



Virtual  
Community  
College

An Cosan VCC response to  
National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland  
2019-2022



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An Cosán VCC are submitting the following response as an organisation with expertise in social enterprise development, accessible community education, high quality pedagogy and technology enhanced learning.

## Background

### *An Cosán (The Shanty Educational Project renamed An Cosán)*

Founded in 1986 our mission is to empower people experiencing the injustices of poverty and inequality through education.

For thirty years An Cosán has been delivering lifelong learning in Tallaght West, teaching from early years to adulthood in communities that struggle with injustice and inequality. An Cosán offers a variety of programmes in early years education and care in 7 sites across Dublin to 350 children and adult community education from foundation education to degree level to a 1,000 educationally and economically disadvantaged learners each year. An Cosán are acknowledged in a national and European context for our expertise and alignment with a range of quality assurance systems.

### An Cosán Virtual Community College

An Cosán VCC was founded in 2014 and has developed a national profile through its innovative and award-winning Virtual Community College (VCC). VCC is reducing the digital divide, supporting learners to develop their skills through using 21st century teaching and learning technologies, and offering additional supports to learners to enable them to achieve their full potential.

### An Cosán's educational track record

An Cosán VCC delivers programmes spanning the national framework of qualifications, ranging from unaccredited education to QQI level 7 degrees. It also offers accredited, continuous professional development programmes to community educators in 'Transformative Community Education' and 'Technology Enhanced Learning'. Feedback from community partners and learners concerning VCC's blended learning model is positive and supportive.

### Social Enterprise track record

An Cosán VCC have been actively engaged in the delivery of Social Enterprise accredited and unaccredited courses in partnership with City and Guilds, IT Carlow, our network of 118 regional partners and other networks, and with local authorities, most recently in collaboration with DCCLEO. As a multi award winning social enterprise itself, An Cosán VCC understands the challenges and needs of social enterprises in the community sector. An Cosán VCC along with other social enterprises under the An Cosán umbrella (Fledglings Early Years Education & Care) are part of the strategic vision to scale social enterprise in a regional, national and European context.

## Introduction

We welcome the Department of Rural and Community Development's (DRCDD) work to develop this Policy, the need for which was acknowledged in the Programme for Government. We support its broad aims to increase awareness at all levels of Social Enterprise, while strengthening the sector and the alignment of policies across other government departments.

We are active members of both the Wheel and ISEN. We work in collaboration with both organisations and wish to endorse their responses to the draft National Social Enterprise Policy. However, we felt it would be useful to make our own separate response, primarily give a strong voice for the demographic that our organisation focuses on.

Our strategic goals are in alignment with the pledge of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to reach 'the furthest behind first'. It is from this understanding that we make the following responses.

## 5 Responses

1. **Targeting support for disadvantaged communities.** We would like to see that the Policy makes a clearer distinction in the level and appropriateness of supports offered (training opportunities, local community Social Enterprise incubation hubs, appropriate financial instruments, impact measurement support, etc) to those with lowest levels of capacity due to exclusion, and social disadvantage. Once clearly sign-posted in the policy, we can be confident that this will guide the implementation strategy to adequately mitigate the risk of a two-tier Social Enterprise sector.
  - a. (A comparable approach would be the ambition of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme to *"have the best education and training system in Europe within the decade. It includes the goals of improving the path of educational opportunity for those who come to education at a disadvantage and of strengthening the capacity of education and training to break cycles in communities with high concentrations of disadvantage."*)

2. **Stage appropriate support.** We strongly recommend that a greater understanding of the stages and pathways to social enterprise development and the need for stage appropriate supports are made explicit in the Policy. This is in line with evidence and best practice from successful incubation of the sector internationally. It allows for solutions to arise from within communities and be supported at every stage of development with supports such as: micro-finance, income support, hyper-local community incubation hubs, mentoring/coaching, education and training. This should also take into account the flexibility needed in organisational structure as a Social Enterprise develops and therefore should not be restrictive vis-a-vis prescriptive organisation types (voluntary boards etc) A not-for-profit or charity often starts as a small local voluntary group. A social enterprise can start as an individual sole trader with a social or environmental mission and move to a social business before becoming a social enterprise. Certain kinds of asset locking would not be appropriate at these early stages and yet small amounts of angel type funding might be needed to help a start-up. In addition, acknowledgement that start-up resources can come from the individuals concerned, including their paid or unpaid time.
  - a. A comparable model is the kinds of income supports offered to social welfare recipients when setting up as sole traders or small business owners versus later developmental supports from a LEO and later again for large export focused companies.
  
3. **Capacity of Educators.** We would like to see further emphasis in the Policy on its commitment to developing the capacity of Educators in the Social Enterprise sector. We feel there is a need to add a more specific section of the Policy that signals support for the development of a Community of Practice of Social Enterprise with access to research support and supports for opportunities to collaborate internationally. The full value of Educator energy and experience is not being fully developed to date as there has not been a central collaborative space for providers of social enterprise education. The knowledge and experience of educators is currently rarely shared in anything other than ad hoc ways. There are no processes or tools currently in use to preserve or disseminate best practices nor arenas in which to address shared challenges. (Note that the list of institutions delivering Social Enterprise education does not include Institutes of Technology (An Cosan VCC offers a higher education programme in Leadership and Social Enterprise, accredited by IT Carlow).

4. **SDG, Climate and Biodiversity Emergency context.** As the aim of the Policy is to fit within a coordinated and integrate approach to the wider non-profit sector, we see an opportunity for taking this approach further. Using the Climate and Bio-diversity emergency and the SDG cross departmental work, there is an opportunity to link Social Enterprise development with key Policies in multiple departments as they are active across many policy areas. Ireland has a contribution to make Internationally especially in the areas of equality in education, circular economy, and sustainable lives where there is considerable innovation already present in the Social Enterprise sector. A dynamic cross-departmental approach would be a further innovation and help our reputation internationally. This could be aided by the proposed implementation committee if drawn from several departments.
  
5. **Impact Measurement supports.** We agree with the emphasis in the Policy on building capacity in the sector to facilitate better impact measurement. This would allow for the contribution of the sector to many areas of government policy implementation to be highlighted. However, despite this being a critical area for *Impact First* organisations there are specific issues that the Policy does not address. For example, in the case of a Charity with an impact legacy branching into trading, or an early start-up Social Enterprise, adequate resources are rarely available to dedicate to data collection either retrospectively or in the start-up phase. Grant aid frequently omits provision of resources for impact measurement. In rare cases when it does exist it is only short-term programme funding. As there is no central repository for such data culminative knowledge is lost. Across both the community and voluntary sector and the social enterprise sector, the social or environmental issues being tackled can ben categorised as *Wicked Problems* ("a problem whose social complexity means that it has no determinable stopping point"). This means that impacts can be years in the making. We recommend that the Policy makes provision for the setting up of a government funded research and impact measurement foundation/organisation that offers highly subsidised services to both the Social Enterprise and not-for-profit sectors, in addition to funding independent research through PhD grant aid (Similar to elements of the remit of the EPA). This would mean that research could be both commissioned and available for use by both Government and the Social Enterprise sector in a more accessible manner.

## Conclusion

Finally, we would like to state for emphasis the need for any Social Enterprise Policy to be open to the rapid development of the sector. Social Enterprises have to do all that other enterprises do plus more. They often operate where an enterprise would not think it was worth their while. However, after operating for long periods often without recognition or advantage, (something that could be remedied by social benefit clauses in public procurement) the value they accrue can be vulnerable to the private sector capitalising on their longitudinal dedication.

All this means care is needed when creating policies and coming up with definitions, so that Governments do not exclude or discriminate against those who have existing disadvantages. We are co-evolving the sector from many different conceptual and value bases and this makes for diversity and the greater chance for highly creative innovations.

“one recent publication... lists twenty different definitions, and one year later another compilation lists twenty-seven ...

In social science, **terminological proliferation is the hallmark of every new field that enjoys rapid growth**. In the case of social entrepreneurship, two facts exacerbate the situation – that not primarily researchers but managers and entrepreneurs determine the evolution of the field, with the conceptual bases of these groups rarely converging, and that wide differences exist worldwide in socio-economic values and systems.”

(Business Models of Social Enterprise: A Design Approach to Hybridity: Wolfgang Grass)

One of the reasons many community groups and individuals are turning towards Social Enterprise is the belief that earning a proportion or all income through trade will allow for greater autonomy than in other restrictive models where over-regulation, and changes in government directions is a frequent burden or barrier to creating innovative solutions to the issues they wish to solve. Social Enterprise allows for a more creative, agile, adaptive approach to the “Wicked Problems” mentioned earlier. We hope the final Policy supports this much needed sectorial innovation.