Waterford Institute *of* Technology

INSTITIÚID TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA PHORT LÁIRGE

Submission from

Waterford Institute of Technology

to the consultation on the

Draft National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022

14 May 2019

1. Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) welcomes the publication of the draft *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022* and the opportunity to contribute to the further development of the policy and the overall approach to social enterprise in Ireland.

2. CPA Ireland (2018) states, in *Social Enterprise: the Irish and international landscapes* report, that Social Enterprise as a sector has the potential to create up to 40,000 jobs and contribute €2 billion to the Irish economy.[1] Social Enterprise is already responsible for at least 25,000 jobs and €1.4 billion in economic activity in Ireland. Social Enterprises also have the potential to address the numerous social deficits which have emerged in Ireland as a result of public finance constraints. The publication of the policy is a timely recognition of this important and emerging contribution, the origins of which are in strong community development principles and practices. Notwithstanding the demonstrable contribution of this sector to Ireland's economy—not to mention the contribution of Social Enterprise to local and community cohesion—there are fundamental challenges for the sector in gaining due recognition and indeed legitimacy. These include a lack of understanding of what a social enterprise is and the hybrid-nature of a social enterprise (for instance, is it a traditional business or is it a community development project, largely operated by volunteers and goodwill?) The publication of the policy, the objectives and actions set out in it will go a long way to assisting the sector's profile and with gaining sectoral recognition.

3. The draft policy sets out some of the other parallel policies that have been developed and that are relevant to Social Enterprise, rightly claiming that Social Enterprise is now more embedded in the national policy landscape than ever. While recognising that Social Enterprise is not confined to rural areas, it is important that the contribution of to future rural development is acknowledged and the policy framework within which rural development takes place fully described. It would be appropriate for instance that the policy contains some reference to the *National Planning Framework* and cross-references against some of the principles in that strategy, specifically those related to regional development and rural job creation. It would be expected that, in policy terms, the Social Enterprise policy would articulate with the various regional spatial and economic strategies (RSESs) currently in development. Furthermore, some reference to existing and planning governance structures (such as Public Participation Networks (PPNs)) would be appropriate.

4. The draft policy states, "Many social enterprises work hand-in-hand with public bodies in the delivery of their services" (p.3). The policy must enable such collaborative activity to take place. Higher education organizations and other public institutions should be encouraged and facilitated to work closely with social enterprises to form regional, national and international networks, thus creating greater mass and capacity amongst other things to access funding and to share expertise and practice. The capacity of an organization such as the GAA, with deep community roots and yet with national (indeed international) reach, should not be underestimated and partnerships between Social Enterprises, public institutions and organizations such as sporting bodies should be encouraged—and referenced in the policy.

5. The definition provided on p.6 is very useful and a strong basis on which to advocate for the sector. It is important, however, that the definition and set of criteria that is being created in the policy is broad enough to recognise areas such as Community Recreation as contributing to the overall Social Enterprise effort; there is a danger in over-prescribing what qualifies as Social Enterprise. The bottom-up nature of Social Enterprise and its roots in efforts to address social inequality, to promote justice, to address community need and

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[1] See https://www.cpaireland.ie/CPAIreland/media/Business-Development/CPA-Social-Enterprise_July2018.pdf.

promote and facilitate improvement in life quality for communities should be not be lost in any description of the sector.

6. We read in the draft policy that "Social entrepreneurs and social innovators are an important part of the wider social enterprise ecosystem" (p.9). This is to understate the contribution of Social Enterprise to the *wider* enterprise ecosystem. While acknowledging the unique circumstances that social entrepreneurs find themselves in (see point 5 above), it is important in order to recognise the impact of the sector that social entrepreneurs are recognised as *entrepreneurs* and as part of the wide range of entrepreneurial and innovative activity driving Irish economic development. In this sense, it is important that Social Enterprise is not treated as an activity that is somehow unconventional and therefore not deserving of typical supports or recognition. It should be noted that Social Enterprise offers models that can be replicated across a spectrum of companies and lead to happier and more engaged employees and stakeholders. The capacity of Social Enterprise to offer direction and guidance right across the business sector should be recognised.

7. The strong support provided by LEOs is rightly acknowledged in the policy (p.11). It would be appropriate also that the policy registered the very considerable potential for Social Enterprise to link to the enterprise support structures and ecosystems clustered in and around some of the regional Institutes of Technology.[2] The policy should make specific reference alongside reference to the LEOs to the role of IOTs in particular (given their regional base and remit) with regard to Social Enterprise. (The challenges raised on p.18 for instance could be addressed within the context of an IOT-based innovation centre.)

8. In addition, there are other ways in which HEIs can contribute to the further development of the sector and it may be appropriate to reference these in the policy (in support of point 5 on page 17).

- HEIs can build the capacity of people working within the social enterprise sector by providing them with accredited qualifications in social enterprise management in order to develop their knowledge, skills, self-confidence and self-efficacy as managers of social enterprises. An example of this is WIT's School of Lifelong Learning and Education which has developed a Certificate in Social Enterprise Management (Level 7, 30 credits) which complements its suite of Community Education and Development (Levels 6, 7 and 8), and offers pathways to professional qualifications for people working in the social enterprise and community and voluntary sectors. The policy might make specific reference to the ongoing need for these supports and endorse an approach that facilitates the delivery of accredited programme of training and education.
- The policy should emphasize the capability of HEIs to support Social Enterprise and add to the recognition of the sector by embedding Social Enterprise as accredited modules within the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, where relevant; the policy might reference schemes to incentivize HEIs to partner with Social Enterprise on these kinds of curriculum-related projects. This would allow undergraduate and postgraduate students to engage with real-life social enterprises, conduct case studies of local and regional social enterprises, and support the development of social enterprises through applied project work, all of which is likely to develop the sector.
- The research capability of HEIs can be usefully drawn on by Social Enterprise; HEIs certainly can play a role, as partners with Social Enterprise within meaningful regional, national and international networks, of "Establishing the size, reach and impact of social enterprise […] to inform policy development in

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[2] See, for instance, WIT's research and innovation centre, ArcLabs (www.arclabs.ie).

the years ahead"(p.24). By researching good practice and the social and economic impacts of social enterprises, HEIs can play a key role in raising the profile and legitimacy of social enterprise nationally. Using an evidence based approach, they could measure, in both quantitative but more importantly in qualitative ways, the impact social enterprises are having on their communities of interest/geography and the wider society and economy. It may be useful to reference this capability in the policy.

- HEI's, particularly IOTs which are regionally based, can facilitate the co-ordination of networks of social enterprises and other partners, assisting with the development of the critical mass needed to access some funding. HEI's can also offer facilities to showcase, celebrate and share the outputs from Social Enterprise.

9. The critical importance of good governance is indicated on p.19. Training needs in relation to governance can be sourced, once again, within innovation centres linked to IOTs and the structures of these centres can be used to co-ordinate social entrepreneurs and enterprises to critical mass in order that they can access training and other supports. There is a balance between the demands of good governance relating to accountability and compliance and bureaucratic requirements that can be an enormous burden on small organizations. The policy should while properly highlighting the importance of good governance should also commit to the reduction of regulatory and compliance costs for social enterprises.

10. While the focus of the policy is on Ireland, it is important that sharing best practice in the domain of Social Enterprise is recognized and facilitated. The policy identifies the large volume of publications and policies that have arisen in this area from the European Commission (p.7) but is largely silent on the need for international collaboration and co-operation. It would be worthwhile offering some encouragement in the policy for Social Enterprise to network internationally and to draw on international practice and exemplars. Again, HEIs could have a role here as a conduit into Europe and beyond.