



Review of the Scheme to Support National Organisations

*SOCIAL JUSTICE IRELAND SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT
OF RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, MAY 2018*

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Introduction

Social Justice Ireland is an independent think tank and justice advocacy organisation that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for societies as a whole. We are a recipient of a grant under the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) in support of our work and we welcome the opportunity to make this submission on the future direction of this important scheme.

Current Operation of SSNO

The stated aim of SSNO is *'to provide multi-annual funding towards the **core costs** of national organisations in the community and voluntary sector to assist them to operate and fund core staff positions. SSNO has a primary focus on the provision of core funding to **national organisations** that demonstrate **good governance** and deliver services and supports that have a focus on one or more of the following: addressing **poverty, social exclusion** and promoting **equality**.*¹ The current (2016-2019) funding allocation supports 71 organisations to achieve their goals in support of those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

Strengths

One of the main strengths of the scheme is the opportunity for organisations to frame their projects and programmes in the context of deliverables, outcomes and impacts.

Administration is fundamental to the operation of every organisation, public, private or 'third' sector, yet it can be the most difficult area for which to raise funds. A key strength of the SSNO funding is that it allows organisations who access it, particularly service-provider organisations, to cover administrative and other core costs, thereby ringfencing all or part of their fundraising activity and donations for the provision of services.

For research and advocacy organisations such as *Social Justice Ireland* who do not have 'service users' in the traditional sense, it allows us to provide independent research and develop evidence-based policy publications for use by us in our engagements with policy-makers and stakeholders, by other organisations to support their work and strengthen their advocacy position, and by the general public to become better informed about issues affecting them. Advocacy is a key tenet of a democratic system, it helps to address power imbalances and lends a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. By supporting advocacy organisations through SSNO, the Government sends a strong message that it is open to debating issues of concern to all inhabitants.

The rigour of the application process is both a strength and a weakness. Its strength is that its integrity can be relied upon to ensure that public money is put to good use, while its operation is administratively burdensome on organisations seeking to access it. This is particularly the case for small organisations with few staff.

It would also be remiss not to acknowledge the exceptional support and advice we have received during the funding process from the staff with whom we have engaged.

Weaknesses

It would seem that the application form, reporting templates and funding agreement are structured in such a way to be broadly applicable to the highest number of organisations, irrespective of structure

¹ <https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/SSNO/Pages/default.aspx>

or objectives. This can act as a barrier to small organisations in accessing funding as the terms are disproportionately onerous and would effectively result in the assignment of a resource to maintain. This is counter-productive and contrary to the objectives of the SSNO to support organisations as it only serves to make grantee organisations less effective. Stratifying the application process into small, medium and large organisations, and tailoring the documentation accordingly, would greatly enhance the efficacy of the grant. The terms of the funding agreement, in particular, provides for a significant power imbalance between the grantor and the grantee, contrary to the partnership approach set out in the Vision section (p.15) of the Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland (2015). While accountability is vital, its processes cannot be so encumbering as to undermine the independent and self-governing nature of the grantee organisation and render it less effective.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has absolute discretion in respect of the continuance of funding to an organisation. This is both set out in the 'Contracting' section (2.5, p.5) of the 'Procedures and Reporting Manual' and the funding agreement. This is in addition to the stipulation that funding is contingent on its availability through the annual Departmental budgetary process. This lack of certainty in respect of core funding makes it difficult for organisations to plan work into the future. While availability of funding on the basis of budgetary processes is to be expected, it would be helpful if an exhaustive list of 'events of default' could be set out within the funding contract and Procedures and Reporting Manual to ensure clarity from the grantor and compliance by the grantee.

Resource planning is critical to all organisations, particularly small organisations who rely on a core number of staff to progress its agenda. Most organisational strategic plans cover a three to five-year period, particularly in terms of long-term or ongoing projects. A three-year funding programme inhibits this planning process as organisations cannot rely on the funding (and associated resources) after the end of the funding programme and staff whose posts are funded have no job security. This can result in high staff turnovers for organisations, resulting in a need to provide induction and training for new staff, and redirecting resources away from the objectives of the organisation.

There is also a need for greater clarity in respect of the requirements of the organisation in exchange for the funding and for time to discuss and negotiate the needs of grantee organisations.

Looking to the Future

Opportunities

Social Justice Ireland welcomes the Department's commitment to supporting the development of communities as set out in its Statement of Strategy 2017-2020. The weaknesses identified in respect of the administration of SSNO funding can be viewed in this context as an opportunity to engage more meaningfully with the sector at an organisational level, ensuring that Government funding is properly accounted for and that it is used most effectively by the grantee organisations, with a focus on streamlining administration and reducing time wastage.

With improvements in the Government balance sheet in recent years, there is more room for SSNO to expand to support a greater number of organisations over a longer period. A five year funding commitment would address some of the planning difficulties referred to earlier in this submission, in addition to the transparency in terms of how funding may be retracted.

The funding provided under SSNO has the capacity to foster creativity and innovation within the sector by ensuring security of core supports. This security can also make grantee organisations more attractive to philanthropic organisations willing to support the front-line work and objectives of the

grantee. This is both cost-effective for the State and enables grantee organisations a range of funding streams to support their objectives.

Evaluation of the use of SSNO funding is an important aspect of the overall commitment. An engaging evaluation process, that looks at outcomes and impacts of funded projects and not only on inputs versus outputs, would greatly enhance the planning capacity of the Department in subsequent funding allocations.

The Pobal staff that *Social Justice Ireland* have engaged with in the course of our funding programme have provided invaluable supports. This programme extends beyond funding to supporting the Community and Voluntary sector through mentoring, capacity building and supports collaboration between grantee organisations working together on larger projects, thereby making the best use of available funding.

Threats

Accountability is essential in any contractual relationship, both from the grantor and the grantee, however where accountability only extends to auditability (that is, a focus on where the money was spent and how, rather than the inclusion of the impact this funding has had), rather than the evaluation of outputs and outcomes, a scheme aimed at supporting organisations can instead have the effect of hampering their ability to perform. *Social Justice Ireland* urges the Department to introduce a balanced approach to the applications and oversight processes and procedures where organisations of all sizes are supported to meet their objectives.

The provisions in respect of termination of funding means that grantee organisations are under constant threat that funding will end at any time, even during the funding programme. This inhibits the work of these organisations and presents a difficulty for the sector as a whole.

Conclusion

Supporting community and voluntary organisations through the funding of core costs aligns with the Mission Statement contained in the Department of Rural and Community Development's Statement of Strategy:

To promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland. (p.7)

In furtherance of this Mission Statement, the Department sets out its vision, enumerating five policy areas on which to focus to achieve it:

- Create the conditions to support increased economic opportunities and local employment in all areas.
- Deliver schemes and programmes that support the revitalisation of towns and villages.
- Improve access to services and social networks that ensure a high quality of life.
- Enable communities disadvantaged by location or social issues to reach their full potential now and in the future.
- Support all communities to be able to have a voice in shaping their own futures and addressing their common goals.

Through our work, funded by SSNO, *Social Justice Ireland* has supported each of these areas. We have advocated for change in areas of employment inequality, rural development, poverty and citizen engagement; we have developed partnerships with organisations aligned with the objectives of creating sustainable communities; and we continue to support deliberative

democracy particularly through the Public Participation Networks (PPNs), enabling capacity building through the delivery of competency-based training and facilitating regional networking meetings and influencing policy development at local level.

The SSNO funding is an invaluable support, not only to national organisations but, through our work, to local and regional organisations too. We look forward to its enhancement and continuance in progressing the work of all partner organisations.



Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of individuals and groups throughout Ireland who are committed to working to build a just society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.



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