



**the
wheel**

Stronger Charities.
Stronger Communities.

THE WHEEL'S SUBMISSION ON OUR RURAL FUTURE POLICY 2026–2031

December 2025

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About the Community and Voluntary Sector

The community, voluntary, charity, and social enterprise sector is involved in every community in rural Ireland, 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. The sector prides itself on being responsive to the needs of the people and communities served, and is flexible and innovative in its work.

The breadth of the community and voluntary sector in Ireland is far reaching. In addition to the delivery of vital services outlined above, they are at the forefront of the work to address the climate crisis and to advocate for human rights.

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.

About The Wheel

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.

Feedback on Section 1: Progress so far

We welcome the opportunity to feed into the public consultation on *Our Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy*.

Since the last rural policy was published, 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 rural areas of 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.

We acknowledge the progress that has been made in areas such as digital connectivity, the investment in rural enterprise, in the infrastructure for upskilling, rural transport and in meeting our climate and sustainability targets in rural areas.

Yet significant challenges remain. These include major societal issues such as social cohesion, climate resilience and the future of rural communities in Ireland.

Feedback on Section 2: A new phase

We welcome the inclusive language and broad scope of the vision statement, and suggest a couple of additions:

Where it says 'a vision rooted in a deep respect for, and engagement with, our language, culture, and heritage', we recommend inserting 'natural environment' after culture. This is important to tie the statement in with pillar four of the new policy.

We also recommend inserting the word 'welcoming' after 'sustainable' in the line 'a place where people can live, learn and work in connected, sustainable and vibrant places'. **It is important that the issue of social cohesion and recent threats to people seeking safety in Ireland and new communities is referenced in the vision statement of the new strategy, acknowledging that this a growing challenge and a priority for Government.**

Feedback on Section 3: The core pillars

Pillar 1. Thriving rural places

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 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. We welcome the reference in the consultation paper for 'improved access to essential services such as healthcare, childcare, disability services, and education.'

Despite increased expectations on community and voluntary organisations, long-term investment seldom matches this reliance on the ‘hidden infrastructure’ of the sector. We believe that significant investment is needed to enable the community and voluntary organisations to continue providing these services in a sustainable way.

Services in rural communities, such as social care, and services for older people and disabled people, are being increasingly privatised, resulting in a well-documented decline in care standards and increasing profits for private providers. **We believe that the new policy should contain an explicit commitment to supporting the not-for-profit model when providing essential services for vulnerable rural communities.**

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.**

For rural communities to thrive, the community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises that support them need to be fully and sustainably resourced, with sustainable funding and equitable pay for the sector. 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. Specifically, the Government should provide sustainable and equitable funding for community and voluntary organisations delivering public services contracted by the State.

The current funding system across Government creates competition between community and voluntary service providers, rather than encouraging collaborative working in the interest of rural communities using those services. Sector-led collaborative initiatives and spaces which foster peer networking and learning help to build a shared understanding of the unique benefits of community-led approaches to service delivery in rural areas.

The *Programme for Government* made extensive reference to cross-Government working and ending siloes within Government. Partnership working across Government as well as with the community and voluntary sector at policy level is essential to build a thriving rural Ireland.

This should be underpinned by policy coherence within and across Government departments, with strategies such as *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2026–2030: the five-year strategy for the community and voluntary sector*, as well as the *Trading for Impact* social enterprise policy and the new *National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals*. It is also essential that major nationwide strategies on housing, health, children and youth, climate, and infrastructure plans such as regionalization, are integrated into this strategy. In addition, any strategy on rural communities should be integrated with policies and strategies that address equality, such as the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy* and the *National Action Plan Against Racism*, as well as the first *National Community Safety Strategy* being developed by the Department of Justice.

Building ‘empowered’ and ‘resilient’ rural 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. 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 communities they serve.

We recommend the inclusion of a dedicated measure to enhance, support and develop the communications effectiveness of community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises in rural areas to underpin their role in maintaining and developing social capital.

Pillar 2. A strong and diverse rural economy

We welcome the recognition in the consultation paper of the important role of social enterprises in building strong rural economies, particularly their role in creating local jobs while delivering wider social and environmental benefits. **Based on the census of social enterprise carried out by DRCDG in 2023, 43% of the 4,335 social enterprises in Ireland are distributed across rural Ireland.**

We also welcome the acknowledgement of the need for access to skills, training, digital connectivity and flexible work for rural enterprises, including social enterprises, to realise their potential. 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 rural communities nationwide.**

In the lifetime of the new policy, 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 in rural areas and the communities they serve. At present, given the lack of sector-focused supports in this area, there is a grave risk of organisations, their staff and volunteers falling further behind. This will have detrimental impacts on the communities served and the services delivered. In order to meet this moment, the community and voluntary sector workforce will need targeted upskilling and organisations will need tailored support to adapt.

The vast majority of organisations that apply the social enterprise approach are charities, so it will be very important that future initiatives relating to innovation and connected communities are inclusive and support the continuum of all community and voluntary organisations that apply social enterprise principles to a part of, or all of, their work.

While the consultations to date have surfaced the importance of enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of rural enterprises, including social enterprises, and enabling them to adapt, grow and thrive, **further work is needed to ensure that Local**

Enterprise Offices are resourced and committed to providing these supports to rural social enterprises in every Local Authority area.

Pillar 3: Resilient rural communities

It is good to see in the consultation paper the recognition of the importance of being inclusive of people with disabilities, new arrivals, minority and marginalised groups, the LGBTQI+ community, and people across all generations, and that they are welcomed and supported to participate fully in local life.

However, 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. 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. Marginalised communities that are served by the community and voluntary sector are the most impacted by this.

Community and voluntary organisations will continue to play a key role in addressing tensions through collective leadership, strategic community development, and dialogue. **We recommend the inclusion of an explicit commitment in the policy to tackling misinformation and hate, and to supporting those organisations working on social cohesion and dialogue initiatives within communities.**

As well as properly resourcing those organisations working on the ground, the policy should address the need for relevant training at departmental and local government level, to meaningfully serve all people that make up communities, but particularly marginalised rural communities whose needs are not currently being met.

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 rural communities using those services. Sector-led collaborative initiatives and spaces which foster peer networking and learning, such as the non-profit sector apprenticeship model, help to build a shared understanding of the unique benefits of non-profit and community-led approaches to service delivery and should be recognised in the new policy.

We welcome the acknowledgment in the consultation paper of the importance of local groups for sustaining rural Ireland and providing spaces for social connection. Many of the challenges identified – including recruitment and retention of staff and volunteers, the lack of sustainable funding and the administrative burden on small organisations – negatively impact the ability of organisations in rural communities to provide essential supports and services.

We recommend addressing the urgent recruitment and retention crisis by acknowledging the value of the work that organisations in rural Ireland do through fair pay and conditions, including training and development. **We would also like to see a commitment in the policy 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.

Pillar 4: A greener rural future

We welcome the prioritisation in the consultation paper to ‘enhancing the climate resilience of rural Ireland by supporting communities, economies, and infrastructure to adapt to the impacts of climate change.’ As already mentioned in this submission, the community and voluntary sector in rural Ireland has repeatedly stepped up during crises, filling infrastructure and service gaps when the country needed it most, including during recent major storms. The sustainability of the sector is crucial in addressing future crises.

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, including in rural areas, who understand the necessity of drastically changing the way our economy and societal structures work.

To effect a just transition in rural Ireland, 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 that the Government:

- supports just transition within communities
- empowers and resources rural communities to be actively engaged in the policymaking and decision-making to eliminate climate-changing pollution and build community and societal resilience to the impacts of climate breakdown
- invests 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
- invests in local action on climate and biodiversity

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