



Stronger Charities.
Stronger Communities.

**the future
is community** 

Budget 2025

**A Pre-Budget Submission
for the community & voluntary sector**

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FOREWORD

Community and voluntary organisations are involved in every community in the country, providing health and social supports, services, and advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities, older people, young people, children, people experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and people at every stage of their lives.

In addition to its societal contribution, the community, voluntary, charity, and social enterprise sector (“the sector”) makes a major contribution to the economy. It comprises approximately 35,000 organisations, involves almost 76,500 volunteer trustees, directly employs 281,250 people in charities alone (1 in every 8 employed people), and manages income of €25 billion per year.¹ These organisations raise almost half of this income themselves, majorly subsidising the cost of public services in Ireland. When direct, indirect, and induced impact is considered, the sector had €32.1 billion in expenditure in 2022, and supported 321,000 jobs.²

Budget 2025 will be the last Budget of the current Government. In the current Programme for Government, “Our Shared Future”, the Government committed to a new social contract between citizens and the State, stating:

The ambition of this Government is to provide each citizen with accessible and affordable health care, housing, education, childcare and disability services, as well as a living wage, upskilling, and a dignified retirement. It will provide greater security for individuals and communities and will be founded on the principle of equality and ensuring that every citizen can achieve their full potential.

- Government of Ireland, 2020, p.74.³

Unfortunately, this commitment has not been realised. Healthcare inequalities persist, particularly for marginalised groups. Records have been made, and broken, in the number of homeless people accessing emergency accommodation. Childcare costs are rising while many childcare workers live below the living wage. Disability services are struggling to stay afloat amid rising costs and deepening disparities in pay and conditions between the public and charity sector. Over 900,000 people, including over 80,000 older people, cannot afford basic necessities. And that is before we consider the impact of an exponential increase in immigration by people fleeing war and persecution.

At every turn, the sector has stepped up to provide support to those in need. It works in partnership with Government to provide services across a range of health and social care services, despite persistent underfunding. A commitment to the social contract is a commitment to the sector. Government should honour this commitment in Budget 2025. The Wheel has a vision for a thriving charity and community sector at the heart of a fair, just and inclusive Ireland. We make this submission in furtherance of this vision.



Ivan Cooper, CEO

1 scoeco.pdf (charitiesregulator.ie)

2 Ibid.

3 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/> p.74

CONTEXT

Member Priorities

More than 2,400 sector organisations are members of The Wheel. Each organisation has an in-depth knowledge of the community they serve and expertise in their respective areas of work. Many members of The Wheel will make their own submissions to Government in advance of Budget 2025. We ask that these important voices also be recognised as part of the Budget process.

In late 2023 and early 2024 we conducted a series of surveys and meetings with members to discuss their policy priorities. While the overarching focus of this submission is on the measures that create a sustainable and thriving sector, we have also included analysis of socioeconomic conditions in which the sector operates and have included specific proposals that address the challenges faced by organisations and the people they serve.

A Holistic Approach

A vision for thriving communities requires a holistic approach to social cohesion, involving both capital and current spending. The total costed measures set out in this submission amount to €4.5 billion, €3.3 billion of which is capital, providing long-term investment in health, housing, and community infrastructure. €1.2 billion is current, ensuring the sustainability of essential services and supports. Some proposals are not costed either because of the lack of available data, or because the most appropriate way to implement the proposal requires further discussion and engagement with relevant stakeholders.

What makes a thriving community spans a range of policy areas. This submission should be read as containing interrelated and interdependent proposals.



Sustainable Development Goals

The work of the sector is inextricably linked to the furtherance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 SDGs, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provide a holistic vision for the future – one that recognises the need to tackle issues collectively rather than in isolation.

“They recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations should go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.”⁴ Each heading within this submission is, where appropriate, tagged with the relevant SDG(s).

⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

1. Supporting the Sector to Deliver

- Establish an Interdepartmental Working Group, working in partnership with the sector, on the future sustainability of services.
- Provide an additional 10% uplift across Grant Aid and Service Level Agreement funding to provide for core costs as a move towards a full-cost-recovery model of funding.
- Normalise the provision of multi-annual funding arrangements with the sector.
- Cost a direct tax incentive for Major Gifts at a minimum level no lower than €5,000 and capped at €5 million.
- Increase the cap on the VAT compensation scheme from €10 million to €20 million.
- Enable more EU funding drawdown by the sector by establishing a match funding scheme.
- Include cost of compliance in all new funding contracts.
- Invest in a €10 million Community Insurance Compliance Fund to address insurance costs.
- Develop a dedicated fund of €1 million to support the recruitment and retention of trustees.
- Ring-fence a portion of decentralised EU funding for the sector.
- Incentivise local authority support of local groups applying for EU funding.
- Provide an additional €2 million to the Central Statistics Office to gather data on the sector.
- Establish a dedicated €2 million fund to incentivise and cover the cost of voluntary mergers and collaborative work in the sector.

2. Tackling Social Isolation

- Invest €10 million in a Social Engagement Fund to support community engagement.
- Develop and resource an Action Plan to Combat Loneliness.
- Commit to investing €1 million over three years (€300,000 in Budget 2025) in capacity-building to support organisations to demonstrate the impact of their work on the sector.
- Establish a cross-sectoral Working Group to support the implementation of the Wellbeing Framework across all Government Departments.

3. Building Inclusive Communities

- Establish a €10 million fund for organisations providing tailored supports to marginalised communities.
- Invest €50 million under the Community Recognition Fund to invest in community infrastructure.
- Develop a €1 million fund for community dialogues and restorative justice programmes.
- Invest €4 million for skills assessments of international protection applicants as part of a new skills agenda for the community and voluntary sector.

4. Promoting Civil Society

- Invest €500,000 in targeted civic participation activation measures in areas that are under-represented in civic dialogue to ensure all voices are heard.
- Fully commit to social and community dialogue in line with the *Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with the Community and Voluntary Sector*.
- Support organisations to engage in local and national advocacy initiatives to promote participative democracy at a cost of €5 million in Budget 2025.
- Provide multi-annual funding for the iCommunity project, beginning with €100,000 in Budget 2025.
- Provide specific grant aid for the sector that supports all-island partnership and convening of sub-sectors to support their development, e.g. digital transformation and inclusion, social enterprise, rural sustainability, and the SDGs, beginning with Shared Island match-funding of €10 million.

5. Lifting People Out of Poverty

- Establish a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty.
- Resource an independent review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.
- Fully fund the restoration of public services, including multi-annual funding for service-delivery organisations.
- Increase investment in community development outreach programmes by €1 million.

6. Decent Work and Skills in the Sector

- Provide a pathway to pay parity for staff in Section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations (and other State-funded services), and an increase in funding to support employer salary and non-salary core costs.
- Invest €13 million in the development of a suite of business supports for social enterprises.
- Commence an annual investment programme of €10 million to fund continued professional development across the sector.
- Provide dedicated funding of €9 million annually to support the sector to respond to digitisation/AI.
- Increase direct investment from the National Training Fund to fund targeted skills programmes for the sector workforce.

7. Healthy Communities

- Invest €900 million to address underfunding in health and social care and provide multiannual funding for organisations delivering these services to people with mental health difficulties, people with disabilities and disabling conditions, and people accessing addiction services, with a particular focus on addressing health and social care inequalities.
- Increase investment in infrastructure and supports for community organisations under the roll-out of Sláintecare by €672.5 million.
- Increase funding to organisations working to deliver the State's commitments under the UNCRPD.
- Ensure patient/lived-experience advocacy groups are included in the co-design of services and

policies, and that voluntary organisations are fully engaged in the regionalisation process to ensure integrated systems of care and support to improve outcomes for those accessing services, interventions and longer-term health and social care supports.

8. Accommodating Communities

- Invest €2.6 billion in Budget 2025 to:
 - Increase capital funding for organisations providing accommodation and supports to people on low incomes.
 - Invest €20 million in organisations engaging in tenant protection, tenancy sustainment, and homelessness prevention.
 - Increase funding to organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities to live independently.
 - Increase funding for organisations working with marginalised communities to secure appropriate, safe accommodation.
 - Increase the provision of affordable housing for all, to support both workers in the sector and the people they serve.

9. Children and Youth Participation

- Increase the allocation to Early Learning and Childcare by 10%.
- Invest €15 million in community youth recreation programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector and built infrastructure (e.g. local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs etc.).
- Invest €1 million for the development and funding of a programme for youth participation and civic engagement targeting areas of disadvantage and co-designed by community and voluntary organisations working within these areas to deliver on the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024-2028.
- Expand the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives.

10. Building Sustainable Communities

- Invest €27 million in the Climate Action Fund to support:
 - Capacity-building for sector organisations to support the full implementation of Ireland’s commitments to the SDGs to reach the furthest behind first.
 - Local action on climate and biodiversity.
 - A “community connector” programme to develop an information and shared-learning space for organisations working to support biodiversity and tackle climate change.
 - Supports for social enterprises working in the circular economy.
 - A dedicated climate literacy programme.

Total costed Budget proposals: **€4,500,500,000**

Capital Spending: **€3,337,500,000**

Current Spending: **€1,163,000,000**

1. SUPPORTING THE SECTOR TO DELIVER

- Establish an Interdepartmental Working Group on the Future Sustainability of Services.
- Provide an additional 10% uplift across Grant Aid and Service Level Agreement funding to provide for core costs as a move towards a full cost recovery model of funding.
- Normalise the provision of multi-annual funding arrangements with the sector.
- Cost a direct tax incentive for Major Gifts at a minimum level no lower than €5,000 and be capped at €5 million.
- Increase the cap on the VAT compensation scheme from €10 million to €20 million.
- Enable more EU funding drawdown by community, voluntary, charity, and social enterprise organisations by establishing a match funding scheme.
- Include cost of compliance in all new funding contracts.
- Invest in a €10 million Community Insurance Compliance Fund to address insurance costs.
- Develop a dedicated fund of €1 million to support the recruitment and retention of trustees.
- Ring-fence a portion of decentralised EU funding for the charity, community and voluntary, and social enterprise sector.
- Incentivise local authority support of local groups applying for EU funding.
- Provide an additional €2 million to the Central Statistics Office to gather data on the sector.
- Establish a dedicated €2m fund to incentivise and cover the cost of voluntary mergers and collaborative work in the CV sector.



1.1 Interdepartmental Working Group on the Future Sustainability of Services

Charities suffered a sharp decline in public funding after the financial crisis in 2008, as part of cuts affecting pay and staffing for all public services. These cuts were reversed, but only for public-sector employees, through the 2017 Public Service Pay and Pensions Act and the Public Service Agreement 'Building Momentum' deal. Cuts to the sector are yet to be restored.

In June 2023, The Wheel and TASC published a report calling for immediate State funding to address the two-tier system of pay for organisations delivering public services on behalf of the State.⁵ The report examined staffing, demand for services, and funding among hundreds of Section 39, 10, and 56 organisations that receive contracts from the State to deliver essential public services countrywide in diverse areas like health, disability, family support, children, care of older people, homelessness, and addiction. It found that staff were not legally entitled to the same pay as public sector employees delivering often-identical services, meaning that in some cases pay increases of up to 15% are required to tackle “negative disparity” compared to staff doing similar work in state agencies.

⁵ https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_wheel_tasc_report_f_v_080623.pdf

Following the publication of the report, and to avoid strike action by thousands of affected organisations, a pay increase of 8% was agreed with the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), with leave to engage again on other matters contained in the *Building Momentum* agreement. Since then, a further public sector pay deal of an additional 10.25% has been agreed, leaving sector organisations further behind.

Disparities in pay and conditions are having a serious impact on the ability of organisations to recruit and retain key staff. This undermines not only the sustainability of these organisations, but the delivery of public services as well.

This issue is systemic across a range of functional areas and requires a whole-of-Government approach to address it. The first step is the appointment by An Taoiseach of a junior Minister to lead an interdepartmental Working Group on the sustainability of the sector with a remit to conduct research and to co-design solutions which ensure this sustainability into the future within the Department of An Taoiseach.

1.2 Core Costs and Multi-Annual Funding

The Wheel has long advocated for the development of a coherent long-term funding strategy for the sector to sustain our social infrastructure and the services delivered by the sector. This would include the introduction of multi-annual funding as the default approach for community and voluntary organisations, facilitating longer-term planning, better staff recruitment and retention rates, and improved outcomes. An average funding cycle of three to five years is deemed appropriate.

Funding should also be provided on a full-cost-recovery basis, considering the need for organisations to fund core costs, pay staff adequately, train and develop staff, and make provision for pension contributions where appropriate. These changes should be applied across government departments and agencies, covering areas such as education, health, social care, and rural affairs to avoid complexity for organisations with multiple funding streams and Service Level Agreements.

This should start in Budget 2025 with an additional 10% uplift across funded organisations to provide for core costs as a move towards a full-cost-recovery model of funding.

1.3 Resourcing the Philanthropy Strategy

The Wheel welcome the introduction of the new Philanthropy Strategy and welcomes the recent progress made in this area. We believe that this new strategy will play an important role in securing a sustainable funding stream for the sector. However, it is crucial that this is fully resourced, with adequate funding ring-fenced for its successful implementation. Funding for sector strategies should not be taken from existing funding streams for the sector, which support crucial work with the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society.

In implementing this Strategy, we further propose:

- Costing a direct tax incentive for Major Gifts (additional to the current charitable tax relief scheme) at a minimum level no lower than €5,000 and capped at €5 million.
- Where major-gift donations are made to grant-making foundations, trusts, donor-advised funds and charities opting into such a new Major Gift Scheme, tax relief should go directly to the donor.

1.4 VAT Compensation Scheme for Charities

The increase in the VAT compensation scheme in Budget 2024, from €5 million to €10 million, acknowledged the major contribution that charities make to society. Expansion of this scheme to increase the cap to €20 million in Budget 2025 would provide a fuller rebate to charities, who pay an estimated €49 million in annual VAT bills to deliver essential services based on their fundraised income.⁶

1.5 Proportionate Regulation and Streamlined Compliance

Charities understand the importance of transparency in their work and worked for years to encourage the establishment of Ireland's Charities Regulator. The sector welcomes regulation and is working to attain the highest standards of governance, but there is a risk now that the compliance and reporting demands associated with statutory funding and regulation are becoming increasingly onerous for charities. There is a risk that the interplay of the many separate, but related, regulatory and reporting requirements is beginning to impede the work and advocacy of charities. These requirements often far exceed those placed on private-sector service providers who operate in the same fields.

We are asking Government to review and streamline compliance and regulatory requirements to ensure that regulation in all its forms helps, and doesn't over-burden, sector organisations and that the cost of compliance is built into all new funding contracts.

1.6 Cost of Insurance

The escalating cost of insurance continues to have a negative impact on the sector, despite many reforms of the insurance sector in recent years. It is a source of ongoing concern that our premiums continue to rise. We need insurance reforms that will quickly reduce liability premiums to affordable levels and keep them there. Budget 2025 should provide for a €10 million Community Insurance Support Fund to assist those organisations with limited or no access to affordable cover, until such time as the Insurance Competition Office delivers increased underwriting capacity. In addition, measures should be introduced to:

- Accelerate the work of the Insurance Competition Office at the Department of Finance to ensure the urgent entry of more underwriters into the Irish liability insurance market.
- Adequately resource the Injuries Assessment Board as a quicker and more cost-effective means of resolving personal injury claims.
- Ensure that insurers pass on the savings generated by the recent insurance reforms.

1.7 Recruitment and Retention of Trustees

The role of the charity trustee is a particularly onerous one, which belies the fact that trustees give their time on a voluntary basis. Increased regulation in the sector, while welcome and necessary, is having an impact on the ability of organisations to recruit and retain these vital volunteers. By implementing

⁶ <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/press-office/press-releases/2020/pr-100920-vat-claims-of-almost-49m-were-received-in-2020.aspx>

supportive policies and initiatives, Government can create an enabling environment for trustee boards to thrive, attract diverse talent, and effectively contribute to the missions of their organisations. These initiatives could support training and development opportunities for trustees, facilitate public awareness campaigns in partnership with sector organisations, incentivise diversity and inclusion initiatives (such as the Future Board Leaders programme operated by The Wheel's Leadership Academy and Boardmatch), and develop recognition programmes that publicly acknowledge the contribution of volunteer trustees.

We propose the development of a dedicated fund, beginning at €2 million in Budget 2025, to support these activities.

1.8 An EU Match Funding Scheme for the Sector

Many EU funding programmes require match funding from applicants, where the EU co-finances a percentage of costs, leaving the applicant and partners to secure the remaining percentage. When EU co-financing covers 80% or more of the costs, this is usually doable, because sector organisations can provide the match through in-kind contributions such as staff and volunteer time. However, many lucrative programmes such as LIFE (which funds environmental projects) and the INTERREGS (which fund cross-border cohesion projects) have co-financing rates as low as 60%.

Sector organisations do not typically aim to accumulate surpluses and are actively discouraged from maintaining reserves, with the expectation being that every euro should go directly into services. This, therefore, puts them at a distinct disadvantage compared to their publicly funded counterparts, and it usually means they are effectively excluded from participating in these programmes. This exclusion has a ripple effect. EU funding tends to beget more EU funding. A concept might start as a small project, and then be scaled up through several EU funding applications until it is fully developed. If our sector is stuck with the smaller, more accessible programmes, they cannot scale their ideas up through larger funding programmes, and that innovation is stifled. This barrier also affects other sectors. Many EU programmes, but especially the INTERREGS, favour multi-sectoral consortia in projects, and so they give priority to projects that can demonstrate the public, private, academic, and community sector working together to tackle societal challenges. Co-financing barriers mean it is difficult to include community organisations in consortia, thereby reducing the quality of the partnership and the competitiveness of the application.

An EU Match Funding Scheme for the sector would mean that for only a small percentage of government investment in overall project budgets, our economy and society would benefit from the full value that these projects offer. Many other European countries already have effective match-funding schemes in place, including the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

The Wheel and Access Europe made a pre-budget submission in 2022 outlining more detail on the need for this scheme, examples from other countries, and proposals for how such a scheme might work. This submission was co-signed by a number of sitting MEPs, EU national contact points, and leading sector organisations.⁷ Budget 2025 could deliver on this, beginning with an initial investment of €5 million.

⁷ Pre-Budget Submission - Access Europe.pdf (wheel.ie)

1.9 Ringfence a portion of decentralised EU funding for the sector

Several EU funding programmes are decentralised from Brussels and are managed by authorities here in Ireland, including the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). A great portion of the funding available through these programmes goes on to be absorbed by state and semi-state bodies. ESF+, for example, funds the education and training boards (ETBs), JobsPlus, Springboard+, Human Capital Initiative, Youthreach, etc. Some smaller grants are filtered down through the likes of Pobal for the community sector.

While these Government initiatives are very important, we would like to see more recognition for our sector's vital role on delivering on ESF+ objectives and see that reflected in how funding is allocated. ESF+ is the European Union's main instrument for investing in people. It focuses on social inequalities and poverty, youth unemployment, and child poverty, all of which are key areas in which our sector is often leading the way in terms of frontline services and social innovation. A specific measure outlines that each country should spend "an appropriate amount" on capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations.

While the funding that does trickle down to civil society is welcome, it is not enough, and is not on par with other countries where ESF+ is a major funder of civil society. There should be ringfenced funding specifically for sector groups working in these areas under ESF+, which should be open for competitive funding applications in a fair and transparent process.

1.10 Incentivise local authority support of local groups applying for EU funding

Many sector organisations simply do not have the capacity to apply for and manage EU funding. Those that are volunteer run especially are very limited in the funds for which they can apply. They do, however, see the needs in their communities, have ideas for innovative projects in line with EU funding priorities, and have the expertise and networks to deliver impact on the ground. They simply do not have the administrative and financial capacity to manage funding, and as such they are excluded from these opportunities. This is especially evident in two subsectors: sport, where we tend to rely so heavily on volunteers, and local migrant and refugee led groups, which tend to be "younger" organisations and often have not had the chance to mature into organisations with staff and well-established administrative and management systems.

Meanwhile, the engagement of local authorities and councils in EU funding varies hugely across the country. Some are especially active, while others have little to no engagement. As net contributors to the EU budget now, Ireland should be prioritising EU funding drawdown at every level. Local authorities and councils should be incentivised or even mandated to reach certain targets of funding drawdown to play their part in capitalising on our EU membership and bringing the EU closer to their communities.

Budget 2025 should support this process by allocating funding to Local Authorities for an EU Programmes Officer located in the LGMA and working with the CCMA, at a first-year cost of €100,000.

1.11 Sector Data

The sector is a huge source of employment, volunteering opportunities, and service delivery in Ireland, and yet there is no centralised mechanism of collating all this data for use in research, evaluation and benchmarking. Budget 2025 should allocate €2 million to the Central Statistics Office to collate data on the sector, including a specific Census module on use of, and engagement with, the sector by the public.

1.12 Collaboration and Mergers

Charities interested in pursuing mergers should be given access to a €2 million fund to enable this action. Mergers should not be linked to reductions in overall statutory funding, but pursued only where there is real opportunity to effectively pool resources and increase impact.

“To meet Ireland’s growing mental health needs, we should invest in the voluntary and community mental health sector with sustainable, multi-annual funding. This sector faces stagnant or reduced funding despite rising demand. Adequate investment is crucial for effective service delivery and staff retention. Embracing new technologies and innovative methods can further enhance support.”

- Fiona Coyle, Mental Health Reform.

2. TACKLING SOCIAL ISOLATION

- Invest €10 million in a Social Engagement Fund to support community engagement.
- Develop and resource an Action Plan to Combat Loneliness.
- Invest €1 million over three years to support awareness-raising and capacity building for organisations to demonstrate their value to society.
- Establish a cross-sectoral Working Group to support the implementation of the Wellbeing Framework across all Government Departments.



2.1 Loneliness

Ireland is the loneliest country in the EU, with more than one in five respondents to an EU-wide survey reporting feeling lonely most or all of the time.⁸ Insights from the survey also show that the rate of loneliness decreases with age, income, and education, and increases with major life events such as separation, job loss, and finishing studies. Having meaningful relationships, and the amount of contact with them, also makes a difference.

The sector plays a key role in supporting people experiencing loneliness, with almost two in five (36.0%) supports being implemented by NGOs, followed by almost one in six (17.7%) by local governments, and one in eight through joint initiatives (12.8%). Over half of loneliness interventions are targeted towards older people, with just over eight percent targeting young people. Interventions for older people provide essential supports, but more is needed across the lifecycle.⁹

The Wheel has recently joined the Loneliness Taskforce, established in 2018 by Dr Keith Swanick and ALONE. The recommendations set out in the First Report of the Loneliness Taskforce¹⁰ are even more pertinent today and form the basis for a cross-sectoral Action Plan to Combat Loneliness. Budget 2025 should provide sufficient resources to develop such an Action Plan, co-designed with sector organisations and delivered in partnership taking an interdepartmental approach.

A 2023 report by the ESRI on civic and political engagement among young adults in Ireland found that young people who live in areas with a strong social infrastructure have more positive outcomes than those who do not.¹¹ A strong social infrastructure includes sports facilities and opportunities to meet up and socialise. Having such infrastructure is associated with a lower risk of depression, higher social trust, and greater confidence in the State, media, and the healthcare system. While the absence of this infrastructure should be addressed at all levels of policymaking, the report also found that civic engagement may provide a “cushion” for younger people without it.

8 https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/loneliness/loneliness-prevalence-eu_en.

9 <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC134255>.

10 [loneliness-taskforce-a-connected-island-an-ireland-free-from-loneliness.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#).

11 <https://www.esri.ie/publications/civic-and-political-engagement-among-young-adults-in-ireland>.

Active participation by younger people in community and voluntary activities, particularly volunteering, would not only mitigate the impact of loneliness, but provide much-needed social infrastructure for future generations. Strong social infrastructure leads to greater trust in the instruments of the State, which in turn leads to greater social cohesion, something that is desperately needed in these increasingly divisive times. We therefore propose the establishment of a Social Engagement Fund, with an initial investment of €10 million, in Budget 2025. This investment would support community engagement programmes that provide social inclusion opportunities and social prescribing, particularly those working in community development with younger people, organisations working with older people experiencing loneliness, and organisations in rural and remote areas. We propose a further €1 million over three years (€300,000 in Budget 2025) to support the We Act campaign, raising awareness and capacity building for organisations to demonstrate their value to society, and the development of a grants programme for sector organisations to undertake communications projects that help connect the public with their services.

2.2 Wellbeing

To sustainably tackle the causes and consequences of loneliness and social isolation requires a whole-of-Government response. In 2021, Government published the Wellbeing Framework,¹² consisting of 11 dimensions of wellbeing as a framework for policymaking. This was a very welcome development, but we note with disappointment the absence of any cross-sectoral oversight of the Wellbeing Framework, its indicators, and its implementation. We therefore propose that Budget 2025 include an allocation to establish such a group.

“Given that Ireland has one of the highest levels of loneliness in Europe, it is vital that an Action Plan to Combat Loneliness is funded in Budget 2025.”

- The Loneliness Taskforce

12 Gov - A Well-being Framework for Ireland (www.gov.ie).

3. BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

- Establish a €10 million fund for organisations providing tailored supports to marginalised communities.
- Invest €50 million under the Community Recognition Fund to invest in community infrastructure.
- Develop a €1 million fund for community dialogues and restorative justice programmes.
- Invest €4 million for skills assessments of international protection applicants as part of a new skills agenda for the community and voluntary sector.



3.1 Tailored Supports for Communities

Building an inclusive society means fostering mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration between new and existing communities, ensuring all people are supported to have their needs met, including communities who have been left behind. The sector is uniquely placed to provide this support and plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion within communities. The sector is often deeply rooted in local communities, making it best-placed to identify and address specific needs and challenges faced by the people who live there. From food banks and youth programs to environmental initiatives and cultural events, sector organisations provide essential services and can empower communities to advocate to have their needs met. Organisations strengthen communities' resilience and cohesion by supporting them to address local issues together. Budget 2025 should include an additional €10 million in funding for organisations providing tailored supports to marginalised communities.

3.2 Community Infrastructure

Community centres, local clubs, and volunteering opportunities create shared spaces where people from all backgrounds can come together. These spaces provide opportunities for social interaction, networking, and mutual support, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among community members. By organising events, workshops, and activities that cater to diverse interests, the sector encourages inclusivity and promotes positive social interactions. Building on the Community Recognition Fund, Budget 2025 should provide an additional €50 million for community infrastructure, including community halls, skate parks, playgrounds, and other shared facilities.

3.3 Inclusive Dialogue

Crucially, at this time where communities face social tensions, the sector puts itself on the front line, playing a pivotal role in facilitating conflict resolution processes. Through dialogue initiatives and restorative justice practices, organisations can bring people together to create a shared understanding of the issues that affect the community and develop an inclusive path forward. We propose dedicated funding of €1 million in Budget 2025 to support these initiatives.

3.4 Skills Assessment and Development

The Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a large portion of the Ukrainian population being forcibly displaced. Since then, almost 105,000 Ukrainian people have come to Ireland.¹³ In addition, more than 26,000 international protection applicants were residing in IPAS accommodation at the end of 2023.¹⁴ An increase in inward migration brings with it infrastructural and service delivery challenges – with many migrants fleeing wars and persecution needing immediate accommodation, healthcare and social care supports. But inward migration also brings great opportunities. Almost 1 in 5 employed people in Q4 2023 were originally from countries other than Ireland. The Information and Communication sector has the highest proportion of non-Irish employees (38.3%, n=64,500), while the highest number of non-Irish employees are in Industry (76,000), and Human Health and Social Work activities (73,800).¹⁵ Addressing the challenges facilitates access to the opportunities, and builds a stronger, more inclusive society while supporting potential contributors to economic growth. Budget 2025 could support this process by investing €4 million for skills assessments of international protection applicants as part of a new skills agenda for the community and voluntary sector.

“Our vision is to work towards an inclusive society that supports the integration and well-being of all, through the strengthening of the availability and functioning of health and addiction services.”

- Eddie Mullins, CEO of Merchant’s Quay Ireland.

13 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/FP/p-ai/arrivalsfromukraineinirelandseries12/>.

14 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/280268/00aa1162-e1e7-4eb6-ae9-232293169794.pdf#page=null>.

15 CSO Labour Force Survey Quarterly Statistics, QLF47 - Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment

4. PROMOTING CIVIL SOCIETY

- Invest €500,000 in targeted civic participation activation measures in areas that are under-represented in civic dialogue to ensure all voices are heard.
- Fully commit to social and community dialogue in line with the Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with Community and Voluntary Sector.
- Support organisations to engage in local and national advocacy initiatives to promote participative democracy at a cost of €5 million in Budget 2025.
- Provide multi-annual funding for the iCommunity project, beginning with €100,000 in Budget 2025.
- Provide specific grant aid for the sector that supports all-island partnership and convening of sub-sectors to support their development, e.g. Digital transformation and inclusion, social enterprise, rural sustainability and the SDGs, beginning with match-funding of €10 million.



4.1 Civil Dialogue

Civil society plays a pivotal role in shaping the fabric of modern democracies around the world. It represents the space where citizens come together voluntarily to express their interests, advocate for their rights, and engage in collective action for the betterment of society. From small community groups to national and international organisations, civil society encompasses a diverse range of entities that contribute significantly to the socio-political landscape.

At the core of civil society's importance is its role in promoting and safeguarding democratic values in inclusive ways. Sector organisations act as advocates for the most marginalised in society and can be 'honest brokers' when engaging in multi-stakeholder processes. Through advocacy campaigns, public awareness-raising, and policy analysis, sector organisations play a crucial role in ensuring that the voices of all citizens, but particularly those who are furthest behind, are heard in the decision-making processes.

In 2022, the Department of Rural and Community Development launched the *Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with the Community and Voluntary Sector*¹⁶ which copper-fastened the relationship and partnership between Government and the Community and Voluntary sector, highlighting its centrality in addressing the crises of recent times. Developed by the sector, in partnership with Government, the aim is to support values such as social justice and active participation along with principles like respect, collaboration, and value for money. The Values and Principles are used by central and local government, as well as state bodies, as a basis for their interactions with the community and voluntary sector in pursuit of the best outcomes for all communities. They provide a basis for respectful, inclusive engagement to reach our common goals. It is important that Government fully commit to social and community dialogue in line with the *Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with the Community and Voluntary Sector*.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4445-values-and-principles-for-collaboration-and-partnership-working/>.

Budget 2025 should move to safeguard these democratic processes by funding participation activation measures in areas that are underrepresented in civic dialogue to ensure all voices are heard, starting with an initial investment of €500,000 for targeted programmes.

4.2 Advocacy Initiatives

Civil society also encourages and promotes deliberative democracy and participation. It provides mechanisms, such as Citizens' Assemblies, Public Participation Networks, and various Dialogue Forums, for citizens to meaningfully engage in discussions on public issues, and learn about their rights and responsibilities within a democratic framework.

As we saw during the pandemic and in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in times of crisis, civil society organisations show up. They demonstrate their resilience and capacity to respond swiftly to emergencies. Sector organisations fill critical gaps where Government and market mechanisms lack the required agility to act fast. This ability to act quickly and with a focus on community needs underscores the importance of a vibrant and robust civil society sector.

Recently, we have seen the attempted undermining of civil society, particularly participation by organisations in advocacy processes on behalf of their members. This is deeply concerning. The role that civil society plays both as partner to Government in the delivery of essential health, social and community services, and as advocate on behalf of the most marginalised in society should be protected.

Participation is vital for the sustainability of the democratic process. In addition to the programmes referenced above, Budget 2025 should include funding for local and national advocacy initiatives to promote participative democracy, beginning with an initial investment of €5 million.

4.3 Communities on a Shared Island

Recent focus groups run hosted by iCommunity, a joint initiative operated by The Wheel and NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action), confirmed that while there is an appetite to work together on pressing issues that impact communities in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, significant barriers remain, particularly in the context of the fall-out of Brexit. There is also a lack of specific funding to support staff to allocate time for partnership building and collaborative work, as distinct from specific programme delivery. In order to address this, Budget 2025 should commit to:

- Multi-annual funding for iCommunity to further develop a current collaborative working on an all-island basis at a cost of €100,000 in Budget 2025.
- Specific grant aid for the sector that supports all-island partnership and convening of sub-sectors to support their development, e.g. Digital transformation and inclusion, social enterprise, rural sustainability and the SDGs, beginning with match-funding of €10 million.

The importance of civil society in modern democracies cannot be overstated. Sector organisations play a vital role in shaping inclusive, resilient, and participatory societies, both nationally and internationally. Nurturing and supporting civil society remains essential for building a more just, equitable, and sustainable society for all.

“Social dialogue allows us to identify challenges at the earliest stages, facilitates communities to come to terms with those challenges and to build consensus about how best to manage change in a way that allows people to have a say in the policies affect them.”

- John McGeady, CEO, Social Justice Ireland.

5. LIFTING PEOPLE OUT OF POVERTY

- Establish a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty.
- Resource an independent review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.
- Fully fund the restoration of public services, including multi-annual funding for service delivery organisations.
- Increase investment in community development outreach programmes by €1 million.



5.1 Benchmarking Social Welfare and Resourcing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025

More than 560,000 people are at risk of poverty and more than 900,000 are living in enforced deprivation, according to the latest figures released by the CSO.¹⁷ This represents a worrying rise of over 200,000 people going without basic necessities (enforced deprivation) since 2021. Lone parents with children younger than 25 and people unable to work due to long-standing health problems are most likely to be living in enforced deprivation (45.6% and 44.7% respectively), while tenants are more than four times as likely to be going without than people in households where the home is owned.¹⁸ In 2022, the Select Committee on Budgetary Oversight published its Report on Indexation of the Taxation and Social Protection System recommending a system of benchmarking social welfare payments.¹⁹ This is a move which has been called for by many of our sector colleagues, and one The Wheel fully supports. We propose the establishment of a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty.

Lifting people out of poverty is about more than income, however. It also requires access to affordable, sustainable public services. The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (the Roadmap),²⁰ which aims to reduce the number of people in consistent poverty and increase social inclusion, acknowledges this in taking a cross-Departmental approach. However, the actions underpinning the Roadmap do not go far enough in meeting its stated aims. An independent review, co-designed with organisations at the frontline of providing support to people experiencing poverty and deprivation, should be conducted and a renewed focus on resourcing ambitious actions for change delivered in Budget 2025.

17 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/>.

18 Enforced Deprivation Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023 - Central Statistics Office.

19 https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/committee_on_budgetary_oversight/reports/2022/2022-07-14_indexation-of-the-taxation-and-social-protection-system_en.pdf.

20 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ca8bf-roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025/>.

5.2 Community Development Outreach Supports

The sector is at the coalface of supporting people on the lowest incomes. One in twelve charities has the specific charitable purpose of the relief of poverty or economic hardship,²¹ while sector organisations in the health, housing and homelessness, child and family services, and community development sectors are under continued pressure to provide supports to those who are most at risk. Persistent underfunding of the community and voluntary sector has led to frontline services being asked to do more with less. Many are experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis as salaries fail to keep pace with public sector operators. These services provide a lifeline to those on the margins and should be adequately resourced to do this vital work in the face of increasing demand.

Research by TASC, commissioned by The Wheel and published in 2023,²² found that the negative disparity in pay for most of the charities average very close to or above 10%, risking the collapse of vital public services. The report also called for funding and other supports to the sector which correspond with the complexity and expansion of needs around housing and homelessness, addiction, disabilities, older people, and the challenges facing young people and low-income families.

What the latest figures show is that deprivation has worsened since the publication of this report. The valuable contribution of the sector should be recognised, and adequately funded, if we are to effectively address the impact of poverty. Budget 2025 should increase investment in community development outreach programmes by €1 million.

“We believe poverty is not inevitable and with the right policies we can end it. Adequate income support, pathways to good quality jobs and quality public services are all needed to lift people out of poverty for good.”

- Tricia Keilthy, SVP: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Ireland.

21 <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/media/4733/crar2022.pdf>.

22 https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_wheel_tasc_report_f_v_080623.pdf.

6. DECENT WORK AND SKILLS IN THE SECTOR

- Provide a pathway to pay parity for staff in receipt of section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations (and other State-funded services), and an increase in funding to support employer salary and non-salary core costs.
- Invest €13 million in the development of a suite of business supports for social enterprises.
- Commence an annual investment programme of €10 million to fund continued professional development across the sector.
- Provide dedicated funding of €9 million annually to support the sector to respond to digitisation/AI.
- Increase direct investment from the National Training Fund to fund targeted skills programmes for the sector workforce.



6.1 Health and Social Care Services

Ireland's sector is a significant employer. Charities alone directly employ 281,250 staff, almost 1 in 8 people in the labour force.²³ The sector also involves the unpaid work of more than 1 million volunteers. One in every three people delivering public services in Ireland works for a charitable community or voluntary organisation.²⁴ Yet these organisations are often underfunded, with staff experiencing shortfalls of up to 17% compared to their public sector peers.

In October 2023, and in order to avoid strike action, the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) agreed a pay increase of 8% for staff of Section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations – staff contracted to provide health and social care services under specific statutory provisions, with a commitment to review the situation in line with a previously agreed public sector pay deal by the following December. The implementation of this agreement was extremely complex as co-funding and part-funding arrangements were not considered and non-salary costs were excluded. This complexity, resulting in many staff in frontline services not receiving the 8% increase, continues to exacerbate a large-scale recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. It is therefore imperative that Budget 2025 include a pathway to pay parity for staff in Section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations (and other State-funded services), and an increase in funding to support employer salary and non-salary core costs.

²³ <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/media/4767/scoeco.pdf>.

²⁴ A total of 303,559 people were directly employed in the public sector (Quarter 3, 2020, Public Expenditure and Reform Databank). Approximately 165,000 people worked in the community and voluntary sector. That totals 468,559 people working in some capacity to deliver public services, of which the civil and public service constitutes two thirds (64.8%) and the community and voluntary sector comprises one third (35.2%). Note that the staff of voluntary hospitals and non-acute voluntary agencies are employed by the CV sector even though their numbers are included in the government databank.

6.2 Social Enterprise Supports

There are over 170 Government supports for start-ups and small businesses. These are delivered on behalf of the government by Local Enterprise Offices and Enterprise Ireland. Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) are Business Units within the Local Authority. They operate under a Service Level Agreement with Enterprise Ireland. The Service Level Agreement between Enterprise Ireland and each Local Authority governs the delivery of services via the LEOs. The Service Level Agreements between Enterprise Ireland and each LEO should require LEOs to provide the same full range of business supports to social enterprises, irrespective of legal form, as it does to other enterprises.

The Wheel again draws the Government's attention to the EU Commission Recommendation on SME's (2003/361/EC) which specifically includes "associations regularly engaged in an economic activity" in its definition of an SME. The Recommendation also states, "An enterprise is considered to be any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form". The exclusion of CLGs from the support by LEOs is clearly counter to that Commission Recommendation.

Social enterprises employ 84,382 people, with a further 74,825 volunteers actively involved or providing governance supports in the sector,²⁵ but the availability of supports to social enterprises from LEOs is not consistent across the country. This lack of support was also reflected by NESC in its recent report, *Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland*.²⁶

The CLG structure is the most common structure for social enterprises. It would therefore be progressive for CLGs to be afforded similar status to limited companies when accessing supports from LEOs and Enterprise Ireland. Some CLGs have engaged in workarounds, such as establishing subsidiary companies limited by shares, but this creates additional and unnecessary complexity. Moreover, while some LEOs are open to considering supporting social enterprises, others are less convinced, citing eligibility and viability as concerns. However, if social enterprises have a strong business component, LEOs should be able to support them. Consistency of approach from LEOs has been raised as an issue by social enterprise proponents. Budget 2025 should invest €13 million to develop a suite of business supports for social enterprises.

6.3 Continued Skills Development

The skills of this significant workforce are the solid foundation on which the social infrastructure of community life in Ireland rests and are central to the delivery of a significant proportion of public services. These skilled workers have demonstrated their capacity, innovative potential, and commitment over decades, especially through the recent turmoil of the pandemic and responses to the migration and cost of living crises. The work of the sector has an impact in every community, tackling the biggest societal challenges, in partnership with the state and other stakeholders right across Irish society. Budget 2025 should begin the process of investing €10 million annually to continued professional development across the sector, particularly in the areas of health and social care, children, and housing where skills needs can change rapidly. Government should also involve service-deliver organisations in national workforce planning fora, especially in areas of acute skills shortages such as health and social care.

²⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise/>.

²⁶ <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/social-enterprise-on-the-island-of-ireland/>.

6.4 AI/Digitalisation

The OECD review of the National Skills Strategy,²⁷ published in May 2023, identifies the sector as a significant stakeholder in the national skills agenda, echoing a previous report by Indecon which found that investment in training in the nonprofit workforce in Ireland is low when compared to other sectors in the Irish workforce and to nonprofits in other countries, notwithstanding a return of nearly €3 in productivity gains for every €1 spent in upskilling supports.²⁸

Over the next short number of years, our entire labour force, economy, and society will face a series of structural trends – demographics, decarbonisation, digitalisation, and deglobalisation²⁹ - which will re-shape how we live and work. These transformative forces will require a step-change in reskilling and upskilling across all sectors. Budget 2025 should therefore include dedicated funding of €9 million, provided annually thereafter, to support the sector to respond to digitisation/AI, decarbonisation and demographic challenges through funding research into sector skills development needs, with particular focus on the twin digital and green transitions.

The OECD review of the National Skills Strategy³⁰ notes a number of concerning trends in Ireland, including that 30% of adults have less-than-basic digital skills, participation in lifelong learning lags behind the EU's top performers, and activation of skills could be improved among disadvantaged groups. The workforce in the sector has an unparalleled reach into communities and can be an influential player in the culture shift towards lifelong learning across society. Raising awareness of and engagement with upskilling pathways among sector workers will help to mobilise large numbers of people across diverse communities. The sector also plays a crucial re-skilling role in the economy through providing employment and training opportunities that reach people who are disadvantaged and who public agencies find it difficult to engage, through involvement in Community Employment, the Community Services Programme, Tús, and other similar schemes. Furthermore, the social services and supports delivered by the sector, often on a voluntary basis and at low or no cost to the user, provide further economic benefits. Budget 2025 should allow for increased direct investment from the National Training Fund to fund targeted skills programmes for the sector workforce. Given the need to greatly accelerate Ireland's lifelong learning rates across the population, the significant return on investment of tackling basic skills needs, and Ireland's full employment status, serious consideration should be given to using a portion of the NTF for basic skills training at Levels 1 - 4.

"It's vital that we ensure that nonprofit workers, both paid and unpaid, and the organisations they work in, have the skills they need to deliver their varied and important missions across Irish society."

- Mairead O'Connor, Senior Skills Development Manager at The Wheel

27 <https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland-d7b8b40b-en.htm>.

28 Investment Appraisal of Upskilling - Indecon.pdf (wheel.ie).

29 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/53e74-national-economic-dialogue-2023/>.

30 <https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland-d7b8b40b-en.htm> p21-22.

7. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

- Invest €900 million to address underfunding in health and social care and provide multiannual funding for organisations delivering these services to people with mental health difficulties, people with disabilities and disabling conditions, and people accessing addiction services, with a particular focus on addressing health and social care inequalities.
- Increase investment in infrastructure and supports for community organisations under the roll-out of Sláintecare by €672.5 million.
- Increase funding to organisations working to deliver the State’s commitments under the UNCRPD.
- Ensure patient/lived experience advocacy groups are included in the co-design of services and policies, and that voluntary organisations are fully engaged in the regionalisation process to ensure integrated systems of care and support to improve outcomes for those accessing services, interventions and longer-term health and social care supports.



7.1 Health Inequalities

According to the National Treatment Purchase Fund,³¹ 86,827 people were awaiting in-patient treatment in April 2024, with 15% waiting a year or more. Some 589,225 people were awaiting outpatient appointments, with 18% waiting a year or more. Ireland ranks lowest on the Health Powerhouse Euro Health Consumer Index 2018 in terms of accessibility.³² The OECD *Health at a Glance* reports that Ireland spends 6.1% of GDP on Health, compared to an OECD average of 9.2%.³³ The same report notes the impact of socio-economic disparities on healthcare across the OECD, with 43% of people in the bottom 20% of the income distribution reporting a long-term illness or health problem, compared to 27% in the top 20%. According to the report, Ireland is among the countries with the largest income gap, where people in the bottom 20% of the income distribution are at least twice as likely to have a long-term illness or health problem as those in the top 20%. The report also found that Ireland had the highest outpatient healthcare costs, accounting for an average of 40% of household spending on healthcare.

Sector organisations play a vital role in health and social care. At a community level, sector organisations are often first to address local needs, promote preventative care, and advocate for more equitable services. At a national level, they are at the forefront of research and innovation in health. A lack of multi-annual funding is significantly increasing the costs of delivering the services – due to the inability to enter contracts in a planned manner, for instance in renting residential or day-service locations, and the inability to utilise funding streams that require more than one year to complete development (e.g. Capital Assistance Scheme).

31 <https://www.ntpf.ie/home/nwld.htm>.

32 <https://healthpowerhouse.com/media/EHCI-2018/EHCI-2018-report.pdf>.

33 <https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance/>

Budget 2025 should address underfunding with an increase of €900 million to account for existing levels of service across health and social care,³⁴ and include multiannual funding for organisations providing health and social care to people with mental health difficulties, people with disabilities and disabling conditions and people accessing addiction services; with a particular focus to address healthcare inequalities.

7.2 Resourcing Sláintecare

Sláintecare, introduced in 2016, committed to a community-based model of healthcare, yet according to the OECD *Health at a Glance* report³⁵ the occupancy rate in acute care (excluding private hospitals) was 90% – the highest across the OECD countries, and 20 percentage points above the OECD average of 70%. Sector organisations are first to bridge gaps in access to healthcare for the most marginalised, operating at national and local level, however with our public hospitals almost reaching capacity, more is needed to deliver sustainable public healthcare in the community, including investment in community infrastructure. The proposed capital allocation under Sláintecare was €3 billion over six years,³⁶ or €500 million per year. Adjusting for inflation³⁷, this would be closer to €672.5 million at 2024 rates. Budget 2025 should deliver on this investment to support care in the community.

7.3 Mental Health and Disability

Sector organisations have also been key to securing reform in mental health services and in reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues by raising awareness, providing workplace and community-based training, and encouraging people to seek the help they need. They also often provide front-line counselling and support services at low or no cost. Almost 1 in 8 (12%) respondents to the Healthy Ireland Survey 2023 indicated a probable mental health problem.³⁸ Almost 25,000 referrals were received by the HSE General Adult Mental Health Services in the period April to June 2023³⁹, while just 13,629 were seen. A similar pattern emerges in the 'Psychiatry of Later Life' service, where 6,295 referrals were received and 3,947 were seen, and in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), were 12,209 referrals were made and 6,451 were seen. Waiting lists for Community CAMHS stood at 4,361 in June 2023, with a reported 700 children waiting more than 12 months for support. Greater collaboration between State agencies and sector organisations, together with adequate resourcing, would help alleviate these concerning waiting lists and provide a holistic service at national and local level.

Disability organisations are key to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to live a life with dignity. More than 1 in 5 people in Ireland have a long-lasting condition or difficulty of 'any extent', with 8% of the population (407,342 people) having a long-lasting condition or difficulty to a 'great extent or a lot', according to Census 2022.⁴⁰ Of the people who reported a 'great extent or a lot', almost 3 in 10 had difficulty going outside the home, and more than 1 in 5 had difficulty dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home. Organisations in this sector provide home care, personal assistance, interpretation services,

34 <https://www.fiscalcouncil.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-path-for-Irelands-health-budget.pdf>.

35 <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bdd23022-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/bdd23022-en#:~:text=Data%20for%20Ireland%20exclude%20private,Source%3A%20OECD%20Health%20Statistics%202023.>

36 An Coiste um Chúram Sláinte sa Todhchaf - Tuarascáil maidir le Cúram Sláinte - Bealtaine 2017 | Committee on the Future of Healthcare - Sláintecare Report - May 2017 (assets.gov.ie).

37 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wpi/wholesalepriceindexmarch2024/>.

38 Gov - Healthy Ireland Survey 2023 (www.gov.ie).

39 <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/performance-reports/performance-profile-april-to-june-2023.pdf> (latest published report).

40 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/census2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/>.

and social prescribing, in addition to advocating to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are being respected. Budget 2025 should adopt the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters report *Towards Harmonisation of national legislation with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*⁴¹ and adequately resource organisations working to deliver the State's commitments to advocate and co-design supports, services, and capacity building for people with disabilities. This would include the provision of adequate funding for disability-specific community supports as outlined in the *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026*⁴² to address demographic change and identified unmet need of people with disabilities.

7.4 Health Dialogue

The establishment of a Health Dialogue Forum with stakeholders from the community and voluntary sector, together with the publication of the *Partnership Principles between Voluntary Organisations and the State in the Health and Social Care Sectors*⁴³ (the Principles) were important steps in having the voice of the community heard in policy decisions on healthcare. The continued strengthening of these processes, and ensuring community organisations and patient advocacy groups are engaged in the co-design of services and policies, will be key to ensuring the delivery of quality services. Budget 2025 should provide additional funds to organisations to ensure patient/lived experience advocacy groups are included in the co-design of services and policies, and that voluntary organisations are fully engaged in the regionalisation process to ensure integrated systems of care and support to improve outcomes for those accessing services, interventions, and longer-term health and social care supports.

“Community supports including disability-specific services, the majority provided by the voluntary sector, are essential to realise the right of disabled people to independent living and to realise the UN CRPD. This includes Personal Assistance, home supports, alternative forms of respite, personalised budgets etc. These critical supports continue to be underfunded and overstretched.”

- Emer Begley, Disability Federation of Ireland.

41 https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_disability_matters/reports/2024/2024-01-24_towards-harmonisation-of-national-legislation-with-the-united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities_ga.pdf

42 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/70871-disability-action-plan-2024-2026/>.

43 <https://assets.gov.ie/251951/d4e6fafb-7127-48c3-b7a4-40192b4b4dec.pdf>.

8. ACCOMMODATING COMMUNITIES

- Invest €2.6 billion in Budget 2025 to:
 - Increase capital funding for organisations providing accommodation and supports to people on low incomes.
 - Invest €20 million in organisations engaging in tenant protection, tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.
 - Increase funding to organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities to live independently.
 - Increase funding for organisations working with marginalised communities to secure appropriate, safe accommodation.
 - Increase the provision of affordable housing for all, to support both workers in the sector and the people they serve.



8.1 Social Housing and Homelessness Supports

Key supports provided by the sector have targeted low-income households, with the provision of social housing (through Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs)), tenancy protection and sustainment supports, and homelessness supports. This is increasingly challenging as more people find themselves in need of these supports. In 2023, 58,824 households were on Local Authority waiting lists for social housing, with 12,626 households, more than 1 in 5 of the total, waiting more than 7 years.⁴⁴

Almost 7,000 households are headed by someone aged 60+, reflecting a worrying trend in precarity in older age highlighted in a recent report by ALONE and Threshold.⁴⁵ Almost 12,500 households have income exclusively from employment, raising serious concerns about affordability and decent work. 23,500 households living in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), which is unsuitable as a long-term solution to a social housing need. 12,000 households headed by lone parents. 8,000 have a housing need due to homelessness, an increase of 18.6% on the previous year. Budget 2025 should address this need through an increase in capital supports for AHBs.

The Housing Commission recently published its report on Ireland's housing sector,⁴⁶ making a series of recommendations for improvement. We note that many of these relate to social housing, and AHBs in particular. These organisations must be included in the co-design of the development and implementation of these recommendations, providing their expertise to the process. In March 2024, 13,866 people accessed emergency homeless accommodation, of which more than 4,100 were children.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0dad4-summary-of-social-housing-assessments-2023-key-findings/>.

⁴⁵ <https://alone.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Threshold-Alone-Report-highres-web.pdf>.

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f3551-report-of-the-housing-commission/>

⁴⁷ Template 2 Cover Front and Back Dept (www.gov.ie).

This represents an increase of 60% in total, 72% in child homelessness, and 19% in family homelessness since the introduction of the *Housing for All* strategy in September 2021. Households in precarious accommodation cannot thrive. They cannot plan for the future. Organisations working at the coalface with these households are often also providing wraparound social care supports. A 2019 report from Focus Ireland found that 68% of families experiencing homelessness had come from the PRS.⁴⁸ Budget 2025 should invest €20 million in organisations providing tenant protection, tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.

8.2 Accommodation for Older People and People with Disabilities

Many organisations are also providing specialised support within the accommodation sector to older people, people with disabilities, Travellers, and international protection applicants; areas which require expertise and understanding of the specific needs of the people they serve.

Accommodation in the housing market is often unsuitable for older people and people with disabilities who may need specific adaptations and supports. While the aim is to support people within their communities, this often requires investment in adaptations and the availability of additional services to ensure independence and a quality of living. While the number of, and expenditure on, housing adaptation grants for older people, people with disabilities, and mobility aids grants have returned to 2010 levels,⁴⁹ the shortfall in the intervening years is yet to be addressed. This means that many organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities are using their own resources to fund minor adaptations, where possible. With an increasing and ageing population, it is likely that this need will increase and should be resourced. Budget 2025 should increase funding to organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities to live independently.

8.3 Traveller-Specific Accommodation

Organisations working with Local Authorities to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation are in the unusual position that allocations are being made, but are not being drawn down, resulting in persistent underfunding of accommodation and additional supports to Traveller communities. A review by IHREC found that, between 2008 and 2018, €168.8 million was allocated for Traveller accommodation, with just €110.6 million (66%) being drawn down.⁵⁰ In 2020, the system of allocating funding per Local Authority was replaced by a disbursement process whereby Local Authorities can apply for allocations for Traveller accommodation. In 2020 and 2021 the full central allocation was drawn down, but not every Local Authority utilised it.⁵¹

Organisations working within Traveller communities have a keen insight into the issues that affect the people they serve. Working together with Local Authorities to build strong, respectful relationships, together with adequate resourcing, will facilitate them to support the provision of this basic necessity. Budget 2025 should fully resource this process of engagement, while introducing measures to address lack of accommodation support in Local Authority areas.

48 <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Long-et-al-2019-Insights-Vol-2-No-1-Family-Homelessness-in-Dublin-%E2%80%93-Full-Report.pdf>

49 <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/0906a-other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics/#housing-adaptation-grants-for-older-people-and-people-with-a-disability-private-houses>

50 <https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/equality-review/>

51 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-09-15/212/?highlight%5B0%5D=traveller>

8.4 Accommodation for International Protection Applicants

21 years after the introduction of Direct Provision in Ireland, and heeding the concerns of civil society organisations, the Government published a White Paper on ending it.⁵² Shortly following its publication, however, Russia invaded Ukraine and the international protection landscape in Ireland changed with the introduction of the Temporary Protection Directive.⁵³ While the measures initially provided for under the Temporary Protection Directive have largely been reduced, it was initially welcomed by organisations working in the international protection space as providing a blueprint for a new approach to international protection.⁵⁴ Budget 2025 should increase funding for organisations working with marginalised communities to secure appropriate, safe accommodation.

8.5 Affordability

It would be remiss of us not to refer to affordability issues in the accommodation sector, both for staff working within the sector and the people they serve.

The average cost of purchasing a new home rose by 4.4% in the year to December 2023 and now stands almost 4% higher than the previous peak in 2007. Standardised average rents increased by 11% nationally, and 10% in Dublin in the year to Q3 2023.⁵⁵ These increases in rent payments have not been matched with increased security of tenure for tenants, which has been called for by organisations supporting tenants.

Between 2013 and 2022, wages increased by 27% while house prices increased by 75% and rents increased by over 90%.⁵⁶ It is no longer affordable to live in the private rental sector for someone on an average wage. Lack of affordability is having an impact on all areas of social and economic life. In addition to an increase in demand for the supports offered by sector organisations working in the housing and homelessness sector, many organisations are experiencing difficulty recruiting and retaining staff due to lack of affordable accommodation in their area. Budget 2025 should increase the provision of affordable housing for all, to support both workers in the sector and the people they serve.

The total package of supports outlined in this section would require an investment of €2.6 billion in Budget 2025.

“A secure, comfortable, and affordable home is the foundation for any community and country. A home forms the basis for a good life and our well-being through a sense of security and privacy. We strongly believe in the provision of high-quality affordable homes through the delivery of social housing. This is only possible through strong partnership and support from the Government.”

- Haley Curran, Cooperative Housing Ireland.

52 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7aad0-minister-ogorman-publishes-the-white-paper-on-ending-direct-provision/>.

53 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:32001L0055>.

54 <https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/irelands-response-ukrainian-crisis-blueprint-better-future>.

55 <https://www.rtb.ie/about-rtb/data-insights/data-hub/the-rtb-q3-2023-new-and-existing-tenancies-rent-index>.

56 https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2023/2023-10-05_housing-affordability-for-private-household-buyers-in-ireland_en.pdf.

9. CHILDREN AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

- Increase the allocation to Early Learning and Childcare by 10%.
- Invest €15 million in community youth recreation programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector and built infrastructure (e.g. local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs etc.).
- Invest €1 million for the development and funding of a programme for youth participation and civic engagement targeting areas of disadvantage and co-designed by community and voluntary organisations working within these areas to deliver on the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028.⁵⁷
- Expand the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives.



9.1 Childcare

One third of children in Ireland are cared for by childminders or childcare organisations.⁵⁸ Childcare providers provide an essential service for children and their parents. Taking a child-centred approach, childcare providers in the community and voluntary sector support the development and education of children across the country. The cost of childcare can vary significantly by area, but this is often a result of overheads such as premises and insurance, rather than salaries. The latest *Early Years Sector Profile Report*⁵⁹ found that the average wage for childcare staff was €13.10 per hour, with early years assistants (accounting for 46% of all staff working directly with children) earning €12.10 per hour, or 20c below the living wage at the time of the report (2021/2022). Children thrive on consistency and stability. The ability of organisations to retain staff is key to providing this stability to the children for whom they care.

In addressing overhead costs, while the *First Five Strategy*⁶⁰ is very welcome, as are the childcare subventions for low-income parents, there is a need to provide consistent, high-quality childcare at an affordable cost. For children with additional support needs, greater investment to expand the access and inclusion model to full-time, all year round is also needed. This will require investment from Government and delivery partnerships with sector early-years organisations, and an increase in funding for the National Model of Parenting Support Services.⁶¹

⁵⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec/>.

⁵⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_childcare_arrangements.

⁵⁹ https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2022/05/Pobal_22_EY_20-21-Report_final_2.pdf.

⁶⁰ <https://first5.gov.ie/>.

⁶¹ gov - Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services (www.gov.ie).

Average public expenditure on early childhood education and care across the OECD is 0.8% of GDP, while Ireland spends just 0.3%.⁶² Budget 2024 allocated more than €1.1 billion to Early Learning and Childcare, an increase of 8% on the previous year.⁶³ Budget 2025 should build on this progress with a 10% increase, or full year cost of an additional €110 million.

9.2 Community Recreation Facilities

Children also need safe spaces to play and explore within their communities. The *Children's Sports Participation and Physical Activity Study 2022*⁶⁴ found that while the number of children reaching the recommended level of physical activity has increased since 2016, it currently stands at just 23% of primary school aged children and 12% of those in post-primary school. Participation rates in any sport (school or community) have also increased between 2016 and 2022, but the drop-off between primary and post-primary school is again evident (96% compared to 84%). Sports associations provide a sense of community among children that can last into adulthood and funding for these bodies should be ensured into the future.

However, not all children enjoy or are able to participate in sports activities. A 2022 study by the ESRI⁶⁵ found that girls were less likely to be engaged in sports than boys, and lower levels of engagement were also found among children with disabilities, children from migrant backgrounds, and children from financially strained households. With loneliness increasing among younger people,⁶⁶ we need a community response to support all younger people to socialise and develop real friendship networks. Family Resource Centres, youth clubs, and community development organisations provide invaluable support to young people and their families. Budget 2025 should invest €15 million in community youth outreach programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector and built infrastructure (e.g. local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs etc.).

9.3 Civic Engagement

In addition to participation in sport and other recreational activities, youth engagement in civic participation is important for having young people's voices heard. Young people have become more socially and environmentally aware, and a 2023 study by the ESRI⁶⁷ found that civic engagement such as volunteering can benefit both young people and their communities. This study further found that young people in rural areas were more likely to participate in civic activities than those in urban areas, and that socio-economic background was a determinant of participation, with young people from more affluent areas more likely to engage than those from disadvantaged communities. As political engagement is correlated with greater levels of social trust,⁶⁸ programmes aimed at youth participation are key to tackling both loneliness, mental health, and social unrest. Budget 2025 should include a sufficient initial investment to resource the implementation of the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028, starting with an initial investment of €1 million in 2025 for youth participation and civic engagement targeting areas of disadvantage and co-designed by community and voluntary organisations working within these areas.

62 <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>.

63 Gov - Minister O'Gorman welcomes substantial investment under Budget 2024 (www.gov.ie).

64 <https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2023-08/CSPPA%202022%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

65 <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS151.pdf>.

66 https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/loneliness/loneliness-prevalence-eu_en.

67 <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS171.pdf>.

68 Ibid.

Recognition of the importance of communities to the development of children and young people, and their engagement in civic society, should be prioritised. In addition to the measures outlined above, Budget 2025 should provide for the expansion of the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives.

“Children and Young People are the future of this country and they deserve the best services to ensure they can to meet their full potential and engage fully in society. We work with many families who are struggling and we know that with the right level of support in properly funded, accessible services, they are able to achieve their goals. Investment in children, young people, and families will help to build a more equal and humane society for all.”

- Siobhán O’Dwyer, Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland.

10. BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

- Investment of a further €27 million in the Climate Action Fund to support:
 - Capacity building for sector organisations to support the full implementation of Ireland’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals to reach the furthest behind first.
 - Local action on climate and biodiversity.
 - A “community connector” programme to develop an information and shared-learning space for organisations working to support biodiversity and tackle climate change.
 - Supports for social enterprises working in the circular economy.
 - A dedicated climate literacy programme.



10.1 Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of international agreed goals that invite all people to ‘think globally and act locally’ to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and take action on climate change. There is enormous potential for communities to drive this agenda at a local level, by nurturing what is working already and growing new ideas through innovation. The Wheel is a member of Coalition 2030, an alliance of over 60 civil society organisations working together to ensure Ireland keeps its promise to achieve the SDGs.⁶⁹ According to Social Justice Ireland’s Sustainable Progress Index 2024, Ireland currently ranks 8th out of the EU14 countries in terms of progress towards the Goals. The sector is key to achieving greater progress. Budget 2025 should invest in the capacity of sector organisations to support the full implementation of Ireland’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals to reach the furthest behind first.

10.2 Sustainability Programmes

Organisations are engaged across the country on projects relating to sustainability from environmental conservation and biodiversity to renewable energy programmes, the circular economy, and community resilience. A recent project, run in partnership between Eastern and Midlands CARO, Urban Foresight, and The Wheel, and funded by the government, provided training and mentoring to empower communities in the wider Midlands region to meet the challenges posed by Ireland’s transition to a climate-proofed economy and resilient society.⁷⁰ This project, which was completed in 2023, provides a blueprint for

⁶⁹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁷⁰ <https://www.caro.ie/projects-research/collaborations/emerge>.

community engagement on sustainability. Budget 2025 should invest in a “community connector” programme to develop an information and shared-learning space for organisations working to support biodiversity and tackle climate change. Government launched the second phase of the Small-Scale Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (SRESS),⁷¹ which aims to provide an easier route to market for community projects and enable them to maximise their participation in the energy transition. We welcome the higher rate provided for Renewable Energy Community (REC) due to the additional barriers organisations face when establishing projects such as planning, grid connection and financing, and the importance placed on community involvement in renewable energy projects.

10.3 A Real Just Transition

The transition to a green economy and the ambition to achieve net neutrality by 2050 will require a radical reshaping of the established societal norms in terms of how we work, live and shape our communities. However, the opportunities are limitless – cheaper living, alternative employment opportunities, energy independent and thriving communities, improved health and quality of life. Social enterprises will increasingly play a role in tackling climate change in areas such as renewable energy and the circular economy, as highlighted in the *EU Transition Pathway for the Proximity and Social Economy*.⁷² Facing the climate crisis head on will continue to be a ground-up movement led by communities who understand the necessity of drastically changing the way our economy and societal structures work. Budget 2025 should invest in supports for social enterprises working in the circular economy and begin the process of legislating to incentivise sustainable business practices.

To affect a just transition, change will require active public participation, belief in the rationale of the transition, and, moreover, the skills and capacity to engage with the process. The European commission suggests that meeting targets will require a mix of technology and societal changes, and 16% will come largely from behaviour change.⁷³ Developing green skills is fundamental to stimulating this behavioural change within communities. Sector organisations have a pivotal role to play and a responsibility to ensure that the transition to net zero is a just one. Budget 2025 should therefore support improved climate literacy within organisations to develop an understanding of the impact of their work on the environment, and to be conscious of the responsibility that they have for a sustainable future, beginning with an increased investment for specific literacy programmes and community engagement specialists.

“Communities possess unparalleled expertise and advocacy for their local areas. With robust government support, they have the potential to significantly accelerate the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. Indeed the global momentum behind ‘SDG localisation’ demonstrates the transformative power of community-driven initiatives. We urge the government to prioritize and empower communities, both present and future, in this budget to maximize their impact.”

- Dearbhail Lawless, Coalition 2030.

71 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/96110-small-scale-generation/#small-scale-renewable-electricity-support-scheme-sress>

72 Transition pathway - European Commission (europa.eu).

73 https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/H2020_LC-GD-10-2-2020.

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of charities, community groups, and social enterprises. As a representative voice, we provide leadership to the sector and advocate on behalf of our growing community of members. As a supportive resource, we offer advice, training, and other opportunities to people working or volunteering in the sector.

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