

Enabling Social Innovation in Ireland

Country Snapshot

Social innovation: "the processes and outcomes of developing novel approaches to address societal challenges facing people and planet." ¹

This snapshot represents a descriptive, non-exhaustive overview of key highlights from Ireland's social innovation ecosystem.

✓ Direct focus on social innovation Ⓜ Connected but indirect focus on social innovation ✗ No focus on social innovation

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Official Definition of Social Innovation Ⓜ

Ireland does not appear to use a single, standalone definition of "social innovation" in primary legislation in the public sources reviewed; however, operational definitions are used in Government-led ESF+ social innovation programming. ^{2 3}

Key elements emphasised in these programme definitions include:

- addressing social needs and improving social outcomes
- developing and testing new ideas (products, services, practices, models)
- collaboration across sectors and scaling effective solutions. ^{2 3}

Adjacent terms are well established in policy, notably "social enterprise" and "social economy." Trading for Impact defines "social enterprise" and clarifies how it relates to nearby concepts (social innovation, social entrepreneurship). ⁵

Government Body for Social Innovation ✓

A central institutional locus for social innovation programming is the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, which sponsors and positions ESF+ social innovation initiatives such as the New Solutions Social Innovation Fund and related ecosystem supports. ⁴

Key delivery and governance roles highlighted in official programme materials include:

- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science as ESF+ managing authority for the Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training Programme (EIST) 2021–2027 (the broader programme framework for the social innovation priority). ³
- Pobal as a delivery partner referenced in programme implementation materials (e.g., administration and supports). ⁴
- Office of Government Procurement as a policy and guidance hub for socially responsible public procurement (a relevant enabling instrument for mission-led or socially driven solutions). ¹²

Government Strategy for Social Innovation ✓

While a standalone, dedicated national "social innovation strategy" was not identified in the public sources reviewed, relevant strategic elements appear in:

- Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024–2027 (objectives and actions that support market building, awareness, financing links, and impact measurement for social enterprises). ⁵
- National Social Enterprise Policy 2019–2022 (earlier policy framework, evidencing continuity of Government attention to social enterprise infrastructure). ⁶
- Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy, which explicitly frames "social innovation" alongside scientific and technological innovation in meeting national missions such as climate and sustainability goals. ²⁷

Policies, Laws & Regulations

Ireland's enabling environment uses multiple organisational and legal routes rather than a single "social enterprise" legal form. Trading for Impact notes there is no prescribed legal/company form for social enterprises.⁵

Key legal and regulatory building blocks for mission-led and social economy activity include:

- Charities regulation via the Charities Act 2009.⁷
- Company incorporation and governance via the Companies Act 2014.⁸
- Co-operative/IPS frameworks (historic legislative base) and active reform work through the published General Scheme of the Co-Operative Societies Bill 2022.^{9 10}
- Enabling market-shaping guidance for procurement: Circular 20/2019 promotes social and environmental considerations in public procurement, complemented by OGP guidance on socially responsible public procurement.^{11 12}
- General innovation incentives (non-social-specific), including the Revenue R&D tax credit framework (rate and rules provided by Revenue).¹⁶

Official Statistics

Routine official statistics specifically labelled "social innovation" were not identified in the public sources reviewed. Government has, however, invested in sector measurement for social enterprise through a baseline data collection exercise.¹³

Related official indicators supporting ecosystem understanding include:

- volunteering participation and civic engagement metrics from Census 2022 spotlight reporting.¹⁷
- environmental indicators (including greenhouse gas emissions) published by the national statistical office.²⁶

Government Programs

Ireland has dedicated Government-led programmes directly supporting social innovation, notably under ESF+.

- New Solutions Social Innovation Fund (ESF+): a €9.8m commitment that combines grant-making with ecosystem-building through a Social Innovation Hub; includes pilots and scaling supports, with scaling grants referenced in the €250k–€300k range and a match-funding requirement in the programme description.⁴
- Achieve Together Social Innovation Coaching and Mentoring Programme (ESF+): provides tailored coaching, mentoring and training supports, positioned under the EIST 2021–2027 social innovation priority.^{3 4}
- National Competence Centres for Social Innovation (NCCSI): Government-published information describes consultative and research-oriented work towards developing competence-centre capacity, including data infrastructure and potential approaches to funding mechanisms.¹⁸

ECOSYSTEM

Stakeholders

Key ecosystem actors are visible through Government-backed programmes and partnerships, including:

- Social Innovation Hub consortium (New Solutions): Rethink Ireland (lead), The Wheel, the Local Development Companies Network, Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Western Development Commission, and Dublin City University.⁴
- NCCSI-linked actors and collaborators referenced in Government materials, including Rethink Ireland and Genio (in the Irish competence-centre development context).¹⁸
- Sector measurement and local development infrastructure partners evidenced in the social enterprise baseline exercise.¹³

Support Initiatives

Support infrastructure combines grant funding with capacity building and practical supports:

- Social Innovation Hub (New Solutions): designed as a "one-stop-shop" style support, including capacity building, convening, and impact measurement supports; also references a planned digital hub/website.⁴
- Coaching, mentoring and training via Achieve Together under ESF+ social innovation priority.³

Collaboration



Collaboration is supported through policy implementation structures and convening formats:

- Trading for Impact includes actions oriented to national visibility and convening (e.g., conference, awards, newsletters) and structured policy implementation arrangements. ⁵
- The NCCSI consultative advisory structure is explicitly cross-sector, with workstreams spanning data, impact assessment, funding mechanisms, and policy/regulatory opportunities. ¹⁸

FINANCE

Financing Schemes



Ireland uses a mix of EU co-financed programming and national allocations to fund social innovation and adjacent social enterprise development.

- ESF+ New Solutions Social Innovation Fund: €9.8m overall programme commitment, combining grants and a Social Innovation Hub. ⁴
- Dormant Accounts Fund (Social Enterprise Measure): Government reporting notes that since 2017, “just under €10 million” has been allocated and supports provided to approximately 1,500 organisations. ¹⁴
- Dormant Accounts Action Plan 2026: Government communication describes overall targeted funding to address disadvantage and includes allocations linked to philanthropic and ecosystem capacity (e.g., support to Rethink Ireland and for implementation of the National Philanthropy Policy). ¹⁵

Financing Inclusivity



Public funding emphasises inclusion and improving outcomes for disadvantaged groups. New Solutions explicitly frames its aims around social inclusion and better outcomes for groups experiencing disadvantage. ⁴

Dedicated, finance-only earmarks targeting specific demographics (e.g., women-only, minority-only) were not clearly identified in the public sources reviewed; however, Trading for Impact highlights the role of social enterprises in supporting marginalised groups and includes youth-facing awareness and education actions. ⁵

SOCIETY

Public Awareness of & Research



Government policy documents position awareness-building as a practical enabler. Trading for Impact includes actions such as national awareness campaigns and annual convening (conference, awards) to help mainstream the social enterprise model and its social impact narrative. ⁵

Social innovation is also visible through dedicated Government-backed programmes and communications under ESF+ social innovation funding. ^{2 4}

Research



Evidence-building is supported through commissioned baseline exercises and EU-linked competence centre development:

- Social enterprise baseline data collection exercise (2022 snapshot) provides sector measurement and a basis for future tracking. ¹³
- NCCSI work highlights research and data infrastructure development (including a “live database” ambition referenced in Government materials). ¹⁸
- International policy evidence and comparative framing is available through OECD social economy reporting for Ireland. ¹⁹

Education & Human Capital



Human capital supports are visible through programme-based training and youth-facing initiatives:

- Achieve Together provides structured coaching, mentoring and training for organisations under ESF+ social innovation priority.³
- New Solutions' Social Innovation Hub includes capacity building and practical supports for development and scaling.⁴
- Trading for Impact references youth engagement through a social enterprise module within entrepreneurship education initiatives.⁵

Entrepreneurship

Selected national-level indicators provide context for Ireland's broader innovation and entrepreneurial environment:



Business Environment

The World Bank's B-READY publishes Business Entry indicators for Ireland (as a modern successor-style measurement to earlier "ease of doing business" approaches).²²



Innovation Capacity

Global Innovation Index 2025

Competitiveness/regulatory proxies:

Competitiveness/regulatory proxies: OECD product market regulation reporting positions Ireland as a strong performer on economy-wide PMR indicators (based on laws/regulations in force on 1 Jan 2023, with some data to 1 Jan 2024).²³



Social entrepreneurship prevalence

GEM (latest profile data shown for 2021): Ireland's Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate is reported at 12.5%, and Established Business Ownership (EBO) at 6.9%.²¹

Social & Environmental Consciousness

Ireland's civic participation and environmental indicators show foundations that can support mission-driven innovation:



Solidarity

Climate indicators: EPA reporting estimates Ireland's 2024 greenhouse gas emissions (excluding LULUCF) at 53.93 Mt CO₂eq (with per-capita estimates reported), while CSO publishes complementary national series (e.g., 2023 reported at 55 Mt CO₂eq).^{25 26}



Political participation

very low regular volunteering in political organisations (under 1%).¹⁷



14% population

Volunteering

Census 2022 spotlight reporting indicates 14% of the population engaged in regular voluntary work (711,379 people), with



Sustainability

Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2024

