

JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT

Opening Statement from
Social Entrepreneurs Ireland

Tim Griffiths
Chief Executive Officer



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Firstly, I'd like to thank the committee for their invitation to this meeting.

My name is Tim Griffiths and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, and prior to this role I have over 25 years' experience in the communications industry, the majority of which in senior leadership positions. I also sit on the board of directors of Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland (SERI).

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland is a not-for-profit organisation (Charity Reg Number No: 20065379), that is committed to accelerated social change through the power of people. Since our foundation in 2004, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland has identified and supported more than 600 social entrepreneurs across the island of Ireland who are championing and driving solutions in areas such as mental health, homelessness, the environment, education, and unemployment. Our vision is accelerated social change through the power of people. What does this mean, quite simply we deliver this in two ways:

- we seek out people with unique insight and scalable ideas to social problems; and then
- we offer them a deeper level of support to grow their impact through our vibrant community of changemakers.

This support contributes to solving or alleviating social problems.

The support that we offer social entrepreneurs is made up of a balance of direct funding; and coaching, expertise and mentorship. We ourselves are funded through a combination of sources from corporates, foundations and individual philanthropy.

The Committee is seeking views on challenges facing businesses in relation to sustainability and corporate social responsibility. In a very practical and direct way, as part of our work we provide a pathway for our innovative social entrepreneurs to achieve social change, through connecting with businesses. In turn, this provides a conduit for business to make a constructive and impactful response to their CSR obligations, and meeting those challenges.

Much of the support we give is delivered in conjunction with many of the corporates that support us. We are very fortunate to have great corporate supporters, many over a long period of time, that include well-established Irish organisations such as Keelings and DCC plc, as well as global organisations like Bank of America.

To illustrate the impact of this support, I propose to outline some examples of some of the social entrepreneurs that we have supported over the past 20 years.

Mamobo Ogoro:

GORM is a social enterprise on a mission to unify across social and cultural differences and advance belonging for marginalised communities. GORM helps bridge connections and conversations across communities through a unique blend of expertise in social psychology and creative media. They focus on creating innovative digital media, intercultural education and events.

GORM have successfully piloted an initial project This is “Them” which highlights the voices of people in different and diverse backgrounds. It has run events on the topic of Diversity in the Media. GORM have piloted their Diverse Screen Programme in late 2021, which had professionals give interactional talks on entering the media industry to new entrants. Mamobo is also developing a research and feasibility study on Cultural Diversity in Irish media to inform a media specific diversity training programme for media professionals.

One of their recent programmes (from 2022-23), The Wideshot, was launched to support young people from ethnically diverse backgrounds to take the first step in the media careers through a series of workshops, education, training and events on digital storytelling, creative media and multimedia. The programme aims to connect young people and recent graduates interested in creative media and we connect them to established Film & TV practitioners and creative media professionals in Ireland by way of interactive workshops throughout the year.

James Leonard and Timmy Long:

The Two Norries Podcast was a platform dedicated to addressing the issue of addiction through open and honest conversations. Available to the public on-demand, the podcast provided regular episodes that featured personal stories centered around addiction and recovery, with the aim of breaking down the stigma and misconceptions surrounding these topics. They also provide educational talks to companies and have worked with the Irish Prison Service carrying out workshops in prisons.

The Two Norries have had significant impact through media appearances, including the Tommy Tiernan Show in 2020, Nationwide on RTÉ in October and have been nominated for Cork Person of the Year 2022. They have had over 1 million downloads of the podcast, with a number of listeners directly seeking support, accessing education or changing their attitudes towards people in addiction and in prison because of its content.

In 2022, They increased the listenership on the podcast by 158% and are in the top one percent of followed podcasts on Spotify.

Catherine Cleary and Ashe Conrad-Jones:

Pocket Forests have crafted a transformative model that empowers communities to create and cherish natural spaces in their neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces. Their approach involves retrofitting urban environments, influencing public discourse, and rekindling community bonds with nature. They achieve this by offering engaging soil health workshops and planting biodiverse, native forests in the heart of neighbourhoods, within schools, and amidst the hustle and bustle of workplaces.

Pocket Forests have created 75 tiny forests and planted more than 2,500 trees and shrubs. They established a small tree nursery in the Digital Hub in Dublin and on the grounds of Shelton Abbey Open Prison in collaboration with the Irish Prison Service. In 2021 Pocket Forests received two years funding from the Department of Agriculture Woodland Support Fund to work with 40 communities around Ireland in schools, GAA grounds, hospices and Tidy Towns spaces.

I hope that the above examples have provided a tangible illustration of what we do, what motivates us to continue to do this, and the very real impact which is being made by so many social entrepreneurs around the country.

I would like to stress that we could have a much wider impact, if there were:

Increased cross-government co-ordination

As outlined in the recent public consultation document on the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2024-2027, where it states that 'Under the new policy, supporting this renewed focus demands greater levels of coordination across Government Departments and agencies'. In our submission, as part of the consultation process, we stated that social enterprise is playing a greater role in supporting the delivery of government strategies and objectives and we believe there should be clearer and more established channels for social enterprise to engage with government. These channels should factor in cross-government engagement as, in our experience, many social enterprises operate in areas that are under the remit of multiple government departments – for example, a social enterprise may be supporting the delivery of a strategy/ strategic objectives through their work under the Department of Education and Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

We believe that consideration should be given as to how social enterprises access government departments to raise awareness of their work with key representatives; establish a relationship with government officials to inform department(s) of their work on the ground; and how best to access support through collaboration with government.

A bespoke legal structure for social enterprises

We believe that there are related challenges with both how social enterprises are defined in the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2024-2027 and the options currently available to social enterprises for legal structures. We believe that government policy should investigate a new bespoke legal structure for social enterprises that can encompass both for profit and not for profit social enterprises. The current definition as stated in the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2024-2027 could be perceived as diminishing the importance of profit which in certain cases is necessary to achieve the maximum potential of the social enterprise and the societal benefit it is aspiring to deliver.

We believe that government should look for international examples beyond looking to include social enterprises within the cooperative legal model, as suggested in the policy.

A more appropriate legal structure would benefit social enterprises when accessing support. This universal legal form which should encompass regulation and transparency along with enterprise and agility will enable quicker growth for social enterprises.

- Business supports: These supports should be universal for organisations that identify as a social enterprise. Currently, legal structure is a consideration in this.
- Funding: Consideration for core funding supports for social enterprise on a multi-annual should be included to enable growth of a social enterprises traded income stream.

A coordinated approach to Social Impact measurement

We believe that an audit of how impact is being and should be measured across the sector is warranted. This should encompass how the overall sector's impact is evaluated as well as best practice for impact measurement for individual social enterprises. Many social enterprises are small organisations that do not have the resources or expertise to measure their impact in an effective way. There is a need for more supports and resources to unlock the impact that the social enterprise sector is making - such as training, guidebooks, and funding.

On a more macro level, we believe that by measuring the wellbeing of Irish society and

treating that measure with equal importance with the financial measures such as GDP and GNP, would not only help improve the core fabric of Irish society but also give the broader business community a measurable focus to engage in a meaningful way in delivering social change. There is no doubt that in today's world, both customers and staff of businesses, expect to buy from and work for companies with values and standards that they can identify with and are in turn proud to support.

This adds an extra layer of complexity to a business.

However, it is actually a layer of complexity that social entrepreneurs must live with every day. They have to manage whatever their own specific financial model might be, to ensure that they run a viable and sustainable operation; but equally as important is that their organisation runs true to delivering on its mission, even if that at times means making decisions that are not always the most economically advantageous. I have included some of the complexities for this sector in an appendix, attached to my opening statement.

It is our view that it is not just the role of communities, or business, or government for that matter either, but a coalition of the willing that can help address the societal issues that we face today. From a business perspective, leaders that bring a value based approach as to how their organisations behave within business and their role in society as a whole are the ones that do, and will, stand out from the crowd in having a positive societal and environmental impact on the fabric of Ireland in the future.

A resetting of our collective mindsets, with subsequent behavioral changes, regarding social issues is therefore required, if we are to measure the overall wellbeing of the people and State of Ireland as well as the more routinely measured financial wellbeing. Not for profits, social enterprises and social entrepreneurs especially have a vital role to play. They have a unique insight and perspective in to how social problems are manifesting themselves on the ground, and in communities and are coming up with unique solutions to how these problems can be alleviated or even solved. For us all to accelerate these solutions happening we need the might and expertise of the business community, and a willingness, open-minded and medium to long term approach from government to ensure that all parts of society can bring their best efforts into play, where each have an equal voice around the table.

Thank you for the invitation. I am happy to take any questions you may have. I am also happy to engage individually with you, if you are interested in further details.

Appendix

Many businesses can see the value in putting their employees and corporate values front and centre in their operations as evidenced by the amount of companies applying for certifications like the Great Places to Work initiative or the fact that there now over 25 companies certified B-Corps in Ireland with many more in the certification process.

These certifications come with their own set of challenges. For example, B Corp certification is a certification for companies that meet specific standards for social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency. The certification is administered by the non-profit organization B Lab. Advantages of this for a business include enhancing reputation, access to B Corp community data providing companies with resources to learn the most cost-effective methods to achieve sustainability, and the process of applying for certification can help companies identify existing needless or wasteful spending. However B Corp certification is not without its critics, with some believing that an over reliance on self-reporting can assist greenwashing.

It must also be noted that making strides in the areas of sustainability and corporate social responsibility comes with a (potentially short-term) financial cost. For example, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) builds upon the existing Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) issued in 2018. The CSRD expands the scope of undertakings that will have to disclose sustainability information and introduces more detailed requirements and disclosures under Environmental (E), Social (S) and Governance (G). This additional layer of work comes with a cost. As too, do requirements for organisations to upskill themselves in areas such as mental health; diversity and inclusion; as well as sustainability. Larger organisations may find it easier to assimilate these costs than SMEs.

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