

# 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.

## *Executive Summary*

September 2023

# 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)<sup>1</sup> 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 employment<sup>2</sup>.

The Bechtaire Fund is a charitable trust operating under the umbrella of Community Foundation Ireland. In 2020, the Bechtaire Fund commissioned AONTAS and the ESRI 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.

In January 2022 the Bechtaire 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 Bechtaire 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

## 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:

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

### 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.

	<a href="#"><u>Doras Buí</u></a>		<a href="#"><u>St. Catherine's Community Services Centre</u></a>
	<a href="#"><u>Longford Women's Link</u></a>		<a href="#"><u>The Acorn Project</u></a>
	<a href="#"><u>An Cosán</u></a>		<a href="#"><u>Mayfield Integrated CDP</u></a>
	<a href="#"><u>WCI Ronanstown</u></a>		<a href="#"><u>One Family</u></a>

Secondly, a [thematic report](#) captures the 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 and community education 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"> <li>• <b>Raise awareness</b> of the mental health benefits of participation in community education across government departments.</li> <li>• <b>Conduct research</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>Scope out opportunities</b> for the HSE and Mental Health Ireland to invest in the psychological supports and counselling offered in community education settings.</li> <li>• <b>Pilot a social prescribing programme</b> designed to explore the impact of social prescribing referrals to participate in community education, on improved mental health and wellbeing.</li> </ul>
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"> <li>• <b>Promote and activate</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>Make provision for student grants</b> accessible to those taking courses on a part-time basis in the FE/HE sector.</li> <li>• <b>Recognise and invest</b> in the role of Community Employment (CE) as an important precursor and partner to community education.</li> </ul>
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"> <li>• <b>Scale up</b> Employability Programmes targeted at lone parents building on the learning from New Futures Employability and Moving On Programmes.</li> <li>• <b>Agencies, with responsibility for training for employment, fund</b> locally designed employment skills programmes developed by community education providers to meet the needs of the local jobs market.</li> <li>• <b>Invest in digital innovation</b> and opportunities to continue to bring online/hybrid learning to lone parents.</li> </ul>

## 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"> <li>• <b>Invest in community education settings located in the heart of local communities and wraparound support</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>Combine investment into a single source of funding</b> 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.</li> </ul>
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## Childcare Matters

5	Ringfence Free Childcare for Lone Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Make provision</b> 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.</li> </ul>
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## Quality Community Education Staff

6	Invest in Community Education Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Re-design</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>Provide</b> specific skills training and CPD for all staff in relevant topics such as trauma informed care and the delivery of online learning.</li> <li>• <b>Dedicate</b> 3% of grant funding to cover costs of CPD.</li> </ul>
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## Positive Role Models

7	Recognise the value and power of good role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Invest in community education settings</b> and the staff teams that facilitate and nurture the power of positive role modeling for better outcomes.</li> <li>• <b>Conduct specific research</b> into the psychological benefits of positive role modeling for vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, in community education settings.</li> </ul>
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Positive Impact on Children and Families		
8	Recognise the power of community education as part of the suite of family support and interventions to address child poverty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Combine investment</b> 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.</li> </ul>
Partnership and Collaboration		
9	Incentivise collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Incentivise</b> collaboration and partnership locally between community settings and further and higher education providers.</li> <li>• <b>Facilitate</b> flexible accreditation systems that encompass community education.</li> <li>• <b>Showcase</b> the greater impact and efficiency of working together to achieve better outcomes for lone parents.</li> <li>• <b>Explore</b> partnership opportunities with employers and other relevant agencies locally.</li> </ul>
Metrics and Monitoring		
10	Strengthen metrics and Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Design and implement</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>Ensure</b> lone parents are a named target group for data capture.</li> <li>• <b>Invest in</b> supporting community settings to strengthen the methods and metrics for tracking the journey through community education.</li> <li>• <b>Ascertain</b> 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.</li> </ul>

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