

Submission to the consultation on the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2024–2027

We are pleased to make this submission in response to the consultation to inform the development of a new national social enterprise policy for Ireland.

Background

Volunteer Ireland is the national organisation that promotes, supports and advocates for volunteering in Ireland. We work with a range of stakeholders to make volunteering accessible, inclusive and of high quality. We build capacity in organisations and companies to create meaningful volunteering experiences. We celebrate volunteering and communicate its impact to Government and the wider public. We advocate for volunteering so that its value is recognised. We support the network of Volunteer Centres and work closely with them to ensure volunteering thrives at local and national level.

Volunteer Centres are at the hearts of communities across Ireland working to support, promote and celebrate volunteering. They help people who want to volunteer find suitable roles; and help organisations in need of volunteers to find suitable people to fill those roles. Volunteer Centres provide support and advice to volunteers and organisations; deliver training; process Garda vetting and run a range of other projects dedicated to facilitating and enhancing volunteering locally.

Policy objective two: Growing social enterprise

Valuing volunteers

According to [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#), 75,000 volunteers, including board members, are involved in social enterprises. With 85,000 paid staff working in social enterprises, that means that just under half of those engaged in social enterprises are volunteers. Despite this, there are no specific actions relating to volunteers in the previous social enterprise policy (2019 – 2022), nor are volunteers named as a specific cohort in the public consultation document for the development of a

new strategy. Given the importance of volunteers to social enterprises, their contribution should be recognised in the new policy. Social enterprises are a unique actor in the community and voluntary sector in that their objective is to make a profit albeit with a social, economic or environmental impact. No other business relies on volunteers in this way.

Developing skills in volunteer management

The public consultation document refers to the provision of business supports including tailored training and mentoring measures that should be targeted for social enterprises to ensure they can become equipped, to the greatest extent possible, with the skills needed for the future.

Given that almost half of those engaged in social enterprises are volunteers, training in volunteer management must also be a high priority. Training in volunteer management would include a breadth of topics such as recruiting and retaining volunteers, engaging diverse volunteers, managing difficult volunteers, developing a volunteer strategy and much more.

Engaging, supporting and retaining volunteers is becoming increasingly difficult, in part because the way people want to volunteer is changing. For social enterprises to survive and thrive, they must be equipped deal with the changing nature of volunteering and be able to provide a quality experience for their volunteers. Therefore, it is important that this policy supports the provision of tailored training in volunteer management.

Volunteer Ireland provides a wealth of training in volunteer engagement from the fundamentals of volunteering to bite size online training on specific topics and bespoke training and consultation for individual organisations.

Volunteers should not replace paid roles

Volunteers should never replace paid roles. This is an important principle in all organisations that involve volunteers, including in social enterprises. Determining if a volunteer role is replacing a paid role is not straight forward. Two questions that can help determine if this is the case, are:

- 1) If a volunteer did not do this, would we pay someone to do it?
- 2) Is the volunteer role description the same or very similar to a paid employee role description?

The new social enterprise policy should state clearly that volunteer roles should not replace paid roles.

Policy objective four: National and international engagement

Aligning with the National Volunteering Strategy 2021 – 2025

Although the previous social enterprise policy notes that it should be delivered in a coordinated and integrated way alongside the Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sectors in Ireland, and the National Volunteering Strategy, there is opportunity for more cohesion in the new policy. The [National Volunteering Strategy](#) notes “Social Enterprises attract volunteers with a diverse mix of skills and experience, people who can inject ideas, passion, and creativity and have the capabilities to help shape their future direction and ensure growth.” Likewise, in order to ensure cohesion, the new social enterprise policy should also reference the importance of volunteers and the National Volunteering Strategy.

European and international engagement

It's positive that Ireland places importance on actively engaging on social enterprise at the European and international level. Social enterprise and volunteering are both rapidly evolving areas. Working with colleagues in other countries and engaging at a European policy level are critical to help us learn and adapt to change. We are an active member of the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), the European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion of, and support to, volunteers and volunteering in Europe at European, national or regional level.

In 2023, CEV produced a [policy statement](#) on volunteering and social enterprises. A particular point to note from the policy statement is that volunteering in social enterprises should respect volunteering principles and values and take place only in a not-for-profit context. In other words, volunteers should only be engaged in a social enterprise where all profits go back into social, economic and environmental benefits. Volunteers should not be engaged where a social enterprise creates private profit.

Conclusion

This submission outlines the importance of volunteers to social enterprises and, by extension, the new National Social Enterprise Policy 2024 – 2027. We are happy to discuss or clarify any of the matters above in more detail.