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Exploring Cork's Agri-food Social Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Final report

Exploring Cork's Agri-food Social Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Final recommendation report, version 1.0, December 2025

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a ten-month mapping exercise of the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork's agri-food sector, conducted by University College Cork and funded through Research Ireland and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. The study combined desk research, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, case studies, and a multi-stakeholder event.

The findings show that Cork's agri-food social entrepreneurial ecosystem can be characterised as nascent but promising. A small and diverse group of social enterprises and community initiatives is active across food production, redistribution, retail, and education. These initiatives demonstrate high levels of community engagement, volunteerism, and innovation, and are supported by a range of local and national support organisations. At the same time, the ecosystem is constrained by fragmented support structures, limited access to appropriate infrastructure, complex regulatory environments, and low levels of public awareness of social entrepreneurship and food system dynamics.

The analysis highlights three key roles played by social enterprises within Cork's agri-food system: addressing social needs and promoting inclusion; driving innovation and supporting sustainable practices; and the emerging potential to provide enabling infrastructure and shared resources. Drawing on these findings, the report proposes four strategic pathways to strengthen the ecosystem: (1) strengthening local networks, (2) signposting and enhancing entrepreneurial supports, (3) informing action and raising awareness, and (4) expanding space and capacity for experimentation.

Together, these pathways aim to improve connectivity, reduce fragmentation, enhance capacity, and create the conditions for socially driven innovation. The report also outlines a long-term vision for the development of a local food hub as a focal point for collaboration, experimentation, and knowledge exchange. Strengthening Cork's social entrepreneurial ecosystem is presented not as a single intervention, but as a cumulative process of aligned actions capable of supporting initiatives that strive for a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable local food system.

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Introduction

Cork has long been recognised as the Food Capital of Ireland, celebrated for its artisan producers, rich culinary culture, and vibrant local food sector. Yet, despite this prominence, a significant number of households in Cork City struggle to access sufficient, nutritious food, increasingly relying on food banks and voluntary supports (Kenny, 2020). This paradox highlights the complexity of the city's food system and underscores the need for coordinated strategic action.

Numerous innovative initiatives are already underway, spanning cross-sector collaboration, community engagement, and entrepreneurial activity. Examples include Cork City Council's efforts to promote the local food sector through knowledge creation and participation in the Horizon Europe project FEAST, the Cork Food Policy Council's (CFPC) work on developing a local food strategy, and community-led initiatives experimenting with local food growing, biodiversity enhancement, food waste reduction, and improved access to healthy and affordable food.

The city is developing a vision for a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable local food system (Cork Food Policy Council, 2024). This vision is developed in the context of an Irish food system that faces multiple challenges at both local and global levels. This including climate change, dependence on fragile international supply chains, rising food prices, food poverty, rising consumption of ultra-processed foods and diet-related health issues (Barnardos, 2023; Steward, 2023; Monteiro et al., 2025). As an example: Ireland's field vegetable production fell by 7% in 2023, while the number of field vegetable growers has declined by 85% over the past 25 years (Teagasc, 2023). Simultaneously, approximately 9% of the population experiences food poverty, and over half of adults are overweight or obese (Barnardos, 2023; FSAI, 2024). These national trends demonstrate the urgency of developing innovative, locally grounded solutions.

Social enterprises hold significant potential to be part of such solutions. By combining economic with social and environmental objectives, they can foster sustainable practices and deliver community-driven solutions tailored to local needs (van Twuijver et al., 2020). With the agri-food sector central to Irish society and the country's largest indigenous exporting sector (DFAM, 2020), integrating social enterprise into this sector offers opportunities to advance a greener, more resilient food system. Across Europe, social enterprises are already contributing to circular solutions, urban agriculture, agri-tech innovation, and regenerative farming practices (RPSO, 2023; Forde, 2023).

This report presents the outcomes of a ten-month mapping exercise of the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork's agri-food sector, conducted by University College Cork (UCC) and funded through Research Ireland and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht under New Foundations 2024 (NF/2024/11368).

The report focuses on the agri-food sector, encompassing production, processing, distribution, and consumption of food, and examines the role of social enterprises in addressing local food system challenges. Strengthening social entrepreneurship in Cork can simultaneously meet social needs, foster innovation, and reinforce the ecosystem of support structures that enable sustainable, community-focused action.

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to examine the current social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork's agri-food sector and identify opportunities to strengthen it. Building on the city's distinctive food culture and existing initiatives, the report outlines four strategic pathways: strengthening local networks, enhancing entrepreneurial supports, informing action and raising awareness, and expanding space and capacity for experimentation. These pathways aim to support social enterprises in addressing social needs, driving innovation, and providing enabling structures for community and entrepreneurial initiatives.

It is important to acknowledge that the social entrepreneurial activity described in this report takes place within the broader context of community-based and civic initiatives, as well as commercial entrepreneurial activities, within the food system. Social entrepreneurship is not a panacea for the complex issues outlined above, but it can make a meaningful contribution in specific areas. In Section 3.3 of this report, we provide a more detailed examination of the areas in which social entrepreneurial activity is currently contributing.

Structure of the Report

The report is structured as follows: section 1 provides the theoretical background for this study and explains the entrepreneurial ecosystem approach. Section 2 provides insight into the methodology used. Section 3 reports on the key findings and section 4 presents recommendations. Section 5 provides conclusions.

1. Social enterprises and social entrepreneurial ecosystems

This section sets out the theoretical background for this study and explains the focus on social enterprises as well as the broader social entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Social Enterprises

In the Irish National Social Enterprise Policy 2024–2027 (Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, 2024, p. 14), a social enterprise is defined as:

“...an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders. It pursues its objectives by trading on an ongoing basis through the provision of goods and/or services, and by reinvesting surpluses fully or primarily into achieving social objectives. It is governed in a fully accountable and transparent manner and is independent of the public sector. If dissolved, it should transfer its assets to another organisation with a similar mission.”

As highlighted in the introduction, social enterprises in the agri-food sector have the potential to address local social needs, foster innovation, and strengthen community-focused food systems. They combine social or environmental objectives with trading activity, enabling them to generate impact while sustaining operations.

In this report, we also use the term *community initiatives* to refer to initiatives that may not formally meet the legal definition of a social enterprise. These initiatives have been included in our research because they contribute to the social entrepreneurial ecosystem by delivering social impact, experimenting with innovative approaches, and addressing local needs. Recognising these initiatives alongside formal social enterprises provides a more complete understanding of the ecosystem in which social entrepreneurship operates.

An ecosystem perspective

For this study, we adopt a social entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective. De Bruin et al. (2023, p. 1089) describe a social entrepreneurial ecosystem as:

“An evolving composite community of varied, yet interdependent, actors across multiple levels, which collectively generates positive externalities that contribute to sustainable solutions to social problems.”

More broadly, a social entrepreneurial ecosystem can be understood as the dynamic constellation of actors, resources, structures, and processes that collectively foster entrepreneurial activity within a specific geographical area (de Bruin et al., 2023; Wurth et al., 2022; Stam & van der Ven, 2021). An ecosystem provides the essential “ingredients” for entrepreneurial activity, such as networks, funding, knowledge, and infrastructure. Cultural and institutional arrangements, through norms, incentives, and regulations, guide how these ingredients are mobilised and combined to produce entrepreneurial outcomes (Stam & van der Ven, 2021). The local configuration of resources and arrangements shapes the type, scale, and impact of enterprises and initiatives, which in turn can reinforce and strengthen the ecosystem, creating a dynamic, evolving system (de Bruin et al., 2023; Stam & van der Ven, 2021). Figure 1 and Table 1 provide an overview of different ecosystem elements considered in this study.

While a social entrepreneurial ecosystem is not centrally managed by a single actor, strategic interventions by public agencies, funders, coordinating organisations and

entrepreneurs can foster a stronger, more resilient ecosystem. Such interventions may include facilitating networks, improving access to funding and infrastructure, supporting knowledge exchange, and creating enabling regulatory environments, all of which enhance the capacity of local actors and catalyse sustainable social entrepreneurial activities.

Diversity is a key feature of a healthy (social) entrepreneurial ecosystem: enterprising activity can take many shapes and forms. While this report focuses particularly on social entrepreneurship and social enterprises, it is important to acknowledge that other forms of entrepreneurship also play a critical role within the agri-food sector and the creation of a sustainable local food system. Community and commercial entrepreneurship complement social enterprises and should be considered alongside them when designing interventions to strengthen the local food system. In this report, we draw attention to the role that social enterprises can play in this, and outline ways to strengthen the ecosystem accordingly.

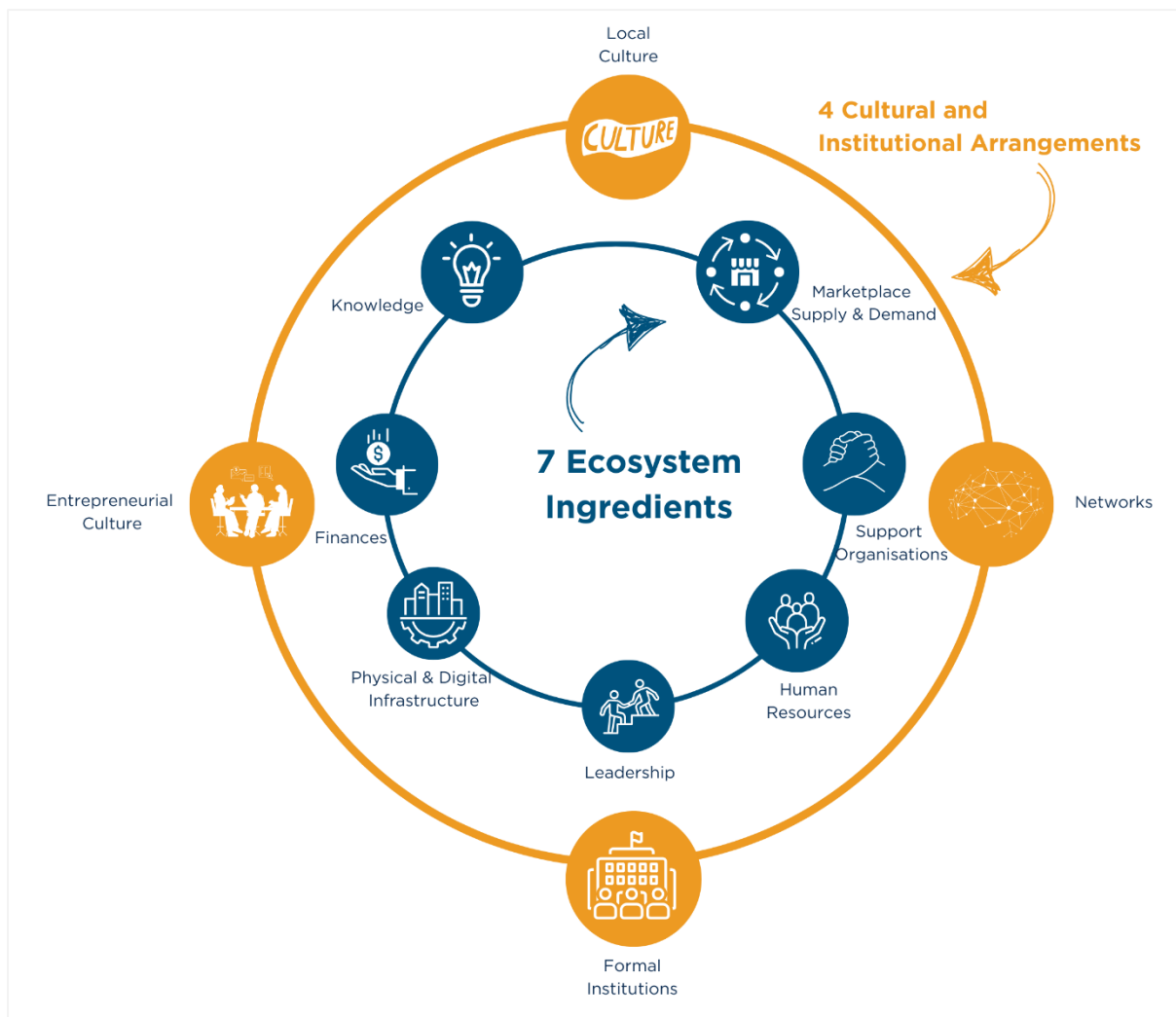


Figure 1: Visualisation of the elements of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, based on Stam & van der Ven (2021)

Category	Definition / Description
<i>Ecosystem ingredients</i>	
Physical and digital infrastructures	The availability of structures and facilities (like modes of transportation, buildings, broadband access) that facilitate proximity, connectivity and ease of interaction between different stakeholders.
Marketplace supply and demand	Receptiveness of marketplace / existing needs.
Support organisations	The range of organisations that can provide support and input for entrepreneurial processes. Includes for example research institutes, incubators and co-creation spaces.
Human resources	The experience, skills, and talents of the local population and those attracted to the area from outside.
Knowledge	Existing knowledge, as well as the development of new knowledge, that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship. This can be supported by the presence of educational institutes and sectoral innovation hubs.
Financial resources	Availability and adequacy of financial resources for entrepreneurs / enterprises.
Leadership	Visionary individuals or collectives that lead out on a shared vision to inspire collective action.
<i>Cultural and institutional arrangements</i>	
Local culture	Values, traditions, sense of place and symbolic meanings held by those living in, working in, and visiting the region.
Entrepreneurial culture	Level to which entrepreneurial behaviour is accepted and supported; place for experimentation and learning; role models; individual vs collective entrepreneurship.
Networks	The presence and density of (formal and informal) networks that facilitate how (new) knowledge, information and ideas can circulate in the community.
Formal institutions	Level of support from government and policies, and the set of rules and regulations that guide local action. Role played by governmental institutions (e.g., facilitating vs prescribing).

Table 1: Elements of a (social) entrepreneurial ecosystem, based on Stam & van der Ven, 2021

2. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to map and analyse the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in the agri-food sector in and around Cork City. The methodology combined desk research, stakeholder engagement through focus groups and interviews, in-depth case studies of social enterprises, and a concluding multi-stakeholder event to validate findings and recommendations. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at University College Cork (approval number 2025-007).

Desk Research

Desk research was conducted to establish the current state of social entrepreneurial initiatives and support structures within the Cork agri-food sector. This involved reviewing a range of official and semi-official sources, including outputs from policy, business, and community organisations, previous research projects, newspapers, and organisational websites. The desk research provided an initial understanding of the ecosystem and informed the design of subsequent data collection phases.

Focus groups, expert interviews and case studies

To complement desk research, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including practitioners, support organisations, and policymakers. The aim was to understand the social entrepreneurial ecosystem from multiple perspectives, identifying both opportunities and barriers for social enterprises operating in the agri-food sector. Participants were selected through existing networks, desk research insights, and snowball sampling.

- **Focus groups:** Two sessions were held, including participants from support organisations and community/social enterprises (total of 8 participants).
- **Interviews:** Interviews were conducted with a total of 11 participants, including representatives from support organisations and social enterprises at different stages of organisational development.
- **Social Enterprise Case Studies:** A total of two case studies were conducted to gain a more in-depth understanding of organisational impact, challenges, and opportunities. Based on desk research Rosehill Community Market Garden and FoodCloud were selected to represent both an emerging as well as an established social enterprise. Each case study included interviews, site visits, and document review.

Participants
Churchfield Community Trust CLG
Cork City Council
Cork County Council
Cork City Partnership
Cork Food Policy Council
Feed Cork
FoodCloud
Former social entrepreneur
Pobal
Rosehill Community Market Garden
Saoirse EHD
Sow Diverse
Quay Coop

Table 2: Overview of organisations represented in focus groups and interviews (in alphabetical order)

Multi-stakeholder event

A multi-stakeholder event was organised to share preliminary findings and draft recommendations with practitioners, policymakers, and academics. Guest speakers included Colm Foley (BIA Innovator Hub) and Nichola Grufferty (Ballyhoura Food Hubs, Ballyhoura Development CLG). The event, held on 30th October 2025, was attended by 25 participants, who provided feedback on the draft recommendations. This feedback has been incorporated into the final recommendations presented in this report.

Limitations and scope

It should be acknowledged that this study involved a selection of social enterprises and support organisations based on participant availability. As such, recommendations are drawn from the lived experiences of research participants involved and might not represent the entire social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork.

3. The social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork

The social entrepreneurial ecosystem within the agri-food sector in Cork City can be characterized as nascent, holding potential for further development. There are ongoing activities and significant strengths that the ecosystem can draw on for such future developments. These include a strong food culture and a long-standing community ethos. At the same time, the ecosystem is shaped by social inequalities, fragmented supports, and structural barriers that affect how social enterprises emerge, operate, and grow. This chapter provides an integrated overview of the landscape in which agri-food social enterprises function, synthesising insights from research participants and the methods outlined in Chapter 2. A more detailed breakdown of findings aligned to the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework (Stam & van der Ven, 2021) is presented in Appendix 1. Throughout the chapter, text boxes are used to illustrate perspectives from research participants through selected quotes and examples.

The chapter begins by outlining the broader landscape in the agri-food sector in Cork and the systemic pressures that influence social entrepreneurial activity. It then characterises the current state of the social entrepreneurial ecosystem, identifying key strengths and constraints, and new opportunities. The final section outlines three interrelated roles social enterprises play within the city's agri-food system. Collectively, these insights provide the foundation for the recommendations that follow in Chapter 4.

3.1 The landscape of social entrepreneurship in Cork City

Cork's reputation as the "Food Capital of Ireland" provides a strong cultural and symbolic foundation for entrepreneurial activity centred on food and agriculture. The city benefits from a diverse network of (entrepreneurial) activities conducted through community organisations, social enterprises, and commercial initiatives.

It must be acknowledged that agri-food entrepreneurs operate within a highly competitive commercial environment. Rising property and energy costs place pressure on small food enterprises, while local producers struggle to compete with globalised supply chains. These dynamics make market entry difficult for small-scale or mission-driven initiatives. Research participants emphasised that the commercialisation of the sector can marginalise socially oriented enterprises unless dedicated supports are in place to help them gain a foothold.

At the same time, systemic issues related to food access and affordability persist across several Cork neighbourhoods. Research participants highlighted the need for solutions to solve these needs.

"There's definitely food poverty here [in the city]. [...] You've got people that are not just on social welfare. You've got people that have jobs that are struggling for one reason or the other." Feed Cork

Overall, the structural conditions under which social enterprises emerge and develop are challenging, yet the motivation to create social impact drives these initiatives to create solutions for needs and issues perceived in the local food system.

3.2 Nascent entrepreneurial ecosystem

Within this broader context, a small but gradually expanding group of social enterprises is emerging within Cork City, contributing to what can be characterised as a nascent agri-food social entrepreneurial ecosystem. A mix of emerging and established social enterprises operates in different areas, including food production (e.g. seed production and horticulture), food retail (e.g. food shops, social cafes and catering) and redistribution of food (e.g. solutions for preventing food waste and a social supermarket).

There is a high level of volunteerism and community engagement. Research participants report that volunteers are a critical resource of particularly nascent social enterprises, as well as part of the business model of some more established social enterprises.

On a local level, there is a range of dedicated (social) entrepreneurial supports available. Key supports in form of funding and training are offered through Cork City Council, Cork City Partnership, and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs). Outside the city boundaries, Cork County Council also plays an important role in this. On a national level, social enterprises report interactions with among others Pobal, Enterprise Ireland, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, HSE, Bord Bia, Teagasc, LEADER organisations, Rethink Ireland and the Wheel. Citizens Advice is also identified as a useful resource, particularly for HR-related issues. One of the social enterprises has hired a private consultancy company to provide a strategic map for the organisation, which helped them to develop current income generating activities.

“There’s a lot of things that are great, like advice wise, it’s very easy to get advice about these things. Cork City Partnership are fantastic, the Local Enterprise Office are really great. Rethink Ireland are fantastic.” Saoirse EHD

Cork also benefits from successful promotional campaigns like *Taste Cork* (county level), events, and festivals such as *Cork on a Fork*. There is ongoing activity, coordinated through the Cork Food Policy Council, to connect stakeholders across the food system.

Moreover, the city can benefit from the presence of several educational institutes, that combined offer a wide range of different educational possibilities, spanning different levels and different topics relevant to the food system. This includes for instance Cork College of FET (with among others degrees in Sustainable Horticulture/Permaculture); MTU (with among others degrees in Agricultural Science, Culinary Leadership, Culinary Entrepreneurship) and UCC (with a Food Industry Training Unit, and among others degrees in Agricultural Science, Artisan Food Enterprises, Food Science, Food Marketing & Entrepreneurship, Food Business and Public Health). Staff and students from these programmes provide a valuable resource to the ecosystem, and have the potential to be driving and supporting (new) social enterprises. There also is a range of practical expertise available from successful (social) enterprises and community initiatives already operating in the local food sector.

Constrains

Despite the strengths mentioned above, the social entrepreneurial environment remains fragmented. Social entrepreneurs often work in isolation, with limited knowledge exchange among peers and few opportunities for collaboration. This challenge is partly driven by the fact that entrepreneurs have limited time to spend on networking. Nevertheless, timely and

efficient mechanisms for sharing updates about activities within the ecosystem could foster cross-fertilization, enhance cooperation, and potentially encourage the sharing of resources.

“It could be something small that actually makes a big difference. If there was a way, or a platform for people to interact, that didn't mean having to take time out a day to go to a meeting in the evening or whatever. Something simple as a WhatsApp group, or something like a notice board or something that people can pull up. There's lots of digital platforms that we could use [...].” Quay Coop

Further fragmentation is experienced in the form of many avenues to receive support. Due to the range of support organisations and diversity in supports available, information on grants, regulations, networks, training or services sits across a wide array of sources, making it difficult and time consuming for new or early-stage initiatives to navigate. Moreover, research participants point out that accessibility to supports could be improved upon, to make sure a diverse group of potential social entrepreneurs can benefit from them.

“There was a call for organisations to get in touch with university researchers, being like, ‘Hey, I've got this problem. Can you, can you research it?’ I think that's an excellent service. But I wonder, how many people know that it exists, and have the capacity to go through all the stages to avail of it. You know, I went to university. I was two years graduated. I was plugged into all of the announcements. So I saw that it was happening, knew who to call, knew what to say, and I got it. But I wonder how much it's been stress-tested for accessibility for people with a wider range of education because, especially agri-food, the education pathways are really, really varied.” Former Social Entrepreneur

Social enterprises that participated in our study have diverse means to access funding. For instance, through the Local Enterprise Office or through national organisations like Social Enterprise Ireland and Rethink Ireland. Some organisations also draw on philanthropic funding. It is noted by social entrepreneurs that the funding and philanthropic landscape are very competitive, in some instances the initial reason that drives initiatives to look for market-based income to realise their activities.

Churchfield Community Trust acknowledges the intensity of the funding application process and the repeated experience of rejection that often accompanies it. To protect organisational health, the organisation deliberately adopted a “gap year” from applying for funding in order to mitigate administrative fatigue and burnout.

Participants noted that existing financial support focuses on projects, making funding for core operating costs, especially staffing, scarce. This is constraining growth and continuity and increasing reliance on volunteers.

“Nobody wants to fund any kind of running costs, [...] they only want to run things that are more attractive, like projects. I think that was one of our biggest barriers and it still is. We just got funding for our new project, but our funding for our staffing for the rest of the organisation runs out next year. [...] We've never had any issue getting project specific funding, but you need somebody to run the projects too.” Saoirse EHD

Another challenge mentioned by research participants is the accessibility of suitable physical infrastructure, in the form of growing spaces (land) or flexible kitchen facilities. Across the ecosystem, establishing enterprises operate from temporary, shared, or improvised spaces, limiting their ability to scale. While existing infrastructure, such as the Cork Incubator Kitchens, offers valuable resources for emerging social entrepreneurs, its impact could be strengthened through enhancements like more flexible rental options tailored to emerging enterprises and additional supports for knowledge development.

Sow Diverse is a social enterprise that grows and sells open pollinated and heirloom seeds. They struggle to get access to permanent land where they can grow their business. They are forced to look outside of the country boundaries at the moment.

Another theme arising from the conversations with research participants is that regulatory and governance structures tend to be geared towards larger commercial food actors, leaving small community-led initiatives struggling with disproportionate administrative burdens. A recurring topic here is the collection and processing of local food waste. Several social entrepreneurial initiatives have either failed in efforts to set up a local composting structure, or currently struggle with finding solutions to this, due to high level of regulative burden that prevents small-scale initiative to develop. Initiatives in terms of a local circular economy have potential here. More information through an example given by Rosehill Community Market Garden can be found in box 3 on page 19.

“One of the challenges of setting up a social enterprise in a city when it comes to agri-food is that regulations are often catered towards large scale organisations rather than small scale organisations. And that is 100% the case in terms of waste management. The regulatory burden is inappropriate if you're a small-scale waste operation, because you definitely won't be taking in enough money to be able to fund the admin supports that you would need to complete this kind of regulatory requirements.” Former social entrepreneur

In terms of public awareness, research participants highlighted two key gaps. First, general awareness of what social entrepreneurship is and what it involves remains relatively low. Increasing public understanding could strengthen local participation, trust, and community support. Second, though there is increasing interest from the general public, food literacy was identified as generally weak. This includes from example limited awareness of seasonal growing cycles, production methods, and the realities of local food systems. Growers

provided practical examples of this disconnect, noting that during summer, when local produce is most abundant, sales can be lowest due to holiday periods.

“At the moment, sales is a bit slow because it's summer and basically there's no one around who buys. All the producers in Ireland have this problem. And that's when we have the most beautiful produce. So, we are thinking of processing and preserving solutions”. Rosehill Community Market Garden.

Opportunities

The themes outlined above also reveal significant opportunities to strengthen the local social entrepreneurial ecosystem in the agri-food sector. Research participants noted a growing demand for local, sustainable, and community-focused food solutions, reflected in rising consumer interest in locally produced food.

There is innovative action going on. This includes, but it not exhaustive to, the development of new approaches to food access, such as the social supermarket currently being developed by Feed Cork, ways to battle food waste developed by Food Cloud and new forms of corporate farming tested out by the community initiative Our Farm at Bushy Park. All of these initiatives test and demonstrate promising models to address a range of needs, and leverage opportunities.

Ongoing efforts to build cross-sectoral collaborations further strengthen this landscape. The Cork Food Policy Council plays a central role as a multi-agency platform connecting diverse food-system stakeholders, while Cork City's involvement in the EU Horizon FEAST project fosters cooperation and innovation at a European scale. Together, these initiatives point to the potential for deeper partnerships across environmental, social, and economic domains, including important themes like water quality, local food waste solutions, and food access and affordability. These developments align well with Cork City's broader strategic priorities, as set out in the City Development Plan, which emphasise sustainability, health, heritage, and biodiversity.

Food is so broad, it's falling in under nobody's jurisdiction, and it's, as a result, falling between the cracks, is what I would argue. So that's why we tried to do that interagency approach and try to keep it on the agenda.” Cork Food Policy Council

There is also scope to explore untapped urban–rural linkages. Cork's fluid boundaries with its surrounding rural areas offer opportunities to position the city as a hub connecting local growers, makers, consumers, and knowledge institutions. Enhanced integration between urban and rural food networks could unlock new possibilities for sustainable agricultural production, local enterprise development, and strengthened community resilience. Locally operating social enterprises like FoodCloud (see box 3 on page 17), and community initiatives like Our Farm at Bushy Park are already actively building and leveraging these connections.

“I really think that Cork has an opportunity to do something really bold and innovative and different. And I think these cooperative style farms would be one example. Another thing [would be...] setting up a system where more young people, who don't have access to land but would like to try being a grower, would have access to farms or land around the city.” Our Farm at Bushy Park

In Chapter 4, an overview of recommendations based on the above analysis will be presented. Before that, however, the next section examines the roles that social enterprises currently play, and could potentially play, within Cork's agri-food system. This provides a deeper understanding of the forms of social entrepreneurship that are, and could be, supported through the social entrepreneurial ecosystem. It offers an additional basis for reflecting on the direction and focus of the recommendations that follow.

3.3 The roles of social enterprises in Cork's agri-food ecosystem

At present, social enterprises in Cork fulfil two interrelated roles within the agri-food landscape: that of addressing social needs and promoting inclusion, and that of driving innovation and supporting sustainable practices. These roles highlight the diversity of missions, organisational models, and capacities across the city. This is not a clear-cut distinction, as some social enterprises operate across both roles. An example of this is FoodCloud (see box 2 on page 17). However, it shows how social entrepreneurial activity can be used to solve different needs from different target groups within the city. A third potential role for social entrepreneurship has also been identified: that of providing enabling (infra)structures. Together, these forms of social entrepreneurship illustrate the multifaceted contributions that social enterprises (can) make to social, environmental, and economic development within the agri-food sector.

Addressing social needs and promoting inclusion

This group of social enterprises focuses on meeting concrete social needs related to food access, affordability, and wellbeing. These organisations address issues such as unequal access to healthy food, limited food literacy, and social isolation. They deliver community meals, operate food redistribution services, provide training in cooking and nutrition, and use gardens, kitchens, or food activities as platforms for inclusion and empowerment. Their work strengthens community resilience and helps reduce barriers experienced by under-resourced households.

Driving innovation and supporting sustainable practice

Another segment of the ecosystem is characterised by innovation, enterprises developing new agricultural practices, exploring biodiversity-enhancing methods, experimenting with circular or regenerative models, or pioneering new products and processes. These organisations act as catalysts for change, helping to push Cork's food system toward sustainability. Their activities span urban growing, small-scale production, and experimentation with alternative business models. In general, these organisations are focused on a different target segment than the social enterprises working to address social needs.

Providing enabling structures and infrastructure

Next to the two areas of activity above, there lies potential to extend the role of social entrepreneurship in providing enabling (infra)structure for other (social) enterprises to benefit from. Such social enterprises could be focused on offering an enabling environment for community initiatives, early-stage entrepreneurs, and small producers. These organisations, like incubators, shared kitchens, or food hubs, provide essential infrastructure, training, knowledge-building and logistical support. They serve as neutral spaces where social, commercial, and community actors can collaborate. Within Cork, Benchspace Cork fulfils this role in the creative and design industry (see box 1). In section 4.5, a further elaboration is provided on what this type of structure could look like in the agri-food sector in Cork.

When considering the implementation of the recommendations below, it is important to reflect on the specific types of social entrepreneurship they are intended to support. This helps ensure that the recommendations are appropriately tailored and ultimately more effective.

Benchspace Cork: a social enterprise supporting the creative industries

Benchspace Cork is a not-for-profit social enterprise and creative hub that supports makers, artists, and creative startups through affordable workspace, access to industry-grade equipment, and business development opportunities. Operating with a voluntary board and a membership model, the hub provides open access to workshops, mentoring, and community events.

The hub offers shared professional workshops and machinery for woodwork, metalwork, and digital fabrication, alongside modular open-plan studios, creating an inclusive space for makers of all levels. Partnerships with local and national organisations enable programming such as Open Making sessions and maker scholarships. Benchspace fosters a collaborative environment where makers, educators, startups, and SMEs can exchange ideas, access skills-based education, and participate in workshops, enterprise programmes, fellowships, and public engagement events. For more information, see: <https://benchspacecork.ie/>

Box 1: Benchspace Cork

FoodCloud: strengthening networks, innovation, and capacity in the food ecosystem

FoodCloud is a non-profit social enterprise founded in 2013 to address food loss and waste (FLW) and food insecurity through the redistribution of surplus food. Working across the food system, FoodCloud connects retailers, producers, and distributors with charity partners and community organisations, enabling coordinated and system-wide action that delivers both social and environmental impact.

Digital and physical infrastructure for food rescue at scale

FoodCloud's food rescue platform, Foodiverse, provides the digital infrastructure that underpins large-scale surplus food redistribution. The platform connects food businesses across the supply chain directly with local community and voluntary groups and is currently operational in five countries: Ireland, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Kenya. More than 5,600 retail outlets and food businesses use Foodiverse, including all major grocery retailers in Ireland (Aldi, B&M, Dunnes Stores, Lidl, Musgrave Group, and Tesco), alongside major food service companies such as Nando's and KFC, as well as food banks internationally.

In 2024, FoodCloud redistributed an average of 1.4 million meals per week through the Foodiverse platform. By facilitating real-time matching of surplus food with community need, Foodiverse supports food banks and community partners to increase food access and expand the number of people they serve. At the same time, it enables food businesses to reduce FLW and to demonstrate progress towards climate and ESG targets.

Next to the digital platform, FoodCloud operates physical hubs in Dublin, Cork, and Galway, which collect and redistribute large volumes of surplus food generated across the food supply chain. FoodCloud currently receives regular donations from 185 food and beverage companies, allowing the organisation to respond flexibly to both large-scale and localised surplus.

Across both core solutions FoodCloud tracks food rescue metrics including total donations, kilograms of food saved, equivalent meals redistributed, estimated tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions avoided, and social impact over time (for example, number and type of community groups supported) so that food partners can measure the environmental and social impact of avoiding FLW through their partnership with FoodCloud. This supports accountability, learning, and reporting at organisational and policy levels.

Strengthening local food system networks

FoodCloud plays a key convening role within local food systems, strengthening connections between food businesses, community organisations, and support services while responding to place-based needs. Since 2013, the Cork Hub alone has redistributed 3,833 tonnes of surplus food to 250 charities, working with 25 regular donors in the local area. Through these activities, FoodCloud fosters collaboration, knowledge sharing and network building.

FoodCloud builds connections across the food system while responding to local needs for accessible surplus food. Since 2013, the Cork Hub alone has redistributed 3,833 tonnes of surplus food to 250 charities working with 25 regular donors in the local area. FoodCloud fosters collaboration, knowledge sharing and stronger networks. FoodCloud also cooperates with international networks such as GFN (Global Foodbanking Network) and FEBA (The European FoodBanks Association).

Academic partnerships and capacity-building research

FoodCloud is actively engaged in collaborative research and capacity-building initiatives with third-level institutions, contributing practice-based insights to food systems research and supporting the translation of research into societal impact. In addition to the *Thrive Together* programme, which was focused on empowering communities through foodsharing and climate action, key collaborations include:

CULTIVATE - University of Dublin, Trinity College (TUD)

CULTIVATE uses a multi-actor approach to build sustainability and resilience in urban and peri-urban areas through a ground-breaking online social innovation support platform – The Food Sharing Compass. Built with (and for) five key stakeholder groups: food sharing initiatives, policy makers, food supply actors, researchers and citizens. *[continues on next page]*

The platform will make it possible to navigate diverse food sharing landscapes and cultures in order to understand, develop, replicate, expand and strengthen sustainable food sharing in Europe, supporting the European Green Deal's Action Plan, Food Vision 2030, the Farm to Fork Strategy and the EU's climate change ambitions.

FRED – Munster Technological University (MTU) and University College Dublin (UCD)

The Food Resource Efficiency Decision Support Hub (FRED) is funded under the Future Food Systems Challenge by Research Ireland. FRED uses an entire supply chain stakeholder approach, as well as computational modelling, to better understand the food supply chain and the real local impact that solutions can have on our future food systems. FoodCloud acts as the project's societal impact champion, supporting implementation and dissemination of research outputs for the benefit of communities, industry, and policymakers.

FoodCloud is also actively engaged in EU-funded multi-stakeholder platforms, including ROSETTA and CIBUS. Across these initiatives, FoodCloud contributes expertise on FLW, facilitates connections between researchers and industry or community partners, and supports the translation of research findings into actionable insights shared with its wider food systems network.

Rosie Fuller, Account Manager, at FoodCloud's Cork Hub explains why continuous capacity building is a key activity of FoodCloud's future: *'In this constantly changing environment, it's important that we continue to listen to our stakeholders and find innovative new ways to generate greater environmental and social impact in Ireland and around the world'.*

Continued experimentation

FoodCloud is constantly developing as an organisation through experimental initiatives that capture more surplus, such as the FoodCloud Kitchen and the Growers' Project. FoodCloud Kitchen converts surplus food into nutritious, ready-to-eat meals that are distributed to community organisations and social services. The Growers' Project works with farmers and growers to rescue surplus and unmarketable 'Grade 2' produce at farm level and redistribute it to communities in need. Together, these initiatives demonstrate FoodCloud's commitment to innovation and systemic change in the food system. They provide hands-on learning, test new redistribution models, and integrate digital technology to streamline coordination, reporting, and knowledge sharing. By addressing local needs and harnessing innovative approaches, FoodCloud exemplifies how social enterprises can strengthen networks, foster learning, and catalyse innovation that address both community needs and global challenges. For more information, see <https://food.cloud/>

Box 3: FoodCloud (continued)

Rosehill Community Market Garden (RCMG): growing a social entrepreneurial model

The RCMG is a one-acre pilot site operating as a Test Incubator Site within Cork City. The initiative is currently supported by funding from the EU Horizon project FEAST, a project that promotes healthier and more sustainable food systems across Europe.

The garden functions as a market garden test site, where growing methods are trialled and practical solutions developed that could inform other small-scale growers. It is managed by a three-person team, all trained permaculture designers, including a chef working with a local Cork restaurant. His culinary expertise guides crop selection to create a varied menu for local restaurants while avoiding competition with existing local producers. The initiative has just completed its first growing season. However, due to issues with the local water supply, it has not yet been able to sell its produce.

The project works closely with local initiatives, like local community gardens to exchange knowledge, and the local Men's Shed on practical, hands-on projects on site. It also trials different collaboration models with local restaurants, cafés, and growers to test short food supply chains in practice.

Availability and affordability of land

Rosehill Community Market Garden is currently operating on a plot of land leased from a supportive individual. This arrangement provides the group with an informal opportunity to test and develop their working model. Ideally, the garden would move to a long-term location, which would enable the installation of more permanent infrastructure and allow for growth. However, securing a long-term location is challenging, both in terms of availability and affordability of land.

Finding the right legal model

The initiative aims to establish a social enterprise model that combines social impact with a viable income for growers. The team faces challenges in identifying a legal structure that enables equitable relationships between growers, buyers, and end consumers within the current regulatory framework.

Challenges in developing circular resources

A key operational challenge for the garden is compost production. The site does not generate enough green waste to meet its composting needs, and purchasing the required compost is estimated to cost €15,000 annually. The garden's preferred model would be to collect green waste from the restaurants it supplies to. This would not only cut the costs for the garden but also create a local circular nutrient loop. However, the costs of compliance of current regulatory requirements are beyond the initiative's capacity. The initiative would benefit from small-scale testing, but there is currently no local room for manoeuvre. As Sandrine Bertin, one of the founders, explains: *Compost is an essential material. And we need to be able to produce it ourselves, because it also falls into our waste prevention as well as, climate action, carbon action. So it ticks a lot of boxes and there's no reason why a local authority should not be incentivized to help with this.*

Overall, the Rosehill Community Market Garden demonstrates the importance of small-scale experimentation in strengthening the local food system, while also drawing attention to some of the practical and regulatory challenges that must be overcome to realise this.

Box 3: Rosehill Community Market Garden

4. Recommendations:

Based on the analysis of the current social entrepreneurial ecosystem in the agri-food sector presented in chapter 3, we have distinguished four pathways to strengthen the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork. These four pathways are the following: (1) Strengthen local networks; (2) Signpost and enhance entrepreneurial supports; (3) Inform action and raise awareness; (4) Expand space and capacity for experimentation. Below, each of these four pathways will be explained in more detail and actionable recommendations are provided. This overview reflects ideas emerging from the research and is not exhaustive; additional ongoing initiatives may also be relevant and could be built upon in alignment with these pathways.

4.1 Strengthen local networks

As highlighted in chapter 3, there is a range of active organisations, initiatives, and (informal) networks that contribute to local connectivity. Community gardens and volunteering structures illustrate strong grassroots engagement. There are local support organisations present, and a range of networking events is organised on an ad hoc basis. Cork Food Policy Council is coordinating stakeholder cooperation across different stakeholders. These existing elements provide a solid foundation on which stronger and more coherent networks can be built.

Identified needs / gaps

Despite these existing strengths, social entrepreneurs report they operate in isolation, with limited time or opportunity to engage in peer learning or collaboration. Knowledge about who is doing what, and where potential synergies lie, is not systematically shared. Information on activities, events, and supports is spread across multiple sources, making it difficult for emerging initiatives to stay connected. Entrepreneurial energy often remains siloed within individual organisations. Strengthening and better coordinating local networks is therefore essential to improve visibility, encourage cooperation, and support the emergence of new social entrepreneurial activity in the agri-food sector.

Potential paths for strengthening local networks

To address these needs, several pathways could be pursued. Together, these measures can help create a more connected, vibrant, and supportive ecosystem for agri-food social entrepreneurship in Cork.

Foster peer networking and mutual support

- Peer networking and mutual support can be strengthened by facilitating informal communication channels, such as WhatsApp groups or online forums, to connect social entrepreneurs and food actors.
- A jointly curated digital newsletter, coordinated by local agencies and community groups, could consolidate information on support, events, funding opportunities, and inspiring examples from both local and international contexts.
- Continued provision of small grants or logistical support for peer-to-peer networking events, field visits, and showcase sessions would further encourage diverse participation and exchange.
- Develop a shared, regularly updated overview of social enterprises, community initiatives, and food-related activities operating across Cork. A consolidated map of who is active, where, and on what themes would help identify synergies, reduce duplication,

and make collaboration easier. Existing resources, such as the database of Local Food Producers currently being developed by Talamh Beo, could be leveraged to support this effort (see box 4 for more information)

Strengthen knowledge sharing and entrepreneurial spirit

- Showcase local success stories by continuing to spotlight social enterprise achievements through festivals, markets, and public events, such as *Cork on a Fork*, to increase visibility, celebrate innovation, and normalise social entrepreneurial activity within the agri-food sector.
- Enable inspiration through partnerships by collaborating with local stakeholders, including existing social and commercial entrepreneurs, community organisations, and educational institutes, to host workshops, talks, and peer exchanges with national and international practitioners. Such interactions can help broaden horizons, strengthen confidence, and introduce new models of practice.
- Facilitate cross-sectoral learning by organising learning events that bring together actors from food, creative industries, design, and the circular economy. These encounters can stimulate new collaborations, foster experimentation, and spread practices that may not yet be common within the agri-food space.
- Encourage initiatives that bring together a diverse range of community members, residents, local producers, volunteers, and social entrepreneurs, to co-create solutions, share knowledge, and identify local needs. This could include community forums, participatory workshops, or neighbourhood-based food networks that complement enterprise-focused networking and ensure that ecosystem development reflects the perspectives and priorities of the broader community.

Talamh Beo: a local producer database

Talamh Beo is an Irish grassroots organisation that aims to create a better food system in Ireland. One of the initiatives they are working on, is the creation of a local producer database. This database will help to create insight on a local and national level about growers and producers of local food in Ireland. For more information on their local producer database see <https://talamhbeo.ie/producer/>.

Box 4: Talamh Beo

4.2 Signpost and enhance entrepreneurial supports

Both on a national and local level, there is a range of supports available for community initiatives and social enterprises. Chapter 3 outlines these in more detail. Yet, (aspiring) social entrepreneurs feel the supports are fragmented. Signposting current supports and enhancing supports in strategic areas will improve access to, and relevance of, supports.

Identified needs / gaps

Many (aspiring) social entrepreneurs struggle to navigate the current landscape of supports, as information is fragmented, spread across multiple agencies, and can be confusing. Entrepreneurs report that choosing appropriate legal and funding models is difficult, and accessing the right advice and skills is time-consuming. Awareness of diverse business models, such as cooperatives, also remains low among both support organisations and entrepreneurs, reducing opportunities for innovation. Moreover, the bureaucracy and governance requirements involved in becoming a formal enterprise can discourage participation, especially among grassroots or community-led initiatives.

In terms of the financial supports offered, research participants mention that supports for core operating costs, especially staffing, are limited. This is restricting growth and continuity, while increasing reliance on volunteers.

Potential paths for enhanced entrepreneurial supports

Increase visibility and accessibility of supports

- Develop a centralised digital signposting platform or directory that consolidates information on funding, training, mentoring, and regulatory guidance relevant to local social enterprises and aspiring social entrepreneurs. Partner with local support organisations to keep this information up to date.
- Produce or disseminate clear, user-friendly explainer materials (like videos, toolkits, FAQs) to help (aspiring) social entrepreneurs navigate grants, legal models (CLG, cooperative, charity), and compliance processes. It is recommended to draw on existing material where they exist.¹
- Run awareness campaigns through local networks, community centres, and social media to promote available supports, increasing uptake by early-stage and grassroots initiatives.

Address gaps in support

- Explore pilot funding mechanisms to offset core operating costs such as (part-time) staffing, insurance, or premises rental.
- Develop or integrate funding mechanisms for capacity-building supports, such as financial literacy, HR management, or legal setup, potentially by expanding existing grant programmes to include consultant support for key areas.
- Promote training and peer learning on alternative legal models (CLG, cooperatives, charities) to improve governance and accountability.
- Collaborate with regional and national agencies to design local funding schemes that address specific local needs, such as food access challenges.

¹ For instance: Rethink Ireland has developed Legal Structures Guide for Social Enterprises in Ireland. See: <https://rethinkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Social-Enterprise-Legal-Form-Guide.pdf>

- Given that food is a highly competitive market, social entrepreneurial initiatives would benefit from protected 'niche-space' for non-profit driven activities, like non-profit oriented selling spaces (e.g. social supermarkets or city owned stores)
- Facilitate field visits and (international) exchanges to expose Cork-based entrepreneurs to diverse business models and innovative practices from other localities.

Learning from abroad: inspiring local solutions

Local initiatives already demonstrate the value of learning from elsewhere. *Feed Cork* drew inspiration for its social supermarket by visiting several other social supermarkets, including the UK-based Coventry Food Bank Social Supermarket. Similarly, *Our Farm at Bushy Park* emerged after exploring the Heerenboeren community-supported farming model in the Netherlands and adapting its key principles to the Irish context. These examples highlight how exposure to external practices can spark innovation and strengthen local entrepreneurial capacity.

Box 5: Learning from abroad

4.3 Inform action and raise awareness

There are already a number of successful social enterprises operating in the city, showing that social entrepreneurship can offer effective responses to community needs. However, overall awareness of social enterprise as a model for social action remains limited, both among potential entrepreneurs and the wider public. This lack of visibility affects the pipeline of new initiatives and the legitimacy of existing ones.

Innovation is beginning to emerge in key areas such as food access, for example, through the development of social supermarkets. These early initiatives provide valuable learning opportunities that could inform wider replication or adaptation across other areas of need. There is also evidence of growing multi-sectoral collaboration, such as efforts to link food initiatives with health-related objectives. These connections are promising and can be developed on further.

Identified needs / gaps

Social entrepreneurs consistently report low levels of public understanding of what social enterprises are and what they do. This lack of general awareness restricts community engagement, limits potential partnerships, and may discourage potential entrepreneurs from entering the space.

Research participants note that some communities in the city continue to face unequal access to healthy, affordable food due to geographic, economic, and social barriers. Food literacy, encompassing knowledge about healthy, affordable, and sustainable eating, is also reported to vary widely across demographic groups. Ongoing work by organisations such as the Cork Food Policy Council is contributing to a better understanding of the city's food environment and the barriers residents face in accessing healthy, affordable food. Continued efforts to build this evidence base will be important for informing targeted action and ensuring that future interventions respond effectively to identified needs.

Potential paths to inform action and raise awareness

Build an evidence base for targeted action

- Identify priority action zones related to food poverty, food access, and affordability; additional data collection may be required to support this.
- Integrate this evidence into existing city planning and social inclusion strategies (e.g. the Cork City Development Plan) to ensure it informs future development and stimulates multi-sectoral collaboration.
- Use the findings to guide local funding calls and social enterprise pilots. For example, around a shared or pooled transport scheme in areas with a large distance to supermarkets, social or city-owned supermarkets, pay-what-you-can cafés, or cooperative buying schemes. Cooperation can be sought with local and national support organisations to realise this.
- Promote community-based food literacy initiatives such as seasonal food guides, cooking workshops, and food preservation sessions.

Raise Community awareness of social entrepreneurship

- Provide a platform to showcase local initiatives and social entrepreneurial actions, for example, through a (digital) newsletter, a recurring feature in a local newspaper or an online directory that shows social enterprises active in the agricultural and food sector.²
- Raise awareness of social enterprises and their community impact through targeted campaigns, local media features, and inclusion in city (and county) events. This aligns closely with the goals of *Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024–2027*, helping to inspire new entrepreneurs and build wider public recognition of social enterprise. Initiatives developed in light of this national policy might hold valuable lessons for Cork³.
- Public procurement can be a powerful mechanism to raise awareness of, and create opportunities for, social enterprises through local purchasing decisions. The proposed *Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021*, currently before Dáil Éireann, may provide useful tools to promote the systematic inclusion of social considerations within procurement processes, thereby strengthening demand for socially oriented agri-food enterprises.

Social Enterprise Dublin: a social enterprise directory

Social Enterprise Dublin is a collaborative initiative involving seven local development companies that deliver coordinated training and mentoring supports to social enterprises across the Dublin region. In addition, the partnership undertakes activities to raise public awareness of the social enterprise sector. One practical outcome of this work is the development of a publicly accessible Social Enterprise Directory, which provides an overview of social enterprises operating in the Dublin area and supports greater visibility and connectivity across the ecosystem. This directory is available via <https://socialenterprisedublin.ie/social-enterprise-directory/>.

Box 6: Social Enterprise Dublin

² Taste Cork already offers a directory of local food producers and retailers on a county level that might be levered in light of this recommendation. For more information see: <https://www.tastecork.ie/food-producers>

³ The bid for World Gastronomical Capital in 2030 would also provide an opportunity to showcase Cork City and Council based social enterprises in the agri-food sector.

4.4 Expand space and capacity for experimentation

Innovative ideas are emerging within Cork's social entrepreneurial and food ecosystems, but they do not always find avenues to come to fruition. Barriers such as regulatory requirements, insurance limitations, and a lack of accessible infrastructure prevent small-scale initiatives from testing or scaling new approaches. Urban-rural linkages are currently underutilized, suggesting potential to better connect city-based initiatives with regional resources and align with the priorities outlined in the Cork City Development Plan 2022–2028.

Identified needs / gaps

Social enterprises and small-scale food projects frequently lack the space, infrastructure, and resources needed to pilot new ideas or expand operations. Current regulatory and insurance frameworks are primarily designed for large commercial enterprises, creating barriers to experimentation for smaller initiatives. Research participants highlighted the need for a 'sandbox', a dedicated space for collaboration, applied experimentation, training, and knowledge sharing across the ecosystem.

Potential paths to expand space and capacity for experimentation

Stimulate innovative practices

- Create and advocate for “right-sized” regulatory frameworks that enable experimentation, including adapting insurance and land-use regulations to support small-scale projects.
- Promote proportionate compliance measures to facilitate low-risk experimentation, for example in local small-scale composting.
- Explore pilot funding mechanisms ‘without strings attached’, that allow for small scale experimentation (and failure without consequences).
- Promote cross-sectoral and international learning events to increase exposure to diverse business models and practices, stimulate collaboration, and accelerate the diffusion of innovative practices within the ecosystem (also mentioned under pathway 1 and 2).
- Connect sector-specific and entrepreneurial knowledge by building partnerships that link expertise in food and agriculture with social and business entrepreneurship knowledge. By connecting technical sector knowledge with enterprise skills, social entrepreneurs can gain the guidance needed to innovate, scale, and address practical challenges in the agri-food sector.

Provide access to infrastructure

- Investigate regulatory, financial, and practical barriers to activating underused urban and peri-urban land and buildings and develop incentive schemes to support their transformation into productive, experimental spaces for agri-food social entrepreneurship.
- Offer flexible facilities for low-risk testing, such as pop-up retail spaces, shared kitchens, or co-working spaces, tailored to the needs of emerging social enterprises. Existing infrastructure, such as the Cork Incubator Kitchens, can be drawn on to realise this. Ongoing dialogue with emerging social enterprises is needed to understand evolving needs as the enterprise develops.

TAST'in FIVES: flexible infrastructure for food innovation

TAST'in FIVES in Lille, France, transformed a former derelict industrial site into a multifunctional hub supporting social inclusion, food-system innovation, and small-scale food entrepreneurship. The project combined a community kitchen, a professional kitchen for incubating new food ventures, an urban farm for training and demonstration, and a food hall for social dining and local producers.

A temporary prototype, L'Avant-Goût, allowed the initiative to test demand, usage patterns, governance, and user needs before committing to a permanent site. This 'sandbox' approach enabled experimentation with minimal upfront investment. For more information, see <https://urbact.eu/good-practices/tastin-fives>.

Box 7: TAST'in FIVES

4.5 Strengthening the ecosystem: towards a long-term vision

An overarching idea emerging from the research is the potential development of a dedicated local food hub as a long-term vision for Cork's agri-food social entrepreneurial ecosystem. Such a hub could serve as a focal point where people, ideas, and resources converge to collaborate, experiment, and prototype solutions.

In the longer term, a hub could combine physical infrastructure (e.g., growing spaces, co-working areas, shared kitchens, or demonstration sites) with digital assets (e.g., directories, mentoring platforms, and knowledge-sharing tools) to centralise resources, reduce fragmentation, and support a coordinated ecosystem. It could be designed as a shared space for community groups, social enterprises, and commercial entrepreneurs, enabling both recreational and professional use. Its governance could follow a social enterprise model, reflecting the role of social enterprises in providing enabling structures and infrastructure for a broad range of users, as described in section 3.3 of this report. The form of such a hub could vary, from a centralized, purpose-built facility to a network of shared facilities and demonstration sites, drawing inspiration from examples such as the BIA Innovator Campus (see box 8) and the Ballyhoura Food Hubs (see box 9).

It is important to recognise that a dedicated food hub would be a resource-intensive and ambitious undertaking, requiring coordination and commitment from multiple stakeholders. Existing infrastructure and initiatives provide a foundation on which such a long-term vision could build, and Cork is well positioned to explore these possibilities given the active involvement of local and regional authorities, knowledge institutions, civil society organisations, and established social enterprises.

Crucially, realising such a hub would depend on first strengthening the broader ecosystem and aligning cooperation across stakeholders, as highlighted in the recommendations made earlier in this chapter. Building a more connected city-wide, or regional ecosystem, by fostering stronger networks, cross-sector collaboration, and shared learning, could itself be a major achievement, with the hub emerging as a natural next step of a resilient, well-coordinated system.

A practical first step could be to build on and improve existing infrastructure in line with earlier recommendations. A subsequent step could involve conducting a detailed needs analysis to assess demand for a hub, whether in the form of a multi-stakeholder innovation lab, an incubator space, or a food system learning network that supports applied experimentation and knowledge sharing. Such an analysis could involve cooperation between Cork City Council and Cork County Council and draw on learnings from initiatives such as the BIA Innovator Campus and the Ballyhoura Food Hubs. Many of the recommendations outlined earlier in this chapter can be seen as incremental and foundational steps toward this broader vision. Importantly, they remain valuable in their own right for strengthening Cork's social entrepreneurial ecosystem, regardless of whether a formal hub is ultimately realised. The idea of a hub reflects the appetite among

stakeholders to further develop this area and provides a longer-term vision that the ecosystem can work toward.

The BIA Innovator Campus: a food hub in action.

The BIA Innovator Campus in Athenry (Co. Galway) provides a versatile range of facilities to support different types of users, including pay-per-use units, 60 m² starter units, and 240 m² growth units, alongside an onsite knowledge and training centre. The campus offers practical and technical supports designed to build food-specific skills and foster a connected community of entrepreneurs, funders, and support organisations.

Supports include maintenance of machinery, guidance from dedicated staff on using production facilities, and, in collaboration with Teagasc, assistance across all technical and practical aspects of food production. This covers, among others, new product development, Food Safety and HACCP compliance, process flow and production optimisation, ingredient knowledge, packaging, shelf-life advice, labelling, and nutritional information. Hands-on support is also available for operating and maintaining onsite equipment and machinery.

The hub works closely with the Local Enterprise Office, which provides complementary business support services. Together, these resources create an integrated environment for innovation, experimentation, and enterprise development in the agri-food sector.

The BIA Innovator Campus operates as a social enterprise. Its support can be availed of by both social and commercial enterprises. For more information see <https://biainnovatorcampus.ie/>

Box 8: BIA Innovator Campus

Ballyhoura Food Hubs: a regional and multi-sectoral approach.

The Ballyhoura Food Hubs aim to empower local food entrepreneurship and strengthen the regional agri-food ecosystem. Across the Ballyhoura region of East Limerick and North Cork, a range of HSE-approved community kitchens and demonstration kitchens is available. The region also hosts two Food Innovation Centres, Moorepark Food Research Centre and Food Quest Innovation Centre in Bruree, as well as two purpose-built food enterprise units in Mitchelstown (Co. Cork) and Hospital (Co. Limerick) providing food-grade production facilities. An online portal showcases these spaces and enables easy booking, supporting accessible and coordinated use of regional infrastructure.

The community-led local development company, Ballyhoura Development CLG, coordinates this multi-agency approach. Operating as a social enterprise, Ballyhoura Development integrates food into its broader programmes, including initiatives focused on economic development and sustainable tourism, demonstrating how food enterprise can intersect with multiple sectors and local development priorities. For more information, see <https://www.ballyhourafoodhubs.ie/>.

Box 9: Ballyhoura Food Hubs

5. Conclusion

This report set out to examine the current state of the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Cork's agri-food sector and to identify practical opportunities to strengthen it. The findings demonstrate that Cork already possesses many of the foundational elements required for a strong ecosystem, including a rich food culture, active community networks, committed practitioners, a range of support organisations, and a growing number of innovative social enterprises.

However, the ecosystem remains at an early stage of development. Fragmentation of supports, limited access to infrastructure, regulatory barriers, and low public awareness reduce the capacity of social enterprises to emerge, collaborate, and scale their impact. Social entrepreneurial activity currently relies heavily on individual efforts, volunteer labour and project-based funding, creating vulnerabilities in terms of organisational sustainability and long-term planning.

Despite these constraints, the study finds strong evidence of momentum and opportunity. Social enterprises and community initiatives are already addressing food poverty, promoting inclusion, reducing waste, enhancing biodiversity, and experimenting with more sustainable production and distribution models. Cross-sectoral platforms such as the Cork Food Policy Council and participation in European initiatives such as FEAST provide a foundation for more coordinated and strategic action.

The four strategic pathways outlined in this report offer a coherent framework for strengthening the ecosystem over time. By improving network connectivity, simplifying access to support, raising awareness, and expanding opportunities for experimentation, Cork can further develop an environment in which social enterprises can thrive. The long-term vision of a local food hub illustrates the potential to consolidate and amplify these efforts, while recognising that meaningful progress will depend on incremental, collaborative steps across multiple stakeholders.

Ultimately, social entrepreneurship is not a standalone solution to the complex challenges facing Cork's food system. However, when embedded within a supportive ecosystem that connects community, enterprise, policy, and education, it can make a substantial and lasting contribution to building a fairer, healthier, and more resilient local food system.

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Appendix 1: Summary of analysis of ecosystem elements

Ecosystem Ingredients	Description
Physical and digital infrastructure	Social enterprises in Cork identify physical infrastructure as a key limiting factor in their development. Access to certified kitchens, food production spaces, and secure growing areas is uneven, and suitability varies depending on the stage of enterprise development. Long-term access to affordable and appropriate land is a particular challenge for food-producing enterprises, especially for those without access to private transport. Retail businesses in the city centre face additional challenges, including limited parking, safety concerns, and uncertainty about future urban development plans. Throughout the ecosystem, a number of entrepreneurs rely on temporary, shared, or improvised spaces, which constrains their ability to scale operations. Existing infrastructure, such as the Cork Incubator Kitchens, provides valuable opportunities for growth, but further improvements, including for instance more flexible renting options tailored to developing enterprises and knowledge building supports, would enhance its utility. Digital infrastructure is currently underutilized. Some social enterprises, such as FoodCloud, successfully leverage digital platforms to connect with stakeholders. At the ecosystem level, there is significant potential for digital solutions to support networking, knowledge sharing, and the dissemination of inspiring examples across the city.
Marketplace / Demand	Participants identify growing opportunities in local, sustainable, and community-focused food. Market outlets include farmers' markets, local shops, and community events, with initiatives such as <i>Cork on a Fork</i> supporting local market development. Despite these opportunities, social enterprises highlight the challenge of carving out a market share in an increasingly competitive food environment. For food producers, the seasonal nature of agriculture poses additional challenges in designing year-round business models. Local market opportunities span diverse segments, from high-end, locally produced food appealing to environmentally and health-conscious consumers, to addressing food poverty in underserved communities. Connections with the agricultural hinterland of Cork City seem to be limited. Strengthening links between commercial and social enterprises could help build a more integrated local food system. Participants also emphasize the need to address food poverty, noting that certain communities in the city face unequal access to healthy, affordable food due to geographic, economic, and social barriers. Some innovation in the area of food access, such as social supermarkets, is already underway, and learning from these initiatives

	could support successful replication and scaling throughout the city. Ongoing work of the Cork Food Policy Council hones in on needs related to food access and the wider food environment in the city, and can provide input for targeted action in this area.
Support Organisations / intermediaries	Support organisations are essential for social enterprises to navigate entrepreneurial paths, providing guidance on accessing funding, building entrepreneurial skills, and creating opportunities for networking. Bureaucracy and governance requirements involved in becoming a formal enterprise can discourage participation, particularly among grassroots or community-led initiatives. Support organisations play a key role in navigating such challenges. Overall, support seems best developed for profit-minded social enterprises, who can avail of funding and mentorship through national funding programmes (e.g. through Social Entrepreneurs Ireland) or retail initiatives like SuperValu's Food Academy Programme. Navigating these supports requires that (aspiring) social entrepreneurs have the right contacts. On a local level, there is a range of supports available, both for profit-minded social enterprises, as well as community-focused initiatives. (Aspiring) social entrepreneurs indicate that supports are fragmented and challenging to navigate. There is a lot of information available, but finding the exact information or advice they need is time consuming. A particular area in which social enterprises would like additional support is around awareness creation of what social enterprises are; in order to create more legitimacy in the eyes of (potential) customers and the general public. Furthermore, social enterprises require support in addressing structural challenges, such as heavy regulatory requirements, which can limit opportunities to pilot new ideas and initiatives. A particular area of attention here are opportunities for local compost production.
Human Resources	Cork benefits from a diverse pool of talent, supported by a range of educational institutions and services related to agriculture, food production, food science, and food retail. The city's diverse population, including immigrants and individuals with varied educational pathways, offers additional skills and perspectives. Combined, the educational institutes present in (close proximity to) the city offer a wide range of different educational possibilities, spanning different levels and different topics relevant to the food system. This includes for instance Cork College of FET (e.g. degrees in Sustainable Horticulture/Permaculture); MTU (e.g. degrees in Agricultural Science, Culinary Leadership, Culinary Entrepreneurship) and UCC (e.g. a Food Industry Training Unit and degrees in Agricultural Science, Artisan Food Enterprises, Food Science, Food Marketing & Entrepreneurship, Food Business & Innovation and Public Health). Students from these programmes provide a valuable resource to the ecosystem.

	There also is a range of practical expertise available from successful (social) enterprises and community initiatives already operating in the local food sector. There is a high level of engagement from volunteers in community initiatives and start-up social enterprises, reflecting a strong culture of volunteerism and community focus that social enterprises can leverage. Social enterprises acknowledge challenges in attracting and retaining talent, as making a full-time living in horticulture or the local food business is often difficult, especially in a competitive environment.
Knowledge	Within the theme of knowledge, several subthemes emerge as critical for social enterprises in Cork. (Aspiring) social entrepreneurs report needing a diverse range of skills, including accounting, financial literacy, food safety, digital marketing, and governance. Accessing the right knowledge at the right time can be challenging. While support organisations are familiar with key organisational types (e.g., CLGs or charities), other avenues for social entrepreneurial activities, such as cooperatives, remain underexplored. Knowledge within the sector is also often siloed, for example, farmers may have very specific expertise in one type of food production. This limits opportunities for cross-fertilisation and innovation. Beyond organisational knowledge, there is a need to raise public awareness in three key areas: (i) social enterprises in general, to build legitimacy with potential customers; (ii) food production cycles, so consumers better understand seasonal patterns in supply and sales; and (iii) healthy eating and cooking skills, to support efforts addressing food poverty and related health issues.
Financial resources	Financial resources for social enterprises in Cork are available at multiple levels, including small-scale local funding, national programmes, and EU funding. Common challenges in accessing these funds include a lack of knowledge or expertise on how to apply, organisational structures that are not aligned with funding requirements, and the highly competitive nature of both funding calls and the broader fundraising landscape. Most funding is project- or capital based, making it difficult for (aspiring) social enterprises to build a sustainable long-term organisational structure that does not rely heavily on volunteers. There is recognition of the benefits of funding without restrictive conditions, which can stimulate innovation and experimentation—for example, small-scale seed or innovation grants.
Leadership	There are several successful social enterprises in Cork that serve as important sources of inspiration and motivation for others. Efforts to raise awareness and profile local leaders are underway, for example, through nominations for national social enterprise awards, but

	participants note that there remains significant room to expand this visibility. Increasing exposure for innovative local initiatives, both within Cork and through national platforms, could help strengthen leadership recognition and inspire broader engagement. While formal leadership structures exist, for example through the City and County Council as well as the Food Policy Council, there is scope to increase cooperation, and foster stronger vision-building across policy sectors to connect important themes like food, health, the environment and the economy into practical action.
Ecosystem Arrangements	Description
Local Culture	Participants expressed pride in Cork’s identity as the “Food Capital of Ireland.” At the same time, there is widespread acknowledgment of the persistent reality of food poverty in several parts of the city, as well as broader social challenges faced by many communities. This coexistence of a celebrated food culture alongside unequal access to healthy, affordable food highlights a key tension within the local food landscape. Some participants also noted cultural perceptions that may act as barriers to engagement in food-related initiatives. In particular, the idea of “growing your own food” can still carry a stigma for some, being associated with poverty or hardship rather than sustainability, autonomy, or community-building.
Entrepreneurial culture	Participants noted the presence of entrepreneurial individuals within Cork’s food and social enterprise landscape, yet this energy remains concentrated at the level of the individual and has not yet translated into a broader entrepreneurial culture. Strengthening this culture would require creating more space for knowledge sharing, experimentation and low-risk piloting. Several enterprises look abroad for inspiration, through field visits and international contacts. Within the farming community in particular, participants described limited room for entrepreneurial activity, noting that it is generally conservative and slow to adopt new models or practices. Increased exposure to national and local initiatives can further spark entrepreneurial thinking, while pilot schemes, supported either locally or nationally, can provide structured opportunities for experimentation. In certain areas of activity, strong cultural values of community play a central role. These values often help mobilise volunteers and collective action, yet they can also generate tensions when community-oriented cultures encounter the business-oriented expectations involved in running or scaling social enterprises. Because diversity is a cornerstone of a resilient ecosystem, maintaining a diversity of language and support structures within the social entrepreneurial space is essential. Doing so will enable a wide range of entrepreneurial — and often community-driven — activities to emerge and thrive.

Networks	Participants highlighted that Cork’s local peer-to-peer networks for social enterprises and food initiatives remain limited. One notable exception is the community garden sector, which has developed an active and cohesive network. In contrast, many other organisations rely primarily on once-off networking events or seminars offered by support organisations, which, while useful, do not always translate into ongoing relationships or collaborative learning. Networking also presents a practical time trade-off. For busy organisations, opportunities must be low in time investment and clearly relevant to their work in order to be worthwhile. At the same time, participants emphasised that in efforts to address social issues, it is essential that people directly affected are meaningfully involved in conversations and network-building efforts. Dynamics of cooperation and competition also shape Cork’s social enterprise landscape. Organisations often navigate questions around how much knowledge, experience, or innovation to share, particularly when they operate in overlapping areas of activity. Finally, while local peer-to-peer connections remain underdeveloped, many support organisations are well linked into national networks—such as the ILDN—which provide access to broader learning opportunities, resources, and policy engagement.
Formal institutions	Participants noted that the policy and regulatory environment plays a significant role in shaping the possibilities for food-related and social enterprise activity in Cork. At the international level, EU regulations strongly influence the financing of farming and food production, setting the broader conditions within which local actors operate. At the national level, several gaps and barriers were identified. Participants highlighted a perceived lack of policy focus on horticulture and small-scale growing, despite its relevance for food security, community development, and sustainability. Regulation was frequently described as unsupportive or poorly adapted to small-scale, community-led initiatives. Waste-management and food-safety regulations, designed with large-scale operators in mind, create administrative burdens that small social enterprises struggle to meet. This limits experimentation in areas such as composting, food waste redistribution, or bio digestion. There was strong agreement that “right-sized” regulations—proportionate to the scale and risk of community-level activities—would significantly enhance innovation. The tension between public provision and increasing privatisation also surfaced, particularly in relation to food waste management and the potential role of publicly supported initiatives to support access to food, like social supermarkets. Some participants expressed concern that essential activities, such as waste collection, redistribution, or

	affordable food provision, are increasingly shaped by market logics rather than public-interest priorities. Overall, the regulatory and policy landscape is seen as both a constraint and an opportunity: while current frameworks can hinder small-scale experimentation, better alignment and appropriately scaled regulations could unlock significant potential for community-driven, sustainable food initiatives across the city. Moreover, the need for policy cohesion on a local level was highlighted, aligning policies in areas such as development, biodiversity, heritage, health, and any emerging food policy, to make use of arising opportunities.
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