



The HeadStart Fund

2023-2026

The impact of a **€3 million**
investment in youth mental health
and wellbeing across Ireland.

What is The HeadStart Fund?

The HeadStart Fund is a three-year, **€3 million fund created by Rethink Ireland in collaboration with the Z Zurich Foundation and the HSE.** Designed for young people aged 15-24, the fund focuses on prevention and early intervention, helping young people build resilience, confidence and wellbeing before challenges reach crisis point.

Through a combination of cash grants, capacity-building and expert business support, The HeadStart Fund invested in ten organisations offering early interventions, wellbeing and resilience programmes, and other mental health supports, to young people in Ireland.

€3 million
invested

10
awardees

3 years
support

33,000+
young people
directly supported

116,000+
people indirectly
reached



Meet the Awardees

The HeadStart Fund supported ten not-for-profit organisations delivering innovative mental health and wellbeing programmes for young people across Ireland. Together, they demonstrated that there is no single pathway to improving youth mental health.

Outdoor & Activity-Based Wellbeing

Liquid Therapy CLG

Using surfing, ocean-based activities and wellbeing programmes to build resilience, confidence and connection, social connection and wellbeing.

The Bohemian Football Club CLG

Using football as an inclusive setting for LGBTQI+ young people, combining physical activity, community connection and wellbeing support with wider work to strengthen LGBTQI+ inclusion within football.

Community & Youth-Led Support

Tacú Ballinrobe Family Resource Centre CLG

Providing preventative and early-intervention support through a youth social-prescribing model, combining one-to-one engagement, community activity and connection to wider services and opportunities.

Involve CLG

Developed with young Travellers, for young Travellers, their No Shame Game programme reduces mental health stigma, builds understanding and confidence, and creates culturally relevant opportunities to discuss mental health and self-care.

Education & Digital Innovation

ShoutOut

Delivering LGBTQI+ inclusive education in schools and youth settings through workshops, resources and related support intended to strengthen inclusive environments, understanding and allyship.

spunout Academy

Providing a digital mental health and emotional wellbeing learning platform, providing accessible content relating to emotional literacy, emotional regulation and pathways to support.

Skills, Confidence & Employment Opportunity

Hair Together CLG

Using barbering and hairdressing as a route to develop practical skills alongside confidence, wellbeing, social connection and personal development.

Way2Work Ireland

Combining mentoring, employability and personal-development support to help young people, including those leaving care and young people in marginalised educational settings. The model integrated progression towards employment, education or training with psychoeducational and wellbeing support.



Therapeutic & Specialist Supports

First Fortnight

Providing free creative therapies including art, drama and music therapy to young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, offering trauma-informed therapeutic support to a population that can face substantial barriers to mainstream provision.

Childhood Matters

Delivering multidisciplinary therapeutic support to children and young people affected by adverse childhood experiences, attachment difficulties and developmental trauma, including children in care and those at risk of placement breakdown.

Our Impact on Awardees

Impact Over Three Years

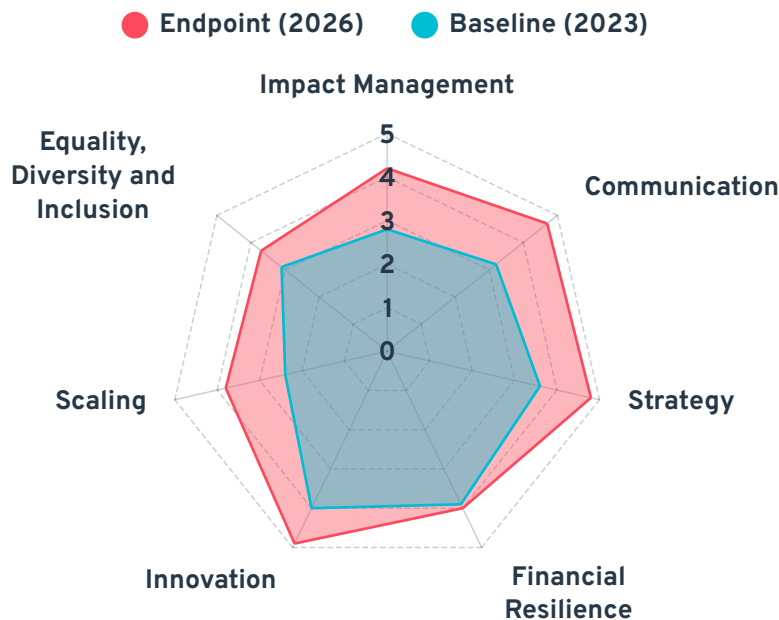
€2.05 Million
in Cash Grants Awarded

€345,000
Invested in Business Supports

More Than Funding

A key feature of The HeadStart Fund was Rethink Ireland's unique combination of financial and business supports, helping awardees strengthen their organisational capacity, increase their impact and plan for long-term sustainability.

Strengthening Organisations: Changes in Organisational Health Assessment Scores



Business Supports

Often described as Rethink Ireland's "secret sauce", tailored business supports provided awardees with one-to-one support from expert consultants in areas such as:

- Impact Measurement
- Strategy Development
- Financial Sustainability
- Communications and Storytelling
- Partnership and stakeholder engagement

Supports were designed in collaboration with each awardee and tailored to their specific organisational needs.

"The non-financial supports have had a very powerful positive impact on our organisation as a whole." - awardee

Accelerator Programme

All awardees participated in Rethink Ireland's Accelerator Programme, receiving practical training and peer learning opportunities designed to strengthen their impact and sustainability. Throughout the three years, workshops focused on:

- Impact Management & Measurement
- Scaling and Growth
- The Green Transition
- Financial Resilience
- Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging
- Communications and Storytelling

These supports helped awardees to build the skills, systems and partnerships needed to continue delivering impact beyond the lifetime of the fund.

The Awardees Impact on Young People

REACHING YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS IRELAND

33,348

young people
directly supported

116,464

people indirectly reached, including young
people, families, teachers, volunteers, staff
and wider communities.

Through The HeadStart Fund, we exceeded our original ambition of directly **reaching 25,000 young people**. Across the portfolio, the ten awardees demonstrated different innovative ways of supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Impact on Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

The HeadStart Fund awardees **helped 33,348 young people across Ireland** build the skills, confidence and connections needed to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Evidence from awardees and participating young people shows positive outcomes across a range of areas:

- **Improved wellbeing** was the most commonly reported outcome, with almost all projects reporting positive changes.
- **Increased confidence and resilience**, helping young people to cope with challenges and develop self-belief.
- **Reduced anxiety, stress and loneliness** through supportive relationships, safe spaces and meaningful activities.
- **Stronger social connections and belonging**, enabling young people to feel more connected to peers, family and their communities.
- **Greater mental health awareness and reduced stigma**, encouraging open conversations and earlier help-seeking.
- **Improved life skills and employability**, supporting progression into education, training, employment and community participation.

Young people consistently reported feeling safe, respected, welcomed and included across the awardees' programmes. Many highlighted the value of trusted relationships, enjoyable activities and opportunities to develop new skills while improving their wellbeing.

The awardees showed that there are multiple pathways to better mental health.



Feedback from the Young People:

83%

said their mental
wellbeing improved

93%

gained personal
development skills

79%

felt less lonely

79%

felt more
confident

76%

more likely to
ask for help

Our Impact on the Ecosystem

The impact of this fund extends far beyond the ten awardees. Over three years, the fund helped strengthen the systems, partnerships, evidence and infrastructure needed to improve youth mental health across Ireland.

1 Building Stronger Partnerships and Pathways

The HeadStart Fund helped create and strengthen relationships across education, health, community, youth and sporting sectors. These relationships became more than networks. They acted as referral routes, delivery partnerships, sources of expertise and mechanisms for reaching young people earlier and more effectively.

Examples included:

- Stronger engagement between community organisations and statutory services such as the HSE and Tusla.
- New referral pathways connecting young people to appropriate supports.
- Cross-sector collaboration between schools, youth services, family resource Centres and mental health providers.
- Increased opportunities for organisations to work together, share learning and develop joint solutions.

3 Developing Models with Potential to Scale

Over the last three years, we supported organisations to test, refine and strengthen approaches that can be adapted, replicated or expanded over time.

Across the portfolio, awardees developed:

- Replicable programme models and training frameworks.
- New approaches to youth social prescribing and integrated support.
- Digital mental health resources with national reach.
- Regional delivery models supported by quality assurance and governance structures.
- Delivery partnerships capable of extending impact beyond a single location.

The fund supported the awardees to build the foundations needed to grow and sustain their impact.

The HeadStart Fund's legacy extends beyond direct impact, leaving stronger organisations, better evidence and more sustainable pathways of support.

2 Influencing Practice, Policy and Sector Development

Several awardees extended their impact beyond direct service delivery, contributing to wider sector learning and influencing practice.

Together, awardees contributed:

- New research, evidence and recommendations for policy and practice.
- Sector-specific advocacy and education networks.
- Training programmes, resources and tools that can be used beyond the fund.
- New approaches to inclusion, mental health promotion and early intervention.
- Stronger connections between community organisations and mainstream systems.

This work is helping shape conversations and practice across youth mental health, education, sport and community development in Ireland.



What We Learned

The HeadStart Fund provided important lessons about how to effectively support young people's mental health and wellbeing through community-based, prevention-focused approaches.

1 Prevention and Early Intervention Matter

Support before crisis can create better outcomes.

- The HeadStart Fund reinforced the importance of supporting young people before challenges reach crisis point. Programmes that strengthened confidence, resilience, social connection, emotional literacy and help-seeking behaviours demonstrated meaningful outcomes and helped build protective factors for long-term wellbeing.

3 One Size Does Not Fit All

Different young people need different types of support

- One of the strongest findings was that young people benefited from a wide variety of supports. Positive outcomes were achieved through youth work, sport, surfing, mentoring, social prescribing, creative therapies, education programmes, digital learning and specialist therapeutic services. A diverse portfolio can reach young people who may never engage with traditional mental health services.

5 Time Matters

Multiannual funding leads to stronger outcomes.

- Several projects required time to build partnerships, refine delivery models, strengthen infrastructure and develop evidence of impact. The three-year funding period allowed awardees to learn, adapt and grow, leading to stronger performance and outcomes over time.

7 Collaborative Funding Creates Greater Impact

Complex social challenges require collaborative solutions.

- Through The HeadStart Fund, we demonstrated the power of collaboration, bringing together the expertise, resources and perspectives of Rethink Ireland, the Z Zurich Foundation, the HSE and Zurich Ireland to support young people's mental health and wellbeing. The Z Zurich Foundation and Zurich Ireland brought valuable insights and a strong focus on prevention and early intervention, helping to shape a fund that prioritised early support and long-term outcomes for young people. By working together, the collaborators were able to increase investment, support more organisations, reach more young people and strengthen the overall impact of the fund.

2 Relationships are Central to Success

Trusted adults and safe spaces are essential for impact.

- Successful projects were built on strong relationships with young people, families, schools, community organisations and referral partners. Trust, consistency, belonging and supportive adult relationships emerged as critical factors in achieving positive outcomes.

4 Community-Based Supports Increase Access

Young people engage where they feel comfortable.

- Young people engaged most effectively when support was offered in settings they already knew and trusted. Schools, sports clubs, youth organisations, community spaces and creative environments provided accessible entry points for conversations about wellbeing and mental health.

6 Sustainability Starts on Day One

Long-term impact requires more than funding.

- The HeadStart Fund showed that sustainability is about more than securing another grant. Strong partnerships, evidence of impact, organisational capacity, trained staff, reusable resources and clear continuation pathways all contribute to long-term success and lasting impact.



Recommendations

Looking Ahead: Building on the Success of The HeadStart Fund

The HeadStart Fund showed that investing in young people's mental health before crisis point can create meaningful and lasting impact, as evidenced by the evaluation. Future youth mental health investment should continue to:

Retain Multi-Annual Portfolio Investment in Youth Mental Health

Future investment should continue to back a deliberately varied range of support, including wellbeing promotion, prevention, early help and targeted services. Giving organisations time to get established, form partnerships, learn and grow makes their work stronger.

Support Organisations, Not Just Projects

Combine funding with organisational development support, ensuring that essential impact measurement tools are developed from an early stage to generate meaningful evidence of long-term change.

Deepen Youth Participation and Cross-System Connection Throughout the Funding Lifecycle

Continue to create fair and realistic opportunities for young people to shape how the fund is designed and delivered, how services improve, and how learning is evaluated and shared. Bring funded organisations, young people and public services together to share knowledge in a structured way.

Plan for a Lasting Legacy, and Follow Up After Funding Closes

Sustainability planning should consider a range of funding sources, embedding the work within the organisation, partnerships and referral routes, and influencing wider practice. Check in around 12 and/or 24 months after funding ends to see what has continued and what has been achieved by each awardee.

Continue Backing Diverse Approaches

Young people benefit from having multiple ways to access support through the settings and activities they know and trust.

Final Reflection

Through The HeadStart Fund, we demonstrated the impact of collaborative investment, combining funding and expertise to create lasting change for young people, communities and the organisations that support them.



Thank You

As we mark the close of The HeadStart Fund, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to every organisation, supporter and young person who has been part of this journey.

What made this fund so special was the opportunity to support an incredible group of community-based mental health initiatives working with young people across Ireland. From villages and towns to cities across the country, these organisations demonstrated the power of local communities to create positive change through a wide variety of approaches, from surfing and football to hairdressing, advocacy, education and peer support.

One of the greatest privileges of the fund was bringing these organisations together and hearing their voices as a collective. While each worked in different ways and served different communities, they shared a common commitment to helping young people access mental health support early and build stronger, healthier futures.

Through the fund, 10 organisations received support, with €2.05 million invested in cash grants and a further €345,000 in business supports. Together, they directly supported more than 33,000 young people and positively impacted over 116,000 lives, far exceeding the fund's original ambition.

These achievements are a testament to the dedication, innovation and care shown by every organisation involved. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to our funding and collaboration partners, the HSE, the Z Zurich Foundation and Zurich Ireland, whose shared commitment to prevention, early intervention and youth mental health made this fund possible. Their partnership, vision and support helped create opportunities for organisations across Ireland to reach more young people and strengthen communities nationwide.

On behalf of everyone at Rethink Ireland, thank you for helping make The HeadStart Fund such a powerful force for change. While the fund has come to a close, its impact will continue to be felt in communities across Ireland for many years to come.

Deirdre Mortell
CEO
Rethink Ireland



Thank You

When we launched The HeadStart Fund, we recognised that improving youth mental health across Ireland was a challenge too complex for any one organisation to tackle alone. Real and lasting change would require partnership: partners willing to bring together funding, expertise, experience and a shared commitment to young people.

Today, as we reflect on what has been achieved, I am filled with deep gratitude for the remarkable collaboration that made this impact possible. The HeadStart Fund represents the very best of public, private and philanthropic partnership. By bringing together Rethink Ireland, the Z Zurich Foundation, the Health Service Executive (HSE), Zurich Ireland, and the support of the Department of Health, we created a shared platform for innovation, learning and impact. Together, we enabled not-for-profit organisations across Ireland to reach thousands of young people with early intervention and preventative mental health supports.

This collaborative approach reflects the ambition of Ireland's National Philanthropy Policy, which champions strategic partnerships, matched funding and measured impact to ensure social innovation can truly thrive.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Minister Mary Butler for her steadfast support and leadership, and to the Department of Health for its commitment to strengthening youth mental health and supporting social innovation. Their support has helped turn a shared vision into tangible impact for young people across Ireland.

To our partners at the HSE, Zurich Ireland and the Z Zurich Foundation, thank you for your trust, collaboration and belief in the power of prevention and early intervention. To our incredible awardees, thank you for your creativity, resilience and dedication. And to the young people, families, communities and frontline teams who engaged with and shaped this work, thank you for being at the heart of everything we do.

The HeadStart Fund has shown that when we work together, we can achieve far more than any of us could alone. The partnerships forged, the organisations strengthened, and the lives impacted are the true legacy of this fund, and a powerful foundation for the future of youth mental health in Ireland.

Pádraic Vallely

Head of Government and Strategic Partnerships
Rethink Ireland



With Thanks to Our Donors



The impact highlighted in this booklet was made possible through the shared commitment of our donors, awardees, community organisations, and the thousands of young people who participated in The HeadStart Fund across the last three years.

We would also like to thank S3 Solutions for conducting an independent, comprehensive evaluation of the fund, providing valuable insights into its impact, learning, sustainability, and legacy.



The true legacy of The HeadStart Fund is the lasting positive change experienced by young people, combined with empowered organisations, enhanced evidence and tested models that can inform future investment in youth mental health.

The HeadStart Fund 2023–2026

Investing in prevention, early intervention and innovative approaches to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people across Ireland.

Learn More

The HeadStart Fund showed that investing in young people's mental health before crisis point can create meaningful and lasting impact, as evidenced by the evaluation.

Watch Awardee Impact Video

Produced by Social Directions Agency



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