# UPDATED NATIONAL DIGITAL & AI STRATEGY CONSULTATION

September 2025

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# Introduction

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of charities, community groups and social enterprises. To deliver on our mission of supporting a thriving community and voluntary sector, The Wheel has a strong focus on skills and leadership development. In recent years, digital transformation and upskilling have become increasingly important for our members and the communities they serve. Digital technology is transforming our lives – the way we work, the way we learn, and how we interact with others. Indeed, the Programme for Government 2025 emphasises the importance of the digitalisation of public services and supporting all sectors of society and the economy to digitalise.[1] In June 2025, Digitalisation was added to the existing portfolio of the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, showing the importance of digitalisation for the new Government.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging AI technologies have accelerated this digital adoption, it also unveiled disparities in digital skills highlighting the risk that the more marginalised in our communities will be excluded from the opportunities the digital age presents.

By 2030, 9 out of 10 jobs will require digital skills; yet, according to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), almost 38% of Irish adults have below basic digital skills[2], well behind both the EU average and the best performing countries in Europe. As a community and voluntary sector, if we are to serve our communities effectively, we must engage with the digitalisation agenda. We can be pivotal in advocating for and facilitating an inclusive society-wide digital transformation. An ambition that is at the heart of the Government's own Digital For Good: Digital Inclusion Roadmap published in 2023, the ultimate goal of which is:

*"To make Ireland one of the most digitally inclusive States in the EU. That everyone should have the opportunity to use digital services, including digital public services, in a meaningful way"[3]*

Organisations in the community and voluntary sector are also actively engaging with the implications of the AI revolution. However, while many organisations are beginning to experiment with AI, they also have concerns regarding the risks and ethics of AI technology. Some areas of concern include:

- data protection and privacy,
- bias in data sets,
- use of AI in public service delivery,
- climate impact,
- copyright,

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[1] https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf

[2] https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/ireland_country_factsheet.pdf

[3] https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/digital-for-good-irelands-digital-inclusion-roadmap/

- young people's engagement with AI
- and the impact on jobs and employment.

Civil society organisations across various sectors are keen to contribute to a national dialogue on the development and adoption of this technology. The opportunity to contribute to this consultation process is a welcome first step in opening up such a dialogue process.

## Background and Context

In 2024, 49% of members of The Wheel noted that there were times when their staff and volunteers lacked necessary digital skills to carry out their current roles. [4]

In a recent exploratory study of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs among sector staff and volunteers, almost 30% of respondents noted that they faced digital literacy challenges.[5]

In 2025, members of The Wheel were asked about their engagement with Artificial Intelligence. 28% of organisations responded to indicate that they are currently using AI in their work, while 42% said they had yet to engage with AI. Other organisations indicated they are in the process of reviewing their AI usage, policies and accessing training.[6]

By comparison, recent research carried out by the Small Firms Association, indicates that 9 out of 10 small businesses are currently using AI.[7]

Of the approximately 12,000 registered charities in Ireland only 2,680 organisations are currently registered on the software donations programme coordinated by Enclude, the charity that supports nonprofit organisation.

Digital adoption and skills development in the community and voluntary sector are essential to:

- Align with national Harnessing Digital targets and the EU's Digital Decade goals.
- Ensure meaningful participation and public engagement of the sector in key consultations that shape the future of Ireland.
- Better communicate on the stories and impact on the sector in people's lives.
- Improve service delivery, reach, and impact.
- Reduce the digital divide for vulnerable groups and ensure better inclusion.
- Increase operational resilience and efficiency.

However, from the figures above, there is growing evidence of low penetration of AI and challenges with the utilisation of digital technologies in the community and voluntary sector. Further research is needed urgently to determine the digital maturity levels in the

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[4] The Wheel Members Survey 2024
[5] https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2024-06/NALA%20Report%20-%20Final%20Final%20-%2010.6.24%20%281%29.pdf
[6] The Wheel Members Survey 2025
[7] https://www.ibec.ie/sfa/news-insights-and-events/news/2025/08/05/9-out-of-10-small-businesses-use-ai-tools

sector, the nature of the challenges that face organisations in digital transformation and the supports required.

Currently the community and voluntary sector lacks any targeted funding to support digitalisation of organisations and services. These services include vital frontline areas such as health and social care, child and family support, homelessness, adult education, disability services and so much more. Given the central role that community and voluntary organisations play in the delivery of essential public services, and the Government's commitments to digitalisation of public services, this digital deficit is a worrying trend.

This digital disadvantage sets the sector apart from other sectors, such as SMEs. This gap, coupled with the resource constraints and requirements of restricted grant funding, means organisations rarely have the resources to embark on strategic digital transformation projects. This will eventually affect service delivery, fundraising capacity and retention of staff. As part of our efforts to understand the sector's digital needs, and begin to bridge the digital gap in our sector, in 2024 we delivered the "Digital Transformation for Thriving Communities" project, funded by European Citizen Action Service, a Brussels based nonprofit organisation that defends EU rights and promotes digital democracy and open decision-making in the EU. The report on the project's findings highlights barriers and opportunities within the digital inclusion landscape in Ireland's community and voluntary sector. [8]

In the report, **barriers** identified by respondents include:

- **Funding and budget constraints.** Digital tools, licenses and data management are often not covered by grants.
- **Lack of digital skills.** Varying levels of digital competence among staff and volunteers. Available information and training are not always accessible.
- **Time and resources.** Lack of staff capacity and time for learning and implementing digital solutions.
- **Infrastructure**. Lack of connectivity, especially in rural areas. Lack of service providers that understand and cater to the sector.
- **Resistance to change.** Risks around data privacy, compliance, governance and security hamper change. Stakeholders and client groups often lack digital skills and prefer in-person services.

In order to support digitalisation in the community and voluntary sector, the following **enablers** were identified as essential:

- **Funding**. Grants and funding specifically for digital infrastructure, devices and training. Funding for access to digitalisation consultancy. Discounted access to software and services.
- **Access**. Decent internet access regardless of location or finances. Access to and awareness of open-source technologies.

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[8] https://www.accesseurope.ie/blog/digitial-transformation-learnings-from-irish-civil-society

- **Training and capacity building.** Templates and tools to support digital strategy development. Case studies of successful digitalisation projects. Research digital skills and training needs analysis for the sector.

## Recommendations

Based on learnings from the project, The Wheel recommends the following cross-sectoral actions to support digitalisation in the sector:

### ENHANCE DIGITAL SKILLS TRAINING AND SUPPORT

- Carry out granular research that identifies digital maturity levels in the sector, identifies skills and resource gaps, barriers to digitalisation and practical solutions to bridge the emerging digital divide in the nonprofit sector.
- Develop targeted, subsidised training programs to address the identified skill gaps within the community sector, ensuring accessibility for volunteers and staff of varying ages and technological expertise.
- Ensure that training is tailored to the specific contexts of workers in the sector, including the requirements for ensuring data privacy and governance, ethical use, working with groups where digital literacy is a challenge, resource constraints etc.
- Collaborate with sector experts to develop training/resources encouraging a human-centred design approach that incorporates feedback from diverse stakeholders, including people with disabilities, to ensure digital platforms meet varied needs.
- Create straightforward and easy-to-understand training resources that address media literacy and basic digital skills, helping participants overcome resistance and build confidence.

### SECURE DEDICATED FUNDING FOR DIGITAL INITIATIVES

- Secure targeted funding specific to digitalisation needs, covering consultancy, software, devices, and ongoing maintenance, equivalent to the levels of funding available to other sectors for digital transformation (e.g. Enterprise Ireland Digital Voucher scheme, Cybersecurity scheme etc.).
- Build on existing and develop new partnerships with technology companies to provide discounted or free access to essential digital tools and services, easing the financial burden on community organisations.

### IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESS

- Work with local and national stakeholders to enhance internet connectivity, especially in rural and underserved areas, ensuring reliable digital participation.
- Advocate for policy measures that address infrastructure gaps and promote equal access to high quality internet services.

### FOSTER COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

- Create networks and partnerships within the sector to share successful case studies, templates, and best practices related to digitalisation.
- Promote peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange to empower organisations to navigate their digital transformation journeys collectively.

## Consultation Questions

### What should Ireland's overall vision for an updated Digital & AI Strategy to 2030 be?

Aligned with the ambition of the Digital Inclusion Roadmap[9] it is crucial that Ireland's overall vision for Digital and AI places a furthest behind first approach at the heart of all actions. Given the pace of change and widespread impact of digitalization and AI adoption, failing to address the widening digital divide across society will lead to a breakdown in social cohesion, educational progression and economic advancement.

As a corollary, we also advocate for no sector to be left behind in the digital and AI revolution – however, as evidenced above, the community and voluntary sector is currently in danger of falling by the wayside. Targeted, sustainably resourced measures must be taken in order to ensure that the sustainability of the sector and the communities it serves are not put at risk by falling further behind.

It is vital that social inequities are not replicated or exacerbated through digital transformation and AI adoption, especially in the digitisation of public and essential services. Government must take an active role in this through regulation, support for civil society engagement with digital platforms and digital rights agenda, and the incentivisation of digital innovation that serves society and our fundamental values. Citizens' voices and civil society should be central in the development and deployment of digital technologies. We are advocating for a cross-sectoral dialogue and a whole-of-society approach to the development of policy in this area.

Given the serious concerns around the potential energy consumption, environmental degradation and social impacts of AI technologies, these factors must be given considerable weight when developing AI policy.

In this context, a risk-based, human-rights-focused approach to AI and digital adoption is preferable. The Government should enact and resource the provisions of the EU AI Act in order to create a safe, fair, ethical AI environment.

### In developing its domestic AI capabilities, what areas should Ireland focus on? Identify top 5 key AI actions/enablers the Government should prioritise to accelerate its AI ambitions.

1. Establish a dialogue with civil society to ensure that a fair, ethical and equitable approach to AI developments is prioritised and that all citizens, including those from marginalised groups, have the opportunity to shape policy.
2. Provide clear regulations and guidelines for AI technology companies and users across all sectors to ensure that confidence in AI technology and its safety is provided for organisations that wish to use it in their operations and services.

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[9] https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/digital-for-good-irelands-digital-inclusion-roadmap/

3. Fund targeted community and voluntary sector training that supports the adoption of AI technologies. Without such targeted upskilling, organisations will lack the confidence and competence to engage with AI effectively and safely.

4. Establish and fund partnership with community and voluntary sector organisations, in particular, with sectors that work with communities already excluded by the digital divide and other social and economic barriers, such as community and adult education providers, disability organisations, youth organisations etc. Tackling digital literacy issues, digital access barriers and digital safety issues should be a priority to reach those furthest away from digital and AI technologies currently.

5. Establish monitoring mechanisms to track AI digital inclusion and identify groups at risk of exclusion, with impact and outcome reporting.


**Please suggest 5 tangible priority actions the Strategy could include.**

1. Invest in research into digital maturity within the community and voluntary sector to identify needs, challenges and opportunities and develop an associated digital strategy for the sector with sufficient funding to achieve its vision.

2. Provide ring-fenced multi-annual digitalisation funding for community and voluntary sector organisations to cover areas such as digital audits, digital transformation consultancy, training, software and hardware purchasing and cybersecurity measures. This would put the sector on an equal footing with other sectors such as SMEs and help fulfil the commitment in the Programme for Government 2025: "Reform funding eligibility for digital grants and consultancy to ensure it is simplified and accessible."[10]

3. A risk assessment to weigh the social and environmental impacts of AI adoption and further digitalisation of public services in order to manage the negative and positive impacts.

4. Agree a definition of basic digital skills based on the European Digital Competence Framework, to be embedded across the entire education and lifelong learning system. Fund basic digital literacy skills training nationwide, delivered in partnership with the community and voluntary sector and targeting those at most risk of exclusion.

5. Create regional "digital hubs" operated by trusted community organisations where people can access support, information, digital hardware and learning opportunities.


**Given Ireland's ambition as a European regulatory hub, and centre of excellence, what opportunities do you see to improve our digital regulatory framework?**

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[10] https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf

- Provide sufficient additional resources to the agencies in Ireland that will monitor AI risk and regulation – including the nine public bodies already identified as supervising fundamental rights in the context of the EU AI Act.
- Carry out targeted impact assessments to ensure that regulations take into account the needs and views of those most at risk of exclusion, or further marginalisation, as a result of the adoption or misuse of digital tools and AI.
- Establish monitoring mechanisms to track digital inclusion and identify groups at risk of exclusion or disadvantage, with impact and outcome reporting.
- Under the AI Act, establish an advisory board, which includes those most affected by the risks and harms of digitalisation and AI adoption, including community and voluntary sector organisations that work in these communities and have fundamental rights expertise.

**Please include any suggestions you have to ensure the strategy is inclusive and of value across society.**

- The strategy should be co-produced with the different relevant sectors, including the community and voluntary sector, at the different stages: design, implementation, assessment. See the Government's [Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership Working with the Community and Voluntary Sector](.)[11]
- Work with stakeholders across government and society, including the community and voluntary sector, to ensure that the actions and ambitions of the Digital For Good roadmap are being achieved. An implementation steering group should be set up to review, on a regular basis, progress made towards the completion of the strategy.
- Ensure that the voices of communities most impacted by digital exclusion and disadvantage are represented in all policy making fora related to digital and AI.
- Resource a nationwide awareness campaign to promote digitalisation led by people from groups at risk of exclusion. [12]
- Resource organisations who support those at risk of exclusion to advocate for and contribute towards fairer and ethical digital and AI transformation.
- Provide training and targeted support in digital and AI so that everyone is informed and has access to information to make informed and empowered decisions about digital and AI engagement.
- Provide regulatory certainty and guardrails so that organisations who work with most vulnerable groups across society can be assured that AI and digital tools are safe, fair and ethical.
- Ensure all public digital services comply fully with accessibility standards (for example, screen reader compatibility, plain language, "easy-to-read" use etc.) A Universal Design approach to the design and delivery of digital public services should

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[11] [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/values-and-principles.pdf](.) prepared by the Department of Rural and Community Development.
[12] A good example for this can be seen here with the Decision Support Service and its campaign centred around champions: [Meet Our Champions | Decision Support Service](.)

be undertaken, in line with the [Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach](#) [13]

- Involve representatives from marginalised communities and civil society organisations in the design and evaluation of digital policies and public services.
- Establish monitoring mechanisms to track digital inclusion and identify groups at risk of exclusion, with impact and outcome reporting.

**Any other relevant feedback/suggestions?**

A strong, coherent strategy with meaningful actions that can be measured is central to ensuring the effective delivery of supports and services by both the state and the sector.

We recommend including one action point on ensuring that regular measurement and review of the Strategy takes place. This should also include reference to other relevant strategies and cross-departmental objectives. One approach could be to link measurement of the Strategy to Government's Wellbeing Framework Indicators.

The Wheel recommends aligning the community and voluntary (CV) sector with existing Harnessing Digital targets:

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|---|---|
| **80% of adults with basis digital skills by 2023** | CV sector-wide basic digital literacy programmes for staff, volunteers, and boards.<br><br>CV sector organisations as key catalyst and delivery partner for funded digital literacy programmes in communities across Ireland. |
| **90% of SMEs with basic digital intensity by 2030** | Provide equitable access for CV sector organisations to targeted digitalisation funding, similar to SME digitalisation supports (Grow Digital Voucher, Digital Transition Fund, Cybersecurity etc.) |
| **Increase graduates/ apprentices in higher-level digital skills** | Pilot CV sector focused micro-credentials in AI, data analytics, and cybersecurity.<br><br>Include digital modules in proposed Nonprofit Organisational Skills Apprenticeship |
| **SME Upskilling Incentive Scheme** | Ensure CV sector organisations have equitable access to proposed Upskilling Incentivisation Scheme |
| **€85m digital transition fund** | Support CVSE digital transformation projects (e.g. CRM, AI, E-Comm etc.) with targeted fund. |

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[13] https://www.nala.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NALA-response-to-Digital-for-Good-April-2023.pdf

## Conclusion

The community and voluntary sector is well placed to contribute to the government's ambitions in Harnessing Digital and the EU's Digital Decade goals. However, as we reach the end of 2025, we are now at a crucial juncture where a growing digital divide threatens not only the sustainability of the community and voluntary sector but also critical aspects of our social fabric. The years ahead will require complex questions to be addressed around ethical, inclusive and environmentally sustainable adoption of digital and AI tools. The community and voluntary sector can be a key contributor to this crucial national conversation – but the sector will need to be supported to play its part.

**ENDS**
**For further information, please contact Mairead O'Connor, Senior Sector Skills Policy Manager, The Wheel (_mairead@wheel.ie_)**

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.

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