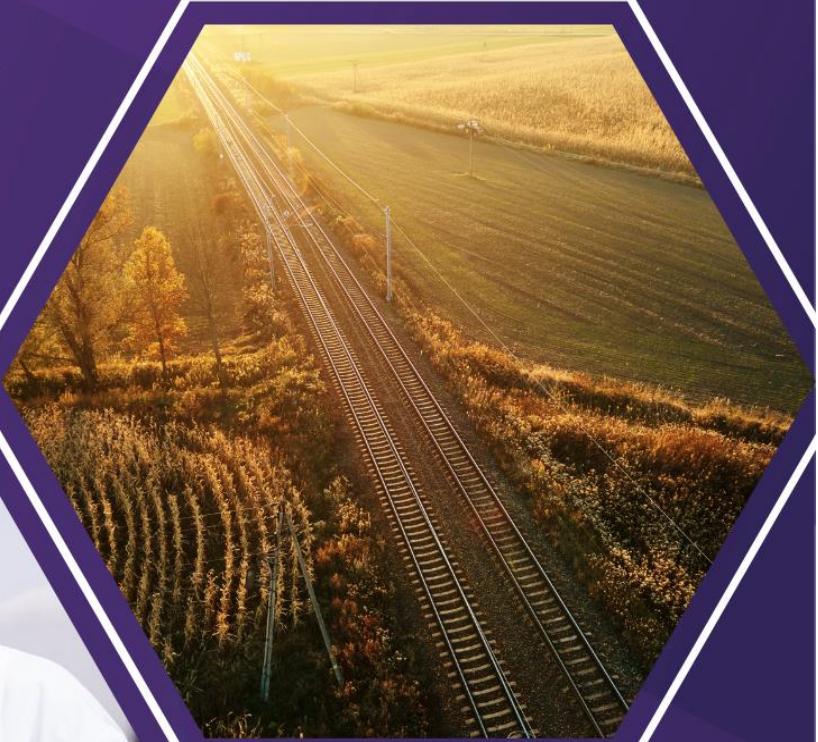


General Election Manifesto 2024



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The Future Starts Here

Elections are about the future; the kind of country we want to live in, and the kind of society we want our children to grow up in.

The Social Democrats want a future where every person can thrive, and every community can flourish.

That future starts with getting the basics right: affordable housing, accessible childcare, healthcare when you need it, a clean environment and properly funded disability services.

Underpinning everything must be a commitment to accountability, honest politics and value for money. For the Social Democrats, these aren't just buzzwords – they are core principles.

A government has to work for the people, and spend people's money as carefully as if it were their own. Too often this government throws money at a problem and asks questions later. That's why we are getting the most expensive children's hospital in the world and vanity projects around the Dáil when they can't even get the basics right.

The current government are epic wasters: wasting money, wasting time, wasting a generational opportunity to invest in a better future.

This has to stop!

At this election, let's not waste the opportunity to turn the page on 14 years of Fine Gael failure, Fianna Fail's second housing disaster in a single generation, and the Green Party's inability to make the climate transformation fair for all.

This election is your chance to stop the waste, to move the dial, to choose a new approach.

The Social Democrats are a party that is unequivocal about prioritising quality and accessible public services over populist gimmicks and giveaways.

We want to play a pivotal part in the next government. We want to be in government to make a difference, not just to make up the numbers. We are not interested in 'jobs for the boys' – we want to do the job right!

It's time to do things differently.

The Social Democrats will only join a government that:

1. Builds 50,000 affordable purchase homes.
2. Fully implements Sláintecare.
3. Agrees a plan to reach our climate targets and avoid €8 billion in fines.
4. Appoints a full cabinet Minister for Disability.
5. Builds high quality public childcare.

For the Social Democrats, these are deal-breakers.



The Social Democrats Parliamentary Party 2020-2024

Left to Right: Jennifer Whitmore, Gary Gannon, Róisín Shortall, Holly Cairns (Party Leader), Catherine Murphy, Cian O'Callaghan

1.

Getting the Basics Right

A Social
Democratic
Approach



Cian O'Callaghan TD
Party Deputy Leader

Candidate for
Dublin Bay North

Housing

Everybody should be able to live in a high quality, secure and affordable home. The ‘market-knows-best’ approach of successive governments has turned a housing challenge into a housing disaster. Handouts for developers and tax deals for investment funds are not solving the crisis. We need a new approach.

The Social Democrats believe the State and the not-for-profit sector should be at heart of housing delivery. In government, the Social Democrats will be laser-focused on directly building tens of thousands of affordable homes every year through local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies.

This is not a radical new way of delivering homes. In the past, when Ireland had far fewer resources, we were able to build thousands of high-quality homes at prices people could afford. The State was responsible for the construction of more than half of all homes between the 1930s and the 1950s, creating entire neighbourhoods of affordable housing that are still thriving to this day.

Previous generations were able to clear the slums and replace dangerous, over-crowded tenement buildings with high-quality social and affordable homes. Ireland has the land and the money to do this again; what we need is a government that is willing and capable to get the job done.

Building Genuinely Affordable Homes

It is vital that we build enough high-quality affordable housing for people who do not qualify for social housing but cannot afford market prices. These homes must be delivered on a not-for-profit basis to achieve the lowest possible price. The Social Democrats will build 75,000 affordable homes over a 5-year term; 50,000 affordable purchase and 25,000 affordable rental homes. We will:

- Build publicly-provided homes on state-owned land.
- Use Compulsory Purchase Orders to acquire development land for housing.
- Provide early-stage finance to help not-for-profit homebuilders get urgently needed affordable housing projects off the ground.
- Create a specific zoning for affordable housing so that only genuinely affordable homes can be built on specified areas of land.
- End the developer handouts and Government schemes that artificially inflate house prices, and redirect these resources to building new affordable homes.

Delivering Social Homes

The Government has failed miserably to deliver enough social housing for the tens of thousands of people on local authority housing lists for years on end. To deliver 70,000 social homes over a 5-year term, we will:

- End lucrative long-term leasing deals for social housing provision, in favour of the direct building of social homes by local authorities.
- Scrap the four-stage approval process, so that the average time to approve plans for social housing (currently two years+) is reduced.
- Establish new local authority housing organisations so that smaller councils can pool resources and expertise to build new social and affordable housing.
- Phase out HAP, RAS, and Rent Supplement in favour of directly building new social homes.
- Change the administration of HAP and RAS so that households in receipt of them remain on the social housing list, except where their income levels increase above the eligibility criteria for social housing.
- Facilitate the merging of smaller Approved Housing Bodies to create more efficient models of social and affordable housing delivery.
- Legislate to ensure that AHB social housing is provided, retained, and let at affordable rates in perpetuity.

Driving Housing Delivery

Ireland has an estimated housing shortfall of around a quarter of a million homes, because successive governments have failed to build enough.

Hundreds of thousands of younger adults are stuck living in the family home, unable to move out and move on with their lives because they can no longer afford to rent a home of their own, much less buy one. Continued government failure to tackle the affordability crisis is causing people to lose hope. Too many are deciding to vote with their feet and emigrate for the chance to live the life they hoped for.

Substantially increasing the supply of housing is necessary for people to be able to form their own households and begin independent lives. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Establish a Housing Delivery Oversight Executive, to coordinate the delivery of housing. The Executive would address blockages to housing delivery, and oversee and drive investment in public utilities on land zoned for housing.
- Establish high-yielding Housing Delivery Zones at strategic locations, where housing can be delivered at scale.
- Commit to multi-annual funding for modular homes, ensuring that the State becomes the driver of demand.
- Identify, acquire and quickly provide state-owned sites for modular housing through the Land Development Agency.
- Tackle ‘First Mover Disadvantage’ for developers who upgrade local infrastructure that can be used in future developments, through a ‘Reasonable Cost Reduction’ mechanism for any network infrastructure that can be used by subsequent connections.
- Develop mechanisms where funds on deposit at Irish financial institutions can be leveraged to build needed infrastructure, including housing. There are several international examples of private savings being used to help fund public housing, providing a secure investment and guaranteed return for savers, while helping to blunt pro-cyclical patterns of spending on housing.
- Support the collaborative development of standard accommodation types (both houses and apartments) to drive efficiency, reduce costs, and support viability.
- Increase the minimum wage for apprentices for their first years on the job.

Building Sustainable Communities

The Social Democrats believe in building affordable homes as part of diverse communities that are socially and environmentally sustainable. Good community facilities help sustain strong communities. Playgrounds, parks, cultural spaces, youth facilities, community centres and other places where people can gather and connect are central to our quality of life. The provision of community facilities must be a central plank of Government policy and will require an all-of-Government approach.

To achieve socially sustainable communities, we must also create new housing options that meet the needs of people of all ages and people with disabilities. This can be done using universal design standards, expanding rightsizing and sheltered housing schemes for older people, and ringfencing funding for accommodation for people moving out of congregated settings.

In addition, building standards must be set high and rigorously enforced. Every household should have a garden, balcony, or outdoor space of its own. We must also ensure all housing standards are suitable for a future where more of us will be working from home.

Building sustainable communities requires increased tree planting and biodiversity projects in new developments, providing for allotments and community gardens, and connections to sustainable transport options including cycling infrastructure.

Ending Homelessness

Homelessness is the direct result of failed policies from Governments that have turned housing into a commodity. It is within the power of Government to put an end to it once and for all. What is required is political will and courage. There is no acceptable level of homelessness. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Build 70,000 social homes over a 5-year term.
- Scale up the delivery of *Housing First* tenancies. Endless cycles of temporary emergency accommodation are costly, cruel, and ultimately ineffective in tackling homelessness.
- End ‘no-fault evictions’ to protect renters from the trauma of becoming homeless.
- End the privatisation of homeless hostels, shelters, and services.
- Double investment in homeless prevention measures to help stop more people becoming homeless.
- Instruct the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) to conduct independent inspections of all homeless services.
- Tackle hidden homelessness and take steps to ensure the housing needs of those not presenting to services, but still effectively homeless, are met.
- Implement a strategy to eliminate youth homelessness, with a strong focus on those exiting care. Our strategy will be disability-proofed, LGBTQ+ inclusive, and will address issues faced by Travellers and other minorities.

Fairness for Renters

The Social Democrats would take immediate action to bring down the cost of rent and provide security for renters. In Government, we will:

- Ban vulture funds buying up existing homes.
- Ban ‘no-fault evictions’.
- Introduce a three-year rent freeze.
- Introduce a ‘Reference Rent’ system.
- Build 25,000 affordable rental homes over a 5-year term.
- Clamp down on illegal rent increases.
- Create a Rent Register.
- Establish a Deposit Protection Scheme.
- Strengthen the powers and resources of the RTB so it can carry out its job effectively.
- Empower Gardaí to intervene in illegal evictions.
- Increase the availability of homes to rent by clamping down on illegal short-term lets.
- Make ‘Sex for Rent’ a criminal offence.
- Formalise the local authority/tenant relationship, with social housing tenancies registered with, and regulated by, the RTB.

Learning From the Mistakes of the Past

Defective blocks, pyrite, and fire safety issues have caused untold misery to people all over the country, and stand to cost the taxpayer billions of euros. In Government we will rigorously enforce high building standards.

Lax regulations and a hands-off approach from successive Governments allowed cowboy developers to wreak havoc on communities across Ireland. We need a defects remediation scheme – managed by the Housing Agency – which funds fire safety, water ingress, and serious structural defects, and reimburses owners who have paid or are paying for the costs of remediating such defects. Any remediation scheme must be end-to-end administered by the State, at no cost to the homeowner.

Failure to regulate management companies properly, combined with sinking funds being used to fund building defects, means that in the next few years, a crisis will come to a head. In Government, we will move legislative responsibility for the Multi Unit Development (MUD) sector from the Department of Justice to the Department of Housing so that policy and legislative responsibility are aligned under the one department. We will also create a regulator for Owner Management Companies (OMCs), and reform the 2011 MUD Act to tackle the problems in relation to the governance of OMCs, dispute resolution, service charges, and sinking funds.

Other Housing Measures

The Social Democrats will implement other key measures to deliver a greater supply of affordable homes to rent and buy, to make the housing system fairer, and to create a pipeline for long-term delivery of affordable homes.

- Bring empty homes back into use by tackling vacancy and dereliction.
- Increase the derisory vacant homes tax from 0.7 per cent to 10 per cent.
- Establish a one-stop-shop for vacancy to provide advice to those looking to renovate vacant or derelict homes.
- Create a fund to compulsorily purchase and renovate vacant or derelict houses.
- Make the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant available in instalments.
- Remove the tax exemptions and reliefs for REITs and other investment funds in the property sector, and ensure they pay a fair amount of tax.
- Put in place an effective ban on bulk purchasing homes, including apartments, by increasing the special rate of stamp duty on bulk purchases to 100 per cent.
- Fund the implementation of the *National Housing Strategy for Disabled People*.
- Implement changes to Housing Adaption Grants to increase funding, increase the maximum grant amount to reflect building costs, and reform the means-testing process.
- Build new designated housing for older people, building both in small infill sites in our cities and towns, and also incorporating them into new developments.
- Create a national policy for the planning of housing and development in Gaeltacht areas, and give Údarás na Gaeltachta clear housing functions.
- Invest directly in publicly owned affordable student accommodation.
- Increase refuge spaces, so that Ireland is in line with our obligations under the Istanbul Convention, and increase the provision of secure alternative housing for those in refuges.
- Prioritise the implementation of the *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review* and increase the capital budget for the provision of new culturally appropriate Traveller accommodation.
- Implement the recommendations of the Kenny Report to make the CPO regime fit for purpose.
- Hold a referendum to put the right to a home in the Constitution.

Further information about our plans for the delivery of more affordable homes can be found in our Housing Policy Document on our website. We have also published supplementary documents on how we would deliver Affordable Housing, and how we would protect Renters' Rights. These documents can also be found in the Policy section of the website.

A close-up portrait of a man with short brown hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a light grey blazer over a dark blue button-down shirt. His hands are clasped in front of him. The background is blurred green foliage.

Rory Hearne

Candidate for
Dublin North-West

Health and Social Care

One of the most basic functions of a republic is to put in place the necessary services to keep people well and treat them when they are sick. It's not too much for people to expect decent healthcare; it is a key part of the social contract.

Instead, Ireland has a dysfunctional two-tier health service which has not been capable of meeting people's needs. Traditionally it has been characterised by an inadequate public health service with long waiting lists on the one hand and, on the other, a large cohort of people feeling they need expensive private health insurance, essentially a health tax, in order to access timely care.

In Ireland there is no legal right to healthcare; people are deemed to be "eligible" for healthcare based on income or age, but eligibility does not confer any *right* to services. In contrast, social welfare is based on "entitlement" set down in law. In health, there is only eligibility if the services are actually available.

Historically, there has been no consensus on the kind of healthcare system which would best meet people's needs, and no coherence on policy; every time the Minister changed, the policy changed, and the health service was dogged by influential vested interests. That is why the Social Democrats led the way to agreement between all the political parties on the way forward for our health services. In 2017 the Sláintecare roadmap was approved by the Dáil with the intention of bringing the country to a point where we would have a fully functioning universal healthcare system where people could access quality health and social care in a timely manner, based on health need, rather than on ability to pay. Such a system would bring Ireland into line with the kind of accessible healthcare that most citizens across Europe currently enjoy.

Since its publication, progress on the Sláintecare plan has been mixed. Initially, Government merely paid lip service to it but were not serious about implementation. No specific budget was set aside for its implementation. During Covid very few practical steps were taken to progress it in spite of the fact that responding to Covid was actually based on a universal care system where care was provided on a strict need basis. Since then, there has been a certain amount of progress but it has been slow, and lacks the ambition and urgency to bring about the radical system change which we should be seeing at this stage. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Legislate for a legal entitlement to healthcare.
- Fully implement the Sláintecare programme within the term of the next government.
- Pre-commit the necessary funding outside of the annual Budget process, similar to how things work with the National Development Plan and public pay agreements.
- Target an additional 5,000 extra hospital beds by 2030.

The Social Democrats are committed to implementing the Sláintecare plan in its entirety. The following are key elements of Sláintecare which remain to be fully implemented.

Enhanced Primary Care

Reorientating services so that people can access most of their healthcare locally through primary care teams is a cornerstone of Sláintecare. Primary healthcare should be provided predominantly in modern primary care centres, developed by the State. Like many aspects of healthcare, the provision of primary care centres has largely been left to the market. This is far from ideal as many of the areas most in need of good primary care services are least likely to get such a centre.

In terms of staffing, multidisciplinary primary care teams are required, and far greater attention needs to be paid to workforce planning to address serious difficulties with recruitment. Cost is also a significant barrier to many people in accessing timely healthcare. Patients often therefore experience a worsening of their condition and need hospital treatment because they couldn't afford to attend a doctor.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure that the State plays a far greater role in the direct provision of primary care centres.

- Significantly expand capacity at community level by recruiting the full range of primary care staff.
- Reduce and remove charges for access to all primary care, including GPs, public health nurses, therapies and medicines. Delivery of these must be accelerated to achieve a genuinely universal healthcare system.

Preventative Care

There needs to be a much stronger emphasis on preventative care and the Health and Wellbeing budget needs to be at least doubled.

Life expectancy and years free from limiting conditions is strongly related to socio-economic status. Such status is also heavily influenced by poor access to healthcare due to inadequate provision and cost barriers.

Additionally, the commercial determinants of health are increasingly being recognised as significant factors in health status, especially the high rates of child and adult obesity. Other ministers and departments must play their part in addressing the impact of their policies on health. This includes easy access to government in respect of lobbying, weak planning laws around fast food outlets, and taxation policies for the food and beverage industries.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure that healthcare is a whole-of-government concern.
- Locate the Sláintecare Implementation Office in the Taoiseach's office, as was originally proposed by the cross-party committee.
- Address the underlying causes of poverty in a deliberate and coherent manner.
- Tackle the commercial determinants of health.

Workforce Planning

One of the biggest challenges facing our health and social care services is the recruitment and retention of staff, across all disciplines. To date, workforce planning has been piecemeal at best and undermined by the absence of a coherent strategy.

Large numbers of highly trained healthcare professionals are leaving the sector, or the country, because of poor conditions and terms of employment, while little attention has been given to the number of training and clinical placements required to address current pressures and changing demographics.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Establish a National Workforce Planning Taskforce to address the short, medium and long-term needs of our Health and Social Care sector.
- Provide funding for a workforce planning function in the Department of Health to lead the integrated healthcare workforce strategy.
- Mandate HSE management to urgently prioritise the creation of additional placements with appropriate supervision arrangements.

The Key Role of GPs

GPs are essential healthcare professionals who provide vital services in local communities. Their role is even more important as we roll out Sláintecare across the country and reorientate the health system to a predominantly community-based system. But there is a serious shortage of GPs in Ireland at present because of poor forward planning, an outdated GP contract, and a lack of flexibility in working arrangements.

Surveys of young GPs have shown a clear preference for working as part of a multidisciplinary team. There is also a demand for better work/life balance which the traditional single-handed practice does not accommodate.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Update and modernise the GP contract to reflect the role of GPs under Sláintecare.
- Provide for salaried GPs.
- Continue the phased rolling out free GP care to all age groups.
- Increase the number of GP training places.

Safe Nurse Staffing

The Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix was published in 2018 but it has still not been fully implemented. Unsafe staffing has essentially become the norm within the HSE. There should be one nurse for every four patients, but the HSE regularly has ratios of one nurse to 12 or 14 patients. This is putting both patients and staff at very serious risk.

The recent recruitment freeze has exacerbated the problem not just in acute settings, but also in the community where there are critical shortages in public health nursing. The newly introduced HSE staff limits are entirely arbitrary, and not based on safe staffing levels. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Implement the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix in full to ensure the best possible care and working conditions.
- Accelerate implementation of phase 3 of the Framework for Safe Nurse and Skill Mix in general non-acute care settings including nursing homes, to ensure minimum staffing levels are prescribed and adhered to.
- Make safe staffing a key focus of HIQA inspections.

Health and Social Care Professionals

Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs) are critical to the success of Sláintecare and its stated aim of “integrated delivery of care in the right place at the right time”.

However, for too long this important clinical group has been overlooked. The recent appointment of a HSCP Chief Officer in the Department of Health is welcome, but further steps must be taken to increase their representation at senior management level. Like in so many areas of our health service, recruitment and retention of staff is a major issue.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Engage in strategic workforce planning, particularly in primary care and chronic disease management.
- Fund additional clinical tutor posts to increase the availability of training placements.
- Invest in career progression and promotional opportunities.

Public Dental Service

Repeated calls for reform of public dental services have gone ignored, with services now teetering on the edge of collapse. The number of public-only dentists has fallen by 23 per cent, while more than a quarter of those remaining are nearing retirement age. The strain on the school screening programme is now so severe that some children are not receiving their first dental check until they have reached fourth year of secondary school.

There has also been a mass exodus of dentists from the medical card scheme. The number of participating dentists has dropped from 1,600 in 2016 to 810, of which only 600 dentists are active in the scheme.

In government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase investment in the HSE public dental service and expand the capacity of services for children and special care patients.

- Immediately begin engagement with the dental sector to reform the medical card scheme and put it on a sustainable footing.
- Replace the almost 40-year-old Dentists Act with modern legislation that protects patients, mandates continuing professional development, and strengthens the regulatory framework.
- Address funding and capacity issues in our dental schools to end the overreliance on international students.

Outsourcing

Despite the Government's stated commitment to Sláintecare, services are becoming increasingly privatised. This is particularly prevalent in social care for older people, with private companies controlling 80 per cent of all nursing homes, while only 40 per cent of homecare hours are being provided directly by the State.

Contracting out these public services is often thought to result in efficiencies, but the reality is that outsourcing these services is poor value for money and results in inferior terms of employment. Meanwhile the increased reliance on the National Treatment Purchase Fund to compensate for lack of capacity in the health service is deepening the public capacity deficit, creating a vicious cycle.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reverse the trend of increased privatisation and take more direct responsibility for the provision of health and social care, in line with the principles underpinning Sláintecare.
- Conduct a review of the privatisation of elder care, and the market structure for those already privatised.

Access to Hospital Care

While most health and social care is best provided locally in the community, it is essential that everyone has timely access to specialist care, whether for an outpatient appointment, or as an inpatient for a procedure or for emergency care. Two key enablers of this under Sláintecare – the new public-only consultant contract and the removal of private care from public hospitals – have been progressed and have been making a marked difference. The removal of overnight charges for a hospital stay has also been welcome.

However, additional staff (for safe staffing levels) and improved bed capacity is required to reach the Sláintecare maximum waiting times of 12 weeks for inpatient care, 10 weeks for out-patient care and 12 weeks for G.I. scopes. In Government the Social Democrats will legislate to underpin and maintain targets for maximum waiting times.

Separately, University Hospital Limerick is dangerously overcrowded and has been for more than a decade, since health services in the Mid-West were reconfigured. The Social Democrats will address this through resourcing of additional staff and beds. Further, we will provide for a Model 3 hospital in the Mid-West with an Emergency Department and fast-track the HIQA review of possible locations.

Homecare

We still have a largely unregulated homecare industry and despite a Programme for Government commitment to address this, only the draft heads of the legislation have been published. This Government has also completely reneged on its commitment to introduce a statutory right to homecare, missing each target for delivery.

Homecare must be a priority to ensure that older people are supported to remain in their homes, reduce dependency on family and friends, and crucially, to end the State's overreliance on institutional care.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a statutory right to homecare and provide a budget for a person-centred homecare scheme with equality of access and availability.

- Invest in homecare packages to abolish waiting lists, and develop step-down and rehabilitation facilities.
- Implement the recommendations of the Strategic Workforce Advisory Group on Homecarers and Nursing Home Health Care Assistants in full, and ensure that carers benefit from good pay, adequate terms and conditions, and opportunities for career development.
- Re-examine the Critical Skills list for visas to ensure as much as possible is being done to allow skilled workers for the sector be found.
- Introduce nationally mandated staffing ratios for nursing homes.

Mental Health Budget

Mental health funding was to reach 10 per cent of overall health expenditure by 2025 under Sláintecare but over the lifetime of this Government, it has only marginally increased as a percentage of the overall health budget. In 2025, mental health funding will still represent only 5.8 per cent of the total health budget, which is a 0.1 per cent increase on 2024.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Set a pathway towards allocating 10 per cent of the total health budget to mental health services by the end of 2030.
- Make multi-annual funding the norm across HSE-funded, and other state-funded, organisations delivering mental health services.

eHealth

Progress on implementing an eHealth strategy, including individual health identifiers, has been shockingly slow. This has badly impacted the health service in terms of patient records, safety, accurate data, efficiency, cost-effectiveness and service planning.

The original eHealth strategy was drawn up in 2013 but the necessary implementation funding was blocked by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Instead, it was suggested that a wait-and-see approach be taken to the digital system in the new National Children's Hospital. Since then, the approach has been piecemeal, slow, and disjointed. Different arms of the health service use different systems and often these systems don't 'speak to each other'. Many hospitals records are still paper based.

2024 saw a new framework for the digital health strategy along with underpinning legislation. However, the level of funding provided is wholly inadequate and represents a huge missed opportunity to modernise the health service, improve safety for patients, and achieve significant cost-savings.

In Government the Social Democrats will:

- Fully fund the eHealth strategy within the next five years to enable the full implementation of Sláintecare and achieve the full benefits of digitalisation.

HSE Reform

A key element of the Sláintecare reform programme is the restructuring of the Health Service Executive. As the largest public service organisation, it plays a critical role in our society and our economy, but it has not been fit-for-purpose. It is highly centralised and based on a command-and-control structure. Its processes are cumbersome, time-consuming, and inefficient, and it is not capable of adequately responding to local need. Resources are not allocated appropriately or fairly, and service design does not reflect local need. Local management are both disempowered and lack accountability due to the centralised nature of management and decision making.

That is why Sláintecare recommended a fundamental restructuring of the HSE and the establishment of six Regional Health Areas. The purpose of this major restructuring is:

- To achieve essential integrated care between hospitals and community care through a single budget and single management team in each region.
- To ensure greater accountability of senior administrative and clinical management at regional level (this was to be underpinned by legislation).
- The fairer allocation of resources across the regions based on objective health need, ending the post code service lottery. This must include ensuring all people have equal access to specialist services, particularly cancer and cardiovascular treatments, and are not disadvantaged by distance of travel for such services.
- To achieve better value for money.

While much work has been done on this reform, it still lacks the promised legislation. In Government, the Social Democrats will introduce legislation to provide for accountability at senior management level within each RHA.

The Challenge of Privatisation to Sláintecare

The increasing privatisation of health and social care services is having very damaging consequences across the health sector, contributing to staff shortages, long waiting times, and inadequate public infrastructure.

This trend towards commercial, for-profit models in health and social care has led to the visible growth of private hospitals and clinics, extensive privatisation of both homecare and nursing home care, and even the management of general practice, with an increased involvement of multinational chains.

We are seeing this wealth extraction being facilitated, and even encouraged, by the State. This flies in the face of the principles underpinning Sláintecare.

Within the private companies that provide contracted out health and social care services, the drive to maximise profits conflicts with the need to spend time, money and other resources meeting the needs of citizens. This in turn, leads to a squeeze on both the quality and quantity of services. This outsourcing of healthcare also makes it more difficult to implement new regional structures.

This creeping privatisation must be challenged and ultimately reversed. Our health and social care services should serve the needs of patients, not shareholders. (See also Page 88 on ‘Decent Public Services’).

Other Healthcare Priorities

In Government, the Social Democrats will take other key measures to deliver accessible and affordable healthcare and increase services for designated groups:

- Resource an increase in specialist inpatient bed capacity for eating disorders from the existing 3 beds to the 23 beds pledged in the Model of Care.
- Develop and expand ambulance and paramedic services, starting with the worst served areas. This would include better collaboration and synchronicity between existing services and improvement of paramedic and EMT working conditions.
- Invest in existing community infrastructure such as supports for community pharmacists, acknowledging the role they play in primary care, supporting greater health literacy, greater access to safe health advice, and supporting a less fragmented primary care system.
- Reducing prescription charges for patients; all prescription charges 50c with a cap of €5 per month.
- Reduce the Drug Payment Scheme maximum payment to €60 per month.
- Increase supports for sufferers of Multiple Sclerosis, including sustainable funding for national physiotherapy services for people with MS and other neurological conditions.

- Set up a Taskforce to develop a 10-Year National Diabetes Strategy to improve access and delivery of diabetes care services that improve quality of life, and invest to improve access to any form of continuous glucose monitoring for people with Type 1 diabetes as recommended by international guidelines
- Adequately fund chronic care programmes such as for arthritis, asthma and EB.
- Cap car parking charges for patients undergoing hospital treatment.
- Implement the Neurorehabilitation Strategy in full, including fully staffed community neurorehabilitation teams in each CHO.
- Implement the National Dementia Strategy, and provide additional funding for dementia and Alzheimer's services and for palliative care.
- Provide additional funding for hospice care, to increase the capacity to deliver quality end-of-life care in the community, and to support people to plan for their care at end of life.
- Provide a sustainable level of funding for LauraLynn Children's Hospice, and commit to develop, implement and resource a new national policy on Palliative Care for Children with Life-limiting Conditions.
- Make multi-annual funding the norm for HSE-funded organisations to put services and projects on a sustainable footing, address staffing issues.
- Begin a process of creating pay parity for Section 39 workers to ensure that they have comparable terms and conditions to their public sector counterparts.
- End the practice of placing people aged under-65 in nursing homes and develop appropriate supportive housing facilities in the community, including ring-fenced annual funding to speed up the transition.
- Adequately resource CORU to accelerate the regulation of the health and social care professions.
- Provide multiannual funding for the National Cancer Strategy.
- Allow for automatic renewal of medical cards for people with terminal and chronic conditions.
- Prioritise delivery of the Women's Health Action Plan and publish an accompanying implementation plan.
- Implement in full the recommendations of the O'Shea Review into the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, including removing the three-day waiting period for access to abortion services, improving access to services in underserved regions, and improve the information available.
- Regulate the predatory practices of rogue pregnancy agencies which provide medically inaccurate and distressing information to pregnant people in vulnerable positions.
- Publish a new National Sexual Health Strategy with a key focus on regional sexual health services and the capacity of PrEP services.
- Improve access to trans-affirming healthcare services based on a model of informed consent in line with international best practice.
- Introduce and enact robust adult safeguarding legislation to protect adults who are at risk of abuse and provide effective powers to investigate potential risk settings.
- Continue to expand investment in fertility services, including funding for IVF, Testosterone Replacement Therapy, and increased investment in male fertility services, including provision of sperm DNA fragmentation tests and improved awareness raising on rare fertility conditions.
- Resource and expand drug treatment services, including detox beds.
- Address children's spinal surgery waiting lists and honour the four-month target for scoliosis surgery.
- Include SMA and SCID screening in the newborn bloodspot screening test and endeavour to expand the spectrum of conditions screened for in Ireland, aligning our national screening programmes with best practices across Europe.
- Update the Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) prevention plan and develop FASD diagnostic and treatment pathways.

Cllr Elisa O'Donovan

Candidate for
Limerick City



Mental Health

Mental healthcare in Ireland is a piecemeal system that allows too many to fall through the cracks.

Primary and community care is disorganised and varies greatly across the country, and emergency care is not fit for purpose.

Mental health services have long suffered from chronic underinvestment. Now, the severe adverse impact of Covid-19 on the nation's physical and mental wellbeing has put additional strain on service providers.

This results in unnecessary distress for patients and families, and, too frequently, avoidable tragic outcomes. While the government has launched several initiatives urging people to 'get help', people in distress often find that this help is not forthcoming.

Growing demand for mental health services throughout the system has not been met with proportional increases in staff and resources for mental health services. As we have highlighted many times, there are huge waiting lists for referrals to child and adolescent mental health services.

The Social Democrats aim to create a mental healthcare system that is proactive and community-based, while also overhauling acute and in-patient care to ensure those who do reach a crisis point receive the best standard of care possible.

The biggest challenge facing our health and social care services in recent years is the recruitment and retention of staff, across all disciplines. This has been as true in mental healthcare as in the rest of the public healthcare system. There are no current projections of training places needed, and there has been insufficient coordination with the Department of Further and Higher Education around this issue. Workforce planning must form a key part of any approach.

There is also a need to prioritise prevention measures, early intervention, and community-based care, and ensure adequate resource allocation, including increasing the annual budget allocated to mental health services to 10 per cent of the overall health budget. (It is currently approximately 5 per cent).

The full implementation of Sláintecare is a core part of the Social Democrats' approach to addressing mental health. We will make mental healthcare a high priority within the health system. This would include:

- Delivering more mental healthcare via primary care and community-based mental health teams, and ensuring effective and timely primary and community mental healthcare is accessible to all.
- Increasing funding for Mental Health to 10 per cent of health budget.
- Fully staffing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Teams, and expanding Adult Community Mental Health Teams.
- Expanding Old Age Psychiatry, services for intellectually disabled people, and the Child and Adolescent Liaison service.
- Progressing legislation to update the 2001 Mental Health Act so that it complies with international human rights standards.
- Improving public education on mental health and continuing to pursue evidence-based prevention strategies.
- Providing appropriate funding, and organisation, to acute and in-patient services, so that those in crisis receive immediate and compassionate care.

Primary and Community Care

The full implementation of Sláintecare will mean increased investment in primary care and community care. It will also mean increased integration of mental healthcare into the primary care system. This will lead to:

- Significantly reduced waiting times for Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and it would address the significant regional imbalances in waiting times.
- Massive investment in the recruitment of extra psychologists for the National Educational Psychology Service and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health.
- More standardised primary care treatment guidelines for conditions to ensure everyone receives the best standard of care.
- Better training for GPs in mental health screening and basic counselling, ensuring they have direct access to mental health specialists and can facilitate early intervention.
- More assisted living and 'step-down' facilities for those leaving in-patient care, and more supports for independent living for those with chronic mental health conditions.
- Timely and effective access and referral processes for multi-disciplinary services, including social workers, occupational therapists, mediators, marriage counsellors, and dieticians.
- More support groups and advice/education for family members.
- Vital services currently provided by state-funded non-profits being incorporated into a more unified public system.
- Improved dual diagnosis (addiction and mental illness) counselling and community services, and full implementation of the 2023 HSE Dual Diagnosis Model of Care.
- Increased neuropsychology services (for issues like dementia and brain injury).

Education and Prevention

Integrating mental health services into schools can be highly effective. This includes not just counselling and support for students, but also training for teachers and staff in mental health first aid and awareness.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools (primary and secondary) have access to at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist as a permanent member of the staff.
This will begin with a local area team, first, before evolving to one per school.
- Reconstitute NEPS and expand it as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service (NEPCS) and mandate it to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools.
- Ensure that all secondary schools have a guidance counsellor, distinct from specialist emotional counsellors/therapists.
- Continue to pursue general awareness campaigns on mental illness prevention, in schools, primary care, etc. with an emphasis on proactive mental wellbeing. This would include a self-care toolkit and web resources.
- Ensure a focus on mental health in marginalised communities, including immigrants, the LGBTQI+ community, and the Traveller community.
- Ensure appropriate funding for mental health research.
- Develop a new national strategy on Suicide to replace *Connecting for Life* which expired several years ago.

Youth Mental Health

Youth mental health services and supports are at breaking point, with long waiting lists and a postcode lottery. The surge in demand, without commensurate increases in recruitment and staffing for the services that deal with young people, has meant that those services are not accessible for young people, and their broader health and wellbeing is being adversely affected. For example, as of May 2024, there were 3,842 children and young people on the waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This means the waiting list has almost doubled since 2019.

Reducing waiting times requires significant and sustained investment to expand Ireland's mental health workforce. There is a significant shortage of a number of critical members of CAMHS teams. The lack of consultant psychiatrists and reduced inpatient capacity pose major patient safety risks.

Despite all the issues with mental health services in Ireland, we know that there are still not enough mental health practitioners being trained. Graduate programmes need to be developed to help with supply. Pay imbalances, including related to Section 39 workers, are also causing issues.

It must also be remembered that while CAMHS and its dysfunction is the headline-grabber in youth mental health, it is far from the case that sorting CAMHS out will sort out youth mental health. The lack of multi-disciplinary community teams has pushed more care onto CAMHS, while the deficit in CAMHS teams has pushed many children into adult services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Implement the recommendations of the Inspector of Mental Health Services July 2023 report into CAMHS, including the independent regulation of CAMHS by the Mental Health Commission.
- Implement the recommendations of Families for Reform of CAMHS.
- Establish a National Workforce Planning Taskforce to address both the short term and medium-term needs of our Health and Social Care sector.
- Liaise between the Department of Health and the Department of Further and Higher Education to ensure higher education places in the area of mental health match future projected service needs.
- Work towards the full clinical and administrative staffing of CAMHS teams. This includes working towards the aim of establishing 16 CAMHS-Intellectual Disability teams. This will help to improve access, and reduce CAMHs waiting times.
- Expand CAMHS to cover young people up to age 25, in line with international best practice, and improve focus on early intervention, targeting programmes at young adults 18-25.
- Resource teams dealing with early intervention in psychosis and ARMS (at risk mental state).
- Restore CAMHS bed capacity to 72, moving towards the necessary 115 beds over time.
- Expand services for young people that do not qualify for CAMHS, including by resourcing primary care and community-based mental health teams to provide a more comprehensive service.
- Increase investment organisations that specialise in youth mental health services to allow them to expand service provision.
- Ensure that mental health practitioners in the Community & Voluntary sector, including Section 39 workers, are paid fairly for the work they are doing.
- Develop national standards of youth mental health services, driven by the regulation of CAMHS.

Other Priorities in Mental Health

Sharing the Vision – Ireland’s national mental health strategy – outlines a number of priority groups, which have specific requirements in the field of mental health. There is a higher incidence of mental health difficulties among people from ethnic minority communities, the LGBTQI+ community, and in the prison population in Ireland than in the general population.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reinstate the Mental Health Bill 2024 to Dáil Committee Stage and progress the Bill to completion.
- Provide sufficient funding for the *Sharing the Vision* implementation plan.
- Ensure that anti-discrimination and cultural competency training is provided for mental health staff.
- Promote the use of qualified and trained interpreters to support communication with migrant groups.
- Provide accessible written material in a variety of languages and formats.
- Involve individuals from ethnic minority groups, their family/friends/carers/supporters, and community members in the planning, improvement and review of programmes and services.
- Begin addressing the national shortfall of 832 acute psychiatric inpatient beds identified by the Specialist Group on Acute Bed Capacity.
- Introduce a VAT exemption for counselling and psychotherapy services.
- Grant additional funding for Community & Voluntary sector providers of mental health services.
- Resource National Clinical Programmes in Mental Health.
- Implement and operationalise the Youth Mental Health Pathfinder Project.
- Expedite the implementation of state regulation for counselling, psychotherapy, and psychology professions under CORU, ensuring high standards of practice, public safety, and addressing the critical risks associated with non-regulation.
- Fund an independent advocacy service for people with mental health difficulties.
- Recruit additional Clinical Nurse Specialists working on suicide crisis situations.
- Reinstate the role of dedicated national lead for mental health in the HSE to ensure national oversight and accountability in developing mental health services.
- Make multi-annual funding the norm for HSE-funded, and other state-funded, organisations delivering mental health services.
- Improve the delivery of Digital Mental Health Services.
- Endeavour to support LGBTQI+ competent service provision – including professional training and reviewing policies and procedures.
- Ensure treatment and care is LGBTQI+ sensitive.
- Conduct further research and evaluation of mental health services, ensuring continuous consultation with LGBTQI+ mental health service users.
- Explore policies that treat drug addiction primarily as a health issue rather than a criminal one, integrating addiction treatment more closely with mental health services.
- Encourage the recruitment, where possible, of staff from ethnic minority communities and create a diverse staff at all levels of the mental healthcare services, reflecting where possible the demographic characteristics of the populations in the service area.
- Increase the mental health supports available to the prison population, addressing the inappropriate waiting lists and publishing and resourcing the implementation plan of the High Level Task Force.

Further information about our plans for investment in, and improvement of, mental health can be found in our Mental Health Policy Document on our website.

A full-length portrait of a man standing outdoors. He has short, light-colored hair and is smiling. He is wearing a dark grey, herringbone-patterned coat over a light blue button-down shirt and a black zip-up jacket. His hands are in his coat pockets.

Cllr Liam Quaide

Candidate for
Cork East

Disability

Disabled people face some of the greatest barriers to full participation in Irish society.

At the 2022 Census, over 1 million people (a total of 22 per cent of the population) reported having a disability or disabling condition or difficulty, and most people will experience some form of disability at some point in their lives.

Within this group lie a myriad of different disability types and circumstances, and therefore a complex range of support needs. But whatever the disability, this part of our community is at significantly greater risk than non-disabled people of experiencing poverty, social exclusion, and unemployment, as well as barriers in transport, housing, education, and other areas.

Despite improvements in funding for services and supports in recent years, the experience of disabled people in Ireland continues to be one of social exclusion. Disabled people consistently have among the highest poverty rates of any group in Ireland, three times that of the general population, while more than two in five disabled people are experiencing deprivation at any one time.

The Department of Health's Disability Capacity Review was published in July 2021, highlighting "significant levels of unmet need" in the provision of appropriate disability services. It estimated that a further €550 million to €1,000 million investment in disability services was required by 2032. The report is a stark reminder of just how far behind the rest of society disabled people have fallen in terms of basic community and residential services.

Progressing Disability Services is failing to meet the needs of disabled children, with many spending significant time on waiting lists and receiving no services. There is a significant long-term impact for the individual and family from not getting the correct early intervention, not to mention a significant long-term cost for the State. *Progressing Disability Services* needs a complete overhaul.

Simultaneously, Ireland has, in comparative terms, a high dependence on the provision of informal care support by family members. This puts a huge burden on carers, often without sufficient state supports. Questions must be asked about the continued viability and sustainability of such reliance in light of the changing demographic and socio-economic realities of modern Ireland.

It doesn't have to be like this. If Government put the principles and demands of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) at the core of policy, it would lead to greatly improved outcomes for disabled people, their carers, and their families.

In Government the Social Democrats will:

- Insist on a full Minister for Disability, with a mandate to ensure a whole-of-Government cross-departmental approach to disability policy.
- Follow a rights-based approach to disability, recognising the role of Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs).
- Implement, enact and commence key legislation and strategies to promote and protect the rights, quality of life, the independence of disabled people.
- Reform the governance and accountability of the provision of disability services.
- Prioritise the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities when in government.
- Create clear criteria for the classification of DPOs, as well as a system of financial supports so that DPOs can participate in public processes on disability issues, including legislative and policy processes.
- Invest in inclusion, guided by the findings of the Disability Capacity Review, to put the sector on a sustainable financial footing.
- Make multi-annual funding from government the norm for the disability sector.
- Implement a weekly Cost of Disability payment to reflect that disabled people have a higher cost of living as a result of their disability.
- Establish an organisation separate from the Health Service Executive to assume responsibility of the assessment of, and care for, disabled people.

- Introduce a statutory right to homecare and Personal Assistance.
- Develop a roadmap on Special Education and Inclusive Education.
- Introduce replacement schemes for the Motorised Transport Grant and Mobility Allowance based on assessment of individual needs.

Reform of Governance and Accountability

As things stand, direct accountability for disability services has been removed from relevant ministers, and responsibilities have instead been abdicated to organisations such as the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). This needs to change to ensure the rights as outlined in the UNCRPD are met.

In Government, the Social Democrats will insist on a full Minister for Disability with a mandate to ensure a whole-of-Government cross-departmental approach to disability policy.

There is also a need to overhaul the monitoring of the performance of those responsible for the provision of services to disabled people. This would mean oversight from three key agencies:

- A Disability Inspectorate – to carry out inspections or enquiries on all aspects of the operation and administration of disability services within organisations receiving state funding including, but not limited to, the provision of medical services/therapies, education services, housing, and the employment of disabled people. This Inspectorate will be based within HIQA initially, and eventually independent from it (as it will have a remit for more than health-related issues).
- A Disability Ombudsman – to deal with complaints made by members of the public, politicians, state bodies or DPOs on the services provided and decisions made by organisations receiving state funding for the provision of services to disabled people.
- A revised Disability Authority – to oversee the performance of organisations receiving state funding for the provision of services and supports to disabled people, as well as its current functions.

Together, these agencies would drive accountability for the provision of services for disabled people, as well as provide clear independent escalation routes where such services are not being provided at all, or not being provided in a timely manner; not being provided to a sufficient level of quality; or where organisations are not clear if it is their responsibility or that of another organisation. It is also clear that the HSE is stretched as an organisation. The priorities and life-long care needs of disabled people are often of secondary importance to the provision of acute medical services.

A separate organisation should be set up within, or in parallel with, the HSE to assume responsibility for the assessment of, and care for, disabled people; and the provision of equipment for disabled people.

The important thing is that an organisation exists whose main priority is the delivery of services to disabled people, and this area is not taking a backseat to the delivery of acute healthcare. This organisation should work in conjunction with the HSE, and a defined mechanism should be established to resolve disputes through the Disability Ombudsman where both organisations are unclear as to who should provide a service.

A Rights Based Approach

In 2006, the United Nations agreed on a series of interpretations and guidelines in the form of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In 2018 Ireland became the last EU country to ratify the UNCRPD. While ratification was welcome in itself, and was long overdue, it has had little effect to date on the actual lives of disabled people as so much of our national legislation remains out of sync with the Convention, and transitioning to a social model of disability inclusion remains a low priority.

In addition, the Government did not ratify the Optional Protocol until recent weeks, with the effective date – in an incredible act of political cynicism – strategically set for after the General Election, ensuring the outgoing

government bore no responsibility for enforcement. This protocol makes a significant difference to disability rights as it would provide for a mechanism of independent oversight by civil society.

Without it the Government is not answerable to the UN nor subject to possible inquiries by it.

Without the commencement of key legislation and a means to enforce the rights within the Convention, disability rights in Ireland still depend on the policy of whoever is in Government and where we are in the economic cycle.

Rights without a means to being vindicated are not really rights at all.

It is little wonder, then, that large swathes of disability legislation are still waiting to be fully commenced. This includes the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, the Citizen's Information Act 2007 and the Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. Each of these must be progressed to ensure a rights-based approach to disability and the full participation of disabled people in our society.

Article 4 (3) of the UNCRPD requires that "in the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties must closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations".

However, most Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) in Ireland have no national funding mechanism and there is too little involvement of them in the decision-making process. As per the UNCRPD requirements, DPOs should be integrated into the decision-making process. For this to happen, there needs to be:

- Clear criteria for the classification of an organisation as a DPO.
- A process for registration as a DPO.
- A system of financial supports, so that recognised DPOs can participate in public processes on disability issues, including independent funding for their involvement in UNCRPD monitoring which may include collecting disability data for parallel reporting.
- A framework for the involvement of DPOs in the early stages of the legislative and policy processes; crucially, this must be before Government and policymakers make decisions.
- An independent mechanism for DPOs to appeal if they believe they are not being included in the decision-making process, or if legislation is not being enforced. This mechanism must have power to order the rectification of the issue at hand within a certain timeframe.

In Government, the Social Democrats will work to implement these points.

Workforce Planning

The biggest challenge facing our health and social care services in recent years is the recruitment and retention of staff, across all disciplines. This in turn is leading to the creeping privatisation of our health and social services.

Too often, Government pledges funding for disability services that cannot be spent because the HSE and other bodies cannot find the required staff. A cross-departmental Workforce Planning Strategy is required to ensure that allocated funding can be spent and that service delivery, including around Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) and Personal Assistant Services, is not hindered by capacity constraints.

As an example of the problem, over 9,000 children have been waiting for over 12 months for initial contact with a Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT), and almost 15,000 are waiting in total. At the end of March, almost 10,000 children were (officially) waiting on an assessment of need.

The main problem is no longer funding; the money cannot be spent because staff cannot be hired. There is an urgent need for strategic work force planning. The HSE staff census in October 2023 showed that 817 posts – 36 per cent of all posts – were vacant across CDNTs, an increase from 34 per cent in 2022 and 28 per cent in 2021.

To date, workforce planning for the sector has been piecemeal at best. There are no current projections of training places needed across health and social care, there is little co-ordination with the Department of Further and Higher Education, the number of training placements in services has been drastically reduced, and scant

attention has been paid to the conditions and terms of employment which have driven large numbers of highly trained workers to leave sector.

There is an immediate and critical need to establish a National Workforce Planning Taskforce to address both the short term and medium-term needs of our Health and Social Care sector; something that will have significant implications for disabled people.

Section 39 Organisations

Investment in universal social care services is vital to ensure disabled people have the necessary supports to reduce dependence on family and friends and to maintain a private life with dignity.

Social care in Ireland has been progressively outsourced. The majority of disability services are now provided by not-for-profit organisations. Many community and voluntary bodies providing health and social care services, and services to disabled people, struggle to recruit staff as a result of a disparity in pay-scales between state agency staff and the section 39, 56 and 10 agencies.

These voluntary organisations play an essential role in the delivery of health, social and community services and are a critical component of Ireland's health and social care system.

We know the sector is struggling, with disparities in pay and conditions between the public and voluntary sector resulting in a crisis of recruitment and retention. While the pay agreement of November 2023 made some progress, no pay indexation process has been achieved. The services provided by Section 39 organisations are key to supporting carers and the people they care for, and must be properly resourced to do the job being assigned to them. There needs to be far greater parity of treatment for staff delivering services in HSE-funded organisations, to prevent the further escalation of the staffing crisis being experienced. Service delivery is being jeopardised as a result of challenges around staff recruitment and retention. In Government we would begin a process of creating parity of treatment for staff delivering services in HSE-funded organisations

Supporting Autistic People

Ireland's record on supporting autistic people is, in many respects, abysmal. Long waiting times for access to services and treatment are the norm, even when those interventions are urgent. Too often barriers are encountered when attempting to access basic human rights. Autistic people should not have to run lengthy and time-consuming advocacy campaigns simply to get the basic supports they are entitled to. In Government the Social Democrats will:

- Continue to implement the Autism Innovation Strategy, and ensure periodic review of the Strategy, in consultation with relevant DPOs.
- Implement the recommendations of the Final Report of the Joint Committee on Autism.
- Hire additional caseworkers to support Early Intervention and School Age Teams for autistic children's referrals around the country.
- Develop a mandatory national training programme on autism for all school staff.
- Invest in the Autism Community Fund's development and delivery to support community initiatives to address the isolation epidemic facing autistic people across the country, including developing an action plan around isolation and social exclusion.
- Provide additional funding towards improving pathways to accessing diagnostic and therapeutic services.
- Provide better supports for families supporting an autistic person, including more respite hours and more Special Needs Assistants in schools.
- Create a pathway for adults to access diagnosis and care.

Further information about our plans for investment to put disability services on a sustainable footing, and our plans for implementation of the UNCRPD, can be found in our Disability Policy Document on our website.

2.

Environmental Sustainability

A Greener,
Fairer Ireland



Jennifer
Whitmore TD

Candidate for
Wicklow

Climate Action and Environmental Protection

The Climate Crisis is the single biggest threat to our environment and to our long-term quality of life. The actions we take or fail to take now will affect our country and our planet for generations. Everybody must play their part in tackling it and preparing for its consequences.

We are at a critical juncture regarding our achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. With ecological crises accelerating before our eyes, as well as evidence of the limits of our economic model, it is clear that we cannot continue as we have been going.

As part of the next government, the Social Democrats will ensure that the necessary systems and structures are in place so that Ireland can play its role in creating a sustainable planet where no one is left behind.

This will require, among other things, a significant modal shift in transport use towards clean green public transport and electric vehicles.

A just transition is central to our approach to the climate emergency. We cannot allow the burden of making the necessary changes to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of those least responsible for the crisis. For example, as part of our efforts to end the burning of peat, coal and unsustainable biomass for electricity we will strive to ensure that workers in carbon-intensive industries can transition to new, quality employment and training opportunities in low-carbon sectors.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Create a revised Climate Action Plan that will allow us to reach our international targets by 2030 and avoid €8 billion in fines.
- Put a focus on the rapid electrification of industry and transport where feasible, accelerating the delivery of wind energy infrastructure (both on- and offshore), solar, and the necessary electricity grid development in order to meet increased demand.
- Ensure Ireland plays its part in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and that government departments and ministers are held accountable for the delivery of the SDGs.
- Fund the Central Statistics Office to collect and regularly publish relevant data on, and monitor Ireland's progress towards, the SDGs.
- Follow through on plans to establish a National Just Transition Commission, putting it on a statutory footing, and resourcing it adequately so that it can carry out its agreed mandate. It should also work with affected stakeholders in developing transition plans to ensure we maintain the principles of fairness and proportionality when reaching our climate action targets.
- Plan, fund and deliver ambitious nation-wide public transport programmes, including high-capacity sustainable transport.
- Continue to increase the affordability of public transport, to encourage greater usage.
- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Introduce a frontloaded 'pay as you save' national retrofitting programme, which would allow people to insulate their homes and pay the cost as they save on their energy bills over time.
- Develop policy that ensures the Department of Agriculture, food processors and supermarkets pay farmers enough to support cleaner and less-polluting forms of agriculture and land use, whilst being financially sustainable.
- Restore the Electric Vehicle grant to €5,000, and increase investment in the EV charging point network, including disability- and gender-proofing EV charging infrastructure.
- Target EV subsidies to those who have fewer public transport options.
- Regulate waste management systems and support recycling initiatives, such as the development of recycling centres close to every community.
- Reduce demand and supply of single-use plastics. We will introduce a levy on plastics which cannot be recycled in Ireland and work with producers to reduce plastic packaging.

Phasing Out Fossil Fuels

The solutions to reducing emissions are, for the most part, already here; the delay in implementing these solutions is behind our failure to achieve our emissions targets. Technologies like solar PV, wind energy technology (on- and offshore), heat pumps etc are already in reasonably widespread use. We must focus on further rolling out these, and other technologies, as quickly as possible.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Greatly scale up capacity within semi-state agencies to deliver large renewable energy projects for the purpose of exploiting offshore wind energy.
- Invest to upgrade our port infrastructure to allow for the development of offshore wind farms, and allow for the transport of materials to facilitate the maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure.
- Install solar panels on 100,000 homes per year as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology.
Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed. We would create an initial €200m fund to provide grants to households to install solar panels, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills by an average of up to 40 per cent over the course of a year.
- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Introduce a frontloaded ‘pay as you save’ national retrofitting programme, which would allow people to insulate their homes and pay the cost as they save on their energy bills over time.
- Uphold the nationwide ban on fracking.
- Ensure greater enforcement of the nationwide ban on smoky coal.

Investments being made in Ireland, and international subsidiaries based in Ireland, are undermining our climate objectives. Despite the fact we know that fossil fuels need to be phased out, the years since the Paris Agreement was signed have seen banks in the developed world provide more than three trillion dollars (yes, \$3,000,000,000,000!) to fossil fuel activities in the Global South.

Investment managers registered in Ireland hold billions of euros in bonds and shares attributable to fossil fuels and agribusiness in the Global South, meaning Ireland acts as a channel for global institutional investors to profit from fossil fuel investments.

We need to take action to address this harmful financial flow through Ireland. In Government, we will conduct an independent and comprehensive assessment of the impacts of national and international tax policy on the economies of developing countries and climate impact, as recommended by the UN International Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

Fossil Fuel Divestment

In Government, the Social Democrats will broaden the scope of the Fossil Fuel Divestment Act 2018 to ensure our national investments are entirely fossil fuel free. The Act should also cover investments in large-scale harmful agribusiness, as well as ‘indirect’ investments, including financial instruments that fund fossil fuel exploration.

We will also endorse the development of an international Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Clean Air

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has highlighted air pollution as a major threat to all people, but people in poorer neighbourhoods in particular. To ensure good air quality, strong government action must be taken to protect our environment and the quality of air we breathe every day.

Ireland is a signatory to various transnational environmental agreements for air pollution, for example the EU CAFE standards which provide Air Quality Directives on which our main domestic legislation is based. There are also the Air Pollution Act 1987 and the Air Pollution Act 2012. However, more is required. In government, we will enact a robust new Clean Air Act.

Outdoor air pollution is increasingly recognised as a major public health issue. It is estimated to contribute to 1,300-1,400 preventable deaths in Ireland each year. It is unsurprising that UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 11 list reducing air pollution as a priority.

Poor air quality leads to a corresponding rise in incidents of respiratory and cardiovascular health issues among the public. Air pollution contributes to cognitive decline, mental health deterioration, early onset dementia, Alzheimer's, and other health issues.

In Ireland, residential solid fuel burning is the primary source of this pollution. This is despite the “smoky coal ban” introduced in Dublin in 1990 that was shown to reduce the incidence of cardiovascular and respiratory disease. This highlights the urgent need to extend the smoky coal nationwide and to expand the ban to all solid fuels, especially in urban areas.

The best course of action is that future buildings are equipped with decent ventilation, accurate air quality monitors, clean sources for heating and cooking, as well as greater public awareness of indoor air pollution.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact a new Clean Air Act, striving for Ireland to have the world’s cleanest air by 2035.
- Set air pollution controls in a phased approach, to meet WHO guidelines by 2035.
- Raise air quality standards in schools and the workplace.
- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Pilot a dedicated retrofitting programme for rural households relying on solid fuel and oil heating systems.
- Increase the sentences and fines for environmental polluters.
- Legislate for a national car idling ban.
- Expand the National Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Network and introduce low-cost monitors in all towns in Ireland with a population of more than 1,000 people to expand air pollution monitoring.
- Update the National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAPCP) and strengthen the powers of the Environmental Protection Agency through legislation and statutory instrument.
- Introduce an early-warning national syndromic forecasting system between EPA monitoring, local GPs, hospitals, local government and media to prepare local services and warn the public against sudden local pollution events.
- Introduce a NOx charge on heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) and other polluting vehicles and expand the scrappage scheme for older, polluting vehicles.
- Make major investment in modes of active travel at a local level (walking and cycling) and multi-modes of transport (park and ride, train commute journeys).
- Increase investment in electric vehicles, the EV charging point network, and public transport across the country.

Further information about our policy on cleaner air for Ireland can be found in our Clean Air Policy Document on our website.

Waste, Recycling and the Circular Economy

Most people want to do their best for the environment and play their part by recycling as much as possible. However, we are not making it easy for them. Our current recycling system is inadequate. There isn't enough basic information for consumers on how and where people can recycle materials and items, and the recycling system in Ireland can't handle many of the goods that are sold in our shops.

Under the current Climate Action Plan, the Government aims to recycle 65 per cent of packaging waste by 2025 and 70 per cent by 2030. However, recent reports suggest that the inadequate provision of segregated recycling infrastructure acts as a serious impediment to meeting Ireland's EU mandated recycling goals.

Plastics remain the most challenging, with recycling rates far behind other materials. For instance, in 2023, paper and cardboard achieved a recycling rate of 67 per cent whilst plastic obtained 26 per cent. We need national legislation on banning certain single use plastics and micro-plastics, and a new national and EU strategy to tackle unrecyclable packaging.

We must work to move Ireland from a linear economy to a circular one, including by setting more ambitious recycling and composting targets, and developing a stronger recovery industry. In Government, we will pursue tangible and evidence-based schemes to increase recycling, reduce cup waste, and incentivise better behaviour from businesses and individuals to help us achieve our climate goals.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Back initiatives that align with the Circular Economy Action Plan, with a goal that all packaging is reusable or recyclable by 2030.
 - Regulate waste management systems and support recycling initiatives, such as the development of recycling centres close to every community.
 - Expand the number of Civic Amenity Centres, making waste charges affordable, expanding opening hours of 'bring centres', and providing better options for recyclable material that is currently not part of kerbside collection.
 - Use the tax code where appropriate to promote better second-hand markets and repair businesses.
- We will explore, through the European Institutions, the possibility of reduced VAT rates for the repair of goods and how better regulation could ensure goods are longer-lasting and/or repairable.
- Encourage the setup/creation of further Repair Cafés, and examine the scope for creating apprenticeships in trades focused on the repair of clothing, electrical goods, and other products, in line with circular economy principles.
 - Pursue policy that acknowledges that while recycling is essential, reducing waste produced

is the real goal through less packaging and less consumption. We will aim to educate on reducing food-, textile-, and other consumption and waste.

- Promote the development of re-fill options in retail to minimise the production of plastic containers and encourage more local authorities to provide refill water dispensers and drinking fountains in their area so that the demand for plastic bottles is reduced.
 - Reduce demand and supply of single-use plastics. We will introduce a levy on plastics which cannot be recycled in Ireland and work with producers to reduce plastic packaging.
 - Work towards the re-municipalisation of waste collection, beginning with gradually phasing out side-by-side domestic waste competition within municipal areas.
 - Allocate funding for the hiring of more litter wardens, and improve the enforcement process.
- We favour the doubling of on-the-spot fines for littering and further increasing fines for illegal dumping. It is vital that penalties for illegal dumping are actually applied. Enforcement bodies are too often failing in their duties to apply appropriate penalties.

Biodiversity, Nature and Heritage

Biodiversity, defined as the variety of plant and animal life in a particular habitat, enables nature to be productive, resilient and adaptable. Biodiversity and Nature loss is one of the biggest challenges that Ireland faces.

This is not a crisis that has just come upon us, but one years in the making. For far too long, we have relied on the false narrative that Ireland is a green and environmentally friendly country.

Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history. Ireland is not immune from that grave assessment. Between a quarter and a third of all species that have been assessed in Ireland are threatened with extinction, according to the National Biodiversity Data Centre, and the conservation status of our protected habitats is dis-improving.

We must meet this challenge head on. The outcomes of not doing so will be catastrophic. But the good news is that nature, our environment, and our wildlife are robust, as long as they are given the time and support to recover.

We know that the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are intrinsically linked, and both must be addressed in tandem. The Dáil declaration in 2019 of a Climate and Biodiversity Crisis was welcome, but it was not followed by an appropriate level of action. Biodiversity improvements and nature-based solutions need to be a key tool to tackle climate change.

Farmers are guardians of much of our land in Ireland and often have connections going back centuries to that land. We need to work with farmers and farming families to ensure that our biodiversity is restored. Combined with political will to act, we can reverse the decline in our biodiversity.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Bring the Minister responsible for Biodiversity and Heritage under the Department overseeing Climate- and Environment-related matters.
- Design, fund and implement an ambitious National Nature Restoration Plan, and ringfence funding for nature restoration in the Infrastructure Climate and Nature Fund.
- Double the size of our National Parks: adding land (and sea) to ones that currently exist, and bringing new ones into existence, including in the midlands on old Bord na Móna land.
- Ensure our parks feature highly protected areas within them, and create management plans with nature protection as the priority.
- Increase resources for the National Parks and Wildlife Service to a level appropriate for them to carry out all their functions and develop new areas of responsibility.
- Increase funding to farmers for areas of Natural Constraint and Special Areas of Conservation, and aim to double protected nature reserve area by 2040.
- Increase funding for the conservation of endangered and vulnerable native species, and promote the expansion of wildlife corridors across the country, recognising the potential of rivers, canals, and roads.
- Examine the potential development of wildlife corridors between identified high-nature sites.
- Change and strengthen the remit of state entities to include protection and promotion of biodiversity.
- Develop a programme of peatland restoration and re-wetting on state land.
- Establish a framework for the creation of action plans for species deemed to be endangered.
- Develop a National Management Plan for Invasive Alien Species.
- Ensure planning authorities have all hedgerows assessed when making planning decisions and that priority is given to protecting existing hedgerows and trees.
- Increase regulation of the sale of pesticides and herbicides.
- Establish a Wildlife Crime Unit in An Garda Síochána.
- Prioritise the enactment of the Marine Protected Areas Bill, and designate at least 30 per cent of our marine area as a Marine

- Protected Area, including 10 per cent to be strictly protected.
- Introduce a ban on trawlers 18 metres or more in length in the six nautical mile zone, ban bottom trawling in Marine Protected Areas, and phase out destructive fishing practices in all Irish waters.
- Reform the Arterial Drainage Act to bring rivers back to more natural flows and good health.
- Remediate weirs and barriers to fish migration in rivers.
- Review Aquaculture Policy and licencing to ensure they align with climate, water and biodiversity policies.
- Map existing native woodland and remnant forests, and develop management strategies to protect and expand them.
- Fund a Farmland Bird Monitoring Programme.
- Ensure that implementation of the Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan is ambitious and fully resourced.
- Develop a results-based payment model for Irish agriculture, and create a voluntary purchase scheme for unprofitable farmland to be converted into protected native woodland.

- Provide additional supports to landowners to ensure the management of land and waterways for biodiversity is financially viable.
- Boost incentives for the planting of native trees on private land.
- Work with local authorities and An Bord Pleanála in urban areas to prioritise the planting of trees and flowers in housing developments, and on streets.
- Develop an Urban Biodiversity Strategy, and use state-owned buildings to showcase nature-friendly buildings and grounds.
- Mandate and fund local authorities to identify small patches of land for planting of mini-forests in urban areas.
- Review the Heritage Act 1995, with a view to updating the definition of heritage to incorporate current international best practice.
- Establish a Heritage Research Unit in the Heritage Council.
- Support and encourage the work of those Tidy Towns groups who put focus on planting for biodiversity and nature protection.

Further information about our plans for biodiversity and nature protection can be found in our Biodiversity & Nature Policy Document on our website.

Ellen Murphy

Candidate for
Dublin West

**Crios a thacaíonn
le Pailneoirí**
Pollinator Friendly Zone



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Biodiversity
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Agriculture and Food

Agriculture is critical to the Irish economy and is the lifeblood of rural communities. It must therefore be the focus of agricultural policy to make the sector economically and socially sustainable, ensuring fair prices paid to farmers for their produce, a living income for farming families, the creation of positive economic spill-over benefits for rural communities, and the production of high-quality food in a sustainable manner.

Agriculture in Ireland is under pressure in a number of areas, most notably in relation to food prices and farm incomes, but also in relation to impending changes to practices necessary to ensure the sector reduces its emissions in line with Ireland's climate-related obligations. Ensuring a just transition is imperative.

The sector is also afflicted by a significant amount of policy incoherence. Government states that its environmental goals include emissions reduction, yet the policies it has pursued will push emissions from the farming and food production sectors in the opposite direction.

Significant resources are allocated to the agriculture sector every year by both national government and the European Union. Too often, those resources incentivise practices that contradict stated government goals, and have negative consequences for the environment, society, and farmers themselves. This must change.

Agriculture policy requires a new focus, founded on coherence of purpose, and ensuring that:

- The industry is both economically and socially sustainable.
- The high quality of Irish agricultural produce is maintained.
- Farmers and food producers receive a fair price for their produce.
- Money flowing into the sector, including the Single Farm Payment, is structured in a way which incentivises practice in line with our economic, social and environmental goals.
- Rural economies benefit from a sustainable farming sector that provides secure incomes.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Work to ensure a fairer price for farmers, fishers, and producers.
- Ensure a fair transition for farmers via the creation of a €1.5 billion Fair Transition Fund for the agriculture and food sector.
- Reform the Agri-Food Regulator as an Independent Food Regulator, with real teeth to make a change in the sector.
- Ensure the high quality of Irish agricultural produce is maintained and championed.
- Work to deliver sustainability in agriculture.
- Seek to secure a national ceiling (at EU level) on individual CAP payments, set at a level that would ensure a greater proportion of the payments will go to small and medium-sized family farms.
- Use the national CAP Strategic Plan to support the delivery of policy goals, including reviewing land eligibility criteria with a guarantee of payments for space for nature and high quality, connected ecosystems on farms.
- Designate Producer Organisations with a legal mandate to represent different food production sectors in collective bargaining with food processors.
- Remove the policy incoherency that exists between agricultural practices and policies in areas like environmental and biodiversity protection, ensuring that farmers are financially rewarded for good environmental practice.
- Phase out environmentally harmful subsidies and change the thrust of payments to farmers to ensure good practice is rewarded.
- Bring Ireland's food production in line with our obligations under the Paris Agreement, Agenda 2030, and our goals of protecting water quality and biodiversity.
- Reduce methane emissions, using compensatory measures from the Fair Transition Fund for farmers to incentivise herd reduction.

A Fair Transition for Farmers

Ireland's goals around emissions reduction in Agriculture have now been set in law. A key part of agriculture policy must now be to reach those targets while ensuring that farmers are adequately assisted to implement, and are compensated for, the changes they must make. Policymakers must ensure that small farmers are not left behind in making the transition.

The current nitrates derogation cannot continue and must be phased out in a controlled manner.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Work with stakeholders, including farmers and their communities, and policy experts in the Department of Agriculture to map out a coherent transition plan so farmers do not disproportionately bear the brunt of the transition.
- Use part of the 2024 budget surpluses to ensure the start of a fair transition for farmers through the creation of a multi-billion-euro Fair Transition Fund, with an initial capitalisation of €1.5 billion.
- Design a debt forgiveness scheme, and a grant funding scheme or 'transition fund', that would allow indebted farms to move away from current models of farming without undue financial loss.
- Use financial incentives to encourage herd reduction in line with our environmental targets. Policymakers must find a way for farmers to act in line with national policy goals whilst maintaining living standards.
- Ensure that money flowing into the sector remains at current levels, but is reconfigured to make family farms more sustainable, and incentivise good environmental practices.
- Work to diversify income sources, including into energy production, for farmers in sectors that will need to be scaled back in line with our climate targets.
- Use financial incentives to encourage farmers to engage in more sustainable horticulture.
- Ringfence funding so that farmers leaving the sector receive funding and support for education and training in other areas with employment prospects.
- Provide funding to encourage diversification by farmers into other income-producing areas, including forestry, and areas of energy production.

The Common Agricultural Policy

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Use the national Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan to select instruments and measures that best support the delivery of all policy goals, not just in Agriculture.
- Demand a fairer and simpler Common Agricultural Policy which ensures more farm payments are targeted towards low-income farmers.
- Seek to secure a national ceiling (at EU level) on individual CAP payments, set at a level that would ensure a greater proportion of the payments will go to small and medium-sized family farms.
- Ensure that money flowing into the sector, including the Single Farm Payment, is structured in a way which incentivises practices in line with our economic, social and environmental goals.
- Seek to increase the environmental ambition around the CAP, ensuring farmers have access to payments only if they comply with a set of basic environmental norms. There should be penalties for non-compliance.
- Create a system whereby agricultural programmes to address environmental and climate needs include performance targets and funding which reflect the costs incurred and the income lost as a result of activities going beyond the environmental baseline.
- Seek to resolve the serious issues around the transparency of CAP negotiations and strategic planning.

Agri-Foods and Sustainable Farm Incomes

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reform the Agri-Food Regulator as an Independent National Food Regulator (INFR), tasked with enforcing EU-wide rules on prohibited unfair trading practices in the food supply chain and penalising breaches.
- Ensure the Regulator is given the power and resources to inspect and intervene in key aspects of the food production chain to guarantee transparency and fairness, and mandate the INFR to analyse and report market data in Ireland, improving price transparency.
- Design a framework to restrict below-cost procurement by larger retailers, wholesalers, and food processors.
- Ensure that processors and supermarkets pay proper prices for quality Irish beef through the implementation of a ban on below-cost procurement by larger retailers, wholesalers, and food processors, as part of the broader efforts to increase price transparency and strengthen profitable farming.
- Work with our European partners to achieve flexibility around state aid rules, including permitting schemes to protect the most precarious parts of the Agri-Food sector.
- Reform the subsidisation of food production to give farmers greater control over what they charge for their produce.
- Ensure that payments to farmers are linked to the achievement of policy goals and public goods.
- Work to achieve a fairer price for farm produce and in particular to ensure the gains of the Irish beef industry are spread more fairly.
- Create greater transparency in where the profits are being generated within the food production sector.
- Ban the live export of animals to countries that have poor animal welfare protections, and raise standards in relation to long journeys and animal transport vessels, and begin to fully phase out the export of live animals.
- Designate Producer Organisations with a legal mandate to represent different food production sectors in collective bargaining with food processors.
- Encourage the setup of farmer co-operatives and fairer supplier/buyer profit splits.

Additional Policies in Agriculture

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Amend the mission statement of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to include 'food security'.
- Put an immediate focus on reviving and expanding the Irish horticulture sector.
- Bring spending on organic farming to the EU average, and ensure the Organic Farming Scheme is backed by a budget that corresponds to our organic farming targets.
- Support the creation of cooperatives for the collective-purchase of farm machinery needed by those looking to enter the horticulture sector.
- Improve the reliability of farm payments; delayed payments are too common and can have a very negative impact on farmers.
- Work to achieve shorter and more local supply chains between producers and consumers.
- Focus on substantially increasing the share of output used as food for direct human consumption as part of a move towards greater uptake of tillage farming. This will include designing a framework of incentives to use land for tillage rather than dairy, to counteract systemic issues around the rental cost of land due to competition from the more profitable dairy sector.

- Create an incentive scheme for farmers to grow vegetables and fruit.
- Oppose unfair competition to European farmers from products that do not respect the same standards that they adhere to, including from countries outside the EU.
- Devote additional funding to expand ACRES to accommodate an additional 10,000 farmers.
- Encourage a move away from monoculture and intensive farming.
- Increase funding for the Land Mobility Service.
- Publish a new forestry strategy, with an explicit goal of keeping Coillte and Ireland's forests in public ownership.
- Address delays in the issuing of forestry licences, especially afforestation and private felling licences.
- Mandate an increase in the percentage of trees planted that are native broadleaf.
- Support the growth and diversification of the forestry industry especially in terms of energy production and biomass production, as well as for construction.

There is a need to maintain and increase our planting of suitable trees to future-proof a greener more sustainable home-building sector, where demand for timber is growing. In order to keep construction costs as low as possible, and make the industry greener and more sustainable, it is important that we grow as much of this timber domestically as we can.

- Fund a Farm Safety Programme and promote education and training initiatives to reduce farm accidents and deaths, and to improve general health and safety.
- Provide funding to examine the creation of viable market opportunities for the sale and use of wool in areas such as housing insulation.
- Consider options around changes to the law, and take measures to improve the processing

infrastructure, to allow for the development of a hemp industry in Ireland.

- Support apiculture and explore the possibility of allowing beekeepers to use land in bogs.
- Consider the development of a National Insurance scheme for farmers.
- Provide Teagasc with research funding for the preservation of seed varieties suitable for the Irish climate, to protect genetic diversity particularly in the face of changing climates.
- Increase investment in Teagasc to support farmers in the changing world environment, particularly by promoting research related to climate change and future options for sustainable agriculture.
- Develop a Nutrient Management Scheme akin to that in New Zealand which would, amongst other things, help reduce dependency on chemical fertiliser.
- Incentivise farmers to grow more of their own feed, to reduce reliance on imports.
- Introduce a ban on the use of neonicotinoids.
- Ban importation of species of bees that endanger the Irish honeybee.
- Improve the affordability for sexed semen so that fewer unwanted bull calves (typically exported live) are born, and conduct a full review of pricing, subsidy and taxation policy as it relates to farming, including on synthetic fertilisers and more environmentally sound farming methods.
- Encourage and incentivise the reduction of all pesticides, herbicides and antibiotics in all types of farming.
- Establish a free-range certification for pig farming. This has largely not been necessary in the beef and dairy sector, or for sheep, but is necessary in the pig sector.

Further information about our plans for a more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable agricultural sector, and our plans for the Fisheries and Marine sector (see next page), can be found in our Agriculture & Food Policy Document on our website.

Fisheries & the Marine

Ireland's current fisheries policy shares some of the drawbacks of its agriculture policy. For example, just as the CAP gives far greater benefits to larger farmers than smaller ones, Ireland's fisheries policy gives the vast majority of Ireland's overall quota of mackerel allocated to around 50 larger Irish vessels, while a tiny proportion is allocated to the inshore fleet of small boats which employ more people, proportionately. This needs to change. The Irish inshore fleet comprises approximately 91 per cent of all our fishing vessels, and supports between 2,500 and 3,000 full-time jobs in rural and coastal communities.

Short fishery supply chains with high value, low volume species are vitally important for island and coastal communities, and it is imperative that we spread the economic, social and environmental benefits of access to our renewable fishery resources across the country, as per Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy.

Article 17 has been one of the most neglected elements of the Common Fisheries Policy. It requires EU member states to allocate fishing opportunities using transparent and objective criteria with a focus on social, environmental, and economic criteria. This includes, for example, the use of fishing gears with low environmental impact and reduced energy consumption.

Article 17 offers the opportunity to incentivise sustainability by providing for priority access to fishing opportunities for environmentally low impact fishing, while delivering social and economic benefits. It can be used to ensure a Just Transition to a low carbon, low environmental impact, and socially just fishing fleet across the EU and in Ireland.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure more equitable fish quota division.
- Develop a Young Fishers Scheme, similar to the Young Farmers Scheme.
- Work with all fleet segments to achieve the environmental, social and economic goals of the sector, and to deliver a fair transition to low-impact, low-carbon fishing, with fairer, more secure access to resources for small scale fishers.
- Seek to promote low impact fishing (including hook and line) over pair trawling and to restrict the negative effect of commercial fishing within Irish waters, including by large trawls and fishing for fish meal.
- Pursue restrictions on super-trawlers, reducing subsidies for industrial scale fishing, and ensuring oversight is adequately resourced.
- Increase funding for marine research.
An increase in funding for basic research via the Higher Education sector is essential to build up capacity and expertise in the marine sphere.
- Develop a framework to assist the fishing industry in the energy transition, and ring-fence funding for fuel supports for fishers and create a programme to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.
- Increase the Fishers Tax Credit for those fishing a minimum of 80 days per year in order to allow the sector to compete for employees, and examine the possibility of creating a social welfare regime for share fishers.
- Reform funding for Producers Organisations to provide upfront funding to allow them to get started.
- Allocate local authority funding for the maintenance and development of small piers, with the allocation based on measurable need; a factor of the length of the coastline within each county, and the number of existing piers.
- Continue to develop Maritime Protected Areas, including a marine national park. Strategies must involve the fishing community from the design phase.
- Ensure that the Common Fisheries Policy is used to support the inshore sector on a proportionate basis.
- Acknowledge that the fragmented nature of marine governance across multiple government departments at times creates barriers to progress, and so examine the possible transfer of more marine-related activities to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, for example considering the transfer of marine-licensing from the Department of Housing.



Holly Cairns TD
Party Leader

Candidate for
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Energy

The reliable supply of safe, secure and sustainable energy is essential for the future prosperity of the Irish economy and society.

The energy policy of the next Government must ensure:

- **Security:** Ensuring reliable and secure energy supply into the future.
- **Affordability:** Keeping costs for households and businesses as low as possible.
- **Sustainability:** Planning for the decarbonisation of Ireland's energy supply and an orderly transition to a carbon-free Ireland.
- **Equality:** Ensuring that the changes needed to achieve this benefit ordinary people and communities, and do not have a disproportionately negative effect on vulnerable groups or areas of the country.

Creating a more sustainable and secure future presents economic opportunities, as well as the possibility of Ireland becoming a net exporter of clean energy in the coming decade. Failure to thus-far capitalise on the potential of our own renewable energy resources has meant excessive exposure to imported energy crises. Ireland has thoroughly failed to meet its renewable energy targets, repeatedly missing emission reduction deadlines set by international agreements and facing significant fines. The current path cannot continue.

A combination of procrastination, lack of ambition, and a purposeful back-loading for decarbonisation actions to the end of this decade has ensured that the task facing the next government is a huge one. Sectoral Targets under the Climate Action Plan have set a target of 80 per cent renewable electricity by 2030. Failures by previous governments means that we need to do much more over the rest of the decade than would otherwise have been the case. However, our climate targets are now based in law.

The Social Democrats want to create a national energy policy that guarantees our future environmental, social and economic health and prosperity. In government we will strive to meet our commitment to a 51 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030, and achieving net zero emissions by 2050 through credible, incremental national and sectoral plans, based on ambitious but attainable goals.

Energy Security

Securing a reliable and sustainable future supply of affordable clean energy will be the main energy policy goal of the Social Democrats.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Scale up capacity within Bord na Móna and the ESB to deliver large renewable energy projects for the purpose of exploiting wind energy, both on and offshore.
- Invest to upgrade our port infrastructure to allow for the development of offshore wind farms, including allowing for the transport of materials to facilitate the maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure.
- Invest to improve the interconnectivity between Ireland and other countries. We will need to manage high levels of wind and solar on the grid, which requires optimising a wide range of technologies and solutions, including:
 - battery storage,
 - demand response, and
 - transmission.
- Pursue policies to increase the electrification of our heating and transport systems, including increased funding for electric vehicles.
- Boost investment in upgrading the nations' electricity grid infrastructure, to allow for expanded future growth in electrification.
- Acknowledge that secure supply requires secure storage, and that energy storage is an essential part of an integrated energy system. We will invest in storage technologies that will allow us to capture energy from intermittent sources that would otherwise go to waste.
- Acknowledge that while offshore wind capacity is being planned and built, there will be a need

for back-up fuel. We will examine the possibility of using hydrogen as a viable back-up.

- Replace the temporary Energy Security Emergency Group with a permanent Energy

Security Group, which would analyse issues of energy security going forward. This group will advise government on energy security matters and oversee implementation of related measures.

Energy Affordability

Ensuring energy affordability for homes and businesses is important to mitigate deprivation and fuel poverty, and improve economic competitiveness. Fuel poverty is often defined as a situation where a household spends more than 10 per cent of income heating the home, but more broadly might be viewed as a situation where households cannot afford to keep the home adequately heated. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Retain the lower 9 per cent VAT rate on energy to provide support to households and businesses.
- Set the Fuel Allowance at a level that better reflects the cost to vulnerable households of heating their home.
- Expand eligibility for the Warmer Homes Scheme, which provides free home energy upgrades to homeowners who get certain social welfare payments, and include access to solar panels in the scheme, with 100 per cent grants for the lowest income households.
- Ensure that all new housing developments include facilities for microgeneration and storage that enables maximum retention of energy produced, allowing households to reduce energy costs and generate income.
- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Pilot a dedicated retrofitting programme for rural households relying on solid fuel and oil heating systems.
- Expand the Better Energy Homes scheme.
- Change regulations so that households using pre-paid power meters can avail of tariffs and

deals currently limited to direct debit customers.

- Introduce an Energy Poverty Act to establish statutory targets and definitions for Energy Poverty.

The Energy Poverty Action Plan pledged to create a category of 'financially vulnerable' for the Vulnerability Register ahead of Winter 22/23. This is still not in place. The Energy Poverty Act would cover this.

- Advocate at EU level to ensure the link between gas and electricity prices on the wholesale market be broken.
- Increase funding to local authorities and their relevant Energy Agencies, to provide greater technical, financial and business planning expertise to Sustainable Energy Communities, as well as funding to provide long-term no-cost loans to help SECs through this process.
- Provide government backed low-interest green-loans to SECs in the construction of these renewable energy projects, and target at least 20 per cent of our new renewable energy generation to be community owned by 2030, providing direct funding to assist capacity building and technical expertise.

Energy Sustainability

It must be a priority of the next Government to ensure the roll-out of renewable energy is sped up; is increased in scale and ambition; and the gains distributed equitably. The Social Democrats are planning for this next phase in the harnessing and development of renewable energy. We will have a strong focus on creating a more sustainable Ireland. Part of this means that individual households and homes must be made more resilient to energy price and supply shocks.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a pay-as-you-save home insulation loan scheme.
- Install solar panels on 100,000 homes per year as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology. Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed.
- Create an initial €200m fund to provide grants to households to install solar panels, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills by an average of up to 40 per cent over the course of a year.
- Enable local authorities to create a register of approved PV installers, allied with government grant funding, so they can efficiently manage PV installation at scale in council-owned private dwellings.
- Develop a Quality Mark scheme for businesses delivering retrofits and solar installations.
- Make access to, and affordability of, fossil-free alternatives like heat pumps and renewable district heating an urgent priority.
- Develop local district heating networks by incorporating district heating considerations into urban planning frameworks, allowing for community-owned heat networks to be set up.
- Enhance funding of local authorities and their associated Energy Agencies so they can support interested Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) to become Solar Meitheals.

These Meitheals can then utilise their local authority's register of approved PV installers to create groups of homeowners, community organisations and/or small businesses who want to complete PV installations, thus achieving scale, efficiencies and saving.

- Examine the possibility for local authorities – or a central government authority – bulk-buying the solar panels to allow households to avail of further economies of scale. A standardised approach has the potential to cut costs by up to half.
- Build on existing grant schemes to support the purchase of microgeneration technologies in residential and commercial buildings, on farms, in public buildings and in the community.
- Ensure a fair price is paid to microgenerators for the power generated.
- Support and fund local authorities, SEAI and energy agencies to develop a list of building contractors under the coordination of One-Stop Shops to tender for block retrofits.
- Instruct and fund local authorities and energy agencies to identify council-owned housing estates, with building fabric that lends itself to a 'deep retrofit', and to work with local SECs, where applicable, to create block applications for 'deep retrofits' in areas of geographic concentration. The same process can be followed to create block applications amongst homeowners.

Energy Equality

'Just Transition' is the principle that we cannot allow the burden of dealing with the climate emergency to fall disproportionately on those least responsible for the crisis, or least able to react or change.

The Social Democrats believe in the principle of Just Transition. During the 33rd Dáil we tried to legally define a Just Transition as a transition that ensures the economic and social consequences of the climate emergency are managed to maximise opportunities for decent work for all, reducing inequalities, promoting social justice, and supporting industries, workers and communities negatively affected. Government voted this down.

A just transition must be central to Government's approach to the climate and biodiversity emergency. A National Just Transition Commission was due to be established before this election. Under a Social Democrat government, it will oversee the bringing together of workers, communities, employers and Government in social dialogue to drive the plans, policies and investments needed for a fair transformation to a low-carbon economy. It is especially important to include the workers and communities that are impacted by the shift away from fossil fuel production.

One of the clearest opportunities where we can manage this Just Transition, thus increasing the viability of a low carbon lifestyle to all people regardless of income, is through the retrofitting and better insulation of homes, specifically through a ‘deep retrofit’. Such ‘deep retrofits’ offer homeowners the opportunity to make significant energy and financial savings, while improving the quality of their living environment.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Define Just Transition as “a transition that ensures the economic and social consequences of the climate emergency are managed to maximise opportunities for decent work for all, reducing inequalities, promoting social justice, and supporting industries, workers and communities negatively affected”.
- Put the National Just Transition Commission on a statutory footing, and resource it adequately to oversee the bringing together of workers, communities, employers and Government in social dialogue to drive the plans, policies and investments needed for a fair transformation to a low-carbon economy.

Managing Data Centres

Increased energy demand is putting Irish energy security at risk, as well as increasing the risk that Ireland will not meet its renewable energy targets, and a large part of that is being driven by the growth of data centres.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact a moratorium on the development of data centres and the issuing of planning decisions as an interim measure until an economic, environmental and energy impact risk analysis has been carried out.
- Enforce higher standards as set out in the European Union Code of Conduct for Energy Efficiency in Data Centres, removing the code’s voluntary nature and putting in place statutory obligations to prevent the industry from self-regulating.
- Mandate data centres to supply waste heat to district heating networks.
- Implement the CRU (Commission for the Regulation of Utilities) proposals that would require EirGrid and ESB Networks to prioritise connection applications from data centres in accordance with a series of factors, including whether data centres:
 - Generate enough energy on site themselves to support their demand for electricity.
 - Can be flexible in reducing their consumption at times of system constraint.
 - Have chosen a location that is mindful of grid constraints.
 - Have the ability to provide onsite dispatchable generation and/or storage.

Other Energy Priorities

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Develop a Community Energy Advice Service in every county to give independent and tailored advice to the public.
- Commission research on the potential for green hydrogen for use as an aviation fuel, and other purposes.
- Resource state bodies like An Bord Pleanála, EirGrid and the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, so that delays on planning decisions related to renewable energy projects are minimised.
- Aim to create greater uniformity of policy across local authorities on renewing permission for old wind farms, to remove uncertainty for windfarm projects.
- Invest and identify opportunities in battery storage and hydroelectricity plant storage that would allow excess energy to be stored in Ireland and be used during peak times.

Further information about our plans for a more secure, affordable and sustainable energy system can be found in our Energy Policy Document on our website.

A head-and-shoulders portrait of a woman with long, light blonde hair. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top. The background is a bright, sunlit outdoor area with green foliage.

Cllr Mary Roche

Candidate for
Waterford

Developing Offshore Wind Energy

Ireland should use a significant portion of the recent (and projected) budget surpluses to invest in a greener future. In Government, the Social Democrats will establish and capitalise a Climate Transformation Fund to direct significant investment into areas necessary to transform Ireland's economy and help us on the road to carbon neutrality, investing particularly in the area of renewable energy.

The goal would be to ensure secure energy supply and make Ireland a net exporter of energy. Such secure energy supply is an economic necessity, imperative to ensuring certainty for households and businesses alike.

The Climate Transformation Fund would be used to direct significant investment into areas necessary to transform Ireland's economy and help us on the road to carbon neutrality. It should invest particularly in off-shore wind, with the aim of ensuring secure energy supply and making Ireland a net exporter of clean energy in years to come.

As two commercial semi-state companies engaged in energy delivery already exist, capacity within Bord na Móna and the ESB to deliver large renewable energy projects should be scaled up for purpose of exploiting offshore wind energy.

If we fully exploit our natural renewable energy resources, Ireland could become a net exporter of energy within a decade. This move would ensure state involvement in a strategically important and potentially lucrative sector of the economy. The input of capital from the State would also ensure quality employment is created in the supporting enterprises.

Despite having some of the greatest indigenous clean energy resources in Europe, Ireland is one of the most import-dependant countries in the EU. This can and should change.

Government will also need to invest to improve the interconnectivity between Ireland and other countries.

Also required is serious investment to upgrade our port infrastructure, which has a big role to play in developing offshore wind farms, including allowing for the transport of materials to facilitate the maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure. At present, Belfast is the only port on the island capable of hosting the construction (and ongoing maintenance) of offshore wind farms.

Now is the time for ambition and fresh thinking.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Capitalise a €5 billion Climate Transformation Fund (CTF) from the corporation tax windfalls and other one-off windfall receipts to invest in state-owned wind energy capacity.
- Direct €200 million from the CTF into an R&D fund so we become world leaders in floating off-shore wind.
- Scale up capacity within Bord na Móna and the ESB to deliver large renewable energy projects for the purpose of exploiting off-shore wind energy.
- Invest to upgrade our port infrastructure to allow for the development of offshore wind farms, and allow for the transport of materials to facilitate maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure.
- Invest to improve the interconnectivity between Ireland and other countries. We will need to manage high levels of wind and solar on the grid, which requires optimising a wide range of technologies and solutions, including:
 - battery storage,
 - demand response, and
 - transmission.
- Prioritise the delivery of the Marine Protected Areas Bill to ensure we can expand our offshore wind generation while protecting marine biodiversity.



Cllr Joan Hopkins

Candidate for
Dublin Fingal-East

Transport

One of the starker differences between Ireland and other European countries is our poor public transport system. Under successive Irish Governments, one abandoned or delayed public transport plan has followed another. Transport policy has focussed on moving cars, not moving people.

The failure of successive Governments to properly plan, fund and deliver public transport programmes means that each of us live daily with the consequences. We have little rural public transport of which to speak. Our capital city suffers from some of the worst traffic congestion in the world, and many of our other towns and cities are not much better.

The result is that we have created severe urban sprawl with poorly planned car-dependent communities. Our rail network is sparse. Cycling is not safe. Pedestrians are only rarely considered. Air pollution is unacceptably high. We continue to incentivise the most environmentally damaging forms of transport and leave people with very few options to reduce their carbon footprint.

Our transport policy is informed by the core tradition of social democracy; ensuring that our national resources and collective efforts are marshalled to the benefit of society as a whole rather than the individual.

Our Policy is grounded on three core pillars:

- Climate Transformer – Public Transport as a key part of the transition to a carbon-neutral society.
- Social Transformer – Public Transport as a Universal Basic Service; a public good delivered as a public service, rather than something to be privatised and run for profit.
- Economic Driver – Public Transport as a pillar to enhance our national and international infrastructure and capacity.

We need more buses, more trains, more often!

In Government, the Social Democrats' priorities will include:

- A €1 fare, valid at off-peak times, which would incentivise public transport use and help deal with capacity constraints.
Public transport fares more generally should be cut, and Transport for Ireland should be funded to begin expanding the '90 Minute Fare' (increasing the time limit to 120 minutes) and rolling it out for cities away from the capital.
- Providing free public transport for under 18s.
- The decarbonisation of transport through a significant modal shift from private car use to public transport and active travel.
- Shifting the balance of investment in transport from roads towards public transport.
- A higher investment in rail, public transport and active mobility; and improved co-ordination between land-use and transport planning.
- The continued public funding of state-owned public transport regulatory bodies, infrastructure providers, and transport operators to advance improvements in the public transport network for citizens, as well as improved working conditions for employees.
- Ring-fenced funding for the purchase of new buses to expand capacity on Ireland's public transport network, and investment in the transition to a low- or zero-emission public bus fleet.
- Continuing to improve the affordability of public transport fares.
- Moving towards a proper 24-hour public transport system, including at weekends.
- Doubling funding to the Rural Transport Programme and to Local Link to increase availability, provide further local and circular routes servicing towns and villages, and ensure the fleet is in line with climate commitments.
- Investment in a new National Transport Policing Unit to police mainland rail services, and DART, tram and bus services.
- Developing major National Development Plan transport projects, including:

- MetroLink between Dublin city centre and Swords.
 - Expansions of the DART and Luas, including the Luas to Finglas, as well as the development of light rail in Cork and Galway.
 - The Cork Commuter Rail project.
 - Bus Connects in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick, in close consultation with The Major Projects Advisory Group, the National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), and with users (pre and post both design and implementation), on the optimal timelines for implementation.
 - Supporting the findings of the All Island Rail Review, including the development of the Western Rail Corridor.
 - Re-examining current plans for MetroLink, including commissioning an independent study on continuing the line to southwest Dublin.
- Supporting the principle that ‘the polluter pays’. Accordingly, we will implement environmentally motivated fiscal measures according to the respective negative externalities of different transport modes, considering things like accidents, congestion, noise, greenhouse emissions and damage to biodiversity.
- Treating public transport as a public good, and opposing the increased privatisation of services. Public bus routes can only be sustained if they provide a reliable service that people can depend on and value.
- Establishing directly elected mayors in our major cities who will take responsibility for transport planning, with consideration given to overall catchment areas and not just the mayor’s specific jurisdiction.
 - Ringfencing a minimum of 15 per cent of the total transport capital budget on the development of walking and cycling infrastructure all over Ireland, including networks within towns, and also more rural areas of the country as well as rural Greenways.
 - Adequately resourcing state and semi-state agencies and local authorities who have responsibilities for governance, planning and environmental protection to monitor compliance among transport providers and operators in the public and private sector.
 - Build a Comprehensive School Transport system.
 - Invest in public transport to ensure it is more accessible for people with disabilities.
 - Mandate consultation with Disabled Persons’ Organisations (DPOs) at all stages of the development of transport strategies and new transport projects, whether led nationally or locally.
 - Review Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) with a view to promoting smaller greener vehicles.

Further information about our plans for a more integrated and sustainable transport system can be found in our Transport Policy Document on our website.

Cycling

Ireland is far behind much of Europe in terms of cycling infrastructure and approach. The Social Democrats recognise that cycling is a major transport area that can contribute hugely to society. Whilst there has been a recent Government effort to improve active travel infrastructure, progress has been slow and has not been sufficiently ambitious.

The benefits of cycling are enormous. And everyone, cyclist or not, gains. With more cycling, we get:

- Less pollution and less congestion.
- Healthier lifestyles and a more active population.
- Better mobility and quicker commuting times.
- Safer streets and more liveable neighbourhoods.
- The possibility of 15 Minute Cities and Communities that residents want to stay in and spend time in.

In Government, the Social Democrats' priorities will include:

Increased Funding for Cycling

Both current and capital funding are critical to the expansion of cycling. We are committed to maintaining the recent increase of cycling funding to 10 per cent of the Land Transport Budget and in the medium term, increasing funding so that 15 per cent of the Transport Capital Budget is spent on cycling and walking as recommended by the UN in their *Global Outlook on Walking and Cycling 2016*.

Proper Segregation for Safe Cycling

The first priority of extra funding for cycling should be the implementation of the Cycle Connects Network and the GDA Cycle Network Plan so that cyclists are as safe as possible.

We are committed to planning for sustained improvements in the years ahead so that everyone can feel safe when cycling.

As a general rule, if the cycle network does not adhere to the Hierarchy of Road Users, then it fails to meet the required standard.

Improved Cycling Infrastructure

We will invest in bicycle parking infrastructure, particularly at transport hubs.

We will increase the bike storage capacity on our public transport rolling stock as it is updated, to ensure that cyclists can bring bikes on buses and trains to facilitate more bike commuting from suburbs and across the country. Where possible, the costs to such commuters for this service should be minimised or removed completely.

At the local Council level, we will ensure that Cycle Connects and the GDA Cycle Network plan are prioritised as part of each relevant local authority's development plan process, as well as priority for the building of cycling networks within towns.

And we will increase funding for the maintenance of cycle lanes at a local level.

We will further ensure that cycling is a central provision in each Local Area Plan, Strategic Development Zone and Master Development plan for individual sites. It is our aim to increase transport connectivity between modes of transport by funding more Bike and Ride facilities adjacent to large towns and cities.

Cycling Greenways

We welcome the publication and roll out of the *Code of Best - Practice National and Regional Greenways*.

We are committed to investing heavily in additional greenways and cycling routes to further promote cycling as a family-friendly pursuit and as a means of encouraging people of all ages and abilities to get on their bikes and make cycling a way of life.

This should also help boost tourism and local economies in the areas where Greenways are built. We are delighted to see the success of some existing routes. However, we believe existing greenways could be better marketed than at present, and better route information on issues such as gradient, rest points, unsegregated sections etc. could boost participation even further.

Cycling Incentive Schemes

We want to make the Bike to Work Scheme more inclusive with a complementary grant scheme focusing on those outside the workforce, with specific supports for people with disabilities to adapt bikes to their use.

We will improve the Bike to Work Scheme rate to €1,500 and look to expand this scheme to better support electric and cargo bikes.

We will also review the scheme to examine how it could support the self-employed and those not currently in the tax net.

We believe the definition of 'eligible equipment' under the Bike to Work Scheme should be expanded to include child seats and trailers designed to safely carry children.

At local level, we will aim to create a bike library in each local authority, lending ebikes and cargo bikes for up to one month. This could be managed as part of Active Travel teams in county and city councils.

Urban Bike Schemes

We will connect the numerous urban bike schemes and bring them under the umbrella of the NTA and expand the scheme in as many large urban areas as is feasible.

We are not satisfied that the current management of existing schemes is maximising usage in certain areas and we believe that usage could be improved with enhanced maintenance and better locations reflective of where people are more likely to use them.

Safer School Trips

Every child should have a safe route to school. We will continue to promote cycling as the optimum mode of transport for children travelling to school.

We acknowledge the good work of the Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS) Programme in relation to active travel and we will seek to build on this.

We will work to provide safe walking and cycling paths around every school in the country, so that those children who choose to walk, scoot or cycle to school can do so safely.

Further information about our plans for better investment in cycling can be found in our Cycling Policy Document on our website.

We will continue to support the cycle bus initiative, such as the highly successful Galway Cycle Bus, and seek to emulate it right across the country.

However, we acknowledge such initiatives would not be needed if proper cycling infrastructure was in place, and will work towards their obsolescence.

Funding should be prioritised for community initiatives such as those that promote active travel to schools.

Better Enforcement

We will strongly advocate for the proper enforcement of new laws that protect cyclists, including dangerous overtaking.

We will set aside funding for proper Garda enforcement as it applies to cyclists – especially the issues of illegal parking in cycle lanes, the ongoing high rates of bike theft, and indeed the issue of dangerous cycling itself.

We will create an online platform for cyclists to report and upload footage for An Garda Síochána of dangerous behaviour, intimidation or incidents from bicycle and helmet mounted cameras.

Cycling Governance

We will ensure that each local Council is covered by at least one cycling officer to help promote, educate and progress cycling initiatives at local level.

We will ensure that there is a fully resourced unit within the Department of Transport dedicated solely to cycling, and that it acts as a champion and guardian of cycling interests. We will appoint a National Cycling Officer to lead this unit and ensure that there is full transparency on how much public money is actually spent on cycling.

Data Collection and Cycling Audits

We will expand data collection on cycling nationwide. This will include live traffic volume monitors on major arterial roads, bike-share usage, and reported incidents. This will help ascertain trends and inform policy on safety issues for cyclists in relation to cars, buses, trams, pedestrians, drains, manhole covers, lack of lights and lack of visibility.

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy, light brown hair. She has blue eyes and is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a black ribbed turtleneck sweater under a bright yellow cardigan. The background is a soft-focus red and blue.

Cllr Eibhlín Seoighthe

Candidate for
Galway West

3.

Social Progress

A More Just and
Equal Ireland



Cllr Jen Cummins

Candidate for
Dublin South Central

Education

Education is the single greatest driver of opportunity, quality of life, social equality and economic growth. The Social Democrats believe education is not just the accumulation of knowledge to facilitate future employment; we understand it to be the holistic development of each child to reach their potential and engage positively in society.

The education of our children is the bedrock of our country's future; economically, socially and culturally. All the research suggests that well-targeted investment in education is paid back many times over, with children and young people with high quality educational experiences having better life outcomes and employment prospects.

Ireland has a strong track record on education, with one of the highest school and third level completion rates in Europe. We have thousands of dedicated teachers and support staff delivering high quality education across the country.

However, we are failing to invest adequately in our infrastructure and people, with a low educational spend compared with European neighbours. Despite the fact education is a fundamental human right for all children as enshrined in the Irish constitution and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children with disabilities are being failed. And though there have been some positive recent developments, like free textbooks and an extension of hot school meals, the cost of education remains too high, and too many children are still being left behind.

There can be no equality of opportunity in education without also understanding and addressing the disadvantages some children experience at home. We need a whole of society approach to investing in our children's future.

Ireland should be a republic in which every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential. That can only happen with a well-resourced, modern and inclusive education system.

In Government, our five priorities in education will be to:

- Significantly reduce the cost of education.
- Invest in our educators and infrastructure.
- Target disadvantage and invest in wellbeing.
- Ensure equality and inclusivity in our education system.
- Innovate for the future, through investment in higher education.

Making Primary and Secondary Education Truly Free

Many families struggle to meet the costs associated with school uniforms, transport and 'voluntary' contributions. The Social Democrats will end state subsidies to private schools and invest in public schools, including a significant increase in hot school meals and breakfast clubs.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Make primary and secondary education truly free by fully funding all school textbooks and classroom resources, abolishing payments for the school transport scheme, and providing capitation grants at such a level as to remove the need for voluntary contributions.
- Fund hot school meals in every school over the lifetime of the next government.
- Invest in the establishment of more school Breakfast Clubs.
- End the state subsidy of fee-paying schools over the course of the next Government, and invest these funds in public education.

Reducing Costs and Improving Services for Third Level Students

Third level students are severely affected by rising costs and an acute shortage of affordable accommodation. Despite Ireland having a high rate of students attending third level, accessibility issues remain. Amongst other things, the student contribution charge should be eliminated to reduce the financial barriers to accessing further education.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reduce third level fees by phasing out the student contribution charge.
- Increase funding to the SUSI grant scheme.
- Increase PhD stipends to €28,000 per year.
- Invest in more affordable student accommodation, including purpose built.
- Increase funding for mental health at third level institutions.

Investing in Our Educators and Infrastructure

The majority of teachers feel large classes have a negative impact on learning and on the disciplinary atmosphere in a classroom. Meanwhile, capitation payments are too low, forcing schools to seek voluntary contributions to meet basic running costs.

Our ambition is to provide universal equality of access to a world class, globally competitive third-level system. It's clear that significant investment in higher and further education is required to address chronic underfunding, significant demographic demand, and to maintain, protect and enhance quality within the system.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reduce the student/teacher ratio at primary level to 20:1 and at secondary level to 18:1.
- Restore pay parity for teachers and end the unjust two-tier system.
- Fully restore posts of responsibility in primary and secondary schools.
- Recognise overseas teaching experience for returning and migrant teachers entering the pay-scale.
- Recruit additional Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and recognise the contribution of our SNAs and further professionalise the sector by providing improved job security, further education opportunities, and a clearer career pathway, in consultation with their representatives.
This would include raising minimum qualifications to Level 6, and ending year-to-year contracts for SNAs as the standard model.
- Increase capitation grants and index/benchmark the level of the grant to costs relevant to running schools, including energy.
- Increase Management Body Grants by 50 per cent, to allow these organisations to catch up to where they were more than a decade ago, in terms of the grant's true value.
- Accelerate the school investment programme and phase out the use of pre-fabs in schools.
- Invest to achieve the international student/staff benchmark ratio of 15:1 at third level.
- Increase third level core funding through state contributions.
- Ensure a move away from insecure and precarious contracts that are increasingly the norm for staff in higher education.
- Focus on improving the quality of higher education programmes, including engagement with students and learning outcomes, and on the development of a more responsive and flexible higher education system.
- Take action to ensure investment in higher education is used effectively, including the additional regulation of course costs, and improvements to the performance management framework and funding allocation mechanisms.

Targeting Disadvantage, Investing in Wellbeing

The Social Democrats recognise our schools, with their dedicated staff, as one of the most important and formative settings for children. Their importance is perhaps even greater for those children who have experienced trauma, disadvantage or social exclusion.

Most schools are still not fully resourced to support students needing additional help effectively. Now more than ever, we need to invest in additional services within schools, including more teachers, SNAs and support staff to ensure no child is left behind.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools (primary and secondary) have at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist as a permanent member of staff. This will begin with a local area team, evolving to one per school.
- Establish a DEIS+ scheme to provide multi-disciplinary teams to address intergenerational poverty, including counsellors/ play therapists for the most disadvantaged areas.
- Continue to fund the School Completion Programme, and develop a new employment framework for SCPs to retain staff.
- Extend the Home School Liaison Scheme to more schools.
- Reconstitute NEPS and expand it as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all schools. This will help schools dealing with complex needs that teachers are not qualified to deal with.
- Work to reduce the barriers that exist for many young people accessing their right to education, e.g. the use of reduced school timetables violates a child's right to education and should be exceptional; schools should be resourced to provide supports as required.
- Increase the school meals programme budget by 20 per cent to improve food quality.
- Step up investment in guidance counselling to support student emotional wellbeing and future career development.
- Develop an *Arts & Social Inclusion in Education Strategy* to promote a whole school approach to the arts and creativity, and develop community arts spaces for young people especially in areas of higher poverty.
- Invest in books to encourage children to read for pleasure, by establishing an annual School Library Grant and having a long-term aim of a school library (with a librarian) in every school.
- Ensure every child has access to nature by establishing School Gardens in urban schools.

Ensuring Equality and Inclusivity in Education

A modern Irish democracy must respect and reflect the diversity of Irish society and the citizens which it serves. Increasingly, a significant number of parents feel that they have no option but to send their child to a school which does not align with their belief system. Reform is urgently needed.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Establish a Citizens' Assembly to make recommendations on the future of the education system, including how it might better reflect and serve a more modern, inclusive and diverse Ireland.
- Aim to remove 'faith formation' from the school day, with it to be provided as an afterschool option, and use the time for a new ethical education programme as part of SPHE, along with enhanced time for other subjects.
- Rigorously follow through on school divestment as per recommendations from the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage.
- Amend the Employment Equality Act so teachers cannot face religious discrimination.
- Ensure children's relationship and sexuality education that is informed by best practice in science and healthcare, with a standardised curriculum across all publicly funded schools.

Ensuring Educational Equality for Children with Learning Differences

Too many students with disabilities are not having their right to education vindicated. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Review the EPSEN Act to bring it in line with the UNCRPD and then *fully* enact it.
- Develop a road map and strategic plan on Special Education and Inclusive Education, co-designed with children and families. The strategy will ensure all school buildings are accessible and suitable to support all children, that educators and school staff have training which is firmly focused on children's rights, and will develop a system wide model to enable access to therapies in schools.
- Invest in more speech and language support, shared between schools if necessary.
- Ensure that every disabled child or child with additional educational needs gets access to a school place in the same time frame as every other child in the country.
- Ensure that all schools are resourced to meet the needs of all children with adequate special education teachers, SNAs and any other resource children require to access their right to education.
- Support the call for increased time in state examinations for students with dyslexia.
- Provide additional funding for accessible educational material for deaf, blind, or vision-impaired students.
- Compile disaggregated data on the education experience of disabled children and children with additional educational needs.

Investing in Further Education

Following years of underfunding, Ireland is under-resourced relative to our ambitions in further and higher education and innovation. Funding for Research & Development (R&D) in this country has not recovered since the financial crash. There is a clear need for a larger role for the State in ensuring that a sufficient amount of the R&D that is vital to maintaining an innovation ecosystem is conducted. Higher Education institutions will be vital in delivering on this. How we structure and fund our higher and further education system will have a huge impact on how we fare in tackling the many challenges we face. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase total investment in R&D to 2.5 per cent of national income and increase investment in 'basic' research to balance applied research.
- Invest in a Research & Innovation transformation fund so that Technological Universities can meet research growth targets as set out in the TU Act.
- Introduce specific funding to support Technological Universities (TUs) as regional drivers of innovation and to engage with SMEs, MNCs and start-ups on innovation training and strategy development.
- Begin the process of creating a full university in the southeast of the country via the upgrading of the South East Technological University.
- Introduce targeted supports to enable SMEs to invest in innovation and productivity, including through the expansion of the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Voucher Scheme with a supportive mentoring programme.
- Increase funding for apprenticeships through the National Training Fund.
- Resource the National Apprenticeship Office to drive the delivery of the Apprenticeship Action Plan, to bring strong alignment between training schemes and employment need.
- Make multi-annual investment in community education the norm, and reform financial supports aimed at – and develop more robust wraparound supports for – adult learners.
- Set a target to increase Ireland's rate of lifelong learning participation from around 13 per cent to a new target of 20 per cent.
- Support the implementation of the Adult Literacy for Life ten-year strategy.

Further information about our plans for a better funded, more holistic education system can be found in our Education Policy Document on our website.

A professional headshot of a man with short, light brown hair and a well-groomed beard. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a white button-down shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with a building.

Gary Gannon TD
Candidate for
Dublin Central

Ending Child Poverty

It's a huge indictment of our country that tens of thousands of children in Ireland grow up in consistent and persistent poverty. In practical terms, this means they live in households with a very low income and go without basics such as adequate food or heat, or face social exclusion, for large parts of their childhood.

This is simply unacceptable. Allowing children to fall behind so early in life stores up huge problems for the future, and costs society dearly in the long run.

There is hardly a greater avoidable tragedy in Irish society than that of child poverty. The scarring effects of living in persistent poverty as a child last for life, and affect everything from emotional development, mental health and physical well-being in adulthood to educational attainment and labour market participation.

It denies children's human rights, is hugely wasteful for society as it inhibits economic potential in adulthood, and reduces the contribution people can make to society. Dealing with the repercussions later in life is far more expensive and less effective than early interventions, which would lead both to future savings in expenditure on welfare and criminal justice, and to higher tax revenues. Eliminating child poverty requires a combination of child and adult income supports, and access to quality public services.

Income supports targeted at the most vulnerable in our society are required, as well as an expansion of services, particularly around education, health, and the care of children, designed to mitigate the notable economic inequality that is increasingly a feature of Irish society.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure that policy in relation to children is underpinned by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Set a clear target in the next Programme for Government that consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated by 2030.
- Acknowledge that children live in households with adults. Therefore, child poverty cannot be eliminated without lifting the households in which they live out of poverty. Working-age income supports are part of the solution.
- Benchmark our social protection system to the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living to ensure everyone has enough to live a decent and dignified life.
- Create a new DEIS+ categorisation for the most disadvantaged schools.
- Set the Qualified Child Increase payment at a level that properly reflects the costs of raising children and the depths of child poverty in Ireland.
- Use the Working Family Payment to support low-income families who are at work.
- Examine the possibility for reform of certain payments to better target child poverty, including the possibility of an additional (targeted) tier of child benefit.
- Increase supports for Foster Carers to a level that better reflects both the cost of raising children and the benefits of having children in foster homes rather than institutional care.
- Introduce a statutory Child Maintenance Service.
- Replicate targeted area-based investment similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving learning and well-being outcomes.
- Increase funding for Tusla and recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- Make the primary and secondary education systems truly free, and extend the school meals programme on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food.
- Automatically fund 'sponsorship' for childcare as full-day care (min 40 hrs p/week) with a minimum capitation rate of €350 per child per week, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year, for children experiencing the worst deprivation.
- Poverty-proof Government Budgets.

Tackling the Problem of Low Income

Ireland has a structural problem around low income. Hundreds of thousands of people subsist week to week on incomes which are not sufficient to live a dignified existence. Approximately one in five workers are on low pay, calculated as two-thirds of median pay.

Plenty of research exists illustrating what various types of households must spend each week to achieve what is considered a socially acceptable standard of living in Ireland. The most well-known is the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research from St. Vincent de Paul, which suggests that a single adult would need to spend at least €280 per week in 2024 to cover basic needs. The immediate implication of this is that core social welfare payments provide only around 87 per cent of what is required to meet basic needs, and this will be further eroded as the cost of living rises.

Core social welfare rates and the Minimum Wage are two key policy levers in ensuring that individuals, families and workers can earn enough to afford a decent standard of living in Ireland. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Benchmark core social welfare rates to the MESL over time, to ensure income adequacy.
- Prioritise increases in social welfare payments that will target the most vulnerable and reduce poverty rates. This will include using targeted payments like the Fuel Allowance, the Living Alone Increase, the Working Family Payment, and the Qualified Child Increase.
- Extend the Jobseekers Transitional Payment to take account of whether the child/children are in education.
- Implement a weekly Cost of Disability payment to reflect that disabled people have a higher cost of living as a result of their disability.
- Develop and implement a successor to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.

The lowest paid in our society should at least be able to keep up with the rest.

Two years ago, Government announced plans for a Living Wage that will be pegged to 60 per cent of median earnings. This is a strong step in the right direction but is a move away from the concept of a living wage being what it actually costs to achieve a decent standard of living.

Median earnings have no bearing on the cost of basic necessities. Linking a living wage to this benchmark could therefore lead to income inadequacy becoming ingrained in the system. Recently, the Living Wage Technical Group announced that the actual living wage for 2024/25 was €14.75 per hour. So we know that the current rate of the Minimum Wage (€13.50 per hour) does not meet this benchmark. While working from an initial base of 60 per cent of median earnings, there must be regular review of this benchmark with reference to calculations of what it actually costs to achieve a minimum standard of living, recognising that while benchmarks are important, so too is maintaining the link between that benchmark and income adequacy.

For too long the attitude has been that employment is the best poverty-reliever. But a job only relieves poverty if it is a decent job – full-time, paid at a living wage, and with decent conditions. Anything less than that fails to achieve our social aims. The new Minimum Wage should apply to all employees aged 18 and over.

Recent trends in precarious working practices contribute to a situation where, according to the CSO, nearly 6 per cent of those in employment are experiencing poverty. Introducing a system of Refundable Tax Credits would help tackle the problem of the ‘working poor’ as it would allow low-income workers who do not earn enough to use their full credits to have the unused portion “refunded” – essentially a cash payment. This would help many on low pay deal with increasing living costs.

Making tax credits refundable would also make Ireland’s tax system fairer, improve the living standards of a substantial number of people in Ireland, and give Government a useful additional tool to target support to low-income workers. In Government, the Social Democrats will make the main income tax credits (the Personal Credit, the PAYE Credit, and the Earned Income Tax Credit) refundable.

Caring For Carers

Carers provide an invaluable service to the State. According to the latest census data there are around three hundred thousand unpaid carers in Ireland providing unpaid care each week, an increase of 53 per cent in six years. Yet the supports they receive do not even come close to reflecting the contribution they make to our society. It is time to overhaul the outdated means-tested Carer's Allowance scheme and work towards a more equitable and gender-balanced Family Carer Payment.

The Parliamentary Budget Office has estimated the full year cost of abolishing the means test for Carer's Allowance at €375 million; an amount that pales in comparison to the economic contributions made by carers, who save the State billions of euros every year.

Supporting carers is about more than money. It is important that carers can sustain a healthy balance between their caring role and their own personal wellbeing. All full-time family carers should have access to regular and appropriate respite; something that is repeatedly identified as a priority by family carers and something which needs to be viewed as integral to supporting them.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Develop a new National Carers Strategy.
- Abolish the means test for Carer's Allowance.
- Ensure that the rate of Carer's Allowance is set at a level that reflects the work carried out by carers and the contribution that they make to society.
- Invest to ensure carers have proper access to necessary Respite.
- Establish a statutory right to homecare.
- Working in consultation with carers and their representatives, create a suite of policies that support carers to enter (or remain in) employment or education where they wish to do so.
- Continue to develop the supports and services available to family carers throughout the country, including with adjustments to the Carer's Support Grant, Domiciliary Care Allowance, Home Carer Tax Credit, and other policy levers.
- Expand the Free Travel Scheme to include people in receipt of the Domiciliary Care Allowance.

Our Child Care System

The latest report from the Child Law Project paints a disturbing picture of how children in the care system are being failed by the State. Children as young as four are being placed in residential care because there is no foster carer available. There are waiting lists of special care beds for children. Meanwhile, dysfunction in Tusla is preventing mothers from coming forward to access services for domestic violence, mental health and addiction issues because of the fear of having their children taken into state care.

Foster carers provide a socially vital service, but their numbers are in decline, in large part due to inadequate government supports. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Conduct a review of Tusla's remit and functioning and create a sustainable workforce plan.
- Increase funding for Tusla and recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- Develop a mechanism to ensure that the work of foster carers is properly recognised by the State Pension system.
- Auto-enrol foster carers for the Back-to-School Allowance.
- Work with foster carers and their representatives to ensure that a fit-for-purpose system of start-up payments, allowances and other supports is in place.



Ross O'Mullane
Candidate for
Dublin South-West

Arts & Culture

The arts have a vital role in stimulating innovation through creative thinking, helping to drive growth and giving us an economic edge in a globalised world. We understand ourselves and others through culture – connecting our past, present and future.

Artists help shape our collective sense of self through reflection, provocation and imagination. Freedom of artistic expression and challenging the status quo strengthens democracy and accountability.

Success for the arts in Ireland will depend on the level of collaboration across government departments, state bodies and arts organisations/practitioners, including using cross-sectoral competencies to foster and platform new Irish creative talent across traditional and digital media.

For too long, the arts have suffered chronic underinvestment – we have among the lowest levels of arts funding as a percentage of national income in Europe. Placing arts at the heart of education, public policy, and economic thinking, and strengthening the cross-departmental approach pioneered by Creative Ireland, will positively transform these vital areas.

Capital investment in arts and culture, while important, must be carefully balanced with current investment in the work of arts practitioners. Every person in Ireland has a right to participate in arts and culture in their everyday life.

The Social Democrats believe that arts and culture underpin our overall wellbeing and creativity, our innovation, and our social cohesion. Ireland has a very diverse artistic and creative ecosystem, which delivers huge cultural and economic value both nationally and internationally.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Develop a roadmap for progressive increases in total arts funding, with a focus on current expenditure to practicing artists through the Arts Council and Culture Ireland.
- Establish special commercial rates for creative/arts spaces and “rates holidays” for new projects.
- Enhance supports for the Irish film and publishing industries.
- Introduce multi-annual funding for essential arts organisations to allow for long-term planning decisions.
- Introduce an annual Culture Voucher, worth €200, to encourage 18–24-year-olds to take part in cultural activities.
- Encourage affordable live/workspaces for artists and creative practitioners.
- Ensure the DSP/Intreo has a framework for understanding irregular/freelance work.
- Ensure planning legislation takes cultural and creative spaces into account for all public developments.
- Revitalise our night-time cultural economy by legislating for later opening hours for venues and bars, as well as further extending the hours of public transport systems.
- Review our licensing laws, including the Public Dance Halls Act and the Theatre Licence, to ensure they are fit for purpose.
- Support the establishment of Night Mayors in each of our major cities.
- Invest in physical infrastructure needed in the Arts sector such as studios, galleries, theatres and workspaces.
- Increase investment in Culture Ireland to enhance our global reputation and create more opportunities for Irish artists and international collaboration. We will also restore independent oversight of its organisation.
- Use the findings from the Basic Income for Artists study to create a more permanent scheme to support artists financially.
- Reform Section 15 tax breaks so that they do not unintentionally discriminate against Irish artists.

Basic Income for Artists

The current government has run a ‘Basic Income for Artists’ pilot scheme. The Social Democrats supported this pilot and view the scheme as a necessary step towards properly supporting people working in the sector. It should be the first step in a series of progressive increases in total funding for the sector, to bring Ireland in line with the EU average for funding the arts over the next few years.

Findings from the study should be used to ascertain the best way to efficiently support artists and the sector more widely. This should ultimately come in the form of a permanent scheme to support artists financially, to ensure they can work without the risk of poverty or the need to engage regularly with the Department of Social Protection.

Extending the current scheme, and expanding participation, seems to be the obvious move in the short term. Its criteria must also be reformed so that it doesn’t continue to effectively exclude disabled artists.

It’s also worth noting that artists working in the live performance, film and other audiovisual sectors in France have a designated unemployment insurance scheme; the ‘Scheme for Intermittent Workers in the Performing Arts’, in English. In government, we will examine the possibility of a similar scheme for Ireland.

Education & Equality

The arts are a vital part of our education system, encouraging creativity, innovation, resilience and adaptability; skills so important in the modern economy.

The Social Democrats believe that arts and culture can have a positive transformative effect in achieving a more equitable society. That is why we are working to make sure our cultural policy promotes equity, inclusion, diversity and accessibility.

Arts education has a unique and proven ability to reduce student dropout rates, to improve engagement with education (particularly for disadvantaged students) and to raise performance standards across the board.

The Social Democrats are committed to increasing investment in arts education, and to ensuring that state-funded arts organisations and programs lead the way in promoting equality, diversity, and integration in Irish society.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure universal access to arts education at both primary and secondary levels.
- Expand the Creative Schools programme and ensure it continues beyond the life of the Creative Ireland initiative.
- Ensure all National Cultural Institutions take action to promote equality, diversity, inclusivity and accessibility.
- Introduce Drama and Theatre Studies as a Leaving Cert subject.
- Support the rebalancing of arts curricula to ensure a more equitable gender representation.
- Provide an additional Arts budget for DEIS schools.

Further information about our plans for investment in arts and culture system can be found in our Arts & Culture Policy Document on our website.

An Ghaeilge

Caithfidh na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta dúthracht lenár dteanga náisiúnta a fhorbairt, a chosaint agus a athbhceochan mar shócmhainn shárluachmhar shocheacnamaíoch agus chultúrtha. Tabharfaimid aird ar leith ar réigiún agus pobail Ghaeltachta agus tacóimíodh leo go praiticiúil, go háirithe de bharr go bhfuil go leor acu faoi mhíbhuntáiste socheacnamaíoch riagh anall.

Aithnímid go bhfuil cónaí ar chaointeoirí Gaeilge i gcathracha agus fud fad na tíre, agus tabharfaimid tacaíocht do phobail ina bhfuil ardlíon cainteoirí Gaeilge nó ina bhfuil líon na gcainteoirí ag dul i méid, lena n-áirítear ceantair ina bhfuil gaelscoileanna agus gaelcholáistí. Cuirmid barr feabhas ar an oideachas Gaeilge i scoileanna Béarla, leis.

Glacfaimid le cur chuige uile-rialtais trasrannach i leith na Gaeilge agus phobal na Gaeilge, laistigh agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Glac ár bhfocal air go ndéanfaimid::

- Cur i bhfeidhm iomlán na Straitéis 20 Bláin don Ghaeilge agus an *Phlean Fáis: Pleán Infheistíochta don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht, 2024-2029*.
- Cláir éifeachtacha spreagtha geilleagair a chinntí do cheantair Ghaeltachta, gnólachtaí atá bunaithe sa Ghaeltacht san áireamh.
- Beartas náisiúnta a chruthú le tithíocht agus forbairt a phleanáil i gceantair Ghaeltachta, agus feidhmeanna soiléire tithíochta a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta.
- Dul i gcomhar le heagraíochtaí Gaeilge, grúpaí pobail agus abhcóideachta san áireamh, le tacú le scéimeanna a chuireann úsáid na Gaeilge chun cinn i ngach gné den saol poiblí.
- Obair a dhéanamh as lámha a chéile le Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh a Gaeilge, agus le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta lena chinntí go dtéann ár n-iarrachtaí, ár mbeartais agus ár bhfeachtas chun fíorthairbhe do chaointeoirí Gaeilge, bídínsa ina gcónaí sa Ghaeltacht nó ná bídís.
- Tacú le Líonraí Gaeilge, idir nua agus seanbhunaithe, an Ghaeilge a scaipeadh mar theanga bheo lasmuigh de na ceantair thraigisiúnta Ghaeltachta.
- Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2019 a chur i bhfeidhm go hiomlán le dul i ngleic leis an easpa seirbhísí stáit atá ar fáil trí Ghaeilge.
- A iarraidh go mbeadh scileanna Gaeilge ag líon agus comhréir níos airde fostaithe san earnáil phoiblí d'fhoinn a chinntí go n-urramófaí na cearta atá ag cainteoirí Gaeilge déileáil le comhlachtaí poiblí trí Ghaeilge.
- Reachtaíocht a rith le go bhféadfadh Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga pionóis a ghearradh nuair a theipeann ar Chomhlacht nó ar Ghníomhairesacht stáit cloí leis an Reachtaíocht Rialaithe a bhaineann le húsáid na Gaeilge.
- Straitéis nua a fhorbairt don Ghaeilge sa chóras oideachais ón oideachas réamhscoile go dtí an t-oideachas tríú leibhéal.
- Tacú le hoiliúint do chleachtóirí luathbhlianta le dul ag obair i suíomhanna Gaeilge.
- Tacú le forbairt gaelscoileanna, gaelcholáistí, naónraí agus ionad oideachais Gaeilge eile i gcás go bhfuil spéis ag an bpobal áitiúil ina leithéid.
- Feabhas a chur ar na tacaíochtaí a thugtar do mhúinteoirí agus do cheannairí i scoileanna Béarla lena chinntí go soláthraítear Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile ina iomláine, lena n-áirítear tacaíocht oiliúna le Foghlaim Chomhtháite Ábhar agus Teangacha (FCÁT) a sholáthar, le tacú le hábhair eile a mhúineadh trí Ghaeilge.
- Straitéis nua a chruthú don Ghaeilge sa Chóras Oideachais ón Luath-Óige go dtí an Tríú Leibhéal, bunaithe ar Chomhchreat Tagartha na hEorpa um Theangacha, ag nascadh gach céim den chóras.
- Tacaíochtaí breise a thabhairt do na meáin Ghaeilge, TG4, RTÉ agus Raidió na Gaeltachta ina measc.
- Labhairt amach ar son béim níos mó a leagan ar an inniúlacht ó bhéal sa Ghaeilge ar leibhéal na meánscoile, cosúil leis na samhlacha oideachais atá i bhfeidhm sa Bhreatain Bheag.
- Cur ar chumas níos mó daoine óga freastal ar scoileanna samhraidh Gaeilge ach cur leis an gcistiú do chláir scoláireachta.

The Irish Language

The Social Democrats are committed to the development, protection, and revitalisation of our national language as an invaluable socio-economic and cultural asset, with particular attention and practical support for Gaeltacht regions and their communities, many of which are historically socio-economically disadvantaged. We recognise that Irish speakers live in cities and all across the country and will support communities where there is a higher or growing proportion of Irish speakers, including areas in which gaelscoileanna and gaelcholáistí are based, as well as enhancing Irish language education in English-medium schools. Our emphasis is on a whole-of-government, cross-departmental approach to the Irish language and its community of speakers, both in and outside of the Gaeltacht. We are committed to:

- Funding the full implementation of the 20 Year Strategy on Irish, and *Plean Fáis - Investment Plan for Irish language and the Gaeltacht*.
- Ensuring effective economic stimulus programmes for Gaeltacht areas, including Gaeltacht-based businesses.
- Creating a national policy for the planning of housing and development in Gaeltacht areas, including giving Údarás na Gaeltachta clear housing functions.
- Working with Irish-language organisations, including community and advocacy groups, to support schemes which promote the use of Irish in all aspects of public life.
- Working with Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, and Údarás na Gaeltachta to ensure our efforts, policies, and campaigns are of real benefit to Irish speakers, whether living in or outside the Gaeltachtaí.
- Supporting new and existing Lónraí Gaeilge to spread Irish as a living language outside the traditional Gaeltacht areas.
- Fully implementing the Official Languages Bill 2019, to address the lack of state services available through Irish.
- Seeking the delivery of an increased number and proportion of public sector employees with Irish language skills to ensure the rights of Irish language speakers to deal with public bodies through Irish.
- Legislate for the Office of the Coimisinéir Teanga to levy penalties where a state Body or Agency fails to adhere to the Governing Legislation concerning the use of Irish.
- Supporting training for early years practitioners to work in Irish language settings.
- Support the development of new gaelscoileanna, gaelcholáistí, naónraí and other Irish-language educational centres where there is local interest.
- Improving supports to teachers and leaders in English medium schools to ensure the full delivery of the Primary Language Curriculum, including training support for the delivery of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), to support the teaching of other subjects through Irish.
- Creating a new strategy for Irish in the Education System from Early Childhood to Third Level, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, linking all stages of the system.
- Providing additional supports to Irish language media, including at TG4, RTÉ, and Raidió na Gaeltachta.
- Advocating for better emphasis on oral proficiency in Irish at secondary level, similar to education models in place in Wales.
- Enabling more young people to attend Irish language summer schools by expanding funding for scholarship programmes.
- Supporting the rollout of Irish language classes and social events for adults, including Irish-language immersion period for trainee teachers at the start of the Academic year.
- Working in a bilingual manner where practical and possible, including social media, press/media relations.
- Supporting new Irish cultural centres and Irish language cafés.
- Addressing international organisations and bodies, such as the United Nations, the European Union etc. via the medium of Irish.



Cllr Eoin Ó Broin

Candidate for
Dublin Mid-West

Sport

Sport is fundamentally embedded in our culture. We know that participation in sport and physical activity can assist the achievement of both health and social goals.

The primary objective of the Social Democrats in government will be to maximise participation levels in sport and recreation. The success of sports policy should be measured not in gold medals but instead by the percentage of the population who are out and active. This is key not only for keeping people active, but also in the fight against obesity, the sustaining of communities, the integration of people from diverse backgrounds, and the promotion of mental well-being.

Research shows lower levels of participation among girls and women, older people, and people with disabilities, though it should be noted that the gender gap has closed significantly in the last two decades. We will target these groups in particular to increase participation.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Use participation levels as the main driver of strategy in sports policy, with funding geared more towards participation than other criteria. Funding will also focus on the role sports can play in social inclusion, gender equality, and integration.
- Have a sports capital fund allocation every year, rather than the current ad-hoc arrangement.
This would provide some additional certainty to grass-roots organisation who wish to plan ahead in the development of their facilities.
- Ensure that core public funding provided to sporting bodies is adequate and delivered on a multi-annual basis.
- Create a fairer and more transparent method for the allocation of funding by locality. This would involve moving the allocation of funds to being a competence of local authorities, where local knowledge can be taken into account on where the greatest need for funding is.
- Seek to provide, via Sports Capital Grants, an open access MUGA (multi use games area) pitch in every community where that is feasible.
- Provide extra funding for initiatives aimed at cohorts with high drop-out rates or low participation rates.
- Work with representative groups from the disabled community to improve access to sporting infrastructure and opportunities.
- Introduce a new requirement that all planning authorities must publish a sport and recreation facilities strategy as part of their development plan process.
Such a strategy would include an appraisal of pitch and recreational shortfalls in each local authority area.
- Plan for pitches and sports facilities to be incorporated into each major planning application, Local Area Plan and all other development projects.
- Review the current tax regime to ensure incentives to make donations to sporting organisations are fit for purpose.
- Phase out state funding to the greyhound racing industry.

Sports and Activity Voucher

Too many young people are being priced out of playing a sport or learning a creative art. This is not a failure of the clubs, who must fund their activities, but a failure of policy.

The Social Democrats are proposing a €150 Sports and Cultural Activity voucher for all children aged 6 to 18.

We believe a voucher scheme would work better than a tax credit, which would likely exclude children from families reliant on social welfare, or with low earnings.

This voucher would ensure that children get to participate in their chosen sport or activity for free, or at a heavily subsidised price. There should be no financial barrier to parents getting their children active.

Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence

The United Nations describes violence against women as the most prevalent human rights violation in the world.

In Ireland, services in the sector are overstretched and underfunded, so cannot meet the ever-increasing demand. Too often the legal system seems to work against domestic violence and abuse survivors, and the lengthy delays created by the family and criminal law infrastructure have unsafe and traumatising results. Too often we are failing to deliver justice for victims through our court system.

The Social Democrats are committed to accelerated investment in this area and fully resourcing and implementing the National Strategy. We will also support the delivery of Ireland's commitments under the Istanbul Convention.

We must maintain momentum towards creating an equal and safe Ireland with zero tolerance of domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Properly resource and implement the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV), and ensure development of a Fourth Strategy is resourced.
- Make sustainable multi-annual funding the norm for domestic and sexual abuse services.
- Pursue policy that recognises the experiences and needs of different groups including disabled people, members of the LGBTQI+ community, Travellers and other ethnic minorities, and migrants and refugees.
- Establish a Commissioner on DSGBV with appropriate resources and powers to monitor the National Strategy's implementation.
- Ensure training on domestic abuse and coercive control is available for legal professionals in the family law and criminal justice systems.
- Establish mechanisms to prevent the current siloing of criminal justice, private family law and public law child care processes in relation to domestic and sexual violence.
- Commit capital funding to double available refuge units over the next term of government.
- Ensure policy on DSGBV has a strong focus on children and that refuges are funded to specifically support and accommodate children traumatised by domestic violence and abuse.
- Resource the provision of essentials (like food and clothes) at refuges, as well as therapeutic counselling to aid recovery, and ensure all refuge services have access to a medical card.
- Include survivors of domestic violence in the next Housing Strategy as a priority cohort for social and affordable housing.
- Continue updating the SPHE/RSE curricula to ensure adequate guidance on issues like sexism and gender equality, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and consent.
- Work to combat online gender-based violence, including intimate image abuse, and address the harms of online pornography.
- Make technology platforms accountable for their content and business models, including for algorithms which push violent, extremist and pornographic material to young people.
- Resource and implement the Family Law Reform Strategy and the Family Justice Strategy.
- Initiate new legislative powers to enable An Garda Síochána to remove abusers from the family home where appropriate.
- Amend legislation so a parent convicted of the murder or manslaughter of the other parent does not retain guardianship of a surviving child or children, and ensure a person cannot financially profit from murder or manslaughter.
- Support survivors of domestic violence to leave abusive relationships by piloting an emergency cash payment, similar to the UK Flee Funds.
- Support programmes which seek to educate on issues of DSGBV.
- Change legislation so that victims' counselling/therapy notes are not routinely used as evidence in sexual offence trials.
- Work to encourage the referral, by An Garda Síochána, of all victims of sexual violence who report a crime to a Rape Crisis Centre for specialised support.

Supporting Families

In Ireland, we do too little to support parents. Despite improvements in recent years, we are still well behind other countries in terms of paid leave for parents, investment in childcare and early years education, supports for new parents, and basic public services for children.

The Social Democrats believe that parents and families deserve a break. Parenting should be more than just about surviving week to week, or an ongoing battle to ensure your child gets the services they are entitled to.

We want a New Deal for Families. This New Deal would put parents and children at the heart of Government policies. It will support those parenting, in all forms of families, by allowing them more time with their children, more help with the cost of raising a family, and more peace of mind over their children's future.

More Paid Leave for Parents

The Social Democrats are committed to extending and vastly improving entitlement to paid leave for parents and flexible work options.

Ireland lags far behind most other EU countries in terms of both paid and unpaid leave. This is not in the interests of employers, workers or children. Our leave system should be providing far better support and flexibility for

The Social Democrats favour the extension of paid parental leave so that in conjunction with paid maternity leave, paternity leave and existing paid parental leave, the first 12 months of a child's life can be covered by paid leave. It would be shareable between parents. We will:

- Increase paid parents' leave by 4 weeks for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each, and
- Increase benefit payments to €350 per week for Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit.

This would allow paid parents' leave and maternity leave to cover the full first year of a child's life.

We should also be moving to a situation where the overall amount of paid and unpaid leave for parents is extended to the European average of around 100 weeks per child. We would also like to see the general child qualifying age for unpaid parental leave extended to 16 years.

We would also reform the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 to provide additional support to one-parent families, acknowledging the disparity in benefit of paid parents' leave compared with two-parent families.

Improved Flexible Work Options

The demand for more flexible working is especially strong from parents of young children, those caring for an older person or a family member with a disability, and generally where people are seeking a better work/life balance. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Legislate to improve Irish employees' work-life balance by strengthening legislation concerning workers' right to flexible work.
- Establish a Commission to research, trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work including working from home, term-time working, and a 4-day week, and to ensure that it works for parents, families of all types, and for large and small employers.
- Recognise that parents of children with disabilities and certain carers have particular demands on their time and require further flexibility.
- Raise the qualifying child age for unpaid parental leave to 16 years and to 18 years for children with disabilities.
- Make it compulsory for employers with more than 250 employees to make publicly available their policies regarding their financial contributions to Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave and Parents' Leave for their employees.

Promoting Active and Healthy lifestyles

One in four children in Ireland are overweight or obese – with marked differences depending on family income. Three in four adults over 50 are overweight or obese. Ireland has among the highest levels of overweight and obese adults in the EU. We have a problem, and it's time we faced it. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a ban on all food advertising aimed at children.
- Improve labelling and nutrition information on food and drinks, and the public's understanding of it.
- Require all schools to have healthy food policies and provide guidelines on school lunches.
- Invest heavily in sport and recreation, ensuring that there are grant allocations on an annual basis and that qualifying criteria are strongly skewed towards driving participation.
- Promote safe cycling as a viable option for children.
- Adequately fund the implementation of the National Breastfeeding Action Plan, with additional lactation consultants.

Better, More Affordable Public Services

The Social Democrats are committed to the introduction of truly free Primary and Secondary Education. This would mean investing in schools to increase capitation grants, improve school transport, and universalise book schemes for students at all levels.

Adequate funding would ensure that schools end the practice of seeking voluntary contributions from parents.

We will also ensure that school managers adopt a principle of cost-minimisation in relation to school uniforms and other school costs. We will invest in more primary school teachers, supports for special needs, and strive towards the full commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 so that parents of children with special needs do not need to campaign eternally for their child's rights.

The proposals of the Sláintecare plan, which was driven by the Social Democrats, will provide for the expansion of frontline primary care services, including free GP Care for all age groups. It will mean that basic services that are key to a child's development such as public health nursing, speech and language therapy, and eye, ear and dental services will be significantly improved so that parents can rely on them if their child needs them.

Thousands of children wait very lengthy periods for basic health services such as speech and language services. The completely unacceptable waiting times in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, in psychology and many other streams of child health services are well known. These waiting times would be significantly reduced under our proposals.

As part of the full roll-out of Sláintecare we will provide additional funding for public health nursing and want to see some of this investment going to dedicated child and family public health nurses. We will aim to expand the home birth service, and invest in maternity and postnatal care. For example, in France, the post-natal care for all new mothers includes a full free abdominal check-up six weeks after giving birth, followed by a post-natal rehab programme where women are given exercises and advice on how to correct their posture and strengthen their abdominal and pelvic area. (Most post-natal care in Ireland is limited to the health of the baby, breastfeeding issues, or perhaps Caesarean stitch removal and scar recovery). The abdominal check certifies that all the organs have returned to their correct positions, that the pelvic floor is recovering properly, and other things. This is the direction in which Ireland needs to move.

Finally, we believe that families deserve a break around childcare costs. The Social Democrats want to cap childcare fees at €250 per child per month, and build a public system of early years education and care to ensure the sustainable delivery of this vital service. (See next section).

Further information about our plans for supporting families and improving work/life balance can be found in our New Deal for Families (aka Supporting Families) Policy Document on our website.

Childcare - A Public Model of Early Childhood Education and Care

The Social Democrats have a clear goal to establish a public model of early childhood education and care (ECEC), and a pathway to achieve it. Overseen by a National Childcare Agency, this would have the triple benefit of guaranteeing quality early years education and care for children, affordability for parents, and appropriate compensation and benefits for workers in the early years sector.

It is important to distinguish between a publicly-funded model, which we have in part, and a public model of ECEC. Investing more money in the sector as it is currently structured – while necessary to make childcare fees affordable for families and to achieve other goals – will not achieve the results we need.

Research suggests that high quality ECEC can have beneficial and long-lasting impacts on children's outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. It can have a positive effect on children's educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes, in both the short and long term. But it is important to emphasise that this is only if it is of high quality.

Early childhood education and care also play a positive role in raising attainment and closing the gap between outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and other children. This is why we need to invest adequately in this area, to ensure that all children have an equal start in life.

We also acknowledge that Irish parents pay some of the highest costs in the world for childcare. Despite some recent improvements, childcare remains a huge expense for many families and yet a majority of staff within the sector earn below the Living Wage, with high staff turnover undermining the quality of the service being delivered.

There is still a clear need to increase the direct state funding to the childcare/early years sector to help improve staff pay and working conditions, and to increase affordability for parents. However, it is clear the system is not structured in a way that can deliver affordability for parents and sustainability for staff, while ensuring accountability for taxpayer money.

A public model of childcare should be pursued, building capacity for greater direct state provision of ECEC, and a strengthening of community provision. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Begin building a public model of early childhood education and care (ECEC) built around three core principles:
 - Universal access
 - High quality
 - Public good
- Create a National Childcare Agency that would run this public ECEC service.
- Ensure affordability for parents, by capping fees at €250 per child per month, with a cap of €200 for lower income households.
- Invest €100m every year to acquire 80 childcare facilities as part of building a base level of public capacity in the sector.
- Conduct an audit of purpose-built settings lying vacant around the country, with a view to acquiring a number of these to begin building public capacity.
- Invest significant capital spending over our term in government to directly build additional settings in the areas most in need, including, where possible, on the grounds on other educational campuses, and ensure that no new schools in Ireland are built without an early years setting.
- Focus on using ECEC funding to disrupt the cycle of poverty and exclusion which exists in many parts of Ireland.
- Target ECEC funding to ensure access to high-quality, full-day care throughout the year for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.
- Ensure sponsorship under the National Childcare Scheme reflects the 'real' cost of provision for children facing adversity.
- Sustain and upscale the important work of the Area Based Childhood Programmes.
- Take measures to ensure a highly skilled and fairly remunerated ECEC workforce.

ECEC: Disrupting Poverty and Disadvantage

High quality, accessible and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an essential social and economic good that can enhance children's development, educational outcomes, and health trajectories across the lifespan. Access to and participation in ECEC can also reduce inequality and social exclusion and remove barriers to parental employment. The complex ECEC ecosystem requires ambitious investment and approaches to create a sustainable, accountable, and affordable public ECEC system. This should include investment of part of the considerable corporation tax surpluses in a sustainable capital ECEC infrastructure. Our priorities include:

- More Community-based infrastructure of ECEC in Ireland.
- Equal Participation in ECEC for Children experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion.
- Adequate levels of Sponsorship for children experiencing extreme vulnerability.

Community-based ECEC infrastructure

Community-based, not-for-profit childcare settings are a critical asset to children, families, and communities across Ireland. Charities, not-for-profit organisations, and social enterprises that provide ECEC should be sustained, encouraged and further developed.

In Government we would ensure that the community-based, not-for-profit, and social enterprise infrastructure is adequately supported to make provision for all children and families, particularly those at risk of poverty.

Purpose-built community childcare settings should not be vacant in the afternoons or during school holidays and settings should be funded and supported to ensure that children can attend on a daily basis, throughout the year. Boards of Management, volunteers and social entrepreneurs should be adequately supported.

Equal Participation in ECEC

Young children are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of poverty in early childhood. Material deprivation and social exclusion have both immediate and long-term causal negative effects on children's health, socioemotional well-being, academic achievement, and participation. Children experiencing poverty benefit significantly from access to high-quality early childhood care and education.

In government, we would target ECEC funding to ensure access to high-quality, full-day care throughout the year for babies and children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. These services should be able to provide favourable adult-child ratios, three meals per day, rest spaces, well-equipped outdoor spaces and access to family rooms that can be used for parent support and/or education purposes.

Such provision requires dedicated funding per child, per week (not deductible based on attendance) and should reflect 'real' provision costs. The capitation per child per week in areas of deprivation should be a minimum of €250, with enhanced capitation based on the level of deprivation in the local area.

We must also sustain and upscale the important work of the Area Based Childhood Programmes.

Adequate levels of Sponsorship for Children in Extreme Vulnerability

Community-based settings in Ireland provide most Sponsored places for children experiencing extreme vulnerability. Sponsorship under the NCS should reflect the 'real' cost of provision for children facing adversity. These children require additional care, attention and nurturing, and funding should reflect more favourable adult-child ratios, adequate nutrition and access and availability of advice and support to meet needs, including access to services such as play therapy, psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and social work teams as required.

Sponsorship should be automatically funded as full-day care (min 40 hours per week) with a minimum capitation rate of €350 per child, per week, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year.

Further information about our plans for building a public model of childcare can be found in our Early Years Education and Care Policy Document on our website.

Empowering Youth

As part of the next government, the Social Democrats will have a focus on delivering better outcomes and brighter futures for young people in Ireland.

Our policies will increase funding for services for young people in areas like youth work, education, mental health, sport and recreation, and transport, and also take measures to increase youth participation in civic life.

By valuing the voice of young people, we recognise the important role they can play in Irish society.

The Social Democrats will:

- Create a €150 Sports and Cultural Activity voucher for children aged 6 to 18 (see Sport section for more details) and increase investment in sports and recreation facilities.
- Provide free public transport for under 18s.
- Seek an amendment to the Local Authority Strategic Policy Committee scheme to provide two spaces on each Strategic Policy Committee for young people.
- Work towards the full clinical and administrative staffing of CAMHS teams, including the aim of establishing 16 CAMHS-Intellectual Disability teams.
- Aim for a situation where all schools have at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist on staff.
- Make primary and secondary education truly free by fully funding all school textbooks, the school transport scheme, and removing the need for voluntary contributions.
- Reduce third level fees by phasing out the student contribution charge and increase funding to the SUSI grant scheme.
- Review the CAO points system in partnership with young people, teachers and higher education institutions, to develop a fairer framework for third level admissions.
- Create a Culture Card valued at €200 for 18- to 24-year-olds.
- Continue to support the expansion of *Gaisce – The President's Award* and its role in supporting the development of Ireland's young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation, or who are otherwise vulnerable.

Youth workers throughout Ireland often provide the most valuable educational and relational services with young people experiencing structural inequality, marginalisation and disadvantage.

At a time of increasing demand for services in communities, it is imperative we assist youth work organisations to deliver high-quality programmes and supports for young people. All young people who need it should have the opportunity to access youth work.

The Social Democrats will:

- Increase funding for youth work services, restoring youth work funding to pre-austerity levels. All young people who wish to avail of youth work services should be able to benefit from them.
- Reform the capital budget for youth work services to ensure it is more accessible, and increase capital investment to create and develop community spaces and facilities that offer opportunities to young people.
- Examine the needs of the sector and establish an investment fund for youth work facilities and infrastructural improvements.
- Commit to multi-annual funding of youth projects, that includes ongoing and evolving provision for supports that will retain and develop youth workers.

Further information about our plans can be found in our Youth Manifesto document on our website.

A photograph of a man with a shaved head and a beard, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is sitting on a dark wooden bench, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a large, multi-story stone building with many windows and a flag flying from the top. The sky is overcast.

Cllr Aidan Farrelly

Candidate for
Kildare North

Supporting Older People

The Social Democrats want to build a society where we can all feel secure in our futures as we grow older.

Over the coming decades, the make-up of Ireland's population will change considerably. We often talk about the needs of Ireland's ageing population as if it represents a change in demographics to be considered for the distant future. In fact, our population has already gotten considerably older in recent years, and will continue to do so.

Older people are not a homogenous group and every individual's experience of ageing will be different. Most older people will live full and independent lives. However, some are more likely to experience challenges relating to health, income, housing, transport, work, digital communications, and more besides. It is important to have policies in place to deal with each area.

Equally, it is important to have a structure in place to ensure policy takes account of the needs of older people, and allows their voices to be heard in reviewing the adequacy of policy, legislation and services affecting older persons. The appointment of a Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons would provide the oversight currently lacking to drive a rights-based approach to ageing policy and services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Appoint a Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons.
- Introduce a statutory right to homecare to support people to remain in their own homes.
- Invest to reduce and eliminate homecare waiting lists, and further develop step-down and rehabilitation facilities.
- Conduct a review of the privatisation of elder care, and the market structure for those already privatised.
- Begin a process of creating parity of treatment for staff delivering services in HSE-funded organisations.
- End the auction politics on pensions by linking the State Pension to at least 34 per cent of the average wage.
- Use indexed increases to welfare payments and schemes, including the Living Alone Increase, the Fuel Allowance, the Household Benefits Package, and Free Travel Scheme to ensure that older people can have a decent standard of living in Ireland.
- Invest in a variety of age-appropriate older persons' housing.
- Increase funding to the suite of housing grants for older people and people with a disability: The Housing Adaptation Grant; the Mobility Aid grant; and the Housing Aid for Older Persons grant.
- Introduce replacement schemes for the Motorised Transport Grant and Mobility Allowance based on assessment of individual needs.
- Increase funding to create additional accessibility on public transport, including at train and DART stations, more accessible buses, and other measures.
- Invest in a range of activities, and social and cultural outlets, for older people.
- Prohibit the 'digital only' provision of publicly funded services, including services that impose obstacles or disincentives to accessing offline options, and give the Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons a role in enforcing this prohibition.
- Implement the National Dementia Strategy, and provide additional funding for dementia and Alzheimer's services and for palliative care.
- Invest in neurological services, including implementing the Neurorehabilitation Strategy in full, with fully staffed community neurorehabilitation teams in each CHO.
- Roll-out chronic care programmes such as for arthritis and heart disease.
- Reduce prescription charges for patients (see Health section).
- Support and engage with age sector advocacy groups.
- Increase the statutory time limit (currently six months) for retirees to raise issues regarding pension entitlements.

A Fairer, More Efficient Immigration System

Migration in both directions brings a broad range of skills and experience, entrepreneurship, and innovation. It enriches society, while also presenting challenges.

Having previously been a country of mass emigration for so many generations, we are now a country of sustained inward migration. Our migration policies should reflect this history, and the effects of the most recent changes, and should acknowledge the benefits – cultural, social and economic – that immigration brings to Ireland, whilst also preparing us for the various challenges migration can bring.

Ireland needs a functioning migration and international protection system to ensure that human rights are vindicated, social cohesion is preserved, and labour markets can function efficiently. There is currently an abject failure on the part of Government to provide such a system.

The Social Democrats want to see a fair system, in which people seeking protection are treated humanely and decisions are made quickly; a rules-based system where the rules are enforced. People coming to Ireland seeking protection deserve a fair hearing, dignity in the process, and a swift decision. There is no reason that applications for asylum should take years to process, but this is what has happened for more than 20 years under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments.

In Government, we will build a robust State-run international protection system which processes people's claims efficiently and treats them humanely during a reasonable waiting period. The over-reliance on private provision of accommodation for migrants in recent years is an abdication of responsibility to provide State-owned and run facilities. It is also clear that more staff and resources must be provided to the International Protection Office so that applications can be dealt with efficiently and in a timely manner.

Meanwhile, business leaders speak about skills shortages in a tight labour market, and capacity deficits in key areas of the economy, while our system seems overly prescriptive about who can come to Ireland to work.

A positive outlook towards people coming here to contribute to society is important. Being an open society is a huge part of Ireland's economic model. We are a tech and pharma hub, but can only provide the workforce those firms need because we take a positive view of inward migration. Migrants make up a disproportionately large part of the construction, food production and food services sectors. Our healthcare and social care systems would collapse without our migrant healthcare workers. Changes to the system are required to ensure these positive contributions can continue.

Countries preventing migration will be poorer in the future. This is a simple fact of economics. We are an ageing society and need workers to keep the economy moving forward, and fill critical skills. We need more and better workforce planning. We are short of workers in so many areas and yet people can't get work visas to work here.

Ireland is not "full", it just isn't working.

The fact that Ireland hasn't been investing enough in housing or in public services for decades isn't the fault of immigrants, and the challenges faced by existing local communities around the country are those faced by international migrants too. Ireland is capable of sustaining a much bigger population, so long as there is intelligent social planning and infrastructure investment, with a focus on community wellbeing and not on the profits of investors.

Coherent planning, an appropriate increase in resources, and greater State-provision, can help us create the kind of immigration system we need.

We need a more efficient asylum process. No one seeking international protection should be waiting years for a decision. There is also a need to reform aspects of employment regulations for migrants, and take measures to improve social cohesion.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Pursue a move away from the over-reliance on private provision of accommodation (particularly hotels) to an international protection system based around state-owned and -run facilities.
- Build, as per the government White Paper, new reception and integration centres for international protection applicants. Vulnerability Assessments should be carried out to determine accommodation and service needs, and there must be a particular focus on the needs of children who come to Ireland, with or without their families.
- Create an SAU (Specialist Accommodation Unit) in the Department of Integration to oversee the delivery of these reception centres.
- Refurbish state-owned vacant properties to provide emergency accommodation.
- Quadruple funding to €80 million to hire more staff and resources for the International Protection Office so that applications can be dealt with efficiently.
- Establish clear protocols and accountability measures within the system.
- Ensure the designation of “safe” countries for the processing of asylum application is clear and transparent.
- Establish a new full time Immigration Court with exclusive jurisdiction to hear immigration appeals so as to speed up and professionalise our asylum system in line with other countries, to ensure that people who are entitled to international protection under international and EU law are provided with it quickly, while applicants who fail to qualify have their cases dealt with it efficiently.
- Increase funding to the Department of Justice’s Legal Aid Board, so that free legal aid is available throughout the processing of international protection applications.
- Continue to implement the National Action Plan to Combat and Prevent Human Trafficking.
- Support work being put into creating wider systemic change to ensure that victims of trafficking are identified effectively, and traffickers are prosecuted for their crimes.
- Create a National Referral Mechanism to encourage victims of trafficking to come forward.
- Grant General Employment Permit (GEP) holders full access to the labour market after two years, making it possible to change employer while remaining on their existing permit, as is currently the case for critical skills permit holders.
- Take measures to improve integration and social cohesion, including:
 - A revised and enhanced system for having qualifications and competencies recognised and accredited in Ireland. By improving mechanisms to recognise the skills and qualifications that refugees and international protection seekers and other migrants bring, we can, with appropriate support and training, better enable them to contribute to the economy.
 - Better supports around English language acquisition.
 - Assistance in learning how Irish society and bureaucracy functions, including around opening bank accounts and applying for Irish drivers’ licences.
 - Immediate family reunification is currently only available to workers on Critical Skills Permits. We would end this discrimination and extend family reunification rights to GEP holders with full time jobs.
 - By following international best practice and granting permanent residency and near-citizenship-rights (such as the right to vote in General Elections) to long-term residents from countries which only recognise sole citizenship who are not in a position to take up Irish citizenship. This is so that related security and basic rights inherent in being an Irish citizen are available to such people.
- Reduce the Irish Residence Permit card fee in line with other State-issued identity cards.

Human Rights, Equality and Diversity

In Government, the Social Democrats will champion human rights and accountability across the political and legal systems of the country, and promote our values in Ireland and abroad.

International Mechanisms

Ireland's approach to international mechanisms that promote and protect human rights and equality has often been found wanting.

A good example is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This was signed in 2007 but Ireland did not ratify it until 2018, when we were one of the last EU states to do so.

Furthermore, despite stating at the time that Ireland would also ratify the Optional Protocol of the Convention, this hasn't happened until the last few weeks, with the effective date – in an incredible act of political cynicism – strategically set for after the General Election, ensuring the outgoing government bore no responsibility for enforcement.

The State's approach seems to suggest Ireland must be fully ready to meet our obligations under any international treaty or convention before we ratify it. The reality is that these are often aspirational mechanisms that every country must work towards. They are best ratified to then become a driving force for the required change within any jurisdiction to meet the obligations contained in the mechanism.

State Litigation Practice

State litigation practice pursues claims in the court relating to, for example, access to services for children with disabilities, or redress for medical negligence or mistreatment in state care. There often seems to be little understanding of the power imbalance between the State and vulnerable individuals who are just trying to access what is their right.

In Government, we will re-examine the state's strategy to these and other similar circumstances, to ensure a less adversarial approach to citizens who are often simply trying to vindicate their rights, and have been left with no option but recourse to the legal system.

Commissions of Enquiry

Survivors of Mother & Baby Homes, as well as many other victims and survivors of State wrongdoing, are further wronged by the State because of its reticence to apologise to, and adequately redress, victims of state wrongdoing.

In Government, we will revisit the Commission of Inquiry legislation from 2004 to ensure that the basis for State responses is grounded in Human Rights and Equality.

EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability

In Government, the Social Democrats will introduce and implement comprehensive national human rights and environmental due diligence legislation to ensure all businesses respect human rights throughout their value chains, with clear provisions to hold companies liable, and measures to ensure redress and access to justice for victims.

This will be done in line with Ireland's obligation to transpose the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

Traveller and Roma Equality

The systemic discrimination against Travellers across generations has resulted in stark inequalities between Travellers and settled people. The Social Democrats will take a holistic approach to improving the living conditions and socio-economic opportunities of the Irish Traveller community.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Resource existing policy commitments to improve access to, and outcomes in, employment and education for Travellers and Roma, including allocating resources to support children at all levels of education.
- Continue the implementation of the National Traveller Health Action Plan (2022-2027), and review the outcomes at the end of the period.
- Continue to seek to identify the specific physical and mental health needs of the Traveller Community, particularly with regard to Traveller youth mental health, and use these to inform a new health action plan for 2027 onwards.
- Target supports to address high levels of substance misuse and addiction among the Traveller and Roma Communities.
- Implement the recommendations of the National Traveller Roma and Inclusion Strategy, the Independent Expert Group on Traveller Accommodation, and the National Roma Needs Assessment.
- Support Traveller inclusion within community programmes and decision making at both local and national level.

More Diversity in Irish Politics, Culture and Society

Democracy is more effective and more relevant when it is better representative of the diversity of the population it serves. There is a clear need to address the under-representation of women and minority groups at all levels of Irish politics.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Implement statutory gender quotas of 40 per cent for local elections, as is currently the case for general elections.
- Develop a strategy to remove barriers to participation in public life and to increase diversity in local and national government.
- Ensure the publication of detailed and disaggregated equality data on changes in minority representation in electoral politics.
- Examine the possibility of financial incentives for parties to select a greater diversity of candidates, as well as the possibility of financial supports for candidates from groups not ordinarily well-represented in politics.
- Legislate for additional annual leave for candidates running for election.
- Fully implement and resource the recommendations of the Taskforce on Safe Participation in Public Life.
- Design, implement and resource a strong national integration policy for new communities, building on positive initiatives like the recent establishment of Local Authority Integration Teams.
- Support the work of the Advisory Committee on the Representation of Women and Women's Stories within the collections of the National Cultural Institutions.

Discrimination

Socio-economic discrimination can occur in many forms, and those with a disadvantaged socio-economic status often face discrimination, which can result in exclusion from employment and/or public services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will introduce socio-economic status as a ground for discrimination in equality legislation.



Cllr Padraig Rice

Candidate for
Cork South-Central

LGBTQI+ Rights

Over the last 30 years, Ireland has made significant progress in terms of LGBTQI+ equality and acceptance. The successful Marriage Equality Referendum in May 2015, and the Gender Recognition Act of the same year, were important moments on that journey of change. But there are still rights and struggles to be won to ensure that all LGBTQI+ people and their families are treated equally across all aspects of Irish society. Right now, Ireland is ranked 15th in Europe in terms of LGBTQI+ human rights and policy protections. We support the goal of getting to No. 1 and making Ireland the best place in Europe to be LGBTQI+.

Legislative Reform

In Government the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a National Action Plan Against Hate Crimes to prevent and reduce hate crimes against the LGBTQI+ community.
- Amend the Assisted Human Reproduction Act and reform the Children and Family Relationships Act to ensure equality for children of LGBTQI+ people and ensure full legal recognition for trans parents.
- Enhance the Equal Status Act and the Employment Equality Act to provide explicit protections for all LGBTQI+ people.
- Implement the recommendations of the Government's Review of the Gender Recognition Act to provide legal gender recognition to non-binary people and trans people aged 16 and older.
- Legislate to protect the rights of intersex people – including a ban on infant genital mutilation.

Other Priorities

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a second *National LGBTQI+ Inclusion Strategy* with enhanced funding, clear targets, and additional staff resources.
- End conversion practices.
- Improve access to trans-affirming healthcare services based on a model of informed consent in line with international best practice.
- Expand access to free contraception and affordable PrEP.
- Review healthcare provision to intersex people and ensure best practice is rolled out nationwide.
- Create an LGBTQI+ mental health strategy with community addiction services to match.
- Develop the strategies and services to end new HIV transmissions, as outlined in the Fast-Track Cities model, including developing and implementing a new National Sexual Health Strategy and including measures to end HIV-related stigma and discrimination.
- Create regional versions of the Gay Men's Health Services in Cork, Limerick and Galway.
- Provide funding for dedicated lesbian and bi women sexual health support.
- Improve LGBTQI+ inclusive relationships and sexuality education in schools.
- Review and update of the Cineáltais Action Plan on Bullying including specific prevention initiatives for LGBTQI+ identity-based bullying.
- Include LGBTQI+ questions on the census to ensure evidence-based allocation of services.
- Expand Ireland's role in supporting LGBTQI+ rights internationally.

Further info about our commitment to LGBTQI+ Rights can be found in the Policy Document on our website.

Supporting the Community and Voluntary Sector

The Social Democrats recognise the indispensable role of the Community and Voluntary (C&V) sector. Encompassing charities, social enterprises, community groups and other voluntary organisations, it plays a major role in Irish society, doing everything from creating community engagement and facilitating social inclusion to delivering essential public services.

The areas of health, social care, disability, education, sports, the arts, and international development are just some of the areas where the sector plays a significant role. It is also a major employer, with almost 300,000 people employed in Ireland by charities alone.

The C&V sector must be resourced adequately, and empowered to deliver on its important remit. Social Enterprises also play a crucial role in addressing social challenges, including in areas like childcare, elder care, integration, housing, and many others. In Government the Social Democrats will:

- Commit to a human-rights-based approach to the delivery of social services.
- Make multi-annual government funding the default model for the C&V sector.
- Begin a process of creating parity of treatment for staff delivering services in HSE-funded organisations, which are experiencing an escalating crisis in staffing, jeopardising service delivery. The disparity in pay and conditions between Section 39 organisation staff and their public sector counterparts must be closed.
- Support the sector in its ongoing response to the need generated by the war in Ukraine, increasing inward migration, and the increased demand on its services as a result.
- Support community engagement programmes that build social cohesion.
- Increase funding for Family Resource Centres to allow for the optimum core funding levels identified.
- Invest in a dedicated Workforce Skills and Training Framework for the C&V sector, funded through the National Training Fund.
- Provide a dedicated fund to incentivise and cover the cost of mergers and collaborative work in the charity and C&V sectors.
- Increase the annual Shed Sustainability Grant for Men's Sheds.
- Increase the core budgets of Community Drugs Projects.
- Increase funding for the VAT compensation scheme for charities.
- Strive to create an enabling environment for social enterprises, to allow them to maximise their contribution to society and the economy.
- Create a funding mechanism for Local Enterprise Offices to support social entrepreneurs.
- Extend the rates exemptions for charitable organisations to social enterprises.
- Continue to support Community Development Projects and Programmes.
- Ring-fence money for local authorities to purchase land for community growing, to allow more permanent locations be set up for community gardens and allotments.

The LEADER Program is an integral part of the community sector providing vital services in several areas including childcare, tourism, enterprise, renewable energy, biodiversity, and basic services targeted at hard-to-reach communities. However, several local schemes that are of particular importance to rural economies and communities have yet to have their funding restored since the cuts that followed the financial crisis.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase funding for the LEADER scheme and reform eligibility criteria and conditions of Tús, Community Employment and Rural Social Schemes to maximise participation by unemployed individuals and protect vital community services.
- Simplify the process through which community groups apply for LEADER funding.
- Begin closing the SICAP funding gap: current funding levels are still far below 2008.
- Enhance the Rural Social Scheme by increasing the top-up to €50 per week for participants.

Animal Welfare

The Social Democrats strongly advocate for animal rights, and recognise animals as intelligent, sentient beings capable of complex thought and of experiencing pain and suffering. As a guiding principle, we believe that the State should strive to ensure that animals live lives free of pain and discomfort in so far as possible, and are protected from cruelty, neglect and abandonment. Animals should be able to live a “life worth living,” even within the context of food production.

We are eager to maintain and improve the relatively high standard of animal welfare that exists within the farming industry in Ireland. Economic and commercial pressures have contributed to a global drift towards intensive systems of farming, so-called ‘factory farming’, which often subjects animals to extreme pain and suffering. Our goal is to ensure that these practices do not become commonplace in Ireland, and to stop any existing practices that cause such suffering.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Phase out state funding to the greyhound racing industry, and use some of the money saved to increase funding for animal welfare charities in recognition of the important work they do.
 - Develop harsher penalties for animal cruelty and improve resources to boost enforcement of animal welfare laws.
 - Increase the number of Animal Welfare Officers to ensure legislation is adhered to.
 - Continue to support the banning of the use of live hares in hare-coursing and prohibition of wild animals in circuses.
 - Maintain our position against foxhunting and fur-farming.
 - Move to ban live exports of animals to countries that have poor animal welfare protections, and raise and enforce standards on long journeys and animal transport vessels.
 - Improve animal welfare standards as they apply to farming practices in Ireland, including pigs, sheep, cattle and chickens.
 - Ban all experiments on animals that are not related to genuine medical research.
 - Support a ban on the prohibition of pets in rented accommodation (including social housing), which is a significant root cause in animal surrender.
 - Support allowing dogs, muzzled if necessary, on public transport, bringing Ireland into line with most other European countries in this regard.
- Our current rules strongly encourage car ownership and use for anyone with a pet, though we note that dogs are allowed on Irish Rail, with a muzzle required for certain dog breeds.
- Fund a trap neuter and return (TNR) scheme in conjunction with local authorities and animal welfare charities.
 - Investigate a form of financial assistance for vets' bills for elderly people and people on low income, to mitigate another common reason for animal surrender.
 - Seek to apply increased regulation to the 'puppy farming' industry.
- To improve dog welfare standards, anyone breeding, selling, or transferring the ownership of a puppy or litter of puppies should be registered and licensed. We will review the Dog Breeding Establishment Act 2010 and ensure that negligent and abusive breeders are held accountable.
- Progress higher targets for the chipping of cats, dogs, and equine animals.
 - Ensure proper regulation of the conditions of horses drawing carriages in the tourism sector.
 - Ensure that all zoos report animal welfare incidents, including deaths, on an annual basis.
 - Ensure proper supervision and inspection of abattoirs.
 - Push for a full review of our dog-breeding legislation which is decades behind other jurisdictions. The current legislation controlling so-called “dangerous breeds” gives people a false perception that other breeds are not prone to aggression. We need a complete overhaul of this legislation so that it is based on evidence and places far more responsibility on owners of all breeds of dogs.

4.

Economic Security

Foundations for
Fairness and Prosperity

Decent Public Services – Rebuilding the Capacity of the Public Sector

Decent public services are a key foundation to social democracy.

Recent decades have seen the increased privatisation of many key public services.

While contracting out what are typically public services, or relying on the market to deliver them, is often thought to result in efficiencies, the reality is that the increased outsourcing of services – especially in the health and care sectors – is leading to a growing public capacity deficit.

The outsourcing of services – including those formerly provided by state organisations – to private providers and the sale of public assets:

- Makes the coordination of those public services more difficult.
- Results in increased commodification of basic services.
- Weakens the public sector, reducing the skills and people available to provide high quality services, thereby making further privatisation harder to avoid.
- Is often a form of wealth extraction, making a relatively small number of people or companies very rich.
- Undermines the ecosystem that underpins a productive labour force and thriving indigenous private sector, and therefore economic growth.

The commodification of public services leads to their increased financialisation, so essential services like health and social care become more about achieving a good return on investment, rather than what is in the citizens' best interest.

When this kind of wealth extraction is facilitated, or even encouraged, it is ultimately citizens who lose out. When publicly-funded, -owned and -run services make a profit, that money can be reinvested. When those privatised services instead keep that money as profit, or pay it as a dividend to shareholders, citizens end up paying higher prices for a poorer service in which quality deteriorates over the longer term.

Within those private companies that provide contracted-out public services, the drive to maximise profits conflicts with the need to spend time, money and other resources meeting the needs of citizens, and leads to a squeeze on both the quality and quantity of services. This can particularly be the case around social care for elderly or disabled citizens.

Universal Basic Services

The concept of Universal Basic Services stems from a belief that all citizens are entitled to a range of public services that are free (or practically free) at the point of use, provided by Government (or a government-funded institution) and funded through taxation.

It is based on the principle that purely by virtue of their citizenship, people are entitled to a certain minimum in service provision in areas like healthcare, education, and housing, as well as childcare and transport. It should form a key part in the central government function of setting a minimum standard of living, below which no citizen should fall.

The most prosperous, inclusive and progressive countries in the world are social democracies where service provision has been guided by such principles.

In government, we will move Ireland from its current model of low service provision and increased outsourcing towards providing Universal Basic Services and rebuilding public capacity to deliver these essential services.

The Challenges

This ongoing commodification and wealth extraction is having disastrous consequences across a number of areas; staff shortages, record waiting lists, and crumbling public infrastructure.

For example, the new structures being created under Sláintecare intend to provide for integrated care – something that is so essential in a modern health and social care system – where combined community and hospital care will be provided on a regional basis, under a single management team with, crucially, a single budget.

The ability to implement such a system gets more difficult with every round of further outsourcing of healthcare.

This trend towards commercial, for-profit models in health and care has led to the rapid growth of private hospitals and clinics, further privatisation of both homecare and nursing home care, and even the management of general practice, with an increased involvement of multinational chains. The increased reliance on the National Treatment Purchase Fund to compensate for lack of capacity in the public system further deepens the capacity deficit in the public system, creating a vicious cycle.

Across social work, and care for elderly or disabled citizens, contracting out squeezes time and quality of care.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is another area that has seen galloping privatisation. Research suggests that high quality ECEC can have positive and long-lasting impacts on children's outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. It can have a positive effect on children's educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes, in both the short and long term, but it is important to emphasise that this is only if it is of high quality.

We need to invest adequately in this area to ensure that all children have an equal start in life, but doing this via subsidising an increasingly corporatised childcare sector owned by international investors with little real interest in fair outcomes for children will not have the effects we desire. We do not believe that the early education of our children should be entrusted to large firms whose sole motive is profit. Similarly, we believe the marketisation of care simply does not work.

It is not just the area of care where this is happening.

Ireland's housing system is increasingly characterised by privatisation and the generation of profit, at the financial expense of taxpayers and the social expense of some of our most vulnerable.

Private developers build on public land; private landlords receive large subsidies to provide 'social housing solutions'; private operators of emergency accommodation prosper while children grow up in totally unsuitable accommodation; and private investment flows into short-term, high-yield lettings, often paying little or no tax on the profits.

A policy decision to cease the direct building of social housing over several decades will leave the Exchequer with a multibillion-euro bill for HAP (the Housing Assistance Payment), for which not one single house has been, or will be, built. Local authorities are entering into long-term leases with private landlords, including investment funds, for deals that will eventually cost more than the value of the home, but leave the State with no asset to show for it.

What can be done?

The current government continues to look to the market and engage private providers to deliver the public services that should be part of a basic floor that everyone in the State has a right to expect.

They do this notwithstanding mountains of evidence that it is more expensive and less effective. The rationale given is that the private sector can provide more, faster and cheaper – but again and again, this is not borne out by the evidence.

Many of these issues are deeply political and so are their solutions. It is time to bring these key services back into public provision. We will expand and strengthen the public model of provision across a number of areas, including healthcare, childcare, social care, and housing. This would include:

- Establishing a National Workforce Task Force to address both the short-term and medium-term needs of our Health and Social Care sector. The biggest challenge facing our health and social care services in recent years is the recruitment and retention of staff, across all disciplines. This in turn is leading to the creeping privatisation of our health service.
- Building a public model of childcare in which every child has a right to a place.
- Building a sustainable homecare service, with a statutory right to homecare, and ending the current post-code lottery.
- Banning long-term leasing for social housing provision. This expensive and wasteful option should be replaced with the direct building of social homes by local authorities.
- More direct state involvement in the building of affordable homes for rent and purchase.
- Treating public transport as a public good, and opposing the increased privatisation of public transport services.

An expansion of state capacity is the only viable solution to the numerous infrastructure deficits, and indeed crises, that Ireland is experiencing.

Even Ibec, the employer's federation, have commented that "the reality is that thousands of additional public servants are required to provide the improved services people need and expect, along with the public system of administration required by the business community. As societies get richer, they want their public services improved. These things are all a function of the State but the fact is that that State is demonstrably shrinking".

The role of the State in protecting households and businesses was never more evident than during the worst phases of the pandemic. We must remember the lessons from this time and use them to re-shape the Irish economy based on a more social democratic model, with a strong role for the State in providing services and addressing market failures, especially in housing.

As well as the above, in Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Commit to a referendum on the public ownership of water, and invest in wastewater treatment plant upgrades to prevent run offs. Major investment in our nation's water infrastructure is imperative.
- Work towards the re-municipalisation of waste collection, beginning with gradually phasing out side-by-side domestic waste competition within municipal areas.

Workers' Rights

Strengthening workers' rights is fundamental to social democratic politics.

The Social Democrats are focused on empowering workers through supporting the growth of trade unions and improving workers' rights legislation.

In recent decades the world of work has been transformed. All too often these changes have had a negative impact on workers in Ireland. Union density and collective bargaining coverage have fallen rapidly, while economic inequality has risen. For many workers, new digital technologies have intensified their work and enabled it to follow them home.

For many in low pay (disproportionately women, single parents, younger workers, and migrants) in-work poverty has become increasingly common. The current cost-of-living crisis has seen many workers' real earnings and living standards stagnate or decline. For younger workers beginning their careers, various forms of insecurity are quickly becoming the new normal.

Many of the solutions to these problems are not overly complicated. Strong workers' rights legislation and the provision of high-quality public services by the State are key to improving living standards for workers.

The most effective way to support workers is to enable them to join trade unions and represent themselves collectively. This empowers workers to bring about change from the bottom up.

Throughout Irish history trade unions have played a major role in promoting economic equality, pushing up living standards, and supporting democracy. These achievements have benefitted all citizens, particularly low- and average-income employees and those who face multiple forms of disadvantage.

Ireland's trade unions have a proud history, and a key role to play in our country's future.

Right to Collective Bargaining

Ireland is one of the only advanced economies in the world where the State does not provide any route for employees to gain union recognition from their employer. For many workers, this makes the democratic right to union representation illusory. The consequences of this are most severe for those in low-paid and precarious employment.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Transpose and implement in full the provisions of the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive, and the Provisions of the Platform Work Directive that promote Collective Bargaining.
- Introduce a statutory right to union recognition for employees in workplaces where 15 per cent or more of employees vote for union representation.
- Ensure that union officials have a right to access workplaces to communicate with both their members and unorganised workers, and to meet with management to represent their members' interests.
- Legislate to protect workers from being penalised on the grounds of trade union membership or activity, and outlaw 'blacklisting' practices.
- Campaign at European level for an EU Directive which reaffirms the right to collective bargaining as part of a broader Social Europe agenda.
- Devise a system of financial penalties for employers who deny workers collective bargaining rights in circumstances where they are entitled.
- Increase protections for workers engaging in industrial action.
- Assign responsibility for increasing collective bargaining coverage to a minister of state within the government department responsible for employment.

Combatting Low Pay, Precarious Employment

Ireland is a rich country, but experiences high levels of economic inequality.

For example, Ireland has one of the highest rates of low pay (low pay being defined by the OECD as less than 66 per cent of median earnings) in the European Union. It is estimated that between 20 and 25 per cent of employees in Ireland are low paid by this definition. In recent decades Ireland has also experienced an increase in other forms of precarious working practices such as zero-hours contracts, involuntary-temporary work, and false self-employment. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Create a regular review of the new Living Wage benchmark with reference to what the minimum standard of living actually costs, recognising that while benchmarks are important, so too is ensuring income adequacy.
- Make the two main income tax credits refundable, to give a boost to low paid workers.
- Reform the workings of the Joint Labour Committees (JLCs) to enable the process to proceed if employers' representatives refuse to engage.
- Combat precarious working practices by expanding the scope of existing bans on zero-hour/if-and-when contracts, introducing a strict legal definition of self-employment (building on recent court rulings), and increasing funding and resources for the Workplace Relations Commission's inspection and enforcement services.
- Amend the Unfair Dismissals Act 1977 to expand protections to workers previously excluded from that Act, and further protect workers from discriminatory dismissals, as per the Bill brought forward by the Social Democrats in March 2023.
- Restore the delayed increases in statutory sick leave to 10 days.

Other Priorities

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase paid parents' leave by 4 weeks for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each, and raise Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit payments to €350 per week.
- Expand leave entitlements to those who suffer from early miscarriage or require other fertility or reproductive health-related treatment.
- Increase funding for the Workplace Relations Commission to ensure a faster and more accessible provision of services and greater capacity to inspect workplaces and enforce laws, and reform its compensation structure.
- Improve public procurement procedures and state investment strategies by ensuring that the process is weighted in favour of firms which recognise unions and comply with other equalities and environmental best practices.
- Legislate to ensure that union representatives in workplaces receive adequate time and resources to conduct union activity, restore tax relief on trade-union subscriptions, and mandate the deduction of union subscriptions at source where union members are in favour.
- Establish a Commission to research, trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work including working from home, term-time working, and a 4-day week.
- Legislate to improve Irish employees' work-life balance by strengthening legislation concerning workers' right to flexible work.
- Promote equality in the workplace by requiring companies to publish gender-pay gap information and take measures, to overcome gender-pay gaps.
- Seek to increase the number of annual bank holidays in Ireland towards the EU average.
- Ensure that economic policies give adequate consideration to the potential for development of worker owned co-operatives.
- Introduce a right for workers in large firms to be represented on the board of directors, and consulted on major decisions.

Further info about our commitment to Workers' Rights can be found in the Policy Document on our website.

Cllr Eoin Hayes

Candidate for
Dublin Bay
South



Business and Enterprise

Steady, sustainable and inclusive economic prosperity is important for social well-being, so it's important that Government enterprise policies facilitate such growth.

Maintaining Ireland's historically high levels of employment is a priority for the Social Democrats.

Multinational companies provide significant employment, particularly at the higher end of the income distribution, and provide a disproportionately high share of corporation tax and value added in the economy. We must ensure Ireland's success in this area continues, in particular by investing in housing and other infrastructure necessary to support continued growth.

We must also remember that employment in Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) makes up a great majority of people working in the private sector, making SMEs key to the economic well-being of a huge number of people. This sector has been neglected. We need to rebalance government's focus towards driving innovation in domestic SMEs to close the productivity gap with Multinationals.

We must secure the economic gains we have made in the last few decades, whilst creating a comprehensive national strategy to develop indigenous industry. It is important that Ireland remains attractive to Foreign Direct Investment, whilst orientating the economy more towards the indigenous sector, providing greater supports for SMEs, which represent the backbone of the Irish economy.

Of those employed in the private sector, two-thirds are engaged in these SMEs. Outside of the Dublin region the proportion is even greater, making SMEs critical to building sustainable communities in rural and regional Ireland.

Supporting Small Business and the Self-Employed

The quality of national infrastructure contributes significantly to the cost of living and so to the cost of doing business. International evidence suggests that when essential services are provided free or at a heavily subsidised rate, it greatly reduces the wage demands on business.

The Social Democrats' policies around universal health care, affordable housing, free education and a public model of childcare will help create a more business-friendly environment while reducing wage pressure, improving employee health, and encouraging social cohesion and increasing consumer spending. As well as this, we will provide more direct supports for businesses.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Make available greater funding to incentivise firms to invest in the human capital of their workforce, and to incentivise engagement with academics and business networks to facilitate a higher rate of technology diffusion.
- Scale-up Microfinance Ireland to support greater numbers of small businesses and start-ups to access finance.
- Improve supports for Local Enterprise Offices.
- Annually increase the VAT-entry threshold for small businesses in line with average earnings.
- Examine, in consultation with self-employed people and their representatives, the possibility of PRSI reform, with the potential for a voluntary hybrid PRSI rate that would attract additional benefits for the self-employed.
- Ensure that all primary and secondary legislation impacting the micro and small business sectors is subject to a regulatory impact assessment, and conforms with the Small Business Act.
- Engage with the sector and its representatives to find ways to use the National Training Fund, which currently has a significant surplus, to address skills gaps, including those that are slowing down infrastructure delivery.
- Tackle late payments for small businesses, who too often are long-fingered by corporations leading to cash flow and viability issues.
- Amend legislation so – in the case of enterprises going out of business with bad debts – smaller suppliers are paid first, once

preferred creditors are paid, helping to keep a larger number of businesses (particularly smaller ones) viable.

- Ensure application processes for credits, vouchers, and grants, and accompanying information, is written in plain English so the information is accessible by all potential applicants, and time investment is minimised.

- Push to reform the energy market at EU level to decouple the price of electricity from gas.
- Task the Energy Regulator with establishing and maintaining a viable microgeneration payment, e.g. for using roof-top solar.
- Expand existing SEAI investment schemes for insulating buildings and provide grants for solar panel installation on commercial premises.

Supporting Hospitality

Small businesses, particularly in hospitality, are the backbone of so many of our cities, towns and villages. Regrettably, many are now facing closure, with hugely negative impacts not just on staff and suppliers, but on the wider community. Many much-loved cafes and restaurants around the country have closed, citing difficult trading conditions and a struggle to make viable profit margins on food and drink.

So much of what the government has provided in support has either been ineffective or overly complicated, to the point that businesses can't access supports. The Social Democrats believe it is necessary to give a break to these businesses. We would split food and drink businesses from the accommodation sector for the purposes of VAT, and apply a reduced 9 per cent VAT rate on food and beverages.

VAT is a blunt instrument, but this is an emergency measure, designed to get support to businesses quickly, and is necessary to stop the further closure of otherwise viable businesses.

In Government, the Social Democrats would:

- Split food and accommodation businesses for the purposes of VAT.
- Apply a reduced 9 per cent VAT rate on food and beverages.
- Conduct, as a matter of urgency, a review of supports to the sector

Addressing Skills Shortages

Many sectors of the economy are facing a skills shortage, which is affecting competitiveness for small businesses in particular. This shortage is resulting in constraint on promising Irish enterprises looking to grow and expand. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Improve supports for apprenticeships to assist small businesses to take on apprentices.
- Conduct a full review of the Employment Permits system and Labour Market Needs Test.
- Invest in the immigration service to fast-track visas for employees of small businesses with critical skills/experience.
- Increase expenditure on Lifelong Learning towards the European average, acknowledging

that ongoing supports for life-long learning and education enable workers to learn new skills and adapt to new technologies.

- Encourage upskilling for both individuals and SMEs, introducing an L&D (learning and development) company tax credit which credits a percentage of the financial outlay for both the employee-participant and the SME.

Supporting SME Ambition

While government policy has for years encouraged the carrying out of research and development in the multinational sector through policies like the R&D tax credit and the Knowledge Box tax break, many Irish SMEs, in large part due to scale, find it considerably more difficult to conduct R&D and to apply for the grants and other financial incentives that encourage this.

More support for SMEs is required to narrow the R&D gap. The OECD believes that Ireland relies too heavily on tax credits to encourage R&D, and not enough on direct subsidies.

Given that most innovation is about the fusion of ideas and technology that exist, rather than one new original idea, Government policy in this area should focus on adopting new-but-tested technology and ways of working, particularly of the kind that can assist SMEs in their growth path. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce targeted supports to enable SMEs to invest in productivity-enhancing innovations, including through the expansion of the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Voucher Scheme with a supportive mentoring programme.
- Increase the Innovation Voucher value to €10,000 to encourage higher levels of research, development, and innovation within business.
- Review and simplify the qualification criteria for the R&D credit, including the definition of "basic research". There is scope to reform the R&D tax credit to create a separate track (to MNCs) for indigenous small businesses.
- Review the system of tax credits, and seek to encourage innovation in business mainly through direct subsidies.
Direct subsidies for innovation are likely to be of greater value for early-stage companies and to carry less deadweight loss. Subsidies should form a larger component of the R&D fiscal incentives offered to SMEs.
- Increase public spending on R&D including funding for both basic and commercial research, particularly in STEM, in order to increase the production, diffusion and use of new ideas.
- Introduce other specific funding to support Technological Universities (TUs) as regional drivers of innovation and to engage with SMEs, MNCs and start-ups on innovation training and strategy development.
- Fund the technology transfer offices at universities with specific mandates to commercialise the fruits of publicly funded R&D.

Enterprise Ireland

State capital has long been a vital component of Irish industrial success. State-owned banks and strategic investment funds have provided patient long-term finance to support business formation and growth, innovation and technology diffusion.

Crucially, this concept of the state as investor entails taking equity stakes in high-risk and high-potential start-ups with an additional but less important secondary function of providing conditional loans for private enterprise.

Enterprise Ireland can play an even greater role in this area than it currently does. In Government, we will greatly increase its budget.

Gender Equality in the Workplace

Our economy thrives when all citizens are able to fully participate and put their skills and intellect to work. We all suffer when good people are excluded from the workplace, not hired to the right jobs, or not promoted to the appropriate level. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Require workplaces to develop, resource, implement and monitor gender-neutral recruitment and promotion policies and practices including specific policies to promote gender equality in leadership positions.
- Require employers to operate gender-sensitive and anti-discriminatory selection and promotions processes.
- Insist that employers provide equal access to training, assignments and mentoring opportunities for all employees including part-time and remote workers.
- Introduce a statutory right to reasonable access to flexible working.

Facilitating Worker Buyouts

Succession planning in SMEs is often an issue, where much of the expertise required to carry on a business after the retirement of a founder/manager rests within the company, but there is no system in place by which the business can be passed on. Examples of this will encompass business types from hairdressers to small IT services, where there may be limited capital but significant staff knowhow in the business.

The Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a scheme to provide finance for existing employees to undertake a management buy-out of firms where a founder/manager is retiring and there is no natural succession plan in place. This will help to limit the trend towards consolidation of businesses.

Industrial Development

For the last three or four decades, Ireland's industrial development policy has focused largely on the multinational sector. This sector has been core to Ireland's economic recovery in the last decade, and a key driver of economic growth in Ireland. It provides tens of thousands of (generally) well paid jobs, and is a huge contributor to corporation tax, as well as forming a huge part of our income tax base.

It is imperative that the important multinational base established here is retained and cultivated. One of the key drivers of economic development to this point is no longer the unique selling point it once was as, to a great extent, the BEPS process has taken our corporation tax rate off the table as a policy lever.

The best way to ensure Ireland remains competitive in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and as a place to set up and grow SMEs is to increase investment in education, university research and innovation, and social and economic infrastructure, to protect Ireland's competitiveness and to support value creation. Excellent public services help to crowd in investment.

The largest current threat to this model is our inability to house workers. It hampers Ireland's attractiveness as a place to establish a European HQ where companies can attract global talent.

For the long term, we want to ensure that the Irish economy competes for FDI at the higher end of the value chain, where investment will be predicated less on our tax system than on the quality, agility and innovation of our workforce. Competing solely on price instead of value is not sustainable for most businesses, and nor is it right for our economy.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Publish an Indigenous Industrial and Enterprise Strategy.
- Invest to improve Ireland's economic infrastructure, particularly telecommunications, transport and port infrastructure.
- Invest to improve Ireland's social infrastructure, particularly housing, health and childcare.
- Ensure increased investment in education, to maintain the strategic advantage we have in this area as an attractor of Foreign Direct Investment.
- Consider the use of an Industrial Policy Commission to select priority areas for industrial research clusters (e.g. cybersecurity, or certain areas of energy), where additional resources and supports will be directed.
- Use financial incentives to instigate the development of industry and academic smart specialisation clusters by supporting a network of smart specialisation centres of excellence in strategic areas.



Hilary Tonge

Candidate for
Clare

Balanced Regional Development

Too many rural communities, or those far from the major population centres, feel left behind by economic progress in urban centres. We need a more economically diverse and vibrant rural Ireland; not only for the sake of rural Ireland, but for the sake of society and the economy more widely.

For this to take shape, people and their families must have the option to live and work in the areas they are from, in sustainable communities. Breathing fresh life into towns and villages across the country requires more than equal access to public services, important as that is. It requires more balanced economic development.

Government and the State must lead by example in creating a more even geographical spread of employment opportunities. While not perfect, previous redeployments of government departments, civil servants and state agencies outside Dublin have proven a real economic boon to many towns and regions. Greater technological advances in the meantime have only increased the potential in this area.

A challenge is to achieve an appropriate balance between supporting Ireland's agricultural communities and other traditional rural based economic activity whilst simultaneously fostering sustainable economic diversification.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Promote regional economic development by investing in capital projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country, including telecommunications and third level technological institutions.
- Increase the regional spread of civil service and state agencies, in a way that has buy-in from all stakeholders and builds on lessons from previous redeployments.
- Invest in Technological Universities so they can better support regional growth, acting as an anchor for regional economic development, research, and investment.
- Acknowledge that we cannot achieve proper balanced regional development without strong regional government, and accordingly devolve to new regional assemblies a certain amount of power related to economic development strategy.
- Recognise that remote work has potential to unlock positive social, economic, and environmental change for the communities of Ireland, and work to unlock these benefits for Ireland, including by supporting REDZ and Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) to develop remote working hubs and Smart Villages.
- Tackle deficits in wastewater infrastructure that are inhibiting the development of towns and villages around the country, including preventing delivery of new homes, hampering business expansion and tourism, adding to environmental pollution, and strangling the potential of several regions.
- Invest in flood defences in areas of the country that are experiencing regular issues, and ensure that construction is avoided in flood-prone areas.
We also need for a national flood management plan, which will restore natural flood defences of rivers, and a reform of flood insurance to ensure businesses and homeowners can access insurance when flood defence work has been completed.
- Support the findings of the All Island Rail Review, including the development of the Western Rail Corridor.
- Aim to foster a more diverse spread of air traffic into the country, with a focus on utilising unused capacity at regional airports, including Shannon, Cork, Waterford, and Ireland West.
- Identify necessary upgrades to our seaports to ensure our main connections to mainland Europe have the capacity and infrastructure required, both for trade and to allow the development of offshore wind.

Further information about our commitment to Balanced Regional Development can be found in the Rural Development Policy Document on our website.

Rejuvenating our Town Centres

Our town centres, main streets and neighbourhood shops are often the centre-points of our neighbourhoods. They are some of the most prominent spaces we share and in which we come together as a community. Yet, too often in Ireland, they can be the worst kept, worst planned, least loved areas. We have to re-think how we support businesses and enterprises at local level to ensure the vitality of our towns, villages and urban villages.

It is no surprise that towns and villages with a vibrant, bustling core, with well-maintained shops, a diverse range of outlets, attractive streetscapes, a strong traffic plan and good access, are often the places where communities are most active. Thriving, vibrant main streets are central to the sustainability of our towns and villages as places to live and work.

The Social Democrats want to put these shopping areas back at the top of the agenda. We will prioritise rejuvenation of these parts of our towns and villages to:

- stimulate economic development and local job creation.
- promote regional economic development.
- protect the interests of main street traders and give a leg-up to small businesses, innovators and entrepreneurs.

We must encourage the re-population of our town centres, while also encouraging community, sporting and arts groups to use our main streets in practical and innovative ways.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Promote Regional Economic Development, using the National Development Plan to invest in projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country such as improved rural broadband, public transport, electricity capacity, and third level technological centres.
- Use Rates Rebates as a policy lever, so owners of vacant commercial premises cannot claim a refund on commercial rates from their local authority.
- Ensure councils work with interested tenants and landlords to ensure that, where possible, vacant commercial premises can be used for 'Meanwhile Use' for things like pop-up galleries and other types of creative spaces, as well as office spaces for local start-ups.
- Improve local authority funding, to allow adjustment of commercial rates and street-parking rates to promote the commercial viability of Main Street businesses.
- Improve local authority funding for environmental improvement works such as street lighting, footpaths, parking, cycling infrastructure, accessibility for wheelchairs and buggies, landscaping, and street furniture.
- Increase funding for the Town and Village Scheme which helps to rejuvenate local communities.
- Tackle vacant and derelict sites, giving greater powers to local authorities to tackle vacancy and dereliction.
- Promote the repopulation of urban centres by encouraging over-the-shop conversion to residential.
- Promote the development of Community Hubs which would provide hot-desks, co-working facilities, hi-speed broadband and conference and meeting spaces to local businesses and remote workers. These could be provided in under-used or disused buildings or as a section of a local library or council office. The more we can promote a community-centred approach, the greater vibrancy and economic sustainability in our local communities.
- End upward-only Rent Reviews, which undermine businesses because their sheer inflexibility does not take account of the ups and downs of the business cycle.

Community Wealth Building

The Social Democrats support the Community Wealth Building approach to local economic development, where local economies are reorganised so that the amount of wealth extracted from the local community is limited, and more income and spending is recirculated within the local area.

By pursuing such an approach, we recognise the benefits of a diverse blend of business ownership models, which can return more economic power to local people and institutions. For example, small enterprises, community organisations, cooperatives and many forms of municipal ownership are often more economically beneficial for the local economy than large or public limited companies.

Community ownership of energy sources is another way in which different ownership models can bring benefits to the locality.

We also want to increase flows of investment within local economies, harnessing wealth that exists locally, for example by maximising local community benefits through procurement and commissioning policies.

Progressive procurement can develop more local supply chains, with benefits for local SMEs, social enterprises, cooperatives, and other forms of community business that are more likely to support local employment and retain wealth and spending locally.

CWB can be particularly useful (even crucial) in areas where the economy has been hollowed out through years of under-investment. It has the potential to re-direct millions of euros back into the local economy, leading to a reduction in unemployment and increased wealth in the area.

All communities, cities and counties are unique, and so there can be no one-size-fits-all model of CWB. It makes sense if elected councillors in each area work together to develop local models of CWB based on local characteristics.

In Government, and at local government level, the Social Democrats are committed to following the principles and key actions around Community Wealth Building:

Procurement

At national government and local authority level, our TDs and Councillors will insist on fair and transparent public procurement processes, and work to give stronger weighting in procurement competitions to bids from suppliers with strong credentials around labour rights, quality local employment, environmental protection, and local social benefit or value.

We will also seek to create a more inclusive and accessible tender process so that a wider range of organisations can successfully bid for contracts, for example smaller local firms or local social enterprises. Using a wider range of criteria beyond cost alone can be used as part of the procurement processes and can help contribute to virtuous local supply chains.

We will develop a Social Value Procurement Framework to encourage suppliers to promote local training and employment, support the local community and community sector, and promote environmental sustainability.

Community Energy Schemes

There can be significant benefits at a community level from the shared ownership of energy projects. Local populations can retain wealth in their local area through the community ownership of projects like windfarms and solar farms.

Such ownership has also been shown to increase local support for such projects.

There is now a clear pathway to allow communities, primarily through the Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) model, to own and generate their own renewable energy, the revenues of which will return to the community, reinforcing community support for decarbonisation.

Despite this, the Government is far off its 500MW target to be produced by community-owned renewable schemes.

The Social Democrats have a target at least 20 per cent of our new renewable energy generation to be community-owned by 2030, providing direct funding to assist capacity building and technical expertise.

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises blend entrepreneurial spirit and activity with a social mission, with the goal of addressing issues including unemployment, social exclusion, or environmental sustainability at a local level. Properly funded and supported, they can play a significant role in building resilient communities.

Our elected representatives, at local and national level, will advocate for access to Local Enterprise Office business supports that enhance the skills and capabilities of social enterprise leaders and workers.

They also will ensure that local Social Value Procurement Frameworks (see the Procurement section, previously) facilitate local authority procurement from social enterprises in a way that supports local jobs and provides other community benefits.

We will work for increased local financial support to encourage the growth and sustainability of social enterprises, and foster an environment where Social Enterprises and Cooperatives can thrive, including by passing the Cooperative Societies Bill.

Promoting Community Banking

It is a long-standing aim of the Social Democrats to support the provision of community banking across Ireland.

This would improve the availability of credit in local communities using credit unions and post offices.

It would provide far better competition in lending to small businesses and in basic banking fees.

Keeping post offices and credit unions viable would also animate town and village centres and increase footfall for local businesses.

(See section on Better Banking for more information).

CWB within the wider Community

Our TDs and Councillors will work with local ‘Anchor Institutions’ so that they are aware of the concept of Community Wealth Building, what it can achieve, and how to implement policies and processes that support it.

The term ‘anchor institution’ refers to organisations which have an important presence in a place by virtue of being large scale employers, or large purchasers of goods and services in the locality, whilst also having relatively fixed assets.

Anchor institutions are usually tied to a place by their mission, for example hospitals and other health and social care-related settings, educational institutions, housing associations, and some large (and longstanding) local businesses and community and voluntary groups.

Tapping into their sense of civic responsibility and their contribution to the local economy – from how they purchase goods and services to their employment policies to their investment and finance strategies – can also further Community Wealth Building. We will work to mainstream Community Wealth Building in the strategies and policies of local authorities, national government, and the business community.

A Plan for Dublin City

Dublin needs a range of urgent measures to tackle creeping dereliction, littered streets and a policing presence dependent on garda overtime. Initiatives that could make a significant difference include a new Event Policing strategy for the city, a Cultural Corridor, and development of residential accommodation on O'Connell Street to encourage people to live in the area, helping create a new sense of community.

We have a number of ideas to rejuvenate our capital city, and ensure it is a safe beautiful space for people who live there, work there, and want to visit.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Proceed with creating a Directly Elected Mayor for Dublin.
- Make implementing the key findings of the Dublin City Taskforce's report a priority, and ringfence €200m funding for this purpose.
- Create an Event Policing Strategy to ensure a dedicated Garda Service for events in the capital.

Gardaí at important events should be in addition to – rather than taking from – policing resources already deployed to the city.

It's not fair that the city, and its citizens and visitors, should be deprived of normal levels of policing because Dublin hosts a disproportionately high number of large events.

- Tackle vacancy and dereliction through a higher rate of vacancy tax specific to Dublin city.

Some of the most important, and potentially most picturesque, streets and areas of our capital city are blighted with vacancy and dereliction. The City Council should be able to apply a higher rate of tax to property lying vacant in certain areas of the city.

We will also consider the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders for buildings in locations where vacancy and dereliction is particularly problematic or unsightly, and give the City Council the power to compel owners to make, in certain circumstances, vacant sites available to the Council for part-time usage.

This should be complemented by a move to convert long-term vacant and/or obsolete retail spaces to cultural use.

- Prioritise making above-the-shop living a reality in Dublin city centre, and reform the schemes we know are not working to deliver this.

➤ Work with Dublin City Council to establish a Cultural Corridor from Henrietta Street to St James's Gate, taking in O'Connell Street, College Green, Dame Street and Thomas Street along the way. We would conduct a consultation on the types of additional attractions and amenities that people would like to see developed on this route.

- Work towards the re-municipalisation of waste collection, beginning with gradually phasing out side-by-side waste competition within municipal areas. We believe these measures will lead to a far cleaner city centre.

➤ Empower Dublin City Council (and all city councils) to apply a 'tourist bed tax' to hotel beds in the city centre, with the money to be ringfenced for use by Dublin City Council to improve amenities and keep the city centre clean and well-maintained.

A small 'tourist bed tax' is standard in most large European cities.

- Assist Dublin City Council to identify appropriate venues for playing pitches that would be held as community assets in the city, targeted for use by at-risk youths.

Dublin 1 and Dublin 8 in particular suffer from a severe dearth of sports playing areas, particularly a lack of football pitches. Aside from depriving the city's youth of opportunities to be active, the lack of such facilities means there is less to distract young people from engaging in anti-social behaviour.

Further information about our plans for Dublin City can be found in our Dublin City Policy Document on our website.

Better Banking, Inclusive Finance

Ireland's retail banking sector is plagued by lack of choice and competition, and regular scandal. Following multi-billion-euro bailouts more than a decade ago, banks have returned to making huge profits (albeit without paying much in the way of tax) and paying large salaries and bonuses to their employees.

The Social Democrats believe there is an appetite amongst the Irish public for a different model of banking.

Credit Unions, and Community Banking

It is well known that the physical provision of financial services in Ireland has been greatly scaled back in recent years. The groups that suffer most as cash access has declined are older people, those with mobility issues, and those in rural communities.

This is a question of democracy, being part of society and living a normal life. Although digital payments will increase, we will still have cash for a long time.

Access to financial services is vital for a sustainable economy, especially outside the major population centres where employment is so much more reliant on the local/Irish SME sector. There are times in the economic cycle when households and small businesses find it more difficult to secure loans, and there is international evidence to suggest that local bank branch closures have a negative effect on the formation of new businesses. Indeed, the further a firm is located away from the bank, the higher the monitoring costs will be for the banks and other problems like this – including high risks associated with the lack of information and uncertainty – make banks less willing to extend credit.

Community Banking has more potential than mainstream retail banks to overcome these deficiencies in the sector. This may involve an expansion of the financial services provided by credit unions and/or post offices. However, to date, no honest analysis of the capacity of these sectors to provide this has been allowed by Government, which seems determined to persist with an increasingly consolidated model of retail banking that continues to fail the public.

Ireland has about 380 credit unions and around 900 post offices across the country, giving them a physical presence in towns and villages in every county.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact the Finance (Provision of Access to Cash Infrastructure) Bill 2024.
- Work with both networks (postal and credit union) to build a strong community banking sector in Ireland.
This would result in credit union and post office customers having full current account facilities, including debit cards and online banking. (While some banking services are currently available via post offices, the full suite of services is not yet available).
- Ensure enhanced loan facilities can be provided by credit unions (on an opt-in basis, by branch).
- Conduct a feasibility study for post office branches to offer enhanced services, potentially via the broker model used by the Royal Mail in the UK.

- The Proposal would have numerous benefits, including:
 - Access to financial services in smaller towns and villages.
 - Increased access to credit for local businesses and the self-employed, including the approximately €8bn of credit union deposits which are currently unused.
 - Local savings being available for local investment.
 - The choice to bank with publicly owned institutions.
 - Profits reinvested locally and distributed to members.
 - Increased sustainability for credit unions, and in particular for post offices, which are under sustained financial pressure.

As part of this, the Social Democrats propose enhanced services for credit unions, to include:

- Provision of full current accounts for personal and small business banking, including debit cards that can be used on the full national and international ATM network.
- Provision of mortgage lending, with expertise and financial aggregation of risk provided at a county and/or regional basis.
- The provision of online banking and associated services including electronic payments.
- Support for on-going development of lending expertise, in particular with regard to mortgages and business lending, as well as for corporate governance changes to ensure compliance for any new financial activity.
- An increased savings limit beyond €100k for credit union customers.
- Wider investment options for credit union deposits than current options (limited mainly to government bonds, bank bonds and cash deposits).
- Allowing credit unions to become conduits for small savings loans underwritten by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, as per the model currently used in the retail banks.

We will also conduct a review to assess the appropriateness of the credit union regulatory environment, with comparison to international peers, and consider the possibility of providing additional state services via credit union locations.

Post Offices

The local post office is part of the heart of many towns, villages and rural townlands. It plays both an economic and a social role in society, including providing social welfare payments and providing a link for residents in isolated areas.

We will improve the viability of the post office network by expanding the range of public services available through the network. An Post has the potential to serve as a point of access for the services of a range of public bodies.

We will also create and implement a Public Service Obligation for the Post Office network.

Financial Inclusion

Access to financial services is key to inclusion in society. Money and finance impact every aspect of our modern lives.

Financial exclusion is not just about access to bank accounts but access to reasonable, affordable credit that takes account of the financial position of the consumer while acknowledging the need for people on low incomes to meet contingency expenditures without resorting to high-cost credit, especially through illegal moneylenders.

Credit unions have traditionally provided low-cost credit to members as an alternative to high-cost credit from legal and illegal moneylenders, and have a good record of ensuring their customers understand the implications of their loans. However, other companies selling financial products and services need to ensure that consumers fully understand the information they are being provided with.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Develop a new national Financial Inclusion strategy.
- Build a module on financial literacy into the primary and secondary school curricula.
- Track levels of financial exclusion, and develop and monitor policies and practices aimed at eliminating it in its entirety.

A Digital Transition for the People

The Social Democrats believe that there are three key issues in digital policymaking right now:

Automation, including Artificial Intelligence, presents many opportunities, but also many policy challenges. The opportunities are evident in our daily lives, as increasingly more tasks are made easier or completely automated. However, the challenges range from anticipated labour displacement, which could sharply increase, to the danger of machine-led decision-making in state policy and practice. The latter has the potential to compromise our overall access to justice, or to diminish it by replacing human justice with machine justice.

Digital access continues to deepen the social divide in our society. Crucial services are online in both public and private sector offerings. While ‘digital first’ is a fitting policy to modernise these services, ‘digital only’ is often deployed, cutting off portions of our population from much needed access; often these are groups who most need these services. This alienates citizens. Digital literacy, data, and, to a lesser extent, hardware are not resources that are equally available across society.

Misinformation, disinformation and mal-information are arguably the biggest contemporary threats to our democracy and to the rule of law, muddying our social (and to a lesser degree, our traditional) media landscape. Strong State responses and collaboration are required to mitigate the damage this is doing to our democracy.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a domestic framework for stronger regulation of the development of AI, with particular attention to the role of large technology companies, in line with recent European directives and regulations.
- Form a Joint Oireachtas Committee to develop a national strategy on AI, with a focus on Irish democracy.
- Ensure Ireland’s national strategy on AI considers climate impacts and environmental sustainability.
- Establish a unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and appoint a Chief Information Security Officer to combat the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.
- Legislate to strengthen the legal framework around the publishing responsibilities and obligations of online platforms.
- Prohibit the ‘digital only’ provision of publicly funded services, including services that impose obstacles or disincentives to accessing offline options.
- Conduct a cross-government analysis of the potential labour displacement that automation will engender in the Irish economy, and explore policy frameworks and mechanisms to deal with it, including large scale re-training, labour creation and redistribution, basic income, and shorter-working weeks.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to bias and discrimination, consulting with minority and marginalised groups.
- Ensure that the progress of automation and AI doesn’t remove or distort access to, or negatively affect, administration of justice.
- Establish independent AI regulators with sufficient resources, and an advisory forum of representatives from civil society organisations with fundamental rights expertise.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to intellectual property, copyright, and the climate crisis.
- Collaborate with global leaders to ensure a unified response to the development of AI in regulatory terms.
- Investigate the broader societal existential risk posed by the development of AI that can ultimately threaten us as a species, and develop law and policy to mitigate.
- Ensure that the progress of automation and AI doesn’t remove or distort access to, or negatively affect, administration of justice.
- Develop and implement citizen information and awareness programmes to bridge the digital divide, increase digital literacy, and mitigate the rise of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.

Public Service Broadcasting

The Television Licence system is broken and needs reform. However, making RTE entirely reliant on state funding opens it up not just to the risk of political influence but also to its budget being cut during economic downturns. This is not a tenable solution.

The Social Democrats have proposed a three-stranded funding model, comprised of a levy on social media companies; a public charge; and exchequer funding.

We need public service journalism now more than ever because of the misinformation and disinformation that spreads on social media. This toxic content is poisoning our media ecosystem, and damaging our democracy.

For that reason, we believe a ‘polluter pays’-type principle should apply. Social media companies should pay a levy to support public service journalism, much of which is attempting to undo the damage caused on the platforms they make so much money from.

A Television Licence in an era where an increasing number of people stream content on their laptops, phones, and tablets is completely outdated. It should be rebranded as a Public Service Journalism Charge, which can be charged at a lower rate than the existing Licence, but collected in the same way.

We would also change legislation around Coimisiún na Meán so that it has specific powers and obligations to maintain a level playing field in the media landscape and avoid anti-competitive actions by the largest players.

Protecting Children Online

The evidence of the detrimental impact on our children and young people of unregulated access to the internet and social media is overwhelming. It has resulted, among other things, in an evolving youth mental health crisis and other challenges, and requires leadership and political will to address it.

We have laws and structures to protect children from harm in our society; that principle must be extended and applied to the digital world. Internet service providers must be responsible for creating an online environment that is safe, and be held accountable where they fail.

Attempts to regulate access to online content according to age seem likely to fail. Instead, the Social Democrats believe that regulating how algorithms – which direct content towards our children – work makes more sense. We would enact regulation of social media platforms, underpinned by legislation and enforced with significant penalties (rather than codes of conduct).

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact specific and effective legislation to protect children online, by regulating ‘preferences algorithms’ and ensuring that engagement-based recommendation algorithms are turned off by default.
- Expand the mandate of Coimisiún na Meán so they have authority to instruct for content to be taken down from online platforms on the basis that it represents misinformation or disinformation.
- Provide guidelines for best practice for smartphone use by children, including no smartphones for children while in primary/secondary school, and age verification requirements for social media.
- Provide education on digital and media literacy in schools, including by having misinformation – and how to identify it – included in primary and secondary school curricula via SPHE.
- Provide resources to support public health awareness campaigns, wellbeing training, and support services for schools.
- Enact stricter rules on influencers, including around what they can promote, and guidance around how they promote it. For example, promoting cosmetic surgery has been banned in France and promotional images promoting cosmetics must come with a disclaimer if they have been altered or a filter has been used.

Sinéad Gibney

Candidate for
Dublin Rathdown



A Social Democratic Fiscal Policy

Sound Public Finances Underpin Social Democracy

The most successful European social democracies combine dynamic private sectors, high-quality public services and relatively low public sector debt. Higher public spending as a share of the national economy does *not* necessarily crowd out the private sector. On the contrary, judicious public investment can have a ‘crowding in’ effect. Better public services mean a healthier, happier and better educated population, and a more productive workforce.

It is also worth noting that while the private sector has expanded in recent years, the size of the public sector has failed to keep pace. Ireland’s infrastructure and public services are chronically under-funded and don’t meet the needs of families and firms across the country. This needs to change.

Too often failing to invest is ‘penny wise and pound foolish’. For years we stopped building social housing because successive governments took the easy, short-termist option of subsidising private landlords. The government is still doing it, meaning massive outlays every year, but no public assets to show for it in the end. In the health system, we don’t hire enough doctors and nurses, but then hire in contractors to plug the gaps for vastly inflated sums. At the same time, public procurement regularly runs vastly over-budget, as with the National Children’s Hospital. This is a waste of public money. We can do better.

It is important to be honest with people. We can’t aspire to world-class public services if we’re not willing to invest the necessary resources over the long term. Rather than promising voters token tax cuts or other populist gimmicks, the Social Democrats have been consistent in saying that financing the public investment people need means finding resources to pay for it, not pretending it doesn’t matter or putting it on the never-never.

The Commission on Taxation and Welfare which looked at how we finance public spending has been very clear: we need to broaden the tax base to face up to demographic and climate change, not narrow it further. We have been extraordinarily fortunate to have reaped a windfall in corporate tax receipts in recent years, but this could dry up at any time. Similarly, cost-of-living supports have played a vital role in recent years, but they need to be much better targeted. We need a new fiscal approach.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Put an end to so-called ‘once-off’ gimmicks and invest for the long-term.
- Axe the arbitrary 5 per cent expenditure rule, which has been more honoured in the breach by the current government.
- Ensure the structurally adjusted general government balance respects EU fiscal rules, but fluctuates appropriately over the business cycle.
- Respect EU fiscal rules, while supporting efforts under way to reform them in such a way that facilitates investment in housing, infrastructure and climate action.
- Continue contributing to the Future Ireland Fund to the extent that windfall corporation tax receipts surpass what is necessary for urgently needed investment in public services and social infrastructure.
- Explore how the Future Ireland Fund can be used to secure a ‘double bottom line’, securing financial returns to finance the future cost of our ageing society during the drawdown period after 2040, but also using funds as appropriate to support investment in Ireland up to 2040.
- Modify the Infrastructure, Nature and Climate Fund (INCF) to include an explicit mandate to invest in social and affordable housing.
- Legislate so that public procurement data can be systematically screened for bid-rigging to improve value-for-money on investment.
- Introduce a recurrent wealth tax on financial millionaires (see Page 112) and engage with global policymakers on the design of an international tax on billionaires.

Tax and Revenue Raising

Ireland faces several significant medium-term challenges, including tackling climate change, increasing housing delivery, caring for an ageing population, alleviating poverty and hardship, and improving public services. Our system of taxation must evolve to take account of these challenges. Yet we have historically collected an amount of government revenue, as a proportion of national income, that is far lower than that of our western European peer countries; the countries we should most aspire to emulate.

Furthermore, the pre-pandemic projections (before the current corporation tax bonanza) were for this proportion to decline, with Government's budgetary documentation repeatedly projecting further declines in government revenue as a proportion of GDP and GNI*. Windfall receipts have artificially bucked these trends, but as these are considered temporary, it would be prudent to assume that structural issues remain.

Ireland's current over-reliance on temporary windfalls in corporation tax receipts is well-documented. In government we will set out a revenue-raising strategy to reduce this dependence through a broadening of the tax base. While windfall receipts can fund much needed capital expenditure that will enhance the long-term productivity of the economy, we must close the structural revenue-raising gap over the longer-term.

The Social Democrats believe that Ireland should aim to provide Universal Basic Services. The concept of Universal Basic Services stems from a belief that all citizens are entitled to a range of public services that are free (or practically free) at the point of use, provided by Government (or a government-funded institution) and funded through taxation. The most prosperous, inclusive and progressive countries in the world are social democracies where service provision has been guided by such principles. The Social Democrats want to see Ireland taking key steps in moving from our current model of low service provision towards providing at least that universal minimum.

Income Tax

The Social Democrats believe that reducing the cost of living and giving working people and families a break requires using a majority of available resources to invest in better quality public services and social infrastructure. This will be our focus in government.

However, we recognise the need to make adjustments at times to the income tax system to ensure workers and families who may be struggling have sufficient resources on which to live.

While acknowledging that some indexation of the Standard Rate Cut-Off Point is warranted, in Government, the Social Democrats will lean more towards the use of Tax Credits to ensure that the benefits of any income tax cuts are shared more equally. Using Tax Credits avoids the narrow effects of changes to tax bands, which see the larger benefits accruing to higher earners rather than low earners.

Our use of Tax Credits would include, where considered necessary, adjustments to credits awarded to the highest earners. This would ensure that benefits of increased Tax Credits accruing to higher earners can be clawed back where necessary, and that very high earners pay a little more in tax. This measure would also make the income tax system more progressive.

Using the Tax Credit system is the fairest way available to the government to reduce taxes on income, as any increase in the credit is of equal benefit to all recipients, regardless of whether they earn the minimum wage, the average wage, or €100,000.

We will also make the main income Tax Credits (the Personal Credit, the PAYE Credit and the Earned Income Credit) refundable. Recent trends in precarious working practices contribute to a situation where, according to the CSO, nearly 6 per cent of those in employment are experiencing poverty.

Introducing a system of Refundable Tax Credits would help tackle the problem of the 'working poor' as it would allow low-income workers who do not earn enough to use their full credits to have the unused portion "refunded" – essentially a cash payment. This would help many on low pay deal with increasing living costs.

Making tax credits refundable would also make Ireland's tax system fairer, improve the living standards of a substantial number of people in Ireland, and give Government a useful additional tool to target support to low-income workers.

Alternative ways of Raising Revenue

The Social Democrats are proposing a number of reforms to promote the investment of private money into solutions that can contribute to solving the country's medium-term challenges. Corporation tax windfalls may not last indefinitely. We need new ways to finance the long-term capital investment our society needs.

We want to create sustainable and affordable long-term sources of finance for investment, in order to blunt the often-pro-cyclical pattern of capital spending in Ireland. Options around mobilising private savings to ensure a regular supply of resources for capital investment should be considered, as is done across Europe.

Irish citizens have more than €130 billion in low interest deposit accounts. Some of this wealth could be channelled to finance the building of much needed social infrastructure, with a guaranteed return for savers. In many European countries, mechanisms are in place to encourage savers to make such money available to tackle their country's infrastructure needs, often giving a guaranteed return to savers at a time when returns are negligible and often negative. The Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations in France is an example that has been in operation for more than a century.

Following on from this model, it is worth considering a reduced DIRT rate payable on deposits within special new accounts that would finance the building of affordable and social housing, and examining how some of the various types of savings in Ireland, including private pension funds (to which Government awards substantial tax breaks) can be mobilised for investment in a way that benefits both savers and the public good.

Other Revenue Raising

Ireland must increase revenue raised as a percentage of national income to tackle climate change, increase housing delivery, care for an ageing population, alleviate poverty and hardship, and improve public services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Begin phasing out subsidies for housing developers that serve only to increase demand in a supply-constrained market.
- Remove the tax exemptions for REITS and other institutional investors.
- Examine the use of stamp duty on non-residential property to meet goals around both revenue raising and directing construction resources towards building homes.
- Increase the Vacant Homes Tax, and implement the Zoned Land tax.
- Remove the refundable element on unused R&D tax credits.
- Increase the minimum effective income tax rate for people earning more than €400,000.
- Increase funding from the Bank Levy.
- Increase the betting tax on both in-shop and online betting.
- Examine all tax-based subsidies related to fossil fuels, with a view to phasing out those which are no longer fit for purpose.
- Phase in the necessary increases to Employer PRSI rates to bring Ireland's Employer PRSI regime towards the European average.
- Scrap the Special Assignee Relief Programme.
- Standard-rate discretionary (non-pension) tax reliefs.
- Ensure automatic periodic review for all tax expenditures with a sunset clause on each expenditure so that each must be reviewed periodically and judged on its merits.
- Examine the fairness and appropriateness of the current regimes around Business and Agricultural Relief for Capital Acquisition Tax, and Entrepreneur Relief on Capital Gains Tax.
- Increase the Stamp Duty on shares.
- Tax 'Super Wealth' (see next page).

A Tax on ‘Super Wealth’

Across Ireland and the world, statistics show that the concentration of wealth is increasing. We know that the ownership of wealth is more heavily concentrated than income in Ireland. We also know that Ireland needs to broaden the tax base and ensure sustainable revenue collection to meet the financial challenges ahead.

A net wealth tax, with fair exemptions, can help tackle both issues. We are proposing a tax on net wealth as a key element of a progressive programme of tax reform.

It is our goal to tax ‘excess wealth’ or ‘super wealth’, rather than what might be viewed as ordinary household wealth. For this reason, the family home (to a value of €2 million) would be exempt from calculations of the tax liability, as would family businesses, agricultural land and so on. The tax would have a high tax-free allowance to avoid an excessive burden on low-income people with high value assets.

What our wealth tax would look like:

- Levied at 0.5 per cent on assets over €1 million, 1 per cent on assets over €2 million.
- The thresholds should be updated at least every five years.
- The tax would be on net wealth, so taking account of liabilities, including mortgages.
- Important exemptions from calculating the base would include:
 - The family home (up to a value of €2 million) and ordinary contents of the home.
 - Business-related assets, including as related to self-employment.
 - Farmland and other agricultural assets.
 - Pension funds.
 - Works of art and other items that are available for public viewing in the State.
- To protect cash-poor households who might have assets that bring them into range of the tax, facility should be made for a deferral where the tax liability exceeds a certain proportion of income.
- Where a taxpayer is ordinarily resident in the State for tax purposes the tax would apply to all assets, regardless of where they are held. Where the taxpayer is not ordinarily resident in the State the tax applies to their assets located in the State.
- We estimate that the proposed tax could raise around €150 million - €200 million in revenue per annum.

It may be necessary to enforce an ‘exit tax’ —a one-off tax on individuals if they decide to move out of the country for tax purposes. For example, the United States has an exit tax to deter expatriation by individuals with over US\$2 million in net worth. Individuals renouncing their citizenship are required to pay tax on all their unrealised capital gains.

It’s time that the people who have benefited the most from the current economic model pay a modest contribution from the massive wealth they hold. We often hear the case against wealth taxes in terms of feasibility – but it’s increasingly a question of political will. Given today’s level of inequality, it is not radical but sensible to be discussing fair wealth taxation if we are to create a fairer society

Protecting Consumers

A dynamic private sector drives innovation and responds to consumers' needs for good and services. But sometimes markets fail and, left to their own devices, will not put consumers' interests first.

Moreover, large businesses often try to stifle competition to boost their own bottom line at the expense of households and other firms. That's why it is so important to have a robust consumer protection and product safety framework as well as rigorous enforcement of Irish and EU competition law.

We need to make markets work better for people. Most markets in Ireland are competitive, while Irish and EU consumer protection and product safety legislation is relatively robust. While there are numerous sectoral regulators, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is the principal body tasked with this mandate on an economy-wide basis.

Correctly, it has been assigned additional resources in recent years to match its expanding mandate. For example, it has been given the power to issue fines to firms for breaking competition laws.

These powers should be extended to consumer protection law, as is already the case in many other EU countries, and with other Irish bodies, such as the Data Protection Commission.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Give consumers better recourse for faulty goods or bad services by increasing the maximum claim allowed at the Small Claims Court to at least €5,000.
 - Use lessons learned from the CCPC's ongoing review of dynamic pricing in the sale of concert tickets as the basis for consideration of the adequacy of the current legislative and regulatory framework governing the practice.
 - Make as much information as possible available to buyers of second-hand cars so that they can make an informed purchasing decision. This will reduce the risk of people unknowingly buying 'clocked' or unsafe cars.
 - Establish an economic regulator in the waste management sector, pending re-municipalisation of the sector.
 - Work to ensure the various reforms in the insurance industry produce the beneficial changes sought (namely price reductions for customers) and take measures to encourage increased competition in the Irish insurance industry. We will maintain the Cabinet Subgroup on Insurance Reform, and address areas of 'market failure' for sectors that cannot get cover.
 - Introduce a price transparency regime for providers of legal services along the lines of that in place in the UK.
- Solicitors and barristers would be required to publish the prices they charge, per hour or by activity, to make it easier for consumers to shop around. Over time, clear pricing could lead to online tools to compare prices for common legal services.
- Ban the '3 per cent plus inflation' automatic annual price increases in certain service contracts (e.g. phone contracts, WiFi).
 - Modernise the Multi-unit Development (MUD) Act, including to tackle problems in relation to the governance of Owner Management Companies.
 - Task the Central Bank with reviewing its existing regulatory regime to identify and remove unnecessary barriers to competition in consumer and business banking.
 - Develop a mortgage switching strategy with the Central Bank and Department of Finance. This should consider barriers to switching, including in relation to credit worthiness assessments, mortgage protection, and property valuation processes. Data on mortgage switching should be systematically published so as to help measure success.
 - Ensure full implementation of the national financial literacy strategy.
 - Work to build a strong community banking sector in Ireland (See Page 104).



Susan Doyle and
Ciarán McCarthy

Candidates for
Cork North Central

5.

Reform

Restoring Trust in Politics and Public Life

Tackling Waste

The current government is squandering the windfall from corporation tax receipts and, with it, a golden opportunity to invest in the public services and infrastructure we need for the future.

They seem to think that announcing flagship projects and writing blank cheques to cover endless cost over-runs is an appropriate way to conduct public spending.

Too much money is being wasted, and nobody is ever held accountable.

This has to stop; we need systemic change.

In Government, the Social Democrats will reform and build on Ireland's existing accountability framework. The Comptroller and Auditor General is established by the Constitution to audit public spending after it has occurred. The Oireachtas's Public Accounts Committee reviews reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General and attempts to hold public servants to account.

Too often, this is after the fact.

One missing piece of the system is a body to oversee spending and ensure accountability in real time.

In Government, the Social Democrats would establish a new Government Accountability Office within the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Its location within the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General would assure the Government Accountability Office's political independence, while respecting the important independent constitutional role of the Comptroller and Auditor General itself.

The Government Accountability Office would:

- Perform the role of a public spending watchdog in real-time.
- Engage with senior civil servants and accounting officers in government departments on an ongoing basis to ensure appropriate implementation of, and compliance with, all relevant aspects of the public spending code throughout the life cycle of large infrastructure projects.
- Ensure information gleaned and lessons learned during the project life cycle are incorporated into an holistic ex post audit by reporting findings to the Comptroller & Auditor General.
- Employ public financial management specialists equipped for rigorous spending oversight.
- Report to the Public Accounts Committee, as part of the Comptroller and Auditor General.
- Propose updates to the governance and accountability framework for public financial management, including:
 - Changes to the public spending code and their implementation to avoid the pitfalls in the system, highlighted by recent high-profile examples of over-spending on infrastructure projects, small and large.
 - Strengthening the public procurement guidelines for goods and services to ensure quality, efficiency, and the provider's track record are considered along with price.
- Advise the Dáil and high-level civil servants on ways to make public spending more efficient and effective.
- Work to eliminate wasteful or duplicative spending, consolidate programmes, and modernise how government departments work to save money and improve performance.

Such a Government Accountability Office, adequately funded and staffed, would make the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General more proactive than reactive, engaging in more than post-hoc auditing but also in real-time monitoring of major public spending initiatives.

Independent Anti-Corruption Agency

Ireland does not have an effective means of preventing, detecting, and prosecuting corruption and white-collar crime. In fact, Ireland is one of the few OECD countries that doesn't yet have an anti-corruption strategy. Various tribunals, commissions and Oireachtas inquiries have come and gone with little consequence for corrupt and reckless behaviour. More than fifteen years on from the banking collapse, serious questions remain about the capacity of our criminal justice system when it comes to detecting and successfully prosecuting white collar crime.

Our chequered history with tribunals, ad hoc commissions of inquiry, and investigations into devastating banking practices instils little public confidence that we have an anti-corruption regime in Ireland that is robust, effective, and free from the clutches of those in power. There is strong public perception of a golden circle in Irish society, the members of which are accountable to no-one and regard themselves as untouchable.

Accountability is a core pillar of the Social Democrats vision. It matters because without accountability there can be no trust in public institutions or fair dealings in business or public life. Lack of accountability damages the reputation of the country, undermines the authority of sound public institutions, and tarnishes our image as a place to do business.

Anti-corruption law is spread across a range of legislative acts, and responsibility for preventing and prosecuting corruption is spread across a multitude of agencies. Piecemeal reforms in recent years have fallen short of what is needed to protect government decision-making from being unduly influenced by vested interests.

More laws are not enough without the drive and resources to vigorously and proactively police them.

The Social Democrats first proposed the setting up of an independent anti-corruption agency in a motion brought to the Dáil in December 2015.

Our detailed proposals are based on best-practice internationally and cover corruption in both the public and the private sphere. Without a dedicated and properly resourced agency, we will continue to see a range of laws on our statute books which meet international standards, but which lead to few actual consequences for corrupt behaviour. In Government, the Social Democrats will publish a National Anti-Corruption Strategy, and establish a new Independent Anti-Corruption Agency (IACA). The IACA would:

- Tackle white collar crime and corruption in the corporate world and political sphere.
- Oversee implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy.
- Operate as a standing Commission of Investigation, ending the need for expensive ad hoc Tribunals.
- Assume the anti-corruption remit of the Standards in Public Office Commission, Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement, Registrar of Lobbyists and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.
- Act as an advisory body to other public bodies.
- Monitor and investigate public procurement activities, including by legislating to allow for public procurement data screening to detect potential bid-rigging.
- Conduct sectoral reviews and initiate investigations as and when necessary.
- Work with a newly established Dáil oversight committee (the Public Interest Committee) to oversee IACA and Ministerial resource allocation decisions.
- Propose updates to anti-corruption legislation, including:
 - Tightening minimum standards for eligibility to hold public office.
 - Requiring serving politicians to declare significant liabilities as well as assets.
 - Further reforming the law on lobbying.
 - Strengthening gift and hospitality rules for public servants, and
 - Extending the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995 to cover members of the judiciary.

Further information about our proposal for an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency can be found in the IACA Policy Document, in the Honest Politics section, on our website.

Transparency in Decision-Making

Public monies and resources have too often been used as political slush funds where the needs of insiders or the electoral interests of governing parties are favoured over genuine public need.

In recent years there have been revelations of unfettered access for bidders for large state contracts to the corridors of power. Time and time again, when state contracts were being awarded, the right questions have not been asked. And time and time again, the public has paid the price for shoddy governance and poor administration which has led to cost over-runs and delays, including the National Broadband Plan and the National Children's Hospital.

The Social Democrats aim to bring about an end to "Golden Circle" politics by introducing meaningful changes to the culture, practices, and oversight of publicly funded bodies.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Improve the Oireachtas Committee vetting procedure for all senior appointments to public bodies.

'Vetting' cannot happen after the fact, as a rubber stamp. We need to introduce objectivity and oversight into the process and ensure that appointments are made on the basis of merit, suitability and qualifications, rather than political connection.

By limiting ministerial discretion in this way, consistency and openness could be achieved and efforts made to bring about inclusivity and diversity in respect of the profiles of appointees.
- Revise the Infrastructure Guidelines that govern public spending on capital projects to strengthen governance and oversight arrangements in light of recent high-profile examples of significant cost over-runs and inexplicably high project costs.
- Equality-proof and Poverty-proof all legislative, policy and budgetary decisions, and introduce more evidence-based systems of resource allocation, based on objective, pre-constructed and evidence-based criteria.
- Replace the Official Secrets Act 1963 with legislation that strikes a better balance between maintaining state security and protecting whistle-blowers in reporting wrongdoing.

The Act was written in very broad terms and has been misused as a means of blocking public interest-led disclosures. Such broad reaching restrictions are no longer appropriate.
- Actively and enthusiastically participate in the Open Government Partnership initiative by prioritising reforms which have the strong backing of civil society and which have the potential to be truly transformative.
- Introduce an e-Governance platform and publish more extensive data in open source to bring about a more open and transparent form of governance and a general presumption of openness in relation to state-held data.
- Improve and urgently enact the long-delayed Public Sector Standards Bill 2015 which would go some way towards implementing the recommendations of the Mahon Tribunal and address future conflicts of interest by TDs, ministers and officeholders. The Bill has not progressed beyond committee stage in almost a decade.
- Empower the Standards in Public Office Commission (and any successor organisation) to verify conflict-of-interest declarations using a risk-based approach, and to make public its recommendations and sanctions for past instances of conflict-of-interest.
- Create a 'legislative footprint' for all Acts of the Oireachtas to ensure full transparency in how our laws are influenced.

A comprehensive digital footprint would allow the public to see in one place the input of different groups and individuals in shaping legislation at different stages in its legislative journey. It would summarise all external input, including submissions received by public officials and representatives.

Reforming Lobbying

There is a need for clear demarcation between the political arena and lobbying.

Seamless movement between the public and private sectors fuels distrust in the political system. In recent years in particular, there have been several high-profile examples of ministerial advisors moving into the private sector and then often back into the public sector again, not to mention examples of ministers of state moving into jobs in sectors of the economy for which they previously had responsibility.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure that where someone takes up a role as a lobbyist after leaving Leinster House, they will only be allowed access to Leinster House on the same basis as any other member of the public or civil society while in the post.
- Review and update the Code of Conduct for lobbyists, with an aim of encouraging higher professional standards.
- Give SIPO, and any successor organisation, authority to make public its investigation reports into contraventions of the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015.
- Resource SIPO (and any successor organisation) to conduct thorough spot checks of a proportion of all lobbying returns filed, and to ‘name and shame’ lobbyists who contravene the law by publishing its investigation reports.
- Give SIPO (and any successor organisation) power to receive complaints, inspect records and returns on the online register of lobbying activities, and verify information.
- Investigate the possibility of enshrining and enforcing certain principles in legislation, including honesty, transparency (which can be enshrined by creating criteria to ensure investigations are carried out in public to the greatest extent possible and that findings are published at an early date), accountability (laying out clear consequences for those engaged in wrongdoing) and timeliness (by setting out criteria for an early response to transgressions, ensuring this becomes the norm).

Improving Accountability in Government

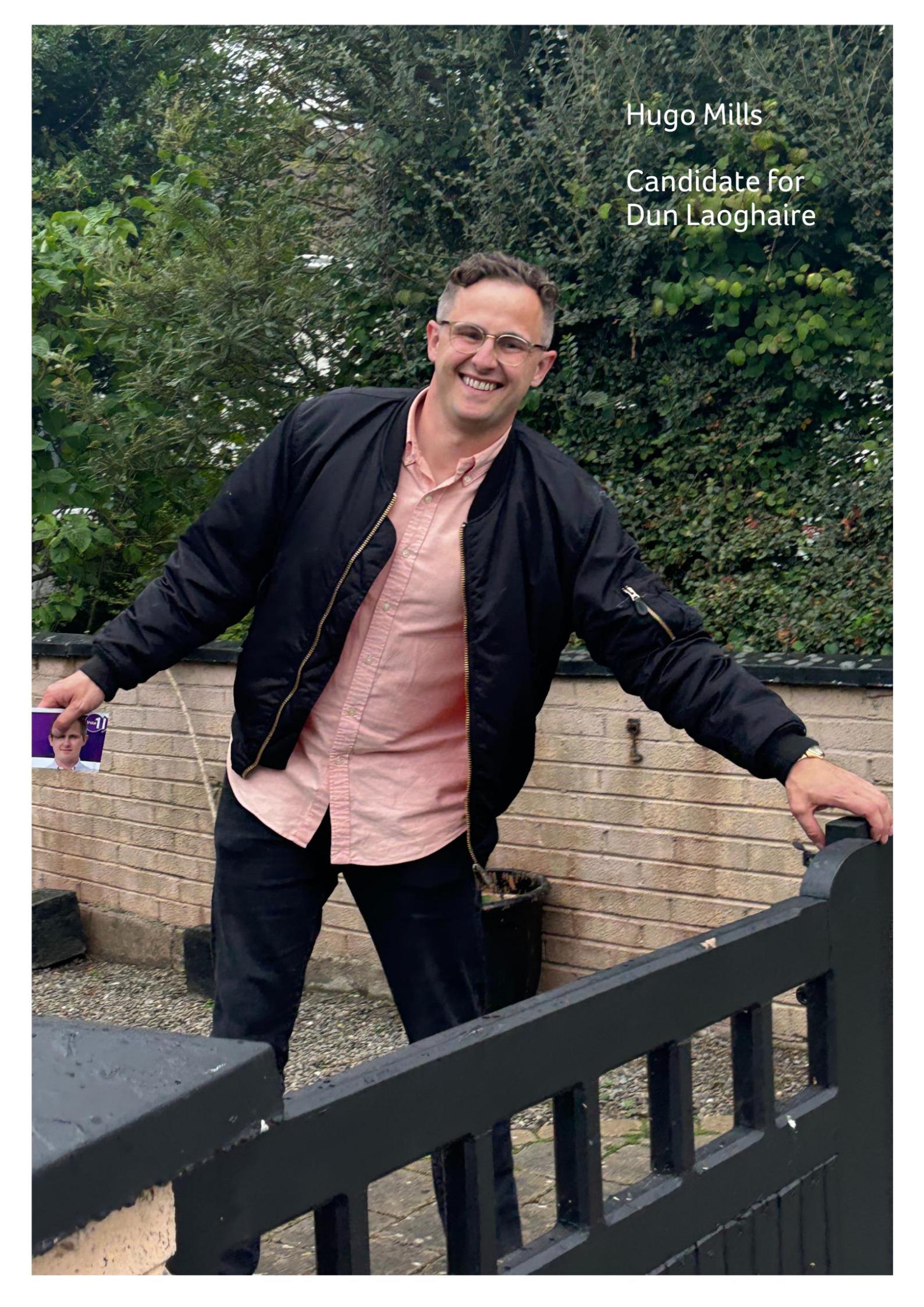
The Social Democrats believe there needs to be a reform of the Ministers and Secretaries Act to make senior civil servants accountable for their actions.

The Act currently protects the relationship between Ministers and Secretaries General, making it virtually impossible to pinpoint how problems (e.g. substantial overspending) have occurred. It should certainly be possible to dismiss a senior public servant for misconduct or incompetence, but it is well known that this is rarely if ever done.

Too often, ministerial interactions with lobbyists take place in informal settings or in meetings without civil servants present. Hidden and informal influence by a cosy circle of ‘insiders’ damages public trust in how important decisions are made at the highest levels. Ministers and senior civil servants should proactively publish online details of all meetings and interactions with lobbyists – including calendars and meeting agendas.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reform the Ministers and Secretaries Act, to make senior civil servants accountable for their actions.
- Ensure that ministers and senior civil servants proactively publish online details of all meetings and interactions with lobbyists. There must also be an end to ‘No Minutes’ policies for key meetings and decisions. The reasons for important decisions made by ministers and senior officials are often not properly documented in official files.
- Oblige public officials to keep accurate records of key government decisions and actions – and to keep these for as long as they are needed for accountability purposes.



Hugo Mills

Candidate for
Dun Laoghaire

Justice and Penal Reform

Crime remains a major issue throughout the country. Many communities feel unsafe or neglected.

It is vital that we take robust steps to address this problem and its causes, while also continuing the process of institutional renewal within our Gardaí.

In Government, our priorities will include the following:

Supporting Gardaí, Preventing Crime

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Invest heavily in Community Policing, restoring the numbers to at least pre-austerity levels.
- Target a garda force of 18,000 gardaí, as per recommendations made by the Garda Commissioner to keep up with population increases.
- Equip Gardaí with the resources required to improve responsiveness, such as civilian staff to free up Garda time and an adequate number of squad cars.
- Ensure hiring for the Gardaí reflects the make-up of the population and, where necessary, provide language training for community policing officers.
- Ensure Gardaí are properly resourced to tackle organised crime.
- Implement the key recommendations of the Hamilton Report, including the development of a multi-annual strategy to combat economic crime and corruption, and an accompanying action plan.
- Review the current split of Garda numbers across regions, with a view to ensuring areas experiencing population growth are not being left behind.
- Acknowledge the changing nature of crime, with increases in cybercrime, fraud, and so-called white-collar crime. We will hire, train and empower Gardaí to handle this changing crime landscape, including with appropriate funding and technological tools.
- Invest in youth facilities and youth work to help prevent young people entering crime.
- Invest in mental health and addiction services, to tackle the root causes of much of crime.
- Strengthen Joint Policing Committees by ensuring there is practical local involvement and decision making.
- Statutorily empower Councils and local area committees to call representatives of the Gardaí before them to address how they intend to tackle issue of significant local importance.

Court and Legal Reform

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Adequately fund the Civil Legal Aid Scheme.
- Use the findings of the civil legal aid review group to inform how best to provide services on the basis of need and how to structure the financial means test.
- Recognise that a properly functioning and accessible court service is essential to providing access to justice. We will conduct a full review of existing facilities, and allocate an appropriate budget to build the dedicated Family Law and Children's Court at Hammond Lane.
- Review and reform the in camera rule in family courts.
- Establish a Statutory Maintenance Authority, separate from the family courts, to manage payments of family maintenance.
- Commit to a programme of consolidation and reconciliation of key legislation, particularly those Acts which are currently the subject of numerous amendments, partial repeals, and statutory instruments. Unconsolidated legislation can often represent a barrier to justice.

Penal Reform

It is our goal in government to create a progressive penal system which prioritises reducing recidivism, is reflective of the needs of victims, and works effectively for all of society.

Poverty and inequality are key underlying causes of crime. At present, the majority of funding is directed to services that deal with the consequences of crime, as opposed to early intervention or prevention methods. Greater attention must be paid to improving mental health services, youth services, access to education, and availability of affordable housing.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure victims of crime are recognised and supported, afforded respect, and remain central to the criminal justice processes.
 - Work to establish and deliver a safe and effective model of restorative justice.
 - Pursue non-custodial sanction as the default for minor non-violent offences attracting a sentence less than six months. Imprisonment should generally be considered a sanction of last resort, or where the Courts conclude a person cannot be managed safely within the community. For the first time ever, we have more than 5,000 people in prison, an all-time high, and well above capacity of the prison system.
 - Ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) and establish a National Preventive Mechanism.
 - Create an inspectorate under OPCAT that is financially independent from the Department of Justice, and accountable to the Oireachtas.
 - Ensure mechanisms and funding exist so that Rehabilitation and Reintegration Services effectively support offenders before and after release from prison.
 - Establish a cross-departmental cross-agency panel to bring forward proposals to improve services to people in prison suffering mental health and addiction challenges including improving the necessary supports on release.
 - Resource and pilot a National Clinical Programme for Dual Diagnosis within the prison system.
 - Increase the mental health supports available to the prison population, addressing the inappropriate waiting lists and publishing and resourcing the implementation plan of the High Level Task Force.
 - Ensure that proper Workforce Planning around mental health and other areas is conducted, so that we are training a sufficient number of people to fill the roles needed.
 - Increase investment in Housing First to enhance wraparound social and health supports for people with experience of the criminal justice system.
- At a minimum, people leaving prison should be supported with pre-release planning for accommodation needs.
- Develop an interdepartmental strategy to support children with a parent in prison.
 - Establish a Consultative Council to provide high level advice on future penal policy.
 - Incentivise people in prison to participate in self-development programmes by introducing increased remission.

Reforming Sentencing and Rehabilitation

- Examine the suitability of the current prison model with a view to improving rehabilitation and lowering recidivism.
- Make greater use of community service overseen by probation officers, in place of frequent warnings or suspended sentences.
- Pursue policies that acknowledge the importance of diverting persons with mental

health difficulties away from prison and into mental health services, where appropriate.

- Acknowledge that where such diversion is not possible, it is crucial to mitigate the negative impact of incarceration on mental health and ensure access to tiered mental health services and supports within the prison.

Road Traffic Safety

Reducing traffic fatalities is a critical public safety goal that requires a multifaceted policy approach.

The Social Democrats will use a combination of infrastructure improvements, enhanced enforcement, public education and awareness campaigns, technology, and policy changes to reduce traffic fatalities and serious injuries.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Redesign high-risk roads and intersections to incorporate traffic calming measures like roundabouts, speed bumps, and protected bike lanes.
- Ensure enhanced enforcement of existing laws, and regulation to include stricter penalties and zero-tolerance for ‘distracted driving’.
- Implement tougher penalties for reckless driving, DUI offenses, and repeat traffic violators, including increased fines, license suspension, and mandatory safety education program.
- Improve pedestrian and cyclist safety by investing in pedestrian overpasses, crosswalks with better visibility, and dedicated cycling lanes to reduce conflicts between vehicles and non-motorised users.
- Lower speed limits in certain urban areas and residential neighbourhoods. Lower speeds significantly reduce the risk of severe injuries in the event of a crash.
- Expand the use of speed cameras, red-light cameras, and automated license plate readers in high-risk areas.
- Reduce the unsafe and illegal use of dirt bikes in urban areas by offering safer alternatives, education, enforcement, and community-based solutions that positively engage young people.
This would include Designated Off-Road Parks, Dirt Bike Clubs and Programs, School Outreach Programs, bike confiscation, fines, and designated high-risk areas as “zero-tolerance” zones where illegal dirt bike riding is strictly enforced, with increased police patrols, cameras, and traffic enforcement.

Other Priorities

- Continue the process of updating hate speech legislation and ensuring that new laws have strong definitions and defences to protect freedom of speech, as well as members of vulnerable communities.

We must ensure our hate speech legislation is fit for purpose and capable of adequately prosecuting hate speech regardless of whether it is conveyed verbally, in writing, or online.

- Implement and support the National Action Plan Against Racism.
- Introduce ‘disregard legislation’ based on the recommendations of the Final Report of the Working Group to Examine the Disregard of Convictions Related to Consensual Sexual Activity between Men.

Drug Reform

We have ample evidence around the conditions that pre-dispose people to problem drug use, including socio-economic factors, and mental health issues. Tackling socio-economic and educational disadvantage, helping everyone to realise their potential and become fully participating members of society, has broader benefits than just in relation to drug use, but it is a hugely important part of how we should approach this area.

In general, using moral judgement as a basis for shaping social policy creates shame and stigma. The criminalisation of what we know to be a health issue means that the bulk of the negative fallout lands on those already marginalised. The Social Democrats believe that in line with international best-practice, a policy of decriminalisation should be pursued in respect of the possession of drugs for personal consumption.

Decriminalisation must be combined with a broader health-based approach to addiction, increased funding for treatment and services, and a comprehensive plan to tackle poverty and deprivation underpinning our approach to drugs. It is vital that the necessary supports and resources are in place first, before legal changes, to take account of the lessons learned from other jurisdictions.

The criminalisation of drug use in Ireland and the policing of drugs for personal use is, largely, bad use of Garda time. Most convictions for drug offences are for possession of drugs for personal use. There is a significant cost to the State through policing, legal aid, probation, DPP and court resources, while there are much better potential uses for this money.

There is also huge inequality in the consequences of drug use, depending on the person and their socio-economic circumstances. Criminalising people for drug use or possession disproportionately harms the most vulnerable in our society. However, just because drug use is decriminalised doesn't mean it's a recommended activity. We also call for a far greater emphasis on education and prevention than is currently the case.

The relationship between poverty and drug-related harms is well-established. But it's not enough to recognise this; action is needed, with a comprehensive plan to tackle poverty and deprivation underpinning our approach to drugs. Most important is to tackle educational disadvantage through well-funded public childcare and DEIS+ education to raise education standards and create quality career opportunities for young people in deprived areas.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Decriminalise the possession of small quantities of drugs for personal consumption.
- Pursue a health-led approach to dealing with drug use.
- Increase funding for treatment and health services, and ensure such services are supportive, not punitive.
- Provide better supports for Community Drug Services, putting in place efficient, reliable and sustainable funding arrangements that reflect the value of the work they do, including the 14 Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces.
- Provide additional funding for Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Adult Mental Health, in line with the principle that early interventions have the most potential to bring benefits.
- Create an expert Commission to examine the possible legalisation, regulation and taxation of cannabis.
- Improve education and prevention campaigns around drugs.
- Develop a comprehensive plan to tackle poverty, deprivation and disadvantage. This has the potential to have the greatest positive impact around problem drug use.
- Aim additional Garda resources at drug dealers who focus their attention on children.
- Increase funding to combat drug trafficking, including recruiting more Customs Officers, increased funding for the naval service, and new anti-money laundering measures.
- Strengthen the power of the Criminal Assets Bureau to target and deprive criminals of assets acquired through criminal conduct, including drug dealing.

A close-up portrait of a man with light brown hair and a full, reddish-brown beard. He is smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a grey, ribbed, quarter-zip sweater over a light blue and white checkered collared shirt. The background is blurred, showing autumn foliage with orange and yellow leaves.

Cllr Ronan Moore

Candidate for
Meath West

Separation of Church and State

Governments should seek to ensure that state institutions are not biased towards any particular religion or belief group; that differences of belief or philosophy are fully and equitably respected in policy and accommodated in practice by public authorities; and that the Constitution, laws and practices of the State, including Government policy, reflect this approach.

Ireland is becoming a much more diverse society: ethnically; culturally; and in relation to religious and philosophical beliefs. This further emphasises the need for the State to respect diversity in its Constitution, its laws and its practices.

Public policy should be formed by applying reasoned analysis, and not religious faith or morality, to evidence. Government should be secular, and the State should be strictly neutral in matters of religion and its absence, favouring none and discriminating against none. Membership of a religion (or otherwise) should not be a basis for appointing a person to any state position.

And yet while Ireland has made progress in removing religious influence from our laws and policies, the UN Human Rights Committee has noted concern at the slow pace of progress in amending the Constitutional provision that obliges individuals wishing to take on senior public office positions such as President, membership of the Council of State, and membership of the judiciary, to take religious oaths.

Clearly, we have a long way to go.

Only a truly secular state can guarantee freedom *of* religion for those who wish to practice it (as no religion is favoured) and freedom *from* religion for those who do not.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Establish a Citizens' Assembly to make recommendations on the future of the education system, including how it might better reflect and serve a more modern, inclusive and diverse Ireland.
- Aim to remove 'faith formation' from the school day, with it to be provided as an afterschool option, and use the time for a new ethical education programme as part of SPHE, along with enhanced time for other subjects.
- Rigorously follow-through on school divestment as per recommendations from the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage.
- Amend the Employment Equality Act so teachers cannot face religious discrimination.
- Ensure children have relationship and sexuality education that is informed by best practice in science and healthcare, with a standardised curriculum across all publicly funded schools.
- Support legislation to introduce Assisted Dying on a limited basis in Ireland.
- Ensure that no further state-funded and -built institutions are simply handed over to religious organisations, as has been the case with the National Maternity Hospital.
- Seek to amend legislation that unduly privileges religious groups or organisations over their secular equivalents, including in the area of rights on social and political campaigning.

Local Government Reform

City and County Councils ('local authorities') contribute to wellbeing in their communities in many ways, most visibly by creating and sustaining the environments in which people live, work, socialise and do business. The facilities and services they provide play critical roles in local wellbeing.

Local authorities influence the quality of the places and homes in which we live; the strength and cohesion of our communities; how we move from place to place, and connect with each other; our health and safety; our shared prosperity; how we spend our time; the environments in which people can exercise and relax; the strength of community and business relationships; and our sense of shared identity.

Yet almost every consequential policy decision in Ireland is made at central government (or 'national') level. This overly centralised system of government marks us out as different from our European peers.

At every general election, all political parties make the same statements about Local Government in Ireland: it's weak, it's underfunded, it's under-resourced. And they all promise to reform it.

But outside of promises to conduct a review, few concrete proposals are ever put forward and, after the election, things carry on as before.

The Social Democrats are serious about reforming Local Government. We believe we cannot reform politics in Ireland until we reform Local Government.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Focus on the principle of subsidiarity in Local Government; that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level, or closest to where they will have their greatest effect.
- Develop and resource a greater ability for local authorities to shape their area, including:
 - Gradually devolving the control of additional services to Local Government.
 - Improving revenue-raising capability at Local Government level.
 - Reforming Local Government entities in Ireland with a view to improving local representation.
- Provide adequate resources to allow Local Government to fulfil the roles already assigned to it, and to broaden their scope.
- Re-establish Municipal Districts as Municipal Councils, with councillors elected to sit on them within their own area, as well as on the local authority's council.
- Increase the budget over which these Municipal Councils have control.
- Recognise the role that regionalism could play in better planning, procurement, environmental management and service delivery.
- Create a consultative process with a view to creating regional assemblies, with responsibility for transport planning, economic strategy, and other areas.
- Devolve to these regional assemblies a certain amount of power related to economic development strategy, and use the regional assemblies to deliver public transport networks at a regional level.
- Restrict the power of Ministers to make directives, to ensure greater local control over development.
- Enhance the capacity of local authorities to respond to the climate and biodiversity crisis, and establish Heritage Teams in local authorities to improve stewardship capacity.
- Encourage the national roll-out of participatory budgeting.

The Seanad's Public Consultation Report on the Future of Local Democracy makes a number of excellent recommendations. As a party we would support the call for the convening of a Local Democracy Taskforce to finalise a programme for the reform and strengthening of local government.

Reforming Local Government Funding

Local Government funding is highly centralised and, as currently structured, disadvantages several counties unduly. It is clear that the current funding distribution system does not adequately provide for areas with rising populations. This is visible in everything from local authority staff numbers to the provision of amenities like municipal swimming pools. In other policy areas it is also evident in Garda numbers and school class sizes.

Areas that have seen rapid population changes, brought on by economic growth, have been left at a distinct disadvantage. This has particularly been the case in counties like Meath, Kildare, Fingal and Wicklow.

The funding of local authorities is in desperate need of reform, to reflect not just the need to maintain current or historical services and amenities, but to facilitate counties who need to catch up to the level of services required by their burgeoning populations.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Review the Local Authority Funding Baselines to better reflect recent population growth, as well as projected future growth.
- Re-structure the Local Property Tax system, including reforming the Self-Funding element, and ensure equalisation funding comes from general taxation.
At present, there is often little incentive to raise additional revenue as payers do not get any benefit.
- Review the system of local rates so they are more aligned to what businesses are currently earning, rather than the ‘potential’ income.
- Legislate to grant Local Government the powers to raise and collect a bed levy on tourists, similar to many major European cities.
- Enable local authorities to issue municipal bonds to fund large infrastructure projects.

Directly Elected Mayors

The creation of directly elected mayoral positions in local authorities would help balance the power of the unelected Chief Executive with added democracy. The Social Democrats welcomed the advent of the directly elected mayor (DEM) for Limerick and believe the further roll-out of this position for other city and county councils is the way forward. Plebiscites should ultimately decide where DEMs should be created.

We need greater accountability for people who are making the important decisions, as well as for directors of services, with more oversight coming from the mayor and councillors. Local authority Chief Executives have a lot of power, and yet they are not accountable to the electorate.

We propose:

- Retaining the Chief Executive role, alongside a DEM for the counties who wish to have it.
- Creating the DEM as a strategic role, leaving the Chief Executive to manage the operations of the council.
- Giving budgetary oversight powers to the DEM who would assist the Chief Executive in drawing up the annual budget with assistance from the councillors.
- Giving the office of mayor responsibility for initial drafts of county development plans and climate action plans, with input from councillors who must also approve the final version.
- That mayors set strategy, reliant on engagement with councillors.
The DEM should not be solely a figurehead and should have responsibility for strategy setting and an appropriate level of power to support the functions of the role.
- That directly elected mayors established in our major cities would take responsibility for transport planning, with consideration given to overall catchment areas and not just the mayor’s specific jurisdiction.
- That a DEM be established for Dublin during the term of the 34th Dáil.

Honest and Open Councils

Most councillors strive to do their best for their communities. Sadly, however, the history of local government in Ireland is littered with malpractice, corruption, backhanders, and abuse of our planning system.

The Social Democrats want to stamp this out once and for all.

A long-standing aim of the Social Democrats is the establishment of an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency. Such an agency would be a vital law enforcement tool to help eradicate corrupt practices in politics and business in Ireland. We remain absolutely committed to its establishment. If we are to build public trust in local democracy, then transparency, accountability, and integrity must be the defining features of local decision-making.

There is wide variation in the levels of openness and transparency between different local authorities, including on things like the live online streaming of council meetings, the availability of files and documents, planning archives, and obligations on council staff to answer questions from local representatives.

While there are many good models of practice, others need improvement.

Additional transparency around public sessions of council meetings can only improve accountability of public representatives and increase a feeling of accessibility towards the political system among the general public.

At local level, the Social Democrats are putting honesty and transparency at the heart of what we do as Councillors.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure live online streaming of council sessions, at all levels.
This is already being done in many local authority areas since the pandemic. Much in the way that Oireachtas TV has improved visibility and accessibility of the national parliament, this would make council meetings more accessible to the people affected by the debates, discussions, and decisions.
- Use technology to make meetings more accessible to Councillors who can't make every meeting.
This additional openness and accessibility should be mandated at all levels, from Municipal Council meetings to Regional Assemblies.
- Ensure voting records at Council meetings are easily available to the public.
- Develop and maintain up-to-date, comprehensive Corruption and Fraud Prevention and Contingency Plans for local authorities.
- Ensure there are proper procedures in place for Ethics Registrars. We will also ensure that all consultations are adequately documented and published on the Council's website.
- Mandate the publishing of Councillors' annual declarations of interests on local authority websites.
- Put procedures in place around the provision of documents and briefing notes ahead of Council meetings so that Councillors have time to prepare properly.
Late receipt of documents means elected representatives cannot properly scrutinise Council affairs.

Niall McCreanor

Candidate
for Louth



Seanad Reform

The government recently brought forward the Seanad Electoral (University Members) (Amendment) Bill 2024 to expand the franchise to all third level graduates. That it has taken 45 years to implement the changes outlined by the Seventh Amendment to the Constitution, and that it required a judicial case to prompt action, merely highlights the attitude of contempt from the governing parties to reform of the Oireachtas's upper house.

Despite this Bill, the current Seanad electoral system – where the majority of Senators are either appointed by the government or ‘elected’ by limited panels of special interest groups – will remain fundamentally undemocratic, and the House greatly underutilised. The 2013 referendum, which rejected the abolition of the Seanad, should have resulted in immediate moves to reform it, mitigating or eliminating the democratic deficit that exists in how the Seanad is constituted and empowered, but that has not happened.

In Government, the Social Democrats will make provisions for a more directly elected Seanad. We will:

- Reform the seats voted on by so-called ‘vocational panels’, opening a majority of them up to direct election by the broader electorate. This could, for example, involve each eligible voter choosing a Seanad panel on which to vote, and would potentially lead to a greater number of elected Senators genuinely representing the interests of their chosen panel, as opposed to the prevailing situation where the link is usually tenuous.
- Give consideration to further reforming the higher education panels. Higher education graduates should also have just one vote, regardless of the shape of the reform.

The Social Democrats will also conduct a full public consultation or Constitutional Convention on Seanad reform.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of possible reforms the Social Democrats believe should be considered:

- Extension of the franchise to Irish citizens in Northern Ireland or overseas, subject to strict criteria.
- Removal of the limitations, within Article 20 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, that block the Seanad from amending, vetoing or introducing ‘money bills’ (any bill with financial implications).
- A role in the oversight/appointment of select offices of national and international importance.
This might include Seanad Confirmation Hearings for appointments of particular political importance, where Senators have the ability to ask questions on the experience and competencies of candidates for the role, and can vote on whether to confirm their appointment.
- Use of the Seanad as a forum for debate and scrutiny of developments within the European Commission and European Parliament, or of developments within other international bodies of which Ireland is a member.
- Use of the Seanad as a forum for oversight and coordination on the spending of the EU Regional Development Funding that goes through different levels of local government.
- Use of the Seanad as a forum for hearings from the representatives of minority communities.

Possible additional powers for consideration in Seanad Éireann might include the power:

- To introduce bills on *any* issue, including ‘Money Bills’.
- To hear testimony, where relevant and required, from expert speakers.
- To hold weekly Leaders’ Questions addressed to the Leader of the House.
- To summon the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, or a Minister, to answer questions on issues under their jurisdiction.
- To have its members participate in Seanad-only committees where the need of one may arise.
- To refer the conduct of members of either House to SIPO, the Dáil Committee on Procedure and the Seanad Committee on Procedures and Privileges where necessary.

6.

Beyond Our Borders

Promoting Unity,
Peace and Prosperity

Northern Ireland and Irish Unity

The 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement remains the cornerstone of policy of the People of Ireland for our own political future. This is a living and developing process through the St. Andrews Agreement (2006), Hillsborough Agreement (2010) and Stormont House Agreement (2015) “A Fresh Start” (which dealt with paramilitaries and peace walls but parked legacy issues).

The implementation of the agreement and its successors has been handicapped by subsequent events, in particular the application of the Northern Ireland Protocol. This, and the lack of impetus to develop and reform it to reflect a changing society and its new realities has suited the two dominant parties in Northern Ireland, to the detriment of smaller political parties (particularly those who decline to be identified as either Nationalist or Unionist).

Civil Society and non-party political organisations have also been left behind unless they fall into narrow definitions related to cross-border or cross-community.

The Social Democrats will engage positively with all such groups to ensure that their voice is heard in the Republic of Ireland, which has a duty as guarantor of the agreement. Such groups include service providers filling a void left by failures of government, trade unions, rights-based groups and others not currently represented.

Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol has stimulated increased interest in a United Ireland, but we are still missing a roadmap for how to get there. New and stronger arguments must be presented to persuade a majority to vote for it and people should be able to see a solid plan for what would happen after unification.

In Government, we would support the creation of a Citizens’ Assembly on Irish Unity and the future of the island.

A United Ireland, achieved by consent has the real potential to benefit the people of the entire island economically, politically and culturally. We will therefore work towards achieving this in a spirit of mutual respect of and by the two parts of the island and based on a foundation of social democratic principles.

Supporting the unification of our island will be an important objective of the Social Democrats in government, and we will ensure any Programme for Government we negotiate will include deliverable commitments to advancing this project.

The Social Democrats believe:

- The Northern Ireland Protocol is integral to the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement as it avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland and safeguards the Good Friday Agreement. It is critical that the European Union and United Kingdom sustain a constructive working relationship to resolve challenges affecting Northern Ireland and deliver the best possible benefits for both the people and business sector.
- A narrow political focus on marginally out-voting those currently in the majority to change the status quo, and the politicisation of cultural division (e.g. the Irish language and institutionalised sectarianism at Stormont), reduces the prospect of the successful unification of the People.
- The prospect of a Border Poll being held is welcome, once the conditions as set down in the Good Friday Agreement are met. There is, however, much that can be achieved to unite people before a border poll such as focusing on cross border services and initiatives that can be mutually beneficial to both communities.
- A border poll without any clear indication of what is to happen afterwards could be viewed as purely a sectarian headcount and might also depress turnout.
- A Green Paper presented following comprehensive discussion with all stakeholders in advance of a Border Poll would be helpful to address the key challenges that will arise and serve to identify all available options to facilitate implementation in the event of a yes vote for unification.
- The fullest co-operation between agencies and bodies on both sides of the border should be

encouraged, supported and funded, where such work leads to practical positive outcomes rather than driven by a political goal. The two parts of the island have no option but to coordinate on matters such as energy, the environment, animal health, fisheries, and telecommunications. But these areas of co-operation should be expanded, for example with regard to public health such as out of hours GP services and specialist hospital services. It is important that freedom of movement of workers be continued e.g. teacher qualifications and exchanges. Strategic transport planning for the island is inherently valuable as is the promotion, marketing, research, and product development of tourism. In a post-Brexit Ireland, the various EU Programmes such as SPPR, INTERREG, and Leader are more important than ever before.

- The Irish Government should act as a voice in the EU for the greater number of people in Northern Ireland who voted against Brexit.
- Trade between the economies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is an important component in advancing economic growth and prosperity on the island and consequently enhanced efforts to grow activity in this area must be actively pursued.
- Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, in the spirit in which they were intended, remains the best means to ensure stability, economic growth and wellbeing for all the People living in Northern Ireland.
- There are fundamental challenges which must be addressed in the Republic of Ireland in advance of any unification process. This includes a universal healthcare system and an equitable tax and social welfare system. The Republic of Ireland should aim to be seen as a beacon of progressive social and economic policy, which an objective observer in Northern Ireland would wish to emulate and ultimately, join.

The Republic of Ireland is not yet such a model.

- Constitutional reform will be necessary and must ensure absolute separation of Church and State. The specific model following a yes vote for unification – for example whether a single unitary state, a federation, or another model – is a matter for the people of Ireland to address through consultation at that time.
 - In Northern Ireland, enhanced co-education programmes must be encouraged and prioritised. There should be a timeline for the ending of designation of parties on sectarian lines (which could be replaced by using PRSTV in the election of First and Deputy First Ministers), and a building up of the profile of Northern Ireland as a viable destination for sustainable investment, and many other confidence-building measures.
- Progressive politics of whatever persuasion requires that the economy and society in Northern Ireland succeed in the interest of all the people who live there. The challenges we face for the next generation are the same; housing, climate change, privatisation of public services, aging populations, tax and social welfare reform and inequality.
- It is important to work unimpeded with all parties interested in peace and reform. Therefore, we will not contest elections in Northern Ireland in the short term. This leaves the Party free to pursue contact with all political and civil society groups to act in a progressive manner in the interest of all the People so that a social democratic ethos is cultivated across all facets of life in Northern Ireland.
 - The extraordinary richness and the diversity of Northern Ireland's communities with its range of opinion and religious belief and culture is a strength and an asset for Ireland which is to be fostered as an integral part of what we are as a people.
 - Transparency, accountability, and integrity in political life both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland must be sustained and built upon as a core value.

A portrait photograph of a man with dark hair and a full, light brown beard and mustache. He is smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a dark brown, ribbed, long-sleeved sweater over a tan-colored collared shirt. A small, bright green ribbon or bow tie is visible on the left side of his chest. The background is a dense, out-of-focus green foliage.

Cllr Chris Pender

**Candidate for
Kildare South**

Defence and Security

Since the foundation of the modern Irish State in 1922, the Irish Defence Forces have worked to secure our national territory, and conducted mandated peacekeeping missions abroad; a contribution of which we are rightly proud as a nation.

The government departments tasked with Ireland's defence must be adequately resourced. The Defence Forces, as the primary state organisation tasked with defence in Ireland, must be given the funding necessary to accommodate and pay its personnel, train units, and meet the challenges of today and the future, wherever they are deployed.

It is also important that national defence and security policy reflect a state's core values. To meet the commitments and challenges of the 21st century the State must:

- Take a comprehensive whole-of-government approach to national defence and security.
- Develop a new National Defence and Security Framework.
- Invest in the Defence Forces with the goal of bringing funding to a sustainable level that would allow it to fulfil the tasks assigned to it.

Compared to countries with a similar standard of living, Irish enlisted personnel receive disproportionately low pay. Current enlisted pay, especially at entry level, does not make for a sustainable career. A full review of pay conditions in the PDF, RDF and civilian employees with a view to adjusting to international best practice is required. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Support the maintenance of Ireland's position of neutrality.
- Reconfigure the Department of Defence as the Department of Defence, Security and Emergency Planning.
- Create within that Department an Office of National Defence and Security Monitoring and Threat Assessment.
- Develop a new National Defence and Security Framework.
- Create an Office of National Information, Cyber and Data Defence and Security to coordinate many of the functions of the various bodies currently responsible for Ireland's data, information and cyber-security.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive Veterans' Policy, establishing a Veterans Commissioner and an Office of Veterans Affairs to coordinate support across government departments.
- Enhance veteran services by providing essential housing, supporting a national network of support centres, and expanding mental health services tailored to veterans' unique needs.
- Invest in the Defence Forces with the goal of bringing funding to a sustainable level that would allow it to fulfil its duties.
- Address the pay issues faced by Defence Forces personnel that are inhibiting goals around recruitment and retention.
- Set, as a minimum, a PDF establishment of 11,500 (plus 500 in training) with an increase to Naval Service and Air Corps strength to a level that would allow each to function as required by Ireland's security requirements.
- Equip the Defence Forces with the systems and technologies required to effectively carry out their roles in the 21st century, including SONAR and Air Surveillance Radar.
- Develop the rank, pay and promotion system within the Defence Forces, and ensure this system evolves with new practices, technologies and skillsets.
- Create an Active Reserve to capture leaving and retired personnel, and utilise specialists within the RDF.
- Create a Civil Protection Rapid Response Corps that can be deployed overseas in response to natural disasters.
- Explore the creation of a Defence Forces History and Heritage Board.

Foreign Policy

Since the foundation of the State, Ireland has always engaged in a positive and committed manner in global affairs while remaining proudly militarily neutral. Our interaction with the nations of the world in an era of increasing globalisation is a critical element in sustaining Ireland's security, and in contributing to our economic growth and the prosperity for our people.

We will promote abroad our values of an inclusive, fair and just society with dignity, respect and equality for all citizens, which defines who we are as both a nation and a people.

A culture that promotes human rights and respect for international law is strongly embedded in Ireland. Through Ireland's participation in European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) institutions the Social Democrats are committed to supporting diplomatic efforts towards peaceful and durable solutions to conflict in accordance with international law, as well as advocating and participating in the global struggle against hunger, famine and extreme poverty.

The Social Democrats will also support UN and EU peacekeeping operations to help mitigate the worst effects of conflict on local civilian populations.

Much of the instability in today's world is propelled by the rapid onset of climate change, widespread hunger, food and water security, poverty, disease and emerging international security and hybrid threats emanating from state and non-state actors.

Ireland must work with the international community to ensure preparedness and resilience to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented today and to those over the horizon and not yet visible in a rapidly changing and evolving world order.

We must ensure to strike the correct balance in our national and international policies, and in the context of our international engagement work, to safeguard Ireland's national security, economic interests, and social and cultural values.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Sustain efforts to ensure accountability for war crimes and human rights abuses, including those committed in the conflicts in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe.
- Seek the further recognition of a Palestinian state among our international allies, and promote a two-state solution on the basis of 1967 borders. We believe the two-state solution offers the only prospect of an enduring peace.
- Support the creation of a shared capital for the two states in Jerusalem, and the ending of the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, in line with successive United Nations resolutions.
- Enact the Occupied Territories Bill.
- Support the supply of non-lethal aid to Ukraine and providing humanitarian assistance to its citizens relocated to Ireland.
- Strive to ensure that the European Union promotes Ireland's cultural and social values, and national interests, as far as is possible.

We believe EU membership and shared European values are central to our national interests and provide Ireland with a platform to actively promote our foreign policy objectives within a European bloc of friendly nations.

- Work within the EU and UN frameworks to promote fundamental human rights, democratic values and institutions, and the rule of law.
- Advocate for the reform of the UN Security Council to feature a more diverse representation, including amongst permanent members.
- Support the creation of EU strategic partnerships outside Europe for the management of common objectives, including food security, energy security, and migration, but *only* where human rights are being upheld.
- Support the vital work of the United Nations around war and conflict, gender-based violence, human equality, minority rights,

- clean water, global health, shelter, food and energy security.
- Leverage our position to promote partnership in mitigating the causes of climate change.
 - Actively support the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2030 agenda for sustainable development.
 - Promote adherence to the Paris Climate Agreement and other environmental protections within European institutions, and support the work of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

- Collaborate with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on climate change issues compatible with our national objectives.
- Promote the development of both new and emerging technologies that can help mitigate the effects of climate change and act as enablers in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Support Ireland's Embassies and Consulates to act as role models for our environmental and cultural principles.

Irish Neutrality

While Ireland's definition of neutrality is not formally described in Irish law, it has been well-established through precedent and is recognised in EU Treaties, while public support for the continuation of this policy remains strong.

The Social Democrats believe Ireland should maintain our current form of neutrality, which can be described as non-membership of military alliances or mutual defence arrangements, while allowing for political alignment and the provisions of non-lethal aid and humanitarian assistance.

Ireland's neutrality is a positive position and does not represent international political indifference. It allows us to play a role as neutral arbitrators where appropriate.

Our neutrality informs our active approach to peace-support operations and crisis management, to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and more. It enables more effective engagement to promote peace, including via the UN.

Crucially, military neutrality means being able to defend and monitor one's own territory. This needs to be reflected in national defence and security policy, and an increased investment in the Defence Forces is necessary to allow it to do its job.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Retain Ireland's long established policy of military neutrality (non-alignment) as a key element in our Foreign Policy and in line with the current wishes of the majority of the Irish people.
- Ensure that any major change to our current form of neutrality, including the Triple Lock, will be tested first via a Citizens' Assembly and possibly by referendum.
- Continue to vocally oppose the crime of military aggression, and also violations of Human Rights and of International Human Rights Law from whatever source.
- Ensure Ireland is not used as a hub by State or Non-State actors for the passage of military equipment including weapons, explosive equipment, ammunition etc. into war zones or regions of conflict. A pro-active inspection system to avoid abuse of landing rights at Irish airports is required.
- Require all military aircraft requesting overflight of Irish airspace to be compatible with our policy of military neutrality.
- Oppose Irish membership of NATO.
- Increase funding to the Irish Defence forces to allow it to defend and monitor our national territory in a manner commensurate with our international obligations.



Patricia Stephenson

Candidate for
Carlow-Kilkenny

Irish Aid and International Development

The Social Democrats believe fighting global poverty and hunger should be an integral component to Ireland's foreign policy. Through implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and a pledge to reach 'the furthest behind first' we can help provide the leadership to reduce global hunger and poverty.

The Social Democrats are committed to:

- Reaching the UN target of allocating 0.7 per cent of national income to official development assistance (ODA) not later than 2030.
- Acknowledging that Ireland's commitment under Agenda 2030 to reach 0.7 per cent of national income by 2030 is separate and distinct from the Climate Finance commitments made in the Paris Agreement in 2015.
- Ensuring that Ireland's domestic response to the Ukraine crisis is additional to current (and future) ODA spending and not diverted from funding for ongoing humanitarian crises.
- Maintaining the poverty-focused, untied, and fully grant-based nature of Irish development aid, and ensure all Irish ODA upholds humanitarian and human rights principles.
- Continuing Ireland's traditional approach of targeting humanitarian aid of all kinds towards the world's most deprived and poorest regions.
- Ensuring Irish Climate Finance is given as grants, not as loans, and that Ireland pays its fair share.
- Working to mobilise new and innovative sources of public climate finance based on principles like 'polluter pays' and 'social equity', in order to meet increasing climate financing needs.
- Scaling-up humanitarian funding to conflict-affected and fragile states, directing funding that contributes to removing the root causes of crises.
- Supporting the pledge of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to reach 'the furthest behind first' as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Helping to tackle the root causes of displacement by continuing to support UNHCR and other UN agencies, international NGOs and humanitarian agencies supporting refugees in their regions of origin.
- Advocating internationally for fair trading arrangements that enable countries in the Global South to pursue their own paths to economic prosperity and food security.
- Ensuring that Ireland's international development policy and foreign policy more generally has a focus on women's rights. Women's Rights programmes are often poorly funded within Aid Programmes and resourcing feminist movements and women's rights organisations is essential to delivering on women and girls' rights.
- Supporting the development of a new UN-based (as opposed to IMF-based) debt workout mechanism. Excessive debt burdens impede the pursuit of more sustainable economic and environmental models in poorer and developing countries.

International Tax Justice

Tax policy is crucial for international development.

It shapes the capacity of states to raise revenue, fund essential public services, and fulfil their human rights obligations. Without fair and functioning taxation systems, efforts to deliver adequate housing, decent healthcare and quality education, and to tackle poverty and inequality, are badly undermined.

Corporate tax avoidance is a major barrier to tackling poverty in the developing world, with harmful tax practices and 'aggressive tax planning' by companies and wealthy individuals depriving poorer countries of hundreds of

billions of dollars every year. It has been estimated that such practices deprive these countries of more than twice the amount they are granted in development aid by the rich world each year.

Ireland's oversized role in the international tax avoidance landscape is well-documented, despite efforts of government to close loopholes. The closure of the infamous 'Double Irish' in 2014 was followed four years later by a move to shut down the so-called 'Single Malt'. However, reports emerged in 2021 suggesting that the Single Malt is very much still alive, and is in fact being used by one of the world's biggest pharma companies to pay an effective corporate tax rate as low as 4 per cent.

Clearly, more needs to be done to ensure that Ireland's role in facilitating tax avoidance for large corporations is reduced and eliminated.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Conduct a new, comprehensive and independent 'Spillover Analysis' of Ireland's tax policies, examining existing anti-avoidance measures, and any potential negative impacts on the economies of developing countries.
- Support the development of a new UN Tax Convention, to design a fairer international tax system and tackle international tax avoidance, to the benefit of both Western and developing countries.
- Take real and tangible action to tackle tax avoidance and profit-shifting by large multinational companies, including the use of the 'Single Malt' scheme and similar structures.
- Support improved transparency rules for all large multinational companies, including registers of beneficial ownership and mandatory public 'country-by-country' reporting, to allow citizens see where multinational companies have business activity and where they pay their taxes.

Business and Human Rights

Corporations wield considerable economic and political influence, and frequently avoid genuine accountability for human rights violations.

Often, intricate corporate structures impede efforts to hold those responsible to account, or hinder efforts to seek justice. Numerous European companies are implicated in human rights violations and environmental damage across the world.

All companies should have a responsibility to respect human rights, workers' rights, and environmental standards wherever they operate. The State should safeguard against human rights violations by businesses and facilitate access to redress through robust policies, laws, and regulations.

In Government, we will support a global treaty on Business and Human Rights, and lobby at EU level to deliver a rigorous Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive on Business and Human Rights.

7.

Budgetary Assumptions

Average Expenditure and Revenue 2026-2030

Additional expenditure	Average 2026-2030	Revenue and GGB	Average 2026-2030
Housing	3,980	Reforming Reliefs on Capital Taxes	
Social & affordable new builds	3,760	Reform of CAT Business & Agricultural Relief	60
Other	220	Abolishing Entrepreneur Relief on CGT	160
Health	3,300	Reforming Taxes on Wealth	
Sláintecare	3,000	Taxing 'Super Wealth'	175
Other	300	Increasing Stamp Duty on Shares to 1.3%	180
Climate and Nature	540	Reform of Business-related Taxes and Charges	
Public and active transport	400	Doubling of bank levy	200
Other	140	Increasing Employer PRSI rate by 0.25%	260
Childcare	505	Reform of R&D tax credit system	200
Fee cap	300	Windfall tax on energy companies	200
Acquisition of new facilities	100		
Running public facilities	150	Reform of Income Taxes	
Public model savings on fee cap	-45	Minimum effective tax rate on income >€400k	110
Disability	1,054	Standard-rating discretionary (non-pension) tax reliefs	152
Capacity Review implementation	514	Abolishing the Special Assignee Relief Programme	35
Cost of disability payment	340		
Section 39 pay parity	200	Housing/Property-related revenue:	
Welfare	1,415	Increasing the Vacant Homes Tax	65
Abolition of carers' allowance	400	Removing tax exemptions for institutional investors	140
Achieving MESL	715	Stamp duty on non-residential property	145
Other	300	Phasing out of subsidies for developers	218
Education	749	Misc	
Other spending	520	Raising the betting tax from 2% to 3%	50
Total additional spending	12,063	9% VAT rate on food and beverage sector	(500)
		Total revenue raising measures	1,850
		Projected General Government Balance (GGB)*	9,320
		Apple tax funds for housing	2,000
		Revised General Government Balance	1,107

* As per Budget 2025 Economic & Fiscal Outlook.

Once off measures	
Climate Transformation Fund	5,000
Fair Transition Fund for Farmers	1,500
Total	6,500
<i>Financed by:</i>	
Apple tax funds ex-housing	4,000
Sale of remaining AIB shares	2,500
Total	6,500



Catherine Murphy TD and
Róisín Shortall TD

Founding Parting Leaders



**#FortheFuture
#ItStartsHere**