



Digital Transformation for Thriving Communities

Event Series Report

The Wheel

Introduction

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of charities, community groups and social enterprises. Established in 1999, we are an authoritative and trusted voice for the nonprofit sector, and we are enthusiastically committed to transparency, accountability, and the highest standards of practice and governance. As a representative body, we provide leadership to the charity and community sector and we advocate on behalf of our growing community of members. As a supportive resource, we offer advice, training and other opportunities to people working or volunteering in the charity and community sector. We work to ensure that the sector is recognised and respected, adequately resourced and appropriately regulated.

To deliver on our aims, The Wheel has a strong focus on skills and leadership development for the charities and community organisations. In recent years, digital upskilling and reskilling has become increasingly important for our members and the communities they serve. Digital technology is transforming our lives – the way we work, the way we learn, and how we interact with others. While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this digital adoption, it also unveiled disparities in digital skills highlighting the risk that the more marginalized in our communities will be excluded from the opportunities the digital age presents. By 2030, 9 out of 10 jobs will require digital skills; yet, according to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), almost 38% of Irish adults have below basic digital skills, well behind both the EU average and the best performing countries in Europe. As a community and voluntary sector, if we are to serve our communities effectively, we must engage with the digitalisation agenda, and we can be pivotal in advocating for and facilitating an inclusive society-wide digital transformation.

With this digital inclusion goal in mind, The Wheel delivered our “Digital Transformation for Thriving Communities” project over a 6-month period in 2024. The project was generously funded by the European Citizen Action Service, a Brussels-based nonprofit organisation that defends EU rights and promotes digital democracy and open decision-making in the EU. By bridging digital divides and empowering Irish civil society, the project aimed to foster a more inclusive and digitally adept society, ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital transformation journey. “Digital Transformation for Thriving Communities” was comprised of a social media campaign and a three-part online event series looking at the digital inclusion landscape in Ireland's community and voluntary sector. This report will summarize the learnings from those events and recommended actions for effectively supporting the digitalisation of the Irish community & voluntary sector.

Methodology

The first two events in our three-part series were called “Driving Digital Inclusion in Your Community” and took place on held on 16 October and 23 October. The aim of both events was to conduct a consultation with representatives from Irish community & voluntary organisations to understand the digital landscape and identify gaps in skills and resources for the sector.

Each consultation began with three anonymous questions via the Menti platform:

- 1) Do you have a digital strategy for your organisation?**

- 2) **If you do, where are you on this journey? (*Participants were asked to rate the implementation of their digital strategy on a scale of 1-5, 1 being “just started” and 5 being “All in place and running”*)**
- 3) **Do you feel there is support for community organisations regarding their digital journey?**

Upon answering these questions, participants then joined facilitated breakout rooms to discuss the following questions:

- 1) **What are the main barriers to digitalisation?**
- 2) **What are the priorities you have in ensuring your strategy is inclusive?**
- 3) **Do you see any opportunities in digitalisation and how it could transform your work?**
- 4) **What further supports do you need to progress or start your digitalisation journey?**

Each breakout room had a dedicated note taker who compiled participants’ responses on the Padlet platform. The Padlet link was included in the follow-up email so participants could continue to add input for a few days following the event.

In addition to serving as an audit of the Irish community sector’s digital skills needs, the results of both consultations informed the content of the third and final event in the series “Digital Transformation & the Sector.” Based on the needs identified in the consultations, the final event provided resources on digital skills training, funding for digital initiatives, and an action plan for starting or scaling up a digital strategy. A detailed summary of each of the three events is provided in the next section of this report.

Event Summaries

Driving Digital Inclusion in Your Community: Afternoon Workshop – 16 October 2024

Online (Zoom)

Participants: 75

[Recording](#)

The **Driving Digital Inclusion in Your Community Afternoon Workshop** was an online event designed to address the growing digital skills gap in Ireland’s civil society sector. The event brought together community and voluntary organisations along with leading experts to explore barriers, opportunities and supports needed to foster digital transformation and inclusivity.

Following a brief welcome, participants joined small break out groups for a consultation moderated by facilitators. The consultation aimed to collect feedback on the challenges and opportunities organisations face in digitalising their services. These insights were set to inform the Digital

Transformation & the Sector event and related report. Discussions focused on four key questions. All answers were captured using a shared Padlet board:

- 1) What are the main barriers to digitalisation?
- 2) What are the priorities you have in ensuring your strategy is inclusive?
- 3) Do you see any opportunities in digitalisation and how it could transform your work?
- 4) What further supports do you need to progress or start your digitalisation journey?

A panel discussion followed, featuring speakers who shared insights and practical advice:

- **Brendan Mulry (Project Officer, Irish Rural Link):** Highlighted Irish Rural Link's experiences in delivering digital inclusion projects, discussing both challenges and opportunities they encountered as a civil society organisation.
- **Caitriona Whelan (Acting Communications, Advocacy and Outreach Manager, National Adult Literacy Agency NALA):** Emphasised the importance of digital inclusion for Ireland's civil society sector and shared accessibility tools and resources available to civil society organisations.
- **Mark Guerin (EPALE Support and Development Officer, Léargas):** Provided an EU perspective on digital transformation, outlining funding opportunities such as Erasmus+ to support civil society digitalisation initiatives.

After a Q&A session, Elizabeth Kelly, Deputy CEO of Enclude, presented a practical Roadmap to Digitalisation, offering actionable steps for organisations to digitise their operations, equipping attendees with tools and inspiration to champion digital inclusion in their communities.

The event was recorded, and all registered participants received follow-up emails with the recording and resources shared during the event.

Driving Digital Inclusion in Your Community: Morning Workshop – 23 October 2024

Online (Zoom)

Participants: 63

[Recording](#)

The **Driving Digital Inclusion in Your Community Morning Workshop** was the second online event designed to address the growing digital skills gap in Ireland's civil society sector. The event followed the same format as the 16 October event, bringing together community and voluntary organisations with leading experts to explore barriers, opportunities and supports needed to foster digital transformation and inclusivity.

Following a brief welcome, participants joined small break out groups for a consultation moderated by facilitators. The consultation aimed to collect feedback on the challenges and opportunities organisations face in digitalising their services. These insights were set to inform the following Digital Transformation Conference and related report. Discussions focused on four key questions. All answers were captured using a shared Padlet board:

- 1) What are the main barriers to digitalisation?
- 2) What are the priorities you have in ensuring your strategy is inclusive?
- 3) Do you see any opportunities in digitalisation and how it could transform your work?
- 4) What further supports do you need to progress or start your digitalisation journey?

A panel discussion followed, featuring speakers who shared insights and practical advice:

- **Gemma Leo (Business Support & Project Manager, Crann Centre)**: Highlighted Crann Centre's experiences in delivering digital inclusion projects, discussing both challenges and opportunities they encountered as a civil society organisation.
- **Jemma Lee (Senior Support and Development Officer, Adult Education, Léargas)**: Provided an EU perspective on digital transformation, outlining funding opportunities such as Erasmus+ to support civil society digitalisation initiatives.
- **Caitriona Whelan (Acting Communications, Advocacy and Outreach Manager, National Adult Literacy Agency NALA)**: Emphasised the importance of digital inclusion for Ireland's civil society sector and shared accessibility tools and resources available to civil society organisations.

After a Q&A session, Elizabeth Kelly, Deputy CEO of Enclude, presented a practical Roadmap to Digitalisation, offering actionable steps for organisations to digitise their operations, equipping attendees with tools and inspiration to champion digital inclusion in their communities.

The event was recorded, and all registered participants received follow-up emails with the recording and resources shared during the event.

Digital Transformation & the Sector – 30 October 2024

Online (Zoom)

Participants: 62

[Recording](#)

The final event in the series, **Digital Transformation & the Sector** offered a platform for discussing the digital skills gap within Ireland's community and voluntary sector. Building on insights from the two preceding **Driving Digital Inclusion in Your Community** events, the session explored practical ways to navigate the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation for civil society organisations.

Participants gained actionable insights, practical tools and the opportunity to engage directly with the following speakers and experts:

- **Emily Nelson (European Programmes Manager, The Wheel)** presented the results from the two preceding digitalisation consultations, highlighting sector-wide needs, priorities, and opportunities.
- **Mairead O'Connor (Skills Development Senior Manager, The Wheel)** outlined emerging digital skill requirements and strategies to upskill the sector.

- **Liz Kelly (Deputy CEO, Enclude)** shared actionable do's and don'ts from digitalisation efforts across the sector.
- **Dola Twomey (Sexual Violence Centre Cork)** provided a case study example of their successful digital transformation journey as a civil society organisation.
- **Lauren Carroll (Programmes Manager, The Wheel)** and **Christina Nuhr (EU Programmes Officer, The Wheel)** detailed funding options, including Training Links and relevant EU funding programmes to fund digitalisation for civil society organisations.

Learnings

The learnings from the event series are outlined below according to theme:

- Barriers to digitalisation
- Opportunities in digitalisation
- Digitalisation priorities for the sector
- Digitalisation supports needed

Barriers to Digitalisation for the Charity & Community Sector

Funding and budget constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital tools, software, and the costs of data management often not financed by grants • Licensing fees, maintenance, equipment, and specialised software costs are high
Lack of digital skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of media literacy, computer literacy and digital skills among sector staff and volunteers • Staff and volunteers have no formal digital skills training • Different age groups have different digital skillsets and have adapted to technology differently • Available information and training is often complex and not easily digestible
Time and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited staff capacity • Lack of time for learning, implementing, maintaining digital solutions

<p>Fear and resistance to change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns about the risks, such as data privacy, compliance, and security lead to lack of confidence and hesitation • Staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries can be hesitant to adopt new technologies • Stakeholders and staff don't necessarily want digital services - they prefer in-person • Fear of the unknown • Fear of making mistakes/the wrong decision • Civil society organisations deal with sensitive data, particularly if they work with vulnerable people; ensuring data privacy and security without deep technical resources is a significant challenge
<p>Infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General connectivity issues and lack of access to the internet • Poor Wi-Fi in rural areas • Lack of a service provider that understands the sector

Opportunities in Digitalisation for the Charity & Community Sector

<p>Improved service delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support stakeholders more efficiently and effectively • Allows 24/7 access to services • Opportunity to automate administrative systems and tasks and improve internal processes • Frees up staff time to focus on other areas and/or value-add tasks • Enables better overall insight when dealing with budgets and expenditure
<p>Expanded reach and engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach a wider audience, beyond local or regional boundaries • Enable greater participation of people with disabilities • Improved stakeholder engagement and enhanced collaboration • Greater opportunities for networking and collaboration with other organisations and communities

Data collection & impact measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier to capture true and accurate data • Digital data analytics can better demonstrate results • Allows for greater accuracy, transparency
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Digitalisation Priorities for the Charity & Community Sector

Understanding and involving diverse groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a human-centred approach • Consult and involve stakeholders • Conduct an analysis of stakeholder needs and access levels • Prototype and test before you make digital resources available to a wider audience • Provide space for users to feedback to ensure actual needs are addressed • Include diverse representatives across gender, race, and roles within organisation to feed into digital strategy
Empowering stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support stakeholders to learn while overcoming fears • Use a motivator and make it fun for people to engage • Build stakeholder confidence and skills organically as they learn • Make sure training is not ageist
Learning and knowledge sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from best practices • Partner with other organisations in the sector • Share knowledge and resources • Encourage ongoing learning and peer exchange
Creating accessible and inclusive digital strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research best practices in accessibility & inclusion • Use language apps and plug-ins • Ensure accessibility and learn about tools for people with different challenges

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a suite of offerings to allow everyone to engage • Meet accessibility standards across websites, applications, and other digital resources • Use Plain English and avoid jargon • Enlist the help of experts in accessibility
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Digitalisation Supports Needed for the Charity & Community Sector

Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grants and funding specifically for digital infrastructure, devices, and software • Funding for staff capacity-building • Discounted or free access to software and services from tech companies • Funding for or access to a free digitalisation consultation with a professional
Training and Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Templates and toolkits for creating a digital strategy and developing digital skills • Case studies from organisations who have successfully digitalized • Conduct a survey of existing staff skills and gaps
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decent internet access regardless of location or finances • Access to and awareness of open-source technology

Recommendations

Based on the learnings from the event series, The Wheel recommends a cross-sectoral approach to advancing the below actions in support of an inclusive digital transformation for the Irish charity and community sector.

1) Enhance Digital Skills Training and Support:

- Develop targeted training programs tailored to the different skill levels within the community sector, ensuring accessibility for volunteers and staff of varying ages and technological expertise.
- Create straightforward and easy-to-understand training resources that address media literacy and practical digital skills, helping participants overcome resistance and build confidence
- Collaborate with sector experts to develop training/resources encouraging a human-centred design approach that incorporates feedback from diverse stakeholders, including people with disabilities, to ensure digital platforms meet varied needs.

2) Secure Dedicated Funding for Digital Initiatives:

- Advocate for and secure funding specific to digitalisation needs, covering software, devices, and ongoing maintenance.
- Establish partnerships with technology companies to provide discounted or free access to essential digital tools and services, easing the financial burden on community organisations.

3) Improve Infrastructure and Access:

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

4) Foster Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:

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