

# SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE IN RELATION TO THE PREPARATION OF THE DEPARTMENT'S STATEMENT OF STRATEGY

April 2023

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## 1. Introduction

The Wheel welcomed the publication of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's first Statement of Strategy in 2021. We are delighted to have this opportunity to help shape the Department's new Statement of Strategy 2023 - 2025.

As Ireland's national association of charities, community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises, The Wheel works to represent and support the network of thousands of organisations that make up our community, voluntary and social enterprise (CVSE) sector, the unseen force powering our communities, driving positive social change, while providing essential supports and services in communities.

As well as providing vital services to communities, community and voluntary organisations<sup>1</sup> advocate for people who otherwise may not have a voice and facilitate public participation of some of the most marginalised in our society.

### The Role of the Department Vis a Vis the CVSE Sector

The relationship between the Department and the CVSE sector is multi-faceted. From community education to adult literacy, mitigating educational disadvantage to managing ESF+ EIST funding, and from workforce development to engaged research the nonprofit sector in Ireland is working alongside the Department across multiple areas of activity and priority.

As a result, the CVSE sector is a key stakeholder and partner for the Department on 4 of its current Strategic Goals:

**#Talent** – development of talent and skill;

**#Innovation** – promote research, knowledge and innovation;

**#Inclusion** – support learning for all

**#International** – succeed on a world stage

As the key representative voice for the sector as a whole, The Wheel's submission today will focus on each of these four areas.

The CVSE sector constitutes a significant social economy within the broader economy. It comprises almost 35,000 community, voluntary and charitable organisations; involves over **86,400 volunteer directors** and trustees; directly employs more than **170,000 people**; and manages income of **€14.2bn per year**. These organisations raise over half of this income (more than €8.3bn) themselves, majorly subsidising the cost of public services in Ireland. Indecon Economic Consultants (in a report published by the Charities Regulator in 2018) estimate that the total direct, indirect, and induced value of the work of Ireland's charities exceed €24bn per annum and supports 289,000 employees.

This sector plays, not only a well-recognised role in Ireland's society, communities and health/social care provision, but it also is an important economic actor. It is also a sector that has a unique reach into the lives and communities that public policy interventions and research programmes often find challenging to engage with.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'community, voluntary and social enterprise sector' is used interchangeably with the term 'nonprofit sector' in this document. Both terms are intended to cover organisations that are any of the following: registered charities, social enterprises, independently government non-profits, civil society groups, voluntary run organisations which deliver public services and many more.

## 2. Summary Recommendations

The Wheel recommends that to support the CVSE sector, a vital element of Ireland's social and economic infrastructure, DFHERIS should give due regard to the following:

### Architecture and Infrastructure

1. The **CVSE sector to be included in the overall governance structures** that are in place to develop and manage the National Skills agenda at national and regional level. The sector to be represented as members of the National Skills Council [or whatever alternative structure may be developed] and all other relevant national, regional and local structures.
2. **Networks and clusters of CVSE employers** to be identified, supported and facilitated to engage with the FE/HE infrastructures at all levels: national, regional and local. So that these crucial elements of national skills development infrastructure are as responsive as possible to this important workforce.

### Implementation

3. Support, encourage and resource the development of a **national skills development strategy** for the 170,000+ employees in the CVSE sector workforce, that provides the necessary guidance, skills development, literacy supports and CPD required to support a 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce serving our communities.
4. Building on existing successful arrangements, such as The Leadership Academy, develop two feasibility studies, looking at: (a) the establishment of a formalised support mechanism for a **not-for profit graduate programme**; and (b) increasing engagement with **apprenticeships and traineeships** amongst nonprofit employers.

### Research, Data and Innovation

5. Establish a **national Engaged Research hub located in the CVSE sector**, bringing together the two key stakeholder groups: academic researchers and would-be engaged researchers and their civic society collaborators and would-be partners.
6. Networks and clusters of CVSE employers to be supported to identify "what works" in their practice, generate evidence and relevant data, and what skills gaps are present which impede their potential to innovate – and **support knowledge transfer and innovation** in and between these clusters and between CVSE and other sectors.

### Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills

7. **Remove barriers to participation in literacy supports**, through the State providing funded targeted paid learning leave to CVSE employees with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs where the employer does not have the capacity to pay for this.
8. Consolidate and expand the **ALL Collaboration and Innovation Fund** to ensure that good practice is harnessed, and quickly and effectively replicated and resourced across the 16 regions and throughout the CVSE sector.

### Investment

9. **Invest €5m annually** for the next five years in a dedicated Workforce Skills and Training Framework for the CVSE Sector.
10. Provide Community Education providers (and all other departmentally-funded community and voluntary providers) with **multi-annual funding**. Invest in suitable learning environments in Community Education centres through capital grants.

### 3. The Wheel's Response

#### **#Talent – develop talent and skill**

The Wheel is committed to ensuring that non-profit 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.

The National Skills Strategy 2025 places a significant emphasis on the need for up-skilling of those who are in employment – regardless of organisational type (i.e. business versus non-profit), and a requirement for employers to participate in the skills development agenda through active collaboration with education and training providers. This model of active collaboration with employers is one which The Wheel, as the largest representative body for non-profit employers, is also committed to, through our role as the National Training fund programme implementer for the non-profit sector and our membership of the National Training Fund Advisory Group. Indeed we welcomed the opportunity to participate in the OECD review of the National Skills Strategy in 2022. We look forward to playing a key role in the implementation of the renewed Skills Strategy from 2023 onwards.

In order to fulfil the commendable ambition of the Department to increase lifelong learning rates and provide all citizens with opportunities to upskill and develop their talents, we urge that the 170,000+ nonprofit sector workforce be included at all levels in the conversation around talent development. In order to tackle the key challenges facing Irish society today, including decarbonisation, digitalisation and demographic shifts, the nonprofit workforce will be working on the frontlines and will require strategic investment in order to play its crucial part in the transformations ahead.

We also urge the Department to ensure that the CVSE sector is included in the overall governance structures that are in place to develop and manage the National Skills agenda at national and regional level. Specifically, that the sector be represented as members of the National Skills Council and all other relevant national, regional and local structures and processes.

#### **Reach equality of access to workforce development through increased funding for upskilling and training in the non-profit sector**

Ireland's charities employ more than 6% of Ireland's labour force. Charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises face the same training and development challenges as those faced by commercial business, yet there is no dedicated national skills development strategy in place. We are seeking a commitment to develop and implement a comprehensive skills-development strategy for charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises funded through the National Training Fund.

Recent research carried out by Indecon, International Research Economists, has discovered the following regarding the current skills and training requirements of Irish non-profit workers:

1. Critical skills gaps exist in the non-profit sector workforce in Ireland
2. Levels of training in the Irish non-profit sector workforce are very low, compared to other sectors of the Irish workforce and also non-profit workers in other countries.
3. There is a need for increased investment in skills enhancement in the non-profit sector here.
4. Investment in upskilling in the sector is likely to have a net positive cost-benefit.

Therefore, it is imperative that the level of resources invested in the skills-building of employees working in non-profits be significantly increased so that all of the labour market in the country has access to appropriate levels of skills building resources. This investment must be targeted at “culturally attuned” and streamlined models of delivery. Citizens who work in the CVSE sector workforce must have available to them the guidance, training and skills-development supports and services and programmes (including literacy, numeracy and digital literacy) they need to engage in ongoing continuous professional development.

Funding for sector-sensitive training and development must be put on as secure a footing as mainstream academic and business training. We recommend an investment of €5 million per year for the next 5 years.

Networks and clusters of CVSE employers should be identified, supported and facilitated to engage with the FE/HE infrastructures at all levels: national, regional and local, so that these crucial elements of national skills development infrastructure are as responsive as possible to this important workforce. The architecture to enable this to be done requires to be designed as do the designation of the various leadership roles.

Networks and clusters of CVSE employers should be supported to identify “what works” in their practice and what skills gaps are present which impede their potential to innovate – and for programmes to support knowledge transfer and innovation in and between these innovation clusters in the sector and between CVSE and other sectors.

### **Further Education and Training**

We welcome the renewed focus on Further Education and Training that has emerged alongside the roll out of the Future FET Strategy, and its recognition of the critical role played by Community Education under Strategic Priority 6: Fostering Inclusion and the development of the community education framework with a range of relevant stakeholders.

In the area of skills and workforce development, Priority 5 of the FET Strategy: Building Skills is a welcome reassertion of the role of FET in the support of the national skills agenda. We welcome the focus on “co-construction models” between ETBs and employers, in order to maximise the relevance and impact of programmes. We have been working closely with colleagues in ETBs, ETBi and SOLAS in order to create effective bridges and collaborations to engage CVSE employers and workers with the opportunities available to them in FET, including Skills To Advance. We welcome the success of these initiatives and encourage the Department to continue to support and invest in this co-creation model.

### **Apprenticeships & Traineeships**

Ireland aims to significantly grow work-based learning over the coming years using the apprenticeship and traineeship modes of learning and skills development, with the Apprenticeship Action Plan aiming to expand apprenticeship to 10,000 by 2025.

Formalised apprenticeships and traineeships are rare in the nonprofit sector, with the For Purpose Not-for-Profit Graduate Programme<sup>2</sup> being the closest thing to a formalised traineeship programme currently offered.

However, there is much scope for collaboration, development and expansion in this space. In line with recommendations from the 'EU Skills Development and Employment: Apprenticeships, Internships and Volunteering' report we should aim to stimulate further the engagement of nonprofits in the development and implementation of apprenticeships and traineeship programmes (e.g. financial incentives and support in organising work-based learning) and make them aware of the benefits of expanding the apprenticeship/traineeship system in the sector in terms of recruitment and the alignment of education to the needs of labour market.

The Wheel recommends undertaking two feasibility studies:

- (1) Into establishing a formalised support mechanism to a dedicated not-for profit graduate programme to attract graduate talent to enterprises in this sector.
- (2) Looking at increasing engagement of nonprofit employers with apprenticeships and traineeships to increase work-based learning opportunities across the sector.

## **#Innovation – promote research, knowledge and innovation**

The Wheel is committed to ensuring that engaged and collaborative research and innovation remains central to shaping policy in Ireland and also at a departmental level, to support and foster partnerships between civil society organisations and researchers in higher education. We see this as a key conduit to develop ideas and innovations through reciprocity, transparency and dialogue, not only to promote sustainable social and economic development across communities, but to gain insights and build the evidence base needed to tackle the major challenges faced by our society and the world over.

Impact 2030 the latest strategy in this area, positions research and innovation at the heart of addressing Ireland's societal, economic and environmental challenges. However, disappointingly, the CVSE sector is largely absent in the inter-sectoral, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborative, cooperative and knowledge sharing initiatives set out in the strategy.

In light of the sector's crucial role in tackling these societal challenges and the recognised contribution that the nonprofit sector plays in generating innovation we would urge the Department to build on the recognised capacity of the CVSE sector to initiate and roll out social innovation [ref: '[Building a new relationship between the community & voluntary organisations and the state](#)', NESCC, Dr. Damian Thomas] and support engaged research initiatives which empower the sector to become partners in this work.

### **Engaged Research**

Recent years have seen a marked increase in the emphasis placed on engagement between HEIs and wider society in research and innovation by institutions, funders and policy-makers. This

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.2into3.com/recruitment/2into3-not-for-profit-graduate-programme.224.html>

development has gained further policy traction, as a range of European, national and institutional policies and funding criteria now promote engaged research to improve the societal impact of research.

Engaged research describes a wide range of rigorous research approaches and methodologies that share a common interest in collaborative engagement with the community and aim to improve, understand or investigate an issue of public interest or concern, including societal challenges. Engaged research is advanced **with** community partners rather than **for** them. As per European guidance public engagement (PE)<sup>3</sup> leads to multiple benefits:

- It contributes to building a more scientifically literate society able to actively participate in and support democratic processes, and science and technology developments
- It injects differing perspectives and creativity in research design and results
- It contributes to fostering more societally relevant and desirable research and innovation outcomes to help us tackle [societal challenges](#).

Public Engagement implies:

- the establishment of iterative and inclusive, participatory, multi-actor dialogues between researchers, policy makers, industry and civil society organisations, NGOs, and citizens
- the fostering of mutual understanding and the co-creation of research and innovation outcomes and policy agendas effective in tackling societal challenges
- More widely accepted and relevant research outcomes.

### **Policies relating to Research and Innovation: Challenges**

The European Economic Social Committee found that only 27% of collaborative EU research projects involve CSOs: “Including CSOs in research can offer many benefits, including higher acceptance of research outcomes and better quality of research findings. At present, CSO participations remain limited.”<sup>2</sup>

The Engaged Research report [2017] commissioned by the Irish Research Council listed a number of challenges to addressing the promotion of engaged research (Report pp.50-58).

These challenges include the identified need to:

- ‘Meet the diverse expectations and needs of all beneficiaries’ p.50
- ‘build national and institutional infrastructure and resources to facilitate engaged research’ p.52
- ‘implement policy to facilitate engaged research’ p. 54-55
- ‘Streamline funding to facilitate engaged research’ p55-56
- ‘provide leadership for societal transformation’ p. 57

Report findings were agreed and supported by The Wheel, which played a significant role in bringing civil society partners into the consultations, as demonstrated by The Wheel’s message of support at the beginning of the report.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/h2020-section/public-engagement-responsible-research-and-innovation>



There is a current imbalance in the investment into supporting research institutions to undertake engaged research and investment in civil society organisations to ensure their readiness to engage. The gap between evidence for policy change and delivery of that change is highly contingent on context. Damschroder et al., (2009) note three key implementation barriers:

- the external environment (where structures do not enable or facilitate the policy change)
- resistance to change (where changes are proposed before stakeholders are ready, or before the organisational culture/ environment is aligned with the proposed changes)
- vested interests seeking to block the change

In the Irish context there is broad consensus about the need for a National Strategy approach. But the challenge is implementation.

There is always a gap between establishing the evidence for what is required and changing practice on the ground and a fundamental gap in the policy interventions to date has been the lack of intervention and support on the civil society side.

Stakeholders relating to research in the Higher Education setting [HEA, IRC, IUA, HRB, SFI and even the EPA within the environmental research context] appear to be broadly aligned around the creation of a national hub of support from within the Campus Engage initiative. The Wheel supports this idea and wants to ensure that the arrangements meet the diverse expectations and needs of all beneficiaries by ensuring civil society can be supported to engage in the policy development process around such a national hub as well as in the implementation of any agreed policy interventions.

Science and technology play an increasingly important role in addressing the economic, social and environmental problems faced by the world today and that role needs the support and active engagement of the public in programmes like PPI Ignite, the SFI Discovery programme, the H2020 Science with and for Society (SWFS) programme etc. Currently however, there are only two organisations broadly supporting civil society organisations to be actively involved in science and research; The Wheel & Health Research Charities Ireland (HRCI). Civil Society organisations need support to:

- Understand the processes and language of research
- Understand how they can add value to the research process
- Facilitate the involvement in research of the communities they support
- Guide all parties in ensuring that engaged research is meaningful and respectful

If changing practice on the ground is a requirement in this space, then being able to actively support and coordinate from the grass roots upwards will be necessary. And the input of civil society organisations in a structured way from the start is a proven method of identifying and securing grass roots input and buy in.

### **Proposed Solution**

The Wheel understands that a key element in the solution is the creation of a national **Engaged Research hub**. For this to be a success and in order to deliver a cultural shift towards engaged research, we need to address the policy environment and potential resistance to change (barriers 1 and 2). There are two key constituencies of stakeholders involved in this work: a)



the academic researchers and would-be engaged researchers; plus, b) their civic society collaborators and would-be partners.

In the spirit of building upon what's already in place, Campus Engage undoubtedly can address the former group. A structure/process to address the latter is however still needed and to address the latter stake-holding group, the existing civil society leads in this space, The Wheel & HRCI, are very well placed, and have tangible solutions to offer.

Based on our respective experience profile, reach and track record, we note the following pillars which any process to involve civil society stakeholders needs to include:

**Information & Awareness:** includes researching and disseminating relevant information in the ways that can be 'digested' to civil society.

**Training & Special Events:** includes developing educational materials and resources, running information and training events to build the capacity of organisations to engage in the various research programmes.

**Helpdesk Support:** includes providing one to one advice and support to civil society organisations on their journey into being part of partnerships delivering on research objectives.

**Network Building:** includes involves networking and signposting with various contact points and agencies and building networks to connect Irish civil society to programmes.

The overall approach is that institutions, funders and policy-makers should not just provide services *'for'* civil society organisations but *'with'* them to foster mutual understanding and deliver outcomes effective in tackling societal challenges. And to do that well, civil society needs to be involved from the start.

### **Why it Will Succeed**

Experience suggests that unless civil society organisations are prepared to engage, and their capacity to participate is developed, then any policy whose implementation depends on civil society to be part of will not gather pace.

There are solutions successfully applied in other areas (like Access Europe<sup>4</sup> and Public Patient Involvement (PPI) supports<sup>5</sup>) that are already at hand that provide replicable models for successful intervention in this space.

The Wheel is the representative voice of civil society in Ireland and has a 20-year track record of inputting into policy considerations and implementation plans for policies which require broader sector-wide activation. With over 2250 member organisations The Wheel has a database of some 40,000+ contacts across 20,000+ organisations and offers an ability to engage broad groups across civil society. HRCI has built a capacity and specialist expertise in the area of PPI Research amongst Irish Health Charities.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.wheel.ie/news/2020/11/wheel-launches-eu-funding-social-economy-support-programme](http://www.wheel.ie/news/2020/11/wheel-launches-eu-funding-social-economy-support-programme)

<sup>5</sup> <https://hrci.ie/a-new-ppi-toolkit/>

## **#Inclusion – support learning for all**

We welcome the Department’s focus on active inclusion and access underpinned by the current Statement of Strategy.

The CVSE sector is a crucial partner in this area and has long been advocating for an approach that reaches those farthest behind first.

We urge recognition and support for the crucial role the sector already plays in reaching out to, engaging with, and supporting so-called “hard to reach” groups (especially those impacted by the challenge of digitalisation and experiencing current or potential social exclusion), to access and thrive in lifelong learning, in and outside of the workplace.

We urge the Department to build on opportunities to scale approaches already working at community level in order to power the national step-change needed in lifelong learning rates. We also call on the Department to provide community education providers and organisations providing literacy and digital literacy supports with multi-annual funding in order to leverage the step-change potential for lifelong learning rates to increase in communities farthest from learning and education. Community Education providers need capital grants in order to provide new and improved learning environments suited to the needs of today’s learners. A new Tertiary Education transition model is needed to assist learners moving between all stages of the sector, and prioritizing groups identified in the National Access Plan.

We welcome the emerging work on the **Adult Literacy for Life: 10 Year Strategy** and look forward to seeing the development of the new coordination office across the coming years. We are delighted to be part of the implementation group for the ALL strategy and to represent the important role that the wider CVSE sector can play in achieving the key ambitions of the 10 Year Strategy. The Wheel, members and CVSE sector employers will work with FE, and in line with the new Community Education Framework and the Adult Literacy Strategy, to prioritise outreach with communities around literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

There is a need to remove barriers to participation in literacy supports, through the State providing funded targeted paid learning leave to CVSE employees with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs where the employer does not have the capacity to pay for this. Other barriers to participation also need to be addressed including: income support, childcare, elder care, transport, digital equipment and broadband and specialist equipment for students with particular needs.

Consolidate and expand the **Collaboration and Innovation Fund** to ensure that good practice is harnessed, and quickly and effectively replicated and resourced across the 16 regions and throughout the CV sector

## **#International – succeed on a world stage**

The Wheel is fully supportive of the Department’s ambition to place Ireland in a leading role internationally.

The CVSE sector is already playing a key role through all-island initiatives such as the Shared Island i-Community programme which fosters collaboration, skills-sharing and learning between sector organisations north and south.

As a signatory to the EU Pact for Skills and a partner in a large-scale sectoral alliance across the EU, The Wheel is keen to see the Department advancing the skills agenda at EU level. The Wheel is a partner in a large-scale sectoral alliance for skills, which through the baSE project – the EU’s Blueprint for Social Economy Skills – is currently mapping skills in our sector and cooperating to create a SocioComp competency framework, a MOOC platform and policy recommendations to advance the social economy skills agenda across the EU.

## **4. About the Wheel**

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of charities, community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises. We are the representative body for this vibrant and diverse sector, offering leadership, advice, training, influence and advocacy.

Together with our members, we shape and promote conditions in which people and their communities thrive. We do this by:

- representing the needs of these organisations;
- supporting these organisations to do their work; and
- promoting the importance of the voluntarism and community values that power these organisations.

We passionately believe that community and voluntary action improves and enriches communities and society. Our simple but ambitious mission is to make Ireland a fair and just place for all by strengthening the capacity and capability of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises to play their part.

### **ENDS**

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