

A €1.6 million fund for social enterprises

The founder of Irish Men's Sheds now manages a €1.6 million fund for social enterprises. Here we talk to John Evoy about social innovation and how to access funding.

It's not every day that you get an opportunity, to meet someone, which in current times has had such a positive and powerful impact, upon the social fabric of Ireland. Well-known social enterprise advocate, John Evoy is, without doubt, such a person. He recalls his time with the Men's Sheds Association and how he now plans to bring the benefits of this hands-on experience, into an exciting new role - as social development manager with the Social Innovation Fund of Ireland (SIFI).

Over 420 Men's Sheds on the island of Ireland

I come from a farming background in Co. Wexford; where I worked on the family dairy farm until my late twenties. A significant career change beckoned, and I began to focus on the area of community development, working successfully over some years with local groups, such as New Ross Community Development Project and the Co. Wexford VEC (WWETB). During that time, I had heard about and met an impressive group called the 'Men's Sheds Movement' in Australia. It was an organisation which appeared to be serving and answering a tremendous unmet need, for men in that country. Similarly, many men here in Ireland were also struggling - some of it due to the economic crisis, along with a myriad of other issues.

One thing led to another, and in 2011, I set up the Irish Men's Sheds Association with the help of hundreds of people around the country. The Men's Sheds Movement has gone from strength to strength, and there are now over 420 Men's Sheds on the island of Ireland - with over 12,000 men attending each week. Then, having stepped away from the Irish Men's Sheds Association in 2015, I went on to work on some projects including the International Men's Sheds Organisation and social farming within the Southeast of Ireland.

I recently started a new role with the Social Innovation Fund of Ireland (SIFI) as their Social Enterprise Development Manager. During my time with the Irish Men's Sheds Association, I got unbelievable support from numerous people and organisations, without which the Men Sheds Movement - would not be, where it is today. When the possibility of working with the SIFI arose, it was an opportunity I just didn't want to miss - as I would have a role in helping support other social innovations, to grow their impact across Ireland.

What is the Social Innovation Fund of Ireland?

It's the venture capital fund of the social innovation sector. It was set up in 2013 by the Irish Government to find and back innovative solutions to critical social issues in Ireland. We work to build the Ireland we all want to live and work in. We support innovations that enable healthy, resilient communities and tackle issues like educational disadvantage and exclusion. We do this in partnership with others. With social enterprises, charities, non-profits, and voluntary organisations – they develop the innovative solutions. With private companies and charitable trusts – they co-fund the ideas, and we match their funds. We thereby back social innovators to help sustain them, scale them and maximise their impact.

Every euro that is donated to private philanthropy is then also matched by a euro from the Department of Rural Affairs and Community Development. Our mission is to provide growth capital and supports to the best social innovations in Ireland, enabling them to scale and maximise their impact - and our vision is to create the world's best ecosystem for supporting social innovation.

Alone, Foodcloud and Pieta House

So far SIFI has raised over €5 million in funds and has made 32 investments in social innovations such as Alone, Foodcloud and Pieta House. These investments are made, following open calls for suitable projects, targeted at specific issues such as health, education or resilient communities.

In business, it is common knowledge that backing innovation requires two key elements: the right amount of funds, structured in the right way, at the right time combined with skills that focus on growth. SIFI recognises that it takes a different skillset to grow innovation than it does to invent and develop it. Therefore, we provide a funding model that includes mentoring and support, as well as supports which are specifically targeted towards growth. As SIFI's social enterprise development manager, my core objective is to manage a brand new fund, called the 'Social Enterprise Development Fund'.

What is the Social Enterprise Development fund?

[The Social Enterprise Development Fund](#) is a €1.6 million fund which will be delivered over two years; 2018-2020. The fund was created by Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI) in partnership with Local Authorities Ireland and funded by IPB Insurance and the Department of Rural and Community Development. (IPB) Insurance is an Irish owned general insurance company which protects and supports their local authority members, and their communities across the length and breadth of Ireland.

The objective of the fund is to find and back social enterprises that add to the social and economic fabric of their community and secondly that want to grow. The fund will provide critical support to

the most innovative and impactful social enterprises across Ireland, helping them to increase their social impact, increase their traded income, create more jobs and develop long-term, effective and sustainable solutions. The fund will be open for applications from the 17th of January until the 27th of March, and full details of the application criteria and the process can be found [here](#).

Accelerator programme

Up to eight social enterprises will receive a cash grant of €50,000. The awardees will come from a mix of urban town and rural settings. Awardees will also receive a place on SIFI's Accelerator Programme - designed to help social enterprises grow their impact around Ireland. By joining the programme, organisations will also gain access to a peer network of the best social enterprises in Ireland.

Global comparisons

Current international comparisons show that Ireland's social enterprise sector, ranks at 43rd of 45 of the world's largest economies, for social entrepreneurship and social enterprise development. A report from Thomson Reuters Foundation also ranks Ireland behind most of the top world economies on supports and access to markets. I am very grateful to SIFI and IPB to have the opportunity to work on this fund as it will both directly aid the growth of sixteen social enterprises – as well as significantly contribute to an improvement in the ecosystem for developing social enterprises within Ireland.

Pictured main image are (l-r) Michael Garvey, CEO of IPB Insurance; John Evoy, social enterprise development fund manager (for Social Innovation Fund Ireland); Deirdre Mortell, CEO, Social

Innovation Fund Ireland; Paul Reid, chief executive for Fingal County Council; Minister of State for Community Development, Natural Resources and Digital Development, Seán Kyne; George Jones, chairman of IPB Insurance. Pictured above are John Evoy and Deirdre Mortell.

Article by Brendan Byrne.

Mobility Mojo is an Irish startup on the rise. It has been called the ‘TripAdvisor for people with reduced mobility’. Read [more](#).