

Social Enterprise Step Up Fund

END OF FUND DONOR REPORT



An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail
Department of Rural and
Community Development



Tomar Trust
National influence. Local implementation

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1. Introduction

This Impact Report outlines the journey and progress made by the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund and its five awardees. This two-year fund was created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with Tomar Trust, who provided €500,000 and the Department of Rural and Community Development through the Dormant Accounts Fund which provided €200,000.

The fund's objective is to support established, mid-sized social enterprises to be ready to scale. It focuses on elevated funding for social enterprises at the next stage and helps support and expand the social enterprise ecosystem in Ireland. The fund launched for applications in September 2022. The awardees commenced work on their projects in March 2023 and finalised their impact in the first quarter of 2025.

Through the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund, Rethink Ireland is supporting five awardees with cash grants and tailored capacity building support to suit the needs of each organisation. The collective aim of these supports is to increase the impact and scalability of each project. Rethink Ireland provided cash grants totalling €475,000 and a package of tailored capacity-building supports totalling €60,000.



Awardee: Urban Co-op

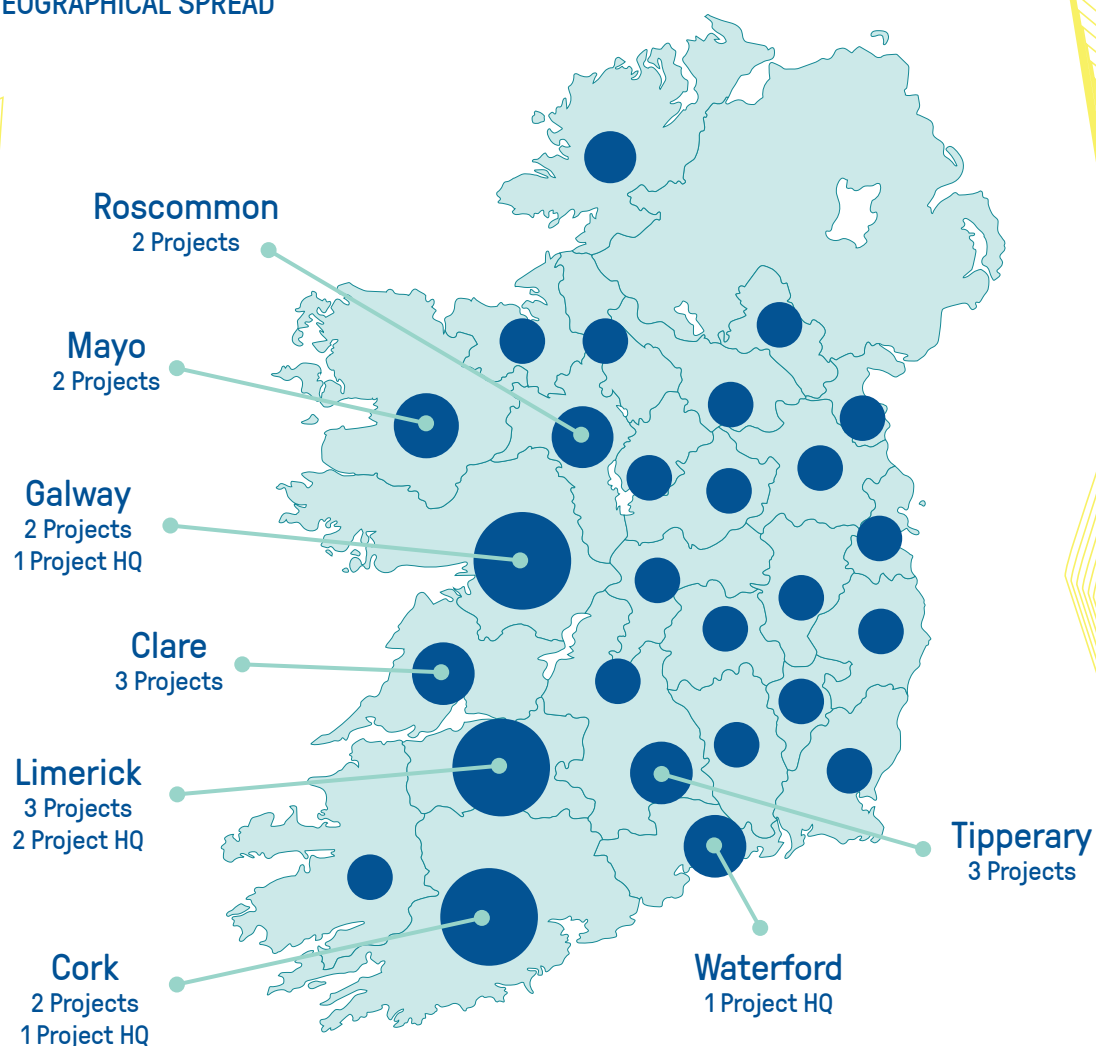
2. Fund Overview

The Social Enterprise Step Up Fund is a two-year fund providing critical support to five innovative social enterprise across Ireland. All five awardees commenced the fund as an established mid-sized social enterprise with a shared ambition to scale.

Participation in the fund enabled the awardees to deliver their projects successfully, engage deeply with participants and develop new processes in their businesses. Awardees highlighted the capacity-building support as an invaluable resource to support them in their journey, strengthen their internal structures and secure financial sustainability.

Whilst the fund offered a bespoke range of supports to awardees, it had a unique impact for each organisation. This report showcases the individual and collective impact achieved throughout the course of the fund. It provides an overview of the capacity building supports that enabled awardees to grow and amplify their impact across Ireland.

IMPACT GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD



Impact Overview

207,255

Total no. of individuals reached through services

59,840

No. of individuals supported through services

3,495

No. of group sessions/workshops held

184

No. of youth and young adults engaged into work experience/mentorship/one-to-one tutoring support

13

No. of operational changes created
This refers to new systems, facilities and processes implemented as part of the awardees fund goals. All changes made have the view to increase impact.

9

No. of staff hired through cash grant
Collectively, the five awardees employ 42 staff

25%

Average increase of traded income (total out of 4 awardees)

29

People supported into employment

9

No. of business development assets created

This refers to new reports, marketing material and website development created as part of fund goals. All of these developments have at view to increase impact.

66%

Average increase of corporate partnership and philanthropic income (total out of 2 awardees)

Communities & Marginalised Groups Supported

- People with disabilities
- LGBTI+ people
- People experiencing poverty or socio-economic disadvantage
- People from minority ethnic communities
- Primary and post-primary school children and young people
- People experiencing poor mental health

SCALING

Scaling is central to this fund with each of the awardees having the opportunity to **scale up**, **scale deep** or **scale out** based on their stage of scaling growth. Below are examples of scaling impact from awardees:

SCALING UP

Scaling Up refers to geographical expansion.

- The Urban Co-Op expanded their reach to two new counties through the development of an online shop.
- The Shona project delivered workshops in 30 new schools in Ireland in 2024, totalling 95 schools.

SPOTLIGHT

Galway Community Circus has opened one new location. They now have three locations in Galway (Galway City East, Galway City West and Tuam, County Galway). Their newest location runs classes for 58 weekly members. They have developed such a strong partnership with the Galway Local Authorities that they are piloting classes in North Galway City since late 2024.

SCALING DEEP

Scaling Deep is strengthening value proposition to deliver more impact to current beneficiaries or other stakeholders in the same geography.

- St. Gabriels increased their service to a new cohort of clients to diversify their income. They treated 981 non-medical card clients and 867 medical card clients during the fund, with an 18.2% increase in traded income.
- Benchspace increased their classes and course offering in turn increasing their memberships by 57%.



Awardee: Galway Community Circus

SPOTLIGHT

In starting the Step Up Fund, The Shona Project's Student Ambassador Programme was a yearlong programme for female students, primarily in the junior cycle at school. The awardee set a 2024 goal to "increase engagement with student ambassadors." They used this opportunity to scale deep. They reflected on and evaluated the impact of the Ambassador Programme and realised the potential to foster a more active participation and offer a support for alumni of the Junior Ambassador Programme.

From this evaluation the Shona Project created their first Mentorship Manual and Senior Cycle Mentorship programme. They onboarded 26 students, in partnership with 26 mentors from seven corporate partners. This innovative approach has a greater focus on the meaningful engagement that the current 130 Junior ambassadors and 26 mentees experience.

SCALING OUT

Scaling out refers to embracing collaboration or partnership with others. All five awardee have demonstrated scaling out since the start of the Step Up Fund.

- Galway Community Circus has developed strong relationships with the Galway City and County Local Authority which has supported their scaling out. They have participated and are active in European and UK Circus Networks, in particular partnering with Extraordinary Bodies to support training and access for individuals with additional needs.
- St Gabriels are leveraging their GP connections to promote their new offering to non-medical cardholders in need of orthotics.
- The Shona Project has leveraged their mentorship programme and recent charity status to support their work. They have increased corporate partnerships to 18 partners in 2024 and raised €206,800 in corporate giving and philanthropy.
- Benchspace continuously seeks and builds a pool of experts to deliver classes and courses. The Step Up Fund supported them to create an impact report that has already proven to be an asset for further scaling out.

SPOTLIGHT

The Urban Co-op is a wonderful example of how the Step Up Fund supported awardees to scale out. The cash grant and capacity building supports enabled the Managing Director to have a greater focus on the organisation's strategic direction. The Urban Co-op has increased their recognition as an active participant in national, regional, and international conversations about organic food



Awardee: Benchspace

Sustainable Development Goals

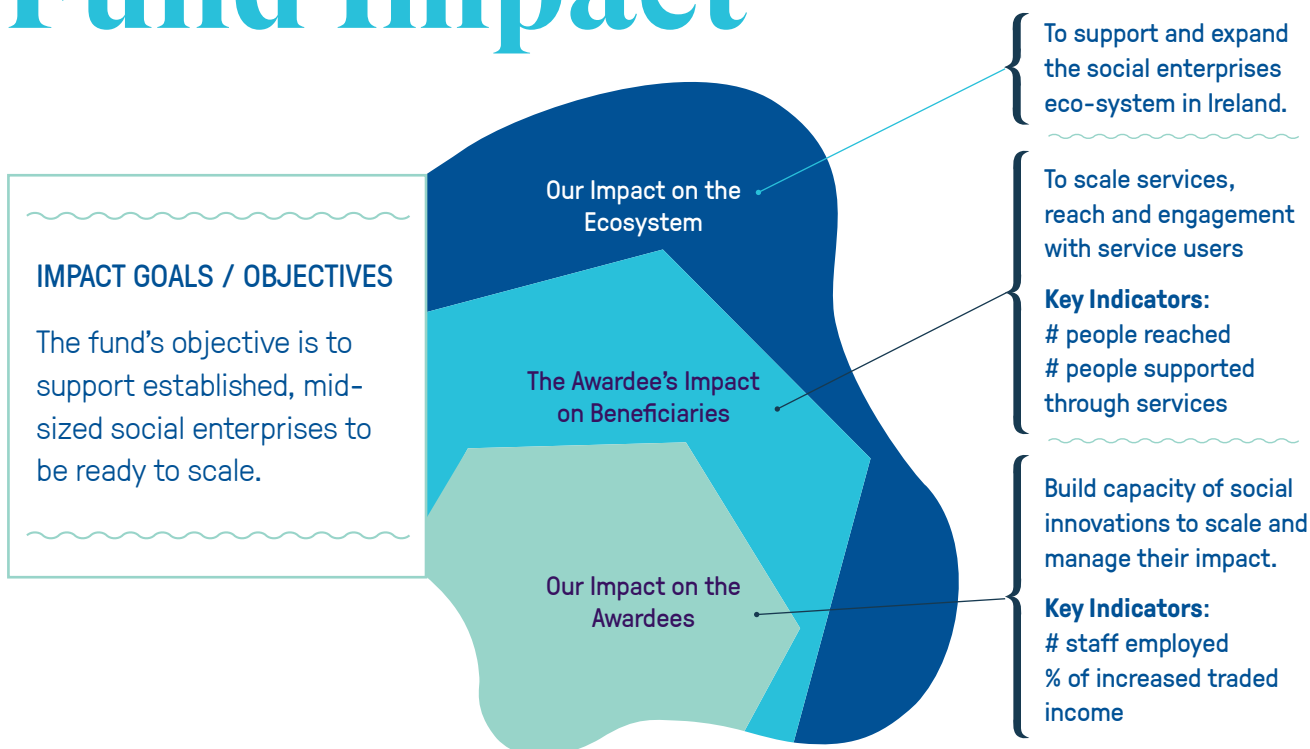
PROJECT NAME	MAIN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL
Benchspace	8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth
Galway Community Circus	10 - Reduced Inequalities
St. Gabriels Orthotics	3 - Good Health and Wellbeing
The Shona Project	5- Gender Quality
Urban Co-op	15- Life on Land



Social Enterprise Step Up Fund addressed a variety of Sustainable Development Goals including the following:



Fund Impact



3. The Rethink Ireland Package

At Rethink Ireland, we are committed to supporting the best social innovations to scale and maximise their impact. We do this by using a venture philanthropy model – a funding method that uses the tools of venture capital investing alongside grants to support long-term social and environmental impact. Cash grant payments align with targets and goals associated with programme delivery as well as strategic areas of growth.

ACCELERATOR PROGRAMME

Rethink Ireland's Accelerator Programme is a unique offering that equips awardees with the skills needed to expand and deepen their impact. It provides training from best-in-class experts across the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. Training provided to the Social Enterprise Step Up awardees included topics such as:

March 2023	Introduction to the programme and End Game
April 2023	EDI
May 2023	Impact and Outcomes Frameworks
September 2023	The Big Why
October 2023	Social Enterprise Financial Resilience
August 2024	Value Proposition

NON-FINANCIAL CONSULTANCY SUPPORTS

The Social Enterprise Step Up Fund capacity building supports centred around supporting each awardee to scale and focus on the following areas:

- **Strategic planning for scale:** Each awardee was matched with a strategic consultant at the start of the programme, who supported them in developing their respective growth and sustainability strategies. Areas of focus included securing high-level partnerships with corporates or public sector actors, assessing the costing models of classes and identification of new offerings.
- **Impact Management:** each awardee worked with a Rethink Ireland lead consultant, SVT, following an initial workshop, to revisit their Theories of Change and build their outcome frameworks to capture their impact meaningfully.



Awardee: St Gabriel's Orthotics

Key developments achieved by Awardees to scale through the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund related to:

AWARDEE	ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING GOALS
BENCHSPACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of Benchspace's first Impact Report
GALWAY COMMUNITY CIRCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of a data evaluation database Review of data gathering tools Accessibility improvement plan Creation of an annual impact report
SHONA PROJECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of an annual impact report Migration of The Shona Project's emails and current workspaces to Google Workspace Website design and development
ST. GABRIEL'S ORTHOTICS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Photoshoot for website development Innovators Circle strategy session Website creation with an integrated client feedback tool
THE URBAN CO-OP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of a succession plan Creation of adverts for local and social media Creation of a photo bank



Awardee: The Shona Project

Quote from **Benchspace:**

"The Benchspace team is hugely grateful for the support we've received from Rethink Ireland. The Impact Report offered a valuable reflection on the benefits we've delivered to Cork's creative community, and has become a vital asset for demonstrating our impact to future partners."

Quote from **St. Gabriels:**

"The consultant who supported us to develop our strategic plan clearly understood the time constraints to our team and were very considerate of this. Every interaction was productive and time well spent. We were very happy with the end result".

Quote from **The Shona Project:**

"As a small team, we did not have all the expertise needed to reach our full growth alone. The Step Up fund has allowed us to access expertise at key times to solve our scaling barriers immediately. This support allowed us to invest in a secure and fit for purpose platform that has the effectiveness and efficiencies and has given us the confidence needed as we scale further."

Quote from **Galway Community Circus:**

"The learnings and development we have achieved as part of the Step Up programme, have positioned us to be ready to fully engage and maximise the impact of the Fellowship programme we have been awarded. The Step Up fund was a key factor in us being selected."

Quote from **Urban Co-Op:**

"Having a greater team capacity meant we could bring other team members who had an interest in the area into the consultant meeting. This helped to remove any barriers by having one person having responsible for everything and increased the teams skills."



Awardee: Urban Co-op

ORGANISATIONAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT

The Organisational Health Assessment (OHA) is an internal tool used by Rethink Ireland to evaluate the position of projects at the beginning and end of a fund. It aids the identification of capacity building supports needed by each organisation. The awardee and fund team complete the OHA together. The framework assesses impact management, communication, strategy, financial resilience, innovation, scaling, and equality, diversity, inclusion.

All five awardees completed an OHA in March 2023, March 2024 and March/April 2025. The awardees highlighted that they found the OHA tool particularly useful, and they plan to apply its principles to future funding opportunities. A key learning from doing this annual self-assessment is the opportunity to focus on their scaling strategy. Scaling was a significant area of greater understanding and clarity for the awardees between 2022 and 2025. The OHA also highlighted some challenges that can arise from scaling - that increased scale can reduce confidence in financial resilience and innovation due to the demands of growth. These challenges will be a focus for awardees as they exit the fund.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE STEP UP FUND PORTFOLIO ORGANISATION HEALTH ASSESSMENT



CASH GRANTS

The overall cash grant investment amounted to €475,000 between March 2023 and March 2025. Each awardee received the following:

AWARDEE PROJECT NAME	TOTAL CAPACITY BUILDING GRANT	TOTAL CASH AWARD
Benchspace	12,000	118,750
Galway Community Circus	12,000	95,000
Shona Project	12,000	95,000
St. Gabriel's Orthotics	12,000	95,000
The Urban Co-op	12,000	71,250
TOTALS:	60,000	475,000

4. Fund Timeline

OPEN CALL & SELECTION PROCESS

The open call and selection process ran from September 2022 to March 2023. Throughout the open call stage, strong interest was expressed by mid-size social enterprises and was reflected in a total of 54 applications submitted.

Following a robust internal and external review process, 13 applicants were brought to the interview stage. Notably, some donors and external experts contributed to the review and interview panels, and Rethink Ireland is grateful for their expertise. A portfolio of five projects was presented to and approved by Rethink Ireland's Grant Making Committee and Board at the end of January 2023.

Contracts were signed in March 2023, and the first cash grant payments were issued in March 2023 following onboarding calls with awardees to discuss each project's goals and non-financial support needs during the fund's timeline:

1. Impact: March 2023 – March 2025.
2. Cash grant payments: March 2023, November 2023, June 2024 and February 2025.



Awardee announcement

AWARDS ANNOUNCEMENT

The awardees were announced on the 13th of March 2023 at an in-person event at Benchspace Cork, Cork City. The event successfully brought together four of the awardees and Rethink Ireland staff for the first time, allowing the group to connect and celebrate the beginning of each project's journey on the fund.

Rethink Ireland issued a press release following this event to spread the news of the fund and announce the awardees. The release obtained 12 pieces of coverage including: two pieces of national coverage – Irish Examiner (print and online) and Business Plus (online) and several regional media outlets including the Limerick Post as well as mentions on local radio outlets Galway Bay FM, Cork's c103fm and 96fm. In total, this media coverage had an estimated reach of over half a million people with an editorial value of over €54,000.



Awardee announcement

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Awardees on the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund were supported by Rethink Ireland throughout the course of the fund. Regular check-in meetings were held to track progress and discuss challenges. The impact of the fund was also tracked via the improvement of the awardee organisation's capacity across multiple strategic indicators.

All projects set annual goals during the two-year fund, thereby goals were amended and revised with the awardees as they entered year two of the fund.

Exit interviews and a final Organisational Health Assessment were conducted with each awardee throughout March and April 2025 to capture achievements, impact data, learnings, and feedback.



Awardees from top left: Galway Community Circus, Benchspace, St Gabriel's Orthotics

5. Meet the Awardees



BENCHSPACE

Target Group: startups and graduates

Project HQ: Cork

Impact Location: Cork

Funding Amount: €130,750

Benchspace Cork is Ireland's first shared creative manufacturing facility, located in the Marina business area of Cork City. With a mission to "Make Creative Livelihoods Possible," Benchspace addresses a critical gap in support for graduates and creative startups.

Their multidisciplinary manufacturing facility includes workshops equipped for woodwork, fine metalwork, digital design, and fabrication. They also house modular open-plan studios, product photography facilities and customer meeting spaces. By providing studio space, professional equipment, and a collaborative environment, Benchspace helps individuals launch and sustain creative careers, preventing the loss of talent from the sector and strengthening Ireland's creative and sustainable economy and promoting local makers.

THE AIM OF THE STEP UP FUND INVESTMENT:

When the fund started, Benchspace was at a pivotal stage of development, where scaling was core to their operations. With this award, Benchspace aimed to increase their education programmes to complement their vision of securing a larger, fully suitable location. To support this growth, the fund also focused on helping Benchspace develop a robust impact management model. This would enable them to assess the effectiveness of their programmes, better understand community needs, reach more people, and increase traded income. The cash grant was set up to support staff expansion, hiring a Programme and Training Manager and a part-time Technician to execute the increased educational programmes.

PROJECT IMPACT

1,369

workshop participants

241

classes run

53

non-resident artists

21

people supported into employment

16

resident artists

15

new members from workshops and course

7

Graduates supported in 2024

2

new Enterprise Development programmes

2

roles created, one part-time and one full-time.

1

Impact Report

IMPACT OVERVIEW:

When asked “what the Step Up fund helped Benchspace leverage,” the programme co-ordinator placed most value on **the impact report they created**. During the Step Up Fund Benchspace assessed, reflected, and presented their impact, in turn helping them to have a **stronger value proposition** for makers, funders and other partners. For instance:

- The Theory of Change created as part of the impact report gave Benchspace a clear foundation to develop their next Strategic Plan. The awardee is exiting the fund with **an active impact measurement framework** to continue their impact journey.
- Benchspace is expanding their base to a third location. The impact report is a strong asset for **engaging new connections for their next stage of growth**. This expansion will require careful balancing and financial supports for Benchspace in the short term.
- The report illuminated meaningful insights. The awardee is reviewing their value proposition and costing structure to **increase access for student and graduate makers**.

In terms of other financial and institutional sustainability, during the fund, Benchspace increased their income from classes and courses with a new team building audience from corporates and friend groups. The second half of 2024 was challenging for Benchspace due to changes within the team. Entering 2025, senior leadership responsibilities are spread across two roles rather than one, the General Manager and Partnerships and Funding Manager- strengthening Benchspace for future team changes.

IMPACT STORY:

“Benchspace has had a huge impact on both myself & my children. Moving my workspace off the kitchen table has helped me separate my work life & home life, giving me more focus in both areas & helping me to be present. The routine I have been able to establish has also made life a lot easier on us all also & I see this impact in my children in ways I never thought I would, they know what is happening every week are happier & more secure in themselves, this makes me feel like a good Mum.”



GALWAY COMMUNITY CIRCUS

Target Group: young people from disadvantaged backgrounds

Project HQ: Galway

Impact Location: Galway and surrounding areas

Funding Amount: €107,000

Galway Community Circus was created as a circus school and social enterprise to meet the needs of local youth, based on their philosophy 'circus for all.'

Through circus education programmes they provide accessible and engaging wellbeing supports that reduce isolation and promote empowerment and expression amongst young people. They also create community programmes in partnership with those who have specific social or developmental needs.

THE AIM OF THE STEP UP FUND INVESTMENT:

The three key social issues addressed by Galway Community Circus are the youth mental health crisis, lack of regular physical activity and inequality in access to preventative services due to social, economic, and other barriers.

When the fund started, Galway Community Circus aimed to strengthen their accessibility for youth and adults with disability, including training for staff. They also intended to expand geographically and open a third location, with the support of Galway City Council. They aimed to develop a scaling plan to prepare for their next stage of growth, assisted by the business supports.

PROJECT IMPACT

9,531

people supported

601

weekly participants in
circus school

99

events and circus school
courses run

1

new location equating to 3
locations in total

7

young people with additional
needs engaged with one-on-
one tutoring.

33%

increase in traded income

Business and Arts Fellowship
with a sustainable plan for
corporate partnerships

Full Audit of facility
accessibility in one venue

Implementation of an EDI
committee

IMPACT OVERVIEW:

When asked “what the Step Up fund helped The Galway Community Circus leverage,” the programme co-ordinator placed most value on the **partnerships they have built since joining the fund**. During the Step Up Fund, the Galway Community Circus enhanced their **reputation with other local and national funding partners**.

- The awardee was able to demonstrate the importance of their work and readiness to scale when applying to the **Business to Arts Fundraising Fellowship Award for 2024 – 2026¹**. Through their participation in the Step Up Fund, they showcased their credibility to undertake an intensive fundraising mentorship programme.
- Galway Community Circus is the first arts organisation in Galway to enter a **Cultural Strategic Partnership with Galway City Council**. The goals they set as part of their Step Up award helped prioritise their mission to scale up in Galway. Their expansion to this third location, increased their membership by 10% in 2024. The awardee felt that their experience working with the Step Up Fund accelerated the process of this expansion.
- The **diversity and accessibility focus** of the awardee’s year 2 goals gave them a new leverage when applying for accessibility funding. For instance, they secured a significant increase in Arts Council Strategic Accessibility Funding for 2025.

In terms of financial and institutional sustainability, the awardee is exiting the fund with a clear vision for corporate funding through to 2027 as part of the Business to Arts Fellowship. Building **corporate partnerships** will be a continued priority for the awardee beyond this fellowship. They have hired a **full-time Outreach Coordinator** who will begin in June 2025. This new hire will use the costing models and programme templates developed through Step Up’s non-financial supports to scale their activities, earned income and impact. The **strong leadership team**, in place since 2024, has expanded the organisation expertise networks across the UK and Europe, creating greater opportunities for transnational collaboration.

IMPACT STORY:

“Circus has helped me to believe more in myself, to love my body and to overcome new challenges in life.”



¹ The Business to Arts Fundraising Fellowship has enabled Galway Community Circus to employ a dedicated Development Coordinator for the first time, who will be mentored by Business to Arts over 2 years to grow income generated from sponsorship, philanthropy, and individual giving.



THE SHONA PROJECT

Target Group: young women and girls

Project HQ: Waterford

Impact Location(s): Nationwide

Total Award: €107,000

The Shona Project educates, empowers, and inspires today's Irish girls to become tomorrow's resilient, capable, confident, and curious young women. Through workshops, events and an online community, The Shona Project creates open and honest communication leading to transformative interventions in tackling the issue of mental health in young girls in Ireland. With the support of schools across the country and extensive partnership, their vision is that all Irish girls have the skills, tools, and self-esteem they need to achieve their potential.

THE AIM OF THE STEP UP FUND INVESTMENT:

When the fund started, The Shona Project had successfully built their audience and were able to capitalise on the value they offer to support girls and young women across Ireland. Their key strengths at the time were content creation, reach and creating campaigns that reflect their values whilst scaling their offering. They were at a stage of growth where capacity building support would be beneficial to them to ensure long-term sustainability. For example, all successes up until that point were achieved with two staff members but to reach sustainability on a large scale the enterprise needed to grow the team. Their aim was to employ an education manager with the cash grant who would help systemize and build up education resources, systems and facilitator supports.

PROJECT IMPACT

70,000

recipients of the handbook

23,000+

students reached through in-school lessons (workshops and online education packs)

4,500

attendees at the Shine Festival

300+ workshops and events

Organisational change to Google

1 Full time Education manager employed

118%

increase in corporate and philanthropic partnerships

26% of traded income

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

300+ classes reached through Online Education Packs

30 new schools engaged

130 Junior Ambassadors

26 Senior Ambassadors

26 mentors from across 7 Corporate Partners

IMPACT OVERVIEW:

When asked “what the Step Up fund helped The Shona Project leverage,” the programme co-ordinator placed most value on the **additional staff hired**. The Shona Project used the cash grant to **hire a full-time education manager**. This impact from this role included:

- The education manager strengthened the quality of workshop and online education content by **building and implementing a framework** for The Shona Project’s programmes. For example, expanding their educational packs so that schools could access and deliver lessons independently. The organisation’s migration to Google complemented the development of innovative frameworks and systems.
- The education manager role provided more capacity for the CEO to focus on corporate partnerships and the strategic aspects of the business. The Shona project exited the fund with **18 corporate partners, a 118% increase in corporate and philanthropic funding**. Corporate partners include, Allianz, CRBE, &Smyth, Salesforce, McCann Fitzgerald and VHI to name a few.
- The Shona Project reflected on their programmes, such as their Ambassador Programme. In 2024 they launched their **mentorship programme and manual**.

In terms of financial and institutional sustainability, The Shona Project has recently employed a full-time community manager to support the education manager’s work. This new role will lead on expanding the school network and supporting the CEO with the growing corporate and philanthropic partnerships. The Shona Project has started to develop their next term strategic plan. They have a clear organisation structure including “departments” that ensure stability should there be personnel changes.

“The hope and determination that everyone involved with the Shona Project displays is a constant inspiration to me... I truly believe we could all achieve incredible things if we were freed from the idea that because we cannot change everything at once, we can change nothing, and it is my greatest hope that more and more young people can find something that inspires them to keep fighting for the world we all deserve as Shona has done for me.”



ST. GABRIEL'S ORTHOTICS

Target Group: children with physical disabilities, people in need of orthotics

Project HQ: Limerick

Impact Location(s): Limerick, Clare & Tipperary

Total Award: €107,000

St Gabriel's Orthotics provides essential treatment to children with physical disabilities to improve their quality of life. Orthotics treatment enables them to walk, run and play. Orthotics also assist with posture, prevention of joint contractures and scoliosis. Prior to St Gabriel's being established, children with disabilities in the Midwest were required to travel to Dublin to be seen by an orthotist or were reliant on intermittent visiting orthotic services. St Gabriel's Orthotics was established to address this issue and provide a family centred not-for-profit orthotics service in the Midwest.

THE AIM OF THE STEP UP FUND INVESTMENT:

When the fund started, St. Gabriel's Orthotics's primary source of revenue derived from the sale of orthotic treatments to the HSE for individuals with a medical card, the remainder is generated from clients without medical cards who self-fund orthotic treatment.

Due to post Covid budget cuts, St Gabriel's faced the need to further diversify their income. The Step Up Fund aimed to further support this highly impactful service to develop a sustainability plan and diverse income stream needed to sustain and grow the services provided. Their goal was to sustain and grow the services provided to medical card and non-medical card clients, in turn establishing a more balanced and sustainable revenue stream. To achieve this growth, the fund aimed to increase St. Gabriel's market presence through strategic planning, updated facilities and increase brand awareness and accessibility to create a more balanced and sustainable revenue stream.

PROJECT IMPACT

981

Non-medical card clients supported

867

Medical card clients supported

18.2%

increase in traded income in 2024

Refurbished facilities to enhance accessibility and client experience

Website launch with online booking option

Client feedback loop implemented

IMPACT OVERVIEW:

When asked “what the Step Up fund helped St Gabriel’s Orthotics leverage,” the programme co-ordinator placed most value on the **more sustainable and scalable service** they have created since 2023. The Step Up Fund supported St Gabriel’s Orthotics to implement a strategy that focused on a **stronger and diversified revenue stream**.

- In year two of the fund, the awardee set a goal to **develop a website with an online booking system**, up to date photos and satisfaction feedback loop. These important assets ensure that St Gabriel’s remain a constant competitor in Orthotics in the Mid and Southwest of Ireland.
- The cash grant enabled St Gabriel’s to **improve facilities by increasing the accessibility** to the clinic for all clients. This included widened corridors, an entrance level car park, and a freshly decorated interior.
- In achieving a more sustainable service, the awardee also valued the **time to reflect** when working with consultants. This was especially important for the programme co-ordinator when developing their **strategic plan and impact measurement framework**.

In terms of financial and institutional sustainability, St Gabriel’s has had an 18.2% increase in traded income from the sales of orthotic services. Their traded income makes up 98% of their annual income. The team and board have a clear goal to focus on the marketing and building their brand to continue to increase their balanced traded income and offering.

BENEFICIARY QUOTE:

“I have been attending St. Gabriel’s Orthotics service for a number of years. I would not be able to walk without their help, I appreciate how important their service is to help me have a good quality of life.”





THE URBAN CO-OP

Target Group: people experiencing disadvantage.

Project HQ: Limerick

Impact Location: Limerick city and surrounding areas

Total Award: €83,250

The Urban Co-op & Wellness Hub in Limerick is a community grocery. They sell organic and local nourishing food with the added provision of wellbeing therapies. They are an active participant in national, regional, and international conversations about organic food production and wellness. The Urban Co-op provides a hub to their local communities to build social connections, foster and celebrate new and contrasting ideas.

THE AIM OF THE STEP UP FUND INVESTMENT:

When the fund started, The Urban Co-op was at a key transition stage, emerging from the economic impact of Covid and transitioning to a cooperative legal form. At the time they were also exploring their expansion options. The aim of the fund was to support the Urban Co-op to hire additional staff to support their scaling plans. The non-financial supports aimed to help operationalising their impact framework and improving their communications and business plan. For example, they wished to explore the best scaling model for the organisation.

PROJECT IMPACT

65,949

till transactions

17,083

wellness sessions run²

30

work placements for young adults with additional needs

1 full-time employee engaged through work experience

1 additional wellness room created

75%

growth in wellness initiatives participation at the Urban Co-op

32%

increase in overall footfall

Less than **1%** waste

67%

Irish produce stocked

22%

increase in traded income

²17,083 wellness sessions run consists of 1/3 one-on-one sessions, 2/3 groups sessions. In calculating the overall figure for the portfolio each session was divided by 6, based on the assumption that event and one-to-one session are a series of six. The total session included in the portfolio "events/sessions run" was 2,846.

IMPACT OVERVIEW:

When asked “what the Step Up fund helped the Urban Co-op leverage,” the programme co-ordinator placed most value on the **increased capacity**. During the Step Up Fund, the Urban Co-op hired **three new staff**. The impact from this increase capacity includes:

- Senior leadership is now able to focus on the organisation’s strategic priorities. This provided **new skills across the organisation** as team members are encouraged to take on new tasks- **reducing the risk of burnout and increasing connection with external networks**. For example, they are participating in the Mid-West Bio District programme through the Department of Agriculture.
- The Urban Co-op **now opens 7 days a week** and delivers high-quality customer service and social engagement with every customer. Since the start of 2023, the Urban Co-op engaged in **190,092 individual connections with customers and visitors**³ equating to 65,942 till transactions.
- The introduction of the inclusive work experience programme, supported 30 young adults with additional needs. **One participant in the work experience programme is now a full-time staff member**.
- The Urban Co-op have **diversified their income**, made possible through the greater team capacity. They have created an online distribution platform as part of their scaling strategy, and they have begun to host more events and have also been generating income as guest expert speakers at events in the organic food sector.

In terms of financial and institutional sustainability, The Urban Co-op has a succession plan in place for the board and senior leadership. One aspect of uncertainty for the Urban Co-op is their transition to becoming a cooperative legal entity. They have decided as a full organisation to make this transition when the new legislation for co-operatives is launched. The timeline of this change is unknown, however, the transition is expected to further diversify the organisation’s revenue stream, such as setting up a structured membership framework.

BENEFICIARY QUOTE:

“I’ve always found the idea of it very inspiring not only in terms of sustainability as a social enterprise, creating sustainable work opportunities but in terms of the sort of alignment of values being sort of anti-corporate, bringing nutrition in the community, collaboration into grass roots society and helping everybody motivate themselves and get together as a community. I really like all that and it is very empowering.”



³The Urban Co-Op has recorded 190,029 “individual connections” with their community, since 2023. This reflects on the number of engagement instances they had with visitors to their grocery, wellness facilities and events.

6. Conclusions

Rethink Ireland's support has created a profound impact across all awardees. From expanding their programmes to achieving greater community engagement and organisational sustainability, these initiatives have leveraged the fund to create meaningful, long-lasting change. Awardees have achieved significant impact figures, reaching up to **207,255** individuals, from various backgrounds, age groups and abilities.

Each of these social enterprises have scaled, capturing at least two of three scaling strategies; scaling up, scaling deep and scaling out. For instance, the full portfolio has scaled out, embracing collaboration and partnership with others. This is demonstrated by more corporate partnerships, collaborations with international counterparts, creating new referral pathways to services and participation in consortium-led, national, and regional projects.

All five of the awardees have also reached new audiences and throughout the fund which has created a collective 25% average increase in traded income since the start of the Step Up Fund. This traded income increase is based on four awardees. Two awardees have increased the accessibility of their services or workplace for young people with additional needs. Two awardees have increased their traded income by engaging new service users. One awardee has seen significant growth in corporate engagement, especially through gaining mentor volunteers to support Ireland's young people.

The participating organisations gained excellent value from participating in the Accelerator Programme and the consultancy support, building their organisational capacity, especially in the areas of impact management and strategic planning for scale. All the awardees will be continuing the projects and further implementing the assets developed during the fund into their business. Three out of the five awardees have applied for further Rethink Ireland funding, to further explore their work specifically in the equality area.

Funding remains a key challenge across the board. All organisations are focusing on diversifying their income sources. For example, adding new services as additional traded income, corporate funding, EU projects, and private donors.

Looking ahead, all supported organisations plan to continue to operate and scale their projects by implementing and building on the lessons learned and valuable experiences gained through their partnership with Rethink Ireland and the support from consultants.

7. Thank You

Thank you to our donors

We are so proud of the five awardees on the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund and the impact their projects have made across Ireland. Together, these five awardees have supported 59,840 people during this two-year fund. These are people who have participated in activities with our awardees as outlined in the goals that they set out with Rethink Ireland. In total, our awardees reached up to 207,255 through their day-to-day supports and activities.

This report demonstrates our awardees' commitment to scale their social enterprises and ensure a more sustainable future for their businesses. Their hard work and commitment have positively impacted communities across Ireland, in particular, Clare, Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Limerick, Tipperary, Waterford, and Wicklow.

At Rethink Ireland, we believe social innovation is a team sport, and we are so grateful for our donors' continued partnership and support. The contributions from the Tomar Trust and Department of Rural and Community Development have made a profound difference not only on the social enterprises' health and sustainability but on the communities they serve.

I want to extend a huge thank you to our donors on the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund: to Tomar Trust, and to the Department of Rural and Community Development for providing match funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund. Your generous support and desire to take risks help bring our joint vision of a scaling social enterprise eco-system to fruition. It is also a key step in bringing the National Social Enterprise Strategy to life. Thank you. Together, we can continue to create meaningful impact, building a better future for these social enterprises and their communities.



Deirdre Mortell
CEO,
Rethink Ireland

8. Looking Forward

When we talk about building stronger communities, it's not just about funding projects – it's about believing in people, in places, and in their power to shape their own future. At Rethink Ireland, we are proud to work alongside partners who share that belief. Tomar Trust has been that kind of partner – investing in resilience, innovation, and hope across Ireland.

Together, we believe that social enterprises are a critical component of Ireland's social fabric, both nationally and locally, providing key services and responding directly to community needs. Through the Social Enterprise Step Up Fund we've backed community leaders, social entrepreneurs, and grassroots organisations who are solving real problems – from social isolation, accessibility of healthcare and employment to empowering Ireland's young people.

Since 2018 – Rethink Ireland and Tomar Trust have partnered on multiple funds impacting tens of thousands of lives and making a significant impact locally, regionally and nationally. The partnership represents trust in local solutions, in the belief that real change comes from the ground up. And the impact ripples far beyond the individual projects – strengthening communities, inspiring new initiatives, and showing what's possible when philanthropy meets community ambition.

The Social Enterprise Step Up Fund supported four awardees based in Munster and one awardee based in Connacht. This place-based approach – where government, philanthropy, and communities work together – is not just an idea, it's a proven way to accelerate change. And with the Government's new commitment to philanthropy as a driver of national development, we see an even greater opportunity ahead, for communities across Ireland to lead the way.

Looking ahead to the second half of 2025 and beyond and focusing on Step Up's impact in Munster, our ambition is clear: to make Munster a national leader in social innovation and place-based giving. Working hand in hand with visionaries like Tomar Trust, we know we can continue to spark real, lasting change – not just for today, but for generations to come.



Pádraic Vallely

Senior Philanthropy and Development Manager,
Rethink Ireland

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The lower half of the image features a large, solid cyan triangle pointing towards the bottom right. Overlaid on this and the blue background are several sets of white, concentric, wavy lines that create a sense of movement and depth, resembling stylized waves or a topographical map.