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Community and Voluntary Sector Workforce

Current and Emerging Skills Needs

Summary Report

This summary, and the associated full report, were authored by **Sheryl Lynch** and **Mairead O'Connor**, on behalf of The Wheel and supported by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, through the National Training Fund.

The authors wish to thank the following:

- The **398 organisations** that contributed to the survey and focus group activities.
- **Intermediary organisations** and **networks** that supported dissemination of research activities across the country.
- **Colleagues** who helped us to host the focus groups and gave feedback on aspects of the draft report, including Rob Brown who supported the editing of the final report.
- **The Sector Skills Subcommittee of The Wheel's Board**, that reviewed and provided guidance on the research plan, activities and report findings, as they evolved.

Please scan the QR code above to read the full report.

About The Wheel

This summary report provides an overview of key information, findings and recommendations from The Wheel's Community and Voluntary Sector Workforce: Current and Emerging Skills Needs Report. Please scan the QR code above to read the full report.

A note on terminology

The authors recognise the complexity of Ireland's nonprofit sector and the large range of important, distinct subsectors operating in this environment. This report refers to the nonprofit sector interchangeably with "the sector" and the Community and Voluntary (CV) sector. Included in this designation are community organisations, voluntary groups, charities, and social enterprises that are independently governed by unpaid volunteers and operating for the public good.

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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

The Wheel is committed to ensuring that Ireland's 1,000,000+ nonprofit workers, both paid and unpaid, and the organisations they work in, have the skills they need to deliver their varied and important missions across Irish society.

This report provides an evidence base to communicate the sector's current and emerging skills needs and contribute to the conversation on community and voluntary sector workforce development.

FOREWORD

The Wheel is delighted to publish our first major study of workforce development in the community and voluntary sector in 5 years. This landmark report follows extensive consultation over recent months with organisations, decision makers and workers, paid and unpaid, across the sector.

With a paid workforce more than 281,000 strong, serving communities all across Ireland day in and day out, and a further volunteer force of more than 1 million people, the community and voluntary sector has particular and urgent skills, training and support needs. This report brings together a comprehensive and wide-ranging set of datapoints that illuminate both the common and various opportunities, pressures and challenges experienced by this significant national human resource.

The report is our contribution to a national conversation of increasing importance and urgency around skills and lifelong learning. Given the speed of changes being wrought at all levels in our communities, workplaces, and society, research such as this is more important than ever in ensuring that those on the frontline supporting communities have the skills and support they need to respond to and resource those around them.



This report should be a touchstone at all levels, from policy makers and funders, through sectoral bodies and education providers. But we also hope that the report provides valuable insight for organisational decision makers and individual staff and volunteers as they navigate this complex space. This is the first step in a phased research programme, with further reports due on areas such as AI and digital skills in the coming weeks and months.

We are keen to work in partnership with infrastructure bodies across the sector, with colleagues in state agencies and with policy makers, government and funders in order to ensure that this key workforce is enabled to make the most effective contribution to our social and economic wellbeing in the years to come.

We wish to acknowledge the support of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in co-funding this work through the National Training Fund.

We would like to thank the 398 organisations that participated in the research activities and shared their valuable insights so that this important evidence could be presented today.



Inez Bailey
Chair of the Board of The Wheel



Pat Watt
CEO of The Wheel



Mary Doyle
Chair of the Sector Skills Subcommittee of The Wheel's Board

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

The Wheel conducted this research, which was co-funded by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) through the National Training Fund (NTF). The purpose of this sector skills and training research was to establish the current and future workforce development needs of community and voluntary sector organisations in Ireland.

The community and voluntary sector in Ireland:

employs more than **281,000** people

involves more than **1 million** volunteers

and contributes daily to the **public benefit** in every single community.

Given the sector's importance, the scarcity of sector-specific data and skills intelligence is a critical issue. This report begins to close that gap. The report builds a picture of the current priorities, gaps, and challenges around workforce development. It also explores options for development. Against a backdrop of fast-moving AI advancements and workplace transformation, the report also begins to explore behaviours and attitudes to digital and AI tools. We will further explore these specific areas in a forthcoming sister report.

This report is the result of our consulting extensively with 398 organisations of different sizes and in different locations, and directly engaging staff, volunteers, and decision makers. A mixed methods approach was used to conduct this research during the Spring and Summer of 2026.



The desk research consulted national and international databases relevant to the nonprofit workforce in Ireland, such as the CSO (Central Statistics Office), SLMRU (Skills and Labour Market Research Unit), EUROSTAT (the Statistical Office of the European Union), and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

We conducted **The Wheel's Sector Training and Skills Survey** in May 2026 and received:

400
responses







We added **four qualitative Focus Groups,** carried out in July 2026, to this quantitative data, reaching

86

people working and volunteering in Ireland's nonprofit sector.

Key national and international skills publications such as the:

- *OECD Ireland Skills Strategy Review* (2023)
- National Skills Council's *Skills Matter: Priorities to Shape Our Future Capabilities* (2025) and
- National Skills Council *From Evidence to Action: An Integrated Skills Infrastructure for an Inclusive Ireland* (2026)

inform this report.

This work also builds on two key sectoral research reports namely, Sheila Cahill's Consultation Report on the Support Needs of the Nonprofit Sector (2021) and the Investment Appraisal of Upskilling Employees in the Nonprofit Sector, carried out by Indecon (2020).

Key Findings

The key findings of this research are:

01

A culture of Workforce Learning and Development is growing but blocks to participation persist.

Our research suggests that the sector is maturing in its approach to workforce development. Most organisations across the sector are investing in training annually. A decreasing proportion of organisations are unsupportive of training requests by individual employees, when compared to research from 2020. However, the evidence also points to significant unmet demand for training across the sector:



Over **two thirds** of survey respondents did not participate in training despite wanting to.

- 68% of respondents indicated that they needed "significant upskilling" in one or more of the skills listed in our survey.
- Smaller organisations (those with fewer than 50 staff) are currently significantly less likely to invest and plan for workforce development.

Targeted investment could unlock this proven demand.

02

More sector training would positively impact culture, service delivery, and productivity, but accelerated roll-out is required.

Decision makers across the sector indicate that 89% of organisations would be negatively impacted if current levels of training are maintained over the next 4 years. This rises to 94% of larger organisations. According to respondents, the benefits of investing in the necessary workforce development measures include:

- improved staff morale
- enhanced services; and
- improved productivity

Larger organisations, in particular, saw the benefits for staffing and productivity. There is some evidence that sector organisations currently lack the resources to take full advantage of the innovation and responsiveness that upskilling can bring. Restricted income is limiting and working with vulnerable groups is complex. It is not surprising, then, that our research found a widespread emphasis on mandatory training, especially in larger organisations.

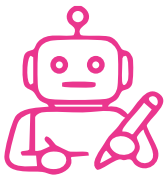
03

There is a significant Digital Skills Gap in the sector that requires upskilling at all levels.

55% of respondents need some or significant upskilling in **digital tools**, and this rises to

75%

for **AI.**



For decision makers the top two upskilling priorities are using AI and using digital tools (except AI). Alongside this, 1 in 5 decision makers also identified a skills gap in foundational skills like literacy and numeracy. Focus group participants emphasised the issue of "leap frogging over the basics" when it comes to digital skills.

Our research shows that many sector workers are using AI (65%), yet nearly one quarter of these AI users are not confident in their skills. This is particularly pronounced for those over the age of 60. Some 37% of these workers said that they are "not so" or "not at all" confident in their use of these new tools.

Further detail on the digital and AI skills of the sector will be found in our sister report, AI Use and Attitudes: Community and Voluntary Sector Skills Digest.

However, **more research** is needed to gauge the overall digital maturity and readiness of the sector.

04

There is a clear need and high demand for sector-specific upskilling.

The **top emerging skills** ranked by respondents are:

Leadership and Management	**37%**
Governance	**35%**
Fundraising	**32%**
Finance, including Compliance and Reporting	**28%**
Impact Measurement	**26%**
Advocacy	**25%**

Smaller organisations rank Fundraising over Leadership. Larger organisations rank AI skills in their top three.

In terms of current upskilling needs, when we set aside digital (85%) and AI (87%), which are the most cited among decision makers, we find the following are the key upskilling requirements:

Impact Measurement	**77%**
Leadership and Management	**71%**
Marketing and Communications	**71%**
Project Management	**69%**

Both the top emerging skills requirements and the current upskilling needs are dominated by sector-specific skillsets that require tailored culturally appropriate solutions.

05

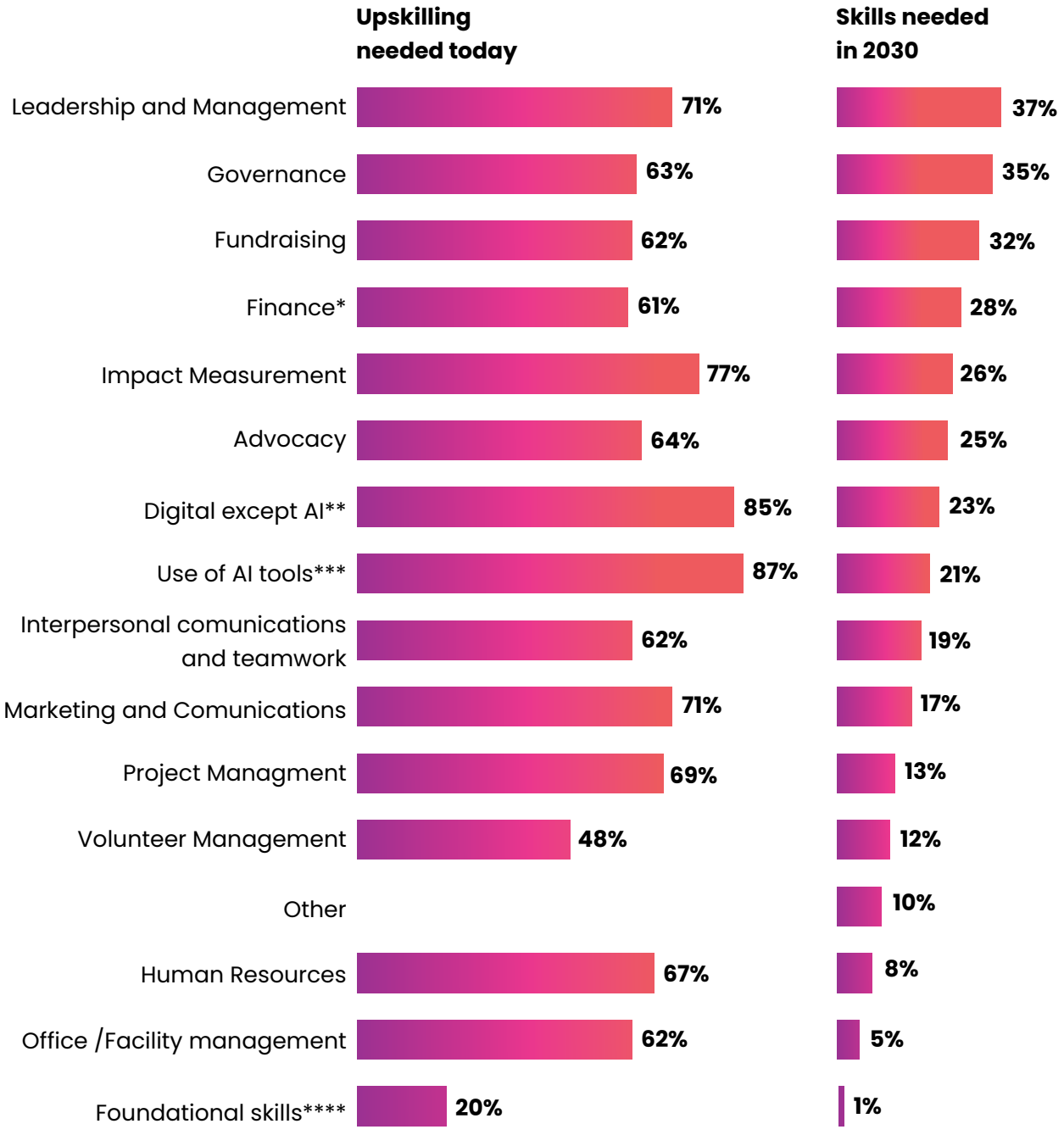
A consolidated, strategic approach to sector skills data and research is needed.

Our research has identified clear gaps in the available data relating to the CV (Community and Voluntary) sector. This is particularly clear when it comes to up-to–date and standardised national CV workforce and skills data. We need to better signpost and coordinate skills information and resources for organisations in the sector. The findings also point to a case for a shared language and approach to skills needs assessments. This is needed at both organisation and sector level, to support current intelligence gathering and benchmarking.

Comparison of current and emerging sector skills needs

The chart below illustrates sector decision makers' analysis of current and emerging skills needs. See the full report for more information.

N: 191



* Incl. compliance/reporting

** Digital literacy, digital communications, office software)

*** Chat GPT; Copilot; Gemini etc

**** Literacy; numeracy

Key Recommendations

The report concludes with a set of **19 Recommendations** which are presented under four headings:



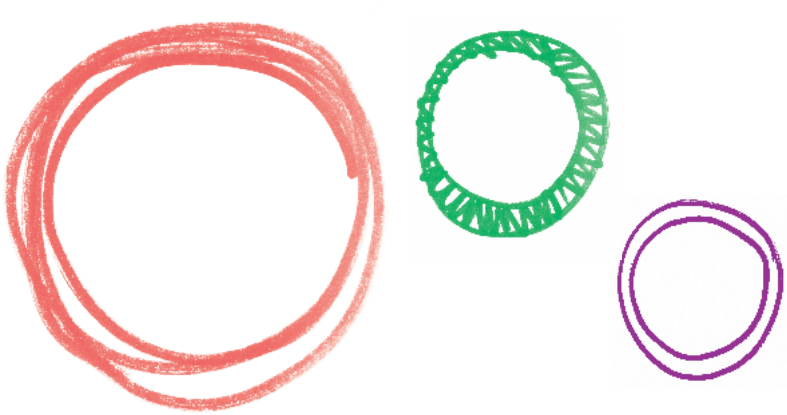
Each recommendation relates to one or more of the Key Findings:

Invest

	Recommendation	Finding
1	Increase provision, across the whole education and training system, of targeted, co-designed and low-cost upskilling measures. Ensure they are culturally appropriate for the community and voluntary sector, meeting proven unmet demand.	4.1; 4.2; 4.3; 4.4
2	Extend provision of a cost-recovery incentivisation scheme to nonprofit employers, like the Upskill SME Training Grant (Skillnet 2026b)	4.1
3	Provide funding for a tiered digital upskilling programme for the sector from foundational to advanced levels. This will support a sustainable, inclusive, and empowered sector into the future.	4.3
4	Provide strategic and ongoing investment for the development of a codesigned national database on the sector. This database must meet the needs of organisations, researchers, policymakers, and funders.	4.5

Act

	Recommendation	Finding
5	Sector specialist training providers continue to build and develop accessible, sector-specific programmes that respond to the demand identified in this study, including: • Leadership and Management; • Governance; • Fundraising; • Finance; • Impact Measurement; and, • Advocacy.	4.1; 4.4
6	Establish a sector-led Learning and Development Network to provide real-time intelligence, peer knowledge sharing, and support an emergent shared sectoral understanding of workforce development needs. These include shaping competency frameworks, sector-skills needs assessment capacity, and career pathway models.	4.1; 4.4; 4.5
7	In partnership with sector skills leaders, explore the opportunity of a "Skills Portal", like the National Enterprise Hub, that would provide up-to-date information and signposting regarding workforce development.	4.1; 4.5
8	Sector partnership to provide guidance on digital skills needs assessment within the CV sector. Work to be undertaken with sector expertise to utilise DigComp 3.0 (Cosgrave and Cachia, 2025) as a basis for shared sector understanding.	4.3
9	Continue to build capacity to involve CV sector expertise in shaping the national skills agenda. Achieve this through contributions at National Skills Council and the National Skills Observatory.	4.4; 4.5



Research



Recommendation		Finding
10	Scope the requirements and means to address the needs and constraints, of smaller organisations. Particularly where investment in, planning for, and commitment to training lags well behind larger organisations.	4.1
11	Conduct research on how best to unlock the innovation and strategic benefits of upskilling for the sector. Explore, for example, knowledge sharing and peer networks, and how to support sector organisations to make the most of these opportunities.	4.2; 4.3; 4.4
12	Conduct further research to fully assess the digital maturity of the sector. Explore the levers required to undertake a digital transformation at sector and sub-sectoral levels.	4.3
13	Assess and cater for basic digital skill competencies within the sector workforce, in tandem with AI learning.	4.3
14	Assess the risks and seize the potential opportunities of ethical AI use. Establish a consultative group to report on acceptable use for AI in the sector.	4.3

Advocate



Recommendation		Finding
15	Advocate that State funders provide an additional allocation for training and workforce development of between 0.5 - 1% of payroll allocation.	4.1;
16	Recommend and support organisations to ringfence funding for training within organisational budgets and strategies.	4.1
17	Advocate for the extension of funding, already available to private firms, to subsidise training related actions. Key models to examine should include, for example,Upskilling SMEs cost recovery programme and Digital Transformation voucher schemes.	4.1 ; 4.3
18	Advocate for a nationwide workplace literacy programme. This programme will provide flexible, accessible literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy programmes, free at the point of access.	4.1; 4.3
19	Advocate for a proactive campaign to encourage the engagement of CV sector employers with Regional Skills Forum structures.	4.1; 4.5

Conclusion

Our research shows that the CV sector has continued to develop a more engaged culture of workforce development since the last major study in 2020. Sector employers are committed to upskilling and know the value and impact investing in training will bring.

There is a clear appetite for education and training opportunities among staff and volunteers, and across a range of established sector-specific skillsets. However, we have found that smaller organisations face specific challenges when it comes to strategically planning and investing in workforce development.

While barriers to upskilling remain, new social, economic, and technical challenges have emerged since 2020. Organisations of all sizes are juggling shifts in resources and transformation at increasingly rapid rates. This includes the expanding influence of AI. As is the case at a societal level, this necessitates renewed efforts across the CV sector. These efforts are needed at all levels and among all stakeholders, to facilitate workforce learning and development as a central strategic priority and enabler.

The full report and the associated recommendations are a contribution towards this important sectoral effort and the vital national conversation on skills and lifelong learning.

Please scan the QR code above to read the full report.

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Stronger Charities.
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Regus House, Harcourt Centre, Block 4,
Harcourt Road, Dublin 2

T 883 +353 (0) 1 454 8727
info@wheel.ie
www.wheel.ie

Rotha (trading as The Wheel)
Registered Charity Number: 20040963
CHY Number: 13288
Company Number: 302282

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of charities, community groups and social enterprises.

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