



# RehabGroup

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

## **Rehab Group Submission to Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht on the Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector**

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## Introduction

Rehab Group welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Community, Rural Development and the Gaeltacht on the development of a new strategy for supporting the Community and Voluntary Sector.

Rehab Group is an independent voluntary organisation that has been providing services to adults and children with disabilities for more than 70 years. We are a campaigning organisation that advocates for the 12,500 people who currently use our services and their families. The people who use Rehab Group services are our most important stakeholders. Our overall objective is to ensure their voices are heard both internally and externally.

C&V organisations deliver essential services, particularly for people with disabilities, often filling gaps left by government provision. The sector is crucial for building inclusive, resilient communities

The current strategy acknowledges the role of community and voluntary sector as a core partner in delivering social inclusion, equality, and innovation, supported by sustainable funding and strong partnerships with government.

There is rightly a strong emphasis on the implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goals. We believe that there should also be a strong emphasis on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability which has at its core the full and effective participation and inclusion of disabled people in society.

People with a disability are marginalised by financial, physical, and societal constraints that reinforce our unequal society. Ireland still has a long way to go to meet the needs and rights of disabled people as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability.

At a time when communities are facing complex social, economic, and environmental challenges, this strategy should recognise the value of the community and voluntary sector, secure our sustainability and deepen the partnership between the state and the community and voluntary sector.

We acknowledge that the objectives and actions outlined in the previous strategy have provided a good basis for engagement, capacity building, and partnership. However, without funding and resources for C&V organisations to match its stated ambition, the strategy will remain largely aspirational.

We ask the Department of Rural and Community Development to take the following recommendations into consideration in the development of the new Strategy.

## **1. Ensuring Meaningful Participation and Strong Participative Structures**

The overarching ambition of the previous strategy was to create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, empowered and self-determining communities that support the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members.

The Strategy has identified six key mission ambitions including for the development of a thriving community and voluntary sector.

Effective social impact is achieved through genuine, equal partnerships. Too often, engagement is consultative rather than collaborative, with decision-making power concentrated within statutory bodies. To achieve the true ambitions outlined above, effective engagement must be measured by the degree to which the sector has an influence on the decision-making processes.

Strong civic participation will result in safer, stronger and more sustainable communities and will improve the quality and legitimacy of the decision-making process. The challenge is to incorporate the various perspectives in shared decisions which will ultimately yield sustainable outcomes.

Effective engagement requires a two-way process and implies a willingness to listen and to discuss the issues, and crucially a willingness to demonstrate preparedness to change or alter the course of action as a result of stakeholder engagement.

## **2. Embedding UNCRPD in the Process**

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals are rightly embedded in the current Strategy. However, it is disappointing that the current Strategy has not even one reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). An effective community and voluntary strategy must ensure that all citizens can participate on an equal basis. Since ratifying the UNCRPD in 2018, Ireland has a duty to progressively realise the rights of people with disabilities under the Convention.

While understanding that there are many sectoral interests competing for position within the new strategy, the principles of accessibility, equality, and active participation of persons with disabilities must underpin the new strategy.

The UNCRPD principles should be embedded in the vision, goals, and actions of the new strategy, ensuring all funded programmes are consistent with these obligations.

## **3. A Sustainable Multi-Annual Funding Mechanism for Community and Voluntary Organisations**

The next Strategy must commit to sustainable core funding for both community and voluntary organisations to deliver consistent, high-quality, person-centred services, avoiding the instability of short-term project funding.

Long-term, **sustainable funding** is pivotal to support the sector's essential role in strengthening social cohesion and inclusive development. Short-term, project-based funding

undermines stability, capacity, and innovation. The sector requires predictable, multi-annual funding to enable long-term planning, retain skilled staff, and deliver consistent services.

Many C&V organisations, particularly Section 39 organisations providing disability services, are seriously underfunded. Section 39 organisations have long been calling for multiannual funding. Such a funding model would be more cost-effective, enable innovation and put people at the centre of services provided by community and voluntary organisations. Multi-annual funding would facilitate advance planning for organisation needs, enable services to be better tailored around individuals' needs and provide greater certainty to the state, which relies on the voluntary sector to provide essential services. Multiannual funding would also ensure a collaborative approach to future need in line with the "Partnership Principles". Indeed, the absence of a multiannual framework serves only to undermine the partnership model.

#### **4. Greater cross-government and cross-agency collaboration**

Community needs often span multiple policy areas—health, education, housing, social protection, and justice—yet siloed approaches persist. The strategy needs to address how greater cross-government and cross-agency collaboration can be achieved so that so we can work more effectively across departments, regions, and communities.

The next strategy must enhance interagency collaboration between community, voluntary, and statutory bodies to deliver integrated supports in health, housing, transport, education and training, and employment.

#### **5. Workforce Development, Including Disability Training**

A strong, skilled workforce is the backbone of the sector. Supporting workforce development in the sector involves a comprehensive approach that prioritises training in key areas such as disability awareness, inclusive practice, and culturally sensitive service delivery.

By promoting inclusive practices, organisations can ensure that all employees, regardless of their background or abilities, have equal opportunities to succeed and contribute to their fullest potential.

The new strategy must support workforce development across the sector, including training in disability awareness, inclusive practice, and culturally sensitive service delivery. Many organisations lack resources for structured training but investment in workforce development not only enhances the capabilities of the workforce but also contributes to a more inclusive and equitable sector overall. By embedding these principles into workforce development, organisations can foster a more supportive and understanding environment for both employees and those they serve.

#### **6. Prioritise disability inclusion in the community and voluntary sector strategy**

Ireland ranks 20th in the EU for disability poverty (32.7%), with an "at risk of poverty or social exclusion by level of disability (activity limitation)" rate 4% above the EU average (28.8%). Ireland's employment rate for disabled people at 32.6% is the lowest in the EU, compared to EU average of 51%. The employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people is 44% in Ireland, as opposed to the EU average of 24%. Research conducted by the NDA found that

23% of disabled youth (ages 16–24) are not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) compared to 10% of non-disabled peers. The NDA Wellbeing Survey reported that 65% of disabled people reported experiencing social exclusion/barriers to community participation, compared to 35% of non-disabled peers.

The new Strategy for the Community and Voluntary Strategy must prioritise disability inclusion to ensure an equitable society where everyone has equal access to services, supports, and opportunities. Early and ongoing engagement with people with disabilities and advocacy groups in the planning and decision-making processes ensures that their voices are heard and their needs are met. The Strategy must ensure that inclusion of people with disabilities is a core element of all its initiatives ensuring equal access to services, supports, and opportunities for people with disabilities across rural, urban, and Gaeltacht areas.

### **Conclusion**

The new strategy must be inclusive, rights-based, sustainably funded, and partnership-driven, ensuring the voices of people with disabilities are heard and acted upon in shaping services and policies.