



Stronger Charities.
Stronger Communities.

THE WHEEL'S SUBMISSION TO THE STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION ON A NEW STRATEGY TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN IRELAND

August 2025

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About the Charity, Community and Voluntary 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.¹

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.

¹ Charities Regulator, Report on the Social and Economic Impact of Charities in Ireland, 2023

Successor to the 2019-2024 Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector

Summary of The Wheel's key recommendations for the new Strategy:

- A core concern with the current strategy is that many of its objectives and actions proved difficult to measure. Tangible, measurable progress indicators should be a key part of the new strategy.
- The strategy should be reviewed by a wide range of stakeholders rather than the only cross-sectoral group members to give an opportunity for a meaningful monitoring process.
- The new Strategy will require more effective cross-Government implementation in order to be successful. It should be regarded as a whole-of-Government strategy rather than a Departmental strategy at both the adoption and implementation stages.
- Sustainable funding and equitable pay are essential to the future of the community and voluntary sector in Ireland and should be included in the new Strategy and visible at all levels.
- Social cohesion should be added as an important objective that has risen in prominence since the development of the last Strategy.
- There should be stronger recognition of the role played by the community and voluntary sector in providing public services, supports and infrastructure within communities.

A. The Vision

The vision of the current strategy was to create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, empowered and self-determining communities that support the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members.

Is this vision still valid? Do you have any suggested changes to the vision?

The development of a dedicated strategy for the community and voluntary sector was an important step towards improved partnership working with the State that was welcomed by The Wheel and the wider sector. We contributed to its development, as did many of our members. We welcome this opportunity to assess the successes and limitations of the current strategy and to develop an improved strategy for the coming years.

The community and voluntary sector plays an essential role in the economy and in society, supporting the most vulnerable, providing essential services and infrastructure, and responding to national crises. **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.** An effective strategy should be followed by a clear implementation plan with mechanisms for regular review.

Since the inception of the last strategy, the national and global political context has changed significantly. Events such as Covid 19, the invasion of Ukraine resulting in a sudden increase in people seeking refuge in Ireland, the dual cost-of-living and housing crises and the ongoing impact of climate change, such as

storm Eowyn have demonstrated how quickly our sector can respond to emergency needs, filling the gaps in infrastructure and services.

As well as responding in a crisis, these organisations provide vital daily services and supports to people across Ireland and across society, particularly in areas such as housing, health and social care, and disability.

Despite positive progress in many areas, Ireland has not escaped the international trend towards political polarisation, 'othering' in public discourse and an increase in both hate crime and hate speech, compounded by online misinformation. Community development, anti-racism and advocacy organisations across the sector have long worked at the forefront of addressing these issues. The community and voluntary sector will continue to play a key role in addressing tensions through collective leadership, strategic community development, and dialogue. **It is important that the issue of social cohesion appears in the vision statement of the new strategy to acknowledge this a growing challenge and a priority for Government.**

We are also seeing a global trend towards the shrinking of civic space and threats to advocacy organisations. It is vital that the new strategy acknowledges this and that Government pledges to protect civil society organisations and civic space more widely.

Despite increased expectations on community and voluntary organisations, long-term investment seldom matches this reliance on the 'hidden infrastructure' of the sector. The Programme for Government made strong commitments around improving cross-governmental working and this will be essential to any new strategy for the sector. There should be a renewed focus on a whole-of-government approach to supporting the community and voluntary sector in a wide range of policy areas, such as housing, health, social cohesion, youth and young people, environmental action and many more. **This should be underpinned by sustainable, multiannual funding models that provide for the full cost of the services being delivered.** While a strategy for the sector is important, it should be noted that partnership working and inclusion of community and voluntary organisation at policy level needs to be extended beyond the Department of Rural and Community Development.

In relation to the skills agenda, The OECD's 2023 review of the National Skills Strategy identifies the sector as a major contributor to Ireland's economic and social prosperity, yet largely excludes it from key workforce supports. Without targeted action, organisations risk falling behind in digital capacity, green transition readiness, and leadership succession, with knock-on effects for communities nationwide.

We believe that the vision of the new Five-Year Strategy for the Community and Voluntary Sector should be **'A vibrant, autonomous, adequately funded and sustainable community and voluntary sector that can collaborate and partner with communities, the State and its agencies to create inclusive, resilient and empowered communities that promote the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members and foster a sense of belonging.'**

B. The Mission

What the strategy aims to achieve

The previous strategy identified six high level ambitions to be attained:

- A thriving community and voluntary sector
- A strengthened partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector
- Community supports underpinned by societal value and community need
- Resilient communities empowered to meet emerging challenges
- Empowered communities informing and shaping responses to their needs
- A thriving volunteering culture

Taking account of the current environment, challenges and priorities for the C&V sector, do these six high level ambitions still reflect the priority for the sector, do you propose any amendments or additional ambitions be included in the new strategy?

The ambitions included in the previous strategy reflect a strong understanding of the needs of the community and voluntary sector, and those they serve. However, in reviewing the impact of the strategy, we recommend **strengthening some of the terminology used and linking them to more tangible, concrete objectives**. We also recommend some additional ambitions that reflect the changing context detailed above.

1. **A 'thriving' community and voluntary sector that is fully and sustainably resourced, with fair systems of pay.** For communities to thrive, Government should provide sustainable and equitable funding for community and voluntary organisations delivering public services contracted by the State. We recommend defining 'thriving' in this way under the first high-level ambition, specifying the need for sustainable funding and equitable pay for the sector.

In The Wheel's recent member survey, almost half of respondents were unsure if they would have sufficient funding with what they currently get to provide their existing supports or services in 2025.² Retention and recruitment of staff are also a significant issue for the sector and there is a need for immediate State funding to address the two-tier system of pay for organisations delivering public services on behalf of the State. A report from 2023 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. While the recent Workplace Relations Commission agreement has been welcomed by the Sector and should progressively address the pay gaps mentioned above, it only includes within its scope Section 39/56/10/40 organisations operating through contracts. Organisations funded through other funding streams with other Departments are not included in this

² The Wheel, Members' Policy Survey, 2025

agreement which will create a two-tier system with employees impacted by the WRC agreement and employees outside its scope (sometimes working in the same service).

In addition, the lack of secure multi-annual funding across the sector generates insecurity and a lack of visibility for many organisations and services who are providing crucial support to people who are relying on them.

- 2. Partnership working across Government.** The development of the DRCD Partnership Principles was a significant step and reflects important values for the State and the sector. However, it is vital that these principles are adopted across Government and reflected in tangible ways through strategies, funding agreements and policymaking processes of multiple departments and state agencies.

The Department of Rural Community Development should make it clear in this Strategy that the work of organisations in the sector spans a broad range of departments and agencies and should seek increased coherence in areas such as multi-annual funding, Service-Level Agreements and reporting requirements. Currently, for example, DRCD acknowledges the benefits of multi-annual funding, while the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality do not. In a similar manner, reporting and compliance requirements vary significantly from one department to another.

- 3. Protecting the values of non-profit service provision and fostering collaboration through shared spaces.** Additionally, areas such as social care, older people and disability are seeing increased privatisation of services, resulting in a well-documented decline in care standards and increasing profits for private providers. We believe that one of the high-level objectives in the new strategy should contain an explicit commitment to supporting the not-for-profit model when providing essential services for vulnerable communities.

Many organisations have also expressed that the current funding system across Government creates competition between community and voluntary service providers, rather than encouraging collaborative working in the interest of communities using those services. Sector-led collaborative initiatives and spaces which foster peer networking and learning, such as the non-profit sector apprenticeship, help to build a shared understanding of the unique benefits of non-profit and community-led approaches to service delivery. These should be recognised within the new Strategy.

Moreover, non-pay issues such as pension auto-enrolment, rising costs around insurance premiums and energy, access to workforce development opportunities, as well as the cost-of-living should also be addressed as they are severely impeding organisations delivering services.

- 4. Including social cohesion and supporting community and voluntary organisations to continue doing vital work in this area.** As detailed in the first section of this submission, the issue of social cohesion within communities has risen in importance in the years since the last strategy was developed. We recommend including an explicit commitment in the high-level ambitions of the next strategy to tackling misinformation and hate, and to supporting those organisations working on social cohesion and dialogue initiatives within communities.
- 5. Protecting civic space and the right to advocate.** Similarly, threats to civil society have become a key issue at global and national level. A recent report by Civil Society Europe noted that "Threats to the freedom of association in 2024 were reported in most Member States" including Ireland, and that civil society and human right defenders are noted as having been subject to "online and media harassment. The report also noted a restriction to freedom of assembly and a lack of genuine public consultation and public engagement."³ The Strategy provides an important opportunity for Government to commit to protecting civil society organisations as part of a healthy democracy.
- 6. Respecting the autonomy and expertise of the community and voluntary sector.** Building 'empowered' and 'resilient' communities that inform and shape responses to their needs requires support for the autonomy and expertise of organisations that work on the ground in communities. These organisations, both local groups and national charities, provide key insights into the needs and priorities of those they support. They respond and adapt to need every day. It is vital that the constraints attached to funding, reporting and regulation requirements support this work and do not pull organisations away from the needs of the populations they serve.

We recommend that the new Strategy include a reference to trust in the community and voluntary sector, and a commitment to protecting autonomy and the right to advocate for the needs of those they support and on the issues they work on. It is also important that services and funding structures are co-designed and co-created with the voluntary organisations who will provide them. This ensures that programmes properly reflect need.

³ Civil Society Europe, Joint Civil Society Contribution on Civic Space to the 2025 Annual Rule of Law Report. Available [here](#).

C. Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives which define the scope of the previous strategy were:

- Strengthen and develop participative approaches to the development of public policy and programming underpinned by an autonomous community and voluntary infrastructure
- Support and facilitate communities to participate in community development and local development
- Develop and strengthen processes and mechanisms to secure meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation in local, regional and national decision-making structures, particularly by non-engaging and marginalised communities and their representative organisations
- Develop capacity of organisations supporting communities to participate in community development and local development, with a specific focus on marginalised communities
- Supporting commitments in Our Public Service 2020, develop the strategic and operational capacity of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), including in coordinating, monitoring and supporting community development and local development
- Strengthen and build understanding and capacity to meet Public Sector Duty obligations in local government and community and voluntary organisations
- Supporting commitments in Our Public Service 2020, continue to develop and strengthen Public Participation Networks as the primary mechanism for communities to engage with local government decision-making
- Strengthen and build understanding and capacity to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan
- Strengthen the Local Economic and Community Plan process, enhancing community participation in the development and implementation of plans and securing more effective collaboration and partnership working nationally, regionally and locally.
- Support, develop and enhance capacity in the local government sector in community development and local development
- Support community development and local development to engage with Climate Change adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Which of these strategic objectives do you consider to be most relevant and are there further objectives that should be considered?

While the 11 strategic objectives contain many positive ambitions, there are too many and they lack specificity and detail. We recommend reducing the number of strategic objectives, updating some terminology used including more specific language.

1. **Make tangible commitments to develop the capacity of the community and voluntary sector through sustainable funding and addressing recruitment and retention issues.** Strategic objective four is also too vague and makes it difficult to monitor any kind of implementation or effectiveness. If community and voluntary organisations are to support communities, they must be fully resourced. Many organisations, and particularly those in the community development sector mentioned in the previous objectives, suffered significant funding cuts in 2008 that have not been restored. The current Strategy contains no specific mention of funding for the sector, which is a crucial part of achieving any meaningful change for communities going forward.
2. **Ensure cross-Governmental collaboration in the implementation of the Strategy:** The current Strategy contains positive commitments for the Department around the Public Sector Duty and Our Public Service 2020. As detailed above, it is vital to the successful implementation of this Strategy that its objectives extend to other government departments. A meaningful and effective Strategy for communities cannot exist without buy-in from departments such as Health, Housing, DCED etc.
3. **Co-design and community-led engagement processes.** Participation is important, but the word is too broad. Some communities feel that engagement with the State can often feel perfunctory and rushed. Participation does not equal influence and the absence of perceived impact or follow up on a survey/consultation can leave people disempowered, frustrated and reluctant to engage in future.

We recommend specifying a commitment to co-design and community-led engagement processes in order to provide truly meaningful engagement and to capture the expertise of communities and community organisations. This should extend to commitments to PPNs and LCDCs. It is essential that marginalised groups in particular are able to have real influence over policies that affect them, and can hold those in power accountable if objectives are not achieved. To this end, the first three objectives could be merged into one that captures this commitment.

4. **Supporting recruitment and retention in the sector.** Developing the capacity of the sector also necessitates addressing the urgent recruitment and retention crisis that many community and voluntary organisations are experiencing. The State has long relied on the commitment and dedication of workers in the community and voluntary sector. In our recent member survey, one third of respondents said they were currently unable to sufficiently recruit and retain staff. We recommend that this objective also make specific reference to the almost 300,000 people who work in community and voluntary organisations in Ireland, as well as the 1 million volunteers. Acknowledging the value of the work that they do means fair pay and conditions, including training and development.

In most instances, community and voluntary sector employers do not have the freedom to use grant funding for workforce development, nor the unrestricted income to finance their own upskilling programmes. Many of the state's primary workforce training and development initiatives are not readily accessible to sector organisations and their workers.

The OECD review of the National Skills Strategy, published in 2023, identifies the community and voluntary sector as a significant stakeholder in the national skills agenda but with a need for concerted efforts to ensure that the sector gets access to the necessary workforce development opportunities.

"These organisations [in the CV sector] are acknowledged as making a vital contribution to Ireland's economic and social prosperity and are increasingly deploying new technologies and creative approaches to address societal and environment challenges. However, many programmes listed [elsewhere in the report] are not available to charities or not-for-profit organisations . . . Addressing these unmet needs should be considered a priority in Ireland."⁴

In the lifetime of the new Strategy we will be navigating unprecedented disruptive change as a result of digital technologies and AI. This will provide huge challenges and opportunities to community and voluntary organisations and the communities they serve. In order to meet this moment, the community and voluntary sector workforce will need targeted upskilling and organisations will need tailored support to adapt. At present, given the lack of sector-focused supports in this area, there is a grave risk of organisations and their staff and volunteers falling further behind. This will have detrimental impacts on the communities served and the services delivered.

5. **Improving social cohesion within our communities.** As detailed above, social cohesion should be included as a specific objective in the new Strategy, to recognise its growing importance in communities. The CSO's Survey on Income and Living (SILC) data demonstrates increasing inequality in Ireland, exacerbated by the dual housing and cost-of-living crises.⁵ Marginalised communities that are served by the community and voluntary sector are the most impacted by this. As well as properly resourcing those organisations working on the ground, the Strategy should include the need for relevant training at departmental and local government level, to meaningfully serve all people that make up communities, but particularly marginalised communities whose needs are not currently being met.
6. **Addressing climate breakdown through active citizenship.** We recommend rewriting the climate objectives to be clearer and more specific, focusing less on behaviour change and more on active citizenship. "To empower and resource communities to be actively engaged in the policy-making and decision-making to eliminate climate-changing pollution and build community and societal resilience to the impacts of climate breakdown."

⁴ OECD National Skills Strategy, 2023

⁵ CSO, SILC 2024

D. Strategic Actions

The previous strategy included 43 strategic actions/commitments, summarised here:

- **Develop processes for meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation of all communities in decisions that affect them**
- **Develop capacity in community and voluntary organisations to support communities**
- **Support education and training opportunities for community workers, volunteers in community organisations and voluntary board members**
- **Ensure local decision-making and participatory structures are fit for purpose (e.g. PPNs, LCDs)**
- **Introduce a sustainable funding model for the community and voluntary sector**
- **Develop capacity at all levels to deliver key policy initiatives including UN SDGs, Climate Action and Public Sector Duty**

Considering the current context, challenges and opportunities, what specific strategic actions/commitments do you consider could be included in the new strategy?

Many of the actions contained in the current strategy are positive but were not fully delivered or implemented. Some that were delivered were limited to DRCD, which means that they were not far-reaching enough to impact communities. Examples of this include the establishment of multi annual funding models and funding services on a full-cost-recovery basis. Cross-departmental ownership of this strategy is key to ensuring that more of its actions are delivered.

Actions need to be more easily measurable in order to assess progress for all stakeholders. There are many examples of this within Government, such as the scoreboard system used in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion. Actions should be clearer and link directly to implementation measures.

1. **Define the ‘consultation, inclusion and participation’ process that will be utilised.** This is important in ensuring that communities are really enabled to influence policies that impact them and that advocacy organisations do not reach consultation fatigue.
2. **Include a specific action on measurement and review of the Strategy.** 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.

- 3. Include more detailed and specific actions on sustainable funding and pay equity for the community and voluntary sector.** We recommend including a dedicated action on ensuring fair and equitable pay for community and voluntary workers providing services on behalf of the State. This should include recognition of the value of community and voluntary staff working to support communities. to avoid tiering of staff within organisations (impacted by WRC agreement or not).
- Retain and further develop the action on multi-annual funding and its importance for the sector to ensure effective planning, sustainability of services and retention of staff.
 - Improving access to EU funds for community and voluntary organisations, particularly those providing services to those most marginalised. More detailed recommendations on match-funding and ring-fenced funding can be found in our pre-Budget submission.
 - Conduct an audit of funding sources for community and voluntary organisation across different departments and agencies to identify gaps in funding provision and opportunities to streamline compliance and reporting requirements.
 - Supporting access to funding for organisations that do not receive funding already.
 - Committing to the principles of commissioning services from not-for-profit organisations.
 - Promoting collaboration across funded organisations by developing shared spaces for joined-up thinking.
- 4. Appropriate training for the community and voluntary sector.** This should be ringfenced within funding streams. The three training needs reports produced by DRCD/Pobal as part of the implementation of the original Strategy demonstrated evidence of the need for:
- ring-fenced, multiannual funding for training included in grant funding
 - access to funding schemes specifically designed to support training
 - training that is tailored to sectoral, organisational and community needs and contexts
 - support for Training Needs Analysis at local, organisational and board levels
 - clearer signposting to available training
- The new strategy must address these recommendations with specific, measurable and timely actions.
- 5. Include tangible action/s on cross-departmental collaboration.** This is essential to achieving any meaningful change for communities through the Strategy. The Values and Principles developed by DRCD is a strong document and its adoption across Government should continue to be promoted. Communities do not exist in a vacuum and outcomes are intrinsically linked to healthcare, housing etc.
- 6. Stronger focus on social cohesion.** As detailed above, we recommend a specific action on addressing social cohesion within communities, tackling misinformation and hate associated with the rise of the far right. It is vital that Ireland learns from its European neighbours and acts to protect and value all those living in communities. This should also include acknowledgement of the increasing risks faced by community workers and safety measures to guarantee their protection.

7. **Include an action for ongoing support for the We Act campaign, enabling organisations to promote the work of the sector and tell positive stories.** Communicating the work of the sector and telling the stories of those people that rely on its services is important especially in the context of shrinking civic space across Europe and increasing anti-NGO sentiment resulting from rise of the far right. We recommend continued support of We Act and projects that communicate the work that goes on in communities and counters harmful narratives, especially in relation to marginalised communities.

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



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The Wheel
48 Fleet Street Dublin 2
D02 T883
(01) 454 8727
info@Wheel.ie
www.wheel.ie
Charity Number: 20040963
CHY Number: 13288
Company Number: 302282