

the future
is community 

General
Election
2024 **A manifesto**
for the community and voluntary sector



the
wheel

Stronger Charities.
Stronger Communities.

www.wheel.ie

This work is partly supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Pobal via the Scheme to Support National Organisations.



**An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail**
Department of Rural and
Community Development



Foreword

This is a pivotal moment in the future of Ireland. In the past four years, we have experienced huge challenges – a pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a cost-of-living crisis – which have had a profound impact on our society. In its response to these challenges, the importance of the community and voluntary sector has never been clearer.

This sector, the beating heart of our society, supports and strengthens the fabric of our communities, offering care, connection, and hope to people from all walks of life. From rural towns and villages to urban centres, community and voluntary organisations provide essential public services that enhance social inclusion, promote equality, and foster solidarity in times of need.

This manifesto is a call to action. It represents the collective voice of members of The Wheel who work tirelessly to uplift individuals and strengthen communities, often with limited resources but boundless dedication. As we approach the election, it is vital that we bring the concerns, aspirations, and values of the community and voluntary sector to the forefront of the political agenda. The wellbeing of our communities depends not only on the services provided by this sector, but also on the support and recognition it receives from policymakers to ensure its sustainability.

We seek a renewed partnership with the government – one rooted in the values of empowerment of communities, sustainable development, active participation, respect for human rights, social inclusion, and social justice. By working together, we can build an Ireland where everyone, regardless of circumstance, can lead a life of dignity, participation, and opportunity.

We are asking for tangible commitments to ensure sustainable funding, stronger infrastructure, and meaningful collaboration with the sector.

In this manifesto, we present key priorities and proposals that will empower the community and voluntary sector to continue its vital work. We believe that by supporting this sector, the next government is investing in a more just, compassionate, and resilient Ireland for all.

Together, we can shape a brighter future where no one is left behind, and every community is empowered to thrive.



Vincent Keenan

Chair,
The Wheel

A handwritten signature in white ink on a purple background, appearing to read 'Vincent Keenan'.



Ivan Cooper

CEO,
The Wheel

A handwritten signature in white ink on a purple background, appearing to read 'Ivan Cooper'.

Table of Contents

Introduction & Summary	5
The Future Is...	
A Strong CV Sector	6
Socially Connected	13
Inclusive	16
Engaged	19
Fair	22
Work & Skills	25
Quality Healthcare	30
Affordable, Secure Housing	35
Good for Children	40

Introduction & Summary

As Ireland approaches a general election, we stand at a critical juncture. The choices made in this election will shape the future of our society and our economy. It is essential for the incoming government to recognise and champion the indispensable role of the community and voluntary sector. This sector, encompassing charities, community groups, voluntary organisations, and social enterprises, plays a major role in social cohesion and support across the country. Their efforts not only fill gaps in public services but also deliver responses to some of the most pressing challenges facing Irish society.

The community and voluntary sector has consistently demonstrated its capacity to foster resilience, solidarity, and inclusiveness within our communities. These organisations address a wide range of issues, from poverty and social exclusion to health and education, often stepping in where state resources are stretched thin. In recent years, they have been pivotal in responding to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, providing essential services, and supporting the most vulnerable among us. As we look to the future, their contributions and insights are critical in shaping policies that are equitable, sustainable, and reflective of the needs of all.

For the next government, valuing and investing in the community and voluntary sector is not just a moral imperative but a strategic one. By partnering with these groups, the government can leverage their on-the-ground expertise and extensive networks to create more effective and responsive policies. Sustained support for this sector will ensure that Ireland continues to be a nation where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive, fostering a society built on collective progress and a strong social contract.

This manifesto, derived from extensive consultations with members of The Wheel, outlines key priorities and actionable recommendations that will enable the community and voluntary sector to flourish, ultimately benefiting all of Ireland.

1.

The Future Is... **A Strong CV Sector**

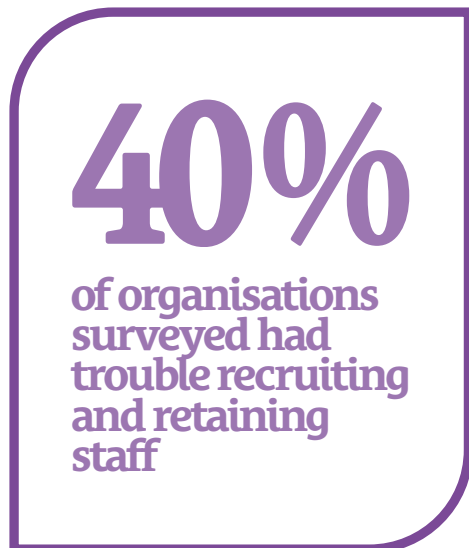
- **Protect Public Services**
- **Provide for Core Costs and Multiannual Funding**
- **Commission for Results**
- **Ensure Proportionate Regulation and Streamlined Compliance**
- **Invest in Recruitment and Retention of Trustees**
- **Maximise EU Funding**
- **Support Philanthropy**
- **Resource and Commence the Charities (Amendment) Act 2024**
- **Pass the Co-operative Societies Bill**
- **Reduce the Cost of Insurance**
- **Collect Sector Data**

Protect Public Services

Charities suffered a sharp decline in public funding after the financial crisis in 2008, as part of cuts affecting pay and staffing for all public services. These cuts were reversed, but only for public-sector employees, through the 2017 Public Service Pay and Pensions Act and the Public Service Agreement *Building Momentum* deal. Cuts to sector funding post-2008, estimated to be as high as 35%,¹ are yet to be fully restored.

This has led to disparities in pay and conditions between the public and voluntary sectors in similar areas of work, having a serious impact on the ability of community and voluntary organisations to recruit and retain key staff.

40% of organisations surveyed in The Wheel’s annual Members’ Policy Survey 2024 indicated that they had trouble recruiting and retaining staff.² This undermines not only the sustainability of these organisations, but the delivery of public services as well.



1 https://www.siptu.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/file_15560_en.pdf

2 <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2024-09/POLICY%20SURVEY%202024%20-%20FINAL%2030.9.24indd.pdf>

In June 2023, The Wheel and TASC published a report calling for immediate State funding to address the two-tier system of pay for organisations delivering public services on behalf of the State.³

The report examined staffing, demand for services, and funding among hundreds of Section 39/56/10/40 organisations that receive contracts from the State to deliver essential public services countrywide in diverse areas like health, disability, family support, children, care of older people, homelessness, and addiction. It 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

Following the publication of the report, and to avoid strike action by thousands of affected organisations, a pay increase of 8% was agreed with the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), with leave to engage again on other matters contained in the *Building Momentum* agreement. Since then, a public sector pay deal of an additional 10.25% has been agreed, leaving sector organisations further behind.

This issue is systemic across a range of functional areas and requires a whole-of-government approach to address it. The first step is the convening of an Interdepartmental Working Group on the sustainability of the sector, under the auspices of the Department of An Taoiseach. This Working Group would have a remit to conduct research and to co-design solutions with sector representatives to protect essential services and supports.

3 https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_wheeltasc_report_f v_080623.pdf

Provide for Core Costs and Multiannual 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. In The Wheel’s Members’ Policy Survey, only two in five State-funded members received multiannual funding in 2024.⁴

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, covering areas such as education, health, social care, and rural development to avoid complexity for organisations with multiple funding streams and Service Level Agreements.

Commission for Results

Government commissioning should focus on being outcomes-based to ensure the delivery of the best health and social care results. Commissioning is broader than procurement or competitive tendering and public commissioners should be required to demonstrate that the outcome of any commissioning exercise maximises societal value. Communities should also be involved in identifying and agreeing their need and in determining appropriate outcomes.

⁴ <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2024-09/POLICY%20SURVEY%202024%20-%20FINAL%2030.9.24indd.pdf>

Commissioning is broader than procurement or competitive tendering, and public commissioners should be required to demonstrate that the outcome of any commissioning exercise maximises societal value

By prioritising measurable, long-term impacts rather than short-term provision of immediate services, this approach promotes accountability and ensures resources are effectively used to improve the well-being of individuals and communities. Outcomes-based commissioning encourages collaboration between service providers within communities and fosters innovation, ultimately leading to higher-quality care and more sustainable solutions for public health and social care challenges.

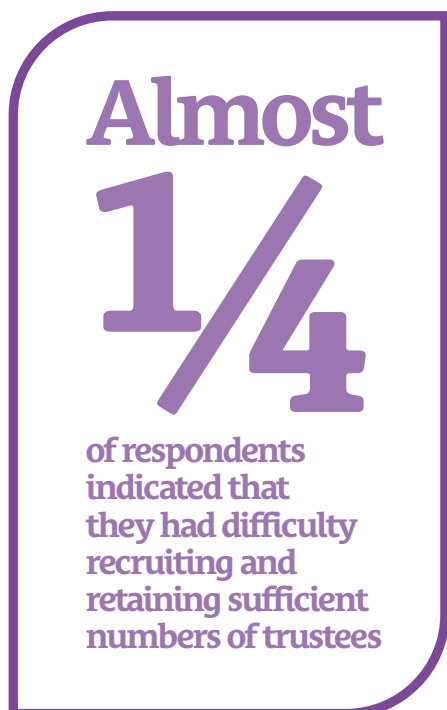
Ensure Proportionate Regulation and Streamlined Compliance

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.⁵ This was a greater issue for State-funded organisations than the general respondent cohort.⁶ There is a risk that the interplay of the many separate-but-related regulatory and reporting requirements is beginning to impede the work and 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 are necessary to ensure that regulation in all its forms helps, rather than over-burdens, sector organisations.

Invest in Recruitment and Retention of Trustees



5 <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2024-09/REGULATION%20SURVEY%202024%20-%20FINAL%20-%2030..9.24.pdf>

6 Ibid

The role of the charity trustee is a particularly onerous one, which belies the fact that trustees give their time on a voluntary basis. Increased regulation in the sector, while welcome and necessary, is having an impact on the ability of organisations to recruit and retain these vital volunteers. In 2024, almost a quarter of respondents to our Member Policy Survey indicated that they had difficulty recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of trustees.⁷ By implementing supportive policies and initiatives, Government can create an enabling environment for trustee boards to thrive, attract diverse talent, and effectively contribute to the missions of their organisations.

These initiatives could support training and development opportunities for trustees, facilitate public awareness campaigns in partnership with sector organisations, incentivise diversity and inclusion initiatives (such as the Future Board Leaders programme operated by The Wheel's Leadership Academy and Boardmatch), and develop recognition programmes that publicly acknowledge the contribution of volunteer trustees.

Maximise EU Funding

Match-Funding

Many EU funding programmes require match-funding from applicants, where the EU co-finances a percentage of costs, leaving the applicant and partners to secure the remaining percentage. However, this is usually only sustainable when EU co-financing covers 80% or more of the costs. In these cases, sector organisations can provide match-funding through in-kind contributions such as staff and volunteer time.

7 <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2024-09/POLICY%20SURVEY%202024%20-%20FINAL%2030.9.24indd.pdf>

However, many lucrative programmes such as LIFE (which funds environmental projects), and the INTERREGS (which fund cross-border cohesion projects), have co-financing rates as low as 60%. Sector organisations do not typically aim to accumulate surpluses and are actively discouraged from maintaining reserves. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage compared to their publicly funded counterparts, effectively excluding them from participating in these programmes. This exclusion has a ripple effect, as EU funding tends to beget more EU funding.

An EU Match-Funding Scheme for the sector would mean that for only a small percentage of government investment in overall project budgets, our economy and society would benefit from the full value that these projects offer.

Ringfence a Portion of Decentralised EU Funding for the Sector

Several EU funding programmes are decentralised from Brussels and are managed by authorities here in Ireland, including the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). A great portion of the funding available through these programmes goes on to be absorbed by State and semi-State bodies.

While these bodies support very important initiatives, we would like to see more recognition for our sector's vital role on delivering on ESF+ objectives and see that reflected in how funding is allocated. ESF+ is a major funder of civil society. A proportion should therefore be ring-fenced specifically for sector groups with a fair and transparent applications process.

Incentivise Local Authority Support of Local Groups Applying for EU funding

Many sector organisations simply do not have the capacity to apply for and manage EU funding. Those that are volunteer-run especially are very limited in the funds for which they can apply. They do, however, see the needs in their communities, have ideas for innovative projects in line with EU funding priorities, and have the expertise and networks to deliver impact on the ground. They simply do not have the administrative and financial capacity to manage funding, and as such they are excluded from these opportunities. This is especially evident in two subsectors: sport, where we tend to rely so heavily on volunteers, and local migrant and refugee-led groups, which tend to be “younger” organisations and so often have not had the chance to mature into organisations with staff and well-established administrative and management systems. Meanwhile, the engagement of local authorities and councils in EU funding varies hugely across the country. Some are especially active, while others have little to no engagement. As net contributors to the EU budget now, Ireland should be prioritising EU funding drawdown at every level. Local authorities and councils should be incentivised or even mandated to reach certain targets of funding drawdown to play their part in capitalising on our EU membership and bringing the EU closer to their communities.

As net contributors to the EU budget now, Ireland should be prioritising EU funding drawdown at every level

Support Philanthropy

Government policies are essential to support Ireland's new Philanthropy Strategy, ensuring a robust framework that encourages charitable giving and investment in social causes. By providing tax incentives, regulatory clarity, and fostering a culture of philanthropy, the government can help unlock private wealth for public good. These policies would strengthen partnerships between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, enabling more impactful and sustainable funding for social initiatives, innovation, and community development. This strategic support is crucial for scaling philanthropic efforts and addressing Ireland's most pressing social challenges.

Resource and Commence the Charities (Amendment) Act 2024

We welcome The Charities (Amendment) Act 2024, which was passed on 10 July 2024 and introduces a series of reforms to charity governance. It aims to enhance transparency, accountability, and public trust in charities, with the proviso that investment is needed. These changes, if properly resourced, will create a more robust and effective framework for the regulation of charities in Ireland.

These changes are a welcome step forward in ensuring that charities operate with the highest levels of integrity and transparency. But the infrastructure of regulation, both the Charities Regulator and the charitable organisations implementing the regulations, must be resourced. While it is prudent not to rush the development of guidelines and regulations, there should be no delay in the commencement of the Act and the provision of support to charities of all sizes to comply with their obligations.

Pass the Co-operative Societies Bill

The co-operative model reflects the values of many community and voluntary organisations and would provide an alternative option for organisations for which it is appropriate and desirable. The Co-operative Societies Bill, if enacted, would benefit a broad range of sector and non-sector organisations by making it more straightforward to form co-operatives in Ireland.

In many cases, community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises are required to incorporate before they receive State funding to provide valuable services and supports.

Reduce the Cost of Insurance

The escalating cost of insurance continues to have a negative impact on the sector, despite many reforms of the insurance sector in recent years. It is a source of ongoing concern that our premiums continue to rise and that savings generated by recent reforms are not being passed on by insurers.

While the Insurance Competition Office puts in place the necessary increased capacity, insurance reforms are needed that will quickly reduce liability premiums to affordable levels and keep them there, and provide assistance for organisations with limited or no access to affordable cover.

This would include ensuring that insurers pass on the savings generated by the recent insurance reforms, addressing areas of market failure for sectors that cannot get cover (or affordable cover), ensuring adequate

competition and a fair market in respect of underwriters and brokers, maintaining the Cabinet Subgroup on Insurance Reform, and tackling unnecessary and excessive legal costs.⁸

Collect Sector Data

The sector is a huge source of employment, volunteering opportunities, and service delivery in Ireland, and yet there is no centralised mechanism of collating all this data for use in research, evaluation, and benchmarking. Investment should be made in a data and research hub for the sector. The Central Statistics Office should also be enabled to collate data on the sector, including a specific census module on use of, and engagement with, the sector by the public.

⁸ The Central Bank NCID liability report for H1 2023 showed no meaningful difference in public liability awards settled through litigation (€23,458) rather than through the Injuries Resolution Board (€23,122), yet legal fees are, on average, 22 times greater (rising from €1,024 to €22,803). 69% of cases are settled via litigation accounting for 89% of the total cost of settling these claims. <https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/statistics/data-and-analysis/national-claims-information-data-base/ncid-employers-liability-insurance-report-3.pdf>

The next Government should prioritise support for the community and voluntary sector, committing to:

- Establish an Interdepartmental Working Group on the Future Sustainability of Services.
- Increase grant aid and Service Level Agreement funding to provide for core costs as a move towards a full-cost-recovery model of funding.
- Normalise the provision of multiannual funding arrangements with the sector.
- Enable more EU funding drawdown by community, voluntary, charity, and social enterprise organisations by establishing a match-funding scheme.
- Include cost of compliance in all new funding contracts.
- Support the recruitment and retention of trustees.
- Incentivise local authority support of local groups applying for EU funding.
- Support philanthropic giving.
- Pass the Co-operative Societies Bill in its current form.
- Ensure that savings achieved by recent insurance reforms are passed on to organisations in the sector.
- Investment in a sector data and research hub and support for the Central Statistics Office to gather data on the sector.

2.

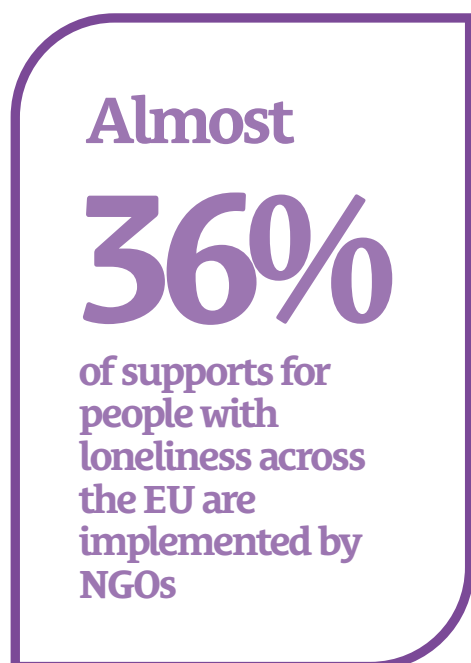
The Future Is... **Socially Connected**

- Tackle Loneliness
- Active Participation

Tackle Loneliness

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.⁹ Insights from the survey also show that the rate of loneliness decreases with age, income, and education, and increases with major life events such as separation, job loss, and finishing studies. Having meaningful relationships, and the amount of contact with them, also makes a difference.

The sector plays a key role in supporting people experiencing loneliness across the EU, with almost two in five (36.0%) supports being implemented by NGOs, followed by almost one in six (17.7%) by local governments, and one in eight (12.8%) through joint initiatives. Over half of loneliness interventions are targeted towards older people, with just over eight percent targeting young people. Interventions for older people provide essential supports, but more is needed across the lifecycle.¹⁰



⁹ https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/loneliness/loneliness-prevalence-eu_en

¹⁰ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC134255>

A 2023 report by the ESRI on civic and political engagement among young adults in Ireland found that young people who live in areas with a strong social infrastructure have more positive outcomes than those who do not.¹¹

A strong social infrastructure includes sports facilities and opportunities to meet up and socialise. Having such infrastructure is associated with a lower risk of depression, higher social trust, and greater confidence in the State, media, and the healthcare system. Social infrastructure also ensures that people with disabilities are fully included in the community.

There is also significant value to developing intergenerational community spaces and activities, which encourage dialogue and inclusion at all ages. This requires sustained investment in both infrastructure and programmes that promote engagement.

Active Participation

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.

¹¹ <https://www.esri.ie/publications/civic-and-political-engagement-among-young-adults-in-ireland>

A Social Engagement Fund would support community engagement programmes that provide social inclusion opportunities and social prescribing – particularly those working in community development with younger people, organisations working with older people experiencing loneliness, and organisations in rural and remote areas. This fund could also drive civil engagement and deliberative democracy in new spaces by developing digital platforms and literacy initiatives to facilitate further engagement. This would support the further development of citizen assemblies and ongoing meaningful

The next Government should make social inclusion a priority. To do this, the next Programme for Government should include commitments to:

- Recognise the importance of the community and voluntary sector in combatting loneliness and social exclusion.
- 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.

3.

The Future Is... **Inclusive**

- **Provide Tailored Supports for Communities**
- **Foster Meaningful, Inclusive Dialogue**
- **Invest in Inclusive Community Infrastructure**
- **Support Skills Assessment and Development**
- **Protect and Promote Cultural Heritage**

Provide Tailored Supports for Communities

Building an inclusive society means fostering mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration between new and existing communities, ensuring all people are supported to have their needs met, including communities who have been left behind. The sector is uniquely placed to provide this support and plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion within communities.

The sector is often deeply rooted in local communities, making it best placed to identify and address specific needs and challenges faced by the people who live there. From food banks and youth programs to environmental initiatives and cultural events, sector organisations provide essential services and can empower communities to advocate to have their needs met. Organisations strengthen communities' resilience and cohesion by supporting them to address local issues together. The sector contributes significantly to promoting inclusivity and implementing a human-rights based approach to delivering services and supports.

Foster Meaningful, Inclusive Dialogue

Crucially, where communities face social tensions, the sector puts itself on the front line, playing a central role in facilitating conflict resolution processes. Through dialogue initiatives and restorative justice practices, organisations can bring people together to create a shared understanding of the issues that affect the community, and develop an inclusive path forward.

Migration is a fact of life. It will be a feature of the future of Ireland. Supporting new communities in an inclusive way will require the expertise of organisations who understand the international protection space, as well as those embedded in community development. These organisations should be resourced to work together to develop programmes and partnerships that foster inclusion.

Invest in Inclusive Community Infrastructure

Community centres, local clubs, and volunteering opportunities create shared spaces where people from all backgrounds can come together. These spaces provide opportunities for social interaction, networking, and mutual support, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among community members. By organising events, workshops, and activities that cater to diverse interests, the sector encourages inclusivity and promotes positive social interactions. Building on the Community Recognition Fund, the next government should invest in the development of community infrastructure, including community halls, skate parks,

These spaces provide opportunities for social interaction, networking, and mutual support, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among community members

playgrounds, and other shared facilities.

Support Skills Assessment and Development

An increase in inward migration brings with it infrastructural and service delivery challenges – with many migrants fleeing wars and persecution needing immediate accommodation, healthcare, and social care supports. But inward migration also brings great opportunities.

Almost 1 in 5 employed people in Q4 2023 were originally from countries other than Ireland. The information and communication sector has the highest proportion of non-Irish employees (38.3%, n=64,500), while the highest number of non-Irish employees are in industry (76,000), and human health and social work activities (73,800).¹²

Addressing the challenges facilitates access to the opportunities, and builds a stronger, more inclusive society while supporting potential contributors to economic growth. Skills assessments of international protection applicants could support this process as part of a new skills agenda for the community and voluntary sector.

Protect and Promote Cultural Heritage

Protection of our diverse cultural heritage is an important part of building shared identities and promoting inclusion. Sector organisations have led the way in advocating for protection of Ireland’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as highlighting the contributions of marginalised and minority groups to this heritage. The next government should build on the commitments to protect our cultural heritage set out in *Heritage Ireland 2030*.

¹² CSO Labour Force Survey Quarterly Statistics, QLF47 - Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment

The next government should make social cohesion a priority. To do this, the next Programme for Government should include commitments to:

- A human-rights-based approach to the delivery of social services.
- Infrastructure investment to develop community spaces.
- Increased funding for services supporting marginalised communities.
- Resourcing a skills assessments of international protection applicants as part of a new skills agenda for the community and voluntary sector.
- Funding research on the role of the community and voluntary sector in integration.
- Protection of Ireland’s cultural heritage and recognition of the contributions of marginalised and minority groups.

4. 

The Future Is...
Engaged

- Promote Meaningful Civil Dialogue
- Support Advocacy

Promote Meaningful Civil Dialogue

Civil society plays a pivotal role in shaping the fabric of modern democracies around the world. It represents the space where citizens come together voluntarily to express their interests, advocate for their rights, and engage in collective action for the betterment of society. From small community groups to national and international organisations, civil society encompasses a diverse range of entities that contribute significantly to the socio-political landscape.

At the core of civil society's importance is its role in promoting and safeguarding democratic values in inclusive ways. Sector organisations act as advocates for the most marginalised in society and can be 'honest brokers' when engaging in multi-stakeholder processes. Through advocacy campaigns, public awareness-raising, and policy analysis, sector organisations play a crucial role in ensuring that the voices of all citizens, but particularly those who are furthest behind, are heard in decision-making processes.

The next government should recommit to the *Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with the Community and Voluntary Sector*,¹³ which copper-fastened the relationship and partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector, highlighting its centrality in addressing the crises of recent times, and fully commit to social and community dialogue.

¹³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4445-values-and-principles-for-collaboration-and-partnership-working/>.

Support Advocacy

Civil society also encourages and promotes deliberative democracy and participation. It provides mechanisms, such as Citizens' Assemblies, Public Participation Networks, and various Dialogue Forums, for citizens to meaningfully engage in discussions on public issues and learn about their rights and responsibilities within a democratic framework.



In times of
crisis, civil
society
organisations
show up

As we saw during the pandemic and in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in times of crisis, civil society organisations show up. They demonstrate their resilience and capacity to respond swiftly to emergencies. Sector organisations fill critical gaps where Government and market mechanisms lack the required agility to act fast. This ability to act quickly and with a focus on community needs underscores the importance of a vibrant and robust civil society sector.

Recently, we have seen the attempted undermining of civil society, particularly participation by organisations in advocacy processes on behalf of their members. This is deeply concerning. The role that civil society plays both as partner to Government in the delivery of essential health, social and community services, and as advocate on behalf of the most marginalised in society should be protected.

Nurturing and supporting civil society remains essential for building a more just, equitable, and sustainable society for all. In order to do this, the next Government should commit to:

- Social and community dialogue in line with the *Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership Working with Community and Voluntary Sector*.
- Funding participation activation measures in areas that are underrepresented in civic dialogue to ensure all voices are heard.
- Developing and fund local and national advocacy initiatives to promote participative democracy.
- Supporting calls to ring-fence EU funding for the civil society sector, and co-design of EU funding programmes.

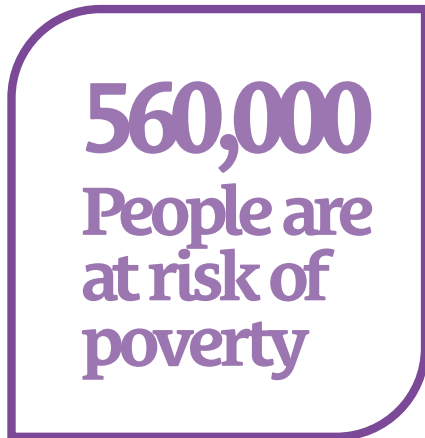
5.

The Future Is... **Fair**

- **Ensure Income Adequacy and Social Inclusion**
- **Support Community Outreach**

Ensure Income Adequacy and Social Inclusion

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.¹⁴ This represents a worrying rise of over 200,000 people going without basic necessities (enforced deprivation) since 2021.



560,000
People are
at risk of
poverty

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), while tenants are more than four times as likely to be going without than people in households where the home is owned.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/>.

¹⁵ Enforced Deprivation Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023 - Central Statistics Office.

¹⁶ 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.

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. Lifting people out of poverty is about more than income, however. It also requires access to affordable, sustainable public services. *The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (“the Roadmap”),¹⁷ which aims to reduce the number of people in consistent poverty and increase social inclusion, acknowledges this in taking a cross-Departmental approach.

However, the actions underpinning the current Roadmap do not go far enough in meeting its stated aims. The next iteration of the Roadmap should be co-designed with organisations at the frontline of providing support to people experiencing poverty and deprivation, with a renewed focus on resourcing ambitious actions for change and an independent review of progress.

Support Community Outreach

The sector is at the coalface of supporting people on the lowest incomes. One in twelve charities has the specific charitable purpose of the relief of poverty or economic hardship,¹⁸ while sector organisations in the health, housing and homelessness, child and family services, and community development sectors are under continued pressure to provide supports to those who are most at risk.

Persistent underfunding of the community and voluntary sector has led to frontline services being asked to do more with less.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ca8bf-roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/media/4733/crar2022.pdf>.

Average
negative pay
disparity of
10%

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.

Research by TASC, commissioned by The Wheel and published in 2023,¹⁹ found that the negative disparity in pay for most of the charities averages about 10%, risking the collapse of vital public services.

The report also called for funding and other supports to the sector which correspond with the complexity and expansion of needs around housing and homelessness, addiction, disabilities, older people, and the challenges facing young people and low-income families. What the latest figures show is that deprivation has worsened since the publication of this report. The valuable contribution of the sector should be recognised and adequately funded if we are to effectively address the impact of poverty.

¹⁹ https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_wheel_tasc_report_f_v_080623.pdf.

To address persistent poverty and deprivation, the next Programme for Government should include a commitment to:

- Establish a cross-sectoral benchmarking working group to ensure adequate income for those at most risk of poverty.
- Ensure the next Roadmap for Social Inclusion is fully cross-sectoral and interdepartmental.
- Fully fund the restoration of public services, including multiannual funding for service delivery organisations.
- Invest in community development outreach programmes.

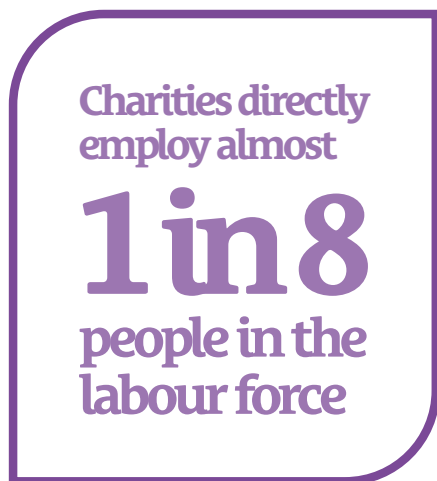
6.

The Future Is... **Work & Skills**

- **Protect Health and Social Care Services**
- **Support Social Enterprises**
- **Building A Resilient Workforce**
- **Respond to Digitisation and AI**

Protect Health and Social Care Services

Ireland's community and voluntary sector is a significant employer. Charities alone directly employ 281,250 staff, almost 1 in 8 people in the labour force.²⁰ The sector also involves the unpaid work of more than a million volunteers. One in every three people delivering public services in Ireland works for a charitable, community or voluntary organisation.²¹



Yet these organisations are often underfunded, with staff experiencing shortfalls of up to 17% compared to their public sector peers. In October 2023, and in order to avoid strike action, the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) agreed a pay increase of 8% for staff of Section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations - staff contracted to provide health and social care services under specific statutory provisions - with a commitment to review the situation in line with a previously agreed public sector pay deal by the following December.

²⁰ <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/media/4767/scoe-co.pdf>.

²¹ A total of 303,559 people were directly employed in the public sector (Quarter 3, 2020, Public Expenditure and Reform Databank). Approximately 165,000 people worked in the community and voluntary sector. That totals 468,559 people working in some capacity to deliver public services, of which the civil and public service constitutes two thirds (64.8%) and the community and voluntary sector comprises one third (35.2%). Note that the staff of voluntary hospitals and non-acute voluntary agencies are employed by the CV sector even though their numbers are included in the government databank.

The implementation of this agreement is extremely complex as co-funding and part-funding arrangements were not considered and non-salary costs were excluded.

This complexity, resulting in many staff in frontline services not receiving the 8% increase, continues to exacerbate a large-scale recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. It is therefore imperative that Government set out a pathway to pay parity for staff in Section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations (and other State-funded services), and an increase in funding to support employer salary and non-salary core costs.

Support Social Enterprises

There are over 170 Government supports for start-ups and small businesses. These are delivered on behalf of the government by Local Enterprise Offices and Enterprise Ireland. Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) are Business Units within the Local Authority. They operate under a Service Level Agreement with Enterprise Ireland. The Service Level Agreement between Enterprise Ireland and each local authority governs the delivery of services via the LEOs.

The Service Level Agreements between Enterprise Ireland and each LEO should require LEOs to provide the same full range of business supports to social enterprises, irrespective of legal form, as it does to other enterprises. The EU Commission Recommendation on SME's (2003/361/EC) specifically includes "associations regularly engaged in an economic activity" in its definition of an SME.

The Recommendation also states, "An enterprise is considered to be any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form". The exclusion of CLGs (Companies Limited by Guarantee) from the support by LEOs is clearly counter to that Commission Recommendation.

Social enterprises employ 84,382 people, with a further 74,825 volunteers actively involved or providing governance supports in the sector,²² but the availability of supports to social enterprises from LEOs is not consistent across the country. This lack of support was also reflected by NESC in its recent report, *Social Enterprise on the Island of Ireland*.²³

The CLG structure is the most common structure for social enterprises. It would therefore be progressive for CLGs to be afforded similar status to limited companies when accessing supports from LEOs and Enterprise Ireland. Some CLGs have engaged in workarounds, such as establishing subsidiary companies limited by shares, but this creates additional and unnecessary complexity. Moreover, while some LEOs are open to considering supporting social enterprises, others are less convinced, citing eligibility and viability as concerns. However, if social enterprises have a strong business component, LEOs should be able to support them. Consistency of approach from LEOs has been raised as an issue by social enterprise proponents, and commitments have been made in the Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027 to invest in greater supports. This should be delivered by the next government.

Build A Resilient Workforce

The OECD review of the National Skills Strategy,²⁴ published in May 2023, identifies the sector as a significant stakeholder in the national skills agenda. A previous report by Indecon confirmed the importance of skills development to a resilient and effective

²² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b30e5-social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exer>

²³ <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/social-enterprise-on-the-island-of-ireland/>.

²⁴ https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland_d7b8b40b-en#:~:text=This%20report%2C%20OECD%20Skills%20Strategy,skills%20governance%20to%20build%20a

community and voluntary sector, but found that investment in training in the nonprofit workforce in Ireland is low when compared to other sectors in the Irish workforce and to nonprofits in other countries, notwithstanding a return of nearly €3 in productivity gains for every €1 spent in upskilling supports.²⁵

With a workforce of more than 280,000 people delivering vital public services and serving communities all over Ireland, the sector must be at the heart of all national conversations around workforce development and upskilling.



280,000+
people are
delivering vital
public services
to communities
all over Ireland

Over the lifetime of the next government, our entire labour force, economy, and society will face a series of structural trends – demographics, decarbonisation, digitalisation, and deglobalisation²⁶ – which will re-shape how we live and work. These transformative forces will require a step-change in reskilling and upskilling across all sectors and a cultural shift towards embracing lifelong learning.

²⁵ <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2020-12/Investment%20Appraisal%20of%20Upskilling%20-%20Indecon.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/53e74-national-economic-dialogue-2023/>.

In order to underpin this national effort, we support the retention of a seat at cabinet for a senior minister with responsibility for further and higher education, training, research, innovation, and science. We also call on the next government to implement the action plan arising from the OECD review of the *National Skills Strategy*, including the strengthening of a renewed National Skills Council, in order to prepare our economy and society for this challenge.

Given that nonprofit organisations and workers are already falling behind their counterparts in other sectors, such as SMEs and the public sector, when it comes to upskilling investment, we are calling on the next government to prioritise increased investment from the National Training Fund in sector-specific skills-building measures. The surplus in the National Training Fund (NTF) is growing close to €2bn due to fiscal rules which regulate domestic expenditure.

This unsustainable surplus could be alleviated by treating spending from the NTF in a similar way as other specific-purpose funds (such as the Brexit Adjustment Reserve or the Recovery and Resilience Fund). Community and voluntary sector employers invest in the NTF every year through their employee contributions. We should see concerted and effective action from the next government to unlock this national resource for the benefit of all workers across the economy, including those that work in charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises.

The OECD review of the National Skills Strategy²⁷ notes a number of concerning trends in Ireland, including that 30% of adults have less-than-basic digital skills, participation in lifelong learning lags behind the EU's top performers, and activation of skills could

²⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland-d7b8b40b-en.htm>.

be improved among disadvantaged groups. Given the need to greatly accelerate Ireland's lifelong learning rates across the population, the significant return on investment of tackling basic skills needs, and Ireland's full employment status, serious consideration should be given to using a portion of the NTF for basic skills training at Levels 1-04.

The workforce in the sector has an unparalleled reach into communities and can be an influential player in the culture shift towards lifelong learning across society. The sector also plays a crucial re-skilling role in the economy through providing employment and training opportunities that reach people who are disadvantaged and who public agencies find it difficult to engage, through involvement in Community Employment, the Community Services Programme, Tús, and other similar schemes. With the generational challenges to come and the absolute need for a paradigm shift in lifelong learning rates, an increased investment in community and voluntary workers will have a compounding ripple effect across communities and contribute to a more resilient, inclusive workforce and society.

Respond to Digitisation and AI

The sector should be funded to respond to the digitisation/AI and decarbonisation challenges through funding research into sector skills and organisational development needs, with particular focus on the twin digital and green transitions. The sector is already falling behind when it comes to investment in digital services and digital skills. Without access to existing funds and supports such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's Digital Transition Fund, sector organisations do not have funding to assess their own digital transformation requirements and invest in digital solutions to increase effectiveness and service delivery efficiencies.

Support should be prioritised to build digital capacity and solutions at sub-sectoral and whole-of-sector levels, creating communities of practice that can design and develop digital solutions at significant scale. This will require investment from Government but will be repaid in increasing impact on the ground.

To address the recruitment and retention crisis in health and social services, and to provide for continued upskilling within the sector, the next Government should:

- Commit to pay parity for staff of Section 39/56/10/40-funded organisations (and other State-funded services), and an increase in funding to support employer salary and non-salary core costs.
- Fund continued professional development across the sector, particularly in the areas of health and social care, children, and housing where skills needs can change rapidly.
- Involve service delivery organisations in national workforce planning fora, especially in areas of acute skills shortages such as health and social care.
- Develop a suite of business supports for social enterprises.

- Develop a framework for a clear, sustainable career path into the sector. Fund support for learning and career pathways for people at all stages of their careers in the sector.
- Retain a senior ministerial seat at cabinet with responsibility for further and higher education, training, research, innovation and science.
- Implement the action plan arising from the OECD review of the National Skills Strategy, including the strengthening of a renewed National Skills Council.
- Include the community and voluntary sector as a key stakeholder across the national skills infrastructure.
- Prioritise increased investment from the National Training Fund in community and voluntary sector specific skills-building measures.
- Ensure that community and voluntary sector organisations have equitable access to relevant skills and training measures under the disbursement of the NTF surplus over the coming five years.
- Support the sector to respond to digitisation/AI, decarbonisation and demographic challenges through funding research into sector skills development needs, with particular focus on the twin digital and green transitions.

7.

The Future Is...

Quality Healthcare

- Address Health Inequalities
- Resource Sláintecare
- Support Mental Health and Disability
- Invest in Community Drug and Alcohol Supports
- Promote Health Dialogue

Address Health Inequalities

According to the National Treatment Purchase Fund,²⁸ 87,100 people were awaiting in-patient treatment in August 2024, with 15% waiting a year or more. Some 601,490 people were awaiting outpatient appointments, with 18% waiting a year or more. Ireland ranks lowest on the Health Powerhouse Euro Health Consumer Index 2018 in terms of accessibility.²⁹ The OECD's *Health at a Glance* reports that Ireland spends 6.1% of GDP on Health, compared to an OECD average of 9.2%.³⁰

The same report notes the impact of socioeconomic disparities on healthcare across the OECD, with 43% of people in the bottom 20% of the income distribution reporting a long-term illness or health problem, compared to 27% in the top 20%. According to the report, Ireland is among the countries with the largest income gap, where people in the bottom 20% of the income distribution are almost twice as likely to have a long-term illness or health problem as those in the top 20%. The report also found that Ireland had the highest outpatient healthcare costs, accounting for an average of 40% of household spending on healthcare.

Sector organisations play a vital role in health and social care. At a community level, sector organisations are often first to address local needs, promote preventative care, and advocate for more equitable services. At a national level, they are at the forefront of research and innovation in health. A lack of multiannual funding is significantly increasing the costs of delivering the services. This is due to the inability to enter contracts in a planned manner (for instance, in renting residential

or day-service locations), and the inability to utilise funding streams that require more than one year to complete development (e.g. Capital Assistance Scheme). The next government should address underfunding to account for existing levels of service across health and social care and include multiannual funding for organisations providing health and social care to people with mental health difficulties, people with disabilities and disabling conditions and people accessing addiction services, with a particular focus on addressing healthcare inequalities.

Resource Sláintecare

Sláintecare, introduced in 2016, committed to a community-based model of healthcare, yet according to the OECD *Health at a Glance* report³¹ the occupancy rate in acute care (excluding private hospitals) was 90% – the highest across the OECD countries, and 20 percentage points above the OECD average of 70%. Sector organisations are first to bridge gaps in access to healthcare and address health inequalities for the most marginalised, operating at national and local level, however with our public hospitals almost reaching capacity, more is needed to deliver sustainable public healthcare in the community, including investment in community infrastructure such as homecare.

The proposed capital allocation under Sláintecare was €3 billion over six years,³² or €500 million per year. Adjusting for inflation, this would be closer to €672.5 million at 2024 rates. It is vital that the next government deliver on this investment to support care in the community.

28 <https://www.ntpf.ie/home/nwld.htm>.

29 <https://healthpowerhouse.com/media/EHCI-2018/EHCI-2018-report.pdf>.

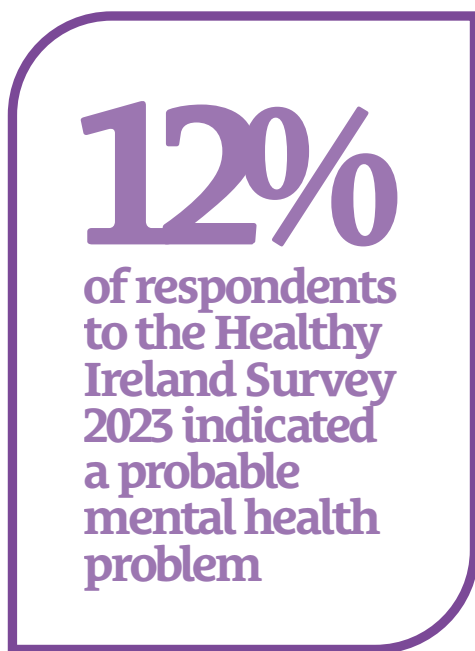
30 <https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance/>

31 <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bdd23022-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/bdd23022-en#:~:text=Data%20for%20Ireland%20exclude%20private,-Source%3A%20OECD%20Health%20Statistics%202023.>

32 <https://assets.gov.ie/22609/e68786c13e1b4d7daca-89b495c506bb8.pdf>

Support Mental Health and Disability

Sector organisations have also been key to securing reform in mental health services and in reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues by raising awareness, providing workplace and community-based training, and encouraging people to seek the help they need. They also often provide front-line counselling and support services at low or no cost.



Almost 1 in 8 (12%) respondents to the Healthy Ireland Survey 2023 indicated a probable mental health problem.³³ Marginalised groups, such as Travellers, migrants, and LGBTQ+ young people are in particular need of improved mental health services in Ireland. Almost 49,000 referrals were received by the HSE General Adult Mental Health Services in the period January to December 2023, while just 26,573 were seen.³⁴

³³ <https://assets.gov.ie/22609/e68786c13e1b4d7daca-89b495c506bb8.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/performance-reports/performance-profile-december-2023.pdf> (latest published report).

A similar pattern emerges in the ‘Psychiatry of Later Life’ service, where 12,625 referrals were received and 7,688 were seen, and in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), where 23,874 referrals were made and 12,338 were seen. Waiting lists for Community CAMHS stood at 3,759 in December 2023, with a reported 568 children waiting more than 12 months for support. Greater collaboration between State agencies and sector organisations, together with adequate resourcing, would help alleviate these concerning waiting lists and provide a holistic service at national and local level.

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’, 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 2022.³⁵ Of the people who reported a ‘great extent or a lot’, almost 3 in 10 had difficulty going outside the home, and more than 1 in 5 had difficulty dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home. Organisations in this sector provide home care, personal assistance, interpretation services, and social prescribing, in addition to advocating to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are being respected.

The next government should 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*³⁶ and adequately resource organisations working to deliver the State’s commitments to advocate and co-design

³⁵ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/census2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/>.

³⁶ 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

supports, services, and capacity building for people with disabilities. This would include the provision of adequate funding for disability-specific community supports, as outlined in the *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026*,³⁷ to address demographic change and identified unmet need of people with disabilities.

Over the last two years, representatives for Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs) and parent representatives have highlighted a range of concerns in child disability services and the rollout of Progressing Disability Services (PDS) nationally. These include inconsistencies in management structures, staffing, and clinical pathways and amount to a lack of accountability and significant ongoing clinical concerns. Organisations have called for appropriate consultation and meaningful engagement with services, children and families, clinicians, and professional representatives to ensure that concerns raised are addressed.

Invest in Community Drug and Alcohol Supports

Since 2021, demand for community-led drug and alcohol supports has increased, according to the National Drug Treatment Reporting Centre data,³⁸ and many sector organisations are struggling to meet need in their local areas. In 2012, there were 5,166 people in drug and alcohol treatment services in Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force (LDATF) areas, by 2021 this had risen to 7,223 or by almost 40%. Like many across the sector, these organisations are also facing rising costs and staff retention issues. We support the call by the Chairs of the Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces to increase funding to match need and to enable full implementation of the national strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery (2017-2025)*.

³⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/70871-disability-action-plan-2024-2026/>.

³⁸ <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/tables/>

Promote Health Dialogue

The establishment of a Health Dialogue Forum with stakeholders from the community and voluntary sector, together with the publication of the Partnership Principles between Voluntary Organisations and the State in the Health and Social Care Sectors³⁹ (the Principles), were important steps in having the voice of the community heard in policy decisions on healthcare. The continued strengthening of these processes, along with ensuring community organisations and patient advocacy groups are engaged in the co-design of services and policies, will be key to ensuring the delivery of quality services.

The next government should ensure the availability of funds to organisations to ensure patient/lived-experience advocacy groups are included in the co-design of services and policies, and that voluntary organisations are fully engaged in processes to ensure integrated systems of care and support to improve outcomes for those accessing services, interventions, and longer-term health and social care supports.

³⁹ <https://assets.gov.ie/251951/d4e6fafb-7127-48c3-b7a4-40192b4b4dec.pdf>.

The next Programme for Government should acknowledge the importance of community-led health care and provide for fully resourcing its implementation by committing to:

- Multiannual funding for organisations providing healthcare, including mental health, disability and addiction services, to address healthcare inequalities.
- Supporting organisations and patient advocacy groups working to deliver the State's commitments under the UNCRPD.
- Increasing investment in infrastructure and supports for community organisations under the roll-out of Sláintecare.
- Sustainably funding providers of home care services in the sector.
- Building on the Partnership Principles between Voluntary Organisations and the State in the health and social care sectors by ensuring patient advocacy groups are engaged in the co-design of services and policies, and that community health organisations are fully engaged in the regionalisation process.
- Ensuring meaningful engagement with services, children and families, clinicians and professional representatives in the area of child disability services
- Supporting Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces to meet rising need in their areas.

8.

The Future Is... **Affordable, Secure Housing**

- **Deliver Social Housing and Homelessness Supports**
- **Secure Accommodation for Older People & People with Disabilities**
- **Provide Traveller-specific Accommodation**
- **Take a Human-Rights-based approach to International Protection Applicants**
- **Protect Victims of Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-based Violence**
- **Deliver Affordability**
- **Protect Our Built Heritage**

Deliver Social Housing and Homelessness Supports

Key supports provided by the sector have targeted low-income households, with the provision of social housing through Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), tenancy protection and sustainment supports, and homelessness supports. This is increasingly challenging as more people find themselves in need of these supports. In 2023, 58,824 households were on local authority waiting lists for social housing, with 12,626 households, more than 1 in 5 of the total, waiting more than 7 years.⁴⁰

58,824
households
were on local
authority
waiting lists for
social housing
in 2023

Almost 7,000 households on these waiting lists are headed by someone aged 60+, reflecting a worrying trend in precarity in older age highlighted in a recent report by ALONE and Threshold.⁴¹ Almost 12,500 households have income exclusively from employment, raising serious concerns about affordability and decent work. 23,500 households live in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), which is unsuitable as a long-term solution to a social housing need.

⁴⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0dad4-summary-of-social-housing-assessments-2023-key>

⁴¹ <https://alone.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Threshold-Alone-Report-highres-web.pdf>

12,000 households are headed by lone parents. 8,000 have a housing need due to homelessness, an increase of 18.6% on the previous year. This need should be addressed through an increase in capital supports for AHBs.

The Housing Commission recently published its report on Ireland's housing sector,⁴² making a series of recommendations for improvement. We note that many of these relate to social housing, and AHBs in particular. These organisations should be included in the co-design of the development and implementation of these recommendations, providing their expertise to the process.

In August 2024, 14,486 people accessed homeless accommodation.⁴³ Marginalised groups, such as migrants, Travellers, lone parents, and members of the LGBTQ+ community are proportionately most likely to experience homelessness and housing precarity. Households in precarious accommodation cannot thrive. They cannot plan for the future. Organisations working at the coalface with these households are often also providing wraparound social care supports. A 2019 report from Focus Ireland found that 68% of families experiencing homelessness had come from the PRS.⁴⁸ There is need for significant investment in organisations providing tenant protection, tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.

Currently AHBs primarily rely on debt finance to develop new homes, using State-backed as well as commercial finance. This is 100% debt financing, which is not sustainable in the

⁴² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f3551-report-of-the-housing-commission/>

⁴³ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/306136/8b71dafa-9f7a-4a4e-ba3b-041cdd46d9a6.pdf#page=null>

medium to long term. It also makes Ireland an outlier in European housing systems. Where the nonprofit sector provides a significant share of housing, part-funding via grants is common practice. Increased funding will improve AHBs ability to deliver lifetime social and affordable tenancies and thus reduce the State's reliance on the Housing Assistance Payment and other leasing schemes. There is a need for AHBs to access diversified funding streams. Greater grant financing for deep energy retrofits and upgrades for AHB homes is also needed.

Secure Accommodation for Older People and People with Disabilities

Many organisations are providing specialised support within the accommodation sector to older people, people with disabilities, Travellers, and international protection applicants. These are areas which require expertise and understanding of the specific needs of the people they serve.

Accommodation in the housing market is often unsuitable for older people and people with disabilities who may need specific adaptations and supports. While the aim is to support people within their communities, this often requires investment in adaptations and the availability of additional services to ensure independence and a quality of living. While the number of, and expenditure on, housing adaptation grants for older people, people with disabilities, and mobility aids grants have returned to 2010 levels,⁴⁴ the shortfall in the intervening years is yet to be addressed.

This means that many organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities

44 <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/0906a-other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics/#housing-adaptation-grants-for-older-people-and-people-with-a-disability-private-houses>.

are using their own resources to fund minor adaptations, where possible. With an increasing and ageing population, it is likely that this need will increase and should be resourced. Sector organisations require additional funding to support older people and people with disabilities to live independently.

Provide Traveller-specific Accommodation

Organisations working with Local Authorities to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation are in the unusual position that allocations are being made, but are not being drawn down, resulting in persistent underfunding of accommodation and additional supports to Traveller communities. A review by IHREC found that, between 2008 and 2018, €168.8 million was allocated for Traveller accommodation, with just €110.6 million (66%) being drawn down.⁴⁵

In 2020, the system of allocating funding per local authority was replaced by a disbursement process whereby local authorities can apply for allocations for Traveller accommodation. In 2020 and 2021 the full central allocation was drawn down, but not every local authority utilised it.⁴⁶

Organisations working within Traveller communities have a keen insight into the issues that affect the people they serve. Working together with local authorities to build strong, respectful relationships, together with adequate resourcing, will facilitate them to support the provision of this basic necessity. This process of engagement should be fully resourced and measures introduced to address the lack of accommodation support in local authority areas.

45 <https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/equality-review/>.

46 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-09-15/212/?highlight%5B0%5D=traveller>.

Take a Human-Rights-Based Approach to International Protection Applicants

21 years after the introduction of Direct Provision in Ireland, and heeding the concerns of civil society organisations, the government published a White Paper on ending it.⁴⁷ Shortly following its publication, however, Russia invaded Ukraine and the international protection landscape in Ireland changed with the introduction of the Temporary Protection Directive.⁴⁸

While the measures initially provided for under the Temporary Protection Directive have largely been reduced, it was initially welcomed by organisations working in the international protection space as providing a blueprint for a new approach to international protection.⁴⁹ With the Temporary Protection Directive expiring in early 2026, the next government should work with organisations working with marginalised communities to provide increased support to secure appropriate, safe accommodation.

Protect Victims of Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-based Violence

In alignment with the government's commitment to a sustainable housing system in Ireland, and with the *Third National Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Strategy*, it is essential to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of victims of domestic abuse. Ireland has consistently fallen short of its obligations under the Istanbul Convention.

47 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7aad0-minister-ogorman-publishes-the-white-paper-on-ending-direct-provision/>.

48 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TX-T/?uri=celex:32001L0055>.

49 <https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/irelands-re-sponse-ukrainian-crisis-blueprint-better-future>.

Sector organisations working at the coalface of gender-based violence have emphasised the need for development and maintenance of refuge and safe housing options for victims, providing them with secure, good quality step-down housing and necessary support upon leaving a violent relationship. Geographically distributed housing is needed to provide access for urban, suburban and rural victims, with design standards that guarantee all residents' safety, privacy and comfort.

Deliver Affordability

The average cost of purchasing a home rose by 9.6% in the year to January 2024 and now stands 12.4% higher than the previous peak in 2007.⁵⁰ Standardised average rents increased by 8.1% nationally, and 6.3% in Dublin in the year to Q1 2024.⁵¹ These increases in rent payments have not been matched with increased security of tenure for tenants, which has been called for by organisations supporting tenants.



50 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/rppi/residentialpropertypriceindexjanuary2024/#:-:text=The%20median%20price%20of%20a,620%2C000%20in%20Dún%20Laoghaire%2DRathdown>.

51 <https://www.rtb.ie/about-rtb/news/residential-tenancies-board-releases-q1-2024-rent-index-and-individual-property-level-analysis-preliminary-findings>

Between 2013 and 2022, wages increased by 27% while house prices increased by 75% and rents increased by over 90%.⁵² It is no longer affordable to live in the private rental sector for someone on an average wage. Lack of affordability is having an impact on all areas of social and economic life. In addition to an increase in demand for the supports offered by sector organisations working in the housing and homelessness sector, many organisations are experiencing difficulty recruiting and retaining staff due to lack of affordable accommodation in their area. Increasing the provision of affordable housing for all should be a priority for the next government, to support both workers in the sector and the people they serve.



Protect Our Built Heritage

Protection of our built heritage should be a central part of both housing and environmental policy. Encouraging traditional building skills (by devising an apprenticeship programme with the sustainable construction sector) would have the dual effect of helping to utilise existing heritage housing stock and conserving traditional building skills, which are under threat. Support for community organisations already leading this work is essential.

⁵² https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2023/2023-10-05_housing-affordability-for-private-household-buyers-in-ireland_en.pdf.

To support affordable, accessible, and appropriate accommodation for all, the next Programme for Government should include commitments to:

- Sustainably fund organisations providing accommodation and supports to people on low incomes / the most marginalised.
- Increase funding for organisations supporting tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.
- Provide access to diversified funding streams for AHBs, reducing reliance on debt funding for long-term sustainability.
- Produce a roadmap for the delivery of affordable housing for all, to support both workers in the sector and the people they serve.
- Increase funding to organisations supporting older people and people with disabilities to live independently.
- Provide refuge and safe housing options for victims, providing them with secure, good quality step-down housing and necessary support.
- Support organisations working with marginalised communities to secure appropriate, safe accommodation.
- Preserve and protect Ireland's built heritage.

9.

The Future Is... **Good for Children**

- **Secure Affordable Childcare and Early Years Education**
- **Provide Places to Play**
- **Encourage Youth Civic Engagement**

Secure Affordable Childcare and Early Years Education

One third of children in Ireland are cared for by childminders or childcare organisations.⁵³ Childcare providers provide an essential service for children and their parents. Taking a child-centred approach, childcare providers in the community and voluntary sector support the development and education of children across the country. The cost of childcare can vary significantly by area, but this is often a result of overheads such as premises and insurance, rather than salaries.

**€13.10
per hour
is the average
wage for
childcare staff**

The latest *Early Years Sector Profile Report*⁵⁴ found that the average wage for childcare staff was €13.10 per hour, with early years assistants (accounting for 46% of all staff working directly with children) earning €12.10 per hour, or 20c below the living wage at the time of the report (2021/2022). Children thrive on consistency and stability. The ability of organisations to retain staff is key to providing this stability to the children for whom they care.

53 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_childcare_arrangements.

54 https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2022/05/Pobal_22_EY_20-21-Report_final_2.pdf.

Childcare costs and accessibility also have a significant impact on gender equality and women's participation in the workforce. At 58.9%,⁵⁵ Ireland's labour-force participation rate for women still lags behind the OECD average.

In addressing overhead costs, while the *First Five Strategy*⁵⁶ is very welcome, as are the childcare subventions for low-income parents, there is a need to provide consistent, high-quality childcare at an affordable cost. Inclusive education is also a vital part of ensuring that all children can engage with their communities. This requires additional supports such as training, therapy and specialised assistance. For children with additional support needs, greater investment to expand the access and inclusion model to full-time, all year round is also needed. This will require investment from Government and delivery partnerships with sector early-years organisations, and an increase in funding for the National Model of Parenting Support Services.⁵⁷

Average public expenditure on early childhood education and care across the OECD is 0.8% of GDP, while Ireland spends just 0.3%.⁵⁸ In 2024, more than €1.1 billion was allocated to early learning and childcare, an increase of 8% on the previous year.⁵⁹ It is important that the next government build on this progress and set out an ambitious plan for the delivery of affordable childcare.

55 [https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter32022/labourforce/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20males%20in,%25%20\(%2B17%2C200\)%20to%201%2C242%2C200](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter32022/labourforce/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20males%20in,%25%20(%2B17%2C200)%20to%201%2C242%2C200).

56 <https://first5.gov.ie/>.

57 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/221981/a8e73d11-c910-4abf-9f80-95bd46e641a0.pdf#page=null>

58 <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>.

59 <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/13544-minister-ogorman-welcomes-substantial-investment-under-budget-2024/>

Provide Places to Play

Children also need safe spaces to play and explore within their communities. The *Children's Sports Participation and Physical Activity Study 2022*⁶⁰ found that while the number of children reaching the recommended level of physical activity has increased since 2016, it currently stands at just 23% of primary school aged children and 12% of those in post-primary school.

Participation rates in any sport (school or community) have also increased between 2016 and 2022, but the drop-off between primary and post- primary school is again evident (96% compared to 84%). Sports associations provide a sense of community among children that can last into adulthood and funding for these bodies should be ensured into the future.

However, not all children enjoy or are able to participate in sports activities. A 2022 study by the ESRI⁶¹ found that girls were less likely to be engaged in sports than boys, and lower levels of engagement were also found among children with disabilities, children from migrant backgrounds, and children from financially strained households.

With loneliness increasing among younger people,⁶² we need a community response to support all younger people to socialise and develop real friendship networks. Family Resource Centres, youth clubs, and community development organisations provide invaluable support to young people and their families.

60 <https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2023-08/CSPPA%202022%20Full%20Report.pdf>

61 <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS151.pdf>

62 https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/loneliness/loneliness-prevalence-eu_en

Youth outreach and youth work programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector and built infrastructure (e.g. local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs etc.) require ongoing investment and support.

Encourage Youth Civic Engagement

In addition to participation in sport and other recreational activities, youth engagement in civic participation is important for having young people's voices heard. Young people have become more socially and environmentally aware, and a 2023 study by the ESRI⁶³ found that civic engagement such as volunteering can benefit both young people and their communities.

A 2023 study by the ESRI found that civic engagement such as volunteering can benefit both young people and their communities.

This study further found that young people in rural areas were more likely to participate in civic activities than those in urban areas, and that socio-economic background was a determinant of participation, with young people from more affluent areas more likely to engage than those from disadvantaged communities.

63 <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS171.pdf>

As political engagement is correlated with greater levels of social trust,⁶⁴ programmes aimed at youth participation are key to tackling loneliness, mental health, and social unrest. *The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024-2028* requires full resourcing to support youth participation and civic engagement, targeting areas of disadvantage, and co-designed by community and voluntary organisations working within these areas. The Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme also addresses child poverty and requires further investment to support existing ABC sites and to expand to more areas.

Recognition of the importance of communities to the development of children and young people, and their engagement in civic society, should be prioritised in the next Programme for Government. In addition to the measures outlined above, the next government should provide for the expansion of the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives.

Recognition of the importance of communities to the development of children and young people, and their engagement in civic society, should be a priority for the next government. The next Programme for Government should commit to:

- Recognising the importance of social inclusion among young people and invest in community youth outreach programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector and built infrastructure (e.g. local libraries, arts centres, youth clubs etc.).
- Expanding the Cross-Government Network of the Child Poverty Unit to include cross-sectoral representatives.
- Providing adequate pay and conditions for childcare providers, funding for operational costs, and insurance reform, and the development of a community childcare model to support the sustainability of the sector.
- Developing and funding a programme for youth participation and civic engagement targeting areas of disadvantage and co-designed by community and voluntary organisations working within these areas.

64 Ibid.

10.

The Future Is... **Sustainable**

- **Recommit to the Sustainable Development Goals**
- **Deliver a Real Just Transition**
- **Protect Biodiversity**
- **Extend Energy Supports**

Recommit to the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of internationally agreed goals that invite all people to ‘think globally and act locally’ to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities, and take action on climate change. There is enormous potential for communities to drive this agenda at a local level, by nurturing what is working already and growing new ideas through innovation. The Wheel is a member of Coalition 2030, an alliance of over 70 civil society organisations working together to ensure Ireland keeps its promise to achieve the SDGs.⁶⁵ According to Social Justice Ireland’s Sustainable Progress Index 2024, Ireland currently ranks 8th out of the EU14 countries in terms of progress towards the Goals. The sector is key to achieving greater progress but organisations need investment to support full implementation of Ireland’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals to reach the furthest behind first.

Deliver a Real Just Transition

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 independent and thriving communities, and improved health and quality of life. Social enterprises will increasingly play a role in tackling climate change in areas such as renewable energy and the circular economy, as highlighted in the *EU Transition Pathway for the Proximity and Social Economy*.⁶⁶

65 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

66 <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/52015>.

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 next government should invest in supports for social enterprises working in the circular economy and begin the process of legislating to incentivise sustainable business practices.

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. The European commission suggests that meeting targets will require a mix of technology and societal changes, and 16% of this will come largely from behaviour change.⁶⁷

Developing green skills is fundamental to stimulating this behavioural change within communities. Sector organisations have a pivotal role to play and a responsibility to ensure that the transition to net zero is a just one. The next government should therefore support improved climate literacy within organisations to develop an understanding of the impact of their work on the environment, and to be conscious of the responsibility that they have for a sustainable future, beginning with an increased investment for specific literacy programmes and community engagement specialists.

Protect Biodiversity

Ireland’s *Fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030* emphasises the urgency with which we must address widespread biodiversity in Ireland and the importance of a whole-of-government approach,⁶⁸ while the 2024 report on the Wellbeing Framework

67 https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/H2020_LC-GD-10-2-2020.

68 https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/4th_National_Biodiversity_Action_Plan.pdf

notes that “Only one of the eleven wellbeing dimensions shows a negative performance over time and in comparison internationally and this is the Environment, Climate and Biodiversity”.⁶⁹ It is vital that sector organisations are supported to continue their work against biodiversity loss and to fulfil the goals of the *Action Plan*.

Extend Energy Supports

Many community and voluntary organisations are struggling with significant energy costs. While one-off government payments for charities in this position have been welcomed, it is essential that ongoing schemes are also open to nonprofit organisations (as well as businesses). The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) Audit Voucher, for example, provides €2,000 towards a professional energy audit, which helps organisations assess and address their energy usage. This scheme should be available to all community groups in order to move Ireland closer to its climate goals while assisting organisations who run vital community services to lower their energy costs.

To empower communities to secure a meaningful just transition where no one gets left behind, the next government should:

- 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.
- Invest in local action on climate and biodiversity, funding for organisations working in this space.
- Invest in a “community connector” programme to develop an information and shared-learning space for organisations working to support biodiversity and tackle climate change.
- Invest in social enterprises working in the circular economy.
- Legislate for sustainable business practices.
- Fund the implementation of ESG Regulation across the sector, including investment in the sector’s capacity to measure and analyse impact and social return on investment.
- Extend the SEAI Energy Audit Voucher to all community groups.

⁶⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/301084/be52296f-93d8-40cb-ae99-aaa863e303fb.pdf#page=null>

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 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

48 Fleet Street, Dublin 2, Tel: +353 (0) 1 454 8727, Email: info@wheel.ie

Charity Number: 20040963 / CHY Number: 13288 / Company Number: 302282

©The Wheel, 2024