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# DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION: STATEMENT OF STRATEGY 2023–2026

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Submission by The Wheel, February 2025

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## About the Charity, Community and Voluntary and Social Enterprise Sector

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

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

The breadth of the community and voluntary sector in Ireland is far reaching. Organisations provide vital services and supports in areas such as health and social care, community development, children and family services, and integration. They are at the forefront of the work to address the climate crisis and to advocate for human rights. The sector is integral to meeting the most important societal challenges and providing essential public services. For example, nearly 70% of all disability services are provided by voluntary organisations funded under Section 38 or Section 39 of the Health Act 2004.<sup>2</sup>

# The Department of Social Protection in the Programme for Government

The new *Programme for Government* makes a series of ambitious commitments to improving the lives of the most vulnerable in our society, pledging to “continue to implement progressive reforms to our social welfare system,” through “policies guided by the core principles of sustainability and fairness”.<sup>1</sup> It also focuses strongly on overcoming governmental silos that limit efficiencies and outcomes. The next *Department of Social Protection Statement of Strategy* will be a vital component in achieving these aims and we welcome the opportunity to contribute. It is essential that the next *Strategy* contains equally ambitious targets for addressing major societal issues such as poverty and deprivation, access to the labour market and just transition, as well as commitments to cross-governmental working, and a partnership approach to community and voluntary organisations providing services and supports.

In 2025, Ireland continues to experience significant levels of inequality, compounded by an ongoing housing crisis and a cost of living that has remained consistently high since 2020. More than 560,000 people are at risk of poverty and more than 900,000 are living in enforced deprivation, according to the latest figures released by the CSO.<sup>2</sup> This represents a worrying rise of over 200,000 people going without basic necessities (enforced deprivation) since 2021.

These dual crises are having a combined impact that disproportionately effects specific cohorts of people. Lone parents with children younger than 25 and people unable to work due to long-standing health problems are most likely to be living in enforced deprivation (45.6% and 44.7% respectively).<sup>3</sup> Alongside the Department of Social Protection, charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises are at the coalface of supporting people who are most impacted by deprivation. Indeed, one in twelve charities has the specific charitable purpose of the relief of poverty or economic hardship.<sup>4</sup> They deliver social services, represent most marginalised groups and assist people into employment. It will not be possible to achieve the Department’s ambitious goals necessary to the next *Statement of Strategy* without meaningful partnership working and engagement between government and the sector, as well as a cross-departmental approach.

However, persistent underfunding of the sector has led to frontline services being asked to do more with less. Many are experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis as salaries fail to keep pace with public sector operators. These services provide a lifeline to those on the margins and should be adequately resourced to do this vital work in the face of increasing demand. In a 2022 Pobal report, 29% of Pobal-funded organisations said that staff left because of salary levels, lack of development opportunities (21%), or preferred private or public sector employment (17%). This poses a significant risk to the continuation of these vital services.

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<sup>1</sup> Programme for Government, p99

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/enforceddeprivation/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/enforceddeprivation/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/media/4733/crar2022.pdf>.

# Summary of Recommendations

Below are a series of recommendations that we believe are essential to moving towards a society where no one is left behind: lifting people out of poverty, addressing loneliness and isolation, providing opportunities for all young people, and supporting the community and voluntary sector to deliver vital services.

- Provide multi-annual funding arrangements with the sector
- Include cost of compliance in all new funding contracts
- Undertake meaningful consultation, engagement and co-design processes with the community and voluntary sector on policy design and implementation
- Establish a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty
- Resource an independent review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025
- Increase investment in community development outreach programmes
- Expand the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives
- Resource the Taskforce on Loneliness
- Increase funding for community engagement programmes that build social cohesion
- Increase funding to support community health programmes aimed at addressing loneliness (“social prescribing”).
- Invest in organisations working in remote and rural areas to address social exclusion
- Ensure digital services are fully accessible and address AI issues for vulnerable service users
- Implement the Department of Rural and Community Development’s *Partnership Values and Principles*
- Support communities to achieve a just transition, where no one is left behind
- Invest in the capacity of sector organisations to support the full implementation of Ireland’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals to reach the furthest behind first
- Investment in local action on climate and biodiversity

# Strategic Objective 1: Put the customer at the centre of policy and service delivery

## Addressing Poverty & Deprivation

The *Programme for Government* makes a commitment to “Retain the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of An Taoiseach to break down silos between departments and drive delivery of measures aimed at reducing child poverty”.<sup>5</sup> We welcome this continued focus and recommend expanding the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives. This would effectively capture the input of community and voluntary organisations working at the coalface of child and family services, and support the commitment in the current Strategy to “inform policy through robust research, evaluation and stakeholder engagement”.

As detailed above, poverty and deprivation remain a significant issue across society and throughout the lifecycle in Ireland, and the current *Strategy*’s commitment to *achieve the goals set out in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion – including reduction in poverty rates and improvement in living standards* should remain a priority. To ensure effective implementation of the *Roadmap*, we recommend resourcing an independent review of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025* to fully assess its impact and to inform the next iteration.

In 2022, the Select Committee on Budgetary Oversight published its *Report on Indexation of the Taxation and Social Protection System recommending a system of benchmarking social welfare payments*.<sup>6</sup> This is a move which has been called for by many of our sector colleagues, and one The Wheel fully supports. We propose the establishment of a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty.

While we welcome the continued focus on addressing child poverty, it is vital that all those experiencing deprivation and poverty are considered in the Department’s next *Strategy*. Lone parents, people seeking international protection, Travellers and Roma, carers and people with disabilities all face disproportionate challenges around earning income, accessing education and healthcare, and being housed. The next *Strategy* must seek to address inequality across society.

We recommend:

- Establishing a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty
- Resourcing an independent review of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*.
- Expanding the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives

<sup>5</sup> Programme for Government, p64

<sup>6</sup>[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/committee\\_on\\_budgetary\\_oversight/reports/2022/2022-07-14\\_indexation-of-the-taxation-and-social-protection-system\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/committee_on_budgetary_oversight/reports/2022/2022-07-14_indexation-of-the-taxation-and-social-protection-system_en.pdf)

## Inclusion & Participation

### Loneliness

The Programme for Government commits to “Invest in social programmes and befriending services to address isolation.”<sup>7</sup> This acknowledges the loneliness crisis that is occurring in Ireland, and that disproportionately impacts older people, people with disabilities, those in rural areas and those from marginalised communities. Ireland is the loneliest country in the EU, with more than one in five respondents to an EU-wide survey reporting feeling lonely most or all of the time.<sup>8</sup>

While the current Department of Social Protection *Strategy* commits to *promoting active participation in society as well as supporting employment as a way out of poverty* we recommend increasing this commitment to full support and resourcing for the [Loneliness Taskforce](#) and support for community and voluntary organisations who are directly supporting people experiencing loneliness.

We also recommend extending supports across the lifecycle to ensure wider societal wellbeing. Active participation by younger people in community and voluntary activities, particularly volunteering, would not only mitigate the impact of loneliness, but provide much-needed social infrastructure for future generations, providing a ‘cushion’ for younger people who need it. Strong social infrastructure leads to greater trust in the instruments of the State, which in turn leads to greater social cohesion, something that is desperately needed in these increasingly divisive times.

### Digital Inclusion

It is vital that everyone can access the Department’s services and initiatives. We welcome the *Programme for Government* commitment to “Implement an eInclusion Strategy to ensure no one is left behind by the move to a digital society” and to “Invest in digital skills at all levels, from basic digital literacy for all citizens to being a leader in higher education and research in areas like Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing”.<sup>9</sup> The Department should continue to ensure that it “facilitates service users, including people with disabilities, to access all of the department’s services” and further extend its commitment to *Providing customers with ‘digital by desire’ use of online and digital services channels*.

This should extend to use of AI, which is posing additional problems for access, information integrity and data protection, especially for vulnerable people. While the *Programme* references a need to “Ensure that the skills necessary for AI deployment, AI innovation and AI support are provided through our education and professional learning networks,”<sup>10</sup> it is important that this is extended to the community and voluntary sector and to those people accessing their supports and services, particularly those engaging in employment schemes or facing barriers to employment.

We recommend:

- Resourcing the Taskforce on Loneliness
- Increasing funding for community engagement programmes that build social cohesion
- Increasing funding to support community health programmes aimed at addressing loneliness (“social prescribing”)

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<sup>7</sup> Programme for Government, p96

<sup>8</sup> [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/loneliness/loneliness-prevalence-eu\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/loneliness/loneliness-prevalence-eu_en).

<sup>9</sup> Programme for Government, p34

<sup>10</sup> Programme for Government, p35

- Investing in organisations working in remote and rural areas to address social exclusion
- Ensuring digital services are fully accessible and addressing AI issues for vulnerable service users



## Public Services Through Partnership

### Partnership Working

The *Programme for Government* places particular emphasis on cross-governmental working and overcoming silos within Government, for example, to “Ensure a holistic, cross departmental approach to homelessness prevention”.<sup>11</sup> The current Strategy also includes an aim to *Achieve greater levels of inter-agency cooperation and support service delivery in other public bodies*. We strongly support this focus and emphasise the importance of extending this partnership working approach to community and voluntary organisations who provide services and supports.

The Department of Rural and Community Development [Partnership Values and Principles](#) provides a blueprint for all Departments who work closely with organisations in the sector. We recommend implementation of these principles to further improve effective working.

### Sustainable Funding

The Wheel has long advocated for the development of a coherent long-term funding strategy for the sector to sustain our social infrastructure and services. This would include the introduction of multiannual funding as the default approach for community and voluntary organisations, facilitating longer-term planning, better staff recruitment and retention rates, and improved outcomes. The *Programme for Government* makes commitments to multi-annual funding for several Government agencies, recognising the benefit to this approach.

Funding should also be provided on a full-cost-recovery basis, considering the need for organisations to fund core costs, pay staff adequately, train and develop staff, and make provision for pension contributions. These changes should be applied across government departments and agencies including Social Protection.

The Department has demonstrated its commitment to fair and equitable allocation of resources to enable the community and voluntary sector to effectively deliver services. It is vital that, where co-funding with other departments is provided, there is a streamlined process on resources and pay levels. This will enable implementation of the *Programme for Government* commitment that “...all state agencies work together to implement community development”<sup>12</sup> and support the commitment that “A Cabinet Committee comprising the Taoiseach and Tánaiste and, where required, ministers relevant to matters being discussed, shall meet regularly”.<sup>13</sup>

### Streamlined Compliance

In addition, charities understand the importance of transparency in their work and worked for years to encourage the establishment of Ireland’s Charities Regulator. The sector welcomes regulation and is working to attain the highest standards of governance, but there is a risk now that the compliance and reporting workload associated with statutory funding and regulation is becoming overly onerous for charities. In our recent Members’ Regulation Survey, complexity of compliance and time spent on this compliance rank among the top member concerns.<sup>14</sup> This was a greater issue for state-funded organisations the general respondent cohort.<sup>15</sup> There is a risk that the interplay of the many separate-but-related regulatory and reporting requirements is beginning to impede the work and

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<sup>11</sup> Programme for Government, p46

<sup>12</sup> Programme for Government, p107

<sup>13</sup> Programme for Government, p152

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2024-09/REGULATION%20SURVEY%202024%20-%20FINAL%20-%2030.9.24.pdf> p20

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

advocacy of charities. These requirements often far exceed those placed on private-sector service providers who operate in the same fields.

Streamlined compliance and regulatory requirements from Departments, as well as cross-Departmental coordination are necessary to ensure that regulation in all its forms helps, rather than over-burdens, sector organisations. Furthermore, Departments funding organisations to provide services should fund the cost of compliance.

We recommend:

- Including the cost of compliance in all new funding contracts
- Providing multi-annual funding arrangements with the sector
- Implementation of the *Partnership Values and Principles*
- Meaningful consultation, engagement and co-design processes with the community, voluntary and social enterprise sector

## Employment

### Employment Schemes

Community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises operate a significant number of employment and activation schemes. Populations across the country receive essential services through these schemes, which focus on supporting all people who want to make a working contribution to their communities to do so, but they are in need of increased investment.

We welcome the plethora of commitments to continue support for these schemes in the Programme for Government: “Progressively increase funding for the Social Inclusion & 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 indeed to “Examine tax measures for donations to community development companies,”<sup>16</sup> many of whom manage such schemes.

The next Department *Strategy* should retain its commitment to *improve the employability of unemployed clients and increase engagement with employers*, recognising the value provided by community organisations managing these schemes.

### Supporting Access to Employment for Disabled People

Disability organisations are key to ensuring that everyone can live a life with dignity. More than 1 in 5 people in Ireland have a long-lasting condition or difficulty of ‘any extent’ (1,109,557 people), with 8% of the population (407,342 people) having a long-lasting condition or difficulty to a “great extent or a lot”, according to Census 2022.<sup>17</sup>

The *Programme for Government* states a clear commitment to “Work with employers and across Government to improve employment of people with disabilities and ensure that supports for entrepreneurs and enterprise are accessible to all, including people with disabilities with a goal of reaching at least the EU average”.<sup>18</sup>

The community and voluntary sector has played a central role in advocating for removing barriers to work for people with disabilities and addressing Ireland’s poor record in this area. It is vital that the next Strategy focuses on achieving this goal, and increase support for people with disabilities in Ireland. This also includes addressing the cost of disability and preventing the loss of benefits such as travel card and medical card for those taking up employment. Moreover, the improvement of the Wage Subsidy Scheme and roll out of the recent Work and Access Support Scheme will enable more employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

It is vital that the next Government adopt the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters report *Towards Harmonisation of National Legislation with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*<sup>19</sup> and adequately resource organisations working to deliver the State’s commitments to advocate and co-design supports, services, and capacity-building for people with disabilities. This would include the provision of adequate funding for disability-specific

<sup>16</sup> Programme for Government, p109

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/census2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/>.

<sup>18</sup> Programme for Government, p17

<sup>19</sup> [https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_disability\\_matters/reports/2024/2024-01-24\\_towards-harmonisation-of-national-legislation-with-the-united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities\\_ga.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_disability_matters/reports/2024/2024-01-24_towards-harmonisation-of-national-legislation-with-the-united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities_ga.pdf)

community supports as outlined in the *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026*<sup>20</sup> to address demographic change and identified unmet need of people with disabilities.

## **Inclusion & Diversity in Government**

Included in the *Programme for Government* were several references to improving inclusion and diversity in the workforce, and we recommend that this approach is reflected in the new departmental *Strategy*. These commitments include: “Offer a paid internship programme targeted at underrepresented groups and individuals to provide them with valuable experience in government departments”;<sup>21</sup> “Maintain the Gender Based Bursary and bursary funding to encourage participation from underrepresented groups in apprenticeships”;<sup>22</sup> “Launch a new political participation campaign to support and promote greater numbers and diversity amongst those competing for elected member roles in local authorities”.<sup>23</sup>

These initiatives also aim at fulfilling the Department’s Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, also detailed in the current *Statement of Strategy*. They should form part of a broader strategy to ensure the Department at all levels fulfils its duty both with its workforce and users of its social services.

We recommend:

- Continued support for community activation and employment schemes
- Increased support for community and voluntary organisations managing employment schemes
- Increased support for people with disabilities seeking to enter the workforce
- Include commitments to improving diversity and inclusion in the new departmental *Strategy*

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/70871-disability-action-plan-2024-2026/>.

<sup>21</sup> Programme for Government, p34

<sup>22</sup> Programme for Government, p73

<sup>23</sup> Programme for Government, p149

## Social Enterprise

Social enterprises are a particular focal point in the new *Programme for Government*. Many community and voluntary organisations who receive funding from the Department of Social Protection also have a social enterprise element to their work. These organisations play a key role in providing services and supports, as well as opportunities to those facing barriers to employment. The *Programme* commits to “Continue to support the vital role of social entrepreneurship, recognising its value in the local economy and society,” 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”. It is vital that these organisations can continue to receive support from the Department while also accessing business supports, to enable the multifaceted approach they take to addressing societal problems.

As recognised in the *Programme for Government*, the social enterprise model for addressing many of the issues under the Department of Social Protection’s remit. We recommend consideration of the social enterprise model for a range of service delivery areas, particularly in employment and activation, community services and childcare, as detailed in the *Programme*.

We recommend:

- Continued support and resourcing for community and voluntary organisations with a social enterprise element to their work
- Commitment to growing the social enterprise sector model across new areas of service delivery

## Just Transition

The Government's *Climate Action Plan* defines 'just transition' as acknowledging that "climate policies should seek to protect the most vulnerable".<sup>24</sup> The transition to a green economy, and the ambition to achieve net carbon neutrality by 2050, will require a radical reshaping of the established societal norms in terms of how we work, live, and shape our communities. However, the opportunities are limitless: cheaper living, alternative employment opportunities, energy independence, thriving communities, and improved health and quality of life. Facing the climate crisis head on will continue to be a ground-up movement led by communities who understand the necessity of drastically changing the way our economy and societal structures work.

The current Department of Social Protection *Strategy* contains important commitments to *reflect increases in carbon taxes in a progressive impact through appropriate changes to welfare rates* and to *progress changes contained in the Climate Action Plan 2023 and its successor*. These reflect strong commitments in the *Programme for Government* to "Implement a Whole-of-Government Strategy to fully integrate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into national policies and initiatives, ensuring that each goal is actively pursued across all levels of government,"<sup>25</sup> And to "Support the Just Transition Commission's work to listen to communities, address their concerns, and ensure they benefit from the green transition."<sup>26</sup>

To affect a just transition, change will require active public participation, belief in the rationale of the transition, and, moreover, the skills and capacity to engage with the process, in addition to welfare rates that support just transition within communities.

We recommend:

- Support for just transition within communities
- Investment in the capacity of sector organisations to support the full implementation of Ireland's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals to reach the furthest behind first
- Investment in local action on climate and biodiversity

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<sup>24</sup> <https://consult.decc.gov.ie/en/consultation/call-expert-evidence-climate-action-plan-2024/chapter/just-transition>

<sup>25</sup> Programme for Government, p49

<sup>26</sup> Programme for Government, p50

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of charities, community groups and social enterprises. Our membership includes thousands of nonprofit organisations of all types and sizes, including most of Ireland's leading charities.

As a representative voice, we provide leadership to the charity and community sector and we 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 charity and community sector.

**[www.wheel.ie](http://www.wheel.ie)**



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