

A photograph of four business professionals in a modern office setting. A man with glasses and a beard is seated at a table, gesturing with his hand while speaking. A woman in a white blazer stands behind him, looking at a document. Another man in a dark suit is seated to the right, also looking at the document. A woman with long brown hair is seated in the foreground, facing away from the camera. The office has large glass windows in the background, reflecting the outside world.

The Social Dividend: A Report on “Good” Business in Ireland


Research Model and Sample Population

25 C-suite level participants in CEO / MD / CPO / CSO roles

In-depth interviews lasting between 35 to 55 minutes, conducted under Chatham House Rule, exploring key business challenges, the role of social impact and strategic thinking on social impact. The participating companies are listed on the right.

119 Survey respondents from random selection of companies

Bespoke practitioner-level questionnaire tailored for in-house teams within marketing, HR and communication functions.

 CALOR	 Allianz	 Bank of Ireland	 Bord na Móna	 ergo
 RSA	 PAUL John Paul Construction	 DANONE	 Dublin Bus	 Bidvest NOONAN
 HOSTELWORLD MEET THE WORLD	 SSE	 HEINEKEN	 an post	 Boots
 Fáilte Ireland	 Re-turn	 BREEDON	 BT	 COOK MEDICAL
 JUST EAT	 ecclesiastical	 AIB	 Cornmarket	 A&L Goodbody



The Core Question: What Is the Business of Business?

For centuries, business leaders have been debating whether they can, or should, contribute to the society in which they operate. The Cadbury brothers' establishment of Bournville — the model town rather than the chocolate bar — from the 1870s is an elegant example of leaders taking their duty to all stakeholders seriously. In an unprecedented move at the time, they went beyond the profit motive and invested in employee housing — much of which still stands — to support business growth while also creating better lives for their employees.

Fast forward to 1970 and renowned economist Milton Friedman decried those business leaders who espoused social good in their strategy as “preaching pure and unadulterated socialism.”¹ Yet just over one year later, a company featured in our study launched a strategy

underpinned by social good. They invested in a healthier society, cut pollution and created more meaningful jobs for employees. This company is now a global powerhouse — selling their products in 120 countries, ranked among the top 10 in its sector and is listed in the top 425² most valuable companies on the planet.

In today's world of unprecedented change and turmoil — where DE&I is being challenged, environmental sustainability is slipping off the agenda and social good is increasingly met with accusations of virtue signalling — what is the right approach for maximising business success? And how is success defined in today's business reality?

¹ *The New York Times*, 13 September, 1970

² Based on March 2025 data

Benefits to Business: Key Survey Findings

While 18% of respondents have fully embedded social impact strategy into the core of their business operations, 33%, or one-in-three, of respondents have no plan or strategy in place for their social impact work, indicating an ad-hoc approach at best.

Key benefits to businesses include:

84%

Improving
overall
reputation

65%

Helping
community
relations

57%

Satisfying
compliance

48%

Retaining best
employees

46%

Winning
customers

43%

Helping
government
relations

43%

Attracting the
best employees

The Research Model

Looking at the interplay between purpose, profit and society, this report focuses on the strategic approaches taken by leading businesses in Ireland as they seek to win hearts, minds and wallets.

Conducted by Teneo's Strategy & Communications team in Ireland, and in partnership with Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI), this new study brings together insights from many of Ireland's most senior business leaders, offering a deep dive into the realities of leadership in today's complex business landscape. Drawing on members of BITCI and clients of Teneo in Ireland, we conducted **25 in-depth, candid interviews** with senior executives, including Group Chief Executive Officers (CEO), country leaders, Managing Directors, Chief People Officers (CPO) and Chief Strategy Officers (CSO).

Beyond these high-level conversations on strategy, we expanded our reach through a broader survey with nearly **120 respondents** involved in the implementation side of social impact. This included professionals from sustainability, operations, communications, HR and marketing functions. The questionnaire design and analysis were completed by Teneo's research team.

The Result

A rich tapestry of perspectives from senior leaders and practitioners across industries.

The report begins by examining the macro challenges leaders face, then explores their views on the appropriateness of businesses focusing on social impact. In doing so, we uncover the strategies, measurement frameworks and best practices that define “good” business in Ireland today.

Macro Challenges Facing Leaders

Despite their sectoral differences, business leaders consistently cite performance pressures, evolving market demands and the increasing expectations of diverse — and often conflicting — stakeholders as core concerns.

The most frequently mentioned challenge was the issue of underlying macroeconomic trends that are impacting the cost of doing business. Supply chain, payroll, compliance and the myriad other costs of opening the doors were also common topics. There are also widespread concerns about consumers and the challenges they face. Seeing the rising cost-of-living and structural logjams in housing, transport, education and healthcare, leaders are keen to mitigate the widening socioeconomic divide that can give rise to social unrest.

More than anything, these factors are reshaping strategic decision-making in a world where geopolitical tension and political upheaval has left business leaders grappling with uncertainty and volatility.

In Ireland, these pressures are further compounded by intense competition for talent in a full employment economy, especially as enhanced employee benefits continue to drive up payroll costs. Additionally, new generations of employees now demand far more from their employers – from enhanced workplace culture and purpose-driven leadership to meaningful social impact and hybrid working.

Participants also cited mounting regulatory and compliance requirements and the potential of increased red tape to put up roadblocks to innovation, agility and competitiveness.

AI remains the dominant technology consideration. Business leaders also frequently referenced digital transformation and technology-driven disruption as factors blurring competitive boundaries. Finally, supply chain instability continues to be a major concern. Even before trade war tensions, business leaders were grappling with supply chain disruptions that complicate both long- and short-term business planning.

It was clear from almost all interviews that these macro-level issues are influencing how businesses approach societal impact as part of their strategy and business model, thus demonstrating the overlap between these spheres.

Top Five Strategic Challenges Cited by Leaders in Ireland

01 Economic uncertainty and cost-of-living crisis

02 Workforce expectations and talent retention

03 Regulatory and compliance pressures

04 Digital transformation and digital disruption

05 Global supply chain instability

Against this backdrop, a reasonable inference might be that business leaders have little time for conversations about social good.

However, the social imperative — the “S” in ESG — shows no sign of being overshadowed or diminished in the face of broader challenges. The leaders we spoke with emphasised social impact as a key component of their strategic toolkit in addressing macro challenges.

Far from being an afterthought, social impact is a source of innovation, opportunity, differentiation, cost reduction and business growth. It delivers a clear and measurable dividend for business and society.

However, it is not without challenges and requires a constant balancing act. For example, on the one hand, businesses can invest heavily in impactful community initiatives and yet their supply chain has downstream suppliers who do not pay living wages. While this can be cast as more philosophical than practical, it highlights the conflicting demands facing businesses.

What is the Dividend from Doing “Good” in Business?

Looking at social impact through the lens of the C-suite brings the issue into sharp focus. But let’s be clear — the business of business is, first and foremost, business.

In every in-depth interview, one priority remained non-negotiable: **delivering financial and business performance**. Regardless of the sector, leaders reinforced the absolute necessity of running their operations to achieve strong ROI, sustained growth and meeting — or ideally exceeding — expectations.

Yet, for today’s leaders, *how* a business operates is just as critical as *how much* it achieves. In our research, the most frequently cited key to success is the existence of a strong corporate purpose that is matched by equally strong social impact.

Leaders consistently highlighted that embedding purpose and social impact into core decision-making isn’t just a nice-to-have — it’s a proven driver of medium- to long-term value creation.

Time and time again, the leaders in this study demonstrated a clear, **measurable link between high performance and a deeply integrated social impact strategy**. This was evidenced in many ways — companies achieving higher scoring on procurement benchmarks, greater customer loyalty, attracting and retaining talent in a tight labour market and many more.

And it’s not just our respondents who affirm this. Commentary from employees, investors and customers further validates the competitive advantage of purpose-led organisations that make social impact an integral part of their business model.

The Takeaway

Social impact isn’t a trade-off — it’s a business imperative.



Key Takeaways

Our Social Impact Framework

Our conversations with business leaders confirm that effective social impact strategies aren't just a “nice to have” — they're the very heartbeat of progressive, purpose-driven businesses. This study highlights several common themes present in successful social impact strategies. While not every organisation demonstrates all of these traits, the key takeaways, when combined, form the golden thread that weaves together business success and social impact.

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 01

Integrate social impact with your business strategy and core purpose

The leaders in our study don't view social impact initiatives as isolated efforts. Nor do they pursue them out of corporate altruism or simply because social impact is the "right thing to do." Instead, they deeply integrate their social impact strategy with their core business purpose, ensuring that company values are lived out in every aspect of their operations.

The benefits of social impact include stronger customer loyalty, increased employee engagement, cost savings, higher scores on tender assessments and, ultimately, business growth. Social impact is woven into the fabric of organisations and is a key driver of the strategic actions to achieve their mission.



"In 2025, in every single decision-meeting that we have, no matter what level within the organisation, we're now going to ask the question, 'did we live our values in making that decision.'"

Insights from a CEO on how they will embed purpose-based behaviours throughout their business.

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 02

Calibrate social impact KPIs to align with business goals

The interviewees made it clear that their companies demonstrate a strong commitment to measuring progress in real time with solid metrics. They establish clear, quantifiable key performance indicators on social impact – tracking volunteer hours, benchmarking employee engagement, monitoring community engagement and assessing the direct impact on the social issue being addressed. Additionally, they track the business benefits that result from these efforts.

By leveraging data-driven insights, these companies continuously refine their approach, ensuring that every initiative not only makes an internal impact but also builds credibility with external stakeholders – amplifying both business and social impact.



“The fear of being accused of greenwashing leads companies to avoid communicating their social impact work. We need to have really robust processes in place so that we can confidently communicate without fear of dismissal.”

Insights from a CSO on measurement and process-driven social impact.

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 03

Embed social impact with your board, senior leaders and workforce

The deep integration of social impact should permeate every layer of the business – from frontline to the board. In the boardrooms of the companies we spoke with, social impact (whether as part of the combined ESG actions or distinctly as the “S” in ESG) is a regular agenda item, discussed alongside strategy, innovation, risk, governance and financial performance.

This level of oversight holds leaders accountable and, in many cases, ensures they have “skin in the game” by embedding social impact measures into executive scorecards, performance reviews and remuneration structures. Many leaders highlighted the interest among board members in being actively engaged in social impact work rather than simply hearing it be reported.



“They are very keen on it. We don’t take it for granted so we have to constantly reinforce it and develop our maturity and thinking in this space.”

Insights from a CEO on board requirements and focus on social impact.

The Role of Employees: Key Survey Findings

TAKEAWAY 03 (continued)

Embed social impact with your board, senior leaders and workforce

Approximately, 40% of respondents identified the CEO as the executive sponsor for social impact work, followed by the CPO at 24%. Notably, 14% of companies reported having no executive sponsor at all. Despite perceptions that social impact is primarily a marketing function, only 2% of participants named the CMO as the executive sponsor. When it comes to alignment with corporate purpose, 49% said their social impact strategy is very closely aligned, while 40% reported it is somewhat closely aligned.

The perception around the role of employees in designing social impact strategies varies, with some respondents viewing it as extensive and others as minimal. This suggests that some employees might feel excluded from the process, impacting their engagement. A more robust, inclusive approach to employee involvement may be needed.

41%

of companies that responded say employees are not directly involved in social impact strategy development.

Of those that are involved:

53%

Dedicated ESG specialists

47%

Business unit leads

37%

C-suite

30%

Boards

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 04

Adapt initiatives to your community to ensure relevance

A collaborative spirit underpins social impact strategies as these organisations co-create initiatives not only with employees but also with customers and local communities. This inclusive approach ensures that strategies remain authentic, responsive and adaptive to the dynamic markets in which these businesses operate.

While the interviews were conducted prior to the recent DE&I Executive Orders from the Trump administration, the companies we spoke with view DE&I as a core driver of innovation and growth.

Our respondents emphasised the importance of fostering a culture where inclusion is celebrated and every decision is filtered through the lens of fairness. This strengthens internal leadership and deepens external community ties.



“This is actually a great innovation pipeline for us and we have a lot of really positive potential new tools for our business. What we need to do now is figure out how those tools can enable us to be successful going forward.”

Insights from a CPO on the benefits of community collaboration through social impact.

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 05

Validate improved business and social outcomes

The true power of an effective social strategy lies in its ability to generate measurable benefits for both business and society.

Not a single leader we interviewed pursued social impact at the expense of business objectives. Nor did they pursue business impact at the expense of societal improvements. Instead, they found that when social objectives align with financial priorities, they spark innovation, improve operational efficiencies and reduce costs. Again though, the delicate balance in the costs of doing business are ever present when considering how to support societal improvements.

Additionally, successful social impact strategies do not require massive budgets. Many leaders demonstrated that cost-efficient, well-integrated initiatives can scale sustainably.



“Last year, we spent c.€250,000 to fund 70 employee-led initiatives. One return to us is a drop in employee turnover from 5% to 1.6%.”

Insights from a CEO on the business impact of their social impact strategy.

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 06

Communicate with authenticity

During our interviews, discussions on communication revealed two distinct approaches — those who actively communicate their social impact efforts and those who do not. For some, communication remained low-key and secondary — an aspect the organisation intended to address but had not yet prioritised.

For others, the hesitancy to communicate was rooted in risk mitigation — a “keep your head down” approach in response to “cancel culture” concerns. With greenwashing accusations and fears of virtue signalling, some organisations have opted not to publicly share their social impact efforts.

However, upon deeper discussion, most respondents acknowledged that communicating authentic actions yields only positive results.

Compelling narrative and authentic storytelling — particularly when tied to the other takeaways highlighted — play a crucial role in amplifying both social impact and business benefits.

Among those companies that do communicate their social impact work, their approach follows three key principles. First, build stakeholder trust and ensure participants know your rationale, focus and desired outcomes. Second, work on programmes where you can deliver a clear social impact and realise a distinct competitive edge rather than simply cutting a big cheque.

And finally, candidly share the real-world benefits of the initiatives you undertake, highlighting the positive effect, what you learned and your ongoing commitment. By deploying an honest and authentic narrative, businesses can dispel concerns of virtue signalling and instead reinforce a credible, long-term commitment to making a difference.



“Social impact needs to be communicated as a business strategy, not a feel-good initiative”

Insights from a Managing Director on how to communicate social impact.

Key Takeaways | Our Social Impact Framework

TAKEAWAY 06 (continued)

Communicate with authenticity

Companies communicate their social impact strategy via different channels:

80%

Internal
communications

80%

Owned social
media

71%

Website or
microsite

55%

Company reports

38%

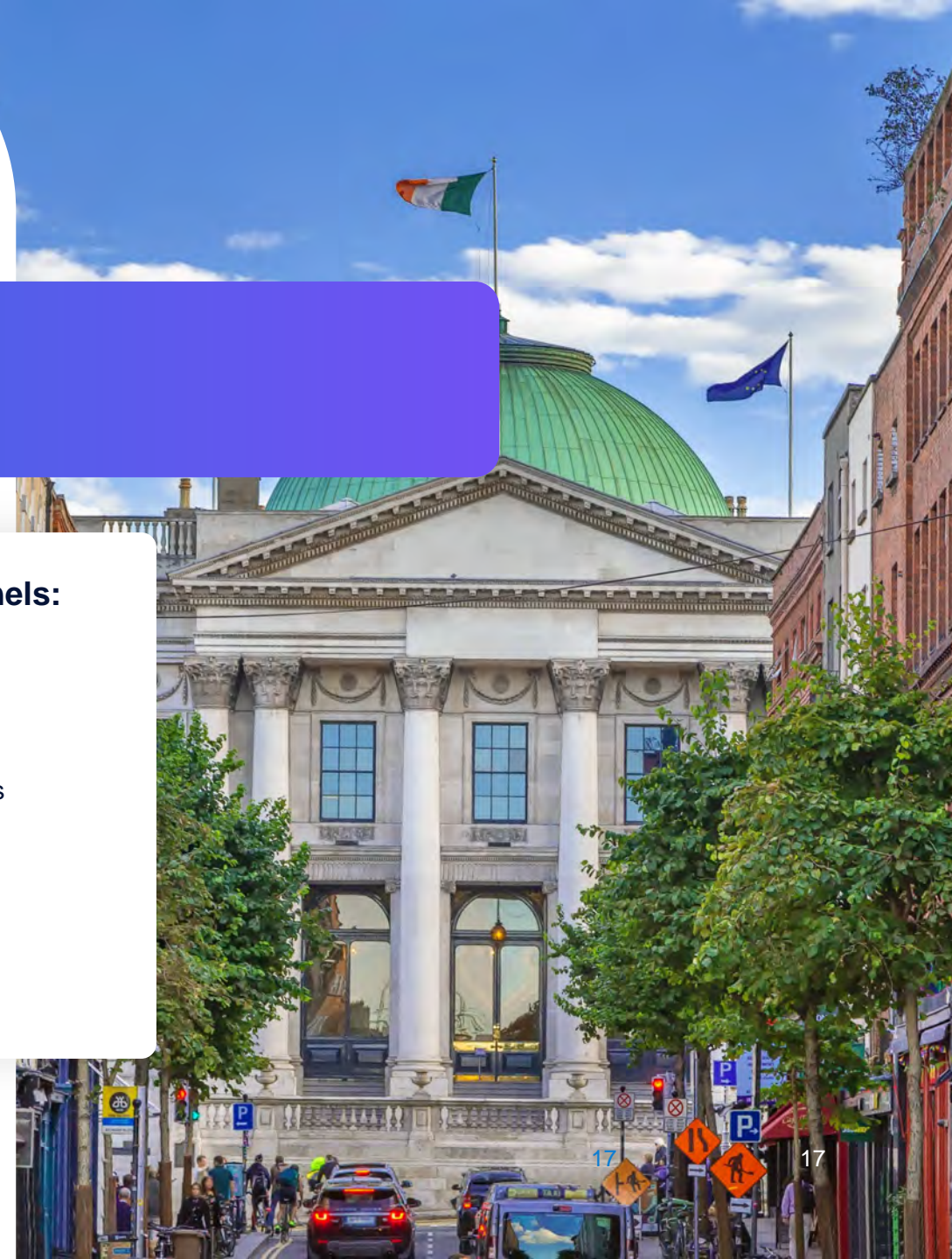
Media (unpaid)

16%

Media (paid)

5%

Sponsorship



A Dynamic and Integrated Social Impact Strategy



A truly effective social impact strategy is not a stand-alone activity — it is a deeply embedded component of business in Ireland today.

When aligned with core business goals, measured with rigour, governed at the highest levels and communicated authentically, social impact initiatives do more than just benefit society. When done properly, social impact initiatives drive competitive advantage, build stakeholder trust, strengthen long-term business resilience and create value.

Collating the insights from our research and combining this with our own observations on current practice, we have created a new framework for social impact strategy development and implementation. This framework offers a powerful, adaptable and actionable roadmap for organisations looking to maximise impact and extract maximum benefit. Companies who choose to pursue this roadmap can use it as a means to deliver a strong dividend — a social dividend, that is good for business and good for society.

Social Impact Strategy Model

In summary, the interviews reveal that a truly effective social impact strategy is not an isolated effort — it is a dynamic, deeply integrated component of modern business.



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Our full range of advisory services includes strategic communications, investor relations, financial transactions and restructuring, management consulting, physical and cyber risk, organizational design, board and executive search, geopolitics and government affairs, corporate governance and ESG.



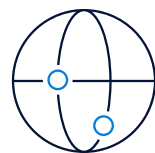
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YEARS
OF IMPACT

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COMMUNITY
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Our purpose is to inspire, challenge and facilitate businesses to bring about a sustainable, low carbon economy and more inclusive society where everyone thrives.

At Business in the Community Ireland, we bring together business, government, and communities to make a real difference in sustainability and social inclusion.

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300

Business
Partnerships



6500

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