

Disability Participation and Awareness Fund

2023 & 2024
IMPACT REPORT



**RETHINK
IRELAND** Our
Social
Innovation
Fund



An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais
agus Comhionannais
Department of Children,
Disability and Equality



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Foreword by Norma Foley, TD

Minister for
Children, Disability
and Equality

I am pleased to introduce this impact report for the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023–2024. It celebrates the work of organisations across Ireland that are creating opportunities for people with disabilities to participate fully in education, employment, culture, recreation and community life.

All funding for the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund is provided by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. It is an important example of how we can turn our commitments under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025–2030 into meaningful action.

The Strategy recognises that people with disabilities have the right to participate fully in every aspect of society. Achieving this means removing barriers, strengthening self-advocacy, promoting inclusive services and ensuring that people with disabilities are active partners in designing the solutions that affect their lives.

The projects supported through this fund demonstrate these principles in practice. They have empowered people with disabilities to develop new skills, access employment, participate in arts and culture, build confidence, improve health and wellbeing, and become leaders within their communities.

These initiatives reflect the core ambitions of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People in terms of promoting participation, supporting independent living, improving access to services, and ensuring that the voices and experiences of people with disabilities shape the decisions that affect them.

I would like to thank the officials in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for securing the funding for the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund, all the funded organisations who made such strong applications and Rethink Ireland, who process the applications. Together, we are creating a stronger foundation for a society where disability inclusion is embedded across our communities, public services and workplaces, and where every person has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Foreword by Emer Higgins, TD

Minister of State
with Special
Responsibility for
Disability

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund demonstrates how targeted investment in community organisations can deliver meaningful change. Across the 2023 and 2024 funding rounds, 40 innovative projects supported thousands of people with disabilities and their families while strengthening awareness and inclusion in communities across the country.

As detailed in the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025–2030 the Government is committed to building a more inclusive Ireland where every person has the opportunity to participate equally and realise their full potential. While significant progress has been made, we know there is more to do. Too many people with disabilities continue to face barriers that limit participation in everyday life. Removing these barriers is central to our vision of a society founded on inclusion, equality and dignity.

The projects in this report demonstrate what can be achieved when Government, community organisations and people with lived experience work together.



Ministers Emer Higgins and Norma Foley

Thank you to Rethink Ireland, and to all of the organisations, participants, family members and partners involved. Your commitment is helping to build a more inclusive Ireland where people with disabilities are recognised not only for the barriers they face, but for the talents, leadership and contributions they bring to communities across our country.

Introduction

This Impact Report outlines the progress made by the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund (DPAF) 2023 and 2024. Created by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and managed by Rethink Ireland, the purpose of this annual fund was to promote the participation of people with disabilities in Irish society.

Despite considerable progress made in some areas related to the lives of people with disabilities, barriers to full participation in society and the enjoyment of equal rights and opportunities remain in place. People with disabilities in Ireland experience higher rates of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, with systems such as education, transport and buildings not designed to accommodate their needs. The challenges they face are created not by their own disability or health condition, but by barriers that society has placed in their path.

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund was created to address these challenges by supporting local social innovations that are bridging the gap to increase accessibility and inclusivity for people with disabilities. Launched with former Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte, in February 2023, the fund began with an initial investment of €3 million from DCDE to support innovative projects across Ireland. This was then followed in February 2024 by an additional investment of €3.5 million.

The objectives of the fund were to build up the skills of people with disabilities and remove barriers to participation in their communities, provide them with valuable employment experience and support their overall participation in local activities. These goals were developed in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in communities and prioritise true equity and inclusion for people with disabilities in Ireland.

Through the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023 and 2024, 40 projects were supported through a combination of cash grants and business supports that strengthened and increased the impact of each social innovation. Combined, these two funds provided €5,038,098 million in cash grants and a range of specifically tailored business supports to build the capacity of each project totalling €224,000.

Evaluation Methodology

This report highlights the collective impact generated across the fund periods. The findings and data summarised in this impact report are the result of external evaluations by Organisation Development Support (ODS) commissioned by Rethink Ireland. ODS is a consultancy service specialising in monitoring, evaluation and organisational development. The first evaluation, between August and December 2024, examined the progress and impact of the 26 projects funded across DPAF 2023. The 14 projects across DPAF 2024 were evaluated between May and August 2025, building on the findings, learnings and approach from the previous evaluation.

The purpose of the evaluations was to assess the extent to which the fund achieved its intended objectives. Grounded in the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the evaluations adopted a participatory, learning-focused approach, and included awardee surveys, focus groups and individual consultations, interviews with Rethink Ireland staff and consultants, and direct engagement with service users where possible.

As with any evaluation, there were some limitations, including self-reported data and different levels of data monitoring across the projects. Some long-term impacts may not have fully emerged yet.



Fund Overview

Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023 and 2024 were two 12-month funds that promoted the participation of people with disabilities in Irish society across culture, sports, community, education and the workforce. The fund supported local and national non-profits who focused on increasing accessibility and inclusivity for people with disabilities. It is important to note that the implementation of awardee projects was managed over an eight-month period in both instances. This is when fund impact was achieved.

Across the two years, the fund enabled 40 awardee projects to enhance their programmes and further build the skills of people with disabilities, preparing and enabling them for independent living, employment readiness and social inclusion.

DPAF 2023 awarded 26 projects focused across four distinct strands:

- Strand 1:** Initiatives building skills and removing barriers to help people with Down syndrome take part in their communities
- Strand 2:** Initiatives by social enterprises providing valuable employment experience to people with disabilities
- Strand 3:** Initiatives promoting arts and cultural endeavours, particularly those that foster awareness of the lived experiences of people with disabilities and support the participation of people with disabilities in artistic, cultural and community life
- Strand 4:** Initiatives aimed at fostering community participation and inclusion for people with disabilities, including sports and outdoor recreation, promotion of accessibility and accessible shared spaces

Similarly, DPAF 2024 awarded 14 projects focused across three distinct strands:

- Strand 1:** Supporting community, social, cultural and physical participation that improves the accessibility of, and participation in, community life for persons with disabilities
- Strand 2:** Promoting disability awareness training in local communities
- Strand 3:** Promoting supports and pathways for teenagers with disabilities transitioning from secondary school



Participation in the fund enabled the awardees to deliver their projects successfully, engage deeply with participants, and connect and collaborate with each other. While the fund offered a bespoke range of supports to awardees, it had a unique impact for each organisation.

Open Call & Selection Process

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023 was launched in February 2023 by former Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte with Rethink Ireland managing the fund. The open call received a total of 143 applications from across 22 counties. This high number demonstrated the urgent need for this fund.

Rethink Ireland employs a robust process for selection, including internal and external reviews with subject area experts, interviews and a presentation to the Grant Making Committee. Following the intensive review process, 53 applicants advanced to the interview stage. A portfolio of 20 projects was presented to and approved by the Grant Making Committee and Rethink Ireland’s Board in September 2023.

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2024 followed the same process, launched in February 2024 by former Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte. The open call received a total of 112 applications, with 33 applications advancing to the interview stage. A portfolio of 14 projects was presented to and approved by the Grant Making Committee and Board in July 2024.

The Venture Philanthropy Model

At Rethink Ireland, our grant making adopts a venture philanthropy model, like that of venture capital investments. We measure the success of a project by the level of positive change it makes, exercising the same discipline and rigour expected of venture capital funds. This enables us to discover the most innovative non-profit initiatives to invest in. Most importantly, the model fosters long-term, effective impact. The selected projects are supported through a combination of cash grants and business supports for greater impact.

Cash Grants

All funding for the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund is provided by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Awardees received cash grants ranging between €50,000 and €200,000. These cash grants provided funding for project staffing costs and project expenses. Final grant amounts were determined by the Grant Making Committee based on the amount requested by the organisation at time of application and overall total available in the portfolio.



Each awardee received the following:
DPAF 2023

Project Name	Organisation	Cash Grant Total
Accessible Play, Recreation & Conservation Spaces	Crann Centre	€82,598
Accredited Training and Individual Enterprise Support	Link Galway	€100,000
Connections Arts Centre	Connections Arts Centre	€82,598
Creative Approaches to Practical Community Advocacy (CAPCA)	Fionnathan Productions	€116,620
Cumas Design	Cumas New Ross	€100,000
DCIL Access Officer & Leader Mentor Programme	Donegal Centre for Independent Living	€100,000
Disrupt Disability Arts Festival	Project Arts Centre	€100,000
DS Champions Health & Wellbeing Programme	No Barriers Foundation	€393,826
Embers Project	Active Connections	€82,598
Healthy Strong Together Programme	No Barriers Foundation	€200,000
Inclusive Dance Cork	Firkin Crane	€81,000
Inclusive Museums	The Hunt Museum	€70,000
Move Smart MS	Multiple Sclerosis Society of Ireland	€69,608
National Para Sport Network	Paralympics Ireland	€200,000
Neurodiversity and the Community	Specialisterne Ireland	€100,000
Neurodiversity Ireland	Neurodiversity Ireland	€82,598
Notes & Signs	Music & Health Ireland	€77,000
Our Place	Saint John of God Community Services	€100,000
Scotia Project	AK Inspired	€198,982
Sightless Cinema	National League of the Blind of Ireland Trust	€92,000
Speech and Language Programme	Down Syndrome Ireland	€199,811
Spinal Injuries Ireland Art Programme	Spinal Injuries Ireland	€80,000
Teens Project	The Down Syndrome Centre	€118,761
The Access Academy	SOS Kilkenny	€144,755
Together Academy	The Down Syndrome Centre	€100,000
Triest Press	Triest Press	€100,000

DPAF 2024

Project Name	Organisation	Cash Grant Total
Adult Support & Wellbeing Programme	AslAm	€165,000
Baboró Creative Sensory School Workshops	Baboró International Arts Festival for Children	€50,000
ChildVision EAA National Programme	ChildVision	€200,000
Deaf Awareness Training and Resource Development	Irish Deaf Society	€114,780
Disability Awareness Training @ The Wayfinding Centre	Vision Ireland	€98,000
Disability Through My Lens: A PhotoVoice Project	Migrant Health Alliance Ireland	€73,000
Enabling Neurodiverse People Gain Employment in Their Communities	Specialisterne Ireland	€100,000
Engaging Disabled People in Direct Provision	Centre for Independent Living	€75,000
JAMCard Awareness Training	NOW Training & Employment Enterprise	€192,725
National Platform of Self Advocates Network	National Platform of Self Advocates	€186,084
Participation Opportunities 2.0	Crann Centre	€175,000
Social Participation for Autistic Adults	Thriving Autistic	€92,618
Therapeutic Supports Project	Together Academy	€143,136
UNIMAAP	HADD-ADHD Ireland	€200,000

Organisational Health Assessment Tool

The Organisational Health Assessment (OHA) is a Rethink Ireland tool used to assess and track awardees’ organisational capacity. The tool helps to identify the supports needed to strengthen their organisation and to scale. It is not meant as a tool for grading awardees, and it is not tied to their cash grants. The OHA is completed collaboratively and assesses organisational development across seven areas: impact management, communication, strategy, financial resilience, innovation, scaling, and equality, diversity and inclusion. Awardees completed the OHA both the start and end of the fund.

The following graph outlines the average changes in the OHA data, across all seven organisational developments for the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023 and 2024. The chart below presents data based on 24 awardees from across the two years of the fund.

This highlights an average increase in all seven areas assessed from the start to end of the fund. Each area had the potential to reach a maximum of five.

The exact scores can be read on the following table:

Area	Fund Start	Fund End
Impact Management	3.0	3.7
Communication	3.3	4.0
Strategy	3.7	4.2
Financial Resilience	3.6	3.9
Innovation	4.1	4.5
Scaling	2.5	3.7
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	2.8	3.2

Two key highlights in the organisation development of awardees during the fund period include awardees’ ability to sustain a high level of innovation while also seeing a significant increase (12 points) across the portfolio in Scaling. Taken together, these two areas can be interpreted as connecting with key learnings from the evaluations. Innovation may speak to the peer-to-peer networking aspect of the fund, while scaling suggests organisations significantly strengthened their ability to grow or replicate activities.

Business Supports

Business supports are aimed at strengthening the capacity building of awardee organisations through tailored supports with expert consultants on key strategic areas and participation in Rethink Ireland's Accelerator Programme.

Each awardee worked with the fund team to identify their exact needs as part of their organisational health assessment. From this assessment, it was determined which type of business support each project would receive by working with a dedicated consultant. Some of these supports include strategic planning, financial sustainability, communications and impact measurement. These in-depth pieces of capacity building work provide significant support for awardees to address a specific organisational challenge, creating space to reflect and identify actionable strategic next steps. The consultant's technical expertise proved especially valuable in areas such as financial planning, scaling, business development, and communications. The strategic support provided was particularly impactful, and without this consultancy, accessing such guidance would have been difficult. In terms of unintended outcomes, the programme's support created long-term value beyond its initial scope and contributed to the sustainability of some organisations. For example, Link Galway reported that the support in impact management and storytelling has been extremely useful, enabling the organisation to successfully apply for additional funding.

Rethink Ireland's Accelerator Programme supports awardees to build the knowledge and skills needed to expand and deepen their impact. It provides capacity building training from best-in-class experts across the private, nonprofit and public sectors. The opportunity for peer exchange and collaboration with other awardees through the Accelerator Programme is highly valued. The series of workshops included topics such as Impact Measurement, Financial Resilience & Scaling, Communications & Storytelling and EndGame (a workshop focused on looking forward to the bigger picture of the awardee's work).



The DPAF 2023 awardees at a Communications & Storytelling workshop in June 2024 as part of the Accelerator Programme



Impact Overview

5,105

people with disabilities
directly engaged



25,000

people reached through
public engagement



360

educators and school
staff reached



43

people with disabilities
employed

630

people with disabilities engaged
in work training, work experience
or employment support



151

people with disabilities
engaged in arts

5,681

people trained in
accessibility or inclusion

43

employers trained



Fund Impact

The independent evaluations found that the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund is strongly aligned with the needs and priorities of people with disabilities in Ireland. Across both iterations of the fund, awardees consistently highlighted the fund's relevance in addressing barriers to participation, including social exclusion, inaccessible environments, discrimination, and limited opportunities for self-advocacy, cultural engagement, employment, and community inclusion.

The fund's focus on participation, dignity, awareness-raising and inclusion reflects the social model of disability, recognising that barriers within society, rather than individual impairments, often limit participation. Awardees particularly valued the fund's emphasis on innovative approaches, self-advocacy and engaging wider communities to create more inclusive environments.

Feedback from the awardee organisations on the fund experience was overwhelmingly positive. The relationship with the Rethink Ireland team and support was consistently identified as a major strength, alongside opportunities for peer learning, collaboration and access to practical tools and supports. The business supports offered under the fund emerged as one of its major strengths. Tailored support has enabled many to grow beyond the start-up phase and deliver more effective, scalable programmes, aligning with the OHA results. Awardees highlighted the Accelerator Programme, tailored support and one-to-one engagement as highly valuable in strengthening organisational capacity.

Enablers and Barriers to Achieving Impact

The evaluations identified several common factors that supported awardees to achieve their goals. A key enabler was the flexible, relationship-based support provided by Rethink Ireland. Awardees consistently highlighted the team's understanding, responsiveness, and collaborative approach as critical to navigating unexpected challenges and adapting projects when needed.

Projects led by people with disabilities or those with lived experience were especially effective in building trust and engaging communities meaningfully. Additionally, those with lived experience were more able to design innovative solutions that were more relevant and effective. Participation was strengthened by embedding supports and services within communities, meeting people where they are, particularly for more isolated or marginalised groups.

Awardees highlighted the importance of the fund's support for additional staff (through cash grants) and capacity building supports as another significant enabler. These elements of the fund allowed organisations to expand their projects, increase their impact, and strengthen governance, strategy, and operational capacity.

The partnership approach between awardees throughout the funds has enabled awardees to better reflect the intersectional identities and diverse experiences of people with multiple disabilities, further suggesting an impact on innovation through the OHA findings.

For repeat awardees, increased visibility and strengthened reputation have supported the delivery of their work—particularly by enhancing their ability to engage key stakeholders and connect with wider audiences.

The evaluations also identified areas of opportunity crafted by challenges experienced in the sector. The most consistent challenge was the short-term nature of the funding. Particularly given the complexity of working in the disability inclusion space and the time required to build trust, deliver meaningful impact, and support sustainable, long-term change was very difficult to deliver in an eight-month timeline. Recruiting staff for short-term roles was particularly difficult, while staff turnover and limited specialist capacity, such as shortages of ISL interpreters across the country, created additional challenges.

Awardees also highlighted the need for greater focus on long-term sustainability, financial resilience and flexible delivery models for greater impact in the future. Some projects faced challenges around financial reporting and impact measurement, particularly where evaluation tools were not fully accessible or suited to the needs of neurodivergent participants. Organisations supporting employment pathways for people with disabilities faced additional structural barriers, including complex onboarding requirements and systems not designed for inclusive employment.

Finally, many awardees described a sense of a “cliff edge” at the end of funding, where successful projects faced uncertainty about continuation despite strong early impact. The evaluations suggest that longer timelines, greater sustainability support, and more flexible transition planning could strengthen long-term outcomes, keeping impact going beyond the fund period.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the fund delivers meaningful value for both organisations and the communities they support, while also highlighting opportunities to strengthen its long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

Case Studies



The Scotia Project

AK INSPIRED

DPAF 2023, STRAND 1:

Initiatives building skills and removing barriers to help people with Down syndrome take part in their communities

PROJECT HQ:

Kerry

IMPACT LOCATIONS:

Cork, Kerry and Limerick

TOTAL AWARD:

€204,582



AK Inspired is a social enterprise that works to empower people with intellectual disabilities, particularly people with Down syndrome, through inclusive education, skills development, creative programmes and social enterprise initiatives. With support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023**, AK Inspired aimed to help participants develop knowledge, skills, and confidence in biodiversity and climate action.

People with disabilities face significant barriers to participation in education, employment, and community life, and are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change and environmental inequality. The Scotia Project sought to address this by creating accessible, person-centred opportunities for participants to engage in climate action, conservation and sustainable living. The project helped reconnect people with intellectual disabilities to the natural environment through biodiversity-focused education and creative activities.

Grounded in the principles of universal design for learning, the project created a supportive “learn by doing” environment where participants built their confidence and environmental awareness while learning practical skills with the support of accessible materials and assistive technology. The project recruited a specialist team to deliver accessible workshops focused on environmental learning and sustainable craft making, while also improving wellbeing, inclusion and opportunities for future employment and community participation.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Building Environmental Knowledge and Confidence

The Scotia Project supported 31 people with Down syndrome through an accessible programme where participants explored biodiversity, food growing, rewilding, water conservation, composting and wildlife protection through hands-on activities designed to build confidence and independence. The project significantly increased participants’ environmental knowledge. After the programme, 74% reported increased knowledge and understanding of climate change and biodiversity.



Developing Practical Skills

Participants took part in creative sustainability initiatives including an eco-woodcraft programme, where ash timber was repurposed into products such as bird and bat boxes, and the “Trash to Treasure” initiative, which transformed recycled plastics into marketable products. The project also developed an organic food loop system, helping participants understand sustainable food production from planting and harvesting to redistribution, with surplus produce donated to local charities.

Improving Wellbeing and Social Inclusion

The Scotia Project fostered teamwork, inclusion and self-belief delivering strong wellbeing and social outcomes. Participants reported increased confidence, stronger friendships, improved wellbeing and a greater sense of purpose.

Challenging Public Perceptions

The project helped raise awareness of the capabilities of people with disabilities through creative showcase opportunities. Participants contributed to environmental discussions at the Wild Minds Festival and their work was showcased in the Biodiversity and Creative Art Exhibition in Tralee. This helped challenge perceptions and celebrate participants’ creativity and contribution.

Lasting Impact

The Scotia Project demonstrated how accessible, inclusive environmental education can empower people with intellectual disabilities to build skills, confidence, and meaningful participation in climate action and community life. By placing participants at the centre of learning and action, the project created a model that promotes both disability inclusion and environmental sustainability.



Accredited Training and Individual Enterprise Support

LINK GALWAY

DPAF 2023, STRAND 2:

Initiatives by social enterprises providing valuable employment experience to people with disabilities

PROJECT HQ:

Galway

IMPACT LOCATION:

Galway

TOTAL AWARD:

€100,000



Link Galway is a not-for-profit disability service in Galway that promotes social inclusion through supported employment and training services for people with intellectual disabilities. Through Link Café and the food preparation training centre, they create meaningful opportunities to develop skills, build confidence and progress towards employment.

With support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund**, Link Galway expanded this model by developing its bakery and catering service, creating new supported employment opportunities and strengthening training pathways for people with intellectual disabilities. As part of the project, Link Galway worked to become an accredited QQI training centre for culinary and employability skills. The project aimed to recruit bakery assistants and support staff, provide practical job training, improve participants' confidence and wellbeing, and create stronger pathways into long-term employment.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Creating Meaningful Employment Opportunities

With support from the fund, Link Galway successfully recruited nine people with intellectual disabilities into supported employment roles. At the café, participants gained practical skills in food preparation, kitchen operations, barista training and workplace communication. This hands-on model of active learning allowed participants to build competencies in a real working environment while receiving tailored support.

Building confidence and wellbeing

The project had a strong impact on participant confidence and wellbeing. Baseline and follow-up surveys were conducted with employees, with all participants reporting increased confidence since joining the programme. Feedback also showed that participants felt positively challenged in their work, reflecting increased independence, self-belief and a stronger sense of purpose.

Expanding accredited training pathways

A key goal of the project was to establish Link Galway as an accredited QQI training centre, creating more formal pathways for participants to gain recognised qualifications in culinary and employability skills. Link Galway successfully secured regional accreditation through the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board and reached the first stage of formal approval, marking a significant step toward long-term training provision.

Lasting Impact

Link Galway's project demonstrated the power of supported employment to build confidence, skills and inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities. By creating meaningful paid roles in a real-world setting and increasing visibility of people with disabilities in customer-facing community roles, the project helps challenge barriers to employment and promote greater inclusion in everyday community life. Beyond immediate participant outcomes, the fund also strengthened Link Galway's organisational sustainability by strengthening its funding case, and helping to successfully secure additional grant funding and pursue further investment opportunities.



Our Place

ST JOHN OF GOD COMMUNITY SERVICES

DPAF 2023, STRAND 3:

Initiatives promoting arts and cultural endeavours, particularly those that foster awareness of the lived experiences of people with disabilities and support the participation of people with disabilities in artistic, cultural and community life

PROJECT HQ:

Dublin

IMPACT LOCATION:

Dublin, Kerry

TOTAL AWARD:

€100,000



St. John of God Community Services

supports over 850 children and adults with intellectual disabilities through a range of residential, respite, day and early intervention services. Through Our Place, the organisation partnered with professional artists to create a collaborative arts project that increased access to visual art, exhibition design and creative leadership for people with intellectual disabilities.

With support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund**, Our Place aimed to create a more inclusive and accessible visual arts environment by collaborating with people with intellectual disabilities to co-create sound artworks and co-design public exhibitions. The project provided opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities not only to participate in the arts, but to shape and lead artistic work as creators, designers and audiences.

The project developed participants' creative and technical skills in sound recording, editing, storytelling and exhibition design. It created employment opportunities within the arts sector and deepened relationships between cultural venues and disabled communities. At its heart, the project aimed to shift public perceptions by platforming the artistic talent and experiences of people with intellectual disabilities.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Amplifying creative voices

Our Place collaborated with 27 co-creators with intellectual disabilities to produce 40 original sound pieces, which were brought together into a 14-minute immersive sound composition exploring the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Participants developed new technical skills in accessible recording, editing, storytelling, and audio software, while engaging in a creative process that centred their ideas, perspectives, and artistic choices.

Creating inclusive exhibition spaces

The project had two public exhibitions at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin and Kerry County Museum, bringing the work new audiences and creating meaningful visibility for artists with disabilities. Accessibility improvements were embedded throughout the process, including collaboration with both venues to improve inclusion and the creation of accessible guides to support visitors.

Supporting participation and employment

The project remained committed to recognising participants' contributions and creating pathways for paid participation in the arts. The project employed four individuals with intellectual disabilities. Co-creation workshops were led by a person with an intellectual disability, demonstrating the importance of leadership opportunities in driving meaningful inclusion.

Improving wellbeing and inclusion

Participants consistently reported feeling happy, safe, supported, and included. This reflects the importance of accessible,

inclusive spaces where people can participate fully and confidently. The workshops helped participants build confidence, communication skills, creative expression and a stronger sense of belonging.

Changing public perceptions

Our Place had powerful public impact, with feedback showing that 100% of exhibition visitors reported feeling happy after the experience, with many expressing feelings of pride, empowerment and connection. Two social media campaigns and a documentary film increased the project's reach, raising awareness of the right of people with disabilities to participate fully in cultural life.

Lasting Impact

Our Place demonstrated the transformative potential of inclusive arts practice through both meaningful opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities and in reshaping public perceptions of disability and inclusion. The project created a model for more inclusive cultural spaces and strengthened the case for greater representation of disabled artists across Ireland's arts sector.



Healthy Strong Together Programme

NO BARRIERS FOUNDATION

DPAF 2023, STRAND 4:

Initiatives aimed at fostering community participation and inclusion for people with disabilities, including sports and outdoor recreation, promotion of accessibility and accessible shared spaces

PROJECT HQ:

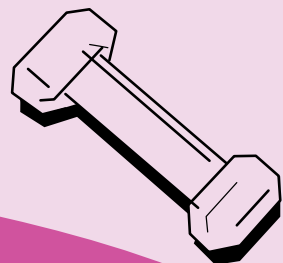
Donegal

IMPACT LOCATION:

Donegal

TOTAL AWARD:

€200,000



The **No Barriers Foundation** is a social enterprise and not-for-profit organisation dedicated to breaking down physical and societal barriers for people of all abilities. Through inclusive rehabilitation and community-based programmes, the organisation empowers people with disabilities to improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life.

The Healthy Strong Together Programme addresses a significant gap in rehabilitation support for people with disabilities in Donegal. Too often, individuals discharged from hospital care following spinal injury, stroke, brain injury, multiple sclerosis, or other neurological conditions face limited options for ongoing rehabilitation. Public rehabilitation supports can be infrequent, while private services are often financially out of reach, leaving many at risk of declining physical health, isolation, and reduced independence.

With support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund**, No Barriers Foundation sought to bridge the gap by delivering a 10-week community-based rehabilitation programme in an inclusive mixed-ability gym environment. The programme combined specialist neurological exercise support, innovative rehabilitation technologies, and social, community-based participation to help people continue their recovery after discharge. It was designed to equip participants with the knowledge and confidence to continue exercising independently after the programme, while increasing awareness among the wider gym community.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Improving physical health

The programme supported 25 participants with neurological conditions through the 10-week rehabilitation programme. It also identified an additional 15 participants for future engagement. Participants experienced significant improvements in physical function and mobility, with an average 21.4% improvement in 10-metre walking speed and a 33.7% increase in sit-to-stand repetitions—two important indicators of strength, independence, and day-to-day mobility.

Strengthening mental wellbeing

Mental health increased, with 36% of participants reporting a strong improvement in mood and emotional wellbeing. Participants described increased confidence, improved energy levels, and a more positive outlook, while having more confidence in everyday activities.



Building social inclusion

A defining feature of Healthy Strong Together was its delivery within a mixed-ability community gym. This created natural opportunities for interaction and reduced social stigma around disability. Survey among the wider gym membership showed better understanding of the barriers people with disabilities experience.

Lasting Impact

Healthy Strong Together demonstrated the importance of accessible, community-based rehabilitation in supporting people with disabilities to regain strength, independence and confidence. The programme improved health outcomes for participants and also helped challenge stigma and create a stronger culture of disability inclusion in everyday community life.



Accessible Play and Conservation Spaces

CRANN CENTRE

DPAF 2023, STRAND 4:

Initiatives aimed at fostering community participation and inclusion for people with disabilities, including sports and outdoor recreation, promotion of accessibility and accessible shared spaces

DPAF 2024, STRAND 1:

Supporting community, social, cultural and physical participation that improves the accessibility of, and participation in, community life for persons with disabilities

PROJECT HQ:

Cork

IMPACT LOCATION:

Cork, Kerry,
Limerick, Tipperary,
Waterford

TOTAL AWARD:

€82,598 (DPAF 2023),
€175,000 (DPAF 2024)



The **Crann Centre** provides life-long support to children, adults, and families living with neuro-physical disabilities. Their innovative 2Gen Model of Care recognises that improved outcomes for people with disabilities are closely linked to the wellbeing of the whole family.

For many families, opportunities to access recreation, outdoor spaces, and community activities remain limited due to inaccessible environments and a lack of suitable facilities. This contributes to social isolation, reduced physical activity, and poorer wellbeing for both individuals and families. Through support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund** across both DPAF 2023 and DPAF 2024, Crann Centre has worked to change this by creating inclusive spaces and expanding opportunities for families to connect and thrive.

DPAF 2023 supported Crann Centre to expand its accessible playground and conservation spaces through structured recreational programming, volunteer engagement, and partnerships across arts, play, fitness, and ecology. Building on this momentum, the support from DPAF 2024 scaled this work through an expanded programme of recreation, arts, exercise, peer support and social connection activities for children, adults and families.



IMPACT OVERVIEW

Creating opportunities for participation

Across the two funding periods, Crann Centre created accessible opportunities for families to enjoy recreation, play and community life together. In the first fund period, the Centre welcomed 1,132 visitors, including people with disabilities, family members and friends. The accessible playground hosted 997 visitors. The conservation area welcomed 141 visitors through activities including seasonal events, ecology tours, live music and inclusive “Walk and Roll” sessions. Across DPAF 2024, Crann Centre significantly expanded its reach, delivering 1,662 visitors.

Building stronger community connections

Partnership development was a major success across both years. Crann Centre established five environmental and conservation partnerships during the DPAF 2023 fund period, delivering biodiversity and nature-based activities. In the second fund period, this expanded to 12 collaborative partnerships with community organisations, sports clubs, NGOs, local government and creative partners. The centre welcomed 357 external visitors, helping raise awareness of disability inclusion, while volunteers contributed over 130 hours across 45 events.

Improving wellbeing and inclusion

Across both funding periods, participant feedback consistently showed positive outcomes in wellbeing, social connection and family inclusion. Parents described the importance of having spaces where families could spend time together, build friendships, and feel part of their community. Participant feedback highlighted the importance of accessible spaces where families could connect and feel included.

Lasting Impact

The Crann Centre’s journey highlights the value of sustained, multi-year investments in achieving and maintaining impact. The first phase focused on creating accessible opportunities for participation; the second built on that learning to scale impact, deepen partnerships, and strengthen community engagement. Crann Centre also reported that support from Rethink Ireland helped increase its visibility, credibility and ability to secure additional funding, demonstrating how early investment can create lasting change. By designing inclusion into community life from the outset, Crann Centre is helping families move from isolation toward connection, participation, and belonging.

Disability Awareness Training at The Wayfinding Centre

VISION IRELAND

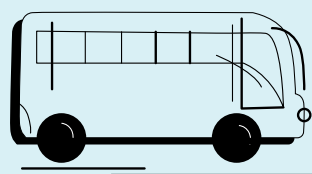
DPAF 2024, STRAND 2:

PROMOTING DISABILITY AWARENESS TRAINING IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

PROJECT HQ:
Dublin

IMPACT LOCATION:
Nationwide

TOTAL AWARD:
€98,000 (DPAF 2024, Strand 2)



..
Vision Ireland

The
WayFinding
Centre

Vision Ireland works to transform the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired by supporting children and adults across the country to live confidently and independently.

Through **The Wayfinding Centre**, Vision Ireland tackles one of the most significant barriers to participation for people with disabilities: access to transportation. Public transport is essential for accessing work, healthcare, education and community life, but Vision Ireland identified that only 6% of people with disabilities use public transport daily, largely due to physical, informational and societal barriers.



The Wayfinding Centre was created as an innovative transport training and accessibility hub, designed to equip transport providers and professionals with the skills and understanding needed to increase inclusivity.

With support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund**, Vision Ireland empowered people with lived experience of disability to become Access Ambassadors – advocates and co-designers of accessibility trainings. The Ambassadors then co-led the trainings to transport and mobility professionals. The goal was to act as a catalyst for systemic change in how transport accessibility is understood and delivered in Ireland.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Empowering disability leadership

The Wayfinding Centre trained 406 Access Ambassadors and directly supported 168 individuals with disabilities to build their confidence, advocacy skills and transport knowledge. The Access Ambassadors took part in 151 programme activities and events, contributing to co-design conversations as well as providing trainings and expanding accessibility advocacy.

Driving change in the transport sector

318 transport and mobility professionals received in-person accessibility training, co-delivered by experienced staff and the Access Ambassadors. This ensured lived experience was central to the learning. Transport operators reported increased awareness and understanding of the barriers people with disabilities face when using public transport. They also experienced greater confidence in communicating with and supporting passengers with disabilities, and a stronger commitment to applying inclusive practices in their day-to-day work.



Raising awareness nationally

Beyond direct training, The Wayfinding Centre increased awareness of disability accessibility issues across multiple sectors through a targeted communications campaign and media engagement. The initiative helped bring greater national attention to the structural barriers that prevent many people with disabilities from travelling independently.

Lasting Impact

The Wayfinding Centre demonstrates the power of combining individual empowerment with systems change. By equipping people with disabilities to become trainers—and by increasing the capacity of transport professionals to deliver inclusive services—Vision Ireland is helping to reshape how accessibility is understood in Ireland. Rather than focusing solely on supporting individuals to navigate inaccessible systems, the programme works to change those systems themselves. Thus, creating a stronger foundation for equality, independence and freedom of movement for everyone.

UNIMAAP

ADHD IRELAND

DPAF 2024, STRAND 3:
Promoting supports and pathways
for teenagers with disabilities
transitioning from secondary school

PROJECT HQ:
Dublin

IMPACT LOCATION:
Nationwide

TOTAL AWARD:
€200,000



ADHD Ireland supports and empowers people with ADHD through advocacy, education and practical supports that improve understanding, acceptance and outcomes across all stages of life. The **UNIMAAP (Understanding and Managing ADHD in Academic Pathways)** programme was developed to address a critical but often overlooked transition point for young people with ADHD: moving from secondary school into third-level education.

For many students with ADHD, the shift to college or university brings increased independence, reduced structure, and greater demands on organisation, focus, and self-management. Yet many young people receive little targeted preparation for navigating this transition successfully. With support from the **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund**, ADHD Ireland adapted its successful adult support programme, **UMAAP (Understanding and Managing Adult ADHD Programme)**, to create a dedicated intervention for students and young adults.

This six-week online programme is designed to be practical, accessible, and flexible. Through a combination of education and therapeutic approaches, the programme helps students better understand ADHD. It supports them to develop strategies for challenges such as procrastination, impulsivity, memory, self-compassion, emotional regulation and academic self-management. Alongside supporting current students, the project aimed to have a larger impact on the system by providing ADHD awareness and accreditation training in secondary schools to help prepare younger students for the transition to third-level education.



IMPACT OVERVIEW

Supporting students at a critical transition point

UNIMAAP engaged 508 students with ADHD through live and recorded sessions. The online delivery model enabled students from across the country to participate, helping reduce barriers geographic and accessibility barriers. Student feedback during beta testing helped to shape the programme, ensuring content reflected the real experiences and needs of young adults navigating education with ADHD.

Improving confidence, awareness and self-management

Participants were supported to build greater understanding and practical coping strategies alongside self-acceptance. 97% of attendees reported that the sessions helped with their ADHD-related challenges, demonstrating the relevance and impact of the content. By combining psychological self-help tools with peer interaction and facilitated discussion, the programme created a supportive environment where participants could better understand their experiences and develop practical strategies to succeed.



Preparing future students earlier

ADHD Ireland also delivered its Schools Accreditation Programme in 10 second-level schools, engaging 716 students, staff, and parents in ADHD awareness and education. In total, the wider project engaged more than 1,000 people, helping build greater awareness and preparation across the education system.

Lasting Impact

UNIMAAP demonstrates the importance of targeted, practical support at key life transitions for young people with disabilities. The adaptation of an evidence-based programme into a youth-focused intervention created a sustainable model that can continue to support future cohorts of students. By helping students with ADHD better understand themselves and develop strategies for success, the programme is supporting more inclusive educational pathways and reducing barriers to participation in third-level education. At the same time, its wider work with schools, parents, and educators is helping create more awareness and earlier interventions, building a more supportive environment for future generations of students with ADHD.



Conclusions

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund 2023 and 2024 demonstrates what is possible when **innovative, community-led organisations** are empowered to design solutions with people with disabilities.

Across two years, the fund supported 40 organisations to grow and scale initiatives that tackled barriers to participation in practical and meaningful ways. From employment and education to arts, sport, rehabilitation, recreation and transport accessibility, these projects responded directly to the everyday barriers that continue to limit equal participation in Irish society.

Collectively, DPAF 2023 and DPAF 2024 supported over 5,100 people with disabilities directly, helped 43 people access employment, reached 630 people through work training and employment supports, and trained more than 5,600 people in accessibility and inclusion awareness. Beyond these numbers, the fund created opportunities for people with disabilities to build confidence, strengthen skills, increase independence, connect with others and participate more fully in community life.



The independent evaluations confirm that the fund was strongly aligned with the needs and priorities of people with disabilities in Ireland. Importantly, the findings reinforce that effective inclusion happens when people with lived experience are central to programme design and delivery, when supports are embedded in communities, and when organisations are given the flexibility and trust to adapt to real-world challenges.

The case studies throughout this report show the diversity and strength of the social innovations supported—from young people with ADHD receiving tailored support to thrive in higher education, to transport systems becoming more accessible through lived-experience-led training, to families accessing inclusive recreational spaces, to people with disabilities building confidence through employment, arts participation, and rehabilitation.

The fund has also demonstrated the value of Rethink Ireland's venture philanthropy approach. Alongside financial investment, tailored business supports, strategic consultancy and peer learning helped strengthen organisations themselves. This builds their capacity, resilience and ability to sustain impact beyond the funding period.

At the same time, the evaluations make clear that meaningful systems change requires sustained investment. Many awardees highlighted the challenge of delivering ambitious programmes within short funding timeframes, particularly in areas where trust-building, accessibility, and long-term behavioural or systemic change are essential. These findings reinforce the importance of longer-term, flexible funding models that support both innovation and sustainability.

Ultimately, the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund has shown that disability inclusion is not simply about removing barriers—it is about actively creating communities, environments, services and opportunities where people with disabilities can participate fully, lead confidently, and shape the communities around them.

The projects in this report offer practical, hopeful examples of what inclusive communities can look like. The challenge now is to continue building on this momentum by scaling what works, addressing structural barriers, and ensuring that participation, dignity, and equality remain at the heart of disability policy and practice in Ireland.



A Closing Reflection

As we close this report, I want to reflect on what the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund has made possible.

Across the 2023 and 2024 funds, with the critical support of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, we have seen the extraordinary impact that can be achieved when organisations are trusted, supported, and empowered to innovate alongside the communities they serve. From improving access to employment, education, sport, the arts, transport, and recreation through to creating spaces for creativity, self-advocacy, and connection/belonging, the projects featured in this report are helping to build a more inclusive Ireland where people with disabilities can participate fully in all aspects of life.

At Rethink Ireland, we believe social innovation has a vital role to play in tackling inequality and addressing systemic barriers. The organisations supported through this fund have shown exactly what that looks like in practice. They have combined creativity, determination and lived experience to develop solutions that not only improve lives today but also demonstrate new ways of creating a more inclusive society for tomorrow.

I want to thank the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the awardee organisations whose work is at the heart of this report. Your commitment, ambition and willingness to challenge barriers have delivered real impact for thousands of people across Ireland. Meaningful change requires persistence, courage and collaboration, and your leadership continues to inspire us.

The evaluations captured in this report remind us that there is still much more to do. Creating a truly inclusive Ireland means listening to people with disabilities, placing their voices and leadership at the centre of decision-making, and continuing to invest in ideas that challenge exclusion and create lasting change.

I hope the stories and evidence shared throughout this report encourage others to build on this momentum. Together, we can continue creating an Ireland where every person can participate, contribute and thrive.

Deirdre Mortell

CEO, Rethink Ireland



Thank you

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund is a powerful example of what can be achieved through long-term partnership between Government, philanthropy and the community and voluntary sector.

On behalf of Rethink Ireland, I would like to sincerely thank the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for its continued partnership and leadership. I also want to acknowledge Minister Norma Foley, Minister of State Emer Higgins, and former Minister of State Anne Rabbitte for their commitment to advancing disability inclusion and recognising the value of investing in innovative, community-led solutions.

Since the fund was established in 2023, the Department has invested €13.5 million through the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund, managed by Rethink Ireland. Together, we have supported 60 organisations across Ireland with a further cohort of 18 additional awardees to be announced in late 2026 under DPAF 4.0. Together with the awardees and the Department, we have reached thousands of people with disabilities, their families and communities, while helping organisations develop innovative approaches that can influence wider systems and services.

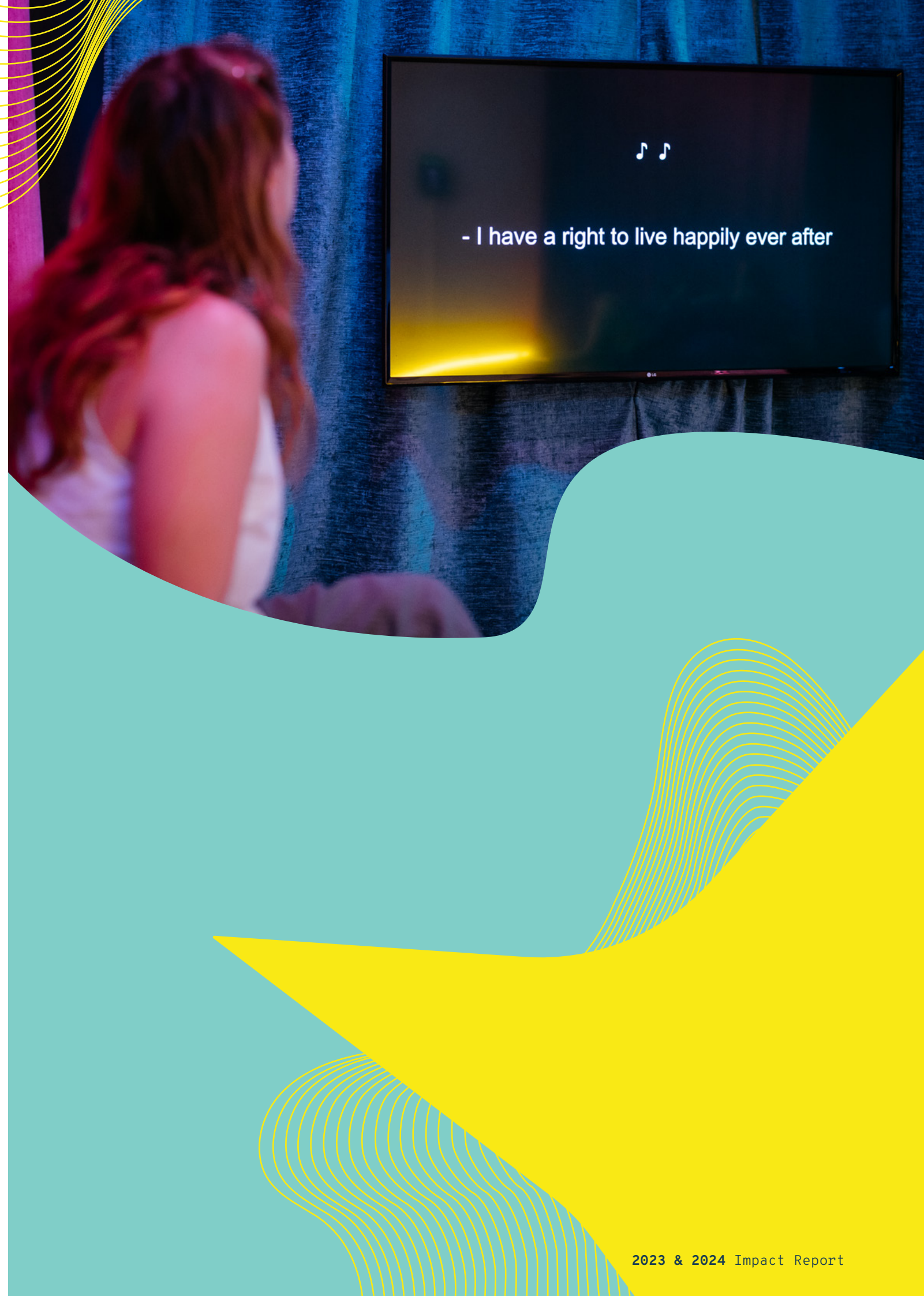
We are particularly encouraged to see Rethink Ireland's role in supporting social innovation recognised in the Programme for Government. This reflects a shared ambition to continue identifying, testing and scaling solutions that address some of Ireland's most pressing social challenges.

Looking ahead, we want to build on the strong foundations created through this partnership with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. We look forward to supporting many more organisations that are working to improve participation, equality and opportunity for people with disabilities. By continuing to invest in innovation, lived experience and collaboration, we can help create lasting change and ensure that inclusion is embedded across every part of Irish society.

Together, we have made significant progress—but our work is far from finished. We look forward to continuing this journey with our government partners, the disability sector, and the inspiring organisations leading change in communities across Ireland.

Pádraic Vallely

Head of Government and Strategic Partnerships,
Rethink Ireland



**RETHINK
IRELAND**

Our
Social
Innovation
Fund



An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais
agus Comhionannais
Department of Children,
Disability and Equality