

# Country Report Ireland – 2022

## Social Entrepreneurship



Prepared for the INSPIRE Project by Workplace Innovation Europe CLG

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## Summary

Building on a long not-for-profit heritage, there is evidence, despite a current lack of robust statistical data, that the social enterprise sector in Ireland has burgeoned during the last two decades.

Social enterprises in Ireland have no distinct legal form. Whilst some emphasise the similarities between not-for-profit organisations of different types, others argue that, as trading organisations, social enterprises need to be given a distinctive identity to separate them from the charitable sector.

The sector's growth has been matched by an increase in the 'organisational density' of the social enterprise support framework. This has helped to create a rich and diverse eco-system within which social entrepreneurship sits, building on the longer-established state structures for enterprise support. However, this newly enriched eco-system (more commonly referred to as the 'social economy') is in a transitional state and greater co-ordination is required. Public policy for the sector is still emerging whilst demonstrating promising signs.

The INSPIRE project, and by implication other countries in Europe, can draw several lessons from the experience of Irish organisations delivering skills and business development support to social entrepreneurs, as well as the resources they have to offer.

Initial analysis suggests high levels of convergence between the learning content of these programmes. For INSPIRE, and for any new actors within the Irish social economy, there is little point in reinventing what is already there, or in duplicating delivery. The challenge is to find ways of adding value to existing provision, particularly by introducing international perspectives and innovations.

## Acknowledgements

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## 1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has followed a slow but steady growth trajectory in Ireland during the current century. Although starting from a low base<sup>1</sup>, its role has increasingly been recognised in Irish Government enterprise policies including the *Action Plan for Jobs* (2012) and its successors, and the *Programme for Government 2011-16*, plus various policy studies by Forfás (the former national policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation) and others. More recently, the Government published the *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022* (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019), launching a portfolio of new policy and funding measures (see section 4 below).

However, Ireland has a much longer tradition of non-governmental intervention in social and environmental issues, led for example by secular charities, religious organisations and community groups. Some organisations see social enterprises as part of a seamless continuum of not-for-profit organisations; others (for example Caffrey, 2020) perceive a degree of confusion in popular perceptions and call for a distinctive vocabulary, arguing that the trading *modus operandi* of social enterprises distinguishes them from the rest of the not-for-profit sector.

Social Enterprises in Ireland are generally characterised in the following terms (Caffrey, 2020; Forfás, 2013):

- Created to achieve social, societal or environmental impacts rather than maximising profit for owners or shareholders.
- Trade through the provision of goods and/or services, reinvesting surpluses into achieving their social objectives.
- Independent from government.
- Governed in a fully accountable and transparent manner.

There is no doubt that social entrepreneurship can play a significant and growing part in Ireland's future, certainly as a proven means of employment growth and economic development but also as a source of social innovation capable of addressing deep-seated economic, social and environment challenges largely intractable to traditional government policy interventions. Moreover, social entrepreneurship speaks to the values and aspirations of a growing number of citizens across a wide age spectrum.

As section 5 argues, Ireland's developing if yet somewhat fragmented social economy has the potential to become a powerful driver for realising this transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> The [2019 Thomson Reuters Foundation Global Study of Social Enterprise](#) ranked Ireland 36<sup>th</sup> out of 44 countries for its social entrepreneurship environment; however this was an improvement from 43<sup>rd</sup> position in 2016.

## 2. The Legal Framework

There is no definition of social enterprise in Irish company law. Many Irish social enterprises are *Companies Limited by Guarantee*, in which the Directors hold minimal share value (typically €1) and are prohibited from sharing dividends.

Some worker and consumer co-operatives, which do not distribute profits to shareholders and are established to achieve a clear social impact, can also be characterised as social enterprises. Though relatively few in number, co-operatives have a distinct legal form under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1893, which lays down specific principles based on democratic control by members. ‘Members’ are defined as employees in the case of worker co-operatives, and membership is open to all service users in the case of consumer co-ops.

In the wider not-for-profit sector, registered *Charities* have a separate legal form which protects them from corporation taxes but generally limits their ability to trade commercially. Charities are overseen by the Charities Regulator, a public body which maintains a public register of charitable organisations operating in Ireland, ensures their compliance with the Charities Acts, and authorises the establishment of new charities and the appointment of trustees.

Some charities have chosen to spin out social enterprises in order to develop trading activity, setting up Companies Limited by Shares or Companies Limited by Guarantee, and retaining the shares.

Recent research commissioned by *Rethink Ireland* identified significant levels of concern about the shortcomings of current legal options, with many social entrepreneurs advocating the creation of a dedicated social enterprise form. However, the research concludes that the argument for a dedicated legal form is currently not sufficiently compelling, and advocates alternative measures to enhance the identity and accreditation of social enterprises within current structures (Lalor & Doyle, 2021).

### 3. Scale

The diversity of the sector makes it challenging to understand the true size and scope of social enterprises. Previous studies (CPA, 2018; Benefacts Analysis, 2019) suggest that there are approximately 29,300 organisations in the entire not-for-profit sector in Ireland, contributing €13.8bn in economic activity and accounting for at least 25,000 jobs.

However, there are no reliable means of disaggregating specific data on social enterprises from the not-for-profit sector as a whole. This is recognised as an issue within the *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland* and is currently being addressed by the Government's Department of Rural and Community Development. The Department is funding a social enterprise [census](#), led by SERI and launched in autumn 2022, intended to provide more robust data on the sector.

According to the CPA (2018):

*If Ireland's social enterprise sector were to approach mean EU levels of output, it is estimated that there would be approximately 65,000 jobs in social enterprises; this figure could grow to as much as 100,000 jobs if Ireland achieved the 9% goal set by the EU under the 'Europe 2020' Strategy (p.15)*

It is this aspiration which informs the current policy vision for Ireland, as discussed in the following section.

## 4. Public Policy

Ireland has a well-established framework for enterprise creation and support, including *Local Authority* economic development programmes, *Local Enterprise Offices* (LEOs), and *Local Development Companies*. At national level, *Enterprise Ireland* provides a range of additional services, especially for high-growth potential start-ups.

Although these services are available to both for-profit and not-for-profit enterprises, their role in Ireland's social economy is discussed in section 5 below.

From a public policy perspective, social enterprise has traditionally been seen as a means of creating jobs (see for example the 2012 *Action Plan for Jobs* and the *Programme for Government 2011-16*). There has been a particular focus on those sections of the labour market facing acute disadvantage. For example, the Department of Justice and Equality, the Prison Service and the Probation Service launched their Social Enterprise Strategy in 2017, designed to support social enterprises to help ex-offenders reintegrate into the labour force (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019). Social enterprise is also seen as part of the solution to unemployment in remote rural areas. Thus the [Western Development Commission](#) has a specific statutory responsibility to support social enterprise creation and development in the west coast of Ireland.

Building on previous steps towards a more comprehensive policy framework, the [National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022](#) (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019) represents an important threshold in Government support for social entrepreneurship, albeit whose full implementation remains incomplete. The policy recognises that social enterprises are distinct from the wider not-for-profit sector in that they share many similarities with for-profit trading enterprises, and identifies the need to raise awareness of their specific nature and purpose. At the same time, the policy acknowledges that business support targeted at social enterprises falls short of that available to mainstream companies.

Critically, the document acknowledges and seeks to address the fragmented nature of public policy support for social enterprise:

*In the absence of a cohesive policy, responsibility for social enterprise in Ireland has, up to recently, been somewhat fragmented, with no single Government Department clearly identified as taking the lead role. Schemes through which social enterprises can source funding to support their activities were also widely dispersed across Departments.* (Ibid. p.14)

The chosen solution is to consolidate lead responsibility and funding mechanisms for social enterprise within a single Government Department – the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Department is now responsible for delivering the policy's three core objectives:



- Policy Objective One: Building Awareness of Social Enterprise**  
*For social enterprise to fully realise its potential it is necessary to build more coherence and raise awareness with the public, other businesses and across government. Developing and promoting an understanding of social enterprise will therefore be a key part of the implementation of this Policy. A particular focus will be to better quantify and explain the positive social, societal or environmental impacts achieved by social enterprises. (Ibid. p.15)*
- Policy Objective Two: Growing and Strengthening Social Enterprise**  
*Supports for social enterprises in Ireland are currently provided by a range of bodies including the Department of Rural and Community Development, Local Development Companies, Local Authorities, and support organisations. However, supports available through public bodies can vary in terms of their effectiveness in meeting the needs of social enterprises. An objective of this Policy is to improve the range, quality and consistency of supports available to social enterprises throughout the country. (Ibid. p.18)*
- Policy Objective Three: Achieving Better Policy Alignment**  
*Developing a better understanding of the interactions between government policy and social enterprise is necessary to ensure that future policy reviews and policy development across government, where relevant, are co-ordinated in a way that is aligned with this National Policy for Social Enterprise. (Ibid. p.22)*

Direct support for social entrepreneurs, reflecting Policy Objectives One and Two, is currently realised through a broad portfolio of funding mechanisms<sup>2</sup>, principally the following:

- [Social Enterprise Small Capital Grants Scheme 2021](#)
- [Social Enterprise Start-up Scheme 2021](#)
- [Awareness Raising Initiative for Social Enterprise \(ARISE\) 2021](#)
- [COVID-19 Regeneration Scheme for Social Enterprise 2021](#)

Based on feedback from our interviews with stakeholder organisations, this policy portfolio is recognised as a significant step forward, yet some respondents argue that there is still a significant gap between policymakers and the needs of social entrepreneurs on the ground, and that little has yet been done to address the wider fragmentation of the social economy in Ireland. We discuss the further in the following section.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/624c74-social-enterprise/>

## 5. The Social Economy in Ireland

Public sector provision is just one component of Ireland's social economy, though in part it is also the longest-established and most widely distributed, and therefore provides the initial point of entry for many prospective social entrepreneurs.

The 31 Local Enterprise Offices are a "local first-stop shop" for new entrepreneurs, and existing micro-enterprise and small business owners, "the front door through which all information on State supports for small and micro-businesses can be accessed and signposted to other supports and bodies with programmes relevant to small business as well as important local services and compliance requirements can be provided"<sup>3</sup>. Services include funding, training, mentoring and guidance for all start-ups. Specific areas of bespoke support can include business strategy, financial planning, market research, marketing & promotion, production planning, distribution, corporate organisation, website planning & design as well as signposting to more specialist services within both the state and non-state sectors. However, some of our interviewees pointed to a disparity between high levels of understanding and engagement with social enterprises in some LEO locations compared with relatively poor performance in others, and called for a 'levelling up' throughout the national system.

Despite the widespread availability of provision for all entrepreneurs, a growing portfolio of targeted support for social entrepreneurship has been developed in recent years by several independent bodies, many of them social enterprises in their own right.

**Enactus Ireland** is part of an international programme to provide higher education students with knowledge and skills associated with social entrepreneurship (Ireland is one of 36 countries around the world who are operating under the Enactus brand). According to Enactus's Ireland Manager Laura Dennehy:

*Our primary aim is actually working with students themselves. We operate a leadership and skills development programme preparing students for future work, preparing graduates who are going to be socially minded. So they may continue as social entrepreneurs, but the majority will go into regular employment or other types of entrepreneurship. What we want is that they take with them a deeper understanding of society issues, a problem-solving approach. Our students when they finish the programme are exceptionally well placed to go into any workplace because they've had that experience of running a project, sometimes running a fully-fledged social enterprise before they graduate from university.*

*Our primary objective is the individual students themselves, and how they can make the world a better place. And we want to be part of the eco-system to support young social entrepreneurs in Ireland. That's what we're doing.*

In 2021, when students were in lockdown, Enactus Ireland registered 514 participants on the programme from universities and colleges across Ireland, and they created 34 social projects which impacted over 4,000 people throughout the country. At least two have now been

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/First-Stop-Shop/>

incorporated as social enterprises, but all the students gained an understanding of social impact, as well as entrepreneurial skills, which they will carry forward into their careers.

[Rethink Ireland](#)'s ambition is to "make our country a more just, equal and sustainable place to live" by supporting "the most innovative non-profit organisations working in communities across the country" with grants, business development and training programmes. Philanthropic donations ("Venture Philanthropy") from several Irish and international corporates, matched by Government funding, plays a large part in resourcing Rethink Ireland's programmes. Rethink Ireland's focus on social enterprise dates from 2018, and its current portfolio of programmes includes programmes to support both start-up and scaling-up stages.

In 2022, Rethink Ireland launched twice-yearly *Start a Social Enterprise Business Courses* targeted at very early-stage social entrepreneurs, even those at the ideation stage or without a clear focus. Based on some seven modules, these online courses lead circa 50 participants through the key stages involved in creating a social enterprise, helping them to make informed decisions and formulate clear objectives. Those that are ready to start a social enterprise and have attended all seven modules can, upon completion of the course, apply for cash grants. Up to five graduates from each course can receive a grant.

The *Social Enterprise Start Up Fund* takes entrepreneurs to the next level, comprising a 4-month accelerator programme providing them with the knowledge and skills to:

- build a plan to grow the social enterprise;
- map key stakeholders and customers;
- create networks within the social enterprise sector;
- increase financial sustainability;
- communicate the vision and mission to a wider audience.

Participants also receive a grant of €10,000 to support the development of their enterprise (50% at the outset and the remainder on successful completion of the programme).

Entry to the programme is a competitive process and entry criteria include the need for the social enterprise to be innovative, and to prove its viability by having created some traded income beforehand. In 2022, the Fund will support up to 20 social enterprises.

The *Social Enterprise Development Fund* targets more established social entrepreneurs with clearly identified innovation and growth potential. Eight social enterprises will be supported in 2022, centring on an intensive and practical six-month Programme which "provides training from best-in-class experts in the private, non-profit and public sector on key functions such as Strategic Planning, Impact Measurement, Financial Management, Governance, Business Modelling, Pitching, Storytelling and more". Participants also receive cash grants of €22,500, paid in two instalments upon delivery of agreed milestones, and bespoke consultancy support.

Overall, Rethink Ireland received almost 800 applications in the last four years, of which only around 100 were funded due to rigorous selection processes.

Over the past 17 years, [Social Entrepreneurs Ireland](#) has been prominent as a passionate advocate for the sector. It has worked with more than 500 social entrepreneurs across the country, aiming to provide support from early-stage ideation to scale-up.

The *Spark Programme* aims to “provide the initial spark that will set some amazing ideas alight” and comprises Spark Sessions, a [Spark Toolkit](#) and small bursaries.

The next step is the *Ideas Academy*, a “three-month programme [to] provide you with the support and direction you need to help you to kick-start your idea and take the next steps to start tackling the problem.” Funded by corporate philanthropy, forty-five places are available on the 2022 programme, made up of 15 social entrepreneur-led projects in groups spread across three regions. The Ideas Academy includes several “core learning days”, peer-to-peer support and networking, an initial bursary of €400, and an opportunity to pitch for a share of €40,000 seed funding at the end of the programme.

The *Action Lab* is “designed for high potential social entrepreneurs who have completed the Ideas Academy and aims to support them through the pilot stage as they build solid foundations”. Ten social entrepreneur-led projects were selected for the 2021/2022 programme. Participants receive action-based group training sessions and peer-to-peer support over 5 months, providing them with practical knowledge and skills relating to social business models, funding, governance, marketing, and communications. Each Action Lab project receives a bursary of €3,000 to support involvement in the programme. At the end of the Action Lab, the participants also have an opportunity to pitch for a portion of funding from a total pot of €15,000.

Five established social entrepreneur-led organisations will be selected in 2022 to participate in the nine-month *Impact* accelerator programme. Participants’ organisations receive support in key business areas and direct funding worth over €20,000, joining “Ireland’s largest network of social entrepreneurs working across the country to solve social problems”. The programme provides one-to-one support, coaching and consultancy as well as group training in areas such as leadership development, communications, governance, strategic planning, fundraising, and resilience. Awardees receive unrestricted funding of €20,000 to support them in building strong foundations for their organisations and enhance social impact.

High potential social entrepreneurs can also progress to a *Scale Partnership*, offering bespoke support to increase social impact over a two-year period.

Since COVID-19, these programmes have largely been delivered online – undoubtedly at the expense of the closeness and peer-bonding that in-person proximity brings, but at the same time helping to improve accessibility for social entrepreneurs in remoter regions. Creating a post-pandemic hybrid will involve continuing experimentation to understand “what works” in practice.

[Social Impact Ireland](#)’s origins date back to 2016 when it was created as a dedicated incubator to help social entrepreneurs test and develop their ideas. The approach aims at blending the personal development of the entrepreneurs with the business development of their

enterprises. Pauline Gannon, Founder and CEO of SII, emphasises the importance of working intensively and individually with social entrepreneurs.

The COVID- 19 pandemic fast-tracked Social Impact Ireland’s expansion from a regional to a national reach through the use of digital communications. As with Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, the post-COVID challenge for SII is to discover a model of hybrid delivery which optimises both depth of engagement and breadth of reach.

The six-month *Incubator Programme* for groups of around ten prospective social entrepreneurs comprises two phases, the first a hybrid series of online and in-person workshops delivered over eight consecutive weeks, the second a tailored programme of one-to-one sessions with consultants reflecting individual needs. Peer-to-peer learning is now increasingly embedded within the Incubator programme, making a tangible impact on participants. At the end of the programme, an Online Showcase celebrates the effort and progress made by participants, and SII brings in external funders (including Rethink Ireland), providing social entrepreneurs with the opportunity to pitch for investment.

SII is currently developing a 12-month programme to support alumni from the Incubator, strengthening business models and helping to secure sustainable funding.

In parallel, a regular programme of workshops open to all social enterprises addresses topics such as marketing, personal strategic direction and social impact, as well as offering weekly clinics for individual entrepreneurs.

Pauline stresses the importance of SII’s work in building an “engaged community” of social entrepreneurs, including through the current development of an online platform. The key word for Pauline in this context is “engaged”, moving well beyond traditional networking by building common purpose. This includes the creation of focused partnerships and themed clusters, including collaboration with for-profit companies.

Advocacy is also central to SSI’s work, collaborating with the Department of Rural and Community Development on shaping social enterprise policy. Pauline is clear about the need to “separate and elevate” profit making social enterprises from the broader not-for-profit sector, giving them a much stronger collective identity: “these profit and impact focused social enterprises do not see themselves as being part of the [charity] third sector, for them it’s about innovation, it’s about creative design, creative thinking and it’s about making profits to have a positive impact on the world.” She emphasises social impact above legal form – a perspective which embraces not-for-profit along with for-profit social enterprises.

SSI also champions the [SE Mark](#), an international accreditation for social enterprises.

In contrast to Social Impact Ireland, [The Wheel](#) represents the wider not-for-profit sector in Ireland, both in its advocacy and campaigning role as a membership organisation, and as a provider of training and support for business development. The Wheel emphasises the commonality of interests between all types of not-for-profit organisations, providing support from the start-up phase through to business strategy, leadership development and governance. However, its Social Enterprise Hub also offers more targeted webinars and workshops for social entrepreneurs on demand-led themes such as procurement and

financial management, plus a helpdesk and advice on funding sources. A dedicated Social Enterprise Network is also available to Wheel members.

The [Community Enterprise Association Ireland](#) (CEAI) represents a network of more than 270 government-funded Community Enterprise Centres across the Republic of Ireland, all of which provide co-working locations, flexible working spaces and support to smaller businesses. Many of these centres are social enterprises in their own right, as is CEAI itself. Although they support both for-profit and not-for-profit businesses, social enterprises are well-represented within many centres. Examples include Dublin-based [Innovate Communities](#) which partners with Social Impact Ireland to support social entrepreneurs, and also facilitates a wider range of youth and community-based projects.

CEAI provides a diverse portfolio of support to its member organisations (and, in turn, to their clients) including thought leadership, professional development opportunities, collective services, peer-to-peer exchanges and access to EU funding, as well as policy advocacy at governmental level.

[Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland](#) (SERI) was founded in 2020 during the pandemic, with the aim of establishing clear leadership within the sector, and is currently building its internal capacity and structure as a membership organisation. Its Board members have close links with the Department of Rural and Community Development.

SERI argues for a clearer definition and higher profile for social enterprise, including the creating of a regulatory structure comparable to that governing the charity sector. SERI has also established a Practitioner Council providing peer-to-peer support and networking opportunities for social entrepreneurs, seen as a vital resource in overcoming the “loneliness” of the role.

The [Irish Social Enterprise Network](#) (ISEN) seeks to be Ireland’s representative network for social enterprise, raising the profile of the sector, giving voice to social enterprises and sharing international good practice. ISEN also runs a series of local networks, problem-solving clinics and webinars.

## 6. Conclusions

### **Overview**

Building on a long not-for-profit heritage, the social enterprise sector in Ireland has burgeoned during the last two decades. We can't be clear about the scale of that growth in the current absence of robust data, but this should be resolved when census data is released later in 2022.

The question of identity is closely linked with the growth of the sector. Whilst some emphasise the similarities between not-for-profit organisations of different types, Caffrey's (2020) research reinforces the views of some of our respondents that, as trading organisations, social enterprises need to be given a distinctive identity to separate them from the charitable sector – thereby raising both their profile and their appeal to prospective entrepreneurs. Whether this identity is best created by means of a new legal form, by regulation or by accreditation (such as the SE Mark) remains a matter for debate.

### **The Social Economy**

The sector's growth has been matched by increased 'organisational density' within the social enterprise support framework. Most of the organisations profiled in the previous section were created in the last twenty years and several of them in the last seven. This has helped to create a rich and diverse social economy within which social entrepreneurship sits, building on the longer-established state structures for enterprise support.

However, it is likely that this newly enriched social economy is in a transitional state. Passion for social entrepreneurship is abundant, but co-ordination and collaboration between the different agencies still appears embryonic. Most are achieving remarkable outcomes but admit to doing so with very limited resources. The (equally embryonic) Government policy framework has yet to address both the challenges of cohesion and capacity building within the social economy. Nonetheless, although criticised for its relative ineffectiveness in some quarters, the active engagement of the state with social entrepreneurship is widely welcomed by stakeholders, and can only be a positive sign for the future.

### **Lessons from support for social entrepreneurship in Ireland**

The INSPIRE project, and by implication other countries in Europe, can draw several lessons from the experience of Irish organisations delivering skills and business development support to social entrepreneurs, as well as learning from the resources that they have to offer.

#### ***Failure is positive***

The Irish system works on the principal of a funnel, with a wide mouth at one end but only a small exit. In other words, many prospective social entrepreneurs enter the support system but only a minority leave with the creation of robust and sustainable social enterprises. There are two reasons why this is not perceived as failure: firstly because it weeds out unviable business ideas at each stage of the process, releasing individuals for more productive careers rather than allowing them to struggle in vain; secondly because most participants emerge

with enhanced entrepreneurial skills, project experience and social awareness which they can carry into their future careers. There are lessons from this for the design of future projects such as INSPIRE.

***Learning resources are already abundant***

Four of the organisations profiled above are experienced in delivering accomplished skills and business development programmes for social entrepreneurs whilst others offer complementary forms of learning and support. Within Ireland it would be timely to create a learning network in which programmes can be peer-reviewed, good practices shared, and common challenges addressed collectively.

Our initial analysis suggests high levels of convergence between the learning content of these programmes. For INSPIRE, and for any new actors within the Irish social economy, there is little point in reinventing what is already there, or in duplicating delivery. The challenge is to find ways of adding value to existing provision, particularly by introducing international perspectives and innovations.



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