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Social Enterprises: Current state of play in Northern Ireland, European Union and Republic of Ireland

RaISe - Public Finance Scrutiny Unit

This Briefing Paper – commissioned by the Committee for the Economy – considers the Social Enterprise landscape in Northern Ireland, including activity at devolved and local government levels. It also examines current European Union policy shaping the Social Enterprise landscape in the Union's Member States; with a closer look at the situation in the Republic of Ireland; followed by concluding remarks.

This information is provided to a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Introduction

This Briefing Paper has been prepared at the request of the Committee for the Economy (CfE), by the Public Finance Scrutiny Unit within the Finance and Economics Research Team, located within the Northern Ireland Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe). It provides context-setting definitions; before considering the Social Enterprises landscape in Northern Ireland, at devolved and local government levels. Thereafter, it outlines a comparative perspective; examining current European Union (EU) policy shaping the Social Enterprise landscape in the Union's Member States, including a closer look at the situation in the Republic of Ireland; followed by concluding remarks.

The Paper is presented as follows:

1. [Definitions of Social Enterprises](#)
2. [Social Enterprises Northern Ireland - Role of Northern Ireland Executive](#)
3. [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#)
4. [Other Support for Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland](#)
5. [Support at District Council Level in Northern Ireland](#)
6. [EU Social Enterprise Policy](#)
7. [EU Member State Case Study – Republic of Ireland](#)
8. [Concluding Remarks](#)

The Paper's contents should not be relied upon as professional legal advice or opinion, nor as a substitute for either.

1 Definitions of Social Enterprises

[SocialEnterpriseNI](https://socialenterpriseni.org/) – the representative body for Social Enterprises and social entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland - defines “Social Enterprises” as:

Social enterprises are innovative, independent businesses driven by social and environmental purposes. Their profits are reinvested in their mission. Social Enterprise is a more sustainable and ethical way of doing business¹

In 2023, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a resolution on [Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development](#), which states:

Recognizing that social entrepreneurship, including cooperatives and Social Enterprises, can help to alleviate poverty and catalyse social transformation by strengthening the productive capacities of those in vulnerable situations and producing goods and services accessible to them²

Social Enterprises are different to other organisations that have social and/or environmental impact as their primary purpose, such as not-for-profit organisations. The [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD) identified key differences between the two in 1999, including:³

- *an entrepreneurial outlook;*
- *a degree of autonomy from the State; and,*
- *the provision of innovative services to respond to needs not met by the State and by the market.*

¹ <https://socialenterpriseni.org/>

² [UN Resolution 77/281 - Promoting the social and solidarity economy for sustainable development](#)

³ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/1999/11/social-enterprises_g1ghg2bd/9789264182332-en.pdf

Academic and third-sector research notes that another key difference is not-for-profit organisations rely on donations for their funding, while Social Enterprises “are businesses; they generate their own profit to keep themselves running”.⁴

Within a European context, Social Enterprises are entities that are part of the wider Social Economy. The [European Commission](#) defines the Social Economy as encompassing:

...a wide range of entities with different business and organisational models that share the objective of systematically putting people first, producing a positive impact on local communities and pursuing a social and/or environmental cause⁵

2 Social Enterprises Northern Ireland - Role of Northern Ireland Executive

This section considers policy development undertaken by Northern Ireland Executive departments, namely the Department for Economy (DfE) and other policy that benefits Social Enterprises, specifically procurement policy issued by the Department of Finance (DoF).

2.1 Department for Economy

The [DfE](#) is the responsible Executive department in relation to Social Enterprises and the wider social economy policy in Northern Ireland. However, as noted by the DfE:

DfE has always recognised the importance of supporting Social Enterprises and has responsibility for social economy policy on behalf of the NI Executive. The local councils have responsibility for Social Enterprise after it was transferred to them in 2015 as part of the [Review of Public Administration](#)⁶

⁴ <https://blog.insightgloaleducation.com/non-profits-vs-social-enterprises-whats-the-difference>

⁵ https://social-economy-gateway.ec.europa.eu/about-social-economy_en

⁶ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/dfe-and-social-economy>

The DfE provides a grant to develop and implement a Social Enterprise Work Programme (SEWP). The current SEWP covers the period 2024-2027. On 8 April 2024, the Economy Minister [announced](#) that Social Enterprise Northern Ireland (SENI) had been successful in obtaining a grant to deliver the SEWP. The Minister also announced:

The award includes over 50% increase in grant funding, with £230k for year 24/25⁷

The Minister continued:

SENI will implement an ambitious work program with several objectives that aim to support and grow the sector and individual Social Enterprises within it. This uplift in funding will provide additional resources to help Social Enterprises become even more effective and take advantage of emerging local and global opportunities.⁸

2.1.1 Social Enterprise Policy Group (SEPG)

The Social Enterprise Policy Group (SEPG) is a cross departmental group which has recently been re-established with an aim:

...to coordinate Departmental policies on Social Enterprise and share best practices and success.⁹

In addition, the Group had the initial purpose:

...to develop a Social Enterprise definition for Northern Ireland which can be applied consistently at a policy level across government.¹⁰

The SEPG [terms of reference](#) are:

⁷ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/social-enterprises-play-key-role-my-economic-vision-murphy>

⁸ See footnote 7 immediately above

⁹ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/social-enterprise-policy-group-sepg>

¹⁰ See footnote 9 immediately above

1. *Social Enterprises play a vital role in communities, providing innovative solutions to complex individual and local issues and act as important enablers within our social economy. To have the greatest impact for our economy and communities, Social Enterprises need to be well supported across all of government.*
2. *SEPG is a cross-departmental body that aims to coordinate Departmental policies on Social Enterprise and share best practices and success.*
3. *The initial purpose of the group is to develop a Social Enterprise definition for Northern Ireland which can be applied consistently at a policy level across government.*
4. *The SEPG is chaired by [an official] from Department for the Economy and secretariat will be provided by the Social Economy Branch.*
5. *Members have been nominated by their respective departments and will act as key points of contact for all Social Enterprise matters, coordinate cross-departmental actions, and support the growth of the sector.*
6. *All meetings will be fully recorded, with records relating to the group will be retained within DfE record management systems.*

2.1.2 Social Enterprise Action Plan

The DfE published the [Social Enterprise Action Plan](#) in December 2024. That Plan set out a three-year vision for the Social Enterprise sector. It was developed through a sector-led, co-design group; designed to align with the [Economy Minister’s Economic Vision](#). Table 1 below provides a summary of the Action Plan and its identified aims for the specified three-year period (for full Action Plan, see [Appendix 1](#) of this Paper):

Table 1. Summary of DfE Social Enterprise Action Plan 2025-27

Actions	Aims
Raise Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce regional Social Enterprise Champions.• Promote Social Enterprise within DfE and Invest NI

Leadership and Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate existing training provision. • Develop a Social Enterprise Leadership Programme (InterTrade Ireland / Invest NI). • Establish a peer learning scheme. • Secure 1-2 spaces on Invest NI's Leaders Programme for Social Enterprise Chief Executive Officer's (CEOs) and founders.
Investment Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope out existing financial offerings. • Explore a dedicated capital loan scheme. • Create a roadmap for accessing support. • Review criteria for business support
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase commissioning awareness across DfE and Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). • Engage with the central and local government on commissioning. • Review the process of procurement frameworks to improve access for Social Enterprises; considering recent legislative changes

Sources: RalSe-PFSU (2025), relying on [Social Enterprise Action Plan](#) (2024)

2.1.3 Barriers to Growth Research – commissioned by DfE

In 2024, the DfE commissioned research to identify barriers to growth within the Social Enterprise sector in Northern Ireland:

...to advance understanding of the strategic barriers to growth facing Social Enterprises and the findings aim to inform policy development and practical interventions that can strengthen the Social Enterprise ecosystem.¹¹

¹¹ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/barriers-growth-research-unleashing-potential-and-overcoming-growth-challenges-social-enterprises-northern-ireland>

On 1 May 2025, the findings of that research was published in a report entitled - [Barriers to Growth Research – Unleashing potential overcoming growth challenges for Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland](#). A summary of the key findings of this report can be found a Table 2 below:

Table 2. Key findings of DfE commissioned 2025 Barriers to Growth Report

Barrier	Description/Findings
Funding and Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Social Enterprises face critical challenges in accessing diverse funding streams, such as low-cost loans, working capital, and patient capital.</i> • <i>Over-reliance on grants is a concern, potentially hindering the development of earned Income streams.</i> • <i>Only 7% of Social Enterprises report using loans or investment, with reasons ranging from risk aversion and poor financial health to mismatched products.</i>
Legal and Structural Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Legal structures limit Social Enterprises' ability to raise investment. These constraints stem from organisational size, lack of tailored advice, and a lack of awareness of investment options.</i> • <i>Board-level risk aversion further limits opportunities for financial growth.</i>
Market Visibility and Procurement Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Social Enterprises struggle to communicate their social value and secure public and private sector contracts.</i> • <i>There is a disconnect and lack of ownership by business owners commissioning procurements and a skills gap in effectively commissioning social value.</i> • <i>Systemic barriers, such as limited capacity for social value brokering and bureaucratic hurdles, hinder growth.</i> • <i>There is no one championing social value at a central government level.</i>

Recruitment and Skills Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>High recruitment costs, skills shortages, and the cost of supporting employees with additional needs are key challenges.</i> • <i>There is limited awareness of these additional costs in social value policies.</i>
Programmatic and Geographic Gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rural areas may be underserved by Social Enterprise programmes, with a need for further mapping to understand regional disparities in support.</i>

Source: [Barriers to Growth Research – Unleashing potential overcoming growth challenges for Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland](#) (2025)

2.2 DoF - Public Procurement Note 02/21

In November 2021, the DoF published [Procurement Policy Note \(PPN\) 02/21: Procurement of Social and Other Specific Services](#); setting out procurement policy in relation to taking a “Light Touch Regime” for procurement of social and other specific services. Thereafter, for such social and other specific services with a procurement value greater than the procurement threshold (currently £663,540), the PPN stated:

These services are not subject to the full gambit of procurement rules because they tend to be delivered locally, often to disadvantaged individuals and communities¹²

Notably, included within the scope of the PPN definition of such “service providers” or “qualifying organisations” are Social Enterprises.

3 2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector report

On 30 July 2025, the DfE published the [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025 NISES Report), which it had commissioned to establish the

¹² [Procurement Policy Note PPN 02/21: Procurement of Social and Other Specific Services](#)

current state of the Social Enterprise Sector in Northern Ireland. The research aimed:

...to provide an up-to-date and in-depth picture of the sector, examining the scale, strengths, challenges, and opportunities of Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland. This will allow the Department to better inform policy development and provide support to the sector in line with DfE's Economic Vision¹³

Notably, the findings outlined in the Report also compared the 2025 results with the 2023 Social Enterprise UK report, which recorded the findings of the [Mission Critical State of Social Enterprise Survey 2023](#); enabling comparison with the wider Social Enterprise sector across the United Kingdom.

The headline figures reported in the 2025 NISES Report recorded:

- The existence of at least 1,225 Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland¹⁴
- Those enterprises provided a wider contribution to the Northern Ireland economy; estimating they:
 - Have a combined turnover of £932.9 million (m);¹⁵ and
 - Are employing at least 17,300 people across the region.¹⁶

3.1 2025 NISES Report – key findings

Key findings of the 2025 NISES Report highlight both the impact and scale of the Social Enterprises sector in Northern Ireland. They concern:

- [Section 3.1.1 - Employment](#)
- [Section 3.1.2 - Trading age of Social Enterprises](#)
- [Section 3.1.3 - Location of Social Enterprises](#)

¹³ [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#)

¹⁴ This includes Charities, Community Interest Companies, different types of cooperatives and some private businesses with core social and environmental purposes.

¹⁵ [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#)

¹⁶ See footnote 15 immediately above

- [Section 3.1.4 - Purpose and trading activity of Social Enterprises operating in Northern Ireland](#)
- [Section 3.1.5 - Financing](#)

3.1.1 Employment

The Report finds that most Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland are small-scale employers. Table 3 below shows the number of employees each respondent reported they employed as a percentage of total responses.

Table 3. Number of those employed by Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland

No. of employees	Percentage of respondents
no employees or just one	23%
between two and nine	51%
between 10 and 99	21%
100 or more	4%

Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (July 2025)

Based on the methodology employed by the researchers who compiled the report, the total number of those employed by Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland is estimated to be approximately 17,300. That methodology used a 5% trimmed mean, which involved excluding 5% of enterprises with no employees and 5% of the largest outliers.

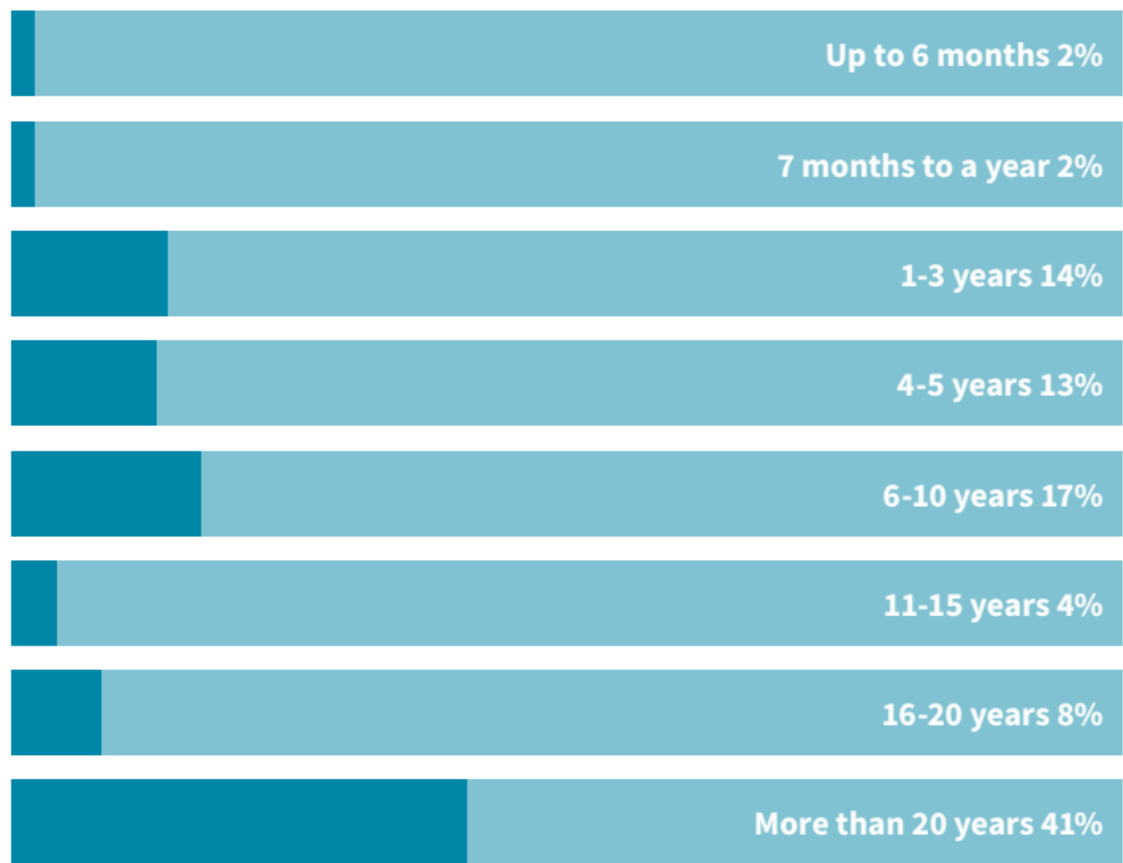
3.1.2 Trading age of Social Enterprises

The 2025 NISES Report notes that over half (53%) of those businesses surveyed have been in operation for over a decade. It considers this to be a sign that the Social Enterprise landscape in Northern Ireland is a:

...mature and resilient core of businesses characterised by long-standing community-rooted organisations that have weathered multiple economic and political disruptions.¹⁷

However, with 18% of respondents trading for less than three years, the Report compares this to the Social Enterprise UK Report 2023; noting that 18% is significantly lower than the UK average which was around 30% in 2023. However, the Report considers a number of options as to why that may be the case; suggesting possibly a slower rate of start-ups in Northern Ireland or that newer enterprises were less likely to respond to such surveys - *due to limited network engagement or visibility*.¹⁸ Figure 1 below provides an overview of the trading age of respondents in Northern Ireland.

Figure 1. Trading age of Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland



Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (July 2025)

¹⁷ [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (July 2025)

¹⁸ See footnote 17 immediately above

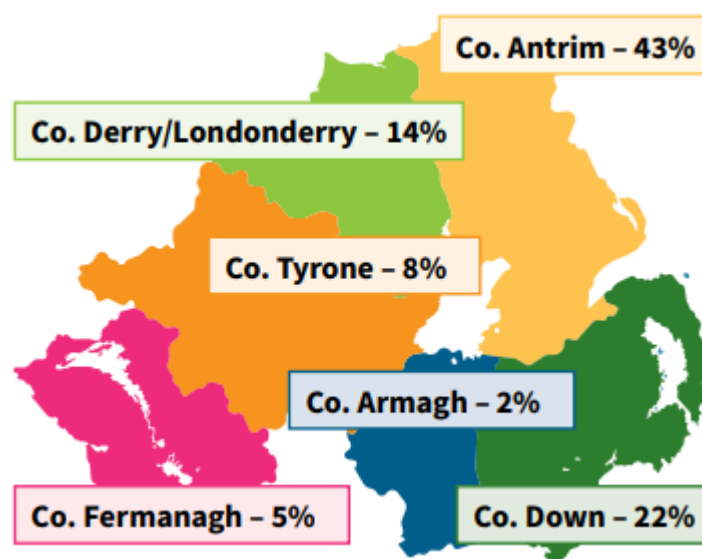
3.1.3 Location of Social Enterprises

The 2025 NISES Report also analysed the location of the Social Enterprises that responded to the survey and found that 65% were based in counties Antrim and Down - see Figure 2 below. It notes that those two counties capture the greater Belfast area; concluding:

*This urban clustering is consistent with trends across the UK and Ireland and beyond, where access to networks, funding opportunities, and population density tends to favour city-based operations.*¹⁹

However, the Report notes that Social Enterprises are based in all counties of Northern Ireland, which “reflects the geographic breadth and adaptability of the sector”.²⁰

Figure 2. Map of Northern Ireland showing the percentage of Social Enterprises operating in each county



Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025)

The 2025 Report also considers the areas in which Social Enterprises operate based on the level of deprivation in that area. Notably, in Northern Ireland 44%

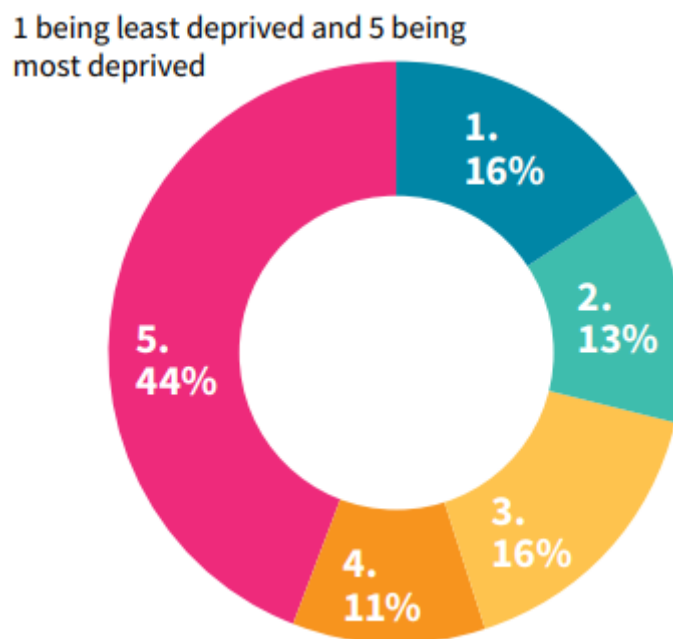
¹⁹ See footnote 17

²⁰ See footnote 17

of Social Enterprises surveyed were operating in the most deprived areas - see Figure 3 below. Comparing that Figure to the results of SESUK 2023, the Report concluded:

This spatial distribution contrasts to some extent with the UK-wide picture: the SEUK 2023 survey found that just 22% of UK Social Enterprises are based in the most deprived quintile²¹

Figure 3. Percentage of Social Enterprises spread between least and most deprived areas



Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025)

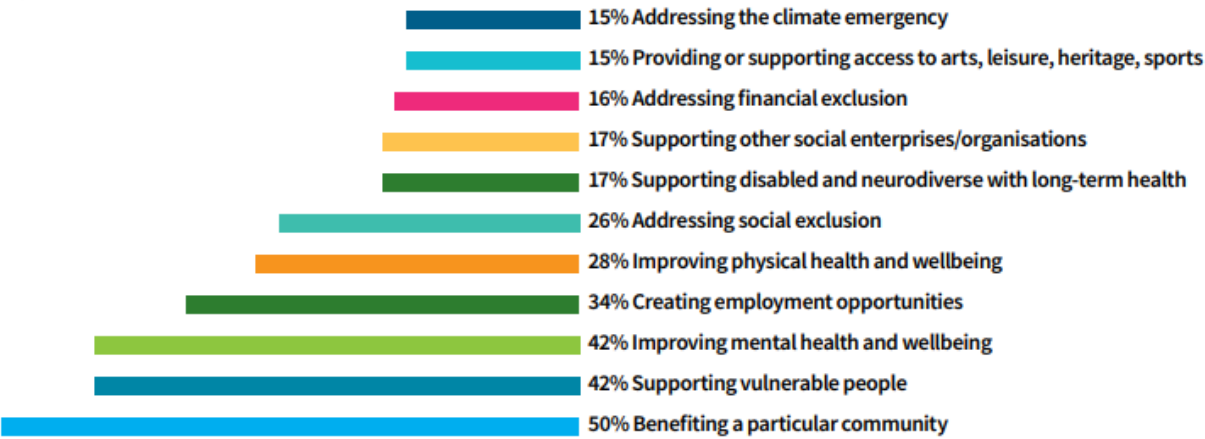
3.1.4 Purpose and trading activity of Social Enterprises operating in Northern Ireland

The research underpinning the 2025 Report considered the objectives or mission of the Social Enterprises, along with the activities Social Enterprises are engaged in to meet these objectives. In terms of those objectives, of those surveyed, half stated they exist to “benefit a local community”. Figure 4 below provides an overview of the objectives; but the Report notes survey

²¹ See footnote 17

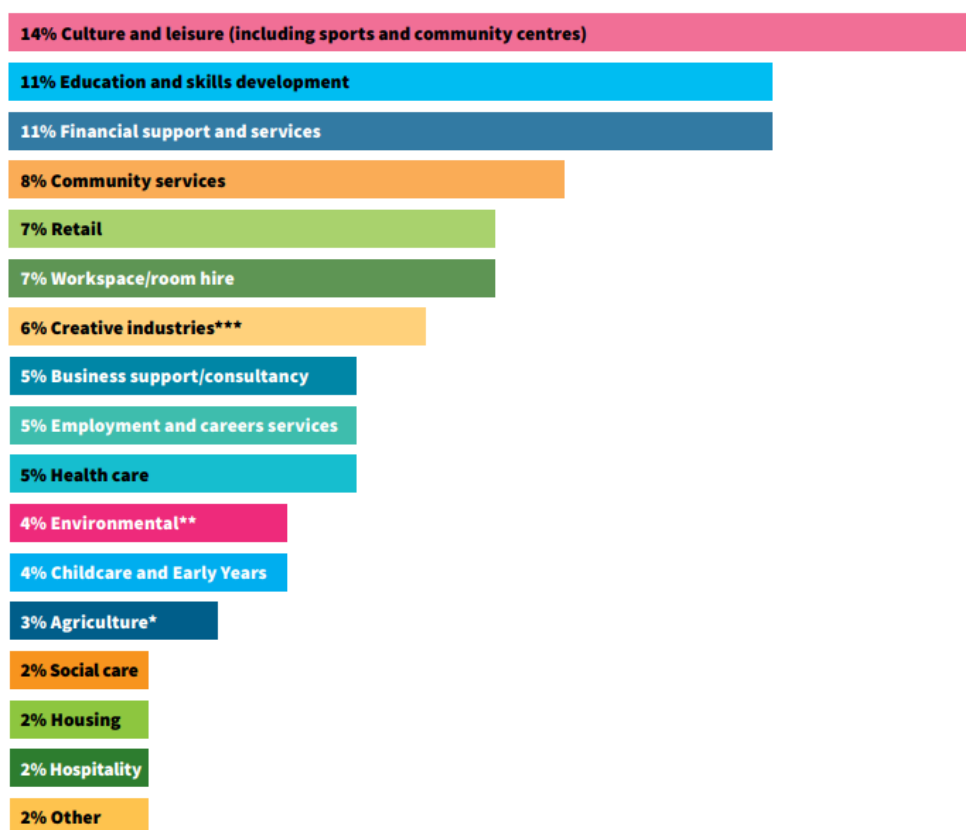
respondents may have more than one objective and the activity engaged in may address a number of the stated objectives at the same time.

Figure 4. Social/Economic/Environmental objectives of Social Enterprises



Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025)

Figure 5 below provides a list of the principal trading activity in which the Social Enterprise engage in for income generation, as identified in the 2025 Report. As the Figure highlights, 14% are engaged in culture and leisure; closely followed by education and skills development, and financial support services, both at 11%.

Figure 5. Principal trading activity for generating income

* Agriculture – farming/gardening

** Environmental – recycling, re-use, awareness etc

*** Creative industries – performing arts, music, film and television, book/magazine publishing, advertising, web, design, print, digital marketing

Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025)

3.1.5 Financing

The 2025 NISES Report also reflects the sources of income that those surveyed rely on for their businesses to operate. Notably, findings show 80% of Social Enterprises surveyed trade with the public. However, significantly fewer, 35% of those surveyed, stated it was their main source of income. The Report also highlights that 65% receive grants from the public sector; while only 18% cite public sector grants as the main source of income.

The next highest trading partners for Social Enterprises are identified in the Report as the third sector (58%), private sector (55%) and public sector (54%). However, when considering the main sources of income, only 4% of those surveyed report the third sector as the main source; while 17% of those trading with the private sector and 13% of public sector trading reported these as the main source of income.

4 Other Support for Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland

Research undertaken by RaiSe-PFSU reveals several other organisations help support Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland. The following sub-sections outline the roles and support provided by such organisations. Please note the information provided here aims to provide initial findings to inform CfE consideration in this area; it is not exhaustive.

4.1 SocialEnterpriseNI

[SENI](#) are a representative body for Social Enterprise, which advocates on behalf of the sector, as well as providing in business development assistance and networking opportunities. SENI describes its mission as:

...connecting, supporting, and empowering dynamic Social Enterprises that drive positive change. Our primary goal is to assist these businesses in generating profit with purpose, inspire lasting impact and create a more inclusive and sustainable society²²

In 2019, SENI commissioned the [Re-balancing the Northern Ireland Economy - 2019 Report on Social Enterprise](#). This was the last comprehensive report into Social Enterprises, before the publication of the 2025 NISES report in July 2025.

4.1.1 Social Enterprise NI Directory

SENI hosts an [online directory](#) providing access to SENI member details. Membership to SENI enables Social Enterprises to be profiled on the directory; and, have directory access to those organisations that are not Social Enterprises - that is, an organisation wishing to work with or engage with Social Enterprises requires Social Value partner membership. Note that Social Value partner membership has an annual fee, so access outside of membership to the directory is restricted. That makes it more difficult to identify and locate for non-member, Social Enterprises which they may wish to work with.

²² <https://socialenterpriseni.org/about-us/>

4.2 NIBusinessInfo

The NIBusinessInfo website provides a list of financial schemes and programmes for Social Enterprises, including:²³

- [EPIC Futures NI](#) - EPIC Futures NI provides funding for research projects that support inclusive employment in Northern Ireland.
- [Rural Action Awards](#) - Rural Action Awards are open to constituted rural community-based organisations, including Social Enterprises
- [Funding Futures Programme](#) - The Funding Futures Programme aims to harness the power of young people to find solutions for those who have been side-lined by the financial system
- [Growth Impact Fund](#) - The Growth Impact Fund is for all social purpose organisations operating in consumer business, education and learning, employment and training, and health and social care
- [Green Support Scheme](#) - The Green Support Scheme supports local businesses and Social Enterprises to implement sustainable practices, reduce carbon emissions, and create a bespoke Carbon Reduction Action Plan
- [Harnessing Heritage Programme](#) - the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) helps communities across the UK find enterprising new ways to revitalise old buildings through advice, grants, and social investment loans
- [Village Catalyst Programme](#) - The Architectural Heritage (AHF) funds the Village Catalyst Programme, an innovative partnership scheme aiming to help target rural poverty and social isolation via the reuse of historic buildings
- [Millennium Awards Trust](#) - The Millennium Awards are open to any social entrepreneur aged 16 years and older tackling a range of social issues
- [National Lottery Awards for All Northern Ireland](#) - The National Lottery Awards for All Northern Ireland provides funding from £300 to £20,000 to support community-led projects for up to two years

²³ <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/financial-support-social-enterprises-northern-ireland>

- [PEACEPLUS Change Maker Funding Programme](#) – This overarching Programme provides funding to support the implementation of projects through a small grants programme
- [MSE Charity Grants](#) - Social Enterprises, community interest companies (CICs), credit unions, not-for-profit companies limited by guarantee, and UK registered charities can apply for grants of between £2,000 and £10,000 to support activities that improve people's ability to become more financially capable
- [Open Grants Programme](#) - The Clothworkers' Foundation Open Grants Programme offers capital funding to UK not-for-profits organisations

4.3 InterTradelreland

Established in 1999, under [Strand 2](#) of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, [InterTradelreland](#), the cross border economic development agency, provides support for business on an all-island basis. Notably, InterTradelreland deliver a number of programmes which Social Enterprises can avail of including:

- [Go-2-Tender workshops](#) – online workshops developing skills to bid for public sector contracts; includes workshops specifically targeting for Social Enterprises
- [Trade Missions @ Home](#) – sector specific programmes for companies wishing to sell cross-border; Social Enterprises are eligible
- [Acumen](#) – funding for owners/managers to recruit an experienced or skilled sales resource to strategically grow your cross-border sales; Social Enterprises are eligible
- [Trade Export Pathway](#) – programme for businesses seeking to become more advanced and experienced exporters, specifically helping owners/managers graduate their business along a pathway of export sales support; Social Enterprises are eligible

5 Support at District Council Level in Northern Ireland

As previously noted in this Paper (see [Sub-section 2.1](#)), local councils are responsible for supporting Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland. That is a

consequence of the Northern Ireland Executive [agreeing](#) in April 2013 the transfer of local economic development activities, to the 11 reconstituted councils in Northern Ireland on 1 April 2015. As such, Northern Ireland councils can take individual approaches to support and promote Social Enterprises in their district.

In June 2025, RaISE-PFSU emailed individual local councils in Northern Ireland, asking what support they currently provide for Social Enterprises. The following sub-section – at Table 4 – outlines key findings of those inquiries, asking:

I would be interested to learn what supports council provide to support the establishment, development and growth of Social Enterprises in the Council area.

I am also aware as part of the Department for the Economy's Social Enterprise Action Plan, there are Social Enterprise Champions based in each of the council areas, I would therefore be keen to learn more about the role and the work they are doing within [named council] to support Social Enterprises.

I am also interested in more general information on Social Enterprises that the council may hold for your area, specifically:

- How many Social Enterprises currently operate in your council area (and if possible a list of these with some detail – type of business, address, contact details, etc.)?*
- Geographic distribution across the council, that is rural/urban or if they are in specific locations or conversely if some areas do not currently have Social Enterprises operating in them?*
- Turn-over rate (average lifespan of Social Enterprises) when they were founded if more or less have closed down compared to other types of business in the council?*
- Employment they create – the number of people in the council area currently employed in Social Enterprises?*

- *Further available support – social enterprise specific compared to general entrepreneurship/business support that the council provides (and are social enterprise eligible to apply for these non-specific supports)?*
- *Any other relevant data that may be helpful that the council holds that relates to Social Enterprises?*

5.1 Individual Council Support for Social Enterprises

Table 4. Responses from Northern Ireland councils in relation to Social Enterprises

District Council	Key extracts of response provided by Council to RaISe-PFSU during summer 2025
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council ²⁴	<p>Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council provided the below response to RaISe query:</p> <p><i>...Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council do not maintain a record of Social Enterprises in the Borough- Social Enterprise Northern Ireland (SENI) would have a better understanding of this and will hopefully be able to provide you with numbers, geographical locations, turnover etc...</i></p> <p><i>...Go Succeed Peer Support Networks (PSN) are spaces for like-minded entrepreneurs and established businesses to provide mutual support, encouragement and assistance. These networks are designed to be vital platforms for businesses to connect and gain insights from similar sector and role models within their industry...</i></p> <p><i>...Launched in September 2024, the Social Enterprise network was created to support Social Enterprises within the Borough...</i></p> <p><i>...A key feature of this network was that it was shaped by the needs and requirements of its members. Feedback taken from attendees was used to determine the themes of each session...</i></p> <p><i>...Sessions;</i></p>

²⁴ Correspondence received by RaISe-PFSU 06/06/2025

	<p>1. Launch Event – Social Enterprise Support Organisations and Networking</p> <p>2. Social Enterprise Governance</p> <p>3. Unlock the Power of AI for your Social Enterprise</p> <p>4. A Practical Guide to Using AI in your Social Enterprise</p> <p>...Officers are currently exploring opportunities for continuing to engage with this group, providing further support beyond the Peer Support Network</p> <p>...The Council also ran a Social Economy Programme between 2022 and 2023, over which 17 businesses received mentoring and 8 bursaries were issued. Hosted and refreshments provided by Mallusk Enterprise Partnership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All events were hybrid delivery; 3.5 hrs per workshop; minimum of x10 participants at each; participant feedback gathered following each workshop <p><u>Mentoring</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum of 15 participants (must be Borough- based) recruited for mentoring; • Each received up to 5 days (up to 35hrs with 28hr average per participant) • End of mentoring feedback gathered • Collaboration/Networking Events • 2 x half day collaboration and networking workshops • Minimum of 15 participants in attendance <p><u>Bursary</u></p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £1,000 max bursary value (incl. VAT) x 15 = £15,000 • Administration of bursaries £100 (x 15 = £1,500) toward set up costs to form a new Social Enterprise / sustain a newly formed Social Enterprise (established/registered within last 3 years) • Must have taken part in mentoring and have registered as a SE (within the last 3 years) • Could be used for branding, market testing, product/service development, test trading, equipment, other reasonable costs
Ards and North Down Borough Council ²⁵	<p>Ards and North Down Borough Council provided the below response to RalSe query:</p> <p><i>Ards and North Down Borough Council Economic Development have offered a variety of support to the business community since the transferring of functions to local government in 2015. The support provided is through to pre-employment, skills development, Business Start; Post-Start and Growth, these are offered to existing businesses or new investments and innovative entrepreneurs. Specific programmes for support to Social Enterprises sector offering a range of activities to the local community are listed below:</i></p> <p><u><i>Ards and North Down Social Entrepreneurship Programme (ANDSEP 2021-2023 – 2-year programmes)</i></u></p> <p><i>This programme has been provided since 2015, ANDSEP 1 and ANDSEP 2 were delivered providing key elements to help develop and promote social entrepreneurs including; preparatory and investigatory phase, core capability support phase (follow on phase), post-start strategic mentoring and participants compiling an implementation plan</i></p>

²⁵ Correspondence received by RalSe-PFSU 17/06/2025

along with a series of workshops delivered in areas of business development and support. The added value of the programmes in 2018-2020 20 achieved 20 new products/services, 39.5 jobs, investment of £1,071,765.

Ards and North Down Social Entrepreneurship Programme (ANDSEP 2023-2024 – 1 year programme)

This programme seen the development of 19 Social Enterprises through series of structured masterclasses, networking opportunities and 1-1 mentoring. Each attained a greater understanding of issues impacting their business/social enterprise. The added value of the programme achieved 9 new jobs, 30% of clients (6/19) are in the top 30% deprived areas, average SOA is 510 v 278 in Belfast City Council Programme which illustrates relative affluence of the area and explains low level of Social Enterprise start-up. 13/19 participant organisations are female-led reflecting overall social economy sector in Northern Ireland. A ANDSEP participant awarded ‘Best New Start Up’ at SENI Awards Oct 2023

Social Directory

A Directory highlights a selection of local Social Enterprise and Community Interest ventures in the Borough. The Directory profiles over 20 local enterprises and is circulated throughout the Borough to raise awareness of the many worthwhile and successful Social Enterprises that operate within the local area. Please find attached a copy of our most recent Social Enterprise Directory from 2019. Please note however that this list is not an exhaustive list of all the Social Enterprises in the Ards and North Down Borough, and some may no longer be in operation.

Social Saturday

This initiative raises awareness of Social Enterprises, Ards and North Down Borough Council participated in a number of events that profiled our Social Enterprises pre-pandemic in 2017, 2018 and 2019. This included online

Media, an online newsletter promoting a range of local Social Enterprises was produced. The Economic Development Section contacted Social Enterprises across the Borough and invited them to take part in the promotional ezine/newsletter highlighting any offers or events that they were planning for the annual Social Saturday.

Social Souk

The Economic Development Section facilitated a “Social Souk” event at Bloomfield Shopping Centre in 2019 (the day before Social Saturday). This event gave 7 local Social Enterprises the opportunity to raise awareness of their products/services and the associated benefits they bring to the Borough.

Go Succeed – launched November 2023

The NI wide Enterprise Support Service, that helps potential entrepreneurs, new starts and existing businesses and Social Enterprises to maximise their potential and contribution to Ards and North Down Borough’s economy. Social Enterprises community outreach.

Go Succeed has supported 31 Social Enterprise, 9 pre-enterprise, 9 higher value / VAT + potential businesses and 13 existing growth business/SE’s

Location

Mainly urban Bangor and Newtownards, other areas include borough wide; Comber, Holywood, Portaferry, Millisle and Cloughy

	In addition, the Council also published the Social Enterprise Information Guide 2019 .
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	<p>Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council provided the below response to RalSe query:</p> <p><i>Within the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, there are currently 35 operational social enterprises. These range in focus from community-based initiatives and charitable organisations to business-oriented enterprises. Some are formally registered with Social Enterprise NI (SENI), where their contact details and profiles can be accessed. There is a notable urban concentration among these enterprises, with 21 based in urban centres and 14 operating in rural areas. Despite this urban dominance, all social enterprises-regardless of location-are eligible to apply for business and community support, including funding opportunities, which are assessed against set eligibility criteria. Social enterprises also benefit from tailored business support programmes, where appropriate. The Council recognises the vital role this sector plays in the economic and social fabric of the borough, as well as the unique challenges it often faces.</i></p> <p><i>In terms of employment, the social enterprise sector contributes positively to the local labour market. Since 2021, support through the Council's Social Economy Programme has helped create over 100 jobs across the borough. The majority of these enterprises operate as micro or small employers, typically with between 1 and 10 staff, reflecting the broader sector trend across Northern Ireland. Looking ahead, projected employment growth under the Go Succeed Growth Pillar for the 2025/26 period includes the creation of an additional 5 full-time and 1 part-time positions, further strengthening the sector's employment value.</i></p> <p><i>To support the growth and sustainability of the sector, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council is actively delivering a series of social enterprise-focused events under the Go Succeed Programme. In addition, the</i></p>

	<i>Council's Labour Market Partnership includes representation from the social enterprise sector on its stakeholder group, ensuring that future support and planning activities remain inclusive and responsive to the needs of this important industry.</i>
Belfast City Council	<p>Belfast City Council (BCC) support Social Enterprises under the banner of the social economy. BCC provide information on actions and programmes on the councils webpage. BCC initiatives include:</p> <p>Social economy directory – BCC invite organisations within Belfast's social economy sector to register, and be added to the social economy directory. The directory is available on the council's website and provides detail of the organisations – name, address and description of the organisations social impact.</p> <p>Go Social: Social Enterprise and co-operative support – the support provided includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advice on legal issues • best practice visits • business planning • help to explore and secure finance • help to generate ideas • sales and marketing coaching, and • support choosing the right governance structure

	<p>Social Economy Incentive Fund (SEIF) 2024 – a £90,000 fund provided by Belfast City Council to “incentivise and boost”²⁶ Belfast based Social Enterprises and co-operatives. The fund provided grants between £1,000 and £10,000 – specifically for:</p> <p><i>...new or developing social economy businesses in early growth stages, or in need of support to begin trading in the next six months.</i>²⁷</p> <p>The SEIF 2024 closed in November 2024. The SEIF 2025 will open for applications in September 2025.</p> <p>Social enterprises in BCC area can also apply for the Go Succeed programme. BCC is the lead council for delivery of Go Succeed in Northern Ireland – See Section 5.2 for more detail.</p>
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council ²⁸	<p>Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council provided the below response to RaISe query:</p> <p><i>In respect of the request for information we hold on local Social Enterprises, we don't keep an SE specific database, as we use a CRM for Go Succeed within which we have individual client account information</i></p> <p>However, the Council were able to provide information on support the council does provide to Social Enterprises, stating it:</p>

²⁶ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/News/%C2%A390k-incentive-fund-aims-to-boost-Belfast-s-social>

²⁷ See footnote 26 immediately above

²⁸ Correspondence received by RaISe-PFSU 23/05/2025

...is committed to stimulating the Social Enterprise sector locally via a programme of support, to ensure that Social Enterprises play a central role in business and community life

This includes:

Go Succeed - Social Enterprises access support across all pillars of the NI Enterprise Support Service including support for those with entrepreneurial intentions to be Social Enterprise ready, support for established Social Enterprises via 1-1 mentoring, grants, masterclasses, peer support networks, enterprise action plans & business plans.

Enterprise Fund - A grant aimed at enterprises less than 2 years, supporting them to address barriers to growth via innovative approaches. Up to £5,000, 100% intervention rate.

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund - Capital grant fund to address the financial barriers faced by enterprises seeking to digitally transform (hardware, software, bespoke system development). S.E, micro and SME's across all sectors. Range is from £5,000 - £20,000 with a grant subvention rate of 70% of total project costs.

Social Enterprise Champion – In this role, the [Social Enterprise Champion] deals with enquiries from those considering a Social Enterprise seeking advice, support and signposting, as well as established Social Enterprises seeking assistance to grow. NI Social Enterprise Champions first regional meeting was held on 19 February. Follow-up meeting held on 18 June and will include discussion on additional support to be provided within Go Succeed service for S.E sector to enable costing. An Social Enterprise specific action plan will also be developed as part of this role.

	Social Enterprise NI – CC&GBC is an associate member of SENI since 2017 and works to support and advocate for the sector.
Derry City and Strabane District Council ²⁹	Nil reply - no information supplied to RaISe-PFSU by the Council. Council response stated the requested information was not held by the Council.
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council ³⁰	<p>Fermanagh and Omagh District Council provided the below response to RaISe query:</p> <p><u>Council Support</u></p> <p><i>Fermanagh and Omagh District Council provides Social Enterprises with access to the following support: Go Succeed Service supports Social Enterprises with mentor business support, business masterclasses and they are eligible to apply for small business grants up to £3,000 with a match funding requirements of 50%.</i></p> <p><i>The Council has annually assigned a budget of £15,000 to Social Economy Programme that includes mentor support and is available to all social economy businesses.</i></p> <p><i>In addition, the Council provides annual revenue support to the three rural social economy businesses as follows: Ecclesville Centre, Fintona, Trillick Leisure Centre and Dromore Leisure Centre.</i></p>

²⁹ Correspondence received by RaISe 27/06/2025

³⁰ Correspondence received by RaISe 27/06/2025

Social Enterprise Champion

The role of Social Enterprise Champion in Fermanagh and Omagh District Council is undertaken by the Council's Head of Economic Development and Investment. It is worth noting that the role did not come with an additional resource and is undertaken as part of the duties of the Council Officer.

The Social Enterprise Champion provides the following function: provides a conduit between Social Economy NI and local Social Enterprises; communicating through the Council business database, events, support programmes and funding opportunities; and is accessible to the needs of individual Social Enterprise.

Location of Social Enterprises in district

The mix of Social Enterprises that include the larger settlements Enniskillen and Omagh and the rural larger settlements of Fintona, Dromore Carrickmore, Gortin, Lisnaskea, Irvinestown, and smaller and rural settlements of Belcoo, Kinawley, Kesh and Creggan

Credit unions also cover the main towns of Enniskillen and Omagh and the local towns, Fintona, Dromore, Carrickmore, Irvinestown, Lisnaskea and as Social Enterprises they are integral to supporting local settlements and their communities

Financial Support

In the 2025-26 financial year, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council commenced a Strategic Capital Grant Scheme (value £1m per annum) with 7 grants up to £100k and 1 grant up to £300k available annually every year for the next five years, with one to be delivered in each Council District Electoral Area (DEA). The programme is open to

	<i>community/voluntary organizations, and Social Enterprises would be eligible to apply, subject to meeting the programme criteria.</i>
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council ³¹	<p>Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC) provided the below response to RalSe query:</p> <p><u>No. of Social Enterprises in district</u></p> <p>LCCC has assembled a register of Social Enterprises from a variety of publicly available sources of Social Enterprises in the council area. LCCC has highlighted that this may not be complete. However the “register reflects around 50 Social Enterprises in LCCC it is estimated that there are around 75 Social Enterprises, including pre-start, new start businesses.”</p> <p>Location of Social Enterprises</p> <p>The Social Enterprises on the register have been assigned, however the council notes:</p> <p><i>General indicators of urban or rural location have been assigned to each business based on relative contextual awareness. These classifications are not definitive and should not be interpreted as an accurate reflection of a business’s formal status.</i></p> <p>From this analysis, the majority of Social Enterprises recorded on the register are based in urban locations.</p> <p><u>Council Support for Social Enterprises</u></p>

³¹ Correspondence received by RalSe 31/08/2025

	<p>As with other councils, LCCC based Social Enterprises have accessed support through the Go Succeed programme - see sub-section 5.2.</p> <p>In addition, from 2018 to 2021 LCCC delivered a SUNSE project, specifically supporting Social Enterprise in Lisburn & Castlereagh. Support Network for Social Entrepreneurs (SuNSE) Programme, which was jointly funded by Council and the EU's Interreg North West Europe programme.</p> <p>SuNSE was an Interreg NW Europe project that stimulated a network of Social Enterprise hubs in disadvantaged areas throughout north-west Europe, across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and France. SuNSE has helped people access a programme of business support, leading to the development of Social Enterprises and bringing new products and services to market.</p> <p>Working in partnership with Development Trusts Northern Ireland, SUNSE supported Social Enterprises with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of workshops and business clinics exploring many topics including, design thinking and creative problem-solving sessions, legal set up, managing assets, all of which were specifically designed for the Social Enterprise sector • Access to a wide host of training and networking events • Delivery of 1-1 mentoring to over 40 aspiring and existing social entrepreneurs • Creation of a Lisburn & Castlereagh Social Enterprise Business Directory and establishment of Social Enterprise Networking Hubs <p><u>Other relevant information</u></p>
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	<p>LCCC regularly shares a large range of marketing opportunities relevant to Social Enterprise. Information and opportunities such as funding, awards, grants, etc. to and for Social Enterprises. This is shared across the LCCC Business Solutions monthly ezine and also across the Business Solutions social channels such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter)</p>
<p>Mid and East Antrim Borough Council</p>	<p>Nil reply - no information supplied to RaISe-PFSU by the Council. The council response stated that it did not hold this information.</p> <p>RaISe did have a subsequent phone call with a council official.³²</p> <p>In this, the Council confirmed that Social Enterprises could avail of the Go Succeed programme - see sub-section 5.2</p> <p>In addition, in 2022 the Council had previously run a programme, Mid and East Antrim – Explore Social Enterprise. This programme was designed for new and existing Social Enterprises, to support development and provide financial and legal advice. The programme was delivered through five workshops under the titles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore Social Ideas • Defining your Social Impact • Getting the Governance Right • Telling your Social Story

³² Phone call with Mid and East Antrim Council 29/05/2025

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making Connections
Mid Ulster District Council ³³	<p>Mid Ulster District Council provided the below response to RaISe query:</p> <p>Mid Ulster District Council highlighted that there is currently no official facility to record data specifically on Social Enterprises. This is made more difficult as ‘social enterprise’ is not a legal status. Therefore, the information provided are approximations based on existing information and council interaction with local businesses.</p> <p><u>No. of Social Enterprises in district</u></p> <p>Mid-Ulster council do not hold a definitive list of Social Enterprises but are currently in the process of building one. The council assume the number of Social Enterprises in Mid Ulster would be 50-60.</p> <p><u>Geographic location</u></p> <p>Based on the locations of Social Enterprises known to the council, it would be reasonable to say that the SE’s are mainly located in rural areas, and distributed across the District. The larger ones with more capacity do seem to be clustered in the towns/ villages.</p> <p><u>Available support</u></p>

³³ Correspondence received by RaISe-PFSU 10/06/2025

	<p>All SEs can avail of the same supports; the primary support is being delivered by Go Succeed Service (See sub-section 5.2). Locally, Mid Ulster Council offers all businesses and Social Enterprises to have their details displayed on our Online Directory so others can search and find details of these and their services.</p>
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council ³⁴	<p>Newry, Mourne and Down District Council provided the below response to RaISe query:</p> <p>The Council has a Social Enterprise programme; delivered by Newry and Mourne Co-operative and Enterprise Agency.</p> <p>Social Enterprise Newry, Mourne and Down (SENMD) provides support to help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Innovation and Ideas development • Market Research • Company Setup and legal issues • Business planning skills and financial projections. • Levering in start-up funding • Advice on how to recruit and manage employees. • PR and marketing advice. • Leadership skills: How to communicate organisational vision. • Business growth and opportunity management. • Mentoring and Coaching

³⁴ Correspondence received by RaISe 02/06/2025

	<p><u>Social Enterprise Champion</u></p> <p><i>There has been one training session for the Social Enterprise Champion therefore this work is in its infancy.</i></p> <p><u>Financial Support</u></p> <p><i>Social Enterprises can apply for support via Go Succeed.</i></p>
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Sources: Multiple email correspondence from Northern Ireland councils

5.2 Go Succeed

As noted in the district council responses above, the [Go Succeed](#) Programme is one of the main support mechanisms used by Northern Ireland councils to support the Social Enterprise sector. The Go Succeed Programme was launched in November 2023, with funding from the United Kingdom Government's Levelling Up Fund.

Northern Ireland received £17m in funding between 2023/24 and 2024/25 under the central government Programme,³⁵ to support business. It is delivered by Northern Ireland's 11 district councils; providing advice, resources, and grants that aim to help entrepreneurs and businesses, including specific support for [social enterprises](#). The Programme is delivered at three levels, namely:

1. [Start](#) – *Go Succeed Start is the go-to source for expert business advice led by Northern Ireland's eleven local councils. It provides advice and guidance for people who have an idea for a new business and need help turning it into a reality.*³⁶
2. [Grow](#) – *Go Succeed Grow is for established business owners who require assistance and guidance on the best ways to expand and innovate. If you're looking to employ someone, develop a brand new product, or are looking to adopt new technology that could improve your business' productivity.*³⁷
3. [Scale](#) – *Go Succeed Scale is for businesses who can go on to generate at least £1 million in revenue after three years. Our Go Succeed Scale industry experts will help tailor your plans to penetrate new markets, identify investment opportunities, and scale up your operations.*³⁸

³⁵ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/economy-minister-calls-clarification-future-go-succeed>

³⁶ <https://go-succeed.com/start/>

³⁷ <https://go-succeed.com/grow/>

³⁸ <https://go-succeed.com/scale/>

On 10 June 2025, the United Kingdom Government confirmed that Go Succeed would get a funding extension for one-year, with a commitment of a further £9.2m.

When RaISe-PFSU corresponded with each district council, those responding highlighted the role of Go Succeed in supporting Social Enterprises in their districts. Moreover, Belfast City Council explained that it is the Project Management Office (PMO) for the delivery of Go Succeed in Northern Ireland; and is in a position to provide Programme information relating to all councils across Northern Ireland. And it confirmed for RaISe-PFSU that across Northern Ireland up to 31 March 2025, 389 (potential and existing) Social Enterprises across all council areas had been supported through 1 – 1 mentoring.

Table 5 below provides a breakdown of Social Enterprises supported by council area and pillar in which the Social Enterprises received support. Go Succeed service delivery pillars are:³⁹

1. Engage;
2. Foundation;
3. Enabling Growth; and
4. Accelerated Scaling

Table 5. Go Succeed Programme support at district council level, specifying the number of Social Enterprise recipients by Programme Pillar

District Council	ENGAGE PILLAR	FOUNDATION PILLAR	GROWTH PILLAR	TOTAL RECIPIENTS OF GO SUCCEED IN COUNCIL AREA
Antrim & Newtownabbey	13	4	10	27

³⁹ <https://causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk/assets/general/250318-LD-Agenda-Item-8-Go-Succeed.pdf>

Ards & North Down	12	8	9	29
Armagh Banbridge & Craigavon	16	4	10	30
Belfast	32	7	54	93
Causeway Coast & Glens	6	2	18	26
Derry & Strabane	11	8	25	44
Fermanagh & Omagh	3	2	19	24
Lisburn & Castlereagh	17	1	8	26
Mid & East Antrim	9	4	7	20
Mid Ulster	9	2	30	41
Newry Mourne & Down	7	4	18	29
Totals	135	46	208	389

Source: Belfast City Council - Entrepreneurship Support Service correspondence
10/06/2025

Note that £1,470,108 was the total value accounting for support provided by Go Succeed to Social Enterprises across all council areas in Northern Ireland,

reflecting all activity including one-to-one mentoring, masterclasses and peer support networks.⁴⁰

6 EU Social Enterprise Policy

Within the EU context, Social Enterprises are entities that are part of the wider Social Economy. The [European Commission](#) defines the “Social Economy” as encompassing:

...a wide range of entities with different business and organisational models that share the objective of systematically putting people first, producing a positive impact on local communities and pursuing a social and/or environmental cause⁴¹

In 2017, the European Parliament’s Committee on Legal Affairs and commissioned a study into the feasibility for [A European Statute for Social and Solidarity-Based Enterprise](#). The report recording the study’s findings concluded that:

...An EU legal statute for [Social Enterprises] should be adopted in order to enhance the development of [Social Enterprises] in the EU. This paper has strongly emphasized the fundamental role performed by specific legislation on [Social Enterprise] and the numerous advantages of such legislation for [Social Enterprises] and consequently for the people and communities benefiting from their existence⁴²

However, the Report questioned the feasibility of introducing such legislation, especially in consideration of negative perceptions in the introduction of

⁴⁰ Belfast City Council - Entrepreneurship Support Service: Correspondence 10/06/2025

⁴¹ https://social-economy-gateway.ec.europa.eu/about-social-economy_en

⁴² [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583123/IPOL_STU\(2017\)583123_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583123/IPOL_STU(2017)583123_EN.pdf)

“additional EU legal entities”.⁴³ To date, no legislation in this area has been adopted by the EU.

On 9 December 2021, the European Commission adopted a [new action plan for the social economy](#), which covers the period up to 2030. It aimed to:⁴⁴

- *create the right framework conditions for the social economy to thrive*
- *open opportunities (including access to finance) and support for capacity building*
- *enhance recognition of the social economy and its potential*

The above Action Plan also included a number of key actions to support social economy, for example:⁴⁵

- a Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions
- a new EU Social Economy Gateway to provide a clear entry point for social economy stakeholders, other relevant actors and individuals seeking information on relevant EU funding, policies and initiatives
- a new European Competence Centre for Social Innovation

The Action Plan was accompanied by two working documents:⁴⁶

1. [The first](#) provides an analysis of challenges and opportunities for the social economy in Europe and a summary of the consultations conducted and evidence gathered since the action plan was announced at the beginning of 2021
2. The second, [Scenarios towards co-creation of a transition pathway for a more resilient, sustainable and digital Proximity and Social Economy industrial ecosystem](#), outlines scenarios for the digital and green transition of the industrial ecosystem. It also indicates what actions and joint commitments are needed to accompany this transition

⁴³ See footnote 42 immediately above

⁴⁴ https://social-economy-gateway.ec.europa.eu/eu-initiatives_en

⁴⁵ [Social Economy Action Plan - European Commission](#)

⁴⁶ See footnote 45 immediately above

Several key actions taken since the introduction of the Social Economy Action Plan, which can be found at [Appendix 2](#) of this Paper.

Thereafter, in November 2023, the European Council adopted the [Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions](#). The European Council recommended a number of measures to support the Social Economy, including Social Enterprises, including:⁴⁷

- *easing access to the labour market, especially for vulnerable or underrepresented groups*
- *fostering social inclusion, by providing accessible and high-quality social and care services*
- *stimulating skills development, including skills needed for the digital and green transitions*
- *promoting social innovation and sustainable economic development*
- *facilitating access to public and private funding, including by making the best use of EU funds*
- *improved access to markets and public procurement, efficient use of state aid rules and an enabling taxation framework are equally crucial for the development of the social economy*

6.1 EU funding initiatives to support Social Enterprises

Currently, the EU supports Social Enterprises through financial instruments, notably Regulation (EU) No [346/2013](#) introduced the European Social Entrepreneurship Funds (EuSEF) label. This label:⁴⁸

- makes it easier for investors to identify and choose EuSEFs;
- helps social businesses through easier access to finance;

⁴⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/09/social-economy-council-recommends-member-states-tap-its-full-potential/>

⁴⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/european-social-entrepreneurship-funds.html>

- enables investment fund managers to raise finance with less cost and complexity

The EU has a number of [funding initiatives](#) to support Social Enterprises, these are in the form of repayable finance and grant support. Those highlighted below are specific supports for those operating in the social economy sector, including Social Enterprises. It should be noted that Social Enterprises can also avail of programmes that support economic development available to all types of businesses, dependent on the sectors the funding programme is designed to support. The following sub-sections provide an overview of funding the EU highlights that support Social Enterprises.

6.1.1 Repayable finance

- [Programme for Employment and Social Innovation \(EaSI\)](#) – enabling access to investments of up to EUR 500,000. This programme includes a guarantee, capacity building investments, a funded instrument and advisory support for Social Enterprise finance providers
- [European Fund for Strategic Investments \(EFSI\)](#) – this provides an EU-budget guarantee to the European Investment Bank (EIB) Group. This supports the EIB Group to provide finance to higher-risk projects.

6.1.2 Grants

- Grants aimed at covering part of the transaction costs of intermediaries⁴⁹ – 21 pilot projects were selected in 2013, a further 20 projects were selected in 2016, and 14 projects in 2019. The projects served as basis for developing a practical guide entitled - [A recipe book for social finance](#)
- Grants for boosting the development of social finance markets in Europe⁵⁰ – The grant serves as an incentive to intermediaries for making

⁴⁹ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/social-economy-and-inclusive-entrepreneurship/funding_en

⁵⁰ See footnote 49 immediately above

investments of below EUR 500,000 in Social Enterprises. [Eight projects](#) were selected in 2017 and an additional [eight projects](#) in 2019.

6.1.3 Other programmes that can support EU Social Enterprises

The following list provides a list of EU funding programmes that can support Social Enterprises, including:

- [European Social Fund](#)
- [European Regional Development Fund](#)
- [Interreg Europe Programme](#)
- [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\)](#)
- [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme](#)
- [LIFE programme](#)

7 EU Member State Case Study – Republic of Ireland

The European Commission monitor social economy activity across the EU. The [EU Social Economy Gateway](#) provides an overview of the social economy in each member state including the [RoI](#). There is no specific Social Enterprise legislation in the Republic of Ireland (RoI); notably the European Commission highlight in their monitoring that there is:

...no separate legal form or status for Social Enterprise, but many have the legal status of Charities or Companies Limited by Guarantee.⁵¹

At present, the Irish Government's approach to Social Enterprises has been led by policy frameworks. In addition to specific Social Enterprise policy, a number of other policy frameworks and strategies support the Social Enterprise sector in RoI. The following subsections detail those initiatives.

7.1 Irish Government policy

⁵¹ https://social-economy-gateway.ec.europa.eu/my-country/ireland_en#framework-conditions-and-social-economy-ecosystem

The Irish Government has several policies which target the Social Enterprise sector at a national, regional and local level across RoI; shaped in part through an international lens, reflecting:⁵²

- EU policy – see [Section 6](#) of this Paper
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) - In 2022, the RoI contributed to the OECD [Recommendation on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation \(2022\)](#)
- International Labour Organisation (ILO) - In 2022, ILO agreed its first ever [resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy](#). The Irish Government participated in this resolution
- United Nations (UN) - In 2023, the RoI contributed to a UN General Assembly resolution on '[Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development](#)'. In addition, the RoI is participating in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Irish Government takes account of the SDGs when developing national Social Enterprise policy

7.1.1 National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland

In July 2019, the Irish Government published its first [National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland](#) (NSEPI), which ran between 2019 – 2022. The NSEPI 2019-2022 focused on three key objectives - namely:

1. Building Awareness of Social Enterprise
2. Growing and Strengthening Social Enterprise
3. Achieving Better Policy Alignment

Each year since 2020, the RoI Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) has published [annual reports](#) on the implementation of the NSEPI.

⁵² <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/trading-for-impact-national-social-enterprise-policy-2024-2027.pdf>

On 24 July 2024, the DRCD published the second NSEPI - [Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027](#). The strategy contained five key objectives - namely:⁵³

- 1. Building Awareness of Social Enterprise
- 2. Growing and Sustaining Social Enterprise
- 3. Supporting the Green Transition
- 4. National and International Engagement
- 5. Impact Measurement

These objectives are supported by 57 action points to be implemented over the period of the NSEPI – 2024-27. In addition, a stakeholder engagement group is to be established with the role of providing oversight of the policy. The CfE may wish to maintain a watching brief in this area.

7.1.2 Social Enterprises in Ireland: A Baseline Data Collection Exercise

In 2022, the RoI Department of Rural and Community Development commissioned a consortium to conduct a baseline data gathering exercise of Social Enterprises in RoI. In partnership with the Social Enterprise sector, an online survey was developed and published. Over 800 Social Enterprises completed the survey. The results of the survey give a snapshot of the Social Enterprise sector in 2022. The final report, [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#), was published on 25 May 2023. The key findings are detailed in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Key findings of the baseline data gathering exercise of Social Enterprise in Ireland

Key findings	Detail
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⁵³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-rural-and-community-development-and-the-gaeltacht/policy-information/trading-for-impact-national-social-enterprise-policy-2024-2027/>

Composition of sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4,335 Social Enterprises in Ireland (8.5 per 10,000 people) • 68% of Social Enterprises concentrated in four sectors: Childcare; Community Infrastructure & Local Development; Health, Youth Services & Social Care; Heritage Festivals, Arts & Creative Industry • 77% of Social Enterprises operating in more than one economic activity • 48% of Social Enterprises +20 years; 16% 0-4 years • 77% of Social Enterprises registered as Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG)
Geographical coverage and reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 43% of Social Enterprises are in rural areas (10.5 per 10,000 inhabitants) • 57% of Social Enterprises are in urban areas (8.3 per 10,000 inhabitants) • 75% of Social Enterprises focus on their localities, 15% operate internationally
Economy and finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • €2.34 billion (bn) is the contribution of the Social Enterprise sector to economy • 39.6% of Social Enterprises have an annual income of less than €100,000; 11.9% of Social Enterprises have an annual income of more than €1m • €180,000 is the median annual income of a Social Enterprise • 84% of Social Enterprises use multiple sources of income • 64% of Social Enterprise income comes from a mix of trading good/services and government grants
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 79,114 of employees within the Social Enterprise sector (84,382 including contractors)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 46.9% part-time workforce ○ 68.8% of Social Enterprises workforce are women (of which 69% work part-time) • 60.2% of Social Enterprises, with paid staff, employ people through Activation Labour Market Programmes (ALMP), especially in rural areas (65%)
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 44,501 volunteers (excluding board members) within the Social Enterprise sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 46% of Social Enterprise volunteers are over 50 years old ○ 54.0% of the volunteers are women • 30,324 board members within the Social Enterprise sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 53.6% of these directive bodies are made up of men ○ 63% of board members over 50 years old

Source: [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#) (2023)

7.1.3 Other policy supporting Social Enterprises and wider social economy

The following examples provide an overview of policy initiatives supporting the Social Enterprise sector and social economy, including examples at both national and regional levels:

- [Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025](#) – Our Rural Future will work alongside the NSEPI to support Social Enterprise in rural areas.
- [White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030](#) – Social Enterprises are recognised in the white paper as an “integral part”⁵⁴ of the RoI’s enterprise landscape.

⁵⁴ <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/publication-files/white-paper-on-enterprise-2022-2030.pdf>

- [Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: 2019-2024 strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland](#) - This strategy sets out the Irish Government “general direction of travel”⁵⁵ in relation to the community and voluntary sector, including, Social Enterprises.
- [National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025](#) - As noted in the [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#), around 45,000 volunteers are involved with Social Enterprises in the RoI; making Social Enterprises relevant to the wider volunteering Strategy.
- [Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023](#) – The Strategy notes:

*Reuse and repair initiatives provide social and economic benefits, including jobs, growth and investment, particularly in the area of Social Enterprises*⁵⁶
- [Western Development Commission](#) – It promotes social and economic development in the west of the RoI. It published its [Unlocking Potential, Driving Change – A strategy for regional growth and collaboration 2025-2029](#). Pillar 4 of the strategy sets the objective - Progressing Social Innovation & Social Enterprise Development

7.2 Representative organisations

7.2.1 Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland

[Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland](#) (SERI) is a representative body, advocating on behalf of the Social Enterprise sector in the RoI. SERI is a membership-based organisation founded in 2020. SERI is running a [Social Enterprise Verification pilot programme](#); enabling 100 Social Enterprises to test

⁵⁵ <https://assets.gov.ie/26890/ff380490589a4f9ab9cd9bb3f53b5493.pdf>

⁵⁶ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/whole-of-government-circular-economy-strategy-2022-2023.pdf>

the for a potential voluntary accreditation – a “quality mark” for Social Enterprises. The accreditation is based on five standards, namely:⁵⁷

- 1) Purpose: Exists to solve a social and/or environmental problem.
- 2) Operations: Prioritises purpose, people and planet over profit in operational decisions.
- 3) Revenue: Has a self-sustaining revenue model.
- 4) Use of surplus: Reinvests the majority of any surplus towards its purpose.
- 5) Structure: Chooses legal structures and financing that protect and lock-in purpose long-term.

7.2.2 Irish Social Enterprise Network

The [Irish Social Enterprise Network](#) (ISEN) is representative network for Social Enterprises in the RoI. ISEN describes the role of the network as; to facilitate networking opportunities between Social Enterprises across Ireland, provide educational resources to support Social Enterprises and to advocate of behalf or Social Enterprises. One notable resource provided by ISEN is the [Social Enterprise Toolkit](#), which aims to support those wishing to set up a Social Enterprise.

8 Concluding remarks

As this Paper highlights, Social Enterprises play a key role in the economy of Northern Ireland. The 2025 NISES Report published on 30 July 2025, provided the most recent analysis of the Social Enterprise sector in Northern Ireland. The headline figures, estimate there are currently, at least 1,225 Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland. The contribution these Social Enterprises make to the Northern Ireland economy is not insignificant: they have a combined turnover estimated at £932.9m and employ around 17,300 people.

The DfE is responsible for developing Northern Ireland Executive policy for Social Enterprises and the wider social economy in Northern Ireland. In that

⁵⁷ <https://www.socialenterprise.ie/verification>

role, the DfE has commissioned and published a number of plans for the sector including: the Social Enterprise Work Programme, the [Social Enterprise Action Plan](#) and [Barriers to Growth Research – Unleashing potential overcoming growth challenges for Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland](#). The DfE also has established Social Enterprise Policy Group to co-ordinate Executive departmental policy in relation to the Social Enterprise sector in Northern Ireland.

As noted in the Paper, local councils have responsibility for Social Enterprise after it was transferred to them in 2015 as part of the [Review of Public Administration](#). At council level in Northern Ireland, all district councils have support for Social Enterprises through the Go Succeed Programme; with 389 Social Enterprises supported up to April 2025. However, the actions taken to support social enterprise vary across Northern Ireland; with some more active in providing specific support to Social Enterprises than others.

As shown by the district council responses provided to RalSe-PFSU, a number of issues exist across the councils in providing support for Social Enterprises. That includes non-existent or incomplete registers of Social Enterprises in each district council. And that is exacerbated by a lack of a legal definition of a Social Enterprise and those which are currently known as Social Enterprises having different legal status.

Looking to other jurisdictions provides a comparative perspective. As highlighted in sections 6 and 7 of this Paper, EU policy pertaining to Social Enterprises, in particular the EU Commission 2021-30 [Action Plan for the Social Economy](#), which sets out its objectives and actions to support the sector up to 2030. Included for Social Enterprises across the EU are a number of financial support mechanisms both in the form of repayable payments and grants; and some are specific to organisations operating in the social economy. Moreover, Social Enterprises can apply for other EU economic and social development programmes that are open to all types of organisations which can meet the specified eligibility criteria.

In addition, RoI, an EU Member State, avails of such EU support: transposing and implementing such EU policy through Irish Government national policy and

strategy. For example, the second NSEPI in RoI- [Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027](#) – it has an objective that aims:

...to help cultivate and sustain strong and impactful Social Enterprises in Ireland. In doing so, Social Enterprises can enrich the social, environmental, and economic well-being of people living in our communities. The policy represents a strong commitment by Government to Social Enterprises, and a recognition of their value and potential.⁵⁸

And in the past, in 2022, the Irish Government commissioned research to provide an up-to-date picture of the Social Enterprise landscape in RoI. The [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#). It revealed in its headline figures that there were 4,335 Social Enterprises in Ireland, which contributed €2.34bn and was employed 79,114 people.

The findings outlined throughout this Paper suggest Social Enterprises are a significant component of the economies in which they operate; supporting employment and addressing social issues in the communities they operate. Common issues arising from the Paper for the Social Enterprise sector include:

- Lack of separate legal status for Social Enterprises
- Issues accessing finance to establish, support and grow Social Enterprises
- Lack of or incomplete directories or registers to identify Social Enterprises when support is available, including – grants, programmes or public procurement initiatives
- Improving and supporting leadership teams of Social Enterprises

It appears those challenges and others, if addressed, could help support the continued growth of the sector. For example, in the policy documents produced across the jurisdictions considered, it can be observed that the aims, objectives and social missions of Social Enterprises align with government priorities -

⁵⁸ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/trading-for-impact-national-social-enterprise-policy-2024-2027.pdf>

notably in relation to social exclusion, labour market access and other social issues affecting different states. Social Enterprises are for the most part community-based and have built up a wealth of experience in addressing issues and approaches. Those could serve to instructively help inform government approaches when addressing those such areas in future.

Appendix 1. DfE Social Enterprise Action Plan

	Action	Detail	Owner	Delivery Target
Initial Actions				
1	Social Enterprise Champions	Introduce regional SE champions to Invest NI, InterTradelreland and in every local council who will act as a point of contact for the sector to support their journey within their organisation. Training will be required to ensure they are knowledgeable about SE and have the right skills and experience to provide dedicated support.	Invest NI InterTradelreland Councils	March 2025
2	The Leader Programme for the SE sector	(a) Reserve a ring-fenced number of spaces for SE on the current InvestNI programme (b) Replicate a scheme specifically for the SE sector	InvestNI	March 2026
3	Procurement frameworks	Review the process of procurement frameworks in terms of frequency of renewal, ease of access for social enterprises, and make recommendations on how to make these more accessible, taking into account recent legislative changes.	DfE (skills)/DoF	June 2025
Objective 1: Awareness of The Sector				
4	Promotion of social enterprise in DfE and InvestNI	Raise the awareness of the social enterprise sector among economic policy teams engaging with the private business sector, to ensure social enterprise stakeholders are involved in business conversations; catered for in new initiatives as appropriate and able to access existing supports on an equitable basis. All DfE and InvestNI staff should have attended awareness raising events before March 2027.	DfE/InvestNI	March 2027

	Action	Detail	Owner	Delivery Target
Objective 2: Leadership and Training				
5	Evaluate existing training provision	<p>Evaluate existing training provision, including regional training initiatives, with a view to reshaping this towards sector needs, and determining if additional external training needs are required.</p> <p>Should the evaluation support it, a pilot training programme would be developed, similar to that used by School for Social Entrepreneurs, bespoke for NI and addressing skills gaps. This would either be a reshaping and uniting of training provided by public sector providers, or an externally engaged programme.</p>	<p>DfE</p> <p>InvestNI/ Intertradelreland</p>	<p>March 2025</p> <p>Financial year 25/26</p>
6	InvestNI's Leadership & Development	Following initial action 2, and the evaluation under action 5, identify scope to wider access from the sector to other leadership and development support offered by InvestNI and Intertrade	InvestNI/ Intertradelreland	Financial year 25/26
7	Peer learning scheme/ Social Value accelerator scheme	<p>Encourage relationships between private and SE sectors and facilitate mutual learning. SE to share knowledge/experience in Social Value to benefit private sector. Private sector to share knowledge/experience in business acumen to benefit SE. This could involve an element of residential learning and aim to grow and develop social value in procurement partnerships.</p> <p>In year 1 this would involve a pilot residential programme with shared learning objectives of benefit to social entrepreneurs and private business entrepreneurs. If the pilot is successful, this could be rolled out further in years 2 and 3.</p>	DfE	Financial year 25/26

	Action	Detail	Owner	Delivery Target
Objective 3: Investment support				
8	Finance	Scope out existing financial offerings and access to finance for the sector from across government, to identify barriers and future needs. This will inform actions to address these barriers and needs in years 2 and 3 of the action plan.	DfE	June 2025
9	Social Enterprise Growth Fund	Explore the potential for a dedicated capital loan scheme for social enterprises that is dedicated to their growth, and which is focused on those organisations for whom existing market offerings do not meet their needs.	DfE	March 2025
Objective 4: Procurement				
10	Commissioning awareness	Undertake commissioning awareness across DfE and the wider NICS to increase understanding of commissioners on: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the ability of NICS departments to use grants to the social enterprise sector as an alternative to contracting; 2. the ability to use open and dynamic purchasing frameworks to deliver social value; and 3. the ability to split contracts into smaller commissions to enable social enterprises to access contracts, and when this is appropriate. 	DoF/SIB	Financial year 25/26
11	Local Government commissioning	Engage with local government commissioners to encourage the maximisation of value to the social enterprise sector through effective procurement mechanisms.	BCC/Solace	Financial year 25/26

	Action	Detail	Owner	Delivery Target
Objective 5: Access to Support				
12	A pathway for the social enterprise sector	Create a road map for the sector to highlight support at various stages of an organisation's strategic goals and provide a high-level view of where support is available to achieve them. E.g. Signpost to GoSucceed – work through their programmes – refer to InterTradeIreland – reach higher turnover – refer to Invest NI. This would build on the work within the existing social enterprise work programme to map out existing sources of funding in one place. This would build on the work within the 24/25 work programme to have all funding information for the sector centrally located in one place on NIBusinessInfo.	DfE	Financial year 25/26
13	Review criteria for business supports	Review access criteria to ensure social enterprises are not unnecessarily excluded, either directly or indirectly, from business support programmes	InvestNI and IntertradeIreland	Financial year 25/26
14	Future planning	In year 3, use lessons learned to look ahead at strategic direction for the SE sector	DfE	Financial year 26/27

Source: [Department for the Economy - Social Enterprise Action Plan](#) (December 2024)

Appendix 2. Key actions taken since introduction of EU Social Economy Action Plan

Propose a Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions. (see section 3.1)	2023
Organise webinars and workshops for public officials in relation to various policy fields with relevance for the social economy. (see section 3.1)	2022-2023
Launch a new initiative under the Single Market Programme supporting the creation of local and regional partnerships between social economy entities and mainstream businesses, enabling a 'buy social' business to business market. (see section 3.3)	2022
Improve access to finance for social entrepreneurs in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and Southern Neighbourhood , by launching actions to boost grassroots initiatives and support intermediaries to develop financial products adapted to the needs of social economy entities. (See section 3.5)	2023
Launch a new single EU Social Economy Gateway to provide a clear entry point for social economy stakeholders, other relevant actors and individuals seeking information on relevant EU funding, policies and initiatives. (see section 4.1)	2023
Launch a new Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy , which will foster youth entrepreneurship, including for female and social entrepreneurs by working with national policy makers and youth entrepreneurship networks. (see section 4.1)	2022
Launch new financial products under the InvestEU programme aimed at mobilising private financing targeted at the needs of social enterprises at different stages of development. (see section 4.2)	2022
Support the development of social impact measurement and management to assist social economy actors in the EU. (see section 4.2)	2023
Launch a transition pathway for the "Proximity and social economy" industrial ecosystem to further work with public authorities and stakeholders on the implementation of the action plan in this area. (see section 4.3)	2022
Boost social innovation through a new approach to transnational cooperation under the ESF+ and the setting up of a new "European Competence Centre for Social Innovation" . (see section 4.4)	2022

Source: [SEAP - European Commission](#) (2021)