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**RETHINK
IRELAND**

Our
Social
Innovation
Fund

A Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds

**EVIDENCE FOR EMBEDDING SUSTAINABLE
WELLBEING APPROACHES INTO THE PRACTICE
AND POLICY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND
YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH PROVISION**

APRIL, 2025

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About Rethink Ireland

Rethink Ireland's vision is a more just, equal and sustainable Ireland. It achieves this by supporting the most innovative non-profit organisations working in communities across the country. Rethink Ireland provides cash grants and business supports to grow and maximise the impact of the best social innovations. Rethink Ireland works in partnership with Government and companies, foundations, trusts and individuals committed to tackling pressing issues in Ireland, predominantly in the fields of education, health, social enterprise, equality, and green transition. Funds raised by Rethink Ireland are matched by the Government from the Dormant Accounts Fund.

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About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Service Executive (HSE). With a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology, the mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services and practices that improve the lives of children, youth and families through research, education and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support, Youth Development and Educational Inequality.

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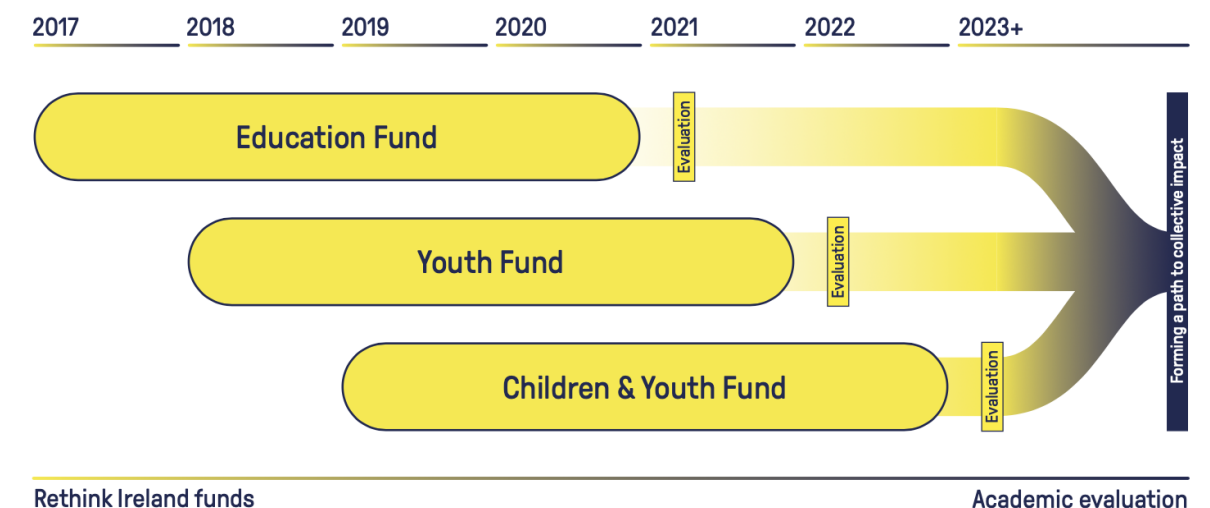
Voicing the Problem

1.1 Introduction

Despite the introduction of several targeted government policies in Ireland, some young people still experience either educational inequality and/or the need for support with their mental health. To address these needs, Rethink Ireland introduced three new Funds that ran between 2017-2022. These were known as the *Education Fund*, the *Youth Funds* and the *Children and Youth Funds*. The Funds provided growth capital and business supports to a total of 39 Awardee Projects, who deemed themselves to have the potential to address these two persistent social issues innovatively. Awardees were invited to participate in an academic and independent evaluation, conducted by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) at the University of Galway. Of the 39 Awardee projects starting, 24 of them participated in the evaluation process (See Appendix 1 for more details on the distribution by Fund). For each Fund, a *Final Fund-Level Evaluation Report* and an accompanying *Executive Summary* were produced¹, and each of the participating 24 Awardee Projects also received an *Individualised² Social Return on Investment Report*, detailing the social value created by their Project.

One of Rethink Ireland's primary end goals when establishing these three Funds and associated academic evaluations, was to support the creation of a raft of social impact data that could inform the development of smart public policy and inspire public leadership (See Figure 1.1). Therefore, this document known as a *Composite Report*, brings together the macro learning from the overall programme of work.

Figure 1.1 – Pathway for Collective Action



¹ These outputs can be found at <https://rethinkireland.ie/reports/>

² At the start, the Evaluation Team agreed with Rethink Ireland and Awardees that the return on investment scores for each Awardee would not be published but instead a cumulative fund-level figure would be used in the respective evaluation reports. This was to avoid unfair comparisons as no two projects are the same. Each Awardee then received a report detailing their own SROI score which they could decide how to share publicly.

1.2 Mini-Executive Summary

Before progressing to the detail of the work in subsequent sections, here we offer a mini-executive summary of the Composite findings, emerging from the evaluation of Rethink Ireland's *Education Fund, Youth Fund and Children and Youth Funds*.

Why did Rethink Ireland fund this Research?

In creating these three funds, delivered between 2017 and 2022 (each for three years on average), which provided growth capital and business supports to 39 awardee projects, Rethink Ireland wanted to explore the extent to which innovative responses already exist that address educational and mental health inequalities for young people in Ireland. Why?

- In terms of what our current formal education system does, we know that it does not cater appropriately for every child, with 8% on average of those who start post-primary school in first year never completing their Leaving Certificate.
- School completion rates in schools serving areas of acute economic disadvantage³ are statistically and significantly lower than in schools serving more affluent populations.
- We know that young people's mental health and well-being significantly influence their sense of self, quality of life, and engagement with peers, teachers and others in societal engagement.
- We also know that adolescence is a critical period of development, with 50% of mental health issues emerging by age 14 and 75% by age 25, emphasising the need for early intervention.

The end goal for Rethink Ireland was for the research to identify projects that can serve '*as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education and/or improving mental health outcomes for young people*'. They wanted to generate evidence that could inform public policy and practice and in doing so, address Rethink Ireland's manifesto, which states "*We measure our economy's success based on the equality we achieve, and the physical and mental health of our people and environment*".

How was this Research conducted?

The final evaluation framework for projects on these funds was co-designed between the evaluation team, the 24 awardees participating in the study and Rethink Ireland. It combined best practices from evaluation theory with practical learning.

While a mixed methods evaluation methodology was used, a Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach was the most significant element. SROI is an internationally accredited framework, used because it allowed us to:

- a. Identify the social outcomes most valued by programme participants, as well as document the actions carried out by awardee projects to achieve these outcomes.
- b. Assign a monetary value to these outcomes and calculate two figures: 1) the total social value created across projects, and 2) the total return on investment for Rethink Ireland and the awardee projects themselves.

³ There are many other factors associated with experiencing educational inequality, such as parental education levels, prevalence of a mental health issue, disability, geographical location, etc.

What did the research find out?

Key Finding 1: The social outcomes that were most valued by participants – The SROI approach helped participants reflect on and identify what they regarded as the most valuable social outcomes they had achieved because of participating in one of the projects funded. A total of 29 common outcomes emerged from the three funds, ranging from better self-confidence to a more positive future outlook. These outcomes were then condensed into 16 categories, deemed central to the well-being of participants.

Key Finding 2: The total social value⁴ created and the return on investment – Using the information about the social outcomes, the evaluation team was able to calculate the total social value and the return on investment. The total social value generated from the three funds was €145m, amounting to a social return on investment ratio of 1:8 (as the total investment in the projects was €18m). This means that for every Euro of investment made, there was €8 of social value created for participants.

Key Finding 3: The practices, processes and actions used by awardee projects to support participants in achieving these outcomes – By listening to the participants and key stakeholders in each Awardee Project, it was possible to document and identify the key practices and processes used by Awardees to enable their participants to achieve these outcomes. It is the first time we have this kind of data on this scale in Ireland (i.e. number of projects, length of study, collation of data into macro level).

Key Finding 4: An evidence-based model for improving educational and mental health outcomes Combining this data with existing theory and policy, we introduce a new evidence-based model, which argues that we can improve educational and mental health outcomes for young people, and ultimately their overall well-being, *when specific practices, processes and supports are used*. Knowing how participant wellbeing can be generated by awardees feeds directly into *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-Being Framework (2023)*⁵.

Key Finding 5: A new understanding of alternative education – In 2022, the Department of Education published its first-ever formal review of alternative education and referred to such provision as '*out-of-school education provision*'. The Review acknowledges the role of 'out-of-school provisions' in supporting the educational and personal development of students who cannot cope with the demands of mainstream schools (Department of Education 2022, 15) and defines this form of provision.

In conducting the research for Rethink Ireland, the research team mapped the awardee projects in relation to the mainstream education system, by the location of the *recipient* and *provider*. This positionality of alternative educational supports in Ireland challenges the Department of Education's definition and current understanding of alternative education.

⁴ Based on Social Value International's guidance, **social value** refers to the broader benefits and impacts of an activity or project, on stakeholders and society beyond financial metrics. These include **economic, social, and environmental** outcomes that contribute to well-being, quality of life, and sustainable development.

⁵ See <https://assets.gov.ie/260026/1dc8a216-7cd7-412a-87d3-10dcf0310789.pdf>

1.3 Layout of this Composite Report

The remainder of this Composite Report consists of four sections, set out as follows:

- **Section 2, ‘Conceptualising the Problem’** summarises the pertinent literature on educational inequality, alternative education, and youth mental health.
- **Section 3, ‘Responding to the Problem’** explores Rethink Ireland and why it introduced the three Funds, with a short description of each Fund being offered. The aim, objectives, and design of the Evaluation Framework are also presented.
- **Section 4, ‘Exploring the Impact of the Three Funds through Cross-Cutting Themes’** creates a framework through which to explore the key findings of the work.
- **Section 5**, brings the report to a close offering a new evidence-based model for *Embedding Sustainable Wellbeing Approaches into the Practice and Policy of Alternative Education and Youth Mental Health Provision*, which also has relevance for all education and health-related activities that involve children and young people.

02

Conceptualising the Problem

2.1 – Introduction

The driving force behind Rethink Ireland’s introduction of these three Funds was finding innovative solutions to two persistent social problems, *educational inequality and poor mental health for our young people*, and to further explore the interconnection between both. Both areas have been examined in detail in each of the three final evaluation reports. Nevertheless, this section provides context by highlighting some core points.

2.2 Educational Inequality and Alternative Education in Ireland

Despite the Government’s commitment to inclusive and equitable education, educational inequality perseveres in the Irish education system (Cahill, 2020). While Ireland has a high post-primary school completion rate, with 92.3% of students completing the Senior Cycle in 2018 and 2019 (DES, 2020), school completion rates in schools serving areas of acute economic disadvantage⁶ are statistically and significantly lower than in schools serving more affluent populations (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019). Despite the introduction of significant policy measures to overcome educational inequalities (i.e., the DEIS Programme; curricular interventions such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme; and schemes such as HEAR and DARE⁷), socioeconomic background remains the core determining factor of educational and social inequality (Cahill, 2020). While there are recognised positive changes in connection with the DEIS Programme, there is still an identified gap in educational outcomes between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Even though the gap in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has almost halved since 2001, there is still a clear difference in retention rates. This was 9.3% for the 2013 cohort (DEIS, 2020). As pointed out by O’Sullivan (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019), there is a recognised improvement in the areas of literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools. O’Sullivan (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019) recommended a more prescriptive approach to the delivery of activities to DEIS students, including academic support, mentoring and college awareness activities to reduce differences in educational outcomes. Other actions, such as supporting students’ well-being⁸ and changing their attitudes, building their aspirations, and paying attention to school climate, should be introduced to narrow the attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

On average, 8% of students who start in the first year of post-primary education do not complete their Senior Cycle. For many, they avail of ‘*alternative education*’ with the Youthreach Programme being the largest state-provided response to ‘second chance’ or alternative education. Recognising that other Alternative Education Provisions (AEP) existed but that there was a lack of systematic information on it, Rethink Ireland’s focus was to find and evaluate innovative interventions taking place across the country that were filling gaps.

Except for Youthreach, alternative education as a concept was not explicitly defined or acknowledged by the Irish education system up until recently. The Department of Education published its first-ever formal review of alternative education in October 2022 and referred to such provision as ‘*out-of-school education provision*’. The Review⁹ acknowledges the role of ‘out-of-school provisions’ in supporting the educational and personal development of students who cannot cope with the demands of mainstream schools (Department of Education, 2022).

6 There are many other factors associated with experiencing educational inequality, such as parental education levels, prevalence of a mental health issue, disability, geographical location, etc.

7 HEAR stands for Higher Education Access Route and DARE stands for Disability Access Route to Education.

8 The Department of Education published the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023) to support schools and centres for education in the area of wellbeing.

9 This Report will be referred to as The Review for the rest of this report.

The Review defines an out-of-school¹⁰ service as: ‘*a provision of education, outside of the mainstream school setting, for children who have become disengaged from mainstream education*’ (ibid: 9). The Review focuses on those services which cater for students aged 15 or under who have been disengaged or might be at risk of becoming disengaged from mainstream education. It is recognised as the last option within the Irish education system for a small cohort of students when all other supports and pathways have proved to be unsuccessful in keeping students engaged in mainstream schools. The Review highlights 23 projects providing out-of-school education, delivered through education centres and schools in residential centres and special care centres, Line projects, Life Centres and other learning programmes for early school leavers. However, there are other alternative education providers, such as ALFA and XLC projects which provide alternative education to students and their families, which the Department of Education does not recognise.

This Review points out that the alternative education sector is not properly recognised nor physically and geographically mapped out and understood by the Department of Education, and so, remains vulnerable in terms of funding and sustainability. Due to a lack of recognition and formal inspection of the sector, the individual settings often provide a different education curriculum, certification and range of education pathways. The Review also highlighted the unstructured nature of the sector with a mix of governance approaches (Department of Education 2022, 11). The recommendation was made to standardise the structure; the settings should meet criteria in the areas of education provision, level of teaching, referral process and overall governance. The review also recommended that the settings complying with this set of criteria should be eligible for state funding, which would help to secure their sustainability.

Using data from the evaluation of Rethink Ireland’s Education Fund, Kovacic & Forkan (2023), the two lead authors from this research and evaluation team, published a paper in response to the Review. The paper aims to build upon and expand the typology describing out-of-school alternative education provision as developed by the Review, to further explore the meaning of alternative education in Ireland. The authors propose a tentative typology of alternative education based on three clusters of Awardee projects. Three critical criteria, positionality toward the mainstream schools, learners’ age, and focus of projects’ work, were used to distinguish between the clusters, identified as (a) life-long learning/social inclusion programmes, (b) curriculum reform/diverse pathways to adulthood programmes, and (c) alternative centres of education/ based outside the mainstream schools. We show how alternative education providers offer a much broader range of programmes, operating both inside and outside of the mainstream schools, use innovative approaches to teaching and learning, support the overall well-being of students and tackle structural inequality within education in Ireland.

To offer a concrete expanded conceptualisation of alternative education in Ireland, we now argue for this definition of alternative education in Ireland (ibid; 19):

Alternative education constitutes educational projects addressing diverse issues connected to educational inequality and diversity (i.e. socio-economic, mental health and intellectual disability), operating inside and outside of the mainstream education system, supporting students’ life-long learning through innovative formal and informal teaching approaches.

10 The history of out-of-school education provision in Ireland started in the 1970s with the establishment of the Youth Encounter Project (YEP) schools. Today, out-of-school education providers have expanded, particularly to urban parts of Ireland with some areas of the country, such as West and Northwest of Ireland, lacking such services.

2.3 Youth Mental Health in Ireland

Mental Health can mean a variety of things for different people (Headstrong, 2011). Mental health is complex as it is influenced by a variety of factors from personality and individual behaviours to structural adversity such as poverty and homelessness (Rochford *et al.*, 2018). Positive mental health is crucial for normal growth and development, engaging with the environment and building positive relationships (Rochford *et al.*, 2018). Mental health issues can lead to experiencing isolation, stigma, substance abuse, eating disorders, self-harm, school dropout, delinquency and impact negatively on educational and long-term employment (Rochford *et al.*, 2018). The World Health Organisation defines mental health as:

“...a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.

(WHO, 2019)

Concerning the focus on *youth mental health*, we know that young people’s mental health and well-being significantly influence their self-perception, quality of life, and societal engagement. We also know that adolescence is a critical period of development, with 50% of mental disorders emerging by age 14 and 75% by age 25, underscoring the need for early intervention. Results from the largest study conducted on the mental health of young people in Ireland, *My World Survey 2* (2019) conducted by University College Dublin’s School of Psychology and Jigsaw, was based on a study of 19,000 young people aged 12-25. The key findings which we summarise below, underscore the evolving challenges in youth mental health in Ireland and highlight the importance of supportive relationships, healthy lifestyles, and targeted interventions for vulnerable groups.

- **Increased Mental Health Challenges:** Since the first survey in 2012, there has been a notable rise in anxiety and depression among young people.
- **Decline in Protective Factors:** Protective factors such as self-esteem, optimism, and resilience have decreased over time, with females particularly affected.
- **Vulnerable Groups:** Young people from seldom-heard groups, including those attending Youthreach or Colleges of Further Education, exhibit heightened anxiety and increased suicide attempts compared to their peers.
- **Impact of Lifestyle Factors:** Good sleep and hygiene and regular physical activity are associated with better mental health outcomes. Conversely, spending more than three hours online daily correlates with higher levels of depression and anxiety, as well as lower body esteem.
- **Role of Supportive Relationships:** The presence of a supportive adult, termed ‘One Good Adult®’, is linked to better mental health indicators among young people.

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study¹¹, a comprehensive longitudinal research project, has provided valuable insights into the mental health of Irish young people across various developmental stages. The study highlights that while many Irish young people navigate adolescence and early adulthood without major mental health issues, a significant proportion face challenges. Persistent socio-emotional difficulties from childhood, socioeconomic disadvantages, gender differences, substance use, and global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic are influential factors affecting youth mental health in Ireland. In terms of learning for the various developmental stages, here are some findings from the study:

Childhood to Early Adolescence: At age 13, the majority of participants exhibited stable mental health, with 80% showing no significant socio-emotional or behavioural difficulties between ages 9 and 13. However, approximately 7% faced persistent challenges during this period. Factors such as higher maternal education levels, having more than one friend, and low conflict with parents were associated with better outcomes. Conversely, experiences like bullying and household transitions, such as changes in family structure, were linked to increased risk of mental health issues.

Late Adolescence: By ages 17/18, while many adolescents reported high life satisfaction, a notable minority experienced mental health challenges. Approximately 10% had been diagnosed with depression or anxiety, and 11% reported self-harming behaviours in the past year. Females were more likely than males to report lower life satisfaction and higher instances of mental health issues. Additionally, those from less advantaged social backgrounds or who had left education were at a higher risk of socio-emotional difficulties.

Transition to Adulthood: At age 25, participants generally reported good physical health; however, there was a decline in mental health since they were 20. Self-reported cases of depression, anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem had increased, with over 30% of women indicating a diagnosis of depression or anxiety at some point. Hazardous drinking behaviours were noted in almost 40% of respondents, particularly among men with higher education. Additionally, more than 20% had experimented with cocaine in the past year.

It is clear from these studies that more work needs to be put into supporting the mental health of young people in Ireland, ensuring available supports are there for them when needed (Headstrong, 2011). Another issue raised by various commentators is the fact that mental health services in Ireland are not developmentally appropriate or youth-oriented (Dooley, O’Connor, Fitzgerald and O’Reilly, 2019).

Sharing the Vision (StV) is a successor to *A Vision for Change* and is Ireland’s national mental health policy. StV sets out a ten-year framework for mental health reform in Ireland and incorporates 100 recommendations. From the outset, it posited that ‘*Importantly, mental health is not a matter for the health sector alone ... cannot be achieved without measures being taken by other government departments and state agencies...*’ (2022: 7)

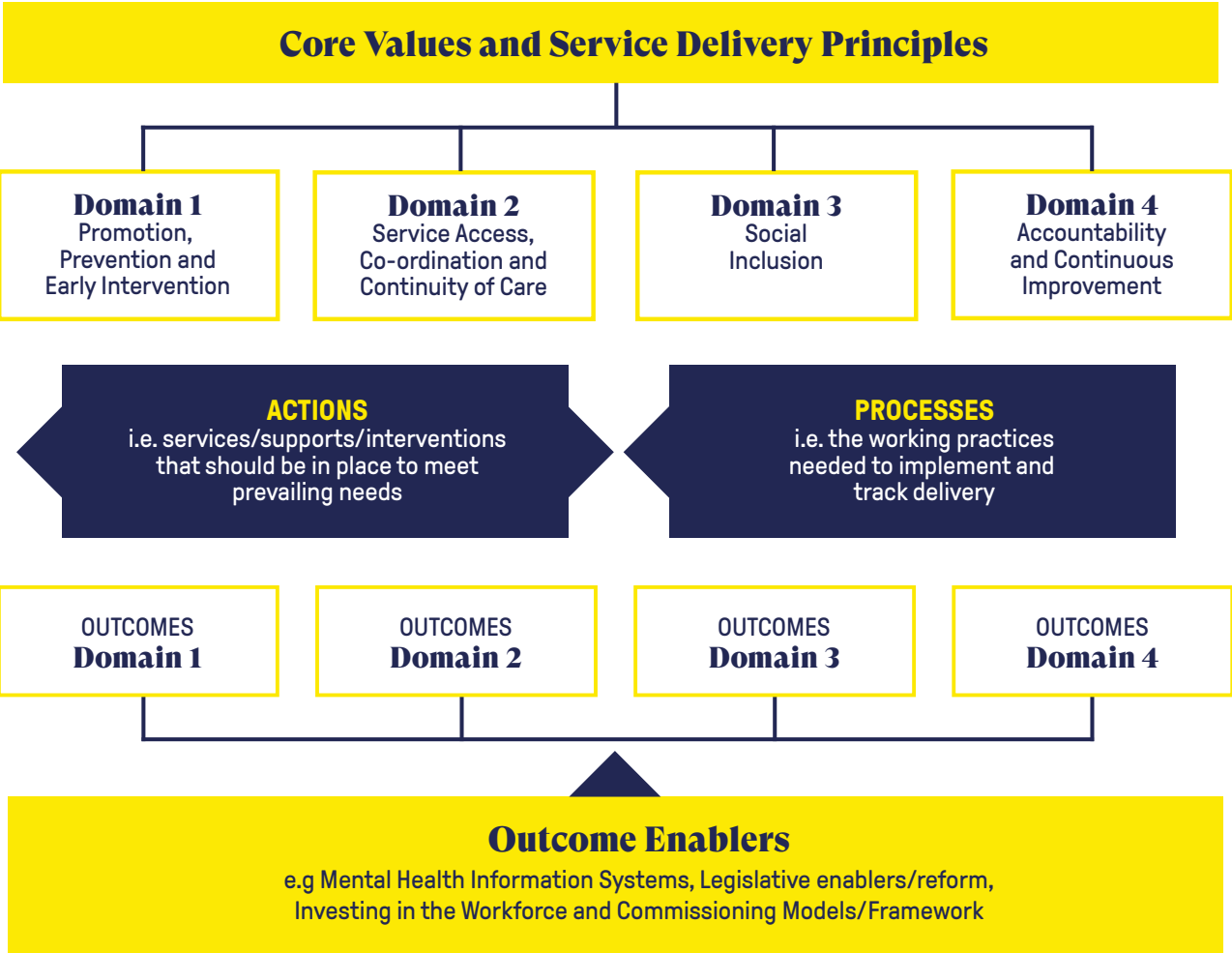
¹¹ **Growing Up in Ireland** is the national longitudinal study of children and young people, a joint project of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Since 2006, the study has provided Government with an evidence base to make informed policy decisions on a wide range of issues based on data from children and young people living in Ireland. For over 17 years, the study has followed the progress of two groups of children: starting with over 8,000 9-year-olds (Cohort ‘98) and 10,000 9-month-olds (Cohort ‘08). The members of Cohort ‘98 were aged 25 at their last wave of data collection (currently 26 years old), and those of Cohort ‘08 will be aged 17/18 in their next wave of data collection (currently 16 years old). Recruitment of a new group of 9-month-olds, Cohort ‘24, started in September 2024. (Growing Up in Ireland, 2025 – see <https://www.growingup.gov.ie/>)

“The vision embodied in this policy – *Sharing the Vision* – is to create a mental health system that addresses the needs of the population through a focus on the requirements of the individual. This mental health system should deliver a range of integrated activities to promote positive mental health in the community; it should intervene early when problems develop; and it should enhance the inclusion and recovery of people who have complex mental health difficulties. Service providers should work in partnership with service users and their families to facilitate recovery and reintegration through the provision of accessible, comprehensive and community-based mental health services”.

(ibid, 12)

As shown in Figure 2.1, StV is organised around four core domains representing policy and service delivery. These four domains reflect a population-based approach, providing mental health promotion for everyone, as well as specialist mental health services for those who need them. As we will present later, the work of Awardees across the three Rethink Ireland Funds, relates closely to Domain 1, with a focus on promotion, prevention and early intervention.

Figure 2.1 – Sharing the Vision Core Values and Service Delivery Principles



Established in 2023, the HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office published its Action Plan 2024-2027 in 2024. The plan sets out comprehensive reform for services in Ireland, the central aim being that all children and young people can have the best chance to enjoy a healthy life and be supported to achieve their potential. The plan notes that mental health needs must be identified early and met with appropriate and accessible services. These services range from early intervention and health promotion programmes to primary and community care services and specialist mental health services. The plan incorporates 16 action areas, each underpinned by their six key principles of *promotion and prevention, evidence-based, safe, accessible, person-centred and integrated*.

Of most relevance to the work of the Awardees is *Action 1 – ‘Mental Health Promotion and Prevention’*. The deliverable here is for a ‘comprehensive suite of mental health promotion and prevention interventions to be available for children, young people and their families’ (ibid: 36). Of the actions listed, Action 2 describes having increased access to parenting and family support programmes that enhance children and young people’s social and emotional skills through better parenting. Action 4 describes strengthening supports in both primary and post-primary schools to achieve positive mental health outcomes.

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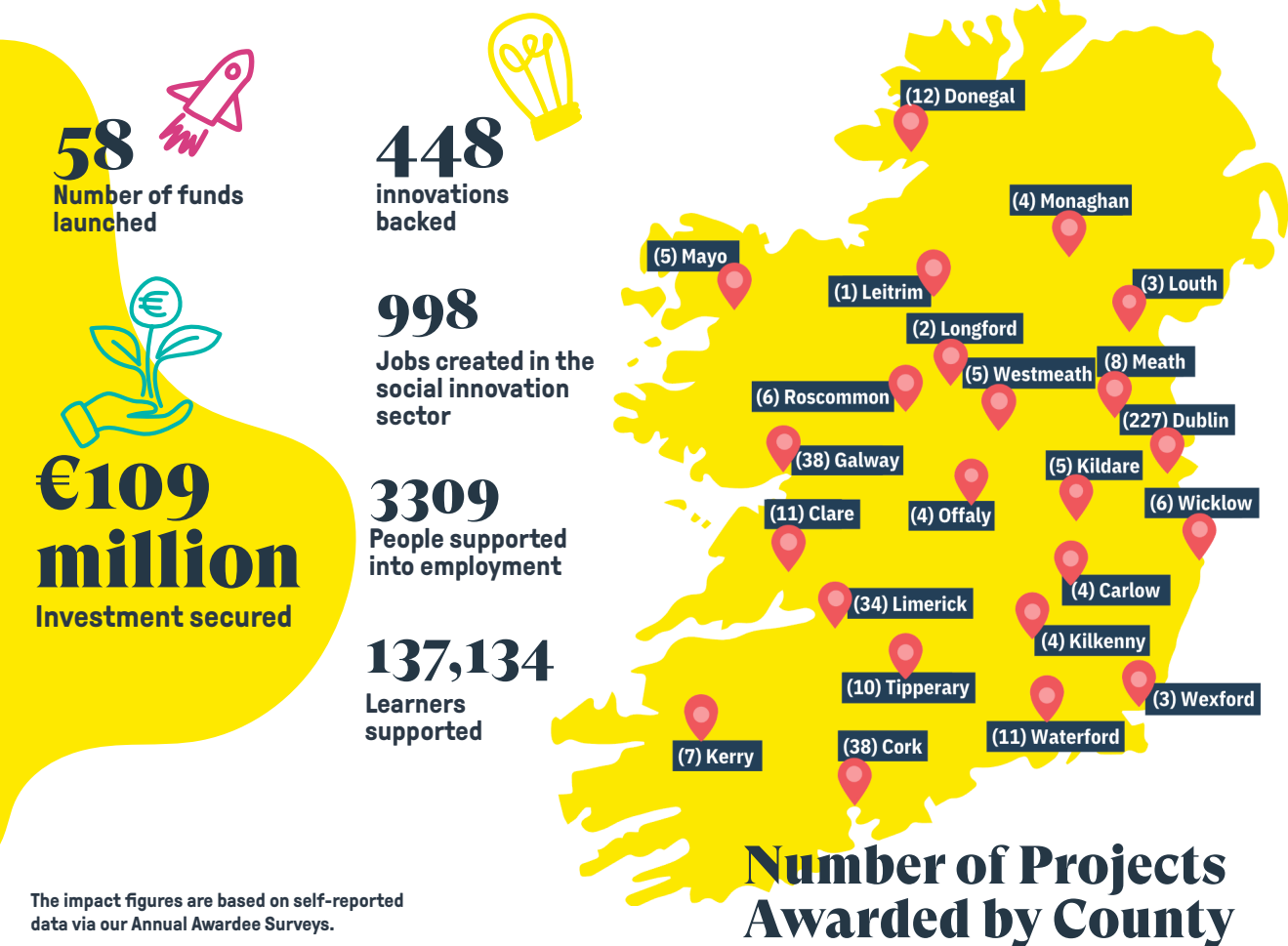
Responding to the Problem

3.1 – Rethink Ireland as Leaders in Social Innovation

It's time to Rethink Ireland. It's time to back big ideas and sustainable solutions. It's time to create the inclusive Ireland we all want to be part of
(Rethink Ireland, 2024)

Rethink Ireland¹² was officially launched by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2016. It aims to stimulate philanthropy and fill a gap in funding innovation for the non-profit sector. Its mission is to support the best social innovations so that they can grow and maximise their impact across Ireland. Since 2016, the Government of Ireland has invested over €56 million (including €42 million in match funding for philanthropy) in social innovation through Rethink Ireland (Rethink Ireland, 2024). Rethink Ireland has now become a €109 million fund, has launched 58 Funds and supported over 137,134 learners (See Figure 3.1). This has been marked by strategic partnerships and bold initiatives aimed at unlocking philanthropic capital. From 2016 to 2023, Rethink Ireland successfully secured €52 million in philanthropic support (ibid). More details can be found in the *One Million Strong Impact Report (2024)*¹³

Figure 3.1 – Rethink Ireland Infographic - 2024



¹² Known as Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI) when this Fund was launched.

¹³ See - <https://rethinkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/One-Million-Strong-Impact-Report.pdf>

Rethink Ireland provides cash grants and business support to the best social innovators. Their task is to fuel these innovations with the knowledge and advice they need to succeed and maximise their social and environmental impact (Rethink Ireland, 2024). Their ethos is built on working in partnership with Government and companies, foundations, trusts and individuals committed to tackling pressing issues in Ireland.

3.2 Establishing a Pathway towards Collective Impact with Three Funds

As noted earlier, Rethink Ireland introduced three Funds to address two key persistent social issues for young people. By engaging with and supporting Awardees who were already working with young people, families and communities around these issues, innovatively, they aspired to generate and collate robust social impact data. This data could then be used collectively by Rethink Ireland, the Awardees and us as evaluators, to establish a pathway towards collective action, informing smart public policy formation. Before detailing the evaluation approach used to get there, we present a summary of each of the three Funds below.

3.2.1 THE EDUCATION FUND (2017-2020)

This was the first of Rethink Ireland's Funds to incorporate a formal academic evaluation. The Fund brought together a set of disparate projects, each with a common interest in some element of education inequality. The Education Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for those experiencing educational disadvantage, and which specifically supported learners to progress from Levels 3–6 on the National Framework of Qualifications¹⁴. The total value of the fund was €7.8m.

The Education Fund's definition of educational disadvantage as something that arises from living in a disadvantaged area, socioeconomic disadvantage, experiencing mental health or other health issues, or disability, is relevant to this fund. Rethink Ireland's goal via the Education Fund aimed to improve access to third-level education for students affected by disability or disadvantage, through improved educational attainment at Levels 3–6 on the NFQ.

Following a rigorous selection process, ten¹⁵ projects were chosen as recipients of the Education Fund Award. Of these, seven projects participated in the programme of evaluation and are included in this report. The names of these seven projects, their location, their participant group and a short description of their work are provided in Appendix 2.

3.2.2 THE YOUTH FUNDS (2018-2021)

Rethink Ireland subsequently introduced The *Youth Funds*, comprising the Youth Education Fund and the Youth Mental Health Fund. The Funds were created to improve the lives of young people in Ireland. The total value of the Funds was over €10m.

The overarching aim of the Youth Education Fund was to *improve access to higher and further education for students (up to age 25) affected by disability or disadvantage*. The specific objectives set for Awardees participating in the Youth Education Fund were to:

- Improve the retention of youth learners up to age 25, who are affected by disadvantage or disability at level 1 to 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or equivalent accredited programmes/courses.
- Demonstrate movement of learners along the NFQ ladder or equivalent.

The overarching aim of the Youth Mental Health Fund was to *provide meaningful, lasting support to innovative mental health programmes and initiatives that reach out to young people before and during the societal, academic, physical, and emotional pressures of early adolescence, adolescence and early adulthood.*

Following an application, Rethink Ireland identified 15¹⁶ projects to be recipients of the Award, six under the Youth Education Fund and nine under the Youth Mental Health Fund. Of these, 11 projects participated in the programme of evaluation and so are included in this report. The name and location of each Awardee, the sub-fund they belong to, the age range of their participant group, their parent organisation, and a short description of their work is provided in Appendix 3.

3.2.3 THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUNDS (2019-2022)

Like the *Youth Funds*, the *Children and Youth Funds* were created to improve the lives of young people in Ireland in two specific domain areas, educational inequality and youth mental health. The total value of the Funds was over €9.5m. The same as the Youth Funds, the Children and Youth Funds had two sub-funds, the Children and Youth Education Fund and the Children and Youth Mental Health Fund.

Following a national advertisement and subsequent selection process, Rethink Ireland identified 14 projects to be recipients of the Award. However, they only took a sample of the 14 projects into the evaluation, to avoid the unnecessary inclusion of projects like those already included in the Education and/or Youth Funds. Following a peer-reviewed selection process, based on our knowledge of the kinds of projects already included in the two prior Funds, we subsequently developed an inclusion/exclusion criterion with Rethink Ireland, to finalise the sample to be included in the evaluation. This resulted in seven of the original 14 Awardees being invited to participate in the evaluation. Of these seven, six Awardees completed the qualitative data collection element of the study while five Awardees completed the SROI study and so are included in this report.

The name and location of each Awardee, the sub-fund they belong to, the age range of their participant group, their parent organisation, and a short description of their work is provided in Appendix 4.

14 Throughout this report, NFQ and QQI are used interchangeably. Established in 2003, the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a 10-level, single national entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other. Underpinned by quality assurance principles, the Irish NFQ describes qualifications in the Irish education and training system and sets out what each qualification says about what learners know, understand and are able to do. It also sets out qualification pathways from one NFQ level to the next. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for developing, promoting and maintaining the Irish NFQ.

15 Of the ten projects that started in the Education Fund, seven completed the evaluation.

16 Of the original 15 Awardees, four exited the Fund and were not included in the research and evaluation study. These projects were Midwest Anxiety Intervention Workshops (The EASE Project); Childline Digital Platform Expansion (ISPC); Sound Schools Toolkit (A Lust For Life), and Roots of Empathy (Barnardos).

3.3 The Evaluation Framework

The overarching aim of the combined evaluations of the Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds was *‘to identify projects that can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education and/or improving and maintaining good mental health outcomes for young people’*.

Rather than using an off-the-shelf evaluation approach, we co-developed it with Awardees and Rethink Ireland. The approach combined and optimised best practice from evaluation theory along with practical learning gathered from the three main stakeholder groups. Our evaluation work was ultimately guided by a *Realist Approach* (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This approach is committed “...to the idea that programmes deal with real problems rather than mere social constructions, and its primary intention, which is to inform realistic developments in policy making that benefit programme participants and the public”. To operationalise this approach, we used a *Social Return on Investment* (SROI) framework, across the three Funds. SROI is an internationally accredited framework that creates two forms of data; a) the social outcomes achieved and most valued by participants because of their involvement with their respective projects. This information helps Awardee projects review their service delivery and *do more good*; b) the total social value created across the three Funds and the total return on Investment for the three Funds.

In addition to the SROI study, to capture the lived experience of participants, we also gave Awardee Projects the opportunity to participate in a methodology known as *Photovoice*. This approach is a community-based participatory action research (PAR) method that provides a voice to marginalised groups that are usually excluded from the political arena (Liebenberg, 2018; Sutton-Brown, 2014). The primary objectives of using photovoice are threefold: for participants to identify, record and reflect on community needs; promote critical dialogue and reach policymakers to enact social change towards community improvement (Wang & Burris, 1997). The method encourages participants to do the research independently, while the role of a researcher is to facilitate the process (Cohen Miller and Izenkova, 2022). While offered to all Awardee projects, not all managed to encourage their participants to volunteer to take part. The results of this work can be accessed at <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/cfrc/>

Despite commonalities in the overall aims and objectives of the evaluation for each Fund, there were also distinct differences. In writing this *Composite Report*, it is clear that the goal of this programme of work for Rethink Ireland was to collect data over a significant period (2017-2022) and use it to evaluate the *impact* for participants in their education and youth mental health, as well as to *collate learning* from across the Funds, to aid future practice and policy (See Appendix 5 for a visual representation of the evaluation framework).

04

Exploring the Impact of the Three Funds through Cross-Cutting Themes

This section comprises three parts broken down by theme.

- **Section 4.1 (Theme 1 – Practices, Processes and Key Actions)** showcases the practices, processes and key actions used by Awardees with Participants, which according to the participants helped support their well-being. We also present findings on the range of outcomes achieved by participants across the three Funds because of this work.
- **Section 4.2 (Theme 2 – Positionality Clustering and Conceptualisation)** presents a model that positions *recipients* and *providers* in relation to the mainstream education system. By doing this, we can see where all Awardee Projects fit within the larger support ecosystem. We conclude by adding to the state’s conceptualisation of Alternative Education Provision in Ireland.
- **Section 4.3 (Theme 3 – Mapping Participant Outcomes onto Ireland’s Well-being Framework)** maps participant outcomes onto Ireland’s Well-being Framework¹⁷ and introduces the SROI study and the outcomes most valued by participants, plus the *total social value* created and the overall *return on investment* for the three Funds. It also explores how the findings fit with the SDG agenda.

Section 4.1 - Theme 1 - Showcasing the Practices, Processes and Key Actions of Awardee Projects and Participant Outcomes

In each of the Fund level evaluation reports, we presented data showing how each Awardee project supported their participants in various ways. This allowed us to investigate the ‘*Black Box*’ of each intervention and establish the nature of how the Awardees do their work. In her work on flexible learning programs (FLP) in Australia, akin to alternative education provision here, Te Riele captured the practices and processes used by projects which saw them ‘*act as enabling spaces in which students can form meaningful and respectful relationships and control over their lives*’ (Te Riele, 2014, p. 29).

From our data analysis, we were similarly able to identify the practices, processes and key actions used by Awardee Projects across the Funds that according to the participants, helped their overall levels of well-being. By way of example, we have included data from the Engage in Education project (See Table 4.1), an Awardee from the Children and Youth Funds. **When taken at a macro level, for the first time in Ireland, we have data on practices, processes and actions for a set of projects in alternative education and youth mental health provision.**

17 See <https://assets.gov.ie/260026/1dc8a216-7cd7-412a-87d3-10dcf0310789.pdf>

Table 4.1 - A summary of the practices, processes and actions used by Engage in Education to support their participants

AWARDEE	A SUMMARY OF THE PRACTICES AND PROCESS-ES USED BY AWARDEES WITH PARTICIPANTS	KEY ACTIONS
Engage in Education	<p>Engage in Education provides holistic support to participants, including financial assistance (covering tuition, laptops, and college-related expenses), emotional and practical guidance, and tailored educational interventions. The programme offers structured pathways through three initiatives: <i>Nurture, Compass, and Engage</i>, supporting students from late primary school to higher education. Key activities include individualized tutoring, summer courses, extracurricular activities, and college visits, which inspire students and make higher education more accessible. Additionally, the programme empowers parents with information on educational pathways, application processes, and financial supports, fostering a collaborative approach to student success.</p> <p>Engage in Education exemplifies how a structured support system can unlock potential, foster resilience, and drive meaningful social change by empowering young people to pursue education and a better future.</p>	<p>Engage in Education employs a comprehensive set of actions to support and empower its participants:</p> <p>1. Personalised Tutoring and Grinds:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ One-on-one academic support is offered to help students improve in challenging subjects, especially in preparation for important exams like the Leaving Certificate. <p>2. Financial Assistance and Material Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The programme covers fees for extra tuition, provides essential equipment such as laptops and tablets, and often organises free transport for college visits. <p>3. Workshops, Courses, and Informal Learning Activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Students participate in summer camps, sports activities, language and business courses, and other enrichment programmes that make learning more engaging and enjoyable. <p>4. College Visits and Exposure to Higher Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Engage in Education arranges visits to further and third-level institutions, helping students visualise campus life and reducing barriers to pursuing higher education. <p>5. Information, Guidance, and Emotional Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Staff work closely with both students and parents to navigate application and admission processes, discuss different pathways (e.g., PLC courses, university routes), and provide ongoing motivation and mentorship. <p>6. Parental Engagement and Empowerment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ By offering information sessions and resources, Engage in Education supports parents in understanding the educational system, boosting their confidence and involvement in their children’s academic journey.

Using the SROI methodology we also identified the specific outcomes participants had achieved as a result of being involved in their respective projects. When these outcomes were collated across the three Funds (Table 4.2) 16 outcomes categories emerged, with one outlier category for outcomes that did not fit elsewhere. These outcomes range from community engagement to empathy to resilience. Therefore, as well as having captured the practices, processes and key actions used by Awardee projects, we now also have robust SROI-generated data on the outcomes achieved by participants, associated with these enabling actions.

Table 4.2 – A Collation of the Outcomes achieved and most valued by Participants from across the three Rethink Ireland Funds

 CATEGORY 1 Community Engagement	 CATEGORY 5 Emotional Regulation	 CATEGORY 9 Pride / Achievement	 CATEGORY 13 Leadership Skills
 CATEGORY 2 Communication Skills	 CATEGORY 6 Empathy	 CATEGORY 10 Self-Confidence	 CATEGORY 14 Maturity and Independence
 CATEGORY 3 Less Stress	 CATEGORY 7 Education & Employment Skills	 CATEGORY 11 Social Skills	 CATEGORY 15 Improved Family Relationships
 CATEGORY 4 Social Inclusion / Exclusion	 CATEGORY 8 Future Outlook	 CATEGORY 12 Empowerment	 CATEGORY 16 Resilience
 CATEGORY 17 Other Outcomes			

Section 4.2 - Theme 2 – Understanding Awardee Positionality and Adding to the Conceptualisation of Alternative Education Provision in Ireland

As 17 of the 24 (71%) Awardee projects participating in our evaluation were classified by Rethink Ireland as having an education focus, we mapped out where those awardees (along with the seven mental health Awardees) fit in terms of the mainstream education system. To achieve this, we developed the idea of *positionality clusters*, capturing the position of the *provider* and *recipient*, in relation to the system. Table 4.3 shows the outcome of this work. The final two columns show the four clusters that emerged, namely the *IN to IN*, *IN to OUT*, *OUT to IN* and *OUT to OUT*. IN refers to either the *provider* or *recipient* or *both* being in the system while OUT refers to them being outside. The results can be summarised as follows:

- Taking An Cosán VCC as an example, we show how the service funded by Rethink Ireland is provided from inside a community and higher education system for those not in the system. We abbreviated this relationship of provider and recipient to the mainstream system as *IN to OUT*. Of the 24 Projects, An Cosán was the only project in this category (4% of the total).
- The next most common category was OUT to OUT which describes the work of four Awardee Projects (Cork Life Centre, iScoil, ALFA Steiner Secondary School and The Breakthrough Project) and constitutes 17% of the overall sample. This is where alternative education of varying kinds is provided by an organisation based outside mainstream education, supporting those outside mainstream education.
- The second most common category was *IN to IN* which describes the work of six Awardee Projects (TCPID, TA21, Moyross Education Support Project, DCU Changemakers Network, DCU Fuse and TUD’s Access to Apprenticeships) and constitutes 25% of the overall sample. This describes supports provided from inside mainstream primary, secondary or tertiary education for those within mainstream primary secondary or tertiary education.
- By far the most common category though was *OUT to IN*, describing the work of 13 Awardee Projects (Aspire2, FastTrack Academy, Foroige Futures, Foroige Leadership for Life, Midlands Science, My Future My Business, Sing Out with Strings, Narrative 4’s Empathy Project, LikeMinded, SOAR’s Hustle Project, Engage in Education, Rainbow Club, SOLAS Project) and constitutes 54% of the overall sample. This describes support provided from outside mainstream education for those within mainstream education.

The high-level finding here is that **79%** of the 24 Awardees are accounted for by the IN to IN & OUT to IN categories. We argue that the creation of this model is highly significant for two reasons. Firstly, it provides a template for positioning educational and mental health supports not just in this study, but at a national level. Secondly, as mentioned in Section 2.2 above, this model adds to our understanding and conceptualisation of alternative education. We have been able to show how alternative education providers offer a much broader range of programmes, operating both inside and outside of the mainstream schools, use innovative approaches to teaching and learning, support the overall well-being of students and tackle structural inequality within education in Ireland.

Table 4.3 – Awardee Projects from the Education, Youth and Children and Youth Funds ordered by position of the Provider and Recipient in relation to the mainstream Education System

AWARDEE PROJECT	RETHINK FUND	AGE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS	TARGET POPULATION	PROVIDES SUPPORT AT WHICH LEVEL OF EDUCATION
An Cosán VCC	Education	18+	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Community & Further Education
Cork Life Centre	Education	12-18	Early School Leavers	Alternative Education
iScoil	Education	13-16	Early School Leavers	Alternative Education
ALFA Steiner Secondary School	Youth	12-17	Alternative Education	Alternative Education
The Break-through Programme	Youth	Adult males	Mental health	Community Education

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	POSITIONALITY CLUSTERS	
An Cosán VCC seeks to empower women and men from disadvantaged communities across Ireland. It provides an entry model of higher education and blended learning, face-to-face workshops, technology workshops, live virtual classes, offline individual and group work, collaborative peer learning, and communities of practice. The programme partners with a wide range of community education organisations at local, regional and national level	Provided from Inside the Community & Higher education system for those not in the System	IN to OUT
The Cork Life Centre’s vision is to provide a unique alternative environment for education for children and young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education. It provides an alternative one-to-one and small-group learning environment with wraparound support and outreach services. The Centre has established links and relationships with numerous agencies and services in Cork City across the areas of business, academia and health, and with local community groups.	Provided by Alternative Education Centre outside system for those outside system	OUT to OUT
iScoil provides innovative flexible online and blended learning for early school leavers. This model provides a safe environment where young people can achieve meaningful accreditation and re-engage with education and access further education, training or employment opportunities. Personalised and online modalities of intervention are provided to each student based on their needs, interests and abilities. iScoil works in partnership with local agencies and youth services nationally.	Alternative Education provided from OUTSIDE system by a Charity for those outside the system	OUT to OUT
The Project combines an innovative, engaging approach to learning with a clear vision of adolescent development and a powerful positive social experience. It provides an alternative to the mainstream Junior Cycle for students and their families who choose it and can address the needs of early school leavers and successfully bring them back into education.	Provided by Alternative Education OUTSIDE System for those Outside mainstream	OUT to OUT
It provides a safe therapeutic environment for men to address their mental health issues via 1:1 counselling, with simultaneous support for their physical and psychological development.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those outside the system	OUT to OUT

AWARDEE PROJECT	RETHINK FUND	AGE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS	TARGET POPULATION	PROVIDES SUPPORT AT WHICH LEVEL OF EDUCATION
Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities	Education	19-25	Intellectual disability	Higher Education / Mainstream
Trinity Access 21	Education	13-18	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Second Level
Moyross Education Support Programme	Youth	4-12	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Primary level
DCU Changemaker Network	Children and Youth	4-12	All	Primary level
DCU Fuse	Children and Youth	9-18	All	Primary level

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	POSITIONALITY CLUSTERS	
TCPID's mission is to enable people with an intellectual disability to develop their potential through a combination of lifelong learning and professional training. The Centre provides learners with a high-quality higher education programme, mentoring, work experience and career guidance. Key partners of the programme come from businesses, including companies and banks (e.g., Abbott, CPL and Bank of Ireland).	Provided from Inside 3rd Level System for those in the 3rd level System	IN to IN
Trinity Access 21 (TA21) aims to transform the Irish education system and aspires to an education system that supports every young person in reaching their full academic potential. Trinity Access 21 provides DEIS schools (and schools where progression to higher education is low) with student and teacher training. Trinity Access 21 is grounded within three core principles: Mentoring, Pathways to College and Leadership in Learning. Students are provided with one-to-one and group mentoring programmes, group work and team-based workshops. The project works in partnership with schools, communities, other educational organisations and businesses.	Provided from Inside 3rd Level System for those in 2nd level System	IN to IN
The Project supports the children through consistent unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy and creates significant relationships with children and their families. They provide a range of interventions that complement classwork and contribute to the social, educational, and emotional development of the pupils and their families.	Provided by Primary School INSIDE the system for those in the System	IN to IN
The DCU Changemaker Network identifies, celebrates, expands and refines the unique attributes of schools which are successful in creating systemic change in education. Changemaker Schools boast several attributes connected with leading change which include empathy, teamwork, leadership, and creativity.	Provided from Inside the 3rd Level System for those in the Primary System	IN to IN
The FUSE Programme is delivered through the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre, located within the DCU Institute of Education. The centre studies the multi-factored causes of the problem of bullying and translates the findings into resources and training to tackle the issue.	Provided from Inside the 3rd Level System for those in the Primary System	IN to IN

AWARDEE PROJECT	RETHINK FUND	AGE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS	TARGET POPULATION	PROVIDES SUPPORT AT WHICH LEVEL OF EDUCATION
Access to Apprenticeship TU Dublin	Children and Youth	16-24	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Higher Education / Mainstream
Aspire2	Education	13-18	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Second Level
FastTrack Academy	Education	15-19	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Community Education & Second Level
Foroige Futures	Youth	12-18	Educational disadvantaged	Non-formal Education / Youth Work
Foroige Leadership for Life	Youth	12-18	All	Non-formal Education / Youth Work
Midlands Science	Youth	13-18	All	Secondary level
My Future, My Business	Youth	13-18	Educational disadvantaged	Secondary level

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	POSITIONALITY CLUSTERS	
The DCU Access to the Workplace scheme provides second-year students in the DCU Access programme with opportunities to undertake summer work placements in established workplaces, supporting them to gain valuable work experiences.	Provided from Inside the 3rd Level System for those inside the 3rd Level System	IN to IN
Aspire2 aims to increase DEIS school students' prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level education and apprenticeships. The project provides students with group mentoring and work experience placement. The programme established a collaborative partnership with several academic institutions around Ireland (i.e., UCD, CIT, UCC, TCD and IT Tallaght).	Provided by Corporate Partner outside system for those in 2nd level system	OUT to IN
Citywise Fast Track Academy's vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach. The project focuses on developing social, behavioural and academic skills and the conditions necessary to increase the number of young people transitioning to higher-level education. It collaborates with IT Tallaght and other agencies in the community.	Provided by Community / Voluntary group outside system for those in 2nd level system	OUT to IN
The Programme wants to enable young people at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage to access a range of accredited education initiatives that will enhance their life opportunities by developing a sustainable model of rural youth work that can be scaled across Ireland.	Provided by Youthwork from OUTSIDE system to those inside the 2nd level System	OUT to IN
The Programme is aimed at 15–18-year-olds. It allows them to learn, practice and develop the core skills of leadership. Upon completion of the programme, participants are eligible to graduate with a Foundation Certificate in Youth Leadership and Community Action, which is awarded by the University of Galway.	Provided by Youthwork from OUTSIDE the system to those inside the 2nd level System	OUT to IN
This Project aims to increase economic and social prosperity in the Midlands region through the development and increase of science capital and the promotion of STEM education.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the 2nd level system	OUT to IN
The project is designed to inspire Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle second-level students to explore future career possibilities by giving the students access to quality learning experiences and encouraging young people at risk of early school leaving to complete second-level education.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the 2nd level system	OUT to IN

AWARDEE PROJECT	RETHINK FUND	AGE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS	TARGET POPULATION	PROVIDES SUPPORT AT WHICH LEVEL OF EDUCATION
Sing out with Strings	Youth	Children and young people	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Primary and secondary level
Narrative 4's Empathy Project	Youth	Young people	All	Primary and secondary level
LikeMinded	Youth	Young people	LGBTI+	Community Education
The SOAR's Hustle Project	Youth	13-18	All	Second Level
Engage in Education	Children and Youth	11-23	Socio-economic disadvantaged	Second Level
Rainbow Club	Children and Youth	5-24	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Community Education
SOLAS Children and Youth Project	Children and Youth	5-26	Cancer Support	Primary and secondary level

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	POSITIONALITY CLUSTERS	
This Project seeks to turn 'disadvantage' on its head, by empowering children and young people to reimagine their own personal and collective identities and represent themselves and their communities positively and powerfully.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the system	OUT to IN
Narrative 4 envisions a world where young adults lead with empathy. Their vision is to harness the power of the story exchange to equip and embolden young adults to improve their lives, communities, and the world.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the system at primary & secondary	OUT to IN
LikeMinded aims to provide opportunities for young people who identify as LGBTI+ to participate in the Gaisce programme in a safe and welcoming environment, where they can lead the direction of their Awards with the support of a peer group and a one-to-one mentor.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the system	OUT to IN
The Foundation selected their programme Hustle for inclusion in the evaluation. This programme is focused on empowering young people. It is an early intervention character development programme for teenagers to emotionally and mentally prepare them for the modern world.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the system	OUT to IN
Limerick community-based education initiative working to maximise educational outcomes in a variety of socially disadvantaged communities in Limerick City. The project targets students and their families and helps them progress through the education system through several support programmes. Early-stage intervention is critical to prevent students from disengaging from formal education.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the 2nd level system	OUT to IN
The Rainbow Club Cork Centre for Autism provides skills, support and a community hub for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families to promote inclusivity, education and career opportunities leading to a fulfilled lifestyle and participation in all aspects of society.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE Education to those inside the mainstream system	OUT to IN
The Solas Cancer Support Centre's Children and Youth Project addresses the needs of young people in the Waterford area at a time of distress in their lives, whether it be through receiving a diagnosis or experiencing the illness or loss of a family member. The project provides additional one-to-one counselling and art psychotherapy sessions and allows group support options and peer-to-peer support groups. It supports the rollout of an education programme to primary and secondary teachers on supporting bereaved pupils in a classroom setting.	Provided by Organisation OUTSIDE education to primary and secondary children and teachers	OUT to IN

Section 4.3 - Theme 3 - Mapping Participant Outcomes onto Ireland's Well-being Framework and Measuring Social Value

This section has five parts. **Section 4.3.1** explores the conceptualisation of well-being for children and young people while **Section 4.3.2** presents *Understanding Life in Ireland Well-being Framework*, the core model used to ground the findings. **Section 4.3.3** maps our participant outcomes onto this well-being framework. **Section 4.4.4** presents data on the total social value generated by the work of the Awardees and the overall return on investment. Finally, **Section 4.3.5** uses the participant outcome categories already mapped onto the dimensions of the Well-being Framework and identifies where they fit within the Sustainable Development Goals affiliation.

4.3.1 Conceptualising Well-Being for Children and Young People

Well-being and how it plays out in the lives of children and young people is a contested concept with many definitional and measurement variations and difficulties (Camfield *et al.*, 2009; McAuley *et al.*, 2010; Kennan *et al.*, 2011). There are four influential perspectives on well-being found in the literature, namely, utilitarian, basic need, capability approaches (Axford *et al.*, 2014:2701) and more recently a multidimensional and integrated approach to personal well-being (White, 2009; Shaughnessy, 2015). White argues that well-being is socially and culturally constructed, comprising of the integration of three dimensions: subjective, material and relational which are interdependent and intrinsically linked (Shaughnessy, 2015). Central to this approach is relatedness. White (2009) argues that relationships provide the core foundation for well-being arguing that *'people become who they are in and through their relationships with others'* (White, 2009: 9). Well-being is viewed not as a state or as belonging to individuals but rather a process that occurs in relationships *'between the collective and individual, the local and the global, the people and the state'* (White, 2009: 11). Therefore, well-being is a highly complex and multi-faceted concept that is temporal and changing, situated within contexts and relationships and involves how people feel and function personally and in society and the value they give to their life (Ben-Arieh *et al.*, 2014).

From the academic and practice discourse, there are several discernible trends over the last 20 years (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Ben-Arieh, 2005), with Kennan *et al.* (2011:7) suggesting that well-being can be characterised as follows in the study of the lives of children and young people:

- Moving beyond child survival to a more inclusive focus on broader aspects of well-being.
- Increasingly focusing on positive rather than exclusively negative outcomes.
- Moving from a future-oriented perspective of well-becoming to a more immediate well-being.
- A shift from traditional domains, for example, child survival to new domains of well-being, such as children's civic involvement and participation.

4.3.2 Finding an appropriate method and Well-being Framework for collating the SROI Outcomes

Well-being has also become an increasingly important priority in Irish governmental policy, with a focus on a more holistic approach to measuring progress and improving citizens' quality of life. Traditionally, when a government seeks to measure how we are doing as a country, the sole emphasis has been on economic measures. Recognising these shortcomings, in recent years, there has been a shift in thinking towards the necessity for capturing a more holistic understanding of life in Ireland, which encapsulates not only economic but also environmental and social issues. In response, the 2020 Programme for Government committed to improving the well-being of Irish people, as well as developing new measures of well-being and progress (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). As a result, the *Well-being Framework* was introduced as a cross-government initiative led by the Department of An Taoiseach.

The overarching vision for the Well-being Framework is *'enabling all our people to live fulfilled lives now and into the future'*, ingrained in well-being across person, place and society (Department of An Taoiseach, 2022). The framework does this by considering and measuring progress as a society in a unified manner with an overarching focus on equality and sustainability (Department of An Taoiseach, 2023). The overarching goals of the framework are to:

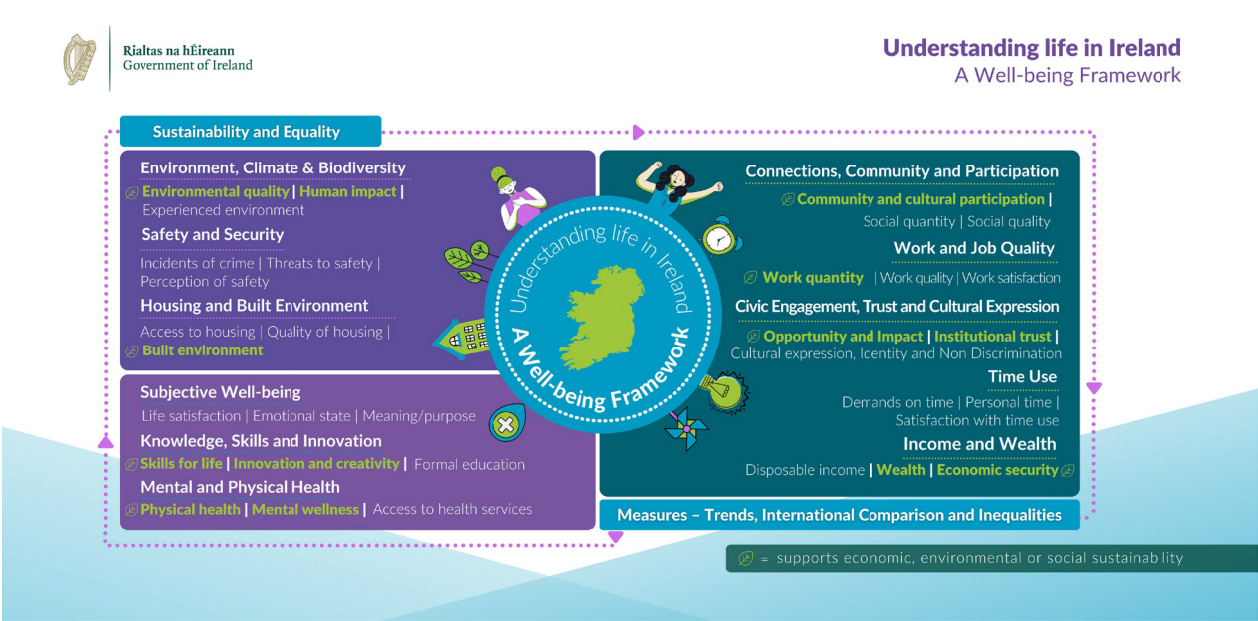
- Enable people to have purposeful lives that support good physical and mental health, enabling the development of skills across the life cycle and providing a good standard of living.
- Ensure a sustainable sense of place, including an appropriate and safe place to live and protection of Ireland's environment, climate and biodiversity.
- Preserve balance, inclusivity and equality of opportunity across society with open and effective government, empowering families, friends and communities to grow, connect and meaningfully engage (ibid, 2022).

The framework utilises a dashboard approach to well-being measurement, incorporating 35 data indicators across 11 dimensions, to provide a medium-term holistic view of quality of life in Ireland (See Figure 4.1). The 11 dimensions include subjective well-being, mental and physical health, knowledge skills and innovation, income and wealth, housing and the built environment, safety and security, work and job quality, connections, community and participation, time use, civic engagement, trust and cultural expression (ibid, 2023).

The introduction of the well-being framework is an iterative process, which tries to embed well-being considerations into policy-making and budgeting decisions. Two annual analyses of the framework have been completed, indicating the country's performance to date. There is an ongoing commitment from the government that future analysis of the framework will be published annually and will be included as part of the budget cycle¹⁸.

¹⁸ More information is available at: gov.ie/wellbeing-framework.

Figure 4.1 – Understanding Life in Ireland – A Well-being Framework



By bringing our SROI outcomes together under an Irish well-being taxonomy, we shift towards more meaningful measures of progress which capture the richness of people’s lived experiences. In doing so, we can create a more meaningful and relevant tool with which to guide policy concerning the impact potential of alternative education and youth mental health.

4.3.3 Mapping the SROI Outcomes onto the Irish Well-being Framework

The first step in mapping the SROI outcomes onto the Irish-Well-being Framework involved developing a master list of all outcomes achieved and valued by participants (See Appendix 6). As Shown in Table 4.2 above, the second step collated them with 16 outcomes categories emerging across the three Funds, with one outlier category for outcomes that did not fit elsewhere. These outcomes range from community engagement to empathy to resilience.

The third step involved mapping these new SROI outcome categories onto Ireland’s Well-being Framework, using an inductive and iterative process. By doing this, we can see how the outcomes generated across the three Rethink Ireland Funds support the focus of the Framework. After exploring the 11 dimensions of Irish well-being central to the framework, we found that four of them were relevant. As shown in Table 4.4, Dimension 2 ‘Subjective well-being’ had the most categories of outcomes (n=6), with Dimension 4 ‘Connection, community and participation’ having five categories. Therefore, most of the well-being generated by the Awardees supports better subjective well-being and better connection and community participation for participants.

Table 4.4 – Mapping of Well-defined SROI Outcome categories onto selected dimensions of the Well-being Framework

SROI OUTCOME NUMBERS	WELL-DEFINED OUTCOME CATEGORY	SELECTED DIMENSIONS FROM THE WELL-BEING FRAMEWORK
20, 21 15a, 15b	Category 3 – Less Stress Category 5 – Emotional Regulation	Dimension 1: Mental and Physical Health
3a, 3b 11a, 11b, 16a, 16b 1, 23 18 8, 19 12a, 12b	Category 8 – Future Outlook Category 9 – Pride and Achievement Category 10 – Self Confidence Category 12 – Empowerment Category 14 – Maturity and Independence Category 16 – Resilience	Dimension 2: Subjective well-being
17a, 17b 6, 10a, 10b 14	Category 2 – Communication Skills Category 7 – Education and Employment Skills Category 13 – Leadership Skills	Dimension 3: Knowledge, skills and innovation
22, 28 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b, 24 2, 7a, 7b, 25 13a, 13b, 13c 9	Category 1 – Community Engagement Category 4 – Social Inclusion / Exclusion Category 6 – Empathy Category 11 – Social Skills Category 15 – Improved Family Relationships	Dimension 4: Connection, community participation

4.3.4 Estimating the cumulative social value and overall return-on-investment achieved across the three Rethink Ireland Funds

As well as providing the mechanism to identify the social outcomes most important to participants, the SROI study also provided us with insight into the social value created both by each Fund, but also collectively. The information on the social value created, the return-on-investment rates for each of the three Funds and the method used to arrive at these figures, was already presented in the three final evaluation reports. Here are the figures again:

- Education Fund:** We found that the total social value generated for project beneficiaries across seven projects was around €68m, with a total cost of €7.8m for these projects over three years. The social return on investment is, therefore, in a range of around 1:9. This means that for every Euro of investment there was €9 of social value created for participants.
- Youth Funds:** We found that the total social value generated for project beneficiaries across seven projects was around €60m, with a total cost of €7.6m for these projects over three years. The social return on investment is, therefore, in a range of around 1:8. This means that for every Euro of investment, there was €8 of social value created for participants.
- Children and Youth Funds:** We found that the total social value generated for project beneficiaries across five projects was around €17.2m, with a total cost of €2.8m for these projects over three years. The social return on investment is, therefore, in a range of around 1:6. This means that for every Euro of investment, there was €6 of social value created for participants.

We found that the total social value generated across all three Funds was **€145m, with a total cost of €18m over three years**. Therefore, the **social return on investment is in the range of around 1:8**. This means that for every Euro of investment, there was €8 of social value created for participants (See Table 4.5)

Table 4.5 – Total investment made, overall social return on Investment and social return on investment ratio for the three Funds combined

	EDUCATION	YOUTH	CHILDREN & YOUTH	TOTAL
Investment	€7,790,285	€7,630,113	€2,758,204	€18,178,602
Social Return	€68,365,589	€59,679,762	€17,234,137	€145,279,487
SROI	€8.8	€7.8	€6.2	€8.0

When the outcomes for all 24 projects were combined, **we found that two outcomes emerged for respondents as having the most social value, namely Self-Confidence and Maturity and Independence** (See Table 4.6). There is a gap between these two and the next group of outcomes. These two outcomes should, therefore, be considered the most important outcomes (according to participants) and roughly equal¹⁹.

Table 4.6 – Overall social value generated by well-defined outcomes for the three Funds

	WELL-BEING DIMENSION	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUND	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND	TOTAL
Self-Confidence	2	€9,709,923	€6,754,678	€4,185,539	€20,650,140
Maturity and Independence	2	€14,995,365	€4,402,497	€682,810	€20,080,673
Social Skills	4	€9,389,130	€6,380,903	€732,282	€16,502,315
Communication Skills	3	€8,995,110	€4,645,967	€291,347	€13,932,424
Empathy	4	€1,558,092	€7,790,809	€3,742,438	€13,091,340
Education & Employment Skills	3	€8,013,426	€4,050,264	€316,873	€12,380,562
Future Outlook	2	€10,809,015	€400,016	€1,100,551	€12,309,582
Pride / Achievement	2	€2,202,030	€4,113,494	€1,380,927	€7,696,452
Social Inclusion / Exclusion	4	€380,022	€3,724,177	€2,630,395	€6,734,593
Leadership Skills	3	€835,595	€3,931,347		€4,766,942
Improved Family Relationships	4	€331,417	€4,158,387		€4,489,804
Emotional Regulation	1	€876,648	€1,935,836	€501,012	€3,313,495
Community Engagement	4		€2,577,466	€669,545	€3,247,011
Other Outcomes			€3,046,514	€182,215	€3,228,729
Resilience	2	€269,815	€1,767,406	€398,875	€2,436,096
Empowerment	2			€346,361	€346,361
Less Stress	1		€0	€72,967	€72,967
TOTAL		€68,365,589	€59,679,762	€17,234,137	€145,279,487

19 The negative outcomes identified on some projects have become absorbed in to net positive figures in this aggregation.

To analyse these SROI figures further, particularly concerning the well-being framework, we split out the social values generated for each of the four dimensions of well-being as highlighted (See Appendix 7 for more details)

- The social value achieved for *Dimension 1, Mental and Physical Health*, represents 2.3% of the overall total of €145m.
- The social value achieved for *Dimension 2 Subjective well-being*, represents 44% of the overall total of €145m, making it the largest category of social value from across the three Funds.
- The social value achieved for *Dimension 3 Knowledge, Skills and Innovation*, represents 21% of the overall total of €145m, making it the third largest category of social value from across the three Funds.
- The social value achieved for *Dimension 4 Connection and Community Participation*, represents 30% of the overall total of €145m, making it the second largest category of social value from across the three Funds.

4.3.5 Exploring how our Participant outcomes feed into the Sustainable Development Goals

The UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015 by 150 countries, setting a 15-year plan to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Concerning our work here, SDG 3 and SDG 4 have direct relevance. SDG 3 aims to ‘ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’ while SGD4 works ‘to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UNESCO, 2018). At an international level, there is a growing concern that many state members are lagging in their national targets. Despite remarkable advancements in several areas of development, millions of children continue to face the harsh realities of poverty, inequality and social exclusion. Today, approximately one in three child-related SDG indicators have either been met or are on track to be met (i.e., more than 50 per cent of their target value has already been accomplished). By 2030, only one in four children will live in countries where 70 per cent of the child-related SDG targets will be met (UNICEF, 2023).

Rather than seeing this as totally negative, however, it could be argued that by exploring the SROI outcomes created in this study, a far more positive policy and practice perspective on the real lives of those researched could be garnered. Positively, this Composite report seeks to advance the capacity of the various stakeholders and community organisations to thrive in their common aim for better personal community and societal outcomes.

Utilising the UNESCO Framework for SDGs

Within the context of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and based on comprehensive evidence and policy analysis, in 2017 the Organisation published “*Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives*”. Compiled from the relevant literature, eight cross-cutting sustainability competencies are interrelated with each other, transversal, multifunctional, content-independent, and key for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):




- **Systems thinking:** The ability to recognise and understand relationships; to analyse complex systems; to think of how systems are embedded within different domains and different scales; and to deal with uncertainty.
- **Anticipatory:** The ability to understand and evaluate multiple scenarios for the future – possible, probable and desirable; to create one’s visions for the future; to apply the precautionary principle; to assess the consequences of actions; and to deal with risks and changes.
- **Normative:** The ability to understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one’s actions; and to negotiate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets, in a context of conflicts of interests and trade-offs, uncertain knowledge and contradictions.
- **Strategic:** The ability to collectively develop and implement innovative actions that further sustainability at the local level and further afield.
- **Collaboration:** The ability to learn from others; to understand and respect the needs, perspectives and actions of others (empathy); to understand, relate to and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership); to deal with conflicts in a group; and to facilitate collaborative and participatory problem-solving.
- **Critical thinking:** The ability to question norms, practices and opinions; to reflect on one’s values, perceptions and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse.
- **Self-awareness:** The ability to reflect on one’s role in the local community and (global) society; to continually evaluate and further motivate one’s actions; and to deal with one’s feelings and desires.
- **Integrated problem-solving:** The overarching ability to apply different problem-solving frameworks to complex sustainability problems and develop viable, inclusive and equitable solution options that promote sustainable development, integrating the abovementioned competencies.

The key competencies represent what citizens particularly need to deal with today’s complex challenges and the associated adversities they face. The competencies are relevant to all SDGs and enable individuals and, as in the case of this study, the set of organisations working with and for them as well.

The social value created by the three Rethink Funds speaks directly to achieving the UN’s primary SDG aspirations. As shown in Table 4.7, we matched the SROI participant outcomes and the selected dimensions from the Irish Well-being Framework, to both primary and secondary SDG affiliations. This revealed that SDG 3 on good health and well-being fits with Dimensions 1, 2 and 4 of the well-being Framework and that SDG

4 speaks to Dimension 3. This mapping shows that as well as the practices, processes and actions used by Awardee projects to support participants to achieve key social outcomes, which support their overall well-being, these findings also add knowledge on how SDG 3 and 4 can be realised in settings of this kind.

Table 4.7 – Mapping of Well-defined SROI Outcome categories onto selected dimensions of the Well-being Framework, with Primary and Secondary SDG affiliation

SROI OUTCOME NUMBERS	WELL-DEFINED OUTCOME CATEGORY	SELECTED DIMENSIONS FROM THE WELL-BEING FRAMEWORK	PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SDG AFFILIATION
20, 21 15a, 15b	Category 3 – Less Stress Category 5 – Emotional Regulation	Dimension 1: Mental and Physical Health	<div><div></div><div></div></div> <div>SDG 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing (P) SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities (S)</div>
3a, 3b 11a, 11b, 16a, 16b 1, 23 18 8, 19 12a, 12b	Category 8 – Future Outlook Category 9 – Pride and Achievement Category 10 – Self Confidence Category 12 – Empowerment Category 14 – Maturity and Independence Category 16 – Resilience	Dimension 2: Subjective well-being	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> <div>SDGs 1 and 2 - No Poverty; No Hunger (S) SDG 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing (P)</div>
17a, 17b 6, 10a, 10b 13	Category 2 – Communication Skills Category 7 – Education and Employment Skills Category 13 – Leadership Skills	Dimension 3: Knowledge, skills and innovation	<div><div></div><div></div></div> <div>SDG 4 - Quality Education (P) SDG 10 - Reduced Inequality within and among Countries (S)</div>
22, 28 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b, 24 2, 7a, 7b, 25 13a, 13b, 13c 9	Category 1 – Community Engagement Category 4 – Social Inclusion / Exclusion Category 6 – Empathy Category 11 – Social Skills Category 15 – Improved Family Relationships	Dimension 4: Connection, community participation	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> <div>SDG 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing (P) SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities (S) SDG 16 - Peace Justice and Strong Communities (S)</div>

Note: (P) relates to Primary Affiliation and (S) to Secondary Affiliation

05

Embedding an Evidence-based Sustainable Model of Well-being into Policy and Practice

5.1 – Introduction

The overarching aim of this evaluation was ‘to identify projects that can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education and/or improving and maintaining good mental health outcomes for young people’. To address this aim and bring this Composite Report to a close, **Section 5.2** introduces our new evidence-based model designed to introduce sustainable well-being into the policy and practice of education, alternative education and youth mental health provision. **Section 5.3** then presents an *Integrated Practice and Policy Framework* (IPPF) to start a dialogue between policymakers and practitioners on how best to address the findings from this work.

5.2 New Evidence-based Model on Well-being

Whilst the three evaluations uncovered many examples of excellence, the persistent finding centres around participant well-being and how Projects supported participants to achieve it. To represent the significance of this finding, we present a new evidence-based model (See Figure 5.1). The model is built upon evidence from across the three Funds and firmly grounded on three key policies - the Department of Education’s *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023)*; ‘*Understanding Life in Ireland - A Well-Being Framework*’ (2022) and the *OECD’s Learning Compass 2030*.

Central to the Department’s Wellbeing Framework is a desire ‘to ensure that the experiences of children and young people from the early years and throughout their primary and post-primary education will be one that enhances, promotes, values and nurtures their wellbeing’ (DES: 2018:5). What this policy puts forward is an aspiration where schools and centres of education are not just about formal education – instead, they play a vital role in the promotion of wellbeing, in the domains of *academic, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual*. Despite being education-focused, there is an obvious relevance here with this Framework and the work of the Awardees across the Funds that have either an education or mental health focus.

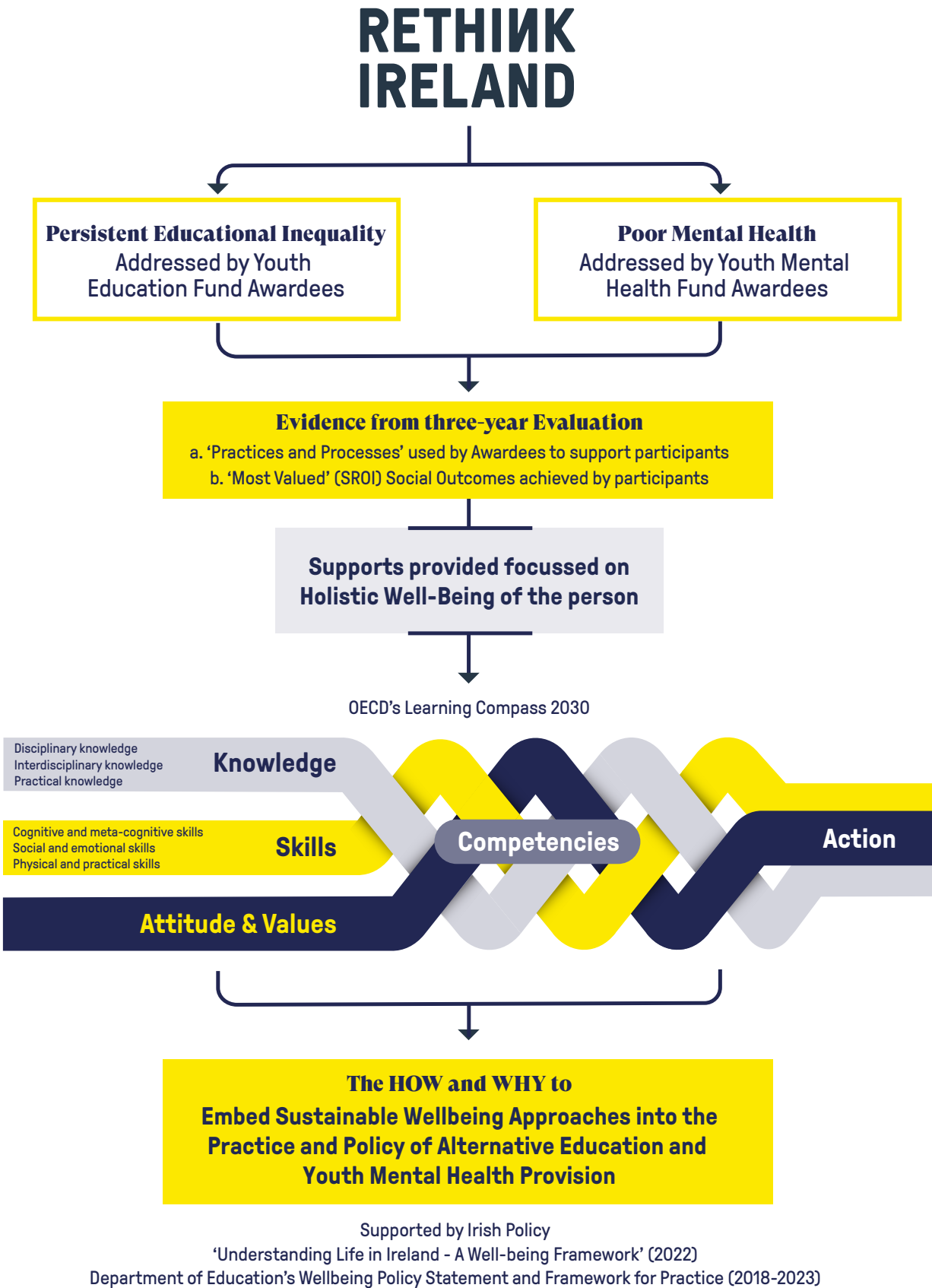
In 2023, the Irish government published *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-Being Framework*. The overarching vision for this Framework is ‘enabling all our people to live fulfilled lives now and into the future’, ingrained in well-being across person, place and society (Department of An Taoiseach, 2022). It places a specific focus on equality and sustaining well-being in the future.

The OECD’s Learning Compass 2030 aims to articulate core goals and elements of a shared future in a way that can be used at multiple levels – by individual learners, education practitioners, system leaders, policy designers and institutional decision-makers. The Compass sets out a learning framework which offers a broad vision of the types of competencies students need to thrive in 2030. It acknowledges the importance of formal, non-formal and informal learning alongside education that is bounded by formal curricula and instructional strategies. Moving towards 2030, it is increasingly important to recognise the multiple layers and directions of learning in which students participate, including at school, at home and in the communities to which they belong. Therefore, well-being as conceptualised by the Learning Compass centres on the individual’s acquisition of core competencies across their various areas of learning and social ecologies.

The key points of our model are as follows (See Figure 5.1):

- Rethink Ireland's Education, Youth and Children and Youth Funds were introduced to address persistent educational inequality and poor mental health outcomes.
- Our evaluation data presents new information on the *practices, processes* and *actions*, used by Awardees to support the needs of their participants. The outcomes of this work for participants were captured by the SROI study, where they told us of the outcomes they had achieved and how socially valuable they were to them.
- Regardless of whether Awardee Projects had an education or mental health focus, the supports they provided were based on a strengths-based, holistic approach aimed at building individual well-being, and not just on the resolution of a singular issue.
- Using the *OECD's Learning Compass 2030* provides the language and lens through which to further interpret the findings. It suggests that for us to achieve agency and move towards fulfilling our potential, we all need core foundations in knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In the future, literacy and numeracy will remain important, but physical and mental health along with social and emotional skills need to be achieved in parallel. It is here that the value of the Awardees can be seen in helping Awardees develop these competencies.
- If '*Understanding Life in Ireland - A Well-Being Framework*' (2022) and the Department of Education's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* are to be realised, society needs a more focused approach towards equality and sustainable well-being. The evidence from this study shows the '*how*' and '*why*' of embedding sustainable well-being strategies for alternative education and youth mental health provision, into policymaking, practice and research.
- We would argue that dealing with educational inequality through Alternative Education Provision and improving youth mental health outcomes, are best addressed from a well-being perspective. This simple yet complex message has major implications for the research, policy and practice communities in education and youth mental health provision.

Figure 5.1 – Evidence for Embedding Sustainable Well-Being Considerations into the Policy and Practice of Alternative Education and Youth Mental Health Provision



5.3 - An Integrated Practice and Policy Framework

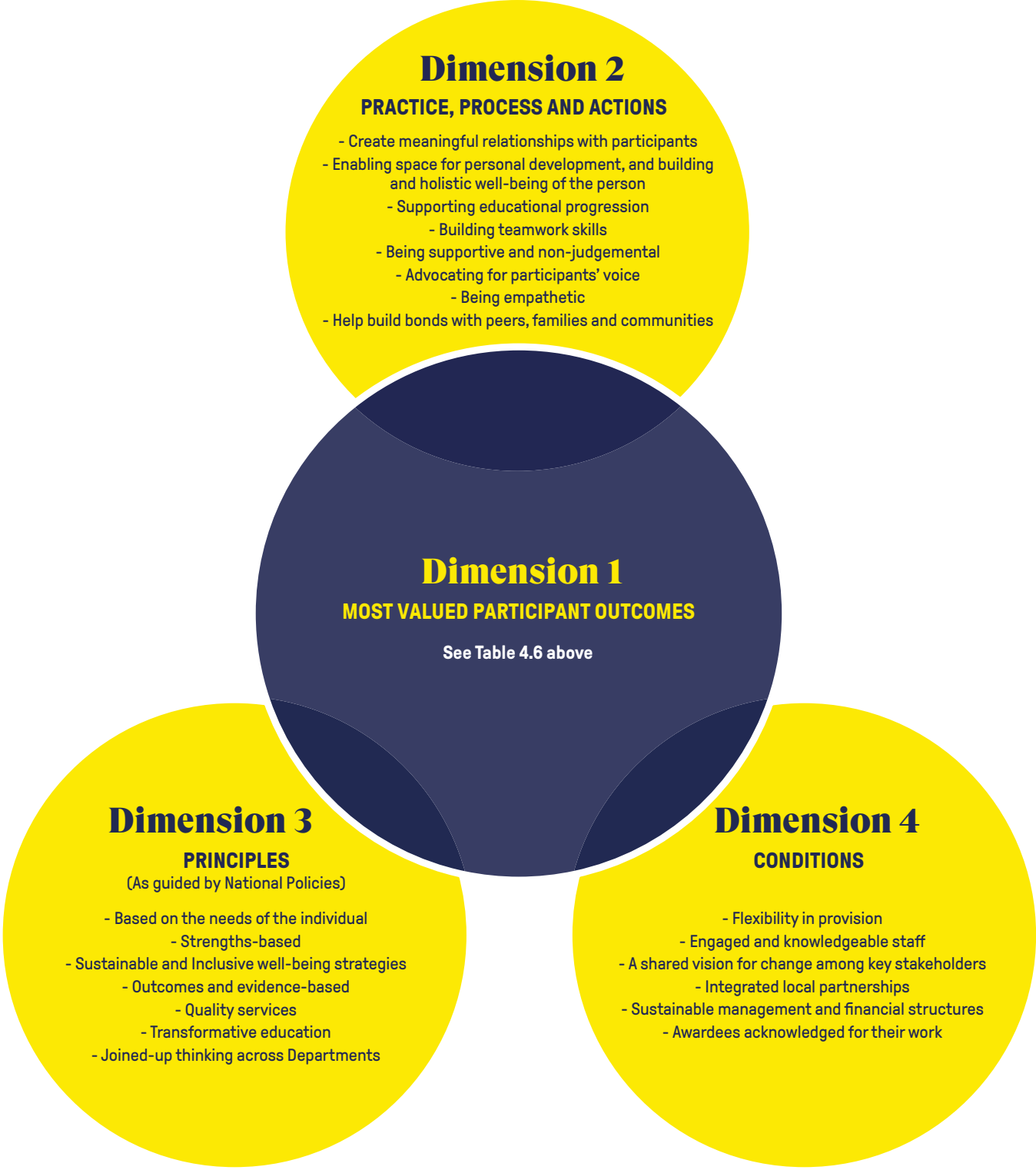
In her work on *Flexible Learning Programs* in Australia, te Riele (2014) developed a *Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs*. It incorporates four key components, which taken together, present an integrated view of how quality in these programs can be achieved. The Framework is an important guide for us now, because “Rather than mandating exactly what a flexible learning program should look like, [it] ... enables programs to apply it to their own specific context and purposes” (ibid: 13). Therefore, this section does not offer strict recommendations for the research, policy and practice communities but instead presents an *Integrated Practice and Policy Framework* (IPPF) to start a dialogue. Its key elements are adapted from te Riele’s work (ibid) and illustrated in Figure 5.2.

- **Dimension 1 – Most Valued Outcomes:** This dimension reflects the qualitative and quantitative data on outcomes most valued by participants, as collected through the SROI study.
- **Dimension 2 - Practices, processes and actions:** This refers to the range of actions used by Awardees to support the most valued outcomes.
- **Dimension 3 - Principles:** The work of any Awardee is underpinned by principles specific to that programme, but which also reflect the larger national policy priorities.
- **Dimensions 4 - Conditions:** All Awardees work within a socio-economic and political context. The conditions within that context can enable or disable staff from achieving the most valued outcomes with participants.

The first use of our IPPF is that of a reflective tool for practitioners - for perhaps someone just starting a career, for someone in the early to mid-stage, or for those who are well-established. Rather than merely reading a list of recommendations, the IPPF offers practitioners an opportunity to engage in self-reflection, on their practice. In addition, it provides a starting point for a discussion with others on how best to meet the needs of participants in their care and understand more widely through that dialogue, the inner workings of the *Black Box* of this form of provision.

The ultimate destination of practice is to support participants achieve outcomes they value the most. As a reference point, the most valuable outcomes identified from our SROI study, are presented in Dimension 1. We also found that regardless of variations between Awardee projects, there was a commonality in the *practices, processes and actions* used to support participants. This is captured by Dimension 2 of the IPPF. For Dimension 3, we would invite practitioners to consider the *principles* underpinning their practice, based on what we found as central to the work of Awardees. Dimension 4 describes the *conditions* in which Awardees do their work, ranging from a well-resourced and trained workforce to having sustainable management and financial structures in place. This opens awareness of the reality of contextual factors impinging on practice, but more importantly how the policy and practice community can engage to address them.

Figure 5.2 – An Integrated Practice and Policy Framework (IPPF)



(Adapted from te Riele, 2014:73)

To operationalise the process of dialogue between the practice and policy communities, we offer a targeted set of recommendations:

Recommendation No. 1 – Establishing a Sharing Forum

Our primary recommendation relates to Rethink Ireland, the commissioners of this research. We suggest that it is their responsibility to establish the appropriate mechanisms through which these findings can be shared with both policymakers cross-departmentally, and with practitioners in alternative education and youth mental health provision. Also, creating a forum for both communities to meet and work together on embedding evidence-based sustainable well-being strategies, is of crucial importance.

Recommendation No. 2 – A better understanding of Alternative Education

We need a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of alternative education in Irish policy. This research offers a new definition for consideration and further debate:

“Alternative education constitutes educational projects addressing diverse issues connected to educational inequality and diversity (i.e. socio-economic, mental health and intellectual disability), operating inside and outside of the mainstream education system, supporting students’ life-long learning through innovative formal and informal teaching approaches”.

Recommendation No. 3 – The SROI Approach and Evidence-based Policy

Rethink Ireland led the way in funding the implementation of an SROI study for this evaluation. Given their aspiration to have evidence-based policy-making processes in Ireland, it would be beneficial if they were to consider how to support Awardees interested in continuing their SROI journey. It is only after continual sets of SROI are created that the value of these forms of provision will be understood.

Recommendation No. 4 – The Value of Social Innovation in supporting Social Change

Social innovations and social enterprises can help create positive change in communities and should be supported.

Concluding Remarks: The Well-being of society is a shared destination

As a considerable cohort of young people in Ireland still experience educational inequality and, in some cases, poor levels of mental health, Rethink Ireland introduced the three Funds to work innovatively to find sustainable solutions. The nature of this *Composite Report* was to present evidence on the practices, processes and actions used by Awardees to support participants. By using an SROI approach, we were also able to document the social value of the outcomes achieved as a result.

The **central thread** running through the Funds was that, regardless of which Awardee was being considered, **promoting the holistic well-being of the participant was their ultimate goal**, and ultimately, this was critical in achieving participant outcomes. Conceptually, we have presented this in Figure 5.1 above. With that, we have explored evidence from the evaluation, and how it might be used for *Embedding Sustainable Well-Being Considerations into the Policy and Practice of Education, Alternative Education and Youth Mental Health Provision*. All the work we have witnessed in Awardee projects, along with the deep, thoughtful data we have gathered from participants, points to one crucial component, necessary for any of this to happen – namely *relationships*. This is summed up by the following:

“...what really matters to any student’s well-being is not one-off curricular input—a session on mindfulness practice, say, or a dedicated week of mental health promotion (‘five ways to well-being’, for example)—but meaningful and sustained relationship with the peers and adults in their lives. Indeed, as the My World Survey (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012; Dooley et al., 2019) of youth mental health consistently reveals, a meaningful relationship between the young person and ‘One Good Adult’ is the single most powerful indicator of youth well-being”.

The implication of having data to support this from this evaluation is significant and cuts across the policy priorities of many government departments through for example, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures or Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (DCEDIY); the Implementation Plan for Sharing the Vision Mental Health Policy (HSE / Department of Health) or the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education and Skills). The goal of these policies is to provide an environment which supports the thriving of the individual. **For the first time in Ireland, we now have a set of data that reveals how education and youth mental health projects do their work.**

As evaluators, we have been privileged to see the way Awardee Projects have supported their participants to thrive and flourish. **Rethink Ireland’s foresight to introduce these Funds has now yielded evidence and data on the nature of well-being for young people either experiencing educational inequality or poor mental health well-being.** There is more than enough for the research, policy and practice communities to come together to explore and co-create recommendations for furthering the golden thread of well-being in the lives of all young people in Ireland and ensuring that “...the well-being of society is a shared destination” and a priority for us all (OECD’s Learning Compass 2030).

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APPENDIX 1

Distribution of the 24 Awardees by Primary Sub-fund Affiliation

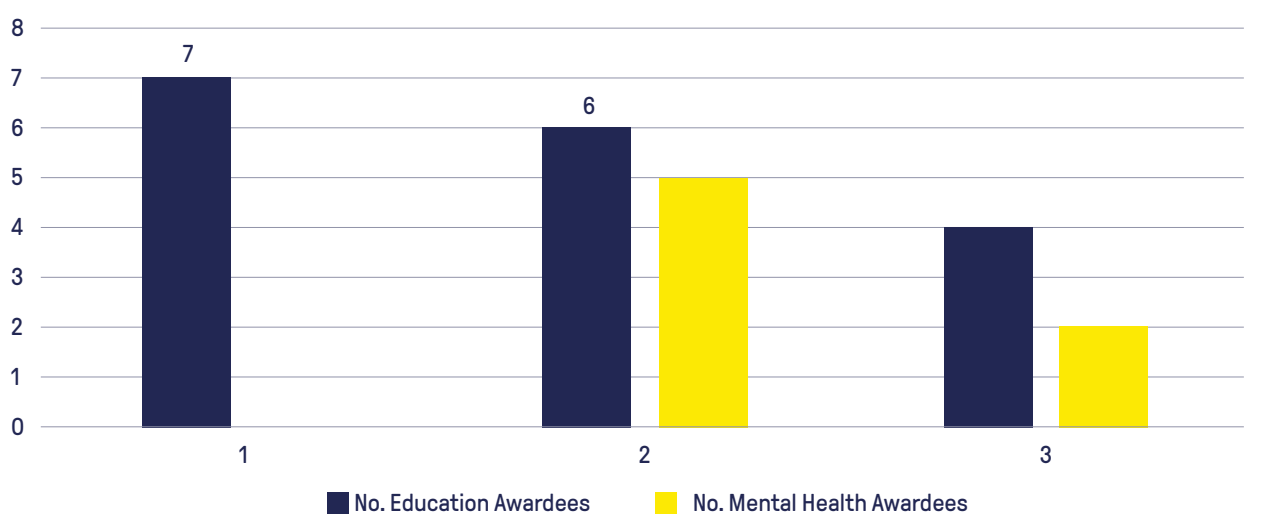
Of the 39 initial Awardee projects, 24 participated in the evaluation process. As shown in Table A1, 17 of the Awardees had an education focus, representing 71% of the total Awardees, with seven Awardees focussed exclusively on youth mental health, accounting for 29% of the total cohort.

Table A1 – Distribution of the 24 Awardees by primary affiliation to either Education or Mental Health

EDUCATION FUNDS	NO. EDUCATION AWARDEES	NO. MENTAL HEALTH AWARDEES	YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH FUNDS
Education Fund	7	N/A	N/A
Youth Education Fund	6	5	Youth Mental Health Fund
Children and Youth Education Fund	4	2	Children and Youth Mental Health Fund
Total Education Awardees	17 (71%)	7 (29%)	Total Youth Mental Health Awardees

Figure A1 depicts the spread of Awardees across the three Funds. Whilst the Awardees in the Education Fund were solely focused on educational interventions, Awardees in the Youth and Children and Youth Funds had either a youth education or youth mental health focus.

Figure A1 - Distribution of the 24 Awardees by primary affiliation to either Education or Mental Health



(Legend for x-axis: 1 = Education Fund; 2 = Youth Funds (Education and Mental Health Awardees); 3 = Children and Youth Funds (Education and Mental Health Awardees))

APPENDIX 2

Awardee Projects Funded under Rethink Ireland’s Education Fund that completed the Evaluation

PROJECT/ AWARDEE	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE	PARTICIPANT GROUP	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
An Cosán VCC	Dublin	18+	<ul style="list-style-type: none">An Cosán VCC seeks to empower women and men from disadvantaged communities across Ireland.It provides an entry model of higher education and blended learning, face-to-face workshops, technology workshops, live virtual classes, offline individual and group work, collaborative peer learning, and communities of practice.The programme partners with a wide range of community education organisations at local, regional and national level.
Aspire2	Dublin	13–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Aspire2 aims to increase DEIS school students’ prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level education and apprenticeships.The project provides students with group mentoring and work experience placement.The programme established a collaborative partnership with several academic institutions around Ireland (i.e., UCD, CIT, UCC, TCD and IT Tallaght).
Cork Life Centre	Cork	12–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The Cork Life Centre’s vision is to provide a unique alternative environment for education for children and young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education.It provides an alternative one-to-one and small-group learning environment with wraparound support and outreach service.The Centre established links and relationships with numerous agencies and services in Cork City across the areas of business, academia and health, and with local community groups.
Citywise Fast Track Academy	Dublin	15–19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Citywise Fast Track Academy’s vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach.The project focuses on developing social, behavioural and academic skills and the conditions necessary to increase the number of young people transitioning to higher-level education.It collaborates with IT Tallaght and other agencies in the community.

PROJECT/ AWARDEE	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE	PARTICIPANT GROUP	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
iScoil	Dublin	13–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none">iScoil provides innovative, flexible online and blended learning for early school leavers. This model provides a safe environment where young people can achieve meaningful accreditation and re-engage with education and access further education, training or employment opportunities.Personalised and online modalities of intervention are provided to each student based on their needs, interests and abilities.iScoil works in partnership with local agencies and youth services nationally.
Trinity Access 21	Dublin	13–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Trinity Access 21 (TA21) aims to transform the Irish education system and aspires to an education system that supports every young person in reaching their full academic potential.Trinity Access 21 provides DEIS schools (and schools where progression to higher education is low) with student and teacher training. Trinity Access 21 is grounded within three core principles: Mentoring, Pathways to College and Leadership in Learning. Students are provided with one-to-one and group mentoring programmes, group work and team-based workshops.The project works in partnership with schools, communities, other educational organisations and businesses.
Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID)	Dublin	19–25	<ul style="list-style-type: none">TCPID’s mission is to enable people with intellectual disability to develop their potential through a combination of lifelong learning and professional training.The Centre provides learners with a high-quality higher-education programme, mentoring, work experience and career guidance.Key partners of the programme come from businesses, including companies and banks (e.g., Abbott, CPL and Bank of Ireland).

APPENDIX 3

Awardee Projects Funded under Rethink Ireland’s Youth Funds that completed the Evaluation

SUB-FUND	PROJECT / AWARDEE & LOCATION	PARTICIPANT GROUP	PARENT ORGANISATION	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
Youth Education Fund	Foroige Futures Longford & Leitrim	Young people	Foroige	The Programme wants to enable young people at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage to access a range of accredited education initiatives that will enhance their life opportunities by developing a sustainable model of rural youth work that can be scaled across Ireland.
	Foroige Leadership for Life Nationwide	Young people	Foroige	The Programme is aimed at 15–18-year-olds. It allows them to learn, practice and develop the core skills of leadership. Upon completion of the programme, participants are eligible to graduate with a Foundation Certificate in Youth Leadership and Community Action, which is awarded by the University of Galway.
	Midlands Science Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath	Young people in secondary schools	Midlands Science	This Project aims to increase economic and social prosperity in the Midlands region through the development and increase of science capital and the promotion of STEM education.
	My Future, My Business Cork	Second level students	Junior Achievement Ireland / Young Enterprise Ireland	The project is designed to inspire Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle second-level students to explore future career possibilities by giving the students access to quality learning experiences and encouraging young people at risk of early school leaving to complete second-level education.
	ALFA Steiner Secondary School Clare	12–16-year-olds	Ard Aoibhinn Community Initiatives	The Project combines an innovative, engaging approach to learning with a clear vision of adolescent development and a powerful positive social experience. It provides an alternative to the mainstream Junior Cycle for students and their families who choose it and can address the needs of early school leavers and successfully bring them back into education.
	Sing out with Strings Limerick	Children and young people	Irish Chamber Orchestra	This Project seeks to turn ‘disadvantage’ on its head, by empowering children and young people to reimagine their own personal and collective identities and represent themselves and their communities positively and powerfully.

SUB-FUND	PROJECT / AWARDEE	PARTICIPANT GROUP	PARENT ORGANISATION	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
Youth Mental Health Fund	The Breakthrough Programme Dublin	Adult males	Beacon of Light Counselling Centre	It provides a safe therapeutic environment for men to address their mental health issues via 1:1 counselling, with simultaneous support for their physical and psychological development.
	Narrative 4’s Empathy Project Limerick	Young people	Narrative 4	Narrative 4 envisions a world where young adults lead with empathy. Their vision is to harness the power of the story exchange to equip and embolden young adults to improve their lives, communities, and the world.
	LikeMinded Dublin	Young people	GAISCE – The President’s Award	LikeMinded aims to provide opportunities for young people who identify as LGBTI+ to participate in the Gaisce programme in a safe and welcoming environment, and they can lead the direction of their Award with the support of a peer group and a one-to-one mentor.
	Moyross Education Support Programme Limerick	Primary School children	Corpus Christi Primary School, Moyross	The Project supports the children through consistent unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy, to create significant relationships with children and their families. They provide a range of interventions that complement classwork and contribute to the social, educational, and emotional development of the pupils and their families.
	The SOAR Foundation Nationwide	Young people	The SOAR Foundation	The Foundation selected their programme Hustle for inclusion in the evaluation. This programme is focused on empowering young people. It is an early intervention character development programme for teenagers to emotionally and mentally prepare them for the modern world.

APPENDIX 4

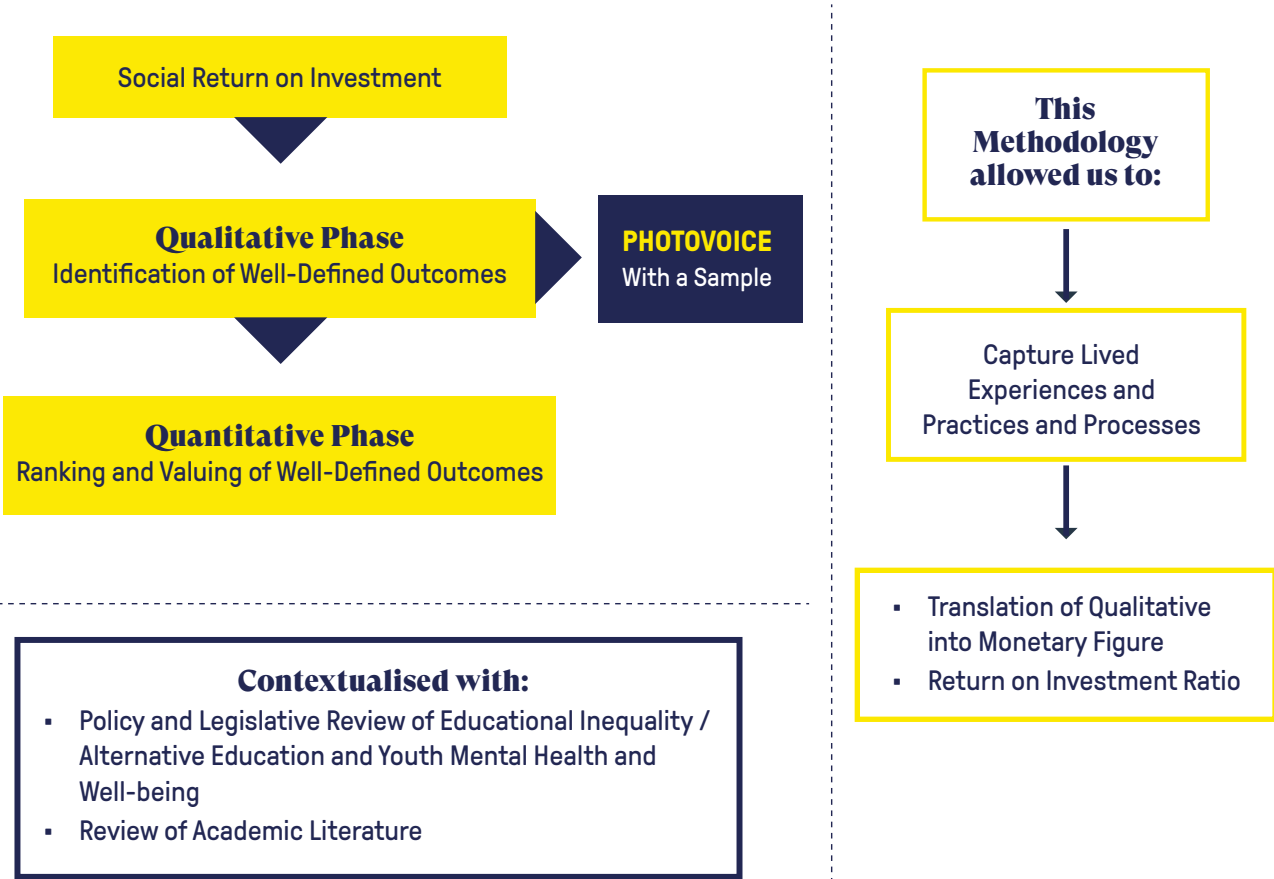
Awardee Projects Funded under Rethink Ireland’s Children and Youth Funds that completed the Evaluation

SUB-FUND	PROJECT / AWARDEE & LOCATION	PARTICIPANT AGE GROUP	PARENT ORGANISATION	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
Children and Youth Education	Changemaker Schools Network Dublin	4-12	Dublin City University Institute of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">CSN is a University-Primary Schools partnership that seeks to promote school cultures underpinned by the pillars of empathy, creativity, leadership, teamwork and social justice.Changemaker Schools receive one to one in the development of their school’s Changemaker identity, teacher training, and join a professional learning network.The programme partners with a variety of national and international bodies, education supports and initiatives.
	Engage in Education Limerick	11-23	Limerick Community-Based Education Initiative CLG	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engage in Education seeks to support and encourage the development of students’ potential from Limerick City to enhance their possibilities by attending further and higher education.The programme offers a variety of financial and non-financial supports that aid progression through the education system. Based on the student’s age, they can get engaged in three streams of the programme: Nurture, Compass and Engage.Engage in Education works closely with a variety of stakeholders, including primary and post-primary schools, further education providers, third-level institutions, community organisations and businesses.
	Rainbow Club Cork Centre for Autism Cork	5-24	Rainbow Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Rainbow Club provides a range of bespoke support for children and young people with autism.It seeks to bring services and social groups under one roof, providing training and advice for families, teachers, and the wider community.The project partners with a wide variety of local and national charity and community organisations, corporate partners, and public services.

SUB-FUND	PROJECT / AWARDEE & LOCATION	PARTICIPANT AGE GROUP	PARENT ORGANISATION	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
Children and Youth Mental Health	TU Dublin Access to Apprenticeship Dublin	16-24	Technological University of Dublin College of Engineering & Built Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">ATA’s mission is to support the transition of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into an apprenticeship scheme.It provides a close-to-the-labour-market, skill-sampling 12-week programme, including modules in Skill Sampling, Personal and Professional Development, and Employer Engagement and Work Placement.The programme engages with a wide range of organisations, including state agencies, NGOs, youth services, DEIS schools and other programmes
	DCU Fuse Dublin	9-11	Dublin City University Anti-Bullying Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none">DCU FUSE aims to build capacity in schools across Ireland to tackle bullying and online safety issuesIt offers a suite of classroom-based workshops covering: Bullying, Cyberbullying and Online Safety and associated topics.The programme is offered free of charge to primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, as well as the Educational Training Board Network of Schools, Community and Comprehensive Schools, Educate Together and Youth Reach organisations.
	Solas Cancer Support Centre Waterford	5-26	Solas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Solas’s core vision is to support people affected by cancer, their families and carers in Waterford and the Southeast, and to engage with underserved communities.It provides a range of one-to-one support and services, including play, music and creative therapies, counselling, reflexology, massage, Reiki, meditation, and yoga.The centre relies on strong partnerships with key stakeholders, including schools, social workers, and the primary care system.

APPENDIX 5

Visualisation of the Evaluation Framework for the Youth Funds



APPENDIX 6

Outcomes Achieved by Participants across the Three Funds

The first step in mapping the SROI outcomes onto the Irish-Well-being Framework involved developing a master list of all outcomes achieved and valued by participants²⁰ from across the three Funds (See Table A6). It is important to recap the point made in all three Fund level evaluation reports – to create the outcomes listed below, we used the language and definitions offered to us by the participants. Details of the social value created by each of these outcomes for participants can be found in the respective evaluation reports from the three Funds. In total, there are 29 well-defined outcomes and the prevalence of each is shown by a tick.

Table A6 – Listing of all well-defined outcomes as achieved and valued by PARTICIPANTS from across the three Rethink Ireland Funds

WELL-DEFINED OUTCOMES	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUNDS	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND
1. Self-Confidence	✓	✓	✓
2. Cultural awareness	✓	✓	
3a. Future Outlook ²¹	✓	✓	✓
3b. Positive Future Outlook			
4a. Positive belonging/ inclusion	✓	✓	✓
4b. Increased feeling of social inclusion			
5a. Social Isolation	✓	✓	
5b. Discrimination / Social Exclusion			
6. Study Skills	✓		
7a. Empathy	✓	✓	✓
7b. Increased Empathy			
8. Maturity / Independence	✓	✓	
9. Improved Family Relationships	✓	✓	
10a. Employability Skills	✓	✓	✓
10b. Increased Employability Skills			
11a. Sense of Achievement	✓	✓	✓
11b. Higher Sense of Achievement			
12a. Resilience	✓	✓	✓
12b. Increased Resilience			

20 Data relates to Participants only and does not include data from ‘other’ stakeholders

21 As with this example, some outcomes were worded differently in different fund-level evaluations but were grouped for this across-fund level analysis as shown in Table 4.2. Table 4.2 records any variations in wording as they arose by fund.

WELL-DEFINED OUTCOMES	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUNDS	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND
13a. Social Skills			
13b. Increased Social Skills	✓	✓	✓
13c. Social Skills / Social Support			
14. Leadership Skills	✓	✓	
15a. Emotional Regulation	✓	✓	✓
15b. Increased Self-Regulation			
16a. Sense of Pride	✓	✓	✓
16b. Increased Pride			
17a. Communication Skills	✓	✓	✓
17b. Improved Communication Skills			
18. Empowerment			✓
19. Sense of Responsibility			✓
20. Decreased Anxiety			✓
21. Decreased Stress		✓	✓
22. Civic Engagement			✓
23. Increased Self-Efficacy			✓
24. Increased Sense of Safety			✓
25. Increased Respect			✓
26. Increased Physical Health			✓
27. Increased Job Satisfaction			✓
28. Active Citizenship / Community Engagement		✓	
29. Curiosity		✓	

APPENDIX 7

Total Social Value Generated by Well-defined Outcomes for Dimensions 1, 2, 3 and 4 on the Irish Well-being Framework

To analyse these figures further, in the tables below we split out the social values generated for each of the four dimensions of well-being as highlighted. For example, Table A7.1 shows that a total of €3m of social value was generated for participants because of achieving less stress and having better emotional regulation, due to their involvement with their respective Awardee projects. The social value achieved for Dimension 1, Mental and Physical Health, represents 2.3% of the overall total of €145m.

Table A7.1 – Total Social Value Generated by Well-defined Outcomes for Dimension 1 – Mental and Physical Health.

	DIMENSION 1	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUND	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND	TOTAL	D1 TOTAL
Less Stress	1		€0	€72,967	€72,967	€3,386,462
Emotional Regulation	1	€876,648	€1,935,836	€501,012	€3,313,495	

Table A7.2 shows that a total of €63m of social value was generated for participants because of achieving six outcomes such as self-confidence, maturity and independence, due to their involvement with their respective Awardee projects. The social value achieved for Dimension 2 Subjective well-being, represents 44% of the overall total of €145m, making it the largest category of social value from across the three Funds. It is here, therefore, that we know now that these Funds have created the most amount of social value. This supports our *golden thread* argument from earlier.

Table A7.2 – Total Social Value Generated by Well-defined Outcomes for Dimension 2 – Subjective well-being.

	DIMENSION 2	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUND	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND	TOTAL	D2 TOTAL
Self-Confidence	2	€9,709,923	€6,754,678	€4,185,539	€20,650,140	€63,519,304
Maturity and Independence	2	€14,995,365	€4,402,497	€682,810	€20,080,673	
Future Outlook	2	€10,809,015	€400,016	€1,100,551	€12,309,582	
Pride / Achievement	2	€2,202,030	€4,113,494	€1,380,927	€7,696,452	
Resilience	2	€269,815	€1,767,406	€398,875	€2,436,096	
Empowerment	2			€346,361	€346,361	

Table A7.3 shows that a total of €31m of social value was generated for participants because of achieving three outcomes, namely communication skills, education and employment skills and leadership skills, due to their involvement with their respective Awardee projects. The social value achieved for Dimension 3 Knowledge, Skills and Innovation, represents 21% of the overall total of €145m, making it the third largest category of social value from across the three Funds.

Table A7.3 – Total Social Value Generated by Well-defined Outcomes for Dimension 3 – Knowledge, Skills and Innovation.

	DIMENSION 3	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUND	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND	TOTAL	D3 TOTAL
Communication Skills	3	€8,995,110	€4,645,967	€291,347	€13,932,424	€31,079,928
Education & Employment Skills	3	€8,013,426	€4,050,264	€316,873	€12,380,562	
Leadership Skills	3	€835,595	€3,931,347		€4,766,942	

Table A7.4 shows that a total of €44m of social value was generated for participants because of achieving five outcomes, ranging from social skills to community engagement, due to their involvement with their respective Awardee projects. The social value achieved for Dimension 4 Connection and Community Participation, represents 30% of the overall total of €145m, making it the second largest category of social value from across the three Funds.

Table A7.4 – Total Social Value Generated by Well-defined Outcomes for Dimension 4 – Connection and Community Participation.

	DIMENSION 4	EDUCATION FUND	YOUTH FUND	CHILDREN AND YOUTH FUND	TOTAL	D4 TOTAL
Social Skills	4	€9,389,130	€6,380,903	€732,282	€16,502,315	€44,065,063
Empathy	4	€1,558,092	€7,790,809	€3,742,438	€13,091,340	
Social Inclusion / Exclusion	4	€380,022	€3,724,177	€2,630,395	€6,734,593	
Improved Family Relationships	4	€331,417	€4,158,387		€4,489,804	
Community Engagement	4		€2,577,466	€669,545	€3,247,011	

