

Benefacts: Restoring Trust and Improving Accountability in Ireland's Nonprofit Sector

Thanks in part to The Ireland Funds, new tools are helping the Irish public make informed decisions around philanthropy.

Ireland's 20,000+ nonprofits are a vital contributor to Irish society and have an effect on Ireland far beyond their positive social impact. In addition to addressing causes that improve the island and care for those often on the margins, the nonprofit sector contributes €5.5 billion to the Irish economy each year and employs over 149,000 people.

Yet the last few years have also been difficult for nonprofit organizations in Ireland. Negative press and financial impropriety of a few highly-visible groups have eroded the public's trust in the larger sector. When polled, 58% of people across Ireland stated that they did not trust charities to use donations wisely. This has motivated many organizations to seek new ways to increase both their transparency to the public and their skill-set in serving the causes they care deeply about.

The Ireland Funds have been at the forefront of this new era of accountability by supporting Benefacts, which provides access to new levels of governance, financial and regulatory data in a user-friendly way on a free online public website.

Benefacts is changing the nonprofit landscape by rebuilding trust and presenting information in an organized and easy-to-understand way. Here, Patricia Quinn, Managing Director of Benefacts, explains what Benefacts is doing to present data for the social good.



TIME TO REFLECT

It's great to have the opportunity to reflect on an incredibly busy two year period, since The Ireland Funds' Board and executive team joined well-wishers from the sector in our new offices on Dublin's Merrion Square to mark the launch of our company. A year later, they were back to mark the launch of our free public website benefacts.ie, and another year on, in April 2017, we celebrated yet another milestone with the launch of the first-ever analysis report on the entire Irish nonprofit sector.

THE DATABASE OF IRISH NONPROFITS

Our first task when we started was to create the Database of Irish Nonprofits – the most extensive and authoritative source of financial, regulatory and governance data on Irish nonprofits.

Irish nonprofits don't have to take any action to be included in the database – Benefacts gets all the information it needs under Ireland's progressive Open Data regime, which means that financial accounts and other nonprofit disclosures are on the public record. Benefacts assembles this into a single repository which acts as the basis for benefacts.ie, where anyone can go for information about an Irish nonprofit that interests them. 30,000 people have visited the website since it launched last year - use it to look up some of The Ireland Funds' grantees!

HOW THE DATA IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The website and the sector analysis report are two great ways of getting our data out to the general public, and already people are telling us they use it all the time to learn more about a charity that interests them, whether they want to make a gift, offer some of their time, or just want to know more about what's going on in their part of the world.

Benefacts Nonprofit Sector Analysis also plays an important role in telling the story of giving in Ireland, using live data from all of the major philanthropies for the first time. Our analysis shows that The Ireland Funds will be Ireland's leading philanthropy after 2017, in terms of the scale of giving.

But we've been busy on other less visible projects as well, for example by helping Ireland's Central Statistics Office to improve its analysis of a sector that accounts about 10% of all organizations in the Republic of Ireland, attracting €5.5bn (or 8%) of government expenditure every year, and providing employment for about 8% of the workforce here. Data like this plays an essential role in feeding into public policy, and into the giving choices of donors, identifying areas of need, educating the public about where their tax euros are going, providing commentators and analysts for the first time with reliable evidence of trends

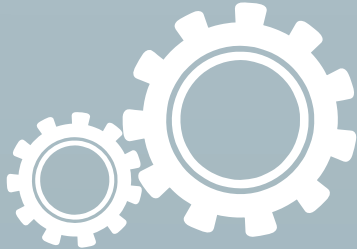
We've also been working with policy-makers and donors in government and in the philanthropy sector to develop a governance, risk and compliance service – Benefacts Analytics – which for the first time provides a due diligence tool to funders, allowing them to assess risk and anticipate challenges in the organizations they support.

Benefacts Activities and Impact

Activities

Strategic impact	benefacts.ie	Benefacts Nonprofit Sector Analysis	Benefacts Open Data	Benefacts Data Services	Benefacts Bespoke Solutions	Benefacts Analytics
OBJECTIVES						
Improve information about, and understanding of the work of all Irish nonprofits						
Promote greater public confidence in the use of the public's money						
Provide decision-makers with timely access to reliable data						
Devise and develop web-based services to help reduce administration overheads and support reform						
Provide the sector with information services that will support business planning						

Patricia Quinn,
Managing Director of Benefacts



An Investment in Infrastructure

Like some other flagship projects supported by The Ireland Funds, Benefacts represents a far-sighted investment in the infrastructure for philanthropy in Ireland. Our future plans include working more closely with The Ireland Funds and other philanthropy leaders to build a better understanding of how philanthropy is making a difference in Ireland.

With support from The Ireland Funds, we have built something that will transform the accessibility and transparency of a sector that has, until now, been hidden in plain view. We present the maximum amount of available data in a neutral and impartial way to support better-informed decisions and to help build public trust.

— Patricia Quinn, Managing Director of Benefacts