them locally.

Measuring and demonstrating the value of community education has been a recurring issue for the sector. There is a view that capturing the full spectrum of benefits in community education poses a challenge to traditional metrics because of the broad social and personal development benefits that courses offer (AONTAS & ESRI, 2020). The findings show that

some organisations have adopted metrics that can capture a more complete spectrum of benefits or outcomes. These could be used as templates to explore with a view to more widespread adoption and use.

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion has become a challenge for a cohort of their learners. Providers have worked to address this by enhancing the learning experience through digital literacy and support, assistive technology, outreach, and technical support.

The findings show that it is possible to develop and roll out digital programmes which draw upon similar peer and group supports for participants by promoting a shared sense of community and social inclusion to that experienced by participants in programmes delivered in person. Programmes which have worked successfully online, e.g., those delivered wholly online by One Family or others where online delivery works in conjunction with in-person programmes, have built on the longstanding reputation of the organisation as providing a community and a safe place for lone parents. This has led to the development and delivery of courses available to lone parents in rural locations or those otherwise facing challenges in attending in person (such as travel distance or competing caring responsibilities).

Childcare

Finally, the findings confirm that access to reliable, good quality childcare is a vital enabler for lone parents to engage in community education and to progress to other forms of participation in education, paid employment and community involvement. The lack of childcare leads to an inability to participate and, at best, deferral of engagement by lone parents in community education, until children are at school. The absence of, or delay in attending childcare, also deprives children of the benefits of childcare and the early years' curriculum and leads to further negative impact on children from households headed by lone parents. This challenge is an important one to address particularly in the current context of high levels of child poverty experienced by households headed by lone parents.

5. Main Messages

This section sets out the **10 messages** arising from the thematic analysis of the research findings across all 8 case studies and the recommendations suggested by these findings.

The research contributes to and confirms the body of research telling us that community education provides opportunities for a return to education for lone parents that can open new and diverse pathways within education, economic activity, involvement and representation in community development, and political representation. The community setting is powerful in this regard in that it is the trusted and safe environment that draws people in, particularly those who have poor experiences of formal education in the past and/or trauma during their lives.

All 135 participants in this research were lone parents in caring roles. This includes caring for their children; some were also caring for older parents and roughly one third were caring for children with additional needs. Many were naturally very caught up in their caring roles and consequently experiencing isolation that impacted their mental health.

The findings show that participation in community education positively impacts mental health and wellbeing, for lone parent participants and their children. This happens because of a mix of components, including personal development and the wraparound support provided, which create a sense of psychological safety in the community education setting. A key feature is the one-to-one support from community education tutors and facilitators who are experienced working in community settings and working with the diversity of experiences of participants, including trauma.

Participation in community education brings experiences of belonging and connectedness that alleviate loneliness and isolation. This supports lone parents to feel grounded and psychologically safe so that they can focus on their own development and learning. The findings indicate that this prepares the ground for learning and progression to further education, training, and development.

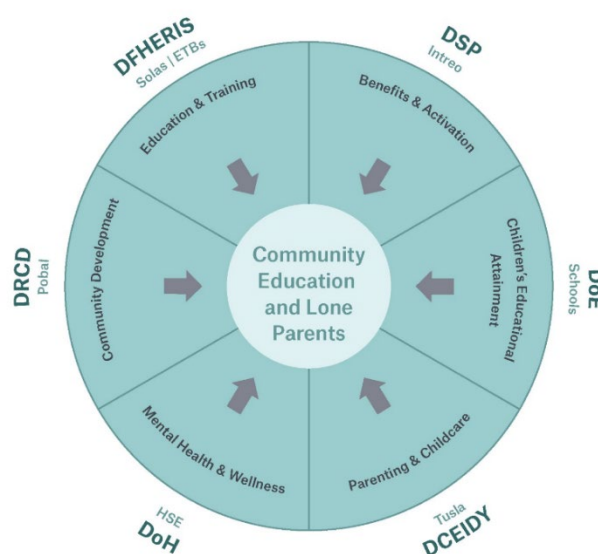
The research shows that community education has the power to respond to a dozen policy imperatives:

1. Employability and Labour Market Activation
2. Family support including child poverty
3. Early Childhood Care and Education including child poverty and wellbeing
4. Social inclusion

5. Further Education and Training (FET)
6. Higher Education
7. Mental Health and wellbeing (including recovery from addiction)
8. Community development and capacity building
9. Multicultural integration
10. Active Citizenship and volunteering
11. Population health (including social prescribing)
12. Community safety (including domestic violence).

The research highlights that community education is part of the wider system of provision and is contributing to the delivery of national policy including further education and training (FET), labour market activation, health and wellbeing. Figure Two below shows community education at the nexus of several policy domains of relevance to lone parents, education, family support and child wellbeing.

Community Education Delivering National Policy
Through an Integrated Approach



One of the ways the policy nexus manifests is in the many streams of funding that settings avail of to finance community education. For example, some sites benefit from specific European Union (EU) grants and Department of Social Protection (DSP) funding for dedicated labour market activation, social inclusion, and employability programmes for women. Examples of this include the New Futures Employability Programme, offered by One Family the Moving On Programme in St. Catherine's Community Services Centre in Carlow, and the Young Women's Education Programme at An Cosán.

All the sites benefit from Education Training Board (ETB) funding for community-based education and training. Some sites benefit from HSE (Health Service Executive) funding under mental health and wellbeing or local authority grants for community gardens and horticultural initiatives (e.g., Mayfield Integrated CDP in Cork City). There are also examples of sites that benefit from corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding. WCI Ronanstown is an example of this, as in recent years the organisation has received one off bursaries from large corporates, for the Women Gender and Social Studies (Level 7) course.

The research affirms community education as a support for lone parents and, by extension, their children. This means that community education is targeting some of the most vulnerable people in Irish society. It is also serving to strengthen gender equality, combat poverty, and overcome structural inequalities that can arise from poverty.

The thematic analysis of the data across all 8 community education settings indicates that there are 10 consistent messages. These messages are presented in three levels: the impact on the individual, the systems level, and wider impact on children and families.

The **overall message** is that community education programmes are already in place, having evolved organically to meet the current needs of lone parents. With increased investment, the effectiveness of this means of support to lone parents and the innovative and agile response of community education providers could be sustained and scaled up to strengthen enhance further its power as a response to contemporary policy imperatives.

Messages: Individual Level Impact of Community Education

The following messages relate to the impact that participation in community education has on lone parents as individuals and the ripple effect through their families. This includes an impact on personal development and agency, progression to further education, training, and employment, as well as a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Message One: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Participation in community education brings feelings of connection and belonging for lone parents who feel isolated.

The research found that participation in community education brings a sense of belonging which eases the loneliness and isolation experienced by some people who are parenting alone. Gathering for shared learning supports the mental health and wellbeing of lone parents and their children. The personal transformation that arises, through feelings of safety and

belonging, prepares the ground for continued engagement and progression to further education, training, paid employment, and community involvement. The research also shows enhanced English language proficiency and feelings of integration for participants who have moved to Ireland from other countries.

The research findings suggest that there is scope for more proactive strategies on the part of government agencies to encourage and support engagement by lone parents with community education and thereby gain the benefits of increased mental health and wellbeing.

There are examples in the research findings of referrals from health professionals in the community activating an individual's engagement with community education. This suggests that there is also potential opportunity to explore the use of referrals by other community-based health professionals such as General Practitioners (GPs).

[relevant policy: family support, social inclusion, mental health and wellbeing, and community development].



Recommendation:

Maximise the significant mental health and wellbeing benefits of participation in community education for lone parents.

- **Raise awareness** of the mental health benefits of participation in community education across government departments.
- **Conduct research** into the benefits of participation in community education to enhance mental health and wellbeing and as a place to bring in health promotion and psychoeducation for population health.
- **Scope out opportunities** for the HSE and Mental Health Ireland to invest in the psychological supports and counselling offered in community education settings.
- **Pilot a social prescribing programme** designed to explore the impact of social prescribing referrals to participate in community education to promote improved mental health and wellbeing.

Message Two: Progression to Further and Higher Education

Participation by lone parents in community education results in personal transformation, strengthened self-confidence and personal agency which motivates progression to further and higher education.

The research confirms that participation in community education facilitates personal transformation in terms of enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem, strengthened motivation, and personal agency. This personal transformation occurs in a safe setting through the psychology of group work, wraparound support, and facilitation on the part of the tutors. The

indicators of transformation include self-awareness and ways of understanding issues in the immediate and wider community. The growth in personal confidence and motivation is a significant driver in supporting participants to continue their community education journey and progress to further and higher education and employment.

[relevant policy: further and higher education, health and wellbeing, community development, civic engagement, and active citizenship].



Recommendation:

Promote better understanding of the mutuality between community education settings and relevant statutory providers.

- **Promote and activate** the pathways (existing and new) from community education to further and higher education. This is already happening and could be further enhanced by being more clearly articulated and widely communicated.
- **Make provision for student grants** to be accessible to those taking courses on a part-time basis in the FE/HE sector²⁸.
- **Recognise and invest** in the role of Community Employment (CE) as an important precursor and partner to community education.

²⁸ This is also a recommendation of the Review of the Student Grant Scheme. February 2022.
https://www.indecon.ie/assets/files/pdf/report_on_indecon_review_of_the_student_grant_scheme.pdf

Message Three: Progression to Employment or Improved Employment

Lone parents who complete community education are highly likely to progress to further and higher education, training, paid employment, and involvement in their community.

The research shows that participation in community education enables progression to further and higher education, training, paid or better paid employment, and involvement in community development. The findings show the potential and power of targeted employability programmes, designed and provided by community education sites, such as New Futures Employability Programme (One Family) and the Moving On Programme (St Catherine's Community Services Centre).

Community education prepares people to progress with skills and confidence to further and higher education. The results of this research show that paid employment in social care, childcare and special needs assisting are the most frequently mentioned careers resulting from community education. There are labour shortages in all these areas currently in Ireland and community education is playing a role in responding to this skills gap.

[relevant policy: community development, social inclusion, health, further education, training, labour market activation and employment, child poverty and active citizenship]



Recommendation:

Utilise the power of community education to respond to employment needs and skills gaps.

- **Scale up** Employability Programmes targeted at lone parents building on the learning from New Futures Employability and Moving On Programmes.
- **Agencies, with responsibility for training for employment, fund** locally designed employment skills programmes developed by community education providers to meet the needs of the local jobs market.
- **Invest in digital innovation** and opportunities to continue to bring online and hybrid learning to lone parents.

Messages: Systems Level

The following messages relate to the practice of community education and the systems and processes that make it work. This includes the community setting, the quality and dedication of staff, the wraparound support, and the power of positive role modelling. The research found that the trusted reputation of the community setting is an important draw for participants. This trust has built up over many years of the community organisations being present and responsive to community needs.

Message Four: Safe Places and Wraparound Support for Lone Parents

Wraparound support is a known distinctive feature of community education and is one of the main success determinants for participation, completion, and progression on the part of lone parents.

The research confirms that access to and participation in community education by lone parents is made possible through wraparound support provided in community education settings. This wraparound support, which is only available as funding and circumstances permit, is tailored to the learner and their needs.

It is often associated with a place or building which is rooted in the community and provides a hub to access support and is place of safety, welcome and inclusion.

Wraparound support can include childcare as well as parenting support, travel allowance, peer support, IT (Information Technology) support, equipment, driving lessons, mentoring, key working, career guidance, and personal counselling. It also includes one-to-one support provided by community education tutors and facilitators who are trauma-aware and experienced, and many of whom have lived experience of lone parenting.

The impact of participation in community education is particularly empowering for those who have experienced trauma in their lives and/or difficulty in their primary or secondary education experience.

[relevant policy: community development, health, education, training, and employment].



Recommendation:

Invest in Safe Places and Wraparound Support for Lone Parents to engage in Community Education

- **Invest in community education settings located in the heart of communities and wraparound support** to augment the demonstrated benefits of engaging in community education to deliver positive outcomes for policy areas such as social inclusion, health and wellbeing, child poverty and progression to paid or improved employment.
- **Combine investment into a single source of funding** covering the physical infrastructure and delivery of wraparound support with appropriate monitoring and metrics to leverage the power of community education to bring multiple benefits to lone parents and their children.

Message Five: Childcare Matters

Access to onsite childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for lone parents.

The research found that access to on-site childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for lone parents.

Childcare, in the settings where it is provided, offers a double positive impact in that it benefits both parent **and** child by connecting them positively with their community, and for younger children, it offers exposure to the early year's curriculum of education, development, and care. The application of evidence informed curricula such as the High Scope Preschool curriculum means that babies and children have access to a good start in life.

The absence of good quality, affordable childcare and after-school care is a block for many lone parents, preventing or delaying their participation in community education. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is educational in function and provides a welcome portion of childcare i.e., 3 hours a day, five days a week and 38 weeks of the year. All children can access the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), up to 45 hours per week, depending on circumstances and income and this can be fully funded. However, this is significantly impacted by the availability of services locally and awareness of the scheme.

[relevant policy: early childhood care and education, parental and family support, child poverty, further education, training and employment, and population health]



Recommendation:

Ringfence Free Childcare for Lone Parents

- Make provision for free childcare for lone parents participating in community education through a voucher system and/or a local arrangement(s) to enable them to engage in community education and for their children to access, and benefit from, the early years' curriculum.

Message Six: Quality Community Education Staff

The quality and dedication of community education tutors/facilitators are distinctive features of community education and important determinants of success.

The research confirms the distinctive features of community education, which includes the quality and competence of staff in community education settings. The competency, dedication, and lived experience of administrators, coordinators, tutors, and facilitators involved in the design and delivery of community education contribute to the longstanding reputation of the settings. This, along with childcare provision, is the most significant attractor that continues to draw in and support participants to complete their community education journeys and prepare for their next steps.

The findings show that experienced tutors and facilitators play a vital role in delivering programmes in a manner that supports and enables lone parents to complete the programmes. The strength of the anchor of the sites in the community is attested by the reports by lone parent participants of the sense of always being able to cross the threshold of their local centre to find welcome and support.

Sites find it challenging to knit together funding to cover all the facilities and resources necessary to deliver programmes and uncertainties surrounding funding leads to uncertainties surrounding the retention and development of team members with the skills and experience to deliver programmes to lone parents.

[relevant policy: education and training, family support and mental health and well-being].



Recommendation:

Invest in Community Education Staff

- **Re-design** the funding model for community education programmes to offer multi-annual funding and design the scope of the funding to ensure that it covers the provision of core facilities and resources, and wraparound support. Ensure funding enables the recruitment and retention of experienced staff on contractual terms that can support consistent and expanded delivery of effective programmes to lone parents.
- **Provide** specific skills training and CPD for all staff in relevant topics such as trauma informed care and delivery of hybrid and online programmes.
- **Dedicate** 3% of grant funding to cover costs of CPD.

Message Seven: Positive Role Models

Role models are a wonderful source of inspiration and encouragement for lone parents.

The research confirms the power of role models and imitative behaviour. The findings indicate that lone parents participating in community education are inspired and encouraged by women who they can identify with and who have gone before them on the journey through community education – ***if you can see it, you can be it***. The authentic role models within community education settings are a vital source of inspiration and encouragement that drives the positive impact of community education. The results remind us of the power of imitative behaviour and role modelling to shape the habits and choices of the next generation as children witness, with pleasure, their mothers engaging and enjoying education.

[relevant policy: community development, social inclusion, further education, training and employment].



Recommendation:

Recognise the value and power of good role models

- **Invest in community education settings** and the staff teams that facilitate and nurture the power of positive role modeling for better outcomes.
- **Conduct specific research** into the psychological benefits of positive role modeling for vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, in community education settings.

Messages: Wider Impact of Community Education

The following themes relate to the wider impact of community education and the potential to maximise the power of partnership and collaboration as well as coherent monitoring and evaluation to bring community education into the foreground.

Message Eight: Positive Impact on Families

Participation in community education by lone parents has a positive ripple effect through the family by enhancing parental wellbeing and positive role modelling for children.

The research indicates that lone parents' participation in community education has a positive ripple effect on their children, wider family relationships, education, mental health, and wellbeing. This includes an enhanced capacity to parent and positive role modelling for children, sparking interest in and excitement about education, and a lived experience of its value. The research found that mothers believe that their own contentment can have a nurturing and calming effect on children's mental health and wellbeing.

The research also shows that participation in community education and progression has the power to increase the financial status of a family. Notwithstanding this, barriers to participation still exist for lone parents, including access to childcare, funding, and IT equipment.

In many ways the community setting, and community education are localised examples of cross-governmental policy materialising organically rather than by design. There are opportunities as well as threats here. The broad scope of the impact of community education as an intervention to support lone parents and their families fits well with the contemporary drive for more holistic cross sectoral responses as set out in the intentions of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing and Programme Office set up in Spring 2023 in the Department of the

Taoiseach. The Programme Plan 2023-2025 sets out six priority actions (below) that align with the experience of the 8 case studies in terms of the effects of poverty on children and families.

- Income support and joblessness
- Early learning and childcare
- Reducing the cost of education
- Family homelessness
- Consolidating and integrating Family & Parental Support, Health, and Well-being
- Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for Children and Young People affected by poverty.

[relevant policy: family support, early childhood care and education, child poverty, school completion, population health].



Recommendation:

Recognise the power of community education as part of the greater suite of family support and interventions to address child poverty.

- **Combine investment** into a single source with appropriate monitoring metrics and leverage the power of community education to deliver on policy areas such as social inclusion, health and wellbeing, child poverty and progression to paid employment.

Message Nine: Collaboration and Partnership

Community organisations are agile and respond well and swiftly to local needs through strategic partnerships and practical collaboration arrangements.

The research shows evidence of partnerships and collaborations, new and old, forming to advance community education provision, reach into communities, and enhance accreditation processes. The community organisations that participated in this research each have long-established and trusted relationships with organisations that help further their goals. Good relationships, agility and ability to innovate enable community education settings to respond to emerging local needs and work collaboratively with shared resources. This includes partnerships with further and higher education and training institutions as well as collaborative arrangements with ETBs, local authorities, the HSE, philanthropy, the private sector, and other community organisations locally. These arrangements are win-win, with

each party benefiting, and are fine examples of multi-agency collaboration in action for the greatest good and benefit of the learner and the wider community.

Accreditation of programmes is valued by participants and can facilitate progression towards further and higher education and acquisition of employment skills including in areas where there are labour market skills shortages such as childcare and social care. The research findings suggest that community education providers can struggle with the complexities associated with meeting accreditation requirements. Some community education addressed this by partnering with their local ETB so that the complexities of meeting accreditation requirements are met by the ETB while the site remains the centre of excellence for programme delivery.

[relevant policy: community development and volunteering, social inclusion, further education, training, and employment]



Recommendation:

Incentivise collaboration and partnership

- **Incentivise** collaboration and partnership locally between community settings and further and higher education providers.
- **Facilitate** flexible accreditation systems that encompass community education.
- **Showcase** the greater impact and efficiency of working together to achieve better outcomes for lone parents.
- **Explore** partnership opportunities with employers and other relevant agencies locally.

Message Ten: Metrics and Monitoring

Community settings gather useful quantitative and qualitative data to inform education, training, and employment policy and yet use of this data is under resourced and under utilised.

The research confirms the multiple different sources of funding for community education across government departments, agencies, businesses and philanthropy. This comes with many different administrative requests and requirements for monitoring data, and there is no one coherent system. As a result, we are missing the full picture of community education. There are missed metrics and opportunities to gain a more coherent sense of its power to effect and sustain positive change within communities as well as within the wider system of education provision within the state.

The research found that community education generates rich data through different systems across different settings. All settings capture the stories of people as they participate in community education and progress to further education and employment. Some of the case study sites have developed their own scales and measures to track individual learner progress. For example, some use software systems, such as Salesforce, to collect activity and output data. Other settings use pre and post measures or methods, such as Outcome Star, to track shifts in confidence and skill levels. The findings suggest that these might serve as templates for data collection to explore, pilot and deploy on a national level.

The results show that there are health benefits and changes in attitudes, behaviour, confidence levels, relationships, financial standing, and progression to further training, education and paid employment resulting from participation in community education.

Uniformity of data points and data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed. It is also important to maximise data and analysis on a larger scale for monitoring, evaluation, and research purposes. The design and implementation of a universal reporting mechanism would mean that the current multiple reporting obligations for different funding streams would be eliminated, and the on-site resources currently consumed by this administrative burden could be more usefully deployed in the design and delivery of community education programmes.

Collaborative work is currently underway exploring the development of a national funding platform. This includes the Department of the Taoiseach, Department of Community and Rural Development and Pobal and will require government/ agencies/ NGOs agreeing data definitions that will enable potential application and reporting through a single reporting system. This has the power to deliver on significant reporting simplification and reduction of administrative burden.

The implementation of a universal monitoring system would show the impact of community education across a range of policy domains and government objectives. It would also more efficiently and effectively inform policy development in the relevant areas of community development, social inclusion, education, and employability. There is also an opportunity to link to What Works – Building Evidence²⁹ and the drive to gather more coherent small area

²⁹ The What Works – Building Evidence Fund is an initiative by the Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) funded under the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF).
<https://whatworks.gov.ie/what-works-building-evidence-fund-2023/>

data to build regional and national data sets and ultimately inform policy and service development.

[relevant policy: population health, community development and volunteering, social inclusion, education, training, and employment].



Recommendation:

Strengthen Metrics and Monitoring of Community Education

- **Design and implement** a centralised monitoring system with metrics that better capture and report the impact on lone parents and their children of participating in community education programmes.
- **Ensure** lone parents are a named target group for data capture.
- **Invest in** supporting community settings to strengthen the methods and metrics for tracking and capturing the journey through community education.
- **Ascertain** potential links to the What Works Initiative and the drive to gather more coherent small area data to build regional and national data sets and ultimately policy and service development.

The **overall conclusion** of this research is that participation in community education, in a reputable and trusted community setting, has the power to transform the lives of lone parents.

Community education programmes are already in place, having evolved organically to meet the current needs of lone parents. With increased investment, the effectiveness of this means of support to lone parents and the innovative and agile response of community education providers could be sustained and scaled up to further enhance its power as a response to contemporary policy imperatives.

The findings confirm:

- the range of wraparound supports that enable lone parents to access, participate in, and progress through community education.
- the positive difference that community education can make to the lives of lone parents across a range of policy domains, including further and higher education, training, labour market activation, paid employment, community development, mental health, and wellbeing.

- the importance of established community organisations as trusted service points and resource centres in their local areas. These community settings are a beacon for people to approach, particularly for lone parents, and others, at vulnerable points in life. They are a tried and tested trusted place to host community education programmes and reach out and respond to lone parents.

Overall Recommendation

The **overall recommendation** of this research is for policy makers and funders to maximise the power of community education to deliver specific policy commitments. This will be achieved by capitalising on the model of community delivery as a safe place for lone parents to begin their return to education.

The recommendation is to design a funding model, or platform, that creates a single point of funding to sites for programmes that deliver positive outcomes across the range of relevant policy areas and at the same time reduces the administrative burden for sites. This funding model would be on a multi-annual basis and inclusive of funding for the related wraparound support that is a hallmark of community education and a distinctive feature of its success as an intervention for lone parents.

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