Beyond the Pilot: Pathways to Lasting Impact in Ireland's Social Innovation Ecosystem

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Executive Summary

Across Ireland, organisations are developing innovative responses to some of society's most pressing challenges. The initiatives highlighted in this research demonstrate what is possible when government, communities, NGOs, social enterprises and civil society work together to address issues such as homelessness, food insecurity, literacy, climate action and health.

The purpose of this report is to inform the development of Ireland's National Competence Centre for Social Innovation and contribute to European learning on strengthening social innovation ecosystems. It draws on Genio's action research interviews with 25 senior civil servants, leaders of NGOs and social enterprises, intermediary organisations and academics.

Participants described an ecosystem that is effective at generating and testing new ideas but considerably less effective at supporting what happens once those ideas have proven successful. Innovations that have already demonstrated their value often face uncertainty about ownership, long-term funding and responsibility for sustaining them. Across the interviews, the same questions surfaced repeatedly: Who funds it beyond the pilot stage? Who adopts it? Who decides whether it should become part of mainstream practice? And who is responsible for sustaining it over time?

Participants suggested that this strong emphasis on novelty has wider consequences. Funding, support and evaluation systems are perceived as assuming that organisational growth is a universal indicator of impact. Participants argued that this can put pressure on organisations to pursue growth because opportunities exist, rather than because expansion aligns with their mission or organisational readiness. The findings suggest that **growth should be understood as a strategic choice rather than a universal expectation, with funding, evaluation and support systems recognising diverse pathways to achieving lasting impact.**

A central finding is that different forms of social innovation create different forms of value and therefore require different pathways to sustainability. Organisations able to generate earned income may build sustainable models through trading, commercial partnerships and service contracts. Others create social value without generating commercial returns and therefore remain dependent on philanthropy, grants and public funding, regardless of how effective they are. **For these organisations in particular, reporting requirements and measurement frameworks associated with public and philanthropic funding were viewed as burdensome, especially for smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity.**

Participants also described an ecosystem characterised by fragmentation. While many organisations were working towards similar social goals, they often did so in isolation, each navigating its own funding applications, reporting requirements, governance responsibilities and organisational development challenges. Participants emphasised that some duplication of activity is both inevitable and valuable, reflecting experimentation, local adaptation and diverse community needs. However, they also pointed to unnecessary duplication of organisational effort, with many organisations independently investing scarce time and resources in solving similar administrative and operational challenges. Across the interviews, there was a strong call for better mechanisms to connect organisations, share learning, build partnerships and, where appropriate, pool knowledge and resources.

Behind these governance and funding challenges are people. Leaders of NGOs and social enterprises frequently described the strain of sustaining organisations that had already demonstrated their value. Many spoke of spending significant time securing funding, meeting reporting requirements and navigating fragmented systems instead of strengthening or extending their impact. In these circumstances, the challenge was simply "keeping the lights on".

Despite the challenges identified throughout this report, Ireland also offers many examples of social innovations that have achieved lasting impact. Although these organisations followed different pathways, the findings suggest they share several common characteristics: a clear sense of purpose, investment in organisational capability, strong collaborative relationships, strategies that reflect the particular form of value they create, and an ability to respond to the context in which they operate. Several organisations, for example, pivoted during the COVID-19 pandemic because they addressed urgent problems experienced by government and society. More broadly, successful organisations were often able to align their work with emerging policy priorities or unmet public needs, creating opportunities for collaboration, funding and wider adoption.

The report concludes that Ireland does not lack social innovation. Rather, it lacks clear and coordinated pathways that enable successful innovations to move beyond the pilot stage and achieve lasting impact. Strengthening these pathways by building stronger connections between innovators, policymakers, funders, researchers and communities represents one of the most significant opportunities for Ireland's emerging National Competence Centre for Social Innovation and for the continued development of Ireland's social innovation ecosystem.

Introduction

Across Ireland, people and organisations are developing new ways to tackle some of society's most complex challenges. Innovations such as Housing First, FoodCloud, Sanctuary Runners Ireland, Creative Ireland, and P-TECH demonstrate the breadth of social innovation already taking place through collaborations between government, civil society, social enterprises, communities, universities, and businesses. Although these initiatives address very different issues, from homelessness and climate change to literacy, social inclusion, and youth employment, they share a common challenge: how can impactful innovations move beyond pilot funding to create lasting impact?

This question is not unique to Ireland. Across Europe and internationally, governments, civil society organisations, researchers, communities, and private organisations are increasingly investing in social innovation as a way of responding to complex social challenges that existing institutions and policy frameworks struggle to address (Mulgan, 2012; Murray et al., 2010; Nicholls et al., 2016).

The European Union defines Social Innovation as:

> …an activity, that is social both as to its ends and its means and in particular an activity which relates to the development and implementation of new ideas concerning products, services, practices and models, that simultaneously meets social needs and creates new social relationships or collaborations between public, civil society or private organisations, thereby benefiting society and boosting its capacity to act (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021)

Increasingly, attention has shifted beyond how social innovations emerge towards how they are sustained, embedded, and translated into longer-term social and systems change (Westley et al., 2014).

This report forms part of a European project which Genio and Rethink Ireland are partnering with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to deliver the National Competence Centre for Social Innovation (NCCSI) project, a national initiative supported under the ESF+ programme. Under the NCCSI, Genio and Rethink Ireland are working to further support the development of the social innovation sector both at a national and transnational European level. We are one of six members of the INSISST consortium, alongside partners in Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, and Poland. Our work is being implemented through an ecosystem approach that is inclusive and participatory, evidence-based, bottom-up, multistakeholder, and iterative in nature.

Building on Genio's earlier work on scaling evidence-based social innovations to address complex problems in Ireland and Europe (Genio, 2023), this research explores how social innovations emerge, develop, and influence wider systems. While much of the literature has focused on how innovations scale through replication, policy influence, and changes in practice, relationships, and culture (Moore et al., 2015), comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how these innovations spread and become embedded within systems (Cinar, Trott, & Simms, 2019; Salas Gironés, van Est, & Verbong, 2019; Loorbach et al., 2020; van Hout, Braams, Meijer, & Meijer, 2024). While Moore et al.'s (2015) framework explains the different forms that scaling may take, it says less about the mechanisms through which innovations spread. Addressing this gap, Genio (2023) identify three principal routes through which social innovations achieve wider impact: public sector adoption, where innovations become embedded within policy or public services; commercial adoption, through diffusion in the marketplace; and open-source dissemination, where innovations are freely shared and adapted by others.

This report examines not only how innovations grow, but also the conditions under which they become sustained as part of everyday policy and practice. The findings are intended to inform the future development of Ireland's National Competence Centre while contributing to broader European learning about how social innovation ecosystems can better support innovation over the long term.

The research presented in this report was initially motivated by questions about scaling. Across Europe, considerable attention has been devoted to understanding how impactful innovations move beyond the pilot stage and achieve wider impact. However, participants quickly broadened the conversation. Rather than focusing solely on scaling, they consistently returned to questions of sustainability, ownership, mainstreaming, adoption, and long-term responsibility. In doing so, they highlighted a broader challenge facing Ireland's social innovation ecosystem: not simply how to generate innovative ideas, but how to ensure that innovations which demonstrate value become embedded within governance, funding, and service systems so they can continue to deliver benefits over time.

The chapters that follow explore these questions through the experiences of participants from across Ireland's social innovation ecosystem. Together, they examine how innovation is supported, the barriers organisations encounter as they seek to sustain impactful initiatives, and the implications for strengthening the ecosystem so that more social innovations can achieve lasting impact.

Methods

The Action Research adopted a qualitative and iterative approach involving participants from across the social innovation ecosystem, including government, civil society, social enterprises, intermediary organisations, and academia. Through interviews, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing reflection, the research explored how different actors understand social innovation, the challenges they encounter, and the conditions that enable or constrain impactful innovation over time.

Emerging findings were shared throughout the research process to validate interpretations, gather feedback, and inform subsequent stages of analysis. Key engagement points included presentations to the Steering Group (Departments of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and Rural and Community Development (DRCD) (October 2025), the INSISST Consortium Visit (March 2026), a consultation with Rethink on the leadership needs of social enterprise leaders (April 2026), and the Advisory Group (May 2026). These dissemination activities formed an integral part of the iterative Action Research cycle, strengthening the relevance and robustness of the findings.

Participants

The Action Research includes interviews with 13 participants from Government Departments, comprising 9 Assistant Secretaries, 3 Principal Officers, and 1 Departmental Advisor from the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

The research has also included interviews with six leaders of NGOs and social enterprises that have demonstrated evidence of growth, expansion, or wider influence beyond their original contexts. In addition, the research includes an interview with a participant from a regional organisation supporting social innovation, providing perspectives on the practical challenges and opportunities associated with supporting social innovators at local and regional levels.

The research has further included interviews with five academics whose work sits at the intersection of research, policy, and practice.

Limitations

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Most notably, the research encountered challenges recruiting participants from the NGO and social enterprise sectors, despite strong engagement from government departments. Participants suggested this reflected wider research fatigue, with organisations frequently asked to contribute to research, evaluations, and consultations without always seeing how their input informs policy or practice.

Findings

1. A Diverse Innovation Ecosystem

Across government, NGOs, social enterprises, academia, and intermediary organisations, participants described a vibrant and diverse ecosystem of initiatives responding to unmet social needs, policy gaps, and complex societal challenges. Participants pointed to numerous examples of innovation already making a difference in communities across the country, including:

- **Housing First:** partnership involving NGOs, local authorities, the HSE, the Housing Agency, and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; subsequently mainstreamed into national homelessness policy.
- **FoodCloud:** social enterprise redistributing surplus food to tackle food waste and food insecurity through partnerships with retailers, charities, and public bodies.
- **Sanctuary Runners:** community initiative promoting social inclusion by bringing together asylum seekers, refugees, and local communities through running.
- **P-TECH (Pathways in Technology Early College High School):** collaboration between schools, employers, higher education institutions, and the Department of Education to prepare young people for technology careers.
- **DRIVE:** interagency initiative addressing drug-related intimidation and violence through collaboration between local drug and alcohol task forces, An Garda Síochána, the HSE, and community organisations.
- **Junior Achievement Ireland:** a member of one of the world's largest educational non-profits, helping prepare young people for their futures by delivering hands-on, experiential learning in entrepreneurship, employability, financial literacy and the value of STEAM.
- **Common Knowledge:** non-profit social enterprise that shares skills in sustainable building through hands-on courses in building, making, mending and growing.
- **Education for Sustainability**: national not-for-profit social enterprise focusing on climate education in Irish schools.
- **Healthy Communities:** HSE-supported programme delivering locally led health and wellbeing initiatives.
- **Creative Communities (Creative Ireland):** whole-of-government initiative delivered through local authorities, integrating culture, climate action, healthy ageing, migration, and community development.
- **Children's Books Ireland:** national charity promoting children's literacy and reading for pleasure through schools, libraries, authors, publishers, and community partners.
- **Sport Ireland participation initiatives:** state-funded programmes increasing participation among women, Travellers, and other underrepresented groups through National Governing Bodies and Local Sports Partnerships.

Participants also reflected on why these innovations emerge. Rather than being centrally planned, social innovation was often described as an adaptive response to unmet needs, service gaps and societal challenges such as homelessness and drug addiction that existing systems struggled to address. As one government participant explained:

> "A lot of the issues I work on are… fringe issues. And they're problematic issues… I'm dealing with them because the main system can't deal with them and is failing to deal with them." (Gov Dep 2)

This perspective was echoed by organisations working on the ground. Some were filling needs that were not addressed by the mainstream system. For example, one NGO participant working in the education sector reflected:

> "We really found ourselves seeing that schools were crying out for support." (Social Innovation Leader 1)

Government participants argued that the challenge was not a shortage of innovation, but the absence of effective mechanisms for connecting successful innovations to wider systems so that they could be adopted, adapted and accessed more broadly. This was particularly evident in discussions about education, where participants described numerous innovative initiatives but few mechanisms for ensuring that successful approaches spread across the system and benefited all children. As one government participant reflected:

> "The lack of great ideas is not our problem in the system… it's that piece of connecting the people in such a way that every child without exception gets access to the new technology, the social innovation, the whatever it might be. And that seems to me one of the missing pieces." (Government Interview 9)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Ireland's social innovation ecosystem is not constrained by a shortage of ideas. Instead, its strength lies in the ability of organisations and communities to identify gaps where existing systems are struggling and develop practical responses. The wider challenge, explored throughout the remainder of this report, is creating the pathways through which successful innovations can move beyond their original context, reach more people, and achieve lasting impact.

2. The Innovation–Sustainability Tension

Attention frequently turned to what happens after an innovation has demonstrated its value. While participants described an ecosystem that is increasingly effective at supporting pilot projects, experimentation and new ideas, they also highlighted a persistent gap in support once innovations prove successful. Rather than focusing on how effective initiatives can be sustained, embedded or expanded where appropriate, participants felt that funding and support systems often continued to prioritise novelty. Several expressed frustration that organisations were expected to continually generate new ideas, even when existing programmes had already demonstrated their impact.

As one social innovation leader reflected:

> "One of the things that is frustrating me about social enterprise is about 'new, new, new' 'innovate, innovate, innovate'. And there's so many amazing projects that just need help to sustain… I'd like to see a bit more talking about how to sustain a project and programme rather than trying to come up with new things all the time." (Social Innovation Leader 5)

Another participant described the pressure to continually reinvent their work in order to secure funding:

> "Why do I have to keep coming up with something else innovative for the next fund, something else innovative for the next fund, when actually what I'm doing is innovative? I just want to do what I'm really good at, what we've proven, instead of me having to do a dance every time there's an application." (Social Innovation Leader 4)

These reflections capture a recurring tension throughout the research. Participants did not question the importance of supporting new ideas, but they repeatedly asked whether sufficient attention is given to sustaining innovations that have already demonstrated their value. In doing so, they highlighted a broader ecosystem challenge: how to balance investment in innovation with investment in the long-term sustainability and mainstreaming of proven approaches.

3. Growth as a Strategic Choice

While participants argued that more attention should be given to sustaining proven innovations, they also challenged another common assumption: that success necessarily means organisational growth. Several cautioned that organisational growth should not be viewed as the desired outcome for every form of social innovation. For some organisations, maintaining the quality of their work and remaining responsive to communities was considered more important than expanding their reach. As one participant in the education sector explained:

> “For us it's about not sacrificing quality. Like we don't want to reach more children for the sake of reaching more children” (Social Innovation Leader, 1).

Another participant described the practical limits of expansion, arguing that increasing numbers could undermine the very quality that made the innovation effective:

> “We can't scale anymore in terms of our numbers, like could we do 500 schools a year? Well, we probably lose our quality then and. It would just be chaos. So like we don't actually want to do more numbers.” (Social Innovation leader, 4).

These reflections reinforce a broader finding emerging throughout the research. Different forms of social innovation create different forms of value and therefore require different pathways to lasting impact. For some organisations, success may involve organisational growth or wider diffusion. For others, it may involve sustaining high-quality local services, influencing policy, strengthening communities or becoming embedded within public systems. The challenge is not to encourage every innovation to grow and increase numbers, but to create an ecosystem capable of supporting diverse pathways to sustainability and impact.

Examining how organisations operating under different conditions navigate sustainability and impact provides further insight into both the opportunities and constraints facing Ireland's social innovation ecosystem.

The following section examines three contrasting examples that illustrate how organisations operating under different conditions have navigated these different pathways to sustainability and lasting impact.

4. Different Innovations, Different Pathways

Participants consistently emphasised that social innovation is not a single type of activity or organisation. Rather, Ireland's ecosystem comprises initiatives operating under very different organisational, financial and institutional conditions, pursuing different forms of social value and different routes to impact. Some organisations seek financial sustainability through earned income and commercial partnerships. Others focus on strengthening communities, improving local wellbeing or addressing complex societal challenges where commercial income is neither feasible nor appropriate. Others aim to influence policy or become embedded within mainstream public services.

These differences shape how organisations understand sustainability, scaling and success. Participants frequently suggested that social innovations are often discussed as though they face similar opportunities and challenges despite operating under fundamentally different conditions. As a result, assumptions about scaling, organisational growth and sustainability are often applied uniformly to innovations pursuing very different goals.

Three examples illustrate these contrasting pathways.

The **first organisation**, operating in the climate sector, combined a clear social mission with a deliberate commitment to financial sustainability. By generating income through service delivery and commercial partnerships, it was able to reinvest surpluses in staff, technology and organisational development, reducing its dependence on short-term grant funding. As one participant explained:

> "We take that profit and reinvest it in our people, our processes and our services... We were passionate about being a social enterprise... How can we bring the positives of the business world and the charity world together: being efficient, effective, data-led and strategic, while remaining driven by our values and mission." (Social Innovation Leader 2)

The **second organisation**, working in the education sector to promote literacy, followed a markedly different trajectory. Because its social value could not readily be translated into earned income, it relied on philanthropy, fundraising, partnerships and organisational development to sustain and expand its work. A major philanthropic investment enabled it to strengthen staffing, evaluation, fundraising and strategic planning, building the organisational capacity needed to sustain its impact over time.

> "We had no time or space to think strategically until we had more bodies there who could do that day-to-day work and resource it properly." (Social Innovation Leader 1)

The **third example, Housing First**, illustrates a different route altogether. Rather than relying on the originating organisation to sustain and grow the innovation, responsibility progressively shifted into mainstream public policy and service delivery. Government participants described innovation funding not simply as a mechanism for supporting pilots, but as a way of identifying approaches capable of becoming part of mainstream provision. As one participant reflected:

> "Housing First is a really good example where you had the bit of funding and got new thinking and now it's in some kind of a more mainstream programme. So that's... what we would always be looking for, is how can we use this then into a more mainstream situation?" (Government Participant 2)

5. The Missing Pathway After Success

One of the most significant findings emerging from the research concerns what happens after innovation succeeds. Participants frequently suggested that answering this question requires recognising that different forms of social innovation pursue different forms of impact and therefore require different pathways beyond the pilot stage.

Across interviews, participants described a diverse range of innovations operating under very different organisational logics. Some innovations sought to generate earned income and expand through trading activity and reinvestment. Others prioritised strengthening communities, improving local wellbeing, or addressing place-based challenges, where remaining locally embedded was viewed as an important component of success. Participants also described innovations addressing complex social problems that existing systems struggle to resolve, alongside initiatives designed to influence policy, public services, or wider systems change. These different forms of innovation raise different questions concerning sustainability, ownership, and long-term development.

Despite these differences, participants repeatedly questioned what happens once innovations demonstrate value and begin to move beyond their original context. Regardless of organisational model, they returned to a common set of questions:

- Who owns an innovation once it succeeds?
- Who funds it beyond the pilot stage?
- Who adopts it?
- Who decides whether it should be mainstreamed?
- Who is responsible for sustaining it over time?
- What happens when temporary innovation funding ends?

These questions emerged particularly strongly among government participants. As one participant observed:

> "A process for rolling it out I think needs to be part of it, otherwise it ends up being something short, and then when the tap is turned off, either the pressure is on the Department to pick up the tab... but it ends up still being a project" (Gov Dep 9).

The findings suggest that there is no clear or consistent answer to these questions. Housing First illustrates one pathway, where responsibility for sustaining the innovation was ultimately assumed by the state through mainstream housing policy. However, participants consistently described this as an exceptional case rather than the norm.

By contrast, organisations that had also demonstrated impact but remained outside mainstream public funding often continued to face uncertainty about their long-term sustainability. One NGO participant explained:

> "We're funded by the Arts Council. We didn't have a fundraiser. We never fundraised from the public. We never took donations. We hadn't been applying to trusts or foundations… when the Arts Council wrote to us and said you need to diversify your income streams because we want to make sure organisations don't become over-reliant on us." (Social Innovation Leader 1).

These contrasting examples capture a recurring concern throughout the interviews. Once an innovation demonstrates value and develops a constituency of users, beneficiaries or stakeholders, expectations for its continuation increase. Yet participants described considerable uncertainty about how responsibility transfers from pilot funding to long-term provision. While a small number of innovations become institutionalised within public systems, many remain dependent on organisations that must continually assemble new funding sources to sustain services that have already demonstrated their value.

6. Mainstreaming as a Governance Challenge

Participants suggested that the challenge extends beyond funding to questions of governance. Even where innovations demonstrate impact, uncertainty often remains regarding who should adopt them, who should fund them, and who should assume long-term responsibility. Mainstreaming therefore emerged not simply as a question of sustaining successful innovations, but of creating governance arrangements capable of embedding them where appropriate.

Importantly, the nature of this challenge varied across different forms of innovation. Organisations capable of generating earned income may be able to construct partial pathways to sustainability through trading activity, commercial partnerships, service contracts, or market expansion. Community-based initiatives may prioritise sustaining local relationships and maintaining place-based impact rather than pursuing organisational growth. By contrast, innovations addressing complex societal challenges often generate substantial public value without generating corresponding financial value, making questions of public ownership, long-term funding, or institutional adoption particularly significant.

Government participants also recognised the challenges associated with mainstreaming successful innovations. As one participant observed:

> "There is a danger sometimes that after a while those become core services… that is a bit of a danger in this space because once you introduce a programme of any kind here: it's really hard to take it back." (Gov Dep 11).

This highlights a central governance dilemma. Innovation is encouraged because it enables experimentation and new responses to emerging needs. Yet once successful innovations begin addressing needs that existing systems are not meeting, questions arise concerning permanence, ownership, accountability, and institutional responsibility.

Participants also highlighted practical barriers to mainstreaming. One government participant reflected:

> "There's a burden – burden is the wrong word – but there is an overhead to the HSE to administer the funding and the arrangements in alignment with the National Financial Regulations which at some point can mean it can be more costly to administer than the value of the amount." (Gov Dep 5).

This suggests that mainstreaming is not simply a matter of proving impact. Even where innovations demonstrate value, public systems must also navigate governance arrangements, procurement requirements, administrative costs, accountability mechanisms, and long-term financial commitments.

Participants also described considerable frustration where innovations had demonstrated effectiveness, generated strong support among beneficiaries, and aligned with stated policy objectives, yet still struggled to secure wider adoption. As one NGO participant explained:

> "It's very frustrating then when you're knocking on a closed door and you have a solution, a proven solution, and you have a lot of support organically on the ground... I have a solution, but it's like, no, sorry, the computer says no." (Social Innovation Leader, 5).

These accounts suggest that mainstreaming is not simply a question of effectiveness but also of governance, authority, and decision-making. Demonstrating impact alone does not create a pathway into mainstream policy or service delivery.

Participants also cautioned against assuming that all innovations should become public services. Some were viewed as most effective when remaining within NGOs, social enterprises, or community organisations. Others were expected to influence policy, shape professional practice, or diffuse through wider adoption rather than formal state ownership. The challenge, therefore, is not determining a single destination for every innovation but creating a clearer set of pathways through which different forms of innovation can achieve lasting impact.

7. Fragmentation Across the Social Innovation Ecosystem

Across participant groups, the social innovation ecosystem was described as fragmented, with funding, governance, organisational supports, and knowledge dispersed across multiple institutions and programmes. While participants acknowledged that innovation activity is widespread, they suggested that the systems intended to support and sustain innovation often lack coordination, creating significant administrative, operational, and strategic burdens for organisations. Rather than identifying a lack of innovation, participants characterised fragmentation itself as one of the principal barriers to sustaining and growing successful initiatives.

Government participants described responsibility for supporting social innovation as distributed across multiple government departments, agencies, local authorities, and funding programmes, each operating with distinct priorities, application processes, reporting requirements, and governance arrangements. Organisations frequently engage simultaneously with multiple funders and accountability systems, requiring separate applications, compliance processes, and reporting mechanisms. Participants suggested that this duplication creates inefficiencies not only for organisations but also for the public sector attempting to oversee innovation. As one government participant observed:

> "There's lots of duplication of process and people and hours and time and compliance for one organisation… so there's something about how we can be more efficient on both sides, both to be efficient for the state but to have sufficient levels of visibility and I suppose good practice in terms of financial regs" (Gov Dep 5).

Fragmentation was also evident within the organisational landscape. Participants frequently described multiple organisations, initiatives, and programmes operating simultaneously with limited coordination or awareness of one another's work. While duplication was not necessarily viewed as problematic—it may reflect experimentation and local adaptation—it was also seen as contributing to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for collaboration. As one academic participant commented:

> "Is anybody else doing this in the locality? Did they have the idea 10 years ago? We quite a bit of duplication and that's not necessarily a problem" (Academic 4).

Overall, participants suggested that fragmentation represents more than an administrative inconvenience. Rather, it shapes how organisations access resources, collaborate, and sustain innovation, creating cumulative burdens that limit the long-term development and impact of social innovations.

8. Accountability and Measurement

Alongside fragmentation, participants consistently highlighted tensions between innovation and accountability. Accountability was widely recognised as essential for ensuring transparency, oversight, and the responsible stewardship of public resources. Government participants acknowledged the importance of maintaining appropriate governance while also recognising that innovation inevitably involves uncertainty and the possibility of failure. One participant explained:

> "I have to be open to taking risks and seeing stuff fail, because otherwise we'll just plod along and do the same thing over and over again" (Gov Department 1).

However, participants also described how accountability systems can unintentionally discourage experimentation by reinforcing organisational risk aversion. One government participant explained:

> "I get hauled in front of… a public accounts committee, and get the absolute shit beaten out of me for a perception of 'you are crap at your job, why can't you do the following?' So, the system is very risk adverse, because the system doesn't get rewarded for innovation" (Gov Dep 6).

Participants suggested that the challenge lies not in accountability itself but in how accountability is experienced within fragmented funding and governance systems. NGO and social enterprise leaders described extensive reporting requirements that divert organisational capacity away from innovation, learning, collaboration, and long-term development. Concerns also extended beyond administrative burden to the assumptions embedded within funding and evaluation systems. Participants argued that reporting frameworks often assume a relatively uniform model of organisational success, regardless of organisational mission, theory of change, or context.

Several participants described how these expectations can contribute to mission drift, as organisations adapt their activities to fit funding priorities rather than pursuing their original objectives. As social innovation leaders explained:

> "It's mission drift… you have all of these things out in these boxes and you need to pay the bills and you're like, oh, well, I just have to like again, shape shift to fit that because otherwise I can't get the extra staff… it is not one size fits all" (Social Innovation Leader 5).
>
> “Social enterprises are just exhausted, and an ecosystem will come and say, well, this is what you need, you need, and they'll go, okay, great. So I think creating space, my advice to every social enterprise is always slow down... And so by taking that space, you make much better quality decisions and set out a path that is more sustainable” (Social Innovation Leader 1).

Participants also questioned dominant approaches to measuring impact. Across interviews, there was a perception that existing performance frameworks privilege outputs, activity levels, organisational growth, and scaling metrics while overlooking forms of impact that are central to many social innovations, including trust-building, community relationships, leadership development, systems change, and longer-term social outcomes. Organisations working with vulnerable populations and complex social issues argued that these relational and developmental outcomes are often difficult to capture using conventional quantitative indicators.

9. Burnout as a Consequence of Ecosystem Conditions

A final and highly significant finding concerns the pressures experienced by those leading social innovation organisations.

Across interviews, leaders of NGOs and social enterprises frequently described operating under conditions of sustained uncertainty, unstable funding, growing service demand, organisational growth pressures, and extensive administrative responsibilities. Burnout emerged repeatedly as a defining feature of leadership within the sector.

As one participant reflected:

> “All across this sector… [leaders] are all absolutely burnt out. Their lives are completely out of balance because they care so much” (Social Innovation Leader, 3).

Participants consistently framed burnout not as an individual issue but as a consequence of wider structural conditions within the ecosystem. Leaders described simultaneously managing strategic, operational, financial, administrative, and relational responsibilities while navigating fragmented support systems, accountability requirements, and ongoing uncertainty regarding organisational sustainability.

One participant reflected:

> “We’re an organisation endlessly innovative, trying to do more, but we’re definitely trying to do too much” (Social Innovation Leader, 2).

The participant went on to describe the importance of deliberately slowing organisational growth:

> “We’ve had to really invest energy and draw breath ourselves is make sure that we brought our own team with us at those times where we did need to move slow” (Social Innovation Leader, 2).

A lack of protected space for reflection emerged as a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Participants repeatedly suggested that organisations often lack opportunities to step back, assess progress, build systems, or think strategically about their future direction.

As one participant explained:

> “The space and time to think about where they are” (Social Innovation Leader, 4).

The same participant continued:

> “Social enterprises are just exhausted... my advice to every social enterprise is always slow down... by taking that space, you make much better quality decisions and set out a path that is more sustainable” (Social Innovation Leader, 4).

Participants also highlighted the importance of peer support, relational learning, and opportunities for meaningful connection. Generic or transactional supports were frequently criticised, while opportunities for shared learning, trust-building, and mutual support were viewed as essential.

Leadership challenges were also described as evolving over time. Early-stage organisations often required coaching, mentoring, and validation. Growing organisations required stronger management systems, governance structures, administrative capacity, and organisational infrastructure. More

established organisations faced questions concerning sustainability, succession planning, influence, and maintaining organisational balance.

Taken together, these findings suggest that leadership sustainability represents a critical but often overlooked component of the wider social innovation ecosystem. If innovation depends upon people willing to lead change, then supporting the wellbeing, resilience, and long-term sustainability of those leaders may be as important as supporting innovation itself.

Importantly, burnout emerged not as an individual leadership problem but as a symptom of wider ecosystem conditions, including fragmented supports, short-term funding, accountability burdens, and the absence of clear pathways through which successful innovations can secure long-term sustainability.

Discussion: Beyond the Pilot as an Ecosystem Challenge

Across government, civil society, academia and intermediary organisations, participants consistently described an ecosystem rich in creativity, experimentation and collaboration. There was little evidence that Ireland lacks innovative ideas or organisations capable of responding to complex social challenges. Instead, participants repeatedly returned to a different question: what happens after innovation succeeds?

While considerable attention has been devoted to stimulating innovation and supporting pilot projects, participants argued that the more significant challenge lies in creating the conditions through which successful innovations can endure, adapt and achieve lasting impact. "Beyond the pilot" therefore represents more than the end of a funding programme. It marks the point at which innovations encounter the institutional realities of the wider ecosystem: fragmented governance, uncertain ownership, competing accountability requirements, diverse funding arrangements and the absence of clear pathways for mainstreaming.

An Ecosystem Challenge Rather than an Innovation Challenge

Participants consistently described an ecosystem characterised by fragmented funding arrangements, dispersed governance responsibilities, disconnected organisational supports and weak mechanisms for sharing knowledge across sectors. Organisations frequently found themselves navigating multiple departments, funding programmes, reporting systems and support providers while simultaneously delivering services, securing future funding and managing organisational development. Rather than representing isolated administrative inconveniences, these arrangements created cumulative burdens that reduced the time and organisational capacity available for innovation itself.

However, fragmentation represents only part of the challenge.

The findings also suggest that many of the systems designed to support social innovation continue to assume a relatively uniform model of organisational success. Funding programmes, accountability arrangements and evaluation frameworks frequently privilege organisational growth, measurable outputs, and short-term performance indicators. Participants repeatedly questioned whether these assumptions adequately reflect the diversity of social innovation operating within Ireland.

Across the interviews, organisations described pursuing fundamentally different forms of public value. Some organisations generated earned income through commercial activity and could gradually strengthen their sustainability through trading and reinvestment. Others intentionally remained locally embedded because their impact depended upon relationships, trust and place-based knowledge. Others sought to influence public policy, professional practice or wider systems rather than expanding organisationally. Many organisations working with vulnerable communities created substantial public value without generating corresponding financial returns and therefore remained dependent upon philanthropy, grants or public funding regardless of how effective they became.

These findings suggest that ecosystem institutions frequently evaluate very different organisations using broadly similar assumptions regarding success. Rather than recognising multiple pathways to lasting impact, organisations often experience pressure to conform to expectations of growth and quantifiable performance that may not reflect either their mission or the form of value they create.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to improve funding or coordination but to develop ecosystem institutions capable of recognising and supporting diversity. If social innovations create different forms of value, then they require different forms of support, different approaches to evaluation and different pathways towards long-term sustainability.

Burnout as a Consequence of Ecosystem Design

One of the clearest findings emerging from the research is that burnout should be understood as a consequence of ecosystem conditions rather than individual organisational failure.

Leaders of NGOs and social enterprises consistently described balancing fundraising, reporting, governance, organisational development, service delivery, partnership building and strategic leadership while simultaneously responding to uncertain funding environments and increasing expectations for accountability. Participants rarely described these pressures as exceptional; rather, they appeared to represent the normal conditions within which many organisations operate.

This finding is significant because discussions of burnout frequently focus upon individual resilience, leadership capability or organisational wellbeing. Participants suggested something rather different. Burnout emerged as the cumulative consequence of fragmented governance, multiple accountability systems, short-term funding cycles and continual uncertainty regarding organisational sustainability.

In this sense, burnout is not simply a workforce issue but an indicator of ecosystem performance. If organisations delivering proven social value are required to devote disproportionate effort to securing resources, navigating administrative systems and adapting continually to external funding priorities, then the ecosystem itself may be reducing its capacity to sustain innovation over time.

Why Do Some Social Innovations Thrive?

Despite the significant challenges identified throughout this report, Ireland also provides numerous examples of social innovations that have achieved enduring impact. Housing First, FoodCloud, Children's Books Ireland and Creative Ireland demonstrate that lasting impact is possible even within a complex and imperfect ecosystem.

This raises an important question. If organisations operate under similar structural constraints, why do some innovations achieve lasting impact while others struggle to move beyond the pilot stage?

The findings suggest that successful innovations rarely depend upon a single enabling factor. Instead, they appear to combine a number of mutually reinforcing organisational capabilities.

First, successful organisations demonstrated strong clarity regarding their mission and resisted assumptions that growth necessarily represented success. Participants frequently described making deliberate strategic decisions about whether scaling aligned with their organisational purpose.

Second, organisations invested in organisational capability as well as programme delivery. Governance, strategic planning, fundraising, evaluation, staffing and operational systems were repeatedly identified as essential foundations for sustaining innovation over time.

Third, successful innovations were characterised by strong relationships. Partnerships between government, communities, researchers, intermediary organisations and funders repeatedly emerged as important mechanisms through which organisations accessed knowledge, legitimacy and opportunities for wider influence.

Finally, successful organisations appeared capable of identifying pathways appropriate to the form of value they created. Some achieved sustainability through commercial income. Others strengthened philanthropic partnerships. Others became embedded within public policy or service delivery. Rather than following a single route towards impact, they demonstrated the importance of aligning organisational strategy with mission, context and institutional opportunity.

These findings suggest that the organisations most likely to endure are not necessarily those with the most innovative ideas. Rather, they are organisations capable of combining adaptive leadership, organisational capability, collaborative relationships and strategic clarity while navigating a challenging ecosystem.

Implications for Ireland's National Competence Centre for Social Innovation

These findings have important implications for the future development of Ireland's National Competence Centre for Social Innovation.

Participants consistently described the need for stronger connective infrastructure capable of linking government departments, innovators, researchers, intermediary organisations, funders and communities. However, the Centre's role extends beyond improving coordination. It also has an opportunity to reshape how social innovation is understood and supported within Ireland.

Rather than promoting a single model of organisational growth or scaling, the Centre could help develop approaches that recognise the diversity of social innovation and the multiple pathways through which lasting impact can be achieved. This includes supporting organisations to identify pathways appropriate to their mission, developing evaluation approaches capable of recognising different forms of public value, facilitating organisational learning and peer support, strengthening collaboration across sectors and helping organisations navigate the transition from experimentation to long-term sustainability.

Viewed in this way, the Centre's greatest contribution may not be generating more innovation. Ireland already demonstrates considerable capacity for innovation. Its greater opportunity lies in helping successful innovations survive, adapt and endure by strengthening the institutional conditions within which they operate.

Key Considerations

- **Social innovations are most likely to achieve lasting impact when they are intentionally aligned with pressing societal needs and policy priorities.** The organisations that demonstrated long-term influence were those responding to clearly identified challenges facing government and communities, creating opportunities for adoption, partnership and mainstreaming rather than pursuing innovation for its own sake.
- **Explore a portfolio approach to social innovation to reduce fragmentation and unnecessary duplication across the ecosystem.** By connecting innovations addressing shared societal challenges, a portfolio approach could strengthen cross-learning, inform policy, and improve coordination between government, funders and innovators.
- **Greater value could be created by systematically capturing and sharing learning across social innovations.** The research suggests that individual innovations generate valuable knowledge about leadership, funding, governance and implementation, yet opportunities to transfer this learning across organisations and into policy remain limited by fragmentation.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings suggest that Ireland's challenge is not an absence of innovation but the absence of an ecosystem designed to sustain it. Fragmented governance, disconnected support structures and one-size-fits-all approaches to funding, accountability and evaluation create cumulative burdens that make lasting impact more difficult than it needs to be. Yet the report also demonstrates that enduring social innovation is possible. Organisations across Ireland continue to create significant public value despite these conditions.

The task for policy is therefore not simply to generate more innovation, but to create an ecosystem in which successful innovations no longer succeed despite the system but increasingly succeed because of it.

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