

the
wheel

Stronger Charities.
Stronger Communities.

Budget 2026

Thriving Communities in a Changing Ireland

the future
is community 

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The cover of this year's pre-budget submission features the results of a valuable wordcloud exercise at The Wheel's Online Member Townhall in March of 2025.

Attendees were asked to submit their top priorities for the forthcoming budget, emphasising areas of concern within the community and voluntary sector.

We have used these words as a reminder that our members and their needs are always at the foundation of our advocacy and campaigning.

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FOREWORD

Beyond Gratitude: Formally Recognising Ireland's Community and Voluntary Crisis Response

The Irish State has long depended on the agility of the community and voluntary sector to respond to crises and fill gaps in public services, particularly in areas like housing, health and social care. Yet long-term investment seldom matches this reliance on the 'hidden infrastructure' of the sector.

If we can draw one lesson from recent crises such as Covid 19, the war in Ukraine, and more recently Storm Éowyn, it is this: the strength of a society lies not only in its ability to avoid crises but also in how it responds to them. In Ireland, that response has always been rooted in the compassion and commitment of the community and voluntary sector.

Storm Éowyn demonstrated how quick our sector was in responding to emergency needs and filling the gaps in existing infrastructure. From cooking facilities and phone charging stations in Castlecoote Community Centre, to Wi-Fi and washing machines at An Cheathrú Rua in Connemara, family resource centres, community centres, and sports clubs all opened their doors. They offered people hot meals, showers, a plug socket, and a welcome respite from the cold. In some of the worst affected areas, local authorities worked closely with these facilities to establish community hubs.

Community and voluntary groups deployed hundreds of volunteers and staff to reach out to the most vulnerable members of the community, including older adults and people living with disabilities. **Rooted in their communities, these groups understand local needs, and so can act quickly when help is required.**

Taoiseach Micheál Martin has recognised the crucial role that community hubs played during the emergency response, just as they did during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ Despite this public recognition, the sector has been asked to do more with less and, for many, funding has never been fully restored to pre-2008 levels.

The community and voluntary sector in Ireland is not merely supplementary, but a fundamental force in navigating crises. Its rapid response, deep community connections, and unwavering commitment provide essential services, foster resilience, and embody the very best of Irish society in times of adversity. Recognising and supporting this vital sector through adequate resourcing is crucial for ensuring Ireland's continued capacity to respond effectively and compassionately to future challenges.

¹ The Journal, February 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the Sector

The community and voluntary, charity, and social enterprise sector stands as a vital pillar of Irish society, making a profound contribution to our economy and our communities. Its scale is substantial:

- approximately 35,000 organisations;
- nearly 76,500 dedicated volunteer trustees; and,
- a workforce of 281,250 people employed in charities alone—that's one in every eight employed individuals.

The sector manages €25 billion in annual income, generating nearly half of this through fundraising, thereby significantly subsidising the cost of essential public services. When we consider the broader economic impact, including direct, indirect, and induced effects, the sector's expenditure reached €32.1 billion in 2022, supporting 321,000 jobs.²

Members' 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. Government should also recognise these important voices as part of the Budget process.

We have based this submission on a series of consultation events with our members on their priorities for Budget 2026, as well as our annual policy survey. **The overarching focus of this submission is on the measures that will support the sector to enable our communities to thrive on a sustainable basis.**

However, as our members' work and expertise spans all areas of policy, we have also included a broad range of recommendations aimed at tackling the far-reaching societal challenges that Budget 2026 will need to address.

Budget 2026

The new *Programme for Government* makes a clear commitment to

“Ensuring our communities thrive and making our villages, towns and cities safer; to support a caring society; and to continue the focus on addressing poverty and social exclusion.”

Programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future³

The first Budget of the new Government presents a critical opportunity for change. While there has been progress in many areas, there is still a long way to go if we want to create the thriving communities described above. In 2026, an uncertain global context, political polarisation, increasing inequality, and climate breakdown will combine to create a particularly challenging context for policymaking and economic decision-making.

Community and voluntary organisations play an integral role in every community in Ireland and occupy a unique position from which to address major societal challenges at local and national levels.

² Charities Regulator, *Report on the Social and Economic Impact of Charities in Ireland*, 2023

³ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future*, p7

They exemplify values and practices such as collective leadership, community development, genuine inclusion, dialogue, and participation, countering the disinformation and ‘othering’ that are becoming increasingly evident in public discourse. The advocacy work these organisations undertake, as well as the services they provide, are increasingly important in a time of heightened social tension.

To effectively support communities to thrive, Government should appreciate the immense value produced by community and voluntary organisations across society, as well as the significant challenges they face in doing so. Addressing these should be a priority for the new coalition in its first Budget.

We welcome the numerous commitments within the *Programme for Government* to adopt a whole-of-government approach and develop joined-up thinking across departments and agencies. Community and voluntary organisations who deliver services on behalf of the State, or advocate for the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups, should also be part of this conversation. Recent improvements made to the partnership working process through co-design and robust social dialogue are at risk of being eroded if we are not seen as a valued partner.

Government’s agreement to fund pay increases for workers in Section 39/56/10/40 organisations, and the automatic link to future public sector pay agreements, reaffirms the sector’s critical role and signals a commitment to its sustainability. However, despite this positive step, significant challenges to the sector’s sustainability remain, including:

- the lack of multiannual funding;
- the absence of a full-cost-recovery model of funding;
- the cost of regulatory compliance;
- the rising cost of insurance and energy; and,
- pension auto-enrolment.

These issues require urgent attention to ensure the sector’s long-term viability in providing essential services and supports across society.

Diverse Needs for a Diverse Sector

Workers and volunteers in the community and voluntary sector provide support to countless people across every county in Ireland. They touch our lives in countless ways and reach across societal divides. We have highlighted some of our members’ current priorities for Government. These clearly demonstrate shared concerns around the sustainability of the sector, pay parity issues, and the need for multiannual funding, as well as broader societal issues around the needs of children and families, addressing poverty, improving access to physical and mental health services, safety, and independent living.

This document makes a series of recommendations for how Budget 2026 can support community and voluntary organisations to enable our communities to thrive and to face future crises.

BUDGET 2026 PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sufficiently increase allocations to all government departments to provide sustainable and equitable funding for community and voluntary organisations delivering public services contracted by the State.
- Increase capital funding for housing organisations in the sector that provide supports and safe, appropriate accommodation to people on low incomes, older people, people with disabilities, and marginalised communities; include an additional €25 million to address homelessness.
- Address health inequalities by providing the full cost of services on a multiannual basis to community and voluntary organisations providing health and social care services, increasing funding for mental health services to 10% of the annual health budget.
- Increase the early years and childcare budget by an additional 10% to €1.5 billion in order to deliver on commitments to radical change, building a childcare system that is not-for-profit, accessible, flexible, and ensures decent pay for workers.
- Commit to benchmarking core social welfare rates to average earnings and make the commensurate increases in social welfare rates that this requires.
- Introduce a recurring Cost of Disability payment of €2,600 a year, or €50 per week (€592 million).
- Fully resource a *Loneliness Strategy* that is cross-departmental and co-designed with sector organisations through the Loneliness Taskforce, which is scheduled to be developed and presented to Government this year.
- Increase the overall Department of Rural and Community Development funding by 5% to €495 million, to ensure sufficient resources for community organisations to meet increased demand for services and to respond effectively to future crises.
- Commit to annual funding of €60 million for the Community Recognition Fund to increase resourcing for community infrastructure (including community centres, playgrounds, and other shared facilities); ring-fence a part of the fund for projects that address social cohesion.
- Invest €21 million in youth outreach and youth work schemes delivered by the community and voluntary sector, as well as the necessary built infrastructure such as local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs, and others.
- Commit at least €30 million in funding for the Community Climate Action Programme for 2026–27, including at least €5 million for another two-year round of Creative Ireland’s Creative Climate Action programme.
- Increase the Shared Island Civic Society Fund to €20 million to address increased demand and build lasting relationships between organisations North and South.

1. SUPPORTING THE SECTOR TO ENABLE THRIVING COMMUNITIES

- Provide funding on a full-cost-recovery basis to ensure the sustainability of services delivered by the community and voluntary sector.
- Increase allocations to all government departments, sufficient to provide sustainable and equitable funding for community and voluntary sector organisations delivering public services contracted by the state.
- To achieve this, apply an additional 20% allocation to each department for pay awards agreed through the Workplace Relation Commission (WRC) to cover increased inflation-based costs such as insurance, pension auto-enrolment, governance costs, and other essential expenditure not covered by the two WRC agreements.
- Ensure similar funding allocations to all government departments and agencies not currently part of the WRC process to ensure equity and sustainable funding for all contracted service delivered to the state by community and voluntary organisations.
- Move towards provision of multiannual funding for the sector on a phased basis.
- Resource the data collection process being undertaken as part of the 2025 WRC Agreement to ensure that section 39, 56, 10, and 40 organisations can actively participate; expand the process to involve all relevant government department contracts and service-level-agreements.
- Include the cost of compliance into all new State funding contracts, reviewing and streamlining compliance and regulatory requirements to ensure that regulation in all its forms helps, and doesn't over-burden, sector organisations.
- Develop a dedicated fund of €1 million to support the recruitment and retention of charity trustees.
- Allocate dedicated annual funding of €9 million to support training and skills across the sector.
- Ensure through legislation that insurers pass on the savings generated by the recent insurance reforms to insured organisations; adequately resource the Injuries Assessment Board.
- Provide €1 million over three years (€330,000 in Budget 2026) to support the We Act campaign, raising awareness and capacity building for organisations to demonstrate their value to society (€200,000 per year over three years), and the development of a grants programme (€130,000 per year over three years).
- Allocate an initial €5 million to an EU Match-Funding Scheme, ring-fence a portion of decentralised EU funding for the community and voluntary sector, and incentivise local authorities to support local groups applying for EU funding.
- Increase the VAT Compensation Scheme to €15 million in the interests of tax equity and the promotion of independent fundraising.
- Cost a direct tax incentive for Major Gifts at a minimum level no lower than €5,000 and capped at €5 million.
- Provide an additional €2 million to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) 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.

Painting by participant and volunteer, Nikolas Ryan



“The **Talk About Youth Service** provides a professional youth work service to provide people aged 10 to 24 in the wider Pearse Street community. Educational and recreational programmes are designed to enhance the personal and social development of young people; they are empowered to become critical thinkers, to build on their self-esteem, develop social skills, and to take responsibility for shaping their own lives and become positive role models in their community. We work with more than 700 young people aged 10–24 who are experiencing economic, social, and cultural disadvantage and are living in an area of high deprivation.

The impact that increased investment would have on our project is immeasurable. We are struggling under the weight of expectation and demands for our services. There is a significant strain on our team to deliver quality youth work services for our young people. Already diminished budgets are stretched to meet all their needs. We are dealing with ongoing complex issues that face young people without adequate resourcing. Staffing shortages are having detrimental impacts on the project.”

Carmel O'Connor, St. Andrews Resource Centre

1.1. Sustainable funding for sustainable services

- **Equality of pay with the public sector**

In recent months, disparity in pay and conditions for organisations delivering public services on behalf of the State has received significant public attention. This has long been an issue for many charities, who 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. While the 2017 Public Service Pay and Pensions Act and the Public Service Agreement *Building Momentum* deal reversed cuts for public-sector employees, sector pay was never restored.

In June 2023, The Wheel 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.⁴ The report examined staffing, demand for services, and funding among hundreds of Section 39, 10, 56, and 40 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.**

4 The Wheel, *The Future of Public Service Delivery by the Community and Voluntary Sector*, 2023

Disparities in pay and conditions have had a serious impact on the ability of organisations to recruit and retain key staff.

More than one third of respondents to our most recent member survey said they were unable to sufficiently recruit and retain staff.⁵

This undermines not only the sustainability of these organisations, but the delivery of public services as well.

Advocating for mainstreaming multiannual funding and adequate funding levels for services generally, as well as seeking an increase in funding for Section 39/56/10/40 organisations and other statutory-funded services, ranked as the top two policy priorities for our members.⁶

We strongly welcome recent progress on this issue and the agreement of a 9.25% increase for up to 40,000 workers equivalent to the Public Sector Pay agreement 2024–2026, following a lengthy Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) process. This represents a significant step towards a more sustainable future for these organisations and the people they serve.

Moving forward, it is vital that this increase is effectively rolled out to relevant organisations and that a clear, efficient mechanism is put in place for organisations to issue payments. Meaningful engagement with the sector on which organisations fall within the scope of the deal should also continue.

- **Non-pay issues and access to grants**

While addressing pay issues in the sector is an important step, many non-pay-related issues are still having a significant impact on the sector. These include pension auto-enrolment, rising costs around insurance premiums and energy, as well as the cost of living.

In The Wheel's recent member survey, almost half of respondents were unsure if they would have sufficient funding to provide their existing supports or services in 2025, a slight increase on last year's survey.⁷

“Sustainable funding for organisations like ourselves is essential to ensure that we can continue to meet the high quality standards of the services that we provide to children and families most in need. The increasing governance and compliance which places additional administration burdens on front line staff takes them away from engaging directly with those that need our services and fulfilling our core purpose as a charity and not-for-profit organisation.

Multiannual contracts and funding is essential to enable us to plan to address evolving and future needs.

I welcome the commitment of the DCEDIY and Tusla and their engagement with our sector on sustainable funding so that community and voluntary organisations can continue to provide essential services now and into the future.”

Dr Tracey Monson, CEO, Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service

⁵ The Wheel, *Members' Policy Survey 2025*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*

Most State funding agreements do not contain built-in mechanisms for inflation. Combined with the costs detailed above, organisations are struggling to cover the rising costs of providing services. A number of our members are also finding it increasingly difficult to access funding, particularly smaller organisations.

To achieve truly effective public-service provision that reflects need and best practice, the State should provide funding 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. Applying these changes across government departments and agencies, such as education, health, social care, and rural affairs, would help avoid complexity for organisations with multiple funding streams and Service Level Agreements.

• Multiannual funding

Additionally, The Wheel has long advocated for the introduction of multiannual funding as the default approach for community and voluntary organisations, which would facilitate:

- longer-term planning;
- better staff recruitment and retention rates; and,
- improved outcomes.

According to our recent survey, less than 30% of respondents received multiannual statutory funding, with three quarters having their funding assessed every two to three years.⁸

The Programme for Government acknowledges the benefits of multiannual funding for public service delivery, committing, for example, to “develop a multiannual funding approach for our health service, which will be linked to productivity, staff levels and the delivery of services for patients”.⁹ To achieve fully integrated services, Government should apply this approach to sector organisations, with an appropriate average funding cycle of three to five years.

“I don’t think there is a full recognition of the value and necessity of the community and voluntary sector. Public fundraising often has to plug the gaps of service-provision because State funding doesn’t cover full-cost recovery. Governance is hugely important, but the costs of compliance need to be covered by State funding. People working in the sector very often go above and beyond what is expected, and we just want that to be fairly recognised, valued, and funded securely.”

Ber Grogan, Executive Director, The Simon Communities of Ireland



“If you came to our office for a day, you’d be shocked by the amount of people that come through our door. It’s so busy. People come to us for support, for information, for advice and it’s all free of charge. The money we raise in December will go to fund our information centre as well as our programmes.”

Caroline França, Communications Lead, Doras

⁸ The Wheel, *Members’ Policy Survey 2025*

⁹ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p84

1.2. Cost of insurance

Despite many positive reforms in areas such as judicial guidelines, occupiers' liability, and the work of the Injuries Resolution Board, the cost of insurance continues to rise for many organisations in the sector. This is having a significant impact on their ability to provide services. The most recent *Report of the Injuries Resolution Board* shows significant reduction in public liability claims, yet insurer profits remain high, and savings are not being passed on to customers.¹⁰ Our members highlighted the need for **continued Government action on insurance costs as a priority for Budget 2026.**

The Programme for Government makes some significant commitments on insurance. For example, to “Publish a new Action Plan for Insurance Reform with a focus on encouraging further competition in the market and working with stakeholders to enhance transparency and affordability across all types of insurance”.¹¹

It is essential that this is progressed and implemented through Budget 2026. We need insurance reforms that will quickly reduce liability premiums to affordable levels and keep them there, enabling vital service providers to carry out their work.

A survey by the Alliance for Insurance Reform,¹² based on responses from 775 small and medium businesses, sport, arts, community and voluntary organisations, found that 85% of respondents considered premium reductions and/or better access to affordable coverage as “very important”.¹³

Further, 90% of survey respondents felt they have not significantly benefited from the Government’s insurance reforms so far, while 95% don’t believe insurers when they say they are passing on savings to customers.

To ensure that progress on reducing insurance premiums continues, Government should also safeguard and promote the Injuries Board as the fairest and fastest means of settling claims. The proposed increase of 17% in personal injury awards from the Judicial Council currently, and the related three-year review period of the Judicial Guidelines, threatens to drive more cases out of the Injuries Board and into costly litigation.¹⁴

“After all the reforms in recent years to create a more stable insurance landscape, it is galling that the savings generated are being used to increase insurer profits, whilst premiums remain stubbornly high for community and voluntary organisations right across the country.”

Brian Hanley, CEO, Alliance for Insurance Reform

¹⁰ Injuries Resolution Board, Personal Injuries and Rewards Values 2024

¹¹ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p20

¹² Alliance for Insurance Reform Member Survey, February 2025

¹³ Alliance for Insurance Reform Member Survey, February 2025

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

1.3. Proportionate regulation and streamlined compliance

People working in the community and voluntary sector understand the importance of transparency in their work; many worked for years to encourage the establishment of Ireland's Charities Regulator. The sector as a whole welcomes regulation, and community and voluntary organisations work tirelessly to attain the highest standards of governance. However, processes have become excessively bureaucratic, repetitive, and detailed. While staffing and resources for regulatory bodies continues to expand, sector organisations require increased resourcing and training to keep pace.

In our recent Members' Regulation Survey, complexity of compliance and time spent on this rank among the top member concerns.¹⁵ Members also emphasised the cost of regulation and compliance as a challenge that particularly affects smaller organisations.

The interplay of ever-increasing, separate regulatory and reporting requirements should be streamlined and simplified, with the State fairly resourcing the effective regulation of the community and voluntary sector for both regulators and those who are regulated. Budget 2026 should commit to a process of consultation in the coming year to enable the allocation of resources in Budget 2027. This commitment should link to a streamlining of reporting requirements in the spirit of the commitments made in the Programme for Government to ending siloed approaches and delivering cross-departmental co-operation.

Increased regulation is also having an impact on the ability of organisations to recruit and retain much-needed volunteer trustees. More than a quarter of respondents to our 2025 Member Survey stated that they were not able to sufficiently recruit and retain trustees.¹⁶

The sector is diverse and not only provides services but also ensures, through advocacy in the human rights field, that regulation is enabling progress for groups who are particularly at risk and often marginalised. Many of our members who are registered charities are deeply engaged in advocacy activities for the communities they support. It is essential that regulation also supports these activities.

1.4. Workforce development for a 21st-century social economy

The community and voluntary sector workforce is on the frontline in the delivery of many of the priorities in the *Programme for Government*, such as developing disability services, extending childcare provision, and providing appropriate housing. The skills of this 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.

The OECD review of the *National Skills Strategy*,¹⁷ published in May 2023, identifies the sector as a significant stakeholder in the national skills agenda. This echoes a previous report by Indecon that found investment in training within the nonprofit workforce in Ireland is low when compared to other sectors in the Irish workforce and to nonprofit sectors in other countries, notwithstanding a return of nearly €3 in productivity gains for every €1 spent in upskilling supports.¹⁸

Government has recently recognised the significant benefit to investing in reskilling and upskilling in the sector, with a welcome increase in National Training Fund (NTF) investment under the Skills Package of €800,000.

¹⁵ The Wheel, *Regulation Survey 2024*

¹⁶ The Wheel, *Members' Policy Survey 2025*

¹⁷ OECD *Skills Strategy Ireland*, 2023

¹⁸ The Wheel and Indecon, *Investment Appraisal of upskilling of Employees in the Non-Profit Sector*

To ensure long-term impact, Budget 2026 should include dedicated funding of €9 million, provided annually thereafter, to support training and skills across the sector, as well as enabling organisations to respond to the challenges posed by AI and other technological advancements. This Budget should ensure that the NTF surplus is unlocked for the benefit of Ireland’s workforce, including community and voluntary sector employers and the more than 280,000 people who work in the sector.

We also support calls for the establishment of a National Skills Observatory, supported by the NTF, which will collate and distribute reliable and recent data on skills across the entire Irish workforce, including the community and voluntary workforce, and support the timely development and investment in responses to these emerging needs.

1.5. Data collection on the sector

The sector is a significant source of employment, volunteering opportunities, and service delivery in Ireland, and yet **there is currently no centralised mechanism of collating all this data for use in research, evaluation, and benchmarking**. The Government should enable the Central Statistics Office to collate data on the sector, including a specific census module on the use of, and engagement with, the sector by the public.

1.6. Access to EU funding

• EU match-funding

Many EU funding programmes require match funding, with the EU typically covering 60–80% of costs. When co-financing reaches 80% or more, sector organisations can often meet the match through in-kind contributions like staff and volunteer time. However, for programmes with lower co-financing rates, such as LIFE and INTERREG, participation becomes much harder.

Nonprofits, discouraged from building financial reserves, are at a disadvantage compared to public bodies and often excluded from these opportunities. This limits their ability to scale innovation through successive EU grants. It also weakens multi-sector consortia, which many EU programmes favour, by making it harder to include community groups, thus reducing project quality and competitiveness.

A state-backed EU Match-Funding Scheme for the sector would unlock significant EU investment for a modest Government outlay. Countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany already offer such schemes. The Wheel and Access Europe submitted a detailed proposal, backed by MEPs and key stakeholders, in 2022. Budget 2025 could deliver this with an initial €5 million investment.

• 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+). Much of this funding goes to state and semi-state bodies, e.g. ETBs, Youthreach, Springboard+, with limited ESF+ funding trickling down to community groups via intermediaries like Pobal.

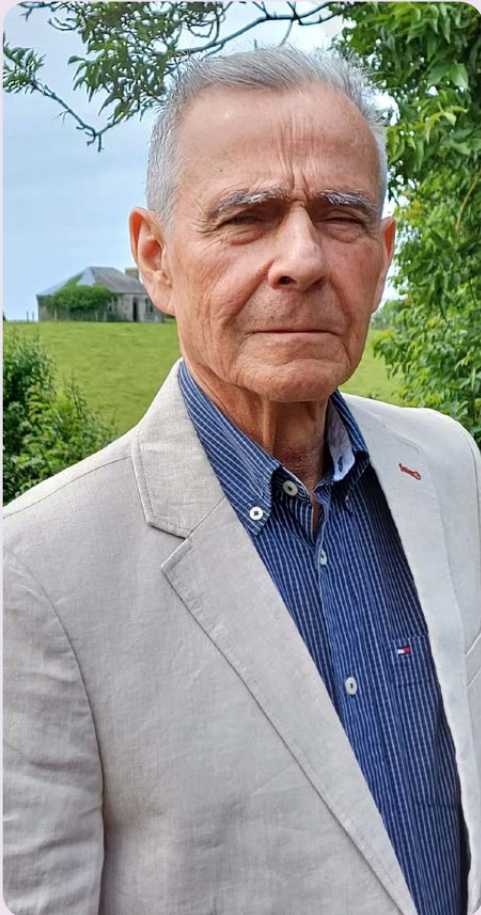
Yet, civil society plays a central role in addressing ESF+ priorities: poverty, inequality, and youth unemployment. With EU regulations calling for “an appropriate amount” of ESF+ to support civil society capacity building, Ireland falls short when compared to other EU countries. Dedicated, ring-fenced funding for sector organisations—distributed through competitive, transparent processes—is needed to ensure fair access and better alignment with ESF+ objectives.

• Incentivising local authority support

Many sector groups, especially volunteer-led or migrant/refugee organisations, lack the capacity to apply for and manage EU funding despite strong local knowledge, project ideas, and impact potential.

Local authority engagement with EU funding is inconsistent across Ireland; some are active, others not. Ireland, as a net contributor to the EU, should maximise drawdown. There is a need to incentivise or mandate local authorities to meet EU funding targets.

By partnering with local groups, councils can manage the administrative side while enabling communities to lead on delivery. This would both increase EU funding access and strengthen community impact.



“Carbery Housing Association (CHA) is a small community-based Approved Housing Body (AHB) based in West Cork. We lease and purchase properties for rent as housing and are now working on our first new-build developments. CHA has so far led or participated in four European Projects, which have developed feasibilities for sustainable housing development, raised awareness around gender issues and issues for Travellers, and installed innovative, solar-based domestic power and heating systems. These projects are important opportunities to learn from social housing best practice in other regions as well as sharing our own knowledge and experience.

The main obstacle we have encountered in our use of EU funds has been the need for match funding in some programmes, that can be up to 40%–50% of total costs. We have managed to get round this in the project we have done by matching our existing development and managing expenditure against it, but this seriously limits the type of projects we can get involved with, and places additional burden on existing staff. We would very much favour a Government contribution towards match funding for approved projects, as is provided in Finland.”

José Ospina, Chair, Carbery Housing Association

1.7. Promoting the work of the sector

In recent years, Government has recognised the importance of promoting the positive work undertaken across the sector. We propose a further €1 million over three years (€330,000 in Budget 2026) to support the successful We Act campaign:¹⁹

- €200,000 per year over three years to aid in raising awareness and capacity building for organisations to demonstrate their value to society), and
- €130,000 per year over three years for the development of a grants programme for sector organisations to undertake communications projects that help connect the public with their services.

1.8. Supporting philanthropy

Government policies are essential to support Ireland's new *Philanthropy Strategy*, ensuring a robust framework that encourages charitable giving and investment in social causes. By providing tax incentives, regulatory clarity, and fostering a culture of philanthropy, Government can help unlock private wealth for public good. These policies would strengthen partnerships between the public, private, and non-profit sectors, enabling more impactful and sustainable funding for social initiatives, innovation, and community development. This strategic support is crucial for scaling philanthropic efforts and addressing Ireland's most pressing social challenges.

1.9. VAT Compensation Scheme

Government introduced the VAT Compensation Scheme in 2018 to address an anomaly in EU law that uniquely prevents charities reclaiming VAT on essential expenditure. Capped at €10 million since Budget 2024, the annual fund rebates only approximately one quarter of total charity VAT expenditure. We propose a graduated increase in the fund during the lifetime of this Government to eventually provide a full rebate of the estimated €40 million VAT paid annually by charities, in the interests of tax equity and to promote independent fundraising. This should begin by increasing the fund to €15 million in Budget 2026.

1.10. Collaboration and mergers

Budget 2026 should provide access to a €2 million fund to enable charities interested in pursuing mergers. Rather than resulting in reductions to overall statutory funding, mergers should be encouraged only where there is real opportunity to effectively pool resources and increase impact.

¹⁹ We Act campaign

2. PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY AND ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC SERVICES FOR ALL

- Increase capital funding for housing organisations in the sector providing supports and safe, appropriate accommodation to people on low incomes, older people, people with disabilities, and marginalised communities.
- Invest an additional €25 million in organisations engaging in homelessness prevention, tenant protection, and tenancy sustainment.
- Increase the provision of affordable housing through development and increased financing options for Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), ensuring that housing development is aligned with climate targets and key strategies across Government.
- Increase funding for organisations working to preserve and protect Ireland's built heritage.
- Fully resource the *Youth Homelessness Strategy* and the *Housing Strategy for Disabled People*.
- Address health inequalities by providing the full cost of services on a multiannual basis to community and voluntary organisations providing health and social care services.
- Increase funding for mental health services to 10% of the Health budget, addressing the increased mental health service needs of specific communities.
- Resource community addiction services to meet increased demand.
- Resource patient-advocacy groups and the implementation of the partnership working principles developed through the Health Dialogue Forum.
- Increase investment in infrastructure and supports for community organisations under the continued rollout of Sláintecare to at least €600 million annually.
- Increase the early years and childcare budget by an additional 10% to €1.5 billion in order to deliver on commitments to radical change, building a childcare system that is not-for-profit, accessible, flexible, and ensures decent pay for workers.

2.1. Housing

The housing and homelessness crises in Ireland continues to negatively affect many people's lives. Safe, appropriate housing is essential for any person to thrive. The *Programme for Government* commits to “a fully-funded, radical and realistic housing plan to get more homes built,”²⁰ and a “new, all-of-government national housing plan to follow *Housing for All*, underpinned by a multiannual funding commitment”.²¹

With Budget 2026, Government has the opportunity to move from a financialised housing sector to one that envisions and enables a more inclusive society, improves wellbeing and progresses within environmental boundaries. A progressive housing system should be properly planned, aligned with intersecting Government strategies, and co-designed by the people it affects.

To achieve this, a collaborative approach is vital, and must include those in the community and voluntary sector who provide essential services and supports.

- **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 services. This is increasingly challenging as more people find themselves in need.

In January 2025, 15,286 people accessed emergency homeless accommodation, of which 4603 were children, figures that have risen since 2024.²² The most recent published figures from local authority social housing waiting lists show 59,941 households waiting, an increase of more than 1000 on the previous year.²³ Government should be fully resourcing organisations in the sector to support the thousands of people currently impacted by the housing crisis. We also recommend expediting and resourcing the *Youth Homelessness Strategy*, to ensure that young people have a fair start in life.

We support commitments in the *Programme for Government* to “Build more cost rental units through the Local Development Agency (LDA), local authorities and Cost Rental Equity Loan funding to AHBs, embedding cost rental as a category of tenure on a permanent basis”²⁴ and to “Expand the role of Ireland’s credit union sector in the housing market”. The *Report of the Housing Commission* made particular recommendations for supporting AHBs, including “building capacity to grow larger AHBs and encourage large new entrants into the sector”.²⁵ In addition to increasing support and financing options for AHBs, they should be included in co-design processes.

20 *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p46

21 *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p40

22 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Monthly Homelessness Report*, January 2025

23 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024*

24 *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p45

25 *Report of the Housing Commission*

The Power of Community: How our work can reach deep into communities for generational and lasting changes



In the heart of Dublin's north inner city, Ozanam House serves as a vital support to the community. Based in Dublin 1, an area with the highest number of families living in emergency accommodation within a single square kilometre, this community resource centre is much more than a building; it's a place of welcome, safety, and opportunity.

Ozanam House offers holistic, wraparound support that meets people where they are, whether it's a toddler starting early years education, an older person seeking connection, or a newly arrived family finding their feet in a new country.

The centre is deeply embedded in the community, responding to real needs with dignity and care. One recent powerful example of its impact involved a mother who arrived at the centre with her child.

She had visible injuries on her face and body. The manager gently engaged with the mother, who felt safe enough to disclose that she was the victim of domestic abuse. The childcare manager ensured the child was safely settled, brought the mother to the family district court, and then spent the morning there, supporting her in securing emergency protection orders. With continued help navigating social protection and family law, the mother left the abusive relationship and is now thriving with her child. This is the difference a not-for-profit service can make—offering not just support, but a pathway to safety, dignity, and a better future.

Louise Bayliss, Head of Social Justice and Policy, Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

• Affordability and sustainability

Housing affordability remains a significant issue in Ireland, with rates of home ownership continuing to fall: home ownership was 66% in Census 2022, down from 68% in 2016, and almost 70% in 2011.²⁶ This is unsurprising, as CSO data shows the median price of a dwelling purchased in the 12 months to January 2025 was just below €360,000, up 8% in that period.²⁷ Rents also continue to rise across the country, with the average weekly rent paid to landlords at €273 in Census 2022, an increase of 37% between 2016 and 2022.²⁸

Lack of affordability is having an impact on all areas of social and economic life. It is vital that Government implements the commitments made in the *Programme for Government* to prioritise increased provision of affordable housing for all.

It is also essential that planning and housing development occur within climate boundaries, with an understanding of the inextricable link between the two. Major-scale retrofitting, right-sizing, and climate-neutral building materials are just some of the ways that housing developments can align with essential climate targets. Ensuring public infrastructure support for major developments, community services, and green space is another important component in cross-governmental thinking around the provision of affordable housing for all. This too requires partnership working with climate organisations in the sector.

• Accommodation for older people

Many organisations and AHBs provide specialised supports and accommodation to older people and people with disabilities, which requires expertise and understanding of the specific needs of the people they serve. While the aim is to support people within their communities, this often requires investment in adaptations and additional services to ensure independence and quality of living.

The *Programme for Government* commits to “Increase the Housing Adaptation Grant [for older people],” but the shortfall in the intervening years is yet to be addressed.²⁹ This means that many organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities are using their own resources to fund minor adaptations.

Additionally, the *Programme* recognises the need to “Support AHBs in developing and managing senior housing with onsite support services, fostering safe, supportive communities”.³⁰ Currently, community organisations provide much of this support.

A 2024 study by TrinityHaus and the Housing Development Agency examined the serious implications of poor housing on older people, with consequences for health and wellbeing outcomes.³¹ The report also identified challenges for older people renting, managing their homes, and facing the impacts of both climate change and energy poverty. **Recommendations include a need for integrated care to address the lack of connection between housing and healthcare services.** The community and voluntary sector plays a key role in this area of service provision; as such, it should be central to engagement and coordination going forward.

²⁶ CSO home ownership in Census 2022

²⁷ CSO Residential Property Price Index 2025

²⁸ CSO home ownership in Census 2022

²⁹ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p96

³⁰ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p46

³¹ TrinityHaus, *Housing Conditions and Integrated Care for Older People*, 2024

Budget 2026 should increase funding to organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities to live independently in appropriate housing.

- **Marginalised communities**

Disabled people

Nearly 3,500 people under 65 years of age are living in congregated settings or nursing homes.³² Thousands are living with elderly parents (some aged over 80) waiting to access social housing. Both the *National Housing Strategy for Disabled People*³³ and the *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024–2026*³⁴ recognise this need and contain clear actions. These should be fully resourced by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Disabled people who are on social housing waiting lists face significant challenges accessing supports and spend longer on those waiting lists. The Irish Council for Social Housing has raised concerns about reduced delivery of housing for disabled people and older people. In the past, 50% of delivery from housing associations was supported housing and 50% general need. This has shifted to an 80:20 ratio in favour of general housing.³⁵

Sustainable progress for disabled people will only be possible if we address the root causes of inappropriate placements, and this requires a cross-departmental approach. These include a lack of rehabilitative services, insufficient access to community supports such as personal assistance and home care, and a critical shortage of accessible housing options.

We recommend ring-fencing a portion of the social housing budget for people with an intellectual disability and providing disaggregated data on progress by each local authority.

“The last Budget wasn’t just numbers on a page; it’s a measure of our commitment to equality. Without adequate investment, disabled people continue to face barriers to full participation in society. The *Programme for Government*, agreed earlier this year, includes ambitious measures on access and inclusion. Budget 2026 is the first real test of the new Government’s intent to turn those commitments into action.”

Elaine Teague, CEO, Disability Federation of Ireland

Travellers

Organisations working with local authorities to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation are still 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 2024 review by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) found that, between 2008 and 2018, €168.8 million was allocated for Traveller accommodation, with just €110.6 million (66%) being drawn down.³⁶ In 2020, a disbursement process whereby local authorities can apply for allocations for Traveller accommodation replaced the system of allocating funding per local authority. In 2020 and 2021, the full central allocation was drawn down, but not every local authority utilised it³⁷.

³² HIQA Annual Report 2023, Office of the Ombudsman, Wasted Lives, 2024

³³ Housing Agency, *National Housing Strategy for Disabled People*, 2022–2027

³⁴ Action Plan for Disability Services, 2024–2026

³⁵ Irish Times, *Elderly and people with disabilities at risk of becoming social housing ‘underclass’*

³⁶ IHREC, *Equality Reviews on Traveller Accommodation*, 2024

³⁷ Oireachtas debate, 2022

The *Programme for Government* makes a strong commitment to “Ensure full draw down of Traveller accommodation funds”³⁸ and it is vital this becomes a priority. Local authorities should work alongside organisations within Traveller communities to build strong, respectful relationships. Budget 2026 should fully resource this process of engagement, while introducing measures to address lack of accommodation support in local authority areas.

People seeking international protection

The provision of accommodation for people seeking international protection has become a headline issue in Ireland in recent months, reflecting global political polarisation and manifesting in very real threats and acts of violence. The 2021 *White Paper* on ending direct provision, and the introduction of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022, as a response to the war in Ukraine, were welcomed by organisations working to provide supports in this area, and seen as providing a blueprint for a new approach to international protection. However, since Government has reduced these protections, and there has been no cohesive overhaul of the direct provision system, **many people seeking international protection, including children, still lack safe and appropriate accommodation.**

Budget 2026 should increase funding for organisations working with marginalised communities to secure appropriate, safe accommodation run on a not-for-profit basis.

Domestic and gender-based violence refuges

Organisations working with victims of domestic and gender-based violence have long campaigned for Government to fulfil its obligations under the Istanbul Convention to develop and maintain sufficient refuge and safe housing options across the country.

The *Programme for Government* commits to “deliver at least 280 refuge spaces by 2026” and to “set new targets in the successor [*National Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*] Strategy and ensure that there is a refuge in every county along with additional safe homes for those in need”.³⁹ It is essential that this is resourced and implemented to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people fleeing domestic abuse, with design standards that guarantee all residents’ safety, privacy and comfort.

• Protecting built heritage

Protection of our built heritage should be a central part of both housing and environmental policy. Encouraging traditional building skills (by devising an apprenticeship programme with the sustainable construction sector) would have the dual effect of helping to utilise existing heritage housing stock and conserving traditional building skills, which are under threat. Support for community organisations already leading this work is essential.

2.2. Health

• Addressing health inequalities

According to the National Treatment Purchase Fund:

- **There were 95,983 people awaiting in-patient treatment in February 2025, with 16% waiting a year or more;**
- Some 575,716 people were awaiting outpatient appointments, with 16% waiting a year or more;⁴⁰

Ireland ranks lowest on the most recent Health Powerhouse Euro Health Consumer Index in terms of accessibility.⁴¹ The OECD’s *Health at a Glance* report 2024 showed that, at this time,

38 *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p45

39 *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p120

40 *National Treatment Purchase Fund*, 2025

41 *Health Consumer Powerhouse, Euro Health Consumer Index*, 2018

Ireland spent 6.1% of GDP on Health, compared to an OECD average of 9.2%.⁴² The same report notes the impact of socioeconomic 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 hugely significant role in health and social care. At a community level, they are often first to address local needs, promote preventative care, and advocate for services that are more equitable. At a national level, they contribute to research and innovation in health. A lack of multiannual funding is significantly increasing the costs of delivering services. Organisations are unable to enter contracts in a planned manner (for instance in renting residential or day-service locations) and unable to utilise funding streams that require more than one year to complete development (such as the Capital Assistance Scheme).

The *Programme for Government* states that, “Through the ongoing implementation of Sláintecare and sustained investment, reform, and leadership, this Government will ensure access to high-quality patient care, reduce waiting times and further cut the cost of accessing care”. The *Programme* makes further commitments to support the Patient Advocacy Service and to “increase funding for drug addiction services including local drug and alcohol taskforces.”⁴³

Budget 2026 should ensure full resourcing of these commitments and address underfunding in the health sector. It should extend multiannual funding commitments to sector organisations providing health and social care, with a particular focus on addressing healthcare inequalities.



“Our service has a profound impact, not only on the individuals we work with, but on their family members, and the wider community. One person addressing their issues—that has a ripple effect. I listen to people who tell me it’s given them their lives back. It’s given them their families back. I’ve seen the progress. I have a lived experience of that as well, so to be able to give back to somebody and seeing them passing that on—there’s so much power in that.”

**Gavin Earls, Integration Support Worker,
Bray Community Addiction Team**

⁴² OECD, *Health at a Glance*, 2024

⁴³ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p91

• Resourcing Sláintecare

Sláintecare, introduced in 2016, committed to a community-based model of healthcare. Yet, according to the most recent OECD *Health at a Glance* report, 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%.⁴⁴ 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, we need more to deliver sustainable public healthcare in the community, including investment in community infrastructure.

Regionalisation of services under Sláintecare is also having an impact on organisations, resulting in an increased compliance load for those who might already have several complex funding agreements with State agencies. It is vital that Government take a coordinated, cross-departmental approach, and that any additional compliance requirements are resourced.

The proposed capital allocation under Sláintecare was €3 billion over six years, or €500 million per year. Adjusting for inflation, this would be more than €600 million at 2025 rates. Budget 2026 should deliver on this investment to support care in the community and to support funded organisations through regionalisation processes.

• Mental health

Mental health services

Budget 2025 recognised the urgent need for improved mental health services across Ireland with a welcome increase in funding. Community and voluntary organisations have long worked at the forefront of mental health service provision, campaigning for ‘parity of esteem’ reform, reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues, and advocating for increased resourcing. As well as advocacy, these organisations provide essential, front-line support services at low or no cost.

The Programme for Government pledges to “Continue to support the voluntary and community sector working in mental health”.⁴⁵

It also acknowledges the value of community-based supports such as Men’s Sheds in improving wellbeing.

Almost 1 in 8 (12%) respondents to the *Healthy Ireland Survey 2024* indicated a probable mental health problem.⁴⁶ **35,890 referrals were received by the HSE General Adult Mental Health Services in the period July to September 2024, while just 18,855 were seen.** A similar pattern emerges in the Psychiatry of Later Life service, where 9,387 referrals were received and 5,919 were seen, and in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), where 18,651 referrals were made and 9,336 were seen. **Waiting lists for Community CAMHS stood at 3,441, with a reported 484 children waiting more than 12 months for support.**⁴⁷

⁴⁴ OECD, *Health at a Glance*, 2024

⁴⁵ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p95

⁴⁶ *Healthy Ireland Survey*, 2024

⁴⁷ *HSE Performance Profile, July-September 2024*

To address the complex and ever-evolving mental health needs of Ireland's population, it is imperative that Government commits to sustained and targeted funding for the community and voluntary sector. Such an investment is essential for advancing the delivery of care that is not only of the highest quality but also truly accessible and person-centred.

We welcome these commitments in addition to the increased mental health funding in Budget 2025. However, the 2025 increase amounts to 5.7% of the overall health budget for 2025, still falling short of the Sláintecare target. We recommend that Budget 2026 allocate 10% of overall health funding to mental health services, in order to address the significant shortfall detailed above.

Mental health inequalities

A recent report by the London School of Economics (LSE) and Mental Health Reform demonstrates the need for additional mental health services for children and young people, particularly the 'missing middle' who have diagnosable mental health difficulties but might not qualify for CAMHS services.⁴⁸ An early-intervention approach minimises long-term pressures on the health service. The modelling used in this study demonstrates that for every €1 spent on these mental health interventions, there is an average return of €7.47 from a societal perspective.

It is also important that the allocation of funding for mental health services should prioritise inclusivity, equity, and accessibility, particularly for vulnerable groups for whom systemic barriers, discrimination, and underfunded services often compound mental health challenges. The community and voluntary sector is indispensable in addressing this need.

- Suicide rates among Travellers are approximately six times higher than those of the general population.⁴⁹
- Of people experiencing homelessness, 39% struggle with both mental health and substance misuse issues.⁵⁰
- Approximately 24% of individuals with disabilities report experiencing psychological or emotional conditions, compared to just 5.2% of the general population.⁵¹
- Some 44% of transgender and gender-nonconforming participants reported severe symptoms of depression and 39% had attempted suicide.⁵²

Budget 2026 has the potential to be a pivotal moment for addressing the disproportionate mental health needs of these communities, by tailoring policies and services to meet their unique circumstances.

48 LSE and Mental Health Reform Ireland, *Scaling up early intervention and services for the "missing middle" in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland*, 2025

49 European Roma Rights Centre, Friends, Families and Travellers, 2023; NOSP, 2016

50 Depaul Ireland, *Mental Health Report 2025*

51 National Disability Authority, Factsheet 2024

52 Trinity College and Belong To, *Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland*, 2024

“I started going to therapy in 2022 after giving birth to a beautiful baby girl. What was meant to be a joyous time was fueled with anxiety, worry, and memories of being hurt in the past by my family. I was afraid of hurting my child, afraid I wasn’t good enough, and afraid my child would be better off without me. I really wasn’t excited about counselling.

But when I started attending Dundalk Counselling Centre, I started feeling safe and welcome. I didn’t have to worry about expensive fees either, because with community therapy, you pay what you can afford for as long as needed, and in my case, I get to attend for free.

Looking back to when I first started therapy, I realise I didn’t want to die. I just wanted to feel normal, to feel like I belonged. I no longer see myself as that afraid girl, because that afraid girl is gone and in her place is a lioness who has been set free. Today, I no longer feel afraid to stand my ground and fight for what is right for me and my two children.

Without community therapy, I wouldn’t be who I am today. Looking back on 2022, I didn’t think my life and my family would be so great in 2025. I am very grateful for community therapy because I really wouldn’t be here without it.”

Jess, Dundalk Counselling Centre, Part of Community Therapy Ireland’s national membership 2025



“Quite often people will say to me, ‘we’re so happy that we found you’. The waiting list for therapeutic support is now four months. As long as a family needs my support, I will work with them. I work with the whole family because adapting to trauma and grief is a family experience.”

Iryna Matuzova, Bereavement Service Psychologist, Barnardos.

- **Community drug and alcohol support services**

The *Programme for Government* commits to a “health- led approach to drug addiction,”⁵³ to assess outcomes of the national strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery (2017-2025)* and to produce a successor. Since 2021, demand for community-led drug and alcohol supports has increased, according to the National Drug Treatment Reporting Centre (NDTRS) data, and many Community Drug and Alcohol Taskforces are struggling to meet need in their local areas. **In 2023, 13,104 cases were treated for problem drug use, the highest annual number recorded to date by the NDTRS and an increase of more than 1000 cases from the previous year.**⁵⁴

Like many across the sector, community organisations providing drug and alcohol services are facing rising costs and staff retention issues. Budget 2026 should include increased funding to match need and to enable full implementation of the national *Strategy*. It is also vital that the new *Strategy* on drug and alcohol services includes resourcing for family supports and takes a whole-of-government and inter-agency approach to implementation.

- **Ongoing dialogue and partnership working**

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* (the Principles) were important steps in having the voice of the community heard in policy decisions on healthcare.⁵⁵ The continued strengthening of these processes, as well as ensuring engagement with community organisations and patient advocacy groups in the co-design of services, will be key to ensuring the delivery of quality services.

The *Programme for Government* gives strong support to the principle of patient advocacy and Budget 2026 should provide additional funds to organisations to ensure the inclusion of patient and lived-experience advocacy groups in the co-design of services and policies.

While the *Programme for Government* makes multiple references to cross-departmental working, it is essential that this is extended to include sector organisations, ensuring fully-integrated systems of care and support to improve outcomes for those accessing services, interventions, and longer-term health and social care supports.

2.3. Childcare

Childcare reform has received significant political focus in recent months and featured in the manifesto of every major political party at the last election. High costs, insufficient provision, and low wages for workers are some of the issues that require urgent reform. With one third of children in Ireland cared for by childminders or childcare organisations, this issue affects a large proportion of the population.⁵⁶ It is also an important equality issue, hampering the ability of women to return to work and negatively affecting their broader economic mobility. A 2023 report by Rethink Ireland and the National Women’s Council found that women with children undertake 42.6 hours of childcare per week, while men reported 25.2 hours.⁵⁷

53 *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p91

54 National Drug Treatment Reporting Centre, *2023 Drug Treatment Demand Bulletin*

55 *Health Dialogue Forum Partnership Principles*

56 Eurostat, *Living Conditions in Europe – Childcare Arrangements*

57 Rethink Ireland and National Women’s Council, *Rocking the Boat or Rocking the Cradle: Women’s Economic Mobility and the Role of Care in Ireland*, 2023

The Programme for Government makes strong commitments to “Undertake a broad consultation and publish a detailed Action Plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system with State-led facilities adding capacity”. It also promises to “Review and increase core funding, ensuring the fee cap is maintained and that the model is open, transparent, and equitable, and that early-years educators in the private sector benefit from Employment Regulation Orders”.⁵⁸

Community and voluntary sector organisations are an integral element of childcare provision. As such, they have long taken the lead on progressing a child-centred approach to early years care. These providers must receive supports under any new initiatives progressed through Budget 2026. This should include overhead costs, which have risen significantly in recent years, as acknowledged in the *First Five Strategy*.⁵⁹ In addition, we urgently need greater investment in expanding the access and inclusion model to full-time and all-year-round, most especially for children with additional support needs. This will require investment from Government and delivery partnerships with early-years organisations, as well as an increase in funding for the National Model of Parenting Support Services.⁶⁰

The latest *Early Years Sector Profile Report* found that:

- the average wage for childcare staff was €13.10 per hour; and,
- early-years assistants (46% of all staff working directly with children) earn €12.10 per hour, or 20c below the living wage at the time of the report (2021/2022).⁶¹

The ability of organisations to retain staff is key to providing this stability to the children for whom they care. It is therefore essential that Government address low wages in the profession.

Budget 2025 allocated more than €1.37 billion for early learning and childcare, a €266 million (24%) increase on the previous year, but Ireland still falls short of average OECD public expenditure on early childhood education and care.⁶² **Budget 2026 should include a further increase of 10% and deliver on election promises of radical change, building a childcare system that is not-for-profit, accessible, flexible and ensures decent pay for workers.**

⁵⁸ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p62

⁵⁹ *First Five Strategy*

⁶⁰ *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*

⁶¹ Pobal, *Early Years Sector Profile Report*, 2021

⁶² OECD Family Database

3. ADDRESSING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

- Commit to benchmarking core social welfare rates to average earnings and make the commensurate increases in social welfare rates that this requires.
- Increase targeted payments to those most at risk of poverty to reflect increases in cost-of-living, inflation and energy costs.
- Introduce a recurring Cost of Disability payment of €2,600 per year, or €50 a week, as an interim measure to build on and replace the Disability Support Grant introduced in Budget 2023 and maintained in Budget 2024 (€698 million).
- Fully resource a *Loneliness Strategy* that is cross-departmental and co-designed with sector organisations through the Loneliness Taskforce, which is scheduled to be developed and presented to Government this year.
- Establish a Social Engagement Fund, with an initial investment of €10 million to increase active participation, especially among young people.
- Fully resource the implementation of the next *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* to ensure it results in meaningful change and is based on a full independent review of the previous *Roadmap*.

3.1. Reducing poverty in Ireland

According to the latest figures released by the CSO, many people are still at risk of poverty in Ireland, especially among the most marginalised groups.

Almost 830,000 people experienced deprivation in 2024 and consistent poverty rates increased to 5% compared to 3.6% in 2023, well short of the target of 2% set up by the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020—2025.⁶³

Cost-of-living measures and one-off payments in recent budgets provided some short-term relief, but did not address systemic poverty and inequality or the impact of inflation and rising costs in energy, housing, and the cost of living.

The increased overall poverty rate between 2023 and 2024 clearly demonstrates this. However, consistent social welfare payments have had a marked impact on poverty reduction. **Without these, 31% of the population would have been living in poverty in 2024.**

Analysis of Budget 2025 by Social Justice Ireland estimates that an increase of €25 in core social welfare rates is needed to address income inadequacy for the poorest families with current cost-of-living and inflation rates.⁶⁴

⁶³ Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024

⁶⁴ Social Justice Ireland, *Budget 2025 Analysis and Critique*

“There is a serious question of fairness at the heart of Irish society. **We are wealthier than at any time in our history, yet almost 630,000 people are in poverty, including 190,000 children.** A third of those who are unemployed or unable to work due to long-standing health problems are in poverty, while the number of workers in poverty has remained above 100,000 for several years. We therefore welcome the Programme for Government commitment to run progressive budgets. To do so, Government should commit to benchmarking core social welfare rates to average earnings and increase payments accordingly, introduce the living wage, make tax credits refundable, and implement the commitment to a cost of disability payment.”

John McGeady, CEO, Social Justice Ireland

3.2. Tackling Loneliness

An EU-wide survey showed that more than one in five respondents reported feeling lonely most or all of the time, making Ireland the loneliest country in the EU.⁶⁵ The survey also showed that the rate of loneliness decreases with different factors such as age, income, and education, and increases with major life events such as separation, job loss, and finishing studies. Having meaningful relationships—and the contact that comes with them—also makes a difference.⁶⁶

The sector plays a key role in supporting people experiencing loneliness, with almost two in five (36%) supports being implemented by NGOs, followed by almost one in six (17%) implemented by local government, and one in eight (12%) through joint initiatives. More than half of

loneliness interventions target older people, with just over eight percent targeting young people. Interventions for older people’s mental health provide essential supports, and the *Programme* references the need to “invest in social programmes and befriending services to address isolation.”⁶⁷ However, across the lifecycle of an individual, there is a need for more.

Tackling loneliness will not only improve mental health but will also foster social cohesion. 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.⁶⁸ A strong social infrastructure includes, for example, sports facilities and opportunities to socialise. Having such infrastructure is associated with a lower risk of depression, higher social trust, and greater confidence in the State, the media, and the healthcare system.

Established since 2018, the Loneliness Taskforce—of which The Wheel is a member—has addressed key recommendations in a report to tackle this issue in Ireland.⁶⁹ They form the basis for a cross-sectoral *Action Plan to Combat Loneliness*. **Budget 2026 should provide sufficient resources to develop such an action plan, co-designed with sector organisations and delivered through an interdepartmental approach.**

Active participation by younger people in community and voluntary activities, particularly volunteering, would not only mitigate the impact of loneliness, but also 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, in these increasingly divisive times, we desperately need.** We therefore propose the establishment of a Social Engagement Fund, with an initial investment of €10 million, in Budget

⁶⁵ European Commission Joint Research Centre, EU-Wide Survey on Loneliness, 2022

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p96

⁶⁸ ESRI, *Civic and Political Engagement Among Young Adults in Ireland*, 2023

⁶⁹ Loneliness Taskforce, *A Connected Island: An Ireland Free from Loneliness*, 2018

2026. 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.

“Loneliness is a serious public health concern that impacts mental and physical well-being, social cohesion, and even economic productivity. As EU commission research finds, ‘Ireland has the highest level of loneliness in Europe’. We urgently need a fully-resourced strategy to combat loneliness included in Budget 2026.”

Susanne Rogers, Chair of the Loneliness Taskforce

3.3. Supporting marginalised communities and social cohesion

- **The right to advocate**

The role of the community and voluntary sector in holding governments to account for decisions and in ensuring that Government hears the voices of those they represent is essential in a functioning democracy.⁷⁰ The Irish constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights both guarantee the rights of community and voluntary organisations to robustly critique government policy. The State also has an obligation under the Council of Europe to facilitate an environment that allows this.⁷¹

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and their guidelines on Freedom of Association further clarifies this right: “Governmental and quasi-governmental mechanisms at all levels should ensure the effective participation of NGOs without discrimination in dialogue and consultation on public policy objectives and decisions. **Such participation should ensure the free expression of the diversity of people’s opinions as to the functioning of society.**”⁷²

Funding agreements between the State and non-governmental organisations should clearly set out that the acceptance of funding does not preclude critique of government policy or campaigning and advocacy. Government might also consider the institution of a complaints mechanism for breach of these agreements.

“Associations shall have the right to freedom of expression and opinion through their objectives and activities. This is in addition to the individual right of the members of associations to freedom of expression and opinion. Associations shall have the right to participate in matters of political and public debate, regardless of whether the position taken is in accord with government policy or advocates a change in the law.”

Claire Mc Evoy, Head of Research and Policy, Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)

⁷⁰ ICCL, *That’s not your Role: State Funding and Advocacy in the Irish Community, Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector*

⁷¹ Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec (2007)14

⁷² European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association Adopted by The Venice Commission at its 101st Plenary Session (Venice, 12-13 December 2014)

- **Community approaches to social cohesion**

Discourse around issues such as immigration, integration, racial identity, and foreign aid have become increasingly polarised in Ireland in recent months, exacerbated by online disinformation and agitation. **Community organisations have long been at the forefront of local tensions, working towards improving social cohesion through meaningful dialogue and restorative justice practices.**

The *Programme for Government* makes positive commitments to “Launch national and local community campaigns to highlight the positive impacts of migration and to challenge disinformation,” as well as to “Develop community-led initiatives to foster connections between migrants and local populations, particularly in areas receiving a high number of new arrivals, to build strong community ties”. It is crucial that Government properly resource community organisations so that they can continue to carry out this essential and difficult work.

We strongly support the Government’s pledge to “Renew the focus and the purpose of the Community Recognition Fund to ensure it meets the needs of local communities which are supporting new arrivals” in order to “ensure every community benefits to guarantee supports for vital services”.⁷³ The impact of this fund and the hundreds of projects it has supported at local level since its creation in 2023 is significant. Increasing the fund to €60 million and securing it as annual funding should be among the Government’s priorities. It is also critical that all communities have access to public services and infrastructure, as well as the chance to actively contribute to the society they live in through work and social participation.



“I’d describe Exchange House as a frontline service for Travellers in Ireland. It offers mental health services, addiction services, social work, family support, education, and youth services. A Traveller can come to Exchange House and knock at the front door and we’ll take them in, whatever the issue. It is very rewarding to work with your own community. You can see yourself and understand yourself with your own community. To see them leaving in a better situation after a few weeks than where you first met them.”

John Paul Collins, Men’s Mental Health Worker, Exchange House

⁷³ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p123

Safe Space Programme



“Outhouse LGBTQ+ Centre’s Safe Space programme is a peer-led support initiative for LGBTQ+ International Protection applicants, refugees, and asylum seekers living in Ireland. These individuals often face multiple layers of discrimination, including racism, xenophobia, and systemic homophobia/transphobia. Safe Space creates a consistent, welcoming environment for participants to heal, connect, and grow. Facilitated by trained LGBTQ+ leaders with lived experience, the monthly group explores themes such as identity, emotional resilience, and navigating life in Ireland as a queer migrant. We have a total of 783 registered participants, 399 of whom are actively engaged in the programme, and many of whom live in Direct Provision and rely on this programme as a lifeline to community and self-acceptance.

Thanks to funding and community support, the Safe Space programme has doubled its capacity in May 2025 to ensure more registrants can access this vital support. Participants describe Safe Space as transformational—a place where they are no longer invisible. One standout moment came when the group marched together at Dublin Pride, proudly and publicly claiming space in a country where many had once arrived feeling voiceless and afraid. “The Outhouse community has helped me begin to heal,” said Stella, a participant-turned-volunteer. The impact of Safe Space ripples far beyond our walls, fostering resilience, belonging, and visibility in one of the most marginalised corners of the LGBTQ+ community.”

Oisín O’Reilly (he/him), CEO of Outhouse

4. ENSURING OUR COMMUNITIES THRIVE

- Increase the overall Department of Rural and Community Development by 5% to €495 million, ensuring that community organisations are sufficiently resourced to meeting increased demand for services and to respond effectively to local and national crises.
- Commit to annual funding of €60 million for the Community Recognition Fund to increase resourcing for community infrastructure (including community centres, playgrounds, and other shared facilities). Ring-fence a part of the fund for projects that address social cohesion.
- Invest €21.3 million in youth outreach and youth work schemes delivered by the community and voluntary sector, as well as the necessary built infrastructure (e.g. local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs etc.)
- Increase the Shared Island Civic Society Fund to €20 million to address increased demand and build lasting relationships between organisations North and South.
- Resource the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028*, with an annual investment of €1 million.
- Invest €13 million into developing a suite of business supports for social enterprise; develop an annual Social Enterprise Empowerment and Development allocation (SEED) to support social enterprise provision for sustainable jobs, affordable childcare and community services.
- Commit at least €30 million in funding for the Community Climate Action Programme for 2026–27, including at least €5 million for another two-year round of Creative Ireland’s Creative Climate Action programme.
- Update the Government’s *International Climate Finance Roadmap* to set out a pathway to a €500 million annual contribution to international mitigation and adaptation efforts by 2030 and to our fair share contribution to the new Loss and Damage Fund, estimated at €1.5 billion.
- Resource implementation of the *Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with the Community and Voluntary Sector* across Government for effective service delivery.

4.1. Community development

• Community centres and public infrastructure

Community services and community infrastructure are critical aspects of public service provision, enhancing wellbeing and facilitating inclusion and participation. The Programme for Government commitment to “Maintain a dedicated Department for Rural Affairs and strengthen its remit to become the Department of Rural, Community and Gaeltacht Affairs”⁷⁴ is an important component in this, but it is important that Budget 2026 include sufficient resourcing for effective community support and development. We recommend an overall departmental increase of 5% to €495 million, to ensure adequate resources for communities to meeting increased demand for services and to respond effectively to local and national crises.

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. These physical community spaces have also proved their importance during recent crises, providing shelter and reassurance during major storms, or facilitating community dialogue. Budget 2026 should include resourcing for essential community infrastructure.

These spaces should be included in all urban and rural planning, ensuring that community infrastructure is an integral part of any new housing developments. This would align with pathway two of *Housing for All 2030* in “supporting social inclusion”⁷⁵ and Government commitments to move from a decision-led to a planning-led system of development across Ireland.

Children also need safe spaces to play and explore within their communities. The *Children’s Sports Participation and Physical Activity Study 2022* 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.⁷⁶ 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; given the importance of these bodies, Government should ensure their funding into the future.

However, not all children enjoy or are able to participate in sports activities. A 2022 study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) found that girls were less likely to be engaged in sports than boys were. The same study also found lower levels of engagement among children with disabilities, children from migrant backgrounds, and children from financially strained households.⁷⁷ With loneliness increasing among younger people, 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 2026 should resource community youth outreach programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector, as well as built infrastructure such as local libraries, arts centres, and youth clubs.

⁷⁴ Programme for Government 2025: *Securing Ireland’s Future*, p105

⁷⁵ Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Housing for All 2030*

⁷⁶ *Children’s Sports Participation and Physical Activity Study*, 2022

⁷⁷ ESRI, *The Changing Social Worlds of 9-Year-Olds*, 2022

• Community schemes

The Programme for Government makes a range of positive commitments to support existing community development and employment schemes. This includes pledges to:

- “Progressively increase funding for the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) which is critical to addressing social exclusion and disadvantage and encouraging involvement in communities”;
- “Open the Community Services Programme for new applications annually so that more organisations can join the programme”;
- “Continue to support and increase the places on successful local programmes such as CE, TÚS and the Rural Social Scheme which do vital work in local communities”; and to,
- “Examine tax measures for donations to community development companies”.⁷⁸

It is pivotal that Government sufficiently resource and implement these commitments through Budget 2026.

• Volunteering

We also welcome the commitment from Government to develop a new *National Volunteering Strategy*. Ireland has very high rates of volunteering, which creates a significant social and economic impact.⁷⁹ However, many organisations are struggling to recruit and retain volunteers. It is important, therefore, that a full review of the current *Strategy* precede any new *Strategy*, in order to identify gaps and priorities, as well as ensure meaningful investment. Research by Volunteer Ireland showed that more than 44% of volunteers cite their nationality as other than Irish, demonstrating the important role it plays in social inclusion.⁸⁰ Budget 2026 should fully support and resource volunteers and organisations to ensure that a broad range of people can contribute to society through volunteering. **Volunteering should be meaningful and worthwhile for the participant and for the community.**

⁷⁸ Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future, p109

⁷⁹ CSO, Census 2022 Spotlight: Volunteering

⁸⁰ Volunteer Ireland, *Valuing the Power of Volunteering*, 2024



ALONE works with all older people, including those who are lonely, isolated, frail or ill, homeless, living in poverty, or are facing other difficulties.

Following the death of her sister in October 2024, this older person—who uses a wheelchair and has complex medical needs—found herself living alone for the first time.

She self-referred to ALONE having found herself very lonely and isolated. ALONE supported her by installing a pendant alarm and Ring doorbell, helping her feel safer and more secure at home. As she doesn't drive and previously relied on her sister, a volunteer has now been arranged to visit her weekly, starting next week. The ALONE volunteer will be able to highlight any additional support needs that she may request by using our app that links her directly to our Services team.

She is deeply grateful, as this will be her only regular social contact outside of carers and medical staff.

4.2. Social enterprise

Social enterprises in Ireland employ 84,382 people, with a further 74,825 volunteers actively involved or providing governance supports in the sector.⁸¹ Defined by the *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland* as a “business that, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders, is an enterprise whose primary objective is to achieve ‘profit for purpose’ and a social, economic or environmental impact”⁸², social enterprises in Ireland are playing an essential role in the economy and in society. They are addressing climate crisis through developing the circular economy, providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and creating recreational and cultural opportunities for a wide range of communities.

The *Programme for Government* makes a range of positive commitments to “support the vital role of social entrepreneurship, recognising its value in the local economy and society.”⁸³ We support commitments to “Review the vital supports available for social enterprises from State Bodies” and to “Establish a forum to promote a more integrated approach to social entrepreneurship across government departments and build on Ireland’s first National Social Enterprise Policy.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Department of Rural and Community Development, *Social Enterprises in Ireland: A Baseline Data Collection Exercise*, 2024

⁸² *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland*, p2

⁸³ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p110

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

In a particularly concerning development, the EU Commission Directorate General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) announced that, from 1 May, it will relinquish its current clear and direct commitment to social enterprise by shutting down its Social Economy Unit and cancelling funding through the programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME)⁸⁵. The social economy plays a crucial role in Ireland and Europe from both an economic and social perspective.

This decision will have a direct negative impact on many organisations in Ireland, and it is more important than ever that Government step in to support potentially affected social enterprises.

Additionally, it is urgent that Government use its influence to ensure that the EU Commission portfolio retains social entrepreneurship as a priority matter.

We welcome funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan: Growing Social Enterprise, announced in July 2024. However, there are currently more than 170 Government supports for start-ups and small businesses delivered on behalf of Government by Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and Enterprise Ireland.

We recommend that an effective way to implement the commitment above is to ensure that 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 EU Commission Recommendation on SME's (2003/361/EC) 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.

Proponents of social enterprise have raised the consistency of approach from LEOs as an issue, and there are clear commitments within the *Social Enterprise Policy 2024–2027* to invest in greater supports. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) also reflected this lack of support in its report, *Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland*.⁸⁶ In order to develop the social enterprise model and to support existing organisations, these supports should be included in Budget 2026.

Finally, the *Programme for Government* acknowledges the value and potential of the social enterprise model, committing to "Consider an annual Social Enterprise Empowerment and Development allocation (SEED) to unlock the potential of the social enterprise sector for sustainable job creation, affordable childcare provision and community services". Budget 2026 should provide supports for social enterprises interested in providing services in these areas of vital public infrastructure.

⁸⁵ Brussels Times, The implications of DG GROW abandoning the social economy at a critical juncture, 30 April 2025.

⁸⁶ NESC, *Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland*, 2023

4.3. Sustainable communities

• Delivering a real just transition

The *Programme for Government* recommits to the objectives of the climate law passed overwhelmingly by the last Dáil and commits this Government to “Deliver actions to achieve a 51% reduction in emissions from 2018 to 2030 and net-zero emissions no later than 2050” and specifically to “taking decisive action to radically reduce our reliance on [...] expensive imported fossil fuels”.⁸⁷

The transition to a climate neutral economy by 2050 requires an urgent and radical reshaping of our energy, transport, building, and food systems. However, the opportunities of a just transition are plentiful:

- warmer homes;
- lower fuel bills;
- cleaner air;
- affordable and accessible public transport;
- abundant employment opportunities;
- energy independent and thriving communities; and,
- improved health and quality of life.

Facing the climate crisis head on requires consistent political and state leadership to direct and resource a just transition. On the ground, it will continue to be a movement led by local organisations that understand both their communities and the need for “decisive action to radically reduce our reliance on fossil fuels”. However, these same organisations require sufficient resources.

We welcome the Programme’s commitment to “listen to communities, address their concerns, and ensure they benefit from the green transition”. We also welcome its commitment to promote “community-led ownership models for renewable energy production” for communities and farmers.⁸⁸ In the context of preparing Budget 2026, therefore, it is crucial that Government appreciate that such community engagement and local renewables development requires sustained, and simplified, investment in community organisations, and in the social enterprises and national charities that support them.

Budget 2026 must ensure that the Community Climate Action Programme has at least €30 million in funding for 2026–27, including at least €5 million for another two-year round of Creative Ireland’s Creative Climate Action programme.

The next phase of the Community Climate Action Programme must also learn from the previous phases. Strikingly, the second phase of the Creative Climate Action programme moved to ensure its community and artistic grantees had substantial organisational funding for a two-year period to ensure they were adequately resourced to implement the programme successfully.

Delivering a real just transition also includes our commitment to contribute our fair share to international climate finance to support the communities around the world who have done least to cause climate change—but who are most vulnerable to its increasing impacts—to transition to a safer future. The *Programme for Government* has a welcome commitment to “Deliver on Ireland’s International Climate Finance Roadmap to address climate challenges and prioritise funding for adaptation efforts in countries most vulnerable to climate change.”⁸⁹ The Tánaiste recently told the Dáil that the Government is on track to provide €225 million in international climate finance in 2025, as planned in the *Roadmap*.

⁸⁷ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future*, p50

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p25

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p140

What is the pathway to 2030? This is the crucial question for Budget 2026. Wheel members who have analysed this question have found that Ireland's fair share of the finance for international climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts is €500 million.⁹⁰ On top of which Ireland's fair-share contribution to the new Loss and Damage Fund, which Ireland worked so hard to help set up, amounts to €1.5 billion by 2030.⁹¹

- **Sustainability initiatives and the circular economy**

Organisations across the country engage on projects relating to sustainability from environmental conservation and biodiversity to renewable energy programmes, the circular economy, and community resilience. The Programme commits to “Support communities to secure grid access for local renewable projects” and to “Explore ways to use surplus renewable energy to help reduce energy poverty, ensuring that renewable energy benefits all communities.”⁹²

It is vital, then, that communities have full access to programmes such as the Small-Scale Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (SRESS), which aims to provide an easier route-to-market for community projects and to enable them to maximise their participation in the energy transition.⁹³ As well as local renewable energy projects, community organisations should be supported to develop initiatives such as the district heating systems group retrofitting projects referenced in the *Programme for Government*.

The *Programme* also recognises the valuable role that social enterprises play, outlining commitments to “Support enterprises in the circular economy such as repair and refurbishment centres,” and to “Require each local authority to create a circular economy strategy focused on waste reduction, with a particular emphasis on food and construction waste”.⁹⁴ Budget 2026 should provide for social enterprises and community organisations working in the circular economy and begin the process of legislating to incentivise sustainable business practices.

- **Protecting Biodiversity**

Ireland's Fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030 emphasises the urgency with which we must address widespread biodiversity loss in Ireland and the importance of a whole-of-government approach to action.⁹⁵ Of Ireland's EU-protected habitats, 85% are of an unfavourable status, while more than 30% of our native bee species are at risk of extinction.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the 2024 report on the Well-being Framework notes, “Only one of the eleven well-being dimensions shows a negative performance over time and in comparison internationally and this is the Environment, Climate and Biodiversity”.⁹⁷

Community and voluntary organisations have been at the forefront of education and action on biodiversity loss, which is now at crisis levels in Ireland. It is of truly great moment that the State supports sector organisations in continuing their work against biodiversity loss, and enables them to fulfil the goals of the Action Plan. In addition, we should see the rapid implementation of improved coordination across Government on this urgent issue.

⁹⁰ Dochas, *No Time to Lose: A Call for Action on Climate, Hunger and Conflict*, 2024

⁹¹ Trócaire, *What is Loss and Damage*, 2023

⁹² *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future*, p54

⁹³ Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, *The Small-Scale Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (SRESS)*

⁹⁴ *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future*, p55

⁹⁵ Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan, 2023–2030

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Wellbeing Framework 2024*

4.4. Civic participation

• Young people

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 ESRI found that civic engagement such as volunteering can benefit both young people and their communities.⁹⁸ 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 correlates with greater levels of social trust, programmes aimed at youth participation are essential in tackling both loneliness, mental health, and social unrest.⁹⁹

Budget 2026 should include a sufficient investment to resource the implementation of the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028, with an investment of €1 million in 2026 for youth participation and the development of supports for disadvantaged areas, co-designed by community and voluntary organisations working within those same areas. To enable high-quality, well-resourced youth work services that continue to support young people, Budget 2026 should recognise, resource, and support essential community and voluntary sector youth services by increasing overall investment for 2026 to €21 million.¹⁰⁰

“Youth work services play an essential role in improving outcomes for young people by providing safe spaces, support and new opportunities.”

Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future

• Democratic decision-making

The value of civic participation extends beyond young people and is key marker of wellbeing across the life cycle.¹⁰¹ The success and popularity of Citizens' Assemblies and other democratic decision-making processes in Ireland has demonstrated this.

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.

⁹⁸ ESRI, *Civic and Political Engagement Among Young Adults in Ireland*, 2023

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ National Youth Council of Ireland, *Stronger Youth Services, Stronger Communities*, 2026

¹⁰¹ CSO, *Wellbeing Index: Civic Engagement, Trust and Cultural Expression*

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, particularly those who are furthest behind, are heard within the decision-making processes. Budget 2026 should include resources for supporting and developing civic participation across society.

4.5. iCommunity and all-island partnership

The community and voluntary sector occupies a position that is key in promoting peacebuilding, inclusion, and shared prosperity across the island of Ireland. Yet, despite being central to public service delivery and social cohesion, the sector lacks the structural and financial support needed to work meaningfully across jurisdictions. **The growing complexity of shared challenges—climate action, rural isolation, youth mental health—requires coordinated, all-island responses rooted in community experience. However, systemic barriers and underinvestment continue to limit collaboration.**

Although multiple consultation mechanisms exist, the absence of a formal framework for cross-border civil society input means only the best-resourced organisations can engage effectively. This results in fragmented policy development, with similar issues addressed in isolation across the jurisdictions, duplicating efforts and missing opportunities for shared learning and innovation.

Recent years have seen a marked increase in cross-border events, networking platforms, and joint conferences, all of which demonstrate the sector's appetite for deeper cooperation. Initiatives like iCommunity have shown that even modest investment can unlock significant engagement and spark collaboration. However, scaling this potential requires sustained, multiannual funding and more coherent, accessible mechanisms to involve civil society in shaping shared policy agendas.

The Shared Island Civic Society Fund has been a welcome development, but current levels fall well short of fully supporting the sector's ambition.

A new *Programme for Government* and Budget 2026 present an opportunity to invest in civil society as a driver of reconciliation, innovation, and resilience on the island of Ireland. Budget 2026 should respond to this by increasing the Shared Island Civic Society Fund to €20 million, recognising the surge in demand for support in hosting conferences, developing joint initiatives, and building lasting relationships between organisations North and South.

Dedicated multiannual grant lines would also support sector-led partnership building, separate from project-specific funding, enabling organisations to invest in relationships, shared planning, and joint service development across the island.

4.5. Partnership working

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*¹⁰², which copper-fastened the relationship and partnership between Government and the 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* provide a blueprint for cross-Government and cross-sectoral working, as emphasised in the Programme for Government.**

Central and local government, as well as state bodies, all use the Values and Principles 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* and, in turn, support and resource its rollout across Government.

102 Department of Rural and Community Development, *Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership*



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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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