

Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland Drive Nearly £1 Billion in Local Economic Impact

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Social enterprises across Northern Ireland are now contributing close to £1 billion in turnover annually and supporting over 17,000 jobs, according to a newly released and comprehensive sector report. The findings underscore the growing economic and social importance of these organisations, many of which operate on a not-for-profit basis with a mission to reinvest in their communities.

Northern Ireland Economy Minister Caoimhe Archibald praised the sector's resilience and positive impact. Speaking to *Belfast Live*, she noted that the report is the most detailed of its kind and highlights how social enterprises are expanding their reach across the region. "It shows the strength of the sector and how it continues to grow, with almost a billion in turnover and 17,000 jobs supported across the North," the Minister said.

Social enterprises are businesses that combine commercial operations with a clear social purpose. These organisations often reinvest profits into community projects or services, addressing local needs such as employment for people with disabilities, environmental sustainability, or education. Minister Archibald emphasised that social enterprises offer a regionally balanced economic contribution and play a key role in both economic development and community support.

In a move to strengthen the sector further, the Department for the Economy has collaborated with stakeholders to develop a Social Enterprise Action Plan. This plan outlines strategic recommendations to help scale operations and provide targeted support to these organisations.

Among the many successful examples highlighted in the report is Loaf Pottery, a social enterprise based in Crawfordsburn and operated by the NOW (North, Opportunity, and Work) Group. The group supports individuals with learning disabilities and autism, offering them training and employment opportunities through creative enterprise.

Maeve Monaghan, Chief Executive Officer of the NOW Group, shared the story of Loaf Pottery's transformation. What began in a derelict building evolved into a thriving business featuring a pottery studio, café, and garden. "We set up a pottery studio to bring people with disabilities into this area, focus on creativity, and help train them," Monaghan explained. "We're producing top-level pottery and selling it all over the world."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the enterprise adapted by launching an online platform to sell its products globally. This shift not only kept the business afloat but significantly expanded its reach. "It's a mug with purpose," said Monaghan, explaining that revenue from the pottery supports the charity's work with people who are neurodivergent or have learning disabilities.

While individual customers remain an important base, corporate gifting has become a significant avenue for growth. "We've just finished a bespoke range for Deloitte," Monaghan

said, noting the value of corporate partnerships in advancing social goals. The report and its accompanying success stories highlight the robust contribution of social enterprises to Northern Ireland's economy and society. As these businesses continue to grow, they provide a model for sustainable, inclusive development, balancing commercial success with community impact.