

SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE
REPUBLIC OF
IRELAND

ACCESSING SUPPORT FROM LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICES

Results of a January 2024 survey of social enterprises

Background



A significant number of social enterprises face challenges and obstacles in their dealings with Local Enterprise Offices. These obstacles vary among the different Local Enterprise Offices.

The White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030 published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in December 2022 recognised social enterprises as an important part of the Irish enterprise space and acknowledged their ability to create jobs, stimulate local economic activity and support green and digital transitions. These organisations, which blend business practices with social goals, face challenges encountered by traditional businesses. Recognising the critical role of Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) in supporting business growth and development in Ireland, it becomes essential to assess how well LEOs are meeting the specific needs of social enterprises.

A survey was conducted in January 2024 to gather insights into the experiences of social enterprises when accessing support from their Local Enterprise Offices. 66 responses were received from social enterprises across 25 LEO catchment areas in the Republic of Ireland. It's important to recognise that numerous social enterprises throughout Ireland have experienced significant benefits and, at times, transformative interactions with their Local Enterprise Offices. At the same time, a significant number of social enterprises face challenges and obstacles in their dealings with Local Enterprise Offices. These obstacles vary among the different Local Enterprise Offices, suggesting that there is a viable, universal path to eliminating barriers through system-level coordination.

Recommendations for Action

1

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

LEOs should enhance their communication strategies to better inform social enterprises about the support available. This could include targeted outreach campaigns, informational sessions, and partnerships with social enterprise networks/Local Development Companies.

2

REVIEW SUPPORT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Considering the feedback on refusal due to legal status, it is recommended that LEOs review their eligibility criteria for support to accommodate the varied legal forms of social enterprises. Flexibility in these criteria could enable a broader range of enterprises to access support.

3

FEEDBACK MECHANISM

Establish formal feedback mechanisms for social enterprises to share their experiences and suggestions for improvement with LEOs. This could help LEOs understand the needs and challenges of social enterprises better and adjust their services accordingly.

4

ENGAGEMENT, COLLABORATION & PEER LEARNING

Foster stronger engagement and collaboration between LEOs and social enterprises through regular networking events, workshops, and co-creation initiatives. This could include highlighting LEOs successfully providing social enterprise supports and sharing their learning peer-to-peer among LEOs.

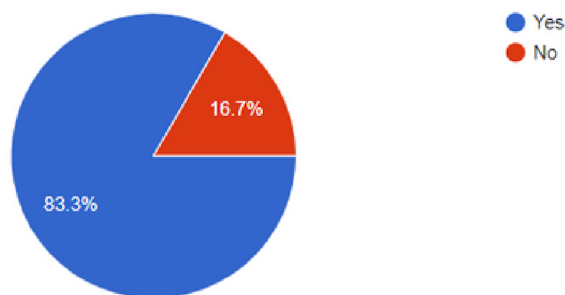
Findings

Engagement with LEOs

- A significant majority of respondents (55 out of 66) have sought support from their Local Enterprise Office, indicating a high level of desired engagement among social enterprises with LEOs.

Have you ever sought support from your Local Enterprise Office (LEO)?

66 responses

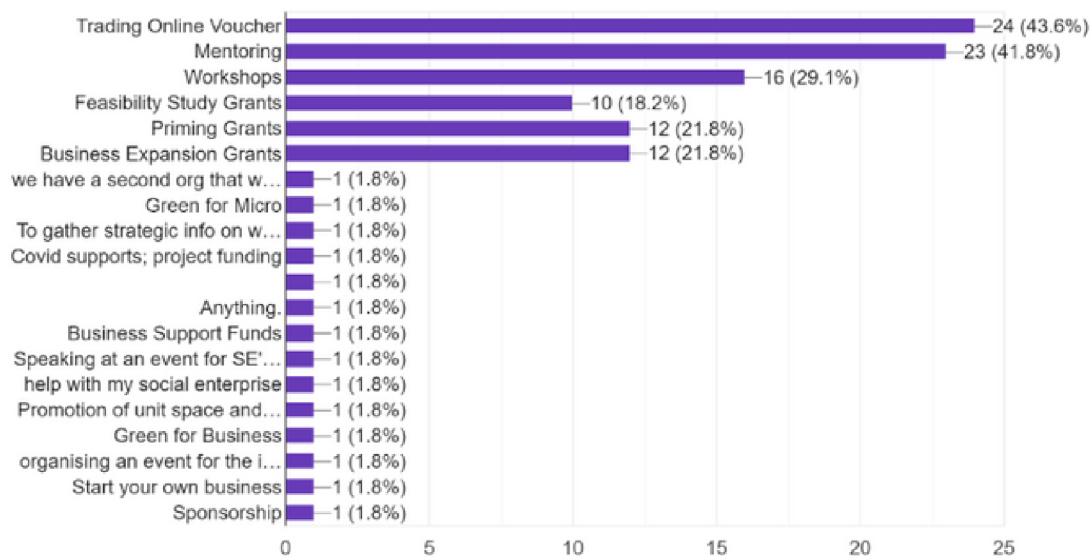


Supports Sought by Social Enterprises

- The supports most sought by social enterprises were the Trading Online Voucher (43.6% of respondents) and mentoring (41.8% of respondents).
- 29.1% of respondents sought access to workshops while grants were also a common type of support sought.

Please describe the type of support you were seeking from LEO (choose all which apply):

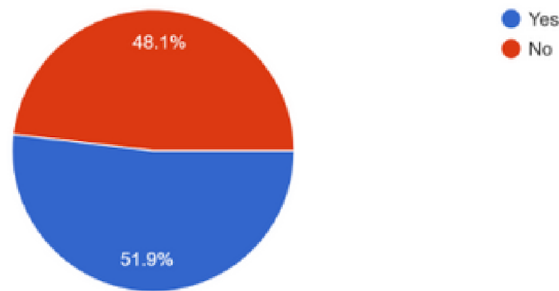
55 responses



Support Provided

- The responses were evenly split on whether LEOs provided the support sought, with 28 indicating "Yes" and 26 indicating "No". This suggests a gap between the needs of social enterprises and the support LEOs are able to provide or willing to offer.

Did the Local Enterprise Office provide the support you sought?
54 responses

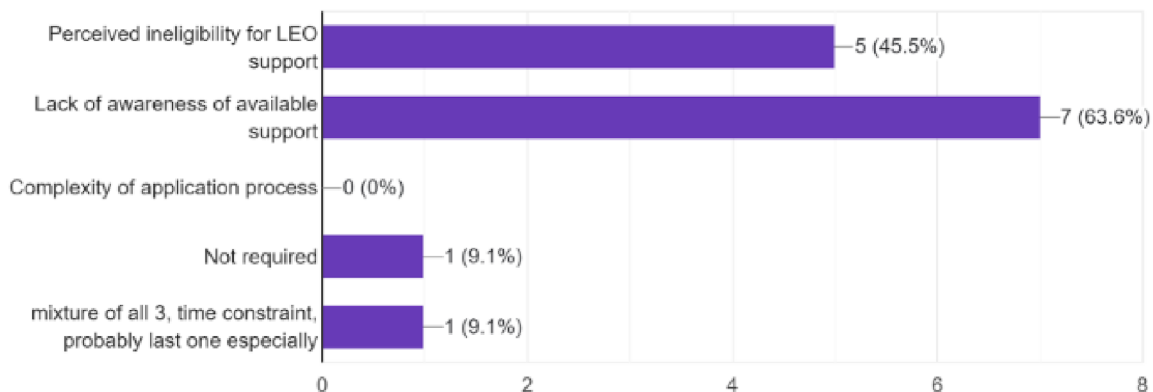


Reasons for Not Seeking Support

- For those who did not seek support (11 respondents), the most common reason cited was a "Lack of awareness of available support" (mentioned 7 times) and "Perceived ineligibility for LEO support" (mentioned 5 times). This points to a potential issue in communication and outreach efforts by LEOs.

As your social enterprise has not sought support from the Local Enterprise Office, please briefly describe the reasons for not doing so.

11 responses

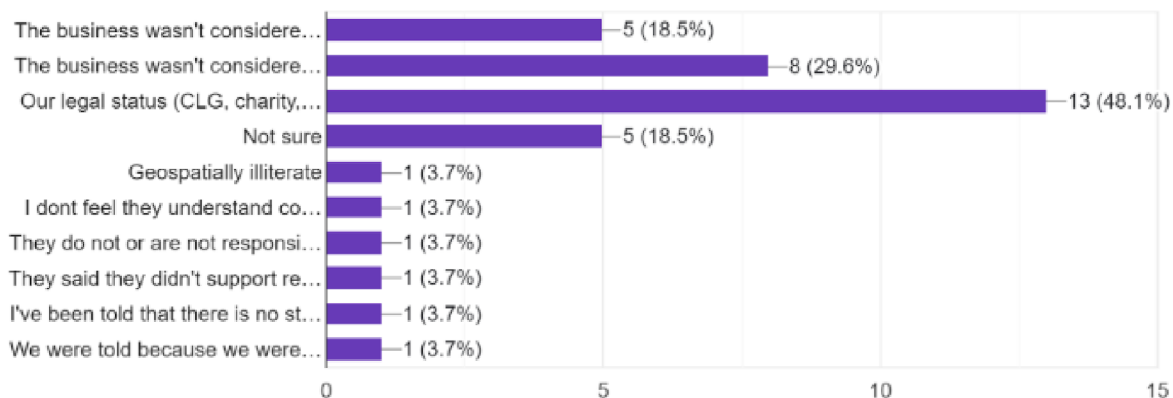


Reasons for Refusal of LEO Support

- Among the reasons for refusal of support, the most frequently cited was the ineligibility due to legal status (e.g., CLG, charity, co-op, etc.), mentioned 13 times out of 27 responses. This indicates that current policies or criteria for support may not align well with the diverse legal structures of social enterprises. 8 respondents were refused because their business wasn't considered to have export potential. 5 respondents were refused because their business wasn't considered commercially viable.

Please specify the reasons given by the LEO for refusing to support your social enterprise. (Choose applicable reasons or provide details if others)

27 responses



Additional Qualitative Feedback from Survey Participants

The qualitative feedback from the survey on interactions with Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) by social enterprises offers a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Here's a summary of raw qualitative data which we've included in the Appendix for reference:

- Respondents report mixed experiences regarding the quality of support received from LEOs, ranging from very helpful and responsive to dismissive and uninterested. The quality of support seems highly dependent on the specific LEO officer involved, with some being praised for their imaginative and responsive support, while others are criticised for lacking business experience or not fully understanding the concept of a social enterprise.
- Several responses highlight challenges related to eligibility for support, particularly around legal status and the focus of LEOs. Some social enterprises feel sidelined due to their charitable status or because they do not fit the traditional export-focused model preferred by LEOs. There's a call for LEOs to adapt and support a wider range of enterprise models, especially those with social objectives.
- Feedback points to a need for clearer information on what support is accessible at the national level and better collaboration between LEOs and other organisations supporting social enterprises. Suggestions include using platforms like National Enterprise Week for collaboration and improving outreach to ensure social enterprises are aware of available support.
- Respondents suggest that LEOs should move with the times and become more in touch with the reality of social enterprises in Ireland. There's a call for more actionable and inspirational support, beyond networking events, that directly contributes to the growth and sustainability of social enterprises. Additionally, there's a recommendation for changing KPIs for LEOs to include cross-agency engagement and collaborations that support social enterprises, indicating a need for a systemic change in how support is measured and delivered.

What is a social enterprise?



The National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022 defines a social enterprise as:

'an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders. It pursues its objectives by trading on an ongoing basis through the provision of goods and/or services, and by reinvesting surpluses into achieving social objectives. It is governed in a fully accountable and transparent manner'.

Social enterprise organisations in Ireland typically incorporate an 'asset lock' mechanism in their structure, which restricts or limits the distribution of property and income to the members, owners, or managers of the organisation.

As outlined in the policy, social enterprises *'make a valuable contribution to the social and economic progress of Ireland through the creation of jobs and through the delivery of a broad range of services in areas such as homecare, child care, employment activation, retail, hospitality and catering, environmental services, and social housing'.*

Social Enterprise in Ireland: A Baseline Data Collection Exercise

There are 4,335
social enterprises
operating in Ireland.

A recent report funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development, '**Social Enterprises in Ireland: A Baseline Data Collection Exercise**', highlights the impressive impact of social enterprises in Ireland as well as challenges facing the sector.



AREAS OF FOCUS

Social enterprises work in various sectors, including Childcare, Community Infrastructure, Health, Youth Services & Social Care, and Heritage Festivals, Arts & Creative Industry.



EMPLOYEES

Employment figures highlight the significant role played by social enterprises as employers in Ireland. Presently, these enterprises provide jobs to 84,382 individuals (3.7% of the Irish workforce).



VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are critical to the success of social enterprises. Approximately 74,825 people actively volunteer in the social enterprise sector, including 30,324 as board members.



INCOME

40% have an annual income of less than €100,000 with a median annual income of all respondents of €180,000. The median annual income reduces to €80,000 in the case of rural social enterprises.

Appendix: Raw Qualitative Data

Respondents were asked to 'share any additional comments or details regarding your interaction with the Local Enterprise Office'. 39 respondents chose to answer this question. Their answers are below. The names of individuals have been removed where referenced.

- “More engagement with LEO and LDC SE Staff. Clarity at national level on what is accessible or not. I notice Dublin City LEO has a section on their website about SE and what they can provide. National enterprise week would be a good time to collaborate.”
- “The course, start your own business, was very solid and excellent value. The quality of the LEO officer leading the effort has a dramatic impact on the quality of services offered. My local LEO has someone great (imaginative and responsive supports/offers), no-one in the role for an age then someone who clearly had no business experience and was far too junior for the role. The service provision reflected the same. The role of LEO lead here is not a junior role but one that makes or breaks their provision of useful/useless services (and please spare us the networking for which no-one has time and focus instead on actionable and inspirational concrete offers).”
- “In Kildare they say that Kildare Leader Partnership has responsibility for social enterprises rather than the Local Enterprise Office. When we enquired about the Online Trading Voucher we were told we were ineligible as we have charitable status and that they can't support charities. The enterprise grants that are available through the LEO are not available through Kildare Leader Partnership.”
- “They sponsored the business networking component of our work and then chose not to renew it leaving our turnover down €10,000.”
- “We did get a few mentor sessions but they were all sitting and listening and no advice or guidance came out of them.”

Appendix: Raw Qualitative Data (cont'd)

- “It was positive and holistic.”
- “Our Local Enterprise Office was generally responsive to our requests but didn't fully grasp the concept of a social enterprise as it didn't align with their export-focused priorities. Our last engagement with them was a number of years ago and they may have changed their focus since then to provide better supports for SE's but my understanding is that they prefer to focus on start-ups with export potential.”
- “Found them very helpful in providing support, access to social marketing training courses and also financial mentoring.”
- “Person seemed uninterested in helping.”
- “Our experience was unfortunately very negative - my business partner and I booked in for a call with the office. The lady we got was very dismissive of us to begin with, until she realised that we had our research done, we were trained and knowledgeable in the area. We have set up a Social Enterprise as we saw a gap for a particular service.”
- “We had funding from Rethink Ireland for a particular project but it was only after hearing this, that she began to 'listen' to us.”
- “She went on to tell us that they don't really support Social Enterprises and that our best bet was to go to the likes of The Wheel / Rethink Ireland.”
- “She said the only support for us from Galway LEO were training courses/workshops.”
- “We have a traded income, and there's scope to scale our business into every city and county in Ireland and abroad. Our business also helps others in the community to start a business and further support with education and employment. It has a knock-on effect on the economy and community.”

Appendix: Raw Qualitative Data (cont'd)

- “The Enterprise Offices should support all forms of Enterprise - not just the ones they deem to be commercially viable to go onto Enterprise Ireland supports. (But that's for another questionnaire!).”
- “Considering the amount of people Social Enterprises in Ireland now employ (and volunteer) the Local Enterprise Office needs to move with the times as they are currently operating in the dark ages! They are out of touch with reality!”
- “We received some supports but not others we sought. They use to run in person workshops from our premises pre pandemic but thats all moved online. They have agreed to post our services on their newsletter. We have asked them to refer business owners to us for virtual office services, meeting space and workspaces. To date we have not had one referral from LEO. Other CECs have a strong referral pipeline from their LEO's but for some reason we do not.”
- “We applied for the green for micro and got two days of consultants for a SDG policy and green pitching supports. Our consultant said they were surprised that a CLG was accepted onto this program and it boded well as the Dublin City LEO were known to not do this. This was only this month (Jan 24).”
- “We had a viable social co-operative registered as a CLG with a business plan reliant on a number of grants issued by LEO. We had invested considerable funds ourselves (via a loan to the co-op) to build the business and test the market. The test was successful, and we were ready to scale up. We had a very disappointing meeting in which we were told we weren't eligible, and we had to shutter the business with employment opportunities eliminated. We've been told since that had we pushed back, we might have had success but we didn't know any better at the time. Very dispiriting experience - no understanding of social enterprise or co-ops, and what a wasted opportunity.”

Appendix: Raw Qualitative Data (cont'd)

- “We were recommended to contact and work with our Local Development Company. LEO said that the Local Development Company deals with social enterprises. LEO don't.”
- “Our local LEO are always very helpful.”
- “I would need a lot of support to complete paperwork.”
- “The mentoring support was very helpful.”
- “We are fortunate to have (*person redacted*) here locally in Clare and he has a futuristic vision for what LEO are working towards but Clare LEO are still constrained by the restrictive criteria associated with grant funding, etc. which in many cases either excludes social enterprises or make it overly onerous to meet that criteria.”
- “LEO's are measured by siloed self-contained deliverables, as are many similar government bodies, so until they change the KPI's to include cross-agency engagement collaborations with ""joined-up-thinking for the future, that include SE's, there is no incentive to change their ways.”
- “We can't continue doing the same thing and expect a different outcome”

About Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland (SERI)

A representative body for the social enterprise sector in Ireland. Led by practitioners.

Board members

(in alphabetical order):

Brendan Whelan
Fergus Finlay, Chairperson
John Kearns
John P. Murphy
Lorraine Corcoran
Michelle Fogarty
Pádraig Casey
Páraig Hennessy
Senan Cooke
Shauna McClenaghan
Tim Griffiths

Practitioner Council

(in alphabetical order):

Catherine Coote
Damian Howard
Dara Connolly
David Neville
Donal Traynor
Hugh Brennan
Janet O'Toole
John Evoy
Joseph Fogarty
Karen O'Donohoe
Kathy Purcell
Linda Ledger
Pascal Derrien
Patrick Mulvihill
Karen Leigh
Robert Finan
Rosemary Kunene
Sean Mullan
Senan Cooke
Tara Farrell

Executive

(in alphabetical order):

John Logue

Contact

John Logue
CEO, Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland
087-275-2101

www.socialenterprise.ie
info@socialenterprise.ie
[@SERIreland](https://twitter.com/SERIreland)