



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Trading for Impact

National Social Enterprise Policy 2024 – 2027



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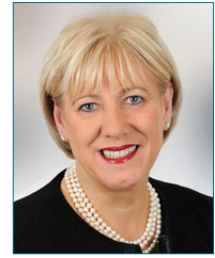
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Minister's Foreword



***Trading for Impact* the National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027 represents an ambitious step forward in the Government's ongoing commitment to social enterprise.**

Building upon the foundation laid by its predecessor, Ireland's first ever social enterprise policy, it puts forward a vision designed to help cultivate and sustain strong, impactful social enterprises in Ireland. This will enrich the social, environmental and economic well-being of people living in our communities.

The policy's title, *Trading for Impact*, has been selected to highlight both the core objective of social enterprises, which is to deliver social or environmental impact and, importantly, their distinct nature as businesses which must strive for sustainability and growth through the income generated via the trade in the goods and services they provide. The policy takes a cross-government approach, to encourage further co-ordination of social enterprise policy across departments and to provide for consideration of their important role when shaping and executing policies.

Social enterprises play an important role in promoting social inclusion and equality, providing supports and employment opportunities to more marginalised groups and minorities such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants, the Traveller community, and former offenders. They can address societal issues such as food poverty, housing provision and the environment.

The landscape of social enterprise is evolving, driven by innovation and a growing recognition of the profound impact that these organisations can have. The social enterprise sector will continue to grow in size and significance over the coming years supported by developments at EU and international level. Now, more than ever, we have an opportunity to harness this momentum to drive positive change and foster inclusive growth.

This policy is a blueprint for sustainable growth of the sector over the coming years, laying out 57 concrete actions. By harnessing the innovative spirit and collective ingenuity of our people, we will create sustainable pathways to improved prosperity that enhance both quality of life and economic opportunity. The implementation of this policy will provide crucial support to the social enterprise sector, and in doing so enhance its ability to contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals

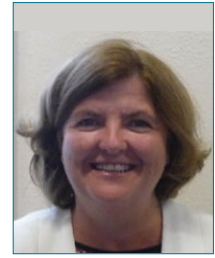
I've had the privilege of observing directly the impact, creativity, and perseverance of social enterprises nationwide as well as witnessing how they consistently enhance our communities. I eagerly look forward to the increased growth and contribution of social enterprise to Irish society in the years ahead, and a future where they remain at the centre of our communities as vibrant centres of innovation and collaboration.

I wish to extend my gratitude to all those working in social enterprises whose daily efforts contribute to sustaining and growing the sector for their significant contributions across the country to their communities, society, and the economy. You have been pivotal to the success to date of social enterprise in Ireland. I'd also like to thank all of those who shared their insights with us, allowing us to truly develop this policy in partnership with the social enterprise sector.

Minister Heather Humphreys TD

*Minister for Rural and Community Development
2024*

Secretary General's Foreword



A primary goal within my department is to develop a strong enabling policy framework and supports to benefit the people of Ireland as well as those organisations that deliver services to people and communities, and tackle social issues, thereby contributing to a fairer and more inclusive society.

Trading for Impact the National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027 forms another key building block in this enabling policy framework. It is designed to be delivered alongside, and operate in tandem with, other key policies including the National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028, the National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025, Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025; and Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024.

Trading for Impact proposes greater ambition than the first social enterprise policy which ran from 2019 – 2022. It focuses on five key objectives; Building Awareness of Social Enterprise, Growing and Sustaining Social Enterprise, Supporting the Green Transition, National and International Engagement, and Impact Measurement. Under each objective concrete actions are defined alongside commencement points, and the responsible lead organisations. These actions are SMART: Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound, and will create an enabling environment for social enterprise to grow and contribute to Ireland's social and economic progress.

This policy is built on a solid base of up to date research, data and consultation. This includes a recent baseline data collection exercise of social enterprise in Ireland commissioned by The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). This confirmed the great value that social enterprises bring to our communities.

There are approximately 4,300 social enterprises making a significant contribution to the Irish economy and jobs market, employing 3% of the Irish population with a combined income of €2.34 billion. An in-depth policy review of social enterprise in Ireland undertaken by OECD experts has also provided a foundation stone for this policy. The recent National Economic and Social Council's report on 'Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland', which proposes greater ambition for social enterprise, has also been influential.

A partnership approach has been central towards developing the policy. Extensive consultation over the past two years has ensured that the policy is both by the sector and for the sector. This has included regional consultation events, submissions by stakeholders, and numerous bilateral meetings between DRCD officials and key stakeholders, including other Government departments, social enterprises, and social enterprise representative organisations. A final stage open public consultation for the policy ensured that the public and all interested parties have been given an opportunity to feed in to the policy.

This policy represents a strong continuing commitment to social enterprises from Government. *Trading for Impact* will foster a vibrant and resilient social enterprise sector, building on the success of the first policy, and going further in order to grow and sustain the sector for the years to come. I have no doubt that this policy will empower our communities, foster economic growth and innovation, and contribute significantly to the betterment of our society for the years to come.

Mary Hurley

Secretary General

Department of Rural and Community Development

Acronyms

ALMP	Active Labour Market Programme
ARISE	Awareness Raising Initiative for Social Enterprises
BIC	British Irish Council
BIDG	Bioeconomy Implementation and Development Group
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CCMA	City and County Managers Association
CE	Community Employment
CLG	Company Limited by Guarantee
CSP	Community Services Programme
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
C&V	Community and Voluntary
DAF	Dormant Accounts Fund
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth
DoE	Department of Education
DECC	Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DFHERIS	Department of Further & Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science
DoJ	Department of Justice
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DSP	Department of Social Protection
DCC	Dublin City Council
EaSI	EU programme for Employment and Social Innovation
EI	Enterprise Ireland
EPR	Extended Producer Responsibility
EPSCO	EU Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
EU	European Union
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GECES	EU Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprise

GPP	Green Public Procurement
GNI*	Modified Gross National Income (Also known as GNI “star”)
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HPSU	High Potential Start-Up
ILDN	Irish Local Development Network
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISEN	Irish Social Enterprise Network
LAG	Local Action Group
LDC	Local Development Company
LCDC	Local Community Development Committee
LDS	Local Development Strategies
LECP	Local Economic and Community Plan
LEO	Local Enterprise Office
LGMA	Local Government Management Agency
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NTF	National Training Fund
NFTE	Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OGP	Office of Government Procurement
RESS	Renewable Energy Support Scheme
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
RSS	Rural Social Scheme
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SERI	Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland
SERNI	Social Economy Research Network of Ireland
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
SIFI	Social Innovation Fund Ireland
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SPAG	Strategic Procurement Advisory Group
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
TY	Transition Year
UCC	University College Cork
WDC	Western Development Commission
WISE	Work Integration Social Enterprise

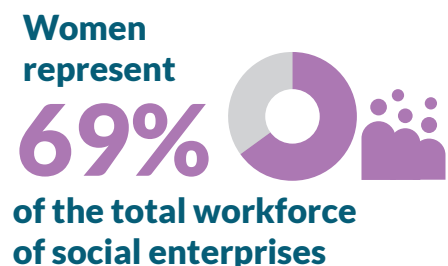
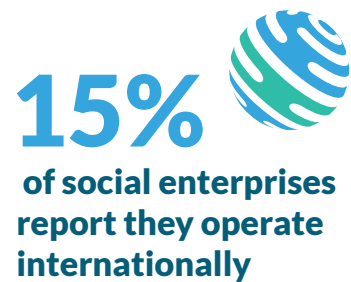
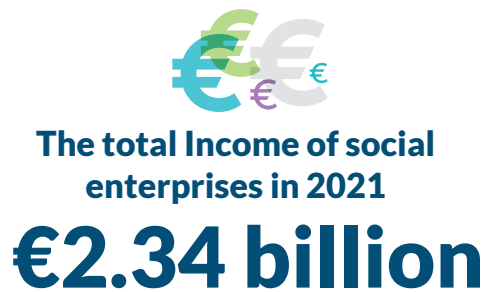


The purpose of this policy is to help cultivate and sustain strong and impactful social enterprises in Ireland to enrich the social, environmental, and economic well-being of people living in our communities.

The policy represents a strong commitment by Government to social enterprises and a recognition of their value and potential.

Social Enterprise in Ireland

Key Data



Source: [Social Enterprise in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#)

Executive Summary

A social enterprise is an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders.

The objective of *Trading for Impact* the National Social Enterprise Policy 2024- 2027 is to help cultivate and sustain strong and impactful social enterprises in Ireland. In doing so, social enterprises can enrich the social, environmental, and economic well-being of people living in our communities. The policy represents a strong commitment by Government to social enterprises, and a recognition of their value and potential. The policy's title is selected to reflect both the social mission of enterprises within the sector as well as the fact that trading in goods and services is core to their activity.

Building on the success of its predecessor, *Trading for Impact* is more ambitious and takes into account the learning gained since the introduction of the first National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland in 2019. It has a new focus on areas that have grown in significance such as the green transition, embedding social enterprise considerations in local and regional enterprise strategies, as well as providing for increased collaboration between stakeholders.

The policy is informed by an updated evidence base comprising an OECD Review of Social Enterprise in Ireland, a National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) Review of Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland and a baseline data collection exercise. A widespread consultation process has been undertaken in the development of the policy which included engagement with all relevant stakeholders.

Trading for Impact has two parts, **A** and **B**, designed purposefully so they may be read independently or together as a single policy.

Part A

Part A provides a description of the social enterprise ecosystem in Ireland. It seeks to prompt a clearer understanding of what social enterprise means, as well as describing the current social enterprise landscape in Ireland. The policy speaks to the breadth and diversity of organisations within the social enterprise sector, as well as the strengths and challenges this diversity can bring. Key definitions within the context of the policy are presented and an overview is provided of the context within which social enterprises work. Using information from a baseline data collection exercise, data is provided on the sector's scale, spread and nature in Ireland. A description of the broad range of supports that Government provides for social enterprises is given. Also detailed is Ireland's contribution to important policies on social enterprise at the EU and international level, as well as the relevance of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.



Part B

Part B details the policy objectives for social enterprise over the years 2024 to 2027, their rationale, and the associated actions which will be undertaken to deliver on these objectives. A chapter is dedicated to each objective, under which the 57 actions are defined.

Policy Objective 1:

Building Awareness of Social Enterprise focuses on actions that will generate a wider public and institutional understanding of social enterprise and its potential. This includes through awareness raising initiatives, education, and youth engagement.

Policy Objective 2:

Growing and Sustaining Social Enterprise focuses on actions that will allow social enterprises to benefit from supports to improve their growth and sustainability. This includes improving access to existing enterprise supports, developing new tailored supports, improving opportunities for access to markets, and improving the capabilities of social enterprises.

Policy Objective 3:

Supporting the Green Transition focuses on actions that will assist social enterprises in contributing towards the green transition and delivering on climate action targets. This includes by ensuring social enterprises can access relevant circular economy funding opportunities, and avail of renewable energy and bioeconomy opportunities.

Policy Objective 4:

National and International Engagement focuses on actions that will deepen Ireland's engagement and alignment on social enterprise policy on a national, regional, EU, and international level. This includes representing the Irish position and contributing to policies at the EU and International level. Enhanced engagement at the national level is also targeted, including through co-ordination between public sector organisations, and embedding social enterprise considerations in local and regional policies.

Policy Objective 5:

Impact Measurement focuses on actions to improve levels and quality of social enterprise data, access to social impact measurement tools, and deepen engagement with academic institutions. This includes through commissioning research on and providing support for impact measurement, expanding on the baseline data collection exercise, and convening a social enterprise academic engagement group.

It is clear that the importance of social enterprise within the broader economy will continue to grow in the years to come in line with significant EU and international policy developments. *Trading for Impact* will be the central blueprint for growing and sustaining the social enterprise sector in Ireland. Implementation of the policy will be monitored by a Stakeholder Engagement Group, which will consist of members of key Government departments, public sector organisations, and social enterprise sector representatives.



Photo by Aengus McMahon -
courtesy of an Mheitheal Rothar

PART A

An Overview of Social Enterprise

1 | Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Background

The Department of Rural and Community Development holds lead responsibility for social enterprise policy in Ireland. The department was established in 2017 to provide a renewed and consolidated focus on rural and community development, gathering previously disparate responsibilities for governance of the sector within a single responsible department. This represents what continues to be a strong Government commitment to improving the social and economic well-being of our citizens and communities.

The Department's mission is "to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland". This involves a range of policy initiatives and funding actions to improve the economic and social development of both rural and urban areas, including addressing gaps in meeting the social needs of those areas.

The central aim of *Trading for Impact*, the National Social Enterprise Policy 2024 - 2027, is to foster an enabling environment for social enterprises in Ireland to grow and meet their potential, and in doing so enrich Irish society and the economy.

Part A of this policy document provides an overview of the social enterprise ecosystem in Ireland.

Part B outlines five key thematic objectives which were identified in consultation with key stakeholders, the social enterprise sector, Government departments and public sector organisations, and through an open public consultation exercise¹. Specific actions are identified under each theme, alongside commencement points for delivery and responsibility assigned for their implementation.

Trading for Impact will align with, and be complemented by, a range of related sectoral policies. This includes [Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities](#), the strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland, the [White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030, Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025](#), the [National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025](#), the [Roadmap for Social Inclusion](#) and the [National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028](#). Taken collectively, this policy framework will support the range of organisations that are providing services to communities and tackling social, economic, or environmental issues.

Ireland has a long and rich history of activities in the spirit of social enterprise. Recognising the sector's increasing contribution to Irish society, in 2019 the Government published the [National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022](#). This was the first policy in the history of the State aimed specifically at developing and realising the potential of social enterprise. Since then, there has been significant public investment to grow and strengthen social enterprise in a variety of ways and there has been real progress in advancing the potential, impact, and awareness of the sector. The success of the first policy is evidenced by recent research, which saw Ireland ranking in the top tier of European nations in a survey regarding the perceived level of political support for social enterprise². *Trading for Impact* intends to build on this success, taking account of input from stakeholders and the lessons learned to date.

1 <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/93961-national-social-enterprise-policy-for-ireland-closing-phase-public-consultation/>

2 <https://euclidnetwork.eu/download/the-state-of-social-enterprise-support-in-europe-and-neighbouring-countries/>

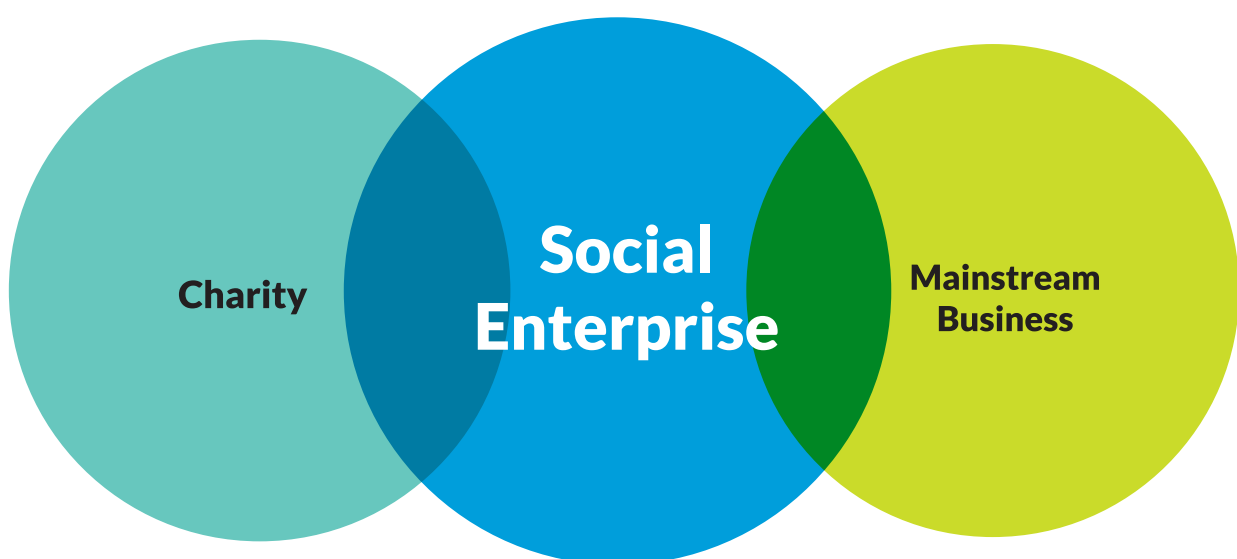
1.2 A Vibrant and Diverse Sector

A social enterprise is an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders. The term social enterprise encompasses a broad array of organisations and in Ireland the sector is characterised by its great diversity. It traverses boundaries with other more traditional and well-established sectors including the community and voluntary, and non-profit sectors and also with the (for-profit) enterprise sector. The spectrum ranges from local community-based social enterprises to larger internationally trading social enterprises and from childcare providers to renewable energy innovators. This diversity is also apparent in the geographical coverage of social enterprises that are evident across every county of Ireland in both urban and rural areas. This reflects the vibrancy of social enterprises and their relevance in tackling diverse and complex social, environmental and economic challenges. It also shows the potential of social enterprises to provide employment opportunities to different demographics.

However, this diversity also presents a number of challenges. This includes establishing a readily recognisable identity for the sector that can be clearly understood by the public and wider business sector.

Social enterprises share a number of common features including pursuing ‘profit with purpose’, having social and / or environmental objectives and developing economic activity. Simultaneously, they can have different needs and interests that are informed by their sector of activity, location, size, and age. Whilst not a definitive categorisation, social enterprises could be said to include the following;

- Work integration social enterprises (WISEs) which support disadvantaged people to prepare for, and participate in, the labour market;
- Enterprise development social enterprises which support the creation of other enterprises (e.g. through the provision of office space and facilities);
- ‘Deficient demand’ social enterprises which seek to meet a demand for goods and services within a community where there is insufficient demand for the operation of a regular market due, for example, to an apparent economic and social disadvantage or low density of population;
- Environmental social enterprises which focus on climate issues and environmental sustainability; and
- Social enterprises contracted to deliver public services, often in disadvantaged areas and communities³.



³ This can include, for example, certain organisations funded by the HSE through Sections 38 and 39 of the Health Act 2004

1.3 Definitions for the Purposes of this Policy

While awareness and understanding of social enterprise have improved, confusion can exist regarding the meaning and scope of related terms such as social enterprise, social economy, social innovation, and social entrepreneurship. It is evident that there exists a broad range of interpretations as to what these terms mean. As such, for the purposes of this policy, it is appropriate to define the intended scope of a number of terms and concepts in order to encourage more coherent debate.

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises in Ireland do not have any single or prescribed legal or company form. The first National Social Enterprise Policy set out a definition of social enterprise which was administrative in nature and sought to capture the unique features of the Irish social enterprise sector.

The 2019-2022 policy confirmed that the definition of social enterprise would evolve nationally and internationally as social enterprises themselves adapted to new societal challenges. It also confirmed that the definition will evolve as national and local governments and wider society understand more fully the nature of social enterprise and the contribution they make to social and economic development.

The definition focuses on their social mission, clear trading and economic activities, governance, and an asset lock⁴. The definition, as outlined here, has been updated to provide that surpluses must be fully or primarily reinvested into achieving social objectives. In order to provide for policy coherence in the years ahead, the Irish definition now more expressly aligns with those of the European Union⁵ and the OECD⁶ while reflecting the Irish sector's particular characteristics and conditions. Based on stakeholder feedback received during the public consultation process, the definition also ensures that the co-operative movement, which may distribute dividends, will not be excluded from being considered social enterprises⁷.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE?

- A social enterprise is an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders.
- It pursues its objectives by trading on an ongoing basis through the provision of goods and / or services, and by reinvesting surpluses fully or primarily into achieving social objectives.
- It is governed in a fully accountable and transparent manner and is independent of the public sector. If dissolved, it should transfer its assets to another organisation with a similar mission.

While creating no hierarchy of importance, this definition is intended to encompass a broad spectrum of organisations from those operating on market margins (often called deficient demand social enterprises) right up to highly commercial, and in some cases, internationally trading social enterprises.

Like many other organisations in the broader social economy, rather than having a traditional hierarchical 'top down' management structure, some social enterprises may be managed more 'democratically' by their staff. Some international definitions specifically refer to the democratic management of social enterprises, however, in general this is not a systematically prevalent feature in Ireland and is not considered a prerequisite for Irish social enterprises.

⁴ An asset lock provides that assets of an organisation cannot be appropriated for private benefit, and are transferred to a similar organisation on dissolution.

⁵ EU definition of social enterprise: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu/social-enterprises_en.

⁶ OECD Definition of Social Enterprise: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0472%20>

⁷ As Trading for Impact is progressed, where necessary, additional processes will be put in place to provide that applicants for public funds demonstrate appropriate structures and safeguards in terms of company form, asset locks, and financial records etc.

Social Economy

The terms ‘social enterprise’ and ‘social economy’ are often used interchangeably. However, social enterprise is in fact a subset of a much broader social economy. The social economy also incorporates charities (of which there are c. 7,800 in Ireland, not including primary or secondary schools registered as charities), co-operatives (c. 930 in Ireland⁸), associations, mutual organisations, and foundations. Often referred to internationally as the ‘solidarity economy’ and / or the ‘social and solidarity economy’, organisations within the social economy are driven by societal objectives, values of solidarity, the primacy of people over profit and, in many cases, are managed in a co-operative or inclusive manner⁹.

Social Innovation

Social innovation refers to solutions that primarily aim to improve the quality of life of individuals and communities through increasing their well-being from a social, economic or environmental perspective. These solutions can, for example, include new services or products.

There is a strong interrelationship between social enterprise and social innovation, with many social enterprises forming or operating as a result of social innovation. Social enterprises are often the business model used for delivering or up-scaling ideas initiated by social innovators and social entrepreneurs.

Social innovations can be developed by social entrepreneurs, community and voluntary organisations, public institutions, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). They can be found across a wide range of fields such as healthcare, agriculture, employment, childcare, community development, equality, social inclusion, rural development, or recycling. The credit union movement is one of the most well most known and recognisable examples of a social innovation in the country. Genio¹⁰ is an example of an Irish organisation that works with Government and philanthropy to support social services to solve complex problems and scale social innovations.

Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurs can be described as individuals, communities or groups with innovative solutions to society’s most pressing social problems. They are ambitious and persistent, tackling major social issues and offering new ideas for wide-scale change.

Organisations such as [Social Entrepreneurs Ireland](https://www.socialentrepreneurs.ie/)¹¹ (SEI), and [Rethink Ireland](https://rethinkireland.ie/)¹², provide support to social entrepreneurs and innovators through funding, or other measures such as advice, mentoring, training, and networking opportunities. In many cases, social enterprises are established as a means of delivering ideas initiated by social entrepreneurs.

Philanthropy

Whilst having no single definition in Ireland or internationally, the [National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028](#) uses ‘private giving for public good’ as a working definition of philanthropy. Philanthropy is strategic and planned to benefit society and deliver public good. It can take many forms including the provision of resources to individuals and organisations by way of gifts, grants, legacies, technical support, capacity building, in-kind donations, and scholarships. It can be undertaken by families, individuals, and corporations and, in terms of management and disbursement of funds, is often managed by intermediary organisations.

One of the ways that Government currently encourages philanthropic giving in Ireland is through Government and corporate partnerships, often facilitated by an intermediary body. Such partnerships can generate additional funding for initiatives for community well-being including social enterprises and social innovation.

The National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028 will increase awareness, create an enabling environment, and accelerate engagement with philanthropy in Ireland for social good, including through social enterprise.

8 Generally co-operatives will be registered as industrial and provident societies by the Register of Friendly Societies, although being a co-operative is not a prerequisite to register. Some are also incorporated under the Companies Act 2014 which does not require indicating whether the organisation is a co-operative

9 OECD definition of social economy: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0472%20>

10 <https://www.genio.ie/>

11 <https://www.socialentrepreneurs.ie/>

12 <https://rethinkireland.ie/>

Community and Voluntary Sector Organisations

The community and voluntary sector comprises a diverse range of community, voluntary and charitable organisations which typically share the following common features in that they are:

- **organised, as distinguished from informal or ad hoc, purely social or familial groupings, with an institutional presence or structure,**
- **non-profit distributing, insofar that they do not return profits to a set of managers or owners,**
- **independent, particularly from Government and other public authorities,**
- **voluntary, containing some element of voluntary or unpaid participation,**
- **self-governing and in control of their own affairs, and**
- **involved in activity contributing to the public good.**

The contribution of the community and voluntary sector is fundamental to addressing social objectives, and many social enterprises have evolved from the work of community and voluntary organisations. Therefore, there is a significant crossover between the social enterprise model and the traditional community and voluntary sector.

What differentiates a social enterprise is the explicit objective to generate revenue and profit from ongoing trading in goods and services. Community and voluntary bodies can use a social enterprise model to deliver some of their services. However, the social enterprise model does not suit all community and voluntary activities.

1.4 The Operating Context for Social Enterprises

Social enterprises are active across many sectors such as childcare, housing, health, food, tourism, recycling, transportation, and arts and culture. Both in Ireland and across the European Union, social enterprises are increasingly recognised as being an important part of the broader enterprise ecosystem. NESCE has proposed greater ambition for the sector in Ireland, and highlighted that development of the sector has the capacity to contribute strongly to the economy and to society¹³.

Social enterprises often play an important role in social inclusion and equality, providing supports and employment opportunities to more marginalised groups and minorities such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants, the Traveller community, and former offenders. They can address societal issues such as food poverty, housing provision, and the environment. For example, social enterprises made a significant contribution during the COVID-19 pandemic including the production of personal protective equipment and the provision of meals to the most at-risk. They are innovative, entrepreneurial, and are increasingly utilising new technologies and creative approaches to address the various challenges facing the world. They are also important players in Ireland's ambition to move towards a zero-waste future as set out in the [Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy 2020-2025](#) in areas such as recycling and / or upcycling household bulky waste.

Given their focus on delivering social impact, social enterprises contribute significantly to the delivery of Government policy goals and many work hand in hand with public bodies in the delivery of their services. By trading on the market economy, social enterprises benefit from an independent income stream that can provide a greater level of independence and long-term stability. In the longer term social enterprises build community wealth to aid local economic development and increase the capacity of the sector, while at the same time relieving demands on the public finances.

13 Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland, 2023, NESCE: <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/social-enterprise-on-the-island-of-ireland/>



Social Enterprise Policy Development and Consultation Process

A partnership approach was adopted in the development of this policy, with ongoing engagement and consultation with stakeholders being key principles throughout the development process. This has included discussion with social enterprises, and their representative bodies, along with support organisations, to obtain their inputs to the process. In addition, six regional consultation workshops took place in Donegal, Waterford, Dublin, Limerick, Cork and Galway. The 2022 National Social Enterprise Conference also included a workshop to provide participants with an opportunity to contribute to policy development.

Given the importance of ensuring the policy is cross-governmental in nature, bilateral meetings and engagements were held between relevant Government departments. A final public consultation informed by these initial discussions was then held between December 2023 and January 2024.

To secure an independent evidence base to support the development of this policy, in 2022 the OECD was engaged to undertake a review of social enterprise in Ireland. The process included an analysis of the Irish social enterprise policy ecosystem. The OECD team met with over sixty stakeholders including social enterprises, Government departments, social enterprise networks and support organisations, higher education institutes, regional organisations, social finance providers, social innovation organisations, and youth organisations. The OECD's [Boosting Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Development in Ireland](#) was published in November 2023.

This policy is also informed by the DRCD commissioned [Social Enterprises in Ireland - A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#), which was published in 2023.

This first-of-its-kind research provided up to date data on the size, scale, spread and nature of the social enterprise sector across the country, and will provide a baseline on which future data reports will iterate. Results of the exercise are discussed in section 2.1.

Rural Proofing Social Enterprise Policy

Social enterprises are an important part of local economies in rural and regional areas. They often fill gaps in markets, which due to a demand deficiency and a low population base are unattractive to singularly commercially-orientated businesses. These social enterprises may provide essential services such as meals on wheels, child or social care, or act as a community hub and gathering space.

The development of this policy has involved a rural proofing process, which sought to develop a broader understanding of the differences between social enterprises located across urban and rural areas. Rural proofing entails viewing policy through a 'rural lens' to allow consideration of the impact of policy on rural economies and communities. Proposals can then be adapted, where necessary, to take advantage of opportunities that may exist in those communities and / or avoid any unintended impacts in these areas. This rural proofing process has included:

- A public consultation event in July 2023 on The Future of Social Enterprise in Rural Ireland.
- Commissioned research on mapping social enterprises and their impact on sustainable rural development in Ireland. This is the first nationwide study on the relationship between social enterprises and different types of rural areas and their impact on sustainable rural development, and will provide evidence-based knowledge for the future development of place-based policies.

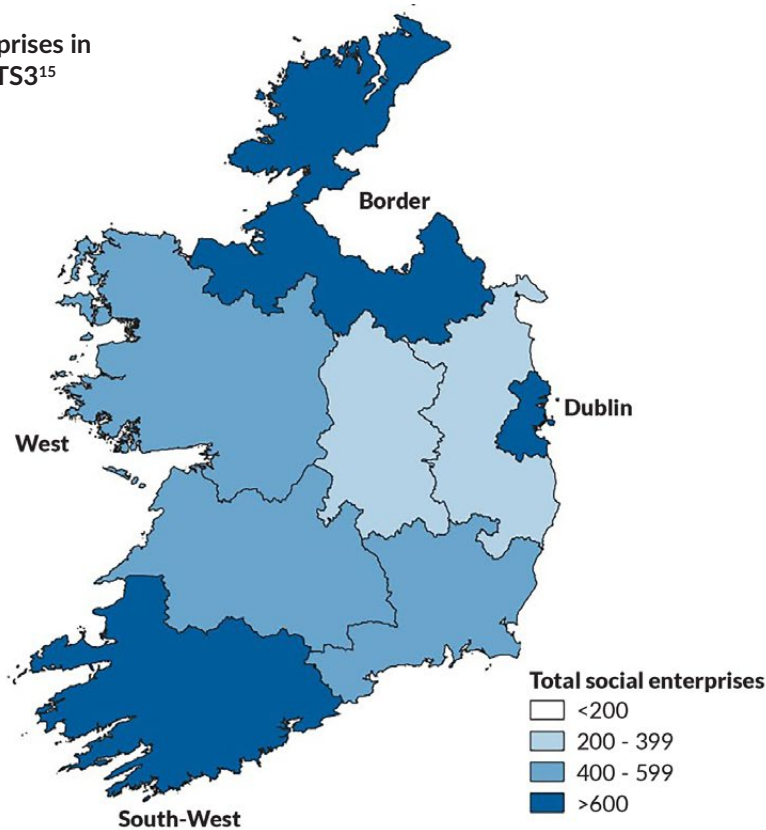
- The inclusion of actions under this policy to:
 - support a ‘Social Enterprise Shared Business Service’ pilot model in a rural community (see action 18);
 - deliver research on mapping social enterprises and their impact on sustainable rural development in Ireland; and
 - expand the 2023 baseline data collection exercise, which will include considering how best to identify the rural characteristics of social enterprises in further iterations.

43% (or 1,864) of Irish social enterprises are located in rural areas. On a population basis, the concentration of social enterprise is higher in rural and highly rural areas rather than urban. 45% of rural social enterprises tend to have a local focus while this decreases to 33% in urban areas. Respondents reported a median annual income for rural enterprises of €80,000 as compared to a median of €254,000 for urban enterprises.

The research has confirmed that whilst the childcare and community infrastructure / local development sectors account for the largest sectors in both urban and rural locations, they are more important for rural areas representing 51.2% of all rural enterprise as compared to 37.2% for urban. Social enterprises in tourism, heritage, and the creative industries are more relevant in rural areas, especially in highly rural / remote areas.

The identification of the particular needs of rural and regional social enterprises is best addressed at a local and regional level as has been demonstrated for example by Údarás na Gaeltachta’s¹⁴ development of its current ‘[Social Enterprise Development Strategy](#)’. To this end, the actions outlined under this policy have been advanced to ensure alignment of social enterprise policy development with other national and sub-national policies which are critical to rural and regional development (e.g. Our Rural Future, Regional Enterprise Plans, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, Local Development Company strategies, Local Economic and Community Plans). Given the more dispersed nature of rural social enterprises, stakeholders have also voiced the need to improve networking opportunities in rural areas in order to develop alliances and seek improved economies of scale including through utilising options such as shared services models (see action 18).

Distribution of Social Enterprises in (Republic of) Ireland by NUTS3¹⁵



14 Údarás na Gaeltachta is the state development agency with responsibility for the economic, social and cultural development of Ireland’s Gaeltacht regions.

15 The nomenclature of territorial units for statistics, abbreviated NUTS (from the French) is a geographical nomenclature subdividing the economic territory of the European Union (EU) into regions at three different levels (NUTS 1, 2 and 3 respectively, moving from larger to smaller territorial units, with NUTS3 being the smallest).

2 | The Social Enterprise Ecosystem in Ireland

2.1 Social Enterprise in Ireland

Scale and Nature of the Sector in Ireland

To address a need for more comprehensive data, a [baseline data collection exercise](#)¹⁶ on social enterprise in Ireland was published by Government in May 2023. This made available the first comprehensive data on the national landscape of social enterprises including their size, geographical spread, sectors of activities, legal forms, contribution to employment, volunteers, board members, finances, and contribution to the economy.

The report identified 4,335 social enterprises. It indicates that the sector makes a significant contribution to the Irish economy, with a total income of €2.34 billion in 2021, representing c. 1% of Ireland's modified GNI¹⁷ (or 0.63% of GDP). About 60% had an income of over €100,000, with the median income of all social enterprises being €180,000. 77% of social enterprises are registered as companies limited by guarantee (CLG), while the majority are also registered as charities.

The long-established nature of many social enterprises in Ireland was confirmed with approximately half in operation for more than 20 years. However, 16% of the total were established in the last 4 years, also pointing to a dynamic and evolving sector. There are approximately 8.5 social enterprises per 10,000 inhabitants with 57% of these in urban areas (8.3 per 10,000 inhabitants). 68% of social enterprises are concentrated in four sectors:

- **Childcare;**
- **Community Infrastructure & Local Development;**
- **Health, Youth Services & Social Care, and**
- **Heritage Festivals, Arts & Creative Industry.**

In relation to the markets they serve, 75% of social enterprises reported a local focus which increased to 84% in rural areas. 15% of social enterprises reported they operate internationally. Social enterprises are typically microenterprises (57%) with a total of between one and nine employees, or small enterprises with a total of between 10 and 49 employees (35%). Medium sized enterprises employ between 50 and 249 and make up 6% of the total, while large enterprises employing 250 or more make up a small number (1%). Most social enterprise income (64%) is derived from a mix of trading (goods and services) as well as grants. 84% of social enterprises report income derived from multiple sources.

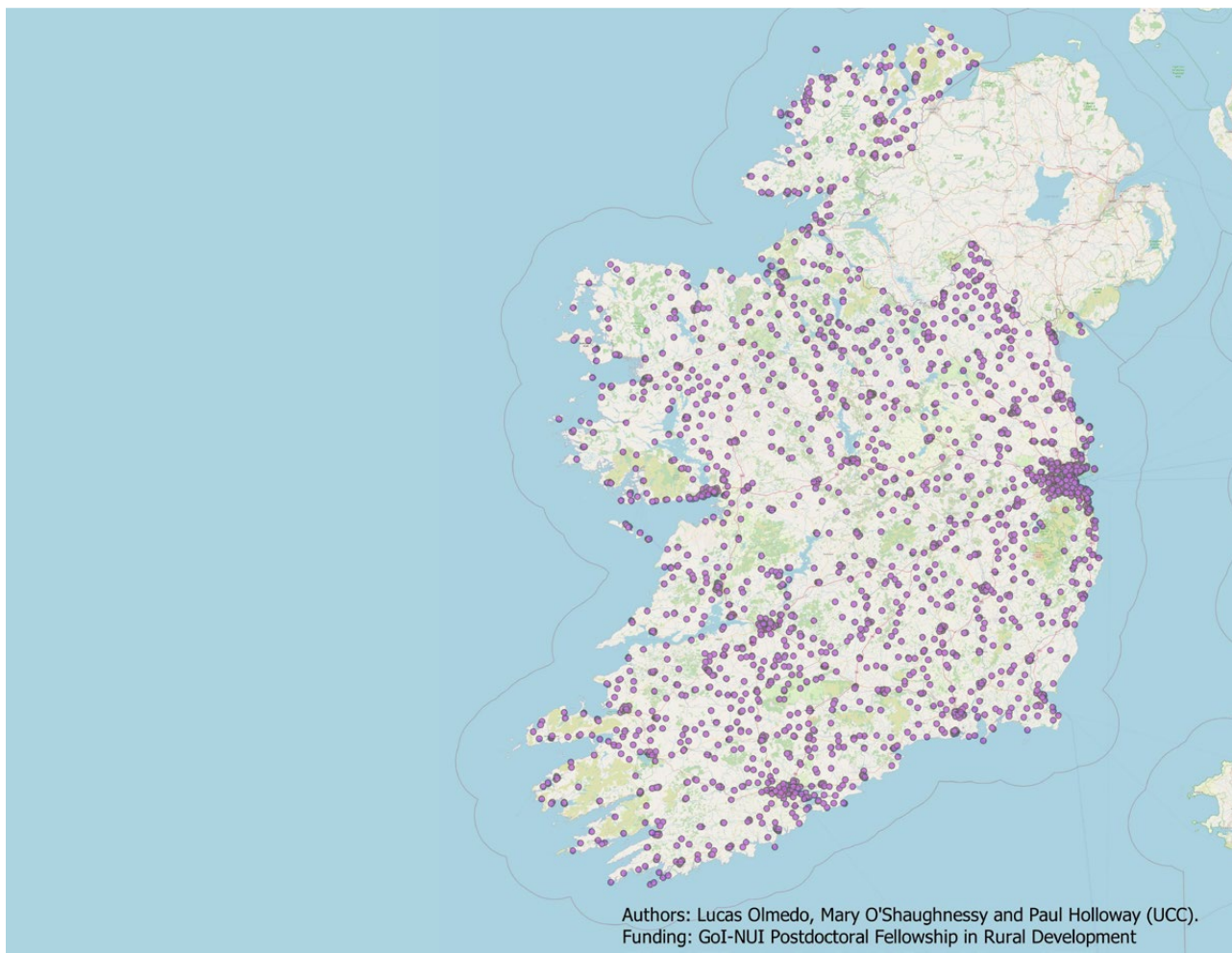
Social enterprises reported a significant employment contribution with 84,382 employees or 3.7% of the Irish workforce. Most employment is concentrated in the areas of health, youth services, social care, childcare, and training and work integration. Women represent 69% of the total workforce and the age of the overall workforce is primarily between 31 and 50 (48.6%). 47% of the workforce is part-time. Active Labour Market Programmes are an important feature of the sector with 60% of social enterprises employing people through such programmes. Indications are that this is more prevalent in rural areas (65%).

Social enterprises are clear that volunteer work is critical in developing activities, taking strategic decisions, and developing connections with communities. An estimated 74,825 volunteers participate in the sector, split between 44,501 active volunteers and 30,324 board members. 46% of the active volunteers are aged over 50 with females representing 54% of these. Male volunteer participation tends to be greater on boards (54%) with an older profile (63% over 50). This age profile, especially on company boards, is not unique to the social enterprise sector.

16 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>

17 Modified Gross National Income (GNI) is an indicator designed specifically to measure the size of the Irish economy by excluding globalisation effects: <https://www.cso.ie/en/interactivezone/statisticsexplained/nationalaccountsexplained/modifiedgni/>

Social enterprise distribution in Ireland



Supports Available for Social Enterprises

The Government's objective is to ensure that a full range of appropriate supports is available to social enterprises. Details of supports will continue to be made available on a central repository on the Department of Rural and Community Development's [website](#)¹⁸. This web resource will be further expanded during the lifetime of this policy.

Detailed below is a range of measures which help grow and strengthen social enterprise.

Community Services Programme (CSP)

The Community Services Programme (CSP) supports c. 430 community based organisations to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model, creating employment opportunities for specific disadvantaged groups and individuals. CSP provides an annual co-funding contribution towards each full-time equivalent (FTE) position being supported, and, where warranted, towards the cost of employing a manager, with c. 1,700 FTE posts and 340 manager posts supported. Aims under the CSP programme¹⁹, which support social enterprises include to:

- Support the scaling up of specific types of services / activities of social enterprises i.e. accelerate their growth.
- Promote and encourage social enterprises to become self-sustainable.
- Enable innovation i.e. new solutions to local problems; address climate change and improve the circular / green economy.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality through supporting communities and individuals, working with the most disadvantaged and the hardest to reach in communities. The programme supports the development of capacity of local community groups to create more sustainable communities, and supports disadvantaged individuals to improve their lives through lifelong learning and labour market supports. SICAP is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/624c74-social-enterprise/>

¹⁹ Under sub-programme 3: Innovation and Growth, one of three sub-programmes of the CSP

The 2018-2023 programme received a funding allocation of approximately €240m over its lifetime. The next iteration will be delivered from 2024 to 2028 (with overall funding of €57.4m in 2024).

Since 2018, SICAP has supported 1,063 different social enterprises by providing training for target groups involved with social enterprises, opportunities in volunteering centres, and by linking people with existing employment schemes for employment opportunities. Additional SICAP supports for social enterprises include provision of advice, business supports and grants up to a maximum of €2,500 per annum. Social enterprises received over €500,000 in grants through SICAP from 2018 to 2023. SICAP is playing an important role in the development of social enterprise nationally. In 2023, over 530 social enterprises received supports, with 560 receiving support in 2022 and 501 in 2021.

LEADER

LEADER is a multi-annual programme for rural development co-funded by the Irish Government and the EU through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The programme is based on a community-led approach to rural development and plays an important role in supporting communities and enterprises in progressing job creation, social inclusion and environmental projects at local level. The programme is administered by Local Action Groups (LAGs) in sub-regional areas across rural Ireland representing defined geographical areas, who select and award funding to projects that align with Local Development Strategies (LDSs) developed by the groups. In this way LAGs can develop plans that support social enterprises in contributing to the LEADER programme's objectives through job creation, service provision, enhancing social inclusion and promoting environmental protection. For the LEADER 2014-2022 programme there were 351 projects who identified as social enterprises and were awarded just over €16.9 million in funding by the LAGs. Under an economic development and job creation theme, the 2023-2027 LEADER programme funding parameters specifically accommodate social enterprises.

The Dormant Accounts Fund

The DAF Social Enterprise measure²⁰ provides funding to social enterprises. DAF has a particular focus on supporting members of the Traveller community, migrants, former offenders, and other marginalised groups, and improving the quality and delivery of services for disadvantaged communities. The fund has allocated significant funding to social enterprise from its introduction. The following details more recent examples of schemes and funds for social enterprises through the DAF:

- The €2.9m **Scaling-up Fund** (2022-23) was designed to improve the impact and sustainability of social enterprises that address economic, social and educational disadvantage or support those with a disability. Up to €100k was available to carry out capital projects with €10k available to carry out feasibility studies for projects that may help enterprises to increase their scale.
- The **Training and Mentoring Scheme** (2019) provided a fund totalling €800k to 14 organisations to support the delivery of tailored training for social enterprises which included modules in the areas of business planning, financial management, and marketing and impact measurement.
- The €1.2m **Awareness Raising Initiative for Social Enterprise (ARISE) Scheme** (2021-22) was developed to highlight the critical role of the sector and increase awareness of social enterprises and their potential. Funding of up to €10k was available to implement awareness raising at a local level with up to €50k available to social enterprise networks and support organisations to carry out awareness raising projects at a regional / national level.
- The **COVID-19 Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme** (2020-2021) provided €945,000 to support hundreds of social enterprises across the country that were affected by the pandemic, providing funding for training and mentoring to help recover and grow their social impact.
- The €800,000 **Social Enterprise Start-Up Fund** (2021-2022) delivered in partnership with Rethink Ireland supported social enterprises at the start-up and early stage of existence to help them scale.
- The **Small Capital Grants Scheme**, (2019-21) administered by the network of Local Development Companies (LDCs) provided funding of up to €15k to 230 social enterprises for the purchase of equipment or the carrying out of repairs or refurbishments that improved their service delivery.
- The **Social Enterprise Capital Grants Scheme** (2021) provided funding for the purchase of equipment or the carrying out of repairs or refurbishments to enable social enterprises to improve their service delivery administered by Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in each Local Authority area.

²⁰ The Dormant Accounts Fund uses unclaimed money from accounts in financial institutions that have no customer-initiated transactions for 15 years or more to support various social and educational initiatives. <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/c376c9-dormant-accounts-fund/>

- The €4.4m **Social Enterprise Development (SED) Fund** created in 2018 by Rethink Ireland in partnership with local authorities receives funding of c. €400k annually from the Department of Rural and Community Development. The fund has provided tailored business supports and cash grants to over 100 social enterprises around the country.

Social enterprises are also supported by other sources of funding such as [EU funding programmes](#)²¹ already supporting social economy and social innovation.

Enterprise Ireland

Enterprise Ireland (EI) is the Government organisation responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in world markets. It works with Irish enterprises to help them initiate, grow, innovate and gain export sales in global markets. EI provides a variety of funding and supports for companies of various sizes, from entrepreneurs with business propositions for a high potential start-up (HPSU)²² through to large companies seeking to expand. EI's HPSU team provides hands-on support and advice to entrepreneurs and early stage companies that are considered to have an innovative product, service or technology, and have the potential to achieve international sales and create employment. EI can currently support those social enterprises that have a company legal structure that allows for equity investment and meets the HPSU criteria of being a manufacturing and / or internationally traded services company that is commercially viable and has a focused export plan creating jobs in Ireland.

Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)

Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) were established in 2014 and carry out enterprise development functions on behalf of Enterprise Ireland. The 31 LEOS are the first-stop shops for every business in the country, providing a signposting service for all Government supports available to the SME sector. The [LEO Policy Statement](#), published in May 2024, confirms the role of the LEO network to stakeholders and the wide enterprise ecosystem. There is an emphasis on a consistency of approach across the LEO network and a clear intention to show that LEOs are, and remain the first stop shop for all businesses, regardless of sector. The Policy Statement sets out clearly that Social Enterprises are eligible for LEO assistance provided they operate on a commercial basis and meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme for which they wish to apply.

All social enterprises can access LEO training courses. LEOs have included events for social enterprises as part of the Local Enterprise Week programme, such as the SoCircular-Innovation and Collaboration, and the Business of Social Enterprise events.

Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs)

Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) are interventions aimed at improving people's prospects of finding employment or to otherwise increase their earning capacity. These programmes are of critical importance to social enterprises, with 60% of social enterprises with paid staff employing people through this manner. Such programmes include the Community Employment programme, the Rural Social Scheme, Tús, and the Community Services Programme.

The **Community Employment (CE)** programme is designed to help people who are long-term unemployed (or otherwise disadvantaged) to get back to work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities. The Department of Social Protection (DSP) is responsible for policy on the CE programme and provides allowances and funding for the scheme. CE sponsors are voluntary organisations (including social enterprises) or public bodies that manage CE schemes at a local level.

The **Rural Social Scheme (RSS)** is aimed at low-income farmers and fishermen / women in receipt of a social welfare payment. In return, people participating in RSS provide services that benefit rural communities. The Department of Social Protection (DSP) has overall responsibility for policy on the Rural Social Scheme, including eligibility criteria, monitors the implementation of RSS, and supports the various bodies that manage RSS locally. At a local level, RSS is managed by implementing bodies such as Local Development Companies and in the Gaeltacht areas, by Údarás na Gaeltachta.

The **Tús** initiative is a community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people. The work opportunities are to benefit the community and are provided by community and voluntary organisations (including social enterprises) in both urban and rural areas. The Tús initiative is managed by Local Development Companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta for the Department of Social Protection (DSP), which has overall responsibility for the scheme.

21 <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/3fc74-eu-funding-programmes/>

22 <https://globalambition.ie/hpsu-faqs/>

2.2 National and International Social Enterprise Policy Developments

National Policy

The Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’ commits to building on Ireland’s first National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022. This has seen an increased drive to improve the potential for social enterprise to generate positive impact on society and to recognise and measure that social impact. As such this policy will be part of a suite of policy and strategy initiatives which support the sector:

- The [White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030](https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/white-paper-on-enterprise-2022-2030.html)²³ recognises social enterprises as being an integral part of Ireland’s enterprise policy landscape and an important and growing part of Ireland’s entrepreneurship ecosystem creating jobs and stimulating local economic activity.
- [Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d8fa3a-sustainable-inclusive-and-empowered-communities-a-five-year-strategy/)²⁴, Ireland’s 2019-2024 strategy for the community and voluntary sector, sets out actions to support the sector in Ireland, and recognises social enterprise as an important part of the C&V sector.
- [The National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3cba6-national-volunteering-strategy/)²⁵, recognises the huge importance of volunteers at various levels for the vibrancy, effectiveness and overall impact of many social enterprises in Ireland.
- The [Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b542d-whole-of-government-circular-economy-strategy-2022-2023-living-more-using-less/)²⁶ recognises that social enterprises can be important leaders in the transition to the circular economy.
- The [National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028](https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/a9795-national-philanthropy-policy-2024-2028/)²⁷ is of significant relevance to social enterprises, and is intended to be implemented in close co-ordination with this policy.
- Under the Programme for Government Shared Island Mission the Government has committed to enhancing, developing, and deepening all aspects of North-South co-operation and the all-island economy, of which the social economy is an important and growing part.

International and EU Policy

In addition to the national, regional, and local level, significant policy is being progressed on an international level to improve the operating environment for social enterprises. This has seen Ireland engage closely with the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the International Labour Organisation.

European Union

To ensure that EU developments on social enterprise were in line with national policy priorities, Ireland contributed to the development of the EU Social Economy Action Plan²⁸ published in 2021, which covers the 2.8 million social economy organisations across the EU. The Action Plan’s ambition is to create the right conditions for the social economy to thrive, open opportunities for social economy organisations to start up and scale up, and to make sure the social economy and its potential are recognised.

On foot of the Social Economy Action Plan, in November 2023, the European Council adopted the [Recommendation on Developing Social Economy Framework Conditions](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1537&langId=en)²⁹. The Recommendation calls on member states to develop comprehensive strategies for the social economy to promote an enabling environment for the social economy across all relevant areas, by adapting policy and legal frameworks.

In 2020, Ireland was one of 19 EU Member States that signed the [Toledo Declaration on the Social and Solidarity Economy](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1537&langId=en). The declaration commits to the development of policy, plans and specific actions to support the social economy and social enterprises and their delivery of sustainable and inclusive development.

The EU has recognised the strong potential of the social economy which is grouped together with the proximity economy as part of the ‘[Proximity and Social Economy](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1537&langId=en)’³⁰ ecosystem. This is one of the 14 industrial ecosystems which are identified in the [New Industrial Strategy for Europe](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0102)³¹ that lays out a plan for how the EU could lead the twin green and digital transitions.

23 <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/white-paper-on-enterprise-2022-2030.html>

24 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d8fa3a-sustainable-inclusive-and-empowered-communities-a-five-year-strategy/>

25 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3cba6-national-volunteering-strategy/>

26 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b542d-whole-of-government-circular-economy-strategy-2022-2023-living-more-using-less/>

27 <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/a9795-national-philanthropy-policy-2024-2028/>

28 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1537&langId=en>

29 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/09/social-economy-council-recommends-member-states-tap-its-full-potential/>

30 These are two separate but related concepts. The ‘proximity economy’ consists of local and short value chains, local production and consumption, human-centric city models and social economy business models. One characteristic vision for the proximity economy is the ‘15-minute city’, where everything a citizen needs is within a 15-minute walk or bike ride.

31 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0102>

OECD

In 2022 Ireland contributed to the OECD [Recommendation on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation](#)³². This recommendation provides for the first time an internationally agreed policy framework for the development of social economy and social innovation. It promotes the sector's potential to provide essential services, pioneer novel business models, contribute to the green and digital transition, engage youth, and build communities.

International Labour Organisation (ILO)

With Ireland's participation, in 2022 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) agreed its first ever [resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy](#) at its International Labour Conference³³. This followed the first comprehensive discussion on the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and it includes a clear and comprehensive definition of the SSE based on a set of values and principles. This is the first agreed definition of the social and solidarity economy at international level.

United Nations

In 2023 Ireland contributed to a United Nations General Assembly resolution on '[Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development](#)'³⁴ which, for the first time, recognises the role of the social economy, including social enterprises, in implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The adoption of the resolution encourages member states and financial institutions to promote and support the work of social enterprises, co-operatives, and other SSE organisations to achieve sustainable development.

Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals are a set of 17 goals established by the United Nations in 2015 to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. The goals address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. The SDGs are important because they provide a blueprint for countries to follow in order to achieve a sustainable future. They are universal, meaning that they apply to all countries, regardless of their level of development.

Reflecting their social missions, social enterprises often work with disadvantaged groups and communities to provide essential services and goods to those who most need it, as well as employment and self-employment opportunities. They also often work in the field of re-use and recycle and the circular economy. By generating this sustainable impact for society and the economy across a wide range of sectors, social enterprises are natural champions of the SDGs. The actions in this policy for social enterprises will contribute towards further implementation of the SDGs.

This social enterprise policy has been drafted taking account of the December 2023 recommendation of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands, proposing that the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals be given a central position in the second National Social Enterprise Policy³⁵.



32 <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/social-economy/social-economy-recommendation/>

33 https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/sse/WCMS_869562/lang--en/index.htm

34 <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2F77%2FL.60&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

35 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/press-centre/press-releases/20231206-joint-committee-on-social-protection-community-and-rural-development-and-the-islands-publishes-report-on-sustainable-development-goals/>



PART B

Social Enterprise
Policy Objectives &
Actions 2024 - 2027

Policy Objectives

The policy is informed by the experience gained in the period since the first social enterprise policy was introduced in 2019, by feedback received during engagement with stakeholders, and by the wider public consultation process. It is supported by the evidence base provided by the baseline data collection exercise on social enterprise in Ireland, and the recommendations of the OECD and NESC reviews of social enterprise in Ireland. Trading for Impact collates future actions under the following themes:

Policy Objective 1:

Building Awareness of Social Enterprise

Actions advanced under this objective will generate a wider public and institutional understanding of social enterprise and its potential.

Policy Objective 2:

Growing and Sustaining Social Enterprise

Actions advanced under this objective will allow social enterprises to benefit from business, and other supports that improve their growth and sustainability.

Policy Objective 3:

Supporting the Green Transition

Actions advanced under this objective will assist social enterprises in contributing towards the green transition.

Policy Objective 4:

National and International Engagement

Actions advanced under this objective will deepen Ireland's engagement and alignment on social enterprise policy on a national, regional, EU, and international level.

Policy Objective 5:

Impact Measurement

Actions advanced under this objective will improve levels and quality of social enterprise data, access to social impact tools, and deepen engagement with academic institutions.

1 Policy Objective One - Building Awareness of Social Enterprise

Context

There has been significant progress in recent years in building societal awareness of social enterprise. The publication of the first policy in 2019, together with the establishment of an explicit social enterprise definition were important steps in helping the sector to develop a more readily understood identity. In the period since, social enterprises have come increasingly to the fore in helping to address major challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine.

It is clear that the diversity of the social enterprise sector prevalent in Ireland represents a real strength. However, this also brings a challenge in terms of communicating and raising awareness of the sector. All stakeholders agree that work remains if we are to generate a fuller public understanding of what social enterprise entails and better realise the potential of the sector. This includes the targeting of what remains an awareness deficit among public and private sector organisations who may not be regularly exposed to social enterprise.

Continuing to Build knowledge and Understanding of Social Enterprise

Measures will be taken to advance social enterprise awareness raising and communications under this policy. The effectiveness of these measures will be dependent on a collective shared effort across Government departments, social enterprise representative groups, social enterprises themselves and other relevant stakeholders. To this end, the sector itself will continue to play a considerable part in helping to develop and implement a national awareness raising campaign. This will include initiatives such as roadshow events, digital storytelling projects, showcase events, social media campaigns, and video productions. Specific measures which will raise awareness and understanding of social enterprise under this policy include:

- **A National Awareness Campaign** - that will contribute to cementing an awareness and understanding of social enterprise, and a commonly understood “identity” among the general public.
- **A Social Enterprise Conference** - that will be held annually to provide a forum for practitioners, policy makers and international guests to come together to share experiences and good practice. It will also provide valuable networking opportunities.
- **An annual Social Enterprise Awards event** - that will be developed to increase awareness of and showcase the sector and provide networking opportunities for stakeholders.
- **A Social Enterprise Newsletter** - that will be published quarterly to provide case studies, best practice examples, and latest news, to share good practice and enhance networking.
- **A study to measure levels of understanding of social enterprise in Ireland** - that will be commissioned to inform awareness raising efforts by providing hard data on societal levels of understanding of social enterprise.

Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards

The Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards were established by Inner City Enterprise (ICE) and Dublin City Council with the support of Local Enterprise Office (LEO) Dublin City. The annual awards programme provides funding and support to kick-start the creation and development of social enterprises in Dublin City. In alignment with the National Social Enterprise Policy, the programme aims to increase awareness of social enterprises and to grow and strengthen the sector. The awards will be jointly funded by DRCD and Dublin City Council in 2024.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
1	Deliver a National Awareness Campaign to improve awareness and understanding of social enterprise.	2025	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
2	Deliver a Social Enterprise Conference.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
3	Hold a Social Enterprise Awards event to increase awareness of the sector and provide networking opportunities.	2025	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
4	Publish a quarterly Social Enterprise Newsletter.	2024	For duration of Policy	DRCD
5	Commission a study to measure the levels of understanding of social enterprise.	2025	Completed 2026	DRCD

Young People and Social Enterprise

Young people's desire to achieve a more just and sustainable world combined with their energy and enthusiasm make them ideal catalysts for change. Available data indicates that young people are under-represented in the social enterprise sector both at board and employee level³⁶. Stakeholder consultations have signalled the need for more young people to have an understanding of social enterprise and work within the sector. The OECD has also pointed to the benefits of making a career in the field more attractive and viable for young professionals to help the sector grow³⁷. The EU's [Social Economy Action Plan](#)³⁸ identifies the need for a greater promotion of the positive impact of the social economy among young audiences. Over the course of this policy, the Government will engage directly with young people engaged with social enterprise to hear their views. This will include how young people might better supported to engage with, or work in, the sector.

Inclusion of Social Enterprise in Education and Training Programmes

The education system plays a significant role in increasing awareness and understanding of social enterprise and stimulating social entrepreneurship. There have been effective developments in our education and training systems that contribute to promoting the concept of social enterprise. At secondary school level, the inclusion of social enterprise in subjects such as business studies, and politics and society has increased awareness.

The current Framework for the Junior Cycle prioritises innovation and requires students develop entrepreneurial skills as part of their learning. Transition Year (TY) can present an excellent opportunity for students to engage with social enterprise. As the managing authority of each school determines the TY programme for that school, flexibility exists to include social enterprise as part of the TY curriculum.

Foróige Social Enterprise Module collaboration with DRCD

To increase awareness among young people of social enterprise and its potential in helping with social and environmental issues, DRCD has collaborated with Foróige over recent years to develop a social enterprise module as part of the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE). The NFTE is a youth entrepreneurship education and development programme. The module was designed to teach young people about social enterprise by enabling them to practice the business model themselves. This provided young people with an opportunity to play their part in developing social enterprise in Ireland and improving people's lives. The NFTE initiative won the *Excellence Through Collaboration* award at the annual Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards in 2023.

36 Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise, DRCD, 2022: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>

37 Boosting Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Development in Ireland, OECD, 2023: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/boosting-social-entrepreneurship-and-social-enterprise-development-in-ireland-3115bcb6-en.htm>

38 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1537&langId=en>

At third level, there are a number of social enterprise-relevant courses, along with modules at both undergraduate and post-graduate level. Higher education institutes also support social enterprise through community involvement, work placements and research. There remains however, the potential to further increase the awareness of, and participation in social enterprise at third level, and to continue to work in partnership with education and research bodies to further support the development of social enterprise.

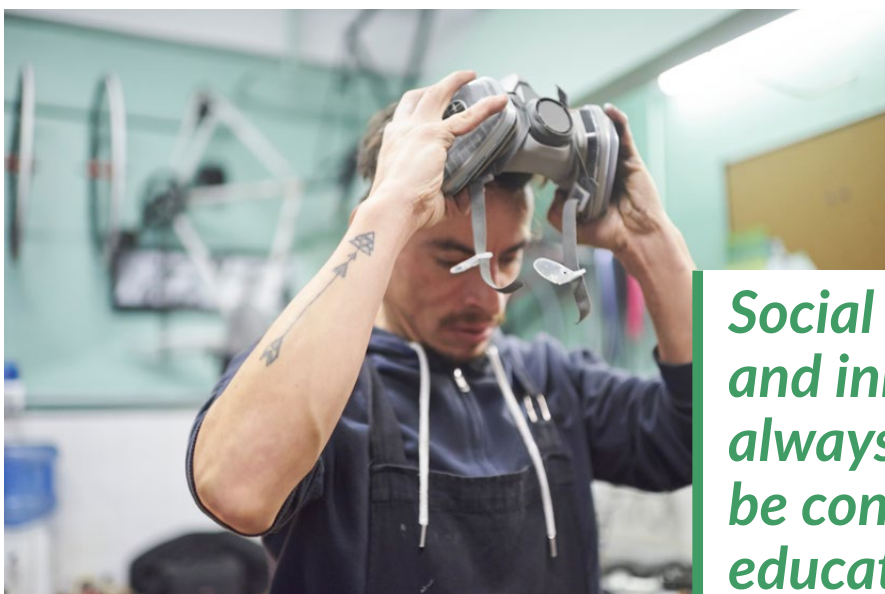
As social entrepreneurs and innovators may not always follow what might be considered traditional educational pathways, over the lifetime of this policy there will also be a need to consider how best to engage with education and training outside of the traditional school and third level system.

This includes, for example, the further education and training sector, training on self-employment / start your own business, vocational education, and Youthreach and other programmes for early school leavers.

Young Social Innovators

Outside the formal education and training system, [Young Social Innovators](#) is a non-profit organisation that empowers young people to use their talents, insights, passion and creativity to come up with innovative solutions to social challenges. Supported by DRCD, it delivers a range of social innovation programmes to children in the primary, junior and senior school cycles which are aligned to the school curriculum.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
6	Hold structured engagements with young people engaged with social enterprises to listen to their views, including on how young people might be better supported to engage with, or work in, the sector.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD / DCEDIY
7	Develop and deliver programmes to improve availability of social enterprise opportunities and education with youth entrepreneur / innovation organisations.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
8	As curricular frameworks, specifications and modules are developed from primary to post primary, opportunities and linkages to social enterprises will be explored by National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Subject Development Groups, as considered appropriate.	2024	For duration of policy.	DoE
9	Following the 2023 publication of a National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance, post primary guidance will be strengthened over the short, medium and longer term. This will support continued provision of information relating to social innovation and Guidance in post primary schools.	2024	For duration of policy	DoE



Social entrepreneurs and innovators may not always follow what might be considered traditional educational pathways



2 | Policy Objective Two - Growing and Sustaining Social Enterprise

Context

Social enterprises, like other businesses, can benefit from supports that improve their capacity to become more self-sustaining and, in cases where the opportunity exists, grow. An increased range of tailored measures for social enterprises has been provided over recent years. Notwithstanding this, in what is a constantly evolving sector, there remains an ongoing need for support. The Government's objective is to ensure that, over the lifetime of this policy, an appropriate range of financial and business supports will be available for social enterprise. This will include funding support provided via the exchequer, DAF, and an increased use of EU programmes supporting the social economy and social innovation.

The Social Enterprise Start-Up and Step-Up Funds

The **Social Enterprise Start-Up Fund**, managed by Rethink Ireland and funded by DRCD and Tomar Trust supported 45 early stage social enterprises to embed strong business principles to deliver social impact. The **Social Enterprise Step-Up Fund 2023-24** supported mid-sized social enterprises with the aim of helping them scale, create jobs and increase traded income.

Business Supports for Social Enterprise

Details of available [business and financial supports](#)³⁹ are updated and made available online for the information of social enterprise stakeholders. Under this policy a website will be provided to act as a central source of supports. This will be primarily targeted at social enterprises, their networks, and policymakers. It will act as a repository for information on available funding, training, and other resources, as well as case studies and updated information about the impacts of social enterprise.

As was outlined in Part A, social enterprises are supported by Government programmes such as **LEADER**, the [Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme \(SICAP\)](#), the [Community Services Programme \(CSP\)](#) as well as grants, schemes, and funds which are specific to social enterprise. In addition, many social enterprises confirm they benefit from active labour market programmes such as Tús, the Community Employment Scheme, and the Rural Social Scheme for staffing, and support under these schemes will be maintained. Over the lifetime of this policy, these significant supports will continue to be provided and, whenever possible, increased.

The White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030

recognises social enterprise as an integral part of Ireland's broader enterprise policy landscape and that Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), which provide business supports, have an important role to play in supporting social enterprises as part of a diversified enterprise base.

³⁹ Business and Financial Supports for Social Enterprise <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/624c74-social-enterprise/#:~:text=of%20good%20practice-,Supports%20Table%20for%20Social%20Enterprises,-In%20line%20with>

LEOs offer enterprise supports under three broad categories;

- Direct financial aid for growth or exporting is aimed at business in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors.
- Supports to enhance productivity and improve competitiveness will be available to all businesses with up to 50 employees, regardless of sector.
- Business advice, training and mentoring is available to all businesses regardless of sector or size.

While LEOs provide supports to social enterprises, stakeholder feedback suggests that in practice, this could benefit from greater uniformity across the country. The recent [LEO Policy Statement](#) sets out clearly that Social Enterprises are eligible for assistance provided they operate on a commercial basis and meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme for which they wish to apply

The eligibility requirements for some supports, including Enterprise Ireland's [High Potential Start-Up scheme](#) (HPSU), means that they are not available to social enterprises which are registered charities and / or CLGs⁴⁰. In terms of financial supports, HPSU invests in commercial entities by way of equity instruments, which precludes investing in CLGs that have no capacity for shareholding. However, Enterprise Ireland can, and have, supported social enterprises if they meet the criteria of being a manufacturing and / or internationally traded services⁴¹ company that is commercially viable and has a focused export plan, creating jobs in Ireland.

Support for Capacity Building

The Department of Rural and Community Development supports capacity building for social enterprises through the delivery of capital support schemes supported by the Social Enterprise Measure of the Dormant Accounts Fund. These schemes assist in the creation of sustainable jobs with a particular focus on social enterprises supporting Travellers, migrants, former offenders, and other marginalised groups by increasing the capacity of social enterprises to generate funded income. The schemes are designed to take into account the varying needs and stages of development of social enterprises including those in rural areas.

Funding Calendar

Many stakeholders suggested that the publication of an annual diary of funding schemes that support social enterprises would prove helpful in allowing them to better plan and manage their available resources. DRCD will publish an annual calendar of funding and scheme calls to allow better planning and predictability for social enterprises.

Stakeholder feedback received during the consultation for this policy proposed the need for, and potential benefits of, a Shared Business Service Model for social enterprises. This involves multiple social enterprises coming together to share the cost of an employee. It could also encapsulate identifying typical goods required by clusters of social enterprises and negotiating with suppliers to achieve group discounts. This shared services model can reduce the challenge faced by many social enterprises working in rural areas of reaching economies of scale; in this case by sharing the cost of hiring qualified / professional staff. This model can enhance hybrid working patterns relevant for rural areas to attract and retain qualified professionals. This will enable management of costs and could include, for example, governance and compliance requirements, accountancy services and human resources. This need is particularly evident in rural communities (see Rural Proofing Social Enterprises section 1.4) where smaller social enterprise can struggle to access and fund business services on an individual basis. There is a clear desire for social enterprises to forge partnerships and share resources in what may be a more financially sustainable way. This may bring the benefit of reduced costs, mutual learning and increased opportunities. To support this, a pilot study on shared services for social enterprises will be implemented under the policy, and supported.

KickStart Social Enterprise Fund

Under its new employment strategy, which addresses barriers faced by those with criminal convictions to enter the workforce, the Department of Justice and the Probation Service, working with the Department of Rural and Community Development will deliver a 'KickStart' Social Enterprise Fund. This will support new and existing social enterprises to create meaningful jobs for people with criminal convictions and as a stepping-stone to mainstream employment. This funding will be disbursed across two strands; Feasibility and Market Research, and Job Creation Fund. Kickstart will involve co-operation between the Department of Justice and the Department of Rural and Community Development, to ensure close alignment between the National Social Enterprise Policy and the forthcoming new Criminal Justice Strategy.

40 Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise, DRCD, 2022: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>

41 <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/about-us/our-clients/eligibility-criteria.html>

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
10	Provide a website to act as a central source of supports for social enterprises, and include an annual calendar of DRCD funding and supports to allow for improved planning and predictability for social enterprises.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
11	Promote the utilisation of EU funding to support social enterprises.	2024	For duration of policy	DRCD
12	Over the lifetime of this policy, deliver loan / grant funding schemes for social enterprises, and provide targeted supports through new and existing programmes including CSP, SICAP, PEACEPLUS, and LEADER.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
13	Establish a €2m capital support scheme to help capacity building for social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD
14	Funding and support will be provided for social enterprises through active labour market programmes including the Community Employment scheme, Tús, and the Rural Social Scheme.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DSP
15	Ensure consistency of approach to social enterprises across Local Enterprise Offices.	2024	For duration of policy.	Local Enterprise Offices
16	Improve social enterprise access to Enterprise Ireland business supports such as the High Performing Start-Up scheme (HPSU), as appropriate.	2024	For duration of policy	Enterprise Ireland
17	Launch and provide funding for a pilot 'Social Enterprise Shared Business Service' model.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
18	Deliver the KickStart Social Enterprise Fund for social enterprises that provide meaningful employment to those with criminal convictions.	2024/2025	Completed 2025	DoJ, DRCD

Skills and Organisational Development

The OECD review of social enterprise in Ireland notes that business, leadership, and management skills for social enterprises require further development. These include strategy, business planning, finance, risk management, marketing and human resources. Stakeholder engagement has also revealed that there is a need for skills in the areas of volunteer management, and digital skills, as well as new technologies such as AI. Over the lifetime of this policy, tailored training and mentoring measures for social enterprises will be supported to help provide the skills needed for the future. Social enterprises have also suggested that governance-related compliance demands have increased, adding to the level of complexity in managing their organisations. For social enterprises which are registered charities, this includes specific obligations under the Charities Act, with compliance overseen by the Charities Regulator.

Stakeholders have also highlighted a need for training and development of board members within social enterprises and referred to issues of recruitment and retention.

[Skillnet Ireland](#) is the Government's business support agency responsible for advancing the competitiveness, productivity and innovation of Irish business through enterprise led workforce development to address current and future skills needs. Whilst some social enterprises have accessed Skillnet business supports, others have highlighted difficulties as companies registered as charities are ineligible for supports. Under this policy, an examination will be undertaken to consider the potential for social enterprises to access Skillnet training supports.

Social enterprises can access ‘Sector Skills’⁴², a comprehensive national programme, created by The Wheel to improve the skills of people working in social enterprises, charities, and community and voluntary organisations in Ireland. It is part-funded by the National Training Fund through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

As the sector continues to develop, research will be undertaken over the lifetime of this policy to identify the range of skills, knowledge and competencies that are required for social enterprises to grow. This will allow for the development of more targeted supports in these areas for social enterprises.

Networking and Peer Learning

Social enterprises have highlighted the significant benefit they derive from networking opportunities and peer-to-peer learning. Linking in with other like-minded social enterprises and discussing common challenges and opportunities provides support for their development and growth. Networking opportunities have long been recognised as an enabler for the development and financial sustainability of many social enterprises. Under this policy, peer-to-peer learning and networking events will be delivered at a national and regional level.

Access to Finance

The financial instruments required by social enterprises can vary depending on many factors, including the sector in which the enterprise operates, the stage of its lifecycle, and its size. However, access to working capital from mainstream financial providers presents challenges for social enterprises. This is influenced by the nature of the services the enterprises provide, which are generally innovative. Social enterprises may not meet the credit criteria of mainstream lenders, in that they often do not have the traditional forms of collateral available, and are unlikely to have strong income streams in their early years.

In an effort to bridge a funding availability gap, [Social Finance Foundation](#) was originally established at the initiative of Government on a not-for-profit basis as a wholesale social finance provider to social lending organisations such as [Clann Credo](#) and [Community Finance Ireland](#). These organisations have emerged as specialists in providing social finance, including bridging loans (often for approved grant support), term loans, and working capital to community and voluntary organisations including social enterprises. Other measures such as the Western Development Commission’s Investment Fund and the Hybrid Social Finance Loan Pilot which includes non-finance supports (see below) have been made available to the sector.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
19	Provide tailored training and mentoring for social enterprises in areas such as business planning, leadership, board membership, governance, HR / Volunteer management, capacity building, diversification, planning, digital innovation, and artificial intelligence (AI).	2025/26	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
20	Examine the potential for social enterprises to access Skillnet Ireland’s training supports.	2024	Completed 2025	DFHERIS
21	Undertake research to identify specific skills, knowledge, and competency requirements for social enterprises, to support the development of more focussed supports in this area.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
22	Deliver peer learning and networking events for social enterprises at a national and regional level.	2025	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD

42 <https://www.wheel.ie/about-us/projects/sector-skills>



The Hybrid Social Finance Loan Pilot 2023 & 2024

In 2021/22, with support from the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme, research was undertaken with a view to supporting the development of a social finance ecosystem in Ireland. Based on the key recommendation emerging from the research [Rethink Ireland](#) supported by Government funding, Community Finance Ireland and Dublin City University launched a new financial instrument pilot to specifically cater for the needs of social enterprises without a credit history. The resulting Hybrid Social Finance Loan, beginning in 2023 and running again in 2024, provides a combination of a repayable loan of up to €50,000 combined with non-repayable funding for the same amount along with tailored business supports, the non-repayable element being payable upon agreed business milestones and business support.

The need for access to bridging finance presents a notable challenge for social enterprises when applying for and accessing grants. Securing bridging funds until such time as grants can be drawn down places considerable additional cost of business particularly on voluntary organisations.

This challenge may be particularly pronounced for socio-economically disadvantaged communities and smaller rural communities, which often have limited reserves to facilitate the cash flow of the grant. To help address this issue, wherever possible, DRCD will seek to facilitate the mandating of capital grants awarded to social finance providers of bridging finance. This will support the provision of bridging finance.

Stakeholders submissions received during the public consultation process expressed the view that there is capacity for credit unions to increase engagement with, and funding availability for, the social enterprise sector. The Irish League of Credit Unions, which represents credit union members, who are themselves social economy entities embedded in our communities, has highlighted that whilst it recognises a number of obstacles exist, it would be keen to develop its activities in the sector.

Under this policy, DRCD will establish a Social Enterprise Social Finance Stakeholder Group comprising representation from social enterprise and social lenders. This group will engage on the funding needs of the sector, whether the current range of financial instruments appropriately address those needs, and where challenges are identified, identify potential developments to address these challenges. This will include an examination of best practice in the development of social finance tools in other jurisdictions.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
23	A Social Enterprise Social Finance Working Group will be established to consider issues and identify potential solutions / options in relation to social finance gaps facing social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2025	DRCD and representatives from Social / Lenders / Academia / Social Enterprises
24	Leverage additional funding support from philanthropy and corporate social responsibility sources for social enterprises, in line with the National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD

Philanthropy

The [National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028](#) aims to deepen understanding and knowledge, create an enabling environment, and accelerate engagement with philanthropy in Ireland for social good. Both funders and stakeholders have highlighted the opportunities arising from philanthropic and corporate social responsibility sources to support social enterprises. The policy encourages philanthropic giving in Ireland through Government and corporate partnerships, often facilitated by an intermediary body. Such partnerships can generate additional funding for initiatives for community well-being such as social enterprises and social innovations. Philanthropic investment can provide unrestricted funding and supports where Government may be restrained. Rethink Ireland's Social Enterprise Development fund in partnership with local authorities and funded by DRCD and IPB Insurance is an example of support provided under this model. Rethink Ireland delivers measures using a match-funding model, to support solutions to social issues via state funding combined with philanthropic funding such as the [Entrepreneurship Impact Fund 2023-2026](#) to support social innovation.

Enabling Market Opportunities

Social enterprises have reported that their income derives from a variety of sources with 31% resulting from the sale of goods and services. Facilitating social enterprises with greater access to markets has the potential to increase their income, and expand their operations. This can improve their self-sustainability as trading businesses and lead to increased social impact. However, social enterprises often report limited capacity, resources, and expertise to navigate complex procurement processes, which can limit access to these opportunities.

Sources of income for social enterprises⁴³.

Sources of income	% of the total income by source
Sale of goods / services	31.3
Fees	4.1
Grants	32.3
Contract service - open tender	3.1
Contract service - service arrangement	10.0
Philanthropy	2.9
Fundraising	7.9
Other	8.4

Public Procurement

Government measures to improve market access and opportunities for social enterprises have included the provision of procurement workshops, webinars, and training. Improving understanding of the strategic benefits of social and environmental considerations in public procurement can assist procurement officers and officials in delivering better outcomes. To this end, there have been a number of important developments in relation to procurement in general as well as in the areas of green public procurement (GPP) and socially responsible public procurement (SRPP).

In March 2023, the Government published new guidance, in the form of [Circular 05/2023](#): Initiatives to assist SMEs in public procurement, which sets out a range of measures for public bodies to take to promote the participation of SMEs in public procurement. The circular has simplified the process for procuring lower valued contracts thereby making them more accessible and inviting to SMEs. The threshold at which contracts for goods and services must be advertised on eTenders increased from €25,000 to €50,000 (exclusive of VAT), while the threshold for works contracts increased from €50,000 to €200,000 (exclusive of VAT).

⁴³ Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise, DRCD, 2022: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>

The circular includes other specific measures that public bodies should take to promote SME participation, including subdividing larger contracts into lots and using innovative procurement. SMEs are encouraged to consider forming a consortium when they are not of sufficient scale to tender in their own right.

The Government's [Green Public Procurement Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2027](#) recognises the important role played by social enterprises in advancing GPP objectives and contains specific actions to support social enterprises in relation to circular procurement and promoting reuse and repair.

The [Public Procurement Guidelines for Goods and Services](#), updated by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) in October 2023, highlight how public procurement can be used to encourage suppliers to perform actions that are focused on the inclusion of broader strategic policy objectives. The guidelines encourage public bodies to consider how social and environmental issues can appropriately be integrated into the procurement process and highlight the key considerations for public bodies when including such issues in their procurements. Also included is guidance on the rules for reserving certain contracts for health, social, and cultural services to organisations such as social enterprises and not-for-profit organisations.

The OGP has also published Opportunities and approaches for Sustainable Public Procurement – A reference for public procurement practitioners and policy makers'. This reference, for the first time, brings together in one place the wide range of international, European Union, and national policies and guidance across both GPP and SRPP.

It is also clear that those working in social enterprises would benefit from improved knowledge and skills on procurement processes. To this end, new guidance and provision of information briefings for public procurement officers and social enterprises will be delivered under this policy. The Government's Strategic Procurement Advisory Group⁴⁴ will also continue to collaborate on promoting the incorporation of social, innovative, and sustainable considerations in public procurement as well as sharing information, knowledge, and understanding.

Private Sector Procurement and Engagement

While there have been a number of initiatives to increase opportunities for social enterprises and drive engagement from the wider business community, the OECD found that private organisation's use of procurement to buy goods and services from social enterprises is 'extremely limited, if not absent' in Ireland. Bringing social enterprises into the supply chain can deliver a range of benefits for businesses, including supporting their local community.

The Supply Chain Sustainability School

Launched in January 2024, the Supply Chain Sustainability School is a free online education platform that provides practical supports in the form of e-learning modules, tailored self-assessment and action plans, sustainability training, and networking opportunities. The topics include sustainable procurement, supplier diversity, energy and carbon, community and social impact, business ethics, and much more. It is free for members and is supported by 16 partners across the construction and infrastructure sector.

Potential exists for mutually beneficial relationships between social enterprises and private sector organisations in the context of environmental, social and governance (ESG) and corporate social responsibility⁴⁵ (CSR) requirements. This also includes extended producer responsibility (EPR) requirements regarding product recycling and recovery. This area has much potential for social enterprises, who may need information or capacity building to avail of such opportunities. The Government will encourage engagement between the social enterprise sector and private sector organisations on this topic in order to determine how this might best be achieved.

During consultations, there was significant support for a regularly updated public platform / website that bridges the gap between social enterprises and private sector businesses and the public. This could also improve an individual's capacity to discover and buy from social enterprises in their vicinity. Under this policy, Government will engage in dialogue with the social enterprise sector and private sector to ascertain the possible options for realising this potential. Research will also be published identifying best international practice regarding SRPP and 'Buy Social'⁴⁶.

To increase engagement from the wider business community with social enterprise, DRCD sponsors the Chambers Ireland Partnership with Social Enterprise category in their annual Sustainable Business Impact Awards. This awards excellence in working with a social enterprise, for example, by funding the delivery of a specific initiative, provision of work experience, engaging in an awareness campaign, or providing operational and skills-sharing to support a social enterprise.

44 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/64b9a-sustainable-public-procurement/>

45 The EU 2022/2464 Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive introduced new company reporting requirements on social and environmental sustainability.

46 Buy Social is a movement that encourages supplier side social procurement, bridging mainstream and impact enterprises, and providing a mark of recognition that extends in to the private sector.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
25	New public procurement guidance will be developed and information briefings provided for public procurement officers and social enterprises.	2025/26	Completed 2026	DRCD
26	Ensure that the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group is fully appraised of the potential of social enterprise in green and socially responsible public procurement.	2024	For duration of policy	DRCD
27	Support initiatives that increase the participation of social enterprises in public and private procurement.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
28	Support capacity building in social enterprises and community-based initiatives that promote GPP and circular procurement. Support awareness of social enterprises and community-based GPP initiatives such as via GPP training provided by public sector training bodies.	2024	For duration of policy	DECC
29	Government departments to capture data in their annual reports regarding tenders awarded to social enterprises, voluntary and community organisations where GPP criteria have been applied.	2025	For duration of policy	All departments
30	Work with stakeholders towards realising an online platform / website for connecting social enterprises with potential customers	2025	Completed 2026	DRCD
31	Research detailing best international practice on socially responsible public procurement and 'Buy Social' will be published.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD / DoJ

Legal Form / Legal Status

Social enterprises in Ireland do not take any specific legal form or legal status⁴⁷. A variety of legal forms are adopted under the Companies Acts by social enterprises as well as under legislation governing co-operatives. Available data indicates that the most common legal form (75%) utilised is a company limited by guarantee⁴⁸ (CLG). In addition, the majority of social enterprises report holding charitable status. Some stakeholders have reported that the initial choice of company form and charitable status may be driven by their greater capacity to access grant funding rather than the appropriate business need. This can have a knock-on effect on the later potential of the company to scale up. Other legal forms utilised include company limited by shares, designated activity companies (DAC) and sole traders.

[Social Enterprises in Ireland: Legal Structures Guide](#)⁴⁹ provides guidance to social enterprises on the various legal structures available.

A 2021 report, [Research on Legal Form for Social Enterprises](#)⁵⁰, found that the argument for establishing a new and dedicated legal form for social enterprises was not sufficiently compelling. In some jurisdictions, where a specific legal form has been introduced, the demand for its use has not been strong. For example, the Scottish 2021 Social Enterprise Census confirmed that just 17% of the sector has availed of the 'Community Interest Company' dedicated legal form, which was introduced for social enterprises.

47 Legal form is the foundational legal structure adopted by an organisation (e.g. designated activity company, company limited by guarantee). Legal status can be adopted by a broad spectrum of legal forms based on their compliance with specific criteria.

48 Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise, DRCD, 2022: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>

49 <https://rethinkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Social-Enterprise-Legal-Form-Guide.pdf>

50 <https://rethinkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Research-on-Legal-Form-for-Social-Enterprises.pdf>

Importantly, the Co-operative Societies Bill 2022 would, based on its current provisions and when passed in to legislation, consolidate and modernise existing legislation to ensure that there is a clear and more favourable legal basis for the co-operative model in Ireland. This would improve the options available for establishing social enterprises, and the views of the sector have been taken into account in drafting the Bill. The Bill, if passed, would make it easier to set up and operate a co-operative in Ireland and include provisions which are of importance to social enterprise in providing for the inclusion of an optional ‘asset lock’⁵¹. It would also repeal existing outdated provisions on raising funds, making it easier to access various sources of finance. It is intended that the legislation will provide as much flexibility as possible, empowering co-operative societies to reflect in their rules what best suits their own particular circumstances.

Further clarity and guidance will be provided to help social enterprises make informed decisions regarding the most suitable legal form or legal status to suit their needs. As the sector grows and matures further, the needs of social enterprises that arise from their legal form (and their effective use of current legal forms) will be monitored and reviewed.

Voluntary (Non-Legal) Accreditation

In certain jurisdictions, voluntary and administrative (non-legal) accreditation systems operated by a non-state entity have been utilised. On meeting particular minimum standard criteria, these systems award a form of ‘quality mark’ or ‘badge’ to social enterprises. This then provides people and businesses with an assurance that they are dealing with a genuine social enterprise delivering a social impact within a given standard.

For example, the [Social Enterprise World Forum](#) has a global verification mark which aims to overcome cultural and language differences, and to provide clear identity for businesses focused on positive purpose. In Ireland, the [Social Enterprise Mark Ireland](#), operated by [Social Impact Ireland](#) delivered third-party accreditation for social enterprise in Ireland to provide assurance that a company is a business committed to creating positive social or environmental change.

In order to be meaningful any accreditation system would need to be robust and transparent. Under this policy, consideration will be given to the challenges and merits of any broad implementation of voluntary (non-legal) accreditation for social enterprises in Ireland.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
32	Progress the Co-operative Societies Bill 2022 which will provide improved legal formation options for social enterprises.	2025	Completed 2025	DETE
33	Conduct further research and analysis on social enterprise legal form / status and publish updated guidance to inform social enterprises of the options regarding company legal form.	2026	Completed 2027	DRCD
34	Investigate the challenges and merits of utilising a dedicated administrative voluntary accreditation or ‘quality mark’ for social enterprises.	2025	Completed 2026	DRCD

⁵¹ An asset lock is a legal device ensuring that the assets of a company or society can never be cashed in by private individuals or companies for their own gain.

3 | Policy Objective Three - Supporting the Green Transition

Context

The climate and biodiversity emergency remains perhaps the most significant international challenge of our time. The potential contribution of the social economy, including social enterprises, in fulfilling our climate goals and achieving the twin green and digital transition to a low carbon economy is recognised by the EU's [Transition Pathway for the Proximity and Social Economy](#)⁵². Social enterprises can contribute to our determination to achieve a just transition by addressing social and environmental problems, providing sustainable employment, empowering marginalised communities, and promoting inclusive economic development. This can help mitigate the impacts on vulnerable groups, contributing to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Agenda principle to 'Leave No One Behind'.

NESC has pointed to the need to support social enterprises in the area of green transformation. In Ireland, social enterprises are playing an increasing role in advancing climate action in areas such as the circular economy, bioeconomy and renewable energy. The baseline data collection exercise identified more than 100 social enterprises, including a high proportion of start-ups, reporting that their primary area of focus was environmental. Over the course of this policy, the Government will seek to create further opportunities for social enterprises to deliver on climate action targets.

Circular Economy

The circular economy keeps resources in active use for as long as possible. The maximum value is extracted from these resources and at the end of life the materials are recovered and regenerated. Ireland's Climate Action Plan 2021 highlights that circular economy measures should act as an instrument for change across all sectors. This is opening up new opportunities for enterprises across the economy which, whilst also providing quality training and job opportunities, are often the only enterprises handling certain goods or materials.

The [Circular Economy Strategy 'Living More Use Less' 2022-2023](#) provides a policy framework that confirms cross-government support for Ireland's transition to a circular economy. The strategy points to the role of social enterprises, for example, in relation to reuse and repair initiatives that provide social and economic benefits.⁵³ The Government's [Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme](#) has been made available to social enterprises in further recognition of their role in this area. Under this policy, the Government will seek to ensure that social enterprises are considered in new measures and supports to help in the delivery of Government climate action targets.

The significant potential of social enterprises in the circular economy could be further advanced by the [EU Proposal to amend the Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/E](#)⁵⁴. As part of negotiations at EU level, Ireland is seeking to include recognition of, and a dedicated role for, social enterprises in amending this Directive. If adopted, the Directive would ensure that textile extended producer responsibility (EPR)⁵⁵ schemes maintain and support the activities of social enterprises which are involved in used textiles management. It would also determine that social enterprises should be regarded as partners in the separate collection systems which support the scaling-up of re-use and repair. By prolonging textiles' life cycle social enterprise actors reduce both the overall quantity of textile waste and the cumulative environmental impact of producing new garments. In this way social enterprises can set examples for a just transition by providing inclusive local employment for marginalised groups and developing crucial green skills.

52 https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/transition-pathway_en

53 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b542d-whole-of-government-circular-economy-strategy-2022-2023-living-more-using-less/>

54 https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/proposal-targeted-revision-waste-framework-directive_en

55 Extended producer responsibility (EPR) is an environmental policy approach that shifts the responsibility of a product's lifecycle to the producer, including design, take-back, recycling, and final disposal.



The Rediscovery Centre

The [Rediscovery Centre](#) is the national centre for the circular economy in Ireland, and an award-winning social enterprise leading Ireland's transition to a circular economy and low-carbon, sustainable future. The centre has a history of social innovation and entrepreneurship since 2004 and delivers reuse and repair workshops and a national education programme. It has its own research and policy unit and houses a communications hub for public engagement and a visitor centre, including a cafe and ecostore.

An important aspect of its work is raising awareness of the role and impact of social enterprises in supporting the transition to a circular economy. The centre also aims to support social enterprises to grow and thrive in the circular economy through the Circular Economy Academy Mentoring programme.

Bioeconomy

The bioeconomy encompasses all sectors, associated services and investments that conserve, produce, regenerate, process, distribute or consume biological resources including related ecosystem services, knowledge, science, technology, and innovation. The bioeconomy considers our use of biological resources in a holistic way and has a range of benefits including supporting food security, mitigating and adapting to climate change, strengthening competitiveness, creating jobs, and supporting a just transition.

The National [Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025](#) was published in October 2023. It acknowledges the potential for social enterprises to become more involved in the bioeconomy. Delivery of the plan will further develop Ireland's bioeconomy, in environmental, economic, societal and policy terms, for the period 2023 to 2025. The plan will also support greater investment in demonstrating the bioeconomy, providing exemplars, and ensuring support for interactions and progress among multiple actors, including businesses, primary producers, scientific communities, policymakers, social movements, and interest groups. Through the participation of key departments on the high level Bioeconomy Implementation and Development Group (BIDG) efforts will be made to seek opportunities for social enterprises to develop their activity in the bioeconomy.

Community Energy and Renewable Energy opportunities

Social enterprises across Ireland have developed various innovative renewable energy initiatives in recent years. Examples include [The Aran Islands Energy Co-operative](#), [National Community Energy Ireland](#), as well as [Community Power](#). There is potential for more social enterprises to engage in renewable energy generation both for larger community-led trading projects, as well as smaller scale micro-generation. This includes social enterprises who wish to reduce their carbon footprint and generate income from surplus energy generation. Community-led initiatives including co-operatives have the potential to create jobs in the area of energy generation and community wealth, as well as helping to increase energy security.

Community Power

Community Power⁵⁶ is a partnership of community energy groups working for a sustainable energy future for Ireland. It began in 2012 as Ireland's first community owned wind farm in Templederry, Co. Tipperary and is now working with communities to develop more renewable energy projects owned by the community. Community Power catalyse, part fund and project manage community-owned renewable energy facilities such as solar, wind, hydro and biomass. It also provides communities with optional PPAs (power purchase agreements), to sell excess electricity, thereby improving their revenue stream.

The Government has established a specific community-led category which includes provision of pathways and supports for communities to participate in renewable energy projects under the [Renewable Energy Support Scheme](#) (RESS) energy auction. Winning bidders must also contribute to a [Community Benefit Fund](#) to support the well-being of communities living in proximity to renewable projects. These community-owned energy projects may operate as social enterprises, and there is also potential for social enterprises to benefit from the Community Benefit Fund.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
35	Ensure that social enterprises are considered in the range of existing and new measures and supports to help in the delivery of Government climate action targets.	Ongoing	For duration of policy	DECC / DRCD
36	Negotiate at an EU level to include recognition of, and a dedicated role for, social enterprises in the proposal to amend the Waste Framework Directive.	2024	Completed 2024	DECC with support of DRCD
37	Provide supports to social enterprises to assist them in availing of renewable energy opportunities.	Ongoing	For duration of policy	DECC
38	Participate in the high level Bioeconomy Implementation and Development Group (BIDG) and identify opportunities for social enterprises.	Ongoing	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DECC / DRCD / DAFM

⁵⁶ <https://communitypower.ie/>

4 Policy Objective Four - National and International Engagement

Context

Increased levels of engagement and co-operation between all stakeholders will help ensure that social enterprise is recognised for its cross-cutting economic, social, and environmental impact. It will also allow those involved in the sector to learn from the good practice of others. Targeted collaboration and co-ordination in relation to social enterprise across national and local government, publicly funded bodies, social enterprise stakeholders, the European Union, and international organisations will be progressed throughout the lifetime of this policy.

National and Cross-Government Co-ordination

The significance of social enterprises will continue to grow in line with efforts to advance policy developments at European and international level. Supporting this increase in focus demands greater levels of co-ordination across Government departments and agencies⁵⁷. While progress has been made in developing a better understanding of the contribution of the sector to achieving Government objectives, such as in the White Paper on Enterprise and the Circular Economy Strategy, there is a need to progress and reinforce engagement and alignment across Government departments⁵⁸.

Regional and Local Authority-level Co-ordination

In addition to this engagement at national level, steps will be taken at regional and local level to increase strategic efforts to ensure the development and support of social enterprises are given consideration. This will include, for example, structured engagement during the development of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES), Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs), and the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP).

Ireland's three Regional Assemblies⁵⁹ have a leadership role to play in identifying regional policies and co-ordinating initiatives that support the delivery and implementation of national planning policy primarily through their Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. These strategies provide regional-level strategic planning and economic policy in support of the implementation of the National Planning Framework. All current strategies have actions that support the development of social enterprise in their region to varying degrees.

Regional enterprise development is supported through nine Regional Enterprise Plans, which are bottom-up plans under the remit of the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment developed by regional stakeholders. The plans complement national enterprise policy and focus on collaborative initiatives aimed at developing the regional enterprise ecosystem and supporting job creation. All current plans concentrate on measures to support the social, environmental and economic development of regions. The Mid-West's plan could be considered an exemplar in identifying the development of social enterprise as one of five strategic objectives in tackling areas of high unemployment and progressing towards employment equality⁶⁰. Successor policies to the current Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs) will be developed from 2025. Abiding by the core principle that REPs should be developed by regional stakeholders, Regional Steering Committees will be asked to consider the inclusion of any appropriate supporting measures for social enterprises within their new plans. Engagement in this regard has been initiated with REP programme managers on the inclusion of such measures in the development of the successors to the current REPs.

The [Western Development Commission \(WDC\)](#) plays a pivotal role in fostering social and economic development across the western region, encompassing Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway, and Clare. With a statutory mandate to bolster social enterprises, the WDC has formulated a [social enterprise strategy](#) aimed at nurturing social entrepreneurship and innovation.

57 Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland, 2023, NES: <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/social-enterprise-on-the-island-of-ireland/>

58 Boosting Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Development, OECD, 2023: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/boosting-social-entrepreneurship-and-social-enterprise-development-in-ireland-3115bcb6-en.htm>

59 <https://www.southernassembly.ie/>, <https://www.nwra.ie/>, <https://emra.ie/>

60 <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/mid-west-regional-enterprise-plan-to-2024.html>

The WDC will both advance the social enterprise sector in the region and support individual social enterprises to start up and scale. This commitment will be realised through initiatives such as the [Community Loan Fund](#) of the Western Investment Fund, through supports for initiatives addressing climate and energy concerns, and by otherwise supporting innovative, community-driven solutions to address some of the region's most pressing current and future social challenges.

Local Development Companies

The Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) is the umbrella organisation for the 49 Local Development Companies (LDCs) around the county. The LDCs themselves support integrated, community-led local development in Ireland. They play a valuable role in supporting social enterprises and deliver community and rural development, labour market activation, and social inclusion. Currently, approximately 40 LDCs employ a dedicated staff member to work with and support social enterprises. Their LEADER and SICAP programme staff also work with social enterprises. LDCs support innovation and the effective management of social enterprises through a dedicated Social Enterprise Managers Network, the provision of shared administrative services for social enterprises, and the provision of an annual calendar of bespoke training.

Local Community Development Committees and Local Economic and Community Plans

In each local authority area, a Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) is responsible for co-ordinating, planning and overseeing local and community development funding. LCDCs play a key role in managing or administering a number of schemes / programmes that support social enterprises, such as SICAP. Each LCDC is made up of public and private sector partners, including local authority members and officials, state agencies, people actively working in local development and community development and economic, cultural, and environmental organisations. LCDCs develop six-year Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) with the current iterations running from 2023/2024. LCDCs have a statutory responsibility to have regard to the needs of social enterprise when developing their LECP. In developing this policy, engagement has taken place with LCDC chief officers in relation to the consideration of social enterprise by their LCDC, including in the context of its LECP.

Dublin City Council Local Authority

Dublin City Council (DCC), through its Economic Development Office and the Dublin City Social Enterprise Committee, actively encourages and supports sustainable and strategic social enterprise and social innovation development in the city. Supports provided include training, mentoring, the Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards, resources, and promotion of social enterprises.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
39	Engage with Regional Assemblies on Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies to raise awareness of the potential of social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD and RSES Authors
40	Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees will consider the inclusion of any appropriate measures within the next cycle of plans to support the development of social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2024	DETE / REP Programme Managers / Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees
41	The Western Development Commission will support individual social enterprises to start up and scale using its range of schemes and programmes.	Ongoing	For duration of policy	WDC
42	Local Community Development Committees will have regard to the needs of social enterprise when developing their Local Economic and Community Plans.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD and LCDCs

North-South Co-operation

The 2022 NESC report to Government on *Shared Island; Shared Opportunity* recommended that “both administrations, building on the platform already put in place, could explore the potential for greater recognition, support and development of the role of social enterprise on a cross-border and all-island basis”⁶¹. NESC further examined social enterprise on the island of Ireland in a 2023 report and identified areas that could be developed on an all-island basis and through the British Irish Council.⁶²

In May 2022, Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD convened a Shared Island Dialogue with participation by over 200 representatives from North and South⁶³. The event, entitled ‘*Enabling Rural and Community Development on a Shared Island*’ examined the role of social enterprise in thriving communities and the transformational potential of rural hubs. The relevance and value of North-South co-operation and interaction on both social enterprise and on exploring the feasibility of developing the burgeoning network of connected hubs across the island was strongly supported in the discussion.

The British-Irish Council (BIC) and Social Enterprise

The [British-Irish Council](#) (BIC) is a body established as part of the Good Friday Agreement. Its current work programme prioritises 11 different work sectors where Ministers, civil servants and, when relevant, invited stakeholders, collaborate. The Department of Rural and Community Development represents Ireland on the BIC social inclusion work sector which focuses on social enterprise, along with its counterparts from Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.

This policy will support Shared Island opportunities in a number of ways:

- The [PEACEPLUS](#) programme, which is making available significant funding over 2021-2027 to support peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland will support social enterprise in those regions through a number of funding streams. PEACEPLUS is funded by the European Union, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Information on application calls, timelines, and requirements may be found at: www.seupb.org.
- A North-South social enterprise conference will be delivered to help social enterprises network, exchange good practice and explore new cross-border markets.
- Social enterprise policy and experience sharing will be tabled as a standing item at a North-South Rural Policy Forum. The forum, established in 2021, is a structure to allow the sharing of information between rural policymakers in Ireland’s Department of Rural and Community Development and Northern Ireland’s Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.
- As part of the work of the [British Irish Council](#), the participant administrations will explore different approaches to supporting social enterprises, as well as sharing best practice. An important part of this work is the opportunity for policymakers to visit and learn from local social enterprises across the different administrations.
- The Department of Rural and Community Development will assess the feasibility of extending the ConnectedHubs.ie network to an island-wide basis.

European and International Engagement

Ireland places importance on actively engaging on social enterprise at the European and international level. Irish officials and stakeholders participate on the EU Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprise (GECES), which provides a platform for engagement with EU policy makers and social enterprise stakeholders.

As was detailed in section 2.2, over recent years Ireland has contributed to, and advocated for, developments to support social enterprise at EU, OECD and international levels. Under this policy, Ireland will proactively contribute to the development of social enterprise policy at an EU and international level, making sure that Ireland’s interests are fully represented, and building links and learning opportunities with other administrations.

61 Shared Island; Shared Opportunity, National Economic and Social Council, Council Report, No. 157 April 2023

62 Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland, National Economic and Social Council, Council Report No. 161 May 2023, p. 60.

63 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/217a3-shared-island-dialogue/#enabling-rural-and-community-development-on-a-shared-island>

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
43	Deliver increased opportunities for knowledge sharing and networking on an all-island basis including through the organisation of an all-island social enterprise conference.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
44	The North-South Rural Policy Forum will engage on social enterprise policy and experience sharing bi-annually.	2024	For duration of policy	DRCD
45	Through its participation in the British Irish Council, Ireland will identify best practice and approaches to supporting social enterprise.	2024	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DRCD
46	Complete a study to assess the feasibility of extending the Connected Hubs Network into Northern Ireland.	2024	Completed 2025	DRCD
47	Access, support, and advance policy, and share good practice via Ireland's participation the EU Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprise (GECES).	2024	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DRCD
48	Participate on the OECD Informal Expert Group on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation.	2024	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DRCD

A Representative Voice for Social Enterprise

In recent years, a number of representative bodies for social enterprise and social entrepreneurs have played a significant part at both policy and operational level in supporting the growth and advancement of the sector. As the sector matures, there is now a more immediate rationale for a greater level of co-ordination and consolidation of that representation.

International experience illustrates that such consolidation has allowed for improved coherency of messaging regarding the needs of the sector, better utilisation of resources and a higher impact for representative groups. In respect of Ireland, the OECD has observed that national networks can tend to work in isolation and sometimes in competition even to the detriment of each other's activities. This observation also emerged during the regional and national consultations in developing this policy.

It must be recognised that the breadth of the social enterprise environment, ranging from deficient demand to internationally trading enterprises, means the sector does not share a single common voice or always share a common view. As such, whilst representative voices may be merited, it is clear that the sector would benefit from greater co-ordination and consolidation. To this end, the Department of Rural and Community Development will work with representative groups to consider ways in which the sector can be supported to achieve this objective.

Separately, in recognition of the experience and capability of social enterprise representative organisations, through an open procurement process the Department of Rural and Community Development will seek to engage a delivery partner organisation/s to support the delivery of a number of key actions within this policy.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
49	Enhance the co-ordination and consolidation of social enterprise representative organisations.	2024	Completed 2026	Representative organisations / DRCD
50	Commission a partner organisation/s to support the delivery of social enterprise policy actions.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD



5 | Policy Objective Five - Impact Measurement

Context

Access to improved levels and quality of data is fundamental for informing the development of policy and measures to support the sector in achieving its objectives. The 2023 [national baseline data collection exercise](#) provided the first concrete quantitative evidence base of social enterprise across Ireland. A key objective of *Trading for Impact* will be to further develop national, regional, and local data availability relating to social enterprise in Ireland.

Separately, at an individual social enterprise level, a broad recognition exists across stakeholders regarding the need to develop tools for measuring social impact. This can assist enterprises to transparently demonstrate their credentials when seeking to access business opportunities and funding in both public and private markets.

Social Enterprise Census

The national baseline data collection exercise was designed in collaboration with social enterprise representatives, academics, and policymakers specifically to improve the availability of national data on the sector in Ireland. The key findings from the report (outlined in section 2.1) have provided an improved understanding of the nature, size, and range of the sector.

Over the course of this policy a periodic data collection exercise or 'Social Enterprise Census' will be undertaken. The research approach will continue to be refined in order to ensure the ongoing availability of up to date key data. It is initially planned to undertake this biannually and this will be kept under review in consultation with stakeholders. This will allow for the continued growth of a strong national dataset on social enterprise, and the identification of trends within the sector.

This growing dataset will provide an evidence base for stakeholders and policy-makers alike, facilitating more informed policy debate and the development of better targeted policy actions to support and grow the sector. The data will be anonymised and made publicly available in line with the 2023-2027 Open Data Strategy⁶⁴, which states that Government data should be open by default and design.

For the next iteration of the research respondents will be invited to provide consent to appear in an online directory of social enterprises. This directory will be developed to improve accessibility and availability of social enterprises to consumers, beneficiaries, and trading partners.

⁶⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/8587b0-open-data/#open-data-strategy>

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
51	Undertake a 'Social Enterprise Census' to expand the baseline data collection exercise, to be undertaken periodically.	2025	Completed 2025 and periodically thereafter	DRCD

Social Impact Measurement

Impact measurement is an approach that organisations can use to evaluate and scrutinise the social, environmental, and economic effects of their programmes, interventions, or policies. This process involves using different quantitative and qualitative tools and techniques to measure the degree of change and influence these initiatives have on people or environments.

Measurement of impact is often a requirement for publicly-funded programmes. There is also evident increased demand among the public for businesses to demonstrate positive social and environmental impact and investment. There has been an increase in the importance of measuring impact via the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) due to emerging EU regulatory requirements⁶⁵

Understandably, social enterprises often have a limited capacity to systematically undertake social impact measurement both in terms of the time and cost demands as well as the skillset required. As a result, social enterprises may outsource this work with the associated costs. Stakeholders in Ireland have universally recognised the need for improved capacity for social enterprises to measure and communicate their social impact, as reflected in the OECD⁶⁶ and NESC reviews of social enterprise⁶⁷. Social impact measurement can demonstrate the value of their work to the public, stakeholders, and funding partners, and ensure intended objectives have been met.

Under this policy and working with key stakeholders and experts, best practices in social impact measurement will be identified and made available to social enterprises⁶⁸. Capacity building supports for social enterprises to utilise impact measurement tools will be provided. A research project identifying a social impact measurement framework for Ireland will be delivered, commissioned from UCC through the Irish Research Council's New Foundations strand.

Consideration will also be given on how best to align social impact measurement tools with those commonly used in the private sector, in recognition of the growing potential for engagement between social enterprise and the private / corporate sector.

Work to better understand the potential or actual contribution / impact made by social enterprises in delivering on green transition / climate action targets will also be undertaken under the policy. Given the relatively nascent nature of the interaction between social enterprises and climate action, the extent to which social enterprises are delivering on, or could deliver on climate action targets in Ireland is currently not clearly understood or formulated in any systematic way.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
52	Make available social impact measurement best practices, and capacity building supports to social enterprises.	2026	Completed 2027	DRCD
53	Undertake research to better understand the potential or actual contribution / impact made by social enterprises in delivering on green transition / climate action targets.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD

65 The EU [Corporate Responsibility and Sustainable Reporting Directive](#) entered into force on January 1st 2023

66 Boosting Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Development, OECD, 2023: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/boosting-social-entrepreneurship-and-social-enterprise-development-in-ireland-3115bcb6-en.htm>

67 Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise, DRCD, 2022: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>

68 This will take into consideration practices within the wider social economy in Ireland e.g. the C&V and Charities sector

Research and Academia

Higher education institutions have an important role to play in informing the continuous development of policies to support social enterprises through sharing of best practices, research, and analysis.

In this context, the Department of Rural and Community Development will establish a social enterprise higher education institutions engagement network via the Social Economy Research Network of Ireland (SERNI)⁶⁹.

It will act as both a forum to discuss latest research and evidence on social enterprise, and on how to progress the number and availability of courses at third level which focus on, or include, social enterprise.

More broadly, commissioning research and improvement of links with academia will be a key component of this policy. This will ensure policy decisions draw on the combined wealth of experience of the academic community, and that they are informed by latest evidence.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
54	Deliver research on rural social enterprises 'Mapping Social Enterprises and their Impact on Sustainable Rural Development in Ireland'.	2023	Completed 2024	DRCD/ National University of Ireland
55	Establish a Social Enterprise Higher Education Network, to meet bi-annually, and commission research in response to emerging needs for social enterprise policy as needed.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD / SERNI group

Policy Implementation

Trading for Impact, which will run for a four-year period, from 2024-2027, demonstrates a clear and strong commitment by Government to continue supporting, sustaining and growing social enterprises in Ireland.

Implementation of the actions under the policy will require a collaborative approach on the part of Government, its agencies, social enterprise representative organisations, and a wide range of stakeholders.

The Department of Rural and Community Development, as the department responsible for the co-ordination of the policy, will engage with social enterprise stakeholders on an on-going basis to achieve delivery.

A 'Trading for Impact Stakeholder Engagement Group' will be established to co-ordinate input into the delivery of the policy. The group will include representation from key Government departments, public bodies, and social enterprise stakeholders.

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
56	Establish a Trading for Impact Stakeholder Engagement Group to co-ordinate input into the delivery of the policy, to meet bi-annually.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD
57	Publish an annual progress report on the implementation of this policy.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD

⁶⁹ <https://www.serni.ie/> is a research network of established higher education institutions and individual academics and graduate students whose goal is to provide a forum for those researching in the broad social economy, including the areas of social and solidarity economy, social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, social finance and social innovation.

Annex 1

Summary of Policy Measures

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
1	Deliver a National Awareness Campaign to improve awareness and understanding of social enterprise.	2025	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
2	Deliver a Social Enterprise Conference.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
3	Hold a Social Enterprise Awards event to increase awareness of the sector and provide networking opportunities.	2025	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
4	Publish a quarterly Social Enterprise Newsletter.	2024	For duration of Policy	DRCD
5	Commission a study to measure the levels of understanding of social enterprise.	2025	Completed 2026	DRCD
6	Hold structured engagements with young people engaged with social enterprises to listen to their views, including on how young people might be better supported to engage with, or work in, the sector.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD / DCEDIY
7	Develop and deliver programmes to improve availability of social enterprise opportunities and education with youth entrepreneur / innovation organisations.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
8	As curricular frameworks, specifications and modules are developed from primary to post primary, opportunities and linkages to social enterprises will be explored by National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Subject Development Groups, as considered appropriate.	2024	For duration of policy	DoE
9	Following the 2023 publication of a National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance, post primary guidance will be strengthened over the short, medium and longer term. This will support continued provision of information relating to social innovation and Guidance in post primary schools.	2024	For duration of policy	DoE
10	Provide a website to act as a central source of supports for social enterprises, and include an annual calendar of DRCD funding and supports to allow for improved planning and predictability for social enterprises.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
11	Promote the utilisation of EU funding to support social enterprises.	2024	For duration of policy	DRCD

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
12	Over the lifetime of this policy, deliver loan / grant funding schemes for social enterprises, and provide targeted supports through new and existing programmes including CSP, SICAP, PEACEPLUS, and LEADER.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
13	Establish a €2m capital support scheme to help capacity building for social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD
14	Funding and support will be provided for social enterprises through active labour market programmes including the Community Employment scheme, Tús, and the Rural Social Scheme.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DSP
15	Ensure consistency of approach to social enterprises across Local Enterprise Offices.	2024	For duration of policy	Local Enterprise Offices
16	Improve social enterprise access to Enterprise Ireland business supports such as the High Performing Start-Up scheme (HPSU), as appropriate.	2024	For duration of policy	Enterprise Ireland
17	Launch and provide funding for a pilot 'Social Enterprise Shared Business Service' model.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
18	Deliver the KickStart Social Enterprise Fund for social enterprises that provide meaningful employment to those with criminal convictions.	2024/2025	Completed 2025	DoJ, DRCD
19	Provide tailored training and mentoring for social enterprises in areas such as business planning, leadership, board membership, governance, HR / Volunteer management, capacity building, diversification, planning, digital innovation, and artificial intelligence (AI).	2025/26	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
20	Examine the potential for social enterprises to access Skillnet Ireland's training supports.	2024	Completed 2025	DFHERIS
21	Undertake research to identify specific skills, knowledge, and competency requirements for social enterprises, to support the development of more focussed supports in this area.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
22	Deliver peer learning and networking events for social enterprises at a national and regional level.	2025	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
23	A Social Enterprise Social Finance Working Group will be established to consider issues and identify potential solutions / options in relation to social finance gaps facing social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2025	DRCD and representatives from Social / Lenders / Academia / Social Enterprises

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
24	Leverage additional funding support from philanthropy and corporate social responsibility sources for social enterprises, in line with the National Philanthropy Policy 2024-2028.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
25	New public procurement guidance will be developed and information briefings provided for public procurement officers and social enterprises.	2025/26	Completed 2026	DRCD
26	Ensure that the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group is fully apprised of the potential of social enterprise in green and socially responsible public procurement.	2024	For duration of policy	DRCD
27	Support initiatives that increase the participation of social enterprises in public and private procurement.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
28	Support capacity building in social enterprises and community-based initiatives that promote GPP and circular procurement. Support awareness of social enterprises and community-based GPP initiatives such as via GPP training provided by public sector training bodies.	2024	For duration of policy	DECC
29	Government departments to capture data in their annual reports regarding tenders awarded to social enterprises, voluntary and community organisations where GPP criteria have been applied.	2025	For duration of policy	All departments
30	Work with stakeholders towards realising an online platform / website for connecting social enterprises with potential customers	2025	Completed 2026	DRCD
31	Research detailing best international practice on socially responsible public procurement and 'Buy Social' will be published.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD / DoJ
32	Progress the Co-operative Societies Bill 2022 which will provide improved legal formation options for social enterprises.	2025	Completed 2025	DETE
33	Conduct further research and analysis on social enterprise legal form / status and publish updated guidance to inform social enterprises of the options regarding company legal form.	2026	Completed 2027	DRCD
34	Investigate the challenges and merits of utilising a dedicated administrative voluntary accreditation or 'quality mark' for social enterprises.	2025	Completed 2026	DRCD
35	Ensure that social enterprises are considered in the range of existing and new measures and supports to help in the delivery of Government climate action targets.	Ongoing	For duration of policy	DECC / DRCD
36	Negotiate at an EU level to include recognition of, and a dedicated role for, social enterprises in the proposal to amend the Waste Framework Directive.	2024	Completed 2024	DECC with support of DRCD

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
37	Provide supports to social enterprises to assist them in availing of renewable energy opportunities.	Ongoing	For duration of policy	DECC
38	Participate in the high level Bioeconomy Implementation and Development Group (BIDG) and identify opportunities for social enterprises.	Ongoing	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DECC / DRCD / DAFM
39	Engage with Regional Assemblies on Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies to raise awareness of the potential of social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD and RSES Authors
40	Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees will consider the inclusion of any appropriate measures within the next cycle of plans to support the development of social enterprises.	2024	Completed 2024	DETE / Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees
41	The Western Development Commission will support individual social enterprises to start up and scale using its range of schemes and programmes.	Ongoing	For duration of policy	WDC
42	Local Community Development Committees will have regard to the needs of social enterprise when developing their Local Economic and Community Plans.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD and LCDCs
43	Deliver increased opportunities for knowledge sharing and networking on an all-island basis including through the organisation of an all-island social enterprise conference.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
44	The North-South Rural Policy Forum will engage on social enterprise policy and experience sharing bi-annually.	2024	For duration of policy	DRCD
45	Through its participation in the British Irish Council, Ireland will identify best practice and approaches to supporting social enterprise.	2024	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DRCD
46	Complete a study to assess the feasibility of extending the Connected Hubs Network into Northern Ireland.	2024	Completed 2025	DRCD
47	Access, support, and advance policy, and share good practice via Ireland's participation the EU Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprise (GECES).	2024	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DRCD
48	Participate on the OECD Informal Expert Group on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation.	2024	Ongoing participation for duration of policy	DRCD

	Action	Commenced	Delivered	Lead Body
49	Enhance the co-ordination and consolidation of social enterprise representative organisations.	2024	Completed 2026	Representative organisations / DRCD
50	Commission a partner organisation/s to support the delivery of social enterprise policy actions.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD
51	Undertake a 'Social Enterprise Census' to expand the baseline data collection exercise, to be undertaken periodically.	2025	Completed 2025 and periodically thereafter	DRCD
52	Make available social impact measurement best practices, and capacity building supports to social enterprises.	2026	Completed 2027	DRCD
53	Undertake research to better understand the potential or actual contribution / impact made by social enterprises in delivering on green transition / climate action targets.	2025	Completed 2025	DRCD
54	Deliver research on rural social enterprises 'Mapping Social Enterprises and their Impact on Sustainable Rural Development in Ireland'.	2023	Completed 2024	DRCD/National University of Ireland
55	Establish a Social Enterprise Higher Education Network, to meet bi-annually, and commission research in response to emerging needs for social enterprise policy as needed.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD / SERNI group
56	Establish a Trading for Impact Stakeholder Engagement Group to co-ordinate input into the delivery of the policy, to meet bi-annually.	2024	Completed 2024	DRCD
57	Publish an annual progress report on the implementation of this policy.	2024	Delivered annually to 2027	DRCD



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

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