

**THE
B!G
iDEA**



**Pre-Budget
Submission
2027**





“They have completely changed their mindset and their goals. They now know they can have dreams.”

Michelle Howard, Tutor, Tullamore CTC



Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. Context: Why Multi-Annual Funding, Why Now	5
3. The Policy Solution	7
4. Costing	8
5. Justification: Why This, Why Now	8
6. Precedent: A Model the Department Has Already Funded	9
7. Impact: For the Young People, Not the Charity	10
8. Why Budget 2027	12
9. Implementation Timeline	12
10. Conclusion and Request	13

1. Executive Summary

The B!G Idea is Ireland’s award-winning creative thinking education charity, on a mission to ensure that every young person has the creative problem-solving skills, confidence, networks, and opportunities they need to thrive in a world changing at unprecedented speed.

The Problem

Young people in Ireland are growing up in a period of rapid technological change, climate anxiety, and global uncertainty and a labour market that the OECD [1] says will demand creative thinking, collaboration and resilience above all else. The sheer pace of these developments often leaves young people feeling disengaged or in a state of crisis, as they feel they are being “prepped for a world that does not yet exist”. Standard academic knowledge isn’t enough.

Landmark studies, such as the Growing Up in Ireland national longitudinal study [2] and UCD School of Social Policy research, show that a child’s confidence and sense of future are closely linked to their socio-economic background, gender, and whether they have special educational needs (SEN).

Recent research from the National Youth Council of Ireland indicates that almost a third (32%) of young people in Ireland say they rarely or never feel optimistic about the future [9], with the gap widest for those in DEIS schools, Youthreach, LCA and disadvantaged communities [3].

The creative thinking skills the State and the EU have identified as critical are not consistently delivered - PISA 2022 [6] shows Ireland performing at average on creative thinking, with the largest gaps in disadvantaged settings - and the small number of high-impact programmes that do reach these learners are kept alive by annual fundraising cycles that no charity can plan or scale around.

The B!G Ask: Allocate €2.46 million over three years (Budget 2027–2029) to The B!G Idea’s inclusive creative innovation pathway, matched euro-for-euro by industry and partners for a total €4.92 million programme. Aligned with Government and international policy, this multi-annual commitment will reach an additional 60,000 young people in Post-Primary Education, Youthreach, LCA SEN and link with Northern Ireland. The deepest support going to those in DEIS, DEIS+ and Pobal Deprivation Index deciles 1–3.



The Solution

At The B!G Idea, we equip young people across Ireland with the creative confidence, critical thinking and innovative mindset to thrive in a world of accelerating change. We scaffold the work of schools, boosting the curriculum with immersive, real-world learning experiences that connect classrooms to the world beyond them. Rooted in equity, we deliberately reach into DEIS schools and underserved communities, because talent is everywhere but opportunity is not. By connecting students with mentors from industry nationally, we close the social-capital gap and give young people the networks, language and self-belief - the social currency - that more advantaged peers inherit by default. **The result: a generation of future-ready problem-solvers ready to shape what comes next in Ireland, not just react to it.**

The Proposition

A three-year multi-annual co-investment agreement with The B!G Idea - Ireland's award-winning, evidence-based, all-island creative thinking education youth charity. Public funding of €750k-€890k per annum, matched euro-for-euro by industry partners and supporters, delivering a €4.92 million programme over Budget 2027-2029.

The Impact

Reach an additional 60,000 young people over three years, building on the nearly 18,000 already empowered through 310+ schools, 1,170+ industry mentors and 26 counties since 2021. Evaluation confirms that 97% of students gain new creative thinking skills, and 100% of teachers recommend programmes.



“The challenge our education system faces is how to equip the young people of today with the necessary skills to help them thrive and adapt in an ever-changing world, where A.I. is a reality and where all aspects of daily life including leisure, study and work are continuously changing... What skills will our young people need to thrive in the future? How will we navigate a world we can only begin to imagine?”

Minister for Education and Youth Hildegarde Naughton,
at the launch of the National Conversation on Education (14 January 2026)

2. Context:

Why Multi-Annual Funding, Why Now

The operating environment for community youth education charities in Ireland in 2026 is the most challenging in over a decade. For The B!G Idea, three converging pressures are now structural constraints on our ability to deliver inclusive, future-ready learning to the young people the State most urgently wants us to reach.

The case for embedding creative thinking is not only economic. The WHO scoping review of over 3,000 studies (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) [13] concluded that creative engagement plays a major role in the prevention of ill health and the promotion of wellbeing across the lifespan, and a 2025 systematic review of adolescent-specific evidence [15] found that regular engagement with creative activities improves mental health and wellbeing in young people. The UK National Centre for Creative Health [14] identifies improvements in self-confidence, emotional regulation, sense of belonging and school engagement - the precise mechanisms by which The B!G Idea reaches the young people most at risk of disengagement. The Skills Insights Note 2026-1 - Skills

Needs for Ireland in the Long-term highlights **“the crucial role of government and the private sector in facilitating productivity and innovation through investment in physical and human capital”**, against the projected slowing of labour productivity in Ireland by 2050.

Rising costs are outpacing single-year grant uplifts

Ireland’s youth and community charities are entering Budget 2027 without the funding stability needed to plan beyond the next twelve months. 93% of community and voluntary organisations report rising costs over the past year, and 80% expect these costs to have a significant or very significant negative impact on their ability to deliver services in 2026 [11], and almost half are unsure whether they will have sufficient funding to maintain existing supports. The cause is structural: just 29% of statutorily-funded organisations operate on multi-annual agreements, 71% are still negotiating year by year, and when organisations were asked to rank reform priorities, multi-annual funding emerged as

The Crisis in One Number: Almost a third (32%) of young people in Ireland say they rarely or never feel optimistic about the future [9]. At the same time, the World Economic Forum [10] names creative thinking, resilience and mental agility, along with curiosity, as the essential skills to thrive in the future of work - yet these skills are not embedded in the Irish secondary curriculum, and students in disadvantaged communities are significantly less likely to access the enrichment programmes that build them.



the single most important issue facing the sector. This aligns with The Wheel's long-standing call for public funders to move to full-cost-recovery, multi-year agreements that recognise governance, safeguarding and CPD as eligible programme costs, not absorbed overheads.

Demand for inclusive, future ready education is rising

Government has set the direction: the National AI Strategy for Ireland [4], Impact 2030, the SOLAS FET strategy [8], the Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027, Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 [5], the Wellbeing Policy, and the Action Plan for Apprenticeship all converge on creativity, problem-solving and adaptability as essential skills for every learner.

“Creating new pathways and opportunities to meet ongoing skills demands is of fundamental importance.”

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 [5]

Since 2021, demand continues to outpace funded capacity, particularly from Youthreach centres, DEIS and DEIS+ schools. The strategies exist, the demand is proven, and the pace of change is unforgiving - what's missing is the funding model that can keep up.



“The impact on students was outstanding. The programme enabled them to engage with contemporary social issues in authentic, real-life contexts and **empowered them to recognise that they have the capacity to influence change.”**

Aisling Ryan,
Teacher, Roscrea Education Centre FET

3. The Policy Solution

The B!G Idea’s Strategic Plan 2026–2028 (Strategic Ambition 3.2) explicitly commits us to “reduce reliance on annual fundraising cycles by building more predictable, multi-year partnerships and revenue-generating income.” These two integrated asks operationalise that commitment for Budget 2027.

Ask 1 - A three-year matched-funding agreement, 2027–2029

- **Exact measure:** €750k in Year 1, indexed to CPI in Years 2 (€820k) and 3 (€890k), matched euro-for-euro by partners.
- **Delivery mechanism:** Funded through the Creative Youth Plan and/or Dormant Accounts Fund and/or Shared Island, all of which have previously funded The B!G Idea, converted into a single three-year envelope with annual confirmation tranches.
- **Eligibility:** Young people aged 15–20 in TY, Youthreach, LCA and Northern Ireland settings, with deepest investment in Pobal HP Deprivation Index deciles 1–3 and DEIS/ DEIS+ schools [12].
- **Administration:** Department of Education & Youth (lead); Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Creative Ireland co-sponsor). Delivered by The B!G Idea against the Department’s existing outcomes framework.

Ask 2 - Full-cost-recovery and CPI indexation written into the agreement

Recognise within the funding line a defined contribution to governance, safeguarding, teacher CPD, premises and the EdTech platform that makes inclusive delivery possible at scale. This is the model recommended by The Wheel and endorsed by Charities Institute Ireland: compliance with the Charities Governance Code - mandatory since 2020 - has materially increased the back-office cost of running a youth charity. Treating these costs as ineligible forces organisations like ours to subsidise governance from voluntary income, which has come under sustained pressure across the sector since 2022.



“The nature of work and the skills requirements for the next decade and beyond are different from those of today. **The B!G Idea significantly improves outcomes for students.**”

Leo Clancy,
CEO EI Electronics, Former CEO, Enterprise Ireland

4. Costing

Total public cost: €2.46m over three years. Total programme cost: €4.92m once industry match is included. Per learner: €41 public / €82 total average, all-in across 60,000 additional young people. Costings assume no inflationary uplifts beyond CPI, current staffing model, with industry and partner match (50%).

Scenario Type	Public (3-yr)	Industry / Partner	Additional Learners Reached
Low - Targeted (Schools, DEIS & DEIS+ / Youthreach/ LCA/NI)	€1.5m	€1.5m	≈ 20,500
Medium - Proposed (Schools, DEIS & DEIS+ / Youthreach/ SEN/LCA/NI)	€2.46m	€2.46m	≈ 60,000
High - National scale + Sector specific expansion	€3.6m	€3.6m	≈ 90,000

5. Justification: Why This, Why Now

- **Evidence.** Independent UCD evaluation (2025), our internal impact framework, and successive quantitative and qualitative evidence converge: creative thinking is teachable, transformative, and currently inequitably distributed.
- **Value for money.** Every public euro is matched by industry and partners - a co-investment model previously cited as best practice.
- **Policy alignment.** Direct alignment with Government; the National AI Strategy for Ireland, the Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027, Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025, Impact 2030, the Wellbeing Policy, the Shared Island Initiative, the Action Plan for Apprenticeship, and SDGs 4, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 17.
- **Risk reduction.** Charities Institute Ireland has flagged a “thinning middle” in the youth sector - multi-annual funding is the most effective tool the Department has to keep proven, high-demand provision in place.
- **Proven Momentum.** 4 years of proven impact with support from Dormant Accounts Funding via the Department of Education aligns with Strategy 5 of the 2026–28 Disbursement Scheme to move to Exchequer funding.

6. Precedent: A Model the Department Has Already Funded

Multi-annual matched funding is not a leap into the unknown. The Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027 itself operates on a multi-annual envelope with annual confirmation tranches - the precise mechanism we propose.

The Dormant Accounts Fund, through the Department of Education and Youth, has previously funded The B!G Idea on an annual basis; converting that into a three-year envelope would deliver the same outcomes with materially lower administrative cost. Sláintecare’s Implementation Strategy 2021–2023 (and its successor Sláintecare 2025+) operates on multi-year envelopes, and the Higher Education Authority is under active OECD recommendation to move to multi-annual core funding for the same reasons.

This submission asks the Department to extend an established discipline to proven, all-island creative thinking education programmes - using existing funding streams and an existing delivery base. No new agency. No new infrastructure. No new legislation required.



“Every year I contribute as a mentor to The B!G Idea, I’m blown away by the standard... growth and development of the [student] ideas over the course of the programme. **The curiosity and genuine desire to make the world a better place** the student’s display is inspiring to see.”

Stephen Cummins,
Industry Mentor, Unum

7. Impact: For the Young People, Not the Charity

Social and societal impact

An additional 60,000 young people reached across TY, Youthreach, LCA SEN and NI over three years, on top of the almost 1800 already empowered since 2021. With sustained funding we can prioritise schools and centres in Pobal HP Deprivation Index deciles 1–3. 97% of students report new creative skills learned; 100% of teachers recommend programmes.

1,800

young people empowered since 2021

100%

of teachers recommend programmes

97%

of students report new creative skills learned

Economic and skills impact

Creative thinking, collaboration and resilience are named by the World Economic Forum (2025) [10], the OECD Learning Compass 2030, and Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 [5] as core competencies for an AI-enabled economy. Multi-annual funding allows us to retain knowledge within the team, continuity with mentors, deepen industry partnerships, and convert engagement into structured progression and further supports for those who need it most.



“To solve new problems, we need new ways of thinking and new ideas and methodologies - it's giving students an opportunity to **think about problem-solving** in a completely new way. I think it's exceptionally important and it's going to **lead to great things for the future of the country.**”

Neil O' Connor,
Director, Autodesk

“The B!G Idea programme stood out for its creative, learner-led approach, and offered participants an alternative to traditional classroom learning. Findings show that there was significant encouragement to explore real-world topics, which helped participants **develop new skills, build confidence, and discover their own agency** as thinkers and creators.

Against a background where alternative education approaches remain under explored in Ireland, The B!G Idea is an example of a creative, **learner-driven**, and project-based programme in re-engaging young people who have experienced educational disadvantage.”

‘Closing The Gap: Evaluating Education to Address Educational Disadvantage Report 2024-2025.’ Dr Angeliki Lima, Dr Gabriela Martinez Sainz, Dr Olga Ioannidou & Dr Seaneen Sloan, *University College Dublin, School of Education.*

8. Why Budget 2027: The Timing Argument

Budget 2027 is the right moment. The Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027 reaches its final year in 2027 - a multi-annual commitment to The B!G Idea positions the sector to feed directly into whatever framework succeeds it, rather than scrambling for continuity after the plan concludes.

In parallel, the Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy on Youth Work and Related Services 2024–2028 has 18 priority actions due for completion by the end of 2026, after which the Department of Education & Youth will review progress and identify the actions needed to deliver the remainder of the strategy by 2028.

Funding architecture reform - specifically the move from annual grants to multi-annual commitments - is the single change

most likely to make those remaining deliverables achievable. The fiscal envelope, while constrained, permits a ring-fenced, matched, multi-annual reform of this scale without displacing other priorities. And the sector still has the workforce, infrastructure and industry partnerships to make a multi-annual commitment land. Continued reliance on annual cycles will, on current trajectories, erode that capacity within the next two funding rounds.

9. Implementation Timeline

Q4 2026

Three-year funding agreement signed under the Creative Youth Plan / DAF framework / Shared Island; industry and partner match in parallel.

Q1 2027

Three-year delivery plan submitted with reach targets by region, school classification, and learner type.

2027–2029

Annual reporting against multi-annual plan; in-year adjustments; independent evaluation in Q3 2029.

10. Conclusion and Request

The BIG Idea respectfully requests that the Minister for Education & Youth, in partnership with the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services, Reform and Digitalisation, and the Minister for Finance, bring forward in Budget 2027 a €2.46 million three-year matched-

funding agreement to scale Ireland's most inclusive creative innovation pathway. It is the single most consequential decision the Department can make for the 60,000 additional young people we will reach. We welcome the opportunity to engage directly with officials on design and phasing.





“What strikes me most about this programme is its reach, students from every corner of the country, from city centres, rural towns, coastal and Gaeltacht communities, working alongside mentors and educators on the **real challenges facing Ireland today.**”

When we trust our young people with real challenges, they don't just rise to meet them, they reframe them. They find solutions the rest of us hadn't thought of. They lead. **The Ireland these students are imagining is the Ireland the rest of us want to live in,** and programmes like The B!G Idea deserves to be supported, championed and scaled.”

Jerry Buttimer,
Minister of State, TD



“They give young people, especially those from disadvantaged or under-resourced backgrounds, opportunities to build transversal skills: creative problem solving, design thinking, collaboration, resilience, and agency.

These competencies are **foundational for participation in the future labour market**, especially in sectors at the intersection of technology, creativity, and social innovation. By doing so, The B!G Idea helps to nurture talent that may otherwise remain untapped.”

Dr Stephen Kinsella,

Professor of Economics, Head, Department of Economics, *University of Limerick*

Because one
B!G idea can
change their
world...

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