

€1.6M ENTERPRISE FUND TO BUILD SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Grant aid of €400,000 per year will be made available for up to eight successful applicants to invest in their organisation, as part of a new €1.6m fund to support social enterprise, launched by Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI) in partnership with local authorities. The Fund is supported by the Department of Community and Rural Development from the Dormant Accounts Fund and IPB Insurance, writes Deirdre Mortell, SIFI's Chief Executive Officer.

This new fund will be delivered over a two-year term and the successful applicants will also receive a place on SIFI's six-month 'Accelerator' programme, while additional places will be reserved for the most promising social enterprises across the 31 local authorities.

The programme is designed to help social enterprises develop their business skills and to provide them with ongoing peer support and advice, so that they develop sustainable enterprises that have a powerful impact in their community.

SOCIAL NEEDS ADDRESSED

Social enterprises in Ireland operate across a wide range of sectors, in both urban and rural settings as well as socially and economically marginalised locations. They vary in size from small independent operators to larger community-based enterprises and they all have one thing in common – they are established to address all social needs.

Unlike conventional, profit-orientated businesses, social enterprises often view success as the ability to collaborate around a shared goal rather than to simply compete and grow the size of their organisation. They often play a particularly important role in areas of market failure for social services such as in rural areas.

Currently it is estimated that between 25,000 and 33,000 people are employed in over 1,400 social enterprises and the opportunity exists to double that number. But while job creation is important, the bigger impact of social enterprise is in providing sustainable solutions to many societal problems.

SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Examples of successful Irish social enterprises and previous SIFI awardees, include FoodCloud, a social enterprise that connects businesses with surplus food to charities in their local communities that need it via a software platform, CareBright is a provider of homecare and support services which allows people to live within their own home and community.

Even with these fantastic examples and the many other innovative social enterprises dotted all across the country, the sector, as a whole, is underdeveloped in Ireland and there is an opportunity to develop a vibrant social enterprise sector.



Deirdre Mortell, CEO of SIFI, and John Evoy, fund manager, and founder of Men's Sheds.

If supported correctly, social enterprises can contribute significantly to achieving the Government's economic growth and employment objectives – it is estimated that social enterprises could grow to represent 5% of GDP (and generate at least 65,000 jobs). This is recognised by Government as the Department of Community and Rural Development is currently developing a National Strategy for Social Enterprise in Ireland.

SIX-MONTH ACCELERATOR PROGRAMME

In addition to financial support, SIFI believes that good business development support is essential for the growth of social enterprises across Ireland. The most promising applicants to the Social Innovation fund will be offered a place on the SIFI Accelerator programme.

This programme will provide organisations with the knowledge that they need to run and develop a sustainable business. Participants will receive training in impact measurement and will gain access to a system that tracks their social impact over multiple years.

All of this, along with the many other specialised training courses included in the programme, will help the participants to improve the efficiency of their organisation and enable them to grow and maximise their impact.