The Future of Community and Voluntary Action
An iterative discussion paper towards vision and action

Drafted by Ivan Cooper, Director of Public Policy, May 22nd 2020

1. A future inspired by our strong community values

Ireland stands at a pivotal moment where community is very much to the fore. People have come together to support each other in responding to COVID-19, which has brought out community spirit and altruism all across Irish society. A huge number of everyday acts of kindness, generosity and creativity have helped people to cope with the isolation, hardship and anxiety brought on by the crisis. These shared community values have ensured that the most vulnerable have been supported through the crisis.

The country has put people's health and wellbeing first, with community and voluntary action a prime mover in our collective positive response. The needs of the economy have been de-prioritised to bring the virus under control. Expertise has been respected and valued. Great sacrifices have been made. As a result, we are now presented with some great opportunities to learn from this experience and shape our future so that the economy sustains strong communities and nurtures the values and the actions that have served us so well.

2. Facilitated by a strong community and voluntary sector

A lot of the community spirit, altruism and voluntary action that has occurred in response to the COVID-19 crisis has been informal and did not require any regulation beyond common sense and decency. At the same time, the organised community and voluntary sector has been involved in an extraordinary surge of activity ever since advice was issued that vulnerable people should self-isolate and the shutdown of schools and businesses. The sector itself has been key to facilitating much of the volunteering, both formal and informal, that has been taking place. The sector is also well placed to help deal with future social scarring from the pandemic, to offset the negative impact of the difficult economic circumstances to come and to help us rebuild a better society based on this recent experience of solidarity and putting the *public good* first.

During the crisis, demand for the supports, services and advocacy of community and voluntary organisations has increased very considerably. Organisations have responded by re-designing existing programmes to facilitate remote delivery in line with the requirements of social distancing, as well as introducing a wide range of new services to cater for emerging need. They have done this while simultaneously dealing with the greatest ever collapse in earned/fundraised income. The sector itself has expended much time and energy in supporting the community-response. Through its representative organisations, it has also made the case for emergency supports and funds to tide the work over and to ensure a thriving future for community action in the context of this new reality.

The period ahead will present many challenges for the community and voluntary sector – especially with regard to its key roles in advocacy and in health, social, child and family, and community services.

A core consideration of The Wheel's work over the last month has been to identify what changes may be coming, and to look at how the sector can shape those changes to ensure our society and economy

sustains strong communities and nurtures the community values that have been central to our positive COVID-19 response.

3. Changes and opportunities we can anticipate

On this basis The Wheel has engaged in exploratory discussions to identify probable changes that the sector needs to be prepared for. These will likely include:

1. A very significant increase in demand for the supports, services and advocacy provided by community and voluntary organisations in the context of an increase in existing disadvantage and inequality – with a risk of significant left-behind and un-served populations.

2. Increased public appetite for more integrated, universal and environmentally-focused public services with emphasis being placed on achieving high standards and consistency in outcomes across the country.

3. Increased focus on public-service reform (especially in health and social services/Slaintecare etc.) as the state a) grapples with the fiscal consequences of the crisis and seeks to do more with less and b) is inspired and motivated by its success in organising the emergency response.

4. A period of pressure on the public finances which will likely translate into pressure on statutory funding for health, social and community services as well as climate action.

5. A potentially protracted period of significantly reduced earned/fundraised income and increased competition between organisations to secure these resources.

6. Increased interest in collaborative and partnership working on the part of cash-strapped organisations with similar missions or serving similar communities. Mergers (in very specific circumstances – see below) potentially offer a practical solution for some organisations to ensure continuation of mission in challenging circumstances.

The COVID-19 crisis will also present many opportunities for the community and voluntary sector – which is by nature resilient – to adapt and renew the supports, services and advocacy it offers for the people and communities it serves. Opportunities include:

1. An energised population newly enthusiastic and experienced in community response, eager to stay involved in organised community activity, motivated by their experience of positive community values and open to imagining a future based on these values.

2. Increased respect for expertise and evidence-informed policy.

3. The mainstreaming of the new ways of delivering remote services/using new technological solutions that have been developed in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

4. The rolling-out of new behind-the-scenes internal organisation work.

5. Fixed overhead costs such as premises-rental will likely reduce as remote working increases.

6. Collaborative work will likely intensify as relationships, alliances and coalitions form to maximise the sector's response to the crisis.

4. Some Points and Questions for Consideration

In the light of these anticipated changes and opportunities, and informed by ongoing discussions with members, we would like to offer the following points and associated questions for consideration:

1. **Our national *sense of community* has been much talked about and praised during the pandemic. How can we build on this and strengthen the infrastructural reality of Ireland as a country of community?**
    While many people have commented positively on the great community spirit shown during the lockdown period, what does this really mean in practice? How can we focus government and public agencies on building and supporting community spirit? Is it possible to rebuild based on the solidarity and "national effort" of recent months, or will society be once again subservient to a "competitive market" approach? Can we articulate this in a way that will command strong support amongst a range of interested parties?

2. **How can we demonstrate the impact and value that the community and voluntary sector contributes through its work? How can we ensure that impact and value is recognised and respected?**
    The sector's role in advocacy and service provision is a core component of the work that it does and the funding it secures (statutory and earned/fundraised) yet the sector contributes so much that isn't recognised. Is there a sufficient focus on and resources for data collection and impact measurement? What is the added value that the sector offers? How can organisations be best supported to identify and demonstrate the impact of their work? How can that value be assured in new, or renewed, public service reform processes?

3. **How can we ensure a future for the crucial advocacy role the sector plays underpinning social justice, social inclusion and democracy?**
    The sector plays a key role in citizen, community and cause advocacy. This is especially important in that much crucial advocacy work attracts little by way of statutory funding. This work is particularly at risk from the collapse in fundraised/earned income.

4. **What can be done to increase collaborative and partnership working?**
    For many organisations, increasing their collaborative and partnership working (both within and between the sector/state) or investigating the possibilities of mergers incurs costs. What supports are needed for organisations seeking to collaborate more or even consider and embark on mergers (when appropriate to their mission – there should be no pressure on organisations to merge)? How can the costs involved be provided for? Who should provide them? What role can shared services potentially play in this area? How can we avoid misguided restructuring that could sacrifice locally-oriented responsiveness for centrally-oriented administrative efficiencies?

5. **What could the potential impact of technology be on the sector?**

    This crisis has caused all of us to make more use of online communications for work, for entertainment and to meet other needs. This will likely accelerate the adoption of these technologies across society, including for mainstream support provision, learning and training. How will the services of community and voluntary organisations be affected? What aspects of interpersonal contact cannot be replaced by technology? What's needed as the sector transitions?

6. **What is needed to sustain our community and voluntary sector and our social fabric?**

    Our communities are held together by the network of community and voluntary organisations and the legions of volunteers they involve. This ecosystem and the social capital it constitutes depends on the community values and the volunteered time, fundraised/earned-income, and statutory grants that support it. What is needed to sustain this great asset into the future? What non-financial supports are required? What statutory financial supports are required? What can be done to support organisations to maximise the fundraised/earned income available to them? Are current strategies adequate?

5. Potential Priorities and Action Points Suggested

In the spirit of stimulating discussion on these points, and to provide food for thought, we think it is useful to put forward some *possible* emergent priorities and action points these questions might suggest (please note that this is not a comprehensive treatment):

1. The role of the community and voluntary sector in maintaining *social capital* and the quality of our democracy should be acknowledged and explicitly supported.

2. The role, contribution and value of the community and voluntary sector to services, supports and advocacy should be acknowledged by government and in all strategies and reform processes.

3. All public-service reform processes, and all engaged in providing supports and services, should be required to formally aim at high-quality, universally available, responsive, flexible, inclusive, and holistic supports and services.

4. Funds for existing service, support and advocacy work being done by community and voluntary organisations should be at least maintained in the aftermath of the crisis (with increased funds being provided for new and emergent need). Any change processes should aim at increasing effectiveness not at reducing costs (i.e. any resulting cost savings should be reinvested in the overall quantum of services delivered by the sector).

5. Reviews should be conducted on existing strategies and plans that support the work of charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises to maximise the impact of the sector's work in serving and supporting communities in this new climate.

6. Initiatives and resources are needed to support community and voluntary organisations to fully capture and communicate the impact and value of their work.

7. Dedicated funds should be made available to support increased collaborative working across the full spectrum from co-operation to coordination through partnership-working towards mergers where appropriate.

8. Funds should be made available to support, empower and enable *key sub-sectors* within the community and voluntary sector to identify priorities for the work that they do and the communities they serve. This will enable sub-sectors to develop leadership, collaborate and participate from a position of strength, and on an equal footing, with statutory partners in future engagements. All such processes within sectors should include built-in protections to ensure that the large and powerful do not dominate.

6. Emerging priorities for The Wheel's approach to our public policy work

In considering the questions and associated *possible* suggested action points outlined for consideration above, please note the following emerging priorities for our advocacy and public policy work as identified by the board of The Wheel:

1. Keeping the needs (and rights) of the people and communities supported and served by community and voluntary organisations to the fore in all situations and contexts.

2. Keeping the inclusive community values of the sector to the fore in public/policymaker consciousness, pointing to the core role played by the sector in supporting people through the impact of the crisis, and promoting the irreplaceable value and contribution of that work to sustaining communities in the period ahead.

3. Facilitating the sector in reflecting on changed circumstances towards a renewed vision for the role and work of the community and voluntary sector based on strong community values.

4. Ensuring that public policy values and supports a diversified and healthy community and voluntary sector, with the importance of community and voluntary organisations as maintainers of voluntary activity and community spirit recognised and appreciated: "it's not about individual volunteers, it's people working together".

5. Helping our members adjust to new ways of working necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis and, where relevant, helping them to pivot existing services to respond to new and emergent need.

6. Helping our members to adjust to changes in income resulting from the COVID-19 crisis (both decreases in fundraised/earned-income and statutory income); identifying and securing the policy change needed to support their work in the short, medium and long term. Where necessary, encouraging, facilitating and supporting the sector to identify and implement sustainable approaches suggested by changing circumstances.

7. Seeking to work in constructive partnership with government (including local government) departments and agencies from a position of strength and legitimacy rooted in our trusted standing with members, adopting a positive, nurturing posture and avoiding defensiveness.

8. Ensuring our members' role is respected, understood and resourced adequately in context of increased demand anticipated post-crisis.
   i. Supporting and providing leadership with and for relevant members in engagements relating to policy towards the sector or the role of community and voluntary organisations in publicly-funded work (and associated administrative changes);

ii. convening members and retaining/securing representation in any forthcoming engagement structures/processes (such as the IRG Dialogue Group; Tusla Commissioning Advisory Group; NTF Advisory Group; or their successors, including any new social partnership type structures).

9. Deepening and intensifying recent work with fellow representative and support-infrastructure bodies in the sector (and its many subsectors), to articulate to maximum effect, well-supported messaging relating to the future of the community and voluntary sector. Identify new processes for linkages and engagement with these sub-sectors.

10. Being with and for our members at all times and taking our leadership cues from them.